

God, The Bible and Circularity

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I. The Insufficiency of Good Deduction

A "classic" example of circular reasoning found repeatedly, and with slight variations, in assorted textbooks on informal logic, reads like this: "God exists because the Bible says so, and we know that what the Bible says is true because it is The Revealed Word of God."¹ What exactly is wrong with this argument? Are there logical gaps in the inference drawn from the premisses to the conclusion which warrant the judgement, "the conclusion does not follow"? Interestingly enough, any argument which begs the question, including any circular argument, is always deductively valid. The reason for this is clear. "A conclusion cannot fail to follow from a set of premisses which include it."² The negative answer to the latter question can be illustrated by first casting our "classic" fallacious argument into an abbreviated dialectical form and then abstracting the premisses and conclusion from it. Perhaps this is how the 'howler' was first committed.

Believer: God really does exist.

Skeptic: How do you know?

Believer: Because the Bible says so.

Skeptic: How do you know that what the Bible says is true?

Believer: Because it is The Revealed Word of God.

By abstracting and simplifying the statements made by the believer, we can see his responses in the form of an inverted written argument of three steps.

- (3) God Exists.
- (2) The Bible says so (that God exists).

- (1) The Bible is The Revealed Word of God.

In this form, moving from top to bottom, we preserve the chronological or speaking order of the believer's responses. But the speaking order, to a degree, hides the written logical order which places the more fundamental premisses first (at the top) and the conclusion last (at the bottom). To see the argument in the traditional written perspective, therefore, is a simple matter: we simply invert the three steps as follows:

- (1) The Bible is The Revealed Word of God.
- (2) The Bible says that God exists.
- (3) Therefore, God exists.

Since premisses (1) and (2) logically entail the conclusion (3), it is evident that the argument is deductively valid. It is worth observing here that, although the conclusion (3) is logically entailed by premisses (1) and (2) together, premiss (2) does no logical work in pushing through the conclusion (3). In a limited sense, therefore, premiss (2) is superfluous. This does not mean that premiss (2) is without value. Even if one believed premiss (1), he may not know that the Bible records that its named author exists. For it is not unusual for an author not to speak of himself in his book.

II. The Purpose from the Context

There still seems to be something amiss. It would seem that there must be more to a good argument than simply its exemplification of good deduction. In the case

of our allegedly circular argument, reference to the faultless deduction does not seem to satisfy the nagging question about circularity that the critical observer of the dialectical exchange may have. For some reason, the argument may seem not to advance or deepen the skeptic's understanding. And therefore, while good deduction may be necessary to preclude the charge of fallaciousness being made, it is not sufficient to ward off the charge of circularity.

What other elements or ingredient of an argument must one examine in order to shed light on the problem of circularity? In a word, the context. Woods and Walton have emphasized the importance of the dialectical context in the business of proper argument assessment. They express their thinking on this matter in the following quotation:

It is the *dialectical* factor of what the arguer chooses as his basis of argument that is crucial. Or, to put it another way: it is not the purely deductive logical form itself that is circular or non-circular: the *petitio* is relative to the *dialectical circumstances* of that form of argument. The critical question resides in the evidentiary basis of the first premise question. The presence or absence of *petitio* can be determined only by examining *how* the arguer infers the first premise or *why* he accepts this premise as true.³

We shall address the "critical question" presently, but before we do, we must try to gain a clearer perspective on the larger "dialectical circumstances". Otherwise the purpose of the dialectical exchange may elude us and our assessment may go astray.

Kahane seems to be aware of the importance of the dialectical context when, in a parenthetical comment, he qualifies his judgement on our "classic" example of question begging.

(Notice that the fallacy *begging the question* is not automatically committed by just any reference to Biblical statements that God exists. Such a reference at, say, a revival meeting would probably not be begging the question, since God's existence would probably not be *questioned*, or *at issue*, in such a setting.)⁴

Kahane's comment suggests that the

preacher may make reference to the fact that God's Word says that God exists. But, since the preacher will be speaking to those for whom God's existence is not questioned, then the preacher's claim that God's Word says that God exists will not be an *argument* for the existence of God on the basis of a statement about the Bible, which presupposes God's existence; that is, it will not be an instance of question-begging. It will instead be an instance of the preacher trying to enlighten or perhaps reinforce an idea in the minds of his listeners concerning what God, whom they already believe to exist, says in the Bible, which they also believe to be inspired by God, about Himself, namely that He exists. This information about the Bible, as we said before when evaluating premiss (2), may not be known to some people in the congregation who, nonetheless, believe in God and the divine inspiration of the Bible.

