

EQUANIMITY AND THE MORAL VIRTUE OF OPEN-MINDEDNESS

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ABSTRACT

The author argues for the following as constituents of the moral virtue of open-mindedness: (i) a second-order awareness that is not reducible to first-order doubt; (ii) strong moral concern for members of the moral community; and (iii) some freedom from reactive habit patterns, particularly with regard to one's self-narratives, or equanimity. Drawing on Buddhist philosophical accounts of equanimity, the author focuses on the third constituent, equanimity, and argues that it is a central, but often ignored, component of the moral virtue of open-mindedness, and its absence can explain many failures of open-mindedness.

Some people are able to revise even their most cherished beliefs in response to challenges, and others are not able to, even when the stakes are high for failing to do so. Wendy Montgomery, a lifelong Mormon, grew up believing that homosexuality is a sin, for which AIDS is God's punishment. When she learned, by reading his diary, that her thirteen-year-old son was gay, she thought: "Either everything I knew about homosexuality is wrong, or my son is not really gay. And, he is obviously gay." She had to then "unlearn everything that [she] had learned" before. With considerable effort, she was not only able to accept her son's sexual orientation, but also became a public advocate for LGBTQ Mormons.¹ How was Wendy able to do this? Other parents who have grown up with similar beliefs to Wendy's, and who also love their children, are not able to use their child's experience to challenge their beliefs. Wendy Montgomery was able to be

open-minded when many people in her situation would fail.²

An account of open-mindedness as a moral virtue should be able to explain what contributes to failures, as well as successful applications, of open-mindedness. An intuitive understanding of the open-minded person as someone who recognizes her fallibility is not sufficient since most of us are able to recognize that we are fallible beings yet fail to apply that knowledge in the appropriate situations. A recent attempt to understand open-mindedness in terms of robust moral concern (Arpaly 2011) is also insufficient, since failures of open-mindedness can occur even when robust moral concern is present.

I argue that the moral virtue of open-mindedness is a character trait that includes at least the following three characteristics: (i) a second-order awareness that is not reducible to first order doubt; (ii) strong moral concern for members of the moral community;

and (iii) some freedom from reactive habit patterns, particularly with regard to one's self-narratives, or equanimity. After a brief discussion of the first two characteristics, I focus on the third, equanimity, which I argue is a crucial aspect of open-mindedness that is not explored in Western philosophical accounts of this virtue. Drawing on Buddhist philosophical accounts of equanimity, I argue that equanimity is a central component of the moral virtue of open-mindedness and its absence can explain many failures of open-mindedness.

I orient my discussion of open-mindedness in the context of morality, understood broadly as including respect for self and others, care, and concern for the welfare of self and others. This is not to deny that open-mindedness is an epistemic virtue, or even primarily an epistemic virtue, but rather to highlight the ways that this virtue also arises in moral contexts. Although I doubt that a strict delineation between epistemic and moral virtues ultimately can be made (Driver 2003; Zagzebski 1996), there are nevertheless contexts in which open-mindedness can arise that are primarily ethical (such as Wendy Montgomery's situation) and others that are primarily epistemic (such as a scientist open-mindedly considering counter-evidence to her hypothesis). For the purposes of this paper, I call virtues that focus on or arise in the context of the desire for truth "epistemic virtues" and virtues that focus on or arise in the context of our relationships with others as members of the moral community "moral virtues." Open-mindedness can be motivated by the desire for truth or the desire to respect or care for self and others (or some combination). My interest here is in the range of cases in which open-mindedness is primarily motivated by respect and care for members of the moral community. Thus my account will be incomplete, as the characteristics of open-mindedness that I claim are necessary in primarily moral contexts may not apply equally to primarily epistemic contexts.

I. OPEN-MINDEDNESS AND SECOND-ORDER AWARENESS

One puzzling feature of open-mindedness as a (epistemic or moral) virtue is that it is not obvious how one can be open-minded about her beliefs while simultaneously actually believing them (Adler 2004; Riggs 2010). How could one confidently hold a belief while at the same time genuinely be open to the possibility that it is wrong? But it would be troubling to think that the open-minded are those who are lukewarm about their beliefs, since surely it is also important to be open-minded about at least some of those beliefs one feels strongly about, including political, religious, and moral beliefs. The mark of a person who has the virtue of open-mindedness, it seems, is her ability to be open to evidence that some of her cherished beliefs—and not just her less confidently held beliefs—may be mistaken.

