

# The Hermeneutic Priority of Which Question? A Speech Act Clarification for Interlocutionary Acts

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**Abstract:** An axiom of philosophical hermeneutics is that questioning has hermeneutic priority. Yet there are many different kinds of questions. Which sort has priority in understanding complete thoughts and for bringing about a fusion of horizons? Speech act theory is one resource for specifying which kind. I first develop the broad notion of questioning in philosophical hermeneutics. Second, I examine aspects of question taxonomies in pedagogy as well as their shortcomings. Third, I turn to the Speech Act approach to questioning and provide a challenge to this theory for adequately addressing what kind takes hermeneutic priority. I propose the category of “suspensives” as the kind of interlocutionary act definitive for questions that have hermeneutic priority.

**Résumé:** Un axiome de l'herméneutique philosophique est que le questionnement a une priorité herméneutique. Pourtant, il existe de nombreux types de questions. Quelle sorte de question a la priorité pour comprendre des pensées complètes et pour apporter une fusion d'horizons ? La théorie des actes de discours est une ressource pour spécifier le type de question. Je développe d'abord la notion large de questionnement en herméneutique philosophique. Deuxièmement, j'examine les aspects des taxonomies de questions en pédagogie ainsi que leurs lacunes. Troisièmement, j'emploie l'approche des actes du discours pour questionner cette approche et je mets en question cette théorie pour traiter de manière adéquate le type de question qui prend une priorité herméneutique. Je propose la catégorie des « suspensifs » comme le type d'acte illocutoire définitif pour les questions qui ont une priorité herméneutique.

**Keywords:** Gadamer, hermeneutic priority, illocutionary acts, pedagogy, questioning, speech act theory, sincerity conditions, Ricoeur

## 1. Introduction—Questions are the answer?

While dogs and gods can bark orders, questioning—as least interrogative statements articulated in particular languages—is a uniquely human activity. In the last ten years, the Agency for Healthcare and Research Quality issued a campaign to encourage patients to ask more questions of their health care providers with the refrain, “Questions are the answer.” Moreover, most pedagogical theory focuses on getting students to ask more questions, suggesting that they need to ask questions in order to learn. We have a general sense that questions are important all around. I want to focus on one peculiar aspect of questioning in philosophical hermeneutics.

An axiom of philosophical hermeneutics is that to understand a question is to ask it; to understand a complete thought is to understand it as an answer to a question (Gadamer 2013, p. 383; see also Dickman 2018). That is, questioning has hermeneutic priority. Yet we know from reading pedagogy and curriculum design—let alone interrogation manuals, theory in clinical therapy, and more—that there are many different kinds of questions (see Morgan and Saxton 2006; Wiggins and McTighe 2005; Graesser and Person 1994; and Dillon 1978). What specific sort of question has priority in understanding complete thoughts? Speech act theory seems to be one resource for clarifying and specifying this topic. In what follows, I first develop the broad notion of questioning in philosophical hermeneutics. Second, I examine aspects of question taxonomies in pedagogy. Third, I turn to the speech act approach to questioning and challenge its ability to adequately address what kind takes hermeneutic priority. I propose the category of “suspensives” to capture the kind of interlocutory act definitive for questions that have hermeneutic priority.

## 2. Questioning has hermeneutic priority

In this section, I develop the analysis of questioning within philosophical hermeneutics. As Gadamer writes, “The close relation between questioning and understanding is what gives the hermeneutic experience its true dimension” (Gadamer 2013, p. 383). Hermeneutic experience happens when we become conscious of

the need for interpretation, the need to come to an understanding of something. Gadamer believes that the experience correlates to the essence and structure of questions, and it is this structure that has hermeneutic priority. That is, we can only come to understand a complete thought about something if and only if it answers to a question that we are actually asking. In general, questions indicate a readiness for understanding meanings or complete thoughts. They situate other units of discourse and experience. They allow for the transference of complete thoughts from one person's understanding to another person's understanding. These elements of the structure of questioning give it its hermeneutic priority. As Gadamer writes, "The *priority of the question* in all knowledge and discourse ... really reveals something of an object" (2013, p. 371).

Without questioning, we cannot even have an experience worthy of the name "experience" (see Gadamer 2013, p. 364). In this way, questions are coextensive with genuine experience because they express that our presumptions of understanding have been disrupted. Public opinion suppress questioning, and prejudices sediment into stereotypes. These are threats to questioning, policing people who ask questions by labeling them "gadflies" or malcontents. Such sedimentation inhibits understanding rather than facilitating it. Illegitimate or unproductive prejudices do not admit of revision, distracting us from seeing the subject matter at issue or preventing us from really hearing what another person has to say about it (see Warnke 1997). Because "the tyranny of hidden prejudices... makes us deaf," understanding requires the critique of arbitrary projection of prejudices or, literally, pre-judgments by making them explicit and articulate (Gadamer 2013, p. 282).

