

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Commentary on “Can a good philosophical contribution be made just by asking a question?”

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Abstract

This paper explains some of the reasoning behind “Can a Good Philosophical Contribution Be Made Just by Asking a Question?,” a paper which consists solely in its title and which is published in the same issue of the journal as the present paper. The method for explaining that reasoning consists in making available a lightly edited version of a letter the authors sent to the editors when submitting the title-only paper. The editors permitted publication of that paper on the condition that the authors also separately publish a version of that letter; the present paper aims to fulfil that condition.

KEYWORDS

inquiry, metaphilosophy, presupposition, questions

1 | STAGE SETTING

As readers of this issue of *Metaphilosophy* will have noticed, the paper immediately preceding the present one has no text except its title. That title is “Can a Good Philosophical Contribution Be Made Just by Asking a Question?” As the authors of this paper, we assure you that it is not a joke or a hoax. It is an earnest attempt to make a good philosophical contribution by just asking a question.

In the present paper we pull back the curtain, displaying some of the reasoning behind the previous one. We invite you to imagine that you are an editor receiving the previous paper as a submission along with the following letter.

2 | A LETTER TO THE EDITORS

Dear Editors,

We write as the authors of “Can a Good Philosophical Contribution Be Made Just by Asking a Question?,” a paper we very recently submitted to *Metaphilosophy*. Highly unusually, this paper consists solely in its title. We assure you that it is an earnest submission, not a joke or a hoax. It is an attempt

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to bring across serious philosophical content in an atypical yet fitting way. As philosophers of art will recognize, it brings across that content by—to use Arthur Danto's (1998) phrase—“embodying” it.

In this letter we explain why we think the paper is an appropriate candidate for publication. We have asked the referees—in a footnote designed to appear only in the submitted draft—to read this letter before making their judgements. If you would kindly forward it to them, we would be grateful.

It is our impression that many philosophers either explicitly or implicitly view questions as something that ought to be confined to the context of discovery in philosophical inquiry, the *process* through which that inquiry proceeds. On this view, questions would be out of place as the published *products* of philosophical inquiry. Our position is that this view is mistaken and that it is possible to make good philosophical contributions just by asking questions. Our paper attempts to bring this position to the fore, obliquely but starkly, by itself just asking a question—the question of whether a good philosophical contribution can be made just by asking a question. We think that this question is an apt target for fruitful discussions among readers of *Metaphilosophy*. In what follows, we broach some of the themes those discussions might explore.

First, there is what we will dub “the cigar theme.” Is it even possible to just ask a question? Or is there necessarily more going on when one asks a question, in addition to the act of question-asking? Is a question ever just a question?

These questions must be handled with care. After all, there is a trivial sense in which whenever one asks a question one does many other things as well. For example, one engages in the more general act of *communicating*. Similarly, there is a trivial sense in which a cigar is never just a cigar; it is always also a spatially extended object. The interesting issue, with both cigars and questions, is whether nontrivial additional things must always come along with them. What would make those other things nontrivial, and whether there are any such things, are among the topics on which our paper might facilitate discussion.¹

Presuppositions are an obvious candidate for something that must always come along with questions. Consider the question “Is the present king of France bald?” In asking this question, one presupposes (inter alia) that there is a present king of France.² Is it possible for a speaker to ask a question without presupposing *anything*? If not, then it would seem that there is a nontrivial sense in which a question is never just a question: one always presupposes something when one asks a question.

Collingwood (1940) advocated that view. It seems to follow, too, from several popular contemporary formal approaches to questions. For instance, the standard definition among erotetic logicians has it that a question *Q* presupposes a proposition *P* if and only if: *P* is true if any direct answer to *Q* is true (see Belnap and Steel 1976). Similarly, in partition-based frameworks, a question is said to presuppose a proposition just in case that proposition is true in every cell of the partition corresponding to the set of exhaustive answers to that question (see Groenendijk and Stokhof 1996). On both of these approaches, every question will be such that a speaker asking it will presuppose many propositions (including, at least, all the logical truths). Perhaps we should conclude that just asking a question is impossible. Our paper's title question would then be answered in the negative: it is impossible for a good philosophical contribution to be made just by asking a question, because it is impossible *tout court* to just ask a question.