As Jonathan Adler (2004) and Wayne Riggs (2010) have argued, this puzzle of open-mindedness can be avoided if we understand open-mindedness as a second-order attitude. Open-mindedness is (or, at least, includes) an attitude that one takes *about* one's beliefs, namely that they could be mistaken. It is, as Riggs puts it, "to be aware of one's fallibility as a believer, and to be willing to acknowledge the possibility that any time one believes something, *it is possible that it is wrong*" (Riggs 2010, p. 180). It is not (or, not necessarily) a lack of confidence in one's particular beliefs that motivates open-mindedness, but a more general (second-order) recognition that one is a fallible being. Open-mindedness, then, is not first-order doubt but the second-order attitude that it is possible that one's first-order beliefs are wrong, despite being confidently held.

But how does the general recognition of fallibility translate to particular expressions of the virtue of open-mindedness? We may share J. S. Mill's skepticism about our capacity to

fully integrate the recognition of our own fallibility:

Unfortunately for the good sense of mankind, the fact of their fallibility is far from carrying the weight in their practical judgment, which is always allowed to it in theory: for while every one well knows himself to be fallible, few think it necessary to take any precautions against their own fallibility, or admit the supposition that any opinion of which they feel very certain, may be one of the examples of the error to which they acknowledge themselves to be liable. (Mill 1978, p. 17)

Adler argues that Mill's position rests on an underlying misunderstanding: Mill is confusing the second-order attitude of open-mindedness (the general recognition of one's fallibility) with the first-order belief that one is actually wrong (Adler 2004, p. 132). The open-minded person does not (and should not) constantly doubt the truth of her beliefs; rather, recognizing her general fallibility, she checks the truth of her beliefs selectively.³

But something still remains of Mill's worry: how does the open-minded person apply this general knowledge of her own fallibility, even selectively? After all, the general recognition that one, like all human beings, is fallible is uncontroversial and would not serve to distinguish those with the virtue of open-mindedness from those without it unless that recognition is integrated into the agent's habits of thought, feeling, and action in the appropriate ways. But it is not clear how this integration occurs, especially given the temptation to think "yes, I am fallible but I'm surely not mistaken now (or now, or now . . .)."

Riggs suggests the practices of self-knowledge and self-monitoring to help fill the gap between the general recognition of oneself as fallible and the application of this recognition to actual cases. In order for one's recognition of one's own fallibility to actually manifest as the virtue of open-mindedness, one has to understand the mistakes to which

one is susceptible, and then monitor one's own reactions in order to properly recognize occasions for open-mindedness (Riggs 2010, pp. 182–184). While this is surely right, there remain several questions that need to be answered: What is the relevant kind of self-knowledge? How is it attained, and how are blind spots overcome? Can we monitor ourselves effectively, or must we rely on others? As I hope to show in section 5, Buddhist concepts of equanimity help answer some of these questions.

2. ROBUST MORAL CONCERN AND OPEN-MINDEDNESS

Understanding open-mindedness as the disposition to have second-order awareness that recognizes one's own fallibility allows us to say, as we surely want to, that lack of confidence in one's beliefs is not the only reason one could be motivated to be open-minded. The recognition of fallibility combined with the desire for truth provides motivation to be open-minded even when one holds a belief with a high degree of confidence. But open-mindedness might be motivated by more than the recognition of human fallibility and the desire for truth. In some cases, the motivation to be open-minded is based in moral concern rather than in the pursuit of truth (although, of course, these need not be incompatible).⁴ We may be motivated to be open-minded to someone else's point of view simply because we care about and respect her.

