ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Openness as a political commitment

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1 | INTRODUCTION

Talk of "openness" today can carry with it an almost hallowed tone. Take, for illustration, the copy of a recent ad by Samsung (2021) touting openness as their guiding value:

> Openness. It's what we believe in. An open world frees us to progress, remove all limitations, defy more than gravity, make new connections, invite everyone in, make impossible possible. The fewer boundaries we have, the further we'll go.

While such physics-flouting rhetoric is rarer in politics than it is in corporate PR campaigns, openness has also been identified as a normative lodestar by major politicians including Tony Blair (2006), Angela Merkel (The Guardian, 2015), Barack Obama (Federation of American Scientists, 2009), and Justin Trudeau (Forbes 2015). Often it is taken to be something that is essential to the identity of Western developed states, worth preserving and yet at the same time rendering them vulnerable to threats both internal and external. Perhaps most notably, George W. Bush framed the global fight against terrorism in terms of the protection and promotion of open societies (Bush, 2002), while US government agencies use the same language today to describe what is at stake in their strategic competition with China (e.g., FBI, 2024). But an appreciation of openness is not merely the preserve of corporate and political leaders—a 2018 poll, for instance, found that 68% of Americans considered openness to foreigners to be "essential to who we are as a nation" (Hartig, 2018).

Thus, while Nathaniel Tkacz probably overstates the case when he says that "it is increasingly held up as the highest political ideal" (2012, p. 389), openness has evidently acquired a considerable political cachet over recent decades. Within the academy this is reflected in the recent revival of interest in the idea of the "open society" (see e.g., Gaus, 2016; Thrasher, 2020;

Thrasher & Vallier, 2018; Vallier, 2018). More broadly, recent years have seen defenders of free trade and lower barriers to immigration (Norberg, 2021; Van Der Vossen, 2018), greater levels of democratic inclusion than representative democratic systems allow (Landemore, 2020), and a system of governance characterized by the rule of law, constitutional constraints, and the protection of individuals' human rights (Soros, 2019) all defending their proposals under the seemingly commodious banner of "openness." Yet in each of these works, little is said about what openness is, and as of yet there is no conceptual analysis of openness in the political philosophy literature. My aim in this paper is to provide such an account.

In Section 2 I will problematise the various ways in which openness has been discussed by recent political philosophers, all of whom take their cue in one way or another from the ur-text of political openness, Karl Popper's *The Open Society and its Enemies* ("*Open Society*" for short).[1] In Section 3 I will develop my own account of political openness, building upon understandings of what it means to say that we ourselves are committed to openness in interpersonal contexts. (By "commitment," here, I mean a belief that an agent has about how things should be in the world where this belief carries some meaningful motivational force for the agent in question.) Specifically, I will argue that political openness involves an active readiness by an agent to engage with or include another on forthright and receptive terms, and to recognize the latter agent's authoritative standing to make political claims against them. In Section 4 I demonstrate the explanatory value of this account by showing that it provides an insightful explanation of what is at stake in the emerging political cleavage between "open" and "closed" politics, explains the appeal of "the open society" as an epithet for liberal democracies, and provides a compelling account of the oft-implied connection between openness and both social dynamism and progressive reform. Section 5 concludes.

2 | OPENNESS IN LIBERAL POLITICAL THOUGHT

Written during the Second World War, Popper's *Open Society* was envisioned as a theoretical intervention into the war, championing liberal democracy and its principles in the face of fascist and communist threats. Through extensive critical exegeses, Popper takes philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle, Hegel, and (more equivocally) Marx to task for their propagation of "historicism"—that is, the belief that "history is controlled by specific historical or evolutionary laws whose discovery would enable us to prophesy the destiny of man" (2020, p. 8). Popper argues that both fascism and communism are intellectual heirs to this historicist lineage and gain much of their appeal from features of historicist thought. The allure as well as the danger of historicism, for Popper, is that believing in it buys us a sense of certainty and security against chaos, but that it does so at the cost of suppressing human agency and denying our collective potential for novelty, creativity, and experiment. By suppressing these human impulses, "closed societies" and their adherents ultimately deprive themselves of the possibility of collective learning and reform, thereby greatly limiting their ability to alleviate human suffering (e.g., 2020, p. 387).

Against closed historicist societies, and building upon his earlier epistemological work on knowledge as a social achievement, Popper defended a vision of an "open" society wherein prevailing social norms and institutions facilitate critical exchange among citizens, and such

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[1] While the idea of an open society was first elucidated by Henri Bergson, its contemporary status as a political ideal is more directly traceable to Popper.

critical exchange guides and shapes society's course in turn (2020, see e.g., pp. 176, 387, 431–432). Open societies, on Popper's account, eschew the psychological shelter of prophecy and historical closure in favor of embracing both the open-ended possibilities of democratic reform (e.g., pp. xliv, 68, 401) as well as the demanding personal responsibility necessitated by acknowledging that our collective fate is ultimately a product of our own actions (e.g., pp. 165, 392, 413, 484). Popper's description of the civic norms and practices of the open society are heavily influenced by what he took to be the critical norms of the scientific community, with Socrates' unrelenting inquisitiveness acting as a sort of moral exemplar (see e.g., 2020, p. 176). (In his intellectual autobiography, Popper refers to himself as a "disciple of Socrates"; see 1986, p. 7).

