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Commentary on Edwards

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QUESTION BEGGING AND CIRCULARITY:
A RESPONSE TO EDWARDS

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In these comments I shall argue contrary to Professor Edwards that there is no good reason to grant that all deductively valid reasoning is either question begging or circular.

I begin with the *Meno*. I borrow liberally from a paper I wrote some years ago. It was about the *Meno*.[1]

I grant to Plato some formal machinery and ask, can he, using this machinery, show that all deductive reasoning is question begging? The answer will be that he cannot.

First I relate knowing to being able to answer questions. I assume: if p is true and x would be justified in believing p then x *knows p* if and only if: if x were to ask himself whether p, he would affirm p.

Next to give some structure to x's reflections, I assume that x is a *basic considerer*. This means that if x were to ask himself whether $-p$, he would ask himself whether p and if he affirms p, he rejects $-p$, whereas if he rejects p, he affirms $-p$, and if he is neutral about p, he is neutral about $-p$. Also, if he asks himself whether p & q, he considers whether p and whether q. If he affirms both, he affirms the conjunction. If he rejects either, he rejects the conjunction. If he is neutral about both conjuncts, he assumes or imagines one of them to be true and considers the other. If on the assumption of the one, he rejects the other, he rejects the conjunction. Otherwise he is neutral about the conjunction.

The basic considerer considers other propositional logic forms in terms of their definitions in terms of *not* and *and*. I shall also suppose that *All A are B* is considered by considering for an unspecified thing whether if *this* is A then it is B.

I now define an argument as being *Meno question begging* just in case if x knows each of the premises then x knows the conclusion. In other words, x can't know the premises unless he already knows the conclusion.

Whew! These definitions are pretty complicated. The significance of them will become clearer as I apply them to particular examples. Still, many of you will feel very suspicious of complex formal machinery with somewhat obscure motivation. Well, what can I say? You are perfectly right to be suspicious. I am myself!

Before turning to concrete examples, we need an *Aristotle* concept of question begging. Now for Aristotle the *idea* of begging the question is the *same* as the idea of reasoning in a circle. Some p is in question. You reason in a circle if you begin with p as a premise and then reason along until you arrive at the ultimate conclusion—right back where you started from—at p. Begging the question is the very same thing: you beg to be granted as a premise the very p which is in question, the ultimate conclusion p. My definition of Aristotle question begging—which I turn out to have gotten directly from Aristotle—will reflect this identity between the two notions. If an argument's conclusion p is actually one of its premises and the proposition p is in question, then I shall say that

the argument is *strictly* question begging and *explicitly* circular. Now Aristotle believes there is a natural and proper order for the development of knowledge, independently of particular audiences and dialectical situations.2 We may doubt this, but believe there is an order appropriate for the development of points in a particular situation. Or, I in this paper will impose order by supposing x is a basic considerer. Supposing one way or the other some notion of order, I define: suppose that *q* cannot be known in proper order except by being derived from *p*. Then an argument with *q* as a premise and *p* as conclusion is, I shall say, circular *at one remove* and question begging at one remove. I call an argument *Aristotle* question begging if it is either strictly so or so at one remove.

But does Aristotle *himself* ever define "question begging" in this way? Actually as I wrote down the definition, I thought he didn't. But as I re-read *Prior Analytics* Book II sec. 16, I think Aristotle *is* giving my definition. (On a previous reading, I had convinced myself that Aristotle was succeeding in defining only Basu 3 question begging instead; Basu sees here the definition of question begging as mere valid argument from an unwarranted premise, with no clear implication of circularity. So let us read *very carefully*!)

