

# Teaching Freedom

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*...at its best, schooling can be about how to make a life, which is quite different from how to make a living.»*

-Neil Postman.<sup>1</sup>

**I**n what is to follow, I will argue that utilizing pedagogical techniques, such as creating a *Community of Inquiry* (a technique central to a more specific pedagogy referred to as *Philosophy for Children*), are important because they expose individuals to viewpoints radically different from their own. In so doing, they prod individuals to reevaluate their own positions in light of strong opposing viewpoints. This opposition-exposing procedure helps to neutralize preexisting biases. Since biases can be characterized as potential 'external' influences on an individual's own thinking, and since eliminating such external influences is a necessary condition for autonomy - or what Kant referred to as «self-legislation,» the ultimate value of utilizing pedagogical techniques, such as creating a *Community of Inquiry*, is that it enhances the possibility of individuals becoming their «own persons.» Since autonomy, or positive freedom, is only possible because humans are self-conscious, and since self-consciousness is the characteristic that defines what it is to be essentially human, if we, as educators, fail to nurture procedures that enhance autonomy, we fail to nurture what it is to be essentially human. If we fail in this regard, we fail at the central task. Thus, I conclude that utilizing pedagogical techniques such as creating a *Community of Inquiry* should be considered not just relatively beneficial, but rather literally fundamental to the human education process.

## IS THERE SOMETHING «ESSENTIAL» THAT WE OUGHT TO BE TEACHING OUR CHILDREN?

If we followed all reasonable advice about what we ought to teach our children, we could fill their time with more educational hours and days than we do now, and we would still have suggestions left over about what else they ought to learn. So when the question arises about what we ought to teach our children, it is important that it is couched in terms of **necessary conditions**. We need to ask, «what is it that is **essential** that we teach our children? What is it that, if it were left out, we, as educators, could be charged as irredeemably irresponsible?»

Obviously the knowledge and fundamental skills that are necessary for making a living are of paramount importance. But what about «making a life»? Is there something special, or essential, about

being human such that, if it were not actuated, a person would fundamentally fall short of what it is to be human.

The characteristic that could be described as **essentially** human is the capacity for **self-consciousness**<sup>2</sup>. It is because humans are self-conscious that they can imagine themselves in various possible future scenarios, that they can evaluate which future they would prefer, that they can estimate the degree to which they can contribute to the possibility of bringing that future into being, and they can decide whether the cost is worth it. By contrast, merely conscious, i.e., non-self-conscious entities, such as the local cow, are, by definition, not conscious of themselves, i.e., they can not imagine themselves in varying alternative situations. Merely conscious entities, again by definition, are clearly conscious of their environment (i.e., they respond to stimuli); they are simply not conscious of themselves in it.

The behavioural and ethical consequence that accompanies this evolutionary leap in cognitive functioning is that self-conscious entities gain the capacity to direct their own actions, i.e., self-conscious entities become masters of their own fate in a way and to a degree that non-self-conscious entities are not.

We already implicitly recognize the behavioural consequence of the development of self-consciousness by the fact that we hold self-conscious entities in contrast to merely conscious entities - responsible for their actions. Holding an entity responsible for its actions only makes sense if we believe that that entity is free to do other than it does; that it has the capacity to choose. However, though we implicitly recognize the freedom of self-conscious entities, the fact that we remain ignorant of the precise dynamics that underpin freedom, ultimately robs us of the possibility of maximizing its potential.

The answer to the question posed above, therefore, must surely be this. Since it is the possibility of self-direction that is unique and defining of self-conscious agents, whatever else we teach our youngsters, surely it is essential that we teach them how to harness that capacity, and make it their own. We need to teach our children how to maximise their capacity for autonomy. We need to teach freedom.

## THE EVOLUTION OF SELF-DIRECTION

In order for self-conscious agents to take more control over their own capacity for freedom - and in so doing acquire a kind of second - order freedom, i.e., the freedom to maximize their own freedom - they must fully appreciate the mechanics that underpin the evolution of this «apparent» qualitative difference in behavioral control. In order to appreciate the mechanics of freedom, it is imperative that we first understand the default value of all animate behavior - namely that it is controlled by the stimulus environment in which an animal moves. In «behaviorist» jargon, how an animal behaves is totally a function of the algebraic sum and relationship of **appetitive** stimuli that elicit approach behavior (such as food or a potential mate) and **aversive** stimuli that elicit avoidance behavior (such as fire, loud noises, or an enemy). Merely conscious entities are utterly at the mercy of the stimulus conglomeration of the

surrounding environment. Humans, since they are animals, also respond to the stimulus conglomeration of the surrounding environment. How then do they gain control of their own behavior? How, precisely, do humans free themselves from the tyranny of the determining forces of the external environment?

