

Transcript: Philosophy VIDEO 1.5 – Two Confusions, and A Quote From Collingwood

In this video I want to try to tie together the confusions of the last video with the confusions of the two videos before that.

In the previous video, you remember, I sliced ‘question’ into three, then slices some more, until the whole thing was highly vague and ambiguous—and yet it still seems unified somehow.

Just to review, my three senses of question were as follows:

- 1) **Putting Nature To The Question:** Problem-Solving/Experimentation
- 2) **Putting Others To The Question:** Interrogative Communication/Social Reason-Giving & Taking
- 3) **Putting Ourselves To The Question:** Self-Awareness/Knowing What We Don’t Know

Maybe the two videos you watched before that last one are getting a bit hazy, so I’ll jog your memory about that, too.

I said all this stuff about dinosaurs and ape-men and Hollywood movies. Who asked the first question? Oh yeah!

Well, now I’m going to make a connection like so: questioning seems to come in what we might call high-end and low-end versions, cognitively. There’s deluxe models, and there’s the less fancy mass market stuff.

I can get at what I mean by deluxe high end questioning by means of example. Non-human animals think. But only a human being has ever been smart enough to get itself put to death for asking other members of the pack annoying questions! Lots of animals think. But to really get confused takes a philosopher!

Another example. The phrase, ‘putting Nature to the question,’ is due to Francis Bacon, as I said. He was interested in proper methods of experimentation. More generally, that’s problem-solving. Lots of non-human animals can be pretty clever at novel problem-solving.

But no one has ever read Francis’ Bacon’s *Novum Organum Scientiarum* – *New Instrument of Science* – and said: my dog could do that!

Francis Bacon: high-end thinking about problem-solving.
Your smart dog: some problem-solving capacity.

Now what's the relationship between Francis Bacon and your smart dog?

I'm actually a cat person so let me give you a personal cat case. Hey, cats can be smart, too! With my own two eyes I've seen my cat 'put Nature to the question' by tapping delicately with one paw at an apparently dead snake. It's easy to reconstruct her feline thought-process. Here's my impression of what it's like inside my cat's head, when she sees a non-moving snake.

Is it dead? Dead snakes do not move, but live snakes sometimes don't move, so my initial visual data set is equally consistent with two competing hypotheses. Snake dead. Snake alive. We must perform a controlled experiment to disconfirm one of the two. All live snakes move if touched, so touch it. If it moves, the hypothesis that it is dead is disconfirmed. If it does not move we may proceed with further testing.

OK, that's totally nuts. Cats surely don't think like that.

Not in cat language either. It isn't plausible that cats think in an inner cat voice in which there is a mental meow for 'disconfirmed' and a separate mental meow for 'hypothesis', etc.

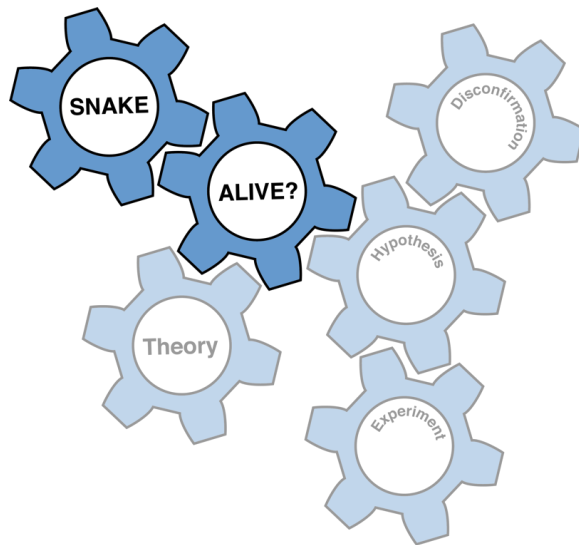
But might there be an inner meow for 'question'—or for the interrogative force that we associate with a question mark? 'Meow?'

I've totally heard my cat say 'Meow?' with a rising tone that I can't help think makes her sound like she's asking a question. Where's my toy? Where's my dinner? Will you play with me?

Aw, isn't it cute?

But, then again, what good would it do my cat to say 'Meow?' inwardly, if she didn't have all that other theoretical apparatus to connect it up to some answer?

How does asking 'how' or 'why' or 'whether', inwardly, get you to an answer if you don't also have inner words for 'hypothesis' or 'disconfirm' or any of that other, high-end stuff.



It seems like the low-end stuff 'where?' 'what?' 'why?' needs the high-end stuff to work. Cats only have the low-end stuff.

So how does the low-end stuff work by itself?

How can you problem-solve at all without problem-solving in a very sophisticated way?

Remember I mentioned the dinosaur from the movie, the one that puts its foot on the other dinosaur and seems to consider whether to let the other live or not.

It's hard to model what is going on there without making the dinosaur sound way more like Hamlet than any dinosaur should.

To be or not to be a questioner! That is the question. But in what sense?

Let me quote a philosopher named R.G. Collingwood. You don't need to know much about him to appreciate what I'm about to read. He was English. He published the following words in 1940:

Every statement that anybody ever makes is made in answer to a question ... I do not mean only statements made out loud to somebody else; I include statements made by somebody to himself in the course of solitary thinking ... In our least scientific moments we hardly know that the thoughts we fish up out of our minds are answers to questions at all, let alone what questions these are.

What exactly is Collingwood saying?

It sounds to me like he is saying that Question-type 1—problem-solving—always works by Questioning 2—interrogative Q&A—but not necessarily by Question 3. Because Q&A, he admits, may be unconscious. We may be working to solve a problem, seeking to know something, without consciously knowing there's this something we don't know.

What do you think? Is Collingwood right? Wrong? Definitely? Maybe? I think the thing to do is probably to ask: how might he be wrong? Can we model him being wrong? That's the next video.