

Healthy: Let Your Beliefs Be Challenged

One of the more frustrating things for me is when supposedly educated people refuse to tolerate challenges to their beliefs.

Either they rebuff all tough questions with a desire not to discuss potentially controversial subjects.

Or they quickly become [angry](#) and quash any chance for civil dialogue.

Or, they resort to a mindless repetition of slogans that's so characteristic of the [propaganda](#) in today's partisan news media.

I suppose all of this is understandable. As professor Justin Berg recently pointed out in an [article](#) on Intellectual Takeout, people's beliefs are usually tied to groups with which they strongly identify. They insulate these beliefs from attack as a subconscious means to protect their "tribe".

But here's the problem: such sensitivity about one's beliefs is inimical to intellectual growth.

This point was perhaps best made by the great 19th-century British thinker John Henry Newman (1801-1890). He argued that challenges to our ideas and beliefs are necessary if they are to mature:

"[W]hatever be the risk of corruption from intercourse with the world around, such a risk must be encountered if a great idea is duly to be understood, and much more if it is to be fully exhibited. It is elicited and expanded by trial, and battles into perfection and supremacy."

And even more forcefully in his famous intellectual autobiography, the *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, he writes:

“The energy of the human intellect ‘does from opposition grow’; it thrives and is joyous, with a tough elastic strength, under the terrible blows of the divinely-fashioned weapon, and is never so much itself as when it has lately been overthrown.”

Having our beliefs challenged gives us the valuable opportunity to put them under a microscope—to reveal their underlying assumptions and principles, to remove unnecessary additions and errors, to hone our arguments on their behalf. It’s healthy for both us *and* our beliefs.

Those who consistently refuse the challenge are destined to remain in a state of intellectual infancy.

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