

# Want answers? Learn to ask the right questions

I've recently published a book on weight loss, and one of the questions put to me was: what qualifies you to write on this subject? Why didn't you refer to the latest scientific research, or ask experts for their opinions?

My response was that in philosophy we learn to ask the questions of ourselves.

Philosophy means "love of wisdom". But we don't become wise by asking experts for their opinions. Regurgitating expert opinions is not the same as having real knowledge, let alone wisdom.

Heeding the experts might be a reasonable choice, but we can't simply rely on asking the experts all the time.

First, the experts are not always right.

Second, we don't always know who is and isn't a legitimate expert, and sometimes there is genuine disagreement between experts.

Third, consulting an expert presumes we understand the nature of the problem. We "ask the expert" our questions, and rely on their expertise to give us the right answer. But how do we know we are asking the *right* questions in the first place?

**'Prudent questioning is one half of knowledge' – Francis Bacon**

There are plenty of "experts" on all aspects of weight loss. You can find expert answers on fasting, gut bacteria, the harmful effects of refined sugar, and dozens of different ways of managing your diet.

What do you do with such an embarrassment of expert answers?

You take a closer look at the question you are asking.

Philosophy is all about asking the right questions. Philosophers are united in their efforts to find the right questions, even if they arrive at different answers.

At university, we learn to question by reading the works of past philosophers and seeing the questions that captured their attention and how they sought to answer them.

We ourselves are then questioned and challenged on our beliefs and opinions, and our answers are scrutinised and criticised by our teachers and our peers.

Together, these efforts reveal to us possibilities we have overlooked and assumptions or prior beliefs we have taken for granted.

We learn to question our convictions and our opinions, not for the purpose of tearing them down, but to test them. We seek to know whether our knowledge is real.

### **Working backwards**

Most people move forward on the basis of their opinions. They act on what they “know”. But philosophers work backwards. They start with what they believe to be true, and ask “how do I know this?” even venturing to ask “what does it mean to know something in the first place?”

This kind of doubt makes people uncomfortable. But discomfort is often a sign that our opinions are not based on anything substantial. It’s not easy to admit to yourself that your hallowed opinions were received unquestioningly from the media, from friends or from society more generally.

Philosophy courses and introductory materials are valuable because they expose us to questions and ideas that may challenge or defy our own unexamined opinions – opinions that might otherwise never be challenged.

The goal of such materials is not (or should not be) simply to replace one set of opinions and beliefs with another. Rather, the benefit of exposure to unfamiliar or contrary arguments and claims is that they give us an opportunity to examine the basis of our beliefs.

Without this opportunity, most of us will go through life clinging to the opinions we have unconsciously developed.

### **How to question**

Long exposure to argument, counter-argument and the rational scrutiny this implies, develops in the philosopher a seasoned anticipation of the possibilities and perils surrounding any question or statement of fact.

Like a skilled craftsman, the philosopher looks at a problem with knowledge and experience of what such projects usually entail.

When it comes to applying the philosopher's skills, the process is steady, careful, and methodical.

Being overweight is not the kind of "big" problem philosophers usually deal with. But if you hope to solve such a problem in your own life, the philosopher's skills will help you first and foremost in identifying the right question.

"How can I lose weight?" might be the burning question that comes to mind, but that doesn't mean it is the right question to ask or answer.

Most of us "know" how to lose weight, after all. We just have to consume less energy than we expend.

Yet that answer would not satisfy most people. So at this point a philosopher might suspect you are asking the wrong question.

How do we find the right question? How do we, as Bacon put it,

question *prudently*?

Reading the works of past philosophers shows that they spend a lot of time *describing* situations and problems prior to asking their questions.

In other words, they provide *context* to their questions. Rushing out and asking “what is the meaning of life?” presumes too much. It presumes we all know what the question means by “meaning” and “life”.

A philosopher will take the time to describe what is meant. They might say

“We experience this thing we call ‘life’, but which we could also call ‘reality’ or ‘existence’. And this thing we call ‘life’ often feels as though it ought to have some kind of meaning or purpose, in much the same way that our actions within life often have their own, more modest, meaning or purpose. I boil the kettle because I want to make a cup of tea. I invite friends over for tea because I enjoy their company. Does *living* itself have an analogous purpose?”

That, by the way, is just a start to finding the right question to ask.

A philosopher glancing at that text will see many questions hidden within it: are there other ways to define or construe “life” and “meaning”? Are the examples of boiling a kettle and inviting friends over really analogous to one another, let alone to “life” which is not, after all, an action we perform intentionally? Are purpose and meaning really the same thing? And so on.

Likewise a philosopher might ask you to describe your circumstances regarding being overweight, instead of rushing into what *you think* is the pertinent question of “how”.

**Don't rush to judgement**

You might end up explaining that you don't like being overweight, but you can't seem to find the motivation to commit to a diet. So naturally the real question is "how can I find motivation to stick to a diet?"

But no, there's still more to describe. Describe in detail how you lack motivation, how you don't like being overweight, how your past attempts have fallen apart.

In other words, tell your story. Describe your experience, your reality, taking care not to rush to a conclusion. When you've described it in full, the right question, the prudent question will often become apparent.

It's a slow process. But what you're doing is profound because you are changing the way you look at the world. You are changing the story you tell yourself about your problems – consolidating and refining it.

Training in philosophy can give us the necessary rigour – and perhaps the courage – to persevere in this process. It teaches us to value honesty and clarity above the convenience, comfort, and consolation of the opinions we just happen to already hold.

Most of the time we fail to ask the right questions because we have never taken the time to describe our world or our experience accurately. We rest on an unstable foundation of things we've always taken for granted, pressures that motivate us, and misguided questions whose answers do us no good at all.

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