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Arguing in Cirles

Fallacy Number Ten

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**CIRCULUS
IN PROBANDO**

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SOME disciples of Mahomet are said to advance the proposition that their holy book, the Koran, is infallible.

"Why?" it is asked.

"Because it was written by Allah's Prophet."

"How do you know that Mahomet is Allah's Prophet?"

"Because it says so in the Koran."

Retreating from Mecca to Main Street, two men go into a bank. One steps up to the paying teller's window and asks if he can cash a check.

"Who can identify you?" asks the teller.

"My friend here," says the man.

"But I don't know your friend"

"That's O.K., I'll introduce you."[1]

These are two examples of the logical fallacy, *circulus in probando*, or arguing in a circle. What looks like proof, or a valid conclusion, turns out, on closer inspection, to be saying the same thing. The conclusion is neatly inserted into the premises, and the argument boils down to: "It must be true because it says so itself."

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[1] Lionel Ruby, *The Art of Making Sense.*

In a valid syllogism the two premises, major and minor, are triangulation points from which a logical conclusion can be drawn, as in the standard:

> All men are mortal—major.
> Socrates is a man—minor.
> Therefore Socrates is mortal—conclusion.

You go forward, you get somewhere; but in a *circulus* you go round and round. At the end of the argument you know no more than at the beginning. The process reminds us to Fitzgerald's famous lines:

> Myself when young did eagerly frequent
> Doctor and Saint, and heard great Argument
>   About it and about: but evermore
> Came out by the same Door as in I went.

If the argument assumes as a premise the thing it claims to prove, obviously it proves nothing at all.

> Chase has written several books on economics because he is an authority.
> Chase is an authority on economics because he has written several books.

Round and round, proving nothing about Chase. And the following proves nothing about the glamorous Miss Z.:

> This actress is on Broadway because she is famous.
> She is famous because she is on Broadway.

Nor does a radio plug prove anything about "Savarin, the Coffier Coffee. It gives you more flavor because it has more flavor to give."

Nietzsche once declared that all mankind was corrupt. To a request for proof he answered: "The mere fact that you disagree with me is in itself proof that you are corrupted."[2]

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[2] From Ruby

The great iconoclast thus made his proposition airtight by calling anyone corrupt who challenged it. A wonderful system if you can get away with it. Many do, and probably most of us try from time to time.

Theological arguments, such as the case of the Koran above, make particular use of the fallacy. A religious sect, for instance, claims that no true believer will ever die. When somebody points out a normal death rate among the faithful, members retort that those who died were not true believers.

"How do you know?"

"Because they died."

An old-time argument "proving" the inferiority of the colored races takes the form: "Man is made in the image of God; since it is well known that God is not colored, it follows that a colored person is not a man." A perfect *circulus*.

MORAL BEES

A traveler is visiting a fetish priest in the African Congo.[3] Somewhat to his surprise he finds a box of live bees in his room. He asks the reason and the priest says: "If you had been an enemy those bees would have buzzed you out of here. Only last week a man came here with evil intentions. Those bees drove him out, he ran away screaming."

"What did the man say to you?"

"Nothing. He didn't have a chance."

"Then how do you know he had evil intentions?"

"Because the bees attacked him!"

Under analysis we find two propositions here:

(1) These bees attack only persons with evil intentions; proof: they attacked A, B, C, D, ….

(2) A, B, C, D are persons with evil intentions; proof: the bees attack only such persons.

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[3] Richard Wright, Black Power (Harper, 1954).

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The fetish priest assumes a moral sense in honeybees. Presumably a man with good intentions could hit the hive with a hammer without arousing it. This story not only illustrates the fallacy of arguing in circles, but shows that natives along the Congo think much like the native along the Hudson and the Thames.

A fortuneteller said to a client:

"Your son will be famous if he lives long enough!"

"What will he be famous for?"

"For having lived so long!"

The story does not say whether the client paid the fee, but probably she did.