Despite the political immediacy with which Popper wrote it, *Open Society* is neither a concise nor an easy read, flitting freely as it does between discussions of scientific method, theories of history, pre-Socratic philosophy, the nature of authoritarianism, and all manner besides. Moreover, Popper was well known for his own opposition to the pursuit of conceptual definitions, rejecting the value of "defining our terms" as a means to attaining precision (2020, p. 231; see also pp. xvi, 86). Thus, despite bequeathing the ideals of openness and the open society to the contemporary canon of liberal democratic thought, it is far from self-evident what is "open" about the political vision Popper defends. (Indeed, Popper spends far more time discussing openness' enemies than either its nature or its defenders.) Perhaps unsurprisingly, given this, openness has been an easy ideal to co-opt, leading to some suspicion that it is an empty ideal, full of rhetorical power yet signifying no positive value (Tkacz, 2012). It remains to be seen, then, what (if anything) the idea of openness adds to our political vocabulary, and what it would require for defenders of openness to make good on their stated political commitment.

On perhaps its most straightforward rendering, we may equate openness simply with the absence of barriers or constraints. This is how Van Der Vossen and Brennan (2018) generally use the term.[2] Concerned with defending economic openness specifically, they take this to require removing the impediments to economic exchange, specifically those impediments which prevent free people in one society exchanging or engaging with those in others, whether through trade or migration. Such openness would be a great boon, according to Van Der Vossen and Brennan, facilitating a vast expansion in the number of positive-sum interactions which people could voluntarily engage in, with this in turn generating a vast increase in global wealth, not least for the world's worst-off.[3] In this picture, openness plays an auxiliary theoretical role; it names the state of affairs we must realize in order to ensure that persons' freedom—specifically their freedom from interference—is assured. In this sense, it is ultimately (negative) freedom that is at the heart of Van Der Vossen and Brennan's work, with openness being cashed out in terms of greater freedom. Toward the end of their text, for instance, they conclude:

> What we owe people around the world is openness. We owe them to remove the constraints on human freedom that keep people from helping make this a better and more prosperous world.
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> (2018, p. 175).

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[2]See also Norberg (2021). In a different context, Landemore (2020) equates openness in governance with accessibility (i.e. lack of barriers) to power.

[3]They also defend such openness on deontological grounds, asserting that 'unless some good justification can be offered, we ought to refrain from coercively interfering with other people's lives' (2018, 28).

While they are surely connected ideals, I believe there are good reasons not to tether the value of openness quite so closely to that of negative freedom. For one thing, I take it that—all else being equal—enriching our conceptual vocabulary is a good thing, and so it is at least worth exploring whether "openness" can capture something more distinctive than this interpretation allows. More crucially, it should be acknowledged that such an emphasis on negative freedom departs quite significantly from Popper's animating concerns—while he was certainly very interested in freedom, he placed much greater emphasis throughout *Open Society* on the freedom to shape our own collective fate than he did on any individual's negative freedoms. We need not take Popper as gospel on the nature of openness, of course, but Van der Vossen and Brennan's thin understanding of openness also has trouble making sense of the various ways in which openness talk is used in political contexts today, as I will highlight in Section 4. In particular, to equate openness straightforwardly with an absence of constraints makes it somewhat perplexing that we ought to refer to liberal democracies—which erect a great many barriers and constraints on persons' as well as governments' freedoms—as "open" societies. Whatever affinity freedom and liberal democracy share, it is not that they are secured by a thoroughgoing elimination (or even necessarily a reduction) of constraints.

To develop a more satisfying interpretation, perhaps we could shift our focus from theoretical work on "openness" to work on "the open society." In recent years, Gerald Gaus, John Thrasher, and Kevin Vallier have each defended versions of open society, where openness is taken to be a feature constitutive of, or facilitated by, political institutions. Though they each make the case for an open society on similar grounds and defend a similar institutional scaffolding as being characteristic of an open society, they describe what qualifies such institutional setups as "open" ones in subtly different ways (though I should be clear, they spend little time on trying to define openness). Vallier, for instance, suggests that liberal societies are "open" because they "do not specify a single social end that all must pursue," nor do they "pursue a single, collective vision of justice" (2018, p. 3). In Thrasher (2020) and in some of his co-authored work with Vallier (2018), openness is equated with social dynamism and with a socio-political configuration that facilitates experimentation, creative destruction, and trial and error learning. Finally, Gaus equates openness with institutions that are "accommodative to diversity" (2016, p. 176). For each of these thinkers, the dual enemies of openness are the drive for homogeneity within society and the pursuit of a single authoritative end-point conception of justice. The former forecloses our ability to learn from perspectives different from our own. The latter forecloses our ability to engage in trial and error, learning as we go along what a better world looks like.

Of the three above-identified understandings of openness, there are good reasons to reject the first two. Were "openness" to merely connote the rejection of any pursuit of a single ideal vision of justice, it would be of little political interest. As Gaus recognizes (2016, p. xix), the search for such an ideal is alive and well within philosophy departments, but it is no longer a real practical worry, most societies long having abandoned the sort of ideological single-mindedness that characterized communist and fascist regimes during Popper's time. If open societies were simply those that lacked any such comprehensive political doctrine, we would be swimming in a sea of open societies, save for perhaps a few closed enclaves like North Korea or Cuba. Similarly, equating openness with dynamism and experimentation alone produces what I take to be obvious false positives. In particular, one would be hard-pressed to find any society in history that has been so dynamic and so full of experimentation as China in the last half-century. Despite being an authoritarian state with high levels of surveillance, restrictions on speech, and on freedom of association, China has changed radically in recent decades—its internal

rural-to-urban migration since 1980 is the largest single wave of migration in history, it has upended its economic model several times over, and it has witnessed major social changes in more or less any area one can think of, from private business to environmental protection, to family planning (see e.g., Economy, 2018; on China's economic development, Naughton, 2018; on environmental reform, Li & Shapiro, 2020). Interestingly, China has a very high level of federalism—one of the institutional mechanisms that Thrasher and Vallier identify with the open society as facilitating experimentation and innovation—and it makes extensive use of this federal structure in order to facilitate trial and error learning, with central government allowing local governments to innovate, and subsequently encouraging diffusion of successful administrative, social, and economic innovations. The point here is not that Thrasher would consider China an open society—it certainly doesn't fit his description of what an open society would look like—but rather that facilitating experimentation, innovation, and dynamism per se cannot be constitutive of openness unless we are to consider China an open society.

