

THE CONCEPT OF UNANSWERABLE QUESTION

In this paper an attempt has been made by us to find out a suitable account of the meaning of *unanswerable question*.

1. Unanswerable questions bear intimately on the problem of the extent of knowledge. And that, also, is how, usually, their significance in philosophy would perhaps be summed up. However, they seem to assume significance in certain more ways too.

For men of religion, unanswerable questions tend to provide a ground for upholding the greatness of God.¹ If there really are some questions which are unanswerable, then one can, on the basis of that, well proclaim that God and the world, which God has created, are more than a man is able to know.

What, however, might appear considerably more interesting about the concept of unanswerable question is a particular historical fact about it. I mean its paradoxical use by Kant and the logical positivists. Both disbanded metaphysics as impossible, but the former on the ground that there are some questions, *e.g.* those in metaphysics, which are unanswerable, and the latter on the ground of the exact opposite of it, namely that there are no questions which are unanswerable.

Anyway, in deciding to occupy ourselves with the concept of unanswerable question here, we do not have in mind any predilection for God or any prejudice against metaphysics. As regards both of them, we are non-committal. What we have in mind as a motive is something different. It is, if we may say so, the idea of a possibility which tends to suggest itself quite strongly to us. To be a bit more explicit, we have a definite feeling that unanswerable questions, if they exist, would make for a significant addition in our list of categories, and, that way, would call for a revision of it. In a sense, this may appear in the eyes of

some to be subservient to metaphysics. But all that is purely accidental.

But on what, one may ask, is this feeling of ours logically grounded? Lest we might appear too dogmatic, we would answer: two things together which are as follows.

First: the position, worked out elsewhere,² that unanswerable questions form a basic class of questions.

Second: a principle to the effect that the basic classes of questions and the ontological categories are isomorphic with each other, so that, given one or all of the former, you can, correspondingly, model one or all of the latter.

This principle, of course, is not something which we have discovered ourselves. It may be said to underlie Aristotle's³ doctrine of categories. True, not all of Aristotle's commentators⁴ will agree on this point. But that is theoretically immaterial. For, obviously, pedigree and, for that matter, difference of opinion as regards it, can make no difference whatever to the logical value of a principle. So, the principle is true, if it is true. And, separately, elsewhere, we shall try to show that it is so. Pending that, we may just assume its truth.

2. Our search for what, really, is to be meant by 'unanswerable question' must begin on an elimination of certain senses of the locution which are palpably irrelevant. These senses include especially those which happen to derive from certain norms which we generally adhere to in certain appropriate contexts; they have no logical bearing on the nature of unanswerable questions *qua* questions. Take, for example, the following three questions which will illustrate the point.

- (1) Why do you doze during committee meetings?
- (2) How old are you?
- (3) When are the troops going to move?

The three questions are all answerable, in the obvious sense that each has an answer which it is possible for one to know. Yet you may call them unanswerable also in cer-

tain senses depending on their contexts. (1) will be unanswerable, *e.g.* for a person in authoritative position, if it is addressed to him by one who is subordinate to him, (2), *e.g.* for a sophisticated young lady, when it comes from, say, her curious neighbour, and (3), *e.g.* for the officer in command of the troops, if it is asked by, say, a layman or an enemy agent.

3. Whatever sense of 'unanswerable question' is to come up for our consideration here must have to derive from its logical character *qua* question. That, indeed, is the primary requirement. Now, a description which would appear to conform to this stipulation is readily available to us. It is as follows :

An unanswerable question is a question which *has no answer*.

The formula looks quite simple. But that, in our opinion, is thoroughly deceptive. What is it, let us enquire, that is to be meant by saying that a question *has no answer*? This is far from obvious. As a matter of fact, the notion of *having no answer* happens to cover a range of employment which is fairly varied; and, that way, naturally, it assumes a number of senses which also are likewise varied. Therefore, left as it is, it can say very little about itself or about the notion of *being unanswerable* which is sought to be defined by it. On the other hand, when the different senses of *having no answer* are sorted out explicitly, one begins to be aware of certain hazards that will result from the attempt to define the notion of *being unanswerable* in terms of it.

- (i) In certain instances, the attempt would make nonsense of the notion of unanswerable questions.
- (ii) In certain other instances, it would totally fail, because there happens to exist in our discourse certain examples of questions about which it would be pretty meaningful to talk of *having no answer* but not of *being unanswerable*.

- (iii) Finally, there are instances where the attempt would make it necessary that we should impose an arbitrary restriction on the scope of *being answerable* or *having an answer*.

Let us elaborate these three propositions *ad seriatim*.

3.1. Take the question 'What colour are apples?', and fancy that your respondents say:

- (i) Apples are the inertia of a greenish symphony.
- (ii) Apples are blue.
- (iii) One apple a day keeps the doctor away.

