

University of Windsor

Scholarship at UWindsor

OSSA Conference Archive

OSSA 7

Jun 6th, 9:00 AM - Jun 9th, 5:00 PM

Irresolvable Conflicts and Begging the Question

Juho Ritola
University of Turku

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/ossaarchive>



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#)

Ritola, Juho, "Irresolvable Conflicts and Begging the Question" (2007). *OSSA Conference Archive*. 128.
<https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/ossaarchive/OSSA7/papersandcommentaries/128>

This Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Conferences and Conference Proceedings at Scholarship at UWindsor. It has been accepted for inclusion in OSSA Conference Archive by an authorized conference organizer of Scholarship at UWindsor. For more information, please contact scholarship@uwindsor.ca.

Irresolvable Conflicts and Begging the Question

JUHO RITOLA

*Department of Philosophy
University of Turku
20014 Turku
Finland
juhrit@utu.fi*

ABSTRACT: I will first look at some of the existing literature on irresolvable conflicts, shortly discuss the fallacy of begging the question, and then examine some questions that irresolvable conflicts bring to surface with respect to this fallacy. In particular, I will argue that even though such conflicts invite an analysis of the fallacy based on the doubt of the opponent, an analysis in terms of justified belief of the arguer is preferable.

KEY WORDS: begging the question, objective epistemic theory, subjective epistemic theory

INTRODUCTION

In terms of fallacy theory, irresolvable conflicts pose an interesting case. In an irresolvable conflict arguers become deadlocked around some issue and both parties appear to beg the question against the opponent. This creates a stalemate. Yet, a position characterized by begging the question is usually taken to be an irrational position. Begging the question means assuming in the premises of an argument what one was supposed to prove. An argument is supposed to proceed from something we already are justified in believing and that, by definition, cannot be the conclusion, because the argument was supposed to justify the conclusion. One could then suggest that whenever both parties beg the question against the opponent, it is reasonable not to accept either side's view. This can be quite difficult, since in some policy debates, where there is already a policy in effect, refraining from taking a position means in practice taking side in the debate, because one thereby allows the existing policy to stay in effect (Woods 2004, ch. 12) but if one is not able to make further judgment on the argument, one does not have, in an epistemic sense, other alternatives than to withhold judgment (although there could further practical arguments). But if both parties cannot be right, surely one of the parties is arguing fallaciously? These argumentative situations seem to merit our further study.

One philosophical discussion where a stalemate of this kind has often been argued to exist is the debate between a determinist and a free-will advocate. The following arguments are crude, and enthymematic, representations of their respective positions.¹ In the debate below, Ann represents the determinist and Bob represents the free-will advocate:

¹ This example is a simplified version of one of the cases discussed by Gary Colwell (1994, 1996) and John Woods (2000).

(FWD)

ANN: All acts can be explained with naturalistic causes. Naturalistic causes leave no room for free will. If all acts can be explained with naturalistic causes and naturalistic causes leave no room for free will, then there can be no free will. Therefore there is no free will.

BOB: There is free will. If there is free will, then either it is not the case that naturalistic causes leave no room for free will or it is not the case that all acts can be explained with naturalistic causes. Therefore, either it is not the case that naturalistic causes leave no room for free will or it is not the case that all acts can be explained with naturalistic causes.

Both parties seem entitled to claiming that the opponent is begging the question against them. On the one hand, Ann could argue that Bob was supposed to prove that not all acts can be reduced to naturalistic causes and when he starts from the assumption that there is free will, he is begging the question. On the other hand, Bob could argue that Ann was supposed to prove that there is no free will and when she starts from the premise that all acts can be explained with naturalistic causes, she is begging the question.

Crudely, then, one form of a stalemate, or an irresolvable conflict is created when one discussant argues that p and q , therefore r , and the opponent argues that $\text{not-}r$, therefore $\text{not-}(p \text{ and } q)$. As John Woods (2000, 206) notes, these two argument-schemes are equivalent as they are contrapositives of each other. If the first argument is valid, so is the second one.

In this paper, I will first look at some of the existing literature on irresolvable conflicts to gain a better view of their nature. I will then examine two different theories of begging the question to see how they would explicate the claim of fallaciousness in this context. The discussion of the problems of these accounts leads to a consideration of the possibility that in irresolvable conflicts, the analysis of the fallacy, or claims of fallaciousness, should be based on the doubt of the opponent. Finally, I will argue that an analysis in terms of justified belief of the arguer is more desirable and can be achieved by using the idea of relevant alternative.

1. IRRESOLVABLE CONFLICTS

In order to explicate the claim of fallacious argument in an irresolvable conflict, we must first try to understand the nature and structure of an irresolvable conflict. I will present analyses of such cases by Robert Fogelin and Gary Colwell.

