

Can ‘God’ ask a genuine question?

On the Virtues of Dialogue and the Personhood of God

Many turn to religious traditions for *answers* to life’s most perplexing questions. People explore various religious traditions, interrogating their representatives, for definitive resolutions to the tensions that constitute human existence. But, reversing traditional roles, can “God” ask a genuine question? The sense of this question depends on determining what constitutes a “genuine question” as well as determining the meaning, if any, of the term “God.” The former is the primary objective of this presentation, while the latter – if possible at all – is, of course, too enigmatic to adequately attempt within the confines of a brief presentation. However, in my conclusion, I will highlight some of the hermeneutic ramifications of my conception of genuine questioning for theological reflection about the Biblical God. I demonstrate that the ability to pose genuine questions is an essential virtue for reaching an understanding with others, human or divine. This requires defining virtues and practices, identifying “understanding” as a good specific to the practice of dialogue, and illustrating the role of genuine questions in dialogue.

Before we can isolate the virtue of the ability to pose genuine questions, we must first determine the meaning of “virtue.” For Plato, and Aristotle following him, everything has an *aretê* (or virtue) proper to its functioning well as the kind of thing it is.¹ If an eye, for instance, were deprived of its virtue, the eye would fail to see – seeing well, the eye displays its virtue. With regard to human beings, Plato and Aristotle conceive of virtues as the necessary dispositions to act and feel for flourishing as human beings, both morally *and* intellectually. Plato and Aristotle pursue this way of conceptualizing the virtues not for the sake of discovering explicit prescriptions for proper conduct, but for the sake of discovering how to become, as L.A. Kosman writes, “the kind of person for whom proper conduct emanates characteristically from a

¹ See Plato. *The Republic of Plato*. 2nd ed., Trans. Allan Bloom. (New York: Basic Books, 1991), 352d-353e. See also Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*. 2nd rev. ed., Trans Terence Irwin. (Cambridge, MA: Hackett Publishing Company, 2000.).

fixed disposition.”²

Human conduct does not occur within a vacuum, though. Alasdair MacIntyre, a contemporary virtue ethicist, argues that we can only make sense of virtues against the conceptual background of a “practice,” which he defines as:

any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity...³

Examples of practices include activities such as sports, agriculture, and academics. Virtues facilitate our comportment toward inherited standards of excellence proper to specific practices. We contribute to the realization of such goods through our attempts to excel with regard to those standards. As a consequence of such virtuous activity, our capacity for excellence extends beyond the confines of the specific practices.

In order to isolate genuine questioning as virtue, then, it is necessary to identify its proper practice. This requires conceiving of dialogue as a specific discursive practice and identifying a) those standards of excellence definitive of dialogue, b) the goods internal to dialogue, and c) the requisite virtues for dialogue.

Many of our practices are discursive, either explicitly in the form of articulate propositions, or implicitly, as indicated by the phrase, “Actions speak louder than words.” Of the various genres of discursive practices, from lyricism to data analysis, philosopher Paul Ricoeur identifies two encompassing categories: poetic discourse and descriptive discourse.⁴ According to Ricoeur, both refer us to the world, but in different ways and with different presuppositions: descriptive discourse presupposes a separation of subject and object, and

² Kosman, L.A. “Being Properly Affected: Virtues and Feelings in Aristotle’s Ethics.” *Essays on Aristotle’s Ethics*. Ed. Amélie Oksenberg Rorty. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), p. 103.

³ MacIntyre, Alasdair. *After Virtue*. 2nd ed., (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), p. 187.

⁴ Ricoeur, Paul. “Naming God.” *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*. ed. Mark I. Wallace, trans. David Pellauer. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995), pp. 222-223.

construes truth as the verified correspondence between them; poetic discourse refers to our many ways of belonging with the world *preceding* the split between subject and object, and construes truth as the disclosure of belonging.

Dialogue, as a specific discursive practice, incorporates elements of both poetic and descriptive discourse because it requires we harness all our moral and intellectual resources for the sake of disclosing dimensions of our experience through metaphors and models as well as for the sake of accurately representing our experience – as demonstrated by such exemplar dialogues as Plato’s *Republic* and Cicero’s *De Natura Deorum*. Socrates, of course, is a source from which we inherit standards of excellence specific to dialogue – like perseverance in pursuit of truth.

