On questions in standard pragma-dialectics

Sobre las cuestiones en pragma-dialéctica estándar

Fernando Leal
fernando.leal@academicos.udg.mx
Departamento de Estudios en Educación
Universidad de Guadalajara

Abstract: The purpose of the paper is to add the concept of a question to standard pragma-dialectics in such a way that the hitherto basic concept of a standpoint can be defined through it. Consequently, the concept of a question becomes the basic concept of standard pragma-dialectics. Being basic, the concept of a question cannot be defined. However, a few things can be said to clarify the concept itself. Among the most important properties of questions as they play a role in argumentation the following should be mentioned: discussions are always triggered by questions; no question stands alone but is always part of a network of questions; there is always a degree of specificity of a question which is crucial to the discussion; questions are never fully verbalizable; background information is based on the specificity of questions. These properties seem to depend on questions being correctly conceptualized as abstract objects—and thus different from requests, which are speech acts.

Keywords: standard pragma-dialectics; basic concept; question; request; standpoint; question specificity; background information; abstract object.

Resumen: El propósito del artículo es añadir el concepto de cuestión a la pragma-dialéctica estándar de forma tal que el concepto, hasta ahora básico, de punto de vista pueda ser definido mediante aquél. Con ello el concepto de cuestión se vuelve el concepto básico de la pragma-dialéctica estándar. Siendo básico, el concepto de cuestión no puede definirse. Sin embargo, sobre él se pueden decir algunas cosas que ayuden a aclarar el concepto mismo. Entre las propiedades más importantes de las cuestiones que juegan un papel en la argumentación hay que mencionar las siguientes: las discusiones arrancan siempre de cuestiones; ninguna cuestión subsiste sola sino que es siempre parte de una red de cuestiones; hay siempre un grado de especificidad para cada cuestión, la cual es crucial para la discusión; las cuestiones no se dejan nunca verbalizar por completo; el concepto de información de fondo se basa en la especificidad de las cuestiones. Estas propiedades parecen depender de que las cuestiones se conceptualicen correctamente como objetos abstractos, siendo entonces necesario que se las distinga de las preguntas como actos de habla.

Palabras clave: pragma-dialéctica estándar; concepto básico; cuestión; pregunta; punto de vista; especificidad de la cuestión; información de fondo; objeto abstracto.

Leal, F. (2021). On questions in standard pragma-dialectics
Quadripartita Ratio: Revista de Retórica y Argumentación, **6**(11), 41-54. ISSN:
2448-6485

The starting point of this paper is standard pragma-dialectics, a well-known theory of argumentation, whose basic construct is the ideal model of critical discussion, itself based on the twin concepts of *standpoint and difference of opinion*.[1] I here propose to add a third one, namely the concept of a *question*. In three earlier papers (Leal 2019, 2020a, 2020b), I discussed questions in relation to both the twin concepts and the model of critical discussion. This fourth paper focuses on the concept of question itself as the basic concept of pragma-dialectics and explores some of its attributes.

Intriguingly enough, the concept of a question has been part and parcel of the pragma-dialectical approach from the very beginning, yet it has remained largely implicit as the theory was developed. Consider the following passage taken from the first English exposition of standard pragma-dialectics:

> Suppose three people hear someone on television propound the view that women have a logic of their own; suppose also that the three people, having heard this view propounded, **embark upon a (serious) discussion of the question 'Have women a logic of their own?'** One of them then says 'In my opinion it is true that women have a logic of their own', the second says 'In my opinion it is not true that women have a logic of their own', and the third says 'I do not know whether or not it is true that women have a logic of their own'. [van Eemeren and Grootendorst 1983, p. 78; bold print added]

The reader will recognize in the three positions described here, respectively, the affirmative answer to the question that triggers the discussion (call it Yes), the negative answer (call it No), and an expression of noncommittal doubt (call it Maybe). The question has thus brought three differences of opinion to the surface, which may be represented as in Table 1 on the next page.[2]

This is all standard pragma-dialectics: a mixed difference of opinion involves two parties, each one of whom upholds a standpoint; a non-mixed one involves one party which upholds a standpoint and another party which does not, resting content with voicing a noncommittal position. The only thing that is added to the standard model is precisely the perspective of a triggering *question* which was raised by someone on television. It is not necessary that the characters, real or fictional, who raised the question on television actually *asked* a question. It suffices that they *said* something that was insofar controversial that it raised the question which in its turn triggered the discussion of the viewers.

