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I

A Few Initial Thoughts about the Questioning Life



*With what end in view do you again and again walk
along difficult and laborious paths? —AUGUSTINE¹*

I have never really doubted whether God exists. That may be the wrong sort of thing to admit at the opening of a book about questioning, but it's true. I have considered the arguments on each side and have done so with as much honesty as I can drum up. But those inquiries were mostly prompted by people around me—friends and family who stood at the water's edge of unbelief wondering whether they should attempt a swim. I looked along with them but found the prospect wanting. To me, that order and rationality are essential to the universe, rather than accidental, remains the most persuasive explanation.

But I have doubted whether God is good, and whether He will be good to me. The uncertainty has pressed on me, bending both soul and body beneath its weight. I have felt the terrors of

1. Augustine et al., *The Confessions of St. Augustine* (New York: P. F. Collier & Son, 1909), 4.12.18.

His judgment and the horrors of His indifference. These moments were often accompanied by confrontations with my own sin, but other times they arose out of my frustrated sense of entitlement, which I experienced as rejection. These moments were “intellectual,” but went deeper even than what we normally call “emotions.” I felt as though my life depended upon finding satisfaction and that my bones would rot if there was no relief. “I would have despaired,” the psalmist writes, “unless I had believed I would see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.”² When we consider the possibility that God will not be good to us, we stand on the precipice of despair and peer into the darkness below. To do so with a cool detachment that comes from treating the question as “merely academic” is to miss the point. To answer wrongly or not to be answered at all—on this nothing less than the universe depends.

Our anxieties sometimes shift, though. These days, I am more doubtful of seeing my own goodness in the land of the living than I am of seeing God’s. He has already proven Himself in the death and resurrection of Jesus. It is I who am in question. “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” is the inquiry the ruler poses to Jesus.³ The question signals a profound uncertainty, a sense that we are responsible for our lives and their destinations. The moment we pose it, we move down a path of confronting our own incapacity to attain salvation, a path that takes us to the limits of our own holiness and places us in need of God’s. The question itself reminds us that it is we who are under judgment, not God, and that all we do is only enough to place us in need of grace.

I mention these questions only because I have asked them at various points in my life and because we start from what we

2. Psalm 27:13 (NASB).

3. Luke 18:18 (ESV).

know. But not everyone's uncertainties have unsettled them to the degree that mine sometimes have. And it is quite possible that Socrates was wrong and maybe no one's should. The writer of Ecclesiastes, a friend to inquirers everywhere, knew that "in much wisdom is much vexation, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow."⁴ Questions that grip us are rarely comfortable, which makes a life pursuing them seem strange to a people preoccupied with comfort and security. It's not easy to sell a tradition whose main representatives, like Solomon and Socrates, faced depression or involuntary death.⁵

Instead, we often hurry through disruptions as though nothing of fundamental importance is at stake. When goodness is called into question, when we are confronted by a dilemma and can see no way through, when a choice between the comfort of silence and gently rebuking a friend lies before us—these are the moments when we are most tempted to retreat and avoid the pressing burden of the unknown. We are rarely in danger of examining to excess, especially when the subject is the shape of our own lives. The sports page and celebrity magazine captivate us and with a good deal less discomfort. Our tendency is to avoid, to inoculate ourselves against unsettling questions with an endless titillation of trivialities. It is better not to be disturbed or to disturb.

Even so, we cannot escape when the questions come upon us. Most of us don't start questioning by hunting for subjects to explore. We feel our questions the deepest when they come over us, slowly pressing upon us until they can no longer be ignored. The mother whose child insistently asks "Why?" may herself catch the habit. The man whose friend's marriage falls apart might be moved to consider his own. The student unable to respond to

4. Ecclesiastes 1:18 (ESV).

5. Was Solomon depressed? Probably not. But Ecclesiastes, which is at least written in a Solomonic way, isn't exactly a chipper book.

an argument may find herself stifling a nagging disquiet that all may not be well. Sometimes questions *perturb* us, which is a lovely and forgotten word: they fill us with an unsettled awareness that, despite their stable appearance, our lives are yet open before us.

