

# Questions and Answers

Comments on Jonathan Schaffer, “Knowing the Answer”  
(<http://people.umass.edu/schaffer/papers/KnowAnswer.pdf> and forthcoming in  
*Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*)  
Bellingham Summer Philosophy Conference, August 2005

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Jonathan is known for his answers as well as his questions. In fact, he is known for giving the same answer to different questions.

This illustrates his point about convergent questions: different questions can have the same answer. Jonathan relies on this point to show that if  $p$  is the answer to a certain question, knowing the answer to that question doesn't consist merely in knowing that  $p$ . Since  $p$  is the answer to many questions, and you can know the answer to one without knowing the answer to another, knowing that  $p$  does not suffice for knowing the answer to the question in question. This argument refutes the orthodox reductive view or, as I'll call it for short, the stupid view.

Jonathan thinks that knowledge-*wh* relates a knower to a question as well as an answer – it's a three-term relation. Indeed, as previous visitors to Bellingham know, Jonathan even thinks that knowledge-that is a three-term relation. His not-so-hidden agenda this time around is to parlay the shortcomings of the stupid view of knowledge-*wh* into new support for his contrastivist view of knowledge-that. He now thinks that even “knowledge-that includes a question” (p. 14).

As for me, there's a more sensible way to improve upon the stupid view. This sensible view is reductive insofar as it holds that knowledge-*wh* reduces to knowledge-that, with knowledge-that understood as a two-term relation. And it's reductive in a different way: it's not expansive like Jonathan's view, which incorporates both questions *and* answers into knowledge-*wh* ascriptions. The sensible view says that knowledge-*wh* is a two-term relation, relating knowers just to questions. Even so, as I will explain, it agrees with Jonathan that knowing-*wh* is knowing the answer (or at least an answer – like Jonathan, I'll downplay the fact that some questions have more than one true answer). Best of all, the sensible view exhibits the connection between answers and questions. It shows precisely how it is that what you know when you know the answer to a question is the answer to that question.

## 1. What is an answer?

Before going on, let's make some quick terminological observations about answers. First, although Jonathan focuses on propositional or sentential answers, we shouldn't overlook phrasal answers. Suppose you ask me, “Where is Boundary Bay Brewery?”, and I reply, “1107 Railroad Avenue [in Bellingham].” This answer is not a proposition but an address. Of course, I could have answered, “Boundary Bay is at 1107 Railroad Avenue,” and that's an answer too. But the proposition that Boundary Bay is at 1107 Railroad Avenue is not where Boundary Bay is.

Next, notice that in Jonathan's jargon the phrase ‘true answer’ is not redundant and ‘false answer’ is not an oxymoron – for him answers can be true or false. I'll go along

with that, but obviously when he speaks of knowing the answer, as in his title, he's going along with ordinary usage and counting only the true answer as *the* answer.

More importantly, and contrary to what Jonathan's title and much of what he says suggests, for many questions there is no such thing as *the* answer. Many questions have many correct answers. Only Yes/No and explicit multiple-choice questions have only one correct answer. It's also worth noting that many questions have no correct answer, namely those with a false presupposition. The classic example is "Have you stopped beating your wife?" Unless you're a wife beater, you shouldn't answer "Yes" or "No" – you should reject the presupposition.

Also, it's worth noting that we don't count as genuine answers those that follow trivially from the question. Suppose you ask me, "Where is the Oyster Bar on Chuckanut Drive?" Having been there five times, I ought to know. Cooperative guy that I am, I answer, "On Chuckanut Drive." That's not much of an answer. Of course, an answer can be correct without being informative, and how informative it is generally depends on what the questioner already knows. But I'm talking specifically about answers derived directly from the question via a simple transformation. To answer the question "Who murdered Smith?" by saying "Smith's murderer" is not to give a genuine answer.

One other thing. My examples might suggest that questions and answers are speech acts, or at least are essentially tied to speech acts. I don't mean to suggest that. I agree with Jonathan that questions and answers can be understood more abstractly. Just as propositions are what at least some declarative sentences and clauses express (some are semantically incomplete and fail to express complete propositions, even relative to a context – see, e.g., my "Conversational Implicature"), so questions are what interrogative sentences (and clauses) express. Now we need to take up what answers are.

