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Appeal to Common Belief

argumentum ad populum

(also known as: appeal to accepted belief, appeal to democracy, appeal to widespread belief, appeal to the masses, appeal to belief, appeal to the majority, argument by consensus, consensus fallacy, authority of the many, bandwagon fallacy, appeal to the number, argumentum ad numerum, argumentum consensus gentium, appeal to the mob, appeal to the gallery, consensus gentium, mob appeal, social conformance, value of community, vox populi)

Description: When the claim that most or many people in general or of a particular group accept a belief as true is presented as evidence for the claim. Accepting another person’s belief, or many people’s beliefs, without demanding evidence as to why that person accepts the belief, is lazy thinking and a dangerous way to accept information.

Logical Form:

*A lot of people believe X.
Therefore, X must be true.*

Example #1:

Up until the late 16th century, most people believed that the earth was the center of the universe. This, of course, is not true.

Explanation: The *geocentric model* was an observation (limited) and faith-based, but most who accepted the model did so based on the common and accepted belief of the time, not on their own observations, calculations,

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and/or reasoning. It was people like Copernicus, Galileo, and Kepler, who refused to appeal to the common belief and uncovered a truth not obvious to the rest of humanity.

Example #2:

How could you not believe in virgin births? Roughly two billion people believe in them, don't you think you should reconsider your position?

Explanation: Anyone who believes in virgin births does not have empirical evidence for his or her belief. This is a claim accepted on faith, which is an individual and subjective form of accepting information, that should not have any effect on your beliefs. Don't forget that there was a time that the common beliefs included a flat earth, earth-centered universe, and demon possession as the cause of most illness.

Exception: Sometimes there are good reasons to think that the common belief is held by people who do have good evidence for believing. For example, if virtually all of earth scientists accept that the universe is approximately 13.7 billion years old, it is wise to believe them because they will be able to present objective and empirical evidence as to why they believe.

Tip: History has shown that those who break away from the common beliefs are the ones who change the course of history. Be a leader, not a follower.

References:

Wagner, R. H. (1938). *Handbook of argumentation*. Nelson.





Joe Walker

I disagree with the exception. How could you possibly know when to make an exception or not. Scientists had always believed that the universe was eternal, or infinite, or had no beginning based upon what they thought at the time was empirical evidence just to find out later that they were wrong. Again, how could you know when or when not to believe them.

Saturday, January 21, 2017 - 12:04:20 PM

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Rob Petersen

Wednesday, May 31, 2017 - 03:09:24 PM
@Bo Bennett, PhD: Well said with one exception, science is not about consensus, remember that in Galileo's time the consensus was that the sun revolved around the earth. Consensus is not truth, it's just a common belief.

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Bo Bennett, PhD

Wednesday, May 31, 2017 - 03:11:46 PM
@Rob Petersen: Sure, but "consensus" is not "scientific consensus." The two are very different.

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Philip J. Rayment

Monday, July 23, 2018 - 02:45:25 AM
In Galileo's time the *scientific* consensus was that the sun revolved around the earth.

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Bo Bennett, PhD

Monday, July 23, 2018 - 06:55:47 AM
@Philip J. Rayment: Right. Ignoring the fact that "science" in Galileo's time was quite different than today, there are *paradigm changes* within science based on new information. Scientific consensus, although extremely reliable when strong, is not always right. All findings are provisional.

I fear we are moving towards the Galileo fallacy here... *"Look, in Galileo's time the scientific consensus was that the sun revolved around the earth. Today, the scientific consensus is that evolution best explains the diversity of life on earth. They were wrong back then, so they are probably wrong today!"* I am not claiming anyone is suggesting this, but I do want to proactively make it clear that this is fallacious reasoning.

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Philip J.
Rayment

Monday, July 23, 2018 - 10:24:38 AM

For the record, I complete agree that

“ They were wrong back then, so they are probably wrong today!

is fallacious, and no, I wasn't moving towards that fallacy (which, by the way, you mis-describe, as Galileo wasn't persecuted for his defence of heliocentrism).

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Bo Bennett,
PhD

Monday, July 23, 2018 - 10:53:47 AM

@Philip J. Rayment:

“ Galileo wasn't persecuted for his defence of heliocentrism

What? Are you suggesting that he was persecuted for his heresy or something technical like that, or are you suggesting that history has it all wrong and the Vatican apologized for nothing?

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Philip J.
Rayment

Tuesday, July 24, 2018 - 12:35:08 AM

I'm not sure what the Vatican apologised for, but for all I know it *was* for nothing, perhaps pandering to popular urban myth.

As for history having it wrong, I guess it depends on whose version of history you are reading. Atheists have been caught inventing history before.

In 1616 Galileo had his writings banned by a cardinal for not being able to supply evidence to support his claim, and was forced to recant and sentenced to house arrest in 1633 (where he continued to publish) because he upset the pope (who had been a supporter).

But none of that means that he was persecuted "for his defence of heliocentrism", which was actually quite well accepted. In 1622, for example, Jesuit missionary and astronomer Adam Schall von Bell "arrived in China in 1622, having been trained in Rome in the astronomical system of Galileo."

See also here.

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Bo Bennett,
PhD

@Philip J. Rayment: Philip.

Tuesday, July 24, 2018 - 06:35:59 AM

“ I'm not sure what the Vatican apologised for...

