

UNBEGGABLE QUESTIONS*

Richard Robinson (1971) denies that there is a fallacy of begging the question. My rejoinder:

(A) There is a fallacy of begging the question.

Therefore, there is a fallacy of begging the question.

Have I assumed the very point at issue? Yes. Does my conclusion merely repeat the premise? Yes again!

I can get away with it because no one is in a position to call me on it. Professor Robinson cannot consistently complain that (A) begs the question against his thesis that there is no such fallacy. He would discourage anyone from "helping" him by accusing me of committing the fallacy against him. With advocates like that, who needs adversaries?

I. EMBEDDING PERSPECTIVES

After all, Robinson has a viable reply to my argument. He should simply deny my premise. Later I will show how (A) might rationally persuade Robinson. But my immediate goal is not to convert the skeptic about the existence of the fallacy but rather to use his extreme position to make a point about the nature of question-begging. Those who object that argument (A) begs the question against Robinson must do so on behalf of Robinson. This assistance requires that one launch the accusation from Robinson's perspective and with his dialectical interests at heart.

The principle of charity generally forbids attributing "defenses" that hurt the defender more than his adversary. The only exception is when a self-inflicted local loss is needed to prevent a greater loss. Since Robinson is not facing a larger loss, we should optimize at the local level and not attribute a defense that defeats the defender.

Intellectual paternalists beware: (A) triggers misleading self-defensive reflexes. This vicarious shielding needs to be suppressed when simulating someone who has scruples

against certain methods of self-defense. Robinson, like the pacifist, limits the ways he will defend himself. Consequently, dialectical verstehen prevents the charge of petitio principii from sticking in the expected places.

Many readers will have a lingering temptation to say that I begged the question with (A). After all, (A) fits textbook definitions both syntactically (because the conclusion is also a premise) and pragmatically, i. e. "In begging the question, a statement is made that presupposes or depends upon the point at issue." (Fogelin 1987, 95) And it fits the psychological characterization of circular reasoning as well. I have reasoned egocentrically, appealing to a premise that I believe but which my opponent does not share -- though I have been empathic enough to anticipate that he cannot lodge the usual protest.

To wax Leibnizian, the monadology of circular reasoning forces the reader to view the situation through the skeptic's prism, to allow Robinson's questionable doctrine about question-begging to colour the concept of circularity. Subtler

hues flow from conditionals such as this recent bone of contention (Adler 1994):

(i) If the principle of charity is true, then there are no fallacies.

Consider an argument that uses the negation of (i) as both premise and conclusion. For clarity, I propound a truth-functional equivalent:

(B) Either charity is false or there are some fallacies.

Therefore, either charity is false or there are some fallacies.

Argument (B) cannot beg the question against opponents of (i); they agree with the premise of (B). But nor does (B) beg against the proponents of (i). Proponents of (i) either believe in charity or not. Those proponents who reject charity agree with the first disjunct of the premise of (B) and so cannot complain that I have illicitly assumed something they would not grant. If, on the other hand, a proponent of (i) believes

the principle of charity, then he disagrees with the premise of (B) but is committed to there being no fallacies. Hence, these dual subscribers cannot complain that (B) begs the question against them. Lastly, proponents of (i) who are neutral on charity cannot complain that (B) has begged the question against them because that would thereby make them believers in the second disjunct of the premise. Finally, (B) cannot beg against those who are neutral about (i) because they have no position on the issue. A neutralist about (i) might complain that the question would be begged against him if he took a position. But the preceding has already demonstrated that (B) would beg against neither an opponent nor a proponent of (i).

II. RELATIVITY SUPPLEMENTS SELF-EXEMPLIFICATION

To beg the question is to beg it against someone. But no victim can be found for arguments such as (A) and (B). Since these two have the form $\neg P, \text{ therefore, } P'$, they show that question-begging is never a matter of mere logical form. For if there were argument forms sufficient for question-begging, $\neg P, \text{ therefore, } P'$ would be among them.

In "' P, therefore, P' without Circularity" I contended that no argument is made circular just by virtue of its form. I appealed to the principle that a rationally persuasive argument cannot be circular and trotted out arguments that convince by illustrating their own conclusions:

(C) Some deductive arguments do not reason from general to particular.

Therefore, some deductive arguments do not reason from general to particular.

Showing and arguing are frequently pictured as mutually exclusive. When one can simply show that p, there is no call for argument. However, if one's exhibit is itself a deduction, then showing and arguing may converge.

