

Assessing one's own open-mindedness: Ten guidelines

At the conclusion of his excellent guide to baloney detection -- ten questions that help us to distinguish between science and pseudoscience -- Michael Shermer reminds us that the method he offers is not foolproof.¹ We assign high or low probabilities to various ideas, and there are borderland claims where we are more cautious, but in every case, Shermer comments, we need to remain open-minded and flexible given that any of our beliefs may need to be revised in the light of emerging evidence.

Suppose, however, it occurs to us to wonder if we are, in fact, open-minded. The ideal of open-mindedness requires, with respect to our beliefs, that we steer a path between empty-minded credulity and dogmatic resistance, and to remain alert to the traps and pitfalls that undermine our attempts to examine claims in a disinterested manner. Of course, if Bertrand Russell is right to suggest that most of us harbour a fond belief in our own intellectual virtue, it will not be at all easy to turn the skeptical spotlight on our attitude towards our own beliefs. It was Russell, after all, who observed that while we see ourselves as resolute and tenacious, other people are merely stubborn and pigheaded. We generally assume that we ourselves are open-minded, but this assumption is itself a belief about which we need to be more open-minded.

If we could bring ourselves to raise the question, however, are there any guidelines that would prove useful? Following Shermer's example, I propose various questions that might be helpful in determining to what extent we ourselves are genuinely open-minded with respect to forming and revising our beliefs. After each set of questions, I formulate what I take to be the underlying principle.

1. What do we really know about the matter in question?

If we are inclined to accept or reject a proposal, have we given adequate consideration to the reasons advanced in favour and against? Can we honestly state that we

have given the issue serious thought and that our opinion derives from a careful consideration of the evidence? Do we know enough, for example, about the implications and ramifications of national identity cards to form a reasonable opinion? Are we familiar with any serious examination of the alleged consequences, beneficial or harmful? Knowing that the matter is controversial, what steps have we taken to become familiar with the various sides? Have we consulted a wide and representative range of sources? To what extent are we simply reacting to vague and general claims, or to persuasive rhetoric? Are we willing to defer judgment until we have taken steps to become well informed?

-- an open-minded person is guided by the evidence

2. How reliable are those whose views we are willing to trust?

In those cases where we cannot independently and personally assess the issue in question, are those whose opinions we are inclined to rely on genuine experts? Have we made a real attempt to determine to what extent the testimony of supposed experts is trustworthy? Are their views truly deserving of credence? Do their comments fall within their area of expertise? Do other experts agree with them? In the case of an alternative medical treatment, for example, are those who purport to be experts recognized as such by others in the relevant community (and how is that community to be identified)? Does anyone involved in the debate have an axe to grind? Have we been influenced by the superficial trappings of expertise, or by confident pronouncements in the media? Have we been too receptive to what we assume to be expert opinion, and have we taken steps to guard against gullibility?

-- an open-minded person seeks out reliable experts

3. Have we tried to take into account our own biases and prejudices?

Are we disposed to believe or disbelieve a certain claim as a result of our own preconceptions even though we have not seriously examined the evidence for or against the claim in question? Are we inclined, for example, to give credence to a report that a certain atrocity was committed because we are generally unsympathetic to the side that stands accused? Conversely, do we dismiss such allegations as propaganda because we are predisposed to think that they are simply preposterous in the case of the group in question? Have we considered how our opinion of such a report might change if, on the basis of the same amount of evidence, a similar claim were made about a different group of people?

-- an open-minded person tries to set aside any factor that might distort the outcome of reflection

4. Is a desire for something to be true (or false) overriding our judgment?

Are we too readily persuaded because we want to be persuaded? Do we, for example, simply want to believe so badly that a notorious serial killer has been caught that we are prepared to be somewhat cavalier with respect to the question of actual evidence of guilt? Have we paid sufficient attention to the fact that the Innocence Project and similar efforts have shown that many guilty verdicts in murder cases were erroneous? Are we ignoring evidence that a colleague is cheating because we don't want to believe it? To what extent are we constructing a set of beliefs that conform to the way we would prefer the facts to be, rather than to how they are? Are we mindful of Russell's reminder that our own tastes and interests do not afford a key to understanding the world?