Of the many goods internal to the practice of dialogue, such as comradeship and clarification, “reaching an understanding” (or simply put, “understanding”) is one unique good specific to dialogue. “To reach an understanding in a dialogue,” writes Hans-Georg Gadamer, preeminent hermeneutical philosopher, “is not merely a matter of... successfully asserting one’s own point of view, but being transformed into a *communion* in which we do not remain what we were.”⁵ Such communicative communion, occurring within the virtual field of speech, represents the *social* solidarity that preserves *individual* autonomy.

Gadamer locates understanding in the context of dialogical practice when he writes,

[I]t belongs to every true [dialogue] that each person opens himself to the other, truly accepts his point of view as valid and transposes himself into the other to such an extent that he understands not the particular individual *but what he says*. What is to be grasped is the substantive rightness of his opinion, *so that we can be at one with each other on the subject [matter]*.⁶

If we are to practice dialogue *with* one another, then we cannot objectify the other person by speaking *about* him – to do this, of course, would be to deny his discursive autonomy as a legitimate contributor participating in the transformative event of understanding. Insofar as we

⁵ Gadamer, Hans-Georg. *Truth and Method*. 2nd rev. ed., (New York: Continuum, 1996), p. 379 – my emphasis.

⁶ Gadamer. *Truth and Method*. p. 385.

take one another seriously as contributors, dialogue makes possible the full realization of our nature as discursive animals, or “persons.”

We attempt to understand one another by asking questions – that is to say, by asking questions we move toward “being at one” over a subject matter. Gadamer explicates this structure of being-at-one over a subject matter through the model of games. A game, like a theatrical drama, only fulfills its purpose when the players *lose* themselves to the game.⁷ A game has its essence beyond the intentionality of the players. According to Gadamer, “all playing is a being played.”⁸ Games draw us in and fill us with their dynamic spirit, like “team spirit,” a spirit surpassing all of us as autonomous intentionalities. Games moderate intentionality by transforming us into parts of a greater whole. This good is available through dialogue.

Just as in any other sphere of our practical lives, a variety of virtues are necessary for the flourishing of dialogue: courage to risk making statements, *phronesis* to contribute fitting content, hospitableness to share conversational space, and wisdom to comprehend the subject matter. These virtues and more are the necessary dispositions for achieving a “good” dialogue. One necessary virtue for the attainment of understanding is the ability to listen skillfully. Listening is necessary, *and certain questions are a way in which we, as it were, listen with our mouths*. These questions I call “genuine questions.” I consider our ability to pose genuine questions the key virtue necessary for the practice of dialogue. But what are genuine questions?

In order to clarify the ability to pose genuine questions, we must examine the *structure* and *activity* of asking questions generally by drawing on resources from contemporary continental and analytic philosophy of language such as Martin Heidegger and speech act theory.

⁷ Gadamer. *Truth and Method*. p. 102.

⁸ Gadamer. *Truth and Method*. p. 106.

In his attempt to address the question of the meaning of being, Heidegger found it necessary to delineate the formal *structure* of questions. Heidegger isolates four formal elements. With regard to the first formal element, Heidegger writes, “Every questioning is a seeking.”⁹ Questions, as a mode of intentionality, aim in a particular direction taken “from what is sought.” This implies, according to Heidegger, the questioner already has a “pre-ontological” sense of that which is sought. If this were not so, we could not ask *about* anything. The second formal element is this thing about which we question.

The third formal element is the interrogated object, the one to whom we address our question.¹⁰ In one sense, the interrogated object “contains” the clarified answer; in another sense, it functions as a medium for the clarification of the answer *we already possess*. The fourth formal element is the theoretical gain that results. In sum, for Heidegger, the structure of a question is the activity of interrogating another for clarification. Put in another way, questions are a means for attaining theoretical clarity by *dissolving* the obscurity contaminating the intended object in the *solution* of the interrogated object.

Speech act theorists concentrate on the *activity* of posing a question. J.L. Austin developed a theory of the *performative* force of utterances, expanding “meaning” to include not only what we say but also what we *do* in the saying. He distinguished between three basic aspects of a speech act: the *locutionary* (or *propositional*), the *perlocutionary*, and the *illocutionary*.¹¹ The illocutionary aspect of speech acts denotes the various forces that speech acts carry; that is, illocution is what we *do* along with what we *say*.

According to speech act theorists such as John Searle and Martin Bell, questions have the

⁹ Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. Trans. Joan Stambaugh. (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996), p 3.

¹⁰ Heidegger. *Being and Time*. p 4.

