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The Virtue of Open-Mindedness as a Virtue of Attention

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Abstract: Open-mindedness appears as a potential intellectual virtue from the beginning of the rise of the literature on intellectual virtues. It often takes up a special role, sometimes thought of as a meta-virtue rather than a first-order virtue: as an ingredient that makes other virtues virtuous. Jason Baehr has attempted to give a unified account of open-mindedness as an intellectual virtue. He argues that the conceptual core of open-mindedness lies in the fact that a person departs, moves beyond, or transcends a certain default cognitive standpoint. Two of his main aims are to show that (1) one does not need to assume a doxastic conflict or disagreement to be at the heart of open-mindedness—that is, there are also instances where the virtue of open-mindedness is needed when there is no opposing view to be considered—and (2) that not all forms of open-mindedness include rational assessment—that is, sometimes being open-minded is not about weighing evidence for and against a claim. So, his main aim is to show that there are various situations that afford open-mindedness, in each of which a slightly different kind of open-mindedness is called for. To unify all these different kinds of open-mindedness is then the goal of his work. He arrives at the following definition of open-mindedness (OM): an open-minded person is characteristically (a) willing and (within limits) able (b) to transcend a default cognitive standpoint (c) in order to take up or take seriously the merits of (d) a distinct cognitive standpoint. In this article, I take seriously Baehr's suggestion of how to understand open-mindedness as an intellectual virtue and argue that the crux lies in formulating how we can *be able to* transcend a default cognitive standpoint. This is not as obvious as it has been taken to be in the literature on open-mindedness. Biases, overconfidence, and wishful thinking are difficult exactly because *we don't know* that we are engaging in them. That is, they are *systematically hidden* from our consciousness, otherwise they would not be a bias, overconfidence, or wishful thinking. Hence, the crux of making open-mindedness open-minded is to see how it is possible to make something of one's own mind visible that is systematically hidden from oneself. I argue that this problem can be solved by looking at research on attention. I base my considerations in this article on Sebastian Watzl's account of attention, which essentially holds that paying attention is an activity of foregrounding and backgrounding mental contents. That is, attention is the activity of structuring mental contents into a priority structure of foreground and background. If I pay attention to the scene in front of me, I foreground the black letters on my screen, and I background the coffee cup next to them. In this way, I create a priority structure between the letters (as they appear to me) and the coffee cup (as it appears to me). I argue that what allows us to make something of our own mind visible that is systematically hidden from us is a special way of paying attention, hence a special way of foregrounding and backgrounding the involved mental contents. That is, the crux of what enables us to transcend a default cognitive standpoint, the conceptual core of open-mindedness, is a special kind of attention, which I will call 'open-minded attention' (OMA). The claim of this article is not that open-minded attention fully describes the virtue of open-mindedness (OMA is not sufficient for open-mindedness). Rather, what I try to show is that in all cases of open-mindedness it turns out that open-minded attention is the necessary component that ensures that we can indeed get rid of prior biases, that is, transcend also those implicit beliefs and expectations that are *systematically hidden* from us (OMA is necessary for open-mindedness).

Keywords: open-mindedness; attention; virtue; intellectual virtue; bias; virtue epistemology; priority structure; foregrounding; doxastic conflict; rational assessment; overconfidence; wishful thinking

1. Introduction

Open-mindedness appears as a potential intellectual virtue from the beginning of the rise of the literature on intellectual virtues. It often takes up a special role, sometimes thought of as a meta-virtue rather than a first-order virtue: as an ingredient that makes other virtues virtuous. Jason Baehr [1] has attempted to give a unified account of open-mindedness as an intellectual virtue.[1] He argues that the conceptual core of open-mindedness lies in the fact that a person *departs*, *moves beyond*, or *transcends* a certain default cognitive standpoint [1] (p. 149). Two of his main aims are to show that (1) one does not need to assume a doxastic conflict or disagreement to be at the heart of open-mindedness—that is, there are also instances where the virtue of open-mindedness is needed when there is no opposing view to be considered—and (2) that not all forms of open-mindedness include rational assessment—that is, sometimes being open-minded is not about weighing evidence for and against a claim. So, his main aim is to show that there are various situations that afford open-mindedness, in each of which a slightly different kind of open-mindedness is called for. To unify all these different kinds of open-mindedness is then the goal of his work. He arrives at the following definition of open-mindedness:

> (OM) An open-minded person is characteristically (a) willing and (within limits) able (b) to transcend a default cognitive standpoint (c) in order to take up or take seriously the merits of (d) a distinct cognitive standpoint. [1] (p. 152)

In this article, I take seriously Baehr's suggestion of how to understand open-mindedness as an intellectual virtue and argue that the crux lies in formulating how we can *be able to* transcend a default cognitive standpoint. This is not as obvious as it has been taken to be in the literature on open-mindedness. Biases, overconfidence, and wishful thinking are difficult exactly because *we do not know* that we are engaging in them. That is, they are *systematically hidden* from our consciousness, otherwise they would not be a bias, overconfidence, or wishful thinking. Hence, the crux of making open-mindedness open-minded is to see how it is possible to make something of one's own mind visible that is systematically hidden from oneself.

I argue that this problem can be solved by looking at research on attention. I base my considerations in this article on Watzl's [3] account of attention, which essentially holds that paying attention is an activity of foregrounding and backgrounding mental contents. That is, attention is the activity of structuring mental contents into a priority structure of foreground and background. If I pay attention to the scene in front of me, I foreground the black letters on my screen, and I background the coffee cup next to them. In this way, I create a priority structure between the letters (as they appear to me) and the coffee cup (as it appears to me).

