

# What is a question?

Daniel Harrell

October 16, 2015

A lecture I gave on the Annapolis campus of St. John's College on October 16, 2015...

## Contents

Introduction

Part One

Part Two

## Introduction

Tonight, I want to ask a question about questions. What are they? What did I just do in asking that one? Or that one? Or this one?

The questions I just asked show they are easy enough to form. And from them we do, in ways that range from the clearly prosaic to the seemingly profound. What did you have for lunch today? Why is there something rather than nothing?

Questions also have a central place at this college, in their own way as important as the books we read and the conversations we have. There is a reason we begin seminar with an opening question rather than presentation. Or why we call the occasion after Friday Night Lecture the Question Period rather than the Answer Period, or even the Question-And-Answer Period. Without the questions we ask, the books we read and the conversations we have would arguably lose their point.

But their very importance can make questions invisible to us. They would get in the way of themselves, it seems, if we couldn't ask a question without having to ask, first, what it means to ask a question. And if we consider questions our best expressions of thoughtfulness, it is easy to focus on what they ask, without any distinct reflection on what they are. One might even wonder if there is anything left in a question to think about, once we grasp, and can ponder, what the question is asking about.

But perhaps there *is* something left to think about. Questions may be invisible in one sense, but they are altogether visible in another. We give questions their own punctuation mark; their own syntax; their own intonation; and even their own verb, making a question something I *ask* rather than simply something I say. It even sounds odd to say that questions are *said* rather than asked. But what is it, then, that might make asking different from saying? What did I just do in raising a question about this difference rather than making an assertion about it? And what would make my question different from my answer, if I had any answer to give?

And *do* I have any answer to give? I ask this last question because I confess I can't make up my mind about the lecture to follow, and what to make of where it goes. I do know I've divided it into two parts. In the first part, I will use my example of a clearly prosaic question—what did you have for lunch today?—to describe something about questions I find essential yet puzzling, even paradoxical. Then, in the second part of the lecture, I will use my example of a seemingly profound question—why is there something rather than nothing?—to try to resolve the paradox. But I will end the lecture with a question that suggests I have failed.

[Back to top](#)

## Part One

So what did you have for lunch today? Or suppose I ask you this, and you reply: I had pizza. What makes my sentence *the question* in this exchange? We can assume I spoke my sentence with the right intonation; and that if I wrote my sentence down, I would put a question-mark at the end. I also used the verb “to do”, to help invert my subject and verb. But there is one more thing I did, another word I used. I began my sentence with “what”, as if to announce a question rather than an answer. Perhaps what makes my sentence *the question* in our exchange, then, has something essential to do with my use of the word “what”. So how am I using it?

I am using it, evidently, to ask you *what* you had for lunch. And the grammatical role it plays in my sentence seems clear enough. It functions, so we say, as a pronoun. And this means, we might presume, that it is taking the place of a noun. But what noun? We might presume this would be whatever noun, or noun-phrase, identifies what you had for lunch. In this case, then, the noun would be “pizza.”

But there is already a problem with this analysis, or at least a puzzle. It gives a fair enough explanation, I think, of how you might use the pronoun “what” in your answer: for example, if you were to say: “What I had for lunch today was pizza”. But since my question precedes your answer, and prompts your answer, it presumably makes sense in advance of your answer, no matter the answer, even if the answer were “I had nothing for lunch today; I was too busy to eat”.

But this suggests that when I use the pronoun “what” in my question, it cannot take the place of *any* noun, lest my question imply your answer.

But then am I *not* using the word “what” in my question as a pronoun? There is a problem with this possibility, too. For even if my question makes sense in advance of your answer, it still asks for an answer; and in this case for the very answer you give about what you had for lunch. Indeed, in this direction we might say that the noun “pizza” is too general, rather than too specific, to have been replaced by the pronoun “what” in my question. After all, in asking you what you had for lunch, I am asking you about the very piece of pizza you had for lunch, all other pizza aside.

But what should we make, then, of my use of the word “what”? If my question is to make sense in advance of your answer, then this pronoun, if it *is* a pronoun, will have represent *whatever* you might have had for lunch, as if its reference to your lunch were indefinite. Yet if my question is to make sense as asking for your answer, then this pronoun will have to represent exactly what you had for lunch, as if its reference to your lunch were definite, even unique. And since I only have to ask the question once, we can assume that the word “what” is somehow making both references at once, as if it could take the place of any lunch you might have had, and the one lunch you actually had, at the very same time. But what kind of pronoun is that?

There is another pronoun like this in my question, related to the first. For my question is about what *you* had for lunch. Evidently, I can use the pronoun “you”, without any dependence on a name it might have replaced, to address my question to each of you, as if my reference to you both included and excluded anyone else, at least in the audience. And this seems something like the way I can use the pronoun “what”, again without any dependence on a noun it might have replaced, to ask my question about *what* you had for lunch, as if my reference to your lunch both included and excluded anything else, at least that was edible and available. And there is yet another word in the most explicit form of my question, the word “today”, that seems to make the same double reference, as if it too were the same kind of pronoun. For there is no date that the word “today” need take the place of; and this allows it to refer to any day, even in referring to just one.

