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OF QUESTIONS. FOR DIDACTIC USE¹**Dr. Adrian Costache**

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ABSTRACT: *The present paper is aimed at the teachers (to be) of human sciences (especially economics) and offers an in-depth commentary and interpretation of Hans-Georg Gadamer's view of the concept of question and the activity of questioning. The goal of the paper is to circumscribe the conditions of interrogation thus offering the teachers (to be) a means of enhancing the didactic efficiency of the learning sequences based on questioning.*

KEY WORDS: *question and questioning; conditions of questioning; wrong questions; rhetoric questions (and the didactic relevance of); blind questions.*

No matter what textbook of pedagogy or didactics one picks up, one will see that, in the methodology section, the part dedicated to the active-participative instruments of teaching revolves around the dialogical method.²Of course, this is not a pure coincidence; the researchers' decision to proceed in this manner is not at all accidental. If something like this happens this is due to the fact that the dialogical method, the succession of crafted questions and answers that bring about other questions, constitutes in fact the backdrop of all the other didactic tools aimed at the transmission of knowledge and the education by active engagement in the process. We recall: the fundamental task of the teacher in a sequence of problem-learning is that of guiding the students – without intervening directly – in the endeavor of resolution. Which means: asking questions. In case study, the teacher's task is that of leading the students towards understanding that, although particular, the example subjected to investigation has, as it is said, an *exemplary* value. Otherwise put, that it allows the logical derivation of general laws applicable to the entire class of phenomena to which it belongs. If the teacher would not guide the students interrogatively and would straightforwardly tell them what to look for in the case studied, the active-participative sequence would not be, in fact, active, while the recourse to the particular case as basis for learning would actually be

¹ The present article is not a research paper *per se*, although it is based on extensive research in preparation for the course and seminar of *Observational Practice* delivered at the Faculty of Economic Sciences, „Babes-Bolyai” University Cluj-Napoca during the academic years 2009-2010 & 2010-2011. It gathers the notes of the course delivered and is intended as a chapter in a textbook that will hopefully reach the students within a year.

² Take, for example, Cucos, Ionescu / Radu, Ionescu, Albulescu / Albulescu.

superfluous. Things stand just the same for all the other active-participative methods.

The importance of interrogation though, does not resume itself to the sphere of transmission of already constituted knowledge (education). It proves itself to be just as much relevant in that of the acquisition of knowledge. In fact, as teaching method, the dialogical method or the heuristic conversation is cut after the model of Socratic maieutic, the primary means of knowing in Plato's Academy.

Beginning with Plato though and up to the 20th century in Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer, in some of the key moments of its history, philosophy has even defined itself as the "dialogue of the soul with itself". If we understand that in their difference to the hard sciences (such as physics, chemistry, etc. based on experimentation), the preeminent task of the human sciences is that of thinking³ we can easily understand that interrogation plays a central role in their endeavors.

But although there is a radical difference between the hard sciences and the human sciences from the point of view of their tasks (experimenting, respectively thinking), their relation is not, in any way, one of exclusive disjunction. Otherwise put, despite the radical difference between experimenting and thinking, the knowledge endeavor presupposed by the hard sciences does not exclude interrogation. On the contrary, *it presupposes it as an antecedent condition and require it subsequently*. Any experimental endeavor starts with a question: Why is this thing behaving as it does? Will it always behave in the same way if the conditions remain unchanged? And, on the other hand: What does this or that experiment mean? How does it impact what we already know?

Scientists (both those working in the human sciences and those working in the hard sciences) are usually very careful with their instruments, both the technical and the conceptual ones. They often turn their eyes upon them, subjecting them to rigorous inspection in order to see whether and in what measure they live up to their purpose, whether they should not be bettered or even renounced. Think about it, a speck of dust on the lens of a telescope could actually lead to the discovery of a new nonexistent planet.

Despite this though, and even if interrogation as a scientific conceptual means already has a multi-millennial history, it has been put under the magnifying glass of the scientist and theorists quite late. The first explicit reflections in this sense appear for the first time in the 20th century. And not even now, when the interrogative activity has become explicitly a theme of investigation, it is not treated very thoroughly. In the communication sciences for example – the inheritors of the old discipline of rhetoric –, questioning is treated most of the time solely from a formal point of view. In such contexts we are told what forms questions take (*closed* - with a *given* number of possible answers - or *open* – which ask from the person questioned to propose him or herself a number of

³Here „thinking“ should be taken in Heidegger's sense from *What Is Called Thinking?*

possible answers and, afterwards, to select one on the basis of some grounds), afterwards the discussion drifting off towards the manipulative dimension of the closed questions and the means at our disposal to escape their traps. But we are told nothing about what questions are in themselves or about what does it mean to ask a question.