The general point implied by Kahane's example, that the presence or absence of circularity in Biblical statements that claim that God exists is context dependent, is a sound one. Furthermore, the specific circumstance of the example he uses leads us to consider *how* the Biblical statements in this limited setting are being used. If God's existence in the revival meeting is not "questioned", or "at issue", then presumably there is no questioner for whom God's existence has to be established. If there is no need to establish God's existence for anyone, then there is no need for an argument. And if no argument is used, then the fallacy of circular reasoning cannot be committed.

In a concise account of the nature of circular reasoning, I.M. Copi outlines two general dialectical states of affairs: "If the proposition is acceptable without argument, no argument is needed to establish it; and if the proposition is not acceptable without argument, then no argument that requires its acceptance as a premise could possibly lead one to accept its conclusion."⁵

Could one ever find that a reference to a Biblical statement of God's existence was

unacceptable in the setting of a revival meeting, that the question of circularity reared its ugly head there also? I think that the answer to this question is Yes.

I do not for a moment believe that we have exhausted the possible specific dialectical circumstances of even such a confined setting as a revival meeting. At least two other possibilities readily come to mind. Despite the influence of the *Zeitgeist*, which makes preacherettes deliver sermonettes to christianettes, there are still some preachers who genuinely hope that some unbelievers will be present when they speak. For such a preacher it could be tempting to try to move his unconvicted listeners by telling them that God's Word says that God exists. A second possibility for reviving the question of circularity lies with circumstances in which the interlocutors are all believers. One of them may, out of sheer intellectual need, inquire of the preacher about the possibility of establishing God's existence. In either case, if the preacher is arguing for the existence of God by claiming that God's Word says that God exists, then the game is on, and the charge of circularity can be raised once more.

The importance of the dialectical context in this case rests not so much with the degree to which the congregation is composed of believers, but rather, with the extent to which the members of the congregation have any questions, for whatever reason, about the *establishment* of the existence of God. And still more importantly, it also rests with the intentions of the preacher in giving the response he does; that is, on whether or not his response is perceived by him to be an answer to real or imagined questions about God's existence among his listeners. However unlikely it may be in most cases, it is nonetheless possible in some cases that a preacher would not perceive that his listeners were asking for argumentative answers to their questions about God's existence. Not perceiving that he is supposed to *establish* God's existence in his response, and thinking only that he

needs to give what he has taken for so long to be the authoritative reply, he states flatly that God's Word says that God exists. On the other hand, if in responding to perceived questions about God's existence, his intention is to establish that God exists with his claim that God's Word says that God exists, then whether or not his listeners are really asking the question he perceives them to be asking is irrelevant to the matter of his accountability. He can still be charged with circular reasoning because he is proffering an argument.

Let us gather our thoughts. In order to determine whether or not a particular stretch of dialogue is a specimen of fallacious circular argument, one needs to determine three things, broadly speaking: (a) whether or not the stretch of dialogue is an argument; and if it is an argument, (b) whether or not it is a circular argument; and if it is a circular argument, (c) whether or not it is a fallacious circular argument, that is, whether it is vicious or benign.⁶ In this section we have been considering, for the most part, question (a). The question of whether or not the stretch of dialogue concerning God's existence and the Bible is an example of circular reasoning can be investigated by considering first the dialectical circumstances of the stretch, especially including the intentions of the questioner and answerer. The purpose of the stretch can only be safely assumed after the context has been carefully examined.

"But isn't the purpose of the believer's responses in the 'classic' example under consideration perfectly clear?" someone is heard to ask. Not unless the context makes it clear, and in most cases of the example's use we know little or nothing of the context. Let us assume, however, that it *is* clear, and that the believer intends what he says in response to the skeptic to be taken as an argument. With this assumption we are challenged to probe the deeper dimensions of the argument, namely (b) and (c). And to do this we must eventually return to the "critical question" of the evidentiary

basis of the first premiss (1) that was referred to in the passage from Woods and Walton above.

III. Priority and Increased Plausibility

Since Aristotle wrote *Prior Analytics*, it has been thought that plausibility should increase with priority in the propositions of an argument.⁷ On the basis of this thinking it might be charged that, in the believer's argument, as one moves retrogressively from conclusion (3) to premiss (1), one does not find increasingly greater plausibility in the propositions. Therefore the "classic" argument fails because it lacks the requisite precedence-relation among its propositions.

The obvious response to this is: why must plausibility increase with priority in the propositions of an argument? Furthermore, why must *any* of the premisses be more plausible than the conclusion in a proposed argument? Perhaps the answer is: because it is of the nature of an argument to have premisses that are more firmly established than is the conclusion. Curiously enough, we have in this answer, which entails a critique of the use of circular argument, an argument which itself is circular, and thus is self-defeating. But there are more answers than one to this fundamental question.