But on second thought, we might think that this standard for “just asking questions” is too stringent. Much of the time, when we talk about speakers presupposing things, we have in mind not whether they are making any presuppositions *at all* but instead whether they are introducing any *new* presuppositions to the common ground of a conversation. Perhaps, then, “just” asking a question

¹Here we've assumed a fine-grained approach to act individuation, but we could equally well individuate acts coarsely. For instance, with the cigar problem we could have said “Given that each act of question-asking falls under many distinct descriptions (such as the description ‘communicating’), is it possible to *just* ask a question? Or does the applicability of these many descriptions establish that question-asking is never *just* question-asking?”

²What idiom is best for discussing presupposition? Should we write of *speakers* making presuppositions, of *utterances* involving presuppositions, or of *sentences* triggering presuppositions? What are the things that do the presupposing: speakers, utterances, or sentences? This issue, like the issue of how finely grained actions are, is orthogonal to our purposes. For convenience, we will mostly use the speaker presupposition idiom.

should be conceived of as requiring, not that one presuppose nothing whatsoever, but instead that one presuppose nothing that's not already in the common ground.

Arguably, we have conformed to the latter standard in asking the title question of our paper. That is to say, in asking that question we have not presupposed anything not already accepted by readers of *Metaphilosophy*. To be sure, we are presupposing a variety of things, including (i) that there are philosophical contributions, (ii) that some of them are good, and (iii) that there are questions. But these presuppositions are (we take it) already common ground between us and the readers of *Metaphilosophy*, and thus do not require accommodation. Nor, as far as we can tell, do any of the other presuppositions that we make (by asking our title question) require accommodation among readers of *Metaphilosophy*. By asking our title question, then, we ourselves are arguably making a philosophical contribution by “just” asking a question. Is that contribution a good one?

That's a good question! Addressing it requires us to broach what we'll dub “the quality theme.” Suppose that the cigar theme has been resolved (perhaps along the lines we've just suggested), and that it *is* possible to *just* ask a question. There are, then, possible acts of just asking questions. Do any of these acts constitute good philosophical contributions? If so, then which ones? And on what grounds?³

These issues turn on the matter of what it is to be a good philosophical contribution, a matter deep in the murky waters of metaphilosophy. Much like first-level philosophical domains such as ethics and epistemology, the second-level domain of metaphilosophy is well served by a distinction between things that are good instrumentally (that is, good in virtue of what they cause) and things that are good finally (that is, good independently of what they cause). What are the final philosophical goods? There are many possible views. On some of those views, the final philosophical goods include knowledge. Perhaps there can be philosophical contributions which are acts of just asking questions and which causally contribute to our attaining that particular final philosophical good.

Of course, a healthy dose of scepticism is in order here. Knowledge of complete answers to philosophical questions is at best hard to come by.⁴ But even if we are not in a position to know complete answers to philosophical questions, asking them might still count as a philosophical contribution that causally contributes to our knowledge. For instance, asking a philosophical question might help us get knowledge of one or more of its partial answers, and asking a question in a way that makes clear its problems might be a means to asking other, better questions.

Even if knowledge of the answers (complete or otherwise) to questions is neither a final philosophical good nor a means to any such good, asking questions might still have instrumental philosophical value. Consider the Pyrrhonian view that the final philosophical good is ataraxia, a state of tranquility involving the suspension of judgement. This state does not involve knowledge, but Pyrrhonians still treat question-asking as a central way to reach it. On at least two views about final philosophical value, then—the knowledge view and the ataraxia view—the act of just asking questions may well have philosophical value instrumentally. Thus we speculate that acts of just asking questions sometimes *do* have instrumental philosophical value.

