Asking a Question is a Proposal in Shared Inquiry

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What is it to ask a question? We might think about asking a question as the expression of an interrogative attitude towards a question that articulates the speaker's aim of resolving their ignorance, and directs the hearer to provide the answer. Call this the default view of asking. This paper argues that the default view faces serious problems accounting for the diversity of asking; in particular with what I'll call *teachers' asking*, *self-directed asking*, and *shared asking*. In place of the default view, I suggest that we think about asking as a proposal in shared inquiry that aims at shared knowledge, by means of either the hearer, the speaker, or both answering the question. This view helps explain some problems about the norms of inquiry, creating a gap between the norms of inquiry and the norms of asking, and suggesting that the norms of asking will involve collective states.

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1. Introduction

What is it to ask a question? Asking is the speech act associated with the interrogative mood, just as directing is with the imperative, and asserting with the declarative. Consider some simple interrogative sentences:

(1) What time does the bus come?

(2) Is the cake vegan?

(3) What plants grow outside over winter?

When we imagine (1), (2), and (3) uttered, the speaker seems to be expressing an unhappy ignorance. They might be curious, wondering, or desiring an answer: in short they have an interrogative attitude towards the question (Friedman 2013). If we add standard interrogative prosody—'What [time]$_F$ does the bus come?' or 'What time does

the bus come? [↑]'[1]—it becomes clear that the speakers are trying to get answers. Asking calls for a response—either a direct answer ('the bus comes at 11.30') or an excuse ('I don't know')—suggesting that asking is or involves some kind of direction to answer. Call cases of asking like (1), (2), and (3) *ordinary asking.*

Combining these observations gets us to the bones of an account of asking: that asking a question is the expression of an interrogative attitude towards the question in which the speaker aims to resolve ignorance by means of directing the hearer to express knowledge. Let's call this bundle of claims *the default view of asking*.

The goal of this paper is to argue that the default view is mistaken. The default view cannot explain cases where teachers ask questions they already know the answers to, self-directed questions which cue the provision of an answer by the speaker (like the first sentence of this paper), and asking which sets out a shared plan to answer a question which neither the speaker nor hearer knows the answer to.[2] I suggest that we think about asking as a move in shared inquiry in which the speaker proposes that both speaker and hearer adopt a shared intention that the hearer, the speaker, or both answers the question, thereby achieving common knowledge of the answer. I will call this view the *Shared Proposal view of Asking*.

The plan of action is as follows. In the second section, we unpack the default view. In the third section, we set out the problem cases and consider how the default view might handle them. In the fourth section, we develop the shared proposal view of asking and show how it explains the problem cases. In the fifth section, we consider the consequences of the shared proposal view for the norms of asking and inquiry.

A quick clarification. In everyday English 'question' is used ambiguously to refer to a type of sentence, a type of content and a type of speech act. I will use the following conventions:

- Sentences and clauses in the interrogative mood are called *interrogatives*, which go in quotes: 'what time does the bus come?'.
- The default semantic content of interrogatives are called *questions*, which are italicised: *what time does the bus come?*
- The default speech act that uses the interrogative mood are called *asking a question* or *asking* for short. This shouldn't be confused with the distinct speech act of asking for permission.

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[1] $[]_F$ indicates prosodic focus, and [↑] indicates a pitch raise.

[2] (Millson and Risjord MS) consider related cases in the course of arguing for what they call a *commitment-disjunction* account of asking, according to which asking either commits the speaker to having an interrogative attitude to a question, or commits the hearer to answering that question. Their account handles these cases differently, by appealing to different bundles of speaker and hearer commitments.

2. The Default View of Asking

Here's a schematic version of the default view of asking:

The Default View of Asking

A speaker *S* asking a hearer *H* a question *Q* involves:

i) *S* expressing an interrogative attitude towards *Q* (the expressive claim).

ii) *S* aiming to acquire an answer *Q* (the aim claim).

iii) *S* directing *H* to provide an answer to *Q* (the directive claim).

These claims naturally fit together, but it is quite possible to hold one of them without the others. For wholesale endorsement of the default view see (979969: 66, Bach and Harnish 1976: 47). For endorsement of the expressive claim see (Whitcomb 2010: 672, Unger 1975: 269) and the directive claim see (Åqvist 1965, Lewis 1969, Hintikka 1976, Searle and Vanderveken 1985: 199, Dayal 2016: 4). There is a case to be made that both i) and iii) entail ii).

Depending on your wider commitments, you might want to endorse a slightly tweaked version of claims i)-iii).

- Depending on your view of inquiry you might have different views about which interrogative attitudes are expressed in asking,[3] have different views about what it takes to answer a question,[4] or you might think about asking as a command, request, or suggestion.[5]
- Depending on your view about speech acts (see Harris, Fogal, and Moss 2017) you might think of different parts of the default view as central. Intentionalists will think that the speaker's aim of relieving their ignorance is central to asking. Functionalists will want to replace ii) with a claim about the function of the speech act (the proper function of asking is to elicit the hearer's knowledge), and will treat this condition as central. Expressionist views will want to replace ii) with the claim that asking expresses the aim of acquiring an answer, and will

[3] For example, that asking expresses a desire to know (Unger 1975: 269, Bach and Harnish 1979: 47, van Elsywk 2025).

[4] For different views about the aim of inquiry, see (Friedman 2024).

