Am I Question or Answer?

Problem or (re)solution?

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Introduction

This is a reflection on the possibility that we may have been enculturated to associate our identities with an "answer" to a "question" such as "who am I". Identity may however be more fruitfully associated with the process of asking the question itself rather than with any answer to it.

Questions are readily defined as problematic, only to be relieved by satisfactory answers. This encourages avoidance of questions and fixation on answers -- possibly prematurely (cf Question Avoidance, Evasion, Aversion and Phobia: why we are unable to escape from traps, 2006 ). This pattern may also be significant in relation to a number of other terms essential to understandings of who we are -- and of who we can be.

Answer obsession?

Philosophy has emphasized "Cogito Ergo Sum" -- "I think therefore I am". Here there is an implicit (and possibly unseemly) haste to answer the question "Who am I" in relation to a thinking process. The challenge dates back to Pythagoras at least [more]. This may or may not involve any questioning dynamic, indicative of self-reflexiveness, or of the potential processes of self-reframing to enable new understanding. This dimension is for example a characteristic of the practice of gnana yoga (cf Ramana Maharshi, Who Am I?) [more]

More generally, in practice, there is urgent need, in many circumstances, to supply answers to those asking "who am I". Examples of those seeking clear and immediate answers include:

- national identity and citizenship registers: identity based on a combination of name, birthdate, etc
- tax authorities:
- social security authorities
- licensing authorities
- immigration authorities when travelling
- banking authorities
- property owners, notably those concerned with provenance
- employers
- relatives and friends
- peers
- opponents in any process of disagreement
It is appropriate to ask whether those for whom a well-defined identity is sought need themselves to be rigorously defined to the degree implied by the needs of the questioner. How closed does such a definition need to be -- whether for the definer or for the defined? Is there, for example, a case for something that might be akin to an "open source identity"? May there be other ways of understanding "identity"?

**Question or Answer?**

One approach is to shift the emphasis from the static specificity of an answer to the dynamic process of asking a question such as "who am I". This approach is of course primarily open to the questioner. But it may indeed be open to others asking the question of another -- and not requiring premature closure on an answer. One can indeed relate to another person -- over an extended period of time -- through the question as to who they may indeed be. This may well be the basis for fruitful relationships -- otherwise undermined by simplistic answers to the question, namely premature closure. Succinctly stated, questions presuppose process, whereas answers are indicative of named objects or categories.

Am I question -- or answer?

As answer "I" buy into various frameworks within which an answer is meaningful and satisfying to others -- and possibly to "myself". This may include a name on a citizenship register or in a telephone directory. It may be an occupational descriptor such as plumber, farmer, physicist, or actor. In some circles this may require a qualifier to avoid being identified as a "nobody" -- perhaps an award winner, or the subject of some public relations campaign, or 'married to' one such -- exemplified by the attribution of titles (cf Varieties of Honour and Dishonour: distinguishing intrinsic honour from honourable externalities, 2005). It may be some other relationship. This is the conventional approach to identity which is also at the origin of much trauma for those who feel impelled to struggle to be "somebody" and claim a sense of inner emptiness where others have a fullness in sensing who they are.

But, if "I" am an answer, who asked the question?

As question, however, the challenge of "my" identity is framed in a completely different way. It is no longer an issue of labels and certificates -- or of being defined by nouns in a particular language which others speak or comprehend. "I" am free to consider the possibility that answering the question may not be possible in a language which others -- or I myself -- as yet understand.

The emphasis shifts from production of something understood to be an "answer" to the process of asking the question -- whatever form that takes. On the basis of the standard interrogatives, possible forms, whether asked by myself or others, include the WH-questions:

- when am I... myself
- where am I... myself
- which am I... amongst my various selves
- how am I... myself
- what am I
- who am I
- why am I

The point is variously made that science focuses its attention on only some of these questions, despite the eternal challenge of the others. For example, John Herlihy (The Modern World: a traditional inquiry into the nature of scientific knowledge The Qur'anic Horizons, October-December, 1998) makes the point:

Modern science questions, judges, and presides over the acquisition of knowledge concerning an objective reality, but is it ever questioned regarding its purpose and identity...?... The modern scientific elite, who are the high priests of the modern world and who alone have power to speak ex cathedra on such questions as the nature of reality and the origin of mankind, have established the fundamental criteria through which modern man understands the nature of reality and the human beings who inhabit that reality. They alone have the right to form the fundamental interrogatives that make up the parameters of the scientific inquiry.

Over the centuries, indeed for millennia, both traditional scientists and contemporary layman have asked the question who and what with regard to man and the universe, with a view to answering the elusive why, for in addition to the who and the what of existence, traditional man was primarily interested in the why of existence. Meaning and purpose placed the fundamental mystery of the origins and ends of both man and the universe into a comprehensible perspective that resolved in a clear and practical manner the interrogative that lay at the heart of existence. Since the 17th century, however, and the rise of what has come to be known as modern science, scientists have prided themselves on asking not why things are the way they are, but primarily how. They are interested in the what, the when, the where, and above all the how of things in their purely spatial and temporal phenomenality. The question of why at best still concerns those who go beyond the study and investigation of the phenomenal world and are willing to partake of the perennial wisdom, while the question of who still concerns the vast majority of mankind that has never lost interest in their own identity...

More fundamental however, is the existential posture from which any of these questions might be asked and the configuration impelling such questions -- the doubting energy that engenders them. This doubting energy engenders the proto-question which presumably takes the initial "yes/no" form of "Am I" or "Am I not" -- "Do I exist" or "Do I not". Some frameworks (permitting a quadrilemma) may then admit of two related additional forms (cf Kinhide Mushakoji. Global Issues and Interparadigmatic Dialogue; essays on multipolar politics, 1988):
Thereafter one or more of the seven WH-questions above become the focus.

