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# Chronological Snobbery

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> Religion comes from the period of human prehistory where nobody – not even the mighty Democritus who concluded that all matter was made from atoms – had the smallest idea what was going on. It comes from the bawling and fearful infancy of our species, and is a babyish attempt to meet our inescapable demand for knowledge (as well as for comfort, reassurance, and other infantile needs). Today the least educated of my children knows much more about the natural order than any of the founders of religion.
>
> Christopher Hitchens, *god is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*

First described by the Christian academic Owen Barfield (1967) in the 1920s and later popularized by his friend and colleague C.S. Lewis (1955), the fallacy of chronological snobbery (CS) presupposes that cultural, philosophical, or scientific ideas from later time periods are necessarily superior to those from earlier ages. Grounded on the Enlightenment's concept of "progress," this informal fallacy stems from the assumption that the ever-increasing amount of knowledge in society (often due to scientific and technological advances) naturally and perpetually replaces all outdated, disproven ideas with updated, better-justified beliefs, therefore making old ideas incorrect or irrelevant simply because they are old. Similar to biological evolution and the phenomenon of vestigial organs, CS labels once-normal beliefs to be now obsolete in light of cultural evolution and the

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contemporary situation, but the lack of reference to either evidence or argument for a specific proposition's inaccuracy is the hallmark of this informal fallacy.

Certainly it is the case that many ideas once popularly held to be true – such as cosmological geocentrism or legal theories that denied rights to individuals based on race or gender – are now indeed known to be false, but such affirmations have always come on the basis of evidence or reason beyond the mere fact of the original idea's age or the time period in which it became popular. As Lewis (1955) points out in his autobiography (where he analyzes his own bygone susceptibility to this fallacy), the mere fact of an idea's age is no guarantee of its inaccuracy; CS is:

> the uncritical acceptance of the intellectual climate common to our own age and the assumption that whatever has gone out of date is on that account discredited. You must find why it went out of date. Was it ever refuted (and if so by whom, where, and how conclusively) or did it merely die away as fashions do? If the latter, this tells us nothing about its truth or falsehood. (207–208)

It is not the case, for example, that geocentrism is false simply because it is archaic but rather because it does not accurately describe reality (nor has it ever), a fact now known to be true given the preponderance of contradictory evidence collected in the years since geocentrism's conception.

In Barfield's (1967) mind, the problem with CS is twofold: first, it promotes an arrogant, *snobbish* attitude that labels the modern *homo sapiens* as the pinnacle of human development in every possible mode as if "intellectually, humanity languished for countless generations in the most childish errors on all sorts of crucial subjects, until it was redeemed by some simple scientific dictum of the last century" (169). While technological advances have certainly answered many questions and made contemporary life more comfortable for human beings than ever before, it is a mistake to assume that this simple fact necessarily makes twenty-first-century humanity philosophically, morally, culturally, artistically, or otherwise *better* than that of any other age. Second, the uncritical acceptance of the contemporary perspective means that CS blinds a thinker to problematic assumptions and perspectives in the modern worldview that a critical eye would otherwise uncover.

Rather than relying on logical reasoning to rebut a premise, the person subscribing to CS assumes that no rebuttal is necessary simply because the concept or the person presenting the concept came from a bygone era when all manner of silly things were believed. As Lewis (1955) points out, a classic example is the equation of the word "medieval" with the word "backwards" (206). Today, when a philosopher ridicules religious philosophy as an "Iron Age conception of God" instead of responding to theistic arguments, when

early adopters attack critics of new media and technology – like Neil Postman (2006) – for being "stuck in the Stone Age," or when political commentators lambast proposed policies as being "like something out of *Leave It to Beaver*" without explaining why the Iron Age, the Stone Age, or the Beaver Age are not to be preferred in the case in question, then CS rears its ugly head.

Essentially the opposite of the appeal to ancient authority, CS also relates to guilt by association (see Chapter 83), hasty generalization (see Chapter 84), and poisoning the well (see Chapter 40) fallacies whenever it references unrelated false beliefs held by individuals from the originating time period. Because of its attempt to invalidate a proposition based on the temporal location of its origin or popularity, this fallacy can be considered a hybrid of the genetic fallacy (that focuses on origins; see Chapter 29) and the *argumentum ad hominem* (because it focuses on cultures and peoples, not on propositions or logic; see chapters 8–11). And because it fails to distinguish between the general level of knowledge in a culture and a specific proposition affirmed during a cultural period, CS is an applied example of the fallacy of division (see Chapter 56).

In short, it is a mistake to conclude that an old belief is incorrect simply because a newer belief is available without demonstrating why the newer idea is to be preferred. As Barfield and Lewis's intellectual forebear G.K. Chesterton (2008) wrote:

> An imbecile habit has arisen in modern controversy of saying that such and such a creed can be held in one age but cannot be held in another. Some dogma, we are told, was credible in the twelfth century, but is not credible in the twentieth. You might as well say that a certain philosophy can be believed on Mondays, but cannot be believed on Tuesdays. You might as well say of a view of the cosmos that it was suitable to half-past-three, but not suitable to half-past-four. What a man can believe depends on his philosophy, not upon the clock or the century. (70)

## References

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