

# Humility and Skepticism



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*"One Improved Unit" is an original column appearing sporadically on Monday at Everything-Voluntary.com, by the founder and editor Skyler J. Collins. Archived columns can be found [here](#). OIU-only RSS feed available [here](#).*

It's easy to fall into the mental trap known as "confirmation bias." This trap is sprung when you put more weight on information that is confirming of your bias (a prejudice in favor of or against some thing) and/or less weight on information that is disconfirming, than either deserves. Avoiding conviction, as I wrote about previously, is one way to protect yourself against confirmation bias. Here are two more.

## Humility

I cannot claim to be a scholar. In fact, I am neither that, nor an economist, a historian, or a philosopher. While I enjoy reading economics, history, and philosophy (among other disciplines), I have not spent sufficient time training my mind to understand, recognize, and employ the various methodologies and schools of thought associated with each area of study. I am less than an amateur in that regard. That being the case, I must remember that even though someone's argument sounds logical and convincing, I have a deficiency in intellectual discernment. Remaining cognizant of that deficiency will, I hope, make confirmation bias less likely to ensnare me.

## Skepticism

Recently, someone who is more intelligent and experienced than I, told me all about a lecture he heard that taught him something damning that he never realized about the religion he grew up practicing. He had previously stopped practicing this religion, and had studied and entertained contrary ideas over the ensuing period. Hearing him describe the content of the lecture, and of his impressions of the lecturer, I couldn't help but wonder if this person was trapped in confirmation bias. When I asked him if he had sought out counter-arguments to this lecture, he seemed uninterested. I told him that considering the significance of the lecture, I was sure there are people just as smart as the lecturer who would have valuable insight on the accuracy of his analysis and conclusions. While his disinterest in searching for counter-arguments persisted, the episode was a good lesson for

me in skepticism.

Writing in 1924, Miguel de Unamuno said, “Skeptic does not mean him who doubts, but him who investigates or researches as opposed to him who asserts and thinks that he has found.” When I investigated the lecturer and his claims, of which I was skeptical, I found a very interesting review by two trained scholars that showed the unscientific nature of the lecturer’s methodologies. It also contained a few example counter-arguments of the lecturer’s points. I don’t know if the lecturer has ever defended himself against the charges made in the review, but at this point I have lost interest. I, too, am a former practitioner of this same religion, and am at present apathetic toward arguments for or against it. But I am a searcher of truth, hence my skepticism (as defined by Unamuno), which likewise protects against confirmation bias.

### **Final Thoughts**

Finding information that confirms one’s bias feels really good. It’s like a warm blanket. You just want to snuggle up inside it and let it melt away all your insecurities and fears about being right. I often find myself wrapped in such sweet pleasure. It’s very difficult to throw it aside and commit to remaining open-minded to the possibility of being wrong. But again, I can’t say that I’m a seeker of truth if I allow myself to be trapped by confirmation bias. Humility and skepticism are healthy preventive measures.

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