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Contribution to The Socratic Handbook:

The Art of Questioning

Abstract:

What is meant by the Socratic approach in philosophical counseling is that counselors restrain themselves to mainly ask questions, and refrain from giving advices and their own opinions. In this way they make room for the client's thought in the know yourself manner. It is thus paramount to master the art of questioning. This requires knowledge of the different kinds of questions, and what they can or cannot do. The question quadrant distinguishes in a neat way philosophical questions from the factual ones and the imaginative ones. But it should be noted that the counselor must not be dismissive of factual and imaginative questions, even if philosophical questions are what we primarily want to discuss.

A Socratic approach in philosophical counseling requests that the practitioner is the one who asks questions, and not the sage who tells the client what to do, or what is the case, or what it is appropriate to mean. Granted that the practitioner can resort to other techniques as well, like sharing an experience of his¹ own with the client, or proposing a metaphor to consider, the art of questioning remains his main tool when thinking together with the client. Encouraging and assisting the client in "giving birth" to her thought, in order to have it revealed and examined, is as necessary when dealing with "real life problems" as when assessing an interlocutor's knowledge of a certain general concept, as Socrates (according to Plato) restricted himself to.

Being the philosopher who asks instead of giving sage advices was just as shocking in Socrates' times as it is today. Most people would now, as then, prefer a counselor who says, like the sophist Gorgias, that nobody has asked him a new

¹ For reasons of clarity and style I refer to the practitioner/counselor as him/he, and to the client as her/she, even if I am fully aware that lots of practitioners are women, and lots of clients are men. No gender bias is intended.

question these many years that he could not answer.² Compared with such a bold statement, Socrates' humble saying that he only knows that he knows nothing, appears to be far less reassuring. It nevertheless is the case that the counselor knows nothing when the session starts, that is about the client's life and problems. He must, in tune with the Socratic irony, decline any request to give advices, and just ask questions instead. Why does the client want a consultation? What does she find hard to deal with right now? What does she expect to achieve during the consultations? And so on.

In order to maintain the Socratic irony (which has proved to be a productive kind of irony), the counselor must keep his own assumptions and personal wisdom to himself. If the client demands his opinion on this or that, he should reply with a question like "Why do you want to know my opinion on this?" Enervating as this may be to the client, it opens up a space for her thoughts. Asking questions on the one hand, and restraining oneself from giving one's own opinions on the other hand, amounts to holding up a mirror where the client sees herself in the Socratic "know thyself" sense: This is how you think about yourself, and about life in general. Do you like it? Or do you not like it? If so, why not? Such considerations may empower the client to deal differently with her situation, at least by realizing that it is quite possible to think differently, and maybe more constructive, on the issue in question.

The question quadrant

Mastering the art of questioning does not only require practice, but also an intellectual insight in what kinds of questions there are, and when to employ these different kinds. The art of questioning thus resembles a virtue in the Aristotelian sense, where the combination of practice and insight is a must. Here the theoretical insight mainly consists in identifying different categories of questions, in order to enhance our awareness and sensitivity of what a question can or cannot do. As different kinds of questions are to a philosopher like different kinds of scalpels are to a surgeon, we surely must know which one to choose at which instance.

The Australian philosopher Phil Cam has made a neat classification of the different kinds of questions by constructing a "question quadrant" in his work on

² Plato: *Gorgias*. In: *Plato. The collected dialogues*, Bollingen Series LXXI Princeton, 1961, p. 231.

philosophy in the classroom.³ Cam's question quadrant contains four squares, each containing a basic kind of questions. A bit modified it is like this:⁴

One right answer	Examine the text! questions	Use your imagination! questions	Many possible answers
	Ask an expert! questions	Use your head – think! questions	

1. "Examine the text!" questions

"Examine the text!" questions (in tune with Cam I employ a straight-forward, childish terminology, as this is just as precise as any academic term, and fully adequate for our purposes) is about reading (or listening) comprehension. Examples of such questions are: Did Cinderella leave the ball before midnight, or not? What does Hamlet say when he holds the skull in his hand? How many addresses or places does the Beatles song *Penny lane* contain? This kind of questions has only one right answer, which can be found in a specific text. Its purpose is to find out if the pupil has paid attention to, or understood, the text the class is dealing with.

