

Questions are higher-level acts

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What is a question? Frege took it to be a kind of request and appealed to sentence or yes-no questions to argue for a version of the dichotomy between forceful subjective acts such as asserting or requesting and their propositional contents, which he called “thoughts”:

The answer “yes” says the same as an indicative sentence, for in it the thought that was already completely contained in the interrogative sentence is laid down as true. So a sentence question can be formed from every indicative sentence. [...] An interrogative sentence and an indicative one contain the same thought; but the indicative contains something else as well, namely, the assertion. The interrogative sentence contains something more too, namely a request. Therefore two things must be distinguished in an indicative sentence: the content which it has in common with the corresponding sentence-question, and the assertion. (Frege 1956: 293–94)

With a sentence question a subject requests a yes-no response to the content it has put forward; through a yes-answer it is “laid down as true” and thus asserted. It seems obvious then that the proposition or thought itself must be forceless and non-committal since it can be put forward without commitment in the question, while assertion requires an additional act.

This ‘Frege point’ (Geach 1965) can also be made about logical compounds such as conditionals and about fictional contexts, where propositions are also put forward without commitment to them – indeed it is more customarily associated with those contexts. It seems to show that forceful acts such as questions and assertions are fundamentally different from their forceless propositional contents and that they have the structure $F(p)$: $?(p)$, respectively $AS(p)$.

This argument has been very influential and may seem compelling, but I will argue that it is mistaken. A simple, but powerful counterargument derives from another feature commonly thought to be essential to propositions: that they are truth-value bearers. Only something that takes a position regarding how things are and is in that sense forceful and committal could fail or succeed in representing them as they are and thus be true or false (Hanks 2015). But how can this be reconciled with the fact that a question does not take a stand regarding how things are and may share content with an assertion?

I propose to reconcile it by adopting the view that questions are higher-level acts which operate on forceful acts like assertions themselves rather than on something supposedly forceless. Let us turn the traditional view of the relation between propositions and forceful acts on its head. A proposition is not a forceless content to which force must be added through a separate act. Rather a forceful act like an assertion becomes a proposition through the higher-level act of questioning which suspends commitment to it. It is merely put forward for consideration – as suggested by the etymology of “proposition”. According to this proposal, a (theoretical) question contains an assertion and is therefore more than an assertion, similarly to how it has been argued regarding other Frege point contexts such as logical (Hanks 2019) or fictional contexts (Dummett 1973) that they contain more than straight-out assertion contexts. I believe these latter contexts also contain higher-level acts, acts like conditionalizing or joking, but don’t have the space to justify this claim here (but see Schmitz forthcoming and Recanati forthcoming).

An argument for the higher-level act account is that a question must contain something that marks it as assertoric (or directive) because it must be marked as a theoretical or practical question. Are we asking whether the door is closed, or where, when, how and why it is closed? Or are we asking whether to close it, or where, when, how and why to close it? Questions can’t only be asked with sentences like (1), but also with sentences like (2):

- | | |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------|
| (1) The door is closed? – Yes | ? AS (dC) – AS (dC) |
| (2) Close the door? – Yes | ? DIR (dC) – DIR (dC) |

By uttering it with a rising question intonation, any direction can be turned into a practical question and any assertion can be turned into a theoretical question. So (1) and (2) are marked as assertoric, respectively directive, through the indicative, respectively imperative mood and as interrogative through intonation. And while an affirmative answer to a theoretical yes-no question is tantamount to an assertion, an affirmative answer to a practical yes-no question is tantamount to a direction.

“Yes” is sometimes characterized as a “prosentence” which refers anaphorically to an an-

tecedent – and we might accordingly also speak of “proacts”. The point now is simply that just like an anaphoric pronoun like “he” can only refer to different people on different occasions of use because its antecedents refer to different people, “yes” can only express affirmation of an assertion rather than a direction because the antecedent sentence or act is marked as assertoric or directive, that is, contains a force indicator. I therefore propose that the structure of theoretical vs. practical questions is as above, with “?” as a higher-level force indicator operating on the lower-level force indicators “AS” and “DIR”.

A corresponding argument can be made for wh-questions. For example, one might answer “Paris” in response both to a question like “Where are we?” and to one like “Where to go for the weekend?”, expressing an assertion in the first case and a direction in the second. How is this possible? Again there must be something in these questions that marks them as theoretical or practical, assertoric or directive.

If this is right, the proposition must already be marked as assertoric (directive), as proposed above. That is, in “?(p)”, “p” must already contain a force indicator. In contrast, “yes” which Frege implicitly treats as an indicator of assertoric force, is rather used for affirming, agreeing with or accepting acts of all forces.

What is going on? While Frege occasionally discusses non-assertoric acts and sentences, he only includes assertoric, indicative sentences in his logical notation. So as a matter of notational economy, he does not need a sign for the indicative mood. Instead all sentences of his *Begriffsschrift* are tacitly understood as being in the indicative mood. However, this invites taking the indicative for granted, not explaining its meaning at all, and using the notion of assertion to mark contrasts other than that between assertoric and directive acts and sentences – for example that between interrogative vs. non-interrogative, fictional vs. serious, or logical vs. standalone contexts. So this is what is going on. Assertoric force proper is taken for granted and conflated with these other varieties of force, when, for example, it is concluded from the fact that something is a question, an antecedent or a joke, that it could not be assertoric or directive.

If we understand the notion of assertion and a corresponding symbol like Frege’s judgement stroke in the way suggested by the Frege point, it can only indicate the *absence of a higher-level act*. In effect, it says something like “I am not merely asking a question, nor is this an antecedent, a joke etc..” But such a sign is redundant because it can’t say more than the actual absence of a higher-level act. Therefore “AS(p)” is redundant. What the Fregean wants to express through a special sign is ordinarily simply expressed by *removing the marker of the higher-level act*. For the yes-response to the sentence question to count as an assertion (direction) it is not only essential that it be affirmative, but that the interrogative marker be removed. (Note that we often give an affirmative response to a question like (1) by saying things

like “The door is closed.” or “Yes, the door is closed.” and contrast this with cases where we say “Yes?” in response to an assertion (direction) to express doubt rather than agreement.) Analogously, one commits to an antecedent by repeating it, while removing the conditional marker. So we don’t need a judgement stroke, but only markers for assertoric vs. directive force and the other higher-level acts, including markers of interrogative force.

But what do assertoric, directive and interrogative force indicators mean? That’s the final question we must answer to understand questions. I can only sketch the answer here. I propose to overcome the force-content dichotomy by ascribing content to force indicators. By using an assertoric vs. a directive force indicator, a subject presents the kind of position it takes up towards the reality of a state of affairs or relation like closing the door. An assertoric act presents its subject as occupying a position of knowing what is the case, a directive act as knowing what to do. An interrogative act indicates a position of wondering – either a position of wondering what is the case that seeks theoretical knowledge, or of wondering what to do that seeks practical knowledge. In the new context created by the higher-level act of questioning, the assertoric or directive act therefore does not anymore indicate a position of knowledge that the subject occupies or lays claim to, but one it is seeking.

This also explains the sense in which a question requests or even demands an answer: because wondering is a position that inherently strives for one. But this does not mean that questions are requests in the sense that they would belong to the category of directions, because, as we have seen, they are only intelligible as higher-level operations on either directions or assertions. Finally, that questions are higher-level on reflection is also already evident from the fact that they have answers and determine answerhood conditions, while these answers themselves have either truth or fulfilment conditions.

References

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