

argument by authority is similar to the **argument by democratic majority** we covered above, in that it reaches for something or someone outside the terms of the argument to close down the debate.

How might it be used in a debate, and how could you rebut it?

In a debate on the motion 'This house would ban private schools', an opposition speaker says:

'It would be wrong to ban private schools because the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights says that parents have the right to decide how their children should be educated.'

How should you rebut this example of argument by authority?

How about this?

'Why should we listen to what the UN says? They're under the control of corrupt leaders in the US and Russia.'

Bad rebuttal. Why? You're guilty of the *ad hominem*, playing the player not the ball, which we discussed above. Don't attack the authority; attack what it says. You can do this even while respecting the authority.

So, try this instead:

'The framers of that declaration had the most admirable intentions, and it has been an inspiration for many vital campaigns. However, they did not foresee the way in which the right for parents to choose their children's education can be abused in countries where private education gives children whose parents who can afford it an unfair advantage. Having the right to educate your son at Eton is a meaningless right for the vast majority of British people, when it costs £40,000 a year and the median household income is £28,000.'

To sum up:

- Simply citing an authority does not prove anything.
- If your opponent cites an authority at you, no matter how admirable the authority:
 - Respect whatever expertise the authority has.
 - Point out the flaws in what the authority says.

Citing an authority does not prove anything

6 Introducing irrelevant issues

'Hannah, tidy up your bedroom.'

'Why?'

'Because it's so untidy you can't find anything in it.'

'Maybe, but you forgot to pick me up from hockey practice last Tuesday and I had to take the bus home in the dark and Mum had a go at you about how dangerous it was for me to come home in the dark so why should I listen to you going on about my bedroom?'

Hannah's criticism of her Dad's failure to remember his chauffeuring duties is well supported and powerful. Unfortunately, it has nothing to do with the issue at hand; the tidiness of her bedroom. She hasn't addressed her Dad's argument in favour of tidying up her bedroom, instead moving the debate on to a completely irrelevant issue. By avoiding the central issue, she has lost the debate.

This fallacy is sometimes known as '**Whataboutery**'. This is because debaters who use it often begin with the phrase 'What about...'. To give some examples:

'The use of homophobic language should be made illegal because it legitimises violence against gay people.'

'What about racist language? Shouldn't that be made illegal?'

'GCSEs should be abolished because they create excessive stress for teenagers.'

'What about the stress caused by competitive posting on social media? Why aren't you addressing that?'

'Meat should be taxed because the production of meat contributes to climate change.'

'What about air travel? Why not tax that?'

How should you respond to 'whataboutery'? One problem is that the issues raised (like Hannah's Dad's life-threatening forgetfulness) are often very real and important ones. However, you need to recall that they are not the issue that the debate is about. So, agree (briefly) that racism, bodyshaming on Whats App, air travel and not picking up your daughter from hockey practice

How should you respond to 'whataboutery'?