But let me pause at this point in my account. For I can see at least two issues with it. One is that it might be wrong, in part or whole, about the use of pronouns in my question. Another issue is that the account focuses on one question, but says nothing about questions more generally. So let me now try to describe what puzzles me about questions more generally, and without appeal to any pronouns, before moving on to the second part of my lecture.

Again, my question was, “What did you have for lunch today?” And when I began my account of what puzzled me about it, I said that the question had to make sense in two ways at once: it had to make sense, first, *in advance of* any answer; and it *also* had to make sense *as asking for* an answer. But I might have

said this much of *any* question, and this much is enough to puzzle me. For by making sense in advance of any answer, a question seems to be complete; yet by making sense as asking for an answer, a question seems to be incomplete. And if it makes sense in both ways at once, then a question seems somehow complete and incomplete at once. But this sounds more paradoxical than possible. So how is it possible? How are *questions* possible?

And in particular, how is the kind of question we ask at the college possible? For the kind of question I asked you about your lunch, we might say, is a question for me, but not for you; and it asks for an answer possessed by you, but not by me. But the kind of question we ask the college—for example, in the opening question of a seminar—is more radical. It is a question for *all* of us, *before* the conversation begins, that asks for an answer possessed by none of us, which is *why* the conversation begins. But questions without answers in this sense might well be dismissed as hopeless, pointless, useless, meaningless—as if these were questions for none of us rather than all of us, in asking for answers possessed by none of us. This, then, is the paradox. For if a question is so incomplete as to ask for an answer in no one's possession, then how can it still be complete enough to *be* a question? How is this kind of question even possible?

---

The epitome of such a question is my example of a seemingly profound question: Why is there something rather than nothing? For any answer to this question—whether it refer to a cause or at least to a reason—would seem to involve something rather than nothing, which the question then obliges us to explain, in yet another answer, leading to an infinite regress of answers, as if the question were asking for an answer only to swallow it, so that no one could ever possess it. But does this mean that the question is truly profound? Even the deepest question there is? Or does it mean that the question is not really a question at all?

[Back to top](#)

## Part Two

So why *is* there something rather than nothing? Or leaving aside any prospect of an answer, why would I ever ask myself this question? One reason, I think, involves the very point of view from which I asked you earlier what you had for lunch. This is the point of view that allowed me to address you with the pronoun “you”. This is also the point of view, then, that allows me to use the pronoun “I”, or “me”, to address myself.

Here is one way to think about this. When I ask why there is something rather than nothing, I don't mean to ask merely why there is something rather than something *else*. It is one thing to ask myself why there is a podium in front of

me at the moment rather than something else, like a table, or a chair, or even just the air in the hall. But it seems another thing to ask myself why there is a podium in front of me rather than nothing at all. But what might lead me from the first kind of question to the second? What might lead me, that is, to suppose it possible, or even intelligible, that something in the world like the podium might be nothing, rather than merely something else? Can I even use the word “nothing” and *not* mean something?

But suppose I ask myself why the person *behind* this podium is *me* rather than someone else. In one sense, the answer is easy to give. It was *my* lecture scheduled for tonight rather than someone else’s. And *my* decision to give a lecture that led to the scheduling. The answer to my question might continue in this vein, going back in time to my appointment at the college, to my birth, my parents’ birth, my grandparents’, all the way back to the Big Bang, if you like. But even this much an answer seems to leave something in my question unaddressed. For why am *I* the person that this answer puts so conclusively behind the podium? Why is his point of view *my* point of view? Why is *his* lecture *mine*? Why is he *me*?

The person behind this podium, I can grant, is definitely me rather than someone else. But it seems I can still ask *why* this person is me; as if he, too, might be someone else, not in the sense that he replaced me, but instead in the sense that he erased me; leaving me nowhere rather than somewhere, no one rather than someone, nothing rather than something. So when I ask myself why the person behind this podium is me *even if* I *am* no one else, I seem to be asking why *I myself* am something rather than nothing. And the reason I can ask this is related to my use of the first-person pronoun in my question, and the point of view upon the world it reflects. Since my use of it allows the pronoun to refer to me and no one else, it reflects a point of view upon the world that I share with no one else. It is the point of view I can call my own. Of course, you also possess your own point of view in this sense—each of you, I mean. And this is why you too can use the pronoun “I” to mean you and no one else.

Yet since each of us shares this point of view with no one else, the view itself seems to be something that could never *be* something else. That is, my own point of view upon the world, since I share this with no one else, can only be something or nothing. And so the reason I can ask myself why *I* am something rather than nothing, it seems, is that I am asking this question not only *from* my own point of view, but *about* this point of view, and why the view is something rather than nothing in being *mine*.