1.1 Fogelin and deep disagreements

Robert Fogelin (1985) has discussed argumentative stalemates he calls *deep disagreements*. According to him, these are ‘non-normal’ argumentative situations where the discussants do not share enough background to resolve the issue. Although he does not address the question of begging the question in this context, he deserves to be mentioned in this connection as he is, to my knowledge, among the first who have addressed the phenomenon of irresolvable conflicts from the viewpoint of argumentation theory or informal logic.

According to Fogelin, a ‘normal’ argumentative exchange requires that we share a great deal of beliefs and background assumptions with our opponent. He argues that this fact has not been appreciated fully before the development of informal

IRRESOLVABLE CONFLICTS AND BEGGING THE QUESTION

logic. The forms of the arguments used are not the only things that are important for a rational discussion but the context of argumentation is also crucial. For example, should we happen to argue over the order in which to do our shopping, we would be able to do this because we share a great deal of beliefs about the local geography, rush hours or about how vulnerable the desired dairy products are to the elements. These facts provide the framework or the structure within which reasons can be given and facts cited or arranged so that their implications to the topic become clear. This presupposing of facts seems a platitude but their importance is revealed only when we try to argue in a context where the presuppositions do not hold. Fogelin's main point is harsh: deep disagreements cannot be resolved for they undercut the conditions essential for arguing: the underlying principles clash in ways that make resolution impossible.² As a consequence, deep disagreements persist even when normal criticisms have been answered. (Fogelin 1985, 3-5.)

As an example, Fogelin (1985, 5-6) mentions the abortion debate. As a debate between a religious person and a secularist, this issue cannot be resolved by biological facts alone but needs to address terms such as 'personhood' and 'immortal soul'. This can be impossible as the terms used by the participants may belong to such walks of life that they do not admit common evaluation at all.

Fogelin's view sheds light on the irresolvability-aspect of the argumentative stalemates. The problem is not only the propositional structure of the discussion but also the fact that the arguers do not have a place to turn to with their disagreement. The arguments seem to make presuppositions that the opponent is not willing to grant and the arguments of both parties seem to be ineffective in resolving the conflict of opinions.

1.2 Colwell and chronic circularity

Gary Colwell (1994) argues that the discussion between a determinist and a free-will advocate exhibits what he calls *chronic circularity*: it not only exhibits circularity but there are some additional aspects that make the circularity chronic. According to Colwell (1994, 252), the reason is that the debaters use different procedures in verifying and falsifying each other's theory. This asymmetry cannot be corrected, because the debaters are committed to profoundly different views on the nature of reality. Colwell's argumentation seems to corroborate Fogelin's view of this type of argumentative stalemates.

In the debate above, Ann starts from the claim that everything can be explained back to naturalistic causes and Bob starts from the claim that there are acts of free will. According to Colwell (1994, 256), the discussion could in fact be resolved, if Ann could get Bob to name a certain act that is definitely an example of a free act and then show that this act can in fact be explained by naturalistic causes. Yet, things would not stop here. If Bob were to bite the bullet, and to come up with a better, (at least so far) unexplained, example of free will, the discussion could keep on going. History of science does know of incidents where a behavior previously thought to be voluntary has been found to have a clear cause³ and in this sense Ann seems to be better off: her position is accumulating evidence.

² In describing such underlying principles, Fogelin (1985: 5) refers to Putnam's 'framework propositions' and to Wittgenstein's rules.

³ Colwell (1994: 251) cites as an example the Tourette's disease, where the patient exhibits involuntary motor and vocal tics, such as involuntary profanity.

Here lies one asymmetry. Namely, in any case where some behavior is cited as an example of free-will, one cannot with the same methods that one uses to show causes, show that there is no cause. One cannot empirically demonstrate a lack of cause by any other means than by looking at the phenomenon and *not* finding causes. In Ann's view, however, this does not mean that there is no cause but only that we have not yet been able to identify it. In methodological terms, Ann seems to have the upper hand. (Colwell 1994, 256-257.)

However, there is an even deeper kind of asymmetry involved here that keeps the discussants revolving. Ann and Bob are using different kinds of evidence. Ann is looking to the outside world to find predictable phenomenon with the help of the five senses whereas Bob is looking to the inside world with the help of introspection. The debate could be resolved if Ann would admit that her restrictive empirical procedure is not able to cope with this phenomenon (for it does not admit that introspection produces reliable knowledge) or if Bob would admit that Ann's empirical methods are decisive. However, the unwillingness to make these kinds of concessions is what this debate is all about. The metaphysics of the participants are different. What the participants are willing to take as evidence varies to the extent that resolution is impossible. (Colwell 1994, 258-260.)