The distinction just mentioned between asking and raising a question is common in English and other languages. People can *ask* questions in the strong sense of the word, i.e. *request* for a piece of information that they need but don't have at the moment, by using either interrogative sentences or a variety of other verbal means ('please tell me

---

[1] The phrase 'standard pragma-dialectics' has been coined by way of contrast with 'extended pragma-dialectics', which includes rhetorical aspects (van Eemeren 2010). The important but rather undertheorized notion of a 'rhetorical question', can only be discussed within extended pragma-dialectics, so I shall not consider it in this paper.

[2] There is, of course, a fourth difference of opinion involving, at the same time, the three parties in the above example. This fact points to the concept of a *trilogue* and, more generally, of a *polylogue* (Kerbrat-Orecchioni 2004). A trilogue is a discussion in which all three parties are engaged in discussion at the same time. In a trilogical situation, there are seven combinations of possible diagreements: Yes-No-Maybe (as in the example), Yes-Yes-Maybe, No-No-Maybe, Yes-Maybe-Maybe, No-Maybe-Maybe, Yes-Yes-No, and No-No-Yes. The most famous discussion which has the Yes-No-Maybe arrangement is Galileo's 1632 *Dialogue concerning the two chief world systems* (see Finocchiaro 1980), in which there is a mixed difference of opinion between Salviati, who defends the Copernican world system, and Simplicio, who attacks it, whereas the younger Sagredo is undecided and thus has a non-mixed difference of opinion with both Salviati and Simplicio. For simplicity's sake, standard pragma-dialectics is predicated upon dilogical situations (two parties in disagreement), but it can be adapted to any polylogical situation (Lewiński & Aakhus 2014).

Leal, F. (2021). On questions in standard pragma-dialectics
Quadripartita Ratio: Revista de Retórica y Argumentación, **6**(11), 41-54. ISSN:
2448-6485

Tabla 1. Diferencias de opinión en un ejemplo de trílogo

Difference of opinion		Q: Have women a logic of their own?		
		Yes	*No*	*Maybe*
Q: Have women a logic of their own?	*Yes*	–		
	No	Mixed	–	
	Maybe	Non-mixed	Non-mixed	–

whether…', 'I wonder why…', and so on).[3] Yet questions are *raised* by things said or done by people in the course of human interactions. If, for whatever reason, we don't wish to *name* the person who by word or deed raises a question, we can also use an impersonal expression and just say that the question *arises*. These and other expressions, both in English and in other languages, are perfectly ordinary, and we want to avail ourselves of this lexically marked distinction in order to make clear that no critical discussion can take place unless a question *arises*, even if no one in the situation actually *asks* the question.

Now, the basic concept in standard pragma-dialectics has so far been that of a *standpoint* (van Eemeren & Grootendorst 1983, p. 7; 2004, p. 2; van Eemeren & Snoeck Henkemans 2017, pp. 1-3). To call it basic implies that it cannot be defined. All other concepts in pragma-dialectics presuppose it and are defined by means of it. In the modified theory I am working towards, however, it is possible and appropriate to define a standpoint. According to such a definition, a standpoint is *an answer offered by someone to a question that has arisen in a communicative situation*. We may well want to modify this definition at some point, but let it stand for the

time being. The concept of a question is thus the basic one in what we may call *erotetic pragma-dialectics* (just a fancy phrase for pragma-dialectics plus the concept of a question). Although the concept of a question, being basic, cannot be defined here, a few things can nonetheless be said about it that may improve the reader's understanding. To say these things is the purpose of the present paper.

Before we start, I want to insist that this paper does not in any way give, nor does it aspire to give, a definition of the concept of question. This concept, I repeat, is basic and cannot be defined within erotetic pragma-dialectics. Readers should look at this paper as a gentle introduction to the concept of a question by way of reminding them of things that they already know at some level, but upon which they perhaps have not quite reflected yet.[4]

1. Questions as triggers

Let us first ask ourselves what triggers a discussion. Very often, somebody says something absolutely outrageous, so people immediately react by contradicting the speaker and a discussion starts. This might induce us to think that it is the outrageous *statement* that triggered the ensuing discussion. But think for a moment. The said statement is

---

3 A few remarks on the terminology I use in this paper might be advisable: (1) *asking a question* is equivalent to *making a request*, (2) if someone *asks* a question, she also thereby *raises* that question, but (3) somebody may raise a question *without* actually asking one, i.e. without making a request.