[5] For the command view see (Åqvist 1965, Lewis 1969, Hintikka 1976) and for the request view see (Bach and Harnish 1979: 47, Searle 1969: 66, Searle and Vanderveken 1985: 199, Dayal 2016: 4).

treat i) and the modified condition ii) as central. Norm-based accounts might replace the expressive claim with a constitutive norm for asking.[6]

- We might think that it is possible to insincerely ask a question without having the aim of answering it; that is to undertake bullshit asking (King 2021 pp.138-9, Whitcomb 2023). Insincere asking is ruled out by condition ii), and there are a couple of potential fixes: We could go Gricean and appeal to the aim of making the hearer believe that the speaker aims to answer the question. Or, we could go Stalnakerian and appeal to the idea that asking involves a proposal to accept that the speaker aims to answer the question (Stokke 2012, 507-10). Alternatively, we could we could say that insincere asking only involves making as if to ask a question and keep ii) as is, denying the possibility of bullshit asking.

The default view has a couple of natural extensions:

- If asking a question expresses an interrogative attitude, it might also involve a speaker presupposition that the speaker is ignorant and the hearer knowledgeable about that question.[7]
- Sociolinguists distinguish between two roles in conversation: the K+ position—the more knowledgeable position, signalled by assertion—and the K- position—the less knowledgeable position, signalled by the uptake indicator 'oh!'—(see Nagel 2019 summarising work by John Heritage). If you endorse the default view, it would be natural to think that asking a question involves situating yourself in the K- position on the topic of the question asked.

3. Problem cases for the Default view

Consider the following interrogative sentences uttered in the specified contexts:

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[6] See (Unger 1975, Whitcomb 2010).

[7] The askings in (1), (2) and (3) pass the 'wait a minute' test for both propositions. For example:

(1) What time does the bus come? … Wait a minute, you don't know that: you're a tourist too.
(2) What time does the bus come? … Wait a minute, I know the answer.

(4) What is the capital of Mali? [Uttered by a teacher, addressing their class at the end of a geography lesson]

(5) What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July? [Uttered by Frederick Douglass, addressing a meeting organised by the Rochester Ladies' Anti-Slavery Sewing Society in 1852]

(6) Are the solutions of regular problems in the calculus of variations always necessarily analytic? [Uttered by David Hilbert, addressing the 1900 international mathematics congress in Paris]

The teacher, Douglass, and Hilbert all seem to perform the speech act of asking a question, but the examples do not easily fit the default view of asking.

3.1. Teacher Asking

(4) is an example of what I'll call *teacher asking* (Searle 1969: 66). Teachers ask their students questions for various reasons: to elicit their students' knowledge, to check student understanding, and to save their voices. When they do so they are often not representing themselves as ignorant. Consider the following interaction:

(7) *Teacher:* What's the capital of Mali?

(8) *Student:* We don't know, Miss. What is the capital of Mali?

If (7) triggered the presupposition that the teacher is ignorant, then the student response in (8) would be a challenge, whereas it is really an admission of defeat. For contrast, imagine echoing back the questions in cases of ordinary asking. When teachers ask questions, they are not expressing an interrogative attitude towards the questions they ask, and they are not expressing the aim of answering their questions. If things are well, they already have them. Teachers are not insincere or bullshiting when they ask questions: it would be strange to accuse a teacher who uttered (7) of misrepresenting themselves. When one learns a new fact, it is appropriate to utter the phatic 'oh!', but the typical teacher response to a student's correct answer is not 'oh!', but 'good!' (Mehan 1979). Teachers can ask questions while positioning themselves in the K+ position.[8] Teacher asking involves the speaker directing their students to answer a question, but without presupposing ignorance, expressing an interrogative attitude, or aiming to answer the question. The one part of the default view that remains unchallenged by

[8] A dislike of positioning themselves in the K- position might explain the philosopher's habit of responding to questions they can't answer with 'good!'.

teachers asking is the idea that asking involves a direction to answer. We might say similar things about the asking which happens in courtrooms and pub quizzes.

3.2. Self-Directed Asking

(5) is an example of what I'll call *self-directed asking*.[9] Douglass subverts the conversational routine of a speaker asking and a hearer answering. He asks a question, and then responds himself, building on the juxtaposition between the aims of the American revolution and the institution of American slavery which grants the power to hold hunt, and sell humans: 'I answer: a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim'.

Douglass is not expressing an interrogative attitude. He communicates that he has a settled view on the question, without immediately indicating what that view is (although the previous paragraphs of the address prepare the ground). But he is not insincere or bullshitting his audience. His aim is not to answer the question for himself, but for the audience to acquire interrogative attitudes about the question, allowing him to supply the answer.

Douglass's question doesn't direct the audience to respond: if an audience-member responded they could be legitimately shushed. If anything, Douglass is generating a conversational commitment for himself: if at the end of the speech he hadn't answered, he would have let the audience down.

Whereas ordinary asking positions the speaker as ignorant and the hearer as knowledgeable, self-directed asking can involve the speaker positioning themselves as knowledgeable, and the audience as ignorant. If one were to give a dramatic reading of Dougass's speech, it would be inappropriate to utter (5) with a strong pitch rise at the end of the sentence. Douglass is positioning himself in the K+ position and informatively presupposing that he has a view on the question.

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[9] The first discussion of self-directed asking I can find is in in book 9.2 of Quintilian's *the Orator's Education*. Here's one of several examples he gives:

> Moreover, to question yourself and then to answer yourself can produce variety that is not unattractive. Thus Cicero in *Pro Ligario*: "In whose presence am I saying this? In the presence of the man who, although he knew this, restored me to my country before he even saw me." (Quintilian (95/2002): 41).