Of the three, I believe Gaus' formulation is the most plausible. Like Vallier's and Thrasher's, it can account for openness' opposition to determinate end-point theories of justice, as well as its facilitation of dynamism and experimentation—for institutions to accommodate diversity, after all, they must be responsive to the novel insights and perspectives that are generated by diversity. But Gaus' formulation also (rightly, in my view) rules out states such as China as open ones because, for all its experimentation, China scores very poorly in how accommodative society and politics are to diversity. (The vast majority of powerful people in Chinese society are Han Chinese men who have at least some allegiance to the Communist Party.)

Yet, for all that, there is still something missing, I believe, from the understanding of openness furnished by Gaus. For one thing, the focus in his work is overwhelmingly on an institutional accommodation of diversity—and of diverse views specifically. As I will note below, a focus on open institutions to the neglect of openness among persons affected by those institutions is problematic. Moreover, while accommodation of diversity matters, it will get you little of what appears to be valuable about openness unless it is coupled with diverse others who are themselves willing to participate and engage forthrightly with majority groups. Finally, while an institution might best illustrate its open character through how it responds to diversity, it seems a mistake to think that openness can only be found in such response—it is surely the case that both institutions and people can be open in some meaningful sense even in the absence of any diversity worth speaking of. (Iceland, for instance, may well deserve the moniker of an "open society" despite it being a remarkably homogenous society, at least in ethnic terms.)[4] All this, then, suggests that there is value in seeking to develop an alternative account of openness, one that does not suffer from the same shortcomings. In the next section, I aim to develop such an account. To do so, I will start with how we think of openness in interpersonal contexts, to get clearer on what it might mean to be open in political ones.

3 | OPENNESS, INTERPERSONAL AND POLITICAL

Openness, whether interpersonal or political, is always openness to some agent. In everyday language, there are several senses in which I might be described as "open" to others, which we can divide into three broad orientations: I can be outwardly, inwardly, or relationally open. Outward openness involves a willingness on my part to disclose or express something truthful,

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[4]See Landemore (2020, 152-178) for a discussion of Iceland which emphasizes its 'open' credentials.

honest, or informative. Depending on the specific content of what I disclose, and the context in which I disclose it, outward openness can express itself as transparency, integrity, criticism, demand, sincerity, honesty, or frankness. For ease of expression, and while trying to capture as much of the possible variations as possible, let's call this "forthrightness," An inwardly open orientation pertains to how I *respond* to others. It involves a willingness on my part to be somehow altered, influenced, or moved by an interaction, thus requiring some measure of that "persuadable temper" that Jane Austen counseled (1960, p. 105; see Hirschman, 2013). Insofar as it involves a willingness to be changed by another, inward openness so understood implies a sort of pro-attitude toward the other, or at least toward what the interaction may engender. Again with an eye to capturing possible variations, let's call this "receptivity." Finally, there is the relationally open orientation. Unlike forthrightness and receptivity, which characterize ways of being *within* an interaction, relational openness refers to my active readiness to engage in, facilitate, or seek out an interaction with others in the first place. Let's refer to this as "readiness to engage"—or, in the case of interactions with or between groups, we might instead talk about "readiness to include": or "readiness to participate."

Insofar as they emphasize the importance of associational freedom, several of the above-discussed authors (e.g., Van der Vossen and Brennan, Thrasher) seem to be primarily interested in institutional reforms that remove barriers to relational openness between persons. Implicit, I believe, is an expectation that once we remove such barriers, diverse agents will engage with one another and will do so receptively and forthrightly, thereby allowing the dissemination of ideas and generating the possibility of positive-sum exchanges across difference. However plausible this may be, it is important to note that agents can exhibit one or two of these open orientations without exhibiting all three[5]—a loudmouth, for example, may be very willing to engage with others and be forthright in their interactions, without being remotely receptive to their interlocutors. Equally, a sycophantic yes-man may be highly receptive to his boss and willing to seek out an audience with him every chance he gets, without ever having the confidence or desire to speak forthrightly (think of the dynamic in *The Simpsons* between Smithers and Mr. Burns). Finally, a hermitic monk may be perfectly receptive and forthright *if* he were to interact with people, and yet may never so interact because he is chosen to live alone in a cave up in the hills.

Tellingly, while there are discursive contexts in which we would be correct to say that each of these agents is "open," there is an important sense in which their behavior does not, on any reasonable interpretation, suggest a commitment to interpersonal openness—their behavior precludes, or at least frustrates, openness *as a feature of an interaction* with another. Another agent's forthrightness would, for instance, "misfire" (I borrow the term from Austin, 1962) if their honesty, sincerity, or what have you were met with the loudmouth's garrulous indifference. Similarly, Smithers' unwillingness to be forthright denies Mr. Burns the opportunity to himself be moved and persuaded by Smithers, and thus any receptivity to Smithers on Mr. Burns' part would misfire. The case of the hermitic monk is most obvious of all; if another agent acted as he did, there would be simply no interaction to speak of. Because forthrightness finds its success conditions in receptive engagement, while receptivity finds its success conditions in forthright engagement, each of these three characters' behavior frustrates rather than facilitates other agents' efforts to realize the same sort of openness within an interaction as they themselves display.

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[5]The same is true of institutions; see Section 4.

