Open-Mindedness and Education

William Hare, *Open-Mindedness and Education*, Montreal: McGill - Queen's, University Press 1979.

Educational theorizing has often been fullsome in its praise of open-mindedness but unfortunately it wears something of a "lean and hungry look" when it comes to providing analyses of the concept. Unlike its distant but definitely "non-kissing" cousin, the concept of indoctrination, open-mindedness has not received the scrupulous analytical attention it no doubt deserves. Yet open-mindedness in education is subject to many claims—that, for example, in order to be open-minded in one's teaching one has to abandon such things as lecturing and resort to discussion; or, that open-mindedness requires a teacher to act as a "neutral" chairman. It is the virtue of William Hare's closely argued book *Open-Mindedness and Education* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 1979), that it, like Mark Antony, has come, not to praise these claims, but to bury them.

1) *Open-mindedness and Traits*

According to Hare, open-mindedness logically requires a person to be both able and willing to revise his or her beliefs in the face of counter-evidence and argument. In order to ascribe this trait to a person it is neither necessary nor sufficient to establish *what* a person believes. So even if it is the case that someone sincerely believes that any belief should be rejected in the light of good counter-evidence this would not be sufficient to establish open-mindedness. Although the presence of certain beliefs does not guarantee open-mindedness, neither is the absence of belief required. That is, neutrality is not necessary to the open-minded person. For Hare, what determines whether a person is open-minded is the way he or she tends to act in certain sorts of circumstances, just as describing a person as honest or as courageous depends upon how he or she tends to act in given sorts of circumstances.

According to Hare, any form of trait ascription depends upon establishing that a person has a tendency to act in certain ways in certain sorts of situations, and failure to act in the relevant way will be attributable either to a person's not having the trait or to backsliding. No doubt educational remedies will differ in accordance with which of these interpretations we place on a person's failure to act. Yet certain remedies may be misplaced if it turns out, as I think it will, that not all traits can be viewed simply as tendencies to act. Consider for example a character trait like courage. If we follow Hare's views we would have to say that a person is called courageous because of the sort of actions which he or she performs. But why could it not be the case that actions are called courageous, because they took courage to perform? Suppose for example that someone has rescued a small child from a river with considerable risk to his or her life. Whether this is to be called a courageous act seems to depend upon whether the act required the rescuer to summon up his courage. After all, he or she could have been oblivious to the dangers involved and if this had been the case, the act, though a dangerous one to perform, was not an act of courage since our hero did not have to overcome fear. Although some traits (e.g., sentimentality, hot-headedness) perhaps do manifest themselves in a direct sort of way in certain sorts of circumstances (e.g., bursting into tears, verbal abuse), there are others which do not, and I think the moral virtues are instances of the latter kind. In these cases failure to act does not require us to infer that the person involved does not possess the requisite moral character. It may, but it may also indicate an inappropriate appraisal of the situation, or to a sort of backsliding which amounts to a failure to overcome an inclination not to act in accordance with one's best judgment.

So far I have argued against Hare's claim that every character trait ascription simply requires establishing that a person has a tendency to act in certain ways. But does this objection also apply to open-mindedness which Hare takes to be an intellectual rather than a character trait? Once more I think that difficulties arise for Hare in viewing an action like revising a belief in the light of counter-evidence, as a direct manifestation of a single trait which gets called "open-mindedness". As I have tried to point out there are some cases of character trait ascription in which failure to act in an expected way does not necessarily mean that a trait is missing. Similarly, in cases where a person refuses to alter a given belief in spite of counter-evidence, this does not require us to conclude that he or she is closed-minded since the particular hypothesis in question may be so important that it is not to be given up at the first whiff of counter-evidence. Hare does indeed recognize this, for he says that being open-minded does not conflict with being tenacious with respect to certain of our hypotheses. According to Hare "intellectual backsliding" begins to occur when a person starts to introduce *ad hoc* hypotheses solely for the purpose of protecting a favoured view (p. 57). But surely this also suggests that a decision to revise a given hypothesis in the light of relevant counter-evidence may not simply be the result of a single trait of intellect any more than the act of saving a drowning child is the result of a single moral trait called courage. Indeed one might claim that insofar as open-mindedness is constituted partly by a *willingness* to revise one's beliefs, traits of character as well as intellect are sometimes called upon so as to allow for the revision of beliefs. One can easily envisage circumstances in which

courage may be called upon and others in which honesty is needed. The long and short of this is that revision of beliefs in the light of counter-evidence is not the result of a single intellectual trait manifesting itself, but rather may be the result of a combination of various intellectual and character traits which vary according to circumstance. In other words, open-mindedness is a more complex notion than Hare takes it to be.

So far I have made much ado about Hare's analysis of open-mindedness in terms of traits and have suggested that more work needs to be done in order to get hold of the logic of trait-ascription. I have done this not out of any inordinate logical fussiness, but because I think that such work is particularly important for moral education. Without it we cannot properly understand the relation between moral judgment and moral character. As Hare points out (p. 16), the work of Lawrence Kohlberg has had something of a depressing effect upon such efforts with the consequence that our understanding of the role of the moral virtues within moral education has been undernourished.

