"BEGGING THE QUESTION"

By A. W. Sparkes

The meaning of the phrase "to beg the question" gives no one any trouble. Why it should have this meaning is rather less obvious. Why "beg"? Is the begging addressed to the question, or is it a request for the question? If either, what connexion is there between origin and use? Is the phrase metaphorical? If so, from what activity or process is it derived?

The *OED* is not much help here. It merely offers the definitions which correspond with the ordinary usage of the phrase and the examples quoted do not help to answer the question of its origin. Neither are we helped by the *OED*'s translation of *petitio principii:* "the begging or taking for granted of the beginning or of a principle." Webster is even more baffling, giving as a literal (*sic*) translation "postulation of the beginning." Even when we realize that "beginning" must mean not "first *premiss* asserted," but "*thesis* asserted at the beginning of the argument," both translations are still baffling. Postulation seems an altogether more aggressive activity than begging. Why should "to beg" be used as a synonym for "to take for granted"? (These same difficulties surround the use of the word "beg" [*αἰτεῖσθαι*] [1] by Aristotle.) And what are we to make of the word "principle"?

In *The Rest of the Second Reply to M. Doctor Whitgift* (published in 1577, four years before the first of the *OED's* examples of the phrase, "begging the question"), Thomas Cartwright says:

> As for your often repeating that the ceremonies in question are godly, comely, and decent; it is your old wont of *demanding the thing in question,* and an undoubted argument of your extreme poverty.[2]

To this, Hooker replies:

> If we being defendants do answer, that the ceremonies in question are godly, comely, decent, profitable for the Church; their reply is childish and unorderly, to say, that we *demand the thing in question,* and shew the poverty of our cause, the goodness whereof *we are fain to beg that our adversaries would grant.*[3]

This would seem to indicate that the phrase "begging the question" is not metamorphical but arises from a straightforward description of the

[1] *Topica* 162b34–163a28; *De Soph. Elench.* 167a36–39; 168b26; ch. 27; *Analyt. Prior.* 41b8; 64b28; 65a37.

[2] P. 176. Quoted by Richard Hooker, *Ecclesiastical Polity,* IV.iv.2 *in marg.* Everyman ed. Vol. I, 373. My italics.

[3] *Eccl. Pol. Ibid.* My italics.

activity of disputation, of what goes on in "encounters,"[4] e.g. in the arguments of the law courts. If an argument is to be successful, the truth of the premisses must be admitted by both sides. When a disputant asserts a premiss, he is, therefore, asking his opponent to grant it to him (cf. "claim"). When he asserts the conclusion as one of his premisses, he is asking his opponent to grant him the truth of the statement whose truth has been questioned: he is "begging the question."

This account of the phrase "begging the question" as a literal description of a move in dialogue is perfectly consistent with the importance accorded face-to-face disputation in Aristotle's Athens, in the mediaeval *scholia generalia* to which we owe the translation of Aristotle's τὸ ἐν αρχῇ αἰτεῖσθαι as *petitio principii*, and in the Oxford and Cambridge of Thomas Cartwright and Richard Hooker.

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[4] *Topica* 101a27. Cf. W. and M. Kneale, *The Development of Logic* (Oxford, 1962), 12: "In what follows it is argued that some logical thinking had been done before Aristotle, which had its source in the criticism of everyday factual argument, and that this helped give rise to a tradition independent of Aristotle, that of the Megarians and the Stoics."