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Book Symposium: Jeremy Fantl's *The Limitations of the Open Mind*

Comments on Jeremy Fantl's *The Limitations of the Open Mind*

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Abstract

In this commentary on Jeremy Fantl's *The Limitations of the Open Mind*, I focus mainly on the book's second half and argue against Fantl's view that you should rarely engage closed-mindedly with those putting forth claims that you know are false and arguments that you know are misleading. I argue that this kind of engagement can be fruitfully exercised without problematic deception. If we are attuned to the social dimension of epistemology, and we see that false and potentially pernicious beliefs are spreading, we have good reason to engage with at least some of these believers with the aim of altering their epistemic attitudes, and to allow for more collective knowledge.

Résumé

Ce commentaire sur *The Limitations of the Open Mind* de Jeremy Fantl se concentre essentiellement sur la seconde partie de l'ouvrage, et conteste son idée d'après laquelle on ne devrait généralement pas débattre en faisant preuve de fermeture d'esprit, en particulier avec ceux qui soutiennent des affirmations que l'on sait être fausses ou des arguments que l'on sait être trompeurs. Je défends la thèse que ce type de débats peut s'avérer fructueux et qu'on peut les mener sans pratiquer aucune forme de duperie qui serait problématique. Si nous prêtons à la dimension sociale de l'épistémologie l'attention qu'elle mérite, et que nous constatons que des croyances fausses potentiellement nuisibles sont propagées, alors nous avons de bonnes raisons de nous confronter au moins à certains d'entre ceux qui les entretiennent dans le but de changer leurs attitudes épistémiques et de favoriser l'accroissement de la connaissance collective.

Keywords: Fantl; epistemic community; open-mindedness; belief; Strawson

1. Introduction

In *The Limitations of the Open Mind*, Jeremy Fantl offers an excellent model of applied epistemology; there are still very few book-length treatments of this kind of

theorizing. Until quite recently, epistemology and ethics were taken to be entirely distinct domains, interested in completely different questions and concerns. While ethical theories were applied to various "real-world" topics, the idea of applying epistemological theories to matters of practical concern was rarely considered, especially among those working in the "analytic" tradition. That so many of our most pressing moral and political problems have an epistemic edge to them has led to shifts in this way of thinking. When the spread of misinformation leads to bloodshed, when a large swath of the population doesn't believe what they are told by many experts, when belief-polarization leads to people having completely different ideas of what counts as evidence, when op-eds repeatedly mention our "epistemic" crisis, it is time for epistemologists to weigh in on these matters. Fantl tell us in the preface that this is what he intends to do:

> The second part of the book is devoted to the consequences of the epistemological conclusions of the first four chapters. Here's the primary thesis: because there are standard situations in which you know some counterargument is misleading, there are standard situations in which you shouldn't engage with that counterargument either open-mindedly or closed-mindedly. (Fantl, 2018, p. xiv)

The epistemological conclusions tell us that our knowledge, even of controversial propositions, can survive being exposed to arguments that appear "flawless," meaning that we cannot identify how they mislead. Still, if we *know* the conclusion is false, we know the argument is misleading. Fantl argues that in many standard cases you should not be open-minded, that is, you shouldn't be "willing to reduce your confidence upon spending time with the argument, finding each step compelling, and being unable to expose a flaw" (Fantl, 2018, pp. 15–16). While open-mindedness is often taken as a virtue, Fantl argues that, on his conception, it will depend on the context whether one should cultivate this state of mind, and in cases where we *know* the argument is misleading, there is no reason to be open-minded and many reasons against engaging open-mindedly: "Open-mindedness can be bad and irrational. Closed-mindedness can be good and rational" (Fantl, 2018, p. 17).

