

PHI 106 CRITICAL THINKING

TOPIC 8:

The Appael to ignorance:

an error in reasoning

This error in reasoning occurs because of an incorrect understanding of who has the burden of proof.

“Accept everything until you have reason not to.”

But people could claim all sorts of ridiculous things, and we’d all be walking around accepting them because no one had proved them wrong yet.

Reasonable default position is “Don’t accept a claim until you have good reason to accept it.”

And that’s exactly the position that is established by putting the burden of proof on the person making the claim. And that’s exactly the position that is established by putting the burden of proof on the person making the claim.

So, just because a claim hasn’t been proven to be false, it doesn’t mean it’s true. Conversely, just because a claim hasn’t been proven to be true, it doesn’t mean it’s false.

When there is insufficient proof one way or the other, you should suspend judgment.

We tend to make this error when we don’t actually have any evidence or reasons for our belief. So if you catch yourself shifting the burden of proof to the other person—insisting they provide evidence against your claim—check yourself: are you doing that because you don’t

have any proof for your claim? If so, it's much better to abandon your claim—or get the evidence!

Facts and Opinions:

A claim can be a fact or an opinion. It's important to know the difference between the two because they require different support and can be argued to different degrees of certainty.

A fact is a statement about the world as it is; it is a statement verifiable, at least in theory, by empirical observation, objectively (that is, using agreed upon methods that don't depend on any one person).

And facts can often, but not always, be accepted with complete certainty. You can say “true” and “false” about a fact (though if it were false, I guess we wouldn't call it a fact).

An opinion is a statement about the world as one thinks it is or should be or could be.

Support for an opinion usually consists of reasons, but facts, or at least empirical evidence, may also be involved.

Opinions are not “true” or “false”—they are acceptable to varying degrees, dependent upon their support.

It is important to note that arguments can, and should, be made to support both facts and opinions.

Just because something is a matter of opinion, it doesn't follow that all opinions are equally good, equally strong. Some opinions are better than others: those backed by argument, that is, those with support, are better than those without support, and those with strong support are better than those with weak support.

The strong arguments start with “givens” that are generally uncontested, even though they may not qualify as facts.

The difference between fact and opinion is loosely paralleled by the difference between knowledge and belief. We know—or can come to know—facts. We believe opinions—or more precisely, we believe they are worth endorsing, worth acting on.

Because established facts are generally uncontestable (they’re established), people often call opinions “facts”—hoping to manipulate us into uncritical acceptance.

(From Peg Tittle’s Critical Thinking Textbook)