

BEGGING THE QUESTION

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No topic in informal logic is more important than begging the question. Also, none is more subtle or complex. We cannot even begin to understand the fallacy of begging the question without getting clear about arguments, their purposes, and circularity. So I will discuss these preliminary topics first. This will clear the path to my own account of begging the question. Then I will anticipate some objections. Finally, I will apply my account to a well-known and popular response to scepticism by G. E. Moore.

I. Preliminaries

1.1—Arguments and their Uses

An *argument* consists of an ordered pair of a set of propositions (the premises) and a proposition (the conclusion).¹ That is all there is to an *argument*, but that is not all there is to the activity of *arguing*. To argue or to give an argument is to present the premises as reasons for the conclusion.

An argument on this account must be distinguished from a particular *use* of that argument. A particular use of an argument is a datable speech act of asserting the propositions in the argument. An argument itself, in contrast, has no location in time or space. Admittedly, the term ‘argument’ is often used to refer to a datable speech act of arguing rather than to its content (just as the word ‘statement’ can refer either to a datable speech act of stating or to the proposition that is stated). However, to avoid confusion, I will restrict the term ‘argument’ to the ordered set of propositions and refer to a datable act of arguing as a use of an argument.

Some critics will object that an ordered set of propositions is not an argument unless it is given or at least intended as an argument. And some ordered sets of propositions are useless for arguing, because they would make such obviously bad arguments. However, any account of arguments should include very bad arguments, since formal and informal logicians can and do study the structure of arguments that nobody ever gave or intended to give or could reasonably give as an argument. Even if some intention were necessary for an ordered set of propositions to count as an argument, this intention would still not be part of the argument, just as an intention to cut is not part of a knife. Thus, there is nothing more to an argument than an ordered set of propositions, every such ordered set is potentially an argument (even if a bad one), and arguments are individuated by the propositions in them.

¹ If the order of the premises matters to the identity of an argument, then an argument should instead be identified with an ordered n-tuple of propositions, but that change would not affect my points. For simplicity, I will sometimes describe an argument as an ordered set of propositions. In any case, this list of constituents is not intended as a definition of an argument.

1.2—Purposes

Understood in this way, arguments are used for many purposes, including justification, explanation, refutation, simplification, organisation, figuring out, etc.² Indeed, the same argument can be given by the same person for different purposes on different occasions. Consequently, despite common language, it is a category mistake to ascribe a particular purpose to an argument in itself (that is, to an ordered set of propositions) or to an arguer (that is, to a person). A particular purpose can properly be ascribed only to a particular person's use of a particular argument on a particular occasion. In short, what have purposes are *uses of arguments*.³

1.3—Circularity

Another reason to distinguish arguments from their uses is to enable us to distinguish circularity from begging the question. To do this, we must first specify exactly which arguments are circular.

That is not as easy as some might think. The clearest cases of circularity occur when a premise repeats the conclusion word for word, as in:

(A1) Jim is taller than Bernie.

∴ Jim is taller than Bernie.

However, some arguments are *not* circular even though the premise does repeat the conclusion word for word:

(A2) This sentence expresses a premise.

∴ This sentence expresses a premise.

The subject of each sentence refers to that sentence itself, so the premise of (A2) is true, but its conclusion is false. Thus, they cannot express the same proposition, even though they repeat the same words. This shows that circular arguments *cannot* be defined by their words alone without reference to their content.⁴

How *can* circularity be defined? There are many options, and the choice does not matter here, so I will just distinguish two kinds of circularity: An argument is *weakly* circular if and only if one of its premises is used to express the same proposition as its conclusion. An argument is *strongly* circular if and only if one of its premises expresses the same proposition *in the same way* as its conclusion.

² See Fogelin and Sinnott-Armstrong [3], Chapter 11.

³ See Jackson [4, p. 27]. Even this is not quite specific enough, since a speaker can present a single argument to two audiences at once for different purposes, such as to justify the conclusion to one audience and to explain the conclusion to the other audience. I will ignore split audiences and split purposes, so that I can speak simply as if particular uses of arguments have purposes.

⁴ Pace Sanford [7, p. 198]. Notice that identity of meaning is still not enough to define circularity, since the premise and conclusion of (A2) also have the same meaning (at least in Kaplan's sense of character).

1.4—Vicious and Virtuous Uses of Circles

The crucial question here is whether circular arguments on either definition are always *bad* arguments. All circular arguments on either definition are valid, and some of them, such as (A1), are even sound. That does not stop philosophers from criticising circular arguments. The most common charge is that circular arguments are useless.

However, circular arguments can sometimes be useful, even for the purpose of justification. Suppose Kate says to Larry, 'Mary lives in the Buckeye State'. Larry responds, 'No. I've never heard of the Buckeye State, but Mary lives in Ohio'. Kate then argues,

(A3) Ohio is the Buckeye State.

Mary lives in Ohio.

∴ Mary lives in the Buckeye State.

The second premise is equivalent to the conclusion, since Ohio is the Buckeye State. So Kate's argument is weakly circular. But Kate's use of the argument is still informative for Larry, who did not know that Ohio is the Buckeye State.

