

May 15th, 9:00 AM - May 17th, 5:00 PM

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# **PATHOLOGICAL CIRCULARITY: DEDUCTIVE VALIDITY AND A CONTEXTUAL ACCOUNT OF THE FALLACY OF BEGGING THE QUESTION**

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## *Abstract:*

The purpose of this study is to provide an account of the fallaciousness of begging the question without thereby indicting as fallacious all otherwise acceptable deductively valid reasoning. The solution that we suggest exploits the intuition that all good arguments are weakly circular. The fallaciousness of begging the question is not that the reasoning is circular *simpliciter*. Rather, begging the question is a fallacy because the conclusion relies on an undischarged assumption that the audience cannot accept without further argumentation. In the face of such an argument the arguer might just as well have merely asserted the conclusion.

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## *1. Goal and thesis of the essay*

Goal: To provide an account of the fallacy of begging the question that both recognizes the circularity that is inherently present in any good argument (specifically a deductively valid argument), yet does not characterize all good arguments (specifically deductively valid arguments) as question begging.

Thesis: Begging the question is an informal fallacy in that an argument and a context (hence the informality) must have the following characteristic: the conclusion depends upon an assumption that is not accepted by the audience without further argumentation.

## *2. The philosophical chestnut that deductively valid arguments beg the question.*

There is a long tradition in philosophy of suspecting that good argumentation must be in some sense circular or question begging. Perhaps the tradition is rooted in Plato's portrayal of Socrates as doing the work in philosophy that is analogous to the work done in childbirth by midwives. Socrates is not able to teach his students anything new by argumentation, all he is able to do is facilitate his student's recognition of what they already think that they know. Thus when Socrates argues with his students, he can only show them what is contained within their own principles. Notably, Socrates proclaims that he cannot deliver agreement from them except where there already is acceptance. Like the midwife who does not create the child, but only delivers it from the mother, the philosopher cannot teach her student the truths, she can only deliver from the student what is in the student. Plato's doctrine of knowledge as recollection (see *Meno* 81c and *Phaedo* 92 especially) reinforces this same framework. The role of the teacher, or to force Plato into this context, the role of the arguer with respect to her

audience, is to bring to the surface what the student, or audience, already knows. This is to say, rather paradoxically, that I cannot convince you of something if you do not in some sense already know it. A natural reaction to Plato's doctrine of knowledge as recollection is to push into the background the role of argumentation, for one can never change the mind by argument of someone who truly disagrees with you. For example, if Plato's teacher can never uncover that body of claims that both teacher and student agree to start from, the teacher does not have a fulcrum from which to change the student's mind. Just as the midwife cannot deliver a child from a woman who is not pregnant. Construed as such, effective argumentation is provocatively close to begging the question, in that I can only fairly conclude in discussion what is already in some sense known.

This tradition is crystallized by Aristotle. In Book VIII of *The Topics*, Aristotle says that there are five ways that one can beg the question in public discourse. First, and most obviously, one can baldly assume the conclusion as a premise. Or, one can assume all the relevant particular cases in order to show the universal. For example, in order to prove the universal claim that all men are mortal, one could assume that for every particular man he is mortal. Or, one can assume all the conjuncts in order to show the conjunction. For example, one could assume that Socrates is mortal and assume that Aristotle is mortal in order to show that Socrates and Aristotle are mortal. The remaining two ways are of primary interest here: one can assume the universal in order to show a particular instance. For example, one could assume the universal claim that all men are mortal in order to show the particular claim that Socrates is mortal. Or, one can assume a premise that necessarily entails the conclusion.<sup>1</sup> For example, one could assume that all men are mortal in order to show that no men are immortal. These last two ways to beg the question are sufficient to make us wonder whether all deductively valid arguments are fallacious.

