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search contents

- Book Contents
- The Fallacies: Ac-An
- The Fallacies: Appeal To
- Appeal to Accomplishment
- Appeal to Anger
- Appeal to Authority
- Appeal to Celebrity
- Appeal to Closure
- Appeal to Coincidence
- Appeal to Common Belief
- Appeal to Common Folk
- Appeal to Common Sense
- Appeal to Complexity
- Appeal to Consequences
- Appeal to Definition
- Appeal to Desperation
- Appeal to Equality

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Appeal to Authority

argumentum ad verecundiam

(also known as: argument from authority, ipse dixit)

Description: Insisting that a claim is true simply because a valid authority or expert on the issue said it was true, without any other supporting evidence offered. Also see the appeal to false authority.

Logical Form:

According to person 1, who is an expert on the issue of Y, Y is true. Therefore, Y is true.

Example #1:

Richard Dawkins, an evolutionary biologist and perhaps the foremost expert in the field, says that evolution is true. Therefore, it's true.

Explanation: Richard Dawkins certainly knows about evolution, and he can confidently tell us that it is true, but that doesn't make it true. What makes it true is the preponderance of evidence for the theory.

Example #2:

How do I know the adult film industry is the third largest industry in the United States? Derek Shlongmiester, the adult film star of over 50 years, said it was. That's how I know.

Explanation: Shlongmiester may be an industry expert, as well as have a huge talent, but a claim such as the one made would require supporting evidence. For the record, the adult film industry may be large, but on a scale from 0 to 12 inches, it's only about a fraction of an inch.

- Appeal to Emotion
- Appeal to Extremes
- Appeal to Faith
- Appeal to False Authority
- Appeal to Fear
- Appeal to Flattery
- Appeal to Force
- Appeal to Heaven
- Appeal to Intuition
- Appeal to Nature
- Appeal to Normality
- Appeal to Novelty
- Appeal to Pity
- Appeal to Popularity
- Appeal to Possibility
- Appeal to Ridicule
- Appeal to Self-evident Truth
- Appeal to Spite
- Appeal to Stupidity
- Appeal to the Law
- Appeal to the Moon
- Appeal to Tradition
- Appeal to Trust

- The Fallacies: Ar–Co <
- The Fallacies: Co–Ex <
- The Fallacies: Fa–Hy <
- The Fallacies: Id–Mu <
- The Fallacies: Na–Ri <
- The Fallacies: Sc–Wi <

Exception: Be very careful not to confuse "deferring to an authority on the issue" with the *appeal to authority fallacy*. Remember, a fallacy is an **error in reasoning**. Dismissing the council of legitimate experts and authorities turns good skepticism into denialism. The *appeal to authority* is a fallacy in argumentation, but deferring to an authority is a reliable heuristic that we all use virtually every day on issues of relatively little importance. There is always a chance that any authority can be wrong, that's why the critical thinker accepts facts *provisionally*. **It is not at all unreasonable (or an error in reasoning) to accept information as provisionally true by credible authorities.** Of course, the reasonableness is moderated by the claim being made (i.e., how extraordinary, how important) and the authority (how credible, how relevant to the claim).

The *appeal to authority* is more about claims that require evidence than about facts. For example, if your tour guide told you that Vatican City was founded February 11, 1929, and you accept that information as true, you are not committing a fallacy (because it is not in the context of argumentation) nor are you being unreasonable.

Tip: Question authority -- or become the authority that people look to for answers.

References:

Hume, D. (2004). *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. Courier Corporation.

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Mike777

This question is mainly about consistency regarding Appeal to Authority since I've seen variations on it's definition. It mainly concerns people of faith appealing to their religious text. Example:

If 2 christian theologians are arguing about something related to the bible, then it should make sense to appeal to the bible (since the bible is the authority that both individuals use.) Both accept the premises of the bible and are using it in their debate. If it was used as evidence against someone who didn't believe, it could just be called begging the question, but under the context listed, would this be somehow fallacious?

Tuesday, March 05, 2019 - 05:18:24 AM

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Bo Bennett,
PhD

Hi Mike, it all depends on their claim. For example, if the claim is that "it says in the Bible..." then of course the Bible is the authority for that claim. In other words, to verify that claim with evidence, one could only look to the Bible to see if it does actually say what it was claimed to say. It is like playing a game of Monopoly and one person claiming "You go directly to jail if you roll doubles 3 times in a row... because this is what it says in the rule book." The rule book is authority of that matter, unless all parties have agreed to "house rules." A player could also question the established rules and elect to change them, but that does not matter to the initial claim. **The point is, the person who made the claim about going to jail because it is in the rules is NOT acting unreasonably (i.e., saying something fallacious).**

The problem is, many Christians really mean "it says in the Bible therefore it means...." Now the claim is one of interpretation and meaning. The correct response to this is "Yes, it does say that in the Bible, but I disagree with what you think it means." There is no authority on interpretation (thus the thousands of Christian denominations).