To put a prejudice at risk of criticism requires bringing it into the foreground by articulating it and making it explicit. Only in this way can we suspend the hold a prejudice has on us (see Gadamer 2013, p. 310). What other people say can thwart our expectations and anticipations of meanings. It is in our acts of questioning, though, where we open ourselves to such an experience. As Gadamer writes, "All suspension of judgments and hence, a fortiori, of prejudices, has the logical structure of question" (2013, p. 310). Questions suspend prejudices—again, literally, pre-judgments—

because they hold subject and predicates of complete thoughts in abeyance (Dickman 2018, p. 236). Consider, for example, the question, “What year is it?” When we take into account possible years in the secularized era-dating system or even take into account various era-dating systems local to different religious traditions, we can see that the question expresses a suspension of the synthesis between the sentential subject (“this year”) and the radiation of predicative possibilities (“is 2021 CE” or “is 1442 AH” or etc.).

The act of questioning, then, breaks open the subject matter through this separation yet simultaneous suggestion of subjects with predicative possibilities. As Gadamer writes, “Discourse that is intended to reveal something requires that that thing be broken open by the question” (2013, p. 371). The “breaking” and subsequent openness results from suspending the connection or copulation between subject and predicate, while simultaneously suggesting a set of possible alternative connections. In this way, our questions bring a subject matter into a state of indeterminacy. In a sincere or genuine question, the subject matter is elevated into this indeterminacy where there is a fluidity and even equilibrium between this or that alternative. Acts of questioning do not *posit* possibilities, but *test* them (see Gadamer 2013, p. 383). Is this suggested predicate fitting? Is that one? Return to consider the example question above. We might be tempted, in a context of Christian global hegemony (however secularized it might be in appearance), to assume that “2021 CE” is *the* correct predicate. However, in Muslim communities at least, it is fitting to predicate of “this year” that it “is 1442 AH.”

While it is important to acknowledge that questions are acts we can choose to perform, we also need to acknowledge they are events that happen to us. As interrogative speech acts, they are things we can do with words. Yet questions also strike us like a sudden idea and in this way questions are also a passion or suffering (in the sense of something we undergo) rather than simply acts we perform. Gadamer emphasizes that it is not so much that we raise questions as much as questions arise and occur to us (2013, p. 375). This nonintentionality or passivity of questions grants them potency (see Levinas 1998). To experience the questionabil-

ity of something, to have a question press itself upon us, is to be already questioning. As Merleau-Ponty explains the nature of our dehiscent embodiment, our fundamental awareness is itself interrogative (1968, p. 121). As Gadamer elaborates, “There is no tentative or potential attitude of questioning” (2013, p. 383). Even just considering a question is to be already asking it. Once a question occurs to us, it is difficult to free ourselves from its grip. As a form of nonintentional consciousness, questioning further indicates a readiness for understanding meanings, and this provides a clue to the way questions situate other units of discourse.

Questioning is, for Ricoeur, constitutive of all meaningful or understandable discourse, where every act of speaking implies “a kind of question” (1976, p. 14). Once we turn to categories in speech act theory, we will clarify that this means questions are categorized properly as “interlocutionary.” It is another way of developing the fundamental hermeneutic axiom. Recall that it states: “To understand a question is to ask it, but to understand a complete thought is to understand it as an answer to a question.” On the one hand, a question does not convey a meaning or a complete thought to be understood. The *asking* of a question is the understanding of the question. This is why just considering a question is to be asking it already although we might not *express* our question out of being polite or due to other social niceties. On the other hand, a question forms the determinate horizon within which a particular complete thought can be grasped and understood. If a person just makes a statement—in seemingly semantic and hermeneutic outer-space—it seems to make no sense and come out of nowhere. That is, the purported meaning comes off as unintelligible. Without our own asking of the question to which it responds, the statement is lost on us.

All meaning is mediated linguistically and understanding meaning is linguistic all the way down. This is so because the medium of human experience and thought is structured by “linguisticity.” The declarative sentence is the unit of discourse often taken as basic. Such a sentence, at the bare minimum, must consist of both a subject and a predicate, corresponding to the human activities of perceiving and thinking. Consider the sentence, for example, “This is a book.” In this case, the grammatical subject, ‘this,’ designates

the experience and perception of the unity of such and such textures, weight, hardness, etc. The predicate, ‘book,’ designates the unitary thought or concept determined by the definition referred to by the term. The copula, ‘is,’ conjoins the subject and the predicate. The sentence as the conjunction and disjunction of subject and predicate expresses the conjunction and disjunction of perception (experience) and conception (thought). The copula designates the being to be understood, the correlate of understanding. In this way, a sentence is a meaning or complete thought to be understood (see Ricoeur 1976, p. 10; Klemm 1983, pp. 10-12). Given the hermeneutic priority of questioning, however, this is only part of the picture, a picture that makes us overlook the role of questioning.

