5 On Having a Mind of One’s Own

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It is common to attach importance to ‘having a mind of one’s own’. For example, it is sometimes said to be part of education (as distinct from training, indoctrination etc.) that it helps one to have a mind of one’s own, enables one to think for oneself etc. Again, we might praise someone by saying that his views are very much his own, that he is ‘his own man’, that he will ‘stick to his guns’, that his opinions are striking, distinctive or original. Finally, it is often said to be a mark of moral maturity that a person can make up his own mind on moral questions, can choose his own moral views, and so on. Now these and many similar expressions are easy to accept at a common sense level, but as soon as we look at them more carefully it is not at all clear what, if anything, they mean, or what rather different things they might mean.

Let us take some examples of the difficulties in these ideas. It would seem uncontroversial that having a mind of one’s own must include having one’s own distinctive beliefs about the world, just as one might have distinctive clothes or furniture. But whereas there is no difficulty about understanding how a person can choose distinctive clothes or furniture, there is a problem about understanding how distinctive beliefs, or indeed any beliefs, can be said to be chosen. Beliefs seem more to be involuntary, forced on us by evidence, and if this is accepted then having a mind of one’s own becomes more like having distinctive blue eyes than like having a distinctive style in clothes. There is therefore a problem about the sense in which one’s beliefs are ‘one’s own’. Another problem concerns the question of whether, and if so in what sense, it is a good thing to have a mind or beliefs of one’s own. For surely, it might be argued, education must at least be concerned with correcting one’s own beliefs about various
matters, bringing them into line with those beliefs accepted by the acknowledged experts in the field under discussion. For example, a person may have his own views on the causes of the First World War, but if he studies modern history the chances are that he will abandon his own, perhaps erroneous or one-sided, views on the origins of the war and acquire those which are commonly held by more scholarly historians. How then can it be a good thing to have a ‘mind of one’s own’ in history, or indeed in any other respectable academic discipline? It sounds odd to say ‘my science’ or ‘my history’, and the fact that one can say ‘my philosophy’ might just mean that philosophy is not a respectable academic discipline!

In view of these and other problems connected with this important idea of having a mind of one’s own it seems worthwhile to try to detach it for a while from its context of common sense acceptability and to put it under the philosophical microscope. In this chapter I therefore intend to consider how far or in what sense it is possible to have a mind of one’s own, what it consists in and how its justification is linked with being educated. Finally I shall examine the idea in the context of morality where it is familiar to moral philosophers as the problem of the ‘autonomy of the will’.

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The first distinction I wish to draw is crucial to my whole argument. It is a distinction between independence of mind and individuality of mind. Independence of mind is shown in the kind of support or justification a person might offer for a belief, rather than in either the way in which the belief is acquired in the first place or in the content of the belief. For it is a contingency how a person acquires a given belief; he may acquire it through experience he has had, or through a book he has read or from an influential teacher. But, however the belief is acquired, a person shows independent-mindedness with respect to it insofar as he continues to hold the belief on evidence or similar considerations. A person may of course acquire a belief as a result of encountering evidence for it, but equally it may be a result of his parent’s teaching; nevertheless, he is independent-minded if but only if he makes it his own by basing it on whatever is the appropriate evidence. Again, students listening to a lecture might all become convinced of the truth of a certain proposition. They could all be said to be independent-minded with respect to that belief provided each