These considerations point to the conclusion that for this type of argumentative stalemates to be created, we need both certain structural features of the arguments, i.e. that both parties start from a claim the other party is directly denying and further the fact that there are some deeper underlying commitments that keep the circularity going. Let us now focus on the fallacy of begging the question in this context.

2. BEGGING THE QUESTION

The problem in the debate on free will (FWD) then boils down to whether the participants are justified in using their respective premises in the debate: Ann must be justified in believing that "All acts can be explained with natural causes" and Bob should be justified in believing that "There is free will". Ann should be further able to justify that introspection is not a reliable sign of free will and Bob should be able to justify that empirical methods cannot be used to settle the issue.

Colwell notes that the metaphysics of the arguers are different. However, I will assume that we can adequately represent this difference of metaphysics simply by stating that both arguers have argumentative presuppositions that they should be able to justify. In similar fashion, if I infer that "John is not at home" from seeing that John car is not on his driveway, I should be justified in believing that John and only John could have taken the car and it is not for example in the garage. I will also assume that in inferential justification, the argumentative presuppositions must be true in order for my inference to produce knowledge, but in order for me to be justified in believing that the conclusion is true something less is required. Namely, it is sufficient for justified inferential belief (or indirect, i.e. belief that is based on other belief) that I am justified in making these presuppositions. Hence, if we agree that the participants in (FWD) make some sort of mistake, the proposed theories should be able to show that the reasons for which the debaters use those premises are somehow illegitimate; they make presuppositions that are not for them to make in this discussion. The premises would, if accepted, establish the conclusion. The problem must thus lie in the presuppositions and the justification the debaters have for them.

IRRESOLVABLE CONFLICTS AND BEGGING THE QUESTION

Let us now look how different epistemic theories of begging the question would explicate the possible mistakes in the argument. I will first present the so called objective epistemic theory of begging the question. Next, I will examine how subjective epistemic analysis would analyze the problem in the debate. As these theories have some problems, I will discuss an alternative solution according to which the doubt of the opponent should be used as a criterion.

2.1 Objective epistemic theory

The objective theory has been proposed by John Biro (1977, 1984) and further defended and amended by Biro and Siegel (1992, 2006) According to the objective epistemic theory of begging the question (OBQ), an argument begs the question if the premise cannot be known or reasonably believed, unless the conclusion is known or reasonably believed (Biro and Siegel 2006, 96). Crucial for this analysis is that it is not dependent on what the user of an argument believes (Biro 1977, 261): whether an argument can or cannot establish the conclusion is an objective fact. This relies on the idea that propositions have different degree of *relative* knowability in respect to other propositions. Some premises are naturally, by their nature, more knowable than others. The premise must exhibit independence from the conclusion but this independence does not refer to truth. Of course, in a valid argument, the premises cannot be true if the conclusion is not true but that is not the issue here. It is the independence of justification that we are after. If the premise cannot be established without knowing or justifiably believing the conclusion first (the premise may also be equally unknowable), the argument is objectively faulty. To give a verdict on an argument, we must look at the objective reasons for accepting the premise.

According to the objective theory, to show that Ann is begging the question, one should be able to show that Ann cannot know or is not justified in believing that “All acts can be explained with natural causes” unless she already knows or is justified in believing that there is no free will. If we rely on Colwell’s analysis, this boils down to whether she is justified in believing that introspection is not a reliable sign of free will. However, to avoid the complexities that easily ensue from using a philosophical debate as an example, I will just discuss whether Ann can justifiably believe the premise without believing the conclusion.⁴ So we must now ask, does this explain what we think is problematic in Ann’s reasoning in (FWD).

The analysis that (OBQ) can provide is dependent on how we understand the relation ‘A cannot be known if B is not known’. If we take this in its absolute sense⁵ it seems warranted it to interpret this as saying that it is not *possible* to establish the premise before the conclusion is established. I understand this to mean that there are no objectively justifying routes to believing the premise that do not first establish the conclusion. In the case of Ann in the (FWD), this should mean that there is no way to establish that all acts can be reduced to naturalistic causes without first establishing that there is no free will. The justification of the former must somehow go through the latter. However, it is not easy to establish claims of this sort. It does not seem obvious

⁴ Bob’s position can be described in similar fashion. His reason to believe the premise “there is free will” must be independent of his belief that “either it is not the case that naturalistic causes leave no room for free will or it is not the case that all acts can be explained with naturalistic causes.” In Colwell’s analysis, this boils down to whether Bob is justified in believing that the empirical methods cannot decide the issue.