This device later gets called *Antipophora,* although confusingly Quintillian uses this label for another category. Self-directed asking is famously used by Lenin—*What is to be done?* (Lenin 1901)—, du Bois—*How does it feel to be a problem?* (du Bois 1903)—, and Emma Goldman—*What is Patriotism?* (Goldman 1911).

Self-directed asking involves a speaker sincerely asking a question without expressing an interrogative attitude, it can involve a speaker representing themselves as knowing the answer, and it commits the speaker (not the hearer) to answering the question.

Self-directed asking shouldn't be assimilated to asking obvious questions or self-talk. Sometimes we ask questions which have obvious answers. When we ask a question in which the correct answer follows analytically from the presuppositions of the question—like 'is the Pope a Catholic?'—we are really asserting or calling attention to the answer. (5) is different because it calls for the speaker to answer the question.[10] We also ask ourselves questions during self-talk: think about saying 'where are my keys?' under your breath as you leave the house. [11] These cases will not fit the default model because the speaker and hearer are identical. (5) is not an example of self-talk either: Douglass is talking to his audience, not to himself.

3.3. Shared Asking

(6) is an example of what I'll call *shared asking*. When Hilbert gave his 1900 address, he was seeking to set out a shared agenda for mathematics: to focus collective attention on problems which were solvable, significant, and would support scientific progress. Hilbert lists ten problems in the 1900 address and included thirteen more in his write up (Hilbert 1902). Hilbert doesn't use interrogatives for all his problems, but he does for several.

Hilbert's asking does involve the expression of an interrogative attitude towards the problem he articulates. He also appears to have the aim of resolving these problems: 'We hear within us the perpetual call: There is the problem. Seek its solution.'. (Hilbert 1902/2000: 412). The interesting thing is that Hilbert is proposing a shared aim: his hope is that his problems will be taken up and solved by the mathematical community of which he is a part. Hilbert is trying to shape the direction of future research in mathematics, not inviting mathematicians to share their knowledge with him. Hilbert's address is an unusual case, but shared asking is perfectly ordinary: if we each know part of the answer to a question—*what are all of the departments of France?*—it would be natural for either of us to ask it in order to cue up the pooling of information (Roberts 1996: 6:15-6:19).

Shared asking involves a speaker expresses an interrogative attitude and an aim to answer a question, but they don't need to assume that the answer to their question is known, and they don't direct their hearer to answer by deploying knowledge they already have: the point of asking in these cases is to direct future lines of shared inquiry.

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[10] Sometimes the label 'rhetorical question' is used for all askings which don't call for answers, which obscures this difference.

[11] Linguists use the labels 'soliloquy questions' and 'outlouds' (Stivers and Enfield 2010: 2623)

3.4. Prospects for the Default View

Let's take stock. The default view combines an expression claim, a claim about aims, and the claim that asking is a directive. Teacher asking and self-directed asking are counterexamples to the expression claim and the aim claim, and self-directed asking and shared questions are counterexamples to the directive claim. We can't save the default view by taking all of the problem cases at face value and dropping one of the parts of the view, so there are two options: reinterpret the problem cases, or deny that they are cases of asking.

The reinterpretation strategy accepts that (4), (5), and (6) involve asking, but seeks to reinterpret them in a way that is compatible with the default view. Here's how the strategy might work:

- In sentence (4), the question the teacher is asking is now *what is the capital of Mali?* but *who knows what the capital of Mali is?*. They do have an interrogative attitude towards this question, aim to answer this question, and are requesting the students to answer it. Searle suggests this view in his distinction between 'real' and 'exam' questions (1969: 66). (It remains to be explained why 'yes' isn't an appropriate answer to (4))
- In sentence (5), Douglass isn't straightforwardly asking, but is performing a short play in which he first plays one character—perhaps an audience surrogate—who expresses an interrogative attitude, has the aim of answering a question, and makes a request of another character to provide the answer, and then plays the second character who knows the answer and provides it. Quintillian suggests this view, describing self-directed asking as imaginary interrogation (*ficta interrogatione*) (Quintilian (95/2002): 40).
- In sentence (6), Hilbert is not really addressing his actual audience, but is directing his questions towards the mathematicians of the future, expressing his interrogative attitude towards the various problems, his aim that they find solutions, and requesting that they tell him what they know.[12]

[12] One might also think about Hilbert's utterances as asking bombs: timed speech acts which go off to ask questions to each generation of mathematics as they read the address. See (Egan 2009) on utterance bombs.

These reinterpretations of the content, nature, sincerity, and audience of asking are possible, but they come at the cost of introducing quite a bit of complexity into the examples.

It would also be possible to recast the default view as an account of sincere asking, and reinterpret cases (4), (5), and (6) as involving insincere asking. This strategy gets into trouble with the fact that there is no obvious deception in any of these cases of asking: all of them involve speakers who care about the truth and the questions they ask.

The other option is to deny that (4), (5), and (6) are cases of asking. There are two versions of this strategy.

