

ANY QUESTIONS?

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1. Why we ask questions?

(1) We ask questions for different reasons and there are many kinds of question. Sometimes we ask questions just to get information when we don't know the correct answer. Who said that? How much do the strawberries cost? Where have you been since 4.30? Why didn't you get the book for me? What do you mean? How? When? Where? Why? We want to know something that we do not know and will not know if you do not give an appropriate answer to the question

(2) Sometimes we ask questions when we know the correct answer. Teachers do it all the time. Curiosity about knowledge can be stimulated by the posing of relevant questions. Dissatisfaction with ignorance or with misunderstanding or with error is an essential ingredient in the process of learning and indeed in the living of a reasonable life. Questions may stimulate us to search for knowledge and result in its discovery.

Learning something by rote is not the same as discovering something for yourself. What we discover by being active in the search for knowledge and truth is more likely to become a part of us than knowledge handed over to us in a set of statements that we simply learn. Not that that may not be essential foundation for progress. Understanding is not the same as learning by rote. But learning by rote may sometimes be a necessary condition for knowledge and understanding. The willingness to pose questions, some of which may not be very welcome to us, is an essential part of the learning and maturing process.

The point of reading literature of any kind is to lead you on, to new ideas which you frame and consider, to the satisfaction of discovery. That is what 'interpretation means, the goal of interpretation.

(3) I want to inform you about something or other. So I may ask a question to arouse your interest in what I have to say to you. It might be that only then I can pass on information in such a way that you will receive and remember it. Teachers know this only too well.

(4) Or sometimes I ask in such a way that the answer dawns on you and you come to consciousness of its implications. It is sometimes the only way to ensure an appropriate response. It sometimes takes an unfinished question to draw our some important realisation of what the truth is. 'You do realise. . . .?'

(5) I ask you questions to get you to see whether your answer corresponds to mine. If I find that it does not, I may then try to persuade you to change your view. The speaker in a conversation has an advantage here over the

writer. For he can judge your meaning and usually judge it well enough by your response or failure to respond and notice subtleties in your expression verbal and physical that give him clues.

The writer's task is rather different. He poses the question having in mind what the point of asking it is. Then he has to leave it and hope for an appropriate response, or one he considers to be appropriate. He who casts bread upon the waters often does not see what happens to it.

(6) Sometimes we repeat the same question. Sometimes we go on asking the same question over and over again. Why would we do that? Because we are not satisfied with the answer we are getting or giving ourselves? We know that we have not got the right answer or the adequate answer. So we ask the further question about the answer to the first question: Is it true? Is it adequate? Is it reasonable?

We may find ourselves in another situation. If I surmise that I will get an unwelcome answer I may do all I can to avoid asking the question that will provide me with an answer whose implications I do not want to face.

We sometimes insist that you shall do the same. We go to some lengths to get people not to ask a question so that they do not have to face the unwelcome response, or that we do not have to! You do not want me to know where you were at 4.30. So you will do all you can to prevent me from asking the question. I want to hold on to my belief or opinion and if I seriously consider answering the question, the answer I give might threaten that belief or opinion. So I may deliberately choose not to give the question serious consideration, not to consider whether I must in honesty change my view.

It becomes clear that we are speaking now of personal integrity.

2. What shall we do with the answers?

Just as, if not more, important than asking questions about questions is the question about the answers. When we have an answer to our question what do we, shall we, ought we, to do with it?

Responses might be one of three. We like the answer. So we readily accept it, sometimes with more enthusiasm than other times.

We get an answer we have to adjust to, have to give consideration to more than we had anticipated. We make a decision as to how we shall treat it. Shall we make the needed accommodation or not?