⁵ This absolute sense seemed originally the one that Biro had mind. He originally talked of ideal epistemic agent not subject to any limitations of computing power and logical acuity. For example, for an ideal agent all necessarily true propositions would be equally knowable. (See e.g. 1984, fn. 3)

that this premise can only be established from the posited conclusion. For example, if one could make a comprehensive list of all known types of acts and then show individually that all these acts indeed can be explained with naturalistic causes, despite the strong intuition that we have free will, then the conclusion would not need to be established first. I am not saying that this will be done, but it does not seem in any way obvious to be the case that all the possible justificatory routes to the premise must go through the conclusion. If we accept that this is possible, we should simply say that we do not know whether Ann is begging the question. If there are alternative objective routes to justifiedly believing the conclusion, she is not begging the question, if not, she is.

There are problems with this analysis. Namely, not only does it leave us unable to say which of the parties is arguing fallaciously, it would also seem that Ann could beg the question even if there were a way of establishing the conclusion without establishing the conclusion first. Think of two alternative scenarios.⁶ In the first scenario, there are three cases. In the first of these, there is a way establishing the premise independently of the conclusion and Ann possesses and uses this evidence to justifiedly believe the premise. Objectively, there is no begging the question. In terms of the discussion, Ann's only failure is to explain these reasons to Bob. In the second case, there is a way of establishing the conclusion and Ann possesses these reasons. She does not, however, bring them to bear on the discussion. There could several reasons for this. For example, she could just fail to see their relevance, or the relevant propositions would have to be established through complex logical deductions and she has never engaged in them. The reason why she accepts the premise, however, is that she accepts the conclusion. She would seem to commit some kind of mistake of reasoning, even if she is not objectively begging the question. In the third case, Ann does not even possess the relevant justifying beliefs, but bases her belief on the conclusion. In the second and the third case, Ann seems to beg the question, even though according to the objective account, she does not.

In the second scenario, there is no objective way of establishing the premise without the conclusion. All proper justificational activities must first establish the conclusion. But now think of two different cases. In the first case, Ann could still reasonably use the premise. She could, for example, justifiably believe a scientist's claim that all acts can be explained with naturalistic causes. In this scenario, the scientist could not know the premise without knowing the conclusion but Ann seems subjectively justified in taking the scientist's word for it.⁷ Ann would not seem to beg the question, even though the objective theory says that she is.⁸ In the second case,

⁶ These scenarios are a variation of a central case that has been studied in the debate between the objective epistemic sense and the subjective epistemic case. See Sanford (1988) for the example and discussion of how it supports the subjective epistemic sense, and Walter Sinnott-Armstrong (1999) for its development; see Biro and Siegel (1992, 2006) for response and defense of the objective theory.

⁷ Biro and Siegel would object to this counter-example to their criterion. In their (2006, 96-97) response to Sanford's counter-example (A1), they note that the existence of the reliable source giving me information about the premise is a change in the objective epistemic sense. The limitations of time and space do not allow me to address this response fully, but I can note that this makes their claim that the value of argument cannot and should not depend on the beliefs of the arguer odd. It is exactly what the reasoner believes and uses in inferring in these cases that accounts for the intuitive difference in the justifiability: what if Ann has heard of the scientist's statement but does not use it in her reasoning, i.e. she believes it but does not use it? Is there no mistake in her justifying activities then?

⁸ If it seems unintuitive that could rely on an argument that is fallacious, consider an analogical case. A mathematician creates a lengthy proof that is beyond my comprehension proving that if p, then q, and I accept this implication. I then come to believe that p, and relying on my belief that if p, then q, I infer that q. I thereby become justified in believing that q. However, assume that the proof is faulty. My

IRRESOLVABLE CONFLICTS AND BEGGING THE QUESTION

Ann is not aware of the scientist's testimony but bases her belief in the premise on the conclusion. Again, she would appear to beg the question.

It appears that the scope of possible mistakes in the (FWD) is not exhausted by the objective theory of begging the question. Let us now look at the alternative.

2.2 Subjective epistemic theory

The subjective account shares with the objective the idea that the fallacy of begging the question cannot be described in purely formal terms, but instead of concentrating on the objective epistemic situation, it gives a criterion that is based on the ways of forming the belief in the conclusion (proposed by David Sanford 1971, 1981, 1988 and further developed by Walter Sinnott-Armstrong 1999)). As with the objective account, one needs to form the belief in the premise independently of the conclusion, but this means actual basing relations, not the objective epistemic relations. The conditions of a normal justifying argument are that i) the premise is the case; ii) the premise implies the conclusion; iii) the arguer believes both i) and ii); and iv) the belief in the premise is formed independently of the belief in the conclusion. This dependence on conclusion can take two forms: an argument begs the question if the arguer's reason to believe the premise is dependent on (a) the arguer's belief in the conclusion or (b) the arguer's reason to believe the conclusion (Sinnott-Armstrong 1999, 183).