At 64b28, McKeon 4,

> To beg and assume the original question is a species of failure to demonstrate the problem proposed [A *species*! Not all failure to demonstrate is begging the question!], but this happens in many ways. [*This*! Here Aristotle refers to failure to demonstrate. Such failure is many things, most of which are *not* begging the question!] A man may not reason syllogistically [= validly] at all [but such failure is *not* yet question begging!], or he may argue from premises which are less known or equally unknown [*not* yet question begging, though many people give just this as the very definition of question begging!], or he may establish the antecedent by means of its consequents; [Here there is a problem for me, for this third case *does* imply question begging at one remove. Perhaps Aristotle means that we have not yet seen *why* it is question begging: namely because the antecedent is being derived from itself (?)] for demonstration proceeds from what is more certain and prior. Now begging the question is none of these: [They *aren't* begging the question; merely failure to demonstrate!] but since we get to know some things naturally through themselves [The self evident propositions are known through themselves and this is *not* question begging: *p/p* is *not* question begging if *p* is self evident!], and other things by means of something else (the first principles through themselves, what is subordinate to them through something else) [Aristotle's parenthetical remark!], whenever a man tries to prove what is not self evident by means of itself, then he begs the question. [Begging the question is the same thing as circularity. However it need not be immediate explicit circularity.] This may be done by assuming what is in question at once; [explicit question begging] it is also possible to make a transition to other things [to appeal to these other things as premises, other things] which would naturally be proved through the thesis proposed [the conclusion itself] and demonstrate it [the conclusion] through them [the other things] ... for it turns out that those who reason thus are proving A [the thesis proposed] through itself [at one remove].

Let this suffice. Aristotle *has* given my definition. True, he goes on to give further explanations and makes some errors which threaten to collapse this definition into mere Basu question begging.

Still, he is *trying* to give my definition.

Now, examples.

Though Aristotle *wants* to mean by question begging what I have called Aristotle question begging, he has trouble sticking to that definition. One place where he tries to explain what he intends by question begging—and does not succeed—is in the *Topics*, as cited by Edwards. Aristotle lists five kinds of supposedly question arguments. The first is the explicitly circular type. I now proceed from the fifth backwards.

Fifth, Aristotle claims that an argument in which a single premise entails the conclusion is question begging. He is wrong, in both the *Meno* and the Aristotle sense. My example comes from my *Meno* paper.

A friend asks me whether there is a four letter word ending in E, N, Y. I go through the alphabet in my mind "Ay-enny, benny, senny or kenny, denny, ee-enny, fenny, ..." And so forth. Having gone through the whole alphabet, I say that there is *no* such word. This shows that I do not *know* that there is such a word.

I am then asked if "deny" is a four letter word ending in E, N, Y. I say "Oh! Of course." This shows that I knew all along that "deny" was such a word. Therefore I knew all along the premise but not the conclusion of the following one premise argument in which the conclusion follows with stupifying obviousness:

> "Deny" is a four letter word ending in E, N, Y.
> So, There is a four letter word ending in E, N, Y.

Plato is wrong in thinking that all deductive argument is question begging because what implies knowledge of the conclusion in this case is not *knowledge* of the premise, but actual *contemplation* of the premise. If I am asked whether the premise is true, I know the conclusion. But if I am merely asked whether the conclusion is true, I do not consider the premise—in this case because I considered 'denny' instead of 'deny'.[5] Nor is the argument *Aristotle* question begging. Since I did not know the conclusion to be true, I hardly derived the premise from it!

As his *fourth* case, Aristotle says that argument from the universal to the specific or particular is question begging. Perhaps, as inference to the particular, he has in mind the argument "All men are mortal/So, Socrates is mortal." But this argument is not even valid, since, as Bertrand Russell has pointed out, [6] the premise does not tell us that Socrates is a man. If we add that premise, the argument is still not question begging, even in the *Meno* sense, for asking ourselves whether Socrates is mortal will not necessarily lead us to consider the question whether Socrates is a man, and the premises will not come into play.

Aristotle fares better with the argument from the universal to the specific: "If this is a man, it is mortal/So, If this is a man and is thin then it is mortal." My knowledge of the premise means that I am prepared to affirm "it is mortal" on the assumption "it is a man". [7] So if I consider the conclusion, I assume it is a man and thin. If the extra assumption that it is thin does not interfere, I will affirm that it is mortal on the other assumption (that it is a man). So the argument is *Meno* question begging. It is in this case not Aristotle question begging however. It is *Meno* question begging only because consideration of the conclusion brings into play the propensity involved in knowing the premise. In other words, consideration of the conclusion leads me to in effect consider the premise and to in effect infer the conclusion.[8] Still, I infer the *conclusion* from the *premise*. I do *not* infer the *premise* from the *conclusion*. So it is not Aristotle question begging.