2. Risks of Open-Minded Engagement

My comments are mostly focused on the book's second half. I agree that we rarely have an obligation to engage with others open-mindedly when we *know* that the claim they are making is false. Engaging open-mindedly in such contexts is indeed risky for the many reasons that Fantl lays out. It can help legitimize views that should not be legitimized, it can be a huge waste of cognitive and emotional resources, and, as Fantl stresses, it can lead you to lose knowledge, often knowledge that is important for you to have in making practical decisions. He is mostly concerned with this latter risk; he tells us "that being open-minded toward arguments you know to be misleading is intrinsically epistemically improper" (Fantl, 2018, p. 147). Briefly, this is because "when you know a decisive reason to do something, you should do it" (Fantl, 2018, p. 137), and knowing that an argument is misleading provides you with decisive reason to not be open-minded. He also thinks that there can be moral impropriety in that such open-minded engagement can constitute a failure

to stand in solidarity with members of marginalized, oppressed, or victimized groups and individuals (Fantl, 2018, p. 147).

In Chapter 5, Fantl considers and critiques a number of ways one may try to ground an obligation to engage open-mindedly. In doing so, he reminds us that, in many formal settings, it is important (perhaps required) to engage with arguments against your view; in such settings, we are unaware of whether one is open- or closed-minded and there is nothing wrong with that. Indeed, one of the lessons of Chapter 6 is that all benefits of being open-minded can be reached without adopting that attitude: for audiences to be aware of both sides (when called for), and for persons' rights to free speech to be protected only requires that opinions are not silenced, not that they are engaged with, especially open-mindedly:

> [T]hese benefits can be achieved regardless of whether those advocating for either side are willing to reduce their confidence if they can't figure out what's wrong with the counterargument; the epistemic goods to the larger society can be achieved just as well, and perhaps better, by closed-minded engagement as they can by open-minded engagement. (Fantl, 2018, p. 153)

3. Closed-Minded Engagement and Deception

What I want to push against is the idea that you should often *not* engage closed-mindedly with those putting forth claims that you know are false and arguments that you know are misleading. Again, Fantl allows that this kind of engagement is called for in certain circumstances:

> to correct easily correctable errors, to convince your interlocutor and your listeners that the arguments are misleading, to call out deeply offensive or victimizing speech, to stand in solidarity with members of marginalized groups, to resist your oppressor, to help your interlocutor overcome their prejudice or error. (Fantl, 2018, p. 155)

He also says:

> [Y]ou should engage closed-mindedly only if doing so is *non-manipulatively effective*. You should engage closed-mindedly only if you don't mislead people into taking you to be open-minded and thereby manipulate them into doing or believing what you want them to do or believe. The difficulty is that in some situations, the only effective way to closed-mindedly engage is by being deceptive. To be effective you sometimes have to allow your interlocutor to see you as open minded. Therefore, there is no way for knowers to rightly and effectively engage in these situations: either you wrongly become open-minded, or you wrongly (so I will argue) deceive your interlocutor (Fantl, 2018, p. 159).

I am more optimistic about this kind of engagement, that it can be fruitfully exercised without problematic deception, and though I am not going to call it an "obligation," it

is often permissible, and a good thing to do; engaging exhibits care and can lead to a reduction of harm. If we are attuned to the social dimension of epistemology, and we see that false and potentially pernicious beliefs are spreading, we have good reason to engage with at least some of these believers with the aim of altering their epistemic attitudes, and to allow for more collective knowledge.

Again, often there is no reason to engage and many reasons not to. Some factors to consider in deciding *when* to engage include the following: the background and motives of the believer, the perniciousness of the belief's content, the potential of the belief to spread, and one's relationship to the believer. Some people may assert propositions such as "the Holocaust never occurred," even if they do not believe it, because it is a way to express and support hatred. When someone argues in bad faith or simply lies, reasons to engage diminish. However, if a good friend who has generally been open to rational discussion loses their job and, when stuck in their house for months, and after spending a lot more time on social media, begins to espouse some of the tenets of Qanon, finding a way to engage without alienating this friend is important. But, rather than start with a bombardment of facts or contemptuous dismissal, it is likely more productive to try to understand how and why they were drawn to these ideas. Engagement of this kind is not open-minded; there is an asymmetry in the parties. My mind is not open to adopting my friend's belief about Qanon, but I hope that their mind is open to change.