The isolated declarative sentence is not the basic structure of meaningful language. A sentence is meaningful if and only if it is an answer to a real, that is, asked question. What is more fundamental for understanding a statement than the connection between subject and predicate is the question to which it is an answer. As Gadamer writes, “[O]ne speaks with motivation, and does not just make a statement *but answers a question*” (2007, p. 104; my emphasis). With regard to the above example, the *apparent* question that the sentence answers is “What is this?” In such a case, the sentence yields meaning according to the map laid out above. However, the actual—though implicit—question it answers is “What sentence might function to help bring out the structure of the basic unit of language called a ‘declarative sentence’?” What makes the sentence meaningful in this case is not merely that it binds subject and predicate together and thereby yields a complete thought or meaning to be understood, but that it also fulfills the question to some lesser or greater degree. Identifying this question is what helps us distinguish the mere example or illustration from the actual assertion. Without questions, contextless sentences do not make sense. For philosophical hermeneutics, the basic unit of language is not merely the sentence, but always the question and answer complex within which any particular sentence yields meanings.

It is crucial to isolate the semantic priority of questions so that we can appreciate their operation in the transferal of complete

thoughts from one person to another person, a further way in which questions have hermeneutic priority. Let us return to the axiom that “To understand a question is to ask it.” The same cannot be said for meanings or complete thoughts. While we can understand alternative possibilities of meaning, that does not imply we ourselves “mean” or intend any of those possible meanings. When we understand a question another person asks, we then also ask it *with* them. It is precisely through this sharing of questions that possible alternative complete thoughts are transferred to one’s own thinking (Dickman 2018, p. 231).

By stressing that meanings or complete thoughts are understandable only within question-and-answer complexes, we can see that complete thoughts really are situated within the life of dialogue. Dialogue just is the sustained movement of question-and-answer complexes (see Dickman 2021, ch. 7). Dialogue is distinct from merely acquiring knowledge. I can gain a bit of knowledge through the use of a question like “What year is it?” But if that question leads to an exchange with another person where I come to know them better, or fuse horizons with them, that is a genuine dialogue. Whether written or spoken, utterances do not yield understandable meanings outside the intersubjective situation of questioners and answerers. This is why Ricoeur labels questions as a unique kind of speech act, the “interlocutionary” acts, because “questioning and answering sustain the movement and dynamic of speaking” (1976, p. 14).

If questions were a mere means of acquiring information as “epistemic imperatives,” if they were such that they achieved their ultimate fulfillment in being answered definitively, then sustained dialogue would be impossible (see Aqvist 1965). If I want to know someone’s name, I can look at their nametag just as easily as I can ask them what it is. Does questioning have to consist of consciousness seeking fulfillment in knowledge? Levinas writes, “Must we not admit, on the contrary, that the request and the prayer that cannot be dissimulated in the question attest to a relation to the other person...? A relation delineated in the question, not just as any modality, but as in its originary one” (Levinas 1998, p. 72). True, there are such questions that dissolve in being answered definitively, and these are “closed” questions or typical

interrogative statements, such as “Where are my car keys?” These questions do not facilitate dialogue. Other questions, however, cannot be resolved definitively. This is not a mere trivial observation of the fact that, for instance, we will never know what Plato had for breakfast on his fortieth birthday—were we actually motivated to find this out, which is doubtful.

The important questions here are the “big questions,” such as those concerning the meaning of life. Every age, culture, and thinker struggles with such perennial questions. Similar to such perennial questions, but oriented toward more modest matters, are those “open questions” that admit of multiple perspectives, such as “Are ‘good reads’ good books?” (Wiggins and McTighe 2005, p. 30). These questions, like the perennial ones, are achievements of and for thinking, not mere problems to be solved or dissolved. Genuinely open questions are achievements because they suspend a space in which we are afforded the opportunity to consider a multiplicity of meanings alongside one another, all of which count as an answer but none of which settle the matter definitively or authoritatively.

