

ARTICLE

Book Symposium: Jeremy Fantl's *The Limitations of the Open Mind*

Let Me Think About It More

Nathan Ballantyne

School of Historical, Philosophical, and Religious Studies, Arizona State University, AZ, USA
Email: n.ballantyne@asu.edu

Abstract

I raise some questions about Jeremy Fantl's *The Limitations of the Open Mind*. I ask what type of applied epistemology Fantl's book represents, whether there might be a better conception of open-mindedness than the one he embraces, and whether he is correct that someone's being an amateur makes it easier for their knowledge to survive the dismissal of relevant counterarguments.

Résumé

Je soulève quelques questions à propos de *The Limitations of the Open Mind* de Jeremy Fantl. Je demande quel type d'épistémologie appliquée le livre de Fantl représente, s'il pourrait y avoir une meilleure conception de l'ouverture d'esprit que celle qu'il adopte, et s'il a raison de soutenir que les amateurs ont de meilleures chances de voir leurs connaissances survivre au rejet de contre-arguments pertinents.

Keywords: applied epistemology; open-mindedness; defeaters; amateurism; Jeremy Fantl

1. Applied Epistemology, 'Sourcing,' and a Softball Question

Jeremy Fantl's *The Limitations of the Open Mind* is not your grandparents' epistemology book. It doesn't deal with the issues characteristic of the earlier ages of epistemological debate: the Gettier problem, the structure of knowledge, internalism vs. externalism about "epistemic justification," and so on. Fantl's book is cutting-edge epistemology of a relatively unconventional variety. It is culturally engaged. To write his book, Fantl grappled with scholarship not often deemed relevant by peers — articles and books in argumentation theory, political philosophy, cognitive and social psychology, media studies, and (last but not least) parapsychology. The result is a trenchant meditation on our practices of engaging with others' arguments and ideas.

Plausibly, Fantl's book represents a kind of "applied epistemology." I will return to that term later on and ask in what sense it is an accurate label for the book.

But first, to suggest something of Fantl's method, let me note an interesting bit of language from the preface. Part of the book explores whether we have obligations to engage critically with others' arguments or obligations against such engagement, and he mentions twice how he "sourced" (Fantl, 2018, pp. xiv–xv) different potential obligations from various domains or discourses — for example, about political rights, agency, free speech, and the practice of argumentation. "Sourcing" is a tool for culturally engaged epistemology. We can't sit in an armchair and expect to know how human inquiry and judgement actually work, or how people think they should work. Instead, we need to study the actual practices of human beings and communities. To find the best potential case for the existence of an obligation to engage, Fantl searched far and wide for ideas that might support that obligation or undermine it. He is not the only one to do this, of course, but the fact that he was explicit about "sourcing," as well as his choice of that term for his intellectual practice, struck me as noteworthy.¹

From my perspective, the "sourcing" impulse is linked with what is the most fascinating and vibrant period in the history of Western epistemology: the 17th and 18th centuries (Ballantyne, 2019, Chapter 2). In that era, natural philosophers tried to make sense of cultural crises of knowledge and credibility, civility and education, and dogmatism and science. These people thought carefully about methods for good inquiry, biases in judgement and evaluation, the bearing of human psychology and anthropology on truth-seeking activities, and the broad social and educational ends served by critical reflection on knowledge-making practices.

Maybe it sounds like a "softball" question, but I am curious to know how Fantl got into the business of culturally engaged epistemology. What is missing in the book is an acknowledgement about the relative oddity of the project. Bubbling beneath the surface, there is an insurgent energy, a countercultural vibe, but Fantl does not explicitly compare his contribution to the works of epistemology that our grandparents read to their children and our parents read to us. The applied epistemology movement is something new on the scene, though also connected to older traditions. So, I want to know: what led to Fantl's curiosity about a wider set

¹ An anonymous reviewer noted that when they read Fantl's book, they were also struck by the talk of "sourcing." But they interpreted it differently than I did. "If I understand your interpretation correctly," wrote the reviewer, "then you have it that, when [Fantl] says (e.g.) that an obligation to engage with arguments might be 'sourced' in the nature of argument itself, what he means is this: he might go do some research into extant scholarly literatures about argument, in an attempt to glean from those literatures some considerations that might support the view that we are obliged to engage with arguments. So, on your view, 'sourcing' in Fantl's mouth means roughly 'doing research, especially in scholarly literatures outside analytic philosophy.'" That was indeed how I was thinking of it. The reviewer continued: "In contrast, I interpreted him as meaning by 'sourcing' something more like 'grounding.' On this interpretation, when he says that an obligation to engage with arguments might be 'sourced' in the nature of argument itself, what he means is this: it might turn out that *it is in virtue of* the nature of argument itself, that we have an obligation to engage with arguments. Which of us has the correct interpretation, you or me? I don't know!"