Echoing Plato's claim that knowledge is recollection, although for different ends of course, Sextus Empiricus claims that we are forced onto the horns of a dilemma if we attempt to explain the effectiveness of argumentation: if I try to convince you of something that you do not already accept, then I can present no argument that reaches the disputed conclusion for you would as such not be in a position to accept whatever premises I used to reach the conclusion for in that case you would already accept the conclusion, yet, if the argument does convince you then it only repeats what you already know (*Against the Logicians* II, Section 357). The latter horn of the dilemma indicates that the only effective argument I can give for a conclusion that you might accept is one that begs the question. To put it succinctly, I can either ineffectively babble, or I can preach to the converted. The first fails to achieve the desired end, and the latter is vacuously question begging.

In Mill, we get the fruit of this peculiar tradition: In *System of Logic* (Book II, chapter 3, section 2), he explicitly postulates that deductively valid arguments (actually syllogisms, in his case) are question begging. His diagnosis is that the fact that the argument begs the question just is the insurance that the deductively valid argument is not creative; it cannot create the conclusion *ex nihilo*, it can only pull the truth of the conclusion out of the truth of the premises. Note that even here in Mill the analogue of the midwife is apparent: effective argumentation does not create, it delivers. In the end, the solution that we will pursue here will amplify Mill's diagnosis that it is the circularity of a good argument that makes the argument good.

What has thus evolved by Mill into a potential embarrassment for deductive validity is noticed by some of our logic textbooks, and by some of our contemporaries who work on informal logic, notably C.L. Hamblin.<sup>2</sup> Also, in the 1st edition from 1969 of Howard Kahane's textbook, *Logic and Philosophy*, an example is cited in the section on the fallacy of circular reasoning that is parenthetically titled begging the question (p. 244-5). The example is the shopworn argument of proving that God exists because the bible confirms it, and that the bible is

the veridical word of God. Kahane claims that the argument is fallacious because it reasons in a circle. In a fit of candour he then retracts this analysis on the grounds that all deductively valid arguments are just as circular. For some reason, this admission was seen as sufficiently blasphemous to be deleted in all subsequent editions of the textbook. At the very least, we can acknowledge that typical examples of arguments that beg the question clearly exhibit deductively valid form.

Hence, if we are to correctly characterize the fallacy of begging the question we need to take seriously the danger of thereby judging all deductively valid arguments as fallacious. I will take as a platitude that an account of begging the question that judges all deductively valid arguments as fallacious is a sufficient reason to reject that account. So even if I share some intuitions with Sextus Empiricus concerning argumentation, it is at this point that we part company. A solution that meets this expectation will be described in detail in section VI, but for now let it suffice to say that if we divorce the fallacy of begging the question from an accusation of argumentative circularity, simpliciter, we are able to both accurately pick out as fallacious those arguments that beg the question, while not falling into Sextus's trap.

Arguments that exhibit the form of deductive validity typically do not carry much if any argumentative force. They are conspicuous in their absence from effective argumentative discourse. Students in introductory logic courses are quick to point out that these complicated proofs of deductive logic are rarely encountered outside of logic class. When I first began teaching introductory logic courses, I used to try to find interesting, complicated deductively valid arguments in everyday sources like newspaper editorials and letters to the editor. I have found this task to be in vain however because I could find at best only one stage modus ponens examples. Perhaps put more accurately, it is not the validity of the argument that is typically in question in argumentative discourse, it is the soundness of the argument that is in question. Notice that students in introductory logic courses are often derisive about the usefulness of their acquired skills in deductive argumentation. The real heart of argumentative discourse is the question of truth, and not of form. There are exceptions of course; consequents are affirmed, but they are unusual. This is not to say that the derisive student has found an embarrassment for logic, rather just that it is one skill among several in argumentation.

Examples of begging the question provided in our introductory texts are invariably transparently fallacious. Here is a common example:

*Bank President:* How can I know that I can trust you with a loan?

*Customer:* Joe will vouch for my reliability.

*Bank President:* How can I know that Joe is reliable?

*Customer:* Oh, he is a very good person.

Examples like this are silly because they are so crudely circular.