Perhaps the reason lies in the simple matter of stipulation. Let us stipulate, it could be said, that the establishment of a precedence-relation be considered a necessary condition for the establishment of well-formed arguments. The response here, of course, should be simple and immediate. Why? For whose benefit? For the benefit of those who wish to proscribe the use of circular arguments? Two can play at the same game. Let us stipulate, it could also be said, that the precedence-relation *not* be considered a necessary condition for well-formed arguments.

There is yet another critical move that can be made on behalf of the establishment

of a precedence-relation in arguments. It may be said that interlocutors have conventionally agreed that plausibility is commensurate with priority in the propositions of an argument. The appeal now is not to future unilateral action, but instead, to past and present mutual consent. It's simply a fact: that's how we argue. Unfortunately, this answer is only marginally less unconvincing than its predecessor. For if it is a fact that we argue in this way, it is also a fact that we argue in contrary ways. Evidence of the conventional use of circular arguments for practical, non-religious purposes will be given in Section V below. It is sufficient here to say that even if one could not demonstrate a conventional use of circular arguments, the possibility would still remain open to question the universal convention. "Why ought we to carry on arguing in non-circular ways?" It is clear now that we must look elsewhere than in the act of stipulation and the fact of convention for a rationale for making the establishment of the precedence-relation a necessary condition for the establishment of a well-formed argument.

Earlier we paid respect to the importance of the dialectical context in correctly assessing circular arguments. We need to return to this source for a deeper answer to our question about priority and plausibility. If we examine the situation in which one person, say the skeptic, asks another person, say the believer, for a justification for a statement which the other person, the believer, has made, do we not find in this situation the reason for reestablishing the precedence-relation as a necessary condition for establishing well-formed arguments? To be the type of questioner who asks for justification for a claim made by another person, is to want, or to feel the need, to have a deeper grounding for the claim that can be got from the claim itself. And to be the type of answerer who wishes to provide such a justification, is to want, or to feel the need, to state certain propositions which provide a deeper grounding for

his claim than can be got from the claim itself. Do not the skeptic, who questions the believer concerning his concluding proposition (3), and the believer, who answers the skeptic with propositions (1) and (2), both, by their speech acts, place themselves in a questioning-justifying context which commits them to the dialectical game which they continue to play? And therefore, if the believer in answering the skeptic's question commits himself to providing a justification for his claim that God exists, the skeptic may fairly expect from the believer's answers a deeper grounding for the claim than can be got from the claim itself. That is, by the tacit mutual agreement established by the acts of asking for, and attempting to give, a justification for the claim that God exists, the skeptic may expect to hear premisses that are more plausible than the claim he is questioning. And if the skeptic hears the same thing in the premisses as he heard in the conclusion, he has a right to complain that the believer has not accomplished what he (the believer) committed himself to do.

Does this mean that because of their mutual commitments the believer should be expected to fulfill the condition of a precedence-relation in the premisses that he proffers? Whether or not the believer, in entering this dialectical game of justification, *has* committed himself to providing increased plausibility with each prior premiss, is a question which invites both a positive and a negative response.⁸ On the affirmative side, one could argue that, because the believer, in making his first move (reply), *has* committed himself to providing a proposition with an increased plausibility, then likewise in each successive move he similarly commits himself. In short, he has committed himself to an iterative process.

On the negative side, however, one can realistically deny this, either partially or completely. Let us assume here for the sake of this argument that it should not be denied completely.⁹ For the time being let us argue instead that the believer has committed

himself to providing somewhere in his set of premisses, perhaps in his major premiss, a proposition which is more plausible than his conclusion. To require more than this, namely retrogressively increased plausibility in the premisses, is unrealistically too confining.¹⁰

We are now assuming that the believer, in dialogue with the skeptic, has committed himself to providing somewhere in his set of premisses (1) and (2), a premiss which is more plausible than his conclusion (3). It seems initially reasonable to further assume that the believer's stopping place, namely premiss (1), in this remarkably short stretch of dialogue, is thought by him to provide the greatest plausibility for his argument; or at least a plausibility which is greater than that of his conclusion (3). Can we now tag him with having constructed a circular argument? A closer look at the first premiss is called for.