THE ANATOMY OF QUESTIONING

What happens when we question? The practice is one of our most common ways of interacting with the world, yet its mechanics remain ambiguous. And despite a few millennia of asking questions, few philosophers have examined questioning directly.⁶

When we assert something, we make a claim that may be true or false. We say that it is sunny outside with all the declarative confidence of people who have looked outside our window and seen the orb hanging in the blue. It's a trivial example, sure, and the more complicated the world gets, the more challenging such assertions become. But the grammar of the sentence, the *indicative mood*, is how we describe the world with the concepts we've inherited.

A question has a different nature, though, and constitutes a different relationship between us and the world before us. It points us toward the unknown rather than the known, drawing our attention toward some feature that is currently hidden to us. Behind the English "question" lies the Latin *quaestio*, which also connotes *seeking out*. In that sense, questions send our attention away from ourselves toward something else. They take us out on an adventure, even when we question ourselves. For by asking, "What is the character of my soul?" we must momentarily stand apart from ourselves in order to find out the answer.

Questioning is a form of our desire. Even while our inquiries often take an intellectual form, they come from wellsprings deeper

6. See *The Philosophy of Curiosity* by Ilhan Inan for a good example of someone who gives it a sporting try. Ilhan Inan, *The Philosophy of Curiosity* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

than the mind. We do not always choose our questions, any more than we choose our spouses. Our questions drag us about like chariots, which is precisely why letting them go can be so hard. They make us feel as though there is *something* incomplete that we desire to resolve. Our desire for satisfaction may be stronger or weaker, may intensify or wane, but it is always present.

We should think through this *something* that we feel is missing. Those who work with art sometimes speak of “negative space,” or the area where something *isn't*. Consider the FedEx logo: the name of the company is spelled out in solid colors, which the eye detects instantly. But the space between the “E” and the “x” makes an arrow, to remind us of their purpose as a shipping company. Or rather, the “E” and the “x” leave an arrow out, imply an arrow that *isn't* there. It's hard to know which way to put it. For a long time, I never noticed it. After someone pointed it out, it became the only thing I could see.

But negative space isn't everywhere. Nor can we make negative space out of thin air, so to speak. I couldn't point to an empty glass cage and say it's where a lion *isn't*. It would remain an empty space, even if I attached an “artist's statement” to the contrary. Negative space takes its shape from the objects that surround it. We can only discern the missing arrow in the FedEx logo because the “E” and the “x” are present.

In a similar way, questioning draws our attention to the negative spaces of the world. We consistently encounter facts and experiences that we have to incorporate into our understanding for them to be meaningful. But what we encounter sometimes stretches our frameworks to the point of breaking them. This is particularly true when tragedy strikes. Our moral and political categories offered no meaningful explanation for the tragedy of 9/11. “How could this happen?” “What shall we call it?” “Who

could do such a thing?” These and other questions forced themselves upon us and have only lost their force through the reassuring illusion of our security—and our own forgetfulness. But in those first days, we were confronted by a host of unknowns. The fragments of our knowledge about Al Qaeda, about our own security, about a suddenly unstable world left more negative spaces than they filled.

But we can only recognize gaps in our knowledge because we already know something. We ask if it is sunny outside because we know there is a sun, that it comes up, that we are inside and that there is an outside. All these claims are interconnected, and we may affirm them with different degrees of confidence. But they combine to shape the unknown about whether it will be cloudy or not today.⁷ They create a space that our inquiry attempts to fill. In the case of 9/11, our understanding of America’s invulnerable security proved to have a massive hole, leaving us grasping to discern how and why the airplanes had been hijacked.

