

The book cover features a vibrant, abstract background with overlapping circles and organic shapes in shades of red, green, blue, and purple. The text is centered and rendered in a clean, white, sans-serif font. The author's name is at the top, followed by the title in large letters, and the subtitle at the bottom.

ERIN DEVERS

THE  
UNBIASED  
SELF

THE PSYCHOLOGY  
OF OVERCOMING  
COGNITIVE BIAS



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# ONE

## THE ORIGINS OF BIAS

IF YOU WANT TO UNDERSTAND how to be less biased, you need to know what bias is. Cognitive bias is a “distorting lens”<sup>1</sup> or a *systematic* error in thinking.<sup>2</sup> In other words, cognitive bias is a built-in glitch in the system, something that prevents us from seeing the world accurately and ought to be a cause for concern. Cognitive biases provide an explanation for why two people from the same country, same city, or even the same household can interpret the same event very differently. Later on in this book, we will take a deeper dive into some of the specific biases, but first, we need to discuss the bias that precedes discussion of all the other biases: the bias blind spot.<sup>3</sup> The bias blind spot refers to the idea that people are really good at recognizing the biases of others but not their own. As you read this book, you will probably be able to generate your own examples of when you have witnessed the biases of others. You will hopefully laugh at the way others mistakenly interpret the world to serve their own ends. If this happens, and I hope it does, I will not have completely fulfilled the purpose of this book. The real purpose

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<sup>1</sup>Jennifer L. Eberhardt, *Biased: Uncovering the Hidden Prejudice That Shapes What We See, Think, and Do* (New York: Penguin, 2020), 6.

<sup>2</sup>Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman, “Judgment Under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases; Biases in Judgments Reveal Some Heuristics of Thinking Under Uncertainty,” *Science* 185, no. 4157 (1974): 1124.

<sup>3</sup>Emily Pronin, Daniel Y. Lin, and Lee Ross, “The Bias Blind Spot: Perceptions of Bias in Self Versus Others,” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 28, no. 3 (2002): 370. The bias blind spot was named in reference to the visual blind spot where the optic nerve connects the eye to the brain.

of this book is not to increase your ability to notice the flaws in other people but to recognize and reduce your own bias.

The idea that we all want to believe that we are seeing the world as it truly is, a concept that psychologist Lee Ross calls naive realism,<sup>4</sup> is the cause of the bias blind spot. We do not always realize that there are gaps in the information we have. We do not know what we do not know.<sup>5</sup> For the most part, we are seeing the same landscapes and tasting the same foods as the people we share those experiences with, but our interpretations of the beauty or deliciousness of those experiences are not always the same. Most of us started to realize that people have different perspectives on the social world when we were around four years old.<sup>6</sup> In spite of this realization, many of us spend the rest of our lives believing that other people's different perspectives are less accurate than ours. This is naive realism. When we think hard, we can recognize that our social perceptions are different than other people's because social perception is incomplete. What do I mean when I write that social perception is incomplete? I mean that we do not get all the social information like a computer downloads a file; we only perceive the social information that we pay attention to, interpret, and then remember.<sup>7</sup> To pursue accuracy, to really understand and know what is true, we need to recognize and reduce our own biases. Knowing what the biases are is not enough.

When research on the bias blind spot emerged, researchers wondered whether thoughtful people might be able to recognize their

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<sup>4</sup>Lee Ross and Andrew Ward, "Naive Realism in Everyday Life: Implications for Social Conflict and Misunderstanding," in *The Jean Piaget Symposium Series: Values and Knowledge*, ed. Edwin S. Reed, Elliot Turiel, and Terrance Brown (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1996), 110-11.

<sup>5</sup>David Dunning, "The Dunning-Kruger Effect: On Being Ignorant of One's Own Ignorance," in *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, vol. 44 (San Diego, CA: Academic Press, 2011), 247-96.

<sup>6</sup>J. Perner and B. Lang, "Development of Theory of Mind and Executive Control," *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 3, no. 9 (1999): 337-44.

<sup>7</sup>Hugh E. McDonald and Edward R. Hirt, "When Expectancy Meets Desire: Motivational Effects in Reconstructive Memory," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 72, no. 1 (1997): 5-23.

own bias even if normal people could not.<sup>8</sup> So to identify the thoughtful people, whom they labeled “cognitively sophisticated,” the researchers collected SAT scores, various personality measures related to cognition, and had people complete the cognitive reflection test.<sup>9</sup> The cognitive reflection test includes this question:

A bat and a ball cost \$1.10 in total. The bat costs \$1.00 more than the ball. How much does the ball cost? \_\_\_ cents.

For most people, the first answer they come up with is ten cents. The right answer, which is five cents, requires more thought. Participants who spent time to get to the right answer on this type of question were labeled “cognitively sophisticated.” The authors of the study hypothesized that the cognitively sophisticated participants (i.e., the thoughtful people) might be less susceptible to both cognitive biases and to the bias blind spot. What the researchers *found*, however, was that there was no correlation (and on some biases, a positive correlation) between scores on the measures of cognitive sophistication and both susceptibility to the biases and the bias blind spot; in fact, all participants demonstrated a susceptibility to bias and evidence of the bias blind spot.

Said another way, the thoughtful people were just as likely to be biased and just as likely to assume that other people are more biased than they are. The conclusion then is that most people are likely to fall prey to bias and are unlikely to recognize it in themselves even after being taught to recognize bias. The blind spot is in all our eyes. It explains why Jesus warned us that we often see the “speck” in our brother’s eye yet “fail to see the plank” in our own eyes (Luke 6:41-42). The plank is in the blind spot. Therefore, rather than just informing

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<sup>8</sup>Richard F. West, Russel J. Meserve, and Keith E. Stanovich, “Cognitive Sophistication Does Not Attenuate the Bias Blind Spot,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 103, no. 3 (2012): 506-19.

<sup>9</sup>Shane Frederick, “Cognitive Reflection and Decision Making,” *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 19, no. 4 (2005): 25-42.

readers about cognitive bias, this book will turn the spotlight away from judgments of the biases of others and *put the spotlight on the biases of the self*. In other words, we must try to “first take the plank” out of our own eyes (Luke 4:41-42). Before diving into the bias literature, it is important to understand how our desire to be right and feel good about ourselves contributes to bias.