IV. Plausibility and the First Premiss

On the assumption that at least the first premiss in the believer's argument must be more plausible than the conclusion, it can be immediately inferred that the conclusion cannot be more plausible than the first premiss. Furthermore, this asymmetrical relation between the first premiss and the conclusion prohibits the first premiss from having a plausibility equal to that of the conclusion. If the first premiss is either (i) equivalent to the conclusion or (ii) depends upon the conclusion to establish its plausibility, then even the qualified precedence-condition will not have been met.¹¹ Under either circumstance the believer will not have fulfilled the condition which he, by answering the skeptic, has committed himself to fulfilling. Is it not therefore clearly evident that the believer's first premiss is not more plausible than his conclusion because he has not established the requirement of an asymmetrical relation between his premiss and conclusion? In

other words, isn't it obvious that his argument is circular? We can better answer the question by increasing the magnification of the first premiss.

- (1) The Bible is The Revealed Word of God.
- (2) The Bible says that God exists.
- (3) Therefore God exists.

Considering first the (i) equivalence conception of circularity, we may well ask if propositions (1) and (3) are saying the same thing. Clearly they are not, for although proposition (1) implies proposition (3), the reverse implication does not hold. One does not have to examine the two propositions microscopically to see that there are significant other terms in proposition (1) which make it importantly different from proposition (3). One of these terms is "Revealed." This would seem to point to (ii) the dependency conception of circularity.

It now appears that premiss (1) cannot be established without presuming that the conclusion (3) has already been established. The plausibility of (1) seems to presuppose, and therefore seems to be dependent upon the plausibility of (3). But appearances can be deceiving. From the fact that one proposition logically entails another it does not necessarily follow that the first proposition cannot be more plausible than the second which it logically entails. The following reference will bear this out.

It is not uncommon to hear of believers who relate their experience of having encountered God through the reading of the Bible.¹² Prior to their divine encounter they often do not hold the proposition "God exists" as being true with anything approaching a probability of one half. Indeed, for some the prior probability of its being true would be equivalent to, or marginally greater than zero. Then, as a result of one of any number of possible precipitating circumstances, they begin to read the Bible. There in the reading, they say, they experience God speaking to them. It is not as though they read the words and then infer

that God exists, though such an inference may be drawn subsequently. Rather, they claim that the significance of the words, the personal relevance of the words, and the divine source of the words are all experienced concomitantly. In reading the words they have the complex experience of being spoken to by God. The experienced presence of God is not divorced from their reading of the words.

This religious experience has its parallel in non-religious experience. Many of the people whom we encounter initially, we do so within the context of their speaking to us. We become aware of their presence in their speaking (it is worth mentioning here that it is not for nothing that the God of the Bible is referred to as the God who speaks to his people. The God of Christianity is emphatically not an utterly transcendent deaf mute).

Given that this experience of encountering God in the reading of the Bible is a grounding experience for the believer, from which he may only later intellectually abstract that one element that he refers to by saying that God exists, proposition (1) for such a believer may actually be more plausible than proposition (3).¹³

It might be objected that this kind of reasoning commits the Genetic Fallacy. Are we confusing the historical origin of the believer's belief in God with the logical nature of his argument in support of God's existence? The simple direct answer to this question is "No, we are not." But neither are we misguidedly assuming that support for the believer's conclusion must be a purely logical support; any more than we would misguidedly suppose of any non-religious argument that is also not purely logical in character, that the premisses must provide only a logical support for the conclusion. A return to the dialectical context will make this clear.

It will be recalled that the skeptic asked for justifying support for the claim "God exists;" to which the believer responded by saying, "Because the Bible says so." Not

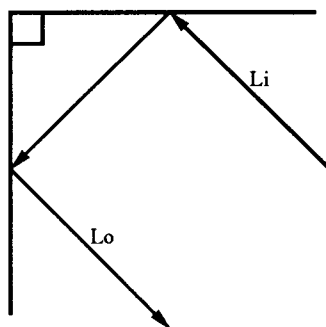
content with this, the skeptic further asked, "How do you know that what the Bible says is true?" Let's stop here for a moment and analyse what precisely the skeptic is asking for and what his question presumes. In his second question he has already committed himself to admitting *the possibility of the Bible's statements being justifying support for the believer's claim that God exists*—otherwise it would have been pointless for him to further ask for justification of the Bible's statements. Now the skeptic knows as well as the believer that the Bible is not a prime number, or any other purely logical entity. In asking for the justification of its truth claims the skeptic is presumably asking for an account which must have an experiential component. Of course it is ultimately the statement of the *existence of God for which the skeptic is asking for supporting experientially based premisses*. And it is just such a premiss that the believer of our example thinks he has provided when he proffers proposition (1). Whether or not proposition (1) is for the believer a statement which takes him back to the historical origin of his belief in the existence of God is not to the main point of the argument. What the premiss does, because it has been asked to do it, is to provide the most substantial, at least partially experiential grounding for the claim that God exists. It may well be in this alleged encounter with God, to which premiss (1) by implication makes reference, that the believer first received his grounding evidence of God's existence. But first or not, it may nonetheless be the most substantial grounding that the believer can offer, both for the Bible's claims and for God's existence. The fact that proposition (1) logically entails proposition (3) is only half the story. The other half has to do with experiential content signalled by the words "Revealed Word of."¹⁴ The second half is clearly asked for, but when the answer is given, the question is strangely forgotten.

