

Transcript: Philosophy VIDEO 1.2 – Q Definition and Origin: Where To Start?

Questions! On we go.

The traditional philosophical thing to do next—that is, first—would be to talk to you about Socrates. You remember. He's one of the guys on the t-shirt I showed you in the previous video.

There's a good chance you've at least heard of the guy. If you haven't, he lived in ancient Athens. Socrates died in 399 BCE. And the reason he died was he was put to death. And the reason he was put to death was that he was seriously annoying. He wandered around town asking people questions. What is justice? What is holiness? What is virtue? What is ...



Starting to see a pattern? Yep, with this guy, that was totally the pattern.

And the reason this was annoying is that, annoyingly, people thought they knew the answers. But then they didn't know. Socrates was very skilled at the game of cross-examination. So his debate partner—interlocutor, victim—call it what you like, puts forward something like a general account or definition—of justice, holiness, virtue, etc.. And then Socrates shows that this general account has some bizarre, contradictory, unwelcome consequence. It can't be right.

Oh, and one more thing. Socrates has this thing he does where he plays dumb.

Gosh, by Zeus, I don't know what justice is! Can you tell me, good fellow citizen?

Very ironic, this guy.

It makes it all the more annoying when it turns out that, actually, the fellow citizen—who think he is so smart—is actually the dumb one.

And Socrates then gets to do this thing where he says his wisdom consists in knowing what he doesn't know.

In the land of the blind, the man who knows he is blind is king. Maybe.

How do we know this about Socrates? Did he write a big book or something? No. Plato did. He's the other guy from the t-shirt. Plato wrote what are called dialogues, purporting to present what Socrates was like, in person.

Some nice historical puzzles start there, but moving right along: since our topic today is Q—questioning, asking questions—it's like I'm set up to tee off on the ultimate Socratic question. Wouldn't it have been funny if Socrates had wandered around Athens, being a pest per usual, asking people 'what is a question?' while pretending not to know what a question is, even while asking the question!

That would have been super ironic, I hope you agree.

Fun fact. Our word 'irony' comes from a Greek word that means, basically 'lie'. You can see the legacy of Socrates in our very language. His fellow citizens were always accusing him of 'ironizing'—that is, being a big fat liar. But today we don't regard Socratic irony as lying exactly. But still, one may wonder:

Can you ask questions without even knowing what a question is? Babies do, seems like. Have you ever been around one of those things. They ask so many questions. Philosophers are just a species of big baby, according to some critics. If babies can ask questions, without really knowing what one is, it seems like Socrates go around town asking the question 'what is a question?' without obviously being a liar about not knowing what one is himself.

So let's do it. But I'll try not to be as snarky about it as Socrates would have been.

What is a question?

Maybe the thing you do now pause this video, open a fresh browser tab, Google "question definition", hit 'return'. then just read whatever Google says. Go ahead. Do it. No shame in taking the easy way. Honestly, if they'd had the internet in ancient Greece, maybe Socrates' fellow citizens would have done significantly better in warding off his weird attacks. Seriously.

But they don't pay me the big bucks at NUS to read out Google search results on camera.

But they do pay me, maybe, to point out that the very existence of Google is totally relevant to our topic—what is questioning.

The internet is the most transformative technological innovation of the last 50 years. It's either that or advances in modern computing generally. We'll get to that when we get to our module segment on computational thinking, by the way.

As I was saying, the internet is the biggest deal since the internal combustion engine—more about cars when we get to the engineering segment, maybe. Our

engineer is a car guy. (You see, we've got this module planned out. It's going to make sense.)

OK, the internet is a big deal. We all agree.

Now, a thought-experiment. Imagine an internet without Google. Yeah, yeah, you would use Bing. But that's not what I mean. Imagine that there's nothing like that. No search engine. No efficient protocols for requesting specific chunks of data and reliably getting them. Imagine a whole internet—vast ocean of info—and no way to access its contents except by staggering, manually, from hyperlink to link. Imagine that humans can only laboriously crawl across the vast datasphere like weary, feeble little info-ants. Getting from one end of the internet to the other would be like walking to the North Pole.

Now obviously that's silly. And incoherent. No one would build a whole internet like we've got with no way to access it via browsers and search engines. I'm not going to build a homepage, at least not like the one I've got, if only a few data neighbors can ever visit it. But I'm making a serious point by means of this admittedly slightly incoherent hypothetical. A point which I can put in question form.

What is a search engine? A thing for getting answers. That is, a thing of questions.

They could have called them question engines. You've got questions, Google's got answers.

Internal combustion engines revolutionized the human capacity to locomote, getting from point A to B through space.

The internet has revolutionized the human capacity to interrogate, thereby getting from point A to B in information space.

We call this the Information Age, but we could call it the Question Age.

I'm old enough to remember when there was no internet. But that's boring. Who wants to hear horror stories from old people about olden days?

Instead, let's think back to an even older days, the very first information technology revolution.

Who—or what—asked the first question?

The very first question. What was it like before? How did things change, after?

How do you even answer a question like that?

Unfortunately, my special effects budget is limited, but maybe you can go to YouTube and search for *The Tree of Life*, directed by Terrence Malick. It's a feature film from 2011. Critically acclaimed, won a lot of awards, stars Brad Pitt.