The first strategy exploits the fact that not every use of the interrogative mood will involve the speech act of asking. In English, declarative sentences with rising pitch can be used to ask questions (Gunlogson 2004), so perhaps we can also use the interrogative mood—perhaps with a non-standard pitch contour—to assert or direct. For example, uttering the interrogative sentence 'is the Pope a Catholic?' might be a way to indirectly assert that the Pope is a Catholic.[13] Here's how this strategy might apply to our cases:

- Sentence (4) involves the teacher uttering an interrogative to assert that their students must tell them the answer to the question.
- Sentence (5) involves Douglass uttering an interrogative as part of a fractured assertion that takes place across several sentences. This assertion has a content something like: *the meaning of the 4th of July to the American slave is that it reveals to him that […]*.
- Sentence (6) involves Hilbert uttering an interrogative to assert that it would be good for scientific progress if mathematicians could solve the problem he articulates.

The problem with this strategy is that it doesn't fit well with our intuitive categorisation of speech act types. Here's a simple test for whether a sentence is used to assert, ask, or direct: is it most natural to report the sentence using i) '*A* told *B* that …' (assert), ii) '*A* asked *B* wh- …' (ask) or iii) '*A* told *B* to …' (direct). Whereas it is awkward to report indirect assertions like 'Is the Pope a Catholic?' with 'ask', this is quite natural with (4), (5), and (6):

(9) The teacher asked what the capital of Mali is.

[13] An alternative strategy is to frame the default view as a set of norms, and to think about (4)-(6) as indirect speech acts which break these norms to perform an indirect speech act asserting or directing by asking a question (see Searle 1979).

(10) Douglass asked what the meaning of the 4th of July is to the American slave.

(11) Hilbert asked how to arrange equal solids most densely in space.

The second strategy falls back onto a technical notion of asking which picks out only cases that fit the default model. We get something of this strategy in Searle's notion of 'real asking' (Searle 1969: 66), and in the linguists' category of non-canonical questions (i.e. non-canonical askings) (Dayal 2016: C9, Mehan 1979, Farkas 2020, Koshik 2005).[14] Someone who makes this move owes us an account of what's interesting about this narrowed technical notion of asking.

Here's an argument that the interesting notion of asking ought to include like (4), (5), and (6). Natural languages have (at least) three high-level grammatical moods: the declarative, the interrogative, and the imperative. When linguists characterise these moods, they fall back on pragmatic considerations: the kinds of things which speakers up typically up to when they use these moods for sentences.[15] Because of this, we need names for the three high-level speech act kinds associated with these moods. This is not just a problem for syntax textbooks. The interrogative mood is signalled in different ways in different languages: by pitch raises, word order, special particles, and verb inflections. This means that to identify the same mood across languages, we cannot just rely on syntax; we need to identify the pragmatic functions associated with the grammatical markers. If we want to connect theoretical linguistics to our intuitive understanding of speech acts, it will be most natural to use the everyday term 'asking' to talk about a speech act characteristically associated with the interrogative mood (and similarly 'asserting' and 'directing' for the declarative and imperative). We absolutely want to classify sentences (4), (5), and (6) as involving the interrogative mood, and if we use a narrower notion of asking we run the risk of losing this classification. Given that (4), (5), and (6) are intuitively categorised as asking, since we are putting the default view into question it would be question-begging to associate 'asking' with a technical meaning that excludes these cases absent a positive argument that these are fringe cases.

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[14] The category includes echo questions, flipped interrogatives, negative polar questions, declarative questions, rhetorical questions, ability/inclination questions, tag questions, and non-intrusive questions (Dayal 2016: C9, Farkas 2020). There is also a category of non-information-seeking questions that includes court-room questions, political interviewers, and teacher questions (Mehan 1979, Koshik 2005).

[15] It's a little surprising to see syntax depend on pragmatics, since we more used to thinking of syntax as explanatorily prior to both semantics and pragmatics. But see the discussion of high-level speech acts in (Roberts 2018: 319-21), and the characterisation of sentence mood in pragmatic terms in (Portner 2018b: 122) and (Dayal 2016: 2).

Here's where we're at. Sentences (4), (5), and (6) use the interrogative mood, they are not naturally described as asserting or directing, and they're not obviously fringe uses of the interrogative mood. This suggests that the default view puts forward a mistaken view of the high-level speech act associated with the interrogative mood, and we need a new theory of this speech act to feed into linguistic theory.

4. The Shared Proposal View of Asking

The default view of asking accounts for (1), (2), and (3), but gets in to trouble with (4), (5), and (6). We want to account for both kinds of cases, so we might start by looking for parts of the default story which we can move to a higher degree of generality. The natural place to start is the claim that asking a question involves the speaker directing the hearer.

Let's take a detour into the theory of directives. Much as we often use the interrogative to direct the hearer to answer, we often use the imperative mood to direct the hearer to do something. Consider some simple imperative sentences:

(12) Pass the salt!

(13) Form a line!

(14) Turn over your exams now!

The speakers of these sentences seem to command the hearer(s) to do various things: pass the salt, form a line, turn over their exams.

It would be a mistake to generalise from examples like (12) to claim that directives are second-person commands that primarily generate reasons for the hearer to do things. Besides the simple point that we can use the imperative to warn (watch out!), to advise (do more mileage!), and to encourage (come on!), and the complexities that arise when the audience is a group,[16] this view fails to reckon with the ways directives generate commitments for the speaker.

Second-person directives generate a commitment to non-interference. If a speaker utters (12), and then knocks the salt out of the addressee's hand as they are passing it, they are open to legitimate criticism from that addressee that goes beyond general norms against impoliteness.[17] On the face of it, someone who issues a second-person

[16] Notice that (12) directs a single person; (13) directs a group of people to do something together (a single person cannot form a line); (14) directs each of a group of people to do the same thing. On collective and distributive reading of verbs in imperatives, see (Egan 2009).

