

OSTRICH EPISTEMOLOGY AND OPEN-MINDEDNESS

Charles Sanders Peirce, “The Fixation of Belief,” *Popular Science Monthly* (12, 1877: 1–15). <-- characterized “ostrich” beliefs. From the Pierce article:

I remember once being entreated not to read a certain newspaper lest it might change my opinion upon freetrade. ‘Lest I might be entrapped by its fallacies and misstatements,’ was the form of expression. ‘You are not,’ my friend said, ‘a special student of political economy. You might, therefore, easily be deceived by fallacious arguments upon the subject. You might, then, if you read this paper, be led to believe in protection. But you admit that freetrade is the true doctrine; and you do not wish to believe what is not true.’

Pierce’s statement embeds examples of two types of “epistemic paternalism,” that is, the restriction of how we come to know things (our epistemology). “First-person paternalism” involves censoring your *own* experience and thinking to avoid changing your deeply held beliefs.

“Third-person paternalism” involves having a third party tell you what to read/do for your own good. This practice of interfering with people’s efforts at inquiry without their consent is based because people will be better off without testing, probing, or thinking.

Confronting and engaging arguments with an open mind about what appears, at first glance, to be stupid conclusions is not as risky as the ostrich might think. On the contrary, a person can improve by being open-minded.

You treat an argument *openmindedly* only if you are willing to change your mind in response to that argument based on evidence. Thomas Kelly, in “Following the Argument Where It Leads,” *Philosophical Studies* (154, 2011: 105–24), suggests following a “modalized reasonableness,” a disposition to believe, disbelieve, or suspend judgment on any proposition whenever becomes reasonable to do so.

In Chapter 2 of *On Liberty*—the *locus classicus* for a philosophical attack on censorship—John Stuart Mill considers a dilemma. On the one hand, perhaps the status quo opinion is false, and the dissenting opinion is true. In that case, suppressing and refusing to engage with the dissenting opinion means foregoing an opportunity to correct ourselves. On the other hand, even if the dissenting opinion is false and is known to be so, suppressing it robs us of the opportunity to gain, in Mill’s words, “the clearer perception and livelier impression of truth produced by its collision with error.”

--> It’s called learning; it involves thinking; its whetstone is reasoning; it requires intellectual humility, not arrogance. Learning, thinking, reasoning, and humility currently are in short supply, I assert.

Epistemic paternalism is the subject of many academic discussions, much of it woolly. One article that seems, as its author writes, “clarifactory” is available at <http://bit.ly/EpistPater>. Not a late-night read, though.