

Chapter 5: Credibility

So we now move from deductive and inductive knowledge to credibility. Credibility includes the evaluation of claims and sources. The ideas in this chapter are some of the most important in the class. As discussed in chapter 1, we all have various beliefs about the world, many of which are unconscious. It's worth reflecting a bit on the way we form beliefs. Again, a belief is just a subjective acceptance that something is true, right, or exists. How did you come to believe that the earth is round? How did you come to believe in God? How did you come to believe *anything* that you believe? Obviously we've to some extent addressed these questions earlier in the class. When Descartes and Avicenna tell us that the one ultimate certainty is that we exist (because we think), it calls into question how we can know anything besides our existence.

Now couple all this doubt with cognitive biases: recall that these biases are examples of fast thinking that cause errors in our reasoning and perception. The evidence from the bias research (discussed and cited in chapter 1) suggests that, most of the time, we do not form beliefs rationally. There may be a partial rational component, but by and large we believe things because we want them to be true, because we were raised to believe them, because we had a profound experience, because we have faith, etc. What seems to happen is that we form beliefs for non-rational reasons, then we rationalize those beliefs after the fact (in other words, many of our beliefs can be explained by the confirmation bias), the tendency to seek confirmation for what we already believe. If you already believe that people who wear glasses are smart, for example, the next person you meet with glasses might “prove” your belief true, regardless of whether that person is actually as smart as you think.

But let's return to Descartes and Avicenna for a minute. Even if we move past doubts about our internal experience, we are still left with doubts about our external experience. In other words, even if we eschew the worries about our existence, even if we use the argument for other minds to infer that we are likely not in *The Matrix*, we are still left with

doubt about the information we get from different sources. And the information we get is the focus of this chapter. What is a good source? How do we know the information we are getting is reliable, accurate, true, etc.? When is a claim credible enough to merit believing it?

The Claim and Its Source

Recall that a claim (or statement, proposition, etc.) is just something that can be true or false in principle (except for subjective claims, which are a matter of opinion). “It's raining” is a claim; either it's raining and the claim is true, or it's not raining and the claim is false. But I may also consider who made the claim. Was it my little sarcastic brother who jokes about everything? Or was it my friend who never lies? Whoever makes the claim is the source of the claim. The source could be an individual person, an organization, a text, and more.

For a claim to be credible, the claim itself must make sense, but the source of the claim must be good as well. So to assess credibility, *we must pay attention to the claim and the source of the claim.*

But some claims are outright implausible, so we can reject them before even getting to the source. Like this one: “All house cats are secretly plotting to take over the world.” It doesn't matter who says it, this claim lacks credibility and was probably said as a joke. Other claims toe the line between credibility and, well let's be honest, bull shit. Conspiracy theories often make claims that fall into this realm. Some conspiracy theorists, for example, like Alex Jones argue that events like the terrorist attacks of 9/11 are false flags, or terror acts carried out by governments against their own people.¹ Some might reject claims like this immediately as being ridiculous and lacking credibility. However, when we look at history, we see that there are documented examples of false flags, like the Reichstag Fire.² Generally, conspiracy theorists like Jones are not very rigorous in making their claims, often creating

¹ See Jones' website here: <http://www.infowars.com/>.

² The Reichstag Fire. (2016, July 2). In *Holocaust Encyclopedia*. Retrieved from <https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10007657>.

sensationalized movies (rather than, say, well-researched books), in support of their beliefs. Still, does this mean we should completely reject the claims made by conspiracy theorists like Jones? I'll let you be the judge.

Other claims are immediately credible—if there is water falling from the sky then it is, in fact, raining. It's important to note that *credibility comes in degrees*. It's not like validity, which is all or nothing. It's a credible claim that smoking cigarettes can lead to lung cancer. Why? Because various medical experts have done independent, controlled studies to support the dangers of smoking. It's less credible to say that using cell phones can cause cancer. Why? Because there is less evidence, at least right now.

