

A Curious Way to Avoid Bias

Bias often manifests in motivated reasoning—we *want* certain conclusions to be true, and so we ignore evidence for what is *actually* true. My colleague Jim Hutchinson argues that we can counter such bias by cultivating an opposing psychological force, namely, *curiosity*, a desire to figure out what is actually true.¹

Jim tells a story to make the point. You may have heard of “Russell’s Paradox,” a contradiction that Bertrand Russell discovered in Gottlob Frege’s system of logic. When Russell first explained the paradox to Frege, Russell was impressed with how easily Frege received this fatal objection to his “entire life’s work.” Rather than appearing defeated, Frege exuded an “intellectual pleasure” which had the effect of “submerging any feelings of personal disappointment.” *Frege’s curiosity overwhelmed any egoistic motive to deny the new discovery.*²

Indeed, empirical psychology confirms that resistance to motivated reasoning is associated with curiosity. One study concluded “the pleasure that...curious individuals uniquely take... counteracts the motivation...to [ignore] evidence.”³

So there it is! If you want to mitigate bias, cultivate curiosity—a passion for learning and discovery.

¹ Jim argues this in an unpublished manuscript on Gila Sher’s work.

² See Russell’s “Letter to Ottoline Morrell, 27 May 1913” and “Letter to Ottoline Morrell, 19 June 1913”. In N. Griffen (ed.), *The Selected Letters of Bertrand Russell: The Private Years, 1884-1914*. London: Routledge, 2002. See also Russell’s “Letter to Jan van Heijenoort, 23 November 1962”. In J. van Heijenoort (ed.), *From Frege to Gödel*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967.

³ P. 192 of Kahan, Dan M. et al. (2017). “Science Curiosity and Political Information Processing,” *Advances in Political Psychology*, 38: 179–199.