

Philosophy and the Art of the Question
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Hand-out

Structure of the talk:

Introduction

Part 1: Questions as the philosopher's tools

Part 2: The nature and structure of questions

Part 1

W. Sellars: "The aim of philosophy, abstractly formulated, is to understand how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term."
(*Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man*)

But: scientists do this too!

How does philosophy distinguish itself from science? Not one correct answer. One important difference, *prima facie*, is that all scientists seem to have certain tools at their disposal, whereas philosophers do not. In a certain sense, however, philosophers use tools too: questions.


Questions as Tools?


Daniel Dennett: "While other disciplines specialize in getting the right answers to their defining questions, we philosophers specialize in all the ways there are of getting things so mixed up, so deeply wrong, that nobody is even sure what the right questions are, let alone the answers. **Every inquiry is in danger of setting off on the wrong foot, by asking the wrong questions. Wherever that happens, this is a job for philosophers!** Philosophy—in every field of inquiry—is what you have to do until you figure out what questions you should have been asking in the first place."
(*Intuition Pumps*)

How do philosophers do this? By asking questions! Philosophers ask questions about questions to lay bare the tacit assumptions which might set off an inquiry on the wrong foot. Example: Brain mapping projects.

- Questions are the subject matter of philosophy
- Questions are the tools of philosophy

Analogy with the tool-using artist. 

Again: Questions as tools? Example of the waving friend across the street & representational tools

Questions as tools in daily life  Questions in philosophy: example of HPC

Part 2

Remarkably little philosophical attention to questions, despite their centrality for the philosophical practice.

Rudyard Kipling:

I keep six honest serving-men;
(They taught me all I knew)
Their names are **What** and **Where** and **When**
And **How** and **What** and **Who**. (*The Elephant's Child*)

2 crucial insights: 1) The questions we ask constrain our answers (knowledge).


2) The kind of questions we can ask is cognitively constrained

} = DOUBLE
} CONSTRAINT

1. The questions-constrain-the-answer principle = semantic principle

understanding a question means understanding what does, and what does not qualify as a possible answer; every question always already is an answer: it has already answered the more fundamental question of which kind of answer will be eligible, that is, what the answer in general must look like.

2. Content questions and polar questions

- 6 content questions: universal?
- Why these content questions?  The structure of our questions might reveal something important about the structure of our minds.
- What do content questions ask for?



1. A when question wants to situate something in time
2. A where question wants to situate something in space
3. A why question asks for an explanation in terms of reasons
4. A how question asks for the way in which things are or the way in which they have happened
5. A who question asks for a person or a personified entity
6. A what question asks for an identification

6': A 'which-question' asks for the identification of a non-person within a disjunction (and is reducible to a what-question).

6'': A 'whose-question' asks for the identification of a person within a disjunction (and is reducible to a who-question).

Internal structure of content questions: priority of WHAT and WHO (also in other languages)

Other content questions are paraphrasable as what-questions, often in combination with hypostatization and reification! = tendency to reify is part of language

Who-questions are similar to what questions, but they ask for a someone, not a something



- At a fundamental cognitive level, humans distinguish between persons and the rest of nature
- Primacy of the What-question, but: what does a what-question ask for?