Education and Cognitive Liberation

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“You are a prisoner, Neo.”
Morpheus, in The Matrix (the film)

Education, even the best possible kind we can dream of, won’t solve all the problems of humanity. But it surely has the potential to help us make the world better than it is. And flawed education can make it worse. This article is an attempt to diagnose the failure of modern education to address a configuration of natural weaknesses in the human mind and society, and suggest a solution.

We believe that whether at the lower primary level or at the tertiary, even graduate, level, whether in language, science and mathematics, or music and theater, unless we address these weaknesses — our weaknesses — education will ultimately remain flawed. What weaknesses should be considered at what age-level, what level-appropriate examples would work best, and so on, would need to be decided on the basis of experimenting in actual classrooms.

The article is organized into the following sections:

1. Liberal education
2. Cognitive entrapments
3. Gullibility: being a slave
4. Close-mindedness: being a prisoner
5. The trap of fake intuition
6. Emotive clouding: enhancing enslavement and imprisonment
7. Education as reinforced slavery and imprisonment
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1. Liberal education

The idea of “liberal education” has been around for centuries, and is traceable to the classical idea of ‘liberal arts’ as the form of education appropriate for a free person (Latin *libera*, “free”) as opposed to a slave. In more recent years, it has emphasized the aspects of education that are non-vocational in nature. And it has come to have an important place in decisions on higher education in most educational circles.

What does ‘liberal’ in liberal education mean? One may entertain at least two possibilities: it is liberal in the sense that:

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* We believe that while the topic of this article may not have an obvious relationship to the areas covered by the journal (linguistics, language, culture, text, or translation...), the ideas here have a direct significance for any educational enterprise, for both teachers and students in a teaching-learning context.

We are grateful to the editing team for inviting us to contribute the article.
I. *its scope is broad.* It seeks to empower learners with "broad knowledge and transferable skills, and a stronger sense of values, ethics, and civic engagement ... characterized by challenging encounters with important issues, and more a way of studying than a specific course or field of study." (The Association of American Colleges and Universities)

II. favouring the freedom of the individual, it *liberates the mind* from gullibility, closed-mindedness, and emotive clouding. These traits, while common among human beings, conflict with the spirit of free inquiry and critical thinking.

While wholeheartedly accepting the first view, we propose that the second sense of liberal is an essential ingredient of liberal education, and perhaps of any true education that goes beyond mere training.

Do the existing forms of education accomplish the goal of liberating the mind? Our answer is no. But it doesn’t have to be this way: a different kind of education can indeed liberate the mind. We invite the providers and receivers of education to reflect on that possibility.

2. Cognitive entrapments

Consider the actions and practices of the following imaginary people:

Person A: on seeing a TV commercial that says that it has been “scientifically proven” that toothpaste X cleans 178% better than other brands, rushes off to buy toothpaste X.

Person B: despite being exposed to the relevant evidence, refuses to believe that epilepsy is not caused by demonic possession, but by abnormal electrical impulses in the brain.

Person C: judges individuals as wise or stupid on the basis of facial features — a predisposition that we are all unfortunately prone to.

Person D: accepts everything that M says and rejects everything that N says, simply because (s)he likes M, and dislikes N.

You would agree that person A is gullible, while B is close-minded. C is trapped in intuition gone astray, and D is emotively clouded. We may describe these traits as follows:

A. **Gullibility** is the readiness, without doubting or questioning, to:
   1) believe what others assert or ask you to believe, and
   2) do what others do, believe they should do, or ask you to do.

B. **Close-mindedness** is the resistance to
   1) changing one’s existing beliefs and practices,
   2) welcoming criticism, and
   3) doubting and questioning oneself, one's authorities, and one's traditions.

C. **False intuition** is the tendency to form quick and automatic impressions on the basis of extraneous information, ascribe the impressions to our intuition, convert the impressions into judgments, and feel confident in our judgments.
D. **Emotive clouding** is the tendency for beliefs and practices/actions to be influenced by emotions at the cost of rational considerations.

To these, we add another common human trait:

E. **Absolute certainty** prevents further learning. If we are absolutely certain that our beliefs or practices are right, it follows that (i) there is no need to doubt, question, or correct them, and (ii) those who entertain beliefs/practices that conflict with ours are wrong (the I-am-right-and-they-are-wrong syndrome).