Some closed-minded engagement can be rude, and again, I think Fantl is right that this is what is often needed, when a kind of calling-out is called for and I need to stand in solidarity with the oppressed or marginalized. But here there is no goal of trying to learn from others or change minds. Another kind of closed-minded engagement, where one is not willing to reduce confidence, involves being empathetic, listening, and trying to understand the other and how and why they came to have these beliefs. An example of this kind of engagement is found in the Listening Project, a conflict resolution organization that tries to effect socially just outcomes in community disputes. The Listening Project seeks to change attitudes on topics such as race and homosexuality by "understanding where people are starting from and seeing the potential. It involves listening at a very deep level so that one builds a relationship of trust and respect" (Imlay & Howard, 1993, p. 2, as cited in Fantl, 2018, p. 162).

The risk of losing knowledge is diminished in this way, as is the worry that the belief will gain legitimacy, since there is no moment in such engagement when the *belief* is treated as one that could be justified or true. The emphasis, instead is on the *believer*, trying to understand why they believe what they do and seeking ways to get them to see their own beliefs as problematic or unstable.

Fantl thinks that this kind of engagement tends to involve a morally problematic insincerity, deception, and potential manipulation: "If you present yourself as open or at least fail to emphasize the degree to which your mind is closed, if you are in fact closed-minded you can easily be problematically insincere" (Fantl, 2018, p. 158). He argues that the only way the Listening Project can succeed in changing minds is if the engagement *appears* more open than it actually is. Commenting on a conversation between Herb Walters, the founder of the Listening Project, and Jeff, a person with racist beliefs, Fantl says:

There is a kind of insincerity in Walters' "nonthreatening questions and accepting manner." First, because the questions have to be asked with an "open-mind and heart," Walters can't represent himself as disagreeing — which he presumably does — with Jeff's initial claims about the source of difficulties in the nearby black community.

Second, Walters does not give a complete representation of his purposes in asking Jeff the questions he's asking. (Fantl, 2018, pp. 163–164)

Why should trying to correct a false, and potentially harmful, belief be different from trying to correct some harm more generally? In general, I don't have to pretend to be open-minded when I confront someone about something that might be wrong or bad for them. I don't have to pretend, for example, that I am willing to be convinced of the benefits of heroin use when I express my deep concern about its harm. The difference in the doxastic context is that in discussing this belief with someone, it *appears* as if one is engaged in inquiry. Typically, when we ask people for reasons and respond to them, we are partners in a shared activity of inquiry. When engaging closed-mindedly, that is not what we are doing. Yet, there is much empirical evidence that being upfront about closed-mindedness is ineffective.[1] When I state explicitly at the outset that I find the other's views abhorrent and obviously false, the possibility of their openness and belief-alteration diminishes.

Returning to the example of conversation with a heroin user, we can imagine two scenarios: one where the heroin user sees nothing wrong with heroin use, and another where the heroin user does not disagree but is powerless to stop using heroin. The first case is more akin to conversation with a person with false, problematic beliefs. In both situations, we want the person to see their own behaviour or beliefs differently and to recognize that they have been led down a path that has diminished their autonomy. It may be that in both cases the way to lead to this recognition is to be less than fully explicit about our attitudes towards these problematic behaviours or beliefs.