Jeremy Bentham once pointed out that the fallacy of arguing in circles may lurk in a single word, and gave as an example a measure which was condemned on the ground that it was "un-English." If Bentham were alive today he could collect some prime examples in the current charge of "un-American" as sole proof of seditious behavior.

CIRCULUS FOR STALIN

At the 1934 Congress of the All-Union Communist Party, the late and unlamented Joseph Stalin reported a conversation with the manger of one of the collective farms.[4]

Stalin –"How are you getting on with the sowing?"

Manager—"With the sowing, Comrade Stalin? We have mobilized ourselves!"

"Well, and what then?"

"We have put the question bluntly."

"And what next?"

"There is a turn, Comrade Stalin; soon there will be a turn."

"But still?"

"We can observe some progress."

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[4] J.H. Spigelman in *Harper's Magazine*, September, 1955.

"But for all that, how are you getting on with the sowing?"

"Nothing has come of the sowing as yet, Comrade Stalin."

The poor fellow is back where he started from. Let us hope that his next move was not to Siberia.

Turning from agriculture to music, here is a typical after-concert argument. Mr. A. starts off with the declaration that classical music is better than modern music.

Miss B.: "How do you know it is?"

Mr. A.: "All the best critics say so."

Miss B.: "Who are the best critics?"

Mr. A.: "Those who appreciate the classics."

The original statement, as in many circular arguments, cannot be proved at all by deduction, for it concerns the subjective feelings of the individual listener. Feelings often enter these circles, which can express wishful thinking to perfection. The child who says, "I need it because I need it," may think he has given a reason. The true believer in the Koran thinks so too.

FLYING SAUCERS

The *Saturday Review* in 1955 ran an omnibus review of books about flying saucers. Some pretended to be scientific; others are apparently aimed at people with pretty low IQ's. The reviewer presently identified a pendulum type of reasoning. Said he: "One way for a reader to test the degree of nonsense contained in a typical book is to examine the bibliography carefully. There he will find a mutual admiration society among flying-saucer writers who cross-reference one another for substantiation." If we ask Author X: "What proof have you that the little men landed in Fresno, California?" he replies: "Author Y confirms it!" And when we ask Author Y for his proof, he declares: "X confirms it!"

In this mutual defense society, two propositions, neither of

which has been proved true, are used alternatively to "prove" each other. The way to break up such a *circulus*, observes Schiller, is to "extract the two propositions and display their interdependence."

Fast-working promoters have been know to employ a technique not too remote from this. The promoter, let us say, wants capital for his wingless airplane and a Big Name to launch it. So he goes to the man with the money and says the Big Name has come in, and he goes to the Big Name and says the money has come in. With luck they both succumb.

IRISH BULLS

Arguing in circles always involves a truism, or tautology. Although there is no proof, at the same time there is no disproof; a rose may indeed be a rose. Irish bulls, which are often discussed with the circular fallacy, deny the truism and contradict themselves; a rose is *not* a rose.

"All men are equal, but some are more equal than others"—which boils down to "equal men are unequal."

At a Washington hearing a Senator once exclaimed: "This is most unheard-of thing I ever heard of."

"One of Peg Slattery's few witty remarks of record was her widely quoted comment that the only thing she liked about the Roosevelts was that they were Democrats, and she hated Democrats."[5] Putting this through the syllogistic sausage machine:

> Peg hates Democrats.
> The Roosevelts are Democrats.
> Therefore Peg hates the Roosevelts.
> P.S. But she likes the Roosevelts because they give her such a fine target to hate.

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[5] John O'Hara in *Ten North Frederick* (Randon House, 1955).

Pat Flaherty's friend ran him along to a banquet in a sedan chair which had no bottom. Said Pat, "Faith, and if it wuzznt fer the honor of the thing, oi moight jist as well've coom on fhoot."[6]

Irish bulls are usually visible a mile away, giving us plenty of time to climb a tree, chuckling as we climb. Circular arguments are not always so readily detected or so funny.

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[6] From J.G. Brennan.