Gullibility is the uncritical acceptance of new beliefs and practices that do not involve correcting one’s existing beliefs and practices. Close-mindedness is the equally uncritical protection of existing beliefs and practices. These two traits, when combined with false intuitions, emotive clouding, and total certainty, set up an enslavement of our minds, resulting perhaps in a form of mental imprisonment.

Granted that it is unrealistic to expect any human being to be completely free of cognitive enslavement and imprisonment, it is still worth asking:

- Do the current forms of institutionalized education liberate us (at least partially) from cognitive enslavement and imprisonment, or do they make us more enslaved?
- What kind of education would set us free (or at least make us freer)?

Let us take a closer look.

3. **Gullibility: being a slave**

Gullibility, the unquestioning acceptance of what others assert or ask us to believe or do (the opposite of **skepticism**), has two related sources, namely, the sheep instinct and the herd instinct.

The **sheep instinct** is the automatic habit of obeying an authority, the shepherd. Children generally tend to believe and to do what their parents tell them, and to imitate the habits and practices of their parents. If children begin to exhibit rebellion, parents often try to squash it, demanding unquestioning obedience to authority. “Because I said so,” and “Shut up and just do what I ask you to,” are archetypal slogans children hear.

When children begin school, the shepherding authority extends to most teachers, who go by the same principles of unquestioning obedience and blind faith. Gradually, authority expands to the clergy, big names in a field, film/cricket stars, bosses, and the government. Books and scriptures (the written word), and the television (popular culture) act as authorities that shape our beliefs and actions.

Such “obedience” is cultivated as a great virtue in many cultures: in the family, in school, in the army, in religious groups, in the workplace, and in civic life. Most of us believe that the earth spins on an axis and revolves around the sun, that human beings evolved from mono-cellular organisms (or that they were created by God from clay), that climate change is (or isn’t) happening, that free market is desirable (or undesirable), and so on, simply because some teacher, textbook, expert, priest, scripture, TV program, newspaper, famous person, or government has told us so.
The herd instinct is the tendency to follow the beliefs and practices of others in our group, one of its specific manifestations being the bandwagon effect. Fashions and consumer behaviour are classic examples of the herd instinct. Teen groups that appear to rebel against the adult community are often strikingly conformist within their respective groups, in dress, speech, and behaviour.

A special combination of the sheep instinct and the herd instinct is tradition. A tradition is a set of values, beliefs, and practices that have been handed down from generation to generation. Many traditions hold the view that the golden age was in the past — that the values, beliefs, and practices of the ancients were the best, and our responsibility is to preserve them “unadulterated”. Most religious traditions belong to this category.

According to a Native American tradition, the ancestors of the native peoples lived in a subterranean world of spirits. Sebastian LeBeau, an official of the Cheyenne River Sioux says:

“We know where we came from. We are the descendents of the Buffalo people. They came from inside the earth after supernatural spirits prepared this world for humankind to live here. If non-Indians choose to believe they evolved from an ape, so be it. I have yet to come across five Lakotas who believe in science and in evolution.”

Quoted in Fear of Knowledge by Paul Boghossian (p.1)

Before we smile a superior smile at LeBeau’s words, we must consider carefully: Do I (as a Christian, a Muslim, or a Jew) reject the biological theory of evolution in favour of creationism? Do I (as a Hindu) believe that Rama and Krishna are gods, incarnations of Vishnu? Do I (not being strongly influenced by any religion) believe in the biological theory of evolution, without being aware of the relevant evidence and argumentation? If I do any of these, how different am I from LeBeau? Aren’t each of us trapped by our respective traditions?

Is science itself a tradition? How can a scientist engage in scientific inquiry without being cognitively imprisoned?

4. Close-mindedness: being a prisoner

While gullibility is the uncritical acceptance of beliefs, close-mindedness is the equally uncritical resistance to self-correction and self-questioning. It arises from at least three sources:

**Inertia effect:** Once we come to have a set of values, beliefs, and practices, we resist abandoning them even in the face of strong reasons for abandoning them.

**Self-threat effect:** In a way, our values, beliefs, and practices define who we are; hence environments that require changing any of them appear to us as threats to the self.