The explanation of the fallacy should then be that either Ann's reason to believe that "All acts can be explained with naturalistic causes" is her belief that "there is no free will" or her reason to believe the premise is dependent on her reason to believe that "there is no free will". (This could, for example, be the case if her reason to believe that "introspective evidence is not reliable" is behind her both beliefs.) In similar fashion, Bob's mistake should be that he is basing his belief that there is no free will on either his belief that "either it is not the case that naturalistic causes leave no room for free will or it is not the case that all acts can be explained with naturalistic causes." or his reason to believe the premise is dependent on his reason to believe the conclusion. (This could, for example, be his reason to believe that empirical methods are not able to resolve the issue)

One problem with the analysis of the subjective account is that it does not seem necessary that Ann's reason to believe the premise "All acts can be explained with natural causes" is based either on the belief that "there is no free will" or her reason to believe that. For example, it could be that she has never thought about the proposition "there is no free will" or its possible connections with her premise before she got involved in this debate with Bob. The point is that no actual basing relations need to exist between either the beliefs in the premise or the conclusion, or the reasons to believe either of them. She might have formed the belief in the premise based on first reading a scientific article on human behavior that listed various forms of behavior that were previously taught to be willful behavior but are now seen to be determined and then generalized from this. This is not something that the subjective account would necessarily have to deny, since it is giving two sufficient conditions but cases like this seem to radically diminish its scope.

There is, however, a natural way of increasing the scope of the subjective account. It seems that we have justified dispositional beliefs. Normally we would say

belief that q is not knowledge but it is nevertheless justified. I do not think we can say that I have actually committed the same mistake as the mathematician, as I do not have the resources to go through the inference but my inference is questionable nevertheless.

that I am justified believing that my shoes are not made of ice, even if I have never formulated any beliefs about the matter. If we accept dispositional justified beliefs, we should take this account in judging the justifiability of beliefs in premises as well. Then we could analyze the mistake even if there were no actual basing relations. For example, Ann is justified in her belief that all acts can be explained naturalistic causes, if her reason to accept the conclusion *is actually justified* independently of her belief in conclusion or her reason to believe the conclusion or if *she would justify* it with something independent of her belief in the conclusion or her reason to believe the conclusion. If not, she is begging the question.

This reference to the dispositions does not, however, solve a further problem. It seems to be the case that one could beg the question objectively, without begging the question subjectively. If Ann based her belief in the premise on the scientist's statement, she would not beg the question by the subjective even if the scientist was begging the question in the objective sense. Both analyses then have cases of begging the question that is not begging the question on the other account.

These analyses might leave one with some discontent. First, the objective and the subjective theories give different results as to whether the participants are begging the question or not and there are cases where breaching one criterion does not imply the breach of the other. Still, both seem to address central worries with the fallacy. This might lead one to look for further criterion that would combine all these aspects. Second, based on the analyses of the objective and the subjective, we are not able to say whether either of the participants are begging the question. It might be the case that there is an objective way to believe the premises of one these position's independently (we just do not know which) or it might be that the participants are basing, or would base, their beliefs in the premise on their belief in the conclusion or the reason to believe the conclusion. We just do not know. But the dialectical structure of the (FWD) gives one the feeling that there is still something problematic in the arguments of Ann and Bob. In explaining the mistake in an irresolvable conflict, the important thing is not just how the participants based, or would base, their own beliefs, or what was independently knowable or justifiably believable in this context, but also how these reasons are used in the context of dialogue. Both the objective and the subjective seem unable to address the concern that the participants to (FWD) beg the question *against each other*. There are aspects in their debate that make these arguments useless as tools of rational persuasion as they start from something that the opponent will deny. The analysis should be sensitive to this aspect. Let us now look at a proposal that initially seems more promising in this respect.

2.3 *Doubt of the opponent*

One way of addressing these concerns could be to start the analysis from the doubt of the opponent. The arguers might have had (or lacked) reasons for forming their beliefs in the premises that are independent of the conclusion (or the reasons for which the conclusion is believed) or the premise might have been possible to establish independently or the conclusion (or not). However, what is important is how the arguers put forth reasons in this context and how well they are able to give premises that the opponent should accept. In this sense, both arguers seem to fail miserably: they give premises that the opponent is going to doubt. The arguers might have been originally justified in their beliefs. But it seems that only when doubt is raised concerning the premise, the arguments become useless even if the belief in the premise was justified earlier. Perhaps this is the more fruitful criterion of begging the

IRRESOLVABLE CONFLICTS AND BEGGING THE QUESTION

question. After all, we agree that doubt is the motivating factor that sets argumentation in motion in the first place. Why not start the explication of the fallacy of begging the question from the same notion? It is the doubt of the opponent in respect to the premises to which the both parties seem incapable of responding.

