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BEGGING THE QUESTION AS A PRAGMATIC FALLACY*

ABSTRACT. The aim of this paper is to make it clear how and why begging the question should be seen as a pragmatic fallacy which can only be properly evaluated in a context of dialogue. Included in the paper is a review of the contemporary literature on begging the question that shows the gradual emergence over the past twenty years or so of the dialectical conception of this fallacy. A second aim of the paper is to investigate a number of general problems raised by the pragmatic framework.

In this paper, it is shown that the methods required to analyze and evaluate criticisms of begging the question are practical, and come under the heading of logical pragmatics, which is concerned with the use of propositions by an arguer to convince, persuade, or refute another arguer in a context of dialogue. However, certain parts of these methods also have to do with logical semantics, which is concerned with relationships between the truth and falsehood of propositions, and with logical reasoning, which is concerned with diagramming the structure of sequences of arguments.

To begin with, it is clear that begging the question is not a fallacy that can, at least straightforwardly, be modelled in a deductive logic of propositions. For the circular argument form, `A, therefore A', is deductively valid. The recent literature on begging the question, outlined in Section 1 below, has concentrated on examining syllogisms and other familiar forms of deductively valid argument, in an attempt to get a grasp of just what is wrong with question-begging arguments. These articles are shown in the account below to have posed the problem: What is the *context* of argument in which begging the question makes sense as a fallacy?

Subsequently, one stream of the literature followed the lead of Hamblin (1970, 1971), who advocated the formal game of dialogue as the right sort of context to model begging the question as a fallacy. But this literature became problematic when it was discovered that circular sequences of argumentation could be constructed in formal games of

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dialogue, in cases where it was unclear whether the circular argument committed the fallacy of begging the question. The circular sequences of argumentation appeared to be open to differing interpretations in this regard. Once again, it will be argued here, the need exposed was one of giving a more specific analysis of the context of argument.

Through building on ten case studies, the argument of this paper leads to the conclusion that not all circular arguments commit the fallacy of begging the question.[1] It is concluded that the fallacy of begging the question is an inherently pragmatic failure. According to the pragmatic view advanced, an argument can be viewed as having several different functions, as used in a context of dialogue.[2] The fallacy of begging the question is analyzed as a failure to fulfill one particular function of argument - the probative or "proving" function - where the failure blocks the argument from fulfilling or contributing to the goals of dialogue in which the arguer is supposed to be engaged. A number of general problems raised by this pragmatic framework are posed and investigated.

1. A FALLACY IN SEARCH OF A CONTEXT

Current awakening of interest in the ancient subject of begging the question as a species of fallacy was provoked by a short article in the form of a dialogue. In this article, Robinson (1971) skeptically posed the question of whether the idea of begging the question makes any sense according to modern ways of thinking.

The phrase 'begging the question' is often used in modern journalism in a way that refers to something quite different from the logician's meaning of the fallacy of illicit circular argumentation. To "beg a question" is often used in popular journalism to mean something like "postpone the asking of a question" or "ask the wrong question".[3] This meaning is quite different from the ancient Greek idea of begging the question as a fallacy of circular reasoning.[4] And indeed, the phrase seems to have fallen into disuse and confusion in modern times. Students typically attach no clear meaning to 'begging the question' but they do tend to have a fairly clear and accurate idea of what "arguing in a circle" means. Robinson's article, and the responses it generated, groped to find some background context in which either of these ideas could be made to make sense.

Robinson (1971, p. 113) began by characterizing begging the question as "assuming what you are to prove", and put forward an example.

Case 1: God has all the virtues.
Therefore, God is benevolent

In the kind of case Robinson had in mind, the argument above has been put forward in order to prove the conclusion that God is benevolent. The objection is that the argument begs the question, meaning that the premise, that God has all the virtues, assumes the conclusion, that God is benevolent.

But what is wrong with that? Why is it a fault or error in the argument? Robinson argued (p. 114) that there are only two proper ways of condemning an argument - because the conclusion does not follow from the premises, or because the premises are not acceptable to the person to whom the argument was directed. Arguing that begging the question does not fit into either category, Robinson concluded that it is not a proper criticism of an argument.

Robinson, continued to build up his skeptical case by arguing that begging the question has traditionally been thought to be a fallacy because it is a breaking of the rules of the old-fashioned game of *elenchus* (two-person contestive question-reply argumentation as found in Aristotle). Each participant has a conclusion (question) to be proved, and one of the rules, according to Robinson (p. 115) was that a question must not directly ask for conclusion. Robinson showed how this rule made sense within the framework of the game of *elenchus,* but went on to claim that argumentation on a serious matter is "trying to get at the truth, to know something" (p. 115). Because Robinson thought that Aristotle's question-answer games were irrelevant,as serious models of knowledge-seeking, he concluded that the prohibition of begging the question is not a law of logic, but only the rule of an old-fashioned competitive game: "To appeal to it when engaged in the scientific search for truth is as irrelevant as to obey the Queensbury rules when attacked by a murderer" (p. 116). Robinson's conclusion was that the fallacy of begging the question has no relevance to any knowledge-seeking inquiry into the truth of a matter, as a proper criticism or alleged fallacy of argument.

In an additional section, Robinson referred to Aristotle's other account of begging the question, in the *Prior Analytics,* where the fallacy is not a breach of a game-rule but a violation of a rule of scientific

method. However, Robinson rejected this account as well, claiming that it founders on the "antiquated" and "mistaken" idea that some truths in natural science are "self-evident". Robinson concluded that the *Analytics* account is a failure "because it uses a concept that has no application in most of science". Since neither of Aristotle's accounts of begging the question appears to make sense to the modern reader, Robinson concludes that the whole idea of this fallacy must be based on confusion or error. This skeptical conclusion soon provoked two replies.

Hoffman (1971, p. 51) replied to Robinson's article that every argument must have at least two premises. He defined begging the question as the case where "the same proposition is asserted twice", both as premise and conclusion (propositional identity).

Sanford (1972, p. 197) asked what Hoffman means by propositional identity. Orthographic identity of a premise and the conclusion of an argument is sufficient for question-begging, but not necessary. To show why, Sanford presented the following case (p. 197), paraphrased below.

> *Case 2*: For any conclusion *A*, one can always give a (question-begging) argument of the form, 'not-not *A*, therefore *A*'. Challenged to defend the premise, one could give another argument of the same form, 'Not-not-not-not *A*, therefore not-not *A*'. This tedious process could be continued indefinitely, and it strikes us as question-begging.

In this type of case, the argument is question-begging, even though the premise and the conclusion are not strictly (orthographically, to use Sanford's term) identical. Hence, to apply the Hoffman criterion of begging the question, we need an adequate definition of propositional identity.

But Sanford went on to point out that even if such a definition of identity could be supplied, there are other cases that remain problematic. To make his point, Sanford (p. 198f.) reconsidered the case of God and the virtues previously put forward by Robinson.

> The argument 'God has all the virtues, therefore He is benevolent', directed toward one who disbelieves the conclusion, would normally beg the question. Only someone extraordinarily obtuse would accept the premise, agree that benevolence is a virtue, and deny the conclusion. Someone less obtuse might accept the premise but neither believe nor disbelieve the conclusion. (If asked out of the blue whether God has all virtues, he would say yes. If asked out of the blue whether God is benevolent, he would be unsure.)

In such a case, the argument is perfectly in order. In other circumstances, even though the same argument is directed toward someone who does not disbelieve the conclusion it would beg the question. If one is unsure whether God is benevolent, and would believe that God has all the virtues only if he believed that God is benevolent, then the argument cannot increase the degree of reasonable confidence he has in the truth of the conclusion.

Sanford (1972) concluded that begging the question is a failure "to increase the degree of reasonable confidence which one has in the truth of the conclusion" (p. 198). According to Sanford's account, an argument begs the question if the person to whom it was directed "would believe one of the premises only if he already believed the conclusion". This criterion makes the question of whether an argument begs the question a matter of what the intended recipient believes. According to Sanford's analysis, there is an ordering of beliefs and disbeliefs that can be violated by a circular argument.