**Investment effect:** We have made a considerable investment in our values, beliefs, and practices; we find it hard to sacrifice that investment too readily.
Building a protective wall around our existing values, beliefs and practices does not mean that we are not open to new ones. When gullibility — uncritical openness to new beliefs and practices — combines with close-mindedness, we tend to resist new beliefs/practices that require changing the existing ones, but incorporate new ones that can be accepted as add-ons.

5. The trap of fake intuition

Psychologists studying forms of human judgment distinguish between two kinds of cognitive processes. One process of judgment is typically fast, automatic, effortless, associative, and not available to introspective scrutiny; it is often emotionally charged, and difficult to modify. (These are prototypical characteristics associated with perception.) The other process of judgment is slower, effortful, subject to conscious monitoring and self-correction, and relatively flexible. Stanovich and West (2000) label these two processes as **system 1** and **system 2** respectively.1

Intuitive judgments are the result of system 1, while judgments resulting from reflection and reasoning are the result of system 2. An expert surgeon who makes a quick decision in the emergency room relies on his honed intuition, acquired through experience; so does a painter who knows where to place a bold patch of bright red on his canvas. Intuition, as Ian Stewart says, is what allows a mathematician to “know” that a theorem is true before proving it. Thus, intuition is critical for the discovery and growth of knowledge.

However, uncritical reliance on what we think of as intuition has problems. Intuition can be completely wrong. Furthermore, we might mistake baseless prejudices for intuitions. So it is important to be on guard against fake intuitions.

The most interesting work on the role of fake intuitions in human judgments is perhaps the work on bounded rationality by Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman, who were “impressed by the fact that significant research decisions, such as the choice of sample size for an experiment, are routinely guided by the flawed intuitions of people who know better.”2

A classic example of widely prevalent fake intuition in our daily lives is our judgment of people, based purely on their facial features, as kind or cruel, wise or stupid, trustworthy or untrustworthy, and so on. Such fake intuitions have even been elevated to a "body of knowledge" called **physiognomy**, the theory that seeks to identify temperament and character from facial characteristics such as a receding jaw, broad forehead, pug-nose, thick eyebrows, narrow lips, and so on.

The practice of reading character traits from facial features is probably as old as humanity. Scholars believe that Aristotle wrote a lengthy treatise on the subject. But the most extensive treatment of physiognomy was by Swiss theologian and mystic, Johann Caspar Lavater, who published a four-volume piece, **Essays on**

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2 Kahneman, Daniel (2003) “A Perspective on Judgment and Choice: Mapping Bounded Rationality.” *American Psychologist* 58:697–720. This work is an account of the work for which he was awarded the Nobel Prize in economics in 2002.
Physiognomy, in 1797. More recently, physiognomy in the scientific garb has been used by organizations such as the Merton Institute, which provided services to AT&T, using physiognomy as their main tool for assessing candidates.

Decisions on criminals are often shaped by our expectations of what a “criminal-looking” face is. There is extensive scientific evidence to show that physiognomic judgments are sheer prejudices (Cohen 1973, Alley 1988, etc.), but we continue falling prey to such stereotypes. A survey by Ran Hassin and Yaacov Trope showed that only 25% of the population rejects physiognomy. What is more striking is that even those who reject it rationally still go by it in their actual decision-making:

“... even when asked to, perceivers are unable to ignore people’s faces while simulating decisions regarding personnel selection, although they are quite sure that they are able to do so... physiognomic information makes us highly overconfident about our judgments.” (Hassin and Trope 2000:848)

“Are we trapped in our faces?” ask Hassin and Trope. And their answer is, “Yes, to some extent we are... because controlled processes are very demanding, and even when these demands are met, controlled processes are not always capable of saving us from our faces.” However, they also point out that it is not impossible to minimize them, through conscious reflection and reasoning.

Hassin and Trope’s cautionary remarks about the absence of self-doubt involved in physiognomy-based judgments, and their hope for ways of minimizing the effects of the trap, can be extended beyond physiognomy to the trap of flawed intuitions in general. It is the responsibility of education to help the young become as free as possible of the flawed-intuition-and-overconfident-judgment trap.

6. Emotive clouding: enhancing enslavement and imprisonment

That our emotions cloud our judgments has been noticed ever since human beings started reflecting on their cognitive processes. During the last few years, however, there have been systematic studies of this phenomenon.