What about holy books like the Bible, the Qur'an, or the Lotus Sutra? Are they good sources?

It may seem controversial to even bring this up, but it's really not. Let's just use the Bible as an example since it is probably the holy book most people are most familiar with in the West, given that Christianity is the dominant religion in our culture. Historians have no problem using the Bible as a legitimate source to investigate historical events discussed within it. Of course, they also use the Bible as one source among many to make these evaluations. But it depends on the question that is being asked. If the question is, "Did X historical event occur?" then the Bible is a good source, just as is the Qur'an. But if the question is, "Is Jesus the son of God?" then the Bible is not a good source, since those who wrote it over the years are the definition of interested parties regarding that question (that is, those people already believe that Jesus is the son of God).

Furthermore, even if we assumed that the writers of the Bible were accurate in their assessment that Jesus is the son of God, we would have to deal with the fact that the Qur'an says the opposite. And there doesn't seem to be any reason to accept the Bible as more accurate than the Qur'an or vice versa. It's precisely due to these issues of comparisons

between religions than many people claim that religious beliefs are primarily based on faith or personal experience.

Interested and Disinterested Parties

Moving on, here are some important terms and definitions:

Interested parties: people who stand to gain from your belief in a claim.

Disinterested parties: a person with no stake in your belief in a claim.

You would be wise to pay attention to this distinction. Another way to say it is, does a person want something from you? Does she want you to believe in her cause or religion? Does he want money from you? If so, he or she is an interested party. To put it simply, an interested party has a bias.

The tricky thing is that people who are interested often claim to be disinterested! Consider a person who comes to your door and asks you to come to his church. He might be very friendly and open. He might even claim that he doesn't really want anything from you, that he just wants you to be "open minded." But make no mistake: this individual is an interested party. Even if what he wants from you is not immediately obvious, like money, it's pretty clear that, ultimately, he would like you to convert to his religion. Or consider a self-help author who claims to want to bring people to enlightenment, but who is a fraud that just wants to get rich when people buy his books.

But what about me? Your philosophy professor? Am I biased? Am I an interested party? Do I want something from you? The controversial philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche argued that all people are interested

parties, that we all are driven by what he called *the will to power*.³ In his view, the will to power is a driving force in all life that leads it to dominate over its environment and over other forms of life. So when grass grows through the cement, that is a manifestation of the will to power, just as when a young gorilla defeats another to become the new alpha male. But in humans, Nietzsche argued, the will to power can be more subtle. To be sure, humans use overt physical strength to dominate. But unlike other animals, humans might also dominate through intelligence alone by, for example, manipulating someone's behavior to get what they want.

If Nietzsche is right, then there is no such thing as a truly disinterested party, since we all have something to gain. We all want power in some form, your philosophy professor included. But before we get too cynical, let's first note that Nietzsche may not be right about the will to power (after all, just the term "power" itself is ambiguous). And more importantly, even if he is right, the distinction between interested and disinterested parties can still be useful. This is because we can just see a disinterested party as someone who is *less interested*, or who makes an effort to manage her bias. In my case, yes, as your professor I am probably in some ways interested. But I am less interested than, say, a public intellectual with an agenda because I am a teacher who cares about your understanding and intellectual growth. On the other side of the coin, just like many other professors, sometimes students tell me at the end of the semester that they really enjoyed my class. Are they saying this because they want me to give them a good grade, or do they really mean it? Can human beings be motivated by selfishness/power as well as kindness?

In any case, one common example of a disinterested (or less interested) party is Consumer Reports.⁴ The people at Consumer Reports buy

³ Nietzsche wrote about the will to power in many of his works, but see here for a starting point with his philosophy: Nietzsche, F. (1989). *Beyond Good and Evil*. W. Kaufmann (Trans.). New York, NY: Random House.

⁴ See the consumer reports website here: <http://www.consumerreports.org/cro/index.htm>.

products from companies *as consumers* (rather than as one company buying from another which would be more conducive to bias), subsequently reviewing these products according to legitimate criteria. Another potentially disinterested party is FactCheck.org. This organization takes specific claims, usually made by politicians, then verifies the truth of those claims using legitimate sources.