More intriguing however is the possibility of identifying with the questioning process than with any of these questions and the forms of the answers to which they may give rise. Any fundamental sense of identity may then be centered more in the dynamic of the questioning process -- or "being the question" in some way, as with "bearing witness". It may be a case of:

"I question, therefore I am", with the corollary "I answer, therefore I am not"

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Qualities of questioning?</th>
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<tr>
<td>Are existential questions eternal? Do answers simply multiply and rot away?</td>
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<td>Is it the energy of potential that questions possess? Do answers only have the energy of momentum, if they have any?</td>
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<td>Do questions challenge patterns -- where answers only reinforce them?</td>
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<td>Are questions engendered by the encounter with the wilderness of unknowing? Are answers then the urbanization and industrialization of knowing?</td>
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**Being in uncertainty vs Being in certainty**

Answers to any question of identity provide a sense of certainty. One is then defined by that certainty. Any process that undermines that uncertainty is therefore threatening to identity. It would naturally be resisted. It could be argued that a high degree of certainty has been defined into planetary society through naming. In this sense naming constitutes a fundamental reduction of freedom. The contrast is perhaps captured by the title of a conference series *Be the Change* -- although whether this implicitly suggests identification with a particular shared definition of change is another matter.

Living in uncertainty calls for a sense of identity that responds to the moment (cf Eve Grubin, *In Praise of Uncertainty*, 2006, citing Shakespeare). It is a condition forced upon many, notably refugees -- but without any understanding of how to respond to that reality in anticipation of recovery of certainty. It corresponds to the sense of contingency -- notably articulated by Buddhism's reflection on *Anatta*. Identity may indeed then be momentarily determined. But there is no permanent identification with what is momentarily identified in this way. Fundamentally one may indeed be unidentified or only identified with processes of reflection about any sense of identity.

The Buddhist term *Anatman* (Sanskrit) or *Anatta* (Pali) specifies the absence of a supposedly permanent and unchanging self or soul. All that is experienced in life is considered impermanent and in a constant state of flux. Consequently any entity that appears to exist does so only in dependence on the conditions of its arising, which are non-eternal -- so-called "dependent co-arising". Therefore, any sense one might have of an abiding self or a soul is regarded as a misapprehension. Since one's "self" is only a contingency that depends on "not-self" for its moment-to-moment existence, that illusory "self" is dependent on nominally distinct sources of authority to form its beliefs and organize its knowledge of the world [more].

Identity within such understanding is inherently dynamic and emergent in response to circumstances. Ironically, given that individuals seldom define themselves by their social security number or by any of the many username-passwords they require, their willingness and capacity to do so suggests an effective adoption of the Buddhist understanding of contingent identity.

**Qualities of answer constraining senses of identity**

If any attempt at an answer to "who am I" is an exemplification of the "not-self", there is a case for exploring the impulse to acquire, possess or "grasp" such a transitory construct of lower-dimensionality. There is even a sense in which this may be understood as a form of "harassment" of reality (cf *Beyond Harassment of Reality and Grasping Future Possibilities: learnings from sexual harassment as a metaphor*, 1996)

There is also a case for exploring the quality of answers -- possibly as conditioned by the form of the WH-question: "who am I", "why am I", "what am I", etc as suggested by erotetic logic. Are answers then to be understood as having forms susceptible to a taxonomical analysis?

Also of interest are the properties of the "matter" by which answers may be distinguished. Contrasting qualitative properties, already used in descriptive metaphors, might include: slippery, evanescent, sticky, solid, unstable, murky, opaque, cold, etc.

**Sustaining uncertainty -- the uncollapsed waveform**

Elsewhere the possibility of relating the WH-questions to elementary catastrophes has been explored (*Cognitive Feel for Cognitive Catastrophes: Question Conformity*, 2006), notably:

> With respect to the set of WH-questions, can the probability function be understood to collapse in a variety of (seven?) distinct ways -- "elementary catastrophes" -- when quenched by an answer that "fits" the form of "when", "where", "who", etc? This would seemingly constitute a development of the theory that consciousness causes collapse of this kind in the case of a conscious observer (as popularized by Gary Zukav, *The Dancing Wu Li Masters*, 1980). Here the observer is to be understood as
the person whose WH-question is in process of being answered.

This collapse is to be contrasted with the continuous, unitary (reversible) evolution of a system according to the Schrödinger equation -- multiple realities in potentia in anticipation of a question that forms them in a particular way to engender an answer. To the extent that the answer is not of the yes/no variety, the collapse of the probability function may be progressive as the answer takes form -- a cognitive topography that progressively becomes apparent and known, as with the various forms of the elementary catastrophes.

As discussed there, a fruitful possibility is that of sustaining uncertainty -- a challenge of preventing the quenching of the probability waveform consistent with a probabilistic view of truth (cf Vasily Nalimov, Realms of the Unconscious: the enchanted frontier, 1982). This challenge may be compared to that of sustaining plasma in a nuclear fusion reactor. The various questions, including "who am I", are then particular modes of collapsing that waveform -- configuring semantic wormholes into the frameworks (or universes) of possible answers. The questions structure spacetime so that answers -- like universes -- can emerge.

Naming through answers effectively closes down possibility space, obscuring the original question to the point that it may never be posed again despite changing circumstances. As noted by Chris Lucas (personal communication):

If we regard "question" as opening up discussion and "answer" as closing it down then we can rephrase from a complexity standpoint as a move to chaos versus a move to order. Thus regarding our world as existing generally at "edge-of-chaos" explains to some extent the resistance to questions and the attachment to answers -- people fear the unknown and want to move back into the static safety of the womb...

The dynamic between question and answer is perhaps usefully to be understood in terms of a study by Orrin Klapp (Opening and Closing: strategies of information adaptation in society, 1978).