Take an example. In an investigation of the cognitive process of fingerprint identification, Itiel Dror and colleagues gave pairs of fingerprints to a group of fingerprint experts. The fingerprints lacked sufficient information to make identification with any certainty. When no contextual information was available, the experts declined to make a positive identification. But when the same pairs were presented to the same experts with contextual information that was emotively charged but was extraneous to the issue of match (e.g., background stories of crimes, disturbing pictures of crime scenes), the rate of positive identification went up significantly.

The phenomenon of rejecting beliefs that cause emotional discomfort, called denial in the literature on psychiatry, has been observed typically among those who have lost someone dear to them—a mother or a husband refusing to believe that the child or wife has died. In less extreme cases, we have all had the experience of someone (typically not ourselves) refusing to believe that a person they love has a serious flaw, or has done something wrong. Perhaps the emotional distress caused by criticism, and the resultant inability to accept criticism, stem from the same sources as denial.

**7. Education as reinforced slavery and imprisonment**

Does education as currently offered to primary, secondary, and tertiary learners liberate them, or does it reinforce the imprisonment and slavery of the young? An empirical study to address this question, though undoubtedly worthwhile, is beyond our scope. But it is indeed possible to arrive at an educated inference on the basis of what we have observed and are aware of.

Let us consider the following attitudes towards teaching, learning, and the learner, from the point of view of the provider of education.

**Authoritarian education: education as training and indoctrination**

**Teacher as authority:** I will tell my students what to believe and what to do.

**Learner as prisoner-slave:** I want my teachers and other authorities to tell me what to believe and what to do.

**Democratic education: education as empowering the mind**

**Teacher as guide:** I have no right to decide what my students should believe, and what they should do. But I do have a responsibility to help them develop the capacity to decide for themselves what to believe and what to do. I also have a responsibility to familiarize them with the beliefs and practices of others.

**Learner as critical inquirer:** I don't want to believe what teachers, other authorities, and the tradition believe, or do what they do. I want to examine the justification that supports these beliefs and actions, so that I can decide for myself what to believe and what to do.

It is not difficult to see that the authoritarian mode of teaching can only yield prisoner-slaves, not free spirits. The question is, how authoritarian are current forms of education?

Let us do a few a couple of thought experiments on ourselves:

Do I believe that the earth spins on an axis and revolves around the sun? If yes, am I familiar with the relevant evidence and argumentation to support this hypothesis? If not, what is the basis for my belief? The fact that my teachers and textbooks told me so? Was this because I are not particularly smart? Or because that is how institutionalized education brought me up?
How often as a student am/was I encouraged to challenge a teacher or a textbook? If my answer is ‘hardly ever’, what does that say about the educational system I was brought up in?

In the bulk of ‘education’, right from primary school to the university, learners are given the conclusions that academics have arrived at, but hardly ever the evidence and/or reasoning relevant to the conclusions, and most educated people believe in conclusions as dogma rather than as scientific hypotheses, as they have almost never invited to challenge the authority of the knowledge transmitter.

8. The Absolute Certainty Syndrome

Cotard’s syndrome is a cognitive disorder resulting from impairment to a specific part of the brain. The central symptom of this disorder is that the patient believes that (s)he is dead. No amount of evidence and rational argument can shake this belief.

Suppose a doctor were to ask a Cotard’s syndrome patient, “Do dead people bleed?” they would most likely say, “No”. Suppose the doctor now said, “Let us try an experiment to find out if you are dead. Let us make a small cut on your finger and see if you bleed.” If the doctor then made a cut, the patient would look at the blood, be amazed, and say, “That’s interesting. So dead people do bleed after all.”

Notice what is going on. There are two beliefs the patient is committed to, namely:

I. Dead people do not bleed.

II. I am dead.

To these two beliefs, a new finding is now added:

III. I bleed.

The patient recognizes that a logical consequence of (I) and (II) is: “I do not bleed,” which contradicts (III). There are two obvious solutions to avoid the contradiction, namely, reject (I) or reject (II). The degree of certainty that the patient has in (II) is absolute, so it cannot be revised. As a result, the only option left — given the patient’s rational commitment to the prohibition of logical contradictions — is to abandon (I).