However we look at a disinterested party, interested parties are generally less credible than other sources. When thinking about credibility, we should ask whether the claim itself lacks credibility, and whether the source of the claim lacks credibility.

General Credibility

Before getting to a clear definition of credibility, let's discuss the idea of credibility in general for a bit. We often judge a person's credibility based on their mannerisms and appearance—but these things say nothing about a person's credibility. Mannerisms and appearance, in fact, are *ethos*, not *logos* (going back to chapter 1). In the movie *Braveheart*, if anyone has seen it, there is a point where two men are found wanting to be added to the protagonist's, William Wallace's, gang. It turns out that the rude, irreverent one is loyal to Wallace, while the one who pledged loyalty from the beginning is not loyal and tries to kill him. Think back on your own experience. Have you ever met someone who, at first, you thought was deceitful or not very credible, but then you found out later that your initial impression was completely wrong? Considering the human predilection toward bias (as I've been hammering into you in this class), it would be wise for us to find actual indications of credibility rather than judge people prematurely.

And what are actual indications of credibility? Honesty, a good reputation among customers/peers, legitimate experience, etc. You will notice in the credibility homework that I divide questions of credibility into bias and expertise. So here is our definition:

Credibility: a source having high expertise and low bias.

To restate, if particular sources have high expertise and low bias in relation to some issue, then they are credible. The method is just a metric to help visualize credibility; you can use it if you want, but it's not necessary. You might just use your own common sense and reasoning to determine credibility, though your common sense had better include considerations of expertise and bias (however you calculate them).

Memory and Personal Observations

What did you eat for lunch two weeks ago? What was the color of the house you grew up in? When were your parents born? What did you do two days ago? Some of you might be able to answer some, or even all, of these questions with no difficulty. However, I wonder how accurate your answers would be? Would they stand up to a scientific test? Some study results, in fact, suggest that even direct eyewitness testimony cannot stand up to a scientific test for accuracy. In a famous study on eyewitness testimony, students on a university campus were witness to a crime that was staged by actors.⁵ Since the crime was staged, the researchers in the study knew exactly what happened (since they planned it). However, when students were asked to recall the event later using photographs, there were substantial mistakes, including some students misidentifying the perpetrator of the crime! Nevertheless, the people in the study claimed to be very confident in what had occurred.

Studies like this should humble us. I actually had a similar experience as a teenager. My friend and I were having an admittedly meaningless argument over the setup of an old park that had been torn down in our neighborhood. I argued that the slide in the park was on the right, my friend said it was on the left. Later, we found a picture of the park one of our parents had taken, and we were both completely wrong (the slide was in the back!). Nevertheless, we had been entirely "certain" of our memories of the park.

⁵ Buckhout, R., Figuroa, D., & Hoff E. (1975). Eyewitness identification: Effects of suggestion and bias in identification from photographs. *Bulletin of the Psychonomic Society*, 6(1), 71-74.

As all of this suggests, our memories are blunt instruments, and no matter how smart you are, you can misremember important details and sometimes entire events. As critical thinkers, how should we respond to this information about memory? We should be honest and open about the fact that, at any given time, we may have misremembered something (though if you're like me, your pride can get in the way).

Our personal observations can be as unreliable as our memories. In addition to cognitive biases, there are numerous factors that influence the way we perceive the world: beliefs, hopes, fears, emotions, tiredness, etc. We automatically see the people we like as doing good things, even if they do bad things. And we automatically see the people we hate as doing bad things, even if they do good things. If we already like a particular actor, we might be predisposed to like a movie that actor is in, even if the movie itself is terrible! Some people—let's face it—are able to perceive the world more accurately than others (but they better have a good track record).