## 2. What's the question about reduction?

The stupid view, I mean the orthodox view, is reductive in a strong way. Knowing the answer is just knowing that which happens to be the answer. Here is how Jonathan formulates it (p. 4):

*The Orthodox, Reductive (Stupid) View*

S knows-*wh* iff S knows that *p*, where *p* is the true answer to the indirect question Q expressed by the *wh*-clause.

It is part of this view that '*s* knows that *p*' expresses a binary relation between *s* and the proposition that *p*.

Before going further, I think we need to distinguish the question whether knowledge-*wh* reduces to knowledge-that from the very different question whether ascriptions of knowledge-*wh* can be analyzed into ascriptions of knowledge-that. For even if ascriptions can't be so analyzed, it could still turn out that knowledge-*wh* reduces to knowledge-that.

Here are two considerations that suggest why. First, having knowledge-*wh* does not seem to require having any beliefs beyond those that comprise your knowledge-that. That is, the totality of your knowledge-that provides answers to all the *wh*-questions you have answers to. Second, there are no beliefs-*wh* – all beliefs are beliefs-that. You can know where Boundary Bay is, but you can't believe where it is; you can know what's best to drink there, but you can't believe what's best to drink there.

Anyway, it's not clear whether Jonathan takes the reductive view, as he formulates it, to be about knowledge-*wh*, on which knowledge-*wh* reduces to knowledge-that, or a

different view, about the analyzability of ascriptions of knowledge-*wh* into ascriptions of knowledge-that. Similarly, what Jonathan calls “the problem of convergent knowledge” he then describes as a problem about “convergent knowledge [-*wh*] claims” (p. 4). Also, what he says about such things as covert variables and logical form makes it seem that he’s talking not about knowledge-*wh* but about its ascription.

### 3. How natural is Jonathan’s “natural” solution?

The stupid view is vulnerable to the problem of convergent knowledge: different questions can have the same answer, and one can know the answer to one without knowing the answer to the other. The “natural solution,” as Jonathan rightly observes, “is to include the question *Q* (which is sitting right on the surface of the knowledge-*wh* ascription)” (p. 10). I agree with that, but Jonathan goes to the extreme of including the question as a separate term of the knowledge-*wh* relation.

#### *Jonathan’s View*

Knowledge-*wh* includes the question: *S* knows-*wh* iff  $KspQ$ , where

*Q* is the indirect question of the *wh*-clause, and *p* its true answer.

This succeeds in relativizing knowledge-*wh* to the question all right, and it captures the fact that, if *p* is the correct answer to the question *Q*, to know the answer it is not enough to know that *p* – one must know *p* as the true answer.

Jonathan cites various bits of evidence for “the presence of the question ... in logical form” (pp. 12-13), but he just assumes that there’s also an argument place for the answer. He argues, “Knowledge-*wh* ascriptions do not express  $Ksp$ . They express  $KspQ$ . To know-*wh* is to know the answer” (p. 13). The third sentence is right, but the second one is a *non sequitur*. Yes, to know-*wh* is to know the answer, but it doesn’t follow that the answer figures in the knowledge-*wh* ascription. To eat is to eat something, but that doesn’t imply that to say that someone is eating is to say that they’re eating something. Similarly, you can correctly say that someone knows what his mother’s maiden name is without saying what her maiden name is. The truth of such a knowledge claim requires that there be an answer that he knows, but there’s no need to posit a separate argument place for it.

I agree with Jonathan that knowing the answer (or an answer) to a question is knowing it as the answer, but not that knowledge-*wh* ascriptions relate knowers to both propositions and questions. Knowledge-*wh* ascriptions relate knowers merely to questions, just as knowledge-that ascriptions relate them to propositions. Let’s see how that can be.