4 As always in language, the word 'question' has several meanings, and I do not pretend that the meaning I am exploring here is the only one. However, this is the meaning that I intend for the purpose of inserting the concept of a question in the body of theory of standard pragma-dialectics.

outrageous precisely because what it says is against what we all assumed was out of the question or unquestionable. By saying what she said, however, the speaker *did* question it. She did not question it by *asking* the corresponding question but rather by asserting something that she knew nobody would accept.[5]

The speaker's assertion shattered the ground, rocked the boat, pulled the rug from under our feet—and the reaction was immediate and strong. However, what gave the statement its force was the fact that through it a question was raised. In fact, the reaction was strong *because* the question was raised, for it had been considered settled at that point and in that company.

A question raised is the exact opposite of a question settled. And unsettling a settled question is one of the most provoking things someone can do in human communication. By dint of giving the question an answer that goes against the grain, against the stream, against the current, the speaker has renewed the question, and so a discussion has become unavoidable. But mark: the discussion that has become unavoidable has not been triggered by the statement that unsettled the question, but by the question itself, by the fact that an answer to it was felt to be already agreed upon until the speaker brought the question as such back to life. The discussion is thus not about the statement itself but about what the right answer to the question is. The statement itself has interest for the discussion only insofar as it is seen to be the wrong answer. This is the first thing that I want to say about questions—they have the unique property of triggering a discussion.

2. Questions distinguished from requests

For reasons which will be explained presently, from now on questions, in the theoretical sense intended,

shall be printed in small capitals. Thus, consider the following expressions:

(1) THE QUESTION OF FREE TRADE
THE TARIFF QUESTION
THE QUESTION OF RACE
THE JEWISH QUESTION
THE CHINA QUESTION

There is in common parlance an endless supply of such expressions, and they all have certain features in common. One is that they correspond to public controversies. People get agitated, excited, even belligerent about them. It is, however, quite likely that, if you ask people what the 'question' is, you will get not only different answers but answers to different questions.[6] This is not a pun but rather a way of introducing an important distinction. Contrast now the following expressions:

(2) Should Congress confirm the USMCA?
Are there any circumstances under which the abolition of import taxes may harm the overall economy?
Is it morally right to accept that some people will be losers if tariffs are completely abolished?
Will the GDP grow in all open economies?
Was Trump right to withdraw from the Trans-Pacific Partnership initiative?

These are particular requests for information that *may* be performed, in the appropriate situation, by somebody who is trying to make explicit what worries her when she thinks about THE QUESTION OF FREE TRADE. Some of the expressions in (2) may be clearer, more precise, more relevant, more interesting, than others in the same list, depending on context and audience, but the point here is that they all are, shall we say, more down to earth than THE

---

5 The triggering statement does not have to be outrageous, of course, it suffices that it is not self-evident for the audience.

6 Van Inwagen (2008, p. 327): "Perhaps we should begin with this question: What is the 'problem of free will'? Like those other great 'problem' phrases of which philosophers are so fond—'the mind-body problem,' 'the problem of universals,' 'the problem of evil'—this phrase has no clear referent."

Leal, F. (2021). On questions in standard pragma-dialectics
Quadripartita Ratio: Revista de Retórica y Argumentación, **6**(11), 41-54. ISSN:
2448-6485

QUESTION OF FREE TRADE. Discussion triggered by the latter expression will, in the ordinary course of things, be more chaotic and less productive than discussions triggered by the expressions in (2). For the time being, however, the important thing is that the expressions in (2) can, in the appropriate context, play the role of illocutionary acts of a particular kind, what we usually call *requests* for information. As opposed to this, the expressions in (1) cannot play that role. Now, the concept that I consider basic to erotetic pragma-dialectics is the concept of a question, not the concept of a request. A request may give voice to a question, by asking it; but requests belong to a different category than do questions. (On the role of requests in the pragma-dialectical model of critical discussion, see Leal 2020b.)

In this paper I shall use ordinary print when I am dealing with requests, but from now on I shall highlight a question by means of small capitals, as indeed I already have in (1) above. This is a convention introduced in linguistics to refer to lexemes, which is the abstract aspect of a word.[7] The distinction between a question and a request is equally a matter of abstraction. Questions are abstract objects; and they are related to requests in that a request consists of a speaker asking a question in a particular situation.[8] When the speaker does not ask a question but says something that makes the question arise, she is not performing the speech act of requesting, but she is nonetheless raising the question and her interlocutor may pick it up and say, in her turn, something in response to it. When that happens, the question becomes dialectically active and may even induce the uttering of standpoints, the emergence of differences of opinion, and the start of a discussion or a subdiscussion.