This isn't to say that our memories and personal observations are completely useless; just that we should be humble about their accuracy. Our personal observations, however flawed, still constitute our most immediate observations of the world and thus have some credibility. And sometimes, our memories *are* in fact accurate. For example, sometimes claims conflict with our personal observations. If a claim conflicts with what you observe about the world, it's natural to doubt that claim. If someone says that he can make water float in the air without a container, it's natural for me to doubt him since I never observe water floating on earth in such a way. Or if I was just at a Padres game and I know that they won, and my friend tells me they lost, then I might be more inclined to doubt my friend's claim.

Given all of this, the appropriate attitude towards new information can be seen in the example of Socrates from *The Apology*.⁶ In this famous

⁶ Plato. (1956). *The Apology* (W. Rouse, Trans.). In E. Warmington, & P. Rouse (Eds.), *Great dialogues of Plato* (pp. 423-446). New York, NY: Mentor.

dialogue of Plato, Socrates is said by the oracle to be the wisest person in ancient Athens. At first Socrates does not believe the oracle, but as he goes around the city to find supposedly wise people, he finds that they all claim to know a lot more than they actually know. It turns out, Socrates is the wisest because *he knew that he didn't know*. It's not that that he didn't know *anything*, but he was honest about the things he didn't know, and this attitude in itself allowed him to keep an open mind, so he could actually learn new things.

Prior Knowledge and Initial Plausibility

Here are a couple more important terms and definitions:

Prior Knowledge: the body of justified beliefs we learn from our own observations or from others.

Initial Plausibility: a rough assessment of how credible a claim is, how consistent the claim is with our prior knowledge.

Often our prior knowledge is confirmed by a variety of sources. We immediately reject the claim that “The T-Rex wanders the forests of the state of Oregon.” We don't have to observe that this is false to know it to be false based on our background information. It might be obvious to some of you that an understanding of prior knowledge is incredibly important to teaching. All of you, as my students, bring different levels of prior knowledge to the class. Some of you have studied philosophy before, some of you haven't. Some of you are very religious, some of you aren't. Some of you come from working class families, some of you don't. And so forth. All of our prior experiences give us different stores of prior knowledge. In fact, this phenomenon is one of the great benefits you can get out of college: learning about other students' perspectives and their different sets of prior knowledge.

But let's move to initial plausibility. As the term suggests, if a claim doesn't fit with our prior knowledge, we give it low initial plausibility. For instance, if a friend tells you that she met the president, you might

initially reject the claim due to the fact that people, particularly your friends, don't meet presidents very often. The claim has low initial plausibility. Of course, if your friend shows you a picture or tells a believable story, then it's possible she could convince you.

There is no formula for deciding what beliefs to accept and what to reject (if there were, there would be a lot less disagreement in the world and classes like this would be less important). You just have to take things on a case by case basis. You have to trust your prior knowledge and keep an open mind—new information can sometimes cause us to give up beliefs that we thought were true.

The broader your prior knowledge, the more likely you will be able to effectively evaluate any claim that comes your way. This gives us a reason to have an enquiring attitude about the world—there's no substitute for a broad range of knowledge. College in general has its problems (as I'm sure many of you are aware). However, one of the basic principles of a college education is exposure to a diversity of knowledge and information, leading to broader prior knowledge.

Questioning the Credibility of a Source

The credibility of a source can be questioned in two ways: 1) We can doubt whether the source has knowledge about the issue or 2) we can doubt the person's truthfulness, objectivity, or accuracy.

How can we judge a person's expertise? Education and experience are often, but not always, the most important factors in judging a person's expertise. Accomplishments and reputation are also important.

Of course, experts can disagree and make bad judgments too. We should also keep in mind that just because someone is an expert in one field does not make them an expert in another field. We should listen to a physicist for his knowledge of the laws of the physical world, not for his knowledge of dentistry. This point often gets lost when we have a lot of respect for people. Even though I respect my father a lot, I have to admit

that he doesn't know anything about biology, though he knows a lot about writing and the media, having worked in the newspaper industry for most of his career.

Speaking of which, let's take a deeper look at the news media.