This line of argument may raise a further objection which concerns the skeptic's

lack of familiarity with the religious experience referred to by proposition (1). The believer has committed himself to providing at least one premiss, presumably the first one, that is more plausible than the conclusion of his argument. If he proffers a premiss, the experiential basis of which is not comprehended by the skeptic, how can he ever expect the skeptic to appreciate the greater plausibility which the believer thinks he has provided. And therefore how can the believer be said to have delivered the supporting premiss(es) that he committed himself to deliver.

There are at least two responses to this objection that we ought to consider. The first one concerns the placement of the onus of responsibility in the matter of comprehending a premiss. The second concerns what may be called "missionary-mindedness."

The first counter-response to the requirement that the believer articulate only premisses which are comprehended by the skeptic, as well as by him, is to point again to dialectical contexts which are relevantly similar. These would be contexts in which person X is trying to establish conclusion C for person Y on the basis of premisses P1, P2... Pn at least one of which is claimed to be more plausible than C. Suppose, for example, person X is trying to establish for person Y the conclusion C: that the incoming light beam (Li), which is directed at



one interior side of a right-angled (two dimensional) line mirror, is parallel to the outgoing light beam (Lo), which is reflected from the other interior side of the mirror. Further suppose that X uses the Law of Reflection as premiss P1, the Triangle Angle Sum Theorem for premiss P2, and the Parallel Line Theorem for premiss P3 of his argument. Then X makes a claim to Y that P1 and P2 and P3 together establish C, and that each premiss is more plausible than the conclusion.

Now imagine that Y protests to X that while he (Y) understands P2 and P3, the first premiss, P1, is incomprehensible to him. Should X now concede that Y's incomprehension of P1 makes X's establishment of C bogus? Certainly not. X's proper response would be to encourage Y to acquaint himself with an elementary knowledge of the physics of light, because Y's knowledge of geometry alone will not enable him to understand the establishment of C. In fact X might suggest to Y how he could set up a simple experiment which will show Y that a light beam's angle of incidence equals its angle of reflection.¹⁵

By parity of reasoning we can say that the skeptic's incomprehension of premiss (1) does not vitiate the believer's establishment of conclusion (3). For it would be an odd *ad hoc* restriction indeed to require that the believer use premisses, the corresponding intuition of which must be taken solely from the skeptic's wealth of experience. The believer's proper response to the charge of proffering an incomprehensible premiss would be to encourage the skeptic to acquaint himself with the revelatory power of the Biblical Word. Recognizing of course that gaining this knowledge is not a purely scientific enterprise, the believer may nonetheless help the skeptic on his way by suggesting that he do certain things. He may even invite Augustine and Pascal to sing a duet: "Follow the way by which many believers have come to know that God exists. Take up and read. Take up and read."

This may not suit the skeptic at all. He

may be quite unwilling to embark upon what could turn out to be a life-changing experience. Suppose that he adamantly refuses to budge at this stage of the dialogue and continues to inveigh against what he perceives to be "a blatant case of question begging."¹⁶ Must the argument end in a stalemate? I think not. First, it needs to be stated firmly that the believer is squarely within his epistemic rights to appeal to his experience of God as the grounding experience of his first premiss. If the skeptic wishes to challenge the putatively extra dimension of premiss (1), then he will have to take issue with the authenticity of the believer's grounding experience. As it stands now, however, there appears to be no convincing reason as to why the believer's argument should be called circular.

There is a second move which the believer can make, referred to above as "missionary-mindedness." He may choose to temporarily set aside his epistemic right to appeal to an experience which is foreign to the skeptic, and attempt to go further in the argument by using mutually comprehensible premisses. In effect, for the sake of possible enlightening dialogue in the future, he may admit provisionally that the skeptic's charge of circularity is accurate. From this point of view, he may try to show that although his argument is circular, it is not viciously circular. It is to this approach that we shall devote our attention in the remaining section.

