the art of argument

an introduction to the informal fallacies

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The Art of Argument

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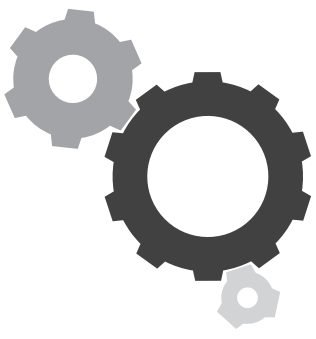


CHAPTER
1.1

What is Logic?

Introduction: Fight Fair!

How to make an argument without starting an "ARGUMENT"

As you may have guessed, this is a "How-To" book, but one of a rather special sort. Its goal is to introduce the reader to the art of arguing like a philosopher. Don't get turned-off by any ideas you have about how philosophers argue before a few terms are explained. First, here are some questions to answer:

What do you think of when you hear the word "logic?"

What comes to mind when you hear the word "argument?"

Perhaps the principal objection to a quarrel is that it interrupts an argument.

– G.K. Chesterton

What is meant by "**argue?**" The above subtitle is a deliberate play on two meanings of this word. In the most common, or "negative" sense, "having an argument" implies an emotional disagreement. This is not what is meant by how philosophers should argue. (Some of them have been known to slip-up, of course. As philosophers, however, they should know better.)

The Latin word ***argūtus*** means clear, bright, distinct or penetrating. The Latin noun ***argūmentum*** means evidence or proof. The Latin verb ***arguō*** means to prove or reveal. To the Latin mind an argument was not necessarily an emotional disagreement, it was an attempt to reveal what was true on the basis of evidence and reason.

CHAPTER
1.1

Philosophers are expected to argue in the "positive" sense. They try to convince others of their point of view by giving a reason, or reasons, to support it. Prosecutors act like philosophers when in a court case they seek to prove their case "beyond a reasonable doubt." When Peter says (I Peter 3:15) to always be ready to give an answer to anyone who asks you to give a reason for the hope that is in you, he is basically asking you to have an argument ready. This implies a need to support your beliefs (or conclusions) with reasons, or premises.[1]

In fact, learning how to present your views carefully through the use of logical arguments in the positive sense is a very important skill to learn if you want to avoid arguments in the negative sense.

Obviously, there is far more to it than this. Learning how to deal with differences of opinion in a way that minimizes unnecessary conflict involves many skills, especially skills in reading other people. The starting point, though, is learning to argue like a gentleman. After all, the same verse in I Peter cautions the reader to frame his arguments with "gentleness and respect."

If you wish to avoid emotional disagreements that are completely unnecessary, gentleness and respect are a good starting point. You must, however, be careful to follow the rules for arguing like a gentleman and a philosopher.

If you are sure your arguments are addressing the real issue in a relevant way (following the principle of **relevance**), others will be less likely to think you are trying to distract them from the main issue. They will not view your arguments as a personal affront to themselves (or others).

If your arguments do not contain unnecessary assumptions (following the principle of **presumption**), others probably won't think you are trying to trick them.

If your arguments contain clear language (following the principle of **clarity**), others will be less likely to misunderstand you.

Following these rules of informal logic means you are "fighting fair." Even your most intense rivals will respect you for that fairness; your disagreements will less likely become personal.

[1] Of course, some, like the NIV translators, seem to think that this passage should be translated with the definite article. Thus, it would read give "the reason for the hope that you have." Understood this way, the passage is instructing the reader to have an explanation ready, rather than to have an argument ready. This doesn't really change the need for critical thinking, however, since the same principles of relevance, clarity, and presumption apply equally to evaluating the merit of both arguments and explanations.

