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Paraphrasing philosophical questions

Parafrazowanie pytań filozoficznych

Abstract

This paper examines the philosophical significance of merely posing a question. Drawing on erotetic logic, particularly the work of Anna Brożek (2008), the author analyzes the cognitive structure of questions, focusing on their presuppositions and resolvability. The paper argues that well-formulated questions – especially hypothetical ones – can meaningfully guide philosophical and scientific inquiry by shaping research agendas and clarifying conceptual gaps. Further, the process of logical therapy and paraphrasing can transform vague or semantically flawed questions into resolvable ones or demonstrate their *unresolvability*, both of which are philosophically valuable. Through the lens of thinkers such as Ajdukiewicz, Collingwood, and Agassi, the paper shows that questioning is not only foundational to philosophical methodology but can itself constitute a substantive contribution. Ultimately, the paper supports the thesis that simply asking a question can be a valuable contribution to philosophy.

Keywords: philosophical question, resolvability**,** presupposition, paraphrase, metaphilosophy

Streszczenie

Niniejszy artykuł poświęcony jest wartości, jaką dla filozofii może stanowić samo sformułowanie pytania. Opierając się na logice erotetycznej, w szczególności na pracach Anny Brożek, autor analizuje strukturę poznawczą pytań, koncentrując się na ich presupozycjach i rozstrzygalności. Argumentuje, że dobrze sformułowane pytania, zwłaszcza hipotetyczne, mogą w znaczący sposób kierować dociekaniami filozoficznymi i naukowymi poprzez kształtowanie programów badawczych i wyjaśnianie luk pojęciowych. Co więcej, proces terapii logicznej i parafrazowania może przekształcić niejasne lub semantycznie błędne pytania w możliwe do rozwiązania lub wykazać ich nierozstrzygalność, co jest cenne z filozoficznego punktu widzenia. Poprzez perspektywę myślicieli, takich jak Ajdukiewicz, Collingwood i Agassi, ukazane zostaje, że zadawanie pytań jest nie tylko fundamentalne dla metodologii filozoficznej, ale samo w sobie może stanowić istotny wkład. Ostatecznie artykuł wspiera tezę, że samo zadawanie pytań może być cennym wkładem w filozofię.

Słowa kluczowe: pytanie filozoficzne, rozstrzygalność, presupozycja, parafraza, metafilozofia

Introduction

In this paper, the author will attempt to answer the question posed in the article, which consists solely of the title[1]: "Can a good philosophical contribution be made just by asking a question? (Habgood-Coote, Watson, Whitcomb, 2023a, to whom I will refer as "the authors"). In the same issue of *Metaphilosophy*, a commentary article was published in which Habgood-Coote, Watson, and Whitcomb (2023b) take their provocation seriously and try to answer the question posed earlier by analysing each of the words that appear in it. They also encourage others to take up this challenge (I will refer to the question "Can a good philosophical contribution be made just by asking a question?" as the "question-challenge"), which the author would like to do by deepening the analysis mainly in terms of the available knowledge in the field of erotetics. In doing so, the author will draw on Anna Brożek's (2011) comprehensive analysis of questions, as well as other relevant works. The paper is divided into two sections: the first dealing with the issue of presuppositions and the second with resolvability.

1. Presuppositions

First, the authors point out that it may not be possible to simply ask a question. This is because there is always something that comes along with the question, namely, presuppositions. They find the claim that every question has them, which guarantees to reveal the questioner's beliefs about the world. It is worth mentioning here that Tomasz Puczyłowski (2022) (Puczyłowski, Ziembicki, 2018) in a series of works shows that questions can also have conversational implicatures, which is a modification of Grice's theory. According to this view, questions can express assertions that would give a positive answer to the question-challenge. However, this phenomenon is mostly relevant to non-scientific language and is not the focus of this paper, so the author will not develop this thread further.

In Anna Brożek's analysis of the cognitive content of questions, assumptions come to the fore. This notion was introduced by Kazimierz Ajdukiewicz (1975: 88–89), who defined the positive assumption of a question as the statement that at least one answer to this question is true, and the negative assumption as the statement that at least one of the answers to this question is not true. However, later eroticists questioned the validity of the negative assumption, as it may not always be in the sender's intention. Brożek adopts the notion of assumption from Wiśniewski, defining it as a sentence that logically follows from any proper answer to the question. Unfortunately, this solution becomes entangled in the definition of both the notion of *answer* and the notion of *entailment*. It is only through the notion of assumption that Brożek can define the notion of presupposition. "Let us call all sentences which analytically (or semantically) follow from an assumption

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[1] Which is not even the shortest published article. This title also belongs to a work of philosophy that also contains the title itself, "A Demonstration of the Causal Power of Absences" by Tyron Goldschmidt.

of a given question − »presuppositions« of this question. The set of assumption and all presuppositions of a given question may be called »the cognitive content« of this question" (Brożek, 2011: 195).

