

CONTROVERSIAL
DEBATE
STRATEGIES

—LESSON TWO—

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This lesson will focus on the specific types of fallacies you might see in **arguments regarding credibility**. Not surprisingly, people give their closest attention to rhetors whom they most respect or trust. As such, a rhetor wants to present her or himself as honest, well-informed, likable, or sympathetic in some way.

But, in terms of establishing credibility, “trust me” isn’t always the most valid warrant. Not all devices used to gain the confidence of others are admirable.

APPEALS TO FALSE AUTHORITY

One of the effective strategies a rhetor can use to support an idea is to draw on the authority of widely-respected people, institutions, and texts. In fact, many academic research papers are essentially exercises in finding and reflecting on the work of reputable sources and authorities. Rhetors usually introduce these authorities into their arguments through direct quotations, citations, or allusions. **False authority**, however, occurs chiefly when debaters offer themselves—or other authorities they cite—as sufficiently trustworthy enough for believing a claim.

Claim: “X” is true because I say so.
Conclusion: What I say must be true.

Claim: “X” is true because source “Y” says so.
Conclusion: What “Y” says must be true.

Rarely will you see authority asserted quite so baldly as in the examples above. Few people would accept a claim stated in either of these situations. Nonetheless, claims of authority drive many persuasive situations. American pundits and politicians, for example, are fond of citing the U.S. Constitution or the Bill of Rights as “ultimate authorities”—a reasonable practice when the documents are interpreted respectfully. However, as often as not, the constitutional rights claimed are not actually in the texts themselves, or do not mean what the speakers think they do. And most constitutional matters are quite debatable—as centuries of court records could prove.

Likewise, religious believers often base arguments on books or traditions that wield great authority within a particular religious community. However, the power of these texts or ways of thinking is somewhat limited outside that group and, hence, less capable of persuading others solely on the grounds of authority alone—through arguments of faith often have power on other grounds.

Institutions can be cited as authorities, too. Certainly, serious attention should be paid to claims supported by authorities one respects or recognizes—the Centers for Disease Control, for example, or the National Science Authority; the *New York Times* or the *Wall Street Journal*; and so on. But one ought not accept information or opinions simply because they have “status” To quote a famous proverb: “Trust... but verify...”

He's one of the busiest men in town. While his door may say *Office Hours 2 to 4*, he's actually on call 24 hours a day.

The doctor is a scientist, a diplomat, and a friendly sympathetic human being all in one, no matter how long and hard his schedule.



According to a recent Nationwide survey:

MORE DOCTORS SMOKE CAMELS THAN ANY OTHER CIGARETTE

DOCTORS in every branch of medicine—113,597 in all—were queried in this nationwide study of cigarette preference. Three leading research organizations made the survey. The gist of the query was—What cigarette do you smoke, Doctor?

The brand named most was Camell!

The rich, full flavor and cool mildness of Camel's superb blend of costlier tobaccos seem to have the same appeal to the smoking tastes of doctors as to millions of other smokers. If you are a Camel smoker, this preference among doctors will hardly surprise you. If you're not—well, try Camels now.



Your "T-Zone" Will Tell You...



T for Taste . . .
T for Throat . . .
 that's your proving ground for any cigarette. See if Camels don't suit your "T-Zone" to a "T."