2) *Open-mindedness and the Teacher*

What educational claims can legitimately be made about open-mindedness? Suppose we examine this issue by raising three questions considered by Hare: (a) Is an educated person necessarily open-minded? (b) Does an open-minded teacher have to adopt the stance of a neutral chairman when controversial issues are being discussed in a class? (c) Are there any teaching methods which are necessarily open-minded?

(a) In considering the relation between "being educated" and "being open-minded", Hare says that it is important to distinguish the former from such counterfeit-synonyms as "schooling" and "learning". After all, one may have received a great deal of schooling and have learned much and yet remain steadfastly closed-minded. But can the same be said of someone whom we all regard as educated? Hare argues that it would be logically incoherent to regard someone as both educated and closed-minded. But why? His argument goes something like this: to be educated entails that one cares about getting things right. But can a person be concerned with getting things right unless he or she is willing to consider counter-evidence when it arises? Clearly not. Therefore, open-mindedness is "necessarily an aim of education insofar as education involves the pursuit of truth..." (p. 61).

I think there are at least two comments which might be interesting to make at this point. The first is that the linkage between education and open-mindedness requires some further argument to the effect that most human knowledge is revisable. That is, with only very few exceptions most beliefs must be regarded as subject to possible counter-evidence. Such a view of human knowledge, which might be called "fallibilism", differs from other views found in the history of philosophy, notably skepticism and dogmatism. In the case of the skeptic, the claim is that there is no sense of "evidence" or "counter-evidence" strong enough to distinguish between beliefs which are reasonable and those which are not; with dogmatism the claim is that there are beliefs which can be established to such a degree that there is no possiblility of there being any counter-evidence against them. Adopting any one of these views towards knowledge may change from domain to domain so that, for example, one might be dogmatic with respect to religious claims, skeptical concerning moral beliefs and a fallibilist in the scientific domain. In so far as one is skeptical or dogmatic, this means that one cannot be open-minded since both views exclude, for different reasons, the possibility of counter-evidence. To claim that "being educated" entails open-mindedness also means establishing that being educated is incompatible with being skeptical or dogmatic. This may be true, but it requires further elaboration.

The second point I wish to make, concerns the connection between being open-minded and domains of knowledge. Hare, at one point, (p. 62) distinguishes between "abilities" (e.g. creativity and effective thinking) and "attitudes" (e.g. open-mindedness). Abilities, but not attitudes, are domain specific so that even if a teacher manages to develop a high degree of creativity in one domain (e.g. science), it does not follow that the student will have the same ability in other domains (e.g. in philosophy). With attitudes the matter is said to be quite different, for Hare claims that a teacher can develop something like open-mindedness in *general* so that once a student "realizes what it involves and begins to adopt it, there is no logical reason why one could not be open-minded about *any* of one's beliefs" (p. 62). Hare does allow however, that people may develop certain blind spots (e.g. religion), which prevent open-mindedness from occuring, but the explanation for these failures is not a domain related one but the fact that a person has either been indoctrinated or is simply ignorant. However, if what I have said about the connection between epistemological attitudes and open-mindedness is correct, then the development of open-mindedness may indeed be domain specific, depending upon how one views knowledge in that domain. Thus one and the same teacher may seek to develop a strong sense of the revisability of scientific beliefs in his students but when teaching something like religion, because he takes a dogmatic view towards such claims, he seeks to establish unswerving faith in a particular creed. If we are to claim that open-mindedness is a justifiable *general* educational aim, we have to establish that knowledge *in general* is revisable.

(b) If we assume that open-mindedness in general is not only possible but is necessarily an educational aim, what can the teacher do so as to promote such a state of mind in students? One answer, albeit an ambiguous one, has been advocated by Lawrence Stenhouse. Through his writing and as Director of the British Schools Council's Humanities Curriculum Project, Stenhouse advances the claim that a teacher ought to act as a neutral chairman when controversial issues are being discussed in a class. Assuming that "neutrality" is not simply a description of a

person who happens to be teaching, but rather is a description of a person which applies because of the way his or her teaching gets done, what does Stenhouse envisage as the connection between neutrality and open-mindedness? Hare considers two possible interpretations of Stenhouse's views about this connection; first, that being neutral about an issue is the same as being open-minded about it; or that being neutral is the best means of fostering open-mindedness in students. Suppose we follow Hare's examination of each of these possibilities.

Hare's argument against the identification of "neutrality" with "open-mindedness" is very simple. If these concepts are identical, then non-neutrality, i.e., taking sides on an issue, would entail that one would be either unable or unwilling to revise one's belief in the light of counter-evidence. Because taking sides and open-mindedness are compatible, neutrality is not the same as open-mindedness. If a teacher adopts the stance of neutrality "*because* it is thought necessarily to be open-minded, then a mistaken *model* of open-mindedness is being presented to the students" (p. 70).