There are in the literature on the fallacy of begging the question at least two suggestions of this kind. Peter of Spain discusses the fallacy in *Language in Dispute* (LID). According to him, begging the question is committed when a “conclusion that should be proven is sought for in the premises” (LID, 146). He then discusses the following example:

(RA)

1. A rational, mortal animal is running.
2. Therefore, a man is running.

This is not a proof, because if one of these propositions is doubted, the other is *necessarily to be doubted* (LID, 147). Peter of Spain does not, unfortunately, develop this idea so that it would explain how and when exactly the doubt transfers from the conclusion to the premise. A similar, but more developed suggestion, has been forwarded by Frank Jackson (1984, 34), who argues that

[i]t may be that what is evidence for the premises of an argument relative to the background beliefs of the propounder of an argument is no evidence relative to the background beliefs of the audience. In this case, the argument fails to be persuasive addressed to *that* audience, despite being valid and having highly probable premises for the propounder.

Jackson explains that if we doubt the conclusion C, we have reason to doubt any argument for C. This does not necessarily mean that we have reason to doubt any argument for C *after* it has been presented to us. It may be that the argument has changed our evidential situation to the extent that C is now acceptable to us. According to Jackson (1984, 35), *some* valid arguments are such that were they propounded, the extra evidence would be ineffective; and *some* will moreover be such that this is not an accidental feature of the particular audience but a pretty much inevitable feature of any audience in doubt about the conclusion. This seems to describe exactly what happens in the debate between Ann and Bob: their arguments are useless against each other and they furthermore seem *inevitably* useless against each other.

But now we must ask what this non-accidental and inevitable feature of an argument is. In defining a question-begging argument, Jackson notes only that:

A special case will be of an argument such that any (sane) audience which was in doubt about the conclusion would have background beliefs relative to which the evidence provided by propounding the argument has no impact. Such an argument could be of no use in convincing doubters and is most properly said to beg the question. (Jackson 1984, 35)

So, for example Ann is begging the question, because she is using as a premise the belief that “All acts can be explained with naturalistic causes”. Bob will not accept this as evidence for it seems to him that this is exactly at issue. But do we now have a tenable criterion of begging the question? The issue of background beliefs and their relation to propounded arguments is by no means a simple matter and Jackson is understandably little vague here, but it can be noted that this criterion, the doubt of any sane audience, is too lax. Consider the argument:

(Fiv)

1. We do not know anything.
2. Therefore, two plus two the equals five.

Argument (Fiv) is such that any sane audience doubting its conclusion would doubt the premise and the argument would have no impact on the audience.

We should thus give a more detailed account of what is useless against the other participant that would explain the transfer of doubt from the conclusion to the premises. This transfer should mirror the logical relations of the propositions involved. If I doubt whether all the heads of horses are heads of animals, I should doubt whether the head of Kincsem, the famous Hungarian race horse, was a head of an animal. By explaining when exactly the audience's transfer of doubt is reasonable, we would characterize the fallacy and give an intuitive explanation to what goes on in the debate between a free-will advocate and a determinist. However, this is not a simple matter. For example, it might be that I have in another place accepted that all the heads of horses are heads of animals. When this is pointed out to me, I should consequently accept that the head of Kincsem is a head of an animal. As noted, the willingness to make admission of this kind is just what keeps the up the chronic circularity: the participants may find the debate so important that they are willing to retract any former commitments in order to avoid losing the debate. Furthermore, some debates may be such that a person is quite reasonable in retracting previous commitments. For example, should the conclusion that seems to follow from my beliefs be that I do not exist, it might be perfectly reasonable to withdraw the commitments.

The problem then is that we should characterize somehow what the participants *should* doubt. It is not sufficient merely to note that the participant is using some premise that is not part of commonly shared assumptions, or common starting point (as for example the pragma-dialecticians do, cf. e.g. van Eemeren et. al. 1996, 287) because the question is exactly what is in the common starting point and what is not. On the one hand, we want to say that an arguer should use as premise something the opponent can reasonably accept. On the other hand, it seems that what the arguer can reasonably believe and what the opponent should reasonably accept is not the same thing as what the arguer *will accept*. If the opponent is just pig-headed, he or she might retract all commitments and make the resolution impossible but the opponent might also retract or refuse to retract reasonably. So we want to describe the transfer of doubt as reasonable transfer of doubt: what you put forth should not be such that a person doubting the conclusion should, if reasonable, doubt. But it seems to me that the transfer of reasonable doubt can only be described through describing what the arguers are justified in believing and what not. But then we have landed back to where we started from: the analysis of the mistake can only be based on the justificational situation of the arguer.