As we have seen, questions have hermeneutic priority in three basic ways: psychically, semantically, and interpersonally. Yet Gadamer does not sufficiently distinguish between kinds of questions. Early in his analysis of the hermeneutic priority of the question, Gadamer briefly distinguishes between roughly four kinds of questions in order to show that only one of these kinds truly counts as a genuine question. For Gadamer, whereas pedagogical questions have no questioner, rhetorical questions have neither a questioner nor an object in question (2013, p. 372). Moreover, “slanted questions”—or what we may be more familiar with as “loaded questions”—are matters that have already been decided, and so are not really questions (Gadamer 2013, p. 372). These three—the pedagogical, the rhetorical, and the slanted question—are, for Gadamer, not real questions. Only “real” questions count as having hermeneutic priority.

We all know that there is a multitude of kinds of real questions. Which of these have hermeneutic priority? Or do they all amount to the same thing in the field of understanding? A brief excursus through pedagogical reflection shows that, no, not all questions are



the same. Some questions indicate superior comprehension of and insight about a subject matter.

### **3. A surplus of question taxonomies in pedagogy**

Developments in reading pedagogy and curriculum design survey numerous kinds of questions, many of which appear to sufficiently measure up to Gadamer's ideal. While there is a surplus of pedagogical manuals categorizing kinds of questions useful for eliciting different qualities of student thinking, Benjamin Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives forms the basis upon which many educators classify questions (see Bloom and Krathwohl 1965; Nilson 2003, pp. 114-115). Bloom divides and arranges thinking skills in a hierarchical order from memory and application to synthesis and evaluation. The presumption is that specific kinds of questions correspond to, and thus are capable of eliciting, these thinking skills. For example, McKeachie—in his popular text for college and university instructors—delineates seven levels of questioning purported to stimulate classroom discussion and formulating student assessments (2002, pp. 34-36). "Factual" questions, for instance, are said to check student background knowledge or memory. "Application" and "interpretation" questions are said to require students to identify the significance of course materials for things beyond the classroom. "Causal" and "comparison" questions are said to help students recognize relationships in the materials. "Evaluative" and "critical" questions are said to require of students that they make judgments and that they challenge their own assumptions.

In her alternative text on college instruction based in research, Nilson posits a definition of "well constructed questions" as those that have "multiple respectable answers" (Nilson 2003, p. 115). These questions, she thinks, encourage broad participation, require in-depth treatment, and spark debate. In addition to McKeachie's (2002) set of questions, Nilson also cites a number of other kinds of questions developed by Andrews in his manual for teaching assistants at UC San Diego (2003, p. 116). Described as "high mileage" types of questions, these include brainstorm questions (such as "How might the public be made to care about ecological

imbalances?”), focal questions (such as “To what extent is Ivan Illich a victim of his own decisions or society?”), and playground questions (such as “What underlying assumptions about human nature must this theorist have?”). Nilson contrasts these with poorly constructed questions, such as those that require a programmed answer, the “dead end” yes or no question, and ego-stroking questions.

A pattern emerges in all of this. The variety of classroom questions are often reduced to two basic kinds of questions: those requiring lower order thinking skills and those requiring higher order thinking skills. As Cotton defines them,

Lower cognitive questions are those which ask the student merely to recall...[and] are also referred to in the literature as fact, closed, recall, and knowledge questions. Higher cognitive questions are defined as those which ask the student to mentally manipulate bits of information previously learned to create an answer or to support an answer with logically reasoned evidence...[and] are also called open-ended, interpretive, evaluative, inquiry, inferential, and synthesis questions (1988, III.B.3).

Because higher order thinking skills are target learning outcomes of standards-based education reform, most state and district standards emphasize and promote questions that are assumed to evoke higher order thinking. The handbook issued by the International Center for Leadership in Education (2001-2006), for example, prescribes higher order questions because they supposedly have a greater potential to create learning conversations. Higher order questions are seen as a powerful tool for teachers in that they ideally help teachers to develop student interest and motivate them to get actively involved, to cultivate critical thinking skills and inquiring attitudes in students, to nurture student insights by exposing relationships, and to stimulate independent pursuit of knowledge in students. It seems that something as simple as a mere question is capable of doing amazing things.

This brief excursus into classroom question taxonomies allows us to ask of philosophical hermeneutics, “*Which* kind of question has hermeneutic priority?” While we might be tempted to claim that Gadamer has “higher order” questions in mind, we ought to

resist this because research on the effects of questions in the classroom is ambiguous at best (see Dillon 1978). As Dickman (2009) explains, “higher order” questions are a mantra or even a myth in pedagogy. Higher-order thinking skills are target learning-outcomes of standards based educational reform. Yet empirical studies of purportedly “higher order” questions show that student responses are no more extensive to them than their responses are to closed questions (Fisher 2005; and Myhill and Dunkin 2005). In broader terms, there is a growing coalition of scholarship exposing how Bloom’s taxonomy itself—if framed in terms of a hierarchy—is problematic. How is synthesis superior to comprehension? How can understanding not also include evaluation and application? This taxonomy is not necessarily helpful. Ordinary language philosophy, particularly speech act theory, can help us clarify the essence of questions in order to determine what kind of question best captures that essence.

