

“Begging the Question With Style: Anarchy, State and Utopia at Thirty Years”
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Abstract

Nozick’s Anarchy, State and Utopia, it seems safe to say at thirty years’ distance, has achieved the status of a classic. In addition to being the locus classicus for contemporary arguments on behalf of libertarianism, it is a stylistic tour de force. This paper considers the role that the book’s rhetoric plays in charming and disarming Nozick’s audience, simultaneously establishing his credibility with readers, turning them on his ideological opponents, and helping his argument over some of its more serious substantive difficulties. Some of these rhetorical moves are clearly more successful than others. But together they seem to me to explain in part the immensely respectful reception the book has gotten over the years, from converts and critics alike.

Although the paper limits its focus to Anarchy, State and Utopia, Nozick is hardly alone among academics in begging the question with style. Many of the rhetorical moves discussed here are ubiquitous in academic writing. To pick one author at random, I doubt that I have ever written anything that would not be seen in a different, and somewhat less flattering, light if subjected to the sort of rhetorical scrutiny to which I have subjected Anarchy here. To that extent, I hope the paper will be read implicitly to raise (without answering) a more general question about the appropriate role of rhetoric in academic writing.