The archetypal WH-questions might also be understood as engendering a form of "cognitive soundscape" -- giving a distinctive feel to the questions "who am I", "how am I", etc (see metaphor of "trumpeting angels" below). This metaphor can be extended by relating such distinct sounds to notes associated with the chakras -- and the possibility of these question-notes being played as on a wind instrument. Identity is then associated with the resulting melodies rather than with answers which the individual notes may evoke.

Alternative framings of identity

Conventional responses to "who am I" typically emphasize individualism -- even in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. These contrast with framings that might emphasize modes including identification with:

- a family
- a team (sport, work, military)
- a group (secret society, etc)
- a corporation, notably as in Japan
- a tribe
- a nation (cf General de Gaulle: "L'Etat c'est moi")

Other modes of identification also preclude simplistic conventional answers to "who am I" or "what am I". These include identification with:

- another, as in an archetypal love relationship
- a pet animal, possibly reciprocated through an identifiable smell
- a vehicle, whether automobile, boat or plane
- a metaphor. In Kenneth Boulding's words: "Our consciousness of the unity of the self in the middle of a vast complexity of images or material structures is at least a suitable metaphor for the unity of a group, organization, department, discipline, or science. If personification is only a metaphor, let us not despise metaphors - we might be one ourselves." (Ecodynamics; a new theory of societal evolution, 1978)
- a fashion or style (cf "clothes maketh man, or woman", "stylists maketh stars")
- etiquette and manners (cf "manners maketh man")
- a political ideology, especially of the revolutionary kind
- a religion or belief (cf Christian understanding of "Identity in Christ" as essential [more])
- an environment, as with identification of indigenous tribes with their ancestral lands (cf Darrell A Posey (Ed), Cultural and Spiritual Values of Biodiversity, 2000)
- the universe (cf Being the Universe -- a Metaphoric Frontier: Co-existent Immanence of Evolutionary Phases, 1999)

Psychoactive drugs have offered many experiences of alternative framings of identity.

Question projects

Search engines offering access to the World Wide Web, empower millions to ask questions that they had not been effectively empowered to ask prior to the 1990s. Many websites enable people to find answers to questions. As noted in the business press in 2005, search engines and portals are on the cutting edge of a new economy, leveraging cost-effective high performance computing networks to quickly provide Internet users with answers.
This answer economy is driven by the emergence of new architectures that enable enterprises to cost effectively leverage the aggregate computing power of servers [more].

The information explosion, and the associated information overload, may be framed as an explosion of answers in a situation in which the questions worth asking are not even the subject of significant classification and categorization. In fact questions may be understood as that which is implied by such answers. And yet this explosion of answers -- in the answer economy -- significantly fails to meet a need.

As noted elsewhere:

What is to be the status of answers formulated or favoured by minority groups or weakly organized large groups? There is an exploited "Third World" to be recognised in non-material terms, and current concern with cultural domination is a step in this direction.... For there to be a viable response to the current condition in the immediate future, the present answer economy must be transformed by reinterpretting it through a more seductive idea. (Development as Discontinuous Societal Learning: Cyclic transformation of the global answer economy, 1982)

The degree of relationship or tension between questions and answers is a continuing theme of debate, notably in both philosophy and information science. In his conclusion to a discussion of the epistemological foundations of information science, Rafael Capurro (Epistemology and Information Science, 1985) notes:

Marvin Minsky... considers the modern theories of intelligence to be moving away from traditional attempts in Psychology and Artificial Intelligence trying to represent knowledge as a collection of separate fragments. A key issue in the new theories of intelligence is, according to Minsky, the concept of frame, which he defines as a "data structure for representing a stereotyped situation"... Minsky sees this frame concept in the tradition of Kuhn's paradigms: such a data-structure can be "a collection of questions to be asked about a hypothetical situation" ....

Recently a number of interesting initiatives have emphasized the significance of questions rather than the responses to them. These include:

- **World Question Center** (of the Edge Foundation) asks the eminent each year a single question. On the occasion of the 5th Annual Edge Question (2002) it was: "What is your question? Why?" This was considered to reflect the spirit of the Edge motto: "To arrive at the edge of the world's knowledge, seek out the most complex and sophisticated minds, put them in a room together, and have them ask each other the questions they are asking themselves".

- **Wondir** strives to be a simple yet effective way for people with an information need to ask a question and get a good answer from those sources who are out there, ready to help. (Question Board)

- **Dropping Knowledge** is an international effort to promote the practice of asking questions. "Why questions? Because we believe in their power to challenge fundamentalism and hopelessness and accelerate action-driven solutions".

- **Union of International Associations** has generated over one million questions from its online databases on world problems, strategies, and values

Such projects point to the need to respond to the query usefully formulated by James Jaeger ([The Questions of Existence](https://www.edge.org/qa/qa_1996-05.html)):

What are interrogatives? Questions, these very instruments of inquiry. Unfortunately, *Homo Sapiens* is so interested in answers that the primary tool he uses to arrive at answers, questions, is hardly analyzed at all... What is a question and how should we presume their purpose and effectiveness? Are interrogatives at all useful? Is there a replacement for interrogatives? Why does one have to use an interrogative to even analyze an interrogative?

As a response, Søren Bo Henriksen ([The Rejection of the Critical Mind, Spirituality in East and West, 1996, 9](https://www.edge.org/_archives/1996/9_1996_05.html)) emphasizes a particularly characteristic human quality:

The critical mind, the state of being critical, is fundamental to man, both psychically and culturally. *To-be-critical* is a distinguishing feature of human conscious life. Indeed, the social and cultural development is precisely a product of the fact that we as adults still possess the same basic need to wonder and ask such questions as: Why this? Why that? Our use of interrogatives such as who, what, where, why, and so on often result in a state of reflection, judgment, i.e. to act critically.

