

## Asking Questions: Some Techniques

HERB YARVIN

*University of Manitoba*

Why ask questions? To my knowledge there is no empirical research on the learning of philosophy in lecture classes as opposed to classes which involve some discussion initiated by the instructor's questions. A study of eleventh-grade students in social studies shows that students who are regularly confronted with questions perform better than those who are not.<sup>1</sup> But of course, if we question the similarity of philosophy to the social studies and of eleventh grade to college, the relevance of the study is limited.

Many instructors take studying philosophy to be valuable in that it induces a student to lead a more examined life. It might be hoped that where certain sorts of questions are asked by teachers the students will come to anticipate such questions, in effect asking the questions themselves and thereby developing a habit of thinking critically. But we do not know that such a habit is likely to arise in these circumstances. The teacher's questions might serve this purpose less effectively than do good lectures. We simply do not have studies on which to base such judgments. So it might be conceded that the grounds for trying to stimulate a class through questions are not clear. But, my own impression is that when a teacher keeps in touch with students through the use of questions, they are more attentive, enjoy the class more and, in thinking through how they themselves would answer the questions become more conscious than they otherwise would be of the ramifications of the subject.

One sometimes hears of new ways of organizing classes—for example, into small discussion groups—which are said to produce intelligent student involvement with the subject matter. Such strategies have their advantages. They also seem to have risks. If a class organized in some innovative fashion fails to produce intelligent student involvement with the subject matter, switching to some other plan to remedy this failure is a potentially dislocating experience for both the students and the teacher. On the other hand, if a manner of organizing lectures or a technique of asking questions proves unsatisfactory, either may be changed without a similar risk of dislocation. At least one has some assurance that better lecturing and questioning can produce intelligent student work on the subject matter. In short, while many teachers might want to try an innovative method, the risk of failure often seems too high to justify the experiment. For this reason, even instructors attracted to innovation often continue to run traditionally structured classes. Therefore, it is important to explore possible means of running such classes more effectively.

Few teachers of philosophy have little knowledge of or respect for what is being done in schools of education. One thing that educators are doing is writing papers and books on techniques of asking of questions. Much of this literature at first seems irrelevant to the philosophy teacher's concerns. Educators may speak of Bloom's taxonomy: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation.<sup>2</sup> The educator may speak of a questioning strategy designed to evoke first knowledge and then, progressively higher cognitive activities up to the ultimate cognitive activity, evaluation.<sup>3</sup> We are invited to choose among questioning strategies based on Bloom's taxonomy: Taba's Questioning Strategy, Suchman's Inquiry Strategy, and combinations of these strategies.<sup>4</sup> We seem to have, in brief, a questioning scholasticism, substantiated by reference to disagreements over just what the stages of cognition are, assuming that these stages can indeed be effectively distinguished.

Nevertheless, there is much of value in the educators' literature about asking questions. F. P. Hunkins, for example, speaking of what he calls "reaction avenues," advises the teacher to anticipate the various ways students are likely to try in dealing with a particular subject, so that the teacher will be ready with questions that will help them explore these.<sup>5</sup>

As an example, consider the technique of asking students whether two or more statements which at least seem to be contradictory are in fact consistent. To this end one might use handouts giving the statements one wants them to consider. For some reason, students who respond glassy-eyed to, "What do you think of Pascal's statements here?" are more ready to raise their hands when asked, "Are statements (1) to (4) by Pascal consistent?" Such handouts offer the additional advantage of good formulations of key material; it is important to offer statements which on their face are plausible or which the instructor can make plausible. Confronted, then, with plausible statements that are blatantly contradictory, students will react differently affirming and some denying that there is a contradiction. These students perhaps take all the juxtaposed statements to be plausible, and then seek to preserve the consistency of their own views.

Anticipating that possibility, the instructor comes prepared with examples of a plausible view taken by a public figure or a character in a novel or a play, one similar to, say, a statement by Pascal. Again it is good to use handouts, because the average student often is uninformed regarding both public events and literature. A written version of the idea under consideration gives a student an opportunity to come to tentative conclusions for himself regarding what the public figure or fictional character is saying.

The instructor then asks if Pascal's position would be consistent if, in lieu of that statement, he had accepted the ostensibly convincing stand which the instructor has suggested as an alternative to the statement. Again the students will probably differ. Saying that he wishes to help the students to clarify their views, the instructor may then ask the students if they take Pascal's position to be consistent with a different set of statements, say by Kierkegaard, setting out a position apparently different from Pascal's. Next the teacher may ask the

students whether, given the apparent difference in the Kierkegaard and Pascal positions, Kierkegaard's statements are irrelevant to the preceding debate. And, after encountering at least some tentative agreement that they are irrelevant, the teacher may present a further quotation from Pascal's work in which Pascal seems to say almost exactly what Kierkegaard does in the statements by him under consideration. Ordinarily the teacher may then attempt to resolve or help the students resolve the different puzzles his questions have raised in their minds. But in any case, by using such questions the teacher will have started the students thinking and participating.

N. M. Sanders, discussing what he calls interpretation questions, offers some techniques useful for the philosophy teacher. He states, for example, the economic law of comparative advantage and then lists several questions, each requiring a true or false answer, which the students can answer successfully only if they understand the law as stated.<sup>6</sup> A similar technique can serve the philosophy teacher well in many contexts. It is obviously applicable to teaching definitions of terms such as "analytic"; the use of principles of inference, such as *modus ponens*; or the implications of a philosophic thesis, such as the view that one cannot go from an "is" to an "ought." After stating a definition, a rule of inference, or a philosophic thesis, the instructor asks questions, each requiring a true or false answer, which the students can answer successfully only if they understand the definition, rule or thesis originally stated.

