

## In Light of Logic

### The *Ad Populum* Fallacy: Safety in Numbers

This fallacy involves appealing "to the people" rather than to reason. Assent to a conclusion is won not by giving valid arguments, but by arousing the feelings and sentiments of the multitude. In modern life, the propagandist, the demagogue, the politician and the advertiser continually make this appeal. If "everyone believes it," or "everyone is doing it," or the poll numbers are high, it must be right. It is an established fact of history, however, that popular ideas have often been proven to be erroneous. This has happened so often that it has been dramatically demonstrated that because the multitudes accept an assertion to be true, this provides no rational assurance that it is true.

One could argue that history teaches that the opposite is more often the case: if the multitudes believe something to be true, it is probably false. But arguing this way is just the flip side of the same fallacy. The number of people believing a particular proposition is irrelevant to the truth or falsehood of the proposition itself. Its truth or falsehood must be determined by relevant and rational means, employing evidence and information from which a conclusion can be logically derived.

The popularity of the *Ad Populum* fallacy is attributable to the tendency of human beings to act like sheep, flocking together around the comfortable and the familiar. Deep within the fallen human soul is the need to be connected with others of his kind, and so compelling is this desire that people will often surrender their conscience and judgment to the tyranny of their culture and the conventional wisdom, even when it makes no sense to them. How few there are who can stand in the integrity of their own mind and judgment when it is unpopular.

A demagogue in the Book of Acts, Demetrius, employs the fallacy of *Ad Populum* when attempting to defend the worship of Diana of the Ephesians in the face of the threat of Christianity.

#### **Acts 19:24-28 (KJV):**

(24) For a certain man named Demetrius, a silversmith, which made silver shrines for Diana, brought no small gain unto the craftsmen;

(25) Whom he called together with the workmen of like occupation, and said, Sirs, ye know that by this craft we have our wealth.

(26) Moreover ye see and hear, that not alone at Ephesus, but almost throughout all Asia, this Paul hath persuaded and turned away much people, saying that they be no gods, which are made with hands

27) So that not only this our craft is in danger to be set at naught; but also that the temple of the great goddess Diana should be despised, and her magnificence should be destroyed, whom all Asia and the world worshippeth.

(28) And when they heard these sayings, they were full of wrath, and cried out, saying, Great is Diana of the Ephesians.

The first thing to be noted in this record is that Demetrius was concerned primarily about the potential financial threat to the silversmiths. The root of all evil is the love of money (1 Timothy 6:10). Seeking to justify his craft, the source of their wealth, Demetrius appeals to the emotions of his audience and their fear of loss. He offers no reasons to believe that Diana is the true object of worship except to say that "all Asia and the world worshipeth" her. This is the *Ad Populum* fallacy, appealing to the numbers of people that believe rather than logical argument.

The Old Testament contains a powerful example of the fallacy of appealing to numbers rather than reason. The king of Israel and Jehoshaphat king of Judah were contemplating going up to battle against Ramoth-gilead. The king of Israel called upon his "prophets" to ask whether or not they should go:

**1 Kings 22:6 (KJV):**

Then the king of Israel gathered the prophets together, about four hundred men, and said unto them, Shall I go against Ramoth-gilead to battle, or shall I forbear? And they said, Go up; for the Lord shall deliver it into the hand of the king

Jehoshaphat was not satisfied with this answer, and wanted another source to be consulted. He turned to Micaiah the prophet, whom the king of Israel hated because Micaiah always prophesied that evil would come upon him. The king wanted Micaiah to prophesy good things about him, but the prophet responded by saying "as the Lord liveth, what the Lord saith unto me, that will I speak." (1 Kings 22:14) He told the king that he would die in battle and his army be defeated, which is exactly what came to pass. Four hundred "prophets" spoke in favor of the king against one who spoke the truth. If the whole world speaks one thing, but it is contradicted by the truth of God's Word, the truth is not altered. To be awed by numbers or popularity more than by truth is to think illogically.

Jesus Christ is "the way, the truth and the life" (John 14:6), yet all men forsook him and he died alone upon the tree. The Apostle Paul wrote in 2 Timothy 1:15 that all Asia had turned away from him. Whether men believed these great men or not is immaterial to the truth of their words. Truth is truth and that fact cannot be altered or negated by man's unbelief, nor made more true by the numbers of people that believe it. Jesus Christ essentially said the same thing to the Pharisees when they charged that he spoke only for himself:

**John 8:14-18 (KJV):**

(14) Though I bear record of myself, yet my record is true: for I know from whence I came, and whither I go; but ye cannot tell whence I come, and whither I go.

(15) Ye judge after the flesh; I judge no man.

(16) And yet if I judge, my judgment is true, for I am not alone, but I and the Father that sent me.

(17) It is also written in your law, that the testimony of two men is true.

(18) I am one that bear witness of myself, and the Father that sent me beareth witness of me.

If God was in the saddle with him, it made no difference if no one believed. He was still speaking the truth. It might be asked, if they could not judge him on the basis of numbers or his personal life or any other logically irrelevant matter, how could they know that he was speaking for God? The answer is simple, as Jesus Christ himself said:

**John 7:16-17 (KJV)**

My doctrine is not mine, but his that sent me.

If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself.

The way to know that he is telling the truth is to act on the premise that he is and then it is confirmed. This is the essence of faith, and the reason that we have the Bible. As the Word of God, the Bible engenders faith in us by providing a basis to understand God's purposes and character. It shows us that God is faithful to His promises, and will never ask us to do anything that is not in our best long-term interests. To live a life of such faith, however, we must face the short-term risk of being unpopular and even the unmitigated wrath of those who have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo.

A statement I heard a long time ago continues to resonate for me: "Following the path of least resistance is what makes men and rivers crooked." As we seek truth, and to be true to the truth we find, we will walk on a "road less traveled." But God will be ever working to connect us to others who are walking the same path. We can sometimes think that we are the only ones on the path, and even pride ourselves on that fact. But we don't know how many others there may be who, though isolated from us, are kindred souls. We have a kind of invisible fellowship with them, which though unsatisfying to our flesh, nonetheless is a palpable reality once we realize it.

This is what Elijah found out when he complained to God that he was the only one left who was adhering to the truth. "I am the only one left," he told God wistfully in 1 Kings 19:10 and 14. God informed Elijah that there were 7,000 Israelites remaining who were faithful to Him.

To be faithful believers in the One True God and His glorious Son Jesus Christ, we must be prepared to be unpopular as we stand for truth, and not become weary, mentally faint and self-pitying. We can take godly pride in the fact that we are adhering to the truth of God's Word as we understand it, and grow strong in adversity, even when nobody appears to stand with us. At the same time, we don't indulge ourselves in the fantasy that we are isolated and martyrs for the cause. We continue to trust that God looks on the hearts of men and women, and will connect us with those who are also honestly seeking the truth with a clear conscience. Then we will neither be overly awed by popularity or unpopularity. We will be content with the knowledge that we are in good company with those throughout the ages who have done their best to stand with love and honesty for the One True God. We will be walking shoulder to shoulder with them, keeping ourselves unspotted from the world and its many illogical and immoral judgments.

**2 Peter 1:3-4 (NIV):**

(3) His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness.

(4) Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires [like the desire to be popular more than to be faithful, the essential appeal of the *Ad Populum* fallacy].