[17] See Gilbert on the way promises generate commitments for the promisee to not interfere with the promisor (Gilbert 2006: 221)

directive is committing themselves to allowing the hearer do what they command.[18] They might even be generating a commitment to help ('which grinder is the salt?').

Directives can also be used to generate positive commitments for the speaker to act. English grammar textbooks distinguish between ordinary imperatives and let imperatives (Quirk et al. 1985: 827-31, Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 924)[19]:

(15) Open the window! (ordinary imperative)

(16) Let's borrow Kim's car! (let imperative)

The assumed agent of (15) is the hearer, whereas the assumed agent of 16 is *both* the speaker and the hearer. There's also a first-person version of the let imperative:

(17) Let me get a round in!

The 'let me' construction can be used to negotiate rights and permissions ('let me go out mum!'), but in this case (given British pub etiquette) it is used to solve a coordination problem: who is going to the bar next. Let's call examples like (15) that target the hearer's actions *ordinary imperatives,* examples like 16 that target a joint action *let us imperatives*[20], and examples like (17) that target the speaker's actions *let me imperative*s.[21]

So far, this is just linguistic data and some observations about the normative upshots of directives, but it shows that just as askings can concern the hearer (1)-(4), the speaker (5), and both (6), directives can also concern the hearer (12)-(15), the speaker (17), or both (16). To build a theory of speech acts that can explain these cases, we need to introduce a couple of ideas.

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[18] There are cases in which this commitment is systematically flouted: think about an army training officer who orders a private to do fifty push-ups then puts his foot on their back. I suspect that the point of this flouting is to establish a habit of not questioning authority when it violates norms.

[19] See (Portner 2018a: 307) on pitch in imperatives. The cross-linguistic picture here is complex, see (Zanuttini, Pak, and Portner 2012) on mood markers in Korean.

[20] Let us imperatives are sometimes associated with the hortative mood and the speech act of *exhortation* (see Portner 2018b: 128-9). This is misleading because (16) isn't really used to encourage or exhort the hearer. Compare (16) with a clear exhortation: a spectator at a bike race shouting 'Allez! Allez! Allez!'. In defence of classifying the let us construction as an imperative it's worth noting that many languages would use a plural construction with a verb marked for the imperative to translate 16). A reasonable French translation of (16) is:

(1) Prenons la voiture de Kim.

[21] See Hare (1963, C4), who identifies the content of evaluative judgements with the first-person imperative: *let me do A!.*

First, we need the idea that conversation is a joint activity in which we plan together about what we are going to do and inquire into questions on the basis of shared assumptions. This idea is central to Stalnaker's and Roberts's work in formal pragmatics, and the success of that project provides pretty good support for the claim as a working assumption. [22]

Although this view has prominent supporters, if we look at real-world communication, we might worry that conversational co-operation an idealising assumption (Beaver and Stanley 2018, Keiser 2022, Muhelbach 2022). This issue deserves more attention than we have space for here, but we can make two preliminary points.

First, it is possible for one activity to be co-operative under one description and non-co-operative under another. Two chess players are co-operating in their following of the rules, and competing in their attempts to achieve checkmate (Suits 1967). Similarly, shared intentional activities can take place within coercive social institutions. An enslaved person might cut a client's hair with their master, with both parties having a shared intention which was unilaterally determined by the master (see James 1989: 33). To say that conversation is a joint activity is to say that it involves a minimum amount of co-operation, not that it is fully co-operative.

Second, we need the idea that the mental state correlate of directives are intentions—rather than desires or reasons—and the idea that a directive is a proposal to take up a shared intention. As I will use the term, shared intentions are intentions where the agent of the intention is two or more people, which normatively govern the actions of both parties. The idea that the upshot of directives are shared intentions has been defended by Daniel Harris (2021) and Brendan de Kenessy (2020, 2022).[23] Harris uses this idea to explain the validity of imperative inference patterns, while de Kenessy uses it to offer account for the normative behaviour of a family of speech acts including promising, suggesting, and offering.[24] A shared intention generates obligations for everyone who participates in it, but its content can concern just one person. A and B can have a shared intention that A and B together do something, but A and B might just as

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[22] One might wonder whether the shared proposal view of asking is already articulated in Roberts' work. She comes close: 'Lewis (1969) treats questions as a type of imperative; this strikes me as correct in that a question, if accepted dictates that the interlocutors choose among the alternatives which it proffers […] If a question is accepted by the interlocutors, this commits them to a *common goal*, finding the answer'. (Roberts 1996: 6:5)

[23] Portner's to-do list model of directive meaning comes close to endorsing this idea, but he seems to think about to-do lists as corresponding to sets of individual intentions (Portner 2007)

[24] de Kenessy offers a typology of directive speech acts distinguished by their target and the routine used to establish them: either *propose-and-challenge* or *propose-and-ratify* (de Kenessy 2022). Do we see a similar distinction in routines used to establish proposals to answer questions? At least in some languages: Farkas (2020) argues that the particle '*oare*' in Romanian allows a speaker to ask a question while leaving it open whether it will be taken up, which we might think of as an example of the propose-and-ratify routine for the speech act of asking.

well have a shared intention that A do something.[25] The idea that directives are proposals for shared intentions whose content can vary allows us to suggest that an ordinary directive is a proposal that the speaker and hearer form a shared intention *that the hearer(s) do something*, a let us directive is a proposal that the speaker and hearer form a shared intention *that the speaker and hearer(s) do something*, and a let me directive is a proposal that the speaker and hearer(s) form a shared intention *that the speaker do something*. We need shared intentions in these cases to explain why ordinary directives and let me directives generate commitments to non-interference for the speaker and hearer respectively. The fact that a speaker participates in a shared intention that a hearer does something explains her obligation to not interfere.