The merit of focusing on questions is that it shifts the centre of gravity to a more fundamental, existential level -- a ground of higher dimensionality from which answers may be sought. In this sense questions are of higher dimensionality than answers -- especially when new answers may be given to the same question in the future. In this sense there is merit in exploring questions as strange attractors ([Human Values as Strange Attractors: Coevolution of classes of governance principles, 1993](https://www.edge.org/qa/qa_1993.html)).
Theology of questions

Theology has been valued for the kinds of questions it raises -- especially about that which is held to be beyond human comprehension. It could be argued that religion seeks to eliminate existential questions by providing absolute answers -- God as the answer -- as a final solution to humanity's condition. An implication is that such answers should be accepted unquestioningly -- or risk branding as an unbeliever. The question to which this condition gives rise concerns the adequacy of understanding of the extant answers offered by religion -- in the light of the 40 religiously inspired conflicts around the world at this time.

Religions and their interpreters may of course differ on this.

**Judaism**: In this case, as exemplified by Mordechai Gafni ([On the Commandment to Question, Azure: Deptment of Jewish Zionist Education, Summer 5756 / 1996](#)): 

> The quest for a common spiritual language for Israeli society requires recognizing that questioning God is not a sign of anti-religion, but the peak of Jewish spirituality.... The classic understanding -- or rather, misunderstanding -- of the relationship between questions and answers in religious life is perhaps best expressed in the old adage, 'For the believer, no proof is necessary; for the non-believer, no proof will suffice.'... To have unwavering answers, on the other hand, is viewed as the epitome of the religious position. Yet on consideration, it becomes apparent that this understanding of the relationship between questions and answers is a caricature of religious truth, and a distortion of the Jewish sources.... To be wise is not to arrive at a place of no questions. A place of no questions is the lowest level.... To be wise is to know how to question from a place of deep relationship.

This understanding of Judaism is echoed by several authors:

- Stephen Fried ([The New Rabbi: A Congregation Searches for Its Leader, 2002](#)): "While its different branches have slightly different theology and observance, Judaism does not dictate belief. Its timeless appeal is as a religion of questions, not answers". [more]
- Chief Rabbi Professor Jonathan Sacks ([Credo, The Times, May 1999](#)): "Judaism is a religion of questions. The greatest prophets asked questions of God. The Book of Job, the most searching of all explorations of human suffering, is a book of questions asked by man, to which God replies with a string of questions of His own".

The fundamental role of interrogatives to Judaism is the theme of a study by Kenneth M. Craig, Jr. ([Asking for Rhetoric: the Hebrew Bible's protean interrogative, 2005](#)) who asks: "What is a question?" He describes a question as 'a special literary phenomenon. A question is an opening that seeks to be closed, and its rhetorical play derives from how it disposes its energies: how it invites opening, how it imposes closure'. He demonstrates the nuanced and multifaceted ways in which the Hebrew Bible's interrogatives function to advance the Bible's literary and ideological goals.

Judaism is notable in that in its annual family celebration of the [Passover Seder](#), dating back over 3,400 years, four questions ([Mah Nishtanah](#)) are asked of the family by the youngest child who is able to do so. The answers are however known to others, but the basis of whatever wisdom there is in the meaning-purpose-significance etc of what Judaism is considered to be is acquired through the gate of questions. Each of the 4 questions raises a different issue of the what and why of redemption and salvation.

**Christianity**: From a Christian perspective, Hubert L. Simpson ([The Quenching Question, 1925](#)) comments:

> On the whole, however, it is good to keep asking questions, and it is highly important that people should always feel that they have the right to ask questions..... In no sphere of human thought and activity is this maxim more necessary of application than in the realm of religious experience.... the Church which asks no questions and permits none to be asked is preparing the way either for catastrophe or for stagnation.... If other questions are burning questions, this is the great quenching question. It silences all others, for it is itself the answer to everything. We all think that we have the right to make certain demands of Almighty God. We are ready with many questions, questions with a touch of complaint in them, with a note of self-excuse, with more than a hint of self-satisfaction. God is ready with His answer: "What think ye of Christ?" That is His Word, His last word. And silence falls at once upon all the questioners. After that, as we read, "no one ventured to ask Him any more questions." (Matthew 22:46)

Unitarian Christians also stress the role of questions. While they accept many of the traditional church teachings, they believe that no doctrine is too sacred to be questioned. Their faith is 'a religion of questions and not answers'. [more]

Questions have a central role to play in parables, as noted by Peter Rhea Jones ([Parables, Holman Bible Dictionary, 1991](#)): 

> Attention to parable form also brings up the prominence of the question format, the refusal parables, and the place of direct discourse. Jesus intended to involve His hearers, and so He constructed many parables that amount to one big question. The parable of the servant and his wages moves by means of two questions ([Luke 17:7-10](#)). The parable of the unjust steward ([Luke 16:1-8](#)) includes four questions. These interrogatives within parables often define a dilemma ([Luke 12:20, Mark 12:9](#)) or call for an agreeing nod in one area of life that carries over to another.

**Islam**: In an extract from his writings, Anwar Shakh ([Memorable Writings, IslamiReview.com, 2004](#)) offers the following insights from an Islamic perspective:
Knowledge is the offspring of ignorance as existence is the child of nothingness.... Again, knowledge usually comes into being through curiosity which is represented by such inquisitive words as "how, why, what, where, when" etc. and many other interrogative forms. Such interrogatives are ambassadors of ignorance, yet they are the tools of enquiry leading to knowledge. If we know the answers we shall not use these words and other interrogative forms.

