Wise Men Can Be Wrong

Fallacy Number Seven

A FAMOUS New Yorker cartoon shows a well-upholstered lady at breakfast in her Park Avenue apartment, opening the morning paper. “I never know what to think,” she is saying, “until I’ve read Walter Lippmann.” Mr. Lippmann can help to steady anyone’s thoughts about China or France or Senate investigations, but he should not be made responsible for the whole job.

So great was the reverence for the name of Aristotle that a medieval scholar could win almost any argument by citing a text which indicated that the philosopher agreed with him. The loser in these tournaments must have been considerably annoyed, and one might hazard the guess that the fallacy known as *ad verecundiam* was discovered then and there. As late as 1600, students at the Sorbonne were commanded to follow the texts of Aristotle or suffer dreadful penalties.

*Ad verecundiam* means “appeal to revered authority.” It is listed among the classic fallacies and its simplicity is deceptive. Quoting authorities is of course entirely legitimate, and only when pushed too far, when the Big Name freezes mental activity, does it become a fallacy. It is not so much that one

\[\text{AD VERECUNDIAM}\]

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1 Abelard referred to him as “our saint Aristotle.”
thinks wrongly, as that one ceases to think at all. The appeal is often to great figures (or documents) of the past, which have become symbols, stirring emotion rather than reason.

Authorities are of various kinds: Great Men, Great Books, great anonymous sayings immortalized in folklore, the practice known as “footnoting,” and lately, “science says” and “statistics prove.” In this chapter I will assemble cases dealing with Great Men, and with “footnoting.” In the next chapter I will illustrate bogus appeals to the authority of “science” and “statistics.”

“It says so in the Bible” is an old but continuing example of *ad verecundiam*. So is an appeal to the dictionary. David Guralnik, who engineered a drastic revision of Webster, once shocked an audience and shattered its faith in the dictionary’s infallibility. Unlike certain brands of cigarettes, he said, supposed to be untouched by human hands, dictionaries are made by men, and the best of them contain mistakes.

Most American investors looked up to those bankers and financial wizards who convinced us, just before the crash of 1929, that the stock market had entered a new and permanent level of values. We trusted those wise men, and did not stop to analyze the ever more fantastic ratio of earnings to market prices.

Appeal to authority is very ancient, personified in the medicine man of the tribe. Its power over an individual begins early: “my daddy said so.” A little later comes “my teacher said so,” and “the minister said so.” A sign used to be posted in British schools: “The teacher could be wrong. Think for yourselves.” It illustrates as good a defense against *ad verecundiam* as anything I know.

We need to be on guard also against an authority which may be correct as far as it goes, but does not apply to the issue. It is not very helpful, for instance, to try to apply what

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2 William Tell can’t avoid this note. Certain movements in our time are fond of giving such-and-such a definition to a term and saying that it is “the common, ordinarily accepted meaning” of the term — when it’s just plain not. Beware.
Caesar said about the use of foot soldiers to a military problem involving atomic weapons. Morris Cohen discriminates carefully between two kinds of appeal to authority:

First: An appeal which is inevitable and reasonable. If we lack the time or energy to go into a matter thoroughly, we let an expert resolve it for us. But his authority should be only relative, not final; we should always reserve the right to check what he hands down.

Second: An appeal which invests some source with infallibility, very common in matters involving religion and moral conduct, and frequent in political and economic matters as well.

For some people Adam Smith or Karl Marx is as infallible as Aristotle used to be. Hitler looked to the stars for his authority and wrote *Mein Kampf*. Millions of Germans, frustrated by their troubles following World War I, looked to der Fuehrer as an infallible guide, and read *Mein Kampf* almost as a sacred text. The infallible guide led them into one of the greatest disasters which ever befell a nation.

TROUBLE FOR COLUMBUS

Columbus apparently went to his grave believing that the islands he had discovered in the Caribbean were the East Indies and that Cuba was an Asian peninsula. The belief is still recorded in the name West *Indies*. He had various reasons for his belief, all wrong, and one of the strongest was reliance on scriptural authority.\(^3\) In the second part of the Apocryphal Book of Ezra, the second verse of the sixth chapter reads: “Six parts hast Thou made dry.” This was taken to mean that the world was six parts dry land to one part water.\(^4\) Asia was known to be a huge continent, and there could not be a great

\(^3\) From J. G. Leithauser, *Worlds Beyond the Horizon*, 1955.

\(^4\) The true ratio is substantially the reverse of this.
deal of water between Europe and Asia. Even the voyage from Spain to the Caribbean, Columbus felt, was longer than the Book of Ezra allowed. When he sighted land, accordingly, he was sure it must be Asia. Ezra, as a supplement to the Bible, is not much referred to today, but it was gospel to thinkers in the fifteenth century.

C. S. Forester, in his historical novel *To the Indies*, gives us another case of *ad verecundiam* based on Columbus. In his third voyage a Spanish lawyer named Don Narciso Rich has been assigned by the Crown to keep an eye on the Admiral’s discoveries. Forester brings out the dramatic conflict in Columbus’ mind, between the authority of the ancients and the new ways of science.

The little fleet comes to the island of Trinidad, and sails around it. Land is seen to the south. Columbus, consulting the works of Pliny, concludes that it must be another island, and sends Rich out in the longboat to investigate. Rich finds that the water five miles from shore is so fresh that the sailors can drink it. Fresh water, he reasons, means a river, and fresh water five miles out to sea means a great big river. Therefore, Rich concludes, the land to the south of Trinidad is probably a continent. His reasoning is sound, of course. Indians on shore tell him the river’s name is Orinoco.