There are even arguments that are useful for justification despite being strongly circular. My favourite example derives from Sorenson:

(A4) Some valid arguments have only particular premises.

∴ Some valid arguments have only particular premises.⁵

Although this argument is circular on both definitions, its use clearly justifies its conclusion. If (A4) is given to an audience of logic students who do not believe its conclusion in advance, then that use of (A4) will make that audience come to have adequate reason to believe its conclusion, if they recognise the particularity of its premises and the validity of the argument. A critic might object that, since this recognition is needed for a use of (A4) to justify belief in its conclusion, the use of (A4) by itself does not justify that belief. However, many argument uses depend on background beliefs, especially concerning validity and argument form, in order to achieve justification; so such dependence does not show that this use of (A4) fails to accomplish justification. Admittedly, this use works because (A4) instantiates its own conclusion. It does not work

⁵ Compare Sorenson [10, p. 249], who gives many more such examples. My second favourite example is of someone who cannot remember the number of days in June until he recalls the rhyme and says, 'Thirty days has September, April, June, and November; so June has 30 days.' What makes the arguer justified in believing the conclusion is an actual utterance (vocal or mental) of the sentences that express the argument. But that is not a problem for the example, since it is *always* a particular use rather than an abstract argument that makes a particular person justified in believing a conclusion.

because the audience believed the premise or had reason to believe the premise in advance, as with most justifications. Nonetheless, the oddity of how (A4) works does not show that it does not work to justify belief in its conclusion. Regardless of which features of the argument or of its use make the audience justified, a particular use of (A4) still does make the audience justified in believing its conclusion.⁶

It might seem natural to conclude that some circular arguments, including (A3) and (A4), are virtuous; and others, including (A1), are vicious. This is a category mistake. Arguments in themselves are not the kind of thing that can be either virtuous or vicious. Since an argument is an abstract ordered set of propositions, the same circular argument can be used legitimately in some contexts but illegitimately in other contexts. For example, Kate's use of (A3) is fine, because Larry does not deny either premise. In contrast, suppose Nancy says, 'Mary lives in the Buckeye State', and Oliver responds, 'No. Mary lives in Ohio. The Buckeye State is Indiana, not Ohio.' In response, Nancy presents argument (A3). This is all Nancy says, and Oliver has no reason to believe that Nancy is more reliable on such matters than he is. In this situation, Nancy's use of this argument does *not* show that Oliver has any reason to believe her conclusion. If that was her aim, then Nancy's use of this argument is defective, even though the argument is sound, and even though Kate's use of the same argument is not defective. Consequently, it is not circular arguments *themselves* but only *uses* of circular arguments in particular contexts that can be classified as either virtuous or vicious.

There still might be some arguments that are so bad that they could not be used for any purpose in any context. (A1) might fall into this category. Nonetheless, it is still misleading to call any argument vicious, because what would make it vicious is not the abstract structure that makes it the argument it is. What makes it vicious is that all of its uses are bad. For this reason, it is more accurate to reserve normative terms like 'vicious' for uses of arguments, and not apply such terms to arguments themselves.

II. Begging the Question

Vicious uses of circular arguments are said to beg the question, but they are not the only uses that do. Just take (A1) and add a false disjunct to get:

(A5) Either Jim is taller than Bernie or I'll eat my hat.

I will not eat my hat.

∴ Jim is taller than Bernie.

⁶ A related argument is also sound: (A4) is a valid argument, and (A4) has only particular premises, so some valid arguments have only particular premises. This meta-argument could be used to justify belief in the conclusion of (A4), but that does not show that (A4) itself cannot also be used for the same purpose.

(A5) is not only valid but also sound, and it is not circular on either definition. However, uses of (A5) and (A1) share the same defect. This defect is what is called 'begging the question'.

What is this defect? One way to explain it is to specify the conditions under which uses of arguments suffer from this defect. That is my goal, but I will begin by criticising some earlier attempts.

II.1—The Formal Approach

Some philosophers try to define begging the question in purely formal terms without reference to the particular context in which the argument is used.⁷ However, we have already seen enough to know that this won't work. In (A4), for example, the sole premise repeats and means the same as the conclusion, so it is blatantly circular, and it is bound to fit any formal definition of begging the question. Nonetheless, it successfully justifies its conclusion, so it hardly begs the question in any way that would be bad.⁸

II.2—The Psychological Approach

Since the formal approach is inadequate, begging the question must be defined at least partly by the context in which the argument is used. But which aspects of the context?

One common move is to define begging the question in terms of whether or not the audience believes the premises. However, recall Kate's use of (A3). Kate's audience, Larry, did not believe that Ohio is the Buckeye State, but Kate could still use this premise to argue that Mary lives in the Buckeye State, since this was well-established common knowledge. Thus, lack of belief in a premise by the audience does not ensure begging the question.