Review Exercises

A. ANSWER THE FOLLOWING:

1. What are the positive and negative senses of the word "argument?":

2. How do arguments sometimes violate the principle of relevance?:

3. How do arguments sometimes violate the principle of presumption?:

4. How do arguments sometimes violate the principle of clarity?:

CHAPTER 1.4

Dialogue 1.4: On Logic ... and Propaganda

Setting: Lobby at a college dormitory

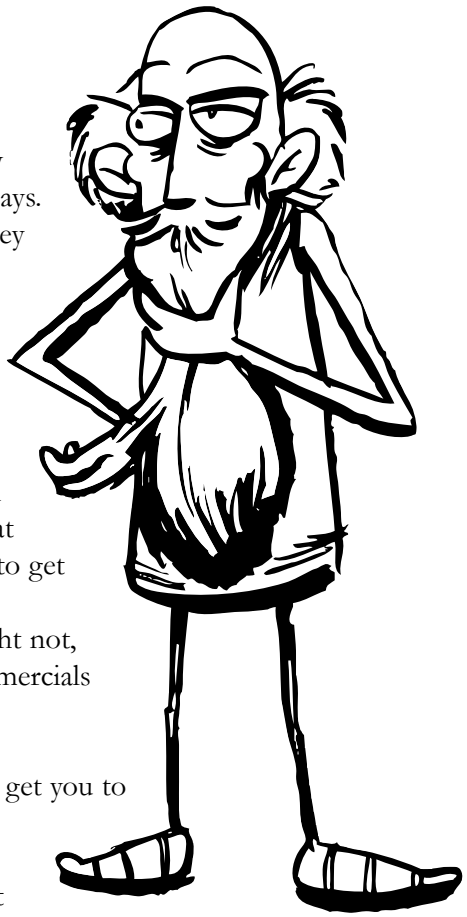
Socrates: Excuse me, would you mind my asking what you are doing?

Tiffany: I'm watching TV. Isn't that obvious?

Socrates: Not so obvious as you might think. Your eyes, and mind, appeared to be elsewhere for a moment.

Tiffany: Oh well, it was just a boring commercial. I was thinking about something else for a moment.

Socrates: On the contrary; I think that commercials make some of the most interesting watching on TV these days.



Tiffany: Really? Why would you say that?

Socrates: Well, to begin with, they're often much more funny and clever than the silly sitcoms that they air so much these days. But that's not my main reason. Mostly, I like them because they are so filled with propaganda.

Tiffany: Propaganda! Isn't that a bad thing? What is propaganda anyway and, why would you want to listen to it?

Socrates: Whoa, Whoa! One question at a time. I think that first I should answer the second question, in which you asked what **propaganda** is. In its most basic meaning, the sense that I am using it, it means any sort of technique that people use to get other
people to do or to believe something that they otherwise might not, usually to people that they don't really know personally. Commercials often use propaganda to get people to buy things.

Tiffany: So why would you want to listen to people trying to get you to buy things? Do you like shopping?

Socrates: Not really. You can see from my outfit that I'm not

exactly the height of fashion.

Tiffany: Yeah...I was just about to ask you about that. Where do you do your shopping, a Sears White sale? And don't you get cold in that get-up?

Socrates: Actually, I was often made fun of in my day for absent-mindedly forgetting my cloak. And I purchased this from the tailor back in my country.

Tiffany: What is your country? And what is your name, too, by the way?

Socrates: I am Socrates, and I am from Ancient Athens.

Tiffany: Sure, and I am Cleopatra, Queen of Denial.

Socrates: Pleased to meet you. Mind if I call you Cleo for short?

Tiffany: No, no; my name's not Cleo. It's Tiffany.

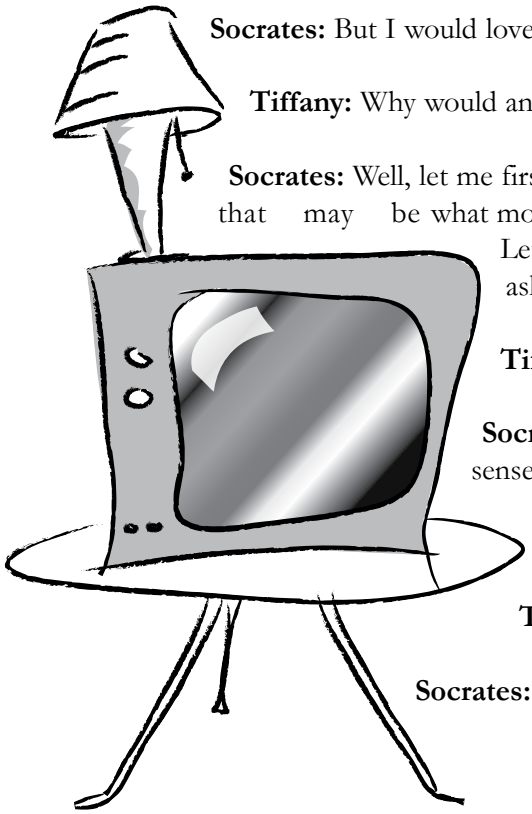
Socrates: Then why did you say your name was Cleopatra?