#### **4. Speech act theory characterizes questions as “directives”**

Ricoeur warrants this turn to ordinary language philosophy in order to clarify what it is to question. While this philosophy does not have the “final word,” it is, Ricoeur thinks, “a necessary first stage in philosophical inquiry” (2008, p. 380). Allow me to briefly rehearse some of the basics of Austin’s theory and others’ development of it before turning to questions in particular. Austin distinguishes between three basic kinds of speech acts: propositional (or locutionary), perlocutionary, and illocutionary (Austin 1976, pp. 98-102; see also Searle, Kiefer and Bierwisch 1980). Perlocutionary speech acts are those acts in which speakers intend to affect a listener in a way that goes beyond the listener’s propositional understanding of what is said (see Rosemont 1970; Dickman 2020). Illocutionary speech acts are the various forces that propositional acts carry; that is, illocution is what speakers *intend to do* in and with what is said.

While perlocutionary acts are important for a comprehensive study of language use, speech act theorists focus predominantly on illocutionary acts. Contra Wittgenstein’s purported claim that there are an “infinite” number of language-games (2009, §23), some

students of Austin claim that there are five basic things speakers can do with language: assert, direct, commit, express, and declare. As Searle writes,

There are five general ways of using language, five general categories of illocutionary acts. We tell people how things are (Assertives), we try to get people to do things (Directives), we commit ourselves to doing things (Commissives), we express our feelings and attitudes (Expressives), and we bring about changes in the world through our utterances (Declarations) (Searle 1979, p. viii).

Assertives are propositions that entail our commitment to the truth of that which we say. Directives are attempts to get a listener to do something, as in uttering a command or a plea. Commissives are those utterances whereby we commit ourselves to future action, such as with a promise. Expressives articulate feelings or psychological states as they relate to the rest of the content of what is said, such as saying “Ouch!” Through declarations, we attempt to bring about new states of affairs through our words. It is in the declarative genus that Austin’s classic example of “I now pronounce you ‘married’” in a wedding has its place.

These illocutionary categories are based on varying coordination of four universal “felicity” conditions, what Searle calls the propositional, preparatory, sincerity, and essential rules (1979, pp. 2-8; see also Searle 1969, pp. 66-67). The essential condition, or rule, of a speech act is governed partially by the “direction of fit” or the way the act relates the words to the world. For instance, when we assert something, we attempt to get our words to “fit” the world accurately (Searle 1969, p. 60). In promises, however, we try to get the world to fit our words via the effort to make our actions match what we promise to do. Another crucial feature of the essential rule is the point of the utterance. For example, the point of a command is to get the listener to do something. The sincerity rule concerns the attitude accompanying the utterance. As examples, asserting something implies we believe it and committing to do something implies we intend to do it. The preparatory rules concern the statuses and the interests of the interlocutors with regard to one another. A parent, for instance, might direct a child to do something and it is likely in the interest of the child to do so.

The propositional rule constrains the content of an utterance. A difference between a statement of regret and a statement of hope, for instance, involves the fact that the former concerns the past whereas the latter concerns the future. The production of a speech act, such as a question, is governed by these constitutive rules and they allow us to recognize whether an utterance is the realization of a particular illocutionary act.

Questions, for speech act theorists, belong squarely within the class of directives as requests for the performance of speech acts in which the form of proper response is prescribed already by the question (Searle 1992, p. 8; see also Bell 1975, p. 206). As Searle writes, “Questions are a subclass of directives, since they are attempts by [the speaker] to get [the hearer] to answer, i.e., to perform a speech act” (1979, p. 14). The point of a question is to get another person to speak within the constraints set out by the question. In this way, questions are a way in which speakers attempt to “get the world to match the words.” With them, speakers attempt to get another to do something, namely, answer. In this way, the speech act approach to questions makes an advance beyond the logical analysis of questions and answers.

Other speech act theorists, such as Bell, help clarify the relation between questions and directives. The formal logical character of questions is not about syntactical or other grammatical conventions since the “same” question can be asked in different ways and in different languages. All questions, in this framework, contain presuppositions or presupposed propositions, and the only way a question can have a true answer is if the presuppositions are true. For example, the question “Is it raining?” presupposes the proposition that “Either it is raining or it is not raining.” This proposition must be true for either answer to be true (Bell 1975, p. 198). Questions with false or narrow presuppositions can be corrected by either rejecting the presuppositions or fleshing the question out to incorporate more potential answers. For example, “Have you stopped beating your dog?” might be rejected by simply pointing out you have never had a dog. The point is, nevertheless, questions—from the approach of erotetic logic—just are (disjunctive) sets of propositions from which answerers must select or answerers must change the topic in some way. So the question of

whether it is raining could be rephrased in the following way. “Select one: It is raining. It is not raining.”

