Fallacies: ad Verecundiam and ad Populum

I. Lesson

"That some deductions are genuine, while others seem to be so but are not, is evident."
-Aristotle, *Sophistical Refutations* (W.A. Pickard-Cambridge, 1984)

There are many tactics that people use to make deductions. As Aristotle suggests in the quote above, not all of these tactics yield deductions. In the lesson about affirming the antecedent and denying the consequent, we learned that false deductions are the result of various kinds of fallacious reasoning. Today we'll introduce two new kinds of fallacious reasoning: the ***ad verecundiam*** fallacy and the ***ad populum*** fallacy.

- ***Ad verecundiam***: an argumentative fallacy in which a person tries to convince you of a position by claiming either that they themselves, or that some other relevant individual, holds that position

On a strict reading, this kind of argumentative pattern is *always* formally fallacious because the truth of a position about a given issue cannot be *deduced* simply from the fact that someone holds that position, no matter how qualified that person is. However, the more common (looser) approach is to view this type of argument as truly fallacious only when the individual lacks the proper authority to support the claim in question, or when the wider pool of authorities actually have mixed opinions on the matter.

[Activity]: Discuss why some position on an issue (e.g., that all dogs are brown) cannot be deduced from the fact that someone believes that position to be true, no matter how much of an expert that person is on the topic.

- ***Ad populum***: an argumentative fallacy in which a person tries to convince you of a position by claiming that the position is widely believed or common knowledge

As with the *ad verecundiam* fallacy, the *ad populum* fallacy also involves an appeal to authority. But in this case, the appeal is to the authority of a larger group (rather than a single individual).

On a strict reading, this latter kind of argumentative pattern is *always* fallacious because it wrongly presumes that widespread acceptance is compelling evidence for the truth of a given proposition. On a looser reading, this type of argumentation becomes truly fallacious only when the group being appealed to lacks authority with respect to the topic in question.

*For the purposes of this lesson, we will adopt the looser understanding of both the *ad verecundiam* and *ad populum* fallacies. This means that, in determining whether a given argument is an instance of either of these fallacies, you will need to consider whether the authority being appealed to is truly a source of authority on the topic in question.

II. Examples

Ad verecundiam:

1. "Albert Einstein slept for 10 hours a night, so you should sleep 10 hours a night too ."

   This is an instance of the *ad verecundiam* fallacy because Einstein is a source of authority in physics, not in how much one should sleep every night. Einstein's beliefs on this matter hold no more weight than those of any other person who is not a physician. It could be true that you should sleep 10 hours a night, but remember that a fallacious argument can have a true conclusion by *luck.*

2. "Oprah says that we shouldn't eat after 6 PM, so we should make sure to stop eating at night."

   As with the example above, this statement is an instance of the *ad verecundiam* fallacy because the purported authority lacks expertise with respect to the matter in question. Although Oprah may know a great deal about philanthropy, public speaking, and TV production (as well as an impressive variety of other subjects), she is not an expert in dietetics. We therefore have no compelling reason to make dietary decisions on the basis of Oprah's assertions.

3. "My doctor says I shouldn't worry about taking too many painkillers, so I definitely ought to take them whenever I even just have a bit of a backache."

   This example is a bit different. Although a doctor is (generally) considered to be a proper source of authority with respect to something like medication, when it comes to painkillers, there is no widespread medical consensus on the appropriate quantity for patients to take. The fallacy here arises from a lack of expert consensus with respect to the matter in question.

Ad populum:

1. "All our friends support that candidate, so we should vote for him as well."

   This is an example of the *ad populum* fallacy because the implication is that one ought to make political decisions on the basis of what one's friends do. However, in the vast majority of cases, a person's friends will not have any special political knowledge that makes their choices a special model to be followed.

2. "Nobody else around here wears a mask just to go outside, so we don't need to wear one either."

As above, what the people "around here" are doing should not be the determining factor in what one decides to do when it comes to a public health decision such as wearing a mask. If there is any popular authority that can properly be appealed to in making this kind of decision, it is only that of public health experts.

3. "Lying can't possibly be morally wrong, because everybody does it."

Although the group being appealed to here is "everybody" (and you may initially presume that within this group there is at least *somebody* who has the proper authority to determine moral codes), this is still an instance of the *ad populum* fallacy because moral codes exist independently of what people do. Moral codes are an ideal to aspire to, not what occurs in practice, so the practices that "everybody" adheres to are not relevant in this instance.

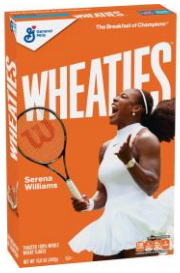
III. Exercises

Exercise 1

Explain the key commonality and difference between the *ad verecundiam* fallacy and the *ad populum* fallacy.

Exercise 2

Briefly describe the logical structure underlying each of the following scenarios. Then determine whether they are examples of the *ad verecundiam* fallacy, the *ad populum* fallacy, or neither.



eg. Suppose that Wheaties' ™ attempt to market its cereal by putting a picture of tennis champion Serena Williams on the box is to convey that if Serena Williams eats this cereal, then you should too.