Tiffany: Because you said your name was Socrates...

Socrates: My name is Socrates.

Tiffany: Look, I don't want to argue with you...

Socrates: But I would love to argue with you...



Tiffany: Why would anyone like to argue?

Socrates: Well, let me first explain. By argue, I don't mean engage in petty squabbling. I think that may be what most people mean most of the time when they say the word "arguing". Let me turn the question to you. What would you do if someone asked you why you believe what you believe?

Tiffany: Well, I suppose that I would give them reasons.

Socrates: In that case you would be making an argument, at least in the sense that I mean it. I'm a philosopher and when we philosophers use the term "argue," we usually mean "to provide rational reasons for or against an idea or action."

Tiffany: So why would a philosopher like watching propaganda?

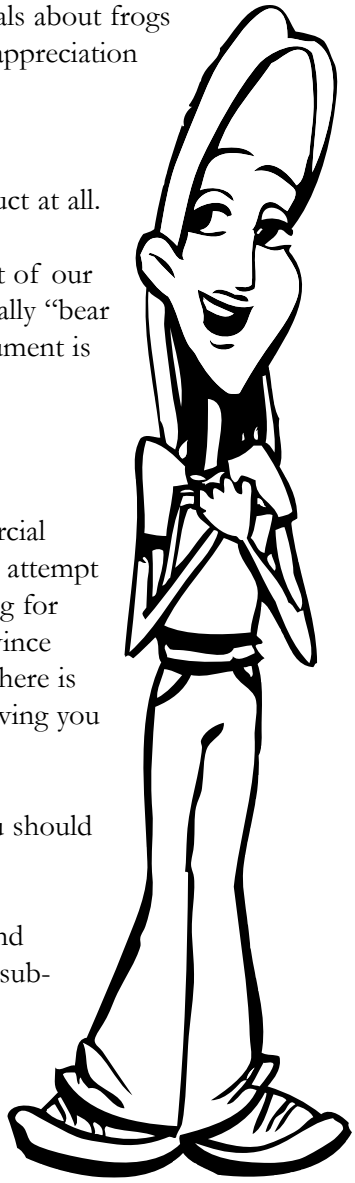
Socrates: Good question. We did get a bit off of the track there didn't we? I

like to watch propaganda, because it provides a good opportunity to evaluate arguments. You see, whenever someone tries to get you to do anything, they are trying to persuade. Usually, when someone is trying to persuade, they give reasons, and whenever they do, they are making an argument.

Tiffany: That's all that it takes to make an argument? You just have to give a reason for something?
Socrates: That's basically it. The reasons that you give are called the premises, and the thing for which you are giving the reasons is called the conclusion.

Tiffany: But... not all propaganda makes an argument. Take this one with the frogs and lizards that is trying to sell beer, for example. What kind of argument is it making?

Socrates: That is another good question. Here's an idea: Perhaps it is making an implied argument that goes something like this: "We make clever, funny commercials about frogs and lizards that entertain millions. You should buy our beer to show your appreciation for this
public service."



Tiffany: That doesn't have anything to do with whether it is a better product at all.

Socrates: You are absolutely right once again. This brings to mind the first of our three great principles of Critical Thinking: **Relevance**. Do the premises really "bear upon," or really provide some support for, the conclusion? If not, the argument is really just a distraction from the real issue.

Tiffany: Aren't you reading an awful lot into this commercial, though?

Socrates: Well, you're right. I was really only being facetious. That commercial might be better explained as a form of Non-Argumentative Persuasion, an attempt to convince you without making an open argument at all. That is something for which we need to be especially careful. After all, if someone wants to convince you to do something without giving you a single rational reason... Oh, but here is a perfect example of an irrelevant argument now. What reasons are they giving you to buy that soft drink?

Tiffany: Well, they seem to be saying that since Grant Hill likes Sprite, you should go and buy it as well.

Socrates: Exactly. That is called an argument from illegitimate authority, and since there is no good reason to accept the authority of Grant Hill on the subject of soft drink desirability, it commits a very important **fallacy**.

Tiffany: What, exactly, is a "fallacy?"