Barker (1976, p. 245) pointed out that the argument in case 1, in the form considered by Sanford, is an enthymeme, because the premise 'Benevolence is a virtue' has been presumed, but not explicitly stated. It appears then that the problem of begging the question also involves a reading of the background context of discourse in which an unstated premise may be implicitly presumed to be part of the argument. This could be a problem because, in the case of a non-explicit premise, it could be unclear whether the recipient of the argument believes it or not.

According to the account given by Barker (1976, p. 242), the fallacy of begging the question always presupposes a context of disputation, and Barker took this to imply that question-begging by one party in the disputation only occurs where her argument is directed to another party in the disputation who disbelieves the conclusion. Sanford at least partially disagreed. The view of Barker contrasts with that of Sanford (1977), which postulates that the central purpose of argument is to show that something is worthy of belief. But this purpose can be accomplished, in Sanford's view, even if the conclusion was initially neither believed nor disbelieved, or if the conclusion has been believed all along.

The question is raised then: Does begging the question presuppose an initial controversy or conflict of opinion between two participants in a context of dialogue? Sanford and Barker appear to disagree on the question of what background context is appropriate when judging whether an argument begs the question.

In a subsequent article, however, Sanford appears to have come somewhat closer to Barker's point of view. Using two interesting cases, Sanford (1981, p. 148) showed that whether or not a premise in an argument is superfluous (which, of course, affects whether or not the argument may be question-begging) depends very much on the background epistemic context of a particular form of argument.[5] The cases used to illustrate this point have arguments with the form of disjunctive syllogisms.

First, consider Sanford's case (p. 148) which illustrates an ordinary kind of inference in the form of a disjunctive syllogism (quoted directly, below).

> *Case 3:* ... suppose that Jones told me this morning that this afternoon he will be either at the library or with the mimeograph machine in the back room. I have just come back from the library, and have not yet visited the back room, when a colleague comes in and asks where he can find Jones. I answer him with an argument.
>
> Well, he is either at the library or in the back room. I just came from the library, and he wasn't there. So he must be in the back room.

In this case, the argument is perfectly straightforward, and the premises both contain information that is relevant to the conclusion.

But consider a parallel case where the form of the argument is the same, but the background knowledge of the arguer is different (p. 148).

> *Case 4:* I come from the library to the philosophy department office. I go into the back room to get some more typing paper. It turns out that Jones is there working the mimeograph machine. When I return to the outer office a colleague comes in and asks where he can find Jones. I produce the following bit of argumentation:
>
> Well, he is either at the library or in the back room. I just came from the library, and he wasn't there. So he must be in the back room.

In this case, the explicit premises and conclusion of the argument are identical to those of the case above. But in this second case, the argument is a "sham", because the information about the library is

superfluous. It does not really represent the arguer's reasons for believing that Jones is in the back room.

Sanford's point is a deeply fundamental one for students of the *petitio,* in particular, because it raises two basic problems. The first of these was pointed out by Biro (1977). Biro commented (1977, p. 263) that if Sanford's general thesis that begging the question varies with the beliefs, commitments, or information possessed by the participants in an argument, then whether the fallacy has been committed is a purely "subjective" matter.

> Is one and the same argument both question-begging and not question-begging? Or are there two arguments now, one directed to Smith and one to Brown, one question-begging, the other not? How does Jones (or anyone else) know which of these two arguments (indistinguishable, of course, in meaning and both valid) is directed to Smith and which to Brown? Which side of his mouth begs the question and which does not?

Biro, like Whately before him, wonders whether the classification of an argument as question-begging has become "subjective" or "multiple", if it is relative to someone's individual system of beliefs.[6]

Sanford's reply to this criticism was that when the purpose of an argument is to convince another participant in argument of some point, whether or not the argument can fulfill this purpose depends on the prior degree of confidence that the person to whom the argument is directed has, in regard to the point of which he is to be convinced. Thus the reasons given to support a conclusion should vary with the commitments of the person to be convinced. Sanford (1981, p. 150) argued that this other-directed feature of argument designed to convince is a legitimate aspect of argument, and is not subjective in a way that precludes begging the question as a fallacy.

> Often, when one's purpose in presenting an argument is to convince another that he should have a certain degree of confidence in the conclusion, one gives an argument which purports to give one's own reasons for having that degree of confidence in the conclusion. We generally assume that what, is good enough reason for us is good enough reason for anyone. On occasion, however, when one's purpose is

> to convince another that he should have a certain degree of confidence in something, this can be accomplished by presenting an argument which does not give one's own reasons for having that degree of confidence in the conclusion.

Sanford argued with some plausibility that this dependency of question-begging on the prior degree of confidence that a particular individual has in the conclusion of an argument does not make classification of the fallacy of begging the question hopelessly idiosynchratic and subjective. But backing up his case for this argument seems to leave many problems open to further inquiry. What method of argument analysis could take into account the individual commitments of the person to be convinced, at any particular point in a sequence of argumentative exchanges where this individual's degree of confidence in the conclusion is supposedly being increased by an argument? The required notion of premises that are less open to doubt than the conclusion, for the person to whom an argument is directed, seems to presuppose a background context of two-person, interactive, dynamic argumentation in which the purpose is for one person to convince the other person of some conclusion. Understanding the organized structure and rules of this background context will be necessary for an explicit, objectively checkable classification of arguments as begging the question.

The second basic problem is that the pair of cases advanced by Sanford above raises the question of how much of the background material pertaining to the knowledge, commitments, presuppositions, etc., of the participants can or should count as part of the argument. In the second case, the fact that I just saw Jones in the back room is part of the "epistemic context" of the argument, according to Sanford. But if so, the fault here can be seen as a Gricean failure to communicate, according to the maxims of collaborative dialogue. The argument is misleading because the arguer is presenting his argument without letting the intended recipient know about additional, relevant information. The failure here is not one of the hearer's beliefs, or his priority of beliefs, but one of the information shared by the speaker. The problem in this case is that once you take the context of dialogue into account, you see that some background information is not shared by both participants.

Thus the general problem posed by this case is one of how to reconstruct an argument from a given context of discourse. And there seems

to be legitimate controversy about how much of the information which can be extracted from the context of dialogue constitutes the "argument". The basic question here is one of how the concept of argument is to be defined - semantically or pragmatically.

Biro (1984) agreed with Sanford that the fallacy of begging the question related to a failure of a requirement of an arguer's knowledge or belief, but disagreed by phrasing the requirement differently. Sanford preferred to phrase his version of the requirement in terms of "reasonable belief" (see also Sanford, 1988) but according to Biro, the appropriate requirement is one of comparative knowability.

What matters in an argument designed to be *epistemically serious,* Biro claimed, is "that there should be a way in which we can learn the truth, of the premises, so that we can use that knowledge to argue to the truth of the conclusion". An argument that begs the question is fallacious because it fails to meet the epistemic seriousness requirement of leaving an evidential route to the premises open. But how can we tell, in a given case, that the requirement of epistemic seriousness has been met or not? And, equally importantly, how can we tell, with respect to a given argument, that it is meant to be an epistemically serious argument? It might be premature and inappropriate to condemn an argument as question-begging on grounds of having failed to meet the requirement of epistemic seriousness if the real purpose of the argument was not to use the knowledge in the premises to argue to the truth of the conclusion. This is not the only legitimate purpose an argument may have, if it is possible for an argument to occur in more than one type of background context of discourse.

What arises from this literature is that it is extremely important, in judging whether an argument begs the question, to arrive at some reconstruction of what the context of dialogue is supposed to be. While the theories of all the papers in the literature imply or lead to the conclusion that the context of dialogue is crucial, there seems to be disagreement and uncertainty on the question of how this context is to be described.

One way of attempting to get a more precise account of a framework of dialogue suitable as a context for argumentation is to model dialogue as an abstract, formal, rule-governed structure.

Hintikka (1987) sees *petitio principii* not as an inferential fault, but as a mistake in questioning procedures in an interrogative game of the type Aristotle studied in the *Topics* and *De Sophisticis Elenchis.* Hin-

tikka (1981) and also Carlson (1983) have proposed structural models of these types of interrogative games. According to Hintikka (1987, p. 220), Robinson was quite mistaken to think that an interrogative game like *elenchus* cannot be a good model of knowledge-seeking in a serious scientific search for truth.