According to Brożek's classification, a *challenge* question is a *hypothetical* question, which in English is constructed by inversion. Embedded hypothetive questions consist of an operator 'if/whether', which signals the question and *datum quaestionis*, which is a scheme of an answer to a given question – in this case, inversions are not needed. "Hypothetical questions communicate not only the existence of a gap in a given picture of a situation and a will to fill this gap; they also present its hypothetical filling" (Brożek, 2011: 131), which functions as a weaker assumption. The utterer of the question-challenge is not convinced of the truth of the hypothesis to the same extent as of a claim like "there are questions" or "there are philosophical contributions", but he is also not completely indifferent about its truth as if he were uttering a selective question "can a good philosophical contribution be made just by asking a question, or can't it be made?".

Given this, the authors, claiming that they are not presupposing any claim that their readers would not already accept (Habgood-Coote et al., 2023b: 57), do not present the full picture. By uttering *just* a question, we limit ourselves to posing questions containing only trivial presuppositions, not suggestive ones. However, by posing *just* a hypothetical question, we are already present. A possible way to fill the cognitive gap, which can shape future research in a very specific direction. This is an argument for answering the question-challenge positively, and if we find it compelling and ask the next question, "if so, which one?" then hypothetical questions are the place to look for answers.

Before moving on to the benefits of questions for philosophy itself, let's pause for a moment to consider the other potential benefits of philosophical questions. The notion of presupposition has been used by Robin Collingwood to appreciate the role of questions in the development of science. According to Collingwood's approach, every proposition we make is an answer to a certain question, which is not necessarily asked, but is logically primary (Gęgotek, 2003, p. 190). Each question, in turn, has certain presuppositions that represent the sender's assumed theory about the world. Collingwood distinguishes two types of presuppositions:

– relative presuppositions – function as propositions, further questions can be formulated about them, and have a truth value;
– absolute presuppositions – fundamental assumptions of a scientific discipline, shaped by historical factors, have no truth value.

Take, as an example, the absolute presupposition of medicine is the existence of causality, and the absolute presupposition of physics is the existence of laws of nature. According to Collingwood, the discovery of absolute presuppositions was the main task of philosophy, and the way to do this was to ask more and more elementary questions. The questions were therefore of considerable importance, but only theoretically. Absolute presuppositions could not be changed deliberately, but only spontaneously with the course of history.

Practicality was made possible only by the concept of Joseph Aggasi (Gęgotek, 2003: 196), who did not deny the truth value of metaphysical assumptions. He treated them

similarly to research programmes and wanted to evaluate them mainly in terms of their effectiveness. In science, if we want to explain a phenomenon, we start by asking a question with the query 'why?'. However, questions with a schema of 'why x?' are general, difficult to critique, and not every answer to them should satisfy us. According to Agassi, we seek answers that are consistent with our metaphysical assumptions and should therefore modify our questions accordingly. If we explicate the assumptions of the scientists, we will be able to transform our questions to include queries like 'which?', 'what?', 'how?', which are much less troublesome. Through the Newtonianism research programme, we were able to transform any question with the schema 'why does phenomenon x occur' into questions with the schema 'what force causes phenomenon x'. The paraphrasing of research questions is of great importance, and this will be referred to in the next section.

2. Resolvability

Another property of the hypothetical questions is that they are elliptic. This means that they require clarification in the form of emphasis. Concerning the question-challenge, the authors clarify by saying that finding any contribution is a trivial matter, so the crux of the challenge is to find a good one. Without going too deeply into their further consideration of what it means to be good, the author will try to present situations in which the importance of questions should be universally accepted.

Brożek argues that philosophical questions are peculiar in some respects. They are very general and seek to synthesise or lay the foundations for knowledge from other disciplines. However, this does not mean, perhaps contrary to popular opinion, that philosophical questions are irresolvable. Questions are resolved according to the generally accepted procedures of the discipline. The only difference is that philosophers cannot rely solely on the fundamental procedure of the natural sciences, namely, empirical verification/falsification. "There are at least two other procedures which have to be listed among the resolving procedures accepted in philosophy: analysis and intuition" (Brożek, 2011: 360). Brożek and Jadacki (2006: 37) define the analysis of x as the "deliberate separation of some parts of x or the incorporation of x into some whole" – the first activity is called diffraction analysis, and the second is called implantation analysis. Defined in this way, analysis is not an exclusively philosophical activity, but a common method used in science. What distinguishes philosophy, however, is its analysis of concepts and the logical relations between them.