Of course, *merely having* instrumental philosophical value does not suffice for *being a philosophical contribution* that has instrumental philosophical value. Sleeping well can have instrumental philosophical value, but it does not count as a philosophical contribution. But, at least in the right context (for instance in *Metaphilosophy*), just asking a question would plausibly count as a philosophical contribution. Such contributions might, we speculate, sometimes be instrumentally philosophically good on account of causally contributing to knowledge, ataraxia, or other philosophical ends.

Even more speculatively, we suggest that just asking a question can be *finally* good philosophically. Consider a real-life case from mathematics: Hilbert's famous paper “Mathematical Problems” (Hilbert 1976 [1902]), originally given as an address to the International Mathematical Congress at the Sorbonne. The main project of this paper was to ask—but not to answer—twenty-three questions that

³On “good questions” in general, see Watson 2021a.

⁴The terminology of “complete” and “partial” answers can be read informally for our purposes. For the standard way to formalise those notions, see, e.g., Friedman 2013 and Yalcin 2018.

were central to active research in pure mathematics at the time. This paper was vital to twentieth-century mathematics, causally contributing to the production of mathematical knowledge in numerous ways.⁵

Suppose (contrary to the facts) that immediately after Hilbert gave the address that was the basis for “Mathematical Problems” the Sorbonne was hit by a comet that instantaneously immolated the audience, Hilbert, and his notes. We suggest that in this unfortunate situation Hilbert’s paper would still have been a good mathematical contribution, even though it wouldn’t have causally contributed to the production of knowledge. If this suggestion is right, then Hilbert’s paper is—not only in our envisaged alternative scenario but also in the actual world—a finally good mathematical contribution.

Perhaps something similar can happen in philosophy, so that sometimes just asking certain questions counts as a finally good philosophical contribution, a contribution whose status as philosophically good does not depend on what it causes. After all, philosophers sometimes ask questions in their writings without making any attempt to *even start* answering them. In Nozick’s book *Philosophical Explanations* (1981), he asks *many* questions without even trying to answer them.⁶ By Kenny’s reckoning (1959), Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* contains exactly 784 questions, 674 of which are unanswered and 70 of which are given what Wittgenstein considers incorrect answers.

The questions in these books—or at least some of them—seem to be good philosophical contributions. They also seem as though they would still have been good philosophical contributions even if they had never causally led to knowledge or anything else (if, for example, the world had come to an unfortunate abrupt end immediately after their authors posed them). Perhaps, then, just asking a question can have not only instrumental philosophical value but also final philosophical value.

Indeed, there is some precedent for this in ancient philosophical writings. Aristotle’s *Problems* (1984), one of the longest but least studied texts in the Aristotelian corpus, is composed of almost nine hundred questions organised by subject matter, covering diverse and sometimes surprising topics from the virtues to the peculiarities of sneezing. It would be a stretch to claim that all of the questions asked in *Problems* constitute good philosophical contributions, but it is not unreasonable to claim that some of them do.⁷ Scholars have debated the origins of the text, suggesting that it may not have been composed by Aristotle but rather by students at the Lyceum as a pedagogical exercise.⁸ This raises a further interesting theme for discussion concerning the use and value of questions as philosophical pedagogy. Can a question asked purely for the purposes of teaching and learning constitute a good philosophical contribution?

We believe many other themes and topics could be fruitfully prompted and explored on the basis of our unusual paper. It may, for example, prompt reflection and discussion of the nature of questions themselves, which are undeniably central to philosophical practice but have rarely been the subject of conceptual analysis.⁹ Likewise, as noted earlier, the paper implicitly raises the question of what counts as a good philosophical contribution, perhaps leading to reflection on the nature of philosophy itself. Perhaps most productively, in its minimal presentation, the paper may bring the topic of questions and their relationship to philosophical practice to the attention of a broader audience across philosophical sub-disciplines—philosophy of art, science, law, metaphysics, ethics, and so on—where questions are, again, central but often do not receive explicit treatment in their own right. These are just some of the topics that may be explored as a result of the paper.