It appears, then, that a commitment to interpersonal openness will require an active readiness to engage receptively and forthrightly with others—the absence of any one of the open orientations described above frustrates the realization of openness between persons, notwithstanding any absence of formal barriers to their interaction. This understanding coheres with the sorts of interaction we would take to be paradigmatic of interpersonal openness. Take as an illustration an "open conversation" between two spouses discussing, say, their current living arrangement. Such a conversation would be characterized by each having their say, being forthright about what is working about their status quo and what is not, what their unfulfilled needs are, what they're willing to change for the other's sake, and so on. Each party is willing to be moved by what the other says, and to respond in turn; hence both ought to eschew any underhanded effort to shape the conversation in their own favor or to try to "win" any points of contention. Instead, they each ought to be genuinely receptive to what the other says, trying to reach a mutually satisfactory conclusion about how to carry on, where each person's needs and preferences have shaped any resolution. Importantly, any deceit that crept into proceedings, or any reticence to speak forthrightly, would be a departure from openness—one, indeed, that the other spouse could rightly take exception to; there is nothing unreasonable about one spouse resenting the fact that the other failed to mention their dislike for their weekly movie nights, say, even where this information was withheld for the sake of their spouse's happiness.

What the spouses are committed to is openness toward one another, and not necessarily interpersonal openness per se. But, the peculiarities of spousal relationships notwithstanding,[6] we can generalize from this example—a commitment to interpersonal openness per se will involve an active readiness to engage with others in forthright and receptive fashion. To the extent that this captures the way in which he sought to engage with his fellow Athenians, such an account allows us to make sense of Socrates' standing as the great standard-bearer of openness. (Granting him such a standing is less evidently warranted if openness amounts to social dynamism, an absence of barriers, or the accommodation of diversity.) Less exalted depictions of openness understood in the above-described sense can be found in *The Guardian's* regular column, "Dining Across the Divide,"[7] in which two people with opposing views on charged political subjects dine together and discuss their perspectives, while exploring what common ground they share (not always very successfully). Though the context is obviously very different from the spousal one, in such interactions too participants can only properly be thought open to one another, and the interaction can only achieve its intended aims if both participants engage forthrightly and receptively.

We have seen that the three open orientations are individually necessary for interpersonal openness—is it also the case that they are jointly sufficient? Yes and no. If the three open orientations are being exhibited by both participants *during the interaction*, yes—there are no barriers to frustrating open interaction. But it is also the case that two agents might exhibit the three aspects of openness in their general orientation to the world, but specific interactions between them may nevertheless fail to be open. This may occur where openness to some agents would jeopardize openness to others—to trust you with my deepest secrets, I need to know that you don't share everything with your hairdresser. Equally, open agents may fail to have an open interaction for contingent reasons—engaging openly with the world at all times would be

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[6]Spouses may, for instance, have a duty to be open in the above-depicted sense, whereas ordinarily strangers and acquaintances are permitted to withhold their views according to their own discretion.

[7]https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/series/dining-across-the-divide

psychically exhausting, and we sometimes have good reasons to shut the world out or to hold our tongue when the occasion calls for it.

But there may also be structural reasons why agents committed to openness may fail to engage in open exchanges. For instance, relations of domination—where one agent has arbitrary power over another—will typically preclude openness between agents, even where the dominant agent has only the most benevolent feeling toward the dominated. In such cases, the insecurity that comes from being dependent on the goodwill of another predictably leads to what Lovett calls "strategic anticipation" (Lovett, 2010, p. 77), where the dominated agent preemptively acts in ways that they believe the dominator wants them to behave, withholding forthrightness. It is because this dynamic so permeates relations between dominator and dominated that Camus claimed that such a relationship structure "kills the small part of existence that can be realized on this earth through the mutual understanding of men" (Camus, 1991, p. 283)—kills, in other words, the possibility of interpersonal openness.[8]

Such possibilities suggest something further about what openness requires, which is lacking in even the most benevolent of dominating relations. Openness requires not just a readiness to engage with others receptively and forthrightly, but it also requires that the agents involved each have a certain standing in the interaction—standing to feel free to be forthright, and to reasonably expect receptivity on the part of the other. What this standing requires in any particular interaction will depend on the norms regulating the relevant domain—the terms of engagement required for openness to flourish will differ depending on whether we're talking about openness between, say, romantic partners, improvisational comedians, or parties to an industrial dispute. Leaving aside how best to understand it in other domains, I submit that the right way of characterizing the standing pertinent to political domains is *authoritative standing*.[9] To have authoritative standing within a relationship is to be recognized by other participants within the relationships, as Rawls puts it, as "self-originating sources of valid claims" (Rawls, 1980, p. 543). Where I recognize an agent's authoritative standing against me, I submit myself to the force of claims that this agent makes upon me, and to the process of reason-giving and responding that undergirds those claims. This, in turn, involves a further submission[10] to a set of attendant accountability practices, without which the reasoning and claiming practices would be impotent. This sort of standing is "authoritative" both in the sense that it involves recognizing that someone has authority to make claims on us and to hold us accountable, and in the sense that the agent with standing is considered an authority on their own nature, needs, experiences, and so on.[11]

As I understand it, then, political openness involves a readiness by an agent to engage forthrightly and receptively with another and to recognize their authoritative standing in political

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[8]Structural features of a relationship can also lead to failures of receptivity in the face of forthrightness, as is highlighted in the epistemic injustice literature (see e.g. Fricker 2007, Catala 2015, McKinnon 2016).

[9]This phrase and the ensuing analysis is informed by Darwall's work on the second-personal standpoint (see Darwall 2006; 2011).

[10]It is worth noting that where submission to such practices is wholly discretionary, agents can only approximate political openness properly understood – a standing that can be given and taken away at will gives an agent no grounds of assurance of a receptive interaction within which they are entitled to be forthright. Such a discretionary character is precisely the problem in the case of the benevolent dominator.