To talk about open-mindedness in the moral context—that is, as a moral virtue—we need the qualification that it is informed by and supportive of an agent's moral concern. I use moral concern here in a broad sense as including both caring about and respecting members of the moral community. In Nomy Arpaly's recent account of open-mindedness (2011), robust moral concern is the main characteristic of the open-minded person. Such a person is one "whose moral concern insulates her from the pull of other concerns

that would otherwise render her unresponsive to evidence, in contexts in which something morally significant might be at stake” (Arpaly 2011, p. 81). In general, when we really care about something, she argues, we are more careful about getting it right (p. 78). On the way to the airport, for example, one might check several times to make sure one’s passport is still where one thinks it is. Normally—that is, when one is not on the way to the airport—one will likely feel no need to double-check the location of one’s passport. The difference is that, on the way to the airport, one *cares* about the location of one’s passport.⁵ Because the open-minded person, on Arpaly’s view, cares about members of the moral community, she is motivated to be epistemically careful when it comes to her moral judgments. Such a person is “prevented from being ‘opinionated’—resistant to evidence—by moral concern” (Arpaly 2011, p. 81).

If the moral virtue of open-mindedness were a kind of robust moral concern that orients and improves one’s ability to integrate evidence, we would expect that failures of open-mindedness could be attributed to the lack of such concern. Some failures of open-mindedness can surely be explained this way: if we hold someone in contempt or moral indifference, we are unlikely to be motivated to consider the person’s beliefs as serious challenges to our own. But it is not clear that this is always the case. Consider Arpaly’s own example of a young woman who is considering divorcing her husband. Upon telling her parents—who have always supported her decisions—she is met with hostility, accused of being selfish and not trying hard enough to save her marriage. Her parents themselves have had a miserable marriage but stayed together anyway. To open-mindedly consider their daughter’s divorce, they would have to revisit their own failed marriage, which they are not willing to do (Arpaly 2011, p. 80).

What is striking about this case of closed-mindedness is that it is *not* well explained in

terms of a lack of moral concern. We have no reason to think that the unhappy parents have inadequate moral concern for their divorcing daughter. On the contrary, the parent–child relationship is, under normal conditions, paradigmatic of moral concern, and we have good evidence (the history of the woman’s relationship with her parents) to believe that these parents were not anomalous in this regard. Something other than the lack of moral concern was responsible for their closed-mindedness.

Arpaly rightly notes that the reason that the parents cannot accept their daughter’s divorce is “because there is connection to their own concerns for their own marriage and their own decisions” (2011, p. 80). To consider the appropriateness of their daughter’s divorce would raise questions about the appropriateness of their own decision not to divorce, questions that they worry cannot be answered well and so should not be asked. The moral failing of the closed-minded parents, then, is not a lack of moral concern; on the contrary, they are very concerned about their child’s happiness and character development. Rather, it is their inability to consider displeasing, but possibly true, narratives about themselves. The parents cannot support their daughter’s divorce (which, we are assuming, would contribute to her happiness) because they are unwilling or unable to consider a displeasing narrative about themselves, namely that a decision that framed their whole adult lives—the decision to remain (unhappily) married—was a bad one.

This ability to consider alternative narratives about oneself, especially those that are frightening or displeasing, without shutting down or lashing out is itself a moral capacity that is not well described by the broad concept of having “moral concern.” I argue that this capacity, which I call equanimity, is, along with moral concern, necessary for the moral virtue of open-mindedness. In what follows, I develop an account of equanimity based on

Buddhist philosophical accounts that I argue can better explain what the open-minded person is doing and what the closed-minded person fails to do.

3. WHAT IS EQUANIMITY?

In Buddhist ethical traditions, equanimity (Pali: *upekshā*; Tibetan: *stang snyom*) is a central moral attitude that is characterized by freedom from reactive habits of thought, feeling, and action that allows one to reduce or eliminate morally problematic bias. It is usually conceptualized in the context of the “four boundless qualities” (*brahmavihāras*; *tshemed gzhi*) of love, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity. These four qualities are the main moral emotions of Buddhist ethics.⁶ They are boundless in the sense that they can be cultivated to encompass more and more members of the moral community and can be felt with increasing depth and sincerity (Heim 2008; McRae 2013). Although equanimity is particularly well theorized in Buddhist ethical traditions, it should not be thought of as the sole purview of Buddhism. Just as one does not need to be a Buddhist to feel or exhibit love, compassion, or joy, one does not have to be a Buddhist to feel or exhibit equanimity.