Philosophical analysis can show that a question is semiotically incorrect (such questions are irresolvable), which is the basis for applying logical therapy to it. Such therapy can have three different outcomes. First, it may allow paraphrasing of the original question, giving us a new question that captures the same intention but is resolvable by a different philosophical method. The whole process, as described above, can be reduced to asking a more precise question, and the benefit of this cannot be underestimated. For it may turn out that the answer is a secondary matter, an obvious consequence of a properly posed question. Even if this is not the case, it narrows the scope of the search considerably. We can therefore respond positively to the question-challenge.

Secondly, the result of logic therapy may be a paraphrase of a question from another field of science. Here, the situation is analogous – we get the philosophical benefit of a clear way to solve a given problem. It is a method that is accepted in the target field. Finally, the result may be the cancellation of the question – a situation in which a meaningful paraphrase is not possible, and therefore, the answer to the question does not exist. This is advantageous in that it saves time for other researchers to consider the question. Even though in this case we are not asking a new question, but rather stating its absence, the author believes this still argues in favour of resolving the question-challenge positively. After all, simply asking "is it possible to paraphrase the question so that it can be resolved by one of the accepted methods" can make it clear that this is impossible and save our time.

It is important to clarify what constitutes the falsity of a question. Jadacki (2002: 249) points out that a question is incorrect if at least one of its assumptions or presuppositions is false. This is a necessary condition, but within it, we can still replace worse questions with better ones. A question is better the more defined and specific it is. The question is better, the more defined it is, the narrower the range of the unknown, i.e., the variable that appears in the proper answer. For example, the scope of the unknown of the question "What colour is this ball?" is any (x) that is the name of the colour. This is because the answer will have the scheme "this ball is (x)". On the other hand, the scope of the unknown of the question "Is this ball red or green?" is the two-element set {red, green}. The question is that the more specific, the fewer proper answers it allows, i.e., substitutions of values under the unknown (x). In practice, questions with syntactic defects (containing ellipses and amphiboles) or semantic defects (containing ambiguities and vagueness) are most often subjected to logic therapy (Brożek 2008: 359–360).

Jadacki (2008: 307) gives an example of such a paraphrase for the question "Does the world exist? If we replace it with the phrase "does what exists, exist?", one of the correct answers "what exists, exists" will be an analytically true sentence, and the other "what exists, does not exist" will be an analytically false sentence. Since there is a true answer to the question posed – the problem of the existence of the world is resolvable. Alternatively, we can assume that "exist" means "be located somewhere outside the world". Then, of course, the true answer to the question posed will be "the world does not exist". So the ontological problem is resolvable, and the answer to the question posed depends on the explanation of the notions.

On the other hand, Jedynak (2008: 308) asks whether it is not the case that the transformed problem becomes a new problem, while the original problem remains unsolved. Whatever the answer to the problem, it is safe to say that it at least makes us aware of the potential dangers to which our claims are exposed. And that, in turn, is surely a valuable contribution made simply by asking the question. The question about the resolvability of philosophical disputes would also have to be paraphrased to refer to at least some' disputes. A negative answer would then imply the *irresolvability* of all philosophical questions, which is wrong, since it is a philosophical question in itself that would then be resolved (Jedynak, 2008: 309).

It is worth noting that some philosophical or quasi-philosophical questions are asked seriously, but the person asking them does not expect an answer. Questions such as "Are

we living in a simulation?" are often asked to evoke certain emotions or to create a certain mood. Philosophical attempts to paraphrase such questions ("Are we brains in a vat?") and make them more precise are perceived by non-philosophers as a misunderstanding of the subject. There are also factions of philosophy that use such questions: to achieve certain experiences or to inspire the audience, to stimulate creativity. I find the phenomenon that some questions have such properties interesting, but it is beyond the interest of logic. To explain it, one would have to paraphrase the problem in the language of psychology.

Conclusion

In this paper, the author has presented several arguments for the claim that one can make a good philosophical contribution simply by asking a question. The benefits of a well-articulated question can be to effectively guide further research in a given area, to make us aware of potential gaps in our claims, but most importantly, to formulate a previously underdetermined problem in a way that makes it possible to solve it. A good paraphrase of a question is useful not only for scientific or philosophical work, but also when talking to a layman who asks broad questions like 'what is the point of all this?' A philosopher can help to clarify his field of interest so that he can express his curiosity in the language of psychology, evolutionary biology, existential philosophy, theology, or another, and find a satisfying answer.

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