

Begging the question

This occurs when we accept as an assumption what we are arguing for as a conclusion: in other words, we smuggle into the premises of the argument the conclusion we then deduce. Strictly speaking, this is what we know as arguing in a circle or, more familiarly, the fallacy of the vicious circle. We use a premise to prove a conclusion and then use the conclusion to prove the premise.

Example

Business people

A politician might make the following argument:

‘Ensuring that every business person has unrestricted freedom to pursue their individual interests must always be a good thing for the country, because it is in the interests of the community that each individual should enjoy complete liberty to maximise their own income.’

As you can see, ‘a good thing for the country’ means ‘in the interests of the community’; they are synonymous. The conclusion clearly repeats the premise. So the very issue that is in dispute is begged. The argument, therefore, is only trivially true, as all examples of these arguments are. They are tautologies: the politician has so arranged things that her argument is true by definition and by no reference to anything outside it. And, of course, it’s easy to persuade someone of anything if you’re free to monopolize words

and give them your own meaning. At best such an argument is useless: A in and of itself does not give us grounds for saying A is true.

However, other forms of the fallacy are more subtle and difficult to detect, so train your mind's eye to see the following forms of the fallacy:

1. Common notions

We hear these so often that they tend to go unchallenged: sentences that begin 'Everyone knows that ...', 'It's common knowledge that ...', 'It's all too clear that ...' or 'It's obvious that ...' So, challenge them and ask what evidence there is for what they claim.

2. Moral words

Even more subtle are moral words, like 'goodwill', 'honesty', 'generosity', 'promise' and 'murder'. Their meaning embraces not just a description of the facts, but a value judgement too.

Example

Honesty

When we say of someone that they are very honest, we are not just making a simple statement of the facts, but also passing judgement on their behaviour. The

word 'honest' means not just someone who has a strong sense of justice and treats others fairly, but also that it is a good thing to be honest and bad to be dishonest.

So to argue that 'Generosity is a good thing' or 'Murder is wrong' begs the question, because the conclusions are already contained in the words themselves – they are tautologies. Generosity is good and murder is wrong by definition, so the statement says nothing substantive; it does nothing but unwrap part of the definition of the word.

3. Verbal propositions

An interesting variant of this is the 'verbal proposition':

Example

Social workers and teachers

In *How to Write Better Essays* I explain how a social worker might be challenged by a politician who asserts, 'You must admit that too much help for single parents is a bad thing', or a teacher might be confronted by someone who insists, 'You can't deny that giving students too much freedom in the classroom is not a good thing.' And you cannot avoid agreeing, not because giving help to single parents or freedom to students is in principle a bad thing, but simply because of the meaning of the phrase 'too much'.

This is just a verbal proposition, not a factual one: 'too much' means 'a quantity so great that it is a bad thing'. We are presented with a mere tautology, nothing more significant than 'X is X', which is trivially true and cannot be used to prove a fact. Too much of anything is a bad thing, so the real point at issue is what do we mean by too much freedom or too much help, and this gets us back to questions of fact.

4. Vague definitions

Some of the most common ways in which the question is begged develop out of the role of definitions in an argument, particularly when these are used in a vague way. If someone uses a vague definition, it is likely to contain all they need to develop their argument. Then, when they are challenged by an example that doesn't fit and they're pushed towards a precise meaning, they try to save their case by insisting that the example isn't a 'real' sportsperson, musician or whatever the argument is about. But, of course, when they stretch the meaning so far in this way to defend a certain point of view the word ceases to do any real work and they end up making no point at all.

So, beware of writers who ground their arguments in what they describe as 'the real sense of the word'. Such a distinction, implying 'real' or 'unreal' senses, is probably meaningless, or else an obvious attempt to beg the question in favour of some sense of the word that best suits their argument. The same can be said of all those epithets that perform a similar function, words like 'true', 'sound', 'good', 'bad' and 'honest' as in the claim that 'All good musicians play many instruments.' Put them to the sword and ask, 'But what do you mean by X?': 'What do you mean by "good" musicians?'

Critical evaluation

1. Common notions.
2. Moral words.
3. Verbal propositions.
4. Vague definitions.