

## Transcript: Philosophy VIDEO 1.3 – Q Definition and Origin, Part 2: Where To Start?

In the last video I asked you what a question is, and I tried to make it puzzling by suggesting you maybe go watch a YouTube clip from Terrence Malick.

See the history of the universe, from the Big Bang to the extinction of the dinosaurs. Listen to the beautiful soundtrack choral music. Think: who—or what—asked the first question?

Or maybe Terrence Malick isn't for you. But you still long slow film sequences about the evolution of life on earth. Honestly I doubt that's possible.

But if it is, then you might consider another classic film, *2001: A Space Odyssey*, directed by Stanley Kubrick (1969).

I teach film as well as philosophy, by the way, and when I teach this Kubrick film I make the following clever observation. The really long opening sequence of the film shows us a troop of primitive proto-humans—ape-men—in a bleak, desert environment. Life is not good. They are driven from their water source by a rival troop. Then the science fiction thing happens.

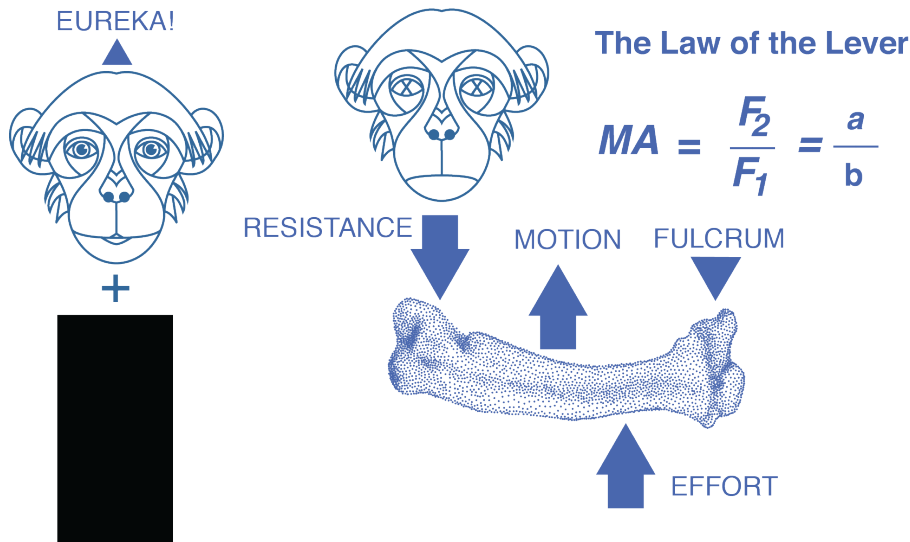
A weird black monolith appears out of nowhere, for no apparent reason. Smooth black tower. The ape-men freak out, of course; then they get curious and touch it. And it changes them somehow. Specifically, it transforms one of them into a mad science genius—for an ape-man value of mad science genius.

His brain doesn't erupt out of his forehead like Mojo Jojo on the *Powerpuff Girls*. Kubrick plays it more subtle than that. The ape-man is sitting there, moping, surrounded by the dry bones of dead animals. He picks up a jaw bone and starts absent-mindedly knocking at other bones. Suddenly, he gets excited.

Eureka! He's discovered the truth of Archimedes famous law of the lever.

More specifically, he's discovered that a bone in the hand, whacked against a resistant object or surface, is a highly efficient third-class lever!

Don't believe me? Just look: there's the formula! It's basically pure geometry.



OK, I'm kidding. Obviously the ape-man did not discover all that math jazz in one second flat. He had no mental representation of all that. He just thought: bone! smash!

So in the film we next get a lot of slo-mo smashing. And soon the troop, now armed, drives that other troop away and retakes the watering hole. Then there's a famous match-cut (which by today's CGI standards looks crude and clunky but looked good in 1969). The ape-man hurls his bone club into the air in triumph, it spins over and over and is suddenly replaced by an orbiting satellite. The implication is that this is surely the ape-man troop that evolves into smart old us—Man! Sorry, ladies, you too. Homo Sapiens. Even more specifically:

*homo sapiens sapiens!*

Yes, you read that right! That's us.

Hey, you know what's sort of funny. To become a philosophy professor, that's me, you need a Ph.D. in philosophy. And then you get a piece of paper that says you are a

Doctor of Philosophy In Philosophy

Kind of weird, huh? The other kids getting Ph.D.'s get pieces of paper that say things like Doctor of Philosophy in Physics, or Engineering, or English Literature. But philosophers? Doctor of Philosophy in Philosophy.