### 3. *Circularity is quiescently a property of all deductively valid arguments.*

First, notice that an argument is only effective when the speaker and the audience share some common ground; meaningful argumentation can only take place between two people if there is some common ground. If we disagree about the truth of *all* claims, then our argument is not resolvable. In virtue of what could we resolve the disagreement? Even an infinitely long lever can move nothing without a fulcrum, and an argument has no force without a fair assumption. Imagine that I wanted to convince you of some claim, P, and imagine that you do not

already accept P and that I want to convince you of P by argument, that is, to give a reason for P. What could I appeal to as a reason for P? If I can find no relevant reasons that both function as reasons for P, and that you accept, then I must take the task one step farther back and give an argument for those reasons for P. Now I must provide reasons for the reasons. This process will never end unless we share some common ground. So, argumentation is only effective when common assumptions can be discovered and used. Effective argumentation just is exposing a conclusion from the materials of common assumptions. As Wittgenstein said, in a different context (in *Philosophical Investigations*, section 1), "Explanations come to an end somewhere."

This claim that every discourse requires a common ground is slightly more robust than it might first appear. For it is true even if we agree on the rules of the discourse. I am not making the banal point that I cannot have an argument with someone or something that does not observe the rules and logic of argumentation. (For this reason I cannot have an argument with a person in a coma, or with a stone.) I am making the stronger point that in order to have meaningful discourse, specifically to make an effective argument, the arguer and the audience must agree on at least one claim that can be assumed without further argument. Otherwise, contra Wittgenstein, the explanation or argument would never end (or depending on the perspective of the metaphor, begin).

Interesting, effective arguments can be finitely long and finitely complex. That is to say that unargued for and undischarged assumptions are made in such arguments. Given this observation, let's reconsider deductively valid arguments as potentially question begging. If the conclusion already being contained in those assumptions is the defining characteristic of question begging, then all deductively valid arguments beg the question. We might pause to rephrase Sextus Empiricus's critique of argumentation: The conclusion must be obtained from somewhere, and if it is a good argument then we must get the conclusion out of the premises. The slippage here is of course found in the notion of *containment*. If we construe such containment as circularity, then circularity must therefore be a benign factor in effective argumentation. In fact, as we shall see, if such circularity were not present then the argument would be a non-sequitur. For even in deductively invalid, yet acceptable arguments, (inductively strong arguments, for example) the conclusion must be a reflection of the premises.

So in an effective argument, from a common ground the speaker reveals that the conclusion follows, that if the conclusion was not already there explicitly, it ought to be. Or put differently, the space for the conclusion is already present amongst their assumptions. To return to Socrates' metaphor, an argument is a dialectical midwife. The common ground is possibly broken up, possibly recombined, in any case analyzed, then delivered as the conclusion. An argument that is not a non-sequitur is an argument that can be held responsible for the conclusion in light of the premises. In a weak sense of the term circular, therefore, an effective argument must be circular. A midwife is useful to deliver a baby that is in the mother, and an argument is useful to deliver a conclusion out of the common assumptions. An argument does not pull the conclusion out of thin air, it extracts it from the premises. This is a weak sense of circularity, but it is circularity nonetheless.

*4. Hence, pinning the fallaciousness of begging the question on circularity is a red herring. To do so is to fail to recognize that circularity is the matrix that makes good argumentation possible.*

The most common way to describe the fallacy of begging the question is that it is a circular argument. For example, we might say that the following argument is fallacious because it repeats as a conclusion one of the premises:

(a)

I am 8 feet tall.  
therefore, I am 8 feet tall.

Perhaps we might analyze the fallacy in the following manner: it is circular because not only does the premise imply the conclusion, but the conclusion also implies a premise. If we visualize deductive validity as an arrow pointing from the premise to the conclusion, and since there is also such an arrow from the conclusion to a premise, then we can see the arrows 'circling back' on one another. This is a very strong sense of the property of circularity in an argument. While we may grant that argument (a) is clearly fallacious and that the strong property of circularity is true of (a), the solution cannot be as easy as the identification of the fallacy with this strong property of circularity. Consider this next argument. Notably it still is fallaciously fishy, yet does not have the strong property of circularity of the previous argument:

(b)  
I am 8 feet tall, and I am my brother's brother.  
therefore, I am 8 feet tall.

