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The paradox of the question

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Abstract What is the best question to ask an omniscient being? The question is intriguing; is it also paradoxical? We discuss several versions of what Ned Markosian calls “the paradox of the question” and suggest solutions to each of those puzzles. We then offer some practical advice about what to do if you ever have the opportunity to query an omniscient being.

Keywords Paradox · Question · Markosian · Self-reference

Markosian (1997) tells the tale of some befuddled philosophers. The philosophers are approached by an angel who promises them a truthful answer to a question of their choosing. After much debate, the philosophers settle on the following:

(Q1) What is the ordered pair $\langle x, y \rangle$, where x = the best question to ask, and y = the answer to that question?¹

In response, the angel answers: “It is the ordered pair whose first member is the question you just asked me, and whose second member is this answer I am giving you” (1997, p. 96). That is, he offers the following answer:

(A1) $\langle Q1, A1 \rangle$

The problem is that Q1 seems like a very good question to ask, but A1 seems like a very bad answer to receive. Markosian asks: “What went wrong?” (p. 97).

¹ In Markosian’s paper, the question appears as Q4.

Before answering Markosian's question, we should first appreciate the paradoxical nature of his story.² Either Q1 is the best question or not. Suppose that it is. Then Q1 must have an answer, since a question without an answer would hardly be the best question to ask. Call the hypothetical answer X . If X is the answer to Q1, then it must be an ordered pair consisting of Q1 and itself. In other words, $X = \langle Q1, X \rangle$.³ Since X is clearly useless, Q1 is clearly not the best question to ask. Suppose instead that some other question, Q^* , is the best question. If one were to ask Q^* , then one would get the answer to the best question, call it A^* . However, if one were to ask Q1, one would learn that the answer to Q^* is A^* and, moreover, one would learn that Q^* is the best question to ask. Since asking Q1 would provide more information than asking Q^* , it would seem that Q1 is better than Q^* .⁴ So Q^* is not the best question after all. Moreover, since Q^* was an arbitrarily selected question and Q1 is better than Q^* , it would follow that Q1 is the best question after all. In short: If Q1 is the best question, then it is not. And if Q1 is not the best question, then it is. Call this puzzle *Markosian's Paradox*.

Markosian's Paradox admits of a simple solution, since his question carries a questionable presupposition. Q1 is a request for *the* best question (and its answer), which presupposes that there is one question which is better than all others.⁵ If this presupposition is false, then Q1 has no correct answer and Markosian's "angel" has made a mistake. The right response to Q1 would not be a direct answer, like A1, but a corrective, like:

(*) I'm sorry, there is no such ordered pair.

To put it another way: If we drop the assumption that there is a unique best question, then the claim *that Q1 is not the best question* does not imply *that some other question is*. And, in that case, the argument for the second horn of Markosian's Paradox fails.

Unfortunately, the paradox of the question is not so easily solved. As Sider (1997) points out, the puzzle can be reformulated by focusing on the following question:

(Q2) What is an ordered pair $\langle x, y \rangle$, where x = one of the best questions to ask, and y = the answer to that question?⁶

Q2 does not presuppose that there is one best question, yet it generates a paradox much like Markosian's (this is what Sider calls "the real paradox of the question").

² Here, we follow Sider (1997, p. 98).

³ As Sider (p. 98) points out, one might argue that there is no such ordered pair on the grounds that there are no self-membered sets. But it is unclear how this helps. If there cannot be such a set, then it is hard to see how there could be a truthful answer to Q1. And a question with no answer is no better than a question with a useless answer.

⁴ One might question this premise, since the quality of a question is presumably determined by the interests of the questioner. If philosophers have no interest in knowing which question is the best, then one might argue that Q1 is no better than Q^* . To avoid this complication, let us stipulate that this knowledge is in the best interests of the philosophers.

⁵ It also presupposes that there is a unique answer to the unique question, which is also questionable.

⁶ In Sider's paper, this question appears as Q5.