### WE WANT TO BE RIGHT

When I took Intro to Psychology as a college freshman, I was introduced to the analogy that our minds are like a room full of filing cabinets filled with the files that we have collected and organized throughout life. The file folders are called *schemas*,<sup>10</sup> but we often refer to them as concepts. These file folders are the way the mind organizes information and are the fundamental units of thinking. We are constantly opening the file folders and putting new information in them.<sup>11</sup> Imagine a baby encountering objects for the first time. When my oldest daughter started talking, she called dogs in the neighborhood “puppies.” When she saw a bunny, she said “puppy.” When she saw a kitten, she said “puppy.” When she saw the weatherman on TV wearing a furry hat, she said “puppy.” Anything that was furry and animated got labeled “puppy.” This bias toward labeling everything a puppy mostly worked because puppies were the most frequent animal that my daughter encountered on walks in the neighborhood. Later, when she figured out that the weatherman wearing a furry hat was not a “puppy,” she had to create a new file folder for “men wearing furry hats” that was separate from the “puppy” file folder. To avoid the bias of labeling everything “puppy,” babies create new file folders for “kitties” and “bunnies.” Eventually, older children can distinguish between many different animals and are mostly accurate in their identifications. Schemas help us navigate the world with increasing accuracy as we learn and mature in our thinking.

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<sup>10</sup>Jean Piaget, *Le langage et la pensée chez l'enfant*, vol. 1 (Paris: Delachaux and Niestlé, 1923).

<sup>11</sup>Frederic C. Bartlett, *Remembering* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1932).

## **WE WANT TO BE RIGHT SO WE COLLECT AND ORGANIZE FILE FOLDERS**

As we develop and increase our exposure to a variety of domains, including those not having to do with animals, we create a filing system that is increasingly accurate, diversified, and less biased. Imagine that now in adulthood, your mind is a room that has been curated by someone who has gone to the Container Store and has organized everything in a manner worthy of an organizational TV show episode. There is a color-coding system, and all of the containers are easily identifiable and accessible. There are schemas for each person we meet, schemas for groups (otherwise known as stereotypes), schemas for events, and a self-schema. *The purpose of creating this beautiful room is so that you can be right.*<sup>12</sup> When someone asks us about something, we go to the container containing the appropriate file folder and pull out our answer—our correct answer. What we don't realize in using our beautiful filing systems is that some information is missing. It doesn't *feel* like anything is missing because our filing rooms appear to have everything; however, it is not possible to become experts in every domain (only God's mind has complete information), which means that in some situations, we may be relying on an incomplete file folder that we don't recognize is incomplete. Like a visual blind spot, we don't see the blind spot in our files. If someone asked us to point to our visual blind spots, we could not do it. There are missing pieces in our fields of vision that our brains fill in, and there are missing pieces in our available information that our brains fill in.<sup>13</sup> I will give a few examples to make the connection between schemas and bias.

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<sup>12</sup>To make sure we are speaking the same psychological language, consider that “right” in this context refers to accuracy. I would extend this definition to include “righteous,” and there is considerable evidence to suggest that people are not only motivated to be righteous but to view themselves as more moral than others. See Scott T. Allison, David M. Messick, and George R. Goethals, “On Being Better but Not Smarter Than Others: The Muhammad Ali Effect,” *Social Cognition* 7, no. 3 (1989): 275-95.

<sup>13</sup>Mahzarin R. Banaji and Anthony G. Greenwald, *Blindspot: Hidden Biases of Good People* (New York: Bantam, 2016), xi-xiii.

Let's compare what happens in a kindergarten classroom over the course of a day when you bring in a novice compared to an expert substitute teacher. Imagine a new substitute teacher in a kindergarten classroom for the first time. She has had limited experience with children so her file folder for "kindergarteners" is based on a few interactions she had with a younger cousin. Right now, she doesn't even know what she doesn't know about kindergartners, so when she walks into a room full of kindergarteners, she assumes these kids will be like her cousin. Her cousin was a good reader but was not yet potty trained, so she spends a lot of time taking kids to the bathroom and very little time on phonics. It is likely that over the course of the day a lot of mistakes were made and a lot of time was wasted. It is likely that the children did not learn very much, but everyone's pants stayed dry.

Contrast that with a seasoned kindergarten teacher, with a large file folder for "kindergarteners," who not only knows what students are supposed to learn in kindergarten but can even identify possible challenges a particular child might be struggling with in the course of a short interaction. This seasoned teacher can jump in right away and invite students to start learning. Even though her file folder is nearly complete, she does not know each individual child so she will have to rely heavily on her past interactions with other kindergarteners. Relying on a file folder that is full and mostly complete will occasionally lead to errors but fewer errors than for the novice substitute teacher. The experienced teacher will likely expect that all kindergarteners will be potty trained. She will mostly be right. She will be surprised if one wets his pants. (Having the "mind of God" would have made it clear which child was not potty trained.) The mostly complete file folder was correct in predicting that most kindergarteners are potty trained. Therefore, the substitute teacher did not need to focus a lot of attention on it, but unexpected and sometimes unpleasant exceptions may occur. It is likely that the kindergarteners learned a lot from the seasoned teacher, but a bathroom-related accident was not out of the realm of possibility.

When we compare the performance of these two teachers, neither one of them had all the information necessary to make the day run *perfectly* with kindergarteners. The experienced teacher had a lot more information to help her prioritize her attention, whereas the inexperienced teacher relied on limited information that made it difficult for her to do little more than babysit. If we consider the importance of learning to read, we recognize that there is a significant cost to occasionally being wrong about kindergarteners.<sup>14</sup>

Let me give you another more gruesome and harrowing example. Imagine being selected to serve on a jury and hear the story of a woman who was raped and brutalized while jogging in a local park. The pictures are appalling. It is horrifying that anyone would do this to someone in your community. The defendant reads the confession he gave. There is no physical evidence linking him to the crime, but the confession is detailed and compelling and mostly accurate to the facts of the case. Someone should pay for the crime to bring justice to the woman and her family. Most people would have convicted the young man who confessed. Most people's file folder for "guilty people" includes the idea that if a person confesses to a crime, that person must be guilty. In the absence of evidence that someone else is guilty, it makes sense to think that the person who confessed is guilty even if there is not much physical evidence to support the conviction.