Argument (b) still seems circular, but this time it is circular in virtue of the conclusion being too prominently displayed in the premise. It does not take enough analytical work to find the conclusion in the premises. However we might hope to analyze this property of "prominent displayal," it must be an informal property of arguments. What might be considered as displayed prominently depends on the scope and depth of one's logical vision. I have no doubts that what Bertrand Russell considered to be prominently displayed would include more arguments than what I would consider to be prominently displayed. Perhaps we might want to widen the strong property of argumentative circularity to include this childish trick of hiding the conclusion as a conjunct in a premise. Yet this widening, or weakening, would miss the following argument:

(c)  
If I am my brother's brother, then I am 8 feet tall.  
I am my brother's brother.  
Therefore, I am 8 feet tall.

Furthermore, whatever formal property of the circularity of arguments that one uses to pick out all and only fallacies of begging the question will have to fail in similar ways. It is an amusing parlour trick to attempt to pin down a formal property of begging the question. (Hint: make sure that your attempted solution does not characterize the following non-fallacious inference as *necessarily* begging the question):

(d)  
P or not-P.  
therefore it is not the case that both Q and not-Q

However I try to formally capture the fallacy of begging the question, it will either be too wide or too narrow to be adequate. For this reason, an attempt to capture begging the question in terms of circularity, a formal property however strongly or weakly it is construed, is not adequate. The more natural problem that people will have with arguments (a) through (c) is simply that one of the premises is disputed. For example, the problem with argument (c) is that the first premise, the claim in the form of the conditional that there is some relationship between my height and my property of being my brother's brother, is outrageously false. This just is not a premise that any conceivable audience would accept.

We might advance our understanding if we notice that instances of begging the question can be both valid and sound. Furthermore, instances of begging the question are always valid. This means that begging the question is not a formal fallacy. Hence, our challenge here in argument theory is to provide the analysis of begging the question as an informal fallacy. This is especially challenging since circularity is a formal property of arguments. The only avenue of hope for a formal account rests on the dubious claim for a substantive, adequate *formal* distinction between an interesting/ non-interesting, or transparent/ non-transparent, or not well concealed/ well concealed argument. For the purposes of this paper, we will assume that this hope cannot be realized.

Trying to cash out begging the question as inherently related to circularity will either indict deductively valid arguments in the way that Mill had postulated, or will fail to capture some examples of question begging as fallacious. In the interest of avoiding Mill's unsavoury problem, and in the interest of our expectation that any formal account of begging the question will be too inclusive or exclusive, we need to turn our attention elsewhere.

Before moving on, let's test this analysis against the judgement of the mythical person on the street, the much dreaded foil of the non-philosopher. Suppose that I offer argument (b) to person on the street and ask what if anything is wrong with the argument. Her opening response might be that I have just argued in a circle. This is prima facie evidence against this account, so I must then ask her why a circular argument is bad. Her response might be something like, "Well, it just assumes what was meant to be shown." "Aha", I respond, "then your problem with the argument had nothing to do with the structure of the argument, but it has everything to do with what I assumed to attempt to convince you of the conclusion." Since this is my mythical person on the street, she pleasantly agrees that in fact this is just what she meant. I carry out this test with 100 other randomly selected people on the street, and they all agree in the end that the fallacy of begging the question is not a formal fallacy.

Being a clever researcher I approach a new person on the street and ask what is wrong with this argument:

(e)

$2+2=4$ .

Therefore, it will rain tomorrow.

She responds that the premise is not even remotely a good reason to accept the conclusion. I ask her what she means by a good reason, and she responds, "I mean that the conclusion has nothing to do with the premise." Upon further questioning, she finally admits that, "I have to get the conclusion from somewhere, and if the argument is to be any good, I have to get it from the premises."

The word from the people on the street confirms our analysis up to this point. Far from being an argumentative flaw, circularity is a necessary component of an effective argument. Even if you do not believe me, then believe those that are not yet tainted with the poison of philosophy.

Without foreshadowing too much, let me say now that I am not opening the door too wide; this is not an endorsement of question begging. This is just a plea for us to redirect our attention away from circularity as the culprit of fallaciousness, and towards unfair assumptions as the source of the fallacy of begging the question.