I argue that what allows us to make something of our own mind visible that is systematically hidden from us is a special way of paying attention, hence a special way of foregrounding and backgrounding the involved mental contents. That is, the crux of what enables us to transcend a default cognitive standpoint, the conceptual core of open-mindedness, is a special kind of attention, which I will call 'open-minded attention' (OMA). The claim of this article is not that open-minded attention fully describes the virtue of open-mindedness (OMA is not sufficient for open-mindedness). Rather, what I try to show is that in all cases of open-mindedness it turns out that open-minded attention is the necessary component that ensures that we can indeed get rid of prior biases, that is, transcend also those implicit beliefs and expectations that are *systematically* hidden from us (OMA is necessary for open-mindedness). In Section 1, I present a sketch of the account of attention that I apply throughout the article. I argue that while the usual way of paying attention is often (implicitly) thought of in terms of *focused* attention, we are also capable of a different kind of attention. This other kind of attention consists in *suspending* our usual ways of foregrounding mental contents, so that mental space is made for that which usually remains in the background. I call this open-minded attention (OMA). This will be the central notion that helps us understand open-mindedness as an intellectual virtue. In

Section 2, I ask what makes open-mindedness an intellectual virtue. I consider various proposals in the literature and suggest that Baehr's [1] and Riggs's [4] accounts give us good reasons to think that open-mindedness is indeed an intellectual virtue. Their accounts leave us with an open challenge, however, which also applies to other existing accounts of open-mindedness: they do not explain how we can overcome a default cognitive standpoint that is *systematically hidden* from us, such as biases, overconfidence, and wishful thinking. In Section 3, I then argue that understanding open-mindedness as a virtue of attention solves this problem. Open-minded attention is that which enables the emancipation from a default cognitive standpoint which is systematically hidden from us. It is what makes open-mindedness open-minded. In Sections 4 and 5, I then show how understanding open-mindedness as a virtue of attention also improves on the other two mentioned central aspects of Baehr's account: the role of doxastic conflict and the role of rational assessment in open-mindedness. I conclude that attention thus helps us achieve a unified, realistic, and coherent account of open-mindedness.

2. Attention: An Activity of Foregrounding and Backgrounding Mental Contents

Watzl [3] argues that attention is, fundamentally, an activity of foregrounding and backgrounding mental contents. That is, attention is the activity of structuring mental contents into a priority structure of foreground and background. If I pay attention to the scene in front of me, I foreground the black letters on my screen, and I background the coffee cup next to them. In this way, I create a priority structure between the letters (as they appear to me) and the coffee cup (as it appears to me).[2] I argue that open-mindedness necessarily entails a special way of doing this kind of foregrounding and backgrounding, hence, a special way of paying attention.

The *usual* way of paying attention is often (implicitly) thought of in terms of *focused* attention. We say "pay attention to the icy road", and mean to say that one should *focus on*—or foreground—the fact that the road is icy or the ice on the road. That is, focused attention consists in looking out for and thus foregrounding a specific aspect in the scene in front of me. I pay *focused* attention when I have a specific aspect in mind (e.g., "ice", "black letters") while creating a priority structure, and I use my (habitualized) skills of foregrounding in order to achieve this focus.

Now, we are also capable of paying attention in a different way than with the goal of creating a focus. That is, we can do the foregrounding and backgrounding in a way that does not consist in having a specific aspect in mind while creating a priority structure. It consists in the contrary: in deliberately *suspending* our usual ways of foregrounding, by backgrounding that which by itself has come to the foreground. This creates *mental space* for contents that are usually in the background. For example, if I stand in my garden, I can suspend my usual habit of foregrounding the berries on the branches of my plants. This will open up my mental space for things to come to the foreground that are usually in the background. For example, perhaps I now notice (foreground) the leaves, which usually stay unnoticed. We can call this 'open-minded attention' (OMA), as a contrast term to 'focused attention'. Open-minded attention consists in *suspending* one's usual habits of foregrounding, so that a different mental priority structure can emerge. Focused attention, by contrast, consists in *using* one's usual ways of foregrounding in order to create a focus.

These two kinds of attention serve different functions in our lives. In some situations we need focused attention, in some we need open-minded attention. Let us now see one role that open-minded attention plays in intellectual virtue, as I argue.

3. Why Open-Mindedness is an Intellectual Virtue

Baehr [1] conceives of intellectual virtues as "ways in which (...) traits are useful for overcoming certain familiar obstacles to successful inquiry" [1] (p. 17). He then distinguishes intellectual virtues from other cognitive excellences, such as intellectual faculties, talents, temperaments, and skills. He notes that "open-mindedness appears at the top of nearly every list of intellectual virtues in the virtue epistemology literature" [1]

(p. 140).[3] That is why he then works out a unifying account of open-mindedness as an intellectual virtue.

Others take open-mindedness to be something more general than an intellectual virtue, such as "taking a special attitude to oneself" (Bommarito [9]). Some also take open-mindedness to be something much simpler, such as Hare [10], who maintains that open-mindedness simply consists in an impartial stance toward evidence. Similarly, "Adler [11] sees it as a way of responding to counter-evidence to one's own beliefs." (Bommarito [9]). And while open-mindedness "is often talked about as an epistemic view (see Zagzebski [7] (...), Arpaly [12] sees it as a disposition to change our beliefs without being opinionated out of moral concern. McRae [13] also sees it as involving moral concern but also a willingness to consider alternate self-narratives (...)" (cited in Bommarito [9]).

Hence, not in all of these is open-mindedness considered an intellectual virtue, narrowly conceived. Sometimes, for example in Hare's [10] case, it is simply an impartial stance toward evidence, which could be the result of an intellectual virtue, but does not have to be. However, in the virtue epistemic literature itself, open-mindedness is taken to have philosophical merit as an intellectual virtue (Turri, Alfano, Greco [14]). Among the virtue epistemologists, it is mainly the virtue responsibilists (e.g., Battaly, Code, Hookway, Montmarquet, and Zagzebski) that take open-mindedness to be an important intellectual virtue.[4] Virtue responsibilists "understand intellectual virtues to include *cultivated character traits* such as conscientiousness and open-mindedness (...). Their approach is broadly aligned with internalist sympathies in epistemology and deeply concerned with cognition's ethical dimensions and implications" (Turri, Alfano, Greco [14]). Baehr's [1] account of open-mindedness is situated in this virtue responsibilist tradition.