News Media

Discussions about media bias are rampant, from the classroom to the workplace to the late night party. Although the situation is often more complicated than indicated by the typical drunken debate (“The media is totally biased bro!”), there are certainly some grains of truth to the charge of media bias. The fewer owners there are of the media, the more likely the news will be slanted. Unfortunately, ownership has become more concentrated since the early 20th century, to the point that there are only a few major news organizations giving us the vast majority of our news, and a few major billionaires in control of those organizations.⁷ We may watch a clip of a TED talk by someone named Eli Pariser, in which he discusses the consequences of consolidated media ownership in the internet age, among other things.⁸

I once had a boss who would talk about the “liberal media.” I also had a friend in high school who used to talk about the “conservative media.” Both were strong in their convictions that one point of view dominates the news. As it turns out, both views are true to some extent. There is some evidence that organizations like Fox News are biased in many ways.⁹ But there is other evidence that suggests a liberal bias, even when

⁷ See for example: Who Owns the Media? (2016, July 19). In *Freepress*. Retrieved from <http://www.freepress.net/ownership/chart>. Also see: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/katevinton/2016/06/01/these-15-billionaires-own-americas-news-media-companies/#3af95382660a>.

⁸ Pariser, E. (2011, March). *Eli Pariser: Beware online “filter bubbles”* [Video file]. Retrieved from http://www.ted.com/talks/eli_pariser_beware_online_filter_bubbles?language=en.

⁹ Holcomb, J. (2014, January 14). 5 facts about fox news [from *Pew Research Center*]. Retrieved from <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/01/14/five-facts-about-fox-news/>.

editorial/opinion pages are excluded from the calculations.¹⁰ What it seems to boil down to is that people in the media with less power (like anchors) tend to be liberal, but the media as a whole tends to be controlled by conservatives. Rupert Murdoch is a prime example, a conservative who owns over 40 percent of all media sources.

But like many things, the process of preparing and presenting news is not a simple one, and many factors go into the product that you read or hear. Thus, to say that there is a “liberal” or “conservative” bias may oversimplify the situation.

In *Critical Thinking* by Moore and Parker (cited in chapter 1), the authors recommend keeping the following points in mind when evaluating news sources:

1. People in the news media make mistakes like everyone else
2. The media are subject to pressure and manipulation from the government, other news sources, and people in power.
3. The media are also, unfortunately, driven by profit, so this brings pressure from advertisers, owners and managers.

While some talk radio is a legitimate source of news, there is so much rumor, gossip, and name calling that much of it becomes unreliable. However, podcasts are interesting new developments in talk media that are getting more and more popular. With a podcast, since anyone can say whatever they want, the expertise of the people involved is very important. There are many good podcasts out there created by credible people with a good track record and expertise in their subjects. One of my favorites includes a philosophy and a psychologist, called *Very Bad Wizards*.¹¹

¹⁰ Groseclose, T., & Milyo, J. (2005). A measure of media bias. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 120(4), 1197-1237.

¹¹ See their website here: <http://verybadwizards.com/>.

The Internet

As much potential as the internet has as a medium, the information it provides must be evaluated with your critical thinking skills on full alert. Many, if not most of you, have lived virtually your entire lives with the internet at your disposal. You're probably also used to people like me telling you that. Still, it's worth really reflecting on this for a moment. For thousands and thousands of years of human history, information was hard to come by. In fact, for much of human history the only people with any access to reading materials and other forms of knowledge were elite males. And now, even some impoverished youths in third-world countries have cell phones and access to the internet.

The information from the internet can be divided into two types of sources: 1) commercial and institutional sources and 2) individual and group sites.

The first are sources that are connected to legitimate news organizations, such as the MSNBC or *Time Magazine* websites (biased or not, these organizations are more credible than blogs). The second are blogs and everything else on the web, from good information to outright lies.