The interrogative model of argumentation presented in Hintikka (1987) provides an answer to the question of why *petitio principii* is fallacious. In such a model, for an arguer to ask a principal question (a question that defines the issue of the conversation) during the course of a dialogue, could be fallacious for several reasons. First, the presupposition of the principal question may not yet have been properly established. Second, the general restrictions on available answers may make it pointless to ask the principal question. This second kind of mistake would be a strategic error, rather than a violation of the rule of the dialogue game.

The fallacy of begging the question, in such an interrogative game, according to Hintikka's analysis (p. 219) occurs where the respondent asks the principal ("big") question immediately, instead of raising a number of "small" questions that should properly be asked first. In an interrogative game, there is a "big" initial or principal question that represents the issue to be resolved by the dialogue (at the global level). But asking this big question right away trivializes the entire questioning procedure, thus destroying the point of the game.

2. MODELLING PETITIO IN FORMAL DIALOGUES

The first attempt to study *petitio principii* in relation to a formalistic structure of dialogue, however, appears to be that of Hamblin (1970). Hamblin designed a 'Why-Because-System-with-Questions', called (H) by Woods and Walton (1978, p. 74), and formulated two optional additional rules for (H) which, he conjectured, banned *petitio*. The technical details can be found in Woods and Walton (1978).[7]

The Hamblin game (H) lacks win-loss rules (a significant deficit), but is regulated by locution rules, dialogue rules, and commitment rules. The locution rules specify which types of locutions the participants in the dialogue may put forward. The locutions may consist of the following forms, where *A* is a statement-form.

(i) statements of the form, '*Statement A*'

(ii) retractions of the form, *`No commitment A'*
(iii) yes-no questions of the form, 'A?'
(iv) why-questions of the form *`Why A?'*
(v) resolution requests of the form *`Resolve A'*

The dialogue rules specify, first, that the players must take turns, each contributing one locution at his turn, except that a *`No commitment'* locution can (optionally) accompany the advancing of a why-question. Second, a yes-no question, *`A*?', must be followed by either *`Statement A?'* or *`No commitment A'.* Third, *`Why A?'* must be followed by one of the following four types of response (i) *`Statement not-A', (ii) `No commitment A', (iii) `Statement B',* where *B* is equivalent to *A*, or (iv) *`Statement B'* where *B* implies *A*. The fourth and final dialogue rule is that *`Resolve A'* must be followed by either *`No commitment A'* or *`No commitment not-A'.*

Each player has a store of commitments, a kind of log or memory-bank that records the concessions of a player at all his previous moves in the game. Hamblin stresses (p. 260f.) that a commitment is not to be thought of as a belief of a player and that a player's commitment-set is not required to be internally consistent. In (H), retractions of commitments by a player is allowed. There are four commitment rules for (H).

(i) '*Statement A*' places *A* in the commitment-store of the speaker, and also in that of the hearer, unless he indicates otherwise at the next move.
(ii) *`No commitment A'* deletes *A* from the speaker's commitment-store.
(iii) *`A?'* places *A* in the speaker's commitment-store, and also places *A* in the hearer's commitment-store unless he indicates otherwise at the next move.
(iv) *`Why A?* places *A* in the speaker's commitment-store, unless his response indicates otherwise.

One can certainly question the possible arbitrariness of these rules for dialogue, especially the commitment rules, because they seem to imply, contrary to many real instances of question-reply dialogue, that the asker of a question, for example, must be committed to the statement contained in his question. But Hamblin does not presume that (H) is the only possible game of dialogue, and in fact, he considers various

alternatives in his discussion. Despite the apparent arbitrariness of (H) then, as a model of dialogue, it is of interest to see how *petitio* is dealt with by the rules of (H).

The paradigm of circular argument in (H), called a *circle game* in Woods and Walton (p. 79), is represented by the tableau below, where ⊃ represents the classical 'if-then' (material implication). Below is a two-step circle game.

Case 5:	WHITE	BLACK
(1)	*Why A?*	*Statements B, B⊃A*
(2)	*Why B ?*	*Statements A, A ⊃ B*

A circle game can take many forms, of the following general pattern.

Case 6.	WHITE	BLACK
(1)	*Why A ?*	*Statements* A_1, $A_1 \supset A$
(2)	*Why* A_1*?*	*Statements* A_2, $A_2 \supset A_1$
(k)	*Why* A_{n-1} ?	*Statements* A_n, $A_n \supset A_{n-1}$
(k + 1)	*Why* A_n ?	*Statements A, A ⊃* A_n

Of the various modifications and extensions to (H) that Hamblin discusses, two rules are of particular relevance to circle games (p. 268f.).

(W) `*Why A?*' may not be used unless *A* is a commitment of the hearer, and not of the speaker.

(Rl) The answer to `*Why A?*', if it is not `*Statement A*' or `*No commitment A*', must be in terms of statements that are already commitments of both speaker and hearer.

To see how (W) and (Rl) jointly have the effect of blocking circular patterns of argumentation, consider how they apply to the two-step circle game above (case 5). When Black responds `*B, B⊃ A*' at step (1), it is required by (Rl) that both statements be in the commitment-stores of both Black and White. But then, because of (W), White is barred from asking the question `*Why B?* because *B* is in his commitment-store by step (2). Being now committed to *B*, by (W) he is not allowed to ask `*Why B?*'. So it would appear that (W) and (Rl), added to (H), block circular reasoning.

However, Woods and Walton (p. 80) showed that this is not so,

by constructing a sequence of dialogue in (H) that may be plausibly interpreted as circular. In the tableau of the sequence given below, the initial commitment-store of each participant is given in brackets at the head of the tableau. A superscript indicates at which step an addition has been inserted. A stroke indicates a retraction, and the superscript at the head of a stroke marks the step at which a commitment has been deleted (retracted).

Case 7: WHITE [$A \supset B$, $B \supset A$, A^2, $\not{B}^3$]	*BLACK* [A, B, $A \supset B$, $B \supset A$, C]
(1) *Why A?*	*Statements* B, $B \supset A$
(2) *Statement A*	*Statement C*
(3) *No commitment B; why B?*	*Statements* A, $A \supset B$
(4) *Statement B*	

This bit of dialogue poses an interesting puzzle. It is a circular pattern of argument, but curiously it is a legitimate sequence of play according to the rules of (H). If this is a right interpretation, then (H) does not ban circular reasoning after all. But has anyone committed the fallacy of begging the question? No clear, non-ambivalent answer to this question is evident.

From one point of view, it appears that White has begged the question. At step (1), White accepted conclusion A on the basis of premise B. But then at step (4), White accepted conclusion B on the basis of premise A. This seems to be a culpable case of begging the question.

From another point of view, however, it seems that there is really nothing wrong with the dialogue as a proper sequence of argument. We could say that Black was simply reminding White at step (3) of White's previous commitment to A at step (2), thereby pointing out, quite rightly to White that because of this (and his prior acceptance of $A \supset B$) he cannot reject B after all. True, White has been inconsistent (or perhaps ambivalent) in trying to retract his commitment to B when he was really committed to B in a way that made the retraction open to reasonable challenge by Black. But inconsistency, ambivalence, or "wavering" of this sort is not necessarily fallacious. At any rate, it does not appear to commit the fallacy of begging the question. Instead, we could describe the dialogue by saying that White was on the verge of committing himself to an inconsistency, until Black straightened him

out. But inconsistency is not a fallacy,[8] and anyway, White restored his commitment-set to consistency in the end, at move (4).

Whether case 7 is a legitimate sequence of play, or commits the fallacy of begging the question, depends on the rules of the game which tell us whether a sequence of moves is acceptable or not. This implies an external criterion for fallaciousness. We have to ask, when it is said that an argument is circular, "Circular in what sense?".

Hamblin (1971) required that games of dialogue used to model reasoned argumentation between two parties should be "information-oriented". Unfortunately, there are different senses of `information' that could be relevant. In one sense, a logically valid deductive inference can yield new information. But in another sense, a logically valid inference is not supposed to yield any new information.