3. Questions always part of a network

As long as nobody *asks* one of the questions in list (2) or says something that makes it *arise* in a given situation, those questions are dialectically inert; but as soon as they become alive, they will sooner or later lead to other questions.

This is so, because any question is part of a more or less complicated *network* of questions, many of which are bound to arise as soon as the discussion gets some traction. Questions are always related to other questions. Whether these other questions get asked or arise during the discussion, and which questions actually do, is another matter, which depends on the ability and knowledge of the discussants, on the time at their disposal, on the emotions that emerge in the situation, and on other factors (for examples, see Leal 2019).

Questions are nonetheless abstract objects, and the interrelationship of questions within a network is an aspect of their being abstract objects. Numbers, which are the first abstract objects to be discovered in Western thought, are not alone, either; each one of them has at least a successor, they can be added to each other, and so on. Something similar is true of questions: they presuppose other questions or are presupposed by them, a question can be divided into sub-questions, and so on. These interrelationships between questions are real, even if, in a given discussion, only a few of them get activated by or during the discussion.

4. Relative specificity of questions

The next thing I want to say is a bit difficult, because it involves the unavoidable fact that when a question is verbalized, many things are usually assumed which belong to the question. Before going on, please note that a question can be verbalized at

---

7 The said convention appeared for the first time in a textbook on morphology (Matthews 1974). We can say that a word can be pronounced, stressed, divided into root and affixes, and so on; and we can also say of a word, e.g. a noun, that it can be combined with an article to form a noun phrase; but none of these things can be said of a lexeme, which is the purely conceptual content of a word, free from all phonological or syntactic attributes. The lexicon of a language contains lexemes, not words. Lexemes are among the various abstract objects studied in linguistics.

8 Sharp readers might make the following objection: if somebody, in an appropriate situation, utters sentences such as those in (2), she is not asking a *question* in the sense of (1), for the sentences in (2) are far more specific than any of the expressions in (1). This is correct, but I beg such readers to be patient, for I shall come back to the point raised in the following.

Leal, F. (2021). On questions in standard pragma-dialectics
Quadripartita Ratio: Revista de Retórica y Argumentación, **6**(11), 41-54. ISSN:
2448-6485

two different levels. On the one hand, the illocutionary act of asking a question obviously verbalizes it, gives it a certain expression by means of a sequence of words. A request on THE QUESTION OF FREE TRADE can be realized by means of several locutionary acts, for instance:

(3) Why is free trade a good thing for the country at this point in time?
   I wonder whether there is a reason to prefer free trade for the country now.
   Perhaps you could tell me whether opening the economy is good for us right now.
   I don't quite get the causal chain leading from the abolition of tariffs to an improvement of our GDP today.
   Explain the benefits of an open economy in the current situation.

There are interesting variations in the above formulations. First of all, there is a difference in syntactic form. As is well known, in order to perform an illocutionary act, here the act of requesting information, we can use various locutionary forms, such as an interrogative sentence or an imperative one, as in the first and last sentences in (3). Secondly, the lexical *content* of the sentences can be considered synonymous only insofar as we accept certain equivalences or quasi-equivalences, namely:

(4) free trade ≈ opening the economy ≈ the abolition of tariffs ≈ an open economy
   why ≈ reason ≈ causal chain
   good thing ≈ preferable ≈ good ≈ improvement benefits
   the country us ≈ our GDP
   the country at this point in time ≈ the country now ≈ us right now ≈ our GDP today ≈ the current situation

Now, the difficulty resides in the fact that, when there is need to refer to the questions that are verbalized by a speech act, all one has is words; and sometimes the words we use in a request will be similar or even identical to the words used to re-

fer to the question. This is not an unusual situation when we use linguistic means to refer to linguistic means. The most famous instance is Tarski's

$$\text{`}p\text{' is true if and only if } p.$$

Yet in order to keep separate the two levels, I propose to refer to questions either by generic expressions of the sort exemplified in (1) or by indirect interrogative sentences in small capitals, with or without the phrase 'the question'. Thus, the questions corresponding to the requests in (2) would be:

