Sorensen on begging the question

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1. Richard Robinson (1971) denies that there is a fallacy of begging the question. Sorensen (1996) argues that Robinson's denial is not well grounded, for assuming what you are to prove does not imply that your argument begs the question. Sorensen uses the following argument to make his point:

    (A) There is a fallacy of begging the question.

     Therefore, there is a fallacy of begging the question. (1996: 51)

Argument (A) assumes what is at issue; its conclusion merely repeats its premiss. Sorensen argues, however, that it does not beg the question. He summarizes his argument as follows:

    1. To beg the question is to beg the question against someone.

    2. An argument can only beg the question against someone who would not agree with all of the argument's premisses and conclusion.

    3. An argument can only beg the question against someone who can consistently object that the argument begs the question against him.

    4. If argument (A) begs the question against someone, then he either agrees with its conclusion and all of its premisses or he cannot consistently object that (A) begs the question against him.

    5. Therefore, (A) does not beg the question. (1996: 53)

Sorensen's argument is valid. Moreover, premisses (1), (2), and (3) seem uncontroverisal. (I will show that premiss (3) is dubious later.) And premiss (4) can be derived from premisses (2) and (3), plus a certain inferential characteristic of argument (A), as can be shown as follows. If you agree with the premiss of (A), you agree with its conclusion. So, according to premiss (2), (A) does not beg the question against you. On the other hand, if you do not agree with its premiss, then you have to say that there is no fallacy of begging the question. Since you hold that there is no fallacy of begging the question, you cannot

consistently condemn argument (A) as begging the question against you. So, according to premiss (3), (A) does not beg the question against you. Therefore, the conclusion that (A) does not beg the question seems inevitable. Therefore, Sorensen concludes, assuming what you are to prove does not imply that your argument begs the question (see also Sorensen 1991).

Given that argument (A) does not beg the question, Sorensen (1996: 55) claims, `argument (A) could rationally persuade Robinson by being a counterexample to one of his presuppositions about question-begging'. It is not clear here what Sorensen is arguing for or against. He seems to be saying that Robinson's scepticism about question-begging presupposes that assuming what is at issue is begging the question; but it has already been shown that assuming what is at issue does not imply begging the question; so Robinson's scepticism about question-begging is not well grounded. And since the scepticism is not well grounded, Robinson can reasonably accept the premiss of argument (A) and conclude that there is a fallacy of begging the question.

2. I think that Sorensen mistakes a number of points Robinson has made. First, Robinson's scepticism about question-begging does not presuppose that assuming what you are to prove is begging the question. He only assumes that begging the question implies assuming what is at issue in an argument. This assumption is commonly accepted, and is consistent with Sorensen's conclusion that argument (A) does not beg the question. Given this assumption, Robinson's scepticism about question-begging can be reconstructed as follows. Begging the question implies assuming what you are to prove in an argument. But assuming what you are to prove implies that the premisses of your argument already `contain' the conclusion, which in turn implies that your argument is valid. Clearly, one cannot condemn an argument because it is valid. So if there is a fallacy of begging the question, it must mean something else. But there are only two proper ways of condemning an argument. One is to say that the conclusion does not follow from the premisses. The other is to say that the argument has one or more false premisses. Begging the question appears to be neither of these. So to accuse an argument of begging the question is not a proper accusation.

Second, Robinson does not say that there is in fact no argument that begs the question. Given your best definition of begging the question, some arguments might in fact beg the question. It just doesn't matter if an argument begs the question. And to deny that there is a fallacy of begging the question is simply to deny that the prohibition of begging the question is a proper restrictive rule for a debating game.

Third, Robinson can consistently say that argument (A) begs the question. This can be done in the following way. Suppose that you are prone to deny that there is a fallacy of begging the question. Your adversary puts forward (A) and concludes that there is a fallacy of begging the question. Since (A) assumes what is at issue, you can say that it begs the question. (You might be wrong, but you are not inconsistent to say it.) Now your adversary, using Sorensen's argument mentioned above, condemns you for not being consistent. You can simply reply that (A) in fact begs the question, but it doesn't matter; you don't accuse it of begging the question. Since (A) is valid, what does matter is whether or not one accepts its premiss.

The above consideration shows that premiss (3) of Sorensen's argument is dubious. For one can consistently *say* that an argument in fact begs the question without *objecting* that it is fallacious. Premiss (3) presupposes that begging the question is fallacious. For those who do not accept this presupposition, Sorensen's argument is valid, but not sound.[1]

References

Robinson, R. 1971. Begging the question. *Analysis* 31: 113-117.

Sorensen, R. A. 1991. `P, therefore, P' without circularity. *Journal of Philosophy* 88: 245-266.

Sorensen, R. A. 1996. Unbeggable questions. *Analysis* 56: 51-55.