In contrast with Kate, Nancy's use of (A3) did beg the question because her audience, Oliver, believed that Ohio is not the Buckeye State. This might seem to suggest that audience *disbelief* in a premise ensures begging the question. But this still is not quite right. Suppose Pat believes that Ohio is *not* the Buckeye State, but she also holds other beliefs that jointly entail that Ohio *is* the Buckeye State. Pat would change her belief if she put together her other beliefs and drew the conclusion, but she has not performed this reasoning yet. Thus, even though Pat disbelieves the first premise of (A3), she is still committed to it.⁹ Because Pat has a reason to believe the premise that she actually disbelieves, another arguer, named Quentin, need not beg the question if he uses argument (A3) to show Pat that she has a reason to believe its conclusion.

⁷ Formal models of dialogue often include rules against begging the question, but such accounts need not be formal in my sense of context independence, since the context can be specified in the models. See McKenzie [5] and references therein. These formal models deserve careful attention, but that will have to wait for another paper.

⁸ For more arguments against the formal approach, see Sanford [7, p. 198], Sorenson [10], and my argument against the objective epistemic approach below.

⁹ Some philosophers use the term 'belief' to refer to all commitments, but here I use it so as to include only actual mental performances and states.

The general point is that, because begging the question is normative, it is implausible to focus on these actual beliefs in isolation from whether one *ought* to believe them or whether one has *reason* to believe them.¹⁰ We need to shift the focus from psychology to epistemology.

II.3—The Epistemic Approach

The epistemic approach claims that whether a use of an argument begs the question depends on whether one has the right kind of reason to believe the premise. To understand this epistemic approach, we must determine, first, when one has a reason.

II.3.1—The Objective Epistemic Approach

Theories of reasons can be either objective or subjective, and so can the epistemic account of begging the question. The objective version defended by John Biro¹¹ claims that whether an argument provides a reason to believe its conclusion depends *solely* on the propositions in the argument and *not* on any beliefs of the arguer or the audience.

Against such an objective approach, I already suggested that whether a use of (A3) begs the question varies with the beliefs of the audience in the cases of Kate and Nancy. David Sanford makes a similar point with a different argument:

(A6) All the members of the club attended the University of Texas.

Twardowski is a member of the club.

∴ Twardowski attended the University of Texas.

Sanford contrasts two situations in which (A6) is used. In both situations, the premises and conclusion of (A6) are true, but the situations differ in the arguer's background beliefs. Sanford claims that it would beg the question to use (A6) in:

Situation 1A: . . . [T]here is a bylaw that restricts club membership to those who have attended the University of Texas. Moreover, this bylaw is operative; it explains why the club has no members who did not attend the University of Texas. None of this is kept secret. You could discover it easily if you tried. But you have not tried and no one has told you. You are ignorant of the bylaw. You have, however, chatted with each club member from time to time over the years. You know who all the club members are. You have learned, from each of them, that he attended the University of Texas. Your belief that all club members attended the University of Texas is based on your

¹⁰ On my subjective approach, reasons are reducible to beliefs and thus to psychology, but we still need to look at more than just belief and disbelief about the premises and conclusion, which are the focus of the psychological approach.

¹¹ See Biro [1] and [2].

belief that Twardowski attended the University of Texas. When you advance the argument, you beg the question, or so I claim.

In this situation, your belief in the universal premise of (A6) is justified by complete enumeration, which requires a belief about each particular member, including a belief about Twardowski that is a belief in the conclusion of (A6). Now contrast a different situation:

Situation 2A: . . . there is no relevant bylaw and nothing about club purpose or function that restricts its interest to those who have attended the University of Texas. It is still possible for you to acquire a reasonable belief that all members of the club attended the University of Texas without first believing anything about Twardowski. One way would be for you to accept it on someone else's reliable testimony. . . . You [do so, believe the second premise in (A6),] and draw the inference. Does your argument beg the question? I say no.¹²

This seems right: To use this argument would beg the question in Situation 1A but not in Situation 2A. These situations do differ in other inessential ways, but the difference between the beliefs of the arguers in these situations provides the best explanation of the difference in whether these uses of (A6) beg the question. Objective approaches deny that such differences in belief can make a difference to begging the question. Therefore, no objective approach to begging the question can work.

II.3.2—The Subjective Epistemic Approach

The subjective alternative takes one's reasons to believe to depend on one's actual beliefs. Sometimes whether one has a reason to believe something depends on whether one has the other belief that would count as a reason to believe it. But beliefs can also matter less directly. Whether a certain belief is a reason to believe something also depends on one's background beliefs. For example, if one believes that a certain newspaper is reliable, and that newspaper reports that aged meat is unsafe to eat, then one's belief that a certain piece of meat is aged *is* a reason for one to believe that that piece of meat is unsafe to eat. However, that same belief about the meat having been aged is *not* a reason to believe that it is unsafe if one believes that the newspaper is unreliable, unless one has some other reason to believe that aged meat is unsafe. In such ways, whether one has a reason to believe something can depend on very large portions of one's belief system (even if not on all of one's beliefs).

III. Developments

What I have said so far might not seem new to some scholars in this area. Several philosophers have already adopted the subjective epistemic approach. However, the details of a particular version within this general approach need to be developed. In

¹² Sanford [9, p. 35].

particular, if begging the question depends on beliefs, we need to answer two questions: Whose beliefs? Which beliefs?

