

On the Pragmatics of Unanswerable Questions

Peter Kügler, Innsbruck

1. Unanswerability Claims

Sometimes it is said that certain questions can never be answered. I will call such statements “unanswerability claims”. At different times different questions were regarded as unanswerable, but at no time there was an agreement as to which questions are the unanswerable ones. An unanswerability claim usually does not imply that the question in focus has never been answered before. In most cases, the question has already been answered in one way or another. But those who claim unanswerability reject the known answers as inadequate. Thus, any unanswerability claim seems to presuppose a distinction between two kinds of answers: on the one hand, inadequate, inappropriate answers which, for some reason, need not to be taken into account, and on the other hand, proper, suitable answers, which also include the right answer to the particular question. Answers of the first kind are not only taken to be false, they are assumed to suffer from deficiencies which endanger their very status as answers. Answers of the second kind, however, are supposed to be out of reach, which is why the respective questions are claimed to be unanswerable as such.

Historic examples of unanswerability claims include the famous “world riddles” (*Welträtsel*) that were debated around the turn to the 20th century. In two lectures delivered in 1872 and 1880,¹ the German physiologist Emil du Bois-Reymond mentioned three problems which in his opinion would never be solved: the essence of force and matter, the origin of motion in the world, and the development of consciousness, in particular sense impression, from material conditions. A fourth problem he considered was the possibility of free will, but this would only be unsolvable if

¹ Emil du Bois-Reymond 1916.

free will did exist. So we can evade the riddle, du Bois-Reymond argued, by denying the existence of free will. He also indicated that the unanswerability of the world riddles is due to the fact that the human mind is limited to insufficient ways of thinking and knowing. He referred to our inability to imagine anything which is not an object of either the outer or the inner sense. But above all, he appealed to the assumption that the problems elude a *mechanical* solution. They should be unsolvable in the sense that the particular facts (the existence of consciousness, etc.) cannot be explained by combinations and movements of parts of matter.

Today, du Bois-Reymond's legacy is continued by Colin McGinn who also thinks that the question how consciousness arises from brain states cannot be answered. A question like this which "happens to fall outside a given creature's cognitive space"² he calls a *mystery*. The problem of consciousness is beyond our cognitive space, so it is a mystery for us human beings. Other mysteries in McGinn's view concern the self, the nature of meaning, the possibility of free will and of knowledge, especially knowledge a priori. Similarly to his 19th century predecessor, McGinn assumes that true explanations must follow a mode of thought he denotes as "combinatorial atomism with lawlike mappings" (p. 18), which is a quasi-mechanical model of explanation, except that the atoms need not to be material and the combination needs not to be spatial.

A third, and notorious, unanswerability claim is associated with *verificationism*. A question is said to be unanswerable if no method is known to verify one of the statements that would answer the question. In his essay "Unanswerable questions?" from 1935, Moritz Schlick referred to this absence of a method of verification as *logical* impossibility, or impossibility *in principle*, and distinguished it from a merely *empirical* impossibility of answering a question.³ In this second, weaker sense of impossibility, a question is unanswerable if a method of verification is known but not applicable. Popular examples of empirical unanswerability are questions about past events when sufficient evidence is missing. In this case we cannot verify an answer to the question, but we do know how a person could have verified an answer if he or she had been in a better epis-

² McGinn 1993, 3.

³ Cf. Schlick 1969, 372.

temic position, for instance, close enough to the event to observe what had happened at that particular time and place. When answering a question is logically impossible, however, there is no method at all that could be used even under ideal, counterfactual epistemic circumstances. Verificationists have ascribed this logical unanswerability to metaphysical questions and inferred that these questions are therefore meaningless.

This was just a short summary of three types of unanswerability claim. In the following I shall recapitulate in somewhat greater length Ludwig Wittgenstein's view of unanswerability. After that I will go into the logic (and pragmatics) of questions and answers before I conclude with some remarks on contextual conditions, above all, metaphysical and anti-metaphysical paradigms.

