

What Kinds of Questions

ROB KOVITZ

So much of how life feels lies in the phrasing



The commander of the Afghan Local Police listens to a question while participating in a key leaders engagement with local Afghan elders in the Shabadeen village, Sarobi district, Paktika province, Afghanistan, Feb. 8, 2012. (U.S. Army photo by Spc. David Barnes/Released)

Question Proposed by the Academy of Dijon
What is the Origin of the Inequality Among Mankind; and whether such Inequality is authorized by the Law of Nature?

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, On the Inequality Among Mankind

In Stephen Harper's world, one does not publicly ask why.

To seek root causes is a sign of weakness.

To launch an inquiry, to bring decision-makers and experts together, is seen as an invitation for opponents to strike or a forum to extort money from the federal government or a waste of time when talk turns his black-and-white world grey.

So, while Harper endures well-deserved criticism for his refusal to consider a national inquiry into murdered and missing aboriginal women in this country, those slinging that criticism can hardly be surprised.

There is no nuance in the prime minister's world. There are bad guys and good guys and there is no public questioning about how we got where we are.

A crime is a crime, it is to be solved and the perpetrator brought to justice. To concede a

“sociological phenomenon” is to invite all manner of inconvenience for his government.

Tim Harper, For Stephen Harper; Governing Means Never Asking

He then desired to know what arts were practised in electing those whom I called commoners; whether a stranger, with a strong purse, might not influence the vulgar voters to choose him before their own landlord, or the most considerable gentleman in the neighborhood? How it came to pass that people were so violently bent upon getting into this assembly, which I allowed to be a great trouble and expense, often to the ruin of their families, without any salary or pension: because this appeared such an exalted strain of virtue and public spirit, that his majesty seemed to doubt it might possibly not be always sincere; and he desired to know whether such zealous gentlemen could have any views of refunding themselves for the charges and trouble they were at, by sacrificing the public good to the designs of a weak and vicious prince, in conjunction with a corrupted ministry? He multiplied his questions, and sifted me thoroughly

upon every part of this head, proposing numberless inquiries and objections, which I think it not prudent or convenient to repeat.

Jonathan Swift, Gulliver's Travels into Several Remote Regions of the World

And yet the question is a real one,
And not for me alone, though certainly for me.
For even if, as Wittgenstein once claimed,
That while the facts may stay the same

And what is true of one is true of both,
The happy and unhappy man inhabit different
worlds,
One still would want to know which world this is,
And how that other one could seem so close.

So much of how life feels lies in the phrasing,
In the way a thought starts, then turns back
upon itself
Until its question hangs unanswered in the
breeze.

John Koethe, North Point North

“But what did happen at Megeve?”

She put this question so urgently that for the first time I felt discouraged, and even more than that, desperate, the kind of despair that overwhelms you when you realize that in spite of your efforts, your good qualities, all your goodwill, you are running into an insurmountable obstacle.

“I’ll tell you about it... Another day...”

There must have been something distraught in my voice or my expression, because she squeezed my arm as though to console me and said:

“Forgive me asking you indiscreet questions... But...”

Patrick Modiano, Missing Person

Who knew that a brief stay in a closet could have such lasting political consequences?

I’m obliged to pose this question after Stephen Harper made a “surprise” visit (there was, of course, nothing surprising about it) to Iraq last weekend, with select members of the parliamentary press gallery in tow.

Andrew Mitrovica, What the Hell Was Harper Doing in Iraq Anyway

“Questions? What kind of questions?” He set his feet on the bike pedals, ready to bolt.

“Don’t worry,” I said, pulling three twenties

from my wallet. “A couple of questions and you’re gone.”

He squinted at me and pulled away. “You ain’t into little boys, is you?”

“No, I prefer girls,” I said. “All grown up.”

“Okay then.”

Andrew Cotto, Outerborough Blues: A Brooklyn Mystery

The lives some people lived! And he was such a nice pink-cheeked boy to look at. “Reads detectives and westerns. Sports: hockey, softball, horse-shoe-pitching. Plays tonette.” Some kind of a whistle, wasn’t it? Ah, here was a clue: “Cannot swim. Questioned if he had a fear of water, soldier hesitated and replied: ‘I’m not really scared of it so long as I know it ain’t deeper than I am. But I’d just as soon not go in the navy.’”

Earle Birney, Turvey: A Military Picaresque

I respond with a question of my own: “Have you ever heard of furies?”

My opportunity to see one in the “flesh” arrived in the form of Furnal Equinox, the largest furry convention in Canada (with 910 attendees). I attended in hopes of learning as much as I could about “the fandom” and uncovering the answers most sexologists are dying to know: Is this a genuine paraphilia? Or are the media exaggerating? Is it even about sex at all?

Debra W. Sob, A Peek Inside a Furry Convention

And who, I ask, can know that he understands anything, unless he do first understand it? In other words, who can know that he is sure of a thing, unless he be first sure of that thing?

Benedict de Spinoza, Ethics, Part 2

Do you need a special room? Do you need a special pen? Do you chant a special chant? Do you write on napkins in the middle of dinner parties? Do you walk a mile, read, then write? Do you practice yoga before your writing hour? Do you wake up early? Do you stay up late? Do you light a candle? Would you write after a particularly comical date? What’s the magic ingredient, all these questions ask, that makes a poet write a poem?

Camille Dungy, Question and Answer: The Top Five

Let $N(Q)$ be the number of questions obtained from FAQ data, let $N(Q+)$ be the number of questions produced by ten expert persons, let

$N(A)$ be the number of answers, let $AVE(N(A)/N(Q))$ be the average number of answers to one question, let $MIN(N(A)/N(Q))$ be the minimum number of answers to one question, and let $MAX(N(A)/N(Q))$ be the maximum number of answers to one question. Table 1 shows information about the FAQ data.

Jun Harada, Masao Fuketa, El-Sayed Atlam, Toru Sumitomo, Wataru Hiraishi, and Jun-ichi Aoe, Estimation of FAQ Knowledge Bases by Introducing Measurements

p. 391–7

Appealing to the senses with metaphors and similes like those in answer explanations 6, the answer must relate to the type of descriptive language used.

B

Henry Davis, Explanations for the Official SAT Study Guide Questions: Detailed Explanations for the Answers for Every Question

So, the book is intended for anyone who wants to write survey questions, as well as all those who want to use the results from a survey; neither statistical issues nor social science jargon should get in the way of any reasonably well-educated person being able to read and appreciate the messages herein.

Floyd J. Fowler, Improving Survey Questions: Design and Evaluation

“Also, don’t you think that it might be necessary to arouse her imagination?”

“In what way? How?” said Bovary.

“Ah, that’s the question! That’s definitively the question: ‘That is the question!’—as I recently read in a newspaper.”

But Emma, awaking, cried out, “And the letter? And the letter?”

Gustave Flaubert, Madame Bovary

And these varied with tenses, *present, past, future*, and conjugated with the verb *see*,—or with these questions added to them;—*Is it? Was it? Will it be? Would it be? May it be? Might it be?* And these again put negatively, *Is it not? Was it not? Ought it not?*—Or affirmatively,—*It is; It was; It ought to be.* Or chronologically,—*Has it been always? Lately? How long ago?*—Or hypothetically,—*If it was? If it was not?* What would follow?—If the *French* should beat the *English*? If the *Sun* go out of the *Zodiac*?

Laurence Sterne, The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman

p. 407–2

This sentence makes sense with the briefest construction eliminates unnecessary were words and keeps the active voice.

C

Henry Davis, Explanations for the Official SAT Study Guide Questions: Detailed Explanations for the Answers for Every Question

...and the question may arise whether our results are seriously wrong from this cause. This question can best be solved by yet another method of estimating the average distance of certain classes of stars.

Simon Newcomb, The Extent of the Universe

Sources: Birney, Earle, Turvey: *A Military Picaresque* (1949), Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1977. Cotto, Andrew, *Outerborough Blues: A Brooklyn Mystery*, Brooklyn: Ig Publishing, 2012. Davis, Henry, *Explanations for the Official SAT Study Guide Questions: Detailed Explanations for the Answers for Every Question*. Henry Davis, 2010. Dungy, Camille, “Question and Answer: The Top Five,” Poetry Foundation, 2010, www.poetryfoundation.org. Flaubert, Gustave, *Madame Bovary*, translated by Raymond N. MacKenzie, Hackett Publishing, 2009. Fowler, Floyd J., *Improving Survey Questions: Design and Evaluation*. Sage, 1995. Harper, Tim, “For Stephen Harper, Governing Means Never Asking Why,” *Toronto Star*, Aug. 24, 2014. Koethe, John, “North Point North,” *North Point North: New and Selected Poems*, HarperCollins Publishers, 2002. Harada, Jun, Masao Fuketa, El-Sayed Atlam, Toru Sumitomo, Wataru Hiraishi, and Jun-ichi Aoe, “Estimation of FAQ Knowledge Bases by Introducing Measurements,” *Knowledge-Based Intelligent Information and Engineering Systems: 10th International Conference, KES 2006*, Springer Science & Business Media, 2006. Mitrovica, Andrew, “What the Hell Was Harper Doing in Iraq Anyway?” *iPolitics*, May 8, 2015, www.ipolitics.ca. Modiano, Patrick, *Missing Person*, translated by Daneil Weissbort, Boston: David R. Godine, Publisher, 2014. Newcomb, Simon, “The Extent of the Universe,” *Scientific Papers*, Vol. XXX, *The Harvard Classics*, New York: P. F. Collier & Son, 1909–14. Rousseau, Jean-Jacques, *On the Inequality among Mankind*, Vol. XXXIV, Part 3, *The Harvard Classics*, New York: P. F. Collier & Son, 1909–14. Soh, Debra W., “A Peek Inside A Furry Convention,” *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, January 2015, reprinted in *Harper’s Magazine*, March 2015. Spinoza, Benedict de, *Ethics*, Part 2, translated by R. H. M. Elwes, Project Gutenberg, 1997. Sterne, Laurence, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, New York: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1912. Swift, Jonathan, *Gulliver’s Travels into Several Remote Regions of the World*, Boston: D. C. Heath & Co., 1900.

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