V. Circular Argument: A Way In and a Way Out

We have been examining a stretch of religious dialogue which has repeatedly appeared with insignificant variation in numerous introductory logic texts as an example of circular reasoning. What is initially striking about this stretch of dialogue is its brevity. We are prompted to think that the skeptic and the believer in this repeated

example are strangers who meet on a high-speed elevator and have an argument between the ground and third floor of the giant office building where they work. One of them gets off at the third floor; the other proceeds to the thirty-fifth floor—and, as luck would have it, they never meet again!

Perhaps the authors who use this example do not intend that the reader should think of the argumentative encounter as anything nearly as abbreviated as we have pictured it here. In that case the realistically longer dialogue from which the textbook example has been abstracted must be especially frustrating for the skeptic. To watch the believer go round and round must surely be taxing. The image that now comes to mind is that of a drug-crazed psychotic who pushes mindlessly on a revolving door for minutes on end, with apparently no idea of how he got in, and with certainly no inclination to get out. Or perhaps after a few complete turns he stops mid-way between the entrance and the exit, dumbfounded.

The believer who is prone to feel discouraged by this picture need not be downhearted, because circular arguments in real life are not nearly so revolutionary. And in most instances, I strongly suspect, this applies to the “classic” example as well as to the non-religious example. Let us consider first a non-religious example of circular argumentation that is not fallacious (vicious), and then follow it up with a concluding visit to the argument between the skeptic and the believer.

It sometimes happens that a department head in an academic institution will approach his dean about increasing the course offerings in his department; and this in spite of the fact that his student enrolment figures over the previous several years have been unpromising. Why the department head should ever request a budgetary increase under these dismal circumstances will emerge from the compressed dialectical exchange that follows.

Head: Sir, we have too few courses in

our department. I should like to propose that we offer three new ones next years.

Dean: What!? Why do you need three new courses?

Head: To attract more students into our program. Our enrolment is down, as you know.

Dean: Indeed I *do* know, only too well. But why in the world, if your enrolment is down in courses you already offer, do you want to try to increase your enrolment by adding *new* courses? Fill up the ones you’ve got; then come back and talk to me.

Head: I understand your thinking, Sir, but our selection is so meagre that students are not attracted to our program.

Dean: And do you understand why your selection is, as you put it, “so meagre;” why this office has had to limit your expansion?

Head: I know, I know, because our enrolment is down and we haven’t attracted more students.

Dean: You should know by now that courses are enrolment-driven.

Head: Although that is true, Sir, it is also true that enrolment is course-driven. If you’ll give me budgetary support I’ll try to demonstrate it.

This dialogue could easily be extended over several pages. It would likely then include additional support for the department head’s position, such as the results obtained from other institutions which similarly took a risk in expanding a department. Or it may include the relevantly similar results obtained from a supermarket’s expansion into unconventional areas, and so on. The main point, however, is that, although there is at least one circle in the department head’s argument, it is not a vicious circle. The claim that the head must establish is that more courses are needed in his department.

When the dean challenges him with the observation that he has got things the wrong way round, the head essentially repeats his claim. But the head does not become fixated on mindlessly asserting his claim; nor does the dean in parrot-like fashion repeat his challenge. One loop may have been completed, but the argument moves on. And besides, the department head may have deliberately returned to his original claim precisely to show that at least in his case enrolment and increased course offerings are inextricably bound together.¹⁷ The circular religious argument about God's existence and the Bible, which has occupied the centre of our attention in this essay, although not exactly the same as the argument just considered, is relevantly similar. It also forms a circle in the dialogue between the believer and the skeptic, due to the repeated claim of the believer. And just as in the previous dialogue there is a way in and a way out, so also in the religious dialogue it is not difficult to imagine how the believer, having made one loop, might exit the circle.

Believer: There really is quite a bit of evidence for the existence of God.

Skeptic: For instance?

Believer: Well, for one, the Bible gives us some extraordinary information which tells us both directly and indirectly that God exists.

Skeptic: But how do you know that this information is reliable? How do you know that what the Bible says is true?

Believer: Because in reading it I have come to know that it is The Revealed Word of God.

Skeptic: Can't you see that you're begging the question? When I ask you for justification for the claim that the Bible tells us that God exists, you answer me by saying that it is The Revealed

Word of God; which of course presupposes that God exists. You're assuming the very claim I'm asking you to establish.

Believer: While I don't think your criticism is correct, I can understand your thinking. But look, there is more to the support of the Biblical account of God's existence than my claiming that it is the Word of God.

Skeptic: Such as?