I submit that we should still aim to analyze the fallacy with the notion of transfer of justified belief instead of transfer of doubt. The fact that the current epistemic accounts differ in their verdicts does not yet give sufficient reason to move away from their main assumption that we should be able to explain the fallaciousness from the arguer's perspective. But more importantly, when one compares the doubt of the audience and justified belief, the latter seems a lot more basic. I do not claim that the nature of basing beliefs justifiedly on others is in any way a simple thing⁹ but

⁹ See for example Keith Allen Korcz 1997, 2000 for discussion on the basing relation.

IRRESOLVABLE CONFLICTS AND BEGGING THE QUESTION

doubt, especially being justified in doubting seems even more difficult and, in any case, derivative to justified belief. This is exhibited by the fact that the attempt to give an analysis in terms of justified doubt forces one to come back to on those very same considerations of justifiability as in the original attempts. Further, I find it more intuitive to keep the responsibility of the argument on the arguer: if the arguer has not formed the belief in the premise in an epistemologically sound way but on the basis of the conclusion which he or she is now using to back up the conclusion, he or she begs the question regardless of the audience. The audience is not to blame.

But I must hasten to add that the audience (or the opponent) can play a crucial role by questioning our reasons and we must somehow address this in our analysis. We should therefore try to insert the role of rational doubt to the explication of the fallacy. We could do this by using the idea of relevant alternative (for further discussion of this idea, see Sinnott-Armstrong 1999, 185-190) in conjunction with the subjective epistemic analysis. Let us think of Ann's case again. Assume first that there is objective justification for believing that "All acts can be explained with natural causes" that does not require one to first be justified in believing that "there is free will". When Bob raises objections to Ann's premise he creates a new set of relevant alternatives to which Ann should be able to answer. Ann should be able to bring her reasons to bear on the discussion. If she is unable to do so she either begs the question (actually or in dispositional terms) and is unjustified in her assumption, or she does not beg the question but simply has an unjustified assumption that has no justificational relations to any of the relevant propositions. If she would for example base her belief on the scientist (stating that all acts can explained), she should be able to bring those to bear on the discussion. But now Bob might raise a further question that creates another set of relevant alternatives to which a new justification should be raised: is the scientist justified in his or her belief? Now Ann should be able to show that that scientist was justified. This would be the case even if we accepted that Ann was originally justified in taking the scientist's word for it. The questioning changes the relevant set of alternatives and explains why the notion of doubt is so central: it determines the need for answers but this need can only be specified by explaining what the original arguers are justified in believing. Bob might note that even if we are originally justified in taking the scientist's word for it, they must now establish further if the scientist is actually justified in his or her claim. If Ann is not able to do this, she should admit that she is not justified in her belief in the premise. Likewise for Bob, if he is not able to justify his belief that empirical are not decisive here.

Assume now that there is no objective justification for believing that "All acts can be explained with natural causes" without first being justified in believing that "there is no free will". If there is no objective justification for the premise, Ann begs the question in the objective sense in any case. She might also beg the question in the subjective sense (actually or dispositionally) but not necessarily, depending on how she formed the belief in the conclusion. But again, she might be justified originally but Bob's questioning decides what she needs to justify further in the discussion. If Bob asks if the scientist is justified in his or her statement, Ann should bring her reasons to the discussion. But it is again what Bob specifically questions that decides what needs to be justified further in this case. There are usually several argumentative presuppositions we make when we engage in reasoning. In discussion, our opponent can direct the questioning on those presuppositions. This can expose previously unseen justificational dependencies in our reasoning. These might have been reasonable or not but the value of the debate is exactly in that it can bring these dependencies to the surface. The discussion has changed the relevant set of

alternatives to which we need to respond. So, what we have originally done (or not done) in our justificational activities affects our justificational status but the questioning of the opponent creates new alternatives that need to be ruled out if we want to keep on being justified in our beliefs.

A final problem that should be mentioned is that there are cases where the argument begs the question in the objective sense but the use of that argument does not. If we give the account of begging the question with the subjective account and explain how the rational doubt affects this with relevant alternatives, are we not then leaving out important aspects of the possible mistakes in (FWD)? However, this is part of what makes the process of questioning so important. Usually the only way the participants notice objective dependencies between the premises and the conclusion is through the questions the opponent raises. Then, we cannot really start even worrying about the possible objective dependency before the set of relevant alternatives against which we are unable to justify our belief has been brought to our attention. And then it is something that the subjective account can address.