Hintikka (1970) has studied the distinction between "depth information" and "surface information" at some length. This distinction is important, because the same sequence of valid inferences may have the same depth information as the premises but contain new surface information. The problem then comes down to defining different senses of `information'.

The conclusion of Woods and Walton (p. 85) is that whether or not problematic sequences of dialogue are fallaciously circular depends on how you interpret the context of the dialogue. In particular, one property of dialogue generally is crucial. A dialogue is said to be *cumulative* in the sense of Woods and Walton (p. 83), when at every move of the dialogue, once a player becomes committed to a particular statement, she must then remain committed to that statement at every succeeding move of the dialogue. No statement (once made) is retractable, in a cumulative dialogue.

A cumulative dialogue is a sequence of reasoning where there is meant to be an "increment of knowledge". The goal is to eliminate the need for retraction. In such a context, an argument that begs the question appears to be a fallacy, because a cumulative type of dialogue proceeds only in a linear direction. The context is not compatible with "circling back" in argument to a previous point.

Another factor of context also seems to suggest a fallacious chain of reasoning. An argument in dialogue strongly appears to commit a question-begging fallacy if we presume that the one party's conclusion *is grounded on* the premises cited by the other party, meaning that these premises somehow may be taken to represent the evidential basis

for the first party's acceptance of the conclusion. For if that conclusion is grounded on a premise that is, in turn, grounded on that conclusion, the argument seems worthless as an evidential basis for the conclusion. But what the concept of groundedness really means or refers to, and whether it is present in the context of trying to interpret or reconstruct an argument, remain open questions, and puzzling ones at that.

A different diagnosis of the problem in case 7 was made by Mackenzie (1979), who constructed a new system of dialogue, DC, that is similar to (H) in general outline, but adds different rules. DC is not cumulative with respect to statements, but it is cumulative with respect to challenges - in DC a statement is said to be *under challenge* for the one party where the other player is committed to the question *`Why A?'*. Mackenzie's innovation in DC was to introduce the idea that a player can be committed to a question, in addition to being committed to a statement. In the game DC, it would be ruled that Black begged the question at move (4) by replying to a challenge with a statement (A) which is under challenge with respect to him at move (4). Mackenzie argued (p. 127) that cumulativeness (at least of statements) is not the crucial factor in *petitio.*

Mackenzie's alternate system DD is non-cumulative, even for challenges. In this game, Black does not beg the question at (4) because, according to the rules of DD, White's assertion of *A* at (2) removed *`Why A?'* from his challenge commitment (Mackenzie, p. 128). However, Mackenzie added (p. 128) that White's concession of *A* at (2) seemed "unnatural", and except for this "unnatural" type of case, DD does generally prohibit *petitio.*[9]

Mackenzie (1980) took a similar approach to begging the question in explaining why there is an informal rule in axiomatic geometry of never using a higher-numbered theorem in order to prove a theorem with a lower number. Mackenzie appealed to the same rule he used to ban question-begging in DC (1979), which expressly prohibits an arguer from using any statement as a premise that is under challenge for her. Thus, according to Mackenzie, the lower-numbered theorems cannot use the higher-numbered theorems as premises because they are under challenge at that point.

In a subsequent article, Woods and Walton (1982) persisted in interpreting the problematic dialogue-segment differently from Mackenzie, for several reasons. First, even though White challenged *A* at (1), he later committed himself to *A* at (2), and surely therefore Black has

a right to use *A* as a premise at (3). It seems to remain possible that a fair case could be made that Black does not commit a fallacy of begging the question, judging from a viewpoint of challenges with respect to commitments that arise out of them. While Black may be in some technical sense "begging the question", meaning that his argument is circular or contains a circular sequence of argumentation, it is far from clear that this circularity is vicious or fallacious.

In short, the question of whether the Woods-Walton fragment is a genuine instance of the fallacy of begging the question remains open. The problem is that the game (H) does not give us enough of a concrete context to determine clearly whether the circular sequence of argument in it should be judged an instance of the fallacy of begging the question. It appears that (H) gives us enough of a context to model certain interesting patterns of circular argumentation, but not enough of a well-specified context to yield the means of determining whether a given circular argument is an instance of the fallacy of begging the question.

3. ARE CIRCULAR ARGUMENTS ALWAYS FALLACIOUS?

In the following case from Walton (1985, p. 263), a sequence of questions and answers takes us in a circle. It is the sort of case that the textbooks might typically cite as an instance of the fallacy of *petitio principii*.

> When asked to prove that the economy in a certain state is in a slump, an economist replies: "A lot of people are leaving the state. Things are very poor in the building industry, for example, because there is no need for new housing". Next question: "How can you show that people are leaving the state?" The economist's answer: "Well, the state of the economy is poor. People just don't seem to be able to get jobs, with the economy being so slow at the moment".

According to the economist's reply, the economy is depressed because people are leaving. But according to her other reply, people are leaving because the economy is depressed. Here we seem to have the typical *petitio principii*, a line of argument that is circular.

But questions need to be raised as to whether this circular sequence of dialogue is an instance of fallacious question-begging. Could the

circularity in the economist's argument be thought of as properly reflecting the circularity of feedback loops in the human behaviour described in case 8? As people perceive that the economy is depressed, it affects their behavior, causing them to leave, which makes the economy more depressed, which causes more people to leave, etc. It is a kind of vicious cycle, and the economist's sequence of replies, far from being fallacious or erroneous, correctly report this cycle.

To analyze this case further, we have to look at the kind of speech act in which the economist is supposed to be engaged. She could be giving an explanation of events in the economy, and if so, her reporting of the cycles in it would not appear to be an instance of the fallacy of begging the question.[10]

The economist could also be putting forward an argument. But what sort of argument is it? Is it an argument to prove to the questioner that people are leaving the state by citing some premises that the question is either committed to, or would accept as true? Or could it be an argument citing premises that are causally related to the proposition queried, but not necessarily meant to be acceptable to the questioner, independent of her questioning of the proposition queried.

In raising these questions, we are asking about the function or use of an argument in a context of discourse. What is the economist supposed to be doing by putting forward his argument in this case? Is she supposed to be proving something to the respondent, basing her proof on premises that the respondent is committed to already or that the respondent can be presumed to find acceptable. Or is she supposed to be drawing inferences from premises that the respondent may not necessarily find acceptable, or has not already agreed to? This supposed purpose or function makes a great difference to the question of whether a circular line of argument is objectionable or not. If the argument is hypothetical or suppositional in nature, then arguing from one proposition to another, and then back again (the other way), does not necessarily defeat or block the purpose of the argument. But if the argument is supposed to be a *proof* of its conclusion in the first sense, there could be grounds for calling it fallacious.[11]

If the respondent doubts one proposition, *A*, and the proponent cites *B* as a premise that is to be used to prove *A* to the respondent, the function of the argument may be to remove the respondent's doubt of *A* by inferring *A* from *B*. To make this function operate successfully, the respondent must not have the same level of doubts about *B* as she

had about A. Otherwise the operation of proving A from B would be futile.

Given these requirements on proving, the proponent cannot now turn around and try to use A as a premise to prove B. For by the prior context, she doubts A. So using A is going to be no good as a way of removing her doubts concerning B.

The question then is not the formal validity of the argument from B to A, but how the argument is supposed to be used in context to fulfill a purpose of discourse. If the goal is proof, in the sense of removing doubt by inferring from less doubtful premises, a circular argument is useless to fulfill this function. But if the goal is to use argument in a more free-ranging way that allows premises to be suppositions that the respondent will not necessarily be inclined to accept as beyond doubt, or less doubtful than the conclusion, there may not be anything fallacious or counter-productive in using a circular argument.

Another question raised is the function of the why-question in the type of dialogue the participants are supposed to be engaged in. In the game (H), it is clear that the function of a why-question is to request the respondent to prove the proposition queried by inferring (deducing) it from premises to which the asker of the question is already committed. A why question is essentially a request for proof that will remove the questioner's doubts about the truth or acceptability of the proposition queried.