Believer: Well, to begin with, you ought to consider the element of predictive prophecy in the Bible. As well, to lend credence to the Biblical account you should consider the recent findings of archaeology and their bearing upon the trustworthiness of the Biblical records. And if you are willing, you can examine the biblical documents according to criteria which are used in the study of non-religious history. You'll find that the Bible measures up very well.¹⁸

This version of the dialogue between the believer and the skeptic could doubtless go on for volumes. But the significant point to be extracted here is that the believer can, and, if this sort of argument is common, probably very often does, exit the circle by appealing to other premisses which support his claim in a way that the skeptic will find comprehensible. He needn't "go round the mulberry bush" again and again... and again, as the textbook example would seem to imply. In short, the Biblical argument in support of God's existence need not be viciously circular.

VI. A Tree-Like Conclusion

Douglas Walton says in his "Conclusions

on Circular Argument:" that "...the pinning down of a given sequence of argumentation as being clearly and incontrovertibly fallacious is, in many cases, not that simple."¹⁹ I can only agree. One of the burdens of this essay has been to show that the "classic example" used in numerous logic textbooks is one such case. Beyond this, I have tried to show that this alleged example of circularity need not be worrisome to those who may be inclined to feel self-conscious about stating their high regard for, and reliance upon, the Bible as The Revealed Word of God. To see the argument of the essay in full perspective we may look at the analysis as taking the form of a decision tree.

Either (A) the "classic example" is an argument, or, (NOT-A) it is not an argument. If (NOT-A) is the case, then although the example may serve some heuristic purpose, it should not concern the believer as a possible instance of his own or another's logical slippage. If (A) is the case, then either (B) the "classic" argument is cir-

cular, or (NOT-B) it is not circular. If (NOT-B) is the case, then although "the classic" is an example of a believer's argument, the believer, in using the argument, has not committed any logical blunders for which he should feel an intellectual responsibility to make corrections. If (B) is the case, then either (C) the argument is viciously circular, or (NOT-C) it is not viciously circular. If (NOT-C) is the case, then again, there is no cause for worry because there is a natural way out of the circle. Of course if (C) is the case then the believer has cause for worry. But what I have tried to show in the foregoing argument is that such a case is precluded. Assuming an exclusive sense of "or", either (NOT-A) or (NOT-B) or (NOT-C) is the case. And in any of these cases there is no reason for worry on the part of the believer.

We end non-viciously where we began, with curiosity about the prominence that the putatively circular Biblical argument has received.

Notes

¹ I have randomly taken all but one of the following texts from my own library shelves and ordered them as follows. Michael A. Gilbert refers to this standard example of circular reasoning as "one more classic:" *How to Win an Argument* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1979), p. 54.

John Woods and Douglas Walton have produced a penetrating and sustained treatment of the fallacies in their work, *Argument: The Logic of the Fallacies* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson Limited, 1982). They devote their entire Chapter Seven to the fallacy called "Arguing in a Circle." They, too, give special attention to the standard example.

Anthony Weston has written a popular, easy-to-read introduction to arguments, designed primarily as a freshman supplementary text to be read without the aid of a lecturer's commentary. *A Rulebook for Arguments* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987), p. 86. The one example that he uses to illustrate the fallacy of Begging the Question

is the same standard example to which the author of this paper is referring.

The following two authors also use the standard example to illustrate the fallacy of Begging the Question. Howard Kahane, *Logic and Philosophy: A Modern Introduction*, 5th ed. (Belmont, California: Wadworth Publishing Company, 1986), pp. 256, 257. S. Morris Engel, *Analysing Informal Fallacies* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1980), p. 55.

The next two authors relegate this same example to one of the exercises to which the student is supposed to apply his understanding of the fallacy of Begging the Question or of the acceptability conditions for premisses. Trudy Govier, *A Practical Study of Argument*. 2nd ed. (Belmont, California: Wadworth Publishing Company, 1988), p. 86; Robert J. Yanal, *Basic Logic* (St. Paul: West Publishing Company, 1988), p. 274.

The last four authors whom we shall mention use different variations on the general

religious theme to illustrate circular reasoning. Jack Pitt and Russell E. Leavenworth incorporate the notions of God, freedom and evil in their example. *Logic for Argument* (New York: Random House, 1968), pp. 113, 114. R.H. Johnson and J.A. Blair use the idea of a rabbi who claims to dance with angels, in their illustration of begging the question. *Logical Self-Defense*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson Limited, 1983), p. 54.

One can see from this obviously less-than-exhaustive sample of informal logic texts that variations do exist among the examples that are chosen to best illustrate circular reasoning. Still, one is struck by the number of times that religious arguments, and especially the Bible argument, are used as paradigms of question begging.

