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THE BLOG

Edge Question 2017

What scientific term or concept ought to be more widely known?

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(Photo via [Katinka Matson](#))

Intellectual Honesty

Wherever we look, we find otherwise sane men and women making extraordinary efforts to avoid changing their minds.

Of course, many people are reluctant to be *seen* changing their minds, even though they might be willing to change them in private, seemingly on their own terms—perhaps while reading a book. This fear of losing face is a sign of fundamental

confusion. Here it is useful to take the audience's perspective: Tenaciously clinging to your beliefs past the point where their falsity has been clearly demonstrated does not make you look good. We have all witnessed men and women of great reputation embarrass themselves in this way. I know at least one eminent scholar who wouldn't admit to any trouble on his side of a debate stage were he to be suddenly engulfed in flames.

If the facts are not on your side, or your argument is flawed, any attempt to save face is to lose it twice over. And yet many of us find this lesson hard to learn. To the extent that we can learn it, we acquire a superpower of sorts. In fact, a person who surrenders immediately when shown to be in error will appear not to have lost the argument at all. Rather, he will merely afford others the pleasure of having educated him.

Intellectual honesty allows us to stand outside ourselves and to think in ways that others can (and should) find compelling. It rests on the understanding that *wanting* something to be true isn't a reason to believe that it *is* true—rather, it is further cause to worry that we might be out of touch with reality in the first place. In this sense, intellectual honesty makes real knowledge possible.

Our scientific, cultural, and moral progress is almost entirely the product of successful acts of persuasion. Therefore, an inability (or refusal) to reason honestly is a social problem. Indeed, to defy the logical expectations of others—to disregard the very standards of reasonableness that *you* demand of *them*—is a form of hostility. And when the stakes are high, it becomes an invitation to violence.

In fact, we live in a perpetual choice between conversation and violence. Consequently, few things are more important than a willingness to follow evidence and argument wherever they lead. The ability to change our minds, even on important points—*especially* on important points—is the only basis for hope that the human causes of human misery can be finally overcome.

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