Precisely because of this, from a didactic perspective, the communication sciences are not very helpful to us. As teachers, we are not interested so much in how many types of questions there are, but in what are we to do so as to ask the right question for arriving at a thoughtful answer, if not to a true/correct one and, at the same time, to determine the person asked to look for such answer. (Two absolutely different but also absolutely necessary things for the success and efficiency of an active-participative didactic sequence based on interrogation.)

In so much as the communication sciences are of no use to us, our last chance is to turn our eyes towards philosophy. That philosophy constitutes a chance in this sense ought to be clear considering that what it tells us about questions is nothing else than a what they are, how they function, what end do they serve and what interrogation presupposes. As we know, in the case of simple things knowing what they are, their purpose is enough to know how to use it with a certain success.

Questions are such simple things. It is more complicated to go beyond the complexities of philosophical language in order to persuade ourselves of this. You see, philosophers have the tendency to discuss everything in the most complex terms possible. Professional hazard similar to others. The economists see the world in numbers and judge it from the point of view of profit.

In order not to give you headaches, in what follows, I will comment line by line and, when the context asks it, word by word some of the most important paragraphs on questions philosophy offers us. I am aware that now, after preventing you with regard to the complexity of philosophical language and the difficulty of understanding it, at least some of you will want to skip the text commented altogether, reading only my explanations. I am not condemning you for this attitude. On the contrary, I will try to make your life easier noting, on columns, the text commented to the left and the explanations I find in order to the right. I would like to believe that despite all these warnings (or, better, because of them) at least some of you will want to read at least a bit of philosophy.

In *Truth and Method*⁴ the German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer writes about questions:

It is essential for a question, for any question to have sense. A question has sense though not purely and simply when what it says is intelligible. We can easily understand what we

⁴ Gadamer, Henceforth TM.

„The essence of the question is to have sense. Now sense involves a sense of direction. Hence the sense of the question is the only direction from which the answer can be given if it is to make sense. A question places what is questioned in a particular perspective. When a question arises, it breaks open the being of the object, as it were.”(356)

are told by the question: “What is the greatest natural number?”, but it does not have a sense for there is no such thing as a greatest natural number; thus it does not ask anything. A question has sense when, through what it says, it orients itself and turns our sight towards *one* thing or *one* state of facts. It is important for the question to be aimed at a single thing/state of facts and, of course, that this thing/state of facts questioned to be well determined if we want the answer to be a thoughtful one and to correspond to our expectations. I believe that each and every one of us, at least once in his or her life, in primary school, high school or college has been asked by a teacher: “What do you know about this or that?” And, at the same time, I believe that the great majority of us have been at pains with withholding the answer “Lots!” even though none of us meant any disrespect to our teacher. An answer such as this is born precisely out of the fact that the question is not aimed at one thing or state of facts but many, none of which being appropriately determined.

Moreover, through the fact that a question, any question, turns our mind's eye towards a thing or state of facts, the latter comes to be put in a perspective. What we take as given (and, thus, unimportant and uninteresting), what did not catch our attention so far, now appears to us unknown and unrecognizable. The things closest to us and most familiar become the strangest and the farthest to us. We are almost never capable of answering a question such as: “Why do you keep straighten you glasses?” because, as soon as it is uttered, our gesture appears to us almost as the gesture of another. I know very well why I keep straighten my glasses for I feel them sliding off of my nose, but in the first moments after I am being asked the question this reason disappears from my mind because the gesture does not seem to be mine.

This ability questions have to render unrecognizable the things best known to us, to

transform what is familiar and close in something strange testifies for the preeminently violent character of interrogation. Any question does violence to the things it is aimed at. This is the reason why personal questions are painful and we are hesitant in answering even though we have the answer in mind before the question is finished.

§

By putting the thing questioned in a perspective, taking it out of the sphere of the uninteresting and unimportant known, the question "puts it into the open". What means to say: the lack of certainty the question brings along with regard to the thing interrogated, the uncertainty that what we believed to know is *as we know it*, opens the possibility that what we used to know is *otherwise* than we knew it. A question can fulfill its interrogative mission and can lead to an answer only through such a suspension of the thing questioned between the possibility of being as we know it and of being otherwise. This suspension is a necessary condition, but not a sufficient one for the question to be able to lead to an answer. The sufficient condition appears only if this suspension takes the form of a state of *equilibrium*. Otherwise put, when the thing interrogated can be in a way in the same measure in which it can be different; when the question, through the very way it is formulated, does not privilege a possibility of answer over the others.

