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Commentary on Juho Ritola: “Irresolvable Conflicts and Begging the Question”

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COMMENTARY

In this comment I will define question begging in the most general sense. For some reason, perhaps because of the purpose for giving the argument, a class of statements has been specified as the class to be argued from. A question begging premise is one that is not in that class and hasn't been derived from statements that are in that class. In other words, you are arguing from a premise you're not supposed to be arguing from.

Question begging consists in arguing from a premise you're not supposed to be arguing from. It is a *fault* in your argument. A broad usage calls faults in arguments “fallacies.” However I prefer to call them *faults* and to speak of *fallacy* only when the faulty argument appears not to be faulty. I have said elsewhere that every real fallacy is a fallacy of ambiguity.¹ Question begging itself is a fault but not yet a fallacy. Still, there is a *phenomenon* of question begging, and, indeed, by taking different ideas of what statements we should argue from, there are several different kinds or ideas of question begging.

Now in these comments I wish to pursue further the task set by Professor Ritola in his paper, using mostly ideas from previous papers of mine.² Professor Ritola's ideas are I think going in the right directions, but I think I can get a bit further. The task is to look at cases of so-called irresolvable conflict and to ask: Is there really any interesting kind of question begging going on in those cases, and, if so, how can it be characterized? The cases are those like the Ann and Bob case. This is a simple minded version of the free will determinism problem. Ann argues: Determinism, therefore no free will. Bob argues: Free will, therefore not determinism, and then they accuse each other of question begging. Ritola remarks that it is difficult to specify an interesting kind of question begging going on in this case. I shall argue that this is because there is *no* question begging in any interesting sense in this case. Later on, I shall relent a bit and admit that, so to speak, there *may* be question begging of a sort going on nearby, though not quite where we're looking.

¹ For example, in “The One Fallacy Theory” read at 1995 OSSA conference at Brock University in St. Catherine's, Ontario and later published in *Informal Logic* vol. 17, no. 2 (Spring 1995) 303-314.

² See note 9 below.

The Ann and Bob dispute is a *philosophical* dispute. My teacher Hector Castaneda used to say that philosophy is a first person business. The argument is not really between Ann and Bob. It is between Ann and Ann, and between Bob and Bob, and me and myself, and you and yourself.

We all secretly believe that whatever happens must have a cause and that determinism is true. And we all secretly believe that we are responsible for our actions and have free will. And we secretly believe, upon the least reflection, that if determinism is true, we cannot possibly have free will. So we believe three statements which form an inconsistent triad.

So if *anyone* should choose *any* two of those three and use them as premises against the third, *no* one is in any position to claim that those premises are question begging. If I ask myself, where did the arguer's premises come from, I reply, they came from ME.

To get clearer about what is really going on in the Ann and Bob case, we would need clarity about the free will determinism problem itself. But, since I am not going to solve *that* problem today, I turn to a case where *we* know the solution even though the debaters do not.

Long ago, in ancient Greece, there was a fallacy. If A and not A, there is a true contradiction, and if there is change, then, for some A, there is A and then not A. So, it was concluded, if there is change, there are true contradictions.

Now *we* know this argument is a fallacy. As Aristotle later pointed out: A and not A in the first premise is really a contradiction, but in the second premise it's just A now and not A later. Yet at a time before Aristotle there were, let us imagine, two philosophers who bought this fallacy hook, line and sinker and thought it self-evident that if there is change there are true contradictions. And let us dub these philosophers Heraclitus and Parmenides. So Heraclitus argued: If there is change there are true contradictions. But there *is* change, so there *are* true contradictions. And Parmenides argued: If there is change there are true contradictions. But no contradiction can be true, so there can't be any change. And on hearing each other's argument, they repeated their own more loudly. And then more loudly still. And then, they accused each other of begging the question.

"You, Heraclitus, are begging the question. You keep assuming that there is change—the very thing that I deny."

"No. *You*, Parmenides, are begging the question. You keep assuming there are no true contradictions, but I am saying there are."

So they accuse each other of begging the question. But are they really? I don't think so.

Parmenides's premise is that no contradiction can be true. It is hard to believe that a premise stating the very basis of logic could be a logical flaw in an argument. This premise is self-evidently true. Aristotle says in the *Prior Analytics*³ that a premise that is self-evident *cannot* be question begging, because it cannot be in doubt and cannot really be in question.