Another application of this fallacy is more along the lines you mention. When a Christian is using the Bible as evidence that what it says in the Bible is true (not THAT is says X, but that X is true). This is the Ultimate *Appeal to Authority* fallacy. It doesn't matter if a Christian is talking to another Christian or an atheist. In the case of two Christians, they are both accepting a premise on faith rather than evidence (i.e., "everything in the Bible is true"). Of course, there is also the problem of what kind of truths are being presented (literal, allegory, "spiritual", etc.).

Tuesday, March 05, 2019 - 06:22:02 AM

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Lars C

Is it an appeal to authority fallacy if someone argues that X is how the state of things should be because it says so in the law or in the constitution?

Saturday, June 02, 2018 - 10:12:20 AM

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4 replies

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Bo Bennett,
PhD

Saturday, June 02, 2018 - 10:14:44 AM

That certainly could be argued.
The real argument would be is if the Constitution is the legitimate authority on the state of things.

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Lars C

Saturday, June 02, 2018 - 10:55:53 AM

@Bo Bennett, PhD:

One example:

In paragraph 4 of the Norwegian constitution it says this about our kings:

"The king must always confess to/follow the evangelical-Lutheran religion"

So one could argue:

the king of Norway must follow the evangelical-lutheran religion (in other words be a Christian) because it says so in the constitution.

Wouldn't that be an appeal to authority fallacy?

I think it does. If I were king I would need a better reason than "it says so in a law book". What if I didn't want to follow the evangelical-lutheran religion? I can't be forced to a lutheran.

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Bo Bennett,
PhD

Saturday, June 02, 2018 - 11:38:19 AM

@Lars C: I don't know anything about Norwegian constitutional law, but it would seem to me that this is a pretty legitimate authority for this issue from what you wrote (so not fallacious). Is the Norwegian constitution a legitimate authority on the king's religion? Should it be? These are two good questions that need to be asked and debated.

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Bo Bennett,
PhD

Wednesday, February 27, 2019 - 07:25:55 AM

@jota: The fallacy is

"Insisting that a claim is true simply because a valid authority or expert on the issue said it was true, without any other supporting evidence offered." Lars asked if "the king of Norway must follow the evangelical-lutheran religion (in other words be a Christian) because it says so in the constitution" is fallacious. The Norwegian constitution is the ultimate authority of the law of the land, so this is not fallacious. There

is no greater external source to reference. This is not a question of SHOULD this be law it is a question of IS it law, and the answer is "yes" (true) because it is in their Constitution. There is no greater "evidence" one can obtain that would falsify this claim.

Let me stress again that one can argue all day long if this SHOULD be the law, but it is objectively true that it IS the law according to the most authoritative document in their law system (I assume since I am not a Norwegian lawyer). Claiming that something is law because it is clearly stated in their highest law document is not a fallacy.

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C. Loftus

Would it be considered appeal to authority if you referred to a consensus among multiple authorities?

Example:

Most experts in the field of Y agree that X is true, so X is true.

Saturday, September 29, 2018 - 02:57:36 PM

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Bo Bennett,
PhD

Yes. However, it would not be fallacious if the conclusion were slightly different:

Most experts in the field of Y agree that X is true, *so X it is reasonable to accept X as true.*

Of course, the expertise has to be properly established. For example, if most experts in Tarot card readings think the cards tell the future, it is NOT reasonable to accept it as true. Basically, expert opinion is (or should be) a shortcut for obtaining legitimate evidence. So the assumption is that the experts obtained their evidence for their expert opinion legitimately.

Saturday, September 29, 2018 - 03:33:04 PM

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Jeremiah

@Bo Bennett, PhD:
Hai sir,.
Is the appeal to authority is occurs when the argument quotes an expert who is not qualified in the particular subject matter....

Thursday, February 07, 2019 - 08:04:51 PM

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I have a friend that is a computer programmer. She states that since she deals in logic issues all day, and logic is her job, that there is no way

Friday, May 18, 2018 - 03:48:22 PM



Phil Wick

that she commits logical fallacies. Would that statement in itself be an appeal to authority?

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1 reply

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Bo Bennett,
PhD

Friday, May 18, 2018 - 05:37:56 PM

As one who programs an average of 5 hours a day for the last 25 years, I can confidently say that while understanding computer logic is helpful to real world logic, it certainly does not prohibit one from logical errors. But, no, that wouldn't be an appeal to authority; it would simply be a claim. Perhaps even a *non sequitur*.

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