This tripartite picture can then be transposed to the case of asking. The initial cases (1)-(3), and teacher asking (4) involve the proposal for a shared intention that the hearer answers the question, self-directed asking (5) involves a proposal for a shared intention that the speaker answers the question, and shared asking (6) involves a proposal for a shared intention that the speaker and hearer together answer a question.[26]

The default view combines an expression claim, a claim about the speaker's aims, and the claim that asking is or involves an ordinary imperative. The shared proposal view replaces the third claim with the idea that asking is a proposal for a shared intention to answer a question. This gets us a core account of asking:

Shared Proposal view of Asking.

A speaker *S* asks a hearer *H* a question Q iff either:

i) *S* proposes that *S* and *H* adopt a shared intention that *H* answer *Q*.

ii) *S* proposes that *S* and *H* adopt a shared intention that *S* answer *Q*.

iii) *S* proposes that *S* and *H* adopt a shared intention that *S* and *H* answer *Q*.

How should the supporter of the shared proposal view think about the relation between asking, intentions to answer, and interrogative attitudes?

If an individual intention to answer a question aims at individual knowledge of its answer, then we might think that a shared intention to answer a question aims at shared

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[25] For the analogous point about individual intentions—that I can intend that we do something—see (Bratman 1999)

[26] At this point, a reader might worry whether we are solving a problem about asking by assuming a tendentious picture of directing. The view that directive involves proposals in shared planning requires defence (see Habgood-Coote MS), and it is a positive feature of the shared proposal view of asking that it fits into a more general picture of directing. It would be quite possible to endorse the shared proposal view of asking, and to continue to think that directing is not a kind of shared proposal. Part of the point of the tangent into thinking about directives is for the sake of the reader: I think the different kinds of proposal are easier to distinguish in the case of directives than in the case of askings.

knowledge of its answer.[27] This idea is plausible in light of our examples of speakers asking questions they know the answers to—(4) and (5)—but we need to finesse the kind of shared knowledge which is aimed at. If A and B between them know everyone who came to a party—A knows that C came, and B knows that D came—it would be quite reasonable for either of them to ask 'who came to the party?' to pool their knowledge. There is a kind of shared knowledge—distributed knowledge[28]—which is possessed before this pooling. Following Stalnaker on the point of assertion (Stalnaker 1984), we might think that asking aims at common knowledge of the complete answer to a question: such that each person in a conversation knows the full answer, knows that each person knows the full answer and so on. This allows us to make sense of the point of asking a question even when all participants in a conversation know the answer—as is often the case in teacher asking—doing so gets the answer to the question into common knowledge.

If asking is a proposal for a shared interrogative attitude, we shouldn't think of asking as expressing a shared interrogative attitude. Asking is meant to establish such an attitude. There remains a question whether asking needs to express individual interrogative attitudes. We've seen that asking can be appropriate without a hearer having an interrogative attitude—(1), (2), (3), and (5)—and without a speaker having an interrogative attitude—(4), and (5). If it is possible for a group to have an interrogative attitude to a question which none of its members have that attitude to, it will also be possible for a speaker to ask a hearer a question which neither bears an interrogative attitude toward.[29] An example: if you and I are employees at a carpentry workshop, I might point towards some planks and ask 'are these the right length?' meaning to propose a shared plan to find out whether they are. You and I might not be curious about, wondering about, or desire to know the answer to this question when I ask it: we're just doing our jobs. At most we want that the question is answered, which is not the same as wanting to know the answer. It would be quite reasonable for us to forget the answer once we've told our boss.[30] After a shared proposal to answer a question has

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[27] What about the following case? B has forgotten the password to his bank account. A and B form a plan to help B work out what the password is without A coming to know it. There's quite a bit to say about this case, but I'd want to say that in this case the shared intention has as its content not that B answers the question, but [that A helps B to learn the answer]. It would be difficult to propose this kind of asymmetric shared plan by asking 'what is my/B's password?'.

[28] A group distributed knows something if it follows from the pooling of its members' knowledge (Fagin, Halpern, Moses, & Vardi 1995, Meyer and van der Hoek 1995).

[29] These facts will have consequences for how to think about insincere and bullshit asking. If insincere asking is not a matter of the speaker or hearer lacking an interrogative attitude, we might instead think about insincerity and bullshitting in asking in terms of the reasons for which the speaker asks the question.