The reviewer prompted me to ask Fantl what he intended: "I did mean what the reviewer said — that it might turn out that what grounds the obligation is something about the nature of argument itself. I think that's how a lot of folks (like [Ralph] Johnson) in the informal logic of argumentation literature think of things" (email correspondence, December 2023). My interpretation was wrong but perhaps interesting enough to report here.

of ideas than is ordinarily found in recent works of epistemology? Was he bored or frustrated by the standard-issue narrowness of mainstream analytic epistemology? Had he been exposed to some more wide-ranging works on epistemological themes in feminist philosophy or virtue epistemology or the history of philosophy?

2. Keep Thinking!

As I turn to more critical questions, I would like to sketch an alternative to the so-called Platonic conception of open-mindedness toward arguments that Fantl defends in Chapter 1. The Platonic conception says, roughly, if you can't refute an argument, you must go along with it. If you aren't willing to go along with an argument's conclusion, you are closed-minded; and if you are willing to go along, you are open-minded. Fantl's full analysis of the Platonic conception rewards careful study, but for the book's main dialectical aims, he focuses on one condition: being "willing to be significantly persuaded conditional on spending significant time with the argument, finding the steps compelling, and being unable to locate a flaw." Failing to meet that condition is *sufficient* for being closed-minded while meeting that condition is *necessary* for being open-minded (Fantl, 2018, pp. 12–13).

Fantl's criticisms of others' theories — for example, accounts from Wayne Riggs and Jonathan Adler — struck me as convincing. Maybe he has provided the best way to think about open- and closed-mindedness. Or maybe not. Speaking for myself, when it comes to tricky matters like conceptual clarification, I try to keep my mind open. In that spirit, then, I will float a speculation that, instead, open-mindedness is primarily a willingness to just *keep thinking*. Your mind is open when you are willing to think and closed when you aren't. Open-mindedness is a sort of commitment to not quit thinking about an argument — not by merely ruminating about the premises or conclusion, but by applying your intellect and relevant background evidence to the task of evaluating the argument. By contrast, the Platonic conception says that the open-minded person is willing to be significantly persuaded whereas the closed-minded person is not willing. But these are ways to be settled in your thinking and thus, in some important sense, *not to be open-minded*. To illustrate, suppose we ask the person who's willing to be persuaded (and thus open-minded on Fantl's account): "Why are you willing to be persuaded even before you have even engaged with the argument? You could also be neutral, neither willing nor unwilling to be persuaded. You could be more open-minded than you are!" The Platonically open-minded person seems closed-minded in their settled willingness to be persuaded.

Can we conceptualize open-mindedness toward an argument as the commitment to continue thinking about it, conditional on new information and opportunities to think arising? Somebody says, "I'll keep an open mind": they commit to continue thinking about an argument as new information and opportunities arise, without settled intentions or plans or promises about being convinced or not. "My mind is closed," somebody else says: they are not committed to thinking about the matter any further.

I don't mean to enter disputes over conceptions of open-mindedness, but I am curious to know if Fantl is attracted at all to this sort of view. One feature of this proposal is that it is consistent with the open-minded thinker having a full belief, a

feature that Fantl wants for his own Platonic account: he says being open-minded does not require giving up full beliefs (Fantl, 2018, p. 18ff). (The “Keep Thinking” idea, suitably spelled out, is a member of the family of so-called Socratic views of open-mindedness, briefly noted in the book: see Fantl, 2018, p. 12, footnote 22.)

Alas, I have not thought deeply enough about the nature of open-mindedness. Here as elsewhere, I am an amateur. So, let me now consider Fantl’s treatment of the epistemic benefits of amateurism.