III.1—Arguer vs. Audience Justification

First, *whose* beliefs matter? Begging the question sometimes depends on the beliefs of the *audience* (as in Kate's and Nancy's uses of (A3) above). Begging the question also sometimes depends on the *arguer's* beliefs (as in the uses of (A6) in Situations 1A and 2A). We could just say that the fallacy depends on beliefs of *both* arguer and audience, but that would not show why or when either person's beliefs matter.

To understand the fallacy on a deeper level, we must look at the precise purpose for which the argument is used. I will limit the discussion to uses of arguments for the purpose of justification, but there are still different kinds of justification that need to be distinguished.¹³

Audience justification is the purpose when one person (the arguer) is trying to show another person (the audience) that the other person (the audience) has a reason to believe something. The audience might already hold other beliefs that commit her to that belief, but she has not yet seen that (or how) her other beliefs commit her to that belief. The argument then teases out the implications of what the audience believes.¹⁴ Whether the arguer's use of the argument can achieve this purpose depends on the beliefs of the audience and not on the beliefs of the arguer.

In contrast, the purpose is *arguer justification* when an arguer is trying to show an audience that the *arguer* has a reason to believe something. The audience might already know that the arguer believes the conclusion, but the argument is given to show the audience that the arguer has a justification in the form of other beliefs that give the arguer a reason to believe the conclusion.¹⁵ Whether the arguer's use of the argument can achieve *this* purpose depends on the beliefs of the arguer and not on the beliefs of the audience (or at least not in the same way as with audience justification).

This difference can be illustrated by yet another use of (A3). Nancy gave this argument to Oliver in order to show that Oliver has a reason to accept the conclusion. Nancy begged the question, because Oliver had just denied the first premise. In this case, whether Nancy's use of (A3) can achieve her purpose, and whether it begs the question, depends on what her audience (Oliver) believes. In contrast, suppose all Risa wants to do is show Sam *her own* (Risa's) reasons for believing that Mary lives in the Buckeye State. This purpose can be achieved even if Sam denies the first premise. Thus, whether this use of (A3) can achieve its purpose (arguer justification), and whether this use begs the question, does not depend on Sam's (the audience's) beliefs, but only on Risa's (the arguer's) beliefs.

¹³ Something like this distinction is suggested but not developed by Sanford [8, pp. 150-1].

¹⁴ This helpful phrase comes from Jackson [4, p. 27].

¹⁵ The fact that an arguer asserts the argument is not proof that the arguer has such a reason, but it is evidence of this, assuming a cooperative context where speakers try not to mislead. The assertion of the argument then reveals what the arguer's reason is, but it still does not show that that reason is independent of the conclusion, since whether or not the reason is independent depends on further background beliefs that are not asserted in the argument itself.

This comparison between Nancy and Risa shows that it is the *purpose* of the argument that determines *whose* beliefs matter to whether an argument begs the question. Of course, many other purposes are possible.¹⁶ The point for now is just that different purposes shift the focus to different beliefs of different people.

III.2—Independence of What?

The next question is: *Which* beliefs matter? I already said that what matters are the beliefs that provide reasons to believe the premise. Moreover, the reasons to believe the premise must be independent. But independent of what? The most common answer is simply: the conclusion. But what exactly is independence of the conclusion? There are two main options: To avoid begging the question, one's reason to believe the premise might have to be independent of either (a) one's *belief* in the conclusion or (b) one's *reason* to believe the conclusion. These requirements are distinct, because one could have a reason to believe the conclusion without actually believing it, and vice versa.

A requirement of independence of one's reason to believe the conclusion seems plausible in some cases. Imagine a lawyer who presents strong evidence for his client's innocence, but whose closing argument is simply, 'My client is innocent, because she is.' The lawyer is not just repeating the conclusion for emphasis or suggesting that it is obvious. He is trying to justify the conclusion. For that purpose, this use of this argument begs the question. But why? The explanation seems to be that the lawyer cannot have any reason to believe the premise that is independent of his reason to believe the conclusion, since the premise and conclusion are identical.¹⁷ This makes it beg the question even though the lawyer's reason to believe the premise was independent of anyone's belief in the conclusion. The evidence would have been just as strong even if the lawyer believed that his client was guilty, and so did the judge and jury. Thus, dependence on belief in the conclusion is not *necessary* for begging the question.

It still might be *sufficient*, if a use of an argument begs the question when one's reason to believe the premise is independent of one's reason to believe the conclusion but depends on one's belief in the conclusion. Consider Jerry who argues,

- (A7) The Bible says that God exists.
 Everything the Bible says is true.

∴ God exists.

¹⁶ Although the kinds of justification in the text are defined by beliefs and reasons that the arguer and audience actually have, more idealised kinds of justification can be defined by what the relevant people ought to believe, including readily available common knowledge. One can also define a creative kind of justification that occurs when an argument gives an audience reasons that it did not have before. Examples might include the use of (A4) above or a use of (A3) to an audience that had no prior reason to believe its first premise, but did have prior reason to believe that the speaker is an honest expert about Ohio. Whether it begs the question to use an argument for these other kinds of justification depends on different beliefs than with uses for the kinds of justification discussed in the text.