2. Wittgenstein

Wittgenstein's unanswerability claims belong to his early and middle periods. They are primarily based on his naturalism, which he announced in paragraph 4.11 of the *Tractatus*: "The totality of true propositions is the total natural science (or the totality of the natural sciences)."⁴ The reference to the Darwinian theory of evolution in 4.1122 makes clear that for Wittgenstein the natural sciences encompass more than just the physical sciences. But metaphysics and ethics certainly do not fall within this broader range, which is why Wittgenstein takes metaphysical and ethical questions to be unanswerable. In comparison with straightforward naturalism, however, Wittgenstein creates a somewhat more spectacular philosophy by adding a few ideas, including an account of "the mystical" in the *Tractatus* and some remarks on *similes* in the *Lecture on Ethics*. Thus we read in paragraph 6.44: "Not *how* the world is, is the mystical, but *that* it is." As the Greek word "mystikós" means "hidden" and "secret", Wittgenstein's statement seems to imply that the old metaphysical question "Why does the world exist?" (or "Why is there something rather than nothing?") cannot be answered. The answer to this question is hidden to us. In the *Lecture on Ethics*, probably delivered in 1929 or 1930, Wittgenstein discusses the same metaphysical example when talking about the experience

⁴ Wittgenstein 1933, 75.

of *wondering at the existence of the world*. When having this experience, he says, “I am then inclined to use such phrases as ‘how extraordinary that anything should exist’ or ‘how extraordinary that the world should exist.’”⁵

Wittgenstein, of course, was aware of the existence of metaphysical, in particular theistic, answers to “Why does the world exist?” He actually maintained, again in the *Lecture*, that the experience of wondering at the existence of the world is “exactly what people were referring to when they said that God had created the world” (p. 10). But answers from religion and metaphysics are to be rejected, for according to Wittgenstein they seem to be similes, but when scrutinized more closely, they turn out to be nonsense. Instead of “simile” he also uses the words “analogy” and “allegory” without distinguishing the three expressions or defining one of them. Yet the crucial point for Wittgenstein is certainly *similarity*: the metaphysical usage of words is similar, but not identical, to ordinary usage. Speaking of God, for instance, resembles speaking of human beings; it is part of an “allegory which represents him as a human being of great power whose grace we try to win, etc., etc.” (p. 9)

For Wittgenstein the problem with analogical, allegorical answers is that they are no proper answers if they cannot be replaced by answers without similes (analogies, allegories): “And if I can describe a fact by means of a simile I must also be able to drop the simile and to describe the facts without it. Now in our case as soon as we try to drop the simile and simply to state the facts which stand behind it, we find that there are no such facts. And so, what at first appeared to be a simile now seems to be mere nonsense.” (p. 10) In summary, then, Wittgenstein’s unanswerability claim in the *Lecture* is this: a question that can *only* be answered by analogy to ordinary or scientific facts cannot be answered at all. The notion of “ordinary life” is used twice in the *Lecture*, but Wittgenstein leaves no doubt that *science* is the measure of all things that make up ordinary life, or nature, or the world. He still holds the view that all facts are scientific facts, so the mystical, which goes beyond science, has nothing to do with facts.

A word of caution may be useful here, regarding the term “simile” in the *Lecture*, which in the German translation is rendered as “Gleichnis”.⁶

⁵ Wittgenstein 1965, 8.

⁶ Cf. Wittgenstein 1989.

