

Chapter 28

The Appeal to Authority

Two ways in which inductive arguments differ from deductive arguments

This section is vital, but it will probably require some class discussion to get everyone clear on it. Practice may help, so try to reinforce the points made in this section as the students work through the exercises.

If you, the teacher, aren't feeling as though you've understood this section, you may find it helpful to read ahead a couple of chapters, noticing how different the 'feel' of inductive argument analysis is after doing all that analysis of deductive (Molecular) arguments.

Two kinds of authority

The point made in this section will probably seem obvious to you. Don't assume it will be grasped easily by your students. I have seen students have a lot of difficulty with it. I'm not sure why that is. I would have thought 'authority' would be about as hard for them as 'argument'. In both cases, we're taking a word that they use mostly in one sense and highlighting another sense, one in which they've certainly heard the word used, though infrequently. And we're insisting that in logic, we want to use the word in that less-used sense. I've seen very little difficulty with 'argument', but lots of difficulty with 'authority'. I would be interested in knowing whether other teachers experience the same thing.

The appeal to authority

You should be aware that there are a good many logic books out there that claim that the appeal to authority is itself a fallacy. This is complete nonsense. Most of what any one of us knows about anything is believed on the basis of appeals to authority. So if the appeal to authority is a fallacy, most of our beliefs are fallacious.

The belief that appeals to authority are always fallacious most commonly arises from a failure to distinguish between deductive and inductive reasoning. If deductive reasoning is the only kind of reasoning there is, then the appeal to authority is indeed a fallacy, for it can never give us the certainty that deduction requires. As long as it is understood that the appeal to authority can give us varying degrees of probability in our beliefs, then it doesn't have to be labelled a fallacy. (Note, however, that it is certainly possible to commit fallacies in appeals to authority—as we shall see.)

It seems to me that all these worries about induction, philosophically interesting as they may be, can be put into perspective by recalling the three ways of learning things that we covered in Chapter 1. One of those ways is by being told things—i.e., by accepting appeals to authority.

Our experience of living reasonably successfully in the world every day on the basis of such beliefs means that it must be taken as a given that such reasoning patterns as we've used to form our everyday beliefs are in some general way reliable.

But I digress.¹ Coming back to the teaching of this section, let me just say that all this picky stuff about assigning values to '⟨Person A⟩' and so on is vitally important if your students are to be able to understand the methods for assessing appeals to authority in the next section.

Assessing the cogency of the appeal to authority

This material is vital, but it probably won't sink in until the students have applied it a few times.

If you want more examples than just the exercises for class discussion, I would recommend getting students to bring in real-world examples. Appeals to authority are all over the place. Then you can critique the really juicy ones with your students. I find that students greatly enjoy this, and it has the added benefit of getting them interested in the larger world around them, something that can't happen fast enough with middle-school students. It also greatly raises their awareness of how dishonest a lot of advertising is, which is not a bad thing for young people living in the context of our consumer culture.

Exercises

1. **Put each of the following appeals to authority into explicit form, and then assess its cogency.**

Note that by 'assess its cogency', I mean go through the questions for assessing the cogency of inductive arguments, and note the points where the argument likely falls short. Because most of the examples are fictitious, I would discourage the students from focusing on those assessment questions that require a lot of research—it would be a frustrating thing to try to verify that a fictitious person actually said something, for example. You may want your students to write out who or what they assign to ⟨Person A⟩ and so on. I've not done that here.

- a) **As pop diva Angie Dits recently said, 'Like, face it, dudes, global warming is, like, totally scientifically established—to the max.'**

[Angie Dits, a pop diva, is a trustworthy authority on climatology.]

Angie says, [concerning climatology], that global warming is a scientifically established [fact].

[Therefore, global warming is a scientifically established fact.]

We aren't given any reason to suspect problems under Questions 1 and 2.

¹ As my wife would say, 'Yes, you *do* digress!' Which is true. But in this case, I only mean that I am digressing right here, right now.

This argument fails pretty miserably on Question 3. Granted, it's possible that Ms. Dits really is a qualified climatologist, but the argument doesn't tell us that. Instead, it seems to focus on her being a pop singer as her main qualification.

It's also possible that Ms. Dits is not trustworthy, which would surface under Question 4. A great many people in the entertainment industry seem to have been brainwashed in some way so that they accept and promote a certain set of political and social views rather unreflectingly. I.e., a great many of them are inveterate axe grinders.

Question 5 certainly raises problems, as there is a very real debate among climate experts on global warming.

We aren't given anything that would enable us to answer Question 6.

- b) God has told me that we should send all our money to Billy Swindell's TV ministry, so what are we waiting for?**

[God is a trustworthy authority on which religious organizations we should support.]

God says, [concerning which religious organizations we should support], that we should send money to Billy Swindell's TV ministry.

Therefore, we should [send money to Billy Swindell's TV ministry].

This argument would probably run into problems under Question 1. The speaker would have difficulty substantiating his claim that God has told him any such thing. (This is a general problem with claims of extra-biblical revelation, but it is made more acute in cases like this in which the alleged revelation from God has come via human agents, as it usually has in these 'giving all your money to ...' cases.)

Question 2 is irrelevant, in light of the problems with Question 1.

Question 3-6: God's credentials as a trustworthy authority are unimpeachable. Anyone who would disagree with him would be wrong. And we can't always understand his reasons. So no problems under any of these questions.

- c) Dr. Hacking-Coff, a research scientist with the Canadian-American Tobacco Corporation, has said that smoking cigarettes causes you to live longer than you otherwise would. So go ahead, light up!**

Dr. Hacking-Coff, a research scientist with the Canadian-American Tobacco Corporation, [is a trustworthy authority on the health effects of smoking.]

Dr. Hacking-Coff has said, [concerning the health effects of smoking], that

We have truncated the PDF version of this chapter in order to minimize the number of exercise solutions visible online. The chapter continues for several more pages and provides answers and commentary for the remainder of the Chapter 28 exercises.