-- an open-minded person tries to recognize when belief is driven by desire

5. Can we accept the possibility that many views that seem sound and secure today may yet prove to be false?

Are we willing to admit the potential vulnerability of beliefs that are presently regarded as firmly established? Are we ready to entertain doubts and objections that may arise in the future? Or are we inclined to believe that our own processes of inquiry and standards of proof today have made that possibility so remote as to raise no serious concern? Are we able to think of knowledge claims as provisional and falsifiable even though they are well-supported by the best standards of evidence presently available? In the absence of counter-evidence, are we able to have sufficient confidence in our beliefs to avoid a debilitating skepticism, while at the same time maintaining sufficient intellectual humility to guard against dogmatic commitment? Are we indeed ready, as Peirce colourfully puts it, to dump our whole cartload of beliefs the moment experience is against them?

-- an open-minded person sees knowledge claims as revisable

6. What efforts are we making to determine whether or not previous conclusions remain tenable?

Are the beliefs we have already accepted supported by subsequent evidence, or are we merely assuming that the right conclusion was drawn at the time? Is the zero tolerance policy which seemed so admirable when adopted really achieving its goals? Would an earlier decision be reinforced or called into question by what has happened since? Is a certain theory to which we subscribe confirmed by further tests designed to replicate the original results? Are problematic findings too quickly dismissed as mere anomalies? To what extent is our recognition of the possibility that on-going observation and reflection might disturb our conclusions actually reflected in practical steps we are taking to pay attention to recent findings? To echo Susan Haack, do we want to know the answer badly enough to take the trouble to find out?

-- an open-minded person takes steps to monitor his or her beliefs

7. Do we see our own views as open to criticism?

Do we admit the possibility that those who disagree with us might be right? Are we inclined to confine our attention to sources that only tend to support the position we already take or are we willing to consider rival views? Are we willing to look into a theory that strikes us as unlikely? How carefully and impartially do we listen to the presentation of an opinion contrary to our own? Have we made a genuine effort to find out if an opposing point of view has any merit before launching into an attack? As teachers, are we happy to see our students develop a point of view different from our own? Do we see the exchange of views as an opportunity to learn or as purely competitive and adversarial? To what extent does our behaviour show that we take seriously Mill's view that our judgment is only deserving of confidence when we have listened to all that can be said against us?

-- an open-minded person listens to opposing points of view

8. Do we shut down in the face of the counter-intuitive?

Do we rely too confidently on what immediately presents itself as "common sense"? Are we too quick to ridicule an idea merely because it strikes us absurd? Are we, for example, able to temper our immediate and intuitive conviction that a certain abstract work of art is rubbish, given that many people more knowledgeable about art than we are judge it to be of high quality? Are we prone to dismiss certain claims, such as the claim associated with the Monty Hall problem, as impossible even though we are in no position to demonstrate the impossibility? By contrast, are we, in Robert Alter's words, ready to be surprised?

-- an open-minded person recognizes that truth can be stranger than fiction

9. Are we ready to reject palpable nonsense?

Is the ideal of open-mindedness distinct in our minds from a form of relativism that refuses to make judgments of worth with respect to claims to knowledge? Are we tempted to think, for example, that we offend against the ideal if we scoff at the claim that someone can bend spoons using only mind control? Do we feel that we ought to pay respectful attention to propaganda by holocaust deniers in case we might otherwise be considered closed-minded? Are we prepared to say about certain claims that they simply have nothing going for them? Have we taken to heart Dewey's reminder that intellectual hospitality is not equivalent to saying, "Come right in, there's no one at home"?

-- an open-minded person is not receptive to every idea

10. Is our belief in the possibility of genuine inquiry alive and well?

Do we remind ourselves that all the numerous and shocking examples of bias revealed in earlier research are necessarily examples of bias that have now been detected through further inquiry? Is it clear to us that while it is immensely difficult to uncover unexamined assumptions that steer our thinking, it is by no means impossible, as previous successes demonstrate? Are we able to resist sliding from a recognition that we are always in danger of being biased to the unwarranted conclusion that closed-mindedness is just inevitable? Can we take into account all of the ways in which our efforts at open-mindedness can be compromised, while stopping short of an outright pessimism that regards the ideal as nothing more than a myth? Is our open-mindedness threatened by our own increasing skepticism about the ideal itself?

-- an open-minded person remains committed to the ideal

These guidelines are not to be implemented mechanically in the manner of a checklist. There are strains and tensions within the list reflected in the struggle between justifiable resistance and dogmatic rejection, and between genuine receptiveness and mere credulity. The questions demand careful judgment and reflection as we try to offset any inclination towards self-deception and rationalization, and these guidelines are no more foolproof than those proposed by Shermer. If we pose the questions above, however, it becomes much more difficult to take our own open-mindedness for granted.

Note

¹ Michael Shermer, “Baloney detection”, Scientific American November 2001; and “More baloney detection”, Scientific American December 2001.