- ² J.L. Mackie, "Fallacies," *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, editor-in-chief, Paul Edwards (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc. & The Free Press, 1966), Vol. 3, p. 177. It is now widely known, and recognized in logic texts, that J.S. Mill claimed that *all* valid reasoning commits the fallacy of *petitio principii*. If one were to adopt both Mackie's position and Mill's position he would hold not only that all circular reasoning is valid but also that all valid reasoning is circular. And this composite position, incidentally, is not itself circular. For a discussion of Mill's position, and De Morgan's response to it, see the historically detailed and, in many ways, ground-breaking work on fallacies by C.L. Hamblin, *Fallacies* (London: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1970), p. 35f, p. 226f. Woods and Walton (1982) also examine De Morgan's intended refutation of Mill in their chapter on circular reasoning (p. 132ff).
- ³ Woods and Walton (1982), p. 148.
- ⁴ Kahane (1986), pp. 256, 257.
- ⁵ Irving M. Copi, *Introduction to Logic*, 7th ed. (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1986), p. 101.
- ⁶ A further question, of course, is whether or not the specimen is a live one; that is, whether or not the stretch of dialogue represents the authentic intentions of real interlocutors. In the case of our "classic" example this is a significant question to which, if space permitted, we could devote considerable attention.
- ⁷ Douglas N. Walton, *Informal Fallacies: Toward a Theory of Argument Criticisms*, part of the *Pragmatics & Beyond Companion Series*

(Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1987), pp. 170-174.

- ⁸ It goes almost without saying that these responses cannot be given simultaneously by the same person.
- ⁹ We have space only to mention that possibly the plausibility condition can be denied completely on the grounds that such a requirement conflates the notion of plausibility and the notion of firmer grounding. Why must a justificatory premiss which is proffered as a firmer grounding for a concluding proposition, be more plausible than the proposition, as well as more firmly established? To say that "more firmly established" means "more plausible" will not suffice; for the equivalence of meaning can be questioned on the basis of imagined simple arguments where a contrary condition obtains. A whole nest of problems is exposed by taking this direction. The family resemblance as well as the distinction between the ideas of plausibility, justification, rationality and firmer grounding need to be mapped out.
- ¹⁰ Walton, (1987), p. 174. Walton has criticized the interpretation of the precedence-relation which says that plausibility increases with priority, in this fashion:

An underlying problem with (C1) [the plausibility condition] as a general condition for all arguments is that it may not allow a disputant enough latitude in seeking out sequences of argument that might eventually lead to more plausible premisses. In argument, (C1) demands more plausible premisses immediately, rather than giving a participant in an argument "room to argue."

The value of allowing room for argument will be made plainer in section V below.

- ¹¹ For a fuller discussion of asymmetry, plausibility and the two conceptions of circularity, see Walton, (1987), p. 182.
- ¹² A classic example of this is found in the autobiographical account that Augustine gives of his own conversion. *The Confession of St. Augustine*, trans. by Sir Tobie Matthew, KT., revised and emended by Dom Roger Huddlestone, (London: Burns and Oats, 1923), Book VIII, Chapter 12, pp. 222-225, cf. F.F. Bruce *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1963), pp. 58-60.

¹³ cf. Alvin Plantinga's discussion of the justifying circumstances of properly basic religious beliefs in: Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff, eds. *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1983), p. 80f. Also in the same volume, see William P. Alston's discussion of "M-Beliefs," p. 104ff.

¹⁴ This phrase also signals other things, such as the historical divine inspiration of the authors who first penned or dictated the words of the Bible.

¹⁵ Thanks are due to Jason Colwell for helping me find this example.

¹⁶ The possible impasse in this argument points up once again the importance of answering the question, "Plausible (rational, justifying) for whom?" The person-relative nature of the cogency of arguments, or of the premisses of arguments, has been well recognized for some time. cf. George Mavrodes, *Belief in God: A Study in the Epistemology of Religion* (New York: Random House, 1970).

¹⁷ This argument is parallel to the case study of circular argumentation that Walton (1987) uses on p. 167f. A citizen's committee is claiming

that the numbers of people in a particular suburb who use the buses are so few because the bus service is so poor; and city hall is countering this claim with the position that it has to limit the bus service because so few people in that suburb use the buses.

¹⁸ Numerous works could be cited which use this or a variant of this apologetic approach. I shall mention just a few. F.F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents*, 5th rev. ed. (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 1960); John Warwick Montgomery, *History and Christianity* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity Press, 1964); Raymond F. Surburg, *How Dependable is the Bible?* (New York: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1972); Howard F. Vos, ed. *Can I Trust The Bible?* (New York: Pyramid Publications Inc., 1968); Edwin Yamauchi, *The Stones and the Scriptures* (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 1973).

¹⁹ Walton (1987), p. 180.

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