„To ask a question means to bring into the open. The openness of what is in question consists in the fact that the answer is not settled. It must still be undetermined awaiting a decisive answer. The signifi- cance of questioning consists in revealing the questionability of what is questioned. It has to be brought into this state of indeterminacy so that there is an equilibrium between pro and contra. The sense of every question is realized in passing through this state of indeterminacy, in which it becomes an open question.“
(357)

Not rarely the polls, especially those concerned with political matters, are guilty of disregarding this condition. The typical question asked in such cases is: "Considering that the Left Party proposes to raise the taxes, whom would you vote for: the Left or the Right?" No wonder that most of us do not want to give up not even five minutes of their time to such polls even though each of us understands that to know the political options of the population of a country is highly important for democracy. In fact, this is the

only means whereby our representatives can formulate political strategies reflecting the nation's interests.

§

We should be attentive to something though! The openness of the thing or state of facts aimed at by the question towards the possibility of being otherwise than we know it cannot be "boundless", i.e. *complete*. Inasmuch as this openness must be constituted, as we have already established, as a state of equilibrium between the possibilities of being in one way or another, the openness of the question is bounded by a "horizon".

The horizon is what encircles us and what moves along with us. It describes the sphere of the visible and constitutes the backdrop of everything that can be seen. At the same time though, the horizon is what gives us the sense of perspective. If our sight would not be bounded by a horizon, the things we see would not appear as big or small according to their relative distance from us, but as big as they are becoming thus impossible to establish the distance that separates us from them and their relative measures.⁵

Because the perspective, the possibility of seeing into a perspective the thing aimed at through the question is precisely what brings about the state of equilibrium between the possibility of it being one way or another, it is necessary that every question renders manifest, through the very way it is formulated, its own horizon. A question that does not manage to make it manifest is still fated to failure. There are many examples in this sense. One of them, dear to me, is a question with which students are often confronted in Economics class after having studied the

⁵ A beautiful representation of a world in which the sight is not bounded by a horizon is offered to us by Seurat in *A Sunday on La Grande Jatte*. A copy of this painting can be found online at http://kingfishers.ednet.ns.ca/art/grade10/images/seurat-sunday_grande_jatte.jpg (Last accessed: 01.02.2011).

„The openness of a question is not boundless. It is limited by the horizon of the question. A question that lacks this horizon is, so to speak, floating. It becomes a question only when its fluid indeterminacy is concretized in a specific „this or that.“ In other words, a question has to be posed. Posing a question implies openness and also limitation. It implies explicit establishing of presuppositions, in terms of which can be seen what still remains open.“ (357)

chapter on globalization: “What do you think, is globalization a good thing or a bad one?” Certainly, this question has a sense – globalization is a highly determined concept – and, insomuch as the question is asked after the chapter has been gone through, this sense ought to be familiar to the students. On the other hand, through the way in which it is formulated our question puts in a state of perfect equilibrium the possibility that the thing aimed at be in a way or another. It asks explicitly: “Is globalization a *good thing* or a *bad one*?” But our question is deprived of horizon. It does not tell us what is the point of view from which globalization should be judged as good or bad – for the world economy as such?, for the corporations?, for the employees? All these are so many perspectives from which the question can be posed, each of them modifying in a radical manner the answer it receives.

Now, that we have seen in a, hopefully, more intelligible manner what the philosophers have to say about questions, it's high time we left the commentary aside, drew a line and gave way to interpretation. Just as, though what it says, every text we might lay our eyes on attracts its commentary, through what implies every text calls for its interpretation. And just as there is no text clear enough so as to render useless its commentary, in like manner, there is no text so deprived of implications as to render its interpretation superfluous.

A first implication of the text commented above concerns the point of view, the perspective out of which the thing or state of facts interrogated is seen or, as it is called in the commented text, the “horizon” of the question. It is no accident that the German philosopher employs precisely this word in his text. (All philosophers measure as carefully as possible their words. In fact, this is one of the fundamental conditions of the philosophical endeavor. If you can satisfy it, you can aspire at ever doing philosophy – even though not at being a philosopher –; if not, it is better to leave such thoughts aside.) For, when compared to the term “perspective” or with the expression “point of view” we used in our commentary in order to translate in more intelligible terms the things discussed in the text, the term “horizon” bears an additional nuance and carries with it, in an implicit manner, also another sense. While saying “perspective” or “point of view”, “horizon” also says “situation”, sending thus in the most direct fashion to the time and place we find ourselves.