This overlooks the performative force with which questions are given and taken. As Bell explains, questions also make requests about selection from the presupposed propositions (Bell 1975, p. 196). They could be expressed with urgency or indifference to how fast the answerer provides their answer. The question “Did you earn a Bachelor of Arts or Bachelor of Science degree?” requests that selection be made between two alternatives, and the request disallows “neither” as an answer—though of course that could be used to reject the question. This has led many theorists to locate interrogatives as a species of imperatives. The theory labels questions as “epistemic imperatives” (see Aqvist 1965). The illustrative cases of questions used here as paradigmatic for all questions in general are those instances in which: a) the questioner does not know the answer and, in asking the question, b) expresses the knowledge the questioner *does* have about the subject matter. For such standard cases, we are to transform questions into the form “Make it the case that I know X.” For example, take the question “Which US Presidents were generals?” This is to be transposed into “For each X where X is a President and a general, ‘make me know’ that X was a President and a general” (Harrah 1982, pp. 26-27). The response to the question only counts as an answer if the request is satisfied in that the questioner comes to know which presupposition is true. We can extend so-called standard cases like this to, say, classroom contexts where teachers already know the answer. The formal structure can be modified to something like, “Make me know that you know X.” This is just what exams do because presumably teachers are not going to ask students questions to which the teachers do not know the answer!

Beyond the construal of questions as imperatives in terms of their formal or logical content, questions are also classed regularly as “directives” or commands in terms of their illocutionary or performative force. Not only do questions appear to *state* imperatives, they also seem to *perform* like imperatives. Questions are requests for the performance of speech acts in which the form of proper response is already prescribed by the question (Searle 1992, p. 8). The point of a question, what questions *do*, is to prompt

another person to speak within the constraints set out by the question. This is in part due to the flexibility of the verb “to ask.” Asking someone to tell you where they are from (“Where are you from?”) is a polite form of the imperative mood but an imperative nonetheless (“Tell me where you are from.”). For example, we can render the question “What is your name?” into the explicit command “Tell me your name” or even the more rigorously discrete “Select one from the following: Your name is Muhammad. Your name is Ruth. Your name is... [ad infinitum].” Simply because a question can be rendered into a command does not mean it is insincere, though. In this speech act approach to questions, there are key “felicity” or sincerity conditions that must be met: the questioner does not know the answer, the questioner wants to know it, and the questioner uses the utterance to attempt to get the answer (Searle 1969, p. 60). Thus, this command counts as a *sincere* question. My point here is that most questions in our day-to-day lives are sincere questions whether they are expressed in the interrogative mood as a question or in the imperative mood as a command.

There are four specific conditions that must be met for a question to be expressed successfully (Searle 1969, pp. 66-67). First, there are no limits set to a question’s propositional content, as distinct from—say—commissives, which must always be about something in the future. Second, the preparatory condition requires that a questioner must not know the answer and not believe that the other person will provide it without being asked the question. Third, to meet the sincerity condition, the questioner must want the requested information. Fourth, to meet the essential condition, the questioner must attempt to get the information via the utterance rather than some other way (see Stenstrom 1984).

Based on the condition of propositional content, Searle distinguishes two different kinds of questions corresponding to the traditional grammatical distinction between “closed” and “open” questions or even the purportedly “lower” order and “higher” order questions in pedagogy (Searle 1979, p. 31; see Kearsley 1976, p. 358). “Closed” questions are typically yes-no questions, questions that can be answered either in the affirmative or in the negative. They ask for the confirmation or denial of a complete

proposition. “Open” questions, however, are *wh*-questions, or incomplete propositions requiring the answer to determine the interrogative pronoun. For example, the question, “What is your name?” requests the determination of the interrogative word “what.” Another way of articulating the question is: “Your name is \_\_\_\_\_ . Please fill in the blank.” Open questions like this one, as we can see, are essentially the attempt to complete incomplete propositions (see Goody 1978, p. 23). As long as this command or epistemic imperative meets all four conditions, then this command counts as a question. In sum, the point of a question is to get words to match the world by way of another person’s answering the question.