¹⁷ The above use of (A4) does not beg the question in the same way because no independent reason to believe the premise is needed in order for (A4) to justify belief in its conclusion.

The first premise is justified by reading the Bible. Jerry's reason to believe the second premise, that everything the Bible says is true, is induction from having verified many things said in the Bible. However, many of these things would not have seemed verified to Jerry if he had not already believed that God exists. For example, the Bible says that God will respond if you pray for guidance, so Jerry prayed, and then he seemed to hear God's voice, but he would not have seemed to hear anything if he had not already believed in God. In such ways, Jerry's reason to believe the second premise depends on Jerry's prior *belief* in the conclusion. However, Jerry's reason to believe the premises cannot depend on Jerry's *reason* to believe the conclusion simply because Jerry has no reason at all to believe the conclusion. All Jerry has is faith. His use of argument (A7) gives him no reason, because this use begs the question.

Thus, there are two sufficient conditions of begging the question: dependence on one's belief in the conclusion and dependence on one's reason to believe the conclusion. Contrapositively, to avoid begging the question one's reason to believe the premise must be independent of both (a) one's belief in the conclusion and also (b) one's reason to believe the conclusion.

IV. Objections

IV.1—Mill's Problem

My account will encounter many objections. The first comes from John Stuart Mill. Mill raised this problem for syllogisms, but it arises even more starkly for arguments with a single premise that is logically equivalent to the conclusion. Here is an example:

(A8) No whales are fish.

∴ No fish are whales.

Someone could have a reason to believe the premise of (A8) without actually *believing* its conclusion. It is harder, however, to see how a reason to believe the premise of (A8) would not also be (and thus depend on) a *reason* to believe its conclusion. Yet, if this independence is not possible, all uses of such arguments (including many standard valid immediate inferences) would beg the question. Most commentators want to escape that result.

The escape runs through intentionality. Suppose Jacques believes the premise that no whales are fish, because he read that all fish have scales, he checked all whales for scales, and no whales have scales. He can go through this reasoning without ever thinking explicitly in terms of whether any fish are whales. So Jacques's reason to believe the premise does not depend on his belief in the conclusion. Still, suppose Jacques does believe the conclusion that no fish are whales. His reason for this belief is that he read that all whales have lungs, he checked all fish for lungs, and no fish have lungs. Then his reason to believe the premise does not depend in any way on this reason to believe the conclusion. The two beliefs are based on different sets of observations (one on

observations of whales and one on observations of fish), so Jacques *could* have the same reasons to believe the *premise*, even if he did *not* have his reasons to believe the *conclusion*. Admittedly, if he has any reason to believe the premise that no whales are fish, and he knows that (A8) is valid, his reason will also be a reason to believe the conclusion that no fish are whales. Nonetheless, he need not have this reason *before* he uses (A8), and this reason need not be *his* reason to believe the conclusion. His belief in the conclusion can still be based on something independent. On my theory, whether a use of an argument begs the question depends on which reasons one's beliefs are actually based on before the use of the argument. If one's belief in the premise of (A8) is based on either one's belief in its conclusion or one's reasons to believe its conclusion, then a use of (A8) does beg the question. However, this basing relation need not hold prior to every use of (A8). That explains why such uses of valid immediate inferences (and syllogisms) do not always beg the question, even though they sometimes do.

IV.2—Self-evidence and the Need for a Reason

Another possible objection to this account is that sometimes one has *no* reason at all to believe the premise, because the premise is self-evident and *needs* no justification. If one has no reason to believe the premise, then one has no reason that is independent of one's belief in or reason to believe the conclusion. Thus, a use of this argument begs the question trivially, according to my account so far.

One response to this objection would be to claim that nothing really *is* self-evident after all. Another possible response is that any argument that depends on the self-evidence of a premise really *does* beg the question.

I will be more accommodating. What makes a belief self-evident is that it does not *need* to be supported by any reason. The lack of a reason to believe the premise is bad and commits a fallacy only when there is a need for such a reason. That is why uses of arguments with self-evident premises should not be criticised as question-begging. To accommodate cases where there is no need for an independent reason, we can say that a use of an argument begs the question if and only if the argument includes a premise such that (a) one needs a reason to believe it, and (b) one has no reason that is independent of one's belief in and reason to believe the conclusion.¹⁸ It is the lack of an independent reason in the face of a need for one that makes begging the question bad and a fallacy.

This account raises the next question: When does one *need* a reason to believe a premise? I cannot answer that question fully, but I want to emphasise two crucial points that are often overlooked: whether and how a premise needs to be justified depends on the arguer's purpose, and it also depends on contrast classes.

¹⁸ Although I refer here only to premises, the same restriction applies to needed suppressed premises and to the rule of inference in an argument, since these are also essential to the argument. I omit this qualification here for simplicity, although these other elements of arguments become important when asking whether inductive justifications of induction and deductive justifications of deduction beg the question.