*5. Examples of arguments in contexts that beg the question yet are not naively circular, and examples of arguments in contexts that do not beg the question yet are circular.*

The purpose of this section is to further erode the intuition that begging the question and circularity are intimately related.

The informal account that we are suggesting here treats arguments as embedded in contexts. The relevant context can be constituted by the people involved (the arguer, the audience, and the previously accepted beliefs of all parties). A fallacy of begging the question occurs when the arguer assumes as a premise some claim that the audience does not already accept.<sup>3</sup> Hence, it is incorrect to describe an argument itself, *simpliciter* as begging the question. Only an argument in a particular context can beg the question. This is so because different audiences can consider different assumptions as unfair.

Two implications of this account are that not all cases of begging the question are circular and not all cases of circular reasoning beg the question. Take for an example of the former:

(f) arg :

If automotive coolant is the only green fluid in a car, then you have a radiator problem.

Automotive coolant is the only green fluid in a car.

Therefore, you have a radiator problem.

Context: Argument made by a mechanic to a skeptical, yet automotively ignorant, customer who doubts whether her car has been fixed properly.

The arguer does not seem to employ a circular argument, yet given the context of the discussion is clearly making an assumption that the audience finds unfair. The skeptical customer is probably looking for a justification of the second premise because she is worried that the mechanic is trying to trick her. Perhaps she worries that wiper fluid might also be green and that the repair of that system would be significantly cheaper.

For an example of the latter:

(g) arg:

If I am right, then today is Wednesday.

I am right.

Therefore, today is Wednesday.

Context: All-knowing Fred utters this argument to one of his disciples.

No question has been begged, yet still there still seems to be an air of circularity about the argument. Fred has not made an argument that his followers will object to. That he is right is a perfectly acceptable assumption to invoke amongst his disciples. Now this argument might not be convincing to us, but we would constitute a different context to the argument.

As has been pointed out, begging the question and circular reasoning are not coextensive categories, and furthermore begging the question is not a formal property of arguments whereas circularity is. Given the observation that not all circular arguments beg the question, two species of circularity can be posited. One kind is a necessary property of a good argument and one kind is sufficient to invoke the charge of fallaciousness. What makes this account of begging the question different from those presented in the literature is that the two kinds are not exclusive. In fact, all arguments which have the latter property will also have the former property. A good argument must have the former, but not the latter.



6. *Solution: Systematize the fallacy of begging the question by differentiating a circular argument that contains an unfair assumption from a circular argument that does not contain an unfair assumption. Let's call the former pathological circularity and the latter benign circularity.*

An argument is *benignly* circular if there is at least one possible context in which the argument could be made such that the conclusion relies on an assumption that the (possible) audience would not accept. (This property is circular because in that possible context it shares the weak sense of circularity of the above property.)

An argument in a context is *pathologically* circular both if in the context that the argument is made, the conclusion relies on an assumption that the audience cannot accept without further argumentation, and if the argument is benignly circular.<sup>4</sup> (This property is described as circular because ultimately what was at stake in the argument (the unfair assumption) is merely assumed. Structurally, the argument is not flawed, but since the audience does not already accept the disputed assumption, the conclusion might just as well have been asserted without argumentation.)

Notice that pathological circularity is an informal characteristic, and benign circularity is a formal characteristic. All good arguments are benignly circular, and the only pathologically circular arguments are question begging arguments. With the more fine-grained analysis of circularity that this solution presents, we can accommodate the intuition that deductively valid arguments are in some sense circular without thereby indicting them on that ground alone. In fact, if they do not have this property then they could not possibly be convincing arguments. An argument that failed to have the property of benign circularity would have to be the kind of pointless argument that two people who shared no common ground would be doomed to have. This is to say that if we share no common ground, I can either beg the question or I can present to you a non-sequitur.