This word also appears in the German version of the *Tractatus*, in paragraphs 4.012, 4.015, 4.063 and 5.5563. It is used there in different senses, which is probably the reason why the Ogden-Ramsey translation of the *Tractatus*, as well as that by Pears and McGuinness,⁷ comes up with three different words for “Gleichnis” (“likeness”, “simile” and “model” in Ogden-Ramsey, “likeness”, “imagery” and “simile” in Pears-McGuinness). In the *Lecture*, as we have seen, the word “simile” refers to a deficient mode of speech that depends on non-allegorical speech. In the *Tractatus* the word “Gleichnis” is used in a similar way in 5.5563, where Wittgenstein compares a “Gleichnis” (model, likeness) of the truth with “truth itself”. In paragraphs 4.012 and 4.015, however, the word appears in the context of Wittgenstein’s picture theory of language. In this pictorial sense, any sign is said to be a “Gleichnis” (likeness) of the signified. A proposition picturing, or representing, a fact, is a “Gleichnis” of that fact. On balance, we need to distinguish at least two senses of “Gleichnis”, of “simile”, “likeness”, or whatever translation we prefer. What Wittgenstein has in mind is similarity, but this similarity can either be *allegorical* or *pictorial*. The first is a similarity between two ways of representation, for instance ordinary language and religious-metaphysical language, the second kind of similarity exists between a representation and its object, for instance a proposition and a fact. Here we are only concerned with the first kind, with allegorical rather than pictorial similarity.

3. Logic and Pragmatics of Direct Answers

The difference between Wittgenstein and traditional metaphysics does not concern the availability of questions or answers, but the assessment of some types of answers, especially answers utilizing analogies that cannot be replaced by statements without analogies. To shed more light on this issue, we need to figure out what makes a statement an answer to a question. Here, yes-no questions cause considerably fewer problems than questions containing interrogative words like “why”, “what”, “how”, “who” etc. A yes-no question such as “Does matter consist of atoms?” can be answered by “yes” or “no”, or by the statements these two words stand for

⁷ Cf. Wittgenstein 1961.

(“matter consists of atoms”, “matter does not consist of atoms”); yet it is not obvious what kind of answer is required by a question with an interrogative word. In the following I shall concentrate on this type of question, not the least because the two previous examples “How does the brain produce consciousness?” and “Why does the world exist?” belong into this category.

I will start with a non-philosophical example, though. We know that a question can elicit many different reactions. When being asked who wrote the song *Desolation Row*, you can say nothing at all and perhaps shrug your shoulders; you can, for whatever reason, insult the questioner, or give him or her a hug and a kiss; you can also answer “I don’t know” or suggest to look it up in Wikipedia. Better responses would include the indefinite answer “some American singer-songwriter”, the disjunctive answer “Neil Young or Bob Dylan”, or the precise answer “Bob Dylan”. Of all the reactions mentioned, only some are answers, and only one of these answers, the last one, gives the desired information.

A well-established concept in the logic of questions (interrogative logic, erotetic logic) is that of a *direct answer*. A direct answer to a question is one that answers the question without giving more information than necessary. The definition in the book *The Logic of Questions and Answers* by Belnap and Steel uses the term *completeness*: “A direct answer, then, is what counts as completely, but just completely, answering the question.”⁸ A direct answer contains just enough information to answer the question completely, not more and not less. Hence “Bob Dylan” is a direct answer to our example question. Another one would be “Neil Young”, even though this answer is false – directness does not imply truth. A disjunction like “Neil Young or Bob Dylan”, on the other hand, is no direct answer, whether being true or false. Though more informative than a shrug of the shoulders, the disjunction does not answer the question completely; whereas the following answer contains too much information and therefore is no direct answer, either: “Bob Dylan wrote *Desolation Row* in the back seat of a New York taxi.” The additional information where the song was written might be welcome to the questioner, but it is not necessary for answering the question.

⁸ Belnap / Steel 1976, 13.