IV.2.1—Purposes and Needs

Suppose my sole purpose is *arguer* justification. The only thing I am trying to accomplish with my argument is to show *my* reasons for believing the conclusion. This purpose can sometimes be achieved even if some of my premises are *not* supported by independent reasons.

Next, suppose my purpose is *audience* justification. Then what I am trying to do is show my audience that *they* have a reason to believe my conclusion. This purpose can also be achieved, even if some of my premises are *not* supported by independent reasons, at least if my audience believes my premises already.

In contrast, suppose my purpose is audience justification and my audience does *not* believe my premises. Instead, they disbelieve and deny them. Then I need some independent justification or else this purpose cannot be achieved in this context. This need was illustrated by Nancy's use of (A3) against Oliver. Because Oliver just denied the first premise, Nancy needs to show that Oliver has some reason to believe that premise if Nancy's use of (A3) is to show that Oliver has a reason to believe the conclusion. Otherwise, Nancy's use of this argument begs the question. What creates the need for justification in this kind of context is the fact that a premise is in dispute, and the arguer's goal is to show that the audience has a reason to believe the premise and thereby the conclusion.

IV.2.2—Contrast Classes and Needs

The second factor that affects whether a premise needs to be justified is a contrast class. This gets complicated, so let's start with a simple example.

What would count as a reason to believe that a certain bird is a cardinal? One piece of evidence might be that the bird has a red head. This would show that it is a cardinal rather than a blue jay (or any bird without a red head). But scarlet tanagers also have red heads. Thus, the fact that this bird has a red head is *not* evidence that it is a cardinal as opposed to a scarlet tanager, even if it *is* evidence that it is a cardinal as opposed to a blue jay. In this way, the same premise can be a reason to believe a conclusion out of one contrast class, even though it is not a reason to believe the same conclusion out of a different contrast class.

Contrast classes also affect the *need* for a reason to believe a *premise*. There is a difference between the shade of red in a cardinal's head (bright red) and the shade of red in a scarlet tanager's head (scarlet). Now, suppose someone gives the following argument:

(A9) This bird's head is bright red.

∴ This bird is a cardinal.

If the arguer is trying to give a reason to believe that this bird is a cardinal as opposed to a blue jay, then all one needs is a reason to believe that the bird's head is bright red as opposed to blue. (Notice that bright red is incompatible and thus contrasts with blue, even though red in general also contrasts with blue.) However, if the arguer is trying to give a reason to believe that this bird is a cardinal as opposed to a scarlet tanager, then more is needed. Assuming that there are no other indications, one would need a reason to believe

that the bird's head is bright red as opposed to scarlet in order to conclude that this bird is a cardinal as opposed to a scarlet tanager. Now, suppose ten observers agree that the head of the bird in the tree is red as opposed to blue, but it is foggy enough that they disagree about whether the bird's head is bright red or scarlet. Then there might *not* be any need for a reason to believe that the bird's head is bright red as opposed to blue, since everyone already accepts that. Nonetheless, there still *is* a need for a reason to believe that the bird's head is bright red as opposed to scarlet, because that is denied. Without such a reason for the premise, it would beg the question to use argument (A9) to show a reason to believe that this bird is a cardinal as opposed to a scarlet tanager. This illustrates how the contrast class with respect to which the arguer seeks a reason to believe the conclusion affects the contrast class with respect to which one *needs* a reason to believe the premise.

V. Application

We can now apply my account to a philosophical issue. For illustration, I will discuss whether the question is begged by one popular response to one kind of scepticism.

Some *sceptics doubt* the existence of any objects in the external world. Some *idealists deny* the existence of any objects in the external world. In response to such sceptics and idealists, G. E. Moore famously held up his hands and argued roughly like this:

(A10) Here is one hand.

Here is another hand.

∴ There are objects in the external world.¹⁹

This argument is simple, but assessing its use is complex.

Does Moore's use of this argument beg the question? That depends on its context and its purpose. So we need to determine Moore's context and purpose.

One crucial aspect of the context is the *audience*, but it is not clear whom Moore had in mind. Moore says that his goal is to meet a challenge posed by Kant.²⁰ Kant seems to assume that to be external is to be met with in space.²¹ Kant also claims that space is a form of experience. Thus, when Moore presents his hands, he creates for his audience an object of experience that is met with in space and, hence, is external by Kant's own standards. So Moore's use of his argument might not beg the question for the purpose of audience justification if his audience includes only Kantians. However, I doubt that Moore's audience was restricted to Kantians, since Moore goes on to argue that 'external' is not a synonym for 'to be met with in space'.²² Another possibility is that Moore was

¹⁹ See Moore [6, p. 144]. Moore's actual argument was more complex than this, but my concern here is not with historical accuracy. I talk about Moore only to refer to a kind of person who gives this kind of response to scepticism.

²⁰ See Moore [6, p. 126]. I am grateful to Bob Fogelin for suggesting the role of Kantians in Moore's audience.