Socrates: A fallacy is a commonly recognized type of bad argument.

Tiffany: Commonly recognized by whom?

Socrates: Good point. Unfortunately, the study of logic isn't exactly at its highest ebb these days and these fallacies aren't as commonly recognized as they ought to be. I guess what I really mean by "commonly recognized" is that it is commonly recognized by those who have studied philosophy or logic.

Tiffany: So what type of fallacy does that commercial make?

Socrates: It's called the Appeal to Illegitimate Authority. It is one of many fallacies of relevance.

Tiffany: So that's why you like commercials. You like to analyze them.

Socrates: Absolutely. Every commercial contains an attempt at persuasion. In almost every case it will be one of three types: 1. a reasonable argument; 2. a bad type of argument, called a fallacy, or, perhaps worst of all; 3. an attempt to persuade without an argument, called non-argumentative **persuasion**.

Tiffany: Somehow, I thought that all of you philosopher types just sat around and asked dumb questions, like "how do I know that I really exist."

Socrates: Well, there are many things that I like to question, but my existence is not really one of them. Do you know how I generally respond to people who ask me how they can really know they exist?

Tiffany: How is that?

Socrates: I simply ask them, "Who wants to know?"

Tiffany: Well, that settles it for me.

Socrates: As it does for me. I must be off, but something tells me we will speak more later...

CHAPTER
4.9

Lesson 4.9 : Appeal to Illegitimate Authority (*Ad Verecundiam*)

DEFINITION: This appeal to emotion is an attempt to "shame" the listener into agreement by citing an illegitimate authority.

We live in a world where our knowledge base is so great that no one could ever achieve a level of expertise in every subject. As this is the case, it is almost inevitable that we rely on the knowledge of experts and specialists in many areas of our lives. As a result, a heavy reliance on the authority of those who know more than we do is essential. In fact, few things are more absurd than a "know-it-all" who refuses to accept the advice and counsel of those who have greater knowledge and experience. At the same time, however, we must be careful, and even skeptical in deciding which authority we ought to accept.

All too frequently we are asked to accept the opinions of someone who, while an accepted authority in one field, has no special expertise in the one in question. Often this is done less to lend us the wisdom of those with genuine expertise, but rather to cow us into accepting an opinion because of the stature or fame of the supposed authority. Though we allegedly live in a society which is actively trying to do away with such a sense of authority, it seems that such appeals are growing more and more frequent. How often today do we see examples of movie stars and musicians, who obviously have no more expertise than the average person, being sought after submissively for their opinions on social, cultural and political issues? While we ought to carefully examine the economic views of the famous economist John Maynard Keynes there is no good reason why we should give serious attention to the economic opinions of Cher.

Four Appeals to Illegitimate Authority

1. Suggesting we accept the opinions of one who has no expertise in the field to which he is speaking.

2. Suggesting we accept the opinion of a biased authority.

3. Suggesting we accept the opinions of an unnamed "expert," by relying on information second hand.

4. Suggesting we accept the opinions of an individual who transfers his celebrity or expertise from one area to another unrelated area. (Typically seen in advertising.)

Such appeals generally seek to cow opponents into accepting a point of view against their better judgment. In fact, the Latin name for this fallacy, given by John Locke, comes from the term "*verecundium*," which refers to our sense of shame or modesty. This term emphasizes how we may be "browbeaten into accepting an erroneous conclusion because we are ashamed to dispute the supposed authority" (Engel, 220). Who wants to disagree with Michael Jordan?

An appeal to the authority of one specific "expert" is the most common form of this fallacy. It must be remembered that such an appeal is not fallacious if the expert really does have the necessary training and background in the field in question. It also helps if the expert shows no obvious bias and does not imply that his opinion makes for a complete proof. The appeal to an authority can be good evidence, but it is almost never complete proof. Thus, if it should turn out that the authority was wrong, that does not prove that the appeal was fallacious, only that no one is perfect. The most common cases when it is obviously fallacious are those when the expert is biased, when the source is unnamed, and when there is an attempt to transfer authority from one realm to another. A great example of the first case would be a situation like that described in T.E. Damer's *Attacking Faulty Reasoning*:

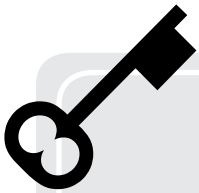
> Senator, if you think that the FBI has been engaging in illegal activities, why don't we get the director and his staff over here at this hearing and get to the bottom of this thing? Who would be in a better position to testify about FBI operations than the Director and the division heads? (Damer, 123)

In such a case, the senators might indeed want to speak to the Director, but they ought to do so with a healthy skepticism, because it would definitely not be in the Director's best interest to reveal anything that would reflect poorly on his management. Of course, this would be even more true if signs indicate his complicity in whatever is being investigated. Thus, his "authority" on FBI operations should not be accepted without question in such a case.