Hare's use of the term "neutrality" to "describe the action of not taking sides" (p. 70) is itself sufficiently ambiguous so as to mute the force of his argument. For what his argument shows is that being neutral about an issue cannot entail open-mindedness about it since whereas the latter may, the former cannot, involve belief. But "neutrality" as applied to teaching is not a matter of non-belief on an issue but rather a matter of refraining from manifesting a belief to a class, provided that the teacher does have a conviction. But even with this qualification the thrust of Hare's argument holds, for "refusing to say what one believes" is not the same as "open-mindedness". How students are likely to take such forbearance on the part of the teacher should be considered in the light of considering neutrality as a means to the development of open-mindedness.

The claim that teacher-neutrality is the best way of enhancing open-mindedness in students is clearly an empirical one. If we take Stenhouse and his associates on the Humanities Curriculum Projects as maintaining that the connection between teacher-neutrality and the development of open-mindedness is of this sort, then, as Hare reports, the amount of evidence they have gathered supporting this hypothesis is dissappointedly meager. Moreover, the favourable evidence which is cited supports a connection between neutrality and tolerance, rather than between neutrality and open-mindedness. Finally, the claim that teacher-neutrality is the means most likely to develop open-mindedness, suggests that a comparison ought to be made between it and other methods of teaching. Yet such an inquiry has not been undertaken. The effectiveness of teacher-neutrality as a means for enhancing open-mindedness, still remains an open question.

(c) The confusion over whether Stenhouse means to identify neutrality and open-mindedness, or is simply stating an empirical connection, perhaps accounts for the lack of any comparative study between teacher-neutrality as a means for developing open-mindedness and such teaching methods as lecturing. Indeed, according to Hare, Stenhouse comes very close to excluding some teaching methods, eg., lecturing, as means for developing open-mindedness as a matter of logical necessity. Conceptual clarity as to what is logically required of such notions as open-mindedness, lecturing, discussion, neutrality, etc., would serve empirical enquiry into teaching very well; for, as Hare claims, we would at least be clear as to what is a matter of empirical rather than logical connection. The corresponding danger for a teacher is that "unless he operates with a clear concept of open-mindedness, he is in danger of misinterpreting the available evidence, much of which is presently stated in misleading terms by empirical researchers who themselves lack a clear concept" (p. 127). In short, Hare is recalling to our minds, that ancient Socratic maxim "the unexamined concept is not worth thinking".

Hare says that an analysis of such concepts as lecturing, discussion, and study, reveals that, as a matter of logic, none of these, as a description of a teaching method, either ensures or excludes the development of open-mindedness. Once we are clear about conceptual matters it turns out that the connection between any one of these teaching method and the development of open-mindedness is a matter of empirical investigation. In this way logical enquiry is a necessary condition for determining what teaching method best serves the development of open-mindedness. Once stated in this way the interesting question arises whether in every case the adoption of a particular teaching method is based solely upon empirical evidence. Perhaps there are cases in which the method of teaching logically entails the sort of outcome sought. Consider for example, the learning of a skill like swimming. Consider also two teaching activities, viz., lecturing on swimming techniques and setting certain swimming tasks for students. We can easily imagine circumstances in which a teacher might lecture to his students about certain techniques. But if he or she thought that by lecturing, the students, once they understood it, would thereby have the technique right, his or her expectation would be out of kilter, not just empirically, but logically. On the other hand, if our teacher did not lecture, but only ran students through carefully selected tasks which required the practicing of various techniques then it would be logically appropriate to expect that if the students mastered these tasks, then they have learned to swim. It is not the case that the particular tasks which the teacher assigns are logically determined, but rather the fact that a teacher has to get students to practice since learning a skill can be regarded as entailed by the successful practicing of that skill just as finding something is entailed by a successful seeking of it. What I need to do in order to find something seems obvious from a logical point of view and I am suggesting that similar things obtain vis-a-vis what sort of teaching is logically appropriate to certain kinds of learning.

3) *Concluding Remarks*

Although I have had a reviewer's usual fun of picking a fight with an author, I have tried to centre serious attention upon three areas which seem to me in need of further investigation if we are to advance, not only our understanding of "open-mindedness" but those other allied notions which prefix whatever "-mindedness" we have in mind. First, there are problems associated with trait ascriptions—what, for example, is the relation between traits of character and traits of intellect; are there any ways of describing these traits which are more perspicacious than others (e.g., should we retain the vocabulary of open-mindedness" or resort to terms like "judgment" and "understanding" along with allied character-trait terms like "courage" and "honesty"); what is the relationship between traits, beliefs, and actions; etc. Secondly, we have to consider just what sort of traits we are logically required to develop in virtue of the concept of education. I have suggested that this can be done if we consider more carefully the relation between various conceptions of knowledge and educationally desirable traits. Finally, there is the problem of the relation between methods of teaching and learning. Is the connection always and everywhere an empirical one and does logical enquiry help only to the extent that it prevents confusion masquerading as solid empirical evidence? Or can logical investigation do more by treating teaching and learning as having a logic analogous to task-achievement terms? Indeed, can one "teach" open-mindedness simply by manifesting it, or is something else required?

Although these and other issues do not receive a fully satisfying answer in Hare's book, he does set us along the path of some very important issues within the philosophy of education and lays to rest some ghosts which have haunted educational theory about what is required of an open-minded teacher.

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