I think we should be worried here. Are there any questions that cannot be reduced to directives? Why do we have “questions” when we can get by with soft imperatives like requesting things? Piazza (2001) raises this concern in developing a notion of “conductive” questions, as some questions lead the answerer to the questioner’s preferred answer. These can be performed in a number of ways, such as the incredulous form (“You seriously believe that [x]?”) or in the form of conjuring an impossible reality (“Do criminal justice systems really convict all people who deserve punishment?”). Borge (2007) develops “unwarranted” questions as conducting answerers to “admittures,” where no matter what an answerer does, the answerer gives away an implication in light of being cornered by such a question. For example, imagine a student asking a professor, “What were you doing last night?” If the professor resists answering, the implication will seem to be that they were up to something nefarious—that is, they admit to something without even saying anything! These should help us see that there is a risk that comes with subsuming questions within the directive genus.

An even more significant worry is whether acts of questioning, as disguised commands, are mere oppressive tools. As Comay writes,

Perhaps one day a history will be written of the institutionalized violence lurking behind the apparent guilelessness of the question—its juridical force (the investigation, the interrogation, the



cross-examination), its pedagogical power (the disputation, the quiz, the exam), its religious authority (the inquisition, the catechism), its medical prerogative (the examination, the inquest), its prestige as an instrument of surveillance (the interview, the questionnaire) (1991, p. 149).

If questions just are oppressive tools, perhaps they all can be translated into commands. Žižek illustrates this in the mouths of totalitarians, “It is *we* who will ask the questions here!” (Žižek 1989, pp. 178-182; see also Fiumara 1990). If all questions, or the paradigmatic versions of questions that purportedly elucidate their logical and illocutionary character, are merely disguised commands, perhaps we might agree with Comay, Žižek, and Fiumara. Perhaps we ought to give up the tactic of questioning wholesale in order to help bring about less oppressive social structures.

I believe this reduction inadequately specifies the unique kind of question that has hermeneutic priority. I propose that we invent an alternative illocutionary category based on Gadamer’s and Ricoeur’s reflections, what we can call “suspensives.”

## **5. Conclusion: Proposing the illocutionary category of “suspensives” for genuine questions**

I consider the speech act theory of questions adequate for what I call “typical interrogative statements” or sincere questions, such as “Where are my car keys?” However, neither kind of question discussed by Bell or others works as the kind of question that has hermeneutic priority in bringing about a fusion of horizons. They are not the kind of question of which we can say, with Ricoeur, that they are constitutive of discourse. Recall that Ricoeur raises the issue that questions are “interlocutionary” speech acts as a distinct metacategory of speech acts, from the locutionary, illocutionary, perlocutionary, to the interlocutionary. To preserve their unique status, I propose naming them “suspensives” within the illocutionary metacategory. As an example, consider again the question suggested by Wiggins and McTighe in their groundbreaking text on curriculum design: “Are ‘good reads’ good books?” (2005, p. 30). While the point of such a question might seem to be to get another person to answer it, I submit that—preceding the

moment of anyone's attempting to answer the question—the question aims at its shared asking. The point of such a question is, in other words, to get our interlocutor to share it, not answer it. The primary point of contestation with Searle is centered, then, on the essential condition, or point, of a particular question.

Let us recall that one crucial way in which questions have hermeneutic priority is that they allow for the transferal of meaning from one person to another. This can only be realized, however, if both partners in dialogue ask the question. If this is so, then they are not reducible to demands for an answer. Instead of directives, these are “suspensives.” To quote Gadamer again,

All suspension of judgments and hence, a fortiori, of [pre-judgments], has the logical structure of a question.” It is not that suspensive questions doubt the truth of a particular judgment, but that they hold all judgments in suspense, relegating them to possible meanings. As Coltman puts it, “Such bringing-into-suspension... is the proper and original essence of questioning. Questioning always allows the possibilities of a situation to be seen in suspension (1998, p. 109).

The point of suspensives is neither to make the world match the words, such as with commissives and directives, nor to make the words match the world, such as with assertives. Moreover, they do not merely express an emotional state, nor do they bring about a change in the world as in a declaration. Suspensives are unique in that their point is not, as current speech act theory claims, to get someone to answer but, first and foremost, to get the other person to share our question and in this way uncover possibilities about the subject matter referenced in the utterance. In other words, the point of a suspensive is to make space so that we can come to understand what someone else has to say about something. In this way, they preserve approximations of sincerity and preparatory conditions. In terms of direction of fit, or the essential condition, questions are omnidirectional—it is not about getting words to match the world or the world to match the words, but a suspended wonder of which words and which world. In terms of the accompanying attitude, or the sincerity condition, the questioner does not necessarily need to be ignorant of a bit of information, such as in

the example about asking, “What year is it?” A questioner can know it is certainly 2021 CE, yet still be open to fusing horizons with others living within other forms of life. In terms of the relative statuses of interlocutors, or the preparatory condition, suspensives are synergistic rather than hierarchical or asymmetrical. In terms of the content, or propositional condition, as noted the complete thoughts or subject and predicate relations are held in suspense rather than already synthesized possible propositions. This is not to say that all questions are suspensives, but that questions that are suspensives break out of the directive genus.