However the extra consideration that this is thin may interfere with my previous propensity to infer mortality from man. The example of a *thin* man may be for me a counterexample to the premise; perhaps I think *thin* men *aren't* necessarily mortal after all. In this case, I will give up the premise rather than inferring the conclusion. So in sum the argument is *Meno* question begging in a slightly revised sense: if I know the premise and would continue knowing it upon consideration of the conclusion, then I already know, in the *Meno* sense, the conclusion.

Aristotle's *third* case *p, q*/So *p & q* is similar. If I know the premises separately and bringing them together won't cause me to doubt them, then consideration of the conclusion leads me to derive it from its conjuncts. We have *Meno* but not Aristotle question begging.

Finally, Aristotle does not fare so well with his second case: inference from all the particulars or all the specifics to the universal. The argument from all the particulars is not even valid unless, as Wittgenstein says in the *Tractatus* 9, you add the extra premise that those *are* all the particulars.

Let us consider the more interesting inference from the specifics to the universal: the premises say if this is a man *and thin* it is mortal, and if this is a man *and not thin* it is mortal. What follows *Meno* question beggingly is only that if this is a man who is either thin or not thin, it is mortal. The conclusion, however, that "if this is a *man* it is mortal" does not follow question beggingly, for consideration of *man* does not cause consideration of *thin or not thin*.

So in sum, of the five types of argument Aristotle says are question begging in the *Topics*, only the first—the explicitly circular—is Aristotle question begging and only some of the rest succeed in being *Meno* question begging. Neither Plato nor Aristotle gives us any real reason for admitting that all deductive reasoning is either circular or question begging. And nor does Mill, for he provides us with no reasons not already in Aristotle or Plato, as far as I can see.

Mill 10 discusses deductive reasoning in Book II of *System of Logic*. In chapter 1, sec. 2, he distinguishes improper (question begging) inferences from proper ones. In improper inferences (p. 160 ff.)

> ... there is not really any inference; there is in the conclusion no new truth, nothing but what was already asserted in the premises, and obvious to whoever apprehends them. The fact asserted in the conclusion is either the same fact, or part of the same fact, asserted in the original proposition [the premise]."

In the next section, sec. 3, we find the title "Inferences proper, distinguished into inductions and ratiocinations." This title suggests that ratiocination or deductive reasoning is *proper*—not question begging. However the title seems to be supplied by the editor, not by Mill. Mill lists inductions and Ratiocinations or Syllogisms as two types of proper inference *according to* what is "*popularly said*." (p. 162 middle) And a bit later (bottom p. 163) he says that induction *is* a real (proper) process of Reasoning, but "Whether ... as much can be said of the Syllogism remains to be determined ..."

The next chapter, chapter II, is a real puzzle. In secs. 2, 3, and 4, Mill *seems* to be considering and rightly rejecting the view that "all men are mortal" says of each and every individual man that he is mortal. Thus "All men are mortal/So, Socrates is mortal" would be question begging. So it seems that by rejecting this idea, Mill is saying that deductive reasoning *isn't* question begging.

However, closer examination reveals that the view that Mill is rejecting is rather that "all men are mortal" says that a certain *class* is mortal or says of a certain *word* ('man') that mortal is attached to it, and we infer that individual men are mortal. I shall not try further to understand this issue!

Still, whatever the issue Mill was discussing, he concludes by affirming a view of his own. This view says that "all men are mortal" says a certain *attribute* (man) implies another attribute (mortal) (sec. 3, bottom of p. 177). This view would seem to save us from the idea that deduction is question begging. And in sec. 4, having re-stated this

view in another form, he actually says in a footnote "the axiom [view] I propose makes prominent the condition which alone makes that application [Deduction] a real [proper] inference."

So, as far as I can see, Mill has just said that deduction *isn't* question begging!

But in chapter III, Mill has forgotten all about his attribute theory!

He himself gives the view that "all men are mortal" says of each man that he is mortal, or at least he seems to be reverting to this view. At any rate (p. 184) he says "It must be granted that in every syllogism, considered as an argument to prove the conclusion, there is a *petitio principle*." And in sec. 4, he denies that any real (proper) reasoning is syllogistic.