The alternative interpretation offered to the concept of horizon in terms of “situation” brings along an alternative interpretation of the entire third passage commented. From this point of view, the idea that any question must have a horizon if it is not to “float” means that any question must be anchored in the situation in which it appears and that it has to appear in the right situation.

We have here an *alternative* interpretation because the appearance in the right situation and its strong anchoring in it render superfluous the expression of the viewpoint from which the thing subjected to interrogation is approached. That is why it is almost always omitted. Nobody asks “What time is it *now*?”

The dependence of interrogation on the situation in which it appears is easily demonstrated by everyday life. On the streets, in Romania – and everybody knows this, even without acknowledging it –, we can expect and are able to answer immediately to no more than three questions from the other passers by: “What time is it?”, “Do you have a light?”, “Can you tell me where is X (how to go to X)?”, sometimes (but, unfortunately, only sometimes) preceded by the polite formula “Excuse me...” When we are asked by a passer by any other question than these we will find ourselves in difficulty in trying to answer despite that the answer searched for can be well known to us. This is what happens almost every time we are stopped by advertisers who probing into our preferences with regard to one type of products or services or another.

From what we have said so far we can already draw some didactic teachings. For, insomuch as it tells us what is a question, the above text, in fact, *inscribes* the conditions of possibility of any questioning able to lead to a thoughtful answer and, on the other hand, *prescribes* the all the types of interrogative simulacra possible (i.e., those types of statements ending in question mark but which do not ask anything in fact).

The first condition of interrogation, deriving from the first passage commented, is that a **question must be aimed at a well determined thing or state of facts**. A question aimed at two or more things or states of fact at the same time is forced to pass between them, thus missing all of them. That is why, such question could rightfully be called **wrong question**.

The second condition, deriving from the second passage, is that **no question, through the way that it is formulated, should anticipate its answer**. The questions which anticipate their answer are called **rhetorical questions**. They do not put anything in question but purely and simply state what the speaker wants the hearer to know.

And a **third condition**, deriving from the third passage, is that **every question, through its formulation, must render manifest the perspective from which the thing put in question is viewed**. Alternatively, the condition is that every question must be asked in the right context. The questions deprived of perspective or those which are not well anchored in their context could be called **blind questions** for, in each case, the deficiency resides either in the question's incapacity to render manifest the viewpoint from which the thing or

state of facts is approached, or in the incapacity of the person asking the question to see that it is inadequate in the situation given.

Wrong questions, rhetorical questions and blind questions— here are the three main forms of false interrogative statements bearing the main responsibility for the failure of our active-participative didactic endeavors. We should be attentive to one thing though - the last one-: this does not mean that these are to be avoided at all times and in any context whatsoever. In spite of their surrogate nature or, better put, precisely because of it, at least one of these simulacra is both indispensable and highly recommended in the didactic endeavors in several contexts and moments of the lesson. These are the rhetoric questions.

A didactic context in which taking recourse to rhetoric questions is not only permitted but also recommended is, of course, given by those situations in which the flow of the dialog between teacher and students breaks down, the latter being incapable to answer the teacher's questions. In such a case and especially if the terms in which the question was put are important for the direction in which the dialogue ought to unfold subsequently it is preferable to reformulate the question as rhetoric question rather than to replace it with another one.

Another context, less obvious this time, is given by the recapitulative moment at the beginning and the end of the class. Two things recommend the use of rhetorical questions in such moments. Of course, rhetoric questions do not demonstrate either whether what has been previously studied has been learned, or how much of what has been discussed in class was retained. But they offer a highly efficient and time-wise economical means of marking and drawing the students attention towards what is really important in what has been discussed in the previous classes or in that which just ended.

On the other hand, the use of rhetorical questions is recommended during the recapitulative moments due to the fact that, insomuch as they contain their answer within themselves, they are deprived of the violence peculiar to the act of interrogation. Thus they do not induce the students a state of psychic discomfort, keeping them their availability to actively engage in the class that is about to start.

Now, after all these discussions about questions, the only thing to do is to put what we have learned into practice.

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