But if someone makes fun of you because your piece of paper says that funny, redundant-looking thing, here's what you say back. You say: well, according to at least some anthropologists, you're a member of the subspecies *homo sapiens sapiens*. If you are going to be the thinking human who thinks you might as well keep on going. Be the thinking human who thinks about philosophy in philosophy.

I did. I turned out alright.

OK, Seriously, the reason my Ph.D. said the redundant thing is that, once upon a time, there weren't separate departments in the university. Everyone around the place was just a ... philosopher. Lover of wisdom. Then the kids grow up, left home, started their own departments: physics, engineering, history, so forth. But there's still a philosophy department. So, in a sense, everyone who teaches in the university is still a philosopher, yet in a sense only I am—and my philosophy department colleagues.

And the reason we are *homo sapiens sapiens*—that redundant thing—is because we humans think we are so special and separate. And yet—

As Hamlet soliloquizes

*What a piece of work is a man!  
How noble in reason, how infinite in faculty!  
In form and moving how express and admirable!  
In action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god!  
The beauty of the world. The paragon of animals. And yet*

OK, that's enough out of you, Hamlet! The guy does rattle on.

Anthropologically, here's the deal. *Homo sapiens sapiens* denotes anatomically modern humans, as opposed to other branches of the human tree—other *homo sapiens* subspecies, that died off more than 10,000 years ago, but in some cases less than 100,000 years ago.

For the last 10,000 years we've been the only humans around. Makes us feel real special. But it wasn't always so. When we see other animals, we like to separate ourselves off on the basis of what goes on upstairs—our thinking. *Homo sapiens*. But when we find out that there used to be other humans, makes us different from them? We double down: we're the wise wise ones. It's like we awarded our species an honorary degree. Species of *sapiens* in *sapiens*.

OK, that was a lot of work to make my joke work. But I'm making a serious point. Is this honorary degree a mere matter of degree, or is it some difference in kind?

Let's go back to that Kubrick film. Hollywood ape-men will save me from getting tangled in actual anthropology controversies, while allowing me to make a conceptual point.

When we left our hero, the ape-man, he had just discovered leverage and clubbed another ape-man to death.

The joke in this famous scene, if I can call it a joke, is that we are totally used to super-geniuses and super-weapons in SF. But it's funny to think of the first hominid that used a club as a super-scientist. Likewise, we are used to cyborgs—hybrids of

flesh and technology! But everything's relative. In a sense, an ape with a bone club has built a cyborg arm for itself. In a sense you are a cyborg when you put on clothes in the morning. Still, it seems a bit silly to talk like that.

So why am I talking like that. Because a similar issue arises concerning questioning. I said this last video, I'm saying it again: in a sense we think of question-asking as a super-advanced thing. In a sense as a primitive thing. So which is it?

In the Kubrick scene the ape-man is asking questions in a new and special. By implication, this is what it means to be human! To ask questions in a new and special way.

The film presents all this as quite mysterious. The monolith, big symbol of mystery. It sticks out in the desert like a sore thumb, so the film is clearly saying: this new and special thing is also a big leap.

But is that right?

OK, I hope I've puzzled you. Now some answers.

Here's a definition sort of thing. I got it from a logician named Lennart Aqvist—but you can feel free to promptly forget that name.

**"A question is a command that the hearer cause the speaker to know the question's answer."**

Does that sound right?

Interestingly, this account is echoed in at least one translation of the Book of Job. Remember in the last video I said Malick's *The Tree of Life* starts with a quote from the Book of Job. After God asks Job "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?"—Job was nowhere, obviously—God continues:

"Cause me to know, if thou hast understanding." Other translations say 'tell me' or 'declare', but there is something nicely comprehensive about 'cause me to know', as a gloss on what questions call for.

To have the power of questioning is to have the power to cause people—maybe things, too—to cause you to know things.

And one last thing. This video and the last have been pretty big picture—even Hollywood big picture. Maybe you are thinking: Holbo obviously wanted to play Hamlet, but no one would cast him. And now we gotta watch the guy.

You could be right. But a nicer way to put it would be this:

I really wish we had an English professor, or a theater studies person, not to mention a physical anthropologist, on our teaching team. Starting in the next video, things are

going to start getting a bit more picky-picky. More analytic and scientific. That's ok. But it's not inherent in the topic. If you want to understand what asking questions is all about, go see Malick's *The Tree of Life*. Or *Hamlet*. It is quite likely that your views on religion, whatever they may be, may be relevant, although nobody specializing in religious studies is on the team either.

Like Hamlet says: "There are more things in heaven and earth, Holbo/ Than are dreamt of in your philosophy."

OK, he didn't say Holbo.

He said Horatio.

Meanwhile, back on earth, the best I can do is try to dream some things up in my philosophy. OK? So, once again: What is questioning?