### 4. What is the sensible view?

The sensible view is reductive insofar as it holds that knowledge-*wh* reduces to knowledge-that and denies that either is a three-term relation. The knowledge relation is as it appears, a two-term relation, either to a proposition or to a question but not to both. Knowledge-*wh* and knowledge-that ascriptions attribute the same kind of knowledge, but in relation to different sorts of things. The verb ‘knows’ univocally expresses a two-term relation, and what it is a relation to depends on its complement. If the complement is a that-clause, the relation is to a proposition; if it’s a *wh*-clause, the relation is to a question (in the abstract sense of question). It’s that simple.

Well, not quite that simple. To be in that relation to a question is not to know the question. It's to know the answer to the question – as the answer to the question. This distinguishes 'know', as well as other factive verbs, such as 'remember', 'inform', 'determine', from non-factive verbs like 'wonder', 'ask', and 'care', which can also take interrogative complements. For example, to be in the wonder relation is not to wonder the answer to the question but to wonder what the answer to the question is. Also, although knowing-*wh* is knowing the answer, the answer doesn't figure in the logical form of a knowledge-*wh* ascription but only in its truth condition. The following schematic formulation of the sensible view reflects this:

*The Sensible View*

Knowledge-*wh* is a relation to the question (= [*wh*<sub>*x*</sub> [... *x* ... ]<sub>S</sub>]<sub>Q</sub>),

but to be in that relation is to know the answer to the question:

To know [*wh*<sub>*x*</sub> [... *x* ... ]<sub>S</sub>]<sub>Q</sub> is to know that [... A ...]<sub>S</sub>,

where A is the *x* such that [... *x* ... ]<sub>S</sub>.

So, for example, to know what<sub>*x*</sub> [Jones buttered *x* in the bathroom with a knife at midnight] is to know that [Jones buttered TOAST in the bathroom with a knife at midnight]. To know when<sub>*x*</sub> [Jones buttered toast in the bathroom with a knife (at) *x*] is to know that [Jones buttered toast in the bathroom with a knife AT MIDNIGHT], and so on for other questioned constituents. Notice that if the answer to these questions is expressed with a full sentence, they all have the same answer: "Jones buttered toast in the bathroom with a knife at midnight." However, as reflected by the location of the contrastively or focally STRESSED constituent, the difference between knowing the answer to one question rather than another requires already knowing that  $\exists x$  [... *x* ... ] regarding the questioned constituent, the one that is raised to the *wh*-position in the interrogative clause. For example, knowing the answer to the question who<sub>*x*</sub> [*x* buttered toast in the bathroom with a knife at midnight] requires knowing that there is an answer, i.e., that someone buttered toast in the bathroom with a knife at midnight. (Actually, this condition may be too strong. Maybe, contrary to closure, it's enough to justifiably and correctly believe the presupposition, but this is not the time to get into that.)

Another way to state the sensible view is in terms of what linguists call the *cleft* construction. It contains a relative clause corresponding to the indirect question. So, for example, to know what<sub>*x*</sub> [Jones buttered *x* in the bathroom with a knife at midnight] is to know that it was toast which<sub>*x*</sub> Jones buttered *x* in the bathroom with a knife at midnight. To know when<sub>*x*</sub> Jones buttered toast in the bathroom with a knife is to know that it was at midnight when<sub>*x*</sub> Jones buttered toast in the bathroom with a knife *x*.

In effect, the sensible view is a kind of descriptivist account of knowing-*wh*. That is, the *wh*-clause, as it occurs in a knows-*wh* ascription, is tantamount to a definite description of the answer. It describes, but not specifies, the fact that comprises the answer. To know that fact as the answer is to know it under that description.

Note that if the presupposition of the question is false, the question has no answer and there is no answer to know. If no one buttered toast with a knife at midnight, you can't know who did. In that case, the obvious way to respond to the question is to deny its presupposition. Similarly, if the question is multiple-choice, the presupposition is that one of the options is correct. Again, to know the answer to the question presupposes that it has an answer.

If the sensible view is right, it explains why knowledge-*wh* is question-relative. However, it doesn't support Jonathan's view that knowledge-that is question-relative too. As you'll recall, his argument for that, at least in this paper, is that 'knows' expresses the same relation in both kinds of ascriptions and, since 'knows' when complemented by a *wh*-clause expresses a three-term relation, so does 'knows' when complemented by a that-clause. But if the sensible view is right, 'knows' expresses a two-term relation in both cases.