Here is the problem: Q2 is either one of the best questions to ask or not. Suppose that it is. It cannot be the only such question, since that would lead to the first horn of Markosian's Paradox. Thus, if Q2 is one of the best questions to ask, then there must be other questions also among the best, perhaps "first order" questions like "What is the solution to world hunger?" or "What is the correct normative theory?". "But now," Sider writes,

...the problem is that there seems to be a danger in asking [Q2]: one of [Q2]'s possible answers is a useless, unfounded ordered pair. Since first order questions lack this trouble, [Q2] would seem, after all, not to be one of the best questions. (1997, p. 100)

Suppose, then, that Q2 is not one of the best questions to ask. In that case, the angel will not answer Q2 with a useless ordered pair like

(A2) $\langle Q2, A2 \rangle$

Instead, he will provide an ordered pair where the first member is a question that is among the best questions to ask and the second member is the answer to that question. Q2 would thus give us the answer to one of the best questions, in which case Q2 would be just as good as that question itself. And any question that is just as good as one of the best questions is itself one of the best questions. Hence: If Q2 is one of the best questions, then it is not. And if Q2 is not one of the best questions, then it is. Call this puzzle *Sider's Paradox*.

Sider's Paradox does not presuppose that there is *one* best question to ask, but it does presuppose that there are *some* best questions to ask. We could therefore solve his puzzle by denying this presupposition. Sider recognizes this response, but writes that "...it is hard to believe that we could be forced to accept such a conclusion [that there are no best questions] by a priori means" (p. 100). This reply is somewhat puzzling, given that Sider has just endorsed an a priori argument that there is no unique best question. His argument was that we should deny the existence of such a question because that would solve Markosian's Paradox. The a priori argument that there are no best questions takes exactly the same form: We should deny the existence of such questions because that would solve Sider's Paradox.

We think this solution is sensible, but other answers are possible. Let us begin by noting that there are many ways of answering a single question. To illustrate, suppose that we ask the angel the following question:

(Q3) Who is the author of *Huckleberry Finn*?

The angel could provide a truthful answer to this question by uttering 'Mark Twain' or 'Samuel Clemens', but he could also respond with

(A3) My favorite author.

(if his favorite author is Mark Twain) or

(A4) Al.

(if he introduces 'Al' as a proper name for Mark Twain). And, of course, there is the perfectly pedantic reply:

(A5) The author of *Huckleberry Finn*.

These examples illustrate the point that reasonable questions can be (truthfully) answered in unhelpful ways.

Of course, there are numerous ways to fill in the details of this point. Perhaps A3–A5 are unhelpful *answers* to Q3. Or perhaps it is just the *utterances* of those answers which are unhelpful. Or perhaps *both* the answers *and* their utterances that are unhelpful. And for that matter, it is an open issue whether all of these answers are *distinct* answers. For example, one might claim that ‘Mark Twain’, ‘Samuel Clemens’, and ‘Al’ would express the same proposition, relative to this context, and thus be different ways of giving the same answer. Fortunately, such issues are orthogonal to our purposes. For *however* answers are individuated, and *wherever* the angel’s potential unhelpfulness is located, the issue of what we should ask angel remains alive. Moreover, we shall argue for a certain question as the one to ask the angel, and the virtues of *that* question are independent of answer-individuation and the locus of the angel’s unhelpfulness. Such issues can therefore be set aside.

Let us, then, take on the general point that reasonable questions can be answered in unhelpful ways. With this point in mind, we return to Sider’s Paradox and the first horn of his dilemma. Sider argues that, if Q2 is one of the best questions, then it is not one of the best questions, since Q2 carries a “danger” that the other best questions lack: “...one of [its] possible answers is a useless, unfounded ordered pair” (p. 100).

This may be correct, but the “first-order” questions that Sider considers carry similar dangers. The question “What is the solution to world hunger?”, for instance, admits of the useless response “the solution to world hunger is the solution to world hunger”. If *all* questions carry this kind of risk, then Q2 is no worse off in this respect. Hence, we have not been given any reason for thinking that it is sub-optimal. Hence, the argument for the first horn of the dilemma fails.

We have suggested that there are at least two sensible solutions to Sider’s Paradox. First, one could block the second horn of his dilemma by denying the assumption that there are some best questions. Second, one can resist the first horn of the dilemma by denying that Q2 uniquely dangerous.

But even if Sider’s Paradox is solved, an interesting question remains: What should we ask the angel? Or: What is one of the best questions to ask (if indeed there are any)? Such questions may not be paradoxical, but we think they are interesting in their own right.