²¹ See Moore [6, p. 138].

²² See Moore [6, pp. 138-41].

preaching to the converted, that is, to an audience who already accepted Moore's conclusion. Such uses of arguments are more interesting than most philosophers suppose. Nonetheless, it is even more interesting if Moore is trying to convert opponents who deny or doubt his conclusion. And elsewhere Moore mentions British idealists as targets of his arguments.²³ So here I will assume that Moore's primary audience includes idealists and sceptics about the external world.

This fixes the *contrast class* in the conclusion. The idealists and sceptics who concerned Moore typically claimed that what appear to be objects in the external world are or might be just sense-data in our minds caused by dreaming or an evil demon or something else. If Moore's argument is to be relevant to *these* opponents, the reason to believe his conclusion needs to be a reason to believe that there are objects in the external world as opposed to just mental sense-data that appear like external objects would appear if there were any.

Finally, what was Moore's *purpose* in giving this argument? I will consider two possible purposes.

V.1—Audience Justification

The first possibility is that Moore seeks *audience* justification. That means that Moore is trying to show sceptics and idealists in his audience that *they* have reasons to believe in external objects as opposed to mere sense-data.

Does Moore's argument show this? That depends on the contrast class in the reason to believe Moore's premises.

V.1.1—The Philosophical Contrast

First, do sceptics and idealists have a reason to believe 'Here is a hand' as opposed to mere sense-data? *Some* sceptics and idealists might really believe in Moore's hands as opposed to mere sense-data. Moore might assume that his audience is just pretending or else that, when he produces his hands, the perception of those hands will force his audience to believe 'Here is a hand' as opposed to mere sense-data. (After all, Moore thinks it is necessary to produce his hands. His use of the argument would not work if he held his hands behind his back.²⁴ And belief does often result involuntarily from perceptual experience.) One of these alternatives might be true about many idealists and sceptics. If so, Moore's argument might achieve audience justification *for them*.

Nonetheless, *some* other idealists do *not* believe 'Here is a hand' as opposed to mere sense-data, and *some* sceptics who believe this really do deny that they have any *reason* to believe it. These idealists and sceptics are consistent. Faced with such an audience, Moore needs an independent justification, just as in the other cases where an audience denies or doubts a premise, such as Nancy and Oliver. Moore gives no such justification, so his use of (A10) begs the question.

Moore (or his followers) might respond in several ways. First, he might claim that, even though idealists and sceptics do deny and doubt his premise 'Here is a hand' as

²³ See, for example, Moore's reference to McTaggart as reported in Wisdom [11, p. 83]. Moore's followers also seem to focus on idealists and sceptics.

²⁴ As Robert Fogelin likes to emphasise.

opposed to mere sense-data, they *shouldn't* deny this or even doubt it. They *should believe* it. Moore's argument would not beg the question if he could show that, despite their denials or doubts, his audience has some independent *reason* to believe his premise 'Here is a hand' as opposed to mere sense-data.

How could Moore show this? He might appeal to perception. By producing his hands for sceptics and idealists to see, Moore seems to think that he has given them a reason to believe that he has hands as opposed to mere sense-data. However, the reply is obvious: All Moore has produced might be sense-data in their minds that look just like external hands. Perceptual experience does not give one a reason to believe 'Here is a hand' as opposed to mere sense-data unless one has a reason to believe that perceptual experience is a reliable indicator of the external world. One has no reason to believe that perception is reliable if one does not believe or has no reason to believe that there is any external world to be reliable about. But that just is the conclusion. Thus, this reason to believe Moore's premise is not independent of either belief in or reason to believe Moore's conclusion.²⁵

More generally, it is hard to see how *any* reason to believe Moore's premise 'Here is a hand' as opposed to mere sense-data could be independent of Moore's conclusion. If a sceptic or idealist does not believe or has no reason to believe the conclusion that there is an external world, then no experience or belief would count as a reason for them to believe the premise 'Here is a hand' as opposed to mere sense-data. And then Moore cannot show them that they have any reason to believe the conclusion 'There are objects in the external world' as opposed to mere sense-data. Thus, Moore begs the question if his purpose is audience justification.

V.1.2—The Everyday Contrast

Another move would be to limit the contrast class in the reason for the premise. All I have shown so far is that idealists or sceptics have no reason to believe 'Here is a hand' as opposed to mere sense-data (which I will call the *philosophical* contrast). Moore might respond that idealists still must at least believe that 'Here is a hand' as opposed to a foot (which I will call the *everyday* contrast). Idealists admit that their sense-data resemble a hand and not a foot. Thus, even idealists who deny that hands or feet exist externally have reason to believe 'Here is a hand' as opposed to a foot. They think that it is internal rather than external, but they still admit that it is a hand rather than a foot.

It is not clear that sceptics have to admit this. This is a tricky issue that hangs on the right way to handle contrast classes and reference. Luckily, I need not go into this here.

