
Movement Musings

Legitimate Questions: A Proposal and a Conversation

Rob Scott

I'm submitting the following language in order to share a distinction which I've used at the School for Designing a Society when teaching permaculture. It includes a formulated proposal, and an excerpt from a discussion. It is part of an ongoing project of mine: distinguishing units of language which permit speakers to create change. I propose that "legitimate questions" are an indicator of potential—a call to design. My purpose here is to juxtapose the beginning and end of a question's "life," when it becomes an "illegitimate question."

A Proposal

The permaculture movement has sufficient knowledge by now to distinguish between those questions which have been answered, and those which either are not yet answered or are in principle unanswerable. Therefore I ask: when is a question answered?!

When I ask a question, I either (a) know the answer, or (b) don't know the answer. My relationship to the answer specifies whether I am (a) in a domain of knowledge, or (b) in a domain of searching for knowledge.

When I pose a question and I know its answer, I'm posing an "illegitimate question." Since I've decided the answer to the question, I'm not on a quest for new answers to that question anymore. I'm not really "asking" anything. If I decide to pose such a question, I'm using the form of a question to serve some other function, because I'm not in a process of searching for answers. I've decided what the answer is. When a question is not part of a legitimate exploration for answers, it is not a legitimate question. It's an illegitimate question.

When I ask a question and I don't know its answer, I'm asking a "legitimate question." When I'm undecided about some domain of knowledge or potential knowledge, I can ask a question. At that time it is legitimate for me to ask, even if I don't suspect anyone will answer. The question is an invitation for proposals or hypotheses. Any unheard-of response is welcome, and necessarily increases the number of potential answers, even if I don't elevate any of the responses to the level of "the answer." As long as the question is legitimate, information offers potential.

A Conversation

I recently presented the above proposal at the School for Designing a Society where I teach in Urbana, Illinois. The school is distinguished as being oriented around a question, rather than an answer. It is one place where the question "What do I consider a desirable society?" is given serious playful thought. The following is an excerpt from the beginning of a conversation about the proposal. In the beginning, there were counterproposals (the available language always claims to have a nice "but").

Rob: Will you help me write the next section of this article for the *Permaculture Activist*?

Tim: Rob, maybe this isn't where you're headed with this discussion, *but*, I like finding things out! I want to know how things work... When I ask "will you marry me?" I want to know: yes or no? When I want to learn how to prepare a French omelet, I look it up in a cookbook.

Rob: That is correct. When you don't know if I'll marry you it is still a legitimate question, then, when I say no, you have an answer, and we're done. The question of how to make a French omelet may be a legitimate question to you now, but you know that others have answered it, and they've published their answers. Therefore, you can look it up. And if you call it the answer, it is. End of discussion. Now you are also correct that this is not the direction I was headed with this discussion. Legitimate questions about researchable facts are fleeting in their legitimacy. What I'm after is the situation in which you want the question to remain legitimate because it helps you generate alternatives. Situations in which the object of inquiry, say an omelet, is to continue to be treated as a system to be generated. A situation that calls for a designer.

Mark: There is another situation in which philosophers pose this as a legitimate question in order to avoid other questions that ought to be asked, (grim facial expression:) "What is a French omelet?"

Kat: *But* this is not complete because it depends on context. Teaching depends on context. You (Rob) are acting like any situation

is so black and white that either a question is legitimate or is not.

Rob: That's the context that is missing. Yes, I'm proposing a context in which the legitimacy of a question is questioned. There is a scale of attitude that changes the legitimacy of a question over time. When first proposed, all questions may be legitimate, then the decay factor sets in and responses are experimented with, certain speculative tendencies arise, and eventually there is wholesale loss of debate and all you have is "the answer," and eventually the legitimate question disappears and all you can do with it is make money posing illegitimate questions for academic institutions.

Permaculture is not in that context yet. So I agree that what is missing is a question of context. Or I could say: a context of questioning. The context of a teacher posing questions only to test, versus the context in which we, student and teacher and all, act as designers by making connections that haven't been made yet—that's a conversation in which the question remains legitimate.

Mandy: What do you want?

Rob: That's a legitimate question. (Pause.) To start I want permaculture teachers to be capable, willing, even anxious participants in the situation in which someone asks a legitimate question. Then the discussion begins. So often what I observe is a situation in which a newcomer asks a question with huge potential, and then this person is responded to with an example. The potential—the potential

for other answers than their examples—must be conserved if we are to teach design rather than decay into rote implementation. So in that situation, I want the permaculture educator to be willing to admit that "that is legitimate question" and open the floor for others' observations. Teaching as sharing power.

Mark: Asking "What is happening during observation?" strikes me as a legitimate question. When a person is observing, are questions being asked? Which ones? At Dreamtime Village I once went on a silent tour of the permaculture garden in which we were asked to observe microclimate. The questions I asked in my observing were different in the silence.

Kat: In this society we are taught not to be observers.

Mark: We could try speaking of observing as asking questions. Not assuming examples already exist.

Rob: Assuming examples exist is when "observing" decays into "diagnosing."

Mark: We could speak of the art of asking questions.

I want "care for the people" to be treated as a legitimate question. The question of people care is not satisfied by material provisioning alone. Whether a person's questions are responded to as legitimate is part of care. The scale of these dynamics over time raise further questions. Legitimate questions decay to illegitimate questions. Occasionally this may

be desirable. My question is: When is it desirable? Permaculture has generated thousands of solutions. They could be quantified. (Not here.) The proposition of design is that the number of solutions be treated as theoretically unlimited.

Therefore, those questions which have been answered may be published, and their publication may be viewed as an invitation to generate new legitimate questions. Otherwise it may become a cause for copying. When someone tells me, "Oh yeah, permaculture, that's when you have a mulched garden with chickens in it," I do not deny that accuracy of the statement. Rather, I thank the person for a reason to formulate a new question: given the answers we already have, what would satisfy the criteria of permaculture design without copying its well known implementations?

Reference

Von Foerster, Heinz. *Lethology: A Theory of Learning and Knowing vis a vis Underterminables, Undecidables, Unknowables*. Article presented at the Seminario Internazionale, "Conoscenza come educazione" April 26, 1990. Δ

Rob Scott is an organizer of the Urbana Permaculture Project; this fall he's organizing a symposium on Permaculture and Architecture in Urbana, IL, which you can find online at www.prairienet.org/upp. Rob welcomes response to this article. Email robscott@freeshell.org