¹¹ See Martinich, A. “Speech Acts.” *The Philosophy of Language*. 4th ed., ed. A.P. Martinich. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 124.

illocutionary force of *commands*. As Bell writes,

Acts of questioning are illocutionary acts belonging to the *command* [or for Searle, *directive*] genus. They are distinguished by the nature of what is commanded, and possess their own performative verb, *to ask*, a verb which also doubles as merely one of the family of command verbs.¹²

While a question may be what is *said*, commanding a response is what a question *does*. Questions function like commands in that they are attempts, in Searle's words, to "get the world to match the words"¹³ in that we attempt to get someone to do something; namely, answer.

Speech act theorists take the information question (or the "yes-or-no" question) as paradigmatic and most readily available to the methods of analysis. The method of analysis, in order to display the illocutionary force, consists of translating the given question into a set of potentially true propositions logically implied by the question. For instance, consider the question, "Do you love me?" Analyzing this question consists of listing out the possible propositions implied by the question – in this case, "No, I do not love you." and, "Yes, I do love you." Asking such a question is the illocutionary equivalent of the following command: "Affirm one of the following statements by nodding your head: 'I love you.' 'I do not love you.'"

A key factor in determining the illocutionary force is the status or position of the speaker relative to the hearer, such as a guru to a disciple. However, Bell argues that a question is "authentic" only if the questioner does not know ahead of time the truth value of the possible propositions.¹⁴ A guru, then, already enlightened and leading another along the path, cannot but fail to ask "authentic" questions. Police, too, often times fail to ask authentic questions, such as, "Do you know why I pulled you over?" Authentic or no, questions, according to speech act theory, command responses.

¹² Bell, Martin. "Questioning." *The Philosophical Quarterly*. 25: 100. (July, 1975), p. 206 – Bell's emphasis.

¹³ Searle, John. "A Taxonomy of Illocutionary Acts." *The Philosophy of Language*. p. 152.

¹⁴ Bell. "Questioning." p. 207.

Whereas Heidegger explicates the *what* of questions, speech act theory explicates the *how*. And all agree that questions are essentially statements in the interrogative mood whereby we command clarification or “answers” from one another. While these analyses deal adequately with many forms of questions, there are good reasons for critique and supplementation on the basis that interrogation is problematic for the practice of dialogue and attaining goods therein.

There are at least two grounds for critique of the interrogative construal of questions. First, it artificially isolates questions from their practical contexts. Questions do not occur in conversational outer space; they often form part of the give-and-take playfulness of dialogue. And, harkening back to the model of games, if the exchange is a dialogue, then the exchange of questions is guided by the activity of the subject matter itself, not the intentionality of the seeker. Questions, like ideas, strike us, and in very real sense are more a passion than an action.

Second, interrogation, in its anxiety, is so obsessed about accurate description that it neglects realizing the communion that affirms the total discursive animal – the central good of dialogue. In interrogation, the uniqueness of the interrogated object does not play an essential role. All that matters is clarifying and consuming the “truth” of whatever was in question. For instance, when I ask, “Where are my keys?” it matters little who tells me the truth, namely, “They are locked in your car.”

Therefore, if reaching an understanding is truly a good, and since this good is only internal to the practice of dialogue, then we must construct an alternative model of questions that respects our humanity. I believe the “open” or “raised” question provides leverage for the construction of an alternative. According to speech act theorists, the force of interrogation is implicit in all questions *except* “raised” questions, which are as if in quotation marks and hence

“no illocutionary force attaches to [them].”¹⁵ Both speech act theorists and Heideggerians marginalize “raised” questions. I propose we think about “raised” questions as invitations to participate in a dialogue in which the interlocutors are irreducible terms. While what I call “genuine questions” preserves some of the elements of speech act and Heideggerian analyses of questions, they replace interrogative anxiety with invitational enthusiasm.

The above analyses of questions show that at least four criteria are necessary for a genuine question to obtain. First, the questioner *cannot know (in the strict sense) the answer*. Second, the questioner *must desire to know the answer*, there must be some kind of quest or “seeking.” Third, rather than methodically interrogating the other, the question *must be invitational*; it must be open to the participation others and the guidance of the subject matter. And finally, the question must invite others into *further dialogue* about a subject matter.