Sider reports that, if he were among the philosophers approached by the angel, he would ask the following:

(Q4) What is the true proposition (or one of the true propositions) that would be most beneficial for us to be told? (p. 101)

Q4 is a good question. If we ask Q4, we will be told one of the most beneficial propositions and, if the angel is being cooperative, he will tell us this proposition in one of the most helpful ways possible. That would be a good thing.

However, Scott and Scott (1999) suggest that Q4 does not go far enough. Why settle for *one* of the most beneficial truths? And why settle for only the *most*

beneficial truths? We should instead ask a question like the following, where C is a coding that assigns a number to each of the infinitely many questions that can be asked in English:

- (Q5) What is the sequence whose n th member is the answer to the question with code n according to C (or 'rhubarb' if n does not code an answerable question)? (p. 332)

Q5 is a great question. If we ask Q5, we will be asking for all of the answers to all of the questions that we could possibly ask. In doing so, we will presumably get the answer to Q4, and to many other questions as well.⁷

However, Varzi (2001) argues that Q5 is a dangerous question to ask, since it places no constraints on the order in which the relevant truths are presented. This is a potential shortcoming, since:

...among the true propositions there are an infinite number of pretty silly and useless ones, and if the angel's answer begins with an infinite series of those then we will never get to any of the good stuff in anyone's lifetime. (p. 253)

Moreover,

the order in which the angel lists the true propositions might be crucial to our survival, hence to the survival of our descendants. For instance, there might be a proposition such that, if we don't learn of its truth within the next year, we accidentally blow up the planet... but there is no guarantee that it is one of the propositions that we will learn from the angel's answer... in the next year. (p. 253)

To avoid these kinds of worries, Varzi suggests moving to something like the following, where R is the *more-beneficial-than* ordering defined over the set of relevant propositions, so that p precedes q under R just in case being told p before q would benefit us more than being told q before p :

- (Q6) What is the sequence, under the ordering R , of all the true propositions?⁸

Q6 is a fantastic question. Like Q5, it asks for all of the truths, but it also asks for all of the most beneficial truths right from the start. Q6 thereby avoids the dangers identified by Varzi.

Unfortunately, not even Q6 avoids all risks. In fact, all of the foregoing questions are undone by the following question: *What if the angel is feeling uncooperative?* Markosian's angel promises us a truthful response, but he does not promise to be helpful. Given this, the angel could answer Q6, for example, with

- (A6) It is the sequence I'm thinking of right now.

⁷ More carefully, the angel will *give* the answer to Q4; we might not *get* that answer, since we might not be around by the time the angel gets around to that particular truth.

⁸ Here we simplify Varzi's suggestion in various ways. Moreover, Q6 is not Varzi's final answer to the question of which question to ask. Fortunately, we can ignore these complications since the objection that we raise below applies to all of the questions that Varzi considers.

(if the angel is then thinking about the sequence, under the ordering *R*, of all the true propositions) or

(A7) Bill.

(if the angel has introduced 'Bill' as a proper name for the sequence in question) or even

(A8) The sequence, under the ordering *R*, of all the true propositions.

(if the angel wants to be blatantly uncooperative). The sequence, under the ordering *R*, of all the true propositions *is* the sequence, under the ordering *R*, of all the true propositions. The truth of that answer is guaranteed by the laws of logic, but those same laws ensure its triviality.

Of course, one might object that A6–A8 would not express answers to Q6, on the grounds that these replies would not remove any ignorance on the part of those asking the question. But that would be a mistake, since answers don't always remove ignorance. Sometimes an answer fails to remove ignorance because one's audience is stupid. And sometimes an answer fails to remove ignorance because one's audience already knows the answer. It is possible to answer a question from God, for example, even though God already knows the answer. So too, it is possible for the angel to answer Q6 with A8 even if we already know that answer in advance.

Alternatively, one might admit that questions like Q6 run the risk of receiving unhelpful answers, but respond that this danger is inescapable. Varzi, for example, notes that his question

...is based on the pragmatic presupposition that the angel will deliver her answer in a sensible way, and that is not so obvious. For one thing, as Sider has pointed out, one can always answer a question of the form 'What is the...?' by saying 'It is the....'. (p. 255)

If Varzi is right, then *all* questions can be answered unhelpfully. And if all questions carry this kind of risk, then Q6's vulnerability would not disqualify it from being among the best questions. Perhaps the best we can do is ask a question like Q6 and pray that the angel is in a helpful mood.