But this is also the reason, then, that I can ask why there is something rather than nothing more generally. For my own point of view upon the world might be said to *contain* the world, as if in a frame; even if I am otherwise *contained* in the world as an inhabitant. The world, that is, is made *present* to me through this point of view; and the world has a *presence*, then, that we can distinguish from its existence. But presence, in this sense, is presence rather than absence, or something rather than nothing. So my own point of view upon the world is

what makes anything I might encounter in it, like the podium in front of me, present rather than absent, or something rather than nothing. And I can make the podium vanish, in this sense, simply by closing my eyes. And once they close for good, I can lose the world altogether. So why I ever *gained* the world in this sense, why I ever found myself with eyes to open, is one way to think about how I might come to ask myself, and feel compelled to ask myself, why there is something rather than nothing.

Even so, it seems I have no hope of finding any answer. For if we take something rather than nothing to mean presence rather than absence, then asking *why* there is something rather than nothing, at least if I hope to find an answer, is like asking for the *source* of presence to present itself to me, as if it were no longer a source. Or like asking for the origin of my own point of view upon the world to become a *part* of that point of view, as if it were no longer an origin. So we again seem stuck in paradox, and stuck with the same question about questions that concluded the first part of my lecture. If a question is so incomplete as to ask for an answer in no one's possession, then how can it still be complete enough to *be* a question? How are questions without answers in this sense even possible?

But there is another way to think about this. What if I can never *find* an answer to this question, because, in some sense, I *am* the answer. What if there *were* no origin of my own point of view upon the world, because the point of view itself *is* an origin? What if a question *could* ask for an answer in no one's possession and still *be* a question, in being the *source* of the answer it was asking for? What if questions without answers were possible, in other words, because questions without answers are beginnings?

Here's an example to try to clarify what I'm thinking of. Suppose at some point this week you wanted to know, but didn't know, who the Friday Night lecturer was. If you asked anyone else who knew, they would say "Mr Harrell is". But if you came to me, I would say "I am". The answers are the same in one sense, but their grammar still reflects a difference. And one way to put this difference, I think, is that the first answer, the one that refers to me as Mr Harrell, is an answer anyone might have, or give. But the second answer, the one that refers to me by the pronoun "I", is an answer only I can give. And while in one sense I might be said to have it; in another sense, and I think this is a more exact sense, I don't *have* the answer, because I *am* the answer.

This is one example, then, where where we might say lacking the answer means being the answer. But something similar, I think, is happening in questions where no one has an answer. Take the question of my lecture: What is a question? Let us assume there are no experts on questions to consult, no Google search we could do, no answer "out there" to find, to put this question to rest. But what answer, then, could the question be asking for? This is where I think it makes a kind of sense to say that lacking the answer means being the answer. Or to try to make this more intelligible, and particular: when we ask the kind of question that can become a question for all of us, before the conversation begins,

and it asks for an answer possessed by none of us, which is why the conversation begins, the answer *may well be* the conversation, as if answering a question were like answering a call, or summons. And to dismiss questions without answers in this sense as hopeless, or pointless, or useless, or meaningless, would then be heedless of the call.

But in case this sounds too much like a platitude for the good of seminar, I have a more heretical way of describing the kind of question we ask at the college. For suppose it true that questions without answers in this sense are possible, because questions without answers are beginnings. This suggests that such questions, in *being* beginnings, have no past. They can never be asked again, without being asked anew. But then for any book of the past we read, there is no way *back* to the author's meaning or intent. Or at least, there is no way back to it when you read the book in light of any question that has truly become a question for you, even if the author has asked it too. For since questions like this can only be asked again in being asked anew, everything you do with the book in this light becomes a part of *your* answer to the question, as if the author had been left behind.

---

But to conclude my lecture, I now want to ask two questions about my lecture.

The first question has to do with my account of the pronoun "I". My use of this pronoun meant, or so I said, that I have a point of view upon the world that I share with no one else. But if so, then what point of view upon the world *do* I share with someone else when both of us can use the pronoun "we"? Such as when a question becomes one for all of us? Or to make my question more particular: in what way do we form a "we", and not simply a "you and I", when we have a conversation?

My second question has to do with my way of resolving the paradox about questions as I characterized it in this lecture. The paradox, to recall, was that questions were complete and incomplete at once: complete in making sense in advance of any answer; and incomplete in making sense as asking for an answer. My way of resolving this paradox was to identify questions with beginnings. In one sense, I think the resolution succeeds. For the way a question can make a beginning, we might say, is when the one who asks is the one who answers; and *what* the question asks for, then, is not an object without, but rather an act within. Still, I suspect this resolution fails in another sense. For beginnings can seem just as paradoxical as questions. A beginning must follow nothing, and in that sense depend on nothing, as if it were complete; yet a beginning is followed by something, and in that sense depends on something, as if it were complete. So how are beginnings possible?

[Back to top](#)