

## **Rationality of an Open Mind**

With the arrival of the information age, it's exceedingly common to encounter beliefs contradictory to our own and to have to respond to them. The vast majority of said responses can be grouped into two broad categories, an emphasized adherence to one's own views or a willingness to consider alternative ideas. For the sake of philosophical integrity, the most valid beliefs are based (as much as constraints allow) on a bedrock of logical thought. Thus the question must be asked, whether it's more rational to consider the views of ideological opponents or to ignore them. Provided of course, that all parties are on equal footing in terms of intelligence, provided information, and caution. In this essay, I shall argue that it is indeed the more rational approach to contemplate the opinions held by those that are ideologically opposed but equally positioned.

First, I will delineate what I mean by rationality. For the purposes of this analysis, an approach towards opposing views will be considered more rational than another if it is more likely to lead to either the objective truth where this is applicable, or to the most beneficial outcome where this is not. Aristotle once said that "Every art and every investigation, and similarly every action and pursuit, is considered to aim at some good." (Aristotle, 1). Through this lens, the good that an argument or debate aims at can either be the truth or the better outcome. Thus my precise argument in this essay is that by keeping your mind open, you are being more rational by allowing yourself the greatest access to the truth possible.

The beliefs and conclusions held by any individual about the world around them are shaped by numerous interconnected factors. Among these, the most prominent are logical reasoning, cultural upbringing, psychological history, and societal pressure. Due to the variable nature of many of these factors, it is entirely possible and even likely that an equally positioned opponent may hold views radically different from our own. As most of the extraneous factors and therefore the foundations of our beliefs and values are entirely or partially outside of our own control, no ideology, belief, or opinion

can ever be held with 100% logical certainty. However, by keeping our minds open, we can expose ourselves to the overall set of competing ideas among which the truth hides, thus enhancing our chances of coming across said truth. To illustrate this, consider the plight of someone who has misplaced their keys within their home. To maximize their chances of finding their lost keys, they must search their entire home thoroughly rather than limiting themselves to any single room.

Closing oneself off to opposing viewpoints is to purposefully limit the information available to you and to make of your mind a fertile ground for radicalization and ignorance. One of the clearest demonstrations of this can be seen by analyzing the internet and how it has contributed to the current culture war raging across much of the western world between the political right and left. Ever since the rise of social media, it has become very easy to isolate one's sources of information to those whose worldviews already match one's own, leading to reinforcement of preexisting beliefs and dehumanization of the perceived enemy. This is why interaction between opposing political factions has become far more heated and most notably in the United States has even become violent in recent years. The inherently social nature of human beings renders us vulnerable to tribalism and undue hatred if we do not make an effort to keep an open, logical mind and to give every reasonable idea proper examination.

In his renowned work, *The Republic*, Plato examined the nature of virtue in great detail. His goal from the beginning was to examine the nature of individual virtue, however he found it useful to first examine virtue at a larger scale beforehand since "States are as the men, they grow out of human characters" (Plato, 287). In other words, what makes an individual virtuous would be fundamentally identical to what makes a state virtuous. This proved to be a very effective technique throughout the rest of his dialogue and it is one that I will utilize here. Thus, if keeping an open mind really is more rational on an individual level, it must be so on a macro level as well. Are governments who keep themselves open to contrary ideas truly more successful than those who do not? Upon examining recent history, it becomes clear that liberal democracy, despite flaws provides an overall

more adaptable, stable foundation for societies over its more closed minded rivals. Authoritarian, one party states have near universally fallen to corruption, economic stagnation, and an inherent inability to adapt to changing circumstances. The USSR for example, along with its dependencies in the eastern bloc, collapsed in 1991 after years of decline, due to a failure to adapt to an advancing world. The western aligned democracies on the other hand, have continued to prosper into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, despite weathering many crises of their own, such as the 2008 global recession and the 2015 European migrant crisis, along with a rise in anti western sentiment across the globe. The key to the success of liberal democracy lies in its unprecedented ability to adapt to new challenges along with its openness to new ideas and solutions. The inherent malleable nature of democracy allows these governments to switch the parties and officials in charge of policy very quickly, enabling quick adaptation to new circumstances. While with liberalism as their guiding philosophy, they maintain a strong foundation of freedoms such as freedom of expression and of the press, that allow new ideas to be generated and to proliferate based on their effectiveness, as judged by an educated and politically active populace. Just as with individuals, states too that keep an open mind accomplish their goals with more ease than those who do not.

Of course, there are many arguments that could be made against such an openness to new ideas and of these, quite a few hold some merit. These arguments are worth addressing if one truly does believe in the value of considering opposing ideas. One of the most prominent criticisms would be that having such a carefree attitude towards new ideas renders us vulnerable to straying from the truth rather than approaching it. This is indeed a very real possibility, however it is not applicable to the specific openness that I am suggesting. In order to be as logically sound as possible, you not only have to maintain an open mind, you must also subject each new idea you encounter to logical analysis. I am advocating not for an openness to the acceptance of new ideas but simply for an openness to the proper consideration of new ideas. Some could also attack my example of the success of liberal democracy by pointing to the rise of the PRC, a confidently authoritarian state. I concede that in the current age, the

PRC certainly does represent the most viable competitor to liberal democracy, however upon closer examination, its success in fact reinforces the value of openness rather than contradict it. The PRC's economic rise only began in earnest after the free market reforms initiated by Deng Xiaoping. In other words, their rise was precipitated by a willingness to learn from the economic system of their competitors rather than a staunch refusal to do so.

Thus, a key component of a logically sound belief system is an ability to carefully consider ideas that may at first go against what one already believes, as long as said ideas come from a source that is equally intelligent, informed, and cautious as oneself. This will allow access to the greatest possible pool of ideas, out of which one must use logic to draw out the truth. At a time where polarization and hatred have become all too common, it is increasingly important to keep all of this in mind and to exercise it wherever applicable.

### **Works Cited**

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