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Commentary on Juho Ritola's "Two Accounts of Begging the Question"

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1. INTRODUCTION

Professor Ritola notes that there are two key epistemic accounts of the fallacy of begging the question in the literature: the objective account, OBQ and the subjective account, SBQ. OBQ involves the claim that an argument begs the question if "one of the premises cannot be justifiably believed independently of the conclusion." (p. 1) On the other hand, SBQ involves the claim that an argument begs the question if "the arguer's belief in some premise is dependent on the belief in the conclusion or on reasons to believe the conclusion." (p. 1) The author then goes on to consider an objection to the OBQ approach arguing that it does not deal a decisive blow to OBQ in favour of SBQ, and in the end concludes that both analyses of begging the question should be retained. What I wonder about is whether one can ever argue without circularity that an argument in favour of a given account of begging the question does not itself beg the question. To make such an argument, one would need to appeal either to the account of begging the question that they are trying to defend, which seems circular, or to another account which itself can be defended only if the argument in favour of it does not beg the question. We would need to determine whether this is the case appealing either to that account or to another account. And so on.

2. HOW DO WE KNOW IF ANY ARGUMENT IN FAVOUR OF RETAINING AN ACCOUNT OF BEGGING THE QUESTION DOESN'T BEG THE QUESTION?

For simplicity's sake only, suppose there are only two plausible epistemic accounts of begging the question: OBQ and SBQ as Professor Ritola characterizes them. An argument in favour of OBQ contains a number of premises having the following schematic form: P1, P2, ..., Pn, therefore, C where C is "OBQ should be retained." Does this argument beg the question from an epistemic point of view? To determine this, we would need to appeal to an epistemic account of begging the question. If we use OBQ we would have to determine whether justifiably believing any of the premises depends on justifiably believing the conclusion. At the end of the critical examination of this

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argument to retain OBQ, we either conclude that the argument begs the question according to OBQ or that it doesn't.

Regardless of what we conclude, we are using OBQ, an account that is being argued for, to determine whether an argument in favour of retaining it begs the question. But this works only if OBQ has already been successfully argued for in a separate argument. But how do we know that that argument doesn't beg the question? To avoid circularity, we could use SBQ to determine if our argument in favour of retaining OBQ begs the question. At the end of the critical examination of the argument to retain OBQ, we either conclude that the argument to retain OBQ begs the question in sense of SBQ or that it doesn't. However, this time around, we are not using the very account being argued for to vindicate or refute the argument in favour of that account. Circularity is circumvented.

However, how do we know whether SBQ that we used to vindicate or refute our argument for OBQ is an account that should be retained? We would need to critically examine arguments in favour of SBQ to determine if those arguments beg the question. But now we are faced with the same difficulty as above. If we use SBQ as a standard to determine whether an argument in favour of retaining SBQ begs the question, then we are employing circular reasoning. For SBQ can be used to determine whether an argument in favour of it begs the question only if SBQ has been successfully argued for in a separate argument. Then we would need to determine whether that argument begs the question, which can be established only if SBQ has already been successfully argued for. And so on.

Perhaps we could use OBQ to determine whether the argument that SBQ should be retained begs the question. But the problem with this approach is that we are using SBQ to show that arguments in favour of OBQ do not beg the question, and an argument for SBQ is exactly what is under critical scrutiny. So we cannot use OBQ to vindicate arguments in favour of SBQ because SBQ is being used to vindicate arguments in favour of OBQ. Suspending our assumption that there are only two plausible epistemic accounts of begging the question, one way out of the circle is to appeal to a third epistemic account of begging the question, call it XBQ. We could use XBQ to vindicate (or refute) arguments for both OBQ and SBQ, and so the circularity has been avoided.

However, the new question is whether arguments in favour of retaining XBQ beg the question. We can't use XBQ to determine this because XBQ is exactly what's under scrutiny. So perhaps we could use either SBQ or OBQ to determine whether the arguments in favour of XBQ beg the question. But XBQ is being used to determine whether arguments in favour of retaining SBQ and OBQ beg the question. So this won't work. Then perhaps there is a fourth epistemic account of begging the question, call it YBQ that can be used to determine whether arguments in favour of SBQ, OBQ and XBQ beg the question. But how do we know whether arguments in favour of YBQ beg the question? To avoid circularity, we can't use SBQ, OBQ, XBQ to determine this. Then we would need to appeal to a fifth epistemic account of begging the question, call it ZBQ. And so on.

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3. CONCLUSION

In this short commentary, I have not taken Professor Ritola's arguments in favour of retaining OBQ and SBQ to task. However, what I have tried to do is call into question whether it is possible to critically evaluate any argument in favour of either account without begging the question. Of course, my argument for this may also beg the question, though I'm not sure how I could know that.

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