

Philosophy 341 - Contemporary Moral Issues
Good Questions
(in the context of ethical inquiry)

After reading and thinking about a philosophical subject, you should reach some stage of puzzlement. To move beyond that, we need to ask questions of the author and discuss the topic with others. The goal of asking questions is to try to isolate your puzzlement. What are you confused about? What are you frustrated or angry about? Why? What do you *think* the text is saying? Why aren't you sure? What do you find confusing about what you think the text is saying?

However, there are range of possible questions you might have, and, however interesting they all might be, only some of them are going to directly aid us in the philosophical project. Below I've tried to isolate some of the question types we are primarily interested in by contrasting them with some question types that are less relevant to us when attempting to gain philosophical clarity.

Question	Type of Question
<i>Not the right type of question</i>	
What did people think about X in the 1800s?	Historical
Is doing X legal?	Legal
Do most people believe X?	Sociological
What is the mechanism that explains why I believe X?*	Psychological
<i>The right types of question</i>	
The author said that X. What do they mean by this?	Clarificatory
The author says X is true. What are the reasons to believe this?	Evaluative
The author says X is true, but then wouldn't that also mean Y is true?	Exploratory

Please keep the following in mind: you are asking your question in the context of an ongoing dialogue you are having with me and your fellow classmates. In light of that, it's essential that you express your question in such a way that furthers this dialogue. One way of thinking about this task is to present your question as if the person you're talking to has not themselves done the relevant reading. So, when asking your question, don't *only* tell us what the author said, but explain the context in which they said it. Plausibly, the author thinks what they wrote is perfectly clear and perfectly well defended, so explain why it is that you're confused, or what you think has gone unsaid by the author. Finally, explain why you think your question is interesting and important to address. What hangs on answering this question?

***This type of question is in a bit of a gray area. On the one hand, it is an empirical question, not a philosophical question. On the other hand, philosophical inquiry often begins by questioning why we believe what we believe. What's key is that we move from the psychological investigation to the philosophical investigation, i.e., from asking why we do in fact believe something to asking whether there are good reasons to believe that thing.*