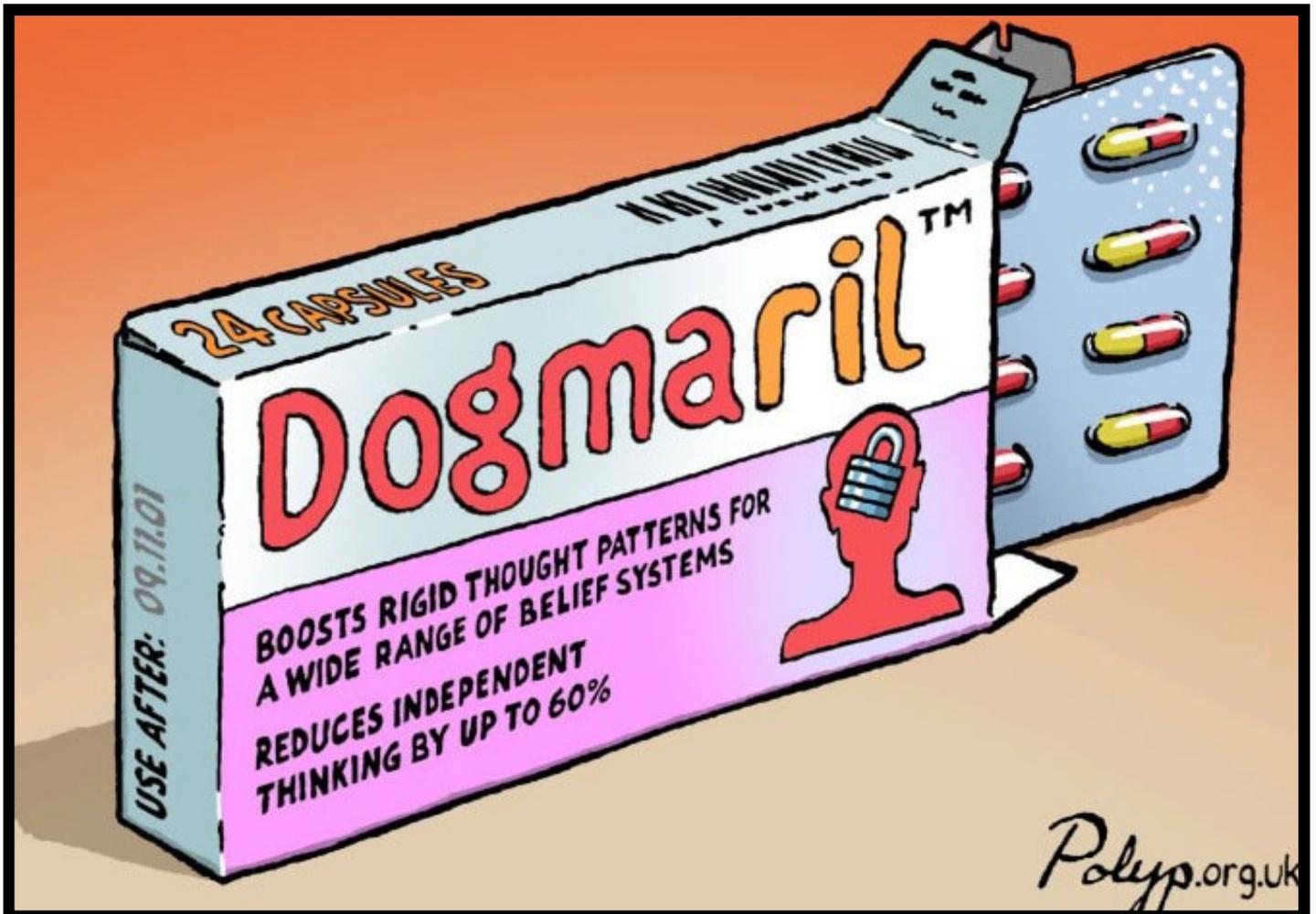
R. J. REYNOLDS Tobacco Company, Winston-Salem, N. C.

CAMELS *Costlier Tobaccos*

DOGMATISM

Dogmatism is a way of thinking that is stubborn and narrow-minded, often because of prejudice and bigotry. This word has nothing to do with dogs. Rather, it has to do with being *dogmatic*: holding onto a view or set of views no matter what.

A rhetor who attempts to persuade by asserting or assuming that a particular position is the *single* conceivably-acceptable one within a situation is trying to enforce dogmatism. Indeed, dogmatism is a fallacy of character because the tactic undermines the trust that must exist between those making arguments and those to whom they make them. In effect, people who speak or write dogmatically imply that there are no arguments to be made; that, in fact, the truth is self-evident to those who know better. You can usually be sure you're listening to a dogmatic opinion when someone begins a sentence like this: "No *rational* person would disagree," or "It's clear to anyone who has thought about it that..."



MORAL EQUIVALENCE

A fallacy of argument perhaps most common today than in earlier decades is **moral equivalence**—that is, suggesting that serious wrongdoings do not differ from minor offenses. A warning sign that this is a fallacy may be coming into play is the retort of the politician accused of wrongdoing: “But everyone else does it too!”

In short, a moral equivalence fallacy occurs when a rhetor raises relatively innocuous activities or situations to the level of major crimes or catastrophes. Some would say that the national campaign against smoking falls into this category. Smoking, a common and legally sanctioned behavior, is often given the social stigma of being as serious as drug abuse. And if smoking is almost criminal, should one be equally concerned with people who abuse chocolate—a sweet and fatty food responsible for a host of health problems? You can see how easy it is to make an equivalence argument. Yet suggesting that *all* behaviors in a particular kind—in this case, abuse of substances—are equally wrong (whether they involve cigarettes, alcohol, drugs, or fatty foods) blurs the distinctions people need to make in weighing debatable claims.

AD HOMINEM ARGUMENTS

Ad hominem (from the Latin for “to the man”) arguments are attacks directed at the character of a person rather than at the claims he or she makes. The theory is simple: Destroy the credibility of your opponents, and either you destroy their ability to present reasonable appeals, or you distract from the successful arguments they may be offering.

In such cases, *ad hominem* tactics turn arguments into two-sided affairs with “good guys” and “bad guys.” This oversimplification is unfortunate, since character often does matter in an argument. People expect the proponent of peace to be civil; the advocate of ecology to respect the environment; the champion of justice to be fair, even in private dealings. But it’s fallacious to attack an idea by uncovering the foibles of its advocates, or by attacking their motives, backgrounds, or unchangeable traits.