All alike would be readily dismissed by you as *no answer* to your question, though for very different reasons of course. (a) In saying (i) is no answer to your question, you will mean that it is a piece of nonsense, neither true nor false, and so the question whether it stands in the QA-relation⁵ to your question does not arise at all in its case. (b) In saying (ii) is no answer, you just say that it is not true, not that it is nonsense or that it does not stand in the QA-relation to your question. (c) As regards (iii), all that you intend to say is that it does not stand in the QA-relation to your question, remaining non-committal about its truth and falsity. In short, as regards (i), you say that *it is not a statement at all*, as regards (ii), just that the *statement is not true*, and as regards (iii), just that the *statement is irrelevant*.

Considered in the light of this three-fold ambiguity of the locution 'non answer', the description that an unanswerable question is a question which has *no answer* would, naturally, admit of reformulation in the following three ways :

- (1) A question such that whatever sentence is furnished in response to it is a piece of nonsense and, for that reason, does not stand in any QA-relation to it.
- (2) A question such that whatever sentence stands in QA-relation to it is a false sentence.

- (3) A question such that no sentence, true or false, can ever stand in QA-relation to it.

To examine the three formulations:

(2) contradicts itself, which is quite obvious. For, what, on earth, might be said to make for any sense in our saying that *all* sentences in QA-relation to a question would express false statements, unless it is presupposed that there is at least one sentence in that relation which would express a true statement?

(1) and (3), on the other hand, contradict the notion of question itself. That is, it makes of an unanswerable question what is not a question at all.

A question must always have something, a statement, or an order, or something else of its kind, which is to stand in QA-relation to it. That is a necessary requirement. And what fails to answer it is not a question, its question form notwithstanding. Therefore, to say that an unanswerable question is that to which nothing can stand in QA-relation is truly equivalent to denying that it is a question. From which it would follow further that to ask for what is to count as the right sense of unanswerable question in this sense would really amount to asking for the right sense of a kind of question which, in fact, is not a question at all.

3.2. The *unanswerability* of a question is not, in any way, the same thing as its *having no answer*. The latter connotes less and denotes more. Accordingly, in actuality, one will come across instances of questions in our discourse about which it would make good sense to say that they *have no answers*, though not, for that reason, to say further that they are *unanswerable*. Consider, for example, 'What shape is your love, round or rectangular?', or any other like question. What, possibly, can one say in reply to it? One may dismiss it summarily saying that it is a sheer nonsense. Or one may say, "Well, love, like a snuff-box, isn't the sort of thing that has a shape, round or rectangular".

However, in neither case, would it be proper to say that we have got an answer to the question. The first is only a

comment on the question, and second only the *denial of the presupposition* of it, namely, that love has a shape, round or rectangular.

So, we get a sample of a question which, we can say, has no answer. But can we, on that ground, call it an unanswerable question also? No. For, the question is meaningless; and, like a meaningless statement which cannot be said to be true or false, a question, which is meaningless, cannot be called either answerable or unanswerable.

Like 'true' and 'false' which stand for the basic predicates of statements and can be predicated, in their primary sense, of meaningful statements only, the words 'answerable' and 'unanswerable', we maintain, constitute the basic predicates of meaningful questions and can be ascribed, in their primary sense, only to them. This, with us, we should point out, is a fundamental logical point about questions.

But the matter, we are afraid, may be called in question particularly in the face of such specimens of meaningless questions as, for instance, 'Is love rectangular', 'Can this hillock run a race?', and so on. Can't we say they are answerable, since to each of them we do seem to give an answer by saying 'no', 'never', *etc.* One may ask.

Well, speaking truly, these are not questions at all; their sentential form is totally misleading. They call for no answers, and as such there can be no point in calling them answerable. 'No', 'never', or such other verbal responses to them are all logically superfluous. These so-called questions are really statements themselves posed as questions simply for emphasis or to subserve some rhetorical objectives. Thus 'Is love rectangular?' is just a figurative way of pointing to the obvious fact that love can never be rectangular, and 'Can this hillock run a race?' that of pointing to the equally obvious fact that this hillock can never run a race. The grammatical form of these so-called questions communicates nothing about their logical character to us.

3.3. We shall consider questions of a third variety now, which, also, are sometimes supposed to *have no answer* and

are called *unanswerable* in that sense. Following Renford Bambrough,⁶ one may take them to include:

(i) questions which have no *objectively right* answers, and (ii) questions which, contrary to what would appear from their forms, do not yield any clear-cut 'yes' or any clear-cut 'no' as their answers.