Or perhaps we can force the angel to play nice. The trick would be to frame our question so as to restrict the range of responses that would express true answers. In particular, we must rule out replies like A6–A8.

Here is one way *not* to do that:

(Q7) What is a helpful reply to Q6?

Q7 would prevent the honest angel from referring to an unhelpful reply to Q6, but it would not prevent him from giving an unhelpful reply to Q7. The angel could still respond with 'Claire', for example, where 'Claire' is a proper name for a helpful answer to Q6.

To avoid this sort of thing, we should make sure that the angel's response expresses a truth only if that response is helpful. And if we want to get the most out of our opportunity, we should make sure that the angel's response expresses a truth only if it is *maximally* helpful. As a first attempt to accomplish these goals, we

might try asking the following question, where a *maximally beneficial experience* is defined as one of the most beneficial experiences the angel could now provide us with by telling us something:

- (Q8) What is something such that, if you were to tell us something about it, that telling would provide us with a maximally beneficial experience?

The obvious advantage is that Q8 rules out responses like the following:

- (A9) The thing I'm thinking about right now.
 (A10) Darrel.
 (A11) One of the things such that, if I were to tell you something about it, that telling would provide you with a maximally beneficial experience.

Take, for example, A10. The angel could certainly introduce 'Darrel' as a proper name for something such that, if he were to tell us something about that thing, that telling would provide a maximally beneficial experience. But the honest angel could not offer this name as a response to Q8. For in that case he would be telling us something about *Darrel*, but that telling would not provide a maximally beneficial experience.

Here is a more expanded way of putting the same point. Suppose that the angel utters A10. Relative to the imagined context, this utterance would express the proposition that Darrel is one of the things such that, if the angel were to tell us something about it, that telling would provide us with a maximally beneficial experience. The standard semantics has it that the relevant counterfactual is true only if some world in which the angel tells us something about Darrel *and that telling provides us with a maximally beneficial experience* is closer to the actual world than is every world in which the angel tells us something about Darrel *and that telling does not provide us with a maximally beneficial experience*.⁹ The angel tells us something about Darrel in the *actual* world (for the angel actually tells us that Darrel is one of the things such that, if he were to tell us about it, that telling would provide us with a maximally beneficial experience). And no world is closer to the actual world than is the actual world itself. Hence, the angel's response expresses a truth only if it actually provides us with a maximally beneficial experience. But the angel's response—his utterance of A10—does not provide us with a maximally beneficial experience. Hence it does not express a truth. Hence the angel cannot offer it without breaking his promise. The same line of reasoning applies to all unhelpful responses, including A9 and A11. Hence, the honest angel will not offer these as answers to Q8.

What *will* the angel say in response to this question? That's a good question! Maybe the angel will provide us with a detailed strategy for ending world hunger or for solving the climate crisis. Or perhaps he will provide us with a maximally helpful list of tips for living a happy life. Or he might just start listing off all of the truths in a maximally beneficial way, starting with the most important truths first.

⁹ More carefully: the standard semantics entails as much given the plausible assumption that there is some world in which the angel tells us something about Darrel.

There is a less rosy possibility as well. Perhaps there is *nothing* such that, if the angel were to tell us something about it, that telling would provide us with a maximally beneficial experience. It is worth contrasting two sorts of scenarios in which this might be so.

First, the angel might be such that, *no matter what* he says, he says it unhelpfully.¹⁰ If this scenario were to obtain, then the honest angel would reply to Q10 unhelpfully, and in particular with an unhelpful corrective like

(**) I'm sorry, there is no such thing.

But notice that if this scenario were to obtain, then *every* question would elicit an unhelpful response from him. The fact that Q10 would elicit an unhelpful response in this scenario is therefore no mark against Q10.

However, there another sort of scenario in which there is nothing such that, if the angel were to tell us something about it, then that telling would provide us with a maximally beneficial experience. In this sort of scenario, the angel is not particularly inclined to say unhelpfully whatever he says. Rather, there is simply an unending sequence of things, each element of which is *both* such that the angel's telling us something about it would provide us with a more beneficial experience than would his telling us something about anything outside the sequence, *and* such that his telling us something about it would provide us with a more beneficial experience than would his telling us something about the preceding element. His tellings might get more and more beneficial all the way up, so to speak. In this sort of scenario, the honest angel would again reply to Q8 with an unhelpful corrective like (**).