Though Cotard’s syndrome is a clear case of brain pathology, most of us suffer from a less specific version of what it points to, namely, absolute certainty of beliefs that makes further doubting, questioning, and self-correction impossible. Let us call it Generalized Cotard’s Syndrome (GCS).

Let us do a small experiment on ourselves to find out if we suffer from GCS. For this, we would have to answer the following questions honestly:

a. Do I believe in God?

b. If my answer is YES, is there a possibility that there is no God, and that I am wrong in my belief?

c. If my answer is NO, is there a possibility that God does exist, and that I am wrong in my belief?

If our answer to (b)/(c) is NO, we suffer from GCS, right? If our answer is YES, we don’t have GCS with respect to theism/atheism, but there is still a possibility that we have it in some other area, and it would be useful to explore further.

Human life would be impossible without a commitment to a set of beliefs. If you don’t subscribe to the belief that a lunatic will not attack you with a machine gun in the next two minutes, you wouldn’t be sitting and reading this article calmly. Some of our beliefs are rationally justified. There are others (called faith) that are neither justified nor refuted. Such beliefs too are both beneficial and necessary. It is also part of human nature to desire greater certainty of belief. This too, is both beneficial and necessary.

However, absolute certainty builds rock walls around us, making us prisoners. When our knowledge, opinions, intuitions, and faith acquire absolute certainty, and are not subject to doubting and questioning, they become harmful to ourselves and potentially dangerous to others. Total certainty is the central difference between Carl Sagan’s rational secular faith of the existence of intelligent extraterrestrial life forms, and a fanatic’s blind faith, for instance, that anyone who doesn’t accept their God, or accepts other Gods, will suffer unbearable eternal torture in Hell after death. When faith acquires absolute certainty, the distinction between faith and knowledge gets blurred, as does the distinction between fanaticism and knowledge. Once again, we must look to education to free us, to the extent possible, from the syndrome of absolute certainty.

9. Can Education Liberate the Mind?

Earlier, we distinguished between authoritarian education that entraps the mind and democratic education that liberates the mind. Is the authoritarian mode inevitable? Or is it possible for educational institutions to practice democratic education? We definitely think so.

What commitments would we need in order to provide maximally democratic education? We might think of at least the following:

- to present knowledge and opinions as **conclusions** with varying **degrees of certainty**;
- to present the **justification** — the **grounds** and **reasoning** — to support the conclusions, with an eye on possible grounds and reasoning against them, as well as on alternative conclusions;
- to discuss **controversies** wherever they exist, along with the relevant grounds and reasoning;
- to help students develop the ability to **critically evaluate** the conclusions, grounds, and reasoning, which implies the ability to unearth and evaluate the **implicit assumptions**; and
- to help students develop the ability to engage in **independent inquiry**.
From the perspective of the knowledge (or scholarly opinions) that students are exposed to, education can in principle empower learners with the following capacities:

A. **Storage and recall**: memorizing the words and sentences that express a body of knowledge, and recalling them when needed.
   **Example**: The textbook says: Newton’s first law of motion is: “An object remains at rest or in uniform motion unless acted upon by an external force.” We ask: “What is Newton’s first law of motion?” and expect students to repeat the law. Whether or not they understand the law is irrelevant for this objective.

B. **Superficial understanding**: understanding at a shallow level, just sufficient to paraphrase the knowledge in one’s own words.
   **Example**: Given Newton’s laws of motion, we expect students to be able to state the laws in their own words, and explain with examples how the laws work.

C. **Standard applicational understanding**: a moderate level of understanding as indicated by the ability to apply the knowledge mechanically in familiar textbook situations.
   **Example**: If students have understood Newton’s theory of gravitation and motion, we expect them to calculate the trajectory of a cannon ball when given its mass and initial velocity.

D. **Deep understanding**: true understanding as indicated by the ability to make connections, and apply the knowledge creatively and thoughtfully, in unfamiliar or novel situations.
   **Example**: If students have really understood Newton’s theory of gravitation and motion, we may expect them to be able to answer the question, “Describe what would happen to a coin if we drop it into a big hole extending from one side of the moon to the other through the centre.”

E. **Independent learning**: acquiring a body of knowledge on their own, without having to depend on teachers and courses.