[30] There's an interesting question how we ought to make sense of question-asking in non-cooperative contexts in which neither speaker or hearer wants to find out the answer to the

been accepted, the speaker and hearer will need to have whatever pattern of individual mental states are necessary for the shared intention, which need not be a pair of individual intentions to answer the question (see Gilbert 1990, Bratman 1992, 1999). Although proposing a shared plan to answer a question might not require any interrogative attitudes, it will often be accompanied by an intention to answer the question on the part of the speaker, the hearer, or both. Asking a question can also sometimes presuppose that the speaker or hearer doesn't have an interrogative attitude towards the question asked (recall teacher asking and ordinary asking). Similarly, although it is possible to propose a shared plan to answer a question which both speaker and hearer already know the answer to, asking a question will often be accompanied by presuppositions that the hearer, the speaker, or neither knows the answer to the question. These different kinds of shared proposals, accompanied by different distributions of interrogative attitudes and prior knowledge allow us to make sense of our full set of cases:

- Ordinary asking (1), (2), and (3):
    - Proposal for a shared intention that the hearer answer;
    - Presupposition that the speaker intends to answer the question;
    - Presupposition that the speaker doesn't know and the hearer does know the answer.
- Teacher asking (4):
    - Proposal for a shared intention that the hearer answer;
    - Presupposition that the speaker doesn't intend to answer the question;
    - Presupposition that the speaker knows the answer.
- Self-directed asking (5):
    - Proposal for a shared intention that the speaker answer;
    - Presupposition that the speaker doesn't intend to answer the question;
    - Presupposition that the speaker knows the answer.
- Shared asking (6):
    - Proposal for a shared intention that the speaker and hearer answer;
    - No presupposition about interrogative attitudes;

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question asked. In a political interview, an interviewer might try very hard to get a politician to admit something which is already a matter of common knowledge. In legal questioning, lawyers often ask questions which are designed to give the audience evidence about the hearer's beliefs whether they choose to answer or not (see Berstler 2023).

- Presupposition that neither the speaker nor hearer knows the complete answer.

By filling in the details of the different kinds of asking, we make clear that the problem with the default view was its insufficient generality: something close to this view comes out as a special case of the shared proposal view of asking. These four cases don't exhaust the category of asking. There remains a job of work to be done mapping out the diversity of asking, and making sense of how we distinguish between different kinds of asking, using prosodical, grammatical, and contextual features. If there is a category of declaratives with rising pitch, we might expect to also see categories of interrogatives with flat and falling pitch. It seems plausible—although this would require phonological evidence—that in English a strong pitch raise at the end of an interrogative or on a wh-word indicates that the speaker is engaged in ordinary asking, whereas final pitches in interrogatives that are flat, slightly rising, or even falling can indicate self-directed, teacher, and shared asking.[31]

5. The Norms of Asking and the Norms of Inquiry

Recent work on inquiry has proposed a triad of norms on inquiry:

> **BELIEF:** One must: inquire into *Q*, only if one doesn't believe a complete answer to *Q* (Friedman 2017).
>
> **IGNORANCE:** One must: inquire into *Q*, only if one doesn't know a complete answer to *Q* (Whitcomb 2017).
>
> **KNOWLEDGE:** One must: inquire into *Q*, only if one knows that the presuppositions of *Q* hold (Willard-Kyle 2023). [32]

The verb 'inquire' is ambiguous, meaning that there are three versions each norm:

i) A norm on the possession of interrogative attitudes;

ii) A norm on the activity of inquiry;

iii) A norm on the speech act of asking.

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[31] Linguists have increasingly recognised that rising pitch in declaratives is associated with a number of different pragmatic and social roles, including contradictory questions, incredulity, confirmatory questions, metalinguistic questions, and uptalk (Jeong 2018). See also (Sider MS) on slightly rising declaratives.

[32] Haziza (2023) argues that there is a hearer knowledge norm on asking someone a question. Haziza restricts this norm to Searle's category of real questions, and notes that shared asking and teacher asking will provide counterexamples to this norm.

Whether norms on interrogative attitudes entail norms on inquiry and norms on asking depends on the relation between interrogative attitudes, inquiry, and asking. For the most part it has been assumed that since asking expresses an interrogative attitude, the norms on asking are probative for the norms on inquiry (see Bach 2008 on the analogous point about assertion and belief).[33] Teacher asking and self-directed asking show that it is quite reasonable to ask a question which you don't want to or intend to answer. This means that there is no reason to expect alignment between the norms of interrogative attitudes and the norms of asking. In the rest of this section, I'll argue that the norms of asking involve collective states, rather than individual states. This argument has no consequences for the norms of inquiry or interrogative attitudes. It might be that you shouldn't believe and inquire, but that it is quite legitimate to ask a question you believe the answer to (as teachers and Douglass do).

The recent debate about the norms of inquiry has focused on a puzzle about asking: there are clear patterns of Moorean sentences for asking which support the belief, ignorance, and knowledge norms on asking, but there are also clear cases where acceptance asking flouts these norms.

Consider the following sentences:

(18) #I think that Marti parked the car, but did Marti park the car? (Millson 2020: 684);

(19) #I know it is snowing, but is it snowing? (Whitcomb 2017: 149);

(20) #I don't know whether there is a party, but when is the party? (Willard-Kyle 2023: 633).

Each of these sentences seems bad in a similar way to Moore's 'It's raining, but I don't believe that it is'. There are various ways to explain this badness, but a natural thought would be to lean on the norms of asking. If BELIEF is correct, then the first half of (18) states that the speaker has a belief which answers a question, while the second half

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[33] (Friedman 2017) is an exception. Friedman's subject matter is the activity of inquiry (in the Vendlerian sense of 'activity' see (Friedman 2024)). She argues that this activity requires an interrogative attitude: a state which aims at the resolution of the question (Friedman 2017: 279-9), and endorses this norm:

> **DBI:** One ought not to inquire into/have an interrogative attitude towards *Q* at *t* and believe *pQ* at *t*. (2017: 303).