Definitions of equanimity in Buddhist ethics vary, as we would expect given the longevity and diversity of Buddhist traditions, but they share the basic theme of freedom from addictive habits, particularly craving and aversion. The Indian philosopher Vasubandhu (fourth century C.E.) defines equanimity as being “free from addictions in the midst of (pleasant and unpleasant) experiences” (Maitreyanātha and Āryasaṅga 2004, p. 228). Buddhaghosa (1956), a fifth-century Buddhist scholar of the Pali canon, describes equanimity as a “neutral” attitude toward all beings and claims that the function of equanimity is “to see equality in all beings,” which “is manifested by quieting resentment and approval” (IX.96). The ninth-century Indian scholar Kamalaśīla, whose work was very

influential in Tibet, describes equanimity as simply “eliminating attachment and hatred” (2001, p. 48). According to the nineteenth-century Tibetan master Patrul Rinpoche, equanimity (*stang snyom*) means “giving up (*stang*) our hatred for enemies and infatuation with friends, and having an even-minded (*snyom*) attitude towards all beings.”⁷ For all of these thinkers (and, indeed, for Buddhist ethicists more generally), equanimity supports the cultivation of love, compassion, and sympathetic joy. This is because when we are able to minimize or even eliminate addiction, aversion, hatred, and the like that arise from morally problematic biases, we are freer to feel love, compassion, and sympathetic joy for other members of the moral community.⁸

Based on these historical definitions, I propose the following definition of equanimity: Equanimity is the freedom from two main kinds of vicious habits of mind and body, namely craving habits (infatuation, neediness, clinginess) and aversion habits (resentment, hostility, hatred), which is characterized by feelings of tranquility and spaciousness that allow one to engage with others (and self) in more virtuous ways. There are three features of equanimity that are especially relevant in the context of understanding open-mindedness: (i) its focus on gaining freedom from problematic self-narratives; (ii) its mutually supportive relationship with the other moral emotions of love, compassion, and sympathetic joy; and (iii) its function as a second-order affective attitude.

In general, Buddhist thinkers argue that the conception of the self as permanent and independent is philosophically untenable, despite being psychologically compelling (see Siderits, Thompson, and Zahavi 2011). According to this view, this untenable conception of the self that most of us assume but do not analyze creates not just philosophical problems, but psychological and ethical ones, including a morally problematic preoccupation with the self, an unhealthy fixation with building and

maintaining certain limiting self-narratives, and a warped and morally impoverished view of others. In Buddhist ethics, the main object of clinging, at the most basic level, is this metaphysically and ethically untenable conception of the self; the main object of our aversion is whatever challenges that conception.

By systematically challenging habits of craving and aversion, practices of equanimity are designed to be antidotes to strong habits of preoccupation with the self. Craving and aversion, rather than other reactions, are emphasized here because they have a special place with regard to one's conception of self. Craving essentially says "I want that and must have it." The object of craving is thought of as necessary for making one the person one thinks one is; aversion, which repels us from objects, likewise says a lot about who one thinks one is not. To gain some facility with observing and intervening in one's habits of craving and aversion, then, is to gain some freedom with regard to one's identifications and self-narratives.

Equanimity, like other moral attitudes and emotions, can be cultivated, and much of Buddhist ethical discussion of equanimity is devoted to the *practice* of equanimity. Some practices involve the systemic scanning of the body with the practitioner noting the pleasant and unpleasant sensations and the accompanying cravings and aversions. The practitioner begins to feel the difference between a mere unpleasant sensation and an aversion, which is her reaction to that sensation. This allows her to cultivate a certain mental distance from unpleasant and pleasant sensations (Aronson 1980; Hart 1987). Other, more discursive, practices invite the practitioner to consider craving and aversion as it arises in her relationships with others. Typical narratives about relationships, such as the narrative that there is a clear, fundamental division between those who are with us and those who are against us, are systematically

challenged (Buddhaghosa 1956; Rinpoche 1994). As meditative practices, equanimity practices are designed to be practiced regularly and over time. Morally problematic biases and self-narratives are slowly worked out like knots.

