

“There is no such thing as a neutral question.” Discuss this statement with reference to two areas of knowledge.

Neutral, in contemporary language, has several widely accepted definitions. Generally, the word neutral defines something that is non-tendentious, or something with no ulterior motive, or second agenda. Whilst there are obviously questions with clear bias and agendas, at first glance, questions like “Do you want fries with that?” might seem entirely devoid of bias or motive. However, it is possible that perhaps the employee needs to attain some sort of quota to get a raise, or is trying to best his colleague in seeing who can sell the most, and therefore the neutrality of this question is put into doubt. Lack of neutrality is not always harmful, but how does one know if there is any such thing as a neutral question? And, if there is, will that question end up being an innocuous, inoffensive type of question that if anything confirms our inability to remain unbiased in all but the most inconsequential of settings? Using the natural sciences as an area of knowledge, we can contrast various types of questions found in this topic in order to determine the existence of neutral questions. Through using language as a way of knowing, we can also observe the construction of the question, the syntax and choice of words to determine whether there is some bias within the question. Further, using ethics as an area of knowledge, in which we determine on a rational but also emotional basis the likelihood of a question being biased, is another effective way of knowing whether the questions being asked are neutral. Ethics are based on morality and reason, neither of which are neutral and vary from person to person. Despite these examples being non-exhaustive, they will go a long way to answering whether there is such a thing as a neutral question.

Using mathematics and the natural sciences as areas of knowledge, we will aim to determine whether or not a neutral question does in fact exist. When one initially considers the statement “There is no such thing as a neutral question”, their immediate response is to think of any one question that could contradict this statement. This natural instinct usually leads individuals to the study of Mathematics. Mathematics is the manipulation of numbers and formulas, with only one correct answer. Following the same process of thought, this would imply that all mathematical questions are neutral, as none rely on the opinion of the individual, thus disputing the non-existence of neutral questions - how can there be motive, and thus bias, in questions relating to natural truths? However, many students when taught about imaginary numbers really questioned if the answer is correct at all, considering that the pathway used to obtain that solution contained things that are not actually real, such as the square root of  $-1$ . In addition, in biology we look at the complexity of a cell and its multiple functions. When asking “What is a cell?”

there are various widely accepted definitions, but they are all relatively similar – the smallest structural and functional unit of an organism<sup>1</sup>. In the asking of this question, there are no ulterior motives, simply a test or a quest of knowledge. This could be attributed to the fact that the answer to this question, does not lie in an individual's perception of it. Opinions in terms of individual knowledge do not play a role in defining a cell. However, when studying cells, medical stem cell research and its usage is often examined. When asking "Is the use of stem cells to alter embryos justifiable?" there is no one correct answer<sup>2</sup>. The answer to this question lies in the individual's own moral compass. What that person considers ethical, is entirely based on their own experiences, upbringing and environment.

Ethics is an intriguing one to examine because it does not inherently seem to relate to the idea of neutrality, as ethics is simply the means by which we use moral judgments to reach the most objective conclusions to situations. But morality is extremely relative, and therefore can rarely be neutral. Making moral value-judgments depends on our ability to see opposing points of view and requires a nuanced but critical and logical way of thinking to achieve a balanced opinion. However, our own critical abilities are shaped by our own experiences, and so are inevitably biased, making the process of ethical reasoning distinctly non-neutral. Socrates<sup>3</sup> was said to have sharpened his own internal reasoning by conversing with general members of the public and asking them questions that were considered to be an affront to general beliefs at the time. It would be trivial to cite any specific ones because this practice only began with him and we have an abundance of more topical questions we can engage with. In contemporary times it has become known as the "Socratic method" to engage in such a practice. These questions would be demonstrably non-neutral because their purpose is to elicit a contrarian - or at least critical - response. Questions are designed to elicit these kinds of responses: they all have a purpose, which can be interpreted as a lack of neutrality. Even the most innocuous of small talk, has the 'purpose' of avoiding awkwardness. But in ethics, any question is likely to be promoting one point of view to the detriment of another, because it is coming from someone who, like his opponent, has a predisposition to think a certain way because of his individual upbringing and experiences. In ethics there is never a universally neutral answer, and so neither is there a universally neutral question, as it will always betray the moral values of

<sup>1</sup>"Cell." *Dictionary*. N.p., n.d. Web. 8 Jan. 2015.