But *why* does open-mindedness count as an intellectual virtue? What are the criteria that need to be fulfilled? Riggs [4] asks and answers exactly that question. He presents three desiderata for a convincing account of open-mindedness as an intellectual virtue: (1) it should be a "thick" concept, (2) it should be a virtue in the sense of a trait of persons, and (3) the specific conceptual puzzles that arise in an account of open-mindedness as an intellectual virtue need to be resolved (cf. [4], p. 174–177). In more detail, (1) means that an account of open-mindedness as intellectual virtue needs to simultaneously have descriptive and normative content, richness of detail or specificity, and a fairly straightforward application to the way we live our lives (cf. [4], p. 175). And (2) here means that Riggs agrees with virtue responsibilists, which means that he thinks for it to be a virtue, its execution doesn't only need to reliably lead to truth, but also that it be done with "the right standing motivations, and that such motivations be present and causally active in the production of belief" ([4], p. 176). And in (3), the puzzles that need to be resolved are all a version of the question "how can one, at the same time, be fully committed to a belief and be open-minded about its challenges?".

Riggs's [4] own account fulfills these three desiderata. For brevity's sake, I leave out his solution to the puzzle(s), and focus on a short summary of his account that satisfies the desiderata (1) and (2). His starting point is that open-mindedness is a second-order attitude toward one's beliefs in general, and not an attitude toward a specific proposition. It is a second-order attitude toward one's beliefs to the effect that one can defeat one's "habits of thought" whenever it is necessary: "To the extent one defeats these habits of thought, one is more open-minded." ([4], p. 183). A further requirement according to his account is that this second-order attitude must "be efficacious in our cognitive lives" in that it "must intrude upon our habits of thought *consistently*" ([4], p. 182). He then formulates two conditions that need to be met, which make it the case that this second-order attitude intrudes upon our habits of thought consistently: self-knowledge and self-monitoring.

This account satisfies desideratum 1: it is a thick concept of open-mindedness as an intellectual virtue, as it simultaneously contains descriptive and normative content, has a certain richness of detail (more in the original than portrayed here in the summary), and shows a straightforward application to the way we live our lives. The account also satisfies desideratum 2: open-mindedness is here understood as a kind of trait of persons—the

account specifies what it means to act according to this virtue with "the right standing motivations", and how these motivations are "causally active in the production of belief". (both [4], p. 176)

A crucial role in his account is thus played by self-knowledge and self-monitoring, namely, in making the second-order attitude (to defeat one's habits of thought when necessary) *efficacious* in our thoughts. That is, self-knowledge and self-monitoring have the role of making this second-order attitude "intrude upon our habits of thought consistently". When describing the role of self-knowledge and self-monitoring, Riggs adds:

> Self-knowledge is something that can be sought and cultivated, and self-monitoring can be practiced. Of course, there is the problem that our biases and tendencies to overconfidence and wishful thinking tend to be hidden from us. How can we become better at discovering these? The obvious answer is through exposing oneself to a variety of ideas and worldviews. ([4], p. 183)

It is here, in the question of how to discover mental contents that are systematically hidden from us, that the current accounts of open-mindedness are insufficient, including Riggs's.

In considering the role of self-knowledge and self-monitoring, Riggs sees that a challenge remains. The challenge that remains is that it is *by design* that our biases, overconfidence, and wishful thinking are hidden from us—so that even self-monitoring might not necessarily correct for that. His solution is that one needs to expose oneself to a variety of ideas and worldviews.

This solution is insufficient. If biases, overconfidence, and wishful thinking are *systematically* hidden from us, then they are also operative and potentially undetected when we confront ourselves with a variety of ideas and worldviews. That is, even with a thick, specific account of open-mindedness as intellectual virtue, which states what motivations need to be causally active in the formation of belief, the problem of *what makes open-mindedness open-minded* is not solved without saying *in what way* one intends to get over these systematically hidden biases, overconfidence, and wishful thinking. I take this to be the actual crux of an account of open-mindedness as an intellectual virtue.

4. Attention Explains What Makes Open-Mindedness Open-Minded: The *Ability* to Transcend a Default Cognitive Standpoint

4.1. Bringing the Background to the Foreground

An account of the virtue of open-mindedness *as necessarily entailing open-minded attention* gives an answer to that remaining challenge. Open-minded attention (OMA) is a mental process exactly geared toward making things visible that are usually in the background, hidden. Recall, OMA consists in the contrary of focused attention: in deliberately *suspending* our usual ways of foregrounding, so that mental space is created. This allows usually unnoticed aspects to come to the foreground. For example, if I stand in my garden, I can suspend my usual habit of foregrounding the berries on the branches of my plants. This will allow me to also notice (to foreground) the leaves, which usually stay unnoticed. Open-minded attention thus consists in *suspending* one's usual habits of foregrounding, so that a different mental priority structure can emerge, so that one notices the otherwise unnoticed.

Open-minded attention is thus mainly an *active undoing* of something (i.e., of what we usually foreground). It is *not* an *active pulling-to-the-foreground of something*. That is, an important aspect of open-minded attention is that it can be carried out without already knowing *what it is* that usually stays hidden in the background. That is, paying open-minded attention, in contrast to other mental strategies, does not presuppose that we already know our biases or that we know what we are being overconfident or wishfully thinking about, in order to overcome them.

Imagine again being in the garden. The first thing you notice are the berries. Now you start paying open-minded attention. That is, you take the thing you notice (the berries), and all you do is actively bringing the berries into the background. You do not know yet what else will come to the foreground instead when you do this. You can repeat this

process indefinitely. Let us say once the berries are backgrounded, the leaves come to the foreground. Now again, you take the thing you notice (the leaves) and actively bring them into the background, without knowing what else will appear in the foreground instead. That is, your activity is not a positive activity in some sense, an active-bringing-in-the-foreground-*of-something-else*. It is, rather, a negative activity, namely an active-bringing-in-the-background-of-what-you-foregrounded (of what you already know). It is a process of *making mental space* (for the hidden).

This way, one can bring things into the foreground that one did not yet know were implicitly there in one's mental space in the background. And that is the crucial step one can achieve with open-minded attention, which one cannot achieve just by thinking about one's potential biases, or by confronting oneself with many worldviews. The crucial point about open-minded attention is, thus, that one does not have to have any positive acquaintance, concept, or knowledge of these other things (biases etc.) that are systematically hidden in the background of one's mental space in order to bring them into the foreground with this process. And that is what makes open-minded attention the crucial process to overcome wishful thinking, overconfidence, and biases. It is what makes open-mindedness open-minded.

Let me in the next section consider a potential objection, which will also allow me to make the process of 'making mental space' involved in open-minded attention more precise, to distinguish it from other, similar mental processes.