The content of these practices clearly varies—from mindfully noting the pain in one's knee and one's aversion to it, to contemplating challenges to some of the basic ways that we view our interpersonal relationships—but their basic function is the same. These practices challenge reactive habit patterns. They accustom one to the possibility that the way one understands one's preferences, desires, beliefs, and narratives about one's life may be mistaken. Through equanimity practice, the moral agent is honing her ability to respond rather than react, even in the midst of unpleasant or pleasant sensations.⁹

Having some freedom with regard to one's habits of thought and feeling, including, importantly, one's self-conceptions, is a necessary condition of having the moral virtue of open-mindedness. What prevented the parents, in Arpaly's example, from considering the possibility that their daughter's divorce may be a good idea? Or, to use another example, what might prevent otherwise loving and concerned parents from considering that their child's sexuality may not be immoral or sinful? To consider these possibilities would require them to seriously entertain the idea that one of their most cherished identity-markers—their religion, their marriage—has instilled in them untrue or hurtful beliefs. Not only does this open the door to the possibility that other core beliefs are also mistaken, but, perhaps what is more damaging, considering that one may be wrong about, for example, the immorality of homosexuality requires one to consider that one may have participated in a lifelong project of misdirected hatred, contempt, and disgust. A self-narrative of moral purity and religious piety would be replaced with the self-narrative of one as an accidental

bigot, which is, no doubt, highly aversive. If these parents lack open-mindedness, it is not because they lack moral concern for their children, but because they lack equanimity. Clinging to one self-narrative and aversion to another make it impossible to respond to the challenge that their child's lives and decisions present to their beliefs, and so they can only react based on the narratives and views that are most compelling and familiar.

The remaining features of equanimity highlight its compatibility with the previously mentioned features of the virtue of open-mindedness: the importance of robust moral concern and the second-order awareness characteristic of open-mindedness. In Buddhist ethical traditions, equanimity is understood as enhancing moral concern, rather than limiting or opposing it. This means that equanimity is not, as Buddhaghosa (1956) reminds us, "unknowing indifference," but is rather an enabler to cultivate moral concern by intentionally and directly minimizing obstacles to such concern (IX.101). These obstacles take the form of craving habits, such as clinging, fixation, and neediness, on the one hand, and aversion habits, such as resentment, bitterness, and hatred, on the other. Although the parents in our examples love and have moral concern for their children, this love and concern could not be engaged or even accessed because of the obstacle of the parents' aversion to considering new world views and self-narratives.

In this sense, Buddhist conceptions of equanimity serve as a complement to Arpaly's focus on moral concern. Moral concern is undoubtedly important since, without it, the motivation to be open-minded all but disappears, at least in the moral context. If the parents do not care about or respect their child, they have no incentive to engage in the difficult work of evaluating and challenging their core values, beliefs, and self-narratives. But moral concern becomes impotent if one is in the grips of strong habits of craving and aversion. Even if it exists, it may not

be accessible. Failures of open-mindedness could be due to either failing, the lack of moral concern, or the lack of freedom from the relevant habitual reactive patterns, that is, the lack of equanimity.

The final feature of equanimity is that, as a way of relating to one's habits of thought, action, and feeling, it is basically second-order; it is an affective attitude that one takes toward other attitudes, beliefs, and, importantly, feelings. It is "basically" second-order because, in the Buddhist context at least, it does have at least one first-order component: feelings of tranquility and spaciousness.¹⁰ These feelings arise from the second-order freedom from habitual reactive patterns. They are simply the affective correlates of being free from craving and aversion; one *feels* free from craving and aversion (at least, within the relevant context). For the person who practices equanimity, challenges to her assumptions and self-narratives become increasingly less distressing, and so when challenges arise, she is more likely to feel a sense of spaciousness rather than the uncomfortable constriction that comes from trying to defend an increasingly indefensible narrative. Such feelings are characteristic of equanimity but are not the goal of equanimity practice, which, in Buddhist ethics, is the development of the ability to have stronger, less biased, and more sensible moral concern for members of the moral community. Allowing this first-order aspect of equanimity—the feelings of freedom, tranquility, and spaciousness—to inform our understanding of open-mindedness poses no problem for understanding open-mindedness; it is plausible to think that such feelings are also characteristic of open-mindedness.¹¹ The main reason to emphasize the second-order awareness characteristic of open-mindedness is to explain open-mindedness about strongly held beliefs. Including equanimity—which has a strong second-order orientation—as part of open-mindedness does not affect our ability

to explain how we can be open-minded about what we believe with confidence.

