

Revving Up with the Rev

Late summer greetings to all!

A few days ago, in one of those moments when my mind had little else to do—in this continuing covid cycle those moments have been frequent—it shot this question at me: How do you square the circle?

What got me all revved up about it was that I recalled hearing the question asked at a Men's Club meeting—it was sometime before March because we were still meeting in person. We had all listened attentively to a speaker. Then, in a question time following the speech, one member asked, "You have said...but how do you square the circle so that...?"

I can't remember the full question but the exact details aren't important. The member was inviting the speaker to explain something he had said that seemed to be...let's just say, not wholly logical.

The interesting aspect of that question is that it can't be done. You just can't square a circle!

Not that it hasn't been tried. In fact, they tried for centuries. Ancient geometers tried it to no avail. Hippocrates (460 BC – 370 BC) was the first. He tried by using a plane construction to find a square with area equal to a figure with circular sides. He squared certain lunes (arcs) but found that not every lune can be squared.

Persistent to the core, they kept trying, by fits and starts, until in 1882—more than 2,000 years after Hippocrates died—it was finally proven that the task was impossible.

Since then the expression "squaring the circle" has been used as a metaphor for trying to do the impossible.

So be aware that, if you're giving a talk of some kind and, at the end of it, some bloke stands up and asks you to "square the circle" with respect to something you've said, you have two choices:

1. Be quick with an answer that makes total sense, and cut the questioner off at the pass.
2. Realize that the bloke has found a colossal chink in your armour.

If the choice is #2 above, you can still get out without egg all over your face by using one of these answers given by politicians when they realize they've sunk themselves into a circle that can't be squared:

1. Start by saying, "That's a very important question." Then go on to talk about a matter you can pretend to know something about...maybe the price of rhubarb in Tanzania, or something else equally irrelevant.
2. "I don't have all the information. I'll get back to you."
3. "We're still working on that."

Otherwise...well, I guess there's nothing much to do but pack up your ol' kit bag and hurry on home, because rather than asking, "How do you square the circle?" the questioner might as well have said, "Gotcha!"

Keep smiling, guys!

Tom Watson