Argument (C) is rationally persuasive because it exemplifies itself. However, I can hardly claim that that (A) avoids begging the question by exemplifying begging the question! Argument (A) supports the possibility of a

noncircular 'P, therefore, P argument' by appealing to the relativity of question-begging:

1. To beg the question is to beg the question against someone.
2. An argument can only beg the question against someone who would not agree with all of the argument's premises and conclusion.
3. An argument can only beg the question against someone who can consistently object that the argument begs the question against him.
4. If argument (A) begs the question against someone, then he either agrees with all of its premises and conclusions or he cannot consistently object that (A) begs the question against him.
5. Therefore, (A) does not beg the question.

III. NON-DIALECTICAL QUESTION-BEGGING?

The first premise might be challenged. Suppose a hermit propounds (A) without addressing it to anyone (even an imaginary adversary). Then the "argument" seems empty

enough to merit the charge of question-begging. Yet the hermit does not seem to be begging the question against anyone else. If one pictures reasoning as an internal dialogue, then one might say that the hermit is begging the question against himself. However, those with a more a solitary picture of reasoning might suspect that 'beg the question against yourself' is a legalistic oxymoron.

Robinson would insist that all question-begging must be against someone. For part of his skepticism about the fallacy of question-begging turns on the etymology of 'begs the question'. Robinson traces the phrase to the ancient dialectical game of elenchus. Aristotle describes elenchus as a question-reply contest in which the questioner tries to prove a thesis by indirectly extracting it from his adversary's concessions. Unlike free-wheeling Socratic interrogation, this dialogue game was governed by formal rules. 'Begs the question' covers an infraction of rules -- asking for the very proposition that one was mandated to demonstrate.

According to Robinson, Aristotle's influence led scholars to apply the expression outside of the dialectical game that gave

it meaning. Since that game is no longer played, Robinson concludes that 'begs the question' does not designate a genuine fallacy.

Robinson's etymological skepticism about the fallacy fails to recognize the priority of informal reasoning over formal logic. (Just as we tend to reverse the priority of spoken language over written language, we tend to view everyday arguments as deriving their legitimacy from formal systems.) Elenchus had logical interest for the Greeks only insofar as it systematized everyday reasoning. 'Begs the question' just formalizes a fallacy that was current in the streets of Athens and had been a problem with human beings since they began to argue. Therefore, question-begging did not begin and end in Ancient Greece. The fallacy originated with the emergence of homo sapiens in Africa during the Pleistocene era.

The effort to formalize the fallacy continues today (Walton 1994). C. L. Hamblin (1971) revived the project of formalizing dialogue in the same year that Robinson pronounced it extinct. This led to a variety of systems that are designed to prohibit question-begging arguments. Since they

approach question-begging as a dialectical fallacy, they share Robinson's sentiment that just as a beggar must beg from someone, question-begging is always against an adversary.

The proponents of dialogue logic have clear reason to be concerned by arguments such as (A). (A) shows that certain logical disputes that bear on question-begging cannot be modeled in the dialogue games designed to articulate the fallacy. The inadequacy echoes structural weaknesses of the approach. The game format will make the fallacy too broad because it forbids the rules of the game from themselves being challenged. The concentration on propositions will also make it too narrow by blinding it to inference rule circularity, such as that committed by Max Black's (1954) self-supporting argument for induction. (The need for positing rule-circularity is brought out by Wesley Salmon's refutation by logical analogy (1966, 13-17).) However, (A) brings out the structural weakness in a conservative propositional form. Instead of directly challenging the rules of dialogue logic, its premise and conclusion repeat one of the least contestible theorems of dialogic logic. This leads to an internal conflict in

the approach. Dialogue logic requires that all arguments of the form 'P, therefore, P' beg the question and yet also requires that all question-begging be begging against someone. Argument (A) shows that these requirements are not always jointly satisfiable.

Robinson might simply grant that (A) is an anomaly for elenchus. Since he has no stake in the game, he might conclude 'so much the worse for elenchus -- and modern attempts to revive it'. Then again, he might take the anomaly to show that question-begging cannot be reduced to a foul in an obsolete debating game. Since this would undermine his grounds for skepticism about question-begging, Robinson might then be more likely to accept the conclusion of (A). Hence, argument (A) could rationally persuade Robinson by being a counterexample to one of his presuppositions about question-begging.

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