4. EQUANIMITY AND OPEN-MINDEDNESS: SOME OBJECTIONS

Open-mindedness, then, is not equivalent or reducible to equanimity; rather, I have argued that it is a necessary affective and cognitive orientation of the person with the virtue of open-mindedness, at least in the moral context.¹² I consider two objections to this view.

First, even if we restrict our inquiry to moral contexts, we may worry that the scope of equanimity may be too narrow to fully account for the virtue of open-mindedness. There seem to be cases in which one can exhibit open-mindedness and yet fail to have equanimity. Consider Jason Baehr's example of the open-minded judge who is committed to hearing both sides of a dispute (2011, p. 194). In this example, she is already neutral between the competing views—that is, she has no pre-existing biases toward one or against another—nevertheless, since she gives both a fair hearing, it seems right to say that she is being open-minded. But does she have equanimity? After all, she had no cravings or aversions toward one view or another to gain freedom *from*. As Baehr argues, one need not feel conflict in order to exhibit the virtue of open-mindedness. Must one have craving and aversions to be free from in order to exhibit equanimity?

The judge in this example does not need to cultivate equanimity to have the virtue of open-mindedness. But this is not because no equanimity is needed; it is because the judge already has equanimity. She already has the freedom from the relevant cravings and aversions that would otherwise prevent her from fairly evaluating both sides of the dispute. But what are the relevant cravings and aversions? In this example, we know that the judge is impartial with regard to the competing views between which she is adjudicating, but the example is silent about other craving and

aversion habits that may be affecting her ability to be open-minded. As Baehr notes, open-mindedness is not opposed only to vices such as narrow-mindedness, dogmatism, and bias; it is also opposed to vices such as hastiness, impatience, and laziness (2011, p. 195). Given her neutrality between the competing positions, the judge is not in danger of exhibiting the first set of vices but may be in danger of exhibiting the second set. From the point of view of Buddhist ethics, the second set of vices also reflects a lack of equanimity since, were one to be vicious in these ways, one would be giving in to a craving to rush or an aversion to listen to something in which one has no antecedent interest. Were she to succumb to these cravings or aversions, she would fail to have equanimity and fail to be open-minded. So, if she really is open-minded (and is therefore not exhibiting any of the opposing vices listed above), then she already has equanimity, since she is free from the relevant cravings and aversions (for instance, to hurry, to shut down, or “zone out”). If she lacks equanimity and so is under the influence of the relevant cravings and aversions, then she also lacks open-mindedness and would be exhibiting one of the vices associated with closed-mindedness.

The second objection to equanimity as a necessary condition of the moral virtue of open-mindedness is that it is not, or at least not obviously, compatible with the second characteristic of this virtue: robust moral concern. The basic worry is that, if one really cares about another, one will fail to have equanimity because one's caring about another requires one to have and act on sets of cravings (for instance, for the other's happiness) and aversions (for instance, to that person's suffering); and, similarly, if one has equanimity, then one cannot properly and fully care for another. Buddhist ethicists are typically sensitive to this concern, which is one reason why so many explicitly insist that equanimity is not indifference; on the

contrary, it only makes one better at caring for others. Resolving this tension is not a trivial concern in Buddhist ethics, especially given the centrality of love, compassion, and altruism, on the one hand, and the significance of equanimity and freedom from afflictive emotionality and desire, on the other, in Buddhist ethical writings. While I cannot give a full account of Buddhist responses to this objection here, I will briefly summarize what I take to be the strongest case that equanimity is compatible with and even mutually supportive of robust moral concern.¹³