Consider one of the early responses to Jesus and His ministry. After He heals a blind and mute man in Matthew 12, the gaping crowd asks, “Can this be the Son of David?”⁸ The question is an important one, but so is what it presumes: the people already think they know (from the Old Testament) what it means to be the son of David. And they have their experience of Jesus and His power. What they don’t have, the *something* that drives their wonder, is clarity about whether Jesus is the one who fits their expectations. They’re exploring what’s unknown to them, the negative space between the concept of the Messiah and the person of Jesus.⁹

We associate questioning with youthfulness and for under-

7. Unless one happens to live in Phoenix, where it is always sunny. Then there is no question. Or in Seattle or Oxford, which (alas) have the opposite problem.

8. Matthew 12:23 (ESV).

9. In this instance, the Pharisees try to close that gap by answering the people’s question for them, but Jesus rejects their attempt and leaves it open.

standable reasons. Children are naturally inquisitive: they search and explore their surroundings with abandon. The university is, for many of us, one of the last seasons of intentional questioning. And these days, many young people broadcast their doubts, which I understand but try to avoid.

But if the young question most, the wise question best.¹⁰ The art of questioning takes a lifetime to perfect, for the most interesting questions flow from a deep well of insights. The more we understand, the more fine-grained our awareness of the negative spaces will be. The more we learn about the world, the more we will realize how much more there is to know, if we will only remember our ignorance and continue noticing the negative spaces. Those who have learned best and longest will explore hidden nooks and corners that those of us starting out cannot begin to imagine. The wise have seen negative spaces that only well-trained eyes are strong enough to detect.

IMAGINING AND THE VALUE OF QUESTIONS

What shall we say about Job, the most famous of the Bible's questioners? Having lost everything, he bitterly laments his state while fending off the bad advice from friends that he should confess his wrongdoing. Job's sense of injustice reveals itself in his pointed questioning of God about his sorrows. "Does it seem to you good to oppress, to despise the work of your hands and favor the designs of the wicked? Have you eyes of flesh? Do you see as man sees?"¹¹ But his inquiries are never answered; instead, they are subverted and chastened. God speaks from the whirlwind and returns to Job a barrage of His own questions that expose Job's

10. This is why many wise people seem so "young at heart." Questioning makes the world feel new, which is partly why it is a youthful activity and so difficult to maintain as we grow old.

11. Job 10:3-4 (ESV).

limited power and understanding. While Job asks God whether He has the eyes of a man, God retorts by wondering whether Job has the eyes of God.

G. K. Chesterton famously wrote of that conclusion that the “riddles of God are more satisfying than the answers of man,” and there’s something to his point.¹² Certainly the riddles of the book of Job are more satisfying than most interpretations of it. God throws His questions about like lightning and thunder, with a sarcastic bite that is terrifying: “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements—surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone, when the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy?”¹³

The effect of God’s response is impossible to summarize. To simply say, as I did above, that God transcends our understanding reduces the point to banality and keeps us at a safe distance from its power. God’s questions are invitations to explore the gap between God and creation from within. When God asks, “Have you entered into the springs of the sea or walked in the recesses of the deep?” there is no doubt about the answer. But by using questions, God invites Job to look at creation as He does so Job can see the gap for himself. God’s questions are a form of saying “come and see,” rather than a didactic exposition on the nature of God’s uniqueness and incomprehensibility.

God’s questions help Job reimagine his world in order to more clearly see his place within it, a place that is surrounded by a host of unknowns. They take Job beyond staring into the void and keep him from losing himself amidst a sea of negations or denials.

12. G. K. Chesterton, *Introduction to the Book of Job*. Available at the American Chesterton Society (www.chesterton.org).

13. Job 38:4–7 (ESV).

Job is taken beyond simply loving the “negative spaces” for their own sake. Each time he is confronted by a question, he comes face-to-face with God. Job has not “entered into the springs of the sea,” but in recognizing this gap in his knowledge Job is confronted by the one who has. The questions themselves help Job understand himself and God more clearly—himself in the light of God—which is why Job will respond to God that he has now seen Him face-to-face.¹⁴

It is through imaginative deliberation that we are able to make sense of God’s questions. What does it mean for Job to “walk in the recesses of the deep”? Understanding the question depends upon conceiving its terms, which takes us beyond the naked confrontation with an abstract question and into the act of exploring and searching out. We imagine a world that both explains the question and might provide an answer—much like we do when looking for the right piece for our puzzle. We look at both our existing picture and the pieces before us and turn and test each possibility to discern how and where they belong. The question opens a “negative space” before us—but as we search out its meaning, the negative space both illuminates and clarifies everything else, helping us to see.