The provisional nature of "answers" to theological questions has been stressed by Nawab Sir Amin Jung Bahadur (Notes on Islam, 1922):

Now all thinking men of all ages of history have ever tried to understand Nature as a whole and to answer regarding her three important questions represented by three interrogatives... Broadly speaking, I may say that science (within its various departments called "Sciences") tries to answer the first question what, the question of as to facts of Nature. Philosophy tries to answer with the second question how, the question as to the explanation of Nature. Religion or Theology (which includes highest Poetry) tries to answer the third and last question why, the question as to the reason of Nature.... I have said that Science, Philosophy or Religion "tries to answer" and not "answers," because the answer of any of them can never be final or immutable. None of them can ever reach finality. As the experience of mankind grows continuously, the new acts or new facts or new phases of old facts are discovered in the course of time. Just as men have to adapt or adjust themselves to new facts (or to changes in old facts) or else die; so men's Science, Philosophy, and Theology have to adjust themselves to new facts or else become empty nothing.

**Buddhism:** One commentator on Buddhism argues:

Other religions are full of answers, Buddhism is a religion of questions. Other religions claim to be an end, Buddhism is a path... The way of Buddhism... is to realize that all things in this world are evanescent and all the things we think are all-important are really illusionary. [more]

In the form of Zen, Buddhism clearly accords a special place to questions through the use of koans to challenge and reframe existing restrictive patterns of thinking. The classical Zen sequence of ox-herding images exemplifies the stages of spiritual exploration [more | more | more]. Such journeys might be understood as 9 ways of answering the question "who am I". All of them are partial and problematic. Each offers something to cling to -- a clinging which can inhibit further insight. All of the journeys are cyclic -- returning to the point of origin so classically indicated by the poet T S Eliot:

"We shall not cease from exploration, And the end of all our exploring, Will be to arrive where we started, And know the place for the first time" (Little Gidding, 1943).

**Interfaith dialogue -- through question or answer:** For the different religions, and especially for their practitioners, much depends on the certainty with which they relate to any answer. To what extent is the answer to existential religious questions "known" -- especially in ways that definitively exclude other, or subsequent, forms of knowing? To what extent is the challenge one of life-long learning without any emphasis on definitive closure that may later be discovered to have been premature? (Enhancing the Quality of Knowing through Integration of East-West metaphors, 2000; Musings on Information of Higher Quality, 1996). To what extent is "unknowing" tolerable -- or to be tolerated in others?

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<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Concordance</strong></th>
<th><strong>(Simplistic) Frequency Count of &quot;Question&quot; relative to &quot;Answer&quot;</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Question</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bible (King James version)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>-- Old Testament (Christianity and Judaism)</td>
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<tr>
<td>-- New Testament (Christianity)</td>
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<td>-- Word</td>
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<td>Islam Qur'an (Koran)</td>
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Given the claimed central role of questions by many religions, is religious conflict to be understood as conflict between questions or between answers? What, for example, is the status of each in the Middle East conflict sustained by interpretations of Judaism and Islam...
-- and Christianity? Do the parties meet in a cycle of violence with regard to their respective answers, their respective questions, or is the cycle of violence to be understood as a pattern of question and answer in which both are complicit? Is the new wall constructed by Israel an "answer" to the "question" posed by Palestinian suicide bombers? Is the challenge for religions that the questions with which they identify are to be understood as nested within answers that go unquestioned? Or is it the answers that are nested within questions that are readily forgotten? Consequently, is the much debated "clash of civilizations" to be understood as a "clash of questions" or a "clash of answers"?

The nature of such "nesting" is clarified in a comment from a holistic mathematics perspective by Peter Collins (private communication):

Obviously from a linear perspective - where polar opposites are clearly separated - question and answer are seen in detached terms with definite type objective answers expected from questions posed by the subjective observer. And we see this somewhat closed approach to truth especially in the conventional scientific and mathematical approaches.

However at subtler levels of understanding (associated with advanced spiritual awareness) the relationship as between question and answer becomes more circular where within every partial answer (with a merely relative validity) is born a more refined question (with again a merely limited contingent answer).

Ultimately of course - in the union of pure spiritual awareness - question and answer are likewise fully united with the pure desire for spiritual meaning (as question) now inseparable from the equally (pure) spiritual experience of such meaning (as answer).

However in the realm of phenomena in dynamic interactive terms, only limited questions - with respect to true holistic meaning - can be asked, which in turn are necessarily associated with limited answers. However this growing appreciation of phenomenal limitation is still vitally necessary as a preparation for the experience of what is absolute in spiritual terms.

One way of looking at the gradual unfolding stages of development would be in terms of unanswered questions arising from earlier stages. So the very attempt to answer the questions (posed in terms of the understanding an earlier stage) inevitably raises new questions requiring progression to a more advanced stage in search of appropriate answers. Indeed with the ultimate attainment of true spiritual union all these stages themselves are seen as merely relative phenomenal expressions of such absolute meaning. Though in terms of linear stages of (conventional) scientific appreciation, questions are posed in the expectation of corresponding answers, this is not strictly true at the "higher" stages of spiritual development.

Indeed in the Christian mystical tradition a sharp divide has often been drawn as between illuminative and purgative stages. The illuminative in this context largely provide answers (in terms of spiritual meaning). However the purgative largely pose deeper questions (which can remain unanswered for some considerable period of time). This is especially true in terms of the Dark Night of the Soul (i.e. dark night of the spirit) which leads to extreme existential anguish in the profound desire for a spiritual meaning (which remains unanswered in actual experience). [cf An Integral Mathematical Stage Model of Perspectives]

God as a question?: Perhaps the more fundamental theological question could be framed as: Is God a question or an answer -- both or neither? In settings providing for oracular communication with divinity, why is it that the communication may take the form of a puzzling pattern of allusions, even a riddle? Is the cognitive challenge to be understood in terms of the existential quality of questions?

"In the beginning was the Word
and the Word was with God
and the Word was God" (John 1:1)

-- but was the Word a question?