It would be nice to avoid the risk of receiving unhelpful correctives from the angel, at least in those scenarios where it is possible to do so. This requires us to ask some question other than Q8. Nonetheless, Q8 seems to be on the right track, focusing as it does on the angel's telling of the answer as opposed to that answer itself, and trying as it does to require that telling to be helpful if it is truthful. What we need to find, then, is a question that retains what is right about Q8 while eliminating the risk of receiving (**) as an answer. Here is one attempt at such a question:

(Q9) What is something such that, if you were to tell us something about it, that telling would provide us with a maximally beneficial experience; or if there are no such things, then what is something such that, if you were to tell us something about it, that telling would provide us with a very very beneficial experience?

Q9 is better than Q8. For, on the hand, it brings us the same maximally beneficial experience as does Q8, *if there is* some maximally beneficial experience that we would get via the angel's telling us something about something. And, on the other hand, *if there is not* such an experience, but there is something such that if the angel were to tell us about it then that telling would provide us with a very very beneficial

¹⁰ This scenario is not very far-fetched. Several customer service representatives in New Jersey are actually like that.

experience, then Q9 will bring us that experience whereas Q8 will bring us an unhelpful corrective like (**). Q9 therefore brings us all the goods Q8 brings us, and more as well.

However, Q9 has two problems of its own. First of all, it is *not careful enough* about what the angel is prepared to offer. Just as Q9 brings us a very very beneficial experience when Q8 brings an unhelpful corrective like (**), there are questions that bring us very beneficial experiences when Q9 brings its own unhelpful correctives. For suppose that there is nothing such that if the angel were to tell us something about it, then that telling would provide us with a very very beneficial experience, but that there is something such that if the angel were to tell us something about it, then that telling would provide us with a very beneficial experience. In this sort of scenario, the honest angel would respond to Q9 with (**), even though there are other similar questions, questions simply replacing Q9's "very very" with "very", that would not receive such unhelpful replies.

Moreover, in addition to being *not careful enough* about what the angel is prepared to offer, Q9 is also *too careful* about what the angel is prepared to offer. For perhaps there is something such that, if the angel were to tell us something about it, then that telling would provide us with a very very very beneficial experience. If there is some such thing, then by asking Q9 we would forego the opportunity to hear about it, and we would be left with an experience that is merely very very beneficial, as opposed to being very very very beneficial.

Q9 is therefore both too careful, and not careful enough, about what the angel is prepared to offer. We believe, however, that it is possible to eliminate these shortcomings, or at least to dramatically diminish them.

Let " v_1 beneficial" mean "very beneficial", " v_2 beneficial" mean "very very beneficial", and so on. Let x be the factorial of the largest natural number anyone has heretofore referred to. Using this shorthand, we might ask

(Q10): What is something such that, if you were to tell us something about it, that telling would provide us with a maximally beneficial experience;
 or if there are no such things,
 then what is something such that, if you were to tell us something about it, that telling would provide us with an experience that is more beneficial than a v_x beneficial experience;
 or if there are none of those things as well as there being no things such that if you were to tell us about them then that telling would provide us with a maximally beneficial experience,
 then what is something such that, if you were to tell us something about it, that telling would provide us with a v_n beneficial experience, where n is the largest natural number y such that (i) $y \leq x$, and (ii) there is something such that if you were to tell us something about it, then that telling would provide us with a v_y beneficial experience.

Q10 is quite a mouthful. But it is a better question than either Q8 or Q9. And it is actually the question we would ask the angel, if he were here today. Let us describe three of its virtues.

The first virtue of Q10 is an assurance that the honest angel will provide us with a maximally beneficial experience, *if* there is something such that by telling us something about it he would do as much. Q10 therefore gives us everything Q8 gives us.

The second virtue of Q10 is an assurance that, if the honest angel would not via any tellings provide us with a maximally beneficial experience, then we will nonetheless get an experience that is more-than- v_x beneficial (if he would give us one by telling us something), or at least v_x beneficial (if he would give us such an experience, but not a more beneficial one, by telling us something about something). Such experiences would be really amazingly profoundly beneficial; words have a hard time capturing how beneficial they would be. Q10 brings us these experiences in the scenarios where Q8 and Q9 bring us the unhelpful corrective (**). So, in addition to giving us everything Q8 and Q9 give us, Q10 gives us more as well.