Now, finally we can give a verdict on the arguers. They are both in an epistemically unsatisfactory state as they are not able to rule out relevant alternatives that the opponent has brought to the discussion. Whether they beg the question in the objective sense is something we cannot decide here, since we do not if there are possible routes to either premise that do not involve first establishing the conclusion. Whether they beg the question in the subjective sense depends on how they deal with relevant alternatives. If they just ignore the relevant alternative, they do not necessarily beg the question but are merely in an epistemically unjustified state of assuming dogmatically their premises. If they rule out, or would rule out, the relevant alternative because they believe the conclusion or some reason for conclusion, they are begging the question. Unfortunately, this brings no ease to those concerned with standing irresolvable conflicts but at least we have brought the problems into sharper focus.

CONCLUSION

This essay discussed the fallacy of begging the question in context of irresolvable conflicts. In these contexts, the participants can be taken to beg the question against each other. It was noted that the problem lies in the fact that the arguers do not share enough common ground to resolve their difference of opinion. It was then argued that if we interpret this lack of common ground as argumentative presuppositions that the debaters make, we can see various kinds of mistakes the arguers could be making that intuitively seem to fit under the fallacy of begging the question. Next, it was examined whether we could explain these mistakes with one notion, namely that of the doubt of the opponent. It was argued that such an explanation would not be any better than an analysis based on justified beliefs of the arguers. We would have to use the notion 'reasonable doubt' and this would have to rely on our conceptions justified belief in any case. It was finally argued that with the notion of relevant alternative, we could incorporate the inferential mistake that begging the question is with the conversational mistake of using something as a premise that one's opponent will not accept.

[link to commentary](#)

IRRESOLVABLE CONFLICTS AND BEGGING THE QUESTION

REFERENCES

- Biro, J.I. (1977). Rescuing 'Begging the question'. *Metaphilosophy*, 8, 257-271.
- Biro, J.I. (1984). Knowability, believability, and begging the question: A Reply to Sanford. *Metaphilosophy*, 15, 239-247.
- Biro, J.I. & Siegel, H. (1992). Normativity, argumentation, and fallacies. In F.H. Eemeren, R. Grootendorst, J.A. Blair & C.A. Willard (Eds.), *Argumentation Illuminated* (pp. 85-103). Amsterdam: SicSat.
- Biro, J.I. & Siegel, H. (1997). Epistemic normativity, argumentation, and fallacies. *Argumentation*, 11, 277-292.
- Biro, J.I. & Siegel, H. (2006). In defense of the objective epistemic approach to argumentation. *Informal Logic*, 26, 91-102.
- Colwell, G. (1994). Freedom, determinism and circular reasoning. *Argumentation*, 8, 251-264.
- Colwell, G. (1996). Why-questions, determinism and circular reasoning. *Argumentation*, 10, 1-24.
- Eemeren, F.H. van, Grootendorst, R., Snoeck Henkemans, A.F., et. al. (1996). *Fundamentals of Argumentation Theory*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Fogelin, R. (1985). The logic of deep disagreement. *Informal Logic*, 7, 1-8.
- Jackson, F. (1984). Petitio and the purpose of arguing. *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*, 65, 26-36.
- Jacquette, D. (1993). Logical dimensions of question-begging argument. *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 30, 317-327.
- Korcz, K.A. (1997). Recent work on the basing relation. *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 34, 171-191.
- Korcz, K.A. (2000). The causal-doxastic theory of basing relation. *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 30, 525-550.
- Sinnott-Armstrong, W. (1999). Begging the question. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 77, 174-191.
- Sanford, D.H. (1972). Begging the question. *Analysis*, 32, 197-199.
- Sanford, D.H. (1981). Superfluous information, epistemic conditions and begging the question. *Metaphilosophy*, 12, 145-158.
- Sanford, D.H. (1988). Begging the question as involving actual belief and inconceivable without it. *Metaphilosophy*, 19, 32-37.
- Spain, Peter of (1990). *Language in Dispute: an English translation of Peter of Spain's Tractatus, called afterwards Summulae logicales* (on the basis of the critical edition established by L.M. de Rijk / Peter of Spain; by Francis P. Dinneen). Amsterdam: J. Benjamins Publishers Co.
- Walton, D. (1991). *Begging the Question: Circular Reasoning as a Tactic of Argumentation*, Westport, CT: Greenwood.
- Woods, J. (1999b). John Stuart Mill. *Argumentation*, 13, 317-334.
- Woods, J. (2000). Privatizing death: Metaphysical discouragements of ethical thinking. *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 204, 199-218.
- Woods, J. (2004). *The Death of Argument: Fallacies in Agent-Based Reasoning*. Berlin: Springer.