If indeed "man" was made in the image of God, should "he" then be understood as a question? Is it indeed a question that "man" most fundamentally shares with God? Did God put "man" on Earth to explore certainty, rather than uncertainty? Is the dynamic between Adam and Eve to be understood in terms of that between question and answer -- with Satan exemplifying doubt and uncertainty? Is the struggle between questions and answers to be compared with the archetypal struggle between good and evil?

With respect to "God as question":

- Kenneth W. Phifer (Coping with God, 2001) offers the reflection: "If God is not present, if God is absent, if God is silent, where else is it possible to seek God except in the silence and the absence. God as question will appear there very visibly, very actively, very engaged. One way to cope with God the Question is in silence. A second way is in appreciation... God as Question can bring out the best in us, even in awful situations. As long as is what we do, we are coping well with God."

- Mark W. Speeks (The Spirit of Anglicanism): "What we do, therefore, is seek to always ask questions without expecting answers. The Roman Catholic theologian Karl Rahner (1997) described God as 'the primordial ground and abyss of all reality' and as 'ineffable darkness'. He concluded that with the insight that 'revelation... is really the presence of God as question, not as answer'. Anglicanism concerns itself with the presence of God as a question".

Earlier, Karl Rahner (Grace in Freedom, 1969) responded to the case of "the so-called believer who regards God as a question which he has long settled to his own satisfaction":

Precisely this is why "God" is not just any word, but the word, in which language -- that is the self-statement of world and existence -- apprehends itself in its ground.... The God of the philosophers is no "Father", but the incomprehensible ground of all reality which escapes every comprehensive notion because he is a radical mystery. This is always only the beyond, the
inaccessibly distant horizon bounding the small sphere we are able to measure. He certainly exists for us also in this way, as the unanswered question that makes possible any answerable one, as the distance which makes room for our never-ending journey in thought and deed.

As noted by Joas Adiprsetya (Karl Rahner, 2005):

For Rahner the fact that Christianity can be the answer requires that we do theology. Moreover, the encounter between the question and the answer is made possible by understanding God's revelation as the 'point of mediation' between both [Rahner, 1978]. To some extent, Rahner's approach is similar to Tillich's method of correlation, which interrelates 'existential questions and theological answers in mutual interdependence' [Paul Tillich, Systematic Theology: Vol. I: Reason and Revelation -- Being and God, 1950] [more]. Yet, as Fiorenza suggests, the difference between them is that of 'a Catholic sacramental vision of the world as graced … and a Lutheran vision that is sensitive to the ambiguities and sinfulness of the human condition' [In: James C. Livingstone, et al. Modern Christian Theology. Vol. II: The Twentieth Century, 2000].

Living in the question can seem counterintuitive to anyone who expects and even demands answers. Our society highly values people who are good at analyzing and figuring things out. Science has made a religion of it.... We should allow for the growth that comes from living with a question without requiring an answer.

Tom Gilbert (Living in the Question, July 2004)

Seven dimensional questioning

It is an interesting challenge to identify a structure that could fruitfully hold and interrelate the seven WH-questions in a manner that allowed for its reconfiguration under different circumstances. One such candidate is the cuboctahedron fundamental to the explorations of R Buckminster Fuller (Synergetics: Explorations in the Geometry of Thinking, 1975) as the vector equilibrium. This structure is especially significant because of its unusual flexibility and the variety of transformations it allows (cf Vector Equilibrium and its Transformation Pathways, 1980).

The structure has:

- 8 triangular-shaped faces on 4 axes -- suggestive mnemonic supports for the when-question, the where-question, the which-question, and the how-question.
- 6 square-shaped faces on 3 axes -- suggestive mnemonic supports for the what-question, the who-question and the why-question.

Together these seven axes offer a symbolic integration of Revelation's "trumpeting angels" (see below).

Question symbolism and metaphor

"Question", ironically, can be understood as "quest-I-on" as an indication of a learning journey in which one is engaged -- a quest. A "vision quest" can be understood as the quest for an answer in the form of a vision. As such it is a journey to a form of closure -- although typically the process of journeying may be recognized as a process of advance-and-retract between origin and destination. And, to a far lesser degree, the process of questioning also.

The classical tale of questing is in the symbolism surrounding the Questing Beast -- vainly pursued in legendary Arthurian tales by King Pelinore. In the version of T H White (Once and Future King, 1958) the only trace of its passage are its excreted "fewmets" found occasionally by the half-crazed knight. The Questing Beast has however been considered to be a misunderstood creature of more profound significance.

The "heavenly destination", as the ultimate goal of every quest, may then be understood as the place of fundamental questioning -- and as such consistent with what is framed as divine judgement associated with such proximity. As suggested above, such a place may be encountered through seven lesser or secondary questions -- the seven WH-questions -- effectively guardians of the ultimate question. To the extent that these questions are indeed formulated as distinct sounds (or waveforms), creating a soundscape, it is tempting to associate them with the role of the seven trumpeting angels (Revelation, 8) [more]

Such a guarded place of ultimate questioning or uncertainty could be said to be entered by a "gateless passage" or "gateless barrier" as presented in a set of classic Zen koans more commonly translated as the Gateless Gate (cf Comments on the Mumonkoan, 1246). The contemplative view from such a perspective is indicated by the isolated and prominently placed symbolic monumental arches characteristic of ancient China that are neither entry nor exit -- through which the wind blows, nowhere and everywhere. The form is structurally echoed in the I Ching (hexagram #20) -- with the image: "The wind blows over the earth; the image of contemplation" [more].

