

## IV

# Arguments from Authority

Often we must rely on others to find out and tell us what we cannot find out on our own. We cannot test every new consumer product for ourselves, for example; we cannot know firsthand what the trial of Socrates was like; most of us cannot judge from our own experience whether prisoners in other countries are mistreated. Instead we must argue in the following general way:

X (some person or organization who ought to know) says that Y.

Therefore, Y is true.

Arguments in this form are *arguments from authority*. For instance:

Human rights monitoring organizations say that some prisoners are mistreated in Mexico.

Therefore, some prisoners are mistreated in Mexico.

Relying on others, however, is sometimes a risky business. Consumer products are not always tested fairly, historical sources have their biases, and so may human rights monitoring organizations. Once again we must consider a checklist of requirements that any good arguments from authority must meet.

### (13) Sources should be cited

Factual assertions not otherwise defended may be supported by reference to the appropriate sources. Some factual assertions, of course, are so obvious that they do not need support at all. It is usually not necessary to *prove* that the population of the United States is more than 200 million, or that Juliet loved Romeo. However, a more precise figure for the current rate of population of the United States or, say, for the current rate of population growth, *does* need a citation. Likewise, the claim that Juliet was only fourteen should cite a few Shakespearean line in support.

Citation has two purposes. One is to help establish the reliability of the premise: remember rule 3. A person or organization is less likely to be misquoted if an exact reference is given: the author knows that readers can check. The other purpose of a citation is precisely to allow the reader or hearer to find the information on his or own. Citations should therefore include all the necessary information.

**NO:**

Human rights monitoring organizations say that some prisoners are mistreated in Mexico.

Therefore, some prisoners are mistreated in Mexico.

**Yes:**

Amnesty International reports in the January 1985 issue of *Amnesty International Newsletter* (volume XV, number 1, p. 6) that some prisoners are mistreated in Mexico. Therefore, some prisoners are mistreated in Mexico.

## (14) Are the sources informed?

Sources must be qualified to make the statements they make. The Census Bureau is entitled to make claims about the population of the United States. Auto mechanics are qualified to discuss the merits of different automobiles, doctors are qualified on matters of medicine, ecologists and earth scientists on the environmental effects of pollution, and so on. These sources are qualified because they have the appropriate background and information.

Where an authority's background or information are not immediately clear, an argument must explain them briefly. The argument cited in Section 13, for example must be expanded farther:

Amnesty International reports in the January 1985 issue of *Amnesty International Newsletter* (volume XV, number 1, p. 6) that some prisoners are mistreated in Mexico. Amnesty International reports having heard of police ill-treatment of suspects in the state of Sinaloa for several years, and the article cited above reports the testimony of one of them in detail. Jose Antonio Nunez Villareal was tortured by the police after being arrested on ordinary criminal charges, and since his release has required two major operations; doctors told him that he very nearly died.

An informed source need not fit our general stereotype of "an authority" –and a person who fits our stereotype of an authority may not even be an informed source.

### **NO:**

President Bernard of Topheavy College told parents and reporters today that classrooms at Topheavy promote lively and free exchange of ideas. Therefore, classrooms at Topheavy do indeed promote lively and free exchange of ideas.

The president of a college may know very little about what happens in its classrooms.

### **Yes:**

An accreditation committee's tabulation of all student course evaluations for the last three years at Topheavy College shows that only 5% of all students answered "Yes" when asked whether classes at Topheavy promoted lively and free exchange of ideas. Therefore, classes at Topheavy seldom promote lively and free exchange of ideas.

In this case, students are the most informed sources.

Also, authorities on one subject are not necessarily informed about every subject on which they offer opinions.

Einstein was a pacifist, therefore pacifism must be right.

Einstein's genius in physics does not establish him as a genius in political philosophy.

Sometimes, of course, we must rely on authorities whose knowledge is better than ours but still less than perfect. Countries that mistreat their prisoners, for example, usually try to hide that fact, so organizations like Amnesty International must sometimes rely on fragmentary information. If you must rely on an authority with incomplete information, but still better information than your own, acknowledge the problem. Often incomplete information is better than none at all.

Finally, beware of supposed authorities who claim to know what they could not possibly know. If a book claims to be written as if the author had been a fly on the wall of the most closely guarded room in the Pentagon,<sup>9</sup> you can reasonably guess that it is a book full of conjecture, gossip, rumors, and other untrustworthy information (Unless of course, the author really *was* a fly on the wall of the most closely guarded room in the Pentagon). Similarly, religious moralists have often declared that certain practices are wrong because they are contrary to the will of God. We should reply that God ought to be spoken for a little more cautiously. God's will is not easy to ascertain, and when God speaks so softly it is easy to confuse His will with our own peculiar prejudices.