Suspensive questions invert the normal expressivity of speech, transforming it into receptive speech that leads to dialogue. It is invitational rather than an interrogation. It is not about bringing about knowledge of a fact but instead bringing about understanding between people. As Levinas suggests, the very relationship established within questioning “cannot be reduced to intentionality, or that *it rests, properly speaking, on an intentionality that fails*” (Levinas 1998, p. 71; my emphasis). The question-answer sequence is too short-lived when it comes to typical interrogatives like “Where are my car keys?” or “What is your name?” As Stenström (1984) explains, conversations and dialogues are defined by prolonged turn-taking, with multiple sets of question-answer-question sequences. The prolonged dialogue shows that the questioner is actively listening to reach an understanding with another. To put it concretely, and paradoxically, suspensives are a way in which we listen with our mouths. In order to distinguish suspensives from directives sufficiently, let us draw out the connection between this kind of questioning and listening, a connection that Gadamer suggests but leaves underdeveloped.

Gadamer provides warrant for this turn to listening in asserting that “anyone who listens is fundamentally open. Without such openness there is no genuine human bond” (2013, p. 369). Gadamer grounds the openness requisite for engaging with another person and which allows us to be conducted by the subject matter in our capacity to listen. Dialogue involves listening because participating in dialogue together means that we are able to listen to what each other has to say. Listening to what someone else has to say does not mean that we blindly or slavishly follow it or

naively agree with it, however. This can only be explained by the openness provided in questioning where we can consider what another person says as a meaning or complete thought to be understood.

The point of listening is to stay focused on what another person is saying. By attempting to stay focused on what the other person is saying, we guard against the distractions of our own hang-ups and suspend disabling prejudices. Moreover, as Beatty writes,

To listen to another with *openness* is... to open the self to the possibility of taking seriously meanings of the sort that can transform it. Such openness requires, therefore, not merely the willingness to rework and rethink experience and its ingredient opinions but the willingness to rework character (1999, p. 295).

Every time we listen to others, in other words, our very selfhood is at stake—to the degree that what we hear and understand might change who we have been.

Listeners are not silent, however. A number of discourse analysts show that listeners indeed speak. Gardner, for instance, labels the speech of listeners “response tokens” (2001, p. 19). Response tokens are usually monosyllabic utterances many English speakers make in order to encourage the speaker to continue (as in saying *mm*), to acknowledge or take note of what the speaker is saying (as in *oh*), and to mark a readiness for change in topic (as in *okay*). We literally speak as we listen, and such speaking displays to the speaker that we are listening.

My proposal is that we need a speech act category that brings questioning and listening together. Speakers use some questions as “response tokens” in order to ensure they are hearing and taking note of what someone else is saying (see Lakoff 2004, p. 49-51). Listening involves suspending the application of our perspective and interests in order that we might understand what another person is saying. Furthermore, we construct tentative interpretations of what the other person is saying. We test these constructions against what they say, sometimes through asking the other person, “Is this what you mean?” Such questioning practices of active listening displays respect for the other person’s authority over their own speech. Asking this kind of question shows that we are listen-

ing to what the other person is saying rather than telling him what he is saying or telling him what to do. Suspensives call in into question the very mechanisms of applying our perspective when it is engaged properly. By suspensives, then, I refer to those questions through which speakers invite and listen to the contributions of others in a sustained dialogue by suspending judgments. Sometimes they initiate a dialogue, and, at other times, they occur in the midst of a dialogue.

Suspensives are particularly unique in the way in which we show our understanding of them. We can show that we understand an order by carrying out the action requested in the order. We can show that we understand a claim by consenting to or disagreeing with it. But what do we do to show that we understand a question? To reiterate Gadamer's insightful remark, "To understand a question means to ask it" (2013, p. 383). That is, when we are engaged in dialogue with another person and we hear her ask a question, our understanding of that question entails that we ask it with her. In this way, questions facilitate the transferal of meanings from one person to the other as possible answers to the questions. Suspensives, then, are not aimed primarily at getting answers but at sharing the question. In this way, the other person's question becomes our question and thus makes dialogue possible as the exchange and consideration of multiple meanings. As such, we can conclude by claiming that it is suspensives that have hermeneutic priority.

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