4.2. Objection: Why Could the Process of Open-Minded Attention not be Biased, too?

It might be tempting to think of the process of OMA more or less in terms of what happens when we are asked to 'change perspective' more generally: suspending one's current perspective in order to be open for a new one. So, one might think that OMA is just one way of suspending one's judgment or views among many ways, and if those other ways of suspending can be biased, then so can the process of OMA be biased. So, the question is: why could not the way we pay open-minded attention be biased too, in the same way as exposing oneself to a variety of ideas and worldviews (and other processes of suspending one's views)?

The short answer is: because OMA is a *systematic* undoing of that which 'forces' itself first into the foreground. Let me give a longer, more detailed answer by contrasting it with the kind of suspension that is triggered by exposing oneself to a variety of ideas and worldviews. So, here is the challenge to make the contrast clearer: the argument in this article makes a lot out of the fact that OMA is foremost an "undoing" of a view, rather than a process of "taking up" a new view. But one can think of deliberately exposing oneself to a variety of ideas and worldviews as an active way of undoing one's views, too. The epistemically operative component of exposing oneself to a variety of ideas and worldviews is exactly that such an exposing tends to undo, or at least weaken, one's attachment to one's current views. So, if we argue that this can be biased, why could not the process of OMA be biased, too?

Here is the idea. In OMA, again, the goal is to suspend our usual ways of foregrounding. That means that when I see, think, or imagine something, I undo what is in the foreground (the red berries, the first association with a term that comes to mind, etc.). This allows what has otherwise remained in the background to now come to the foreground. The process so far, of course, can still be influenced by biases—the next best association, or the green leaves, can still have come to mind because I am biased to notice certain things rather than others. However, if we *continue* that process of suspending what is in the foreground, we can work further and further into aspects of that which we perceive or think about that we otherwise would not have noticed. That is, OMA is not a one-time exercise. It is, rather, a process in which we keep suspending what is in the foreground in order to make space for what is still in the background. In the end, we have gone through a (perhaps long) list of aspects that we would otherwise not have noticed. We might end up with a completely different view than we started out with. While the order in which the things that came into the foreground can be just as biased as any other process of suspending, with OMA we can

keep deepening this process until we arrive at hitherto never considered aspects. Moreover, by afterwards analyzing what came to mind first and what came to mind last, this gives us some quite explicit insight into our own biases—we might notice the pattern in which things become foregrounded first.

We do not have to think of this as a process that takes very long, and in which every new round of suspending requires a new effort. Someone who has the virtue of open-mindedness is able to go through such a process of *repeated* suspending until she arrives at a new viewpoint without mechanically repeated effort and without taking too much time.

So, what makes the difference from other forms of suspending (such as exposing oneself to a variety of ideas and worldviews)? Two aspects make the difference: that it can be repeated indefinitely, and that it is systematic. First, in contrast to exposing oneself to a variety of ideas and worldviews, to exercise OMA one does not need any external views to confront oneself with in order to go through the process, nor does one need any other external resources that could run out. I can undo what is in the foreground of my mind again and again, in principle indefinitely. By contrast, there are a certain number of different ideas and worldviews that I can find in a given moment, and even if I expose myself to all of them, there is an external limit to how often I can repeat the process. Moreover, those views within my reach are a contingent but possibly biased bunch, in the sense that there is a preselection in what views are available to expose myself to. That is, even if I expose myself to views very far from my own, the views that are in fact available right now within my reach are a preselection of all possible views there could be. Second, OMA is a *systematic* approach of undoing one's current views. As described above, it is always that which is most in the foreground which is suspended to make space for the background aspects. After repeating the process a few times, one can notice one's history of what comes to mind first, and what last. One can get an explicit insight into what one usually foregrounds and usually backgrounds. And OMA seems less subject to contingent and possibly biased mechanisms, because one does not rely on what alternative views happen to be within one's reach, as in the approach of exposing oneself to a variety of ideas and worldviews. These are the main reasons why OMA promises to not fall prey to the same biases as other approaches of suspending one's current views.[5] All that being said, the claim is not that OMA is an *infallible* tool to get rid of biases. That is, even after these considerations, one must leave the possibility open that even after exercising OMA, one continues to have some biases. To leave that possibility open, however, corresponds to good epistemic practice anyway—it pertains to epistemic humility that we do not assume, at any given point in time, that we have actually gotten rid of all our biases.

5. The Role of Doxastic Conflict and Rational Assessment

Let us now go back to Baehr's unifying account of open-mindedness as intellectual virtue. He argues that the conceptual core of open-mindedness lies in the fact that a person *departs*, *moves beyond*, or *transcends* a certain default or privileged cognitive standpoint (p. 149). Hence, also in his account, the challenge remains how one *is able to* transcend one's default cognitive standpoint, exactly in cases where it matters most, namely when biases etc. are *systematically* hidden from one's own mind. Along the same lines as we have shown above with Riggs's account, an account like Baehr's also needs to fill in open-minded attention for this crucial step. Open-minded attention is what enables the emancipation from a default cognitive standpoint in the case of *systematically* hidden contents, and thus makes open-mindedness open-minded. But there is more.

Two of Baehr's main aims in unifying the different kinds of open-mindedness into a unified account of intellectual virtue are to show that (1) one does not need to assume a doxastic conflict or disagreement to be at the heart of open-mindedness—that is, there are also instances where the virtue of open-mindedness is needed when there is no opposing view to be considered—and (2) that not all forms of open-mindedness include rational assessment—that is, sometimes being open-minded is not about weighing evidence for and against a claim.

I argue that open-minded attention also explains better these two central aspects of Baehr's [1] account. That is, in addition to what we have just seen, namely, that open-minded attention explains how we are *able*, in the first place, to transcend a default cognitive standpoint, there are two more ways in which the attentional framework of open-mindedness improves on Baehr's account. First, I argue here that open-minded attention explains better the relation of open-mindedness to doxastic conflict than Baehr's original account, and second, it explains better why open-mindedness does not necessarily entail rational assessment.

