

Lesson 15

Circular Reasoning

An argument which says “P is true because Q is true, and Q is true because P is true” is using *circular reasoning*.

There were once two little neighbor boys who wanted to eat a cookie together. But each of their mothers had said that they couldn't have any.

SAM: I've got an idea. Why don't I take a cookie from my mother's jar, and we can share it. Then, Bill, you'll take a cookie from your mother's cookie jar and put it in my mother's jar.

BILL: But then I will get in trouble 'cause my Mom will see a cookie gone.

SAM: Then we can take a cookie from my Mom's jar and put it in your Mom's jar, then she won't notice.

BILL: No, then you will get in trouble.

SAM: I don't get it. We're going in a circle here.

This is circular and isn't getting these boys anywhere.

PLAINTIFF: Judge, I'm not lying here. I'm a religious person, and religious people don't lie.

JUDGE: How do I know you are a religious person?

PLAINTIFF: Because I would never lie.

The plaintiff is using circular reasoning. The plaintiff is saying that he is a religious person, and since religious people don't lie, therefore he isn't lying. We have to assume that he isn't lying when he says he is a religious person! The plaintiff is going in circles, which is why this is called circular reasoning.

The plaintiff is essentially saying “P is true because Q is true, and Q is true because P is true” or “It's true because it's true.” Circular arguments assume the thing they are trying to prove. Some circular arguments can be

- 3. Why are 1996 U.S. pennies worth more than 1967 U.S. pennies?
- 4. Answer each of these riddle questions, then check your answers at the end:
 - a. What color is snow?
 - b. What color is the opposite of black?
 - c. What color is a boiled egg if you take out the yolk?
 - d. What color are most clouds on a peaceful summer's day?
 - e. What color is the largest part of people's eyes?
 - f. What color is the paper on the page to the left?
 - g. What color are most clothes when you bleach them?
 - h. What color of cloth commonly keeps you the coolest in the hot sun?
 - i. What do cows drink?

very difficult to catch and unravel. They make you feel like you want to take your brain out and look at it.



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Circular reasoning. Girls are smarter because scientists have proven it. We know the scientists are right because they are girls, and girls are smarter.

JIMMY: Dad, why do I have to learn logic?

DAD: Because it will help to develop your mind.

JIMMY: Why will it develop my mind?

DAD: Because it will help you think better.

Jimmy's Dad is using a very simple circular argument. He is simply repeating his first statement but using different words to say the same thing. Jimmy wants more proof, but his Dad won't give it. He did not actually answer his son's question. Sometimes when someone can't think of a better argument for something, he simply restates his original argument in different words as proof for his old argument.

When someone tries to support an argument by just repeating his main premise, then he is using circular reasoning. If we said that "everyone should study logic because logic should be studied by everyone," we would be using circular reasoning.

"To allow every man unbounded freedom of speech must always be, on the whole, advantageous to the state; for it is highly conducive to the interests of the community that each individual should enjoy a liberty, perfectly unlimited, of expressing his sentiments." – Richard Whately, *Elements of Logic*, 1826

This is a classic example of circular reasoning. Many famous and intelligent men have used circular reasoning like this without realizing it – and many others have used circular reasoning and did know that they were using it. Sometimes we are so captured by the magic of words that we never realize

that an argument only went in a circle.

Exercises

- Which of the following examples contain the fallacy of circular reasoning?
 - PERSON A: Capital punishment for murder is perfectly justified.
PERSON B: Why is that?
PERSON A: Because it is right for society to put to death those who have committed murder.
 - POLITICIAN RUNNING FOR PUBLIC OFFICE: You can all trust what I say. I have never lied in my life.
 - WOMAN: It doesn't seem like you love me.
MAN: Why is that?
WOMAN: If you loved me, you would give me all your money.
 - "You shouldn't pray to God because he doesn't exist. But you should pray to your dead ancestors because you couldn't pray to them if they didn't exist."
 - A: I feel that astrology brings us closer to the truth about our future, don't you?
B: No. I think it's stupid.
A: But I know it is true because I'm an Aries, and people born under the sign of Aries are very good at discovering the truth.
 - TEENAGER: Who took my hairbrush? I never can find it when I want it, and when I don't want it, it's always right there.
 - PERSON WHO WANTS TO STUDY LOGIC, BUT HASN'T YET: I know that all the people who want to study logic are very intelligent people. It's very simple. If they weren't so intelligent, then they wouldn't want to think logically! Obviously.
 - HUSBAND: I'm pooped. When we get home I'm going to sit and relax and eat in front of the TV. That's what I need to do.
WIFE: And I suppose I'll have to work my fingers to the bone cooking that food you're going to eat...
HUSBAND: Why, who else would do it?

9. NEWS REPORTER AFTER A DEBATE: My fellow Americans, these debates have given you the opportunity to observe a pessimistic candidate who nearsightedly hearkens us back to the defeatism and uncertainty of four years ago. You have also observed an inspiring, future-oriented optimist who believes in the strength and hope of America and who wants to continue moving us forward. I am confident you will let your wisdom be clearly known at the polls.

10. PROFESSOR SNEDELL: All experienced experts in this field agree with my findings.

STUDENT: But I heard that Professor Schilling disagrees with you.

PROFESSOR SNEDELL: He isn't an experienced expert, so his views don't count.

STUDENT: How do you know he doesn't have any experience in this field?
PROFESSOR SNEDELL: Obviously he must not have any experience, since he disagrees with me.

11. "We must accept the traditions of the men of old time who affirm themselves to be the offspring of the gods – that is what they say – and they must surely have known their own ancestors. How can we doubt the word of the children of the gods?" – Plato, *Timaeus*

B. What fallacy, if any, is committed in the following examples?

12. ADVERTISEMENT: Gary Cooper brushed his teeth with Colgate.

13. YANKEE: Yuck! You're eating grits! I don't see how you can stand them – they originated in the South, and southern foods taste terrible.

14. "Handgun Control, Inc. says buying a gun will make you suicidal. I don't think I'll buy a gun. Those people at Handgun Control, Inc. must be experts on guns."

C. Is there an example of circular reasoning in the following dialogue? If so, what is it?

15. LITTLE GREEK: I think I have a cold.

BIG GERMAN: At least it isn't an echinacea cold.

NOSY AUSTRIAN: What is an echinacea cold?

BIG GERMAN: You take echinacea because you think you might be catching a cold, then when you stop taking it, you get an even worse cold because you've stopped.

NOSY AUSTRIAN: What clinical studies have led you to believe this theorem?
BIG GERMAN: I know it's true because it happened to me.

NOSY AUSTRIAN: But anecdotal evidence, especially just from one experience, isn't reliable.

LITTLE GREEK: Real doctors don't recommend taking echinacea.

NOSY AUSTRIAN: How do you know that? What are "real" doctors?

LITTLE GREEK: Real doctors who go to college know more than those health-nut doctors like Dr. D——, who recommends taking herbs because he sells them.

NOSY AUSTRIAN: How do you know the difference between a real doctor and the other kind?

LITTLE GREEK: Because real doctors are smarter.

NOSY AUSTRIAN: How do you know that the IQ of doctors who do not recommend taking echinacea is higher than doctors who do recommend taking echinacea? Have you done studies on the different IQs of doctors taking echinacea? It's obvious they are smarter. They don't recommend taking echinacea.

NOSY AUSTRIAN: Our argument is going in a circle.

LITTLE GREEK: No, it isn't.