3. Guiding the Reflective Amateur?

The first part of the book defends a kind of dogmatism, on which being an amateur sometimes allows you to know things while rejecting recognized counterarguments without identifying any flaw in them. For Fantl, dogmatism is not a character trait or psychological disposition, as common parlance suggests. It is a thesis about the possibility of knowledge surviving closed-minded dismissal of counterarguments (Fantl, 2018, p. 30). He calls his main dogmatic thesis “forward-looking dogmatism,” which he states as follows: “Knowledge can survive closed-minded dismissal of apparently flawless relevant counterarguments” (Fantl, 2018, p. 32). He does not say that knowledge can survive encounters with *all* possible apparently flawless counterarguments (see Fantl, 2018, pp. 33–34) but just some of them.

Even if you reject Fantl’s brand of dogmatism, the thesis is very much worth thinking about. That is because the way we live is chronically and embarrassingly dogmatic. Even people who are avowedly anti-dogmatic are prone to think and act in ways that are in fact tacitly committed to dogmatism. Consider one way to see why. For better or worse, we are surrounded by more information than we can hope to make sense of. In ancient Athens, Aristotle had around 400 books in his library and that was a large collection for the time. But we are denizens of what the Canadian media theorist Marshall McLuhan called the “Gutenberg Galaxy.” Just fire up your laptop or smartphone and you have access to more texts than Aristotle ever dreamed of. But the constellations, interstellar clouds, and black holes made of books and articles and webpages mean that we inevitably dismiss counterarguments all the time. Glance momentarily at the op-ed pages of magazines and newspapers representing ideologies you do not embrace and take notice: here are many arguments you dismiss.²

Fantl’s careful philosophical work can help us reflect more critically about practices that normally go unexamined.

Sometimes, we come across counterarguments we can properly resist: we know or reasonably believe something that gives us a reason to reject some premise or inference. But Fantl’s forward-looking dogmatism leads to some surprisingly counterintuitive claims about rejecting counterarguments. First, he argues that you can dismiss counterarguments that you find compelling at each step *even when you can’t put your finger on what the flaw is* — and nevertheless retain your knowledge. Second, you can dismiss such counterarguments and not merely retain your

² For reflections on these themes, see Ballantyne (2015, 2019, Chapter 7), Joshi (2022), and Milburn (2023).

knowledge but also not adjust your confidence downward at all. Third, *lacking expertise* in a domain makes it *easier* for your knowledge to survive upon dismissing relevant counterarguments.³

I am not inclined to accept all of the arguments Fantl marshals for these claims, but I think that the arguments are important. He has done much to illuminate important epistemic phenomena that philosophers have mostly ignored. But now that he has identified these issues, philosophers ought to pay attention. The stakes are high. For if Fantl's pro-dogmatism arguments fail, we are faced with the specter of scepticism for many topics. As Fantl notes:

For many of the issues you have strong positions on [...] you might not much care whether, when faced with a relevant counterargument, you end up flummoxed. You might happily maintain outright belief even if you have no clue where the flaw is. If knowledge — or even knowledge-level justification — is the norm of belief, then your disposition is proper only if [forward-looking dogmatism] is true. (Fantl, 2018, p. 33)

Let me briefly describe some of the manoeuvres that Fantl suggests while noting a few of my reservations. To start with, I wholeheartedly agree that you can dismiss counterarguments that you find compelling at each step even when you can't put your finger on what the flaw is — and keep your knowledge. One kind of example involves encountering some type of "denialist" literature, such as an article by industry-funded scientists, claiming that a causal link between smoking and cancer has not been established. You can read such an article, follow along with the scientists' argument, be unable to see where the flaws are, and yet retain your knowledge that smoking does indeed cause cancer.

Fantl says there are "controversial lay propositions" that you can know are true, and when you encounter counterarguments for them, you can closed-mindedly dismiss the counterarguments and still retain your knowledge. But my sense is that I disagree with Fantl about when and, more importantly, why that is possible.

As I see things, here's why that type of dismissal is legitimate. Unless you are unaware of mainstream discussions of health and science, you have heard about the consensus view among informed observers, based on vast bodies of data accumulating since the middle decades of the 20th century, that smoking causes cancer (Brandt, 2007). And unless your thinking has been hampered by denialist ideologies, you accept what the experts report. I think you can rely on your awareness of expert consensus together with your awareness of the authors' potential source of bias as a reason to dismiss the denialists' counterargument.