(5) THE QUESTION WHETHER CONGRESS SHOULD CONFIRM THE USMCA
   THE QUESTION WHETHER THERE ARE ANY CIRCUMSTANCES IN WHICH THE ABOLITION OF IMPORT TAXES MAY HARM THE OVERALL ECONOMY
   THE QUESTION WHETHER IT IS MORALLY RIGHT TO ACCEPT THAT SOME PEOPLE WILL BE LOSERS IF TARIFFS ARE COMPLETELY ABOLISHED
   THE QUESTION WHETHER THE GDP WILL GROW IN ALL OPEN ECONOMIES?
   THE QUESTION WHETHER TRUMP WAS RIGHT TO WITHDRAW FROM THE TRANS-PACIFIC PARTNERSHIP INITIATIVE

All these questions may be said to be specifications of a generic question, namely, THE QUESTION OF FREE TRADE. The corresponding requests, i.e. the concrete, situated acts of asking, can be more or less *particularized*, according to how specific the question is which they verbalize.[9]

---

9 The adjective 'particularized' originates from Collingwood (1939, pp. 31-32): "It must be understood that question and answer, as I [conceive] them, [are] strictly correlative. A proposition [is] not an answer, or at any rate could not be the right answer, to any question which might have been answered otherwise. A highly detailed and particularized proposition must be the answer, not to a vague and generalized question, but to a question as detailed and particularized as itself. For example, if my car will not go, I may spend an hour searching for the cause of its failure. If, during this hour, I take out number one plug, lay it on the engine,

Leal, F. (2021). On questions in standard pragma-dialectics
Quadripartita Ratio: Revista de Retórica y Argumentación, **6**(11), 41-54. ISSN:
2448-6485

5. Requests can never fully express a question

Now, there are severe limits to the particularization of a request. An example may clarify my meaning. In 1914, Bertrand Russell delivered the Lowell Lectures on "our knowledge of the external world". After an informal sketch of the formal logic he pioneered, he proceeds to apply it to philosophy via "the oldest and most travelled road… which leads through doubt as to the reality of the world of sense" (Russell 1914, p. 63). This leads him to a "hypothetical construction" (*ibid.*, p. 93) of the world out of the data provided to us by our senses. We may here forego the details of such a construction. But of it he says at some point:

> Our hypothetical construction… shows that the account of the world given by common sense and physical science can be interpreted in a way which is logically unobjectionable, and finds a place for all the data, both hard and soft. It is this hypothetical construction, with its reconciliation of psychology and physics, which is the chief outcome of our discussion. **Probably the construction is only in part necessary as an initial assumption, and can be obtained from more slender materials by the logical methods of which we shall have an example in the definitions of points, instants, and particles; but I do not yet know to what lengths this diminution in our initial as-sumptions can be carried.** [Russell 1914, pp. 104-105; bold print added.]

The last sentence, printed in bold and consisting of two clauses connected by 'but', asks the question that was bothering Russell. It is a request directed to himself and to other philosophers who might be interested in answering the question. The point is that the request could only be *understood* by someone who was steeped in the details of those logical methods and shared the ideal of putting forward a logical construction with the minimum of initial assumptions. This was exactly the case with another philosopher, Rudolf Carnap, who read that sentence, understood the question asked in all its specificity, wrote a marginal note saying that he was going to answer it (Creath 1991, p. 24), and actually offered such an answer in another famous work in early analytic philosophy (Carnap 1928).

In other words, the request could only be understood by someone who was suitably trained and interested in filling in the details that are hinted at in Russell's sentence. Carnap had mastered those details, which is why, for him, the sentence was crystal clear and utterly precise (again see Creath 1991, pp. 23-24). However, a reader innocent of *that* knowledge could never have understood the question asked by Russell. Let us now try to produce a more particularized version of the request contained in Russell's sentence. This is one possible attempt:

(6) How could one rationally reconstruct, by means of the logic of *Principia Mathematica*, the sensory basis of our knowledge of the external world by a narrower and deeper selection of terms and axioms?

This verbalization certainly makes certain aspects of Russell's question more explicit (a) by mentioning that one condition of the solution is the use of those particular *techniques* introduced in *Principia Mathematica*, (b) by naming the *goal*—rational reconstruction—and (c) by distinguishing two kinds of *principles*, the terms and the axioms of a logical system. However, the question we raised before

---

turn the starting-handle, and watch for a spark, my observation 'number one plug is all right' is an answer not to the question, 'Why won't my car go?' but to the question, 'Is it because number one plug is not sparking that my car won't go?' Any one of the various experiments I make during the hour will be the finding of an answer to some such detailed and particularized question. The question, 'Why won't my car go?' is only a kind of summary of all these taken together. It is not a separate question asked at a separate time, nor is it a sustained question which I continue to ask for the whole hour together. Consequently, when I say 'Number one plug is all right', this observation does not record one more failure to answer the hour-long question, 'What is wrong with my car?' It records a success in answering the three-minutes-long question, 'Is the stoppage due to failure in number one plug?'" Note that Collingwood does not distinguish between (specific) *questions* and (particularized) *requests*, as I do here.