[11]Part of the value of the epistemic injustice literature (see fn.8) is to illustrate how the two forms of authority are directly linked – absent a recognition of our status as authorities on our own nature, needs, and experiences, we lack assurance that our grievances would be taken seriously by others or considered admissible grounds on which to hold others to account.

contexts. Before illustrating the virtues of such an account, it might be worth discussing how it relates to two closely related concepts, tolerance and (political) humility.[12] One way in which we can distinguish between the three is through the attitudes they express toward self and difference. Where we tolerate an agent or their behavior, this is typically taken to imply a negative attitude toward that agent; though we exercise forbearance, refraining from interfering or imposing our preferred behavior upon them, there is a sense in which we nonetheless disapprove of them.[13] Humility, by contrast, is consistent with either a pro or a negative attitude toward those who are relevantly different from us. The typical emphasis in humility is instead on a negative or at least self-effacing attitude to our own views, beliefs, and behavior; it relates, broadly speaking, to "keeping one's ego in check" (Sinha, 2012, p. 260, see e.g., Schueler, 1997; Driver, 1999; Bommarito, 2013). In the face of difference, the humble person will acknowledge that they may be the one who is wrong or misguided, and so will be willing to listen to and engage with those who are different in the relevant sense. This, then, relates closely to the "receptivity" component of openness (though it is surely possible to keep our ego in check while being utterly indifferent to the views of others, due to e.g., a lack of curiosity). Openness, however, goes beyond this in that it involves a pro-attitude toward the other and an active readiness or desire to engage (as opposed to a mere tolerance of such engagement). This may be a pro-attitude to a particular other, or it may be a pro-attitude to persons generally; such a pro-attitude, in turn, may be grounded either in instrumental considerations (e.g., the more open we are, the more opportunities we come across), or in intrinsic value-judgments (e.g., it is a joy to better understand the people around us).

Of course, like openness, such concepts can be understood in diverse ways, and some conceptions of humility in particular share much in common with openness as I understand it. For instance, drawing extensively on the work of the great Indian thinker and social reformer B. R. Ambedkar, Luis Cabrera's recent work characterizes political humility as "a recognition of the equal moral standing of others, an openness to input from them, and an intellectual modesty about the finality of one's own judgments" (2020, p. 9).[14] While this evidently retains some emphasis on a self-effacing attitude to ourselves and our intellectual achievements, Cabrera—through Ambedkar—also links political humility directly with a pro-attitude toward others or, as he puts it, a recognition of their "high equal moral worth" (Cabrera, 2020, p. 67). For Ambedkar, "the appropriate recognition of such innate worth and status would entail dispositions effectively to openness and inclusivity" (Cabrera, 2021, p. 102), resulting in what Ambedkar variously captured under the labels of fraternity, kinship, social endosmosis, and "maitri" (a Buddhist concept roughly translated as loving-kindness). Here, then, humility not only involves receptivity to others but is also thought to generate or entail a pro-attitude to others and a readiness to engage with them on amicable terms.

While openness and political humility so understood are surely complementary virtues, there are good reasons to think that openness should not be reduced to a form of political humility. First and most straightforwardly, even those who defend such a thicker understanding of humility appear to recognize a distinction between humility and openness, albeit in passing—the relation is described as one where the former facilitates or entails the latter, rather

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[12]I thank two anonymous reviewers for suggesting such a discussion.

[13]See Forst (2017) for discussion, including of alternative conceptions which place more emphasis on respect or esteem across difference.

[14]See also Mark Button, who construes political humility as 'an active, other-regarding civic virtue' (2005, 841), one involving an attentiveness to difference and an equanimity in the face of social and political change.

than being identical with it.[15] Second, openness requires not only receptive but also forthright engagement. There is, to be sure, no impossibility in combining humility and forthrightness, but equally, there is no necessary relation between the two; indeed, it is worth noting that humility appears to be a negative predictor of political conviction, which is at least a suggestive proxy for forthrightness (see Hannon & Kidd, 2023; Hodge et al., 2021). Third, there is exegetical value to understanding this cluster of commitments—to engagement, receptivity, and forthrightness—in terms of openness, insofar as doing so helps us make sense of an important ideal of the liberal cannon (Section 4); humility, for all its value, has neither the same resonance nor frequency of use within liberal-democratic discourse.

Finally—and it is worth dwelling on this point—thinking in terms of openness, rather than in terms of humility, entails a different characterization of one's political opponents. While humility faces its antithesis in arrogance, openness' antithesis—"closedness"—suggests something much more general and refers to a sort of policy response rather than any one attitude. The empirical research on open and closed orientations to politics, however, suggests that very often it is not arrogance, but rather fear and a sense of threat—particularly perceived threats to one's way of life—which undergirds such closed orientations (see e.g., Johnston et al., 2017; Stenner, 2005).[16] Here, the sense in which terrorism represents a grave threat to openness becomes clear—by heightening fears and anxieties about (typically) minority groups among the population, terror attacks reduce people's willingness to open themselves or their circle of political accountability up to those different relevantly from them. To characterize opposition to openness in terms of fear or anxiety rather than arrogance makes, I believe, some moral difference; to suggest that someone is arrogant when they are simply anxious about losing something of great value seems an uncharitable judgment.[17] But it also makes considerable practical difference. To the extent that the interpersonal and institutional features of our polities are closely intertwined,[18] after all, open policies must be supported, upheld, or at least accepted by a sufficient number of citizens—absent this, such policies will be unsustainable or will simply fail to realize whatever ends they are intended to further. Diagnosing potential opposition to open policies in terms of citizens' anxieties would suggest the need for complementary measures which seek to enhance people's felt sense of security in the face of change; diagnosing potential opposition in terms of arrogance, I take it, does no such thing.[19]

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[15]See the Cabrera quote above. See also Button: 'I want to suggest that the concept of humility can do a lot more work for diverse societies, valuable democratic work, if humility is reimagined less as a private, self-referencing quality and more as an active civic virtue and political ethos geared toward facilitating attentiveness, listening, and mutual understanding among and between plural others' (2005, 849).