The human capacity for self-consciousness offers the answer. Because humans are self-conscious, they can imagine themselves in future situations. These images, in turn, like the behavior eliciting images of the external environment, also act as behavior-eliciting stimuli. It is these images that are a direct product of the human capacity for self-consciousness that allow self-conscious agents to gain control over their actions. That is, aside from reacting to the behavior determining stimuli of the external environment, self-conscious agents can also respond to stimuli that they themselves produce. These self-generated stimuli of imagined various futures behaviors, actions, and interactions that are imbued with varying degrees of positive and negative value compete with «external»<sup>3</sup> behavior-guiding stimuli of the surrounding environment.

A mundane example might help clarify this evolutionary miracle. A large and luscious piece of chocolate cake might exert as strong an appetitive pull on Joe as a steak does on his dog, Rover. However, unlike Rover, Joe has the capacity to imagine a future slim self (e.g., if he is overweight), or a future healthy self (e.g., if he is a diabetic), and this imagined stimulus will serve as a competing stimulus force to the objective stimulus environment. The degree to which a projected imagined stimulus will in fact alter Joe's behavior presumably depends on the strength, i.e., the value, which Joe has assigned, consciously or otherwise, to that stimulus relative to the strength of the «objective» stimulus environment.

There are two points that need to be kept in mind in order to clearly understand the human capacity for self-direction or self-control. First, *self-control does not reside directly in action*; self-control, rather, resides in an agent's capacity to *think through an image of the future, i.e., an agent's capacity for self-consciousness*. It is self-consciousness, i.e., the capacity to imagine oneself in future various scenarios (i.e., to think about and evaluate **ends**) that is a direct evolutionary product; self-control is simply a by-product. Secondly, self-control is not an all-or-nothing phenomenon; it is, rather, always a **matter of degree**. In particular, it is a function of the strength of self-generated stimuli relative to the strength of the objective, external stimulus environment in which an entity functions.

### NEGATIVE AND POSITIVE FREEDOM: A TWO STEP PHENOMENON

To say that an individual has the capacity for self-control is not to say that an individual thereby becomes the author of his or her own actions. The dynamic thus far described merely depicts the movement of the locus of behavioral control from the «external» to the «internal» environment. However, as we are all too well aware, an individual's «internal» environment may nonetheless remain very much under the control of external influences. As we are all too well aware, what people think they ought to do in any given situation is very often a function of what others expect of them.

What more is needed for a self-conscious agent to become truly autonomous? This question is the one that lies at the heart of Immanuel Kant's moral philosophy. In attempting to answer this question, Kant emphasized the distinction between self-direction, which he referred to as **negative freedom**, and autonomy, which he referred to **positive freedom**. Negative freedom, what we have heretofore referred to as «self-control,» can be characterized, as the capacity to act in way that is not determined by external influences. In the above case, Joe can be described as free in the negative sense because he freed himself from the appetitive pull of the chocolate cake. Positive freedom, or autonomy, is different. Positive freedom, or what Kant called self-legislation, is the capacity to free one's judgments from the influence of external forces. In the above example, though Joe's behavior was free in the negative sense, Joe's decision may not have been autonomous at all. That is, Joe's decision to forgo the cake may have been more a function of the wishes of his new love than a result of what he truly believed was a wise decision.

True freedom, that is, freedom in both the negative and positive sense, thus appears to be a two-step phenomenon. It requires that one free one's behavior from the determining influence of external stimuli by responding to self-generated stimuli, but it also requires that those self-generated stimuli are themselves a genuine product of oneself, or one's own thinking.

### IMPARTIALITY: AN ESSENTIAL CONDITION OF AUTONOMY

If autonomy requires that we free our decision-making from the undue influence of external forces, the questions that now demand our attention are not only how we might bring that about, but also how we would know if we had brought it about. Since all thinking is, as it were, invisible, how can one ever tell whether one's thoughts are really one's own, or whether they are unduly influenced by others?