Friedman's argues that someone who is going through the motions of an investigation without having an interrogative attitude is not truly inquiring (Friedman 2017: 301), meaning that they don't fall within the scope of DBI.

represents the speaker as having no belief about the answer to this question. The diagnosis is that (18) is weird because it represents the speaker as both believing and disbelieving. The explanation for (19) and (20) goes similarly. If IGNORANCE is correct, then (19) represents the speaker as both knowing and not knowing whether it is snowing (Whitcomb 2017: 155-6)). If KNOWLEDGE is correct, then (20) represents the speaker as both not knowing and knowing that there is a party (Willard-Kyle 2023).

Despite this pattern, there are cases of asking which flout these norms without being at all inappropriate. Against the belief norm, Millson points out that biased interrogatives can be combined with an answer:

(21) Jim smokes, doesn't he? (Millson 2020: 689)

Someone who utters this sentence seeks to confirm that their beliefs about a question are correct, combining the expression of belief with asking a question.[34] Similarly, against the knowledge norm Falbo (2021, 2023) points out that in high-stakes scenarios it is appropriate to ask questions which you know the answer to (see Brown 2008). If a surgeon is about to operate, even if she knows which kidney should be removed it would be appropriate for her to ask:

(22) Can you please confirm: is it the left kidney or is it the right kidney? (Falbo 2021: 626)

This speaker here seeks to double-check that the speaker knows which kidney to extract and combines knowledge of a complete answer with asking a question. Finally, we can use asking to check whether the presupposition of a question is correct:

(23) I don't know how your university is structured, but are you a member of the philosophy department?

The first part of this sentence denies knowledge of the presupposition of a question (the university might have two or zero philosophy departments), but the second half still asks the question, seeking both to check its presupposition and to answer it.[35]

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[34] We can get similar data with echo questions (*A*: Jim Smokes, *B*: Jim smokes?) and with certain focus patterns on (18). Consider:

(18a) $[I]_F$ think that Marti parked the car, but did Marti park the car?

(18b) I $[think]_F$ that Marti parked the car, but did Marti park the car?

[35] It seems to me that this pattern is acceptable with polar questions, but unacceptable with wh-questions, but it is not clear why.

The shared proposal view connects asking to joint—rather than individual—inquiry, claiming that asking aims to establish common knowledge of the answer to the question asked. If this view is right and there are norms of asking, they will presumably concern both the speaker and hearer taken together. Instead of a requirement that the speaker doesn't believe a complete answer, we might expect a requirement that the speaker and hearer don't have a common belief about a complete answer. Instead of a requirement that the speaker doesn't know a complete answer, we might expect a requirement that the speaker and hearer don't have common knowledge of the complete answer. Instead of a requirement that the speaker knows the presuppositions of the question, we might expect a requirement that the speaker and hearer between them know the presuppositions of the question.[36] Rather than BELIEF, IGNORANCE, and KNOWLEDGE, the shared proposal view naturally supports

> **COMMON BELIEF:** A speaker *S* must: ask a hearer *H Q*, only if *S* and *H* don't have a common belief which is a complete answer to *Q*.
>
> **SHARED IGNORANCE:** A speaker *S* must: ask a hearer *H Q*, only if *S* and *H* don't have common knowledge about the complete answer to *Q*.
>
> **DISTRIBUTED KNOWLEDGE:** A speaker *S* must: ask a hearer *H Q*, only if *S* and *H* have distributed knowledge of the presuppositions of *Q*.

These norms can explain the appropriateness of the cases of asking that caused problems for the individual belief, ignorance, and knowledge norms. When a speaker utters a biased interrogative like (21), they are both expressing their belief and asking a question as a way of (perhaps tentatively) proposing a proposition to add to the common ground. When a speaker utters a double-checking question, they are simultaneously presupposing that they know the answer to a question, and trying to achieve common knowledge of the answer. Common knowledge will often be sensitive to more defeaters or a greater evidence base, so there is a sense that the speaker in this case is trying to upgrade from individual to common knowledge. When a speaker utters a sentence like (23), they are asking a question while leaning on their expectations about what the hearer knows.

What about the Moorean sentences (18), (19), and (20)? Here the shared proposal view can exploit the heterogeneity of asking. Asking does not in general presuppose either that the speaker doesn't believe or know the answer to a question, or that they know that its presuppositions hold. However, it would be reasonable to suggest that there are kinds of asking which are associated with different presuppositions. Plausibly, ordinary asking makes all three of these presuppositions. This claim should be treated as a

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[36] Why not common knowledge of presuppositions? Because a speaker can use a question to introduce new presuppositions into a conversation. I suggest that what matters is that the presupposition is known by the speaker (ordinary asking), the hearer (presupposition checking), or that knowledge of the presupposition it is distributed between them.

hypothesis. The shared proposal view denies any general connection between asking and the beliefs and knowledge of speaker and hearer, so there is a substantive question how different kinds of asking are signalled in conversation. If it turns out that ordinary asking presupposes lack of belief, ignorance, and knowledge of presuppositions, and (18), (19), and (20) have grammatical or contextual markers of ordinary asking, we can explain the badness of these sentences in basically the same way as we did above, only appealing to presuppositions rather than general norms of asking.

Conclusion

To answer the question we started with: asking a question is a proposal in shared inquiry for a shared intention that the speaker, the hearer, or both answers a question. This view does better than the default view in explaining the diversity of asking, fits into an attractive picture of directives as proposals for shared intentions, and suggests norms of asking which can explain the normative behaviour of asking. I don't think that we've fully surveyed the different things we can do with asking, but the shared proposal view provides the beginnings of a better map.

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