But our real concern about Mill is not in figuring out his torturous views, but in finding out what *arguments* does he give us for saying deduction is question begging. His discussion in chapter III, and at p. 184, suggests the argument that "all men are mortal" already *says* that Socrates is mortal. But I have already rejected this argument in my discussion of Aristotle's *Topics*.

The discussion at p. 184 also suggests the argument that if *p* entails *q* then any doubt about *q* will be an equal doubt about *p,* and so the inference *p/q* will be useless.

But that argument is wrong. My initial doubt that there is a four letter word ending in E, N, Y did not become an equal doubt about whether "deny" was such a word. Rather, upon consideration of the premise, the doubt about the conclusion simply disappeared.

And then on p. 185, he gives the argument that in a valid deduction, everything in the conclusion must already be 'asserted' or 'included' in the premises. As Edwards points out, the expressions 'asserted' and 'included' are here the tricky expressions. As far as I can see, this is just Plato's *Meno* argument revisited.

So Mill gives no new reason for thinking that deduction is either question begging or circular.

We still have to consider Sextus Empiricus and the dialectical concept of question begging. In another paper 11, where I was looking for the widest possible concept of question begging, I defined an argument as *dialectically* question begging with respect to a particular audience if everyone in that audience who would accept the premises already accepted the conclusion. Then, by an argument essentially the same as the one which Edwards derives from Sextus Empiricus, I concluded that any valid argument, or at least any that did not have all self evident premises, would be dialectically question begging for an audience that had already considered that argument. Thus any valid argument whose premises are not all self evident will be *potentially* dialectically question begging.

Now let us suppose that dialectical question begging implies a corresponding dialectical circularity. Actually, I find *this* assumption very doubtful, but I assume it for the sake of argument. Well, then, leaving aside self evident premises every valid argument will be *potentially* question begging and—doubtfully—*potentially* circular. I see here *no* motivation for saying that every valid argument is *actually* circular. Edwards seems to be too quick, in my view, to grant to Plato, Aristotle, Mill, and Sextus Empiricus a conclusion they have not earned.

I have said it is doubtful that dialectical question begging involves any real circularity. Suppose I argue from *p* to *q* but my audience has already argued since -*q* therefore -*p*. So I argue from *p* to *q*, while they go from -*q* to -*p*. Here we have two half circles, so to speak, but each half is a half of a different circle. Neither circle is actually

completed. I do not argue also from q to p, and my audience does not argue from $-p$ to $-q$.

Nor is it convincing to say that since I argue from p to q, therefore I assume that my audience's view that $-p$ & $-q$ is wrong (with respect to p) in order to conclude that my audience is wrong (with respect to q). For their being wrong *with respect to p* is not the same as their being wrong with respect to q, and there is no real circle.

And anyway, dialectical question begging (everyone who accepts the premises already accepts the conclusion) is obviously an attenuated form of *Meno* question begging, and we have seen that *Meno* question begging does not really always involve circularity, which would be Aristotle question begging.

I have now concluded my discussion of Edwards' main thesis that deductive reasoning is somehow circular.

I wish now to turn to an unrelated but nonetheless very interesting passage where Edwards gives some problem examples a, b, and c.[12] These cases seem intuitively question begging, but, though a is explicitly circular, Edwards challenges us to find any clear sense in which b and c are circular. I accept this challenge.

Case a is "I am 8 feet/So, I am 8 feet tall". Cases b and c are more complex variations on a.

Case b is "I am my brother's brother and I am 8 feet tall/So, I am eight feet tall." Here the component "I am my brother's brother" is not self evident, as it might momentarily seem to be, for it says in effect that I *have* a brother and that I am male.

Now this argument has the form p & q/q. My *Meno* theory does *not* say that *every* argument of this form is *Meno* question begging. For instance, in the example:

> "Deny" is a four letter word ending in E, N, Y
> <u>and there is a four letter word ending in E, N, Y</u>
> So, There is a four letter word ending in E, N, Y,

I might not know the conclusion, yet I could not help but know the premise, since when I consider the premise, the first conjunct causes me to know the second.