Am I required to take what Peter Strawson calls the "objective attitude" with believers in, for example, debunked conspiracy theories? Must I view someone with such beliefs "as a subject of social policy; as a subject for what, in a wide range of sense, might be called treatment … to be managed or handled or cured or trained" (Strawson, 1974, p. 9) rather than the "participant attitude," which is essential to "ordinary adult human relationships" and includes a range of reactions such as resentment, gratitude, and forgiveness? My answer is a qualified "yes." Engaging closed-mindedly does require using the objective attitude, but in a way that Strawson points to that is not so worrisome, namely in a way that is compatible with viewing the person as "normal and mature." According to Strawson (1974, p. 9), we can use the objective attitude as a "resource" in interpersonal relationships,

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[1] For an overview of some of these studies, see Maria Konnikova's (2014) *New Yorker* article, which cites Brendan Nyhan on changing people's minds about vaccines. According to Nyhan, vaccines are "not inherently linked to ideology. … That means we can get to a consensus." Seven years later, beliefs about vaccines and diseases have in fact become political, so Nyhan's optimism may have been misplaced. A recent article (on which Nyhan is a co-author) shows how difficult it can be to correct people's beliefs about epidemics, and how dangerous misperceptions can be. See also John M. Carey, et al. (2020).

and this does not require taking a "wholly objective" view of the person. Strawson recognizes that adoption of these attitudes is not wholly dichotomous. He says, "I must deal here in dichotomies and ignore the ever-interesting and ever-illuminating variety of case" (Strawson, 1974, p. 9). In a conversation with a person who holds fringe beliefs, different attitudes may be present in the same human interaction.

Fantl considers ways one might avoid deception in closed-minded engagement, but says that these will not work if the aim is to convince others. For example, he considers Marshall Rosenberg's Nonviolent Communication (NVC) process:

> Rosenberg advocates a mutual honesty of expression that the Listening Project doesn't emphasize. While the Listening Project emphasizes passive techniques for drawing the speaker out until they change their mind, Rosenberg's "NVC Process" is designed to get the listener and the speaker to understand each other about their feelings and needs. (Fantl, 2018, p. 172)

The immediate goal is mutual understanding and humanizing, not mind-changing, though there is hope that the process can lead to a change in perspective. Fantl is doubtful that complete honesty about one's closed-mindedness can lead to belief alteration, saying,

> [Y]ou can only permissibly engage closed-mindedly by being honest about your closed-mindedness. This can be a difficult trick to pull off effectively, if your goal is to convince others, since honesty about your closed-mindedness is just the sort of thing that can alienate your listener and put them on the defensive. (Fantl, 2018, p. 176)

But one can hope that engagement will lead to belief alteration but see that as different from needing to *convince* others through direct confrontation. The route can be indirect, through mutual understanding and by helping to create an openness to take in new information. This seems to be the point of the NVC process. If we think about how we engage with someone when aiming to alter their emotions, we can see how this might work. There are different strategies we might take when someone has an irrational or problematic emotion. Reflecting on these can help us imagine ways of engagement that, though deviating from the thoroughgoing participant stance where we regard each other as equally rational, need not devolve into the wholly objective stance either.

Is there really a difference between trying to directly convince someone that they are wrong, and engaging in a way that aims for them to change their belief? And, again, do I need to mask my intentions for the belief alternation to be successful? While being fully explicit in your intentions, and hopes in such interactions might impede success, not saying *everything* need not entail deception. Coming right out and saying exactly how you feel about someone's misplaced anger or fear is often not helpful but being less than fully forthcoming does not mean that one is being deceptive. There are times when I ought not to have a particular emotion, but you telling me that I shouldn't feel this way, and offering evidence for why I shouldn't, does little to alter my emotion. To put it simply, evidence does not immediately affect

feelings. We see this clearly in the case of recalcitrant emotions; I can still experience fear even if I am convinced that the spider is not at all dangerous. Thinking of beliefs as being like emotions can explain why, if one's belief is seen as centrally connected to one's identity, even if there is overwhelming evidence *against* the belief, it remains resilient. The way to get people to be open to changing their beliefs is to find ways to make them more secure and less defensive, so that the presentation of facts does not feel like an assault on who they are.