Leal, F. (2021). On questions in standard pragma-dialectics
Quadripartita Ratio: Revista de Retórica y Argumentación, **6**(11), 41-54. ISSN:
2448-6485

(viz. WHO IS IN A POSITION TO PICK UP RUSSELL'S QUESTION) necessarily re-appears. A group of readers who may not have *quite* understood the specific question asked by Russell will perhaps, thanks to the more particularized formulation (6), see the light and get the point. However, another and larger group of readers will still fail to understand what (6) entails and what Russell was asking for. (For instance, he or she may fail to understand what would be *a narrower and deeper selection of terms and axioms.*)

From these considerations it should be easy to see that, no matter how many more details we add, no matter how long and complex the request becomes, it will never be possible to express the specificity, as it were the *full* scope, of Russell's question. The reader or listener will always need a modicum of *background information* to complete the meaning.[10] All a request can do is give a hint of what the required background information is. In certain cases, it will be possible to ask for more details and actually get them, but a limit will always be reached, beyond which all one can say is that, if people want to understand the question, then they have to find out more about the subject matter that the question is about.[11]

Please note that Russell's *phrasing* of the question is not very precise. This, however, does not mean that the question itself was vague. In fact, it was quite precise. In order to understand it, though, a reader needs a lot of background information, for instance, about mathematical logic, geometry,

perceptual psychology, and so on. Carnap was a very informed reader, which is why he did not only understand the question which Russell's vague formulation was raising, but he was able to go further and raise even more precise questions than even Russell could have imagined at the time when he wrote the passage quoted above.

In sum, requests are essentially incompletable, for language can only do so much. As Frege used to say (see fn. 11), the reader has to meet you halfway.[12]

6. Requests can express more than one question

Sometimes requests are quite simple —they express just the one question. If I answer the phone and somebody on the other side of the line asks me WHETHER MARY IS HOME (assuming that the request makes sense and has no complicated presuppositions), it would be right to say that the request is simple. But things can get complicated very quickly. If the request is rather WHETHER MARY AND PAUL ARE HOME (making a similar assumption as before), then it is quite possible that two questions have been asked by means of just one request.

This is in a sense only the other side of the coin of what I have just said about the incompletability of requests. Take again the question Russell asked in the above passage. As we have seen, part of what Russell means by putting forward his request is that the logical system of *Principia Mathematica*, or at least a system very much like it, has to be used in reconstructing the sensory basis of our knowledge of the external world. Somebody with sufficient understanding of the stakes contained in Russell's request may answer that the task envisaged by Russell is feasible but only by using a substantially different logical system. This means that the fuller formulation in (6) is a request which, precisely because it

---

10 The term 'background information' is intended to cover both background *knowledge* (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 1983, pp. 135, 166, 180; Kahane 1984, p. 171) and background *beliefs* (Kahane 1984, pp. 16-17, 35, 171). The old Platonic distinction between knowledge and belief belongs to philosophical epistemology and, after the deluge of undecisive literature on the topic, I think it advisable to set it aside for the purposes of argumentation theory. The word 'information', whose home is in computer science, is austere and abstract enough for our needs (cf. 'unstated information' in Kahane 1984, p. 37). See also §7 below.

11 Frege often insisted on this point; see 'Über Begriff und Gegenstand', in Geach & Black 1960, p. 54; 'Was ist eine Funktion?', *ibid.*, p. 115; 'Über die Grundlagen der Geometrie', in Kluge 1971, p. 33.

12 I mean what I say. I do not just mean that requests are, as a matter of boring fact, always incomplete, because after all one relies on context for communication, and so on. I mean that nobody—*nobody*—can ever say all that she means, and even less say, or even be aware, of all that is implied (in the various sense of this notoriously polysemic word) in and by what she says.

Leal, F. (2021). On questions in standard pragma-dialectics
Quadripartita Ratio: Revista de Retórica y Argumentación, **6**(11), 41-54. ISSN:
2448-6485

contains so many specifications, has to be understood as expressing many questions.