But Fantl thinks something else can help you: insofar as you are an amateur or novice with respect to the type of arguments and methods used in the denialists'

³ If I am reading between the lines correctly, the background story here is that if Fantl can show knowledge is not in fact threatened by dismissing counterarguments that we have actually engaged with, then knowledge is not threatened by ones we don't engage with at all and instead those can be closemindedly ignored. I came away with that interpretation after reading the book but subsequently couldn't find anywhere he says it explicitly — but see Fantl (2018, p. 31).

article, you can be positioned to dismiss its counterarguments to your belief that smoking causes cancer. His idea, articulated in Chapters 2 and 3, is that, as an amateur, you should not be surprised to find the denials' counterargument apparently flawless. Given your amateur-level grasp of the relevant methods, it is more or less expected that you would read that article and find it apparently flawless. But this means that what you learn when you find the article flawless is quite weak evidence against your target belief. That's because, as Fantl argues convincingly, surprising evidence is stronger than unsurprising evidence, meaning that the counterargument you have found doesn't count against your belief as much as it would if you were an expert and found the denials' counterargument flawless. Fantl defends what he labels the "Novice Knowledge Principle": "Often, if a counterargument invokes evidence types, methods, and principles with respect to which you lack relevant background knowledge or requisite methodological acumen, then knowledge can survive the counterargument being apparently flawless" (Fantl, 2018, p. 62). One upshot of the principle is that "it can be easier in one sense to retain knowledge if you lack the relevant expertise than if you have it" (Fantl, 2018, p. 63).

Importantly, according to Fantl, amateurs do not need anything like the background evidence about expert consensus or the biases shaping the production of denialist articles. Getting such evidence can take serious time and effort, but he claims amateurs needn't break a sweat. "[T]he felt obviousness of a proposition," he writes, "sometimes provides knowledge that the proposition is true" (Fantl, 2018, p. 77). He notes some limitations for the epistemic power of obviousness, but he thinks that knowledge based in your sense of obviousness can survive confrontation with apparently flawless counterarguments. For instance, people who are not experts about parapsychological claims can deny those claims — even when the claims are apparently supported by complex statistical arguments — simply by finding it obvious that those claims are false.

I have two brief reactions to this line of argument. I don't yet see how it helps the reflective amateur.

First, consider the fact that we should not always trust our sense of obviousness, as Fantl notes (Fantl, 2018, p. 77ff). If obviousness is a reliable process for forming and sustaining beliefs, it is sensitive to relevant evidence and facts. Reliable obviousness gets trained or conditioned by enough of the evidence and facts within a domain (unless it is something like an innate, unlearned capacity, which I'll assume here it is not). But an amateur's sense of obviousness concerning an esoteric topic is not conditioned or trained by a representative sample of relevant evidence or facts. Thus, an amateur's sense of obviousness is unreliable. Even if the amateur is as a matter of fact correct, they appear to be correct by luck, not a process that reliably delivers accurate views. Now, insofar as an amateur is at all reflective about their dismissing counterarguments on the basis of felt obviousness (in contrast to evidence about expert consensus and biases, for example), they will have reason to significantly doubt whether their method is reliable.

Second, consider the difference between an expert and an amateur. One invests time and energy to acquire skills and evidence. Another goes off and dabbles, maybe "doing their own research" online (Ballantyne et al., *in press*). But an amateur can know they did not do the hard work — at any rate, the amateur relying on Fantl's

pro-dogmatism principles will likely know that. What is curious to me is that the amateur can now reflect as follows:

I am an amateur, but if I were an expert and I found this counterargument flawless, I would need to change my mind, at least a little. The only reason I can retain my view is that I was slacking off and failed to become an expert. But I really should aspire to more and do what *an expert* would do in my circumstances. I should change my mind, at least a little. Why should my mere dabbling save my confident view when I know I might well need to revise it had I put in more effort?