5.1. Doxastic Conflict

Baehr's account seems confused about what it means to have a doxastic conflict. Baehr finds it implausible that open-mindedness is required only in situations where there is a doxastic conflict with one's current beliefs. He writes:

> (. . .) it is tempting to think of open-mindedness as essentially relevant to situations involving intellectual conflict, opposition, challenge, or argument, and in particular, to situations involving a conflict between a person's beliefs, on the one hand, and an opposing position, argument, or body of evidence, on the other. ([1], p. 141–142)

and

> While initially plausible, the conflict model is inadequate as a general account of open-mindedness. This is because an exercise of open-mindedness (1) need not involve the setting aside or suspending of any beliefs; and (2) it need not presuppose any kind of conflict or disagreement between an open-minded person's beliefs and the object of her open-mindedness. Both (1) and (2) are a function of the fact that open-mindedness can be manifested in situations in which the person in question is *neutral* with respect to the items being assessed. ([1], p. 143)

This seems to betray a somewhat naïve view on what our epistemic default positions are when we are confronted with new evidence, a new view, or a new opinion. Baehr seems to think that there is such a thing as a *neutral* standpoint in regard to new information. And consequently, he thinks there must also be a kind of open-mindedness that applies to situations where the new information does not stand in conflict with any of our default cognitive standpoints (because they can be neutral in respect to the new information).

If we consider the model of attention as foregrounding and backgrounding, we obtain a different picture of our default cognitive standpoint. With this model, we are *never* in a position of a neutral blank slate, as it were, in regard to any of the new information we receive. We always already have certain habits of foregrounding and backgrounding with which we take in the new information in the first place. For example, it is possible that I have never been in a garden before. Even in such a case, when I step into a garden the first time, I am not in a neutral cognitive standpoint in regard to the new impressions there. Some things will be more salient to me than others, even if I have never seen them before. I might have a habit of foregrounding red things as opposed to green things,[6] and so the berries will be foregrounded (thus, noticed) and the green leaves backgrounded. Hence, there is no neutral standpoint. And the attention model makes this clearer. What and how we foreground and background is, of course, all the more relevant if we consider how we perceive the *social* world, where implicit social biases are usually at work. How I perceive the social world is inherently structured by my habits of foregrounding and backgrounding, which we know include implicit biases for all of us. Here, it is all the more important to realize that there is no neutral standpoint to start out with.

Let me clarify two points here: first, what kind of conflict is necessarily involved when we have to exercise the virtue of open-mindedness (Section 5.1.1), and second, what it would mean to have a neutral standpoint (Section 5.1.2).

5.1.1. What Kind of Conflict?

One could respond to the argument so far that 'doxastic' means 'judgment-based', and so a doxastic conflict is a conflict in judgment, and not just any kind of conflict. And the activity of foregrounding and backgrounding does not, by itself, imply the making of a judgment. So, in that sense, there is still no doxastic conflict if a situation requires of us to suspend our usual ways of foregrounding and to do it in a new way.

If considered in the narrow sense of 'judgment-based', open-mindedness does not always presuppose a *doxastic* conflict. The point made above should, thus, be understood in a weaker sense: that there is *some* form of conflict presupposed in exercising the virtue of open-mindedness. One could call this necessary conflict an 'expectation conflict'. One expects (in virtue of one's habits of foregrounding) ideas, visual stimuli, etc. to be structured into foreground and background in a certain way, but a new situation requires of one to revise that expectation, so that other objects are foregrounded than those expected. That is when the virtue of open-mindedness needs to be exercised. If there were no such conflict in expectation, there would be no need to suspend one's usual ways of foregrounding, hence no need for the virtue to be exercised. We can understand the term 'expectation conflict' as the more general term, under which 'doxastic conflict' falls as one species. Hence, the revision this article makes to Baehr's account—if doxastic conflict is to be understood in this narrower sense—is that it is not accurate to say that there is sometimes *no* conflict at all between one's current way of seeing things and the new way one is trying to adopt, when exercising the virtue of open-mindedness. Some conflict is always required for the virtue of open-mindedness to be called for. This conflict might not always include a conflict in judgments, but at least a conflict in one's expectations and how one then has to revise one's habits of foregrounding and backgrounding. Baehr seems to have assumed a wrong dichotomy: either open-mindedness presupposes a kind of conflict between a person's prior *beliefs* and the object of her open-mindedness, or open-mindedness can also be operative when a person is neutral with respect to the items being assessed. Our considerations show that there is a third possibility: one can also experience an expectation conflict (different foregrounding required than one's habitual way), which means that one is *not* neutral in respect to the assessed objects, but one does likewise not have conflicting *beliefs* (not a doxastic conflict). These considerations do not speak against Baehr's unifying account; they only make it more precise.

From the way we have now revised Baehr's account with the attention framework, a worry might arise. The worry might be that this framework conceives of any change as a form of conflict. But, one might say, learning something new might require of me to change my foregrounding and backgrounding, but that does not necessarily mean that my new view is in conflict with my prior one—it is just different. In response to this worry, let me suggest distinguishing between three cases: (1) a case where the new view is in doxastic conflict with the old one; (2) a case where the new view is 'only' in an expectation conflict with the old one; and (3) a case where the new view is simply added to the old ones (having learned something completely new), in the sense that none of my prior views had to be adjusted or revised to add the new view.

In distinguishing these three cases, I argue that in cases 1 and 2, we need to exercise the virtue of open-mindedness in order to acquire the new view. In the third case, however, the virtue of open-mindedness is not required. That is, if I learn something new that does not in any way challenge my current views, not even my implicit expectations and what I give more and less focus to, then one does not need open-mindedness to add this view to one's current views. To be able to learn something new in that way might still require some intellectual virtues, for example, the intellectual virtue of curiosity. But curiosity is not the same as open-mindedness. I suggest that this is precisely a good criterion to distinguish the virtues of curiosity and open-mindedness: while the latter is required in cases where at least one's current expectations need to be revised to acquire the new view, curiosity is already required even if the new view is a conflict-free addition to one's current views. Thus, it is true that in this framework, any change is conceived of as a conflict with

one's prior expectations. But this does not seem to be problematic by itself. Once we have the more minimal concept of an expectation conflict, we can see that even quite minimal expectations can be in conflict when we consider something new. On the contrary to being problematic, this framework helps us distinguish the virtue of open-mindedness from a very similar but distinct one: from the virtue of curiosity.