### **5. Are all questions multiple-choice questions?**

When someone utters an interrogative sentence, he might not be asking the exact question predictable from the sentence's semantics. He might intend certain options to be included in what he's asking, even if he's not making them explicit. But this is a case of conversational implicature, not context sensitivity. Similarly, someone ascribing knowledge-*wh* might intend to report that the person knows the answer to a more specific question than the one expressed by the *wh*-clause. Again, this is a case of implicature, not context sensitivity. This is a pragmatic phenomenon, not a semantic one (see my paper "Context ex machina").

So it's not clear why Jonathan supposes that "all questions are multiple-choice questions" (p. 6), even those that do not list choices of answers explicitly. It seems to me that all his examples show is that any question, if intended to be taken as a multiple-choice question, can be *turned into* a multiple-choice question by explicitly adding a list of choices. The fact that any interrogative sentence or indirect interrogative clause can be expanded into a multiple-choice question doesn't show that it is one. Interrogatives are not inherently context-sensitive. Not all questions are multiple-choice questions.

### **6. Is there something special about answers to multiple-choice questions?**

As we have seen, Jonathan objects to the stupid view on the grounds that one can know, e.g., whether George Bush or Janet Jackson is on TV without knowing whether Bush or Will Ferrell is on TV, even though these two questions have the same true answer, that Bush is on TV. But do they have the same true answer?

Jonathan observes that you can turn an easy multiple-choice question, all of whose wrong answers are obviously wrong, into a hard question by limiting the wrong answers to ones that are not obviously wrong. I'd like to suggest an alternative explanation for this. The reason you can know the answer to one question but not the other is, contrary to appearances, that they don't have the same answer. In Jonathan's example, the answer isn't simply that Bush is on TV. What you know in answer to the question whether the person on TV is George Bush or Janet Jackson is that *if* it's one or the other, it's Bush. After all, you could know that much even if all you see is a close-up of a portion of the person's right chest area. But you wouldn't know categorically that it's Bush.

This observation refutes the stupid view in a more devastating way than does Jonathan's argument from convergent questions. It shows that knowing the answer to at least some *wh*-questions, namely disjunctive or multiple-choice questions, doesn't really require knowing that *p*. You only have to know that if *d*, then *p*, where *d* is the disjunction of choices that is presupposed in the question and where the right answer is included. But you don't have to know that *d* to know the answer to the question.

If this is right, it explains why you can turn an easy question into a hard one by including less obviously false answers along with the true answer. Some questions are more difficult than others, even though they have the same right answer, because, relative to what is presupposed as known, the wrong answers are harder to rule out. And notice that there's a simple way to make any multiple-choice question more difficult. Just include the option "none of the above." That eliminates the presupposition that any of the other options is right.

So how should the sensible view be formulated to handle multiple-choice questions?

*The Sensible View for Multiple-Choice Questions*

To know [whether  $\{a, b, c, \dots\}_x [\dots x \dots ]_s$ ]Q is to know that [... A ...]s,

where A is the  $x: x \in \{a, b, c, \dots\}$  such that [... x ... ]s, given that  $\exists x [\dots x \dots ]_s$

This formulation is intentionally ambiguous as to whether the 'given'-clause is or is not within the scope of 'know'. That is, I don't want to settle, at least not here, whether knowing that the question has an answer, or its merely having an answer, is necessary for knowing the answer.

**7. Who gets the last word?**

Jonathan is right to insist that to knowing-*wh* is knowing the answer. He is right to insist that the verb 'knows' is not ambiguous as between its uses in knowledge-*wh* and knowledge-that ascriptions. Yes, "knowledge-*wh* and knowledge-that ... express one and the same relation" (p. 13). But I don't believe that Jonathan has made a case that 'knows' expresses a three-term relation, between a person, a proposition, and a question. It univocally expresses a two-term relation, to either a proposition or a question, depending on whether it is complemented by a declarative or an interrogative clause. That's the sensible view. But I don't get the last word.