(1) (i) may be exemplified best by those questions which happen to involve some choice, moral, aesthetic, and so on. The question 'What should I do?', which puzzled Sartre's pupil,⁷ is a typical specimen of such questions. They are said to *have no answers* and, in that sense, to be unanswerable because, unlike questions of the kind, e.g. 'What colour is the cloud?', 'Is saccharine sweet or sour?', 'What is one third of 99?', etc. etc., they do not admit of answers which can be objectively confirmed, i.e. on the ground of experience, by the rules of mathematics, etc.

(2) (ii) may be instantiated, among other things, by those questions which are named 'borderline questions' by Bambrough.⁸ These questions are those "to which it seems clear that the answer 'definitely yes' and the answer 'definitely no' are equally inappropriate."⁹ Bambrough's example of borderline question: 'Is this man a bald?', where the man in question "has too much hair to justify us in calling him definitely bald, and too little hair to justify us in calling him definitely not-bald..."¹⁰ Such questions, it is often said, *have no answers* and, that way, they are *unanswerable*.

(1) and (2), we think, suffer from a common defect. The defect is that in both of them the notion of 'being answerable' of that of 'having an answer' has been taken in a restricted sense which is arbitrary. And this mistake, again, as far as we can see, could arise entirely because of a set of mistaken assumptions about what is to count as an answer or a right answer to a question.

(a) Let us elaborate this objection as regards (2) first. Unlike 'What is laterite?', 'When did you see him last?', and so on and so on, there indeed are a species of

questions which would seem to indicate by their form that they are in a position to collect definite 'yes' or definite 'no' as their possible answers. Form is undeniably a significant thing with these questions. It does play a role, a role which is important. Yet, merely by itself, the form, we think, is far from enough; so that one who chooses to judge the questions entirely by their form is very likely to misjudge them. One must take into account certain more elements, *e.g.* their contexts, their contents, *etc.*, which must have to match their form in an appropriate way. The question, which conforms to this requirement, can, by that, make a claim to definite yes-answer or no-answer. But the one which fails will have to go without it. However, that alone, in no case, can be said to imply that the latter will *have no answer* or that it will have to be called *unanswerable*. For, it is perfectly possible that it will admit of something other than 'yes' or 'no' as its answer.

And Bambrough's borderline questions, with 'Is this man a bald?' for an example, we may say, are, precisely, questions of this kind. Their form does not blend properly with their other relevant ingredients; so that they are answerable only by something besides 'yes' and 'no', no matter that their form suggests otherwise.

Hence, to say that these questions *have no answers*, or that they are, for that matter, *unanswerable*, merely on the ground that they cannot be answered by 'yes' or 'no', would be a sheer mistake; and the mistake, as we understand, arises from their form being taken too seriously and relied upon too blindly. Bambrough also concludes substantially to the same effect. He says:

A question to which "Yes" is a wrong answer, and to which "No" is also a wrong answer, is not a question to which there is *no* answer, but one to which some answer other than "Yes" or "No" is the *right* answer.¹¹

(b) Now about (1), which, as is not difficult to notice, involves two assumptions.

- (i) That what is to count as an *answer* or *right* answer to a question will have to be *objectively right*, i.e. provable by experience or by some other relevant method.
- (ii) That a question can have *only one* answer which is objectively right in this sense.

But the assumptions are both of them purely arbitrary.

(i) Taken for valid, the *first* would impose an unwarranted limit on the range of what can justifiably make a claim to count as answers or right answers. That is, it would restrict them strictly to statements and their cousins (e.g. propositions, beliefs, descriptions, etc.). For, truth being a semantic value of statements only, it is statements, and statements only, which can be called true, in other words, *objectively right*. But this would be most unfair. Must all questions be answered by statements? What, for instance, is to be said about those which collect imperatives as their answers? For example, 'What am I to do now?', to which you can answer, say, 'Draft that petition to the Mayor', 'Get ready for dinner', 'Come, let us have a walk', and so on. None of these can be *proved* true, as none of these can be *called* true.

Besides, why is it that answer, which is to be called right, will also have to be objectively so? We don't really know. This appears in our eyes, if we may say so, taking objectivity just a bit too far, making a fetish of it. Suppose that in reply to your question whether I would like to drink tea or coffee, I say, "Tea". This, undoubtedly, would be the right answer, if it expresses my sincere preference for tea; though there is no point in saying that it is objectively right, insofar as there is no point in saying either that it can be proved true.

(ii) The *second* assumption also is likewise wrong and arbitrary. There is no ground whatever for one to suppose that a question can admit of only *one* such answer as can be considered right. Numerous examples would point to the contrary of it. Take, for example, 'What are the fac-

tors of 16?', to which one can answer by saying ' 2×8 ', ' 4×4 ', or ' $2 \times 2 \times 4$ ' or ' $2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 2$ '. Not just one but each of these answers has an equal right to being objectively right. Just another example, someone asks, 'How can one kill a bird?' You may answer: 'by a gun', or 'by a bow and an arrow', or 'by a stone', and so on. Each of these, not merely one, would be an objectively right answer to the question, since each of them can be proved by experience.