THE BEGINNING OF OUR QUESTIONS

Where do questions come from? That’s an odd way of putting it, I realize, but the impulse to inquire about the world is an odd phenomenon. We feel the presence of unknowns; we notice the negative spaces. And we set about exploring because we feel, however opaquely, that what we discover will be *good*. We believe that our finding will be better than for the unknown to remain unknown, that our apprehending the truth will somehow make us whole. The good and the true go together. As theologian

14. Job 42:5 (ESV).

Thomas Aquinas put it, “truth is something good, otherwise it would not be desirable; and good is something true, otherwise it would not be intelligible.” When we relate to the unknown, though, goodness goes before and beyond the truth. Our belief that the truth will be good *even when* we don’t know it moves us to search and inquire. Why would we search out the world if we did not think that what we find would be better for us? The love of goodness precedes our knowledge and stands beneath and within all of our exploring.

Because questioning is a form that our love takes, it is a practice that demands more of us than our intellects. In a passage that has become something of an anthem for younger Christians eager to embrace a questioning life, poet Rainer Maria Rilke writes:

You’re so young, so far from any beginning; I should like to ask you, dear sir, as well as I can, to show patience towards everything in your heart that has not been resolved and to try to cherish *the questions themselves*, like sealed rooms and books written in a language that is very foreign. Do not hunt for the answers just now—they cannot be given to you because you cannot live them. What matters is that you live everything. And you must now *live* the questions. One day perhaps you will gradually and imperceptibly live your way into the answer.¹⁵

Questioning well is not a task to be marked off in our plan for self-improvement. It has no formula to apply, no technique that can be mastered. It is a form of life, a practice that encompasses and entangles our hearts, minds, and bodies. Which means that we will live ourselves into the answers only if we live the questions well, orienting them around the good and the true that are

15. Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*, trans. Mark Harman (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 45–46.

revealed in the person of Jesus.

The sort of questions that we *can* live arise when we linger over our lives, when we patiently and deliberately peer into unknown corners with the boundless, childlike energy of those eager to discover what all shall be. They bubble up from our communities and the challenges we face to live well within them. They land in front of us, when societies move away from convictions they once took for granted. Marriage, monogamy, the need for two parents—these are no longer assumed as they once were. We take up our questions when we are taken up by them. The inquiries that we make reveal ourselves and our commitments, for as expressions of our loves they signify what we care most about.

This is why questions rise to the surface during seasons of suffering, even if the suffering is not our own. Pain renders the world's goodness *questionable*. It shocks us out of our complacent attachment to the blessings of comfort and prosperity. It reopens the universe to us, casting a shadow over our lives and the goodness we had wrongly "taken for granted." When we see the reason for our pain, when we are finally given the meaning—the satisfaction will be a joy beyond words, a peace beyond understanding. But until then, the questions that grip us demonstrate the nature of our hearts and our fundamental need for the purification of our desires.

It is a sign of the frailty of contemporary Christianity, rather than its strength, that we often do not begin to question until the megaphone of suffering has awakened us from our sleep. Until suffering comes upon us, the explorations that consume our hearts and our communities reflect the shallowness of our lives. We ask our questions forgetting that we lie under the shadow—under the sentence—of death. Our lack of courage keeps us free to live among distractions and trivialities and stay within the warm comfort of our own understanding. But our "freedom" is only

bondage, and these days our chains are only broken when death and pain's rude irruption turns our faces toward the unknown, undiscovered country all around us.