⁵See the papers in Browder 1976a and 1976b.

⁶See, among many others, the parenthetical question on the book’s first page.

⁷Another interesting and better known case of a question-based philosophical text is Thomas Aquinas’s *Summa Theologica*, a vast work structured explicitly around the posing and answering of 512 questions. Given the prominent role that questions play in this text, perhaps some of them constitute good philosophical contributions in and of themselves.

⁸See, e.g., Forster 1928.

⁹For some attempts at this see Cohen 1929; Bell 1975; Borge 2013; and Watson 2021b. For a useful though pessimistic exploration of the issue of what questions are, an exploration that is philosophically informed but mostly rooted in Conversation Analysis, see Levinson 1992.

Thus ends our sampling of the kinds of discussions we hope the paper might engender among its readers.¹⁰ If we wanted to, we could include this sampling in the paper itself. But we don't want to do that, for two reasons. First, we want the paper to serve as a test case for attempts to adjudicate the question it asks. In order to serve as a test case in this way, the paper itself must just ask a question (or, at least, attempt to do as much). Second, we aim to act as midwives to bring the foregoing kinds of discussions forth from our readers themselves. This outcome would be pre-emptively blocked if we added the discussions at issue to the paper. For both of these reasons, we intend not to include in the paper itself the material that appears in this supplementary letter. In order for the paper to function as intended, it must consist solely in its title.

We now return to the point that our paper embodies its content. Consider Duchamp's *Fountain*, a urinal displayed in a museum. On a standard view among philosophers of art, this artwork means something—and, in particular, it means that anything can be made into an artwork. This meaning is “embodied by” *Fountain* itself, since urinals are not the sorts of things one would normally take to be artworks. Danto (1983; 1998) famously focused on the phenomenon whereby artworks embody their meanings. Our paper is an instance of that same phenomenon. The paper's meaning amounts to the semantic content of the interrogative sentence that is its title, the sentence “Can a good philosophical contribution be made just by asking a question?” This semantic content, in turn, is embodied by the paper itself, a (good?) philosophical contribution that (just?) asks the question of whether a good philosophical contribution can be made just by asking a question.

While Danto-esque artistic writings are not unheard of in academic philosophy, they are somewhat out of step with the contemporary standard.¹¹ That standard enjoins us to announce our theoretical aims with what would otherwise be perverse explicitness, in the paradigm case starting out with “In this paper we argue that . . .”.¹² We have nothing against that sort of philosophical writing. There is a place for it, a place our own writings often aim to occupy. But there is also a place for philosophical writings that pursue their aims obliquely.

Thank you for reading this letter. We hope that you consider the paper for publication, and we look forward to hearing your response.

Yours sincerely,

[Names deleted for anonymous review].

3 | A CONCLUDING QUESTION

We conclude with a question: If you were the editor who received this letter, how would you react?¹³

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¹⁰That sampling belongs not only to metaphilosophy but also to the burgeoning contemporary epistemological discussion of *inquiry* (see, e.g., Friedman 2013 and 2020).

¹¹See, e.g., Carroll 1895; Laraudogoitia 1990; Brown 1993; Sorensen 1997; Goldschmidt 2016; Della Rocca 2020.

¹²Compare Delia Graff Fara (in Pyke 2011, 70): “By doing philosophy, we... [subject] our most commonly or firmly held beliefs to what would otherwise be perversely strict scrutiny.” And here's John MacFarlane (in Pyke 2011, 122): “Philosophy is sculpture in the medium of questions. By chipping away what is irrelevant and distinguishing what is confused, it strives to transform intractable muddles into questions that might have answers.”

¹³With both papers, the authors are listed in alphabetical order. Joshua Habgood-Coote and Dennis Whitcomb conceptualised the title-only paper. All three authors wrote that paper and the present one.

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