Such questions are also relevant for recalling speech, even if a faulty memory may betray us here. In a counseling session it might sometimes be necessary to restate what the client has said, in order to establish what is (or is not) the case. This is about clarification: Have I understood you correctly? And even: Have you understood yourself correctly?, as this is not always the case. The counselor might even find that the client tends to modify, or flatly deny, what she has said, knowing

³ Philip Cam: *20 Thinking Tools*, ACER Press, 2006.

⁴ I have left out the notion of open versus closed questions, as Cam's terminology on this differs from European (or at least in Scandinavian) language. In Cam's terminology, a closed question has just one right answer, while an open question has many possible answers. In Scandinavian terminology this is instead about the grammatical structure of the question: A closed question starts with a verb and demands a yes/no-answer, while an open question starts with a "question word" like why and who – see the last part of this chapter.

that there is no way to prove what has been said in a conversation that is not recorded. Then he has discovered an issue of its own to probe into.

Some counselors repeat and write down crucial statements the client puts forward, and ask for the client's approval before moving on, in order to confront the client with these later on, should it be needed. Then the client cannot as easily as before escape from her own words, and has to take this into consideration. A counseling session may benefit from this.

2. *"Ask an expert!" questions*

"Ask an expert!" questions are factual, empirical questions like: Who invented the light bulb? What is the easiest way to drive from Oslo to Stockholm? How does one make an apfel strudel? What is a black hole? This kind of questions asks for something we can google, or find out by looking up in a dictionary, or by asking an expert on a certain topic. Like the "Examine the text!" questions they have only one right answer, and are therefore of limited philosophical interest. In traditional pedagogy, where a transfer of factual knowledge from the teacher to the pupil is pivotal, this kind of questions is predominant. Good pupils are expected to pose such questions, which the teacher will reply, with a textbook or an answer book in hand. During tests, it is the teacher who asks the pupils such questions, in order to find out how much factual knowledge they remember.

There are people who win all the quiz contests because they have accumulated an astonishing amount of facts in a wide range of fields, but who are not inclined to reflect upon values and the meaning of life, and other "big" philosophical questions. Of such people one can say that "They know everything, but that's everything they know". This is what eventually happens when the focus is mainly on factual questions, while "philosophical" questions are deemed irrelevant, and a waste of time, since they have no right answer.

In a philosophical session one does not expect factual questions to be predominant in such a way. If a client wants to fix a leak in her kitchen sink, she should consult a plumber and not a philosopher. It might, however, be the case that such a trivial problem troubles the client so much that it surpasses the practical "how to fix it?" level, and amounts to a metaphor or a symbol of something bigger and more existential in her life. Then the counselor should probe into these aspects of the issue, and leave the "how to fix it?" part alone.

Is the counselor then to avoid asking “Ask an expert!” questions altogether, since they are merely factual? No, it is not as clear-cut as that. If the client tends to speak in general terms, maybe even from the start, it can be necessary to ask for a concrete example, in order to establish a clearer picture of what the issue is all about.

A client may for instance lament in general terms of being harassed by her neighbors. Then the counselor should not accept this at face value, and gullibly conduct a general discussion on the misfortune of being harassed, even if the client wants just that. He must instead make her provide an example of the harassment, and analyze this in its factual details. If the example turns out to be valid, the general discussion on harassment is justified. But if the example proves to be weak, or even dubious, then both the counselor and the client have discovered a particular way of perceiving things in the client, which might be the real problem. The private eye saying “Never trust your client!” applies for philosophical counselors as well, as it is not just a cynical wise-crack, but contains hard-earned wisdom. And the way to make use of this wisdom is to pose well-directed, factual questions for clarifying purposes.

Basic informal logic tells us that if one or more of the premises are untrue, the conclusion will also be untrue, even if the logical reasoning is valid. Philosophical counselors must bear this in mind, and not accept underlying, and often unstated, premises in a too lenient way, just because they are of a factual, and not of a philosophical, kind. A statement like “I am being harassed by my neighbors” can very well be regarded as a conclusion based on unstated premises, and then a check on the premises’ truth-values is called for. It is a gross misunderstanding to refrain from factual questions, just because one is a philosopher. One gets easily misled by relying on general concepts and informal logical reasoning alone.