In (H) then, it would seem that the economist's circular sequence in answering the pair of why-questions in case S would constitute a fallacious *petitio principii.* But if we look back at the argument in the Woods-Walton case, it appears that not all circular arguments in response to pairs of why questions are fallacious. If you look at the dialogue in case 7, the argument takes essentially the following form.

Case 9:

WHITE	BLACK
Why A?	Because B, $B \supset A$
Why B ?	Because A, $A \supset B$

This sequence of dialogue is clearly circular in structure, and it has the following argument reconstruction diagram. The points represent propositions that are premises or conclusions. The arrows represent

steps of inference. Sameness of numbers on a set of arrows indicates a linked argument.

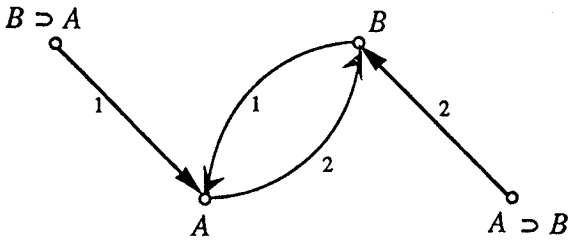

Fig. 1.

Here we have two linked arguments that share a dicycle *(ABBA)*. Whether *A* or *B* is supposed to be the ultimate conclusion of the dialogue, in either event the circle is a worrisome one because there is no line of evidence leading into the conclusion that is not dependent on (linked to) the circle. So depending on what is meant by "inevitable circle", the argument contains an inevitable circle the sense that, given the information on the diagram, there is no line of argument for the conclusion that does not contain a circle.[12] From this point of view then, Black has committed a *petitio principii* fallacy in the Woods-Walton dialogue.

But the problem is that the diagram of the argument is inherently misleading as a true reconstruction of the dialogue.. For the diagram does not take into account that White retracted his commitment to *B* at move (3) in case 7. It is this retraction that made White's consistency somewhat questionable, but at the same time it can also be interpreted as justifying Black's apparently circular tactics in response to White's retraction. The problem however, is that the retraction is not pictured on the argument diagram in Figure 1, above.

If the retraction of *B* were pictured. on the diagram, perhaps *B* would be erased, resulting in the disappearance of the circle. But how do you represent retraction (if at all) on an argument reconstruction diagram? This is an open question, but evidently an important one in studying begging the question. This is the very kind of problem one would have to deal with in an argument where assumptions are withdrawn, for example in diagramming a *reductio ad absurdum* argument. The problem is not insoluble, but it is certainly a practical obstacle in ensuring

that an argument reconstruction diagram represents a particular text of argument completely enough to enable a critic to determine from the diagram whether the argument is a fallacious *petitio principii* or not.

This problem is part of the larger problem of knowing when an argument reconstruction is complete with respect to a context of dialogue for a given, particular case. Take the instance of the Woods-Walton dialogue in case 7 as an example. Is the given argument a complete sequence of dialogue which is now closed to further argumentation? We have no guarantee that it is, going by the given information. Presumably, the participants could continue to engage in persuasion dialogue - presuming that is the type of dialogue they are engaged in - and further premises could be added in, questioned, or even retracted. How then can an allegation that some participant has, at this point, definitely committed a fallacy of begging the question be judged definitively and conclusively? The answer would appear to be that such a judgment cannot be made conclusively until some indication has been given that the dialogue is closed.

Indications that a dialogue has reached the closing stage are given by textual evidence of the speech acts in the language of the dialogue, or by contextual indications that closure has been properly achieved according to the appropriate rules or conventions for this particular type of dialogue. This evidence does not appear on the digraph itself, as any structural property of digraphs, so it seems that we must look to some tactical factor as part of the evidential picture for documenting a case that a fallacy of begging the question has been committed.

If case 8 is not necessarily fallacious, and case 9 represents, in outline, the sequence of the argument structure of case 8, then it would seem to follow that case 9 does not necessarily represent a fallacious kind of argumentation either. It seems then that case 7, the problematic Woods-Walton dialogue, at best is only fallacious in some contexts of argument.

To get any closer to seeing why and how circular arguments do beg the question in some cases, we have to turn to the pragmatic question of context.

4. CONTEXTS OF DIALOGUE

The pragmatic approach to analyzing begging the question as a fallacy sees an argument as a set of propositions used in a context of dialogue. Normative evaluation of the argument requires that such a context of

dialogue has rules of argument accepted by both participants. Because it has different rules, the context of persuasion dialogue (defined below) is a different kind of normative model of good argument from either the quarrel or the debate. We could say that the model of persuasion dialogue is a rule-governed game, where one party wins if he persuades the other party that his (the first party's) thesis is right. The game of dialogue will have procedural rules that will govern when each player will move, and govern the sort of move he will make. Each move must be a question or an answer, and the specific types of questions and answers that are allowed will be clearly stated at the outset, as part of the game.

There are two levels of reasonable dialogue, according to Hamblin. At the abstract level, a game of dialogue is a normative model - a precisely stated set of rules forming an abstract structure that may or may not correspond in greater or lesser degrees to realistic contexts of argumentation. At the practical level, a game of dialogue is a sequence of speech events - a regulated sequence of questions and answers that represents interactive argument exchanges between two parties on a controversial or disputed issue.

According to van Eemeren (1986), a theory of analysis of argumentative discourse which purports to be practical must be normative as well as descriptive.[13] Characteristic of van Eemeren's normative conception is that it should be based on the critical discussion as reasoned dialogue. However, van Eemeren concedes that real life is seldom either as simple or as reasonable as the ideal of the critical discussion, where the roles and rules of discussion are defined by rules that order and regulate permissible moves and replies. According to the classification of types of dialogues put forward here, the critical discussion is a subspecies of persuasion dialogue.

The theory of critical discussion expressed by an abstract model composed of a set of rules is inevitably an idealization, to a greater or lesser extent. As an idealization, its approximation to any real situation is always open to question in a particular case. However, to say that a model or theory is an idealization is by no means necessarily to say that the theory is useless or impractical.

A criticism of an argument which seeks to justify an allegation that the argument commits a fallacy must be based on several methodological presuppositions. The first is that the argument in question has a text of discourse which can be identified as exemplifying a particular

type of dialogue. Every type of dialogue has a goal, and is made up of a sequence of speech acts that move towards the fulfillment of the goal, according to rules of dialogue. In analyzing a particular case of an argument, the first step is to identify the type of dialogue the arguer is supposed to be engaged in.

The second step is to reconstruct the argument in question, from the given text of discourse and our identification of the type of dialogue. The third step is to apply the normative model of dialogue appropriate for the given case to the reconstructed sequence of argumentation extrapolated from the case.

One context of dialogue is the *personal quarrel,* where the goal of each participant is to defeat his opponent at all costs, even if that means resorting to persuasive but incorrect arguments. A second context of argument is the *debate,* a form of exchange of argument controlled by rules enforced by an external judge, referee, or speaker. Debate can be highly informative when it reaches a high level. Unfortunately however, too often the logically weak argument turns out to be a real crowd-pleaser in debate, and therefore the debate turns out to be no friend of logic.

A third context of argument is *persuasion dialogue,* where one arguer has the goal or burden of proving his thesis from another arguer's premises. Persuasion dialogue differs from the debate and the personal quarrel in that the procedural rules of questioning and replying govern every move. Persuasion dialogue can be identified as the generic type of dialogue of the more specific type called the critical discussion by van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1984). Persuasion dialogue can test arguments on both sides of a controversial issue. A successful persuasion dialogue exhibits a sequence of linked objections and replies that serves to bring out our understanding of arguments on both sides of the issue. Good persuasion dialogue has the effect of revealing the position of the arguer on each side if each argument at the local level is connected to each other argument so that the dialogue globally connects together as a sequence of questions and answers.

There are ten basic components of persuasion dialogue as a normative model of argumentation, as applied to a particular case.

(1) The first characteristic is that there should be a specific claim or thesis, put forward by its proponent, and argument should

be directed to convincing the other arguer or audience (the respondent) of the acceptability of this thesis.

(2) The second characteristic is the sequence of questions and replies generated in dialogue as each arguer takes a turn.