<<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/cell>>.

<sup>2</sup>"The Ethics of Stem Cells." *Wellcome*. N.p., n.d. Web. 12 Jan. 2015.

<<http://www.wellcome.ac.uk/About-us/Policy/Spotlight-issues/Human-Fertilisation-and-Embryology-Act/Stem-cell-basics/WTD040077.htm>>

<sup>3</sup>"Socrates." *Ancient Greece*. N.p., n.d. Web. 11 Jan. 2015.

<<http://www.ancientgreece.com/s/People/Socrates/>>.

the person asking it. "Don't you think abortion is immoral?" is an obviously simplistic example but one can see from the asker's obvious own perception (don't you?) and the qualifying language at the end ("immoral") that this particular question is not neutral. In fact, the inference is that if you do not agree with the question, you could be accused of being immoral yourself. Ethics demonstrate that areas of knowledge which rely on an individual's perception and moral intuition cannot contain any sort of neutrality. A lack of universally accepted values means that ethical questions will often only be neutral to the person asking it them.

There are some who might claim that ethics are based on innate values that are universal. They believe right and wrong was determined by the universe before we were born and that ethics, like other areas of knowledge, have neutral, unbiased, therefore 'correct' answers. And so, if we accept this to be true, it is conceivable that if there are neutral answers, there can probably be neutral questions. Questions which are genuine searches for a universal ethical truth are difficult to consider as biased. Or, if the question has a purpose to direct its answerer towards this universal truth, it is uncertain whether it can be considered anything but unbiased and neutral. To use the example from the last paragraph, "Don't you think abortion is immoral?" if based on some universal moral truth that abortion is immoral, cannot be anything but neutral if it is directing one towards said truth. Because reason plays such an important part as a way of knowing in ethics, we would presume that our reason, if based on universal truth, would also be neutral to these truths. However conflating the idea of correctness and neutrality is potentially problematic. It might make neutrality possible, but does not ensure it. This line of reasoning takes us back to questioning whether this correctness is even possible in ethics. And once this is put into doubt, the same biased perceptions that lead to ethics itself being determined by our bias, will also plausibly affect our neutrality in reasoning. This finally leads us towards the conclusion of the previous paragraph, that neutrality in ethics is unlikely, if not impossible.

Using reason in everyday life, we can determine that though there are instances where a question should be neutral, it is effectively impossible to ensure that it is kept so. But many of these biased questions are often welcomed or treated indifferently, by those receiving them, responding thankfully to the pleasant stranger in the slow elevator because, you too, perceived the awkwardness they felt. Or, not stopping to consider the nature of the question "do you want fries with that?" because whatever motive they may have is irrelevant to you, regardless of your answer. But in ethics the lack of neutrality can be extremely consequential when powerful authorities make ethical judgments that negatively affect certain

groups. Pertinent examples are Ford Motors' decision not to recall the defective 1977 Pinto<sup>4</sup> ("Should we recall a car that has a life-threatening defect?") or numerous US States' decision to limit abortion rights for women ("Should our religious views trump their reproductive rights?"). Though negative implications of bias depend on the area of knowledge the bias is found in, it is fair to say that there is a lack of neutrality in nearly every question. Math however may promote the opposite point of view, that in some areas of knowledge it is very possible to have neutrality in a question, but only if it has a neutral or universal answer, implying that neutral questions can only exist if they are directed towards a universal - or neutral - answer. Unless the answer to the question is either entirely inconsequential or universally true, it is difficult to imagine a lack of motive present in the question itself and, thus, neutrality is unlikely. Overall, many factors come into play with the neutrality of a question. Context, structure, diction, tone, intention and interpretation all play important roles in determining whether or not neutral questions do in fact exist. It can be concluded that the vast majority of questions are not neutral, whether the person being questioned knows it or not. But certain areas of knowledge display circumstances where neutral questions are present. There is therefore, such thing as a neutral question.

#### Bibliography

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<sup>4</sup>"The Ford Pinto Case." *Ford Pinto Ethics*. N.p., n.d. Web. 11 Jan. 2015. <<http://fordpintoethics.webs.com/>>.