It turns out that many people, including most people who work in law enforcement, believe that only guilty people would confess to a crime. Many jurors are very likely to convict anyone who confesses even if no compelling physical evidence is presented. This is exactly what happened to the jurors on the cases of the Central Park Five.<sup>15</sup> Each of the five teenagers who were convicted in the brutal attack of

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<sup>14</sup>Emily Hanford, "Why Millions of Kids Can't Read and What Better Teaching Can Do About It," January 2, 2019, NPR, [www.npr.org/2019/01/02/677722959/why-millions-of-kids-cant-read-and-what-better-teaching-can-do-about-it](http://www.npr.org/2019/01/02/677722959/why-millions-of-kids-cant-read-and-what-better-teaching-can-do-about-it).

<sup>15</sup>Lauren Cook, "Central Park Five: What to Know About the Jogger Rape Case," June 5, 2019, AMNY, [www.amny.com/news/central-park-five-1-19884350](http://www.amny.com/news/central-park-five-1-19884350).

Trisha Meili in the spring of 1989 gave detailed confessions. In 2002, DNA evidence revealed that none of those teenagers were involved; rather, Trisha was attacked by one man, Matias Reyes. The members of the Central Park Five received a \$41 million settlement. The cost of a bias caused by an inaccurate file folder for “guilty people” was steep for all involved. Jurors, like a substitute kindergarten teacher, must rely on a limited “guilty” file folder even if they do not have all the information that would be helpful to make an accurate decision. None of us are immune to this kind of inaccuracy; we all use our schemas to fill in the missing information of our blind spots.

Hopefully, it makes us feel uncomfortable to think that we could have made the same kind of mistake as the jurors for the Central Park Five. This uncomfortable feeling is there because we want to pursue accuracy and righteousness. The beautiful room full of file folders was created to help us believe we are right, but if the information in the file folder is incomplete, we might not realize it, and then bias will go unchecked. The jurors in the cases of the Central Park Five did not have a complete file folder for the specific cases because there was a lot of missing evidence, and their file folders for “guilty people” did not include the conditions under which a false confession is likely. At the time of the original convictions, it is likely that the jurors believed they were right. *In this book, we will make a distinction between feeling right and pursuing accuracy.* Wanting to be right leads us to rely on our incomplete file folders without checking for bias. Pursuing accuracy involves considering what information might be missing from the file folders before rendering a judgment. Recognizing the *incompleteness* of the content of the file folders is one step toward recognizing our own bias.

### **WE WANT TO BE RIGHT SO WE USE OUR SCHEMAS TO FILTER INFORMATION**

Our desire to be right motivated us to create the organized room of incomplete file folders, and it guides the processing of new information.

Bias emerges not only because we are missing information in file folders, but because the information we put into the file folders passes through the filter of our filing system. For example, many people experience that when they decide to buy a particular car, they see it everywhere. This is called the Baader-Meinhof phenomenon.<sup>16</sup> The effect got its name when a person on a message board in 1994 started writing about how having once read about the German terrorist group, Baader-Meinhof, he started noticing more and more references to it. Given the obscurity of a terrorist organization that was active in the 1970s, this was curious. Other people on the message board started posting their experiences of having read something for the first time and then noticing it everywhere. The explanation given by psychologists for this phenomenon is that it is the result of selective attention.<sup>17</sup> *Once we have activated a schema, that schema guides our attention and filters our experiences.*

In an experiment, imagine you are told to read the following story about newlyweds who are considering their first home purchase and are told to try to remember as many details about the house as possible. The story reads,

The time came for them to go to the house. No one was in sight, so they decided to examine the house carefully from the outside. They looked carefully at the front of the house and noticed that the paint on the porch was beginning to peel. They walked around the side and looked through the windows into the spacious living room. The room was luxuriously furnished. The owners had arranged the furniture to orient toward a television with a large screen. A VCR and a new stereo completed the entertainment center. The living room was split-level, and going down three stairs, there was a vast stone fireplace. In front of this was a sofa and a coffee table, on top of which sat a laptop computer. A sliding glass door in the back wall

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<sup>16</sup>Kate Kershner and Austin Henderson, "What's the Baader-Meinhof Phenomenon?," September 5, 2023, HowStuffWorks, <https://science.howstuffworks.com/life/inside-the-mind/human-brain/baader-meinhof-phenomenon.htm>.

<sup>17</sup>William A. Johnston and Veronica J. Dark, "Selective Attention," *Annual Review of Psychology* 37, no. 1 (1986): 43-75.

opened to an outside patio. They then went around the other side of the house. The first room they saw was the dining room, which was big enough to house a table for eight. A cabinet on one side held crystal, china, and silverware. Despite this evidence of luxury, the wallpaper appeared yellowed and faded.<sup>18</sup>

Consider what a person might remember having just read that paragraph. Most people who do this remember the VCR because of its anachronistic qualities but also notice things like the large rooms and stone fireplace. In a different version of this experiment, participants are asked to read the same paragraph about the house but are told that two burglars are considering robbing the house instead of being told that newlyweds are considering buying the house. The people who read the burglar version pay more attention to the computer, crystal, and TV. People in both conditions remembered an equal number of things, but the things they remembered were different. In both versions, everyone is trying to remember things accurately, but they have different file folders open and are not able to remember every detail no matter what version they read.