Nor does Heraclitus's premise seem question begging. This says there is change. But surely that fact is obviously true and not in doubt.

³ At 64b 28.

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It will be complained that here I employ too logical an idea of question begging, where we are supposed to argue from premises that are self-evident or obviously true (Ritola calls this the objective epistemic idea). No doubt we need a more *dialectical* idea, where we argue from the *beliefs* of an audience or an opponent.

But not *too* dialectical, or it will be uninteresting. As Ritola remarks, if Parmenides uses a premise which is self-evidently true and if Heraclitus is fool enough to deny that premise, how can that be counted as a fault on *Parmenides's* side?

Suppose I step into a room and see the murderer repeatedly plunging the knife into the victim, and with much blood everywhere, the victim dies. I say, "You've murdered him!"

The murderer says very calmly, "No, I didn't."

I say, "Of course, you did!"

The murderer says, "*Now*, you're just begging the question." Surely this idea of question begging is one only a murderer could love. Or someone guilty of a flagrant misdeed.

Nor is it easy to see dialectical question begging here in any serious sense. Parmenides says that no contradiction can be true. Heraclitus's only objection seems to be that the premise is *contradictory with* his, Heraclitus's, conclusion. But if Heraclitus employs the Law of Non-Contradiction to object to that premise, how can that premise which *is* the Law of Non-Contradiction be question begging against such a Heraclitus?

Or if Heraclitus has the courage of his convictions and embraces the premise, so that the premise plus his own conclusion form another fine example of a true contradiction, how can the premise be question begging against a Heraclitus who embraces it?

Nor is it easy to believe that Heraclitus's premise that there is change is really question begging against Parmenides. For though Parmenides purports to believe that change is impossible, he keeps trying to *change* Heraclitus's mind on this point. And, anyway, how did Parmenides bring himself to attempt and to perform the impossible task of dressing himself in the morning?

There is no question begging in this case!

Now I relent a bit.

In an earlier paper⁴ I argued much as here and said that philosophers *never* beg the question. But then I said rather oddly that whoever accuses his opponent of begging the question is *himself* begging the question!

And I am bothered by Aristotle's remark that a self-evident statement cannot be doubted. In past papers⁵ I said that in metaphilosophy we need *two* epistemologies, epistemology 1 and epistemology 2.

Imagine some debaters, philosophers, are having a debate and they are confused about the true logic of their issues. But *we* are the all-knowing outside observers. We know what really follows from what and what really is a good reason for what. The evaluation of this is Epistemology 1. However the debaters are *seeking* this knowledge. They only have appearances of the true logic and they must argue as best they can from the balancing of those appearances. The evaluation of this is Epistemology 2.

⁴ One Fallacy vs. Begging the Question.

⁵ In the One Fallacy Theory. Also earlier in "On Philosophy and its History" *Philosophical Studies* 50 (1986) 1-38. Copyright 1986 by D. Reidel Publishing Co.

If S is self-evident, it is indubitable 1. Suppose there is an argument appearing to prove not S. Then that argument contains a hidden fallacy, since not S is self-evidently false. The argument appears to give a reason for not S, but really it's a worthless fallacy. No real reason can exist for thinking not S or doubting S.

But Epistemology 2 sees it differently. To the debater, S appears to be self-evident—self-evident 1—but the argument appears to prove not S. So both S and the argument must be doubted. The appearance of proof is a *reason*—a prima facie reason 2—for believing there *is* a proof and that the conclusion is true. So S *can* be doubted.

Now to see how and where there may *be* question begging in our cases, let us call our two debaters H and P and let us put H and P through three stages of discussion envisaged in my metaphilosophy.⁶ In Stage I, H argues that there are true contradictions, P that there is no change. Epistemology 1 states its view. The first premise of their arguments says that change implies contradiction. This is absurd and no reason could justify it. The supposed reason about A and not A is a worthless fallacy. H's second premise is obvious, P's self-evident. Neither can be doubted. The conclusions follow but since the first premise is absurd, there is no proof. Anyway both conclusions are absurd and there could be no reason to believe either.