The film opens with a question, from the Hebrew Bible, from “The Book of Job”, which appears on the screen:

“Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? ... When the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy?” – Job: 38: 4, 7

This is God, answering a question with a question. Job has asked God ‘why?’ because Job’s life is a problem. Job suffers.

Next, in the film, we get 20 minutes in the life of a 1950’s Texas couple whose son has died, so they, like Job, are ask: Why?

Then—stay with me here—the film jumps from Texas in the 50’s to a magnificently-filmed, already very famous creation sequence.

Birth of the universe. Formation of the Milky Way. Cooling fires of a newly-formed earth. Oceans. Primitive life. More advanced life. Fish. Fish flopping on land. Dinosaurs. Meteor strike. Extinction. That’s another 15 minutes of film time.

Then we jump back to Texas in the 50’s.

I know, I know: what a way to tell a story. Some critics—and even more viewers—didn’t like it. More Brad Pitt, less Big Bang (the people said). Terrence Malick is maybe more a philosopher at heart than a Hollywood director? I think he is.

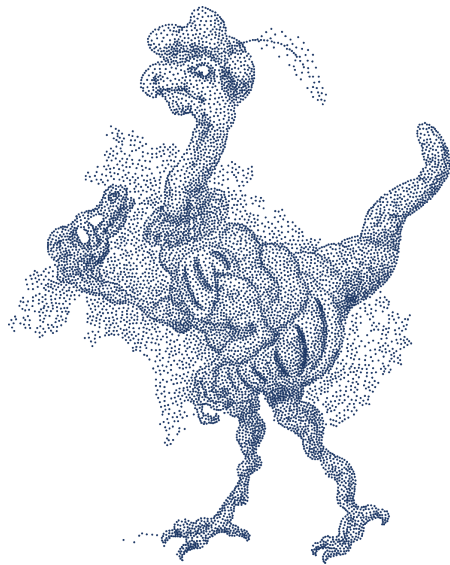
But here’s my question for you. Are there questions in the universe, from the birth of the universe to the death of the dinosaurs? I mean in our universe. In the real world (assuming the world is real and we aren’t trapped in the *Matrix*.) Malick’s film version of the history of the universe up to the death of the dinosaurs is just a way of making it all vivid. (If you are too lazy even to go to YouTube, you can just imagine it all, from the Big Bang to big meteor strike, in your head.)

The Book of Job says the stars sing. In the film there is all this beautiful antiphonal choral music in the sound track. Antiphonal music. That means call and response. Question and answer?

Does the first eye that opens ask the first question? Perception is about getting information. Is every glance of every eye a questioning glance? Or do you need more to make it a question. Maybe something a bit more ... Socratic? If every eye that looked knew what it didn’t know, and wanted to know better, maybe every eye would be a Socratic eye. It seems pretty doubtful that the first creature that evolved an eye knew what it didn’t know. Then again, maybe demanding Socratic levels of wisdom, to qualify as a questioner, sets the bar too high. Even Socrates’ fellow Athenians didn’t know what they didn’t know, apparently. But they did know about questions. Maybe fish, who also aren’t Socrates, can ask questions, too.

Malick includes a scene in which a dinosaur—obviously a predator-type—puts its foot on the head of the other dinosaur, kind of experimentally, evidently weighing its options. Seeing that scene, we can't help thinking the dinosaur is wondering what to do. It seems likely that Malick included this scene to symbolize something like the birth of compassion or empathy. The dinosaur—for whatever reason—let's the other one live. But you could also say: maybe that dinosaur symbolizes the birth of questioning. This dinosaur is being weird, letting prey live. Whenever we see someone bucking the system we figure that's because it's questioning the system.

If Malick were a total ham, instead of the great director he is, he might have done a sudden jump cut from the dinosaur, it's claws wrapped around the skull of the other dinosaur—not back to Texas—but to a famous scene in *Hamlet*. You know the one.



“To be, or not to be, that is the question!”

You could even have Hamlet holding Yorrick's skull, even though that's totally from a different scene.

OK, that would be really bad, because the audience would immediately go: wait, what are you saying, Malick. Are you implying that this dinosaur, considering whether to kill the other dinosaur, is like Dino-Hamlet? Or like Dino-Socrates? Please. That's ridiculous!

Yes, it is ridiculous. I'm no Terrance Malick. But I'm imagining this silly scenario to highlight a conceptual dilemma I think is rather important.

On the one hand, we think of questioning as very high-end activity.

Hamlet, Socrates, The Book of Job. The University.

On the other hand, questioning is elementary, elemental, primordial.

First eye that opens. First brain that thinks.

So which is it? It can't be both. If you don't know whether questioning is a recent, super-sophisticated thing that only humans do or an ancient thing that even dinosaurs did, you obviously don't know what questioning is. And just asking Google for the definition of 'question' won't settle it. Although it may be helpful.

Fun fact. *The Tree of Life* grew out of an earlier Malick project that was known, simply, as *Q*. And our module, in the planning stage, was known, simply, as *Q*. Coincidence? Yes, 100%.

Confused? I quite understand. Here's what I'm going to do. The next video is going to basically make the same point this video did, but in a slightly different way. Same point. Different film to illustrate the point.