



Begging the question

All of the following exercises illustrate cases of begging the question. See if you can identify what has been begged in each case.

Exercises

1. 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.’

Answer

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 reason or premise. So the very issue that is in dispute is begged.

2. Abortion

To cast abortion as a solely private moral question,...is to lose touch with common sense: How human beings treat one another is practically the definition of a public moral matter. Of course, there are many private aspects of human relations, but the question whether one human being should be allowed fatally to harm another is not one of them. Abortion is an inescapably public matter.¹

Answer

This argument begs the question because it assumes that abortion involves one human being fatally harming another. However, those who argue that abortion is a private matter reject this assumption. In contrast, they believe that only one human being is involved in abortion—the woman—and it is, therefore, her private decision.²

3. The argument from design

We know a god exists because we can see the perfect order of creation, an order which demonstrates supernatural intelligence in its design.

Answer



The conclusion of this argument is that a god exists. But the premise itself assumes that the 'perfect' order was created, that there was a creator, a designer, that is to say, a god. But you are not obliged to accept the assumption that the universe exhibits intelligent design. The architect of this argument must provide support for that claim.

4. Abortion as murder

Abortion is the unjustified killing of a human being and as such is murder. Murder is illegal. So abortion should be illegal.

Answer

In this argument the conclusion of the argument is entailed in its premises. If you assume that abortion is murder then it follows that abortion should be illegal, because murder is illegal. The person using this argument assumes that abortion should be illegal (the conclusion) by assuming that it is murder. But there is no reason why you should allow the assumption that abortion is murder to go unchallenged. The person arguing this case must be made to provide support for this claim.

5. The paranormal

Paranormal phenomena exist because I have had experiences that can only be described as paranormal.

Answer

As you can see, the conclusion of this argument is that paranormal phenomena exist. But in the premise that leads to this conclusion the person arguing this has already assumed that he or she has had paranormal experiences, therefore, the existence of paranormal experiences has already been begged. There is no reason why you should concede this assumption without this person providing independent evidence for it.

6. Past life

Past life memories of children prove that past lives exist because the children could have no other source for their memories besides having lived in the past.

Answer

In this argument the conclusion that past lives exist is already assumed in the assumption that the memories of children can have no other source than a past life. The person arguing this must support the claim that such memories could have no other source.



7. DNA and the design argument

This example, from Perry Marshall, an American online marketing strategist, is similar in that it comes to its conclusion as a result of excluding other possibilities and assuming that, therefore, the conclusion is proved true by virtue of being the only remaining possibility:

- 1 DNA is not merely a molecule with a pattern; it is a code ... and an information storage mechanism.
- 2 All codes are created by a conscious mind; there is no natural process known to science that creates coded information.
- 3 Therefore, DNA was designed by a mind.

Answer

Marshall assumes the very thing he should be proving, namely, that all codes are created by a conscious mind. Whether or not there is a natural process known to science that creates coded information doesn't exclude the possibility that there is in fact such a process and, of course, it doesn't provide adequate justification for the even more remote possibility that such a code was created by an omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent being.³

¹ Helen M. Alvaré, *The Abortion Controversy*, Greenhaven, 1995, p. 23.

² I owe this example to the website: <http://www.fallacyfiles.org/begquest.html>, where you will find a fuller analysis of it.

³ I owe the last 5 examples to the website: <http://www.skeptdic.com/begging.html>.