BY LORRAINE LOVIGLIO

Begging the Question, Beggaring the Language

Like an heirloom crystal punchbowl we lift down from its shelf once a year, some words and phrases are prized in proportion to how infrequently we use them. I mean those nice, precise turns of phrase that are indispensable to convey a specific meaning that would otherwise require lengthy explanation.

Such a phrase is "beg the question," which refers to the logical fallacy of basing a conclusion on an argument requiring proof as much as the conclusion itself does. One form it often takes is arguing in a circle—that is, assuming without evidence the truth of something whose truth is the subject of the argument. In Latin, begging the question is known as *petitio principii*, or "seeking the start". *The Oxford Companion to the English Language* gives this example: "Good English is the English used by well-spoken people; what well-spoken person doesn't use good English?"

Unless you are a philosopher or just naturally disputatious, you probably don't have much call to use this expression. Yet, writers avid for novelty and unconcerned about questions of meaning increasingly reach for it whenever they feel their prose needs a dash of spice. Some sportswriters apparently don't consider they've earned their day's pay unless they've used the phrase in at least one sto[illegible] An example: "If the NBA and NHL play[illegible] were to begin today, neither the Celtics no[illegible] the Bruins would qualify. Which begs th[illegible]

question: When was the last time both teams failed to make the playoffs?" Headline writers love the expression, too; "Scandals Beg Question: Who Is Minding the Store?" asked (begged?) the *Boston Globe* over a story about Wall Street finagling. Anothor story in the same paper began, "The death of Phyllis Hyman, 45, in her Manhattan apartment last weekend begs many questions. . . ." Ms Hyman's death at an early age was regrettable surely, but she can hardly be accused of having committed a logical fallacy—much less, "many" of them.

Medical writers, too—no laggards they—are increasingly peppering their copy with the trendy phrase. They use it correctly just slightly more often than sportwriters do—about as often as copyeditors receive flowers from grateful authors. One savvy author, criticizing an NIH regulation requiring the consent of fathers to research involving fetuses, used the expression effectively when he wrote that the regulation "begs the question of the status of the fetus by treating the fetus as a child." Another skillful writer, reviewing a book entitled *Animal Liberation,* referred to "animal issues (as I shall call them, to avoid begging the 'rights' question)."

Far more often, though, we see examples like this: "The practice of anesthetizing patients to unconsciousness so they can die of 'natural causes' begs the question of physician-assisted death." What the author apparently meant here was "evades the issue". This is what most medical writers mean when they use the phrase, although others often mean "raises the question", "asks the question", "answers the question", or "explores the question".

All of which prompts (*not* begs) the question: If you regularly use your crystal punchbowl to feed the dog, what are you going to do with the New Year's champagne punch? The English language is a treasure trove of precise linguistic tools. It's a shame to beggar it through carelessness or sloth.

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