Then read what the Vatican wrote and Pope John Paul said himself rather than sources such as creation.com. If you don't read or can't translate Italian, the read this from the Vatican observatory on the matter:

“ *Pope John Paul II named a commission to investigate again the Galileo affair; after the work of Galileo commission was completed, Pope John Paul II's discourse to the Pontifical Academy of science in 1992 stated that Galileo's sufferings at the hands of some individuals and church institutions were tragic and inescapable, and a consequence of a mutual incomprehension in those times between church theologians and the new scientists such as Galileo. To be clear, science as we know it was just being born and not even scientists of those times could comprehend fully what was happening. The Church officially apologized to Galileo in 2000.*

Honestly, I feel like I am defending a spherical earth here. Again, you are not at the right website here, Philip. I am sure there are many places for you to argue for "fake news" like the Galileo was not really persecuted and "global conspiracies" such as evolution. But this is not the site for that.

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Philip J.
Rayment

Tuesday, July 24, 2018 - 10:27:51 AM

Good grief! So many problems with your reply.

First, the Avoiding the Issue fallacy (thanks for making it so easy to find what it's called). I didn't bother looking up what the Vatican apologised for because that was not the issue. For all I knew, the Vatican apologised for the wrong reason. The issue is what Galileo was persecuted for.

Second, thanks for the link. I've read it (the English one) and it largely agrees with what I said. Your quote from the link said that Galileo suffered at the hands of some church institutions and individuals, and said that this was "a consequence of a mutual incomprehension ... between church theologians and the new scientists such as Galileo", but doesn't specify just what form that took (i.e. doesn't say that it was due to "his defence of heliocentrism"). On the contrary, it says things like the following: "Most theories explain Galileo's problems with

the Church as a clash of strong personalities; as coming from a fear that his ideas would threaten the basis of contemporary theology; or as a reaction by the Pope to the political pressures of the day.", "The trial may have been a reaction to the political pressure being put on Pope Urban VIII by the Spanish (and others). By attacking Galileo, the Pope could be seen as showing the more conservative elements that he was not a radical.", and "However, once he became famous with his writings, Galileo had a falling out with some Jesuits. This was driven at least in part by arguments of priority, as he felt that some Jesuit scientists who were publishing their own results about sunspots and comets were challenging his priority in these matters.". All points that indicate problems for Galileo that were not due to his defence of heliocentrism.

Third, you have, or at least come close to, committing the genetic fallacy, in your implication that whatever I get from creation.com must be unreliable. My link was to a peer-reviewed paper, but you dismissed it out of hand.

Fourth, you ignored the evidence of support for Galileo's views cited in Encyclopaedia Britannica. Is that unreliable too?

Fifth, I've never said or even intimated that evolution is a "global conspiracy", a claim which creationists explicitly reject, by the way.

Sixth, the only reason I'm arguing the point on this site is because *this site* (i.e. you) have made these disputable claims.

Finally, I think it's ironic that you feel like you're defending a spherical earth, given that I pointed out that it was atheists who invented the myth that people used to believe that the earth is flat. Granted, though, there is a rising number of people today who think the earth is flat.

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Bo Bennett,
PhD

Tuesday, July 24, 2018 - 11:24:46 AM

@Philip J. Rayment:

“*Second, thanks for the link. I've read it (the English one) and it largely agrees with what I said.*”

"Largely," meaning that that specific link avoids the actual charges that are in direct contradiction to your claim. No matter this is spun, Galileo's support of heliocentrism was the necessary and sufficient cause of his persecution by the Church. As the Church writes in the article referenced:

“ In the dialogue, Galileo provided persuasive, but not conclusive, evidence for a Sun-centered system. In so doing, he challenged the classical Greek philosophy of nature, which had dominated thinking about the universe for millennia. To embrace Copernicanism was to threaten Aristotelianism. The persistent requirement of fidelity to Aristotelianism had nothing to do with a Sun-centered system; rather, Aristotelianism was the basis for the philosophical and theological teachings of the time. If Aristotelian natural philosophy crumbled, some feared that the whole system of theology that it supported would also crumble.

Galileo's support of heliocentrism ultimately led to the fear that "the whole system of theology that it supported would also crumble."

Claiming Galileo wasn't persecuted for heliocentrism is like saying Jesus didn't die because he was crucified, but because his heart stopped. Or a murderer did not get arrested because he murdered someone, but because he "did something against the prevailing societal standards at the time."

You are correct in that my reference to the Pope apologizing was not really relevant to your claim (I wrongly assumed that the Pope's apology would include the charges for which Galileo was persecuted). So here are the charges as listed by several sources. I assume you think these are fake and fabricated by "atheists," but here they are anyway:

From NASA: "Early in 1616, Galileo was accused of being a heretic, a person who opposed Church teachings. Heresy was a crime for which people were sometimes sentenced to death. Galileo was cleared of charges of heresy, but was told that he should no longer publicly state his belief that Earth moved around the Sun."

"On February 24 the Qualifiers delivered their unanimous report: the proposition that the Sun is stationary at the centre of the universe is "foolish and absurd in philosophy, and formally heretical since it explicitly contradicts in many places the sense of Holy Scripture"; the proposition that the Earth's moves and is not at the centre of the universe "receives the same judgement in philosophy; and ... in regard to theological truth it is at least erroneous in faith."" ([source](#))

On February 26, Galileo was called to Bellarmine's residence and ordered,

to abstain completely from teaching or defending this doctrine and opinion or from discussing it... to abandon completely... the opinion that the sun stands still at the center of the world and the earth moves, and henceforth not to hold, teach, or defend it in any way whatever, either orally or in writing.

— [The Inquisition's injunction against Galileo, 1616](#). (Inquisition

Minutes (25 February 1616)) Also

<https://global.oup.com/academic/product/galileo-9780199655984?cc=us&lang=en>; #page 218.

This can't be more clear.

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