My suggestion is as follows: the contingent fact that you lack expertise should be cold comfort when you are a reflective amateur faced with apparently flawless arguments and the awareness of what an expert might well be required to do in your circumstances.⁴

These two brief points attempt to apply Fantl's pro-dogmatism to specific contexts involving reflection on the position itself. And that brings me to a final matter, raised earlier: what kind of applied epistemology do we find in *The Limitations of the Open Mind*? Readers might think that Fantl is offering guidance or advice for intellectual life. That is one kind of applied epistemology that I call "regulative" — the kind of epistemology that aims to provide guidance for inquiry (Ballantyne, 2019). Another type of applied epistemology is not applied in the regulative sense just noted. It is focused on epistemological phenomena found in culture and practice, but it does not aim to guide anyone in their inquiry or knowledge-seeking. Instead, it aims to clarify, analyze, and bring order to the messiness of intellectual life — to theorize about the stuff that so much recent epistemology has ignored. I will call that "idealized" or "descriptive applied epistemology."

What is the book doing? Having read it carefully and thought about it a little, I doubt that Fantl intends to guide inquiry and here are two reasons. First, the core examples Fantl examines are heterogeneous with respect to subject matter. The subject matter is a laundry list: morality, politics, philosophy, religion, parapsychology, and tricky math puzzles. Now, one possibility is that the pro-dogmatism principles come out true and are thus valuable for inquirers because there are cases supporting the principles in some *but not all* of the subject-matter categories. In other words, maybe Fantl's pro-dogmatism is correct because of some cases involving, say, parapsychology and tricky math puzzles. But then the policies, even though true abstractly stated, should not be applied in cases involving different subject matter. To put it another way, the policies lack a sort of universality or wide coverage even though they are true as stated. I have not argued this is so, but I am not sure the worry is totally off-base.

Second, if we take the book to recommend inquiry-guiding policies, we need to think about applying them in cases where we really do know something. Following the principles will generate ignorance and improper engagement whenever we start off lacking knowledge. But, of course, knowledge is often precisely at issue as soon

⁴ I reflect on similar issues in Ballantyne (2014).

as we know topics are controversial, and knowing something does not mean we always know that we know.⁵ In other words, we might have a legitimate question, “Do I know this claim?,” and fail to be in a position to know or even reasonably believe an affirmative answer. The failure to know *those cases in which you know* seems to make headaches for anyone trying to apply the policies. To see why, just recall the difference between *knowing something* and *merely thinking we know it*. If you feel even a bit unsure whether you know as opposed to merely think you know, determining whether you are applying the policy at the right time and in the right place will be vexed. At any rate, the amateur might wish for assistance from an expert to determine what is really known — and that sort of assistance is not supposed to be required by the epistemic policy at issue.

But, ultimately, although I am unsure what to think, I am settled in my determination to keep an open mind and listen to an expert. And I am grateful to Fantl for his fruitful and stimulating book.

Acknowledgements. I am grateful to Matthew Altman-Suchocki, Jeremy Fantl, and three anonymous reviewers for helpful comments on the penultimate version of this material. My work was supported by a generous grant from the John Templeton Foundation [62824].

Competing interests. The author declares none.

References

- Ballantyne, N. (2014). Counterfactual philosophers. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 88(2), 368–387. <https://doi.org/10.1111/phpr.12068>
- Ballantyne, N. (2015). The significance of unpossessed evidence. *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 65(260), 315–335. <https://doi.org/10.1093/pq/pqu096>
- Ballantyne, N. (2019). *Knowing our limits*. Oxford University Press. <https://global.oup.com/academic/product/knowning-our-limits-9780190847289?cc=ca&lang=en&>
- Ballantyne, N., Celniker, J. B., & Dunning, D. (in press). Do your own research. *Social Epistemology*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02691728.2022.2146469>
- Brandt, A. (2007). *Cigarette century: The rise, fall and deadly persistence of the product that defined America*. Basic Books.
- Fantl, J. (2018). *The limitations of the open mind*. Oxford University Press. <https://academic.oup.com/book/26297>
- Joshi, H. (2022). The epistemic significance of social pressure. *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 52(4), 396–410. <https://doi.org/10.1017/can.2022.39>
- Matheson, J. (2018, September 31). Review of *The limitations of the open mind*. <https://ndpr.nd.edu/reviews/the-limitations-of-the-open-mind-2/>
- Milburn, J. (2023). Unpossessed evidence: What’s the problem? *Topoi*, 42(1), 107–120. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11245-022-09867-1>

⁵ In a review of Fantl’s book, Matheson (2018) makes a similar point about luminosity.