LEARNING TO LIVE THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

If I may add to the distinguished poet, I would suggest that we not only “live the questions” but consider which questions we should live. We may care about a question because it is ours, but that is simply to suffer from an (un)natural vanity. It is the starting place, but we cannot stay there. For if we are to enter into the questioning life, we might begin by questioning ourselves. Not all our inquiries deserve the time and attention we are inclined to give them. We ought not give ourselves the benefit of the doubt if we plan on doubting everything else. Both our lives and their questions must be placed on the altar, tested, and tried to discern whether they will last until the end of all things.

We can learn to ask better questions. We read old books to learn to ask the questions of those who have gone before us. And we read the *great* books because the questions they pose go into the center of things, even if the answers they put forward and the worlds they imagine are not always true. And we read Scripture to see the questions that arise from it, to learn to see the hidden spaces of the world from the vantage point of God and man.

Questioning well takes a whole life. We don't wake and master the practice in a morning. When I taught the occasional class at the Torrey Honors Institute—an educational environment that inculcates habits of excellent questioning—the difference between the freshmen and seniors was striking. Something happens in the hundreds of hours of practice that helps students ask better questions on the far side. Like any endeavor, inquiry has its own rules and norms. It's possible to inquire badly, just as it's possible

to play piano badly. And we learn those norms as we learn anything else: by studying, imitating, and practicing.

As someone who loves questioning, I am well acquainted with the internal defensiveness that arises at the suggestion that *my* questions are badly conceived, or badly timed, or asked with an impure intention. Surely we speak only of other people and their errant inquiries! But the possibility of questioning badly is what makes questioning so interesting, if perilous. In the long journey into understanding, a misstep really matters and a wrong turn might place us in danger. It is the sort of life-and-death stuff that every true adventure hangs on.

It is possible for our exploring to imperceptibly lead us toward destinations we never imagined at the outset. Our questions can quietly assume the tenor of demands, such that we would pull the Almighty down to us and compel Him to answer. Or we can treat them as bricks in our towers, as was built at Babel, as we scale the heights in comic acts of hubris. Searching the nooks and crannies is not for the faint of heart. “Guard your steps,” the author of Ecclesiastes writes, “when you go to the house of God.”¹⁶ We shouldn’t be so naive as to think it safe to explore things into which angels long to look.

We like to speak of those who “make the faith their own,” which has now become something of a rite of passage within the North American church. Such a process sometimes involves leaving—imaginatively, at least—our fathers’ house and exploring paths that we suspect might lead to a more flourishing environment. And sometimes such explorations actually do take us in new and surprising directions. For we do not all start with the truth. Nor do all of us end with it.

But to begin that journey is to play the prodigal. Raising ques-

16. Ecclesiastes 5:1 (ESV).

tions about our communities' presuppositions or their most cherished beliefs is not necessarily transgressive, but it can certainly feel that way.¹⁷ It is commendable to search out and explore the doctrine of the Trinity, to come up to the brink of our own understanding. But those around us who have never been taken up by questions may struggle to distinguish between questioning and denial, making them react to our inquiries with suspicion and fear. The life of exploring is a different sort of life, and it takes everyone a little time to get used to. In waking to the strangeness of the world, many of us become strangers in our own homes.

But home is where we start and where we shall someday return. The path between has been marked out for us by a Savior who became the prodigal from heaven, journeying into the far country to bring us home with Him. He is both the end of our exploring and its liberating transformation. It is Jesus who has already profaned the mysteries of God by making the unknown at the center known to us: he who has seen Jesus has seen the Father. "Although [wisdom] is actually our homeland," St. Augustine once said, "it has also made itself the road to our homeland."¹⁸ The beginning of questioning well is to *seek to question well*, which may mean laying down our questions and allowing them to be reshaped and reformed by the answers given us by God. For if Christianity is true, then the end of our exploring will be joy and goodness and life. But the path leads down the *via Dolorosa* and up toward Golgotha, as we take up our cross and follow the One who went ahead.

17. And sometimes, it is. There is a time and a place for everything and a necessary limit on our questioning that we should respect.

18. Augustine and R. P. H. Green, *On Christian Teaching* (Oxford, England; New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 13.