

Transcript: Philosophy VIDEO 1.4 – Three Senses of Question

I say there are two big reasons I was able to confuse you in the previous two videos—well, I tried to confuse you, anyway.

First, ‘question’ is a **vague** word. That’s because questioning is a vague category.

Do you know what the so-called Paradox of the Heap is?

If you take one grain of sand,

and you add another,

and another ...

eventually you’ve definitely got a heap of sand.

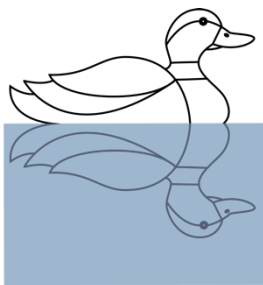
But who can say exactly which grain makes the heap?

I know, not a very fancy paradox. But it makes very clear what ‘vague’ means, in case you were wondering. I say questioning is vague.

Second, ‘question’ is an **ambiguous** term. Also, ambiguous is not the same as vague. How not? Let me explain.

Vague: pile up grains of sand until you’ve got a heap!

Ambiguous: ‘Duck!’



Get your head DOWN!

With that second one, I am either telling you to get your head down right now; or I am announcing the arrival of one member of a species of waterfowl.

Vague statements concern some whole continuum of cases that are closely related, so you can't tell which, if any, you want. Ambiguous statements concern either of two distinct, possibly quite sharply defined cases. But you aren't sure which is wanted. And often the two sets have nothing to do with each other. (I mean: I guess if a duck is about to hit me on the head and you are warning me. But what are the odds.)

Now: when we ask a question like

who or what asked the first question?

Or, maybe a bit more relevantly:

what sorts of things should you teach in a module on questioning?

I say these questions are both vague and ambiguous.

I say there are three major, distinct senses of 'question' that are probably relevant. Serious ambiguity.

Also, each of the three major sense contains an internal ambiguity.

Also each is also kind of vague.

So asking 'what is questioning?' is like asking six vague questions all at once.

No wonder we're confused.

Let me just lay it out. Three senses of question. Let me give them names. And each one will get a subtitle to say what the thing is, and that subtitle will have a slash in it to indicate that this thing the thing is, is ambiguous.

- 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

Let me put all those together onscreen.

Good. Take a few seconds to consider. Problem-solving is not obviously the same thing as eliciting information from someone else verbally is it? And neither of those is quite the same as self-awareness. Three things

Let us now pursue the de-confusion process further.

First, you may note that in each of 1-3, I decided to repeat a funny phrase—‘to the question’.

Sounds funny. Like maybe it’s something a superhero with science powers would say. ‘To the question mobile!’ Captain Question probably has a sidekick named Kid Curious or something.

I admit it, I like superheroes. But I was actually not writing a comic book. I was giving the nod to a 16th Century philosopher named Francis Bacon, who is famous for having tried to develop a very innovative, empirical philosophy of inductive scientific method. Some people think he also wrote Shakespeare’s plays. But most scholars say that’s ridiculous, and I trust most scholars to know about a question like that. Anyway, Bacon is also famous for saying—not these exact words, but this idea—

that the job of science is experimentation, and experiment is a matter of **putting Nature to the question**.

Bacon was a lawyer. ‘Putting to the Question’ was a judicial phrase for interrogation—maybe involving torture, force, but certainly rigor. The idea is that Nature is like a hostile witness you’ve hauled into court. You need to compel this witness to answer. A good experiment is like a well-conducted interrogation of a hostile witness.

Note how we are already kind of mixing up my senses of question. Nature—the physical world—doesn’t literally, linguistically answer questions. Literally, only other people do that. (Maybe some animals.) Comparing Nature to a person who can talk is metaphoric, hence maybe misleading.

Anyway, that’s where ‘to the question’ comes from. From Francis Bacon.

So, again, we have ‘putting Nature to the question’. That’s problem-solving or experimentation. We have: ‘putting People to the question’: that’s asking people stuff and/or giving and taking reasons, in a communicative sense. Last but not least we’ve got ‘putting Ourselves to the question’. That’s coming to know you don’t know, like good old Socrates.

I’m only now getting to the point that each of 1-3 is internally ambiguous, per the slash marks in the subtitles. Each is probably vague, too. But first, notice three things about the set.

Unity. Even though 1-3 look different, they still feel kind of unified somehow. Don’t they? Even if ‘question’ is ambiguous, it still isn’t ambiguous like ‘duck’, meaning get your head down, and ‘duck’ meaning waterfowl. Problem-solving and eliciting information verbally and being self-critical seem to go together, even if they’re different. But how so?

Complementarity. Here's an obvious reason they go together. Namely, they go GREAT together. Each of these capacities plausibly complements the others. For example, if you want to 1) be better at problem-solving, it totally makes sense to 2) brush up on your communication skills and 3) cultivate an awareness of the limits of your knowledge.

Distinctiveness. Nevertheless, 1-3 do seem like three different things. They go great together, but they don't obviously have to go together. Think about it. Design an imaginary creature that is an extremely capable questioner, in one sense, but lacks the capacity in some other sense. I'll bet you can do it.

Also, as I mentioned before, each of 1-3 seems to cover diverse internal ground. Problem-solving is not necessarily the same as experimenting, although clearly those concepts are related. You know what, I'm going to just let you think about that. Maybe it will come up in tutorial. Think about the subtitles. Think about how many different things we seem to be dealing with here.

Oh, and you know what else? Going back to the original 1-3, each of those senses of question can be tackled either in a descriptive or a normative spirit.

What do I mean by that? I mean that we can either study these as things that ARE, or as things that OUGHT TO BE. I mentioned Francis Bacon. He had a philosophy of science. He didn't think it described how people DO question. He thought it described how people OUGHT TO question, but usually don't. On the other hand, a psychologist might be more interested in how people DO question—maybe in a confused, biased, ineffective way.

So, however many things we end up with, by slicing and dicing 1-3, double that number. Because each component has a descriptive aspect and a normative aspect.

Confused? Good! I am. And I'd hate to think you're smarter than me.

We aren't done with 1-3 but I'm ending the video here so you can sit back and philosophize a bit about them in the comfort of your own head. If you had the job of designing a module about 'Asking Questions', how would you juggle, or mix and match 1-3? Would you teach 'em all? Slice them and dice them. Mash them all back together? Do you think they all can be taught? Do some of them flow from others. Is one of them fundamental? Should they be studied in a descriptive or a normative spirit.

I think 1-3 is a good framework. It seems basically solid to me. But there's a lot of work still to be done.