Someone may ask why asserting that a speaker is biased is not itself an *ad hominem* circumstantial fallacy. The answer is that, in the specific case of an appeal to authority, the circumstances of the speaker or expert can be very important. If we are asked to accept an argument that rests on undisputed data presented by an unbiased authority, then the circumstances of that authority are not very important. If, however, we are being asked to accept a point of view specifically because of some special expertise on the part of an authority, it becomes crucial that we can verify (to the best of our abilities) that the speaker is reasonably unbiased.

The second type of case is extremely common in the contemporary news media today. Newspapers and magazines are filled with "unnamed sources" and "unidentified spokespersons." While we may understand the dilemma of journalists who need "sources" for the credibility of their stories and their sources will only provide information on the condition of anonymity, we still have to treat these sources with heavy skepticism because we know nothing about them.

Finally, we've already mentioned the issue of a "transfer" of expertise from one field to another. Perhaps one of the most common abuses of this approach is the widespread use of celebrity "testimonials" for every product under the sun. Sometimes there is little or no connection between the product and what it is that made the celebrity famous. For example, it is not really Michael Jordan's cologne that makes him adored by millions. Sometimes, there may be at least some connection between the celebrity and his testimonial, such as when an athlete like Jordan endorses a particular shoe that he actually wears. After all, he probably has the clout to get them modified to suit his specifications, and he probably knows his shoes pretty well. Wouldn't you, however, rather accept the word of an exercise physiologist?



Ad Verecundiam/Appeal to Illegitimate Authority

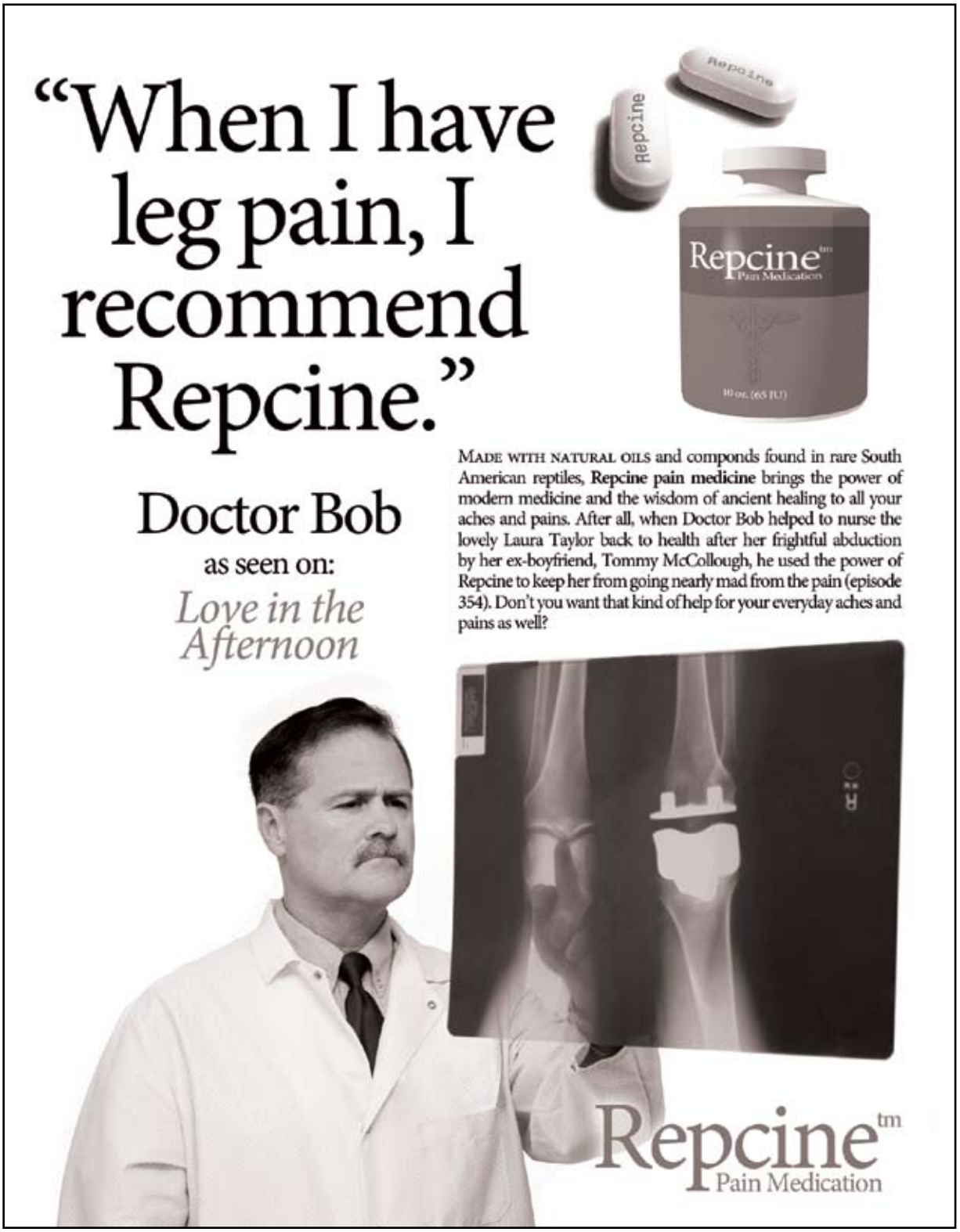
Genus: An argument that avoids the issue by appealing to the listener's emotions.
Difference: This type of argument plays on the listener's sense of shame by appealing to an illegitimate authority.

