

CBC Radio - The 180

with Jim Brown

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Actually, you're not entitled to your opinion

"I'm entitled to my opinion" is a phrase you often hear about a favourite Christmas movie, the best pizza place in the city, whether climate change is real, or if vaccines are safe. But philosopher Patrick Stokes says opinion is NOT an entitlement.

The 180 spoke to Patrick Stokes. Below is a lightly edited and condensed version of his conversation with Jim Brown.

What's wrong with having an opinion?

There is nothing wrong with having an opinion. In fact, there are some **things** I think we all have to have opinions on as ethical agents and human citizens. The problem is having an opinion and thinking that's the end of it, that you don't have to justify it, or argue for it, or be open to the possibility of revising it. **There are some kinds of opinions where there is no possibility of argument.** If I think that chocolate is better than vanilla, that's not an opinion that I can be called upon to justify.

But if we are talking about climate change or vaccinations, it's not a simple matter of brute belief. Those are topics where evidence needs to come into play and you need to be open to revisability.

Are there any kinds of opinions that we are entitled to have?

If you have put in the work to have them. **Have you actually formed the view on the basis of evidence? Have you considered counter arguments?** To have an opinion on certain topics, you need to be deeply immersed in it, such as having done on the level of having done former education. If you want to say that this party is better than that party in politics, that's fine, you can form that on the basis of information that is available to any citizen. If you want to deny that climate change is happening, then really you need to be a part of the knowledge generation that does that. In other words if you are going to make that case- go and have it published in a scientific journal, have it peer-reviewed.

the first category of opinions that Professor Stokes discusses in his own article (e.g., "tastes or preferences")

the second category of opinions that Professor Stokes outlines in his own article

It seems logical that opinions are more acceptable in fields that allow for subjectivity, than in fields of debate built on objective truths. So why do you think we confuse the two?

My sense is that a lot of it comes down to authority. When you look at a lot of these discussions where facts are contested, scientific facts for instance - and there is room for disagreement about scientific facts within the relevant scientific community for sure - look at those discussions and I think a lot of it comes down to a kind of background resentment that somebody else gets to determine what is true or false. **People want to be able to determine for themselves what is actually true and not true. And the problem with that is there is a huge range of things where we just can't determine that for ourselves- we are forced to trust other people.** I have never been to Iceland, but I know it exists. I know it exists because I have read it in books and seen it on TV and I have friends who have been there. I am radically dependent on other people for that amount of knowledge. In the same way that I am radically dependent on other people everytime I get on an airplane- I just assume they know how to get the thing to fly. We are hugely dependent on other ppl's knowledge all the time and some ppl resent that, they don't like that they have to defer to the knowledge of other ppl, or trust in that way.

As a philosopher, how do you interpret this apparent post-truth world we're living in?

It's really disturbing and I don't know what comes on the other side of it. It's hard to see how that is going to play out. I look at it with a certain kind of despair, which sounds defeatist, but there it is.

So you don't see any kind of change? That we might start embracing the truth again?

What it comes down to is that for these kinds of discussions to work, you need to have agreement on what counts as evidence.