[16]Cabrera's own interviews with Brexit supporters strongly support the view that they were primarily motivated by anxieties and a sense of threat (see 2020, 242-45), though Cabrera focuses on the political arrogance they display (understood in the sense of deeming others outside the UK as being unauthorised to have a say over UK politics). It should be noted that the two are not necessarily competing explanations, and they may even reinforce one another.

[17]One virtue of Button's more recent work on political vices (2016) is that he emphasizes that they can often be grounded in fear, and that displaying political virtues – such as openness, one can assume – therefore often requires considerable courage on the part of citizens.

[18]Something many feminist democratic theorists, in particular, have persuasively argued (see e.g. Pateman 1970, Young 1990, Mansbridge 1993, Tronto 2005).

[19]For arguments that the recent re-emergence of populism is best explained by a pursuit of institutional openness without due concern for the felt sense of security of affected citizens, see Goodhart (2017) and Eatwell and Goodwin (2018).

4 | POLITICAL OPENNESS

In this section, I identify three explanatory virtues of my account of political openness. First, I argue that it generates a compelling way of understanding the emerging political cleavage between "open" and "closed" politics. Second, I show that my account aligns with and clarifies the appeals that theorists and political groups alike have made to ideas of openness and "the open society." Finally, I suggest that my account provides a more plausible link between openness and dynamism as well as progressive reform than alternative accounts of openness do. Before starting in earnest, two points are worth stating explicitly. First, agents could be committed to openness in certain domains and not others. While I will discuss what openness entails in some specific domains, however, I am primarily concerned below with a more general commitment—to political openness per se—of the sort implied by the distinction between "open" and "closed" politics and by the idea of "the open society." Second, agents can be more or less open; it is a matter of degree. Where I talk of those committed to openness, this should be taken to refer to those committed to greater levels of openness, relative either to their relevant interlocutors or to some salient baseline, typically the status quo; where I talk of those committed to closed politics, this should be taken to refer to those committed to less openness. (I will return to this point below.)

It has become fairly commonplace to suggest that if we are to properly map today's political terrain, the left-right divide which has for so long framed our political discourse needs to be supplemented with, if not wholly supplanted by, a new cleavage that better tracks the substance of much contemporary political debate. Capturing the increased salience of and polarization around issues like immigration, trade, national identity, and multiculturalism, this cleavage has been framed in myriad different ways—Ford and Jennings, for instance, list "open–closed, liberal–authoritarian, cosmopolitan–parochial, cosmopolitan–communitarian, cosmopolitan–nationalist" (2020, p. 295) as non-exhaustive alternatives. Leaving aside the question of which of these various alternatives we should prefer, I want to illustrate the value of my own account of openness by making sense of this cleavage's framing as an "open-closed" one (for this framing, see e.g., Brooks, 2016; Global Future, 2018; Kirkup, 2014; Lorimer, 2018; The Economist, 2016; Wheatley, 2019).

On the "closed" side of the spectrum are "national populists" who have become an important electoral force throughout large parts of the world. National populists tend to couple a politics focused on the importance of protecting the nation and its cultural values, with support for an economically interventionist state wielded to protect "ordinary" or "common" people from the volatility of globalized markets and the cultural disconcertion of high immigration flows (see Eatwell & Goodwin, 2018). National populists of note today include—but are far from limited to—Giorgia Meloni and Matteo Salvini (Italy), Donald Trump (USA), Marine Le Pen (France), Jarosław Kaczyński and Andrzej Duda (Poland), and Viktor Orban (Hungary). Given that the recent emergence of an open-closed political cleavage can be put down largely to the success of such figures, it is perhaps unsurprising that what the "open" side of the spectrum involves is, by contrast, comparatively vague. I believe my account of openness does a good job of describing what is at stake in this political divide, and what a genuine commitment to openness would entail.

To start, it might be objected that my account needlessly complicates things—"open," the objection might go, simply entails a commitment to removing barriers (as per Van Der Vossen and Brennan's usage). Closed politics, by contrast, seeks to raise barriers. To see why this latter approach will not do, let me highlight three key issue areas: trade, immigration, and

democracy. With respect to trade, for instance, Donald Trump is often taken to be emblematic of the move toward "closed" trade politics (see e.g., Brooks, 2016). Yet Trump was not against international trade per se; he spent an inordinate amount of his time as president (re)negotiating trade arrangements, most notably the USMCA[20] which he touted—equal parts pride and inaccuracy—as "the largest trade deal ever made anywhere in the world" (Dale & Subramaniam, 2020). With respect to immigration, some states have levels of immigration much higher than elsewhere in the world, despite which we would be loath to designate their immigration systems "open." Take Qatar, for instance, where around 77% of the domestic population is made up of immigrants (McAuliffe & Triandafyllidou, 2021, p. 75), a far greater number than almost anywhere in the world—but where many immigrants live under appalling conditions with little-to-no legal protections (Amnesty International, 2022). Recalling the study cited earlier according to which many Americans deem openness to foreigners essential to the nation's identity, it is doubtful whether any such minimal sense of openness could really achieve such resonance. Finally, it has been argued (see e.g., Eatwell & Goodwin, 2018; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017) that the sort of populism that characterizes the politics of many of the figures typically associated with "closed" politics has an ambivalent, rather than antagonistic, relationship with democracy—populists often reject elements of *liberal* democracy but are *in favor* of more direct forms of democracy such as referenda. If anything, ostensibly "closed" politicians seem to be, in this case, concerned with removing barriers to participation. Across the board, then, it appears that thinking of openness as simply the absence of barriers misses something important.