(3) The third characteristic is the issue, the controversy or conflict of opinion to be resolved by the dialogue. It is made up of that proponent's thesis and the respondent's opposition or doubt with respect to that thesis.

(4) The fourth characteristic is that argument takes place at a local level, but also exhibits. a back-and-forth sequence that emerges at the global level of analysis. Each local argument fits into a larger context. As Hintikka and Bachman (1991, p. 180) put it, "we must proceed by careful, smaller steps", local question-reply steps, towards answering "the big (principal) question at the global level".

(5) The fifth characteristic of argument is the commitment-set of each arguer that is revealed throughout the course of the dialogue. As the dialogue proceeds, propositions are added to, or deleted from each arguer's commitment-set, according to the rules for asking and answering questions (Hamblin, 1970, p. 264). An arguer's commitment-set is also called his position.

(6) The sixth characteristic of an argument is the *corpus* or text of argument that provides the evidence of what was said in a given case.

(7) The seventh characteristic of argument is the burden of proof, which defines what each participant must do in order to win the argument.

(8) The eighth characteristic of argument is the various kinds of criticisms that are the tools used by arguers to attack the weaknesses of an opponent's argument. Whether a criticism is justified depends on the textual evidence of the dialogue, and on the normative model. Persuasion dialogue can shift to other contexts of dialogue, like the quarrel.

(9) The ninth characteristic of argument is that the medium of argument is normally that of natural language. Hence arguments can be vague and ambiguous, and the question of how the terms in an argument are to be defined is often crucial and controversial.

(10) The tenth characteristic is that there are different contexts of arguments other than persuasion dialogue, with contrasting goals and methods, e.g., the inquiry, the quarrel, and negotiation dialogue.

The skills of good management of arguments involve learning to cope with criticisms like begging the question in a rational manner. These skills often involve the ability not to be deflected by emotional and other kinds of recriminations from the global mainstream of the argument, which serves to reveal the reasoning behind the main issue of the dialogue.

Among the diversions that can impede the flow of all types of reasonable dialogue are appeals to emotion. Such distractions include appeals to pity, personal attacks, asking loaded questions, appeals to fear or force, and appeals to popular opinion. Another kind of appeal that is not necessarily unreasonable in itself, but can choke off the flow of argument in some cases, is the appeal to expert opinion. Each of these kinds of appeals needs to be understood more fully as a kind of move made in dialogue, for if any of them is mismanaged it can easily lead to confusion and the loss of the line of argument. Hence the pragmatic study of argumentation should include the proper management of each of these types of appeals in argument, as well as the management of question-begging arguments.

When an allegation of question-begging has been made, or surfaces as a plausible allegation, evidence on the type of dialogue, and textual evidence of the context of dialogue should be brought to bear. The gathering of this type of evidence involves the reconstruction and interpretation of the argument in its pragmatic context, relative to the available information. In some cases, the data will be incomplete, and the issue of whether a fallacy has been committed cannot be settled. Generally, however, the burden of proof should be on the accuser. On the other hand, a transparently circular argument will always look inherently suspicious. And if so, the burden of proof to defend the argument will be put on its proponent.

The subject of this investigation is the normative evaluation of begging the question as a criticism that can be backed up by rational evidence. However, this critical perspective also implies that persuasion dialogue has a genuinely adversarial nature, but that is not in itself bad. For the critical perspective serves to strengthen an argument by

alerting both the critic and the proponent of the argument to its weaker and stronger points. By questioning an argument; a reasonable critic can often give insight into the deeper reasons behind the convictions that made that argument plausible. However, to achieve this valuable goal, the critic must avoid the loss of critical perspective. His most valuable tool is the insight required to understand the plausible arguments on both sides of the issue.

In persuasion dialogue, the increment of knowledge is not only in coming to learn the strengths and weaknesses of an argument, but the deepening of the understanding of both one's own position and that of one's opponent. It is a curious paradox of persuasion dialogue, frequently commented on by Socrates, that real knowledge of one's position in argument comes only through the process of learning that one did not really know as decisively as one thought in the beginning that one's convictions are true. In persuasion dialogue, the strength to defend a position is achieved through learning the worst weaknesses in it.

In replying to a why-question, a participant in a persuasion dialogue should try to give an answer in the form of an argument that convinces the respondent by removing the doubt expressed in her question. The argument should fulfill the probative function of proving to the respondent that the proposition queried is true by inferring it (according to the rules of inference of the dialogue) from premises that the respondent accepts as non-doubtful, or at least can be brought to accept as non-doubtful. To perform this probative function successfully in persuasion dialogue, the proponent should respect the respondent's doubt, and not try to slur over it, or suppress it, other than by properly fulfilling the burden of proof by exercising the probative function.

Now we can begin to see why begging the question is a fallacious move in this context of dialogue, a kind of illegitimate sophistical tactic. Giving a circular argument in answer to a request to prove a proposition (in the sense of fulfilling a probative function in a dialogue) is fallacious if the very same doubts attach to one of the premises that were already raised by the respondent in questioning the conclusion to be proved.

In case 7 however, these doubts could very well have been removed by the retraction that occurred in the middle of the circular sequence of argumentation. Hence case 7 does not necessarily represent an argument that was question-begging.

We can see then that persuasion dialogue is a context of argument

in which circular arguments can occur, and in which they are not necessarily fallacious. But in the case of some circular arguments, the fallacy of begging the question is committed, because the circular structure of the argument is a failure to fulfill the probative function. The fallacy is an illegitimate or sophistical use of a circular sequence of argumentation to give the appearance of removing doubt, when in reality the probative function has not been properly fulfilled.

5. ARISTOTLE ON BEGGING THE QUESTION

Aristotle's account of begging the question as a sophistical refutation in many respects, as noted by Hamblin (pp. 74-77) and Woods and Walton (1982a), is opaque and difficult to make sense of for the modern reader. Curiously however, it may be that Aristotle's analysis is alien to the reader versed in modern logic precisely because it is a pragmatic account.

Aristotle saw fallacies as sophistical refutations, kinds of tricky tactics in the use of argument techniques, which can be used deceptively to get the best of a speech partner in dialogue.

The remarks on begging the question in the *De Sophisticis Elenchis* clearly presuppose a context of a two-person disputation game where one party has undertaken to prove a particular proposition (his conclusion to be proved), and the other party has taken on the obligation of doubting this proposition, and of resisting the first party's attempts at proof. The fallacy of begging the question can arise in this context if the first party adopts tactics of trying to get the other party to grant the first party's conclusion without doing a proper job of proving it.

Aristotle, in the *De Sophisticis Elenchis,* gives the following advice to anyone who is confronted with the tactic of begging or assuming the original point to be proved in a disputation (181a15-21).

> As to refutations that depend on begging and assuming the original point to be proved, suppose the nature of the question to be obvious, one should not grant it, even though it be a view generally held, but should tell him the truth. Suppose, however, that it escapes one, then, thanks to the badness of arguments of that kind, one should make one's error recoil upon the questioner, and say that he has brought no argument: for a refutation must be proved independently of the original point. Secondly, one should say that the point was, granted under the impression that he intended not to use it as a premise, but to reason against it, in the opposite way from that adopted in refutations on side issues.

The practical nature of Aristotle's intent in the *De Sophisticis Elenchis* to offer advice on how to hold your own in a contestive dispute is evident in this passage. Aristotle tells the reader that in this context of argumentation, he should not grant the opponent's conclusion, even if it is a plausible or "generally held" viewpoint. The reader should, instead, insist on his rights, or rather, on the other party's obligations. He should insist that the would-be question-begger bring forth an argument, that he should prove his contention independently of his original conclusion to be proved. For the latter is not to be freely granted - the work of really proving it is an obligation of the first party in this type of dialogue exchange. This conclusion is what is at issue.

Aristotle's account presumes that there is a context of dialogue wherein two participants are "reasoning together", but where the purpose of the dialogue is at least partly contestive. It is understood that in the Greek game of *elenchus* (refutation), each party has the goal of "reasoning against" the other by trying to refute the other party's contention. In this framework, when you concede the other party's thesis or conclusion to be proved, you are not granting it as proven, for that would, in effect, concede that you have lost the game. Rather, you are only "conceding" or "granting" it in the technical sense that you are acknowledging it as the thesis you now propose to argue against. Your opponent must *prove* his point, not merely ask you to grant it without proof. Any proof useful for the purpose of this contestive type of game of dialogue must, in this model of dialogue, be independent of the original point. The argument used must not depend crucially on the original point or it would beg the question and, therefore, be useless as a proof.

