

*The Limitations of the Open Mind*. By JEREMY FANTL. (Oxford University Press, 2018. Pp. xviii + 229. Price £45.00.)

The common assumption that being open-minded is good and being closed-minded is bad receives careful scrutiny in Jeremy Fantl's rich, interesting, and tightly-argued book. The motivating issue is a practical one: When is it appropriate to refuse to seriously consider arguments against a proposition one accepts, particularly when the proposition is a morally significant, controversial one (xi)? Fantl argues that it is appropriate to refuse to engage with counterarguments when those arguments are known to be misleading. To know that an argument is misleading, one need only to know that *p* and that the counterargument implies not-*p*. On Fantl's view, knowledge of controversial propositions is rather easy to acquire. Instructively, Fantl claims to know that genes do not play a role in racial IQ differences (57), that there are no psychic phenomena (83), and that human activity is the primary cause of global warming (146).

The first half of the book defends an account of open-mindedness and advances a few distinctive epistemological principles. Fantl argues convincingly for a "Platonic" conception of open-mindedness that crucially involves being "willing to be significantly persuaded conditional on spending significant time with [an] argument, finding the steps compelling, and being unable to locate a flaw" (12). According to this view, merely being willing to hear an opponent out while being committed to maintaining one's belief are insufficient to count as open-minded. Open-mindedness also requires a sincere willingness to change one's mind if the argument is sufficiently convincing.

There surely are times when we take ourselves to be reasonable not in carefully hearing out an argument for a conclusion that we find clearly false or even repugnant, but in stopping our ears and joining a protest. A partial explanation as to why this is reasonable is that we already know that the conclusions of those arguments are false; so, we know the arguments given for those conclusions are misleading. Precisely the same reasoning applies if the argument is clever enough that one cannot discern what is wrong with it. Fantl calls such an argument an "apparently flawless relevant counterargument". Fantl argues that "knowledge can survive closed-minded dismissal of apparently flawless relevant counterarguments", which position he calls "Forward-Looking Dogmatism" (32). Why think knowledge is so resilient? Fantl gives two reasons. The first is that (i) for any controversial proposition one knows, there could easily be an apparently flawless relevant counterargument (35). The second reason is that, (ii) as far as one's knowledge is concerned, there is no relevant difference between the possibility of there being an apparently flawless relevant counterargument and there actually being one (40, chapter 3).

Accepting (i) requires only some imagination and some humility. Because the proposition is controversial, it is easy to imagine that smart people with an interest in supporting the proposition could devise an argument that one is unable to refute. For (ii), even an actual apparently flawless relevant counterargument does not defeat one's knowledge when that argument's apparent flawlessness is unsurprising, because unsurprising evidence bears little evidential force (50). It is unsurprising that a fair coin would land heads on two tosses in a row, so the coin landing heads twice does little to confirm that the coin is biased toward heads. By the same principle, a

counterargument may be apparently flawless because it is flawless, or it may be apparently flawless because it is misleading. Which explanation of apparent flawlessness one should favor in a particular case depends upon what one knows and one's source of belief. An amateur with respect to a type of evidence relevant to  $p$ —say, expert testimony—may come to know that  $p$  on that basis and it will be unsurprising if the amateur finds a not- $p$  counterargument to be apparently flawless when that counterargument uses a different type of evidence—say, statistical analysis—that is unfamiliar to the amateur (60). The amateur may retain knowledge that  $p$  in the face of this counterargument, because it is entirely unsurprising that the amateur will find that counterargument apparently flawless given the amateur's lack of familiarity with the type of evidence used in the counterargument.

Putting it all together, an amateur with respect to  $p$  may come to know that  $p$  and may retain that knowledge in the face of counterarguments in which the amateur cannot identify a flaw, and thereby the amateur is reasonable in being closed-minded toward counterarguments against  $p$ .

The second half of the book defends the claim that when one knows that  $p$ , in many standard situations, one should not engage open-mindedly or closed-mindedly with arguments against  $p$ . One should not engage open-mindedly because one already knows that the conclusion is false, and thus there are no plausible further epistemic reasons why one should engage open-mindedly, as that would involve a willingness to exchange knowledge for false belief. One should not engage closed-mindedly because it is wrong to deceive one's interlocutor by making a display of being open-minded when one is not. The arguments in this section are plausible if one accepts the conclusion of the first half: that we know many controversial propositions.

The final chapter applies the book's epistemological and ethical conclusions to the issue of campus invitations to problematic speakers. Fantl argues that it is wrong to invite problematic speakers to campus when some students would view the invitation as a betrayal (177). For students to view the invitation this way requires two things. First, those students are in the sort of relationship to the institution that generates special obligations (190). Second, the institution betrays this relationship by offering requisite respect-behaviors to the problematic speaker (194).

The argument for non-invitation of problematic speakers is unconvincing because both conditions are implausible. To the first, it is unlikely that students and universities are in a kind of special relationship that grounds an obligation that the institution should not invite a speaker whose conduct, values, or speech conflicts with the students' views. Nor do students themselves accept that view. Students typically view their relationship to the institution as one of consumer to retailer, and that relationship does not generate an obligation that the consumer approve of which goods are offered. To the second condition, independently of the first, no part of a campus invitation to a speaker demands honoring the invitee. A problematic speaker brought to campus for the purpose of allowing students to sharpen their critical thinking skills may as well be introduced as invited for just that purpose, as Columbia University President Lee Bollinger 'welcomed' Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad by excoriating him for suppressing individual freedoms, denying the Holocaust, and supporting terrorism. That one may invite a speaker just to hear them out closed-mindedly, without pageantry, is a coherent position.

But is it better than Fantl's position? If we really do know ordinary, controversial propositions of the sort that Fantl thinks can be known, then the plausibility of those principles that connect knowing to being closed-minded strongly support the conclusion that one should not pay the

social and psychological costs to hear out ideas that we already know are false, whether on campus or elsewhere. If that dogmatic conclusion is implausible, the problem lies in the concession that we can have fallible knowledge of controversial propositions in the first place, and not in further inferences drawn from what is allegedly known. Fantl so ably connects possessing ordinary knowledge with dogmatic attitudes that in the end, one must choose an attitude concerning ordinary propositions: dogmatism, or skepticism?

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