The third virtue of Q10 is an assurance that, if the honest angel would not via any tellings provide us with an experience that is v_x beneficial (or more than v_x beneficial), then he will nonetheless provide us with an experience that is, among the ones he would provide us with by telling us something about something, among the most beneficial. This shows that Q10 eliminates the problem of being not careful enough about what the angel is prepared to offer.

Q10 also eliminates, or at least dramatically diminishes, the problem of being too careful about what the angel is prepared to offer. Let us explain why we think that Q10 either eliminates or dramatically diminishes this problem, as opposed to simply thinking that it eliminates it.

Instead of choosing x as we did above, we could have chosen a larger number, say the factorial of the factorial of the largest natural number anyone has heretofore referred to. On these grounds, it might be claimed that Q10 is too careful, indeed too careful in the same way Q9 is too careful, about what the angel is prepared to offer. Why ask Q10, as opposed to a similar question taking x to be an even larger number?

There is some force to this worry. But observe that if this worry amounts to a compelling objection to asking Q10, then it amounts to an equally compelling objection to asking *any* question having the form of Q10 but taking x to be an even larger number. From this observation, one might infer that Q10 has the wrong form entirely, and that we must look elsewhere in choosing what question to ask the angel. However, we are not inclined to draw this inference. For, as far as we can see, no other questions are even in the same league as Q10 and similar questions letting x be even larger. All the other questions we can think of are significantly inferior candidates for what to ask the angel.

Here, then, is the position we are in. There is a series of questions—call it the Q10 series—each element of which has the form of Q10, and each element of which takes x to be a particular natural number. For some of the elements of this series, x is small. For others, x is mind-blowingly huge. And, when x is mind-blowingly huge, the resulting questions are better to ask the angel than are any questions outside the series. But despite being better than any outside the series, each of these questions is *worse* than each of the (infinitely many) succeeding questions in the series.

When we find ourselves in this position, what should we ask the angel? It seems that there is no best question to ask him, and indeed that there are no best questions

to ask him. (This, by the way, is a position we should expect to find ourselves in, given our analysis of Sider's Paradox. As we argued, there are good grounds for thinking that there are no best questions—in particular, we can resolve Sider's Paradox by thinking as much.)

So, given that there are no best questions to ask the angel, and that some of the elements of the Q10 series are better than every question not in that series, what should we ask the angel? One view here is that there is no question we should ask the angel, because we are in something akin to a moral dilemma. According to this view, every question we might ask is a wrong question to ask; no matter what we ask, we will ask something we shouldn't.

This view may or may not be correct. But if it *is* correct, then Q10 nonetheless dramatically diminishes the problem of being too careful about what the angel is prepared to offer. For it dramatically increases the benefits of the most beneficial experience the angel might give us (if there is no maximally beneficial experience he could give us).

On the other hand, maybe it isn't the case that every question we might ask the angel is wrong. Perhaps it is the case that whenever a question sufficiently high in the Q10 series, it is not wrong to ask the angel that question. To be sure, for each of these questions, some other question is a little less careful (in just the right way) about what the angel is prepared to offer. But perhaps this is not a compelling criticism of the relevant questions, when those questions are sufficiently high in the series. Q10 as we stated it is surely very high in the series, for the factorial of the largest natural number heretofore referred to is a mind-blowingly huge number. If this is correct, then Q10 actually *eliminates* the problem of being too careful, instead of merely dramatically diminishing it.

We suspect that one of the two foregoing lines of thought is correct, but we aren't sure which one. That is why we think Q10 *either* eliminates *or* dramatically diminishes the problem of being too careful about what the angel is prepared to offer. And in any case, Q10 eliminates (as opposed to merely dramatically diminishing) the problem of being not careful enough about what the angel is prepared to offer.

We conclude that Q10 is a fine question to ask the angel. If he were here today, Q10 is what we would ask him.¹¹

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¹¹ We treat Q10 as a single (complex) question, rather than a complex of many simple questions. That choice might be challenged, but we doubt that this issue is central to the puzzle. On this point, see Sider (1997, p. 97).