
LOGICAL FALLACIES PART II:

The Issue of Circular Reasoning



In part one of this discussion, we showed how we could be susceptible to illogical reasoning in our communication of Christ to others. Because Christians have the truth of the Word of God, they must not be shy about learning from it and leaning on it. Ours is not an uninformed faith. However, in the realm of logic, one could claim that Christians are guilty of the logical fallacy of *circular reasoning*. As an example, if you were to be asked to prove that the Bible is true, how would you respond? Certainly, you could show proofs of biblical prophecies fulfilled, of the historicity of biblical events based on archaeological evidence, or of documented accounts of the risen Christ. But would any amount of evidence serve to ultimately prove the veracity of God's Word?

If we are honest with ourselves and with others, we have to admit that our reasoning is technically circular. Yes, there are evidential proofs of the truths of Scripture, but Scripture's authority is not based on those evidences. The reason that the Bible is true is because it is God's Word and because God said that it was His Word. See the circle? Let's oversimplify it a little: "Why is God's word trustworthy? Because it's God's word!"

Is this a problem?

At the outset, this could seem like a major problem for the professing Christian, but the fact is that *everyone*—Christians, Atheists, and anything in between—*everyone claims some ultimate truth* that will cause them to go in “circles.” If you were to talk to a Christian about where he or she finds ultimate truth, they would eventually have to cry out, “Because God says so!” Similarly, if you were to talk to an atheist about where he finds ultimate authority, he would have to say, “Because I say so,” or, “Because we say so.” Now it makes little difference whether or not he or she would be *willing* to express such a bold statement; the reality remains.

Something has to be God.

Even in a postmodern era, no one can seem to escape the fact that they all rest on some kind of truth they deem to be ultimate. The scientist can spend his whole life answering the “what” questions through that which he observes and tests, but if he’s honest with himself, he could never answer the big “why” questions. He’d have to appeal to something that transcends what he can see. The humanist can claim that he has the “greater good” of mankind to support what he believes, yet cannot reasonably explain who gets to call things “good” and “bad” and why they should deserve such a privileged position. Indeed, if anyone makes any kind of truth claim at all, it would be most necessary to admit that they are appealing to some ultimate authority... otherwise they’ve said nothing at all. Something must be ultimate. Someone must be God.

Is the Christian any different?

The question might then arise, “How then is a Christian any different? Aren’t we all just making unjustified truth claims (logical fallacies) when we speak of ‘truth’?” Daniel Akin addresses this kind of question in *A Theology for the Church*:

Whose epistemology [theory of knowledge] is superior? Perhaps someone may say that the two perspectives have simply reached an impasse between presuppositions. This may in fact be the case. Nevertheless, the Christian theist still contends that his position is privileged because his epistemology is based on a *theory of dependence* on an omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, and personal transcendent God. Surely if such a God exists, he is in the position to communicate universal knowledge to his creatures. Any other approach relies on an assertion of *human independence* clearly less satisfactory to the Christian knowledge claim.

In his book, *Logic*, Vern Poythress makes a similarly helpful point, demonstrating the privileged position of the Christian faith:

Are we engaged in circular reasoning? We are already relying on a particular conception of reasoning and logic when we use arguments to establish our conception of logic. But *there is no other way of arguing when the nature of logic itself is at stake*. We start with instruction in the Bible, and we use it in order to reform logic. And after our reform, we find that logic is in harmony with the God who is described in the Bible. So what have we really accomplished? The process is really a spiral rather than a circle, because, by the grace of God, *we can learn in the process*. But it is also worthwhile to point out that when we come to consider the ultimate foundations for thought and the ultimate foundations for human life, everyone is moving in a circle of some kind.

Autonomy is a circle... But autonomy is a fruitless circle. In actuality, we are human beings and not gods. We have to rely on other people and on a lot of assumptions, but we typically do not notice it. We do not worry about it.

Unbelievers simply circle back on their own limited logic and understanding when they deny an ultimate authority outside of themselves. Believers—at least believers who humbly admit their limitations—are utterly dependent on God. And because they're dependent, they can learn. Do the unbelievers around us see evidences of our dependence on God and our learning from him?

Follow them down.

As we converse with the unbelieving world, we should "follow them down" the path of their own logic. We should try to help them discern just what it is that they're ultimately relying on. It's likely that they rarely consider it because they would rather not consider it. We shouldn't be at all nervous to do this, because we know the truth that has set us free and we know that any "truth" that they have is in some way dependent on God's truth. "All truth is God's truth." So we can have confidence that when we follow them down these paths, their conclusions will come up short and lacking. Any ultimate outside of *the* Ultimate must by definition be self-defeating. Let us lovingly help people realize that all other ground is sinking sand.