Recall that on Buddhist ethical views, equanimity is theorized in the context of the other four boundless qualities—love, compassion, and sympathetic joy. The idea here is not that equanimity needs to be balanced against love, compassion, and joy, but that equanimity—like love, compassion, and joy—aids the development of genuine moral concern. This is because it allows one to access feelings of love, compassion, and joy that would otherwise be truncated, blocked, or warped by one’s reactive habit patterns of craving and aversion, as I briefly argued in section 3. This seems to what is happening in Arpaly’s example of the unhappily married parents: their love and compassion for their daughter is not accessible to them because it is blocked by their reactive habit patterns concerning divorce that arise from their own cravings and aversions. Equanimity is an enabling affective and cognitive orientation; it enables moral concern to manifest by reducing barriers to having such concern.

Moral concern, then, on a Buddhist ethical view, is not another set of reactive habit patterns of craving and aversion—for two main reasons. First, craving and aversion are understood as involving preoccupation with the self, what the self can get or what it can avoid. This is true even when the object of craving is a loved one. If, for example, I crave my loved one’s attention, this desire has more to do with me and my needs than genuine concern for

my loved one. On Buddhist ethical views, we can only have proper moral concern when we are not preoccupied with ourselves in these ways.¹⁴ Second, and related, craving and aversion, unlike true moral concern, are understood as “afflictive” rather than liberating. They are afflictive because (i) we experience them as controlling or compelling us in ways we might not otherwise choose, and (ii) they lead to or constitute other negative affective or cognitive states, such as hatred, envy, and ignorance.¹⁵

5. CONCLUSION: WHO NEEDS EQUANIMITY?

I have argued for three main characteristics of the moral virtue of open-mindedness: (i) it includes a second-order awareness that recognizes one’s fallibility; (ii) it is motivated and informed by moral concern; and (iii) requires equanimity. This suggests a preliminary definition of open-mindedness as a moral virtue: the disposition, motivated and informed by moral concern, to recognize one’s fallibility as a believer and to integrate that recognition appropriately in daily life. This integration can occur only when one is not overwhelmed by one’s habitual reactive patterns of thought, feeling, and action, that is, it occurs when one has equanimity. Closed-mindedness can occur despite a robust sense of moral concern, and even in relationships that are otherwise paradigmatic of moral concern, such as the parent-child relationship. Even when she has robust moral concern, the closed-minded person may lack equanimity if she lacks freedom from reactive habits of mind, particularly those of craving and aversion. This lack of freedom prevents her from considering relevant evidence, despite her care and concern for others.

The inclusion of equanimity can explain not only failures of open-mindedness, but also how the general recognition of fallibility can be properly integrated. Equanimity practices cultivate self-knowledge through a lens of

craving and aversion. It is an emotionally inflected self-knowledge: what we learn about ourselves by observing and investigating what we (think we) must have and what we (think we) cannot stand. By tracking feelings of craving and aversion, equanimity practices highlight the narratives that we are attached to and those we cannot allow.

This kind of self-knowledge is critical for the cultivation of open-mindedness, since, as I hope to have shown, failures of open-mindedness are often due to these craving and aversion habits, especially around self-narratives. If we know what it feels like to be very invested in a particular narrative (or very invested in avoiding it), this can serve as a “red flag” to proceed with caution. Such red flags—strong feelings of craving and aversion—can serve as effective self-monitoring tools. By practicing equanimity, one becomes familiar with one’s reactive habits through safe experimentation; one can purposefully challenge them in reasonably safe settings. The idea is that, when one’s bias and reactive habits are challenged in everyday life, one will have developed some resources to meet that challenge.

Finally, equanimity can also explain what is “open” about open-mindedness as a moral virtue in a way that the concept of robust moral concern alone cannot. Arpaly, for example, sometimes talks about open-mindedness as though it arises when moral concern overpowers other concerns. The open-minded person is prevented from being opinionated because her “moral concern insulates her from the pull of other concerns”

(Arpaly 2011, p. 81). But this seems to describe an over-powered mind rather than an open one. Despite her moral concern, a person with equanimity may still feel the pull of craving and aversion (and related feelings). But her relationship with these “pulls” is characterized by a certain distance, curiosity, and freedom. She feels them, but is not completely under their influence. The freedom of equanimity captures the intuitive sense of open-mindedness as *open* in a way that the mere strength of moral concern cannot.