Contrast this with the implications of my own account of openness, on which it is negated either when we fail to engage with others, or where we are willing to engage with others *but without giving them authoritative standing*—where we do not recognize an agent as entitled to make claims on us and to hold us accountable. Insisting on this thicker understanding of openness explains a great deal more about what, in general terms, is at stake in the emerging political cleavages mentioned above. The more general divide is about who is granted the sort of standing to make demands against us as citizens, and against our polity—who, in essence, "we" ought to be accountable to. Those who adopt a more closed vision of politics are more inclined to believe those outside our territory have no right to make demands of us regarding how we regulate our polity. This explains the sorts of hostility to supra-national organizations and institutions that is characteristic of "closed" politicians and movements, seen for example in Trump's opposition to the World Trade Organisation (Swanson, 2019) and Orban's flagrant disregard for EU rules (Politico, 2020). But politicians can also be closed in the sense that they refuse to give authoritative standing to groups within their own jurisdiction—say, newly-arrived refugees, minority ethnic groups, or the prison population (on this latter group, see Zimmermann, 2019). In general terms, then, a political orientation will be more closed the fewer groups that it is willing to include or to grant standing to.

Turn, now, to what my account implies regarding the three issue areas mentioned above: trade, immigration, and democracy. A commitment to openness in trade on my account involves a willingness to engage with other states *and to do so on an accountable basis*, which involves a degree of receptivity to the claims of trade partners. It, therefore, rules out unilateral forms of economic coercion, threat, or any other forms of economic statecraft which seek to strong-arm trade partners into compliance with our interests, strategies the Trump administration routinely engaged in (Russ, 2019; Swanson, 2019). This also chimes with the way in which

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[20]United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement.

politicians and trade representatives speak about and defend the value of an "open trade regime," which is typically taken to refer not only to a system with low barriers to trade but also to the multilateral, rules-based approach to managing trade relations, embodied in the World Trade Organisation.[21] With respect to immigration, an open politician will be one who endorses immigration on terms where immigrants are given the standing to hold others (e.g., us, our politicians, and their employers) to account. In contrast, a closed politician may refuse to allow immigration, or allow it while restricting the standing of immigrants and what sorts of claims they can make. Finally, with respect to democracy, an open politician will be one who is willing to remove barriers to democratic participation—but the open politician will also be sensitive to the ways in which removing barriers to participation may in some circumstances undermine the democratic standing of others. Hence, the demands of openness will sometimes be in tension, and which democratic procedures best realize openness will be a context-sensitive judgment. Take, for instance, referenda. Where referenda are used to circumvent unrepresentative and unresponsive parliaments, referenda may constitute a win for openness. Where, however, referenda are favored because they allow a majority to ride roughshod over the rights of a certain minority group, then this is a win for closedness. This, to my eyes, seems like a plausible way of marking out the terrain between open and closed politics.

That this is the most compelling way of understanding political openness is further reinforced by showing how it lines up with the common use of "openness" rhetoric in politics. It is telling, for instance, how many projects that describe themselves as promoting openness frame this commitment in terms of more than one of responsiveness, accountability, engagement, and collaboration, or along cognate terms (see e.g., Open Society Foundations 2021; The Open Government Partnership, 2021; Democracy, 2021). This highlights the interdependent importance of forthrightness, receptivity, and the granting of authoritative standing. And, just like in interpersonal contexts, we would not deem an institution committed to openness if they were lacking any of the three openness orientations: we would not, for instance, label an authoritarian government "open" if they were forthright about the reasoning behind their policies and pro-active in engaging citizens when it comes to informing them about the policies while denying citizens the standing to themselves be forthright in challenging the policies. The same would be true if a government were receptive but not forthright about its policies and their effects, or if they simply refused to engage with citizens at all.

My account also explains the rhetorical appeal of the "open society" as an epithet for specifically liberal democratic societies (see e.g., Gaus, 2016; Popper, 2020; Soros, 2019). For although liberal institutions involve many constraints and regulations on behavior, those constraints are enforced in the service of preserving and accommodating the autonomy of agents, allowing people to lead the lives they want, protecting them from discrimination, preserving their freedom of association, and preventing any one group from dominating others. Through such protections, liberalism ensures (in theory) that all persons have the standing to make claims upon their fellow citizens. On the other side of the "liberal democracy" equation, democratic norms and institutions facilitate our engagement with our governing institutions, our leaders, and with each other, thereby giving us the opportunity to collectively shape and reshape society, ruling out any one individual's or group's right to impose their will unilaterally or in perpetuity. Thus, the attraction of "the open society" as a shorthand for liberal democratic societies is that it

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[21]Though, to be clear, a low-barriers trade regime is, ceteris paribus, more open than a high-barriers trade regime insofar as there is more 'engagement' (in this domain, we're more likely to call it 'integration').

captures the alchemy wrought by the *interplay between* liberal and democratic norms, which together generate enabling conditions for openness among citizens and their governments.