The form is also echoed in the two pillars of Boaz and Jachin favoured in the symbolism of freemasonry dating from those of Egyptian temples [more]. Curiously it is echoed in its form in the mathematical symbol π (Pi), most closely associated with the circle -- itself the classic symbol of Sunyata (cf Dean Brown and Wenden Wiegand, Law of Nothingness, 2003: "The beginning of everything and the end of everything is the void"). Sunyata has long been represented in China by a flat jade disc with a circular hole in the centre (bi) -- symbolic of heaven. Such "gateless gates" have now acquired widespread imaginative currency as "stargates" through spacetime wormholes.
The cognitive challenge is the nature of the void through which the "cognitive wind" so freely blows. A classic description by Lao Tzu (Tao Te Ching) is as follows:

Thirty spokes share the wheel's hub;  
It is the centre hole that makes it useful.  
Shape clay into a vessel;  
It is the space within that makes it useful.  
Cut doors and windows for a room;  
It is the holes which make it useful.  
Therefore profit comes from what is there;  
Usefulness from what is not there.

A modern structural representation of the "spokes" of the "wheel" in a three-dimensional variant, with the "spokes" as "polarities", is as follows:

![A tensegrity structure, illustrating rigid polarities with flexible associative links](click image for animated version with VRML browser)  
[and see others by Bob Burkhardt]

Such a structure might also be understood as a form of wind harp. It is characterized by dynamic stability, constantly seeking equilibrium in response to destabilization. It is useful as an ordering of a set of strategic dilemmas -- and the associated interplay between questions and answers. Whether questions are associated with strings and answers with the rigid elements, or the reverse, may also be a useful question (cf Configuring Globally and Contending Locally: shaping the global network of local bargains, 1992; Configuring Conceptual Polarities in Questing: metaphoric pointers to self-reflexive coherence, 2004).

As noted by Chris Lucas (personal communication):

In structural terms, the question is a push, divergent, repulsion, discontinuous compression (mutation?) or need; and the answer is a pull, convergent, attraction, continuous tension (metabolism?) or action. As Buckminster Fuller put it, the two are complements, we need both, they are win-win. So I am both question and answer, in balance, at the only stable point -- edge-of-chaos, the human and social tensegrities. A term used by Kenneth Snelson "prestressed" certainly seems to sum up well our human condition, and as the tension is distributed across all society members this may explain why it is so difficult to perturb it for the better -- it is a self-stabilising structural attractor. The 7 WH types each try to reduce the world to one dimension, so perhaps we need a question word that does not do this?

**Problem vs (Re)solution?**

There is a widespread process whereby "questions" are reframed as "problems" -- to which "solutions" provide the "answer". Within this framing "problems" are entirely unwelcome and need to be overcome or circumvented. They are framed as "negative" -- whereas solutions are "positive" (cf Being Positive Avoiding Negativity: management challenge -- positive vs negative, 2005). The underlying questions are to be avoided (cf Question Avoidance, Evasion, Aversion and Phobia: why we are unable to escape from traps, 2006). This attitude may be extended to the major policy questions underlying the thousands of "world problems" perceived by some (cf Encyclopedia of World Problems and Human Potential). It is only in disciplines such as mathematics and engineering that "problems" are normally framed as a welcome challenge to creativity and ingenuity -- pragmatically accepting that any "solutions" may be provisional and inadequate. Some of their most creative practitioners may voluntarily identify themselves with a "problem" -- as their life's works.

Curiously, particular people are readily framed as being a "problem", especially because of their disruptive behaviour. Those who signal the existence of "problems" may also be labelled as "problems" -- notably in the extreme case of whistleblowers. There is little effort to explore the challenging question that such people constitute for their environment. That question is a "problem" for which a "solution" is necessary as soon as possible -- even one involving "extreme prejudice".

The creative arts, through which "stories" are told, focus on the transformation of "problem" to "resolution". Many folk tales are based on this. A tension or discontinuity is first acknowledged which the tale then proceeds to resolve. In contrast to the world of policy, it is the process of transformation that is of interest rather than the outcome. But, again, the original question impels attention towards the solution -- avoiding the question itself and the challenge of how to live in the question (cf Thinking in Terror: Refocusing the interreligious challenge from "Thinking after Terror", 2005).
In endeavouring to focus on "solutions" to "problems", the policy world is confronted by its problematic, if not questionable, ability to reconfigure its solution capacity -- as expressed formally in "resolutions". This suggests that governance finds itself continually faced with the inadequacy of its past "solutions" and the need to "resolve" them -- by calling on new levels of "resolve". Here lies the challenge of the so-called political will to change. For the individual, any "resolution" then becomes a matter of the controversial questions relating to the will-to-act and to intentionality, intrinsic or otherwise (cf Pär Sundström, Consciousness and Intentionality of Action, 1998) [more].

There is a further irony to the manner in which "questions" may be reframed as "issues" in any policy debate -- given that "issue" has the significance of "way out". Frequently the effort is made -- as with "problems" -- to eliminate the "issue", thus effectively eliminating consideration of what may be a "way out".

For an individual, perversely defined as a "problem", or possibly as an "issue", the challenge is how to live the "question" implied by the discontinuity with an environment that prefers seamless "solutions" and "answers" and the avoidance or elimination of "issues".

Conclusion: a pattern of misunderstanding?

Is the focus on "answer", rather than on "question", indicative of a pattern of similar misunderstanding that is locking humanity into constrained responses to its challenges?

Consider some other potential candidates exemplifying this pattern:

- "fine" vs "de-fine": The quality associated with "fine" is much appreciated and sought after. In practice however efforts to achieve this emphasize a need to "de-fine". Is it possible that the very act of "defining" precludes access to important dimensions of that which is "fine"? The ambiguity is highlighted by any effort to "re-fine".

- "veloping" vs "de-veloping": The social project of "development" that has been promoted and implemented in every possible way over the past half-century cannot be said to have met the needs of the increasing numbers placed in precarious condition by it. It is indeed questionable whether the United Nations Development Programme and the Earth Summit Agenda 21 promotion of "sustainable development" conceal inconsistencies that have been deliberately ignored by the economic logic of development -- most recently under the banner of globalization through the good offices of the UN Global Compact. To what degree should the United Nations Development Programme be more correctly named as the United Nations Developers' Programme? If de-veloping has proven to be so problematic, perhaps there is a case for exploring the process to which it is antithetical, namely "veloping" -- deriving from "wrap up" (cf Veloping: the Art of Sustaining Significance, 1997).