The underlying logic is that if Serena Williams eats this cereal, then everyone should. This is an example of the *ad verecundiam* fallacy because Serena Williams lacks the proper expertise to be informing us about our cereal decisions (she's an athlete, not a dietician).

i. A magazine article argues that global warming is certainly a hoax, since one environmental scientist who has been studying climate change for a decade says so.

ii. A man decides that it's unquestionably best to sear the hunk of steak he's barbecuing because he remembers having heard somewhere that most people agree that searing meat seals in its moisture.

iii. The president of a country contradicts leading economists about important saving recommendations, and the citizens of that country listen to the president (as they always do) rather than the economists simply because of the fact that she is the president.

iv. A child listens to his mother when she explains that the reason he must do his chores is "because I say so."

v. At a dinner party, someone casually says, "this famous study I read shows that several common household cleaners are actually carcinogenic. Therefore, they certainly are."

vi. The creators of the SAT recommend that students take at least one practice test prior to the actual exam, and students therefore decide to take a practice test.

Exercise 1

Challenge: construct your own example of an *ad verecundiam* fallacy and an *ad populum* fallacy.

V. Conclusion

Although Aristotle himself didn't explicitly discuss the *ad vericandum* and *ad populum* fallacies, the examples and exercises throughout this lesson have shown just how prevalent these fallacies are in our everyday lives. Now that you've seen some of the different ways that these fallacies can show up, and what exactly is wrong with the patterns of reasoning they involve, you'll be better equipped to respond in situations where people try to make arguments of these sorts.

VI. Lesson Goals

At the end of this lesson, students will be able to:

- Understand and distinguish between the loose and strict conception of the *ad verecundiam* fallacy
- Understand and distinguish between the loose and strict conception of the *ad populum* fallacy
- Be able to note the key commonality and differences across the two aforementioned types of fallacies
- Determine whether specific debates or patterns of reasoning are examples of the *ad verecundiam* fallacy, the *ad populum* fallacy, or neither

- Create their own examples of both types of fallacies

Answer Key:

Exercise 1

The *ad verecundiam* fallacy and the *ad populum* fallacy both involve an improper appeal to authority. However, the authority in the former case is that of a particular individual. The authority in the latter case is that of a larger group.

Exercise 2

i. A magazine article argues that global warming is certainly a hoax, since one environmental scientist who has been studying climate change for a decade says so.

The underlying logic is that the testimony of that particular environmental scientist warrants the conclusion that global warming is a hoax. This is an example of the *ad verecundiam* fallacy because, even if that particular scientist is in fact a reputable source, there are many other equally reputable scientists who believe precisely the opposite of what that scientist believes. One cannot therefore conclude that "global warming is *certainly* a hoax" from this particular testimony.

ii. A man decides that it's unquestionably best to sear the hunk of steak he's barbecuing because he remembers having heard somewhere that most people agree that searing meat seals in its moisture.

The underlying logic is that the common consensus about searing meat sealing in its moisture means that this act unquestionably has the purported effect. This is an example of the *ad populum* fallacy because, even if most people believe that sealing meat seals in its moisture, and this might be *evidence* that this is in fact the case, one cannot conclude on this evidence that it is unquestionably the case (after all, most people are neither chefs nor food scientists, and in fact, searing meat actually causes it to *lose* its moisture more rapidly).

iii. The president of a country contradicts leading economists about important saving recommendations, and the citizens of that country listen to the president (as they always do) rather than the economists simply because of the fact that she is the president.

The underlying logic is that we should follow the leadership of the president in all matters, even when it contradicts that of other prominent experts who have more technical expertise with respect to the topic in question. This is an example of the *ad verecundiam* fallacy because, even if the president's advice should be adhered to in the absence of significant and compelling arguments to the contrary, when these arguments *are* present, they should not simply be ignored in favor of the advice of a figure who knows less about the subject in question (no matter how prominent that figure may be).

iv. A child listens to his mother when she explains that the reason he must do his chores is "because I say so."

The underlying logic is that the mother's authority as a parent justifies her in telling her child how to behave within the household. On the loose understanding of the *ad vericandum* and *ad populum* fallacies under which we're operating, this example is not an instance of either fallacy, because the mother's parental authority arguably *is* appropriate to make this claim in this particular context.

v. At a dinner party, someone casually says, "this famous study I read shows that several common household cleaners are actually carcinogenic. Therefore, they certainly are."

The underlying logic is that the study *itself* should lead us to believe that common household cleaners are carcinogenic. This is an example of the *ad verecundiam* fallacy because a piece of research in and of itself cannot be the source of authority for a given claim--the authority instead derives from the individuals who conducted that research.

vi. The creators of the SAT recommend that students take at least one practice test prior to the actual exam, and students therefore decide to take a practice test.

The underlying logic is that the recommendations of the SAT creators should be adhered to in preparing for the SAT exam. On the loose understanding of the *ad vericandum* and *ad populum* fallacies under which we're operating, this example is not an instance of either fallacy, because the SAT makers' authority *is* appropriate in this particular context.

Exercise 3

Answers will vary, but the *ad verecundiam* examples should involve a single individual whose authority is inappropriate in relation to the given claim, and the *ad verecundiam* examples should involve a larger group whose authority is also inappropriate in relation to the given claim.