For all this, my account suggests that an open society, properly understood, cannot be reduced to a liberal democratic society of the sort we have today. Openness is equated with liberal democratic societies because, historically, the most relevant political alternatives to liberalism were the more closed totalitarian systems found in the USSR and Nazi Germany (Popper, 2020; Soros, 2019), while in recent decades the openness of liberal democracies has been challenged by terrorists and political extremists, and the most prominent institutional alternative is authoritarian illiberalism such as that found in China and Russia. Yet "open" and "closed" are relative terms, finding their meaning in relation to one another as well as to the contemporary moment. Whatever the status quo of a given historical moment, "open" politics will be committed to further expanding, and "closed" politics committed to contracting, the set of agents to whom we hold ourselves accountable. Given this, liberal democracy of the form we have today ought not to be considered "open" if more expansive forms of political organization present a viable and live alternative. Judgments of openness, then, entail a temporal and contextual changeability, which is as it should be—it seems right to say, for instance, that those who would advocate for the removal of women's right to vote today would be expressing a commitment to a more closed politics, but those elites who advocated even for male suffrage in the 1700s could be characterized as being more committed to openness relative to their contemporaries. Similarly, while our sovereign state system does not allow foreigners to vote on our affairs, we would hardly call someone a "closed" politician simply because he accepted this status quo. Yet if those outside our territory were someday given a voice within our polity, subsequently seeking to revoke this entitlement would indeed (at least on the face of it) be a mark of closed, rather than open politics.

Note, finally, that the account defended here generates an attractive explanation of why greater openness leads both to social dynamism and to progressive social reform—connections that all the authors discussed in Section 2 draw in one way or another. While my account supports such a connection, it does so for different reasons—and, I believe, more compelling ones—than Thrasher and Vallier, who provide the fullest account of openness' relation to dynamism and reform. On their account, "[t]he main benefit of open institutions is that they allow for social experiments that can lead to improvements" (2018, p. 404), experiments from which both people and societies more broadly can learn through a society-wide process of trial and error. Absent such a process we are likely, they believe, "to congregate around an unacceptable conception of justice, or at least an inferior institutionalization of the conception of justice and institutions we have chosen" (2018, p. 404). For Thrasher and Vallier, open societies are dynamic because they allow innovators to innovate, and open societies are good because they allow us to learn at a collective level from the successes and failures of those innovations.

On my account, by contrast, open societies are dynamic simply because they involve considerable forthright and receptive engagement between citizens and government,[22] and open societies conduce toward positive reform because receptivity to others (on the part of both governments and citizens) requires taking seriously their claims of need and injustice. A society becomes more open, on this picture, not when it facilitates a greater array of just any social experiments, but rather when it reforms itself so as to allow greater forthrightness from, and to

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[22]Given that any policy will produce winners and losers (if only in relative terms), and so open societies' stock of grievances will be constantly replenished, open societies will naturally generate some degree of dynamism simply as a by-product of people's airing and responding to such grievances.

ensure greater receptivity toward, all those who have hitherto been marginalized or excluded. Relative to Thrasher and Vallier's, then, the connection between my account of openness and social dynamism is more indirect, while the connection with progressive reform is more direct.

I believe this recalibration has its advantages. For one thing, it brings openness into the heart of democratic practice. This is because openness as I construe it can be evidenced not only by social receptivity to novel innovations, but also by the prosaic forthrightness and receptivity that we should expect between, say, political representatives and their constituents in the ordinary course of political life, or even between neighbors respectfully disagreeing. That openness might be so basic to democratic life would help to explain why it has so frequently been identified as a core normative value by politicians in recent years. At the same time, and unlike Thrasher and Vallier's, my account has the resources to explain why some particular reforms—including wholly unoriginal ones—might reasonably be taken to represent greater advances in societal openness than others; we might think here of legalizing homosexuality, simplifying immigrants' path to citizenship, or extending voting rights to younger people.[23] In each case, hitherto excluded or marginalized groups are given (or promised) a degree of authoritative standing within society which they had previously been denied; through such reforms, societies expand the web of accountability relations within which they are bound and recognize a greater array of needs as potential bases of political entitlement. Such changes, which allow greater numbers of people to insist upon their own needs as bases of entitlement against us and our institutions, represent a distinctive kind of progress that societies can make. I believe the best way of capturing such a form of progress is to say that, through implementing such reforms, societies become more open.

5 | CONCLUSION

Politicians today frequently profess their commitment to openness. Absent some understanding of what such a commitment entails, such professions can ring hollow, empty verbiage with little substantive content. In light of this, I have sought to develop an account of political openness, according to which it involves an active readiness to engage forthrightly and receptively with others and to recognize their authoritative standing in political contexts. The greater our commitment to openness, the greater the range of those we are willing to recognize as having authoritative standing against us. I have shown that this account of openness has considerable explanatory power, cohering with and making sense of the various ways in which openness talk is often used in politics. My account reaffirms a widely recognized affinity between openness and political virtues like responsiveness, accountability, and progressive reform, as well as more broadly with the liberal democratic tradition. For all that, my analysis has some surprising implications, with openness turning out to be more prosaic and yet more radical than is perhaps ordinarily assumed. More prosaic because openness can be evidenced in even the most basic interactions of democratic life, whether between neighbors respectfully disagreeing or in the ordinary course of representatives dealing with their constituents' grievances. More radical

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[23]For the sake of simplicity, I only list reforms that could be implemented through policy change at the political level; similar advances can take place in our social norms which, when they occur, can constitute progress of the same kind (see e.g. the social acceptance of homosexuality, which was far from coterminous with its legalisation – and which is, in many places, still a work in progress). They are by their nature, however, more complex as phenomena, and so are less useful as illustrative examples.

in two ways. First, because a concern with openness has been shown to require not only a concern with people's negative freedoms but also, more demandingly, with their social and political non-domination. Second, because a commitment to openness per se has no extensional limit—a thoroughgoing commitment to political openness is unlikely to find its fullest expression in the liberal-democratic forms of today's states, but rather in a more robust form of global governance, or at least in the development of stronger forms of international accountability within and between societies. Far from being of little substance, then, a commitment to openness properly understood is a commitment to a demanding political and institutional vision.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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