F. **Critical understanding**: responding to questions of evidence and argumentation, as an indication of critical understanding.
   **Example**: If students have a critical understanding of Newton’s theories of gravitation and motion, given a brief account of Aristotle’s theory of motion, we may expect them to tell us why Newton’s theory is superior to Aristotle’s.

G. **Critical thinking**: engaging in critical thinking about knowledge claims as well as knowledge application.
   **Example**: Given Darwin’s theory of evolution and the standard types of evidence in support of the theory, we expect students to be able to evaluate the theory, tell us what it successfully accounts for, and what it fails to account for.

H. **Independent inquiry**: engaging in independent inquiry.
   **Example**: If secondary school students have been initiated into academic inquiry, we might expect them to answer questions like the following:
   1. What is happiness? When thinking about happiness, try to distinguish it
from pleasure, enjoyment, contentment, satisfaction, and absence of unhappiness. Would you treat joy or joyfulness as the same as or related to happiness?

Include as many examples/scenarios as you can when inquiring into this question. If you enjoy eating a certain kind of food, does eating it result in happiness? What kind of situations would make you say, “I’ve been happy for the last five years”?

2. The statement that one and only one straight line can be drawn through any two points is called an axiom in geometry. Given this axiom, can you prove that no two straight lines can intersect at two places?

3. A friend of yours claims that eating four or five tulasi (holy basil) leaves every day cures a common cold. Design an experiment to test this hypothesis. In about a page, write a research proposal outlining the project, clearly stating what kinds of experimental results would make you accept the claim, and what kinds of results would make you reject it.

Notice that an adequate ability in deep understanding implies mastery of storage and recall, together with reasonable understanding. Both critical understanding and independent inquiry imply independent learning and critical thinking. Curricula that focus on deep understanding, critical understanding, and independent inquiry would therefore successfully cover the entire spectrum of the capacities (A)-(H).

Even a cursory look at the prototypical textbooks, examination questions, and classroom instruction indicates that traditional forms of education focus typically on superficial understanding, and sometimes reasonable understanding, and in the worst cases, solely on storage and recall. Clearly, this is unsatisfactory.

What we need as a starting point towards democratic education as we have described it is to implement an experimental project that incorporates deep understanding, critical understanding, and independent inquiry as outcomes, in the curriculum, in learning materials and classroom instruction, AND in assessment tasks. An educational program that accomplishes this can hope to improve the quality of education our students receive, and to set learners free.
### Appendix: How free am I?

Answering the questions below (by writing YES or NO in the boxes against (1) and (2), and giving a number for (3)), trying our best not to deceive ourselves, might help us see how cognitively entrapped we ourselves are.

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<tr>
<th>Can I think of examples (say, two or three) of:</th>
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<tr>
<td>statements that I</td>
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<tr>
<td>a. i. initially regarded as true, but later rejected as false, when I came across sufficient evidence and/or reasoning against them?</td>
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<tr>
<td>a. ii. initially regarded as false, but later accepted as true, when I came across sufficient evidence and/or reasoning in their support?</td>
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<tr>
<td>1. actions or practices that I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. i. initially regarded as morally good or neutral, but later judged as morally bad, on the basis of my own thinking and reflection?</td>
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<tr>
<td>b. ii. initially regarded as morally bad, but later judged as morally neutral or good, on the basis of my own thinking and reflection?</td>
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<tr>
<td>c. propositions that I have been thinking about for quite some time, but have not been able to decide whether they true or false?</td>
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<tr>
<td>d. actions or practices that I have been thinking about for quite some time, but have not been able to decide whether it is morally good, bad, or neutral?</td>
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<th>Can I think (of say, two or three instances) of the experience of:</th>
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<td>a. reading a book or listening to a talk by someone that I regard as an authority, and telling myself, “That couldn't be true. He/she is wrong.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>b. acting in ways that my community would disapprove of?</td>
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<tr>
<td>c. judging as:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i. morally wrong the actions or practices of someone I love and admire?</td>
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<tr>
<td>ii. judging as false the beliefs of a community that I strongly identify with?</td>
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<tr>
<td>iii. morally bad the practices of a community that I strongly identify with?</td>
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| For each of the 11 questions above that I answered with ‘YES’, can I think of adequate reasons for modifying a position or judgment, or for deciding to act in a certain way? Or was I simply following what I regarded as a higher authority? |

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