

1. Testify!

A person *testifies* to a statement **P** when that person asserts (sometimes solemnly) that **P** is the case. Generally, when someone testifies that **P** is true, they claim that they have some experience or special knowledge that supports **P**. This is distinct from when someone is “just saying **P**”. When we ourselves believe **P** or infer that **P** is true on the basis of this testimony, we make the following *inference*:

Person **A** testifies that **P**
Therefore, **P** is true, **P** ought to be believed, or there is reason to believe **P**

This type of argument is called an **argument from testimony**. There is a species of arguments from testimony that appeal to an authority on **P** in order to conclude that **P** is the case or ought to be believed. This type of argument has the following structure:

A person **A** testifies that **P**
A is an authority on matters concerning P.
Therefore, **P** is true, **P** ought to be believed, or there is reason to believe **P**

The above argument **appeals to authority**. It *appeals* to an authority’s view on **P** in order to argue that **P** is the case. What makes this a genuine (non-fallacious) form of argumentation is that we contend that there is a connection between being an authority on **P**, thinking **P** is the case, and **P** actually being the case (or at least giving us a good reason to believe **P**).

In short, we accept arguments like those above because we contend that *certain individuals can be an authoritative source of knowledge or reliable information*.

2. Fallacious Appeal to Authority

The **fallacious appeal to authority** occurs when an individual argues that **P** is true (or ought to be believed) on the basis that authority **A** claims **P** but:

- (i) **A** is not a legitimate authority on matters concerning **P**,
- (ii) there is not a sufficient degree of agreement among authorities on matters concerning **P**
- (iii) **A** has a significant bias concerning **P** or is likely to lie about **P**
- (iv) **P** is not an area that anyone can have authority
- (v) **A** is unidentified

<i>Example #1 of Fallacious Appeal to Authority</i>	
1	Justin Bieber is a pop star.
2	Justin Bieber says that you can save money by switching to Geico (a type of automobile insurance)
3	Therefore, you can save money by switching to Geico.

Justin Bieber is *not* an authority on which car insurance is the cheapest or whether or not you can save money by switching to Geico.

3. Legitimate Appeals to Authority

In order to legitimately (non-fallaciously) appeal to authority, it is necessary that:

(i) **A** is an authority or expert on matters concerning **P**.

Quick Take (QT) #1: It is important to keep in mind two things: (i) **A** is an authority and (ii) that **A** is an authority about **P**. In the example (above) involving Justin Bieber, he is probably an authority on popular music but not an authority on car insurance.

Critical Question (CQ) #1: How do we determine who is an expert on **P**?

(ii) there is a sufficient degree of agreement among authorities on matters concerning **P**

QT1: If **A** and **B** are both authorities and **A** says **P** and **B** says **not-P**, it cannot be the case that **P** and **not-P** are both true.

CQ1: Sufficient agreement is a **vague** matter. How do we determine whether there is sufficient agreement? Is 51% agreement a sufficient degree of agreement? How about 49% or 71%?

(iii) **A** does not have a significant bias concerning **P** and is not likely to lie about **P**.

QT1: Remember that **A** is offering expert testimony and not an argument. They are not asking you to evaluate a set of statements supporting a conclusion. Instead, you are being asked to believe **P** on the basis that **A** is a *reliable* source of knowledge. If **A** has a significant bias, then the reliability of this source is compromised.

- *Example:* see pp.147, American Council on Science and Health; Air Hygiene Foundation, Surgeon General C. Everett Koop

QT2: The testimony of any authority **A** is dubious if they are known to lie; if **A** claims **P**, then we ought to believe **P** only if we know that **A** believes **P**. But, if the **A** is a liar, then we don't know if **A** believes **P**.

CQ1: No one is completely objective and so the bias has to be significant enough to affect the reliability of the expert's testimony. But, what counts as *significant* bias?

(iv) **P** is about something that someone can have authority upon

QT1: There may be experts on how to make magical love potions. And, these experts may all agree that love potions provide an effective way to seduce someone. In addition, they may all honestly believe in the efficacy of love potions, but magic is not a real area of knowledge.

QT2: What counts as a real area of knowledge is a controversial issue, e.g. religious authorities.

(v) **A** is identified

QT1: You are being asked to believe **P** on the basis that **A** is a reliable source of knowledge, but if **A** is not identified, there is no way to know whether **A** exists, whether **A** is an expert, whether **A** has a bias, etc.

Example #1: Some expert I know says that fruit is bad for you.

Example #2: An insider source told me that Barack is getting ready to nuke Iran.

When you cannot appeal to an authority because there are no authorities about **P** or there is disagreement among the authorities about **P** or there is rampant bias among authorities or **P** is

not an issue that someone can have authority, then we cannot appeal to the testimony of authority to decide what to think about **P**. We must instead *look at arguments* for and against **P** and decide the matter that way.

4. Two Species of the Appealing to Authority Fallacy

The **fallacious appeal to popularity** occurs when an individual argues that **P** is true (or ought to be believed) on the basis that most people believe that **P**.

<i>Example #1 of the Fallacious Appeal to Popularity</i>	
1	Everyone is smoking these days.
2	Therefore, you should smoke.

The above argument treats *what everyone is doing* as authoritative about how individuals should live their lives. It reasons that if everyone is doing a behavior **b**, then you too should do behavior **b**.

<i>Example #2 of the Fallacious Appeal to Popularity</i>	
1	All eleven of us jurors firmly believe that the defendant is guilty.
2	Therefore, the defendant is guilty (you, the last unsure juror, should believe the defendant is guilty).

Classroom Discussion Question: In what contexts might an appeal to popularity be legitimate?

The **fallacious appeal to traditional wisdom** occurs when an individual argues that **P** is true (or ought to be believed) on the basis that people have traditionally believed that **P**.

<i>Example #1 of the Fallacious to Traditional Wisdom</i>	
1	Slavery has been around for ages.
2	Therefore, we should continue the practice of slavery.

In the above example, *what people have been doing for a long time* is regarded as authoritative for what people should do in the future. But, obviously, no one thinks we should reinstitute slavery.

Classroom Discussion Question: Why is an appeal to traditional wisdom fallacious? Is an appeal to traditional wisdom ever non-fallacious?

Homework Exercises

Ex.10-1 #1a, b, c, #2, #4, #5