This happens in real life frequently. Consider meeting someone for the first time. We *pay attention to different information* when we meet someone we are interviewing for a job compared to when we meet that same someone as a potential brother-in-law. In both cases, being a hard worker is important, but attractiveness might matter more in the case of marrying a superficial sister. We ask different questions and *draw different conclusions* depending on whether the “future family member” file is open or if the “temporary desk worker” file is open. After the interview is over, we *remember different things* about the person depending on whether they are about to marry into our family or not. Neither of these file folders is likely to be more accurate than the other, but the file folders will be different, and lead

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<sup>18</sup>Jerry Zadny and Harold B. Gerard, “Attributed Intentions and Informational Selectivity,” *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 10, no. 1 (1974): 34-52.

to a different bias. None of the folders can be completely accurate because they are not complete. It is impossible to store all the information about a person or situation. The lack of completeness in our file folders means that there is bias. It reflects the limits of our perception. We can try to be as accurate as possible but must recognize that bias creeps in because the knowledge in our file folders is incomplete, and our filing system is filtering out information that might be important. If the person we interviewed is applying for a job, and we use the “future family member” folder, we will not end up with the right information.

In a similar experiment, a group of college students participated in what they were told was an experiment about “teacher evaluation methods.”<sup>19</sup> In the experiment, the participants were introduced to Hannah, who they were told was in the fourth grade. In the control condition, they were asked to evaluate her academic capabilities but were not given any information other than her socioeconomic status (either that she was rich or poor). In the experimental condition, participants found out her socioeconomic status, but also watched a video of her taking a twenty-five-item achievement test. She missed some of the easy problems and did well on some difficult problems. All the participants were asked to judge her academic capabilities.

The participants were well-meaning college students who wanted to treat Hannah fairly without using her parent’s financial status to infer how smart she was. The participants who did not watch the video of Hannah taking the test, but did know whether she was rich or poor, did what you would expect people who are trying to be unbiased to do. If she is in fourth grade, she is probably typical for a fourth grader. There was not a difference in the ratings of academic capabilities for the rich versus poor version of Hannah. The interesting part of the experiment is revealed by the participants in

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<sup>19</sup>John M. Darley and Paget H. Gross, “A Hypothesis-Confirming Bias in Labeling Effects,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 44, no. 1 (1983): 20-33.

the experimental condition. Only when they get to watch the video of Hannah taking the test do the participants give higher ratings to the rich Hannah. They judge her as being nearly equivalent to a fifth grader. When participants watched the video of poor Hannah, they judged her as being equivalent to a third grader.

Let's consider what was happening in the minds of the participants in the experimental condition. It is likely that before watching the video, those participants were trying to avoid assuming that poor Hannah is less capable. The file folder for "rich kids" and "poor kids" was open, but it did not impact the judgments until more information was given. In a memory test after the experiment, participants who watched the video of rich Hannah take the test were more likely to remember the difficult questions she answered correctly, and students who watched the video of poor Hannah take the test were more likely to remember the easy questions that she missed. The bottom line of this experiment is that even when people want to avoid using a bias, the schema *guides attention* toward the information that is consistent with the schema.

File folders that are chronically open not only guide attention in one situation but *create the lens* by which new information is filtered. The lens over time creates a worldview. This idea is communicated by a famous C. S. Lewis quote: "I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen: not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else."<sup>20</sup> Having chronically activated file folders facilitates one of the most pernicious biases, confirmation bias.

Confirmation bias is the tendency to take in and interpret information in such a way that it confirms rather than challenges what we already think.<sup>21</sup> The desire to be right motivates us to look for evidence

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<sup>20</sup>C. S. Lewis, *They Asked for a Paper* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1962). Lewis was not making an argument to avoid disconfirming information, but this quote reveals how a worldview can shape information.

<sup>21</sup>Raymond S. Nickerson, "Confirmation Bias: A Ubiquitous Phenomenon in Many Guises," *Review of General Psychology* 2, no. 2 (1998): 175.

in the world of what we already believe. This is why we might select a particular news outlet or talk about certain topics with certain friends who we know already agree with us. The world is easier to navigate when we do not have to question things. There is an obvious downside to confirmation bias—it can keep us stuck in a wrong way of thinking.

As in the example of the Central Park Five, most people believe that no one would confess to a crime unless they were guilty. If we are like most people and hold this belief, we are likely to use the confession to draw our conclusion: the defendant is guilty. After drawing that conclusion, the confirmation bias suggests that all new information regarding the evidence will be interpreted to confirm rather than challenge that the defendant is guilty. To test this, psychologists Jeff Kukucka and Saul Kassin had participants complete an online experiment in which they all read a story, based on a real case, in which a bank robber gave a handwritten note to the bank teller, robbed the bank, and managed to escape.<sup>22</sup> Next, the police were able to capture someone resembling the description given by the bank teller, who then wrote a waiver of his Miranda rights by hand before being questioned. In the confession conditions, participants found out that the suspect confessed, but then later recanted by claiming that the confession was coerced. Participants in the non-confession condition were told that the suspect never wavered in his claim of innocence the entire time. Next all participants were given a copy of the handwritten note (originally given to the bank teller) and the handwritten waiver of Miranda rights to judge whether or not both were written by the defendant. For half of the participants, the handwriting was very similar for both notes. For the other half of the participants, the handwriting was not similar. Participants who were told that the suspect confessed were more likely to perceive a match

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<sup>22</sup>Jeff Kukucka and Saul M. Kassin, “Do Confessions Taint Perceptions of Handwriting Evidence? An Empirical Test of the Forensic Confirmation Bias,” *Law and Human Behavior* 38, no. 3 (2014): 256-70.

in the handwriting than participants who were told the suspect maintained his innocence regardless of the actual similarity of the handwriting. The participants confirmed in the handwriting what they already believed about the guilt of the suspect. To avoid confirmation bias and pursue accuracy (not just feeling right), we must be vigilant about seeking disconfirming information.

In addition to the specific filters that our particular schemas create, our brains have a shared filter that favors negative content.<sup>23</sup> We have a well-documented *negativity bias* in how we take in information.<sup>24</sup> It extends to how we form impressions of others, memory, perception, and decision-making.<sup>25</sup> In a compelling experiment, participants were asked to make judgments about the truth of various claims that were either given a positive or negative frame. For example, half of participants in an experiment were told that “85% of attempted instances of rape were successful,” while the other half were told that “15% of attempted instances of rape were unsuccessful.”<sup>26</sup> Participants were more likely to believe that the first more negative framing of the information was true, even though the facts of the sentences are the same. Both optimists and pessimists were more likely to believe the negatively framed statements than the positively framed ones.

