

## Complex Question

*A.G. Holdier*

George Walker Bush: *great* president or the *greatest* president? I'll just put you down for *great*.

Stephen Colbert

Commonly referred to as a “loaded” question, the fallacy of the complex question (CQ) appears in two varieties: the implicit form distracts an interlocutor by assuming the truth of an unproven premise and shifting the focus of the argument in an unfounded direction, while the explicit form collapses two distinct questions into a single question such that a single answer would appear to satisfy both inquiries. Although it is possible for a philosopher to commit this fallacy accidentally, its common use as an intentional tactic by debaters and investigators has also earned this example of faulty reasoning the title of the “interrogator’s fallacy,” with the classic example being that of a journalist asking a senator, “Have you stopped beating your wife?” – a question that implicitly presupposes without justification that the senator has actually beaten his wife at some point in the past. If the senator fails to recognize the fallacious thinking when he answers the CQ, he may unintentionally appear to admit that he is guilty of a crime of which he may be innocent.

The explicit variety of CQ is far easier to identify and is typically not wielded as an argumentative tool but is often played for laughs; when a talk

show host asks her celebrity guest a question like “What is your favorite novel and why is it *The Lord of the Rings*?” the interviewer clearly presents two questions concurrently, brazenly forcing the conversation in a desired direction. Nevertheless, because her inquiry operates with two parallel questions instead of a more open single query (such as “What is your favorite novel?” or “What is your opinion of *The Lord of the Rings*?”), the host’s question is complex. Essentially, her goal is not to uncover new information but to guide the focus of the discussion in a predetermined direction. Consequently, the CQ is similar to, though not identical with, the courtroom infidelity of a lawyer “leading the witness” where open-ended questions that allow a witness to provide personal testimony (such as “What did you see that night?”) are replaced with targeted questions (like “Isn’t it true that you saw the defendant murder the victim on the night in question?”) that only leave room for a “yes” or “no” answer. Leading questions (such as the example at the beginning of this chapter) are not technically fallacious, however, for they merely suggest their own answer and do not attempt to trick a witness into a confession (see Hurley 2010, 148–149 for more on the difference between leading and loaded questions).

Concerning trickiness, the more problematic form of the CQ is the implicit rephrasing of an enthymeme (an incomplete syllogism) into a question-like structure that can lead a respondent to affirm unintentionally an unstated but distasteful or untrue secondary conclusion. Consider the case of Bart Simpson in the 2004 episode of *The Simpsons* “Bart-Mangled Banner,” where a series of unfortunate events land Bart and his family on a talk show because of their perceived lack of American patriotism: when the host, Nash Castor, asks the Simpson family (in a fiery manner similar to many media personalities), “What do you hate most about this country?” he first assumes that they *do* hate the United States of America and instead asks a clarifying question about this preconception. It would be impossible for Bart simply to answer the posed question without simultaneously giving credibility to Castor’s unproven assumption (that he does, in fact, “hate [...] this country”), ironically providing the very proof that had to that point been lacking. The possibility that an undetected CQ might lead a speaker to affirm additional, unspoken premises unintentionally makes this a popular tactic in police interrogations and debate cross-examinations; avoiding this rhetorical trap is only possible either by rejecting the question as posed and extemporaneously clarifying the situation on one’s own terms or by remaining silent.

It is important to note that the fallacious nature of a CQ may be context-dependent. In the flow of normal conversation, it is often natural to pose questions based on any number of assumptions that one might reasonably expect a conversation partner to accept either on the basis of common knowledge or because they had previously been established; a question like “What color is the President’s dog’s hair?” assumes, at the very least, (a) that there

is a President, (b) that he or she owns a dog, and (c) that said dog has hair, but one need not spell out each of those assumptions to avoid speaking erroneously – indeed, conversations would be both tedious and lengthy without such linguistic shortcuts. Instead, CQ relates specifically to instances where the questioner attempts to force a preconceived conclusion into the subtext of a conversation, especially if that conclusion is an embarrassing or incriminating answer.

Because of its attempt to control the flow of an argument regardless of validity or soundness, CQ can often appear similar to the fallacy of begging the question (see Chapter 70), where the conclusion of an argument simply restates one of its premises. The key difference is that while CQs do suggest a particular conclusion, they do not explicitly state it. Instead, like a false dichotomy (if two oversimplified options are suggested; see Chapter 81) or a red herring (where an unrelated premise intrudes on an argument; see Chapter 43), CQ seeks to distract from the logical flow of the argument and force the fallacy-presenter's desired conclusion – and like poisoning the well (see Chapter 40) and *ad hominem* fallacies (see chapters 8–11), it does so at the expense of the other party with the added twist that it is that very party who ends up expressing his or her own condemnation.

Rhetorically speaking, the CQ is a useful tool, simultaneously making a speaker appear clever while casting doubt on the ability or intelligence of his or her opponent. However, unlike a Socratic question (which is designed to reveal methodically a contradiction or error in the thinking of one's opponent), a CQ aims to trick one's interlocutor into affirming a damaging position, therefore operating essentially as the opposite of the Socratic method (because it aims at obscuring and not revealing the truth). Even if some valid use could be found for such a move, it would unavoidably operate at the expense of an opponent's pride, leaving any logical reason for its employment sorely absent. Instead, CQ is best left to media representatives with their so-called "gotcha" questions; philosophers should instead take care to explain each step in their reasoning processes and be plain about their evidence. Otherwise, it may be best simply to remain silent.

## Reference

Hurley, Patrick. 2010. *A Concise Introduction to Logic*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.