The information you get from a source is only as good as that source. Some of you may not be familiar with the concept of *blind peer review* in academia. Many top academic journals make use of this sort of peer review. What this means is that when an author submits an article to be published in a given journal, the article is peer reviewed and fact checked by usually around five other scholars who have no idea who the author of the article is. Blind peer review is one way of cutting down on bias (though note that even with blind peer review, bias can shine forth, a testament to the power of bias). There are search engines that are devoted entirely to scientific and other academic journals—these search engines generally lead you to more credible information. For example, try Google Scholar if you aren't already familiar with it (though there are many more).

What about Wikipedia? In my view—and many of my colleagues agree—it is good and bad. Because anyone can modify Wikipedia, the quality of the articles varies considerably. Although most errors get corrected eventually, at any given time, an entry can contain errors and falsities. Although Wikipedia was once heavily looked down upon by the academic world, its credibility has grown over the years. In fact, one study suggests that it is as reliable as Encyclopedia Britannica.¹² It is my view that Wikipedia is a great starting point for learning the basics about a given topic. And it is for precisely this reason that I occasionally use Wikipedia links in my teaching. *But* if you really want to know about something in detail, you'd better consult other sources—books, articles, journals, etc. Remember, too, that a complete Wikipedia article contains sources at the bottom of the page.

Blogs, on the other hand, are online journals that contain anything a person wants to put there. This definition alone should show you that blogs are not generally good sources of information, though they can be fun to read. It's true that some blogs are written by *people* who are more credible, and these blogs are generally the most credible among blogs.

Advertising

Advertising in the media really stretches what we find to be credible. Advertisers exploit our fears and desires in an effort to get us to buy their products, support their candidate, support their ideal, etc. Those who create ads are masters of the technique. They are creative (as you *Mad Men* fans will be well aware). They hire sociologists and psychologists who understand human behavior, sometimes for the name alone. Exxon spent \$100,000 on their name, for example.

The interesting thing about discussing advertising is that many of you are probably reading this and thinking, “Yeah, obviously.” But ads can affect us unconsciously, often depending on our biases to kick in. Many feminist philosophers and thinkers have pointed out the way ads instill

¹² Giles, J. (2005). Internet encyclopedias go head to head. *Nature*, 438, 900-901.

views about how women should behave into girls. Simone de Beauvoir, for example, said famously that a woman is not born, but becomes a woman.¹³ In other words, a woman is given dolls and dresses, and her life is infiltrated with media that reinforce this image (think of the stick-thin women on the covers of magazines at the grocery store). Even if a woman wants to behave differently, she is unconsciously guided by the media toward the norms of womanhood, and criticized for breaking them.

So, we should appreciate that the media can have both an overt and covert influence on our behavior. Naturally, advertisers depend on so many people *not* thinking critically at all about their ads that even a little critical thinking on your part can prevent you from being persuaded. One question is important: does the ad give you a good reason to buy or support the product?

If buying the product will improve your life in some way, it might be a reasonable decision to buy. The problem is, advertisers can purposely instill desires in us that we didn't previously have (you are not hungry... until you see the ad for Taco Bell).

There are two kinds of ads: 1) those that offer reasons and 2) those that don't.

The first kinds are ads that promise you will feel better about yourself, your hopes will be satisfied, needs met. The second kind has further divisions: ads that bring out our feelings, ads that rely on some admired person, and ads that put the product in good situations (like Corona ads).

I hope it's clear that advertisers are perfect examples of interested parties. Ads do not justify our purchase of an item. Ads are made so that products will sell, not so you have the most reliable source of information concerning the product. If you're going to buy something,

¹³ See that argument, and much more, in her most famous book: De Beauvoir, S. (2011). *The Second Sex* (C. Borde & S. Malovaney-Chevallier, Trans.). New York, NY: Vintage.

there should be reasons beyond what is offered in the ad (although the ad may influence you by its existence alone).

Major Ideas for Credibility

Although anything from the readings or homework might appear on the assessments, the following **major ideas** should be clearly understood.

- Claims and sources
- Interested vs. disinterested parties
- Credibility (bias and expertise)
- Memory and personal observations
- Prior knowledge and initial plausibility