Unlike interrogative questions, genuine questions are open to spontaneous disclosures of the subject matter. Thus, genuine questions are not leading questions steering the dialogue in only certain directions. Nor are genuine questions clinical, where the questioner has an idea of what is best for the other in such a way rendering the other’s contributions mute. Pedagogical questions are not genuine either in that they entail the questioner already possesses the right answer. Rhetorical questions are not genuine questions insofar as they, among other things, neglect to invite other participants. Real questions, such as the illustration above about car keys, fail both to affirm the other person and to produce further conversation. Unlike these other forms of questions, genuine questions reflect what appears to be the essential dynamic of life: life is not the kind of quest from which we ought to expect a return “home.”

We have explicated the virtue of the ability to pose genuine questions. We might wonder who, if anyone, can really pose genuine questions? Can teachers? Can the president?

¹⁵ Bell. “Questioning.” p. 209 – my emphasis.

Can traditional religious figures? Can I? While this project may have a number of potential areas of impact, I will here suggest some hermeneutic ramifications for theological reflection about the personhood of God by posing the question, “Can ‘God’ ask a genuine question?”

The word “God” plays a vital role for and bears an effective history in many communities. If we trace the effective history of the word “God” through its theological evolutions in the Western philosophical and religious traditions, we will observe at least three relatively distinct conceptualizations of the divine: the anthropomorphic gods effective in the lives of ancient cultures, the “perfect being” effective in medieval and modern theological reflection, and the “wholly other” and ultimately ineffable ground of being effective in both post-modern and mystical erasures. Even with these evolutions, the starting point for theology in the West is biblical narrative – for it is, Ricoeur points out, the embryo of all fully explicit theological thinking.¹⁶ Although aware there are alternative options for reflecting about God, I suggest we follow Ricoeur by returning to the biblical texts.

These sacred texts of Judaism and Christianity present an anthropomorphic deity who continually seeks out human beings. In Abraham Joshua Heschel’s words,

The Bible tells us nothing about God in Himself; all its sayings refer to His *relation* to [humanity]. His own life and essence are neither told nor disclosed... The only events in the life of God the Bible knows of are acts done for the sake of [humanity].¹⁷

The Hebrew Bible illustrates its God’s humane character by depicting, for example, God entering covenantal relationships as well as listening to the intercession of prophets. Following Heschel, the Hebrew Bible scholar Yochanan Muffs underscores “personhood” as both the defining feature of the Biblical God, and the mark this God’s superiority over other gods.¹⁸ For

¹⁶ Ricoeur, Paul. “Toward a Narrative Theology.” *Figuring the Sacred*. p. 248.

¹⁷ Heschel, Abraham. *Man Is Not Alone: A Philosophy of Religion*. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1976). p. 144.

¹⁸ Muffs, Yochanan. *The Personhood of God: Biblical Theology, Human Faith and the Divine Image*. (Woodstock: Jewish Lights, 2005). p. 30.

Muffs, “personhood” is constituted within a dialogical relation, and so personhood is essentially *interpersonal* – defined as a relationship of mutual responsibility.¹⁹ The God-character presented in biblical narratives is, on his reading, such a person.

Whether the Biblical God can ask a genuine question provides a ground for further exploring the meaning of the Biblical God’s personhood. One hermeneutic ramification is the work toward liberating the multiplex of biblical narratives from the interpretive constraints of the supposedly more sophisticated and philosophically defensible conceptions of God. Dialogue is one of the most fulfilling forms of communion in which persons flourish. Such dialogue requires in the ability to pose genuine questions. And *anyone* incapable of such a feat is suspect.

A number of passages in the Hebrew Bible present the Biblical God asking questions. I have found at least four situations in particular that *might* yield fruitful results if read with a dramatic hermeneutic rather than a dogmatic one. I conclude here by merely pointing out these passages. In Genesis 3:9-13, the Biblical God’s very first questions are: “Where are you? Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from? What is this you have done?” In Genesis 4:9-10, the Biblical God and Cain appear to converse about the nature of justice upon the Biblical God’s asking Cain, “Where is your brother Abel? What have you done?” In Numbers 14:11, Moses seems to converse with the Biblical God about the nature of forgiveness upon the Biblical God’s asking, “How long will they refuse to believe in me?” And in Job 1:8, the Biblical God converses with Satan about the integrity of human character upon asking, “Where did you just come from? Have you considered my servant Job?” If the Biblical God does not know the answers to these questions and wants to know the answers, if these questions invite further conversation, then they just may be genuine questions.

¹⁹ Muffs. *The Personhood of God*. p. 24.