News organizations and social media exploit and expose the negativity bias. Negative information drives engagement on social media and in news. Specifically, moral outrage and negative content about a rival group increases the probability that something will get shared on social media.<sup>27</sup> In the past few years, researchers have found that

<sup>23</sup>Catherine J. Norris, “The Negativity Bias, Revisited: Evidence from Neuroscience Measures and an Individual Differences Approach,” *Social Neuroscience* 16, no. 1(2021): 68-82.

<sup>24</sup>Interestingly, this effect has recently been demonstrated to decline with age. Laura L. Carstensen and Marguerite DeLiema, “The Positivity Effect: A Negativity Bias in Youth Fades with Age,” *Current Opinion in Behavioral Sciences* 19 (2018): 7-12.

<sup>25</sup>Paul Rozin and Edward B. Royzman, “Negativity Bias, Negativity Dominance, and Contagion,” *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 5, no. 4 (2001): 296-320.

<sup>26</sup>Benjamin E. Hilbig, “Sad, Thus True: Negativity Bias in Judgments of Truth,” *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 45, no. 4 (July 2009): 983-86.

<sup>27</sup>Steve Rathje, Jay J. Van Bavel, and Sander van der Linden, “Out-Group Animosity Drives

if a liberal mentions moral outrage and the word “conservative” or “republican” it will get more attention than mentioning positive information or the success of a fellow liberal. You can then imagine if humans are set up to pay attention to negative news, and our capitalistic culture knows how to provide it for us, then we are going to get caught in a confirmation bias web. This web leads us to conclude that many negative things are happening and that we are not equipped to solve problems because they are presented as being worse than they actually are. To use an analogy, if we think about the effect of naturally occurring negativity bias as a hit of caffeine, it is at the level of green tea. The level of hit we get from social media is like the hit you get from energy drinks that can kill us if consumed at high volume. This negativity bias-driven thought cycle reflects a disconnection from what is true. When we are caught in a web of confirmation bias, we get the benefit of feeling right, but we are no longer pursuing accuracy.

DON'T THINK ABOUT A WHITE BEAR. Try not to think about a white bear for the next sixty seconds. If you are like the participants in Wegner's study, you found “not thinking about a white bear” to be a difficult task.<sup>28</sup> To be even remotely successful at the task, a person should focus on thinking about something else like a grocery list or a pink bear. Trying not to think about negative things is just as difficult as trying not to think about a white bear. So instead of simply not thinking about negative things, the better advice is to try to think about the things that are true, lovely, noble, and of good report (see Philippians 4:8). When I pray for my daughters each day before they head off to school, I pray that their attention will be directed to what is true and delightful. The negativity bias is so pronounced that more

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Engagement on Social Media,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 118, no. 26 (June 23, 2021): 1-9.

<sup>28</sup>Daniel M. Wegner, “Ironic Processes of Mental Control,” *Psychological Review* 101, no. 1 (1994): 34-52, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-295x.101.1.34>.

than just combatting negative information with positive information, this book will help us pursue what is accurate and avoid bias.

### WE WANT TO BE RIGHT AND EFFICIENT

So far, it might seem advantageous to try to avoid schemas and file folders altogether because they introduce bias, but even if that were possible, trying to function without an organized thought structure would be like a return to infancy but without the infant's cute factor. We need our organized filing system to help us pursue accuracy even if the side effect of the filing system is bias. We don't have time to collect all the information to complete our filing system, and schemas help us to function in the world without complete knowledge. I presented this earlier as a disadvantage and source of bias; but on the other hand, schemas save us time. *Schemas help us behave efficiently in the world without having to give attention and mental resources to every stimulus.* The efficiency of schemas is best characterized in the use of cognitive heuristics. Heuristics are "rules of thumb" that work well most of the time, but not all the time. Kahneman and Tversky, pioneers of the study of bias and heuristics, began by identifying rules of thumb like the representativeness heuristic, in which people make probability judgments based on similarity and ignore basic facts.<sup>29</sup> For example, my husband is convinced there is a bobcat that lives in our neighborhood because the animal he sees in our backyard looks very similar to a bobcat. If we still lived in California, it would be likely he is right since many bobcats live in California. Given the number of bobcats that live in northern Indiana, I'm going to continue believing that he saw a large cat in our backyard, not a bobcat. He is using similarity to "categorize the bobcat" and ignoring the low probability that bobcats live here. This "rule of thumb" that involves using similarity to cat-

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<sup>29</sup>Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, "Subjective Probability: A Judgment of Representativeness," *Cognitive Psychology* 3, no. 3 (1972): 430-454.

egorize things usually works pretty well. If it looks like a duck, and quacks like a duck, it is probably a duck, unless you live in Antarctica. Only when the base rate for something is low, like ducks in Antarctica or bobcats in northern Indiana, does the representativeness heuristic lead to error.

Heuristics are generally useful because they help us to be efficient thinkers and decision makers. Some people are less willing than others to employ heuristics. Psychologists have developed personality scales to measure a person's desire to maximize. Maximizers will not settle for the second-best decision but will research every possible angle before zeroing in on the best decision regardless of how much time is required. Maximizers do not ask the question, "Is this a *good* outcome?" Instead, they ask, "Is this the *best* outcome?"<sup>30</sup> Satisficers, on the other hand, are sensitive to the time-accuracy trade-off and are willing to sacrifice the best outcome to save time. They are willing to accept a good outcome without being sure that it is the best outcome. Satisficers employ more heuristics. When a satisficer goes to the grocery, they don't need to know if they could have gotten better, cheaper, or more locally sourced produce at a competing grocery. They are buying the first available version that meets the recipe requirements. Not surprisingly, satisficers are happier, more optimistic, have higher self-esteem, and are more satisfied with their lives than maximizers.<sup>31</sup> Heuristics save us time and contribute to happiness, but they are a cause of bias. Satisficers are willing to make the time-accuracy trade-off in favor of time with a potential loss of accuracy; given the limits of available time, we all must satisfice sometimes.