5.1.2. What is a Neutral Standpoint?

One might wonder what a neutral standpoint would be according to the attention framework, after we have rejected its possibility in our revision of Baehr's account. The worry might be that if even one's best efforts, exercising all intellectual virtues, cannot achieve a neutral standpoint, then it is an (either psychologically or conceptually) impossible standpoint, and hence not relevant for epistemic considerations in the first place. That is, it does not show us anything interesting to say that such a standpoint is epistemically not achievable, if the concept is made to be unachievable in principle. So, the challenge to the attention framework is: can we still conceive of a, in principle, neutral standpoint, or does that concept have no space in an attention framework?

A response to this must make the concept of 'biases' more precise. So far, it has been argued that a neutral standpoint is not achievable because we will never get rid of all of our biases. This was a loose way of making the point. A more precise way of putting it is the following. What we cannot get rid of, as long as we hold any beliefs and expectations at all, are presuppositions. Presuppositions can be thought of as those beliefs on which other beliefs necessarily build. For example, if I say "I like apples", I presuppose that apples exist, that I have preferences, that apples are the kind of things that one can like, and so on (cf. Beaver, Geurts, Denlinger [20] for more on presuppositions). So, no matter how thoroughly we examine our beliefs, there will always be some beliefs that are presupposed by holding old and by adopting new beliefs. There is no way out, as it were. The point can also be put in this way: we cannot think outside of conceptual frameworks, and conceptual frameworks are a network of presupposed beliefs within which we form our other beliefs.[7] If we called a standpoint 'neutral' only if it was 'outside' of such a framework, it would indeed be a conceptual impossibility to achieve that standpoint, and, thus, not epistemically relevant to consider such a standpoint.

Now, it is one thing to claim that we cannot get rid of presuppositions, and it is another to claim that we cannot get rid of biases. Biases are not just any presuppositions that we make. Biases (usually thought of as implicit biases) are a special kind of presuppositions: presuppositions that we had better not have.[8] They are called biased because they distort our thinking in some way. They make us think of an aspect as connected with one concept rather than another, they make us draw conclusions in one direction rather than another, they narrow our conceptual choices in a way that is unnecessary and distorting, and so on. What would it thus mean to say that a standpoint is neutral if it is not biased in this distorting sense? That is, a standpoint that does presuppose beliefs, but only non-biased ones? We would hope that such a standpoint is at least conceptually (even if perhaps not psychologically) possible. If we give up the possibility of a non-distorted standpoint, we lose track of what it would mean to make progress in one's thinking. That is, if we want a notion of an intellectual virtue, we better think that one can get rid of distortions in thinking, at least in principle. Hence, we at least must think that, in principle, a non-biased standpoint is possible.

As a matter of epistemic humility, however, it is better to assume, at any given point in time, that we probably have not achieved such a fully non-biased standpoint (yet). While conceptually possible, it would most often be rash to assume that one has achieved a fully non-biased standpoint. Exactly in order to be able to be open-minded, one needs to assume that, most likely, one still has some implicit biases in the way one has structured one's thoughts.

This kind of limitation in achieving a neutral standpoint is non-problematic for our issues at hand here, however. We can think of the virtue of open-mindedness as a necessary

virtue (among others) to get rid of distortions in our thinking, that is, to also get rid of our biases. In the best of cases, with this virtue, we ameliorate all our biased presuppositions into non-biased presuppositions. However, it would be rash to assume, at any given point in time, that we have actually achieved such a neutral, that is, fully non-biased standpoint.

It is in this sense that Baehr's position seems to assume a naïve view on our epistemic default position. He seems to assume that there can be cases where we are neutral in this latter sense—that we have no biases or expectations. The point made here is that we at the very least have certain expectations, and those lead to an expectation conflict in how to foreground when confronted with something new, even if there is no judgment-based conflict. On top of that, we always make (implicit) presuppositions because we cannot think outside of a conceptual framework—although this aspect is not problematic for Baehr's view. In regard to biases, however, it is important that even if we think that it is *in principle* possible to get rid of all our biases, it would at any given point in time be rash to assume that one has achieved such an epistemic standpoint. To sum up, given that there can also be expectation conflict and that we should never assume that we have in fact gotten rid of all our biases, we cannot epistemically act as if from a neutral standpoint.[9] This is just another way of showing that the virtue of open-mindedness is always exercised in the context of an encountered conflict, pace Baehr, be this a doxastic or some other expectation conflict. It is only when some new impression or information conflicts with my current ways of understanding (or structuring) things that I have an occasion to be open-minded (or to fail to be so).

It is clear that 'conflict' is not to be understood in a problematic sense here; this would be too strong and narrow. It does not need to be as strong as, for instance, a *conceptual incoherence* with my current views, nor does it need to entail some negatively valenced feelings toward the new information. All it takes for it to count as a conflict is some sort of incongruence with my current default expectations. That is, all it takes is a situation that requires of me to foreground things differently than I would habitually do. If I habitually foreground the berries, and someone asks me whether the leaves are pointy or round, this requires of me to suspend my habit of foregrounding the berries, so that I can notice the shape of the leaves. If I follow suit to do this in order to answer the question, I exercise a form of open-mindedness.[10] The question about the shape of the leaves triggered an expectation conflict, in that it required of me to go against my habit of foregrounding the berries. Another example would be if I had the habit of always foregrounding male loud voices in a group discussion, and the topic currently discussed is women's issues. This situation requires of me to suspend my habit of foregrounding male loud voices, so that I can notice what the women in the group say. If I follow suit to do this, I exercise a form of open-mindedness, in which I have to overcome my own habits of foregrounding. The question of what the women in the group say triggered an expectation conflict, in that it required of me to go against my habit of foregrounding male loud voices. But there is nothing particularly bad in experiencing such an expectation conflict.

In each of these cases, there is thus a conflict at the heart of exercising open-mindedness. The conflict lies between my habitual ways of foregrounding and the required way of foregrounding. Our default position is always already a particular way of foregrounding mental contents. That is why open-mindedness is such an important intellectual virtue. We would do better to give up on the myth of a neutral default standpoint and acknowledge how ubiquitous conflict is. This way, we can see how important the virtue of open-mindedness is, and understanding it as a virtue of attention helps us see that.