Kant argued that the only way to ensure that one's thoughts were one's own is to neutralize the biasing influence of one's sensuous nature. A bias is a predetermined way of viewing the world. Though biases are not necessarily a product of external influence<sup>4</sup>, they very well may be. Thus, the only way to ensure that one's judgments are one's own, and not a result of an externally influenced bias, is to think through every issue and situation anew in a way that is as impartial, or objective as possible. The resulting judgment may be the same as the one embodied by one's original bias; but that is irrelevant. What is important here is the process. It only by embarking on a bias-neutralizing process that one has grounds for making the claim that one's judgments are a product of one's own thinking. It only by embarking on a bias-neutralizing process that one is worthy of dignity that Kant believed was the ultimate payoff of autonomy or being your own person.

This was the brilliance of Kant's insight. Simply because a judgment comes out of one's own mouth, that is not a sufficient condition for claiming that that judgment is one's own. Biases though they are, «in a sense,» internal, may nonetheless be a product of external influences. As Kant pointed out, it is the form, not the content of the judgment that is important. It is the process that is important, not the product.

## THE ROUTE TO IMPARTIALITY: INTEA- OR INTER-SUBJECTIVE?

Kant argued that the route to impartiality, and thus autonomy, was through rationality. Obviously, if one were able to be perfectly rational (e.g., Star Trek's Data), one could be sure that one's judgments were «impartial» or «objective,» and from Kant's perspective, therefore moral. Kant offered the Categorical Imperative (so act that the maxim of your action can become a universal law) as a negative test of rationality. Since universality is a mark of rationality (e.g., two plus two equals four in all possible worlds), if one's maxims for action are not universalizable, one would know that they were not contenders for objectivity and morality.

Kant's universalizability test is a kind of «reverse roles» or «golden rule» procedure. Using this procedure, a creditor, for example, can quickly see that his view that «a debtor ought to be hung, drawn, and quartered» could not be a candidate for rationality, or impartiality, as «he himself (presumably) would not wish to hung, drawn, and quartered were he a debtor.»

Kant's emphasis on the importance of rationality has lent powerful support to the glorification of the solipsistic thinker. Kant's model suggests that good thinking, in and of itself, is the road to human excellence. After all, if autonomy resides in one's capacity to be rational, then it appears that all one need do to become autonomous, i.e., the best to which we humans can aspire, is, through sufficient will power, and with the use of various skills, to rise up from one's lower, biased, particular point of view to the more ethereal, objective, universal point of view. All one need do to become autonomous is to travel upward within one's own mind.

The difficulty with the rationality process advocated by Kant is that the only check on the potential bias of one's own thinking is one's own biased self. «I have reasoned it through,» so one says, «and I can assure you that I am not the least bit biased.» It is a danger similar to the one inherent in postulating the possibility of a private language. As Wittgenstein has pointed out, this is like checking the accuracy of a newspaper by going out and buying another copy of the same edition. It also leads to a travesty of one apparently legitimately universalizing one's own biases, e.g., Hare's fanatic Nazi<sup>5</sup> who argues that the extermination of the Jews is moral because he can universalize his maxim, i.e., he can will that, even if he were a Jew, he would still wish that all Jews of the world be exterminated.

If we can not go inward to find impartiality, what is the alternative? The goal is to understand a given situation, or issue, for what it really is, rather than seeing it as a function of one's preconceived ideas. What one is attempting to do is to get an accurate picture of the situation, to see the situation as «objectively» as possible. The optimum viewpoint, as Kant correctly pointed out, would be a universal, or God's eye view. However, since striving for universality directly is problematic, surely the next best option is to try and see the situation from as many points of view as possible.

John Stuart Mill, in his treatise, *On Liberty*, argues this very point when he says:

*...the only way in which a human being can make some approach to knowing the whole of a subject, is by hearing what can be said about it by persons of every variety of opinion, and studying all modes which it can be looked at by every character of mind. No wise man ever acquired his wisdom in any mode but this; nor is it in the nature of human intellect to become wise in any other manner.<sup>6</sup>*

And Mill goes on to argue that it is important that this exposure be «real» rather than imaginary, i.e., that in order to benefit from the multiple viewpoints of others, those viewpoints cannot be artificially contrived by the teacher, or through examining text books. Individuals must have the opportunity to listen to those with whom they disagree, to empathize with their perspectives, and to genuinely see the issue as those others see it.