In addition to the use of heuristics, there are other ways that our thinking works in service of efficiency. Cognitive and social psychologists have developed dual-process models to explain that there are two

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<sup>30</sup>Barry Schwartz et al., "Maximizing Versus Satisficing: Happiness Is a Matter of Choice," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 83, no. 5 (2002): 1178-97.

<sup>31</sup>Schwartz et al., "Maximizing Versus Satisficing."

ways of thinking and remembering information.<sup>32</sup> The first way, system one processing, is thinking that is referred to as fast or automatic. Automatic (fast) thinking happens below awareness, is unintentional, is outside of human control, and is *efficient*.<sup>33</sup> This constellation of features is also referred to as implicit thinking. In contrast, system two processing is thinking that is slow or controlled. Controlled (slow) thinking is effortful, intentional, occurs above awareness, and is time consuming. This is what most non-psychologists refer to as “thinking.” It is referred to by psychologists as explicit thinking. This distinction between fast and slow, automatic and controlled, explicit and implicit, is one of the most important distinctions for the purposes of understanding thinking and reducing bias. More examples are coming, but for now, it might be helpful to think of automatic processing like the thinking it takes to drive a car under normal conditions in familiar neighborhoods, but controlled processing is the thinking it takes to drive on the opposite side of the road in an unfamiliar city.

Perhaps because of Freud’s insistence that the unconscious is full of sublimated sexual desires,<sup>34</sup> implicit, fast, automatic thinking has gotten a bad reputation. As a culture, we exalt the rational, logical, explicit, pro/con list-making thinking that looks more like controlled thinking. However, bias can exist in both automatic and controlled thinking. Returning to the research on the bias blind spot, which demonstrates that people are better at seeing the bias in others than themselves, the researchers began by making the argument that bias largely exists in fast thinking. They hypothesized that if you make people aware of the bias, they can use their controlled thinking to correct the bias. There is some evidence, which I will discuss later, that this can

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<sup>32</sup>Shelly Chaiken and Yaacov Trope, *Dual-Process Theories in Social Psychology* (New York: Guilford Press, 1999).

<sup>33</sup>J. Bargh, “The Four Horsemen of Automaticity: Awareness, Efficiency, Intentions and Control,” in *Handbook of Social Cognition*, vol. 1, ed. Thomas K. Srull and Robert S. Wyer, 2nd ed. (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1994), 1-40.

<sup>34</sup>Mick Power and Chris R. Brewin, “From Freud to Cognitive Science: A Contemporary Account of the Unconscious,” *British Journal of Clinical Psychology* 30, no. 4 (1991): 289-310.

work to reduce some biases when people are motivated to pursue accuracy and have sufficient mental resources.<sup>35</sup> However, as in the example of the bias blind spot, even people who were practiced at overriding their initial automatic response to correctly use controlled thinking to answer questions regarding the price of balls and bats,<sup>36</sup> were not able to avoid biased responses and believed that they were less susceptible to bias than other people.<sup>37</sup> However, logic holds that since automatic thinking occurs below awareness and personal control, controlled thinking must be employed to reduce the bias that results from both controlled and automatic thinking. Logic also holds that automatic thinking, given that it exists below awareness, is more difficult to pinpoint; thus, bias that emerges from our efficient fast thinking is hard to correct. So far, the cause of bias that we have been discussing is rooted in cognitive explanations such as the incompleteness of schemas, the way schemas guide our attention, and the efficiency of our thinking. These features of cognition that are guided by a desire to feel right are important to developing an understanding of bias. However, they don't explain some of the ridiculous human behavior we observe on a regular basis. Given enough motivation to pursue accuracy (not just feeling right), it might be possible to reduce bias, but there is another important motive that gets in the way of accuracy.

## **WE WANT TO FEEL GOOD ABOUT OURSELVES**

Imagine you are in a lab where you have been told that your cognitive aptitude will be assessed.<sup>38</sup> In your first task you are told to unscramble a series of letters to form words, a task the experimenters

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<sup>35</sup>Daniel T. Gilbert, "Inferential Correction," in *Heuristics and Biases: The Psychology of Intuitive Judgment*, ed. Thomas Gilovich, Dale W. Griffin, and Daniel Kahneman (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 167-84, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511808098.011>.

<sup>36</sup>Frederick, "Cognitive Reflection and Decision Making."

<sup>37</sup>West, Meserve, and Stanovich, "Cognitive Sophistication Does Not Attenuate the Bias Blind Spot?"

<sup>38</sup>Steven Berglas and Edward E. Jones, "Drug Choice as a Self-Handicapping Strategy in Response to Noncontingent Success," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 36, no. 4 (1978): 405-17, <https://doi.org/10.1037//0022-3514.36.4.405>.

have designed to be impossible. You spend about twenty minutes trying to unscramble the words but have little success. If anything, you feel you have failed the task. Then an experimenter comes in, looks at your work, and tells you that you have performed very well, even brilliantly compared to past participants. If you are like most participants in this experiment who receive this feedback, you are feeling confused. Then the experimenter gives you an option to take one of two drugs before attempting the next task. One of the drugs is likely to enhance performance and one is likely to impair performance. To most people who are not in this experiment, it seems like an easy choice. Why would anyone take a drug that impairs performance in the middle of an assessment of cognitive aptitude? Turns out 70 percent of the male participants who had just received the unsettling, positive feedback about their performance on the unsolvable anagram task chose to take the drug that would impair performance. This is compared to 13 percent of male participants who were in the condition in which the anagrams were solvable and thus the positive feedback appears warranted.

What is the reason for taking the performance-impairing drug? The desire to be right could not explain why a person would take a drug to impair their own performance. In addition to wanting to be right, *we want to feel good about ourselves*. This motive is at play in the decision to take the performance-impairing drug. Taking the performance-impairing drug creates a built-in excuse for poor performance on the next task. Taking the performance-impairing drug allows the participant to tell himself, “I am brilliant, just like the experimenter said, but my failure on the second task was caused by the drug, not by my low cognitive aptitude.”