Even if sceptics and idealists do have to admit that they have a reason to believe 'Here is a hand' as opposed to a foot, this still would not give any reason that opposes scepticism or idealism. We are assuming here that Moore's purpose is to show sceptics and idealists that they have a reason to believe that there are objects in the external world as opposed to just sense-data in our minds. No reason to believe this conclusion out of the *philosophical* contrast class can be shown if all one has is a reason to believe the premise out of the *everyday* contrast class.²⁶ This argument use does not beg the question, but the difference

²⁵ Compare Jackson [4, p. 36].

²⁶ A premise can support a conclusion out of a different contrast class if the conclusion's contrast class is included in the premises's contrast class. But no such inclusion holds here.

between the contrast classes still makes the argument fail to provide the desired kind of justification. Consequently, limiting the contrast class cannot help Moore in this way.

I doubt that Moore would give any of these responses anyway. In his legendary style, Moore would probably just say that he is more certain that sceptics and idealists are wrong than he is in anything that they or I have said. However, this response misses the point of *audience* justification. Moore himself might be more sure of his premises, but the consistent sceptics in his audience are not sure of Moore's premises, and the consistent idealists deny them (despite what Moore might have claimed). That is why his argument fails to provide *audience* justification against *this* audience. The doubts and denials of this audience create a need for an independent reason when the purpose is audience justification, and then Moore's failure to meet this need means that his use of his argument begs the question in this context.

V.2—Arguer Justification

The other purpose that Moore might have is *arguer* justification. In that case, Moore wants to show the audience that he (Moore) has a reason for his belief in external objects, even if his audience lacks such a reason. Moore seems to have more chance of achieving *this* purpose, because *this* kind of justification depends on Moore's own beliefs rather than on the beliefs of sceptics and idealists in his audience.

Does Moore's use of his argument achieve arguer justification? That depends on whether Moore has an adequate reason to believe his premises, and that in turn depends on the contrast class of his reason to believe his premise.

V.2.1—The Everyday Contrast

First, Moore does have a reason to believe 'Here is a hand' as opposed to a foot. His reason is that his sense-data are shaped like a hand as opposed to a foot. This reason works even if his conclusion is false, and even if his perception is not a reliable indicator of the external world. Thus, Moore has an independent arguer justification to believe 'Here is a hand' as opposed to a foot.

The problem, as before, is that this does not give any reason that conflicts with idealism or scepticism about the external world. To give that kind of reason, Moore needs to show that he has a reason to believe the conclusion 'There are objects in the external world' as opposed to mere sense-data. However, no reason relative to this philosophical contrast class can be shown by a reason to believe anything out of the everyday contrast class. Consequently, Moore's reason to believe 'Here is a hand' as opposed to a foot cannot make his overall argument succeed even if his purpose is only arguer justification.²⁷

V.2.2—The Philosophical Contrast

To give any reason against scepticism and idealism, Moore needs to give an independent reason to believe 'Here is a hand' as opposed to mere sense-data. For this, Moore needs some reason to believe that his perception is a reliable indicator of the external world.

²⁷ On this reading, Moore's argument does not beg the question. That might explain why some defenders deny that he begs the question. However, even though he avoids this particular fallacy on this reading, his argument still fails for other reasons.

Moore does believe this, and he can support this belief with other beliefs of his, but no reason to believe any of this would be true if there were no external world, that is, if his conclusion were not true. Thus, Moore's reason to believe 'Here is a hand' as opposed to mere sense-data ultimately depends on his belief in his conclusion or on his reason to believe his conclusion. He does not have any *independent* reason to believe his premise, and it is hard to see how he could get one.

Moore still might claim that his premise does not *need* any such justification. This can't be because this premise is self-evident, for it is not self-evident. He needs to show his hands in order to give a reason to believe his premises. However, he still might claim that, after his hands are revealed, his premise is so obvious that it needs no justification. Nonetheless, the fact that it seems so obvious does *not* show that the premise needs no such justification. Moore needs a reason to believe 'Here is a hand' as opposed to mere sense-data, because that is exactly what is at issue. The point is not that Moore's audience denies this claim, since that would be relevant only to audience justification. Instead, the point is that, if Moore wants to reveal a reason that is contrary to idealism and scepticism, then he needs to show a reason to believe his conclusion out of the philosophical contrast class; but this contrast class in his goal then creates a need for a reason to believe the premise out of the same philosophical contrast class. Moore cannot give any such reason that is independent of his belief in the conclusion or of his reason to believe the conclusion. Therefore, Moore's use of his argument begs the question even if his purpose is only arguer justification.

V.3—Conclusion

This does not show that Moore's argument is useless, for I have been assuming a sceptical audience that fixes a philosophical contrast class in Moore's conclusion. Moore's argument still might be useful for non-sceptical audiences. Moreover, even if Moore's argument cannot refute scepticism, that does not show that scepticism can never be refuted in any way. But that was not my goal. My goal has been to illustrate my theory of begging the question by applying it to one popular argument against scepticism. Another goal has been to show that even an argument as simple as Moore's has subtleties that come out only when one looks carefully at contrast classes and at the purposes for which arguments are used. If this way of looking at Moore's argument is illuminating, that supports my general view of begging the question.²⁸

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