On this point, one, however, we fancy, may have recourse to the following line of argument. Well, singly, none of the alternatives in either of the two examples, it may be said, is the complete answer and, that way, the right answer. In either case, what is truly to be reckoned as the complete and, therefore, the right answer, is one and only one: it is, so to say, the whole of the disjunction of the alternatives, the so-called right answers. From which it would follow that the answer to 'What are the factors of 16?' which is to be called its right answer should be formulated as ' (4×4) —or— (8×2) —or— $(2 \times 2 \times 4)$ —or— $(2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 2)$ '; while the answer to 'How can one kill a bird?' which is to be called its right answer should be formulated as '(by a gun)—or—(by a bow and an arrow)—or—(by a stone).'

The argument is a bit too artificial. But this artificiality apart, it is also logically unsound, for the simple reason that whatever logical value is to belong to the two disjunctions of alternatives above must in each case be the function of the alternatives themselves; so that to say that the former is right, while denying that the latter are so would be palpably self-contradictory.

4. To summarize the results of our analysis so far.

An unanswerable question, we have seen, is not to be construed merely as a question which *has no answer*. For, the notion of *having no answer* is prone to assume a number of senses some of which are incompatible with the notion of question itself, while the rest with the permissible uses of the expression 'unanswerable question'.

What, then, to constitute an unanswerable question? Is there any alternative account which might be expected to prove adequate? We would venture to suggest the following:

A question is to be called unanswerable, if what is to count as its right answer is *unknowable*.

What is distinctive of this formulation is plainly its epistemological orientation, that is to say, the idea of the *answer being unknowable* which it is made to incorporate. This, however, goes to introduce a significant ambiguity which we must make explicit.

It is common to distinguish three senses in which a thing may be called *unknowable*. *First*, a thing is called *logically unknowable*, if its knowledge is found to be incompatible with the laws of logic. *Secondly*, even though logically knowable, it will be called *empirically unknowable*, if its knowledge is found incompatible with the laws of nature, *e.g.* those about the nature or the working of the mind that is to know, those about the nature of the object that is to be known, *etc.* *Thirdly*, a thing, even though it may be otherwise knowable, may yet be called *technically unknowable*, if its knowledge becomes unattainable because of any technical reason, *e.g.* want of necessary equipments, *etc.*

This three-fold distinction of the senses in which a thing is to be called unknowable will, naturally, proceed to introduce a corresponding distinction of three senses in which an answer to a question is to be called unknowable, and, that way, further, it will give rise to the following three types of unanswerable questions as conceived by us:

- (1) *Logically unanswerable questions* (LUQ), where the right answer is logically unknowable.
- (2) *Empirically unanswerable questions* (EUQ), where the right answer is empirically unknowable.
- (3) *Technically unanswerable questions* (TUQ), where the right answer is technically unknowable.

(2) and (3), *i.e.* EUQ and TUQ, which have countless instances in our discourse, can neither of them become

much of a problem in philosophy. Nobody denies their existence. As a matter of fact, those, *e.g.* the logical positivists, who are anxious to deny that there are unanswerable questions, do not have either EUQ or TUQ in mind. And the same is to be said also of those, *e.g.* Kant, who admit them. The philosophical interest over unanswerable questions is confined entirely to (1), *i.e.* LUQ, and this, therefore, for us is to become the sole important sense of the concept of unanswerable question.

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NOTES

1. Cf. Moritz Schlick, "Unanswerable Questions", reprinted in the *Philosophy in the Twentieth Century*, ed. W. Barret and H. D. Aiken, Random House, New York, pp. 23-24.
2. Vide my "Theory" Towards a Theory for the Classification of Questions", *Indian Review of Philosophy*, vol. 2, 1973.
3. Vide, for example, *Analytica Posteriora*, Book II, *The Works of Aristotle*, translated under the editorship of Sir David Doss, vol. I, The Clarendon Press, Oxford. Also, see Ryle's "Categories", *Logic and Language*, ed. A. G. N. Flew, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, pp. 65-75.
4. *E.g.* J. M. E. Moravosik. See his "Aristotle's Theory of Categories", *Aristotle*, ed. J. M. E. Moravesik, Macmillan, London, 1969, pp. 125-145.
5. I mean the characteristic logical relation which holds between a question and its answer.
6. "Unanswerable Questions", *The Proceedings of the Aristotlean Society*, supplementary volume XI, 1966, pp. 151-172.
7. Quoted by Bambrough from Sartre's *Existentialism and Humanism*. See *ibid* pp. 153-154.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 160.
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Ibid.*