

# WHAT'S THAT QUESTION?

KNOWING QUESTIONS VS KNOWING THINGS

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# Knowledge and its objects

*What* do we know? Maybe\*, a lot of things:

- Facts (*that this bad time won't last*),
- People (*your friend there in the corner looking like a dumbass*),
- Things (*this bubblegum*),
- Topics (*the history of papermaking in China*),
- Places (*your town*),
- Ways (*how to make a carrot cake*)
- Experiences (*what it is like to smell the grass after a rain*)

Can we know *questions*?

\* Maybe we *don't* know *anything* at all strictly speaking. Bear with me though.

# Knowledge of facts and knowledge of questions

Assertions can be seen as answers to questions.

In two ways:

First, assertions typically answer to a *topic under consideration*.

For example, 'assertions can be seen as answers to questions' answers to the topic that I am trying to talk about. You may *presuppose* that I had a reason to say it.

Second, they might be answers to interrogatives.

'Assertions can be seen as answers to questions' answers the interrogative 'to what can assertions be seen as an answer to?'

# Knowledge of the questions behind an assertion

Collingwood (1939):

Every statement that anybody ever makes is made in answer to a question.

*(An Essay on Metaphysics, 23)*

But: how can we tell *which* question?

How do we know the questions behind an assertion?

# Knowledge of questions, then?

So it seems like we can know questions.

Or at least, that we might reasonably *want* to know them.

But what does it mean *to know a question*?

A methodological note: we can take this question descriptively (*what is it to know a question*), but also in a more revisionary sense, and ask *in what way is it better to understand what knowing a question might be*.

Here I will move freely between these two dimensions.

A high-contrast, black and white graphic of a person's face and upper body. The person has their hands raised in a gesture of surprise or questioning. The image is rendered in a stark, almost binary style with no gray tones. The text is overlaid in a bright pink color.

**AND WHAT IS A  
QUESTION, BY  
THE WAY?**

# OK, so what is a question?

One first take: a question is the content of an interrogative expression, something that makes sense with a question mark at the end.

- Who is this book about?
- When will capitalism be replaced?
- Will there be a sea battle tomorrow?

Almost anything can be made into a question in this sense. ('Amanda?', 'Of course? almost? anything? can? be? posed? as? a? question? with? the? right? tone?')

The problem is that the same interrogative may express different questions. So things have to be a little more indirect.

## OK, so what is *really* a question?

Another take: a question correlates to an *issue* or *topic*, something we can have information about. A question can be *answered*, and thereby an issue is *resolved*.

- Did you have a nice breakfast today?

Bears on the issue of *whether* you had a nice breakfast today. This is something that you could have information about. This information could tell you whether you did have a nice breakfast or not. So the question asks which of these holds. Saying 'yes' when you had a nice breakfast gives accurate information, but not if you didn't, obviously.

An issue is a set of ways to answer a question. To have an answer resolves the issue. 'Yes', and 'Yes I did' convey the same answer because they offer the same information.



# Issues in logical space

*Logical space* is the set of all ways things can be.

Any subset of logical space is an informational state: it corresponds to the idea that there is some information that is common to all the worlds in that set, even if that information is just that they belong to the set.

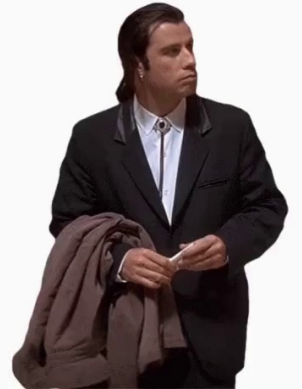
A set of informational states is an issue. Issues are ways to divide logical space.

# Asking and answering as self-locating

Each division of an issue (each set of worlds that make it up) is an answer to a question. When we ask if we had a nice breakfast today we ask if the actual world is in a division of logical space where we had a nice breakfast today.

Answering a question is like locating ourselves in space.

Asking 'is X true?' is just a more abstract way of doing the same as asking 'Am I in Albuquerque?': rather than asking where I am on the surface of the Earth, we ask where we are in logical space.



## What is it to *know* a question, then?

Supposing that questions are divisions of logical space, why not treat knowledge of questions as a special type of knowledge of things? Namely, knowledge of divisions of logical space?

Maybe. But knowing a question is not the only *attitude* we may take towards a question in this sense.

For example, we may *wonder* about a question, or inquire into it, or know the answer to a question, and so on.

So, specifically, what kind of attitude is entailed by knowledge of questions?

# What is it to *know* a question, then?

We also need to distinguish between

- *de dicto* knowledge of questions: we can know *that* there is a question to be asked, without knowing *which*.
- *de re* knowledge of questions: we can know *of* a question, that it is hard.

I want to suggest that *de re* knowledge of questions is different from knowledge *de dicto* of questions, and that this difference is not just a matter of how much *de dicto* knowledge of questions we have.

# What is *de re* question knowledge?

It requires understanding of a question as a question, that is, something that can be meaningfully asked.

It thus requires that we can see how someone could reasonably ask it, that is, how it *arises*.

This suggests that the attitude that question-knowledge requires is different from the attitude that knowledge of facts requires, or that even knowledge of things requires.

It has a different dispositional profile. To use a phrase from John Haugeland, to know a question requires the capacity *to give a damn*.

## Another view

The view of knowledge of questions as supported by the capacity to give a damn about something is non-reductive. Here's a reductive view.

Knowing a question *de re* is a form of know-how.

Namely, it is knowing how to play a game of inquiry of a given type that is appropriate to the question.

The game of inquiry is open ended, like games of make-believe.

It requires *imagination*.

It uses interrogative expressions as *props*.



Questions?



*Thanks!*