Readers who are familiar with the current fallacy literature will recognize the contextual (or sometimes called "pragma-dialectical") property of pathological circularity from Walton. His analysis of arguments as embedded in contexts and specifically, that the fallacy of begging the question occurs when a burden of proof has not been met are substantively identical to the basis of this account.<sup>5</sup> The contribution that we are making in this essay is the property of benign circularity. This is a natural extension of Walton's informal account, for the notion of burden of proof in the actual context begets the notion of possible contexts. This extension is not idle, the notion of benign circularity allows us to meet the goal of answering Mill's and Sextus' charge against deductive argumentation. Sanford (1972) hints at the formal property of benign circularity in his discussion of Robinson's dismissal of the fallacy of begging the question, but does not pursue the implications of the property.<sup>6</sup>

7. *Observations of this solution:*

a. *It yields a new and interesting manner in which to generally judge the effectiveness of arguments.*

Only non-sequiturs fail to have the property of benign circularity. A difference between deductively valid arguments and deductively invalid, yet good arguments is the number and proximity of possible contexts in which the question has been begged. That deductively valid arguments are so often without rhetorical force (that they

are so seldomly effective in discourse) fits with this result. Deductively valid arguments are often *too* circular to be effective in discourse.

Think of a spectrum of argumentative force with non-sequiturs on one extreme, and deductively valid arguments on the other extreme, and non-deductive, yet still good arguments some place in between. Now overlay on that familiar spectrum another field. On one extreme of this new field place arguments with no possible contexts in which the argument begs the question on one hand, and on the other extreme place arguments that beg the question in proximate contexts on the other hand. To speak metaphorically, since every effective argument must begin on common ground with the audience, the most effective argument that you can make will cite the claims that the audience will allow you to assume and proceed to demonstrate that the conclusion follows from them. To a third party, one who does not share the assumptions, the argument will be utterly fallacious. Such an argument is circular, and it would be question begging if the audience did not share the relevant common ground. To put a fine point on it, the strongest argument you can ever give is to preach to the converted.

Hence, the closer you are to potentially begging the question, without actually begging the question, the better the argument will be in that context. The reason that deductively valid arguments are so often not convincing is that for an interesting, and complicated dispute there is typically no easy common ground that both parties can accept, and that is rich enough to generate an argument that is benignly circular.

Finally, if we mean by an interesting argument one that yields a conclusion that you did not expect, or did not see transparently in the premises, we can superimpose yet another field on our spectrum. On one hand we have arguments that yield surprising conclusions, such as (e). On the other hand, we have arguments that are utterly banal, like (a). Given, these three fields, we have a means of expressing the goal of good argumentation: to maximize the level of interest and the deductive force yet without quite begging the question.<sup>7</sup> Arguing is hard business, and it is hard in virtue of the interplay of these three factors.

*b. This solution is similar to some accounts of begging the question put forward in the literature in that it tries to steer the accusation of begging the question away from circularity.*

Walton and Hamblin both resist the naive intuition the characteristic of circularity is a *negative* characteristic of arguments. They are admirable solutions so far as they go. But, the solution presented here conspicuously embraces the formal characteristic of circularity as a *positive* characteristic of arguments, insofar as benign circularity is a necessary condition of a good argument. (So to speak), the more circular the argument is without begging the question, the better; this is a conclusion that they do not reach.

The solution that I am suggesting shares some affinity to the contextual theories of Hamblin and Walton. But whereas these solutions begrudgingly acknowledge that the mere presence of circularity in the argument does not mean that the question has been begged,<sup>8</sup> our solution embraces circularity as the matrix that constitutes a good argument. The trick is to recognize when the circularity has been abused, not just to recognize the presence of circularity.

*c. It is incumbent upon this solution to address the messiness of coming to grips with the notions of argument, speaker, audience, and whatever constitutes context.*

The attribution of the fallacy of begging the question to an argument will be a messy business. But, if we are going to hold on to our intuition that begging the question is an informal fallacy, then this messiness is just what we

ought to expect of a solution. Any solution that did not have this messiness simply could not be adequate.

To be fully worked out, this theory of the fallacy of begging the question must be placed within a more general contextual (or pragma-dialectical) account of argumentation. Such an account is given in Walton (1995). Walton's account is more complicated than is needed to answer questions of fallaciousness within argumentative dialogue, but still it is consistent with this theory of one particular fallacy.