*Nor is it enough that he should hear the arguments of adversaries from his own teachers, presented as they state them, and accompanied by what they offer as refutations. That is not the way to do justice to the arguments, or bring them into real contact with his own mind. He must be able to hear them from persons who actually believe them; who defend them in earnest, and do their very utmost for them. He must know them in their most plausible and persuasive form; he must feel the whole force of the difficulty which the true view of the subject has to encounter and dispose of else he will never really possess himself of the portion of truth which meets and removes that difficulty. Ninety-nine in a hundred of what are called educated men are in this condition; even of those who can argue fluently for their opinions. Their conclusion may be true, but it might be false for anything they know: they have never thrown themselves into the mental position of those who think differently from them, and considered what such persons have to say; and consequently they do not, in any proper sense of the word, know the doctrine which they themselves profess.<sup>7</sup>*

### IMPARTIALITY: AN OPPOSITION-SEEKING PROCESS

In contrast to the «going up» model which suggests that autonomy is achieved through an intrasubjective process, the «going out» model suggests that striving toward impartiality, or objectivity, is an intersubjective process. Neutralizing the determining influence of others merely by traveling upward in one's own mind is inevitably treacherous because often the determining influence of others is most prevalent within one's own mind. By contrast, and paradoxically, the way to neutralize the internal determining influence of others is by forcing oneself to test those perspectives against the viewpoints of actual others. This precludes the possibility of a Pyrrhic victory, or what in Critical Thinking circles is referred to as an illegitimate «strawperson» maneuver that is endemic to the Kantian intrasubjective model. The most treacherous obstacle to impartiality lies in the human propensity to underestimate the strength and wisdom of perspectives that are radically different from our own. It is only by forcing ourselves to test our own judgments against the strongest possible actual opposition that we can claim, as far as humanly possible, to have neutralized our biases.

Like the Kantian Categorical Imperative, this opposition-seeking process is a negative test for impartiality. What one is actually doing when testing one's viewpoint against the strongest possible opposition is trying to see if one can falsify one's own claim; one is looking for a fatal flaw. Scientists do this on a regular basis; indeed, it is at the core of the scientific process. As Karl Popper has pointed out<sup>8</sup>, science does not progress on the backs of «once and for all» truths, but rather, on the backs of falsifications. A good scientist does not attempt to prove her/his claim to be true. Indeed, logically s/he can not, as the reasoning would be fallacious.<sup>9</sup> What a good scientist does is to try and prove her theory false. S/he starts with the null hypothesis: If theory X is *not* true, then Y should not happen. Then, if Y does happen, that shows that it is not the case that theory X is not true.<sup>10</sup> What a good scientist does, in other words, is to try to find the most damning evidence possible, and if, despite this effort, she fails to find her/his theory false, i.e., it is not the case that theory X is not true, is s/he justified in believing her original theory, but even then only conditionally, i.e., on the condition that the theory remain open to re-evaluation (through exposing it in print to the judgment of the scientific community).

What scientists do within their discipline is what we all must do if we are to claim our judgments as «our own.» We must take an inventory of all that we believe and test those beliefs against the strongest possible opposition, in our imagination when necessary, but in reality when possible. It is only through genuinely trying to disprove our own beliefs, through attempting to judge those beliefs through the perspective of others, that we can claim to have achieved any degree of objectivity or impartiality. It is only through this process that we can attempt to neutralize our biases, and hence it is only through this process that we can strive for autonomy.

### AN OPPOSITION-SEEKING PROCESS VERSUS SUBJECTIVE RATIONALITY

This suggestion, that an inter- rather than intrasubjective process is the best route to autonomy, is more dramatic than it may at first appear, because in many instances, focusing on the intrasubjective process may actually preclude the possibility of embarking on an intrasubjective process. That is, if one does not understand the route to autonomy, one may actually go the wrong way.