Including equanimity in our understanding of the moral virtue of open-mindedness can help explain failures of open-mindedness that are otherwise difficult to explain. Although it is true that open-mindedness involves a second-order awareness of one’s own fallibility, this alone does not explain how such an awareness should be integrated into one’s thoughts, feelings, and actions in actual cases. Equanimity practices help to specifically address this problem of integration by providing methods for working with habits of craving and aversion. It is also true that open-mindedness as a moral virtue requires robust moral concern, but, without equanimity, we cannot explain how failures of open-mindedness occur even for persons with such concern. Equanimity, then, can explain how one’s second-order awareness is integrated and how one’s moral concern can be accessed and engaged in order to consider challenges to one’s beliefs.

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NOTES

1. Montgomery (2013).
2. There are other possible interpretations of Montgomery’s behavior according to which she would not be exhibiting the virtue of open-mindedness. For example, she may be simply choosing her son over her Church because of her strong attachment to her son, without ever considering that he may not be a sinner. I resist this interpretation of Montgomery’s actions mainly because she sees herself as “unlearning” what she was taught about homosexuality.

3. The need for selectivity is cleverly illustrated in this farcical headline in the *Onion*: “Close-Minded Man Not Even Willing to Hear Out an Argument on Why Homosexuality an Abomination” (<http://www.theonion.com/articles/close-minded-man-not-even-willing-to-hear-out-argum,35379/>).
4. Although sometimes they may be incompatible; see Driver (2003).
5. Arpaly writes:

We are often more cautious in drawing conclusions when the stakes are high by the lights of our concerns, and often less confident in our conclusions once we have drawn them. . . . Perhaps, being in the middle of a real estate transaction, it is very important to me that the bank is open tomorrow, and tomorrow is Saturday. If you ask me, “Is the bank open tomorrow?” I am likely to respond, “Oh let me double-check.” After all, I have read only once, and on the bank’s website, that the bank is open tomorrow; I feel as though I might have read the wrong line, and besides, I think to myself, the website could be out of date. I suspect the answer is that the bank is open, but I lack confidence: I think I should call and ask. (2011, p. 78)
6. Calling these qualities “emotions” is slightly misleading since there is no word for emotion in the traditional languages of Buddhism, no concept of emotion in Buddhist philosophy, and, therefore, no dichotomy between reason and emotion (Dreyfus 1994; de Silva 1995; Heim 2008). But because these are states with clear affective, cognitive, and volitional components, I refer to them as moral emotion for the purposes of this essay.
7. Rinpoche (1994, p. 196).
8. Of course, not all biases are morally problematic. Very generally, for the Buddhist thinkers I have cited in this paper, biases become morally problematic when they involve a warped or impoverished perception of the moral worth of others or self.
9. This is true even in the body scanning practices, which, on the surface at least, do not seem to have much to do with moral development. But one quickly learns, simply from the practice of sitting on the floor and remaining aware of one’s body, one’s typical reaction to displeasure and discomfort, which is usually some form of aversion ranging from anger (or even rage) to a slight desire to move the body. By experimenting with not moving, the practitioner gives herself an opportunity to start to dismantle her habitual reactions in order to analyze how helpful they really are.
10. See, for example, Buddhaghosa’s (1956) discussion of equanimity in the *Path of Purification* (IX.88).
11. I leave this as a hypothesis since I cannot fully address the affective contours of the phenomenology of open-mindedness here.
12. I suspect this is also true of open-mindedness as an epistemic virtue, but I do not argue for that here.
13. See McRae (2013) for a more complete account of the compatibility of equanimity and moral concern.
14. This is not a straightforward issue in Buddhist ethics. One has to care about one’s moral and spiritual improvement, and so one cares about oneself in a meaningful way, but moral and spiritual improvement are defined in terms of emotional sensitivity to others, moral concern, and wisdom. For this reason, caring about the self one, on Buddhist ethics, cannot be separated from a deep, abiding, and pervasive concern for others.
15. See McRae (2015) for a more complete account of the differences between afflictive and liberatory affective states in Buddhist ethics.

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