### **(15) Are the sources impartial?**

People who have the most at stake in a dispute are usually not the best sources of information about the issues involved. Sometimes they may not even tell the truth. The person accused in a criminal trial is presumed innocent until proven guilty, but we seldom completely believe his or her claim to be innocent without some confirmation from impartial witnesses. But even a willingness to tell the truth as one sees it is not always enough. The truth as one honestly sees it is can still be biased. We tend to see what we expect to see: we notice, remember, and pass on information that supports our point of view, but we are not quite so motivated when the evidence points the other way.

Don't rely on the President, then, if the issue is the effectiveness of the Administration's policies. Don't rely on the government for the best information on the human rights situation in countries which the government happens to support or oppose. Don't rely on interest groups on *either* side of a major public question for the most accurate information on the issues at stake. Don't rely on a product's manufacturer for the best information concerning that product.

**NO:**

Epson claims that its FX-80 dot-matrix computer printer prints at a rate of 160 characters per second. Therefore, the Epson FX-80 dot-matrix computer printer does indeed print at about 160 characters per second.

Sources should be impartial. The best information on consumer products comes from the independent consumer magazines and testing agencies, because these agencies are unaffiliated with any manufacturer and must answer consumers who want the most accurate information they can get.

**Yes:**

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<sup>9</sup> Advertisement in the New York Times Book Review, 12/9/84, p. 3

*Consumer Reports* tested the Epson FX-80 dot-matrix computer printer and found that it prints at 19 characters per second. Therefore, the Epson FX-80 dot-matrix computer printer prints at about 19 characters per second.<sup>10</sup>

Independent service people and mechanics are relatively impartial sources of information. Amnesty International is an impartial source on the human rights situations in other countries because it is not trying to support or oppose any specific government. On political matters, so long as the disagreements are basically over statistics, look to independent government agencies, such as the Census Bureau, or a university studies or other independent sources. For handgun statistics, for example, look to the National Center for Crime Statistics, not to the National Rifle Association.

Make sure that the source is genuinely independent and not just an interest group masquerading under an independent-sounding name. Check their sources of funding; check their other publications; check the tone of the report or book which is quoted. At the very least, try to confirm for yourself any factual claim quoted from a potentially biased source. Good arguments cite their sources (rule 13); look them up. Make sure that the evidence is quoted correctly and not pulled out of context, and check for further information that might be relevant. You are then entitled to cite those sources yourself.

## (16) Cross-check sources

When experts disagree, you cannot rely on any of them. Before you quote any person or organization as an authority, you should check to make sure that other equally qualified and impartial people or organizations agree. One strength of Amnesty International's reports, for instance, is that they usually are corroborated by reports from other independent human rights monitoring organizations. (Again, they often *conflict* with the reports of governments, but governments are seldom so impartial.)

Authorities agree chiefly on specific factual questions. Whether or not a prisoner has been tortured is a specific factual issue, and it is often possible to verify. But as issues become larger and more intangible, it becomes harder to find authorities who agree. On many philosophical it is difficult to quote anyone as an uncontested expert. Aristotle disagreed with Plato, Hegel with Kant. You may be able to use their *arguments*, then, but no philosopher will be convinced if you merely quote another philosopher's conclusions.

## (17) Personal attacks do not disqualify a source

Supposed authorities may be disqualified if they are *not* informed, impartial, or largely in agreement. *Other* sorts of attacks on authorities are not legitimate. Ludwig von Mises describes a series of illegitimate attacks on the economist Ricardo:

In the eyes of the Marxians the Ricardian theory is spurious because Ricardo was a bourgeois. The German racists condemn the same theory because Ricardo was a Jew, and the German

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<sup>10</sup> This and the above information come from *Consumer Reports' 1984 Buying Guide Issue*, vol. 48, number 12 (Mount Vernon, New York: Consumers Union of the United States, December, 1983) p. 96.

nationalist because he was an Englishman... Some German professors advanced three arguments together against the validity of Ricardo's teaching.<sup>11</sup>

This is the "ad hominem" fallacy: attacking the *person* of an authority rather than his or her qualifications. Ricardo's class, religion, and nationality are irrelevant to the possible truth of his theories. To disqualify him as an authority, those "German professors" have to show that his evidence was incomplete –that is, they have to show that his judgements were not fully *informed*- or that he was not impartial, or that other equally reputable economist disagree with his findings. Otherwise, personal attacks only disqualify the *attacker*!

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<sup>11</sup> L. V. Mises, *Human Action* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), p. 75.