Thus, a direct answer must be neither incomplete nor overcomplete. Getting too much information, though, is generally less disturbing than getting too little. Overcompleteness includes completeness and the latter is what we are typically looking for. So it seems appropriate to confine the discussion to the property of completeness. What, then, does it mean that a statement answers a question completely? It is surprisingly difficult to answer this. When David Harrah introduced the concept of direct answer in a paper from 1961, he tried to give a formal characterization of direct answers for certain types of questions.⁹ Yet the prospects of such a purely formal approach are rather poor, particularly when applied to questions like those we have considered so far. The answer “Donald Duck wrote *Desolation Row*” has the same shape as “Bob Dylan wrote *Desolation Row*”. But given that all people involved know that Donald Duck is a Disney comic character, the first answer will hardly be rated as being complete. And an answer to “Why does the world exist?” will be of the form “The world exists because p”. Incomplete answers, too, do have this form. Perhaps it is the form of the embedded sentence p that decides about completeness? No, because form alone does not determine which sentences must be inserted for p to make a good explanation. Suppose a theist who takes “The world exists because God created it” as a complete answer to the previous question. This answer has the same form as “The world exists because Michelangelo painted it”, which seems to be far from being a complete answer if “world” means the real world. Note that we do not reject this answer for being wrong but for being irrelevant, or even absurd.

Obviously it is not form alone that makes the difference between complete and incomplete answers. It needs more than a purely formal characterization of completeness. In the logic of questions this requirement is usually met by adding some *pragmatics* to logical theory. Pragmatic concepts are used to explain what completeness or directness is. According to the meanwhile classical definition by Charles Morris, pragmatics is “the science of the relation of signs to their interpreters”, dealing “with all the psychological, biological, and sociological phenomena which occur in the functioning of signs.”¹⁰ The “functioning of signs” we are interested in is

⁹ Cf. Harrah 1961.

¹⁰ Morris 1938, 30.

the asking and answering of questions, and relevant psychological phenomena include intentions, interests and preferences of the persons involved in this process. What counts as a complete answer partly depends on such psychological factors. Thus, after having defined a direct answer as “what counts as completely, but just completely, answering the question”, Belnap and Steel go on explaining that a direct answer is just what the questioner wanted to get: “If we were to put the matter psychologically, we would say that a direct answer is precisely the kind of response the questioner *intends* to elicit with his question.” (p. 13)

What is remarkable about this statement is its “unofficial” character, as it were. In Belnap’s and Steel’s book on the *logic* of questions and answers this pragmatic or, as the quote says, psychological definition of direct answers is presented as a mere comment that apparently does not belong to logic itself. But in fact this supplement is indispensable for understanding the property of completeness. There is no way of determining which answer is a complete one without referring to the psychology of the questioner. We must know what the questioner wants to know. In the introduction of Belnap’s and Steel’s book, written primarily by Steel, we read that logic is concerned with grammar, semantics and proof theory (though the latter cannot be expected from erotetic logic). Logic in this sense should be free of pragmatics, dealing with syntactical operations, abstract contents and inferential relations between these contents. It follows that the notion of direct or complete answer is no logical concept at all, although it is located in the very heart of erotetic logic. Here, “pure” logic depends on non-logical assumptions.

Another example for a pragmatical amendment to the logic of questions can be found in approaches in which it is treated as a kind of epistemic logic. According to Lennart Åqvist, a question is used to express a *request* that is satisfied if the questioner gets to *know* the answer.¹¹ A person asking a question thereby requests to provide him or her with appropriate knowledge. To use a term by Jaakko Hintikka,¹² the *desideratum* of the question “Who wrote *Desolation Row*?”, when described from the questioner’s point of view, is “I know who wrote *Desolation Row*.” The desid-

¹¹ Cf. Åqvist 1975, 140.

¹² Cf. Hintikka 1976, chap. 2.

eratum is a state of knowledge in which the questioner wants to be brought. A complete answer, then, is one that succeeds in bringing about this epistemic state. This shows that whether a question is complete or incomplete depends, among other things, on what the questioner knows in advance. The answer “Robert Allen Zimmerman wrote *Desolation Row*”, for instance, would only be satisfactory for questioners who already know that the person of that name is identical to Bob Dylan (given that he or she knows who Bob Dylan is).