We get an answer that we do not like, or we do not particularly like, or to which we are (initially at least) hostile. It may be that we had not at all thought in the way that the answer suggested and so we have to adjust our thinking to take it in. A prejudiced person will immediately reject such an unexpected and perhaps unwelcome answer. A rational person will give it consideration. The reasonable person will find perhaps that, in giving the unanticipated answer due

consideration, he must adjust other aspects of his thinking. Looking back he may see the acceptance of the answer as a stage in his intellectual progress. It may lead to other questions that are to be similarly treated.

The process of dealing with answers to questions starts very early in life. The child must measure its reaction to answers it does not like as well as finding satisfaction with the answers it does. Normally the parent or teacher will encourage a rational acceptance of the answer she gives to the child's query.

While we are in this writing talking about questions and answers, we must include the tacit question. I mean by this that when ideas and positions come to our attention we have sometimes to deal with the unexpected and new idea. WE hear or read something and we realise that it raises questions for us. So we are faced with the problem of making a response. Such a response will fall into one of the three categories outlined above and will receive one of the three treatments we have suggested.

Having been a teacher of theology for the best portion of my life, I am very aware of the division which takes place between people in a group when a question gives rise to different responses.

Take the belief that a human person is a combination of body and soul, and that if there is to be immortality it will involve the separation of the soul from the body and its continuance forever. I present a version of Aristotle's denial that the soul is an entity of the person and find that reactions come swiftly to such functionalism. Some students with entrenched opinions present predictable objections. Some consider and think the denial to be a rational one. Some just do not worry and learn the idea off as part of Aristotle's philosophy, as a piece of intellectual history and pass on to other things. Students who believe that the existence of the soul is a necessary condition for immortality reject such denial, and so go on to find ideas that support the view they hold.

I ask the question, What does it mean to say, 'The Second Advent is soon?' There are several kinds of Adventist, united in their claim that the Advent is soon but refusing to set the time yet to elapse before the event. No limit can be specified as to the time involved. 'Soon' (and its synonyms) is to be taken as undefined, indeed indefinable, as regard to length of time involved. The word then becomes a neologism. It comes to mean, 'in the future but without any possible specification how far in the future.' Raise the question whether that is irrational and so misguided, and reactions vary. One says with no further consideration, 'I have no problem with what you call a dilemma', thus rejecting the validity of the question and the obvious force of the arguments presented. Such a one has not even considered the argument but reacts as it were automatically in this negative way. Another considers and agrees that there is a problem but attempts to minimise it and leaves it unresolved. A third admits the validity of the question and finds the assertion meaningless. The way is then open for reconstruction.

Now let us consider a couple of particular searching questions: 'What do you mean?' and 'Why?'

If you want to be stimulated to think, there are no more effective questions than these. For often our beliefs are held in an inarticulate way, and the influence of the social environment that forms the immediate context of a person's life will largely determine the beliefs and attitudes that person has. I usually believe what we believe. The accepted belief is taken to be the acceptable belief. So ask 'What do you mean?' and you cannot hide behind accepted opinion or explanation. I have often found that the very fact that one asks the question, 'What do you mean?' produces considerable disturbance when a cherished belief is in question.

When you have not considered very thoroughly or not at all what you mean, when you take for granted that the belief is true, is reasonable or is meaningful, it comes as a surprise, not to say a shock, that you are being asked about it and have to give a statement that clarifies it or makes it explicit, when you have never made it explicit to yourself. You have assumed it is meaningful because accepted generally and not questioned, perhaps repeated often or for some reason known to yourself. We are often quite certain of what we do not really understand. So when asked to understand it by saying what it means, by giving an explanation, we do not know quite what to do. If we are really pressed we cannot simply entrench. But the exercise may well be beneficial, for it will enable us to decide whether the belief is satisfactory, whether we must modify it or even whether we must abandon it.