5.2. Rational Assessment

The last central aspect of Baehr's account to be considered is his point that not all forms of open-mindedness include rational assessment—that is, he says, sometimes being open-minded is not about weighing evidence for and against a claim. I argue here that understanding open-mindedness as a virtue of attention explains better why open-mindedness does not necessarily entail rational assessment. Hence, the contribution of

considering attention in this last aspect is not to disagree with Baehr (as in the case before, about the role of conflict), but to agree with him and to give an underlying reason why this is so.

Baehr [1] considers the case of a high-school physics class to illustrate in what sense one can exhibit the virtue of open-mindedness without going through a rational assessment:

> (. . .) imagine a physics teacher who has just led a group of bright high school students through a unit on Einstein's Special Theory of Relativity. Most of the students have managed to follow the teacher's lessons and thus have achieved a basic understanding of the theory. In the final part of the course, the teacher intends to push his students a significant step further by introducing them to Einstein's General Theory. This is bound to pose a major challenge for most of the students in the course. It will require an even more dramatic departure (compared with the Special Theory) from their usual ways of thinking about space, time, physical laws, velocity, frames of reference, and the like. ([1], p. 145)

Baehr thinks that, in this situation, the students need to exercise a form of open-mindedness in order to be able to wrap their minds around the scientific claims of Einstein's General Theory, and that in this case, there is no rational assessment involved. Hence, there are cases of open-mindedness that do not include rational assessment. "For the students are not attempting to assess or evaluate Einstein's General Theory. At this stage, they are simply trying to follow or understand it." ([1], p. 146).

I agree with Baehr that this is a case of open-mindedness and that it does not include rational assessment. What I want to argue is that the initial idea that open-mindedness *would* necessarily include rational assessment was misguided and comes from not seeing it as a virtue of attention. The idea that open-mindedness would necessarily include rational assessment seems to mean, in Baehr's case, that it has something to do with "assessing or evaluating" a position (e.g., Einstein's General Theory). This seems, to wit, to be a leftover from some reliabilist (as opposed to responsibilist) ways of understanding intellectual virtues (considering that reliabilist virtue epistemology was there first, and virtue responsibilists like Baehr try to move away from it).

Recall, reliabilists' main criterion is whether a certain mental practice reliably leads to truth. Hence, much of reliabilists' thought is on how evidence is being treated—how evidence is being assessed and evaluated. Responsibilists also care about how evidence is being treated, but in a different way. They ask what *habits* lead to certain (virtuous) practices, and which do not. In a responsibilist framework of asking which (mental) habits lead to (intellectual) virtues, rational assessment can *sometimes* play a role, but not always, and never the most fundamental one. Hence, Baehr's default position of considering rational assessment a necessary ingredient of open-mindedness seems to betray some reliabilist tendencies (from which he then moves away).

Considering open-mindedness as a virtue of attention, by contrast, has the promise of making it obvious that we do not have to consider rational assessment as a necessary ingredient of open-mindedness. In that sense, to understand open-mindedness as a virtue of attention is more thoroughly grounded in a responsibilist framework.

The core of understanding open-mindedness as a virtue of attention is that we ask, instead, how we foreground and background mental contents. Importantly, we ask how we are able to suspend our usual ways of foregrounding. This can but does not have to include rational assessment. Applied to the physics high-school class, we see that what the teacher asks the students to do requires a dramatic departure from their usual ways of thinking about space, time, physical laws, velocity, and frames of reference. That is, it requires of them to suspend their usual habits of what they foreground when they think about space, time, physical laws, etc., in order to make mental space for other ways of conceiving of these concepts. It seems natural in the attention framework of open-mindedness that rational assessment never appears as a step, and it seems natural that this is a (paradigmatic) way of being open-minded. This shows the strength of understanding open-mindedness as a virtue of attention.

Let us consider a related but slightly different observation by Baehr about the virtue of open-mindedness, with which I would like to close this section showing the strength of the attention model for the virtue of open-mindedness.

Baehr [1] observes that when being open-minded, this sometimes means engaging in what he calls a "positive psychological activity" ([1], p. 150), that is, for example, actively considering a competing position to one's own. But at other times, he notices, being open-minded has "a negative character: it consists in refraining from taking up an alternative cognitive standpoint" ([1], p. 151) He then concludes that "this illustrates the important point that while open-mindedness is often a matter of positively opening one's mind, it is sometimes a matter of not closing it" ([1], p. 151).

Again, I agree with Baehr that open-mindedness consists in both of these mental practices, namely what he calls "positively opening" and "not closing". And again, I argue that understanding it as a virtue of attention shows the underlying reason why this is so. An attention framework of open-mindedness makes this a non-surprising aspect of this virtue. In Baehr's own definition, by contrast, it might look like a surprising result that open-mindedness sometimes consists in a "positive" activity of considering a new standpoint, and sometimes in a "negative" one of refraining from taking on a certain standpoint. In an attention framework, these two mental practices are really one and the same.

The clue is to realize that "refraining from taking up a certain standpoint" is just as much a "positive" psychological activity as "considering a new standpoint".[11] That is, in a non-attention framework, it might look like either we actively consider a new standpoint and so we engage in a positive mental activity, or we "refrain" from this, remaining in our prior standpoint, which is considered a "negative" activity, in the sense that one does not go through any steps to get to a new standpoint.

It is this last assumption that distorts the picture. Remaining in a certain standpoint while being confronted with new impressions is *not* a merely negative mental activity, because it is *not* a mere refraining from going through certain mental steps. On the contrary, it is an active endeavor, and a (sometimes) arduous achievement. It is an *active interference in how to foreground things*, resisting a 'natural' (default) way of foregrounding. Imagine someone approaches you and says, "notice how women always try to get a guy's money in a divorce process". This person is asking you to foreground a certain (assumed) motive when you hear stories of people going through a divorce. When he says that to you, your mind, at least for a moment, might imagine things the way this person claims it to be. If you then, open-mindedly, decide to not keep this now-inserted-in-you way of foregrounding the next time you hear a divorce story, you are actively keeping this way of foregrounding at bay. You have to *do* something in order to not succumb to this misogynistic bias. So, you refrain from taking on this standpoint by actively suspending this way of foregrounding. This is in no way different from, and instead the same kind of activity as, when you suspend your usual ways of foregrounding in order to make mental space for a *new* standpoint. So, it does not matter whether you do the suspending to take on a new standpoint, or whether on the contrary you do it to avoid a new standpoint. In both cases, you suspend your immediate way of foregrounding things in order to get rid of biases, overconfidence, and wishful thinking. The "positive" and "negative" mental practices, in Baehr's words, are thus really one and the same in an attentional framework of open-mindedness. Hence, understanding open-mindedness as a virtue of attention gets rid of the requirement of an extra explanation as to why there seem to be two different mental activities that both count as open-mindedness. In short, attention gives us a unified, realistic, and coherent account of open-mindedness.