Appeal to Illegitimate Authority

FALLACIES OF RELEVANCE | Arguments that are really distractions from the main point.

Appeals to Emotion | Arguments that distract by arousing our emotions too much.

Appeal to Illegitimate Authority *(Ad Verecundiam)* | Arguments that distract by attempting to shame the listener into agreement by citing an illegitimate authority.



CHAPTER
4.9

Appeal to Illegitimate Authority

CHAPTER 4.10

Dialectic Exercise 4.10
Appeal to Illegitimate Authority

Socrates: Hello again young philosophers! Let's listen in on a news broadcast. Then explain if the authority is misconstrued.

> **Tom Brocaw:** Now, let's head to the White House where our Chief Political Correspondent, Claire Shipman, is standing by with some new details about the Enron scandal. Claire.
>
> **Claire Shipman:** Thank you Tom. Today, new allegations about a cover-up have the White House staffers scrambling for information. Several top executives at Enron have leaked information suggesting the Vice President was aware of the impending Enron collapse as early as November, 2001. One of the Vice President's top advisors, Mary Matalin, is denying that the Vice President knew about the unfolding disaster. She went on to say that he was just as shocked to learn about Enron's financial woes as the rest of the country. Back to you, Tom.

Socrates: Ahh, political scandals. Where would logic teachers and philosophers be without the never-ending supply of political scandals for examples and discussion?

Oh, yes! You're waiting for my analysis of the news report. Well, in this case, there is a possible abuse of authority.

Let's look at those unnamed Enron executives. It's important to note that the top Enron executives have already taken quite a bit of heat for the collapse of their company. In fact, most of them have been called to testify before the United States Congress about the disaster which cost hundreds of Enron employees millions of dollars in life savings and investments while they walked away with millions of dollars for themselves.

So, these unnamed Enron executives would probably like to share the spotlight a little bit. And, who better to take the focus off of them, than the Vice President? Still, we can't jump to those conclusions without evidence. But it's just as difficult to believe the unnamed Enron source without knowing who he is, how he knows this information, and what his role was in the company.

In these types of situations, patience and a healthy dose of skepticism is probably a good idea.

Review Exercises

1. Scan the newspaper or news magazines for examples of "unnamed sources" who are cited as authorities. Find an example that you think justifies a "healthy dose of skepticism" and explain why.

2. Look for examples of print advertisements that make use of the *argumentum ad verecundiam.*

3. Can you think of any T.V. commercials that make use of this fallacy?