

No, you're not entitled to your opinion



Every year, I try to do at least two things with my students at least once. First, I make a point of addressing them as “philosophers” – a bit cheesy, but hopefully it encourages active learning.

Secondly, I say something like this: “I’m sure you’ve heard the expression ‘everyone is entitled to their opinion.’ Perhaps you’ve even said it yourself, maybe to head off an argument or bring one to a close.

The problem with “I’m entitled to my opinion” is that, all too often, it’s used to shelter beliefs that should have been abandoned. It becomes shorthand for “I can say or think

whatever I like" – and by extension, continuing to argue is somehow disrespectful. And this attitude feeds, I suggest, into the false equivalence between experts and non-experts that is an increasingly pernicious feature of our public discourse.

Firstly, what's an opinion?

Plato distinguished between opinion or common belief (doxa) and certain knowledge, and that's still a workable distinction today: unlike "1+1=2" or "there are no square circles," an opinion has a degree of subjectivity and uncertainty to it. But people use the term "opinion" to cover everything from tastes or preferences to views grounded in technical expertise, such as legal or scientific matters.

You can't really argue about the first kind of opinion. I'd be silly to insist that you're wrong to think strawberry ice cream is better than chocolate. The problem is that sometimes we implicitly seem to take opinions of the second sort to be unarguable in the way questions of taste are.

Perhaps that's one reason (no doubt there are others) why enthusiastic amateurs think they're entitled to disagree with climate scientists and immunologists and have their views "respected."

Second, what does it mean to be "entitled" to an opinion?

If "Everyone's entitled to their opinion" just means no one has the right to stop people thinking and saying whatever they want, then the statement is true, but fairly trivial. No one can stop you saying that vaccines cause autism, no matter how many times that claim has been disproven.

But if 'entitled to an opinion' means 'entitled to have your views treated as serious candidates for the truth' then it's pretty clearly false.

Here, "the first kind of opinion" means (from the paragraph above), the use of the term "my opinion" to refer to a person's **"tastes or preferences."**

Here, "opinions of the second sort" means (from the paragraph above), the use of the term "my opinion" to refer to **"views [that should be] grounded in technical expertise."**

So the next time you hear someone declare they're entitled to their opinion, ask them why they think that. If their opinion is simply a taste or preference, then sure: They are entitled to that opinion. It's their preference; it's their taste; it's their opinion.

But if they are using the expression "I'm entitled to my opinion" to defend having an opinion about a matter that should be grounded in technical expertise and supported by evidence, then no. They are not entitled to having that opinion, because opinions are not candidates for truth. Truth, unlike opinions, requires evidence.