*d. Perhaps there are some cases of an argument such that the conclusion relies on an unfair assumption that we would not have otherwise characterized as begging the question.*

The argument and context in example (f) might be a case of this kind. This and other unexpected results might just be artefacts of our now ingrained prejudice that requires that a question begging argument be fallacious in virtue of its circularity. After all, all the examples of begging the question that are included in our textbooks are naively, and transparently, and pathologically, *strongly circular* arguments that any child can see is fallacious. So perhaps we have been trained by Kahane and others to equivocate the two properties. Notice that the examples of begging the question provided in our introductory texts are invariably *obviously* fallacious. They are silly because they are attempts to draw out the circularity rather than the question begging.

## 8. Concluding remarks

This distinction is useful for expressing the historical tradition that there is a sense of circularity in any deductively valid argument, while not indicting validity on the grounds of circularity. A central lesson of this analysis of begging the question is that the accusation of circularity, *simpliciter*, is vacuous. What must be shown is that the conclusion of the argument, in a particular context, depends upon an unfair assumption. What must be shown is that the argument is pathologically circular. Given this more refined terminology, we have an expectation that if circularity is going to be invoked pejoratively, then it is pathological circularity that must be invoked. Hence, the accusation of begging the question is not an accusation of circularity, it is an accusation of something more than circularity. Specifically, it is an accusation of an unfair assumption.

## Notes


1. In Richard Robinson's watershed essay (1971), the two characters who make up the dialogue toy with Aristotle's claim that necessary entailment of the conclusion from the premises rates as fallacious question begging. Ultimately, Robinson, in the voice of the dominant character, Jon, concludes that outside of the archaic and Academic dialectical game of *elenchus* described in the *Topics*, there is no fallacy of begging the question.



2. Especially Hamblin (1970) pp. 226-8, 246-8. Hamblin resolves the problem by providing an analysis of argument within an evidential and epistemological framework. One of the central goals of his book mirrors the goal of this essay: to account for fallacy without thereby indicting all deductive reasoning.




3. For the purposes of this paper, we will ignore the irrelevant complication of discharged or hypothetical assumptions. For example, if I wanted to prove the conditional, "if P then Q" I might well begin by hypothetically


assuming that P is true in order to determine whether Q followed. If Q does follow, then I am warranted in discharging P as an assumption. Since such assumptions are hypothetical, there is no expectation that the audience to the argument agrees to the truth of assumption. Typically, there is no reason to think that either speaker or audience accepts the truth of a hypothetical assumption. 


4. The reason for the second clause of the definition of this property is that otherwise there could be an argument in a context that both begs the question and is a non-sequitur. For example:

(h) arg:  
I am blue.  
Therefore, tulips are pretty.

Context: Argument made to someone who has never met me.

Not only does the audience have no reason to believe the premise, but that premise also provides no reason for the conclusion. It is a matter of taste whether we call this argument begging the question or a non-sequitur, but it strikes me that the fundamental flaw in such cases is that of non-sequitur. Without this restriction on pathological circularity the result that an argument can be both question begging and a non-sequitur is counterintuitive. The two fallacies ought to be contrary categories. Walton (1995), by the way, does not so restrict his account of begging the question. Walton's essay in Hansen and Pinto was originally printed in 1990 and in that earlier work he makes this adjustment. 

5. Walton (1995), p. 51: "It [begging the question] is a failure or fallacy, presumably because of what we know or assume about the context of the dialogue between the two parties. The burden or task of the one party is to convince the other party rationally by appealing to evidence that will be adequate or sufficient to resolve the other party's doubts. To Fulfil this burden, the first party must cite evidence that is, or could be, acceptable to the other party." This solution of the fallacy is identical to the characteristic of pathological circularity (minus the restriction of the second clause) defended here. 

6. Sanford (1972), p199: "All men are mortal, therefore no immortals are men', the immediate inference mentioned by Robinson, would beg the question *in some circumstances but not in all.*" Italics are added for emphasis. Sanford moves in the direction of evidential priority instead of circular reasoning as the source of the fallacy, but without developing a notion of benign circularity, he is forced to be provide a sufficient, but not necessary account of the fallacy. 

7. The three fields of the spectrum are rendered graphically as:



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