That anyone would choose to impair their performance may seem hard to believe but consider that the same phenomenon is likely one explanation for why people procrastinate on important tasks. If a person waits until the last minute to write a paper, the poor grade on

the paper could be explained by the last-minute rush and not by the student's overall inability to write a good paper. In the mind of the student, self-esteem is preserved. "I could have written a good paper, if only I hadn't procrastinated." The translation of this could be, "My poor grade is not a reflection of my low ability. I am still a good student." We know that procrastination leads to a poorer outcome so why do we do it? We agree with Paul's words, "I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do" (Romans 7:15). We do things like tell white lies, eat gluttonously, scroll social media, and exaggerate our performance when we ought to know better. We want to feel good about ourselves even when it costs us something like seeing the world accurately or getting a good grade on a paper.

The behavior described in the performance-impairing drug experiment is called "self-handicapping," which is defined as setting up explanations in advance of poor performance to protect self-esteem.<sup>39</sup> Men tend to self-handicap by withdrawing effort, like when they stop trying to repair a relationship, skip sports practice, or avoid studying for an important test. Women tend to do it by giving an excuse like, "I might not do well because I am tired/sick/anxious." Women rarely withdraw effort as a self-handicapping strategy. Self-handicapping, especially the kind that involves withdrawing effort, not surprisingly leads to worse outcomes. If my students don't study for tests, they do worse. If humans were rational actors who were pursuing accuracy, they would not self-handicap. Self-handicapping happens because we want to feel good about ourselves. In a follow-up study to the drug study described above, participants were more likely to take the drug that impairs performance when they believed that the experimenter would know which drug they chose and their score on the test.<sup>40</sup> This

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<sup>39</sup>Berglas and Jones, "Drug Choice as a Self-Handicapping Strategy in Response to Noncontingent Success."

<sup>40</sup>Thomas A. Kolditz and Robert M. Arkin, "An Impression Management Interpretation of the Self-Handicapping Strategy," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 43, no. 3 (1982): 492-502, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.43.3.492>.

demonstrates that part of our desire to maintain self-esteem is rooted in what we think others think of us. We feel good about ourselves when we think other people think well of us.

If pursuing accuracy was the primary motivation people held, the world would be a more wonderful place. This motive would be prompting people to create file folders with as much accurate information as possible, to take their time considering the lens created by the file folders, and to seek out disconfirming information. Imagine how much easier it would be to solve problems if we could trust that everyone was only using near-complete file folders to give us accurate information. People's behavior would be rational and predictable. Unfortunately, wanting to feel good through maintaining self-esteem will complicate the quest for truth. Instead of behaving rationally, people *rationalize* to maintain self-esteem. Self-esteem refers to a global evaluation of self-worth,<sup>41</sup> which is a personal judgment that is not necessarily based on accomplishments. Given that a global evaluation of self-worth does not require undeniable evidence of successful performance, it is easy and advantageous to filter information through the lens of self-esteem; thus, *the motive to maintain self-esteem causes bias*. We will trade accuracy and righteousness for good feelings and self-esteem. Often, like a self-handicapper, we will lie to others and even to ourselves to save face because acknowledging major deficiencies in ourselves is very difficult.

Data suggests that depressed people are more accurate in their assessments of the causes of other people's behavior than are non-depressed people.<sup>42</sup> People are less depressed when they misrepresent information in service of self-esteem.<sup>43</sup> People who are not

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<sup>41</sup>Brett W. Pelham and William B. Swann, "From Self-Conceptions to Self-Worth: On the Sources and Structure of Global Self-Esteem," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 57, no. 4 (1989): 672-80.

<sup>42</sup>Kerry L. Marsh and Gifford Weary, "Depression and Attributional Complexity," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 15, no. 3 (1989): 325-36.

<sup>43</sup>Mark R. Leary and Roy F. Baumeister, "The Nature and Function of Self-Esteem: Sociometer Theory," in *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, vol. 32, ed. Mark P. Zanna (San Diego, CA: Academic Press, 2000), 1-62.

putting effort into spinning the information using strategies like self-handicapping to benefit their self-esteem are more likely to be depressed.<sup>44</sup> This finding is very ironically depressing to me. In an adaptation of Oscar Wilde’s play, the lead character accurately states, “It takes a great deal of courage to see the world in all its tainted glory and still to love it.”<sup>45</sup> Maybe it takes courage to see the world accurately because the consequence is depression. To avoid this depression, many of us choose to see the world through rose-colored glasses.

As I was getting to know a student of mine, she began to share many of the personal details of her life. She told me about her Christian upbringing, including the message she received from her church and her parents surrounding the importance of sexual purity, and how deeply she had internalized this message. She then went on to describe how in high school she and her boyfriend were sexually active, but she only realized that what they were doing was sex later. At the time that they were sexually active, she was so committed to seeing herself as sexually pure that she figured out a way to convince herself that what she was doing was not sex. If I had not witnessed the sincerity of her story firsthand, I would not have believed this story. The only way to make sense of her story is to understand that the power of wanting to feel good about ourselves can prevent us from seeing things accurately. It made her feel good to think of herself as a good Christian girl, and if a good Christian girl does not have premarital sex, she had two choices, and both options would require her to change her file folders. One choice would be to change the “self” file folder and conclude that she was not a good Christian girl, and she would have to deal with the negative feelings of not being good or of not being Christian. Her other choice was to change the sex file folder by recategorizing what she was doing as “not sex.” Choosing to recategorize her behavior as “not sex”

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<sup>44</sup>Howard Tennen and Sharon Herzberger, “Depression, Self-Esteem, and the Absence of Self-Protective Attributional Biases,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 52, no. 1 (1987): 72.

<sup>45</sup>*An Ideal Husband*, directed by Oliver Parker (Santa Monica, CA: Icon Productions, 1999).

was not accurate (or righteous), but it allowed her to keep on feeling like a good Christian girl. It was easier on her self-esteem to change the “sex” file folder than change the way she thought about herself.