One might agree that there are times when not being fully forthcoming in one's attitudes is not problematically deceptive, but when it comes to engaging with a fringe believer, it seems one is intentionally hiding something that would alienate them if they knew what your attitudes were. That is, the very reason you are hiding your anti-fringe belief attitude is so that you will not alienate the one holding this belief, which would lessen the possibility of their changing their mind. This is different from withholding one's attitudes about a friend's attire or cooking. Now, Fantl may well agree that the *prima facie* duty to not engage can be outweighed by the good if it leads to belief alteration. But still, he would see this as a case of ends justifying problematic means. I seem to be failing to respect the believer as a rational person, or as Immanuel Kant would put it, treating them as an "end-in-themselves."

In trying to make sense of what this means, Rae Langton emphasizes Kant's distinction between treating someone as a means and treating someone *merely* as a means:

> I treat a person merely as a means when I act towards her in a way that blocks her ability to form her own ends and act on them. I do this when I make it impossible for her to assent to my action towards her, impossible for her to share the goal I have in acting. (Langton, 1992, p. 489)

To make the distinction clear, she presents two examples of my baking a cake with a friend and treating her as means in the sense that I am exploiting her culinary abilities "and without her my cake would be a dismal flop." If she knows I am doing this and "thinks baking is fun and still wants to do it with me, she shares my end; she is not *merely* a means" (Langton, 1992, p. 489). However, if this cake is part of a plan to seduce my friend's "notoriously sweet toothed boyfriend," then my friend is *merely* a means: "Consent, outright enthusiasm, is there for our joint action under the description: 'making a delicious cake'; but not, sadly, under the description: 'helping Rae to seduce Otto'. My deceit makes it impossible for her to choose that end as her end" (Langton, 1992, p. 490). Importantly, just as is the case with my Qanon friend, no outright lie is needed here — only reticence. The question then becomes, could my friend choose my end as hers? It is quite possible that she could if the end is described as "regaining autonomy."

I think there are times when one can engage close-mindedly without violating even a *prima facie* duty, though it likely will vary from case to case. Thinking about how we appropriately respond to each other's emotional states can help address the worry about closed-minded engagement being a failure to respect someone as a person. At times, recognizing that persons are not only rational agents, capable of choosing their own ends, but also part of the causal order is what is needed for proper

respect. If I know you, and I know that you have a tendency to snap when you are tired and hungry, it is not disrespectful for me to explain your behaviour by appealing to these "merely causal" explanations. Conversely, I can fail to respect someone by demanding rational engagement when it is not appropriate. And what applies to one's emotional state, such as irritability, and one's behaviour, such as complaining or lashing out, can also sometimes apply to doxastic states. This type of objective stance with its "causal mode of interpretation" can humanize the person one is trying to understand or engage with, and I don't see why this is problematically deceptive or manipulative.

4. Problematic Speakers

I want to end with a note about Fantl's final chapter regarding inviting problematic speakers to campus. His conclusion is, "it's wrong for groups or individuals to invite certain problematic speakers to campus", but the argument was novel (to me) in that it hinged on "the ethics of invitation" (Fantl, 2018, p. 179). Again, many advocates of bringing in such speakers, as well those opposed to speech codes appeal to Mill-type arguments supporting freedom of expression. What Fantl points out is that when someone is invited to campus, it is not the same as failing to suppress a certain viewpoint; it brings with it certain obligations.

Part of the larger social situation that makes the racist and sexist attitudes of invited speakers so damaging is that they've been invited and, therefore, as the norms of invitations require, they are to be treated respectfully by the host — the university community. And so, the psychological harm caused by the invitation of the problematic speaker is not just "offence" at the speaker's words; it's a feeling of betrayal and isolation that is the result of a perception that the speaker is getting more respect from the larger group than are the targets of the speaker's words (Fantl, 2018, p. 188).

While I find this argument compelling, and hope that it receives attention and open-minded engagement from its opponents, I have a harder time connecting it to the conclusions of the first half of the book. It seems that whether one adopts an open or closed mind to the arguments of these potential speakers has no effect on whether they should be invited.

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