I. Administrative

A. Problem Set #3 – Due November 12; will post these problems by the end of next week

B. Exam #1 – next Thursday, 10/22; we will use some time on Tuesday as for review

C. Questions?

II. Fallacies of Vacuity

A. To call something “vacuous” is to call it empty. A vacuous argument is an empty argument; that is, it is an argument that does not establish what the proponent of the argument intended because it doesn’t put forward a substantive claim in favor of the conclusion.

1. In many cases, the argument purports to be one that can advance the discourse, but because it lacks any substance, it does not.

2. This can be done intentionally, but often it is unintentional.

B. Circular Reasoning
1. What is the standard form version of the argument in the Dilbert strip?

2. One engages in *circular reasoning* if and only if one of the premises used to support the conclusion is equivalent to the conclusion itself.

3. **Examples**
   
   **a.** P1. There exist circular arguments

   C. There exist circular argument

   **b.** P1. Killing someone unlawfully is always morally wrong.

   C. Murder is always morally wrong.

4. Depending on the context, such reasoning can be either *viciously circular* or *virtuously circular*.

   **a.** If vicious, the circle undermines the argumentative goal of the speaker. In many cases, a speaker puts forward an argument so as to convince a doubter that a certain conclusion is true; if one reasons in a circle, however, then one will be unable to succeed because the doubter will reject the premise (and so the argument) for the same reason that they reject the conclusion. In this case, the doubter can correctly accuse the speaker of *begging the question* (see below).

   **b.** If virtuous, the circle can help achieve the speaker’s argumentative (or more broadly rhetorical) goals. For example, one uses circular reasoning in the process of classification. Also, one uses it in the process of exploiting identities. In these cases, the arguments present information that has theoretical value or is news to the listener, so the presence of a circle is not a problem. [7.1, 7.2]

   **c.** Is this argument circular? Put it in standard form.

   https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8CVbku6nxhU
C. Begging the Question

1. An argument *begs the question* in a context if and only if any objection in the context to its conclusion is also an objection to a premise (or premises), and the premise (or premises) is not supported by any independent evidence.

   a. This is committed in the context of discourse in which there is doubt about the conclusion. If there is doubt about the conclusion, then assuming the very thing you wish to prove is not the way to dispel that doubt. Context is critical here.

   b. If you engage in viciously circular reasoning, you beg the question in this sense; however, you needn’t engage in circular reasoning to beg the question. (See table below.)

   c. This should be distinguished from the popular sense of “begging the question”, which has a different meaning (although they can be tied together).
d. **Examples:**

   i. The Bible is the inerrant word of God, because God speaks only the truth, and repeatedly in the Bible God tells us that the Bible consists of His words.

   ii. Abortion is murder. This is clear from the fact that fetuses are persons, and intentionally killing a person (who isn’t threatening one’s life) is murder.

2. The way to avoid begging the question is to provide an argument for the conclusion that contains premises which are not equivalent to it and which are not open to the same type of objection that is directed at it. This will require that they are supported by evidence independent of the sort of evidence you are marshaling in support of your conclusion.

3. This creates the following relationship between circular reasoning and begging the question:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Circular</th>
<th>Non-Circular</th>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th><strong>Question-Begging</strong></th>
<th><strong>Not Question-Begging</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A: “Terrorists cannot be stopped without torture, because they are so callous that their goal is to kill and maim innocent civilians, and inflicting pain is the only way to put a stop to this.”</td>
<td>A: “People with suicidal tendencies are insane, because they want to kill themselves.”</td>
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<td>— <strong>Context:</strong> B accepts the definition of torture as inflicting pain and still questions it.</td>
<td>— <strong>Context:</strong> B doesn’t know that a person with suicidal tendencies is a person who wants to kill himself.</td>
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(16.I.10) A: “The drinking age should be lowered to eighteen, because eighteen-year-olds are mature enough to drink.”

— **Context:** B’s reason for disputing the conclusion is the same as the reason for disputing the premise here.

(16.I.12) A: “People with suicidal tendencies are insane, because they want to kill themselves.”

— **Context:** Pick your favorite.

A: “Evolution is true because the vast majority of scientists who work in biology accept it.”

— **Context:** Pick your favorite.
4. This table depends on an important distinction: (i) the classification of an argument on the basis of the structure and meaning of its component sentences, and (ii) the classification of an argument on the basis of how it is used in a particular situation. (Put another way: the thing said vs. the act of saying.)

a. All the arguments we’ve examined in the “Fallacies” section can be so classified on the basis of their structure.

b. However, whether they count as fallacies or not will depend on context.

5. Examples – see the worksheet

D. Self-Sealing Arguments

1. These are arguments that are set up in such a way that nothing could possibly refute them; thus, they seal themselves off from criticism.

a. Such an argument is objectionable because it provides no one who is skeptical with any reason to believe it; indeed, any possible reservation is easily accommodated within the argument.

b. Another way to put this: the argument is empty (i.e., vacuous) because it provides no testable predictions and so no way to determine if it is false. (Contrast significant statement with tautology.)

2. An argument can be self-sealing in a number of different ways:

a. By universal discounting: all possible objections are dismissed, often in ad hoc or arbitrary ways. E.g., conspiracy theories.

b. By going upstairs: use of the ad hominem fallacy to dismiss objections; objections are dismissed as a sign that the objector is not yet in a position to understand the argument, or that the objector is actually proving the argument sound by asking those objections. E.g., psychoanalysis.

c. By definition: use of the fallacy of equivocation to finesse objections; one makes a substantive claim and then subtly redefines the critical term in a way that guarantees the truth of
the claim, even though by doing this the claim is deprived of substance. E.g., selfishness.

d. Certain words are also used to seal off arguments: ‘enough’, ‘true’, ‘thoroughly’, etc.

3. An argument that is self-sealing is vacuous and it is usually offered when trying to shore up a position that is false, or at least criticizable. One way to avoid criticism is to make one’s argument impervious to it; however, in doing this, you deprive the argument of all content.