4. Contexts and Paradigms

Now back to the supposed unanswerability of metaphysical questions. In the terminology of the previous section we may say that Wittgenstein’s unanswerability goes back to his refusal to accept irreducible analogies as direct (or complete) answers. For Wittgenstein such answers can only be provided by natural science. Answers coming from other discourses, like religion, ethics or metaphysics, are rejected as meaningless. We know, however, that most philosophers of the past did disagree. Thomas Aquinas, to name but one, dealt at length with our main example, explaining the existence of the world by a divine cause. God, in turn, is a perfect being whose essence can only be grasped by way of analogy. When God is said to be good, wise etc., these predicates are not applied in the same sense as when applied to human beings. Rather, what they convey is that God possesses the properties ascribed to him in a higher or even infinite proportion. So, according to Thomas, there is not only analogy between God and his creatures but also infinite difference. Moreover, analogical speaking of God cannot be reduced to non-analogical speaking, as this would require that predicates can be univocally applied to God and creatures, and this is denied by Thomas.¹³

A few hundred years later, Immanuel Kant expressed a related but somewhat different view, referring to God as “the Unknown, which I do not hereby cognise as it is in itself, but as it is for me or in relation to the world, of which I am a part.”¹⁴ This he called a “cognition of analogy”. In

¹³ Cf. *Summa Theologiae* I q. 13 a. 5.

¹⁴ Kant 1912, 129 (§ 57).

contrast to Thomas Aquinas, however, Kant rejected the idea that God's *essence* can be known by analogy. In Kant's view, the analogy only concerns the *relation* between God and the world. Yet this is not the place for discussing the parallels and differences between Thomas' and Kant's understanding of analogy. Suffice to say that both shared with Wittgenstein the idea that analogies are based on some kind of similarity and, most importantly, that they are *irreducible*. In metaphysics analogies cannot be replaced by non-analogical language. Yet in contrast to Wittgenstein, the other two did not worry about that, since they did not regard translatability as a meaning criterion, neither translatability into the language of natural science, nor in that of ordinary life. Even Kant, who strongly opposed speculative theology as meaningless, tried to establish a transcendental theology by using analogical descriptions of God.¹⁵

A very different and more recent example comes from Nicholas Rescher's book *The Limits of Science*. In chapter eight of this book, entitled "Against Insolubilia", Rescher deals with the existence of the world, admitting that it cannot be explained causally, by positing a thing as the cause of all being. A natural cause would itself belong to the things in the world and thus could not explain their existence. Assuming a supernatural cause, however, would amount to mixing two spheres that must be kept apart. Rescher opts "for leaving God to theology and refraining from drafting him into service in the project of scientific explanation."¹⁶ His own explanation of the existence of the world is in terms of a "principle of value", which is not a thing or like a thing, hence no *cause* in a material, thing-like sense. The explanation, then, is a teleological one, employing the principle "that things exist because 'that's for the best.'" Such a teleological approach would hold that *being* roots in value." (p. 121) In short, the world exists because its existence is good and valuable. To the obvious objection that this explanation is not a scientific one, Rescher replies by indicating that scientific standards have often changed in the past, and that they will do so in the future. In prior centuries, teleological explanations have been highly esteemed; today they are regarded as unscientific but this need not remain

¹⁵ Cf. *the Critique of Pure Reason*, B 659 ff. and 723 ff.

¹⁶ Rescher 1999, 120.

so. “The fashion of the present day could turn out to be [...] wrong with respect to teleological explanation.” (p. 121)

In Wittgenstein’s view of science, there was no room for teleology or values. Science is committed to causality, and values belong to the realm of the mystical. Outside of science there is no meaning. On the background of Rescher’s account of the variability of scientific standards, a restrictive criterion of meaning, like Wittgenstein’s, may be seen as an arbitrary premise, a contingent invention made at some point of history. Yet it is only from a historical perspective that it can appear like this, since a meaning criterion may well present itself as an absolute truth to the members of a paradigm that is built upon this criterion or a similar assumption. Our previous examination of the logic of questions and answers may help to illuminate how these differences in opinion between members of different paradigms, between metaphysicians and sceptics, are possible. They are possible because logic has a pragmatic side. At least the central concept of a complete answer cannot be explained without mentioning pragmatics.

