

### 3.1 Appeal to Authority (*Argumentum ad Verecundiam*)

An *appeal to authority* is an argument in which the testimony of someone believed to be an authority is cited in support of a conclusion. The fallacy occurs when the person cited is not in fact an authority on the matter or for some reason should not be relied upon. Here are three examples:

#### Example 1

*Well, I wouldn't listen to Bishop Desmond Tutu's version of the situation in South Africa, because Jerry Falwell says that Tutu is a phony.*

#### Example 2

*According to my physics professor, Emily Dickinson's poetry is for the birds. That's good enough for me.*

#### Example 3

*Marvis Frazier is America's greatest boxer. I have that on the authority of Marvis's father, Joe Frazier.*

The underlying idea of such arguments is that some statement *S* is true because some authority *A* has said it is true. The argument's basic structure is this:

*Authority A asserts that S.*

*Therefore, S is True*

You see immediately that such an argument is neither valid nor inductively strong, since the mere fact that someone asserts *S* neither makes it so nor makes it probable. Typically, however, the arguer believes more than the mere fact that *A* asserts that *S*. The arguer very likely is assuming such things as that *A* is someone who knows what he or she is talking about regarding *S*, or that *A* is speaking without bias, or that *A* is telling the truth. If those or similar assumptions are well founded, then the appeal to authority *A* may constitute good—that is, nonfallacious—reasoning. Not all appeals to authority are fallacious; some may be inductively strong. After all, we should accept the testimony of qualified and unbiased experts, for we cannot be experts in every field ourselves.

The fallacy of appeal to authority occurs when the authority cited is not qualified in the relevant matters or, less typically, is not free from adverse influences. Thus, the arguer is relying upon the assertions of someone who is not truly in a position to know.

To identify the fallacy of appeal to authority, we ask two questions: (1) Is the

authority in fact a *qualified* authority about matters related to *S*? (2) Is there any good reason to believe that the authority may be biased in matters related to *S*? Regarding example 1 given above, we should ask, Is Jerry Falwell qualified to claim that Bishop Tutu is a phony? Is Falwell an expert on South Africa and the political representation of the protesters? Regarding example 2, we should ask, Is a physics professor likely to be an authority on American poets? And regarding example 3, although we know that Joe Frazier is a boxing expert, we may ask if he is impartial when it comes to his own son.

A common variation on the appeal to authority is an appeal to a magazine or newspaper article or a radio or TV program. Consider this example: 'They've found a cure for cancer. I read about it in *Popular Mechanics*'. In such cases we ought to ask the same question: Is the source cited a reliable one in this matter? Ordinarily, we should be very suspicious of medical breakthroughs reported in *Popular Mechanics*, though not of such breakthroughs reported in, say, *The Journal of the American Medical Association*. On the other hand, we would not expect to get reliable advice on automobiles in a medical journal. The fallacy occurs when an argument is supported by reference to a publication or program not known for specialization on the subject.

In summary, not all appeals to authority are fallacious. The fallacy occurs when an arguer appeals to someone who is not an expert in the field for which he or she is cited as support or who is not unbiased.

*To recognize the appeal to authority, look for an argument based primarily on the premise that some person (or some publication) reports that S is true. The fallacy occurs when the person (or publication) is not relevantly qualified or is not speaking without bias.*

### 3.2 Appeal to the People (*Argumentum ad Populum*)

The *appeal to the people* fallacy is a variation on the appeal to authority. It consists in arguing that some statement *S* is true because most people believe *S*. It is, in effect, an appeal to commonly or traditionally held beliefs. Many advertisements recommend a product by asserting that "everyone uses it," as for example, in this ad for Ford trucks:

#### Example 4

*America's best-selling pickups: Ford.*

The unstated premise is that the best-selling pickup truck is the *best* pickup truck, and the conclusion is that since you ought to buy the best, you ought to buy a Ford. But of course the fact that Ford sells the most pickups entails neither that Fords are the best nor that you ought to buy one.

Here are some other examples of the appeal to the people:

#### Example 5

*Well, for centuries people have believed in God, and I just don't see how so many people could be mistaken. So that's why I choose to believe.*

#### Example 6

*Working one's way through college is a cherished American concept. (Dr. Newman, former president of the University of Rhode Island)*

In the first example the arguer bases a decision to believe in God on the fact that, as he or she claims, people throughout the centuries have so believed. The implicit inference of Dr. Newman's statement is that working one's way through college is good because it is "a cherished American concept." Both arguments commit the fallacy of appeal to the people.

*To recognize the fallacy of appeal to the people, look for an argument in which the conclusion is based on assertions about commonly or traditionally held beliefs.*

### 3.3 Appeal to Force (Argumentum ad Baculum)

An *appeal to force* is an argument based upon a threat. Arguers using this type of appeal try to persuade you by pointing out their power over you or by warning you of the bad consequences of refusing to accept their argument. Consider these examples:

#### Example 7

*Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, if you do not bring in a verdict of guilty, you may be this killer's next victim!*

#### Example 8

*Look, I give out the grades in this course, so I guess I should know that your answer is wrong!*

#### Example 9

*Smith, we can't have this statement on expenditures coming to the attention of the president. You've been the*

*accountant here for nearly twenty years. It would be a shame to ruin all that now. I think it would be wise of you to take another look at the books, don't you?*

Rather than offering a relevant reason for the conclusion, the arguer poses a threat to the listener, saying, in effect, "Accept my conclusion or you'll be sorry." Obviously, the fact that the arguer poses a threat does not make the arguer's conclusion true or even probably true.

*You may recognize the fallacy of appeal to force by the presence of a threat either explicit or, as in the third example above, subtly disguised.*

### 3.4 Appeal to Pity (Argumentum ad Misericordiam)

Someone offering an *appeal to pity* is reasoning, in effect, "You should accept my conclusion out of pity." Such arguers urge you to believe something by arousing your sympathy for them or their cause. For example, imagine an attorney defending his client to the jury:

#### Example 10

*There is no question that what this young man did is intolerable and repugnant. He admits it himself. But you're not here to evaluate this man's conduct morally; you're here to try him and determine his guilt or innocence. And as you think this over, I want you to think hard about this young man, his home life and his future, which you now hold in your hands. Think about his broken home, never knowing his father, being left by his mother. Think about the poverty he's known, the foster homes, the birthdays going unnoticed, and the Christmas he's never had. And think hard about what life in prison will do to him. Think about these things, and I know you will acquit him of this crime.*

This clever lawyer makes quite a case for his client's miserable and unfortunate life. Although all of it may be true, it would be fallacious to conclude that the defendant is not guilty because his life has been hard or because finding him guilty would add to his misery.

*To recognize the fallacy of appeal to pity, look for premises that appeal to your sympathy.*

*These have nothing to do with the evidence*