Though such a procedure smacks somewhat of high school, as Sanders points out, interpretation questions lead students into intellectual processes often reserved for scholars.<sup>7</sup> It becomes clear to students, for example, when they are asked to determine whether certain statements are analytic by reference to a given definition of "analytic," that some property of the definition, for example, its lack of clarity, makes their task impossible. The students notice this, making it appropriate for the teacher to introduce some alternative definition of "analytic" which will then lead to problems of its own when the students attempt to use it in answering the teacher's questions. This in turn leads even average students in a natural way to deal with philosophical questions that might ordinarily seem to be beyond them.

Furthermore, use of this technique has the advantage of offering the teacher an indication of when the students have clearly understood the material under consideration so that the teacher can either continue offering examples or further explanations when the need for them is indicated, or can move on to other matters. And the technique in question suits itself to the discussion of advanced texts. The teacher focuses on a statement or argument in a text by someone such as Hume, and then lists, say, three different ways the statement or argument may be taken, asking the students which of the three makes the most sense from Hume's perspective (in the light of what the instructor or the students may already have outlined that perspective to be.)

In addition to discussing types of questions, the literature on questioning offers technical advice on such matters as waiting-time—how long to wait for an answer after asking a question—and how to deal with students who offer

inadequate answers to questions. It is pointed out, for example, that if a question is complex, then the teacher must be prepared to wait five seconds or more while students think about how to answer it. And the advice about how to deal with an inadequate answer (the importance of not ignoring or simply skipping over a poor answer is discussed) is relevant in cases such as the following:

The teacher asks the students to raise their hands to indicate what side each takes on some issue, for example on whether a certain philosophic use of a term conforms to the way we ordinarily use the term; or on whether it is society's right to perform psychosurgery on criminals. The teacher then calls on several students who did raise their hands (usually at least half abstain) to ask them why they made the choices they did, and next may ask an individual student how he or she might respond to the points made by other students who disagreed. Such a strategy will not always work. One possible problem is that the first student to respond might with a clever answer convince the others that there is only one way to look at the question. Sometimes in such a case the instructor may revive general involvement by at least temporarily puncturing the clever argument, but such a procedure may just as easily lead to a dialogue between the instructor and this student, which shuts out the rest of the class. Thus this strategy must be used with care. The instructor must know when to desist—to make sure that, in calling on students who may have been trapped into raising their hands without realizing this left them open to be called on, the instructor does not force shy students into situations which they are personally inequipped to handle. Nevertheless, used cautiously this kind of question-asking can be very useful, enabling the instructor to bring about a dialogue among students of differing views.

A difficulty is that such a technique also may elicit very confused answers. Experienced elementary school teachers, who often deal with such answers, can suggest simple verbal formulas, such as "What you say holds in some cases" in lieu of "Why on earth do you think that?"<sup>8</sup> Use of such responses may initially enable the teacher to explore and clarify students' views that might be forestalled were the class simply put on the spot with a request to explain themselves.

But not everything in the literature on questioning is so worthwhile. In one text it is suggested that the teacher begin the classroom discussion of an assigned reading on existentialism by asking the class, "What is the existentialist position?" In my experience, during the first class periods such a question is as likely to draw a constructive response from average students as it is from average teachers when asked by a stranger who has just approached them in the faculty club at the end of the day, as they relax after their hard work, with a few well-earned martinis. My point is that, using techniques such as those described earlier in this paper, which involve asking questions that pose clear alternatives to students, one may elicit active student response, turning at least the question-asking portion of a class into a sort of game for the students, an intellectual game which has some heuristic advantage.

In the course of one of his discussions of questioning, F. P. Hunkins, to whose work I have already referred, writes: "Once we have our tentative

questions . . . selected we should, at least at first; have someone judge them." Such a statement might sound strange to the philosophy teacher who is accustomed to devoting class-preparation time to planning his lectures, and who formulates the questions he will ask as an afterthought. In fact, however, through appropriate questioning techniques one may involve students of average academic ability in a discussion of philosophic issues which, being organized around planned questions, will not degenerate into a bull session. And since this goal is worth attaining, the sort of detailed planning of questions which writers such as Hunkins advise may in turn be well worth the time of those philosophy teachers who find themselves unable to stimulate or lead such discussion.

### Notes

1. Francis P. Hunkins, "Analysis and Evaluation Questions: Their Effects Upon Critical Thinking," *Educational Leadership*, 27 (April, 1970), pp. 697-705. See Hunkins' substantial bibliography. Hunkins' own study involves the use of questions posed in a text, not the use of questions posed in a classroom by a teacher, and on this ground as well one might hold that his conclusions are not directly relevant to the thesis of this paper.
2. Francis P. Hunkins, "Effects of Analysis and Evaluation Questions on Various Levels of Achievement," *The Journal of Experimental Education*, 38, 2 (Winter 1969), p. 44.
3. Francis P. Hunkins, *Questioning Strategies and Techniques* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1972), p. 89.
4. Hunkins, *Questioning*, pp. 92-105.
5. Hunkins, *Questioning*, p. 19.
6. Norris M. Sanders, *Classroom Questions: what kinds?* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), pp. 47-48.
7. Sanders, p. 69.
8. Cf. Arthur A. Cairn and Robert B. Sund, *Developing Questioning Techniques* (Columbus, Ohio: Merrill, 1971), pp. 34-37.
9. Hunkins, *Questioning*, p. 70.