In studies of the pragmatics of questions it has become customary to use the terms “context” and “relevance” to cover the pragmatic factors on which questions and answers depend. A typical assumption is that only some answers to a given question are relevant, and that the context of asking determines which answers these are.¹⁷ There is no doubt that an important part of this context is constituted by psychological factors. Belnap and Steel, as well as Åqvist and Hintikka, focus on *intentions*: a questioner intends to get some knowledge by eliciting the right answer. In a recent paper on the epistemology of questions, Christopher Hookway characterizes “the context of an utterance as an evolving body of presuppositions, of things that are taken for granted by the participants, and, perhaps, are known to function as a body of shared background knowledge.”¹⁸ Those looking beyond epistemology would prefer to call this the “epistemic context” and distinguish it from physical, linguistic, and social context. Actually, psychology and epistemology cannot be separated from sociology.

¹⁷ An influential example is Bas van Fraassen’s theory of why-questions; see Fraassen 1980, § 4.3.

¹⁸ Hookway 2008, 13.

Which answers people expect when asking a question, and which they accept as completely answering that question, is what they have *learned* to expect and accept in interaction with others. This is particularly so in the case of philosophical or scientific questions, where people learn these things, for instance, when studying at a university. A great mind like Wittgenstein, of course, may also start a new tradition.

As Thomas Kuhn writes, the term “paradigm” in its “sociological” meaning “stands for the entire constellation of beliefs, values, techniques, and so on shared by the members of a given community.”¹⁹ Philosophical unanswerability claims represent philosophical paradigms. They are used to identify a paradigm, promote it and delineate it from others. In the case of Wittgenstein the relevant paradigm may be described as a kind of naturalism that emphasizes causal laws of nature. But since paradigms, just like discourses, language games, research programs etc., are no clear-cut entities and often overlap each other, we may also locate Wittgenstein in the narrower paradigm of logical atomism. The parallels between the *Tractatus* and Russell’s “The Philosophy of Logical Atomism”, first published in 1918, are well-known, and so is Russell’s confession that these lectures “are very largely concerned with explaining certain ideas which I learnt from my friend and former pupil Ludwig Wittgenstein.”²⁰ In the last of this series of lectures (on metaphysics), Russell says “that the only difference between science and philosophy is, that science is what you more or less know and philosophy is what you do not know. [...] Therefore every advance in knowledge robs philosophy of some problems which formerly it had, and if there is any truth, if there is any value in the kind of procedure of mathematical logic, it will follow that a number of problems which had belonged to philosophy will have ceased to belong to philosophy and will belong to science.” (p. 243) This seems to imply that if a problem cannot be solved by science, thus turning from a philosophical problem to a scientific one, it cannot be solved at all.

So much for logical atomism, the naturalistic paradigm of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*. Non-naturalism, of course, has its own paradigms. Like most metaphysicians at all times, Thomas Aquinas deliberately employed

¹⁹ Kuhn 1970, 175 (Postscript).

²⁰ Russell 1986, 160.

analogies, metaphors, similes, symbols, etc., to answer questions like that about the origin of the world. As a rule, metaphysicians did not expect that these creative ways of speaking about things remote and mysterious could be replaced by more mundane ones. They often also agreed that these ways of speaking are insufficient, imperfect, and even “incomplete”, in the sense that they are not able to reveal the whole truth about the matter (e.g. God). But nevertheless we must admit that they may be complete in the sense discussed in the previous section. Even an “incomplete” answer, a “mere” simile, can be *pragmatically* complete if it satisfies the request expressed by the metaphysical question, i.e., if the questioner accepts the simile as answering the question.

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