Hintikka (1987, p. 220) pointed out that Aristotle's term for "begging" is *aiteo,* meaning "to ask for", suggesting that the fallacy of begging the question, for Aristotle, was a failure of questioning in *elenchus.* According to Hintikka's analysis, the fallacy is the asking of a question that violates a rule of *elenchus* requiring that the "big" question which is the main or global issue to be resolved by the dialogue, should not be asked right away (at the first move). Otherwise the dialogue would be pointless, in throwing any light on the issue by subjecting it to any real, reasoned discussion or inquiry.

Within its Greek context, such a concept of begging the question was, no doubt, intuitively meaningful to Greek readers. But in a twentieth-century context, where the game of *elenchus* is not familiar, Aristotle's

analysis of begging the question as a fallacy did not strike a responsive chord. Generations of subsequent commentators found it obscure or useless, hardly knowing what to make of it.

Most modern accounts take more of their inspiration from the brief account of the fallacy of begging the question given in the *Topics* (162b31)-163a13), where Aristotle lists five ways in which a questioner may beg the question.

(1) The "first and most obvious way" is where "anyone begs the actual point requiring to be shown". Aristotle adds that this type of fallacy is more apt to escape detection where different terms are used, or where a term and an expression mean the same thing. What he appears to have in mind here is the type of case typified by Whately's classic case - (see Whately, 1836, p. 223) - where an expression like "unbounded freedom of speech", used in a premise, means essentially the same thing as a phrase like "liberty perfectly unlimited, of expressing his sentiments", which occurs in the conclusion. Such an argument is circular because the premise and the conclusion (the actual point to be shown in the discussion) mean the same thing, despite the surface differences of terminology.

(2) The second way "occurs whenever anyone begs universally something which he has to demonstrate in a particular case. . . ". (163,1). This kind of error also appears to be familiar kind of fallacy of begging the question often cited by textbooks.

(3) The third way "is if any one were to beg in particular case, what he undertakes to show universally. . ." (163,5). As an example, he gives a case someone undertakes to show that "knowledge of contraries is always one", but begged this conclusion for a certain pair of contraries. The fallacy in such a case is evidently not just the selection of a particular case by a prover, but the attempt to extract concession of the case without proving that it holds.

(4) The fourth way refers to the type of case in which someone begs a conclusion "piecemeal". Aristotle gives the following example: [suppose that someone "had to show that medicine is a science of what leads to health and disease. and were

> to claim first the one, then the other . . ." (163a8). It is not so clear exactly what mistake he refers to here, but it looks like he is describing a type of case where a disputant tries to first claim `Medicine is a science of what leads to health', and then claim `Medicine is a science of what leads to disease'. Or could he be describing a case where the disputant first tries to claim, `Medicine is a science', and then tries to claim that it is a `science of what leads to health and disease'. Perhaps either illustration would do, or both could be combined. Also, it is evidently not just the separation of the two claims that is fallacious. For proving first one thing then another could be reasonable, and even a good way to proceed in argumentation. It is the separation used to cover a lack of proof that seems properly to merit the label of the fallacy of begging the question.
>
> The fifth way is to "beg the one or the other of a pair of statements that necessarily involve one another. . ." (16all). Aristotle gives the example of someone who has to show that the diagonal is incommensurate with the side, but begs that the side is incommensurate with the diagonal. This type of case seems somewhat similar to the first way. But perhaps the geometrical context is meant to suggest that the difference between the two statements is more conceptual than verbal.

In the *Prior Analytics,* Aristotle treated begging the question as a failure of a requirement of priority in a type of dialogue called a *demonstration.* According to Aristotle, argument in a demonstration must proceed from premises that are better established - "more certain" and "prior" - in relation to the conclusion to be demonstrated. When begging the question is a fault in this context, it is because the argument in question violates the requirement of priority (64b28-37). However, Aristotle is not claiming in the *Prior Analytics* that circular arguments always commit the fallacy of begging the question. His claim is the more qualified one that, in some cases, a circular argument can violate the priority requirement of a proper demonstration, and be properly faulted as question-begging. This, of course, is the famous principle that some propositions are self-evident while other propositions are known by inference from prior propositions. As Hamblin

(1970) put it, propositions have an epistemic "pecking order" in Aristotle's epistemology.[14]

6. SIDGWICK ON BEGGING THE QUESTION

Alfred Sidgwick's approach to begging the question shows how much he is a kindred spirit to the pragmatic orientation of analyzing argumentation in a two-person interactive context of question-reply dialogue. Like Aristotle's, his motivation and point of view on *petitio* are meant to be practical, and presuppose a pragmatic context. The reader will note that we refer to Alfred Sidgwick, and not to his more famous cousin, Henry Sidgwick.

Sidgwick began his account of begging the question (1910, p. 203) by criticizing DeMorgan, and formal logicians generally, for their habit of taking the words of an assertion as being (all there is to) the assertion. Sidgwick suggested (p. 205) that this formalistic approach leads to the error of thinking that question-begging "can somehow be detected without going behind an arguer's words" to reconstruct his argument by filling in the unstated assumptions. Sidgwick's whole approach to *petitio* stresses the practical, and emphasizes the difficulties and uncertainties of analyzing a given text of discourse as a prior task to evaluating an alleged fallacy of begging the question.

He also has a critical comment for those who expound "the old puzzle" whether the syllogism is a *petitio principii* (Sidgwick, 1910, p. 205):

> Those who understand the difference between begging and raising a question find no puzzle here. They are able to distinguish between a right and a wrong use of a syllogism, and they see that a question can only be begged by a syllogism when doubts as to the truth of the premises are denied a hearing.

While Sidgwick praises Mill's treatment as one that introduces practicality into logic, showing an advance of logic "of late years" (p. 206), he dismisses Mill's argument that all syllogisms are question-begging. Insightfully, Sidgwick is pointing out that there are right and wrong *uses* of a syllogism. Hence the puzzle disappears. Some syllogisms beg the question and others do not. A syllogism only begs the question where the fault of "denying a hearing" to doubts about the truth of the premises exists.

According to Sidgwick (1910, p, 205), there is nothing inherently

wrong with openly disputing a premise of a syllogism. But when the proponent of the syllogism tries to suppress or slur over disputative questioning, the fallacy of begging the question can be committed: "Under this conception of the fallacy, then, to beg a question is simply to slur over, in a dispute, any doubts which an opponent may be asking us to consider". (p. 213). Hence the fallacy of *petitio* for Sidgwick is not to be found (entirely) in the propositions that make up the syllogism, but in how the syllogism has been presented by its proponent in a context of dialogue. It is the manner of use of the syllogism in the context of dialogue that should determine whether the fallacy of begging the question has occurred or not.

Sidgwick's analysis of the fallacy of begging the question as a dialectical failure of openness of presentation of a proposition in argument was a radical point of view for the state of logic at the time he was writing, when formal logic was on the rise. Although, like Aristotle's account, it was deeply pragmatic in nature, in its particulars and point of view it does not seem to owe very much to Aristotle's analysis.

Instead of trying to propose a specific analysis of begging the question, Sidgwick appeared content to emphasize the difficulties of substantiating a charge that the fallacy has occurred in a particular case. Even so, this pragmatic emphasis on the practical problem of "nailing down" a fallacy were far ahead of their time in pointing towards the development of methods of discourse analysis and argument reconstruction now widely recognized as the tools of informal logic. According to Sidgwick (p. 207), the method should begin with a shrewd suspicion that an argument contains a particular fallacy, and then evaluate the evidence which can be gleaned from the context of the argument to seek textual evidence to support or refute the charge.