So Epistemology 1 states part of the very truth the philosophers are yearning for, but it has a very low opinion of philosophers.

Epistemology 2 says the first premise appears to be self-evident to both debaters and no one puts up any point against it. So, although actually false, it is dialectically *established*—by the positive weight of appearance in its favor.

The second premises appear obvious or self-evident, but they appear to be in direct conflict, so there is no clear balance either for or against either. Nothing is established either way.

Each conclusion appears to be proven—proven 1, but neither is established, since the arguments are in conflict and anyway, the second premises aren't established. So, in sum, the first premise only is established dialectically, or established 2.

At Discussion Phase 2, each debater is supposed to explain, by citing fallacies, the apparent *goodness* of his opponent's bad argument. The true explanation is the fallacy behind the first premise, but each debater is too busy committing this fallacy himself and is in no position to point it out. So H, say, must find some fallacy, some ambiguity, explaining why P's false *second* premise appears self-evidently true. Unfortunately, H's theory has no relevant distinction or pseudo-distinction in it and he has *nothing* to say. He can't do his dialectical duty. Neither can P. *This* and not question begging is the real problem in their positions. But H has heard, falsely, that question begging is a *fallacy*, and he has heard that if he doesn't *like* a premise and wishes it would just go away, then that alone makes the premise question begging. So, in desperation he accuses his opponent of the fallacy of question begging, and hastily and with great relief escapes from Stage 2.

His opponent treats him in the same cavalier fashion and escapes in the same way. In sum, in Stage 2, they do *nothing* except make noise.

So as we move to Stage 3, the dialectical situation is unchanged; only the first premise is established. At this stage, the debaters are to step back and evaluate the dialectical situation; each deciding which of their positions is more probably right.

⁶ In "The One Fallacy Theory."

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Suppose H now wants to argue, falsely, that *his* position is established. He tries to show that his conclusion is established dialectically by deriving it from his premises. He argues: “It is established that if there are changes there are true contradictions. But *obviously*, there *is* change! So it is established as I’ve said all along, that there are true contradictions.”

Here H repeats his original argument but for a new purpose. He is *now* not entitled to that second premise which is *now* question begging. But this question begging is a fallacy, since the premise is obvious, so established 1, though not established 2. And this question begging is interesting. The premise is not question begging merely because P disagrees with it, but because the balance of appearances is not clearly in its favor; there is lack of justification 2.

But note: There is still no question begging in H’s argument if given for its original, Stage 1 purpose, namely as an intended proof 1. The only fault *there* is still in the first premise.

That’s my solution to Ritola’s problem.

BACKGROUND⁷

I shall here give my own view on question begging and in the actual comment I shall discuss the so-called irresolvable conflicts.

Fallacy theory began with Aristotle’s *Sophistical Refutations*. A fallacy or sophism is an argument that is not demonstrative though it appears to be so. So with demonstrativeness as the goodness in question, a fallacy is a bad argument that appears good. There are two factors: badness and apparent goodness.

Now Aristotle makes a blunder of major proportions, as pointed out by Hamblin.⁸

His list of fallacies has two parts. In one part he lists the various ways a bad argument might be made to appear good, the various types of ambiguity. In the other part he lists various badnesses an argument might have. Here we find various invalidities, plus question begging, irrelevant conclusion, and redundant premise. I shall ignore redundant premise; we have invalidity, question begging, and irrelevant conclusion.

But surely then every true fallacy or sophism must be on both sides of the list. It can’t be, as Aristotle says, that we have here two *kinds* of fallacy, as if there were on one side the fallacies that appear good and on the other the fallacies that are bad! But surely every real fallacy must be on both sides.

Notice then that every fallacy involves, on this understanding, an *ambiguity*, by which its badness is disguised. So Aristotle to this extent agrees with my own view, the One Fallacy Theory, according to which the only fallacy is the fallacy of playing with an ambiguity.

In a typical fallacy then we want to go from some premises to a conclusion. This inference is the intended argument, the principle argument of the fallacy. To make the argument *appear* valid, we express it ambiguously so that the formulation has the principle argument as one reading but also has other valid readings, and so the principle argument appears to be valid, and the valid readings appear to be the intended argument.

⁷ This was originally going to be part of my comment on Ritola’s paper, but to cut down on time I didn’t read it at the conference, but sent it to Ritola.