An example of this danger is evident in many contemporary «Critical Thinking» classrooms. Many, if not most, Critical Thinking courses focus on enhancing rationality per se, which may, in some instances, turn out to be a dangerous tactic. When one focuses on individuals and their capacity to reason, the message may be that the aim is to arm students against the ideas of others. Indeed «Logical Self-Defense» is the title of a popular Critical Thinking text which has been in print for about 18 years and is published in 16 countries. It is filled with techniques, as the title suggests, that help to arm individuals against being verbally manipulated by others. Though arming students against verbal manipulation is admirable on the face of it, such an approach may actually reinforce the tendency to avoid genuinely listening to others. After all, with their newly acquired «critical thinking» skills; such students will have the capacity to swiftly pick holes in the arguments of others; throw fallacies in the face of those trying to express a point; intimidate others with their **fancy jargon**; and **all in all render themselves virtually immune to perceiving an issue from any point of view other than their own.** This is the evil genius in the making.<sup>11</sup>

Echoing this concern, Richard Paul, one of the gurus of the «Critical Thinking» movement, has said:

*«Skilled» thinking can easily be used to obfuscate rather than to clarify, to maintain a prejudice rather than to break it down, to aid in the defense of a narrow interest rather than to take into account the public good. . . . One can learn to be cunning rather than clever, smooth rather than clear, convincing rather than rationally persuasive, articulate rather than accurate. One can be judgmental rather than gain in judgment. One can confuse confidence with knowledge at the same time that one mistakes arrogance for self-confidence. . . . The result can be the inadvertent cultivation of the manipulator, the propagandist, and the con artist... When this happens, schooling often does more harm than good.<sup>12</sup>*

### THERE IS SOMETHING «ESSENTIAL» THAT WE OUGHT TO BE TEACHING OUR CHILDREN

Whatever else we teach our children we ought to be teach them to genuinely seek out and honestly evaluate the strength of opposing viewpoints relative to their own. Since thinking through multiple perspectives is hard work, and since maintaining logical consistency through it all is even harder work, and since it is humiliating for any of us to back down, and since all of us are more comfortable when we think the way others do, and since what we think is often definitional of who we are, to ask anyone to think through an issue, and to follow *reasons where they lead*, is to ask a lot. If we are going to expect our children to carry out this process in the real world, we must first give them practice, and a lot of it, in relatively risk free situations. Whether it is through writing techniques that demand that all essays incorporate the strongest possible opposition<sup>13</sup>, or through classroom techniques (such as creating **Communities of Inquiry**) that nurture genuine dialogue and require of the participants that they entertain points of view radically different from their own, we, who care whether or not our children learn to maximize their autonomy, must lead the way.

And not only must we teach the process, we must also teach the «why» behind it. Striving toward impartiality often seems counterintuitive, even counterproductive. So the message is this:

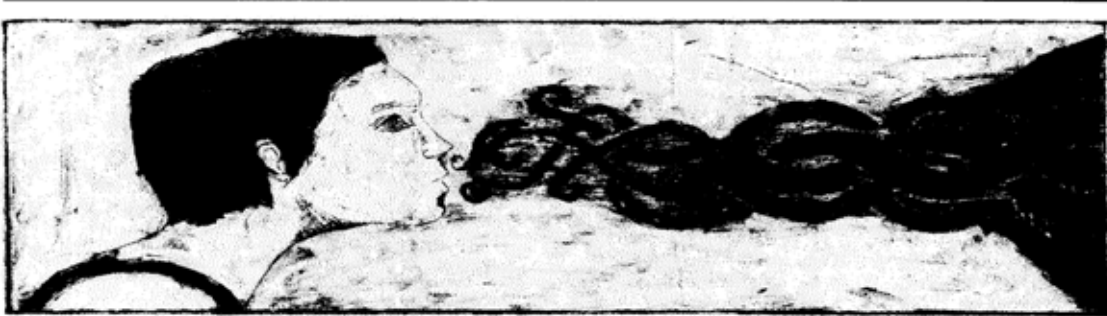
*You ought to strive toward impartially because your biases are not your own. If you value autonomy - if you want to be your own person - then you must be not only prepared but, indeed, eager to test your points of view against the strongest possible opposition.*

We must also teach our children that «relativity» is a bogus theory; that it is not the case that anyone's opinion is as good as anyone else's. We must teach our children that if they wish their judgments to be respected as something more than sheer personal bias, whether it be in science, in ethics, or in the practical matters of every day life, they must be prepared to follow a process that maximizes the possibility of objectivity. We must teach our children that if their claims are not subjected to a process of this sort, they have no grounds whatsoever for asserting that those claims are true. They have no grounds whatsoever for making the claim that they are anything more than personal whim, and they **have no**