But, if we suppose that the conjuncts p and q are unrelated, as in Edwards' example, the argument *will* be *Meno* question begging and *also* Aristotle question begging. For when I consider p & q, my only way of knowing it will be to independently affirm p and affirm q. So in effect, p & q is derived from p, q.

Turning to case c, this also is Aristotle question begging and circular at one remove. The argument is:

> If I am my brother's brother [*i.e.*, if I am male and have a brother], then I am 8 feet tall.
> <u>I am my brother's brother.</u>
> So, I am 8 feet tall.

Now the problem with this argument is, as Edwards says, that there is no relationship between the antecedent "I am my brother's brother" and the consequent "I am 8 feet tall."

There *could* in some situation *be* a connection, for instance if scientists reported that in my town everyone with a brother was 8 feet tall. *Then* the argument would not be question begging.

However there is no connection. How then can the conditional premise be known? Not by a connection because there is none. Not by the falsity of the antecedent, because the second premise assures us the antecedent is true.

The only way to know the conditional premise is true is to know its consequent is true. But the consequent is the conclusion. The argument is Aristotle question begging and circular at one remove.

This completes my comments

Notes

1. "Knowledge by Deduction," *Philosophical Review*, July 1978, pp. 337 ff.

2. For instance, at *Topics* 141b34-142a10, Aristotle argues that a proper definition of a term is not tailored to the understanding of this or that audience; rather a term has only one proper definition, which defines it in terms "more intelligible absolutely" rather than "to us." Such terminology will be intelligible to a person "intellectually in a sound condition." In effect, the proper definition of a term will be the one used in a properly ordered exposition of knowledge.

3. See Basu, Dilip, "Begging the Question, circularity, and epistemic propriety," *Argumentation* 8 (1994): 217-26.

4. Quoting from the translation by A. J. Jenkinson in R. McKeon's *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, 1941, Random House, New York.

5. Some formalities. The reader need not give him or her self a headache by trying to fit my actual consideration of the "deny" example to the model of basic consideration. In the *Meno* paper I had no model for quantified logic, and in the present paper I proceed in an ad hoc way with quantified statements.

In considering whether there is a four letter word ending in E, N, Y, I actually consider and end up affirming that Every *four letter combination ending in E, N, Y* is a *non-word*. But instead of assuming that an unspecified thing, "this", is a four letter combination ending in E, N, Y, I am able to survey all 26 actual cases of such combinations, though I mispronounce the crucial one.

6. Russell, B., *The Problems of Philosophy*, Oxford U., London, 1959, pp. 105-106.

7. In considering for an unspecified 'this' whether *If this is a man it is mortal*, it suffices here to consider whether to *affirm* it or *not* to affirm it. We affirm it if and only if we deny "this is a man but is not mortal." But, since, for an unspecified thing, we must be neutral about whether it is or is not a man (or mortal), we assume one of the conjuncts, say the first, and consider whether to deny the other. Assuming *man*, we affirm *mortal*, thus reject *not mortal*, thus reject the conjunction *man and not mortal* and thus affirm *if man then mortal*.

8. I say I *in effect* consider the premise and *in effect* infer the conclusion. These qualifications are necessary. The rejection of *p* is the *basis* for a *result*: the affirming of -*p*. The affirming of *p* and the affirming of *q* are together the *basis* for a *result*: the affirming of *p & q*. Similarly the affirming of mortal on the assumption of man

is the *basis* for the *result*: affirming if man then mortal. In the present case, while considering *if this is thin and man then it is mortal*, I affirm this conclusion because I affirm mortal on the assumption man. That is, I enact the *basis* for the premise and as a consequence affirm the conclusion. I do not actually affirm the premise itself.

9. Wittgenstein, L., *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1922, 1.11.

10. My references to Mill are to *A System of Logic Ratiocinative and Inductive* (Books I-III), ed. J. M. Robson, University of Toronto Press, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973.

11. "One Fallacy vs. Begging the Question," read at the 1995 conference at George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia.

12. Edwards also gives a case d. Since, however, both its premise and its conclusion are self evident, nothing is *in question*, and therefore case d cannot be question begging. Like Aristotle in the *Prior Analytics*, I too hold that *p/p* is not question begging if *p* is self evident. (I took this view in the paper cited in the previous footnote.)