But sometimes there is a show of pretence. Let me explain. You do not really understand the question, but have often heard the answer to it, so you do not really understand that either. From my experience of teaching philosophy to different groups of student, I sometimes found that some students were keen to make conversation but had understood neither the questions nor the answer or answers suggested. So they were quite ready to jump into making comments. You cannot make a contribution to understanding by talking when you fail to understand. It is good to be specific, but only if you understand what you are talking about. Otherwise at best what you have to say will be irrelevant and probably repetitious soliloquy. As someone commented, 'There is no point in being precise if you do not know what you are talking about.'

If we are going to understand Locke's empiricism we shall have to master the meaning of key terms before we can begin to grasp the meaning of the questions, let alone understand the answers given. How could you discuss the problem for example, 'Does Locke's empiricism lead to scepticism?' unless you understand what the question means. So the teacher cannot just say, 'Let us have your opinion on this problem' to students have never met it before and do not know what ideas they must employ to entertain it. They must get a hold on the basic concepts: 'empiricism' and 'scepticism'. To do so you will have to consider other basic concepts new to you. Then, having mastered the basic ideas, having become somewhat familiar with the vocabulary needed, you can begin to understand when you have made the attempt to find a relation between the concepts that are used to frame the particular questions. You can, but you may not. You may lose interest, or just not be up to it intellectually.

Sometimes it is a matter of mastering the relevant facts as well as the appropriate concepts. It is always a matter of connecting both ideas and facts

logically and relevantly. For example to answer such questions as, What was Churchill's greatest achievement? What in *Hamlet* is 'the stamp of one defect' that produces tragedy? Was King Lear self-deceived?

3 Some religious examples. Questions we are asking you?

Do you think that in the gospel of *John* eschatology is realised in the experience of the believer? Before you can agree and accept or disagree and discuss you will need to master the concepts involved. But you may not be willing to do so. So you bypass the issues raised, and which you have not attempted to understand and maintain the status quo of your limited understanding and persist with your understanding of how to approach Scripture. And if your 'conversation partner' does the same, there can be disagreement but possibly no meeting of minds.

Take the simple seeming question; 'How did the New Testament come into being?' or the related question 'Why are there just 27 books in the New Testament?' Now consider what are proper ways of answering the question. Some will involve historical study. Others will involve the consideration of such concepts as 'canon', 'authority', 'consensus' and others. But you may not be prepared for such research. So you simply bypass the question and continue to assert your view of the status of the New Testament. It may satisfy you even if it is naïve. But some of us are tempted to be too easily satisfied and are ready to rest with naive understandings. But because a belief is simple does not mean that it is either true or satisfactory. It may be. It may not be. It is not a matter of complexity but of adequacy.

So you can appear to reject a position when you have simply bypassed it. You say, 'I shall not consider the question. I entrench in the position I have always held and to which my group subscribes.'

We could produce literally hundreds of questions. Some are more important than others. Take a few very basic questions, such as the following.

What is a miracle?

What does it mean to say that God acts?

Why are so many miracle stories to be found in Scripture?

Assume a miracle takes place. Assume you have a satisfactory definition of 'miracle'. Assume that it is an act of God. There must be a physical cause and effect when the five loaves turn into thousands of pounds of bread to feed a multitude. What are the physical processes that are taking place to produce this (impossible?) effect? How are they initiated?

Why is a statement that a virgin conceived a son included in the Gospel of Matthew? Again there must have been a physical process that produced this effect. What was it? There must have been a process by which the story was transmitted until it got into Matthew's Gospel. Answering the second question may shed some light on the first. The two processes are connected.

How do you explain the fact that most of Mark is repeated, sometimes verbatim, in Matthew and Luke?

How do I decide whether an account presented in historical form is literal or symbolical? Did it happen? Or, is the aim of the account rather to convey a meaning?

If I do not simply take for granted the existence of supernatural beings how shall I explain their activity and interpret the accounts of that activity in the literature, like for example, John Milton's and apocalyptic pictures, warfare in the heavens, resulting in Satan's access to beings in this world?

**What sort of authority does the Bible have?
Should readers approach Scripture as they approach other books?**

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