> One thing that tends to keep alive the habit of taking the sentence as being the assertion is the desire to find a way of nailing fallacies definitely to the counter. We dream of being able to say, with all the authority of logic, that such and such an argument plainly contains such and such a fallacy. The desire is natural and excusable enough, but the notion that it can as a rule be accomplished in any off-hand way, by merely inspecting the words used in an argument, belongs to an older and simpler world of thought than ours.
>
> What we can always do is to *suspect* the presence of a given fallacy, and to seek for clearer indication of it. But to fasten on the words of the argument and say confidently that our opponent is begging the question ... is to put ourselves in a needlessly weak position. Indeed, the charge of begging the question is a peculiarly difficult one to substantiate (p. 206f.).

Sidgwick felt that every accusation or charge of fallaciousness should be judged as conditional on the ability of the accused to respond critically to the charge. If the person charged can defend his reasons given as independent of the conclusion of his argument, it may turn out that the accusation is found to be "hasty" or "foolish".

A second problem in the analysis of question-begging cited by Sidgwick (p. 209) is that the simple examples (he mentions several, pp. 208-211) are not very convincing because they are too obvious. But the more realistic cases which are less obvious, are also much more complex, and consequently "the amount of explanation they would require renders them unsuitable for exposition in this book. . ." (p. 218). This is a very serious and basic problem that has hindered the textbooks in their attempts to deal with begging the question as a fallacy that is both realistic and that can be pinned down as a definite, diagnosable error of reasoning. The usual brief examples favored by the texts have humor value, but are rarely of value as examples of serious errors of reasoning that could fool a mature and attentive person in an argument. On the other hand, longer examples, in which a realistic case of *petitio* would show it to be a serious error that could easily be overlooked, are not suitable for straightforward textbook presentation. And anyhow, the methods of argument reconstruction needed to handle this type of complex example are either not available or have rarely (if ever) been successfully applied to the study of *petitio*. Certainly such methods were not available to Sidgwick. Hence, the conjunction of realistic examples and good theory needed to analyze begging the question as a fallacy has never been realized.

Sidgwick apologized that the examples he presented for analysis were "rather gross and simple", when the practical difficulty in evaluating *petitio* is "digging out" the dependent statements from the surrounding "mass of verbiage" (p. 209). Sidgwick alludes the Aristotelian idea of priority in argumentation when he writes (p. 209) that the crux of the fallacy is to set the conclusion and premise side by side and ask "which is supposed to be known before the other". But he stops short of analyzing the concept of priority or of judging how it obtains in a particular argument.

Even Sidgwick's very general and negative comments on the difficulty of analyzing arguments and backing up charges of *petitio* are very illuminating, however, for they point the way to the necessity of developing pragmatic methods of argument analysis for these purposes,

to supplement the existing methods of formal logic that are not useful or adequate beyond a certain point.

The third difficulty for the analysis of *petitio* mentioned by Sidgwick (1910, p. 209; 1914, p. 147) is that a particular example where a fallacy of *petitio* seems to have occurred must be cleaned up prior to evaluation of the charge. The required argument reconstruction involved restatement, which in turn means deleting some parts of the argument and expanding other parts. But this process of reconstruction involves the very real possibility of misinterpretation of the original argument: "Very few actual arguments show their circular character clearly on their face; as a rule the critic has to dig it out from the surrounding verbiage. . .". (1914, p. 147). Thus if Sidgwick is right here, the analysis of petitio as a fallacy presupposes a context of dialogue and a method of argument reconstruction that could dig out how the circular reasoning was allegedly used in a particular case.

7. CONCLUSIONS

The conclusion to be drawn is that begging the question is a fallacy where `fallacy' means an argument that fails to perform a useful function in contributing to a goal of dialogue. So conceived, begging the question a pragmatic fallacy, a failure that needs to be evaluated in relation to how an argument has been used in a context of dialogue.

In particular, one function of argument is the probative or doubt-removing (or doubt-reducing) function which presupposes the following framework of dialogue. One participant, the questioner, has doubts or questions conceming a particular conclusion. The other participant, the arguer or proponent, has the job or role in the dialogue of proving this conclusion to the satisfaction of the questioner, according to the requirements of burden of proof appropriate for the type of dialogue and the particular case. Now if the proponent puts forward a circular argument, of such a type that the only way the questioner could possibly resolve his doubts, or back up one of the premises by some line of proving or supporting it, would be to prove it from the conclusion, then the argument begs the question. The determination of *petitio* in a given case, according to this analysis, is a matter of the lines of argumentation leading into the proponent's conclusion available to the questioner. If no lines into a premise are open that do not already presume the truth of the conclusion, then the argument cannot fulfill its proper

probative function in the dialogue. For this reason, an argument that begs the question can be properly evaluated as fallacious in a given case.

The question of whether an argument begs the question is, by these lights, a matter of the context of dialogue. We rightly take case 1 to be an instance of the fallacy of begging the question if, for example, we take the context to be that of a dialogue between a believer and a non-believer, and the believer is trying to convince the non-believer that God is benevolent. Presumably then, the believer not only questions or doubts whether God is benevolent, but he is skeptical about the theological enterprise generally. Telling him "God has *all* the virtues", we may presume, is going to cut no ice with him, in the sense of fulfilling a probative function in the dialogue. For if we presume (subject to context) that both agree that benevolence is one of the virtues, then the questioner's doubts about the benevolence of God are also grounds for doubting the proposition that God has all the virtues.

This natural reconstruction of one context, at any rate, gives easily understandable grounds for classifying such an interpretation of case 1 as an instance of a question-begging argument. Consider a different context fleshed out for the argument in case 1, however.

> *Case 10*: Bob and Mary are devotees of a religion adhering to the holy writ as set down in the *Book of Zog*. Mary asks Bob, "Is God benevolent? I doubt it, because in the Gospel of Marvin (in the *Book of Zog*), God appears to be offended by evil-doers and strikes them down". Bob replies, "Well, it says clearly in the Gospel of Ted, and elsewhere in the *Book of Zog*, that God has all the virtues". Mary then asks, "Yes, I accept that. But is benevolence a virtue? Isn't benevolence one of those modern, trendy attributes that is a virtue only for pampered, late twentieth-century types?" Bob replies, "Well, you have a point there, but it clearly says in the *Book of Zog*, in several places, that benevolence is a virtue. Mary thinks a bit, then says, "Well, OK, it's official then".

Case 10 fills out a context of dialogue in which the syllogism in case 1 legitimately fulfills a probative function, given the commitments of the participants and the context of their dialogue. Bob's argument does not beg the question, because there are evidential routes available to Mary

by appeal to scriptures in the *Book of Zog* that she can come to accept as good reasons for satisfying her queries, independently of her doubts about the conclusion she questioned in the first place.

The same semantical form of argument given in case 1 is also applicable to case 10, but the pragmatic context is different from the one we attributed to our previous interpretation of case 1. The one argument begs the question, and the other does not. The difference lies in how the argument was used in a context of dialogue. Hence, begging the question is a pragmatic fallacy.

Once one views begging the question from a pragmatic perspective, one sees it in a wholly different light as a fallacy. It becomes clear that the *petitio* is both an important procedural error in reasoned discussion, and a highly significant and powerful sophistical tactic of argumentation. The previously obscure and unappreciated accounts of Aristotle and Sidgwick can now begin to make sense, and these two philosophers can be seen as important precursors and contributors to the pragmatic analysis of *petitio principii.*

NOTES

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1 The thesis that not all circular arguments beg the question has previously been advocated by Walton (1985) and Smith (1987).

2 Jackson (1984) has also linked *petitio principii* to the purpose of arguing.

3 Walton (1991).

4 Hamblin (1970).

5 See also Sanford (1977) and Barker (1978).

6 Whately (1836).

7 See also Hamblin (1971).

8 Whether or not inconsistency can be called a fallacy is discussed in Rescher (1987) and Krabbe (1990).

9 See also Mackenzie (1981) and Mackenzie (1984).

10 Palmer (1981) also cites cases of circular arguments evaluated as being non-question-begging.

11 Snoeyenbos (1980) also discusses the role of the concept of proof in analyzing *petitio.*

12 Walton and Batten (1984).

[13] See also van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1984).
[14] See also the very helpful analysis of Aristotelian demonstration in Basu (1986).

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