

## In the Light of Logic

### Petito Principii: “Begging the Question” (and “The Complex Question”)

This logical fallacy involves assuming as a premise for an argument the very conclusion that is supposed to be drawn from the premises. Such an argument fails to prove anything because it somehow takes for granted what it is supposed to prove. This fallacy is also called a “circular argument.”

Sometimes Christians fall into this line of thinking when they witness to others about the Bible.

(Believer Bob): “You shouldn’t drink liquor.”

(Joe Sixpack): “Why do you say that?”

(BB): “Because drinking is against God’s will.”

(JS): “How do you know?”

(BB): “The Bible says so.”

(JS): “But how do you know that the Bible is right?”

(BB): “Everything the Bible says is right!”

(JS): “How do you know that?”

(BB): “Because it’s God-breathed and divinely inspired.”

(JS): “But how do you know?”

(BB): “Because the Bible says so.”

(JS): “But why should I believe that?”

(BB): “You’ve just got to believe the Bible because everything in it is right.”

A much more rational approach would be to provide evidence for the divine inspiration of the Bible by citing archeological evidence, fulfillment of prophecy, 40 men writing during a period of 1600 years without collaborating or contradicting each other, etc. But to say that the Bible is true because it is true by definition is not sound reasoning.

Sometimes the fallacy of begging the question is couched in deceptive language, and must be carefully analyzed. Consider this argument by Whately: “To allow every man unbounded freedom of speech must always be, on the whole, advantageous to the state; for it is highly conducive to the interests of the community that each individual should enjoy a liberty, perfectly unlimited, of expressing his sentiments.” This is not an argument supported by evidence, but a controversial opinion stated in two different ways.

Evolutionists are particularly notorious offenders in the way they employ circular reasoning. When one looks in the *World Book Encyclopedia* under the heading “Paleontology,” we learn that the age of fossils is determined by the age of the rocks they are embedded in. But when we look under “Geology” we find that the age of rocks is determined by the age of the fossils that are embedded in the rocks! This is neither scientific nor reasonable.

Assuming what one sets out to prove is such a common practice that it often goes unnoticed. A variation of this fallacy has become practically a mantra in the post-modern climate of our age. People will say that there are no absolutes, and that everything is right or wrong only in relationship to one's own taste. But for them to say there are no absolutes is self-refuting because they are advancing an absolute: there are no absolutes. Or people will say, "There is no such thing as truth – here are only opinions." But they state their opinion as if it were a truth, and expect us to agree. If our opinion is that there is truth, then they will object that we are arrogant and accusing them of being in error.

The fact is that the lazy human mind will ever seek to assert as truth that which is assumed, received from tradition, commonly believed, etc. Few people will follow the rigors of disciplined, logical thinking to make sure their opinions are supported by evidence and their conclusions honestly derived from relevant premises. Logical thinking is an enterprise that every person who wants to be solidly grounded in reality and truth must engage in, even if it disturbs his comfort level and emotional equilibrium. Too many people are committed to their own comfort and ease, and use their reasoning powers to rationalize what they already believe and assume instead of scrutinizing their beliefs and assumptions in the light of reason and truth.

### **Complex Question**

A variation of *Begging the Question* is the posing of a complex question. This is a question that assumes an answer to a previous question that was not even asked. A question like "Have you given up your evil ways?" assumes that the person being asked answered "Yes" to the question, "Have you in the past followed evil ways?" Another famous illustration of a complex question is, "Have you stopped beating your wife?" Either a yes or no answer incriminates the person who is being queried. The only answer is to say, "I cannot answer that question because it contains an assumption that I cannot grant: namely that I have beaten my wife in the past.

When the Serpent questioned Eve in Genesis 3:1 (NIV), he posed to her a complex question. She should have seen the assumption contained within it and refused to entertain the question as posed. When he asked her, "Did God say, you shall not eat of every tree in the garden?", she should have answered: "No, he said of every tree of the garden we could freely eat." By posing the question in the negative, he forced her to share his perspective that God was keeping something back from her. Once she accepted the terms of the question, she was doomed to being manipulated.

We often ask complex questions of those with whom we are in close relationship, and often in the heat of passion. We will ask: "When are you going to stop trying to control my life?" or "Why do you love your work more than you love me?" These are not really questions at all, but emotionally charged accusations that contain hidden negative assumptions and judgments. Oftentimes the "evidence" that supports these judgments has not been presented and rationally discussed with the person prior to these outbursts, and the person accused is clueless and hurt to be accused in this way.

It is good for each of us to analyze our own communications to find the assumptions hidden therein, and make sure we are being honest with ourselves and others before burdening those we love with irrational outbursts that may not be based on any real evidence. Our feelings are important, and communicating them is an essential aspect of developing intimacy with others, but feelings make a poor basis for sound judgment. Many intimate relationships are sabotaged by undisciplined communication that is laden with hidden assumptions and unsupported conclusions. When we share our feelings with those we love we need to separate them from the negative conclusions and judgments that so often accompany them. To say “I feel betrayed” is different than saying “You always betray me.”

Sadly, the complex question fallacy has even burdened our American legislative system. Many bills introduced by well-meaning congressmen are designed to benefit both their constituents and their country. But “riders” are added to the legislation that have nothing whatsoever to do with the intent of the bill. The President cannot veto that objectionable part of the bill, only the bill in toto. If the bill is something that he generally approves of, but contains amendments that he disapproves of, he must choose either vetoing a measure of which he approves or approving something he disagrees with. This dilemma is due to the posing of a complex question.