

Why ask?

Description

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Cambridge University has launched a campaign to celebrate the physicist Stephen Hawkingâ??s 70th birthday in January 2012. You can Tweet (or email) questions to #AskHawking. The questions appearing so far are a mix of the extremely clever, sensible, predictable, witty, sarcastic and vulgar.

Hawking is here serving as an oracle, a role often expected of the Internet itself. A correspondent (ddmyun) to last weekâ??s blog on *infinity* astutely remarked,

> Even though there are thousands of millions of web sites on the Internet, I still fail to find answers at times when I have questions.

Were it not for his finitude, perhaps Stephen Hawking can deliver those answers. In any case, ask any sage, thereâ??s skill in asking the right questions. There are questions that are cleverer than their answers could ever be. Often, the framing of a question presupposes a certain kind of answer. Questions can be traps; they are not there to be answered but evaded, or reframed. In fact itâ??s often safer, less direct, and more polite, to require the person to whom we direct the question to *address* it, rather than *answer* it.

Smart questioning is a well-known path to teaching and learning. Socrates asks his interlocutor Euthyphro, â??Whatâ??s the difference between the pious and the impious?â?• Sometimes the answer is in the question. Saint Paul laced his letter to the Romans with a series of such questions: â??Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?â?•

Sometimes a question doesnâ??t make sense unless you are already in a frame of mind receptive to the question, let alone the answer. You have to be in the mood. Hereâ??s a picture to help.



Martin Heidegger barraged his readers with difficult questions. Here are some â??interrogative tweetsâ?• from Heideggerâ??s collection of lyrical essays *Poetry, Language, Thought*, stripped from their contexts.

- What and whence is the artist what he is? (17)
- Can art be an origin at all? (17)
- What is at work in the work? (36)
- What is truth itself, that it sometimes comes to pass as art? (39)
- What are poets for? (91)
- What is it to dwell? (145)
- How does building belong to dwelling? (145)
- What in the thing is thingly? (167)
- In what way does language occur as language? (190)

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Here the challenge is to enter into a Heideggerian, or phenomenological, frame of mind. How do I do this? By reading the texts of course; but then adjusting my frame of mind, even if momentarily, suspending scepticism, meditating on the texts, returning after a break, and not just to comprehend the answers, but to understand the questions. Perhaps the job is done when the committed reader reaches a moment of *understanding*: when they feel that the artfully formed question is understood.

Perhaps then itâ??s Stephen Hawking who should be asking the questions. Correction: Should Stephen Hawking be the one asking the questions?

Bibliography

- Hawking, Stephen. 1988. *A Brief History of Time: From the Big Bang to Black Holes*. New York: Bantam.
- Heidegger, Martin. 1977. *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*. Trans. W. Lovitt. New York: Harper and Row.
- Heidegger, Martin. 1981. *Poetry, Language, Thought*. Trans. A. Hofstadter. New York: Harper and Row.

Coda

If you ask Google â??How do you bake a pie?â?• you get recipes. If you present Google with Heideggerâ??s questions you get: something about graffiti art and vandalism; Wikipedia on martial arts; health and safety in the workplace; someone quoting Martin Heidegger; the Free Online Dictionary definition of â??dwellâ?•; a suggestion to correct â??thinglyâ?• to â??tingly,â?• and Wikipedia on

language acquisition. I donâ??t think that these answers are too oblique to be relevant. Understanding is after all a matter of practical application.

Category

1. Art

Tags

1. architecture
2. Art
3. Heidegger
4. interpretation
5. Stephen Hawking

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rcoyne99

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