Some readers may detect something like a contradiction in what I have just expounded. If a request such as (6) can, on the one hand, never fully express a question, yet on the other, by trying to become more particularized, turns out to correspond to more than one question, then I seem to imply that questions are single and multiple at the same time. The solution to the puzzle lies in taking very seriously the idea of questions being *nodes* in complex networks of questions (§3). Requests which, through an effort at particularization (§4, fn. 9), add more and more bits of information, are actually capturing several nodes of the question network at the same time.

7. Questions and background information

The relation between questions and background information is reciprocal. Let us start from an utterly imaginary scene. Russell is talking, in person, to three different people: Carnap himself, an advanced student of Carnap's, and a sophomore. They have all three listened to the lecture which ends with the quotation above, i.e. with the request put forward by Russell (1914). Carnap understands the question raised by that request so well that he says he has a very good idea of how to start answering it.[13] Carnap's advanced student, call her Ruth, is unable to start answering the question yet understands an important part of what Russell means, and so she can at the very least raise intelligent, well-informed questions, by means of the answers to which she slowly achieves an ever greater understanding of it, so that she may in the fullness of time come to know as much as Carnap and put herself in a position to

work on a possible answer. Martin, the sophomore, however, understands little or nothing of the question, so he cannot even formulate good questions in order to improve his understanding.

This shows that background information can actually be defined as that which makes possible both to understand, wholly or partly, any request and, crucially, to ask further questions in order to improve one's grasp of the original request. So, we should say that someone cannot understand a request or cannot ask a good question concerning that request because she lacks background information, but we should also say that someone lacks background information if she cannot understand a request or ask a good question concerning that request. The two concepts are interdefinable. Nonetheless, given that the concept of question is here stipulated to be basic, I propose to use it to define background information and not the other way around. After all, one major problem in argumentation theory is precisely that, although it is widely understood that the concept of background information is essential to the interpretation of what people mean when they argue, nobody has found a way to define it, let alone theorize about it. Let us then define background information as that which enables an arguer either to understand a request at issue or, in case she does not understand a request, at least to raise other, appropriate questions in order to come to understand what the request is about.

Consider once again the example above. The same question can be raised by means of several requests; sometimes, it *has* to be raised by several requests in order to try to reach different people. A vague request, such as Russell's, can convey a sufficiently precise question for a well-prepared listener, such as Carnap, whereas a less well-prepared listener, say Martin, will take a vague request as raising a vague question, given his inferior amount of background information. This might have been the reason for Russell's choosing a vague request. By his vague phrasing, Russell would be reaching both Carnap and Martin, and anyone in between. On the other hand, the same request can raise several questions for different people, and even for

---

13 In truth, we know (Creath 1991, pp. 23-24) that it took Carnap several years to answer the question, for he read Russell (1914) in 1919, shortly before finishing his doctoral dissertation, and he only tackled Russell's question in his *Habilitationsschrift*, completed in 1926 and published as Carnap (1928). In these several years, I am sure the question became increasingly specific as time went by and it gave birth to many other questions in the network of philosophical questions that makes up a significant part of Carnap's constructionist variety of logical positivism.

Leal, F. (2021). On questions in standard pragma-dialectics
Quadripartita Ratio: Revista de Retórica y Argumentación, **6**(11), 41-54. ISSN:
2448-6485

the same person who is issuing the request, if she is confused about what she means. Thus, if Martin is utterly ignorant of logic and lacks other bits of highly relevant background information of Russell's question, then he would mistake Russell's intent so widely that a completely different question would have been raised as far as he is concerned. Those of us who have a long teaching experience, find this sort of thing happening all the time when students struggle with their assigned readings.

8. Kinds of request, kinds of question

Traditional grammar distinguishes two kinds of interrogative sentence: open and closed. Open interrogative sentences are introduced by a special kind of pronoun or pronominal construction: *what, who, why, how, where, when, to which end, by what means*, and so on, either in its direct form (*who is the man standing there?*) or in its indirect form (*I wonder who the man standing there is*). Closed interrogative sentences have no such pronoun or pronominal construction in the direct form, but either a special word order (*is the man standing there John?*) or a special intonation (*the man standing there is John?*); and in its indirect form, they are accompanied by the word *whether* and sometimes by the word *if* (*I wonder whether/if the man standing there is John*). I propose to apply this elementary grammatical distinction to requests, the illocutionary acts that are sometimes expressed by interrogative sentences.[14]