6. Conclusion

In this article I have argued that open-minded attention helps us understand better the central aspects of open-mindedness as an intellectual virtue. While accounts like Baehr's and Riggs's get the central aspects right, the unsolved crux for them lies in formulating how

we can *be able to* transcend a default cognitive standpoint, especially when there are biases, overconfidence, and wishful thinking involved, which are *systematically* hidden from our minds. With open-minded attention we can understand how we can suspend our usual ways of seeing things (of foregrounding), *without* already having to know, be acquainted with, or have a concept of the biases and other mental contents that are systematically hidden from us. Open-minded attention is a process of *making mental space*, which can be repeated in a systematic way to get rid of one's biases. This then allows for otherwise hidden contents to come into the foreground. This is the crucial step in the virtue of open-mindedness that we can understand thanks to open-minded attention.

In addition, I have argued that two further central aspects of Baehr's unifying account of open-mindedness as an intellectual virtue are better explained by considering open-minded attention. I argue, first, that Baehr's account of the role of conflict is improved by considering open-minded attention. It allows us to discard his somewhat naïve view on the default cognitive standpoint, namely that there can be a *neutral* standpoint when one is confronted with new views or evidence. Our default cognitive standpoint is, I argue, always already a particular way of foregrounding mental contents. We would do better to give up on the myth of a neutral default standpoint and acknowledge how ubiquitous conflict is. That is why open-mindedness is such an important intellectual virtue. Hence, against Baehr, conflict *is* (always) at the heart of exercising open-mindedness. The conflict lies between my habitual ways of foregrounding and the required way of foregrounding. This is not a problem for Baehr's account, however. It is an improvement of his view, in that considering open-mindedness as a form of attention allows us to have an updated view on what our default cognitive standpoint is—not a neutral one—and at the same time to keep the virtues of Baehr's account.

Finally, I have argued that considering open-mindedness as a virtue of attention gives an underlying reason why not all forms of open-mindedness include rational assessment, the last central aspect of Baehr's account. His observation was that sometimes, being open-minded is not about weighing evidence for and against a claim, while sometimes it is—how could that fit into a unified account? I argued that this does not pose a problem for the account at all if we consider open-mindedness as a virtue of attention. The initial idea that open-mindedness *might* necessarily include rational assessment was identified as a conceptual leftover from some reliabilist intuitions, where virtues are (merely) about reliably tracking truth. The core of understanding open-mindedness as a virtue of attention, by contrast, is that we ask how we foreground and background mental contents, and how we are able to suspend our usual ways of foregrounding. This *can* but *does not have to* include rational assessment. It seems natural in the attention framework of open-mindedness that rational assessment is not a necessary step, while it can be part of the process. This shows the strength of understanding open-mindedness as a virtue of attention. This, in addition to seeing the necessary role of open-minded attention in transcending our biases, helps us achieve a unified, realistic, and coherent account of open-mindedness.

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Notes

[1] And so has he in [2], in a less detailed way. Because his account of open-mindedness as an intellectual virtue does not differ substantially between [1] and [2], I refer only to [1] from here on.

[2] This is an instance of perceptual attention. The same principle can be applied to non-perceptual kinds of attention too.

[3] See also, for instance, Kvanvig [5], Montmarquet [6], Zagzebski [7], and Roberts and Wood [8].

4   For an overview of the field of virtue epistemology, see Wood [15], Zagzebski [16], Baehr [17] and [18], Battaly [19], and Turri, Alfano, Greco [14].

5   Note that one could very well understand OMA as sometimes being triggered by exposing oneself to a variety of ideas and worldviews. This goes well together with the idea that the epistemically operative component of exposing oneself to a variety of ideas and worldviews is the resulting suspending of one's current views. However, it seems that exposing oneself to a variety of ideas and worldviews is neither necessary nor sufficient for OMA.

6   And there might be evolutionary reasons for this.

7   A similar thought is behind the Wittgensteinian concept of 'hinge commitments'—those (often implicit) conceptual commitments that we must have if we are to have any beliefs at all. Cf, e.g., Schönbaumsfeld [21], Coliva [22], and Maddy [23] for more on hinge commitments.

8   And of course, they are most often not explicitly held, but an implicit assumption that we make, unknown to ourselves.

9   From these considerations it is most plausible to deduce that even open-mindedness will not be an infallible tool to get rid of bias. That is, even after we have exercised open-mindedness, we better had not assume that we have gotten rid of all our biases.

10   This example of foregrounding leaves instead of berries, once prompted, might make it look like a quite natural ability that we have, rather than a virtue. That is, it seems too easy to be a virtue. If even just changing the focus of my visual field counts as being open-minded, then that seems too natural an ability in order to amount to a virtue. Examples of this kind should be understood only as an analogous way of illustrating what it means to change one's foreground and background structure. Of course, in order to amount to a virtue, a certain degree of difficulty of the task is presupposed. When it comes to foregrounding differently from how one's own implicit biases would frame one to do, it is clear that the task involves some difficulty. And one can also think of perceptual examples that are more difficult than just changing the focus from the berries to the leaves. If someone, for instance, asks you to only ever see the duck in the duck–rabbit picture (i.e., to only ever foreground the features that make it look like a duck), you will probably fail.

11   To be clear, Baehr uses 'positive' here differently from how I have used it earlier in the article. I claimed that OMA is a purely negative activity in the sense that the process of OMA is only an undoing of prior views, but does not by itself give us an alternative view. However, in Baehr's sense as used here, OMA is a positive activity, in that it is an active undoing, not a passive one—so OMA is just as much an active psychological effort as it is an active psychological effort to find an alternative view, for example.

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