**claim whatsoever to demand respect for those views.** Whether we like it or not, and as Existentialists have so famously and forcefully reminded us, all self-conscious entities have the capacity for choice. Existentialists have argued that what we choose defines who we are, and, for that reason, paint a rather pessimistic picture of this burden. But choosing need not be perceived as a burden. While it is true that one can never know that the decision that one makes in any given situation is the right one, one can know whether or not one has followed the only method to truth that is open to a finite mind. It is not so important **what** one chooses, in other words, as the **method** one employs in making that choice. And so the message continues:

*If your beliefs and opinions survive continuing inquiry, they are worthy of being held and espoused, and you, in turn, are worthy of the dignity of being deemed an autonomous being. This is confidence both in yourself as a thinker and in the content of your thoughts that is deserved, not artificially endowed; this is self respect that has been self-anchored and self-earned, a situation which will ensure its stability and endurance. This is the best that you can do.<sup>14</sup> You ought to be at peace with that.*



Erik Kube

## NOTES

1. Neil Postman, *The End of Education*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1995. p. x.
2. Humans, however, are not unique in their capacity for self-consciousness. There is overwhelming evidence to suggest that marine mammals and Great Apes are also self-conscious.
3. «External» has been put in quotes so as to signal that the force of any external stimulus is also a function of the internal state of the conscious being. For example, the appetitive pull of food is at least partially a function of the degree to which the conscious being in question is hungry.
4. One may have spent a good deal of time and energy thinking through the issue.
5. R.M. Hare, *Freedom and Reason*. Oxford University Press, 1967, pp. 159-185.
6. J. S. Mill, *Utilitarianism and Other Writings*. New York: New American Library, 1962, p. 146.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 163-164.
8. Karl Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations: the Growth of Scientific Knowledge*. London, 1963. Collected Essays.
9. «If theory X is true, then Y would follow. Y happens. Therefore, theory X is true.» In logic this is referred to as the «fallacy of affirming the consequent.»
10. This is a valid inference which, in logic, is referred to as «modus tollens.»

11. Though to be fair, R. H. Johnson and J. A. Blair argue in their Critical Thinking textbook *Logical Self-Defense* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill, 3rd edition, 1993, p. 61) that «if your argument is to succeed in its attempt to persuade rationally, it is not enough merely to present the reasons or evidence that led you to accept its conclusions. You must also respond to the competing points of view on the issue, and to the reasons why others might resist your conclusion. You can identify alternative viewpoints and argue that they are defective or inferior to yours. You can identify standard objections to your position and show how these objections fail. An argument which does not in some sense address these competing points of view fails to satisfy the requirement of global sufficiency (as opposed to logical sufficiency which focuses on the degree to which a premise supports a conclusion).»

12. Richard Paul, *Pseudo Critical Thinking in the Educational Establishment: A Case Study in Educational Malpractice*, Santa Rosa, published by the Foundation for Critical Thinking, 1993, pp., 11-12.

13. This is a technique that forms the core of the Critical Thinking Manual by S Gardner, *Thinking Your Way to Freedom: A journey toward Wisdom*. Capilano College, 1999.

14. Mill's own words, perhaps, best reveal the importance that dialogue with the opposition plays in the grounding of one's confidence in one's «mind.»

*If even the Newtonian philosophy were not permitted to be questioned, mankind could not feel as complete assurance of its truth as they now do. The beliefs which we have most warrant for have no safeguard to rest on, but a standing invitation to the whole world to prove them unfounded. If the challenge is not accepted, or is accepted and the attempt fails, we are far enough from certainty still; but we have done the best that the existing state of human reason admits of we have neglected nothing that could give the truth a chance of reaching us: if the lists are kept open, we may hope that if there be a better truth, it will be found when the human mind is capable of receiving it; and in the mean time we may rely on having attained such approach to truth as is possible in our own day. This is the amount of certainty attainable by a fallible being, and this is the sole way of attaining it.* Mill, Op. Cit., p. 147.

And he says elsewhere that:

*There is the greatest difference between presuming an opinion to be true, because, with every opportunity for contesting it, it has not been refuted, and assuming its truth for the purpose of not permitting its refutation. Complete liberty of contradicting and disapproving our opinion is the very condition which justifies us in assuming its truth for purposes of action; and on no other terms can a being with human faculties have any rational assurance of being right.* Ibid., p. 145.

In the case of any person whose judgment is really deserving of confidence, how has it become so? Because he has kept his mind open to criticism of his opinions and conduct. Ibid., p. 164.

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