3. *“Use your imagination!” questions*

Moving to the right half of the question quadrant, we arrive at the kinds of questions that have no right answer, but many possible answers. At the top right is the “Use your imagination!” kind of questions, like “How would it be to be able to fly (like Peter Pan)?”, “What was Jesus’ favorite dish?”, and “What would you do if an animal started to speak to you?”. Such questions are either counter-factual, or asks for something we cannot know for sure (no historical source refers to Jesus’ favorite dish, even if he probably had one, so here we can only take a guess).

Children are especially intrigued by “Use your imagination!” questions, as they have not yet developed the resistance to fantasize that we so often find in grown-ups. Traditional pedagogy does not encourage fantasy-based speculations, but tends rather to dismiss this as a kind of childishness one is supposed to rise above, in order to become a rational, responsible and mature citizen.

Philosophers may also be suspicious of fantasizing, even if the counter-examples one routinely produces in analytical philosophy can be quite imaginative. The general tune is that fantasizing and reasoning do not go well together. But if this is so, why are we then so keen on telling non-philosophers to step out of their daily routine and start wondering about how things are, as wondering is the very prerequisite for philosophizing? This in fact calls for imagination, as it takes imagination to establish counter-factual scenarios like “Why isn’t the sky green instead of blue?”, or “Why does thunder come after the lightning, and not vice versa?”, or “Why doesn’t mom read the paper while dad does the dish-washing?”

To question what is given instead of just accepting it can be both revealing and disturbing, and can even have a revolutionary potential. It calls for a satisfactory explanation of why things are as they are, and not different. Or for another explanation if the present one turns out to be dubious.

In a counseling session it can be fruitful to encourage the client to use her imagination, in order to make her fully realize that things could have been different indeed. Challenging her with a “Use your imagination!” question is an efficient way of tipping her habitual thinking off balance, and thus create a wider space for what it is possible to think. Indulging in a fantasy journey together with the client can be both fun and mind-blowing, and establish a basis for much bolder philosophizing than what would elsewhere be the case. Even if fantasizing is not philosophizing, it might pave the way for productive reasoning on the issue in question. Enhancing a mode of playfulness and creativity is just as welcome in philosophical counseling as it is in science and in philosophy at large.

4. “Use your head – think!” questions

Even if “Use your imagination!” questions establish the basis for philosophizing by making us wonder why things are as they are, they do not ensure rational reasoning. People have probably used their imagination and wondered about small and big issues since the dawn of man, but the answers they settled for, were mostly of a

mythological kind, and not philosophical. While mythological explanations are commonplace all over the world, philosophical and scientific explanations are exceptions, and not the natural way of dealing with wondering. It was not until two and a half thousand years ago that some wise and wondering men in what is now Turkey and Greece introduced *logos* – which means both word and reason – as an alternative to the familiar *mythos*.

While mythological thinking is narrative (by producing intriguing and seductive stories, packed with meaning), the logos thinking is dry and hypothetical. It merely proposes a hypothesis that can be examined by way of critical thinking and (when possible) be subjected to empirical testing. A hypothesis is falsifiable, and that is considered a strength and not a weakness.

The fourth kind of questions in the question quadrant, the “Use your head – think!” questions, is the product of this development. Originally scientific and philosophical questions were mixed together, but when the scientific ones eventually turned into empirical, factual questions, the remaining ones became what we today label philosophical questions. Socrates was the first to combine critical thinking with philosophical questions, as he was primarily interested in moral issues, and not in questions like “What is the world made of?”, that so much preoccupied thinkers before him.

Philosophical questions require us to stop fantasizing, and to stop looking for factual answers. While “What would you do if an animal started to speak to you?” calls for imagination, the related question “Would it be okay to eat animals if they could speak?” does not. It is instead an example of a “Use your head – think!” question. Other examples are: What does it mean to be an adult person?, Is there a God?, Should we always tell the truth?

Unlike mathematical problems, “Use your head – think!” questions do not have one right answer, but many possible answers. They cannot be solved once and for all, or proven to be unsolvable. One common way of distinguishing “factual questions” from “philosophical questions” is thus to state that the latter ones have not one right answer. This is okay as long as we bear in mind that the same thing goes for “Use your imagination!” questions, which are not philosophical. Only “Use your head – think!” questions can be deemed philosophical in the strict sense, and that is why philosophical counselors should aim at identifying such questions, both in one-to-one consultations and when facilitating group conversations. Getting from a

concrete, personal problem to a generally stated philosophical question is a must, as it is only when we deal with such questions we can reason in a philosophical way.