Rich comes back to report to Columbus. The admiral struggles with the account, as he tries to reconcile Pliny’s four rivers — the Euphrates, Hiddekel, Pishon, and Gihon — with the Indian name Orinoco. Finally Columbus gives it up; reconciliation is impossible. Pliny cannot be wrong, and so the Orinoco does not exist.

FOUNDING FATHERS

The Founding Fathers are to American argument, especially political argument, what Pliny was to Columbus. A Columbia historian comments:
Since Revolutionary times, Americans have been appealing to their great men of old for support in political controversy. Now in a time of hesitation and anxiety they are carrying the practice to ridiculous extremes. Conservatives and liberals, reactionaries and radicals, absolutists and anarchists, conformists and heretics — all are heard to argue, not that the idea is wise, but that it would engage the support of great Americans of the past if they were alive today.\(^5\)

Professor Rossiter finds at least seven Thomas Jeffersons now being appealed to as final authority for as many points of view. He gives specific quotations from Jefferson’s writings to support each.

1. People opposed to Big Government and Statism cite him with reverence.
2. So do the people in favor of States’ Rights.
4. Agrarians, small farmers, lovers of the soil, quote with enthusiasm his criticisms of the sinful city.
5. Followers of science, reason, progress, find strong support in his writings.
6. People devoted to civil liberties and the Bill of Rights appeal to him constantly.
7. Believers in the democratic form of government — the People, Yes! — use Jefferson as their staunchest champion.

Some of these claims are in serious conflict. The extreme Right quotes him no less approvingly than the extreme Left. Did Jefferson therefore contradict himself? The truth seems to be that he had an active, inquiring mind and changed his point of view from time to time as new facts came in. As he was a prodigious letter writer and rarely failed to put in writing how he felt at the moment, he supplied devotees of \textit{ad verecundiam} with stocks of quotations as ample as they were varied.

George Washington’s warning against “foreign entanglements” in his Farewell Address remains a prime favorite, despite such new conditions as the hydrogen bomb, and the fact that London is now nearer to New York, in travel hours, than Philadelphia was to New York in Washington’s day.

An excited liberal writes to the New York Herald Tribune protesting against the “power trust” and its alleged attempts to fasten the label “creeping socialism” on all public power projects. The same label should also be applied, he says, “to such great Americans as George Washington, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, who believed that the great natural resources of the nation should not be allowed to fall into the hands of the few.” This gives us another Jefferson, number eight, conservationist and sponsor for public power!

A New York judge recently sentenced four sets of parents to various terms in jail, while reading them a lecture on juvenile delinquency. “It is time,” he said, “that parents return to the moral principles on which this Republic was founded.” He did not mention that when the Republic was founded, New York City had a population of forty-nine thousand and everything above Forty-second Street was farm land. The New York of today, with its eight million people living in paved canyons, exerts very different and far more ominous pressures on young people.

“FOOTNOTING”

“Footnoting” means piling up references and documents until the opposition is silenced by sheer tonnage. Senator McCarthy was famous for staggering into the Senate Chamber loaded like an Everest climber with files, reports, and papers, which he pounded as he delivered one of his notable philippics. Trial lawyers sometimes use a similar technique to impress juries.

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6 William Tell thinks this sounds like what he calls “filibuster.”
Richard Rovere once examined a bulky file of McCarthy’s documents in the Senator’s office, at the latter’s request. In this file, which dealt with the Malmédy massacre in the Battle of the Bulge, Rovere could find no dependable evidence at all. But he admits, in his book The Eisenhower Years:

I continued to be impressed by the Senator’s manner. And the papers themselves were impressive — not only by virtue of their contents but by virtue of their existence. Photostats and carbon copies and well-kept newspaper clippings have, I think, an authority of their own for most people; we assume that no one would go to the bother of assembling them if they didn’t prove something.

A true quotation can be torn out of context so that only part of the original is cited. Thus an advertisement for a new play may read, “‘Wonderful!’ — Evening Standard” — when the Standard’s reviewer actually said “a wonderful slice of pure ham.”

Before me is a photograph of the chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission, surrounded by four large crates of documents, which have just been wheeled into the room where the Joint Congressional Atomic Energy Committee is holding a hearing on the Dixon-Yates contract for TVA power. 7 “Who is responsible for this physical display?” asks Senator Anderson of New Mexico with some asperity.

“I am,” says the chairman, and explains that the crates contain papers on every subject other than Dixon-Yates. This proves, he says, that the Atomic Energy Commission has not slighted its study of weapons because of the power contract controversy. The file on Dixon-Yates is brought in next — a stack of papers about six inches high.

“I don’t think we need this kind of physical display,” exclaims Senator Pastore of Rhode Island. “I think this is assum-

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ing an air of ridiculousness.” Ridiculous or not, it assumes a
decided air of *ad verecundiam*, department of footnoting.

When the Chinese Reds announced in 1954 that they were
holding thirteen American fliers on espionage charges, they
claimed that spying had been proved by “ten thousand pieces of
evidence taken from the fliers.” This works out to 769 pieces
of evidence per man, presumably including suspender buttons.

A book loaded with footnotes seems to show that the au-
θor has consulted everybody since Confucius. What the au-
θor has to say, accordingly, must be so. Sometimes, however
— as I have learned by experience in many libraries — he has
only laid down a barrage of references to cover the thinness of
his thoughts. F.C.S. Schiller remarks ironically that “nothing
has a greater hold on the human mind than nonsense fortified
with technicalities.”

Cartoonist Webster’s immortal character, Caspar Milque-
toast, believes everything he sees in print, including sign-
boards, sky writing, and magazine advertising. The dear man
spends his life trying to follow instructions — instructions
which frequently contradict each other and get him into endless
trouble. He is the perfect victim of *ad verecundiam*, crediting
every footnote, never checking sources, never allowing for dif-
fences in time, never daring to figure things out for himself.