⁸ Hamblin, C. L., *Fallacies*, Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1970, p. 12, last paragraph.

If we look at one of the valid readings, it turns out to differ from the intended argument. If its premise is different, that premise is question begging; it's not one of the given premises. If the conclusion is different, we have irrelevant conclusion.

I take this account of question begging to be the only authentic idea of question begging.⁹

Note that in this account the invalid primary argument is not itself a fallacy. It's fallacious if you will, but it's not a fallacy until it's covered up by the ambiguities. Similarly the question begging argument or the irrelevant conclusion argument are not fallacies; they are just, if clearly stated, clearly different from the intended argument and so are markedly faulty and not yet fallacies.

Nextly, on this account, the property of question begging is very dependent; there is no question begging unless a primary argument is specified.

But Aristotle's blunder presents his list as if the two parts are independent and the badness on the one side are fallacies in their own right and question begging isn't dependent.

Yet question begging is clearly the fault of using a premise which isn't given as one to be argued from. So in looking for an independent idea of this we find ourselves asking, "What premises should we argue from?" And various possibilities arise. If I am forming an opinion, I argue from things I believe. If I believe something but wish to be surer, I argue from things I am sure about. If I want to cause some audience to know something, I argue from things they already know. If I want to sell them something by hook or by crook, I argue from things they believe, even if I think they are false. If I want to refute a theory by reductio, I argue from statements of that theory. If I want to cite an authority as an ally, I argue from statements of that authority. Or some teacher may just assign a class of statements to be argued from.

But people want a more substantive, less relative, idea. So they ask, "What do we usually or most importantly want to argue from?" And this leads to different theories of what question begging "really" is. Aristotle himself thought the main use of argument was to lead to new knowledge, and that knowledge was given by proof. So we should argue from self evident statements. This leads to the logical idea of question begging. Ritola calls this the objective epistemic idea. He finds it in Biro and Seigel¹⁰ and raises difficulties for it. In one of my earlier papers¹¹ I find it in Aristotle's *Prior Analytics* and raise the same difficulties that Ritola rightly finds. Of the substantive notion, this is the most authentically Aristotelean, since Aristotle himself tries to develop it, and I think it would be of especial interest to have a viable theory of this sort of question begging.

Still it is rather stiff. If we shake it a bit to loosen it up and make it more flexible, we get the epistemic or subjective epistemic idea, which Ritola finds in David Sanford¹² and Walter Sinnott-Armstrong.¹³ This motion is still fairly Aristotelean, for it also sees argument as trying to reach knowledge or justified belief, though it surrenders the idea

⁹ Here I repeat points I first made in "One Fallacy vs. Begging the Question" which was read at a 1995 conference at George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia.

¹⁰ For example: John Biro and Harvey Siegel. (2006). In the defense of the objective epistemic approach in argumentation. *Informal Logic* 26, 91-102.

¹¹ Question Begging and Circularity: A response to Edwards. OSSA 1998.

¹² David H. Sanford. (1988). Begging the question...(etc.). *Metaphilosophy* 12, 145-158.

¹³ Walter Sinnott-Armstrong (1999). Begging the question. *Aristotelean Journal of Philosophy* 77, 174-191.

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that all knowledge is from proof. Still, Ritola, shows there are similar difficulties in this approach as in the logical one.

Furthest from Aristotle is the dialectical approach, where we argue from the mere opinions of an audience or an opponent. I believe the third approach discussed by Ritola is a variant of this. This approach is very far from Aristotle. Aristotle does indeed have the idea of a dialectical argument, an argument from the opinions of an audience. But this sort of argument is not dear to Aristotle's heart. Nor is it to mine, or to Ritola (more on this in the paper).

Concerning these substantive ideas of question begging, we may note two points. None of them is really *the* authentic idea, which is the dependent or possibly the relative one, though the logical one is clearly pushed by Aristotle, and, at the other end, the dialectical is close to the relative one.

Second, in none of the substantive theories is question begging a *fallacy* in the full sense. It is a fault in reasoning, since there is arguing from a premise you're not supposed to be arguing from, and in that loose sense it is of course a "fallacy." But question begging in itself is a badness only, with no appearance of goodness.

[link to paper](#)