A philosophical consultation is, however, a bumpy road between the concrete and the general. There we move back and forth between these two domains, in order to demonstrate that even the most abstract philosophical questions are rooted in real, everyday life. This is, after all, the basic conviction of philosophical practice. Then it follows that we cannot settle for philosophical questions alone, and judge a consultation to be more successful the more it indulges in general, abstract issues – and less successful the more it deals with concrete, factual issues. Even if we agree with Hegel that Plato does not philosophize when he tells stories about prisoners in a cave, and about riding a chariot with a white and a black horse etc., we must concede that these stories are indispensable in Plato's thinking at large.

On a far more modest level, philosophical counselors should then accept that anecdotes and examples and moments of fantasizing are indispensable for arriving at the golden moments when "real" philosophizing take place. "Use your head – think!" questions are surely what we strive for, but that must not make us too dismissive of the other three kinds of questions. All of them are needed, and have their place in the art of questioning. An apt counselor is well aware of that.

"Open" and "closed" questions

Finally I have some remarks on the notion of "open" versus "closed" questions, as this is highlighted both in philosophical practice and in psychology. In the Scandinavian vocabulary, "open questions" start with a "question word", which is one of Kipling's six honest serving-men in his famous, little poem (that goes like this: "I keep six honest serving-men / (They taught me all I knew); / Their names are What and Where and When / And How and Why and Who."⁵ Even if a seventh serving-man named Which is not mentioned, I assume that he was of good assistance, too.) Since such questions allow the interlocutor to answer freely, by giving an explanation and even tell a story in her own words, they are labelled "open".

"Closed" questions, on the other hand, start with a verb (Examples: Have you done your homework?, Was the movie any good?, Are you all right?). They are labeled "closed" since they only allow for a yes or no (or a don't know) answer.

⁵ The poem is from one of Rudyard Kipling's "Just So-Stories" for children.

Philosophical counselors (and psychologists) are strongly advised to ask “open” rather than “closed” questions, in order to make the client speak her mind as freely as possible. In accordance with this, one is wary of asking “closed” questions, as this might restrain the client too much, and even be manipulative by steering the answers too much in a certain direction.

I have no objections to this advice, as long as it is not understood as next to a ban on closed questions. As we see from the question quadrant, questions of all four kinds can be both open and closed, and it would then be odd to avoid closed questions as a categorical rule of thumb. Some of the big philosophical questions are closed, like “Is there a God?”, and “Should we always obey authorities?”. Here the reasons one gives for a yes or no (or a don’t know) answer will be pivotal, and what the discussion is all about. Since reasons both for and against a proposition are numeral, a closed question will open up a wide range of possible answers, just as the open philosophical questions do.

During a consultation it may from time to time be necessary to ask closed, factual questions, in order to establish more precisely what is the case in the client’s narration. “Was he still there when that happened?” is one example, “Did you just imagine this, or did it really happen?” another. (Note that this second example is a kind of a closed question that demands us to choose between two alternatives instead of just answering yes or no – something which can be quite clarifying.)

Such factual, narrowing-in questions, both of a closed and an open kind, enhance the reality orientation in the client, and may thus prove a line of thought to be untenable, or, at the contrary, to be relevant. The simple question “How old are you?” does just that when, for instance, a young person talks about her substantial love life experience, or if an ageing person speaks like a teenager of her future aspirations. Then the answer may instantly prove that the client’s reality orientation is somewhat lacking.

To give another example: If the client tells about her husband’s leaving her with much bitterness, it is not a trifle if this happened six weeks or six years ago. The question “When did this happen?” is all it takes to establish the reasonableness or the pathology of the client’s way of dealing with this incident. Which in turn leads to two different philosophical questions. Far from being too trivial, such a reality check might reveal what the philosophical inquiry should really be about.

About the author:

Morten Fastvold has a master degree in philosophy from the University of Oslo, Norway, and has since 2006 been a philosophical counselor in Oslo. He is also a writer, and has written three books and several essays and papers on philosophical topics (some of them are in English, and available on his website www.fastvold-filopraksis.com/english).