- "mean-ing" vs "mean-ness": Much focus is placed on the search for meaning. Questions are expected to be meaningful -- as are answers. And yet, curiously, there is a degree of distortion and narrowness associated with the root quality of "meaning", namely "mean-ness" -- and ambiguity as to the etymology. Does this suggest that what is conventionally understood as meaningful is unwittingly characterized by meanness -- perhaps a lack of generosity of spirit? Does meanness taint the modern pursuit of meaning -- as exemplified by the blinkered perspectives of those promoting particular ideologies, disciplines or religious beliefs?

- "under-standing" vs "over-standing": Great importance is attached to "understanding", notably both in asking a question and in receiving an answer. Under whom or what does the "standing" take place? Is this some implicit reference to an authority who "over-stands" in enabling the insight? Or does it suggest an inadequacy of "standing" -- an inability to stand or be "up-standing" -- a form of under-performance?

- "pro-fessor" vs "con-fessor": It is indeed professors who are most empowered and valued in their provision of insight in a complex society. Although curiously it is primarily to confessors that some go to alleviate the stressful impact on their sense of identity of the consequences of such insights in the guidance of society. And yet confessors, when formally empowered as religious or psychotherapeutic authorities, are susceptible to their own manipulation of that privilege. Should a case not be made for a "fessor" role -- intermediate between "professor" and "confessor"? This would emphasize the root derivation of admit or declare openly (fateri, in Latin).

- "business" vs "stillness": In a hyperactive world, "business" reigns supreme. For many it is "business" that can supply the "answers" to the challenging questions faced by the world -- if only it were allowed to act unfettered. Ironically no social project is now considered sustainable unless a viable "business model" is articulated in support of it. It is forgotten that "business" derives from "busy-ness" -- suggesting the need to keep in mind an alternative model based on "stillness" or "quiet-ness", or some notion suggesting non-material inspiration. What might a "quietness model" look like? Would it address issues that "business models" clearly fail to do? In a society faced with increasing degrees of apathy, is there no case for a viable "inspiration model" to complement any "business model" -- in society's vain pursuit of the Questing Beast of sustainable development? Is this indeed the concern of those promoting "spirit in business" (cf Business Spirit Journal) [more]?

- "ob-ject" vs "sub-ject" vs "pro-ject" vs "re-ject": These terms provide fundamental organizing principles for social activity and belief, whether individual or collective. They condition the manner in which questions can be framed, the acceptability of answers -- or their "rejection". And yet "subjective" questions are inadequately satisfied in practice by the "objective" answers of those onto whom authority has been "projected" -- or by the "projects" to which they ensure that available resources are massively allocated [more]. Perhaps, again, there is a case for exploring "ject" in other ways. Deriving from "iactus" (Latin) -- to throw -- perhaps greater insight could be obtained from more centered and self-reflexive disciplines such as the martial art of aikido?
In some of these cases, it may be objected that, as homonyms, words (or their roots) may legitimately have different significance, whether being pronounced (homophones) and/or spelt (homographs) the same. The challenge is that this readily reinforces a pattern of misunderstanding which is effectively institutionalized -- especially when the difference is so contrasting as to promote a degree of cognitive dissonance (cf Lynne Truss, *Eats, Shoots and Leaves*, 2003). With respect to "questions", agencies of governance, notably those of the United Nations, are indeed funded to provide answers rather than to identify strategically relevant new questions. Their constitutions emphasize answers, not questions, in defining their activities. As a consequence, do they themselves then become questionable -- as international question marks?

A similar phenomenon is to be found in the academic arena, as noted by Sally Humphreys (*Questions and Answers: Knowledge Production and the Functions of a University*, 2003):

Sally Humphreys launched off this session by calling attention to the fact that most universities have by now come to accept the idea that knowledge is constructed by disciplines. In other words, it is widely recognized that both questions and answers are shaped by disciplines and the disciplinary framework. This, she argued, is a relatively recent insight. She noted, however, a certain opposition between academics, on the one hand, and representatives of university administrations, on the other: while the former are more interested in raising new kinds of questions, the latter believe, together with most sponsors of academic activities, that universities should be funded because they solve society's problems and produce useful kinds of knowledge. She suggested, however, that it might be worthwhile to focus more on how questions are raised and how they influence the design of universities and (postgraduate) curricula. Let us for the moment think of the world, she urged, not as full of problems for which we do not have solutions, but rather as full of answers for which we do not yet have questions!

Emphasizing questions rather than answers opens the possibility of new frontiers for the human spirit. Together with the above examples, does this suggest that somehow planetary society has got locked into a dysfunctional mindset? Has humanity been going "the wrong way": de-fining, de-veloping, mean-ing, under-standing, pro-fessing, busi-ness and pro-jects? Will the future (or extra-terrestrials) come to judge the past on the quality of the questions asked -- or the quality of the answers?

Am I indeed question or answer? Or neither? Or both? Problem or (re)solution?

**References**


Anthony Judge:

- *Question Avoidance, Evasion, Aversion and Phobia: why we are unable to escape from traps*, 2006 [text]
- *Thinking in Terror: Refocusing the interreligious challenge from "Thinking after Terror",* 2005 [text]
- *New Paradigms via a Renewed Set of Prefixes: Dependence of international policy-making on an array of operational terms*, 2003 [text]
- *Being the Universe -- a Metaphoric Frontier: Co-existent Immanence of Evolutionary Phases*, 1999 [text]
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Ramana Maharshi. *Who Am I?* (Tr. by T. M. P. Mahadevan) [text]


Karl Rahner:


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