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Reply to my Commentator - Ritola

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Reply to my Commentator

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My commentator raises a problem of great philosophical interest. On the one hand, we wonder whether we can identify instances of some fallacy without having a criterion of that fallacy at hand first. On the other hand, we wonder whether we can identify a criterion of a fallacy without having clear instances of the fallacy at hand first. But then, if both horns of the dilemma are sound, we are led to the conclusion that one cannot have knowledge of either instances of the fallacy or of a criterion of the fallacy. It would appear that this dilemma is a version of the general sceptical problem, *the problem of the criterion*, applied to fallacy studies. I want to make two comments on this problem.

First, the problem is not specific to epistemic analyses of begging the question, or of any fallacy, for that matter. Any account of any fallacy, be it epistemic, pragmatic, or rhetorical will have to deal with this problem to the same extent.

Second, this issue creates a very curious dialectical situation. In the interest of brevity, let us assume that we believe that the objective analysis of the fallacy is the only tenable account of this fallacy.¹ One thus accepts that a fallacy of begging the question has been committed if and only if some premise of the relevant argument cannot be known (or justifiably believed) without knowing the conclusion of that argument first. SO one believes that there are epistemic situations where the knowledge of one proposition cannot be established without establishing some other proposition first. But we then notice that this description bears great similarity to the challenge Professor MacPherson presents: he wonders whether we can know instances of the fallacy without having a criterion at hand and whether we can know the criterion without having instances of the fallacy at hand. But now this challenge seems legitimate only if one assumes something just like the proponent of the objective criterion is assuming. The challenger is claiming that one cannot reason from the instances of the fallacy to the criterion without already having established the criterion and vice versa. It seems that by launching the criticism one has already accepted that are claims to knowledge that are dubious just for the reason that the objective criterion of begging the question is trying to capture. One cannot complain that we cannot formulate a criterion of begging the question without begging the question, without first accepting some criterion of the fallacy of begging the question. In order to criticize the objective version of the analysis for begging the question by using a version of the problem of the criterion, one must assume the objective version. So,

¹ This is not to imply that the subjective version could not launch a retort similar to the one developed here.

either the criticism is meaningful or not. If it is, it must assume the very thing it is criticizing. So, it is internally incoherent. If it is not, we need not worry about *this* criticism. By the dialectics of the situation, it seems that the objective criterion wins the day. Yet, the dialectical success is somewhat pyrrhic: it seems to entail that the problem of the criterion is a real paradox, which leads us to worry about our knowledge.

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