When ancient dialectics was codified by Aristotle in his *Topics*, he fixed the canonical form of a dialectical request: it had to be expressed by a closed interrogative sentence.[15] He was thereby closely following a Socratic practice of going as soon as possible from the open form to the closed form, i.e. from asking the question WHAT VIRTUE IS to asking

the question WHETHER VIRTUE IS THIS OR NOT. This practice is based on the fact that a closed interrogative sentence expresses *more* of the background information needed to answer it than an open one. If somebody loses her car keys and asks herself the question WHERE HER CAR KEYS ARE, the number of possible or even impossible answers is much bigger than if she asks herself the question WHETHER HER CAR KEYS ARE INSIDE THE CAR OR NOT. Thus, a closed request is *ceteris paribus* much more informative than an open request. This makes an answer to a closed request much easier to attack than an answer to an open request, which is the reason why Socrates in Plato's dialogues wants to proceed to closed requests as soon as feasible and why they are the canonical form in Aristotle's dialectics.

At this point, however, I want to call attention to an important change that took place in medieval dialectics, as it presents itself in the genre of *quaestio*. What we find particularly well developed in Aquinas is the idea that a *quaestio* cannot be expressed by an interrogative sentence but rather by a vague description, of the sort illustrated above in (1). If a thinker does her homework and cashes out that vague description by carefully framing requests, then there is progress from the *quaestio* to its *articuli*, which are the subdivisions of the *quaestio*.[16] Each *articulus* is a closed request, of the sort illustrated in (2) and (3) for THE QUESTION OF FREE TRADE. In the wording of §4, each *articulus* is the attempt to articulate a particular specification of a generic question.

The concept of a question in erotetic pragma-dialectics must thus perform a double function, referring both to *quaestiones* in the medieval sense (i.e. generic questions) and to the abstract objects that any concrete request, such as Russell's in the above quoted passage, is trying to *approximate* (i.e. more or less specific questions). When Carnap attempted to answer Russell's request, he produced further

---

14 The distinction harks back to Chrysippus's dialectics, in which an open request was called πύσμα and a closed one ἐρώτημα (Diogenes Laertius VII, 66). Of course, the Stoic terminology conflated dialectics, logic, and grammar, as we all often do.

15 He called such an interrogative sentence either πρότασις or πρόβλημα, depending on the dialectical stage in which it occurred (see *Topics* A, 101b29-34).

16 For recent descriptions of the complex role played by the *quaestio* in medieval thinking, see Lawn (1993), Weijers (2013), Novikoff (2013).

Leal, F. (2021). On questions in standard pragma-dialectics
Quadripartita Ratio: Revista de Retórica y Argumentación, **6**(11), 41-54. ISSN:
2448-6485

and further approximations in the form of increasingly particularized requests.

The medieval *articulus* very often takes the canonical form 'whether something is the case or not', but sometimes it takes the form of a multiple-choice request 'whether something is A or B'. This is important, because the medieval *articulus* is the source of our modern research article, in which either one hypothesis is put to the test (say, by means of null hypothesis significance testing, which is increasingly under fire; cf. Gigerenzer 1993, Ziliak & Mc-Closkey 2008) or more than one (Chamberlin 1890, Platt 1964). When a researcher frames what we call a research question, she takes a generic question and, by working hard, specifies that question down to one or several closed requests. Graduate students learning to become researchers are often guided toward such a specification by a supervisor or other senior researcher (Alon 2009).

Although this process of specification is especially clear when talking about academic research, we can also witness it in the sharp requests put forward by seasoned journalists who have, through careful investigation of the issues, managed to identify *that one point* which a politician is trying to keep hidden from the public. Only very able politicians, when subjected to accurate questioning of this sort, can manage either to appear in a more or less favourable light or to once more successfully dodge the issue by the skillful use of certain techniques of evasion (Rogers & Norton 2011, Clementson 2018).

9. Triggering vs. underlying questions

The discussion triggered by a question may, as a consequence of the back and forth between the parties, unearth a new, different question, which is perceived by them, more or less clearly, as part of the network of questions raised during the discussion and perhaps even as the ultimate ground of their disagreement. In real life, this happens often enough, as is shown by this snippet of conversation between man and wife, overheard during an airplane flight (Gilbert 1999):

(7) She. We never seem to really talk anymore.
He. Sure we do, we talk all the time.
She. But I don't feel like we really communicate.
He. That's because you're always talking about your work.
She. Not all the time.
He. Well, a lot of the time—most of it, in fact.
She. Oh, never mind.
He. See, when the talk becomes real you stop it.

The question that triggered the discussion could perhaps be framed as WHETHER THESE TWO PEOPLE TALK TO EACH OTHER or