I tell this story to point out the extremes to which a person can go to maintain a positive self-view, but we are all doing this on smaller scales every time we tell a white lie or participate in hazing. Hazing, the embarrassing non-life-threatening kind, is a helpful tactic to increase commitment to a group. If you work hard to join a group either through effort or having to wear an embarrassing hat, you will value the group more because of the pressure to resolve the tension in the motives to be right and to feel good about yourself.<sup>46</sup> Let’s say you have to sing a children’s song loudly in a public place while pushing a doll in a stroller in order to be accepted into a group. You will likely think to yourself, “Singing songs in public when people are trying to drink coffee in peace is not the right thing to do and is generally embarrassing to me.” To justify the action to feel good about yourself, you have to rationalize, “Joining this group makes this embarrassing behavior worth it.” Likewise, if you must go through an extensive vetting process to get a boring, unfulfilling job, you are likely to value the job and stick with it longer than if you were hired based on simply submitting a resume online.

It is much easier to find a way to justify or rationalize a behavior than it is to grapple with the truth of our own poor judgment or immoral behavior.<sup>47</sup> We are expert rationalizers who can justify our behavior automatically without realizing we are doing it.<sup>48</sup> We do not want to file information in memory that threatens how we characterize our behavior as smart and moral. The tension of not living up to our beliefs is real. Participants who eat beef jerky rate the moral

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<sup>46</sup>Elliot Aronson and Judson Mills, “The Effect of Severity of Initiation on Liking for a Group,” *The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 59, no. 2 (1959): 177-81.

<sup>47</sup>Harold B. Gerard and Grover C. Mathewson, “The Effects of Severity of Initiation on Liking for a Group: A Replication,” *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 2, no. 3 (1966): 278-87.

<sup>48</sup>Jake Quilty-Dunn, “Rationalization Is Irrational and Self-Serving, but Useful,” *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 43 (2020).

status of cows as lower than the participants who are randomly assigned to eat dried nuts.<sup>49</sup> Participants who shock other students in the course of an experiment feel the need to denigrate those students.<sup>50</sup> Rather than admitting that we behaved poorly, *it is easier to blame the victim*. More frequently than I am even aware, I blame my poor behavior on the people around me, which increases the probability that I will behave poorly in the future but spares my self-esteem. Like all of us, I do not see myself clearly.

The story of my student did not end with self-deception. She had to come to terms later with what happened. She had to take her behavior out of her “not sex” file and move it to a “sex” file. She had to acknowledge her behavior for what it was. My student’s self-esteem does not need to be tied to her sexual behavior in high school anymore. Her self-esteem resides in value that has been given to her by God and cannot be taken away. Confession, forgiveness, and redemption are available to Christians. *Our value is not found in our good behavior or accomplishments but in the identity we have been given by God. Having our self-esteem needs met should allow us look at the world more accurately.* If we can take the self-esteem motive out of the equation by getting self-esteem needs met through a secure identity in Christ, it will not be competing with the pursuit of accuracy. Maybe we can avoid depression *and* have the courage it takes to love the tainted world and ourselves.

After reading about the origins of bias that are built into our desires to be right and feel good about ourselves, you should have an increased appreciation for the reality of bias, but you may have difficulty

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<sup>49</sup>Steve Loughnan, Nick Haslam, and Brock Bastian, “The Role of Meat Consumption in the Denial of Moral Status and Mind to Meat Animals,” *Appetite* 55, no. 1 (2010): 156-59. “Moral status” was defined by Loughnan et al. (2010) as the ability to experience eighteen different cognitive states (Hassam et al., 2008) combined with responses to two questions: “How much does this cow deserve moral treatment?” and “How unpleasant would it be to harm this cow?” (1 = not at all; 7 = very much so).

<sup>50</sup>David C. Glass, “Changes in Liking as a Means of Reducing Cognitive Discrepancies Between Self-Esteem and Aggression,” *Journal of Personality* 32, no. 4 (1964): 531-49, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6494.1964.tb01357.x>.

understanding how bias can be reduced given the entrenched nature of these processes. The manifestation of our desire to be right in the use of schemas and cognitive efficiency hacks combined with our desire to maintain self-esteem create real barriers to accuracy. This writing is my attempt to write a redemption story—to acknowledge the bias, to acknowledge the difficulty inherent in the pursuit of the unbiased, and to propose a roadmap toward becoming less biased. The roadmap begins with our motivations. We want to be right, and we want to feel good about ourselves. If instead of just being motivated to believe we are right, we pursue accuracy by recognizing the incompleteness of our file folders and seeking out disconfirming information, we can be more accurate and less biased. If we can get our self-esteem needs met because our identities are secure in Christ, we can pursue what is righteous without the biasing force of self-esteem maintenance motives. We can be less biased, but as the bias blind spot literature suggests, less cognitive bias won't come from just learning about bias.<sup>51</sup> Instead, you will have to focus your attention on *your own bias*.

## CHAPTER ONE SUMMARY

This chapter charts two origins of cognitive bias: the desire to be right, and the desire to maintain self-esteem. Given that we do not have the cognitive capacity to process all incoming stimuli, the process of pursuing what is right begins when schemas (file folders) are created to help collect and organize information. Schemas are *useful* in helping us navigate the world, but bias emerges because schemas are *incomplete* and we don't always recognize their incompleteness. Likewise, schemas are *useful* as filters to guide the processing of new information, but we don't always realize when we *miss or distort* important information because of the filter. Schemas and heuristics are *useful* in helping us think more efficiently but may involve an *accuracy*

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<sup>51</sup>West, Meserve, and Stanovich, "Cognitive Sophistication Does Not Attenuate the Bias Blind Spot."

*trade-off*. These basic cognitive processes are necessary, but they contribute to bias and are difficult to change. Instead of believing we are right, we need to *pursue accuracy* by seeking out more and disconfirming information. Our motivation to feel good about ourselves is another contributor to bias because people will distort what is true to maintain self-esteem. *If self-esteem needs are met, people are freed up to pursue accuracy. Christians, having a secure identity in Christ with self-esteem needs met, ought to be more accurate.*

**APPLICATION: UNBIASED NUDGE**

- Consider that you are biased by your own thinking and that the research on bias applies to you.
- Think of a time when your desire to be right has come into conflict with your desire to feel good about yourself.

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