

# Sources of Bias in Ethical Decisions

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## WHAT'S COVERED

In this tutorial we will be considering some obstacles to making fair ethical judgments, focusing on uncovering the source these obstacles. Our discussion will break down like this:

1. [Bias and Ethics](#)
2. [Recognizing Bias](#)
3. [Identifying Bias in Practice](#)

## 1. Bias and Ethics

First of all, recall that ethics aims to provide evaluations of all possible actions. It does this by consistently applying its standards of judgment. In this way, ethics is systematic and objective.

One of the biggest barriers to proper ethical evaluation is when our own attitudes or views distort a fair and even evaluation of things. This is commonly referred to as **bias**.

You may not even be aware of your own biases. In fact, biases frequently inform our judgments without us knowing it.



### THINK ABOUT IT

How many times do you think you've assumed someone was trustworthy because they were well presented and confident? Or, how often do you think you've assumed a stranger is no good just because they are wearing old, shabby clothes?

Preferences for certain appearances often turn out to be misleading. There are three main steps that you need to take in order to make accurate judgments about people.



### STEP BY STEP

1

You need to recognize how biases inform your judgments without you even knowing it.



2

Once you become aware of your biases, you're in a position to find the source of your biases.



3

Now you're in a position to make unbiased judgments, as required by philosophical ethics.

There are some common sources of bias. Firstly, you could be biased because it suits your own interests to do so. Secondly, you might be biased in favor of something just because you're familiar with it (or biased against it if it's unfamiliar). Finally, bias might result from how you were brought up, for example, your religious upbringing.

In the next section we will look at various examples of evaluations that are informed by biases from these sources.



#### TERM TO KNOW

##### Bias

An unfair preference for or against something.

## 2. Recognizing Bias

Let's start with bias from self-interest. Typical examples are where you judge someone harshly for some behavior, but let yourself off the hook when you do this same behavior.

#### IN CONTEXT

Let's say you normally think that talking loudly on a phone in public is rude and you wish that people would challenge this behavior more often. Imagine you get into a heated--and loud--argument with someone on your phone.

You say to yourself it was justified because the person on the other end of the phone was being obnoxious. Here, you've made yourself an exception from your normal judgment because it suits you to do so in this case.

There are many similar instances where you're biased in favor of your own behavior because it's convenient for you to be.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Imagine you normally complain about careless driving, but do it yourself when you're in a rush to get somewhere.

In this case, you would have allowed bias to inform your favorable judgment on yourself.

Now let's consider bias due to familiarity or unfamiliarity. It's fairly well known that much racism is due to unfamiliarity.

➞ **EXAMPLE** People might view someone with suspicion just because they're from another country, speak another language, or have different color skin.

By contrast, you may be biased in favor of someone just because they share your cultural or social background.

Finally, consider how upbringing shapes our views. Many people think that we ought to raise a family, and do so in a traditional manner. Often, this is because they've been brought up to think this is the only way to properly become an adult. But to think that someone who decides against starting a family is necessarily avoiding adult responsibilities is a biased ethical judgment.

One particular way we may become biased through upbringing is religion. If your religion teaches that homosexuality is sinful, you might judge homosexuals as bad people, even if they aren't.



#### BIG IDEA

Bias can inform many of our everyday judgments and can come from several different sources.

## 3. Identifying Bias in Practice

Now that you have seen how bias can cloud our judgment in various different ways, you can have a go at identifying bias in a specific situation. Consider the example below and think about where bias informs judgments.



#### TRY IT

Imagine you're planning a holiday. You decide against some destinations because you believe they are dangerous, even though you haven't done any substantial research to confirm this belief. Once you get to the airport you're held up at security. You're angry because you feel there's no reason for them to pick on you. But you usually judge people when you see others in the same situation. Finally, you notice an unmarried couple and their child on the plane. You consider them immoral people even though you know nothing about them.

The actions would have been evaluated in the following way:

1. When you chose your holiday destination you were biased by familiarity. That's because you unfairly rejected certain countries just because you were unfamiliar with them.
2. When you were outraged at your treatment by security you were biased because of self-interest. That's because you normally think people must have done something wrong if security stops them, but you make yourself an exception.
3. When you judged the unmarried couple you were biased by your religious upbringing. That's because your religion taught that having sex before marriage is wrong.



#### SUMMARY

We started this tutorial by looking at **bias and ethics**, seeing that we need to be aware of the sources of our unfair preferences in order to make unbiased judgments in ethics. Then we considered the task of **recognizing bias** in various examples. Finally, a specific scenario, with various judgments, was considered so you could

have a go at **identifying bias in practice**. We saw how biases from all different sources can be at work in a certain situation.



#### TERMS TO KNOW

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