

The Question Concerning Questions

The human brain is an incredible system. It can execute 10 quadrillion instructions per second. Contrast this with the average desktop computer which can perform 100 million instructions per second. Even the world's fastest supercomputer, IBM's BlueGeneL, completes only 360 trillion instructions per second. That is still 100 times slower than the 3 pound bundle of tissue resting inside the human skull. With over 100 billion neurons and approximately 10,000 synapses or connections per neuron, the brain may be the most complex system that human beings have ever discovered. One of the consequences of this complexity is the advent of language. Language is the sociological construct which can transmit ideas between brains, or simply reformat ideas for better processing. Languages are composed of words obviously, but these words are always expressed in the form of sentences (whether complete or fragmented). Traditionally, sentences can be divided into two types: those that provide new information and those which request information. The former are called statements while the later are called questions.

Questions have always been extremely interesting to me, not only asking questions but the actual existence and process of questioning. You see, while earlier I said that all utterances either pose information or request it, I think this division is simply wrong. The noun, question, comes from the Latin root, *quaerere*, meaning "ask and seek". I think it is important that the word *seek* is at the core of the concept of questioning. The act of seeking carries emotional information. This affective content is preserved in the process of questioning. Suppose, I ask the simple question, "How are you doing today?" That question certainly expects an informative response (e.g. I am doing very well), but the question is also charged with emotional information. When I ask that question I am *making a statement* about my concern for you. I am conveying to you that I have these emotions. When we really scrutinize questions, we can see that they are not merely "a sentence worded so as to elicit information" as the dictionary says. Rather, questions are an expression of genuine affective content. When I ask a faculty member for

advice, my questions carry latent information that says, "I trust you and value your knowledge." The evocative power of questions is further exemplified in rhetorical questions. I could ask the question, "Why is there suffering in the world?", or I could say "There is suffering in the world." The former carries an emotional content, a deeper level of meaning.

So what is my point? In today's world, questioning is being stifled. We are constantly being told what to like, what how to think, what values we should have, etc. We have stopped asking questions of ourselves and others. In the classroom, I see students asking fewer questions today than they did when I was a freshman. And this growing complacency, this trend of saying "yes" rather than "why" worries me because with the loss of questions comes a loss of deep emotional content. If there is any point I have tried to make here it is that questions allow us to probe deeper into the modes of our being. They express affective nuances in a way that the limited conventional statement forms can't. They are a unique engagement of our mental faculties that are such a precious resource. If we stop asking questions, then we deny living with depth that is befit creatures with such prodigious cognitive endowments. The philosopher Martin Heidegger said, "Questioning is the piety of thought." I love this quote because of the relationship it outlines between questions and thought. To be pious is to have a sensibility of devoutness. If we are to be devout wielders of thought, then we cannot forsake our ability to pontificate, to challenge, to question.

I am Nathan Herring and I believe in questions.