

Ch. 03: Credibility

I. When a claim comes without any evidence or proof to support it, you have to decide whether to accept or reject the claim.

- A. In the absence of an argument or other support, a claim has to be assessed on the grounds of credibility.
- B. Claims and their **sources** both need to be credible.
 - i. As a general rule: It is reasonable to be suspicious if a claim either lacks credibility inherently or comes from a source that lacks credibility.

II. A reasonable bias exists against claims that deny direct observation.

- A. Direct observation makes a solid basis for knowledge
- B. Several factors can render observations unreliable
 - i. Observations depend on the conditions under which they are made.
 - 1. Distractions, emotions, and fatigue can diminish the reliability of observations.
 - 2. Observations that call for the use of measuring instruments are only as trustworthy as those instruments.
 - ii. The power of observation can differ with people's expertise and experience.
 - iii. Expectations often influence observation.
 - 1. You are more likely to hear a knock at the door if you know someone plans to come.
 - 2. Your emotional relationship to a person creates expectations about what that person is doing, and why, and how well.
 - 3. You will call an action successful more often if you want it to succeed, and call it useful more often if it's something you want to do anyway.
 - iv. An observation made in the past suffers from the same dangers of unreliability as memory in general.

III. A similar bias exists against claims that deny background information.

- A. **Background information** includes all the general and specific facts we have learned through our lives, very often without being able to say where we learned them.

IV. Credibility of the Source

- A. The reasonable acceptance of a claim also ought to depend on the credibility of its source. The credibility of people is usually a matter of their knowledge on one hand, and their truthfulness, accuracy, and objectivity on the other.

- B. This principle even holds in cases of **eyewitness accounts**.

- i. The quality of direct observation can depend on the observer's knowledge. Artists will be better than nonartists at remembering the color of someone's shirt.
- ii. Untrained observers are more likely to exaggerate their observations, partly because unusual features of a person or thing are more noticeable, and partly because reports of unusual features are more entertaining to describe.
- iii. **Sharpening** and **leveling**, the processes of exaggerating certain features of an experience and downplaying others, frequently distort an honest person's attempt to describe a person, a film, a book, etc.

- C. Since knowledge makes one more credible, **expert knowledge** makes for the most credible sources of all.

- i. Experts have had the education, training, or experience to possess special knowledge on a subject.
- ii. Whether or not a matter concerns direct observation, the expert's claim should be accepted over the non-expert's.

D. Assessing Expertise

- i. Education
- ii. Experience
- iii. Accomplishments
- iv. Reputation
- v. Field of expertise

E. Several factors can diminish that person's credibility.

- i. All sources, even experts, lose credibility when we have reason to suspect them of **bias**. Bias most often arises when the expert has a financial stake in an issue.
- ii. Experts lose some credibility when their claims conflict with those of another expert. Ask two further questions:

V. Other Credible Sources: News Media and the Internet

A. Newspapers, newsmagazines, radio, and television need to be used carefully.

- i. Talk radio at first appears to be a good alternative to traditional news sources, but it almost always represents specific political agendas that skew the information being presented.
- ii. As for the traditional news media, they vary in the depth and breadth of coverage they provide, and the selective presentation of facts can slant a story.
- iii. Most reporters get their information not through investigation but from governmental and private press releases and press conferences. So they depend on what their sources want to divulge, and on retaining good relations with those sources.
- iv. Being private businesses, the news media have to make a profit.
 1. They need to take care not to offend or criticize their advertisers.
 2. The media also can't lose their audience

a. Solution: they tend to simplify issues and present more entertaining or sensationalistic stories.

B. The **Internet** has produced an unprecedented flow of informative claims. Depending on their origin, they may possess as much credibility as the claims of news media, or substantially less.

- i. Commercial and institutional sources vs. Individual and group Web sites

VI. Advertising

A. Advertising contains a number of unsupported claims whose credibility needs to be weighed with special care.

B. Remember that advertising sells more than consumer goods.

- i. It may try to sell a political candidate or policy, a way of life, a habit.
- ii. Advertising acts by creating desires

C. The critical response to advertising rests on the question: "Does this ad give us a good reason to buy this product?"

- i. This question fundamentally means: Will I be better off with the product than without it, or better off with the product than with the money it costs?

D. Many advertisements give no reasons why you should buy their product.

- i. They try to associate pleasant feelings with the product, show it being used or endorsed by people we identify with, or show it in situations we would like to be in.

E. But just because some advertisements give reasons for their claims does not mean they give good arguments or reasons.

- i. The typical reason found in an advertisement is vague, ambiguous, misleading, or exaggerated.

F. One kind of advertisement provides a justifiable reason to buy its product.

- i. This occurs when the ad tells you of the availability of a certain product you already want, or its availability at a price you can afford.

G. Two Kinds of Adds

i. Those that offer reasons for buying the product

1. They try to promise that:
 - a. Certain hopes will be satisfied
 - b. Certain needs met
 - c. Certain fears will be eliminated

ii. Those that do not offer reasons for buying the product

1. Three categories
 - a. “Those that bring out pleasurable *feelings* in us (e.g., through humor, glad tidings, pretty images, beautiful music, heartwarming scenes)” (108).
 - b. “Those that depict the product being used or endorsed by *people* we admire or think of ourselves as being like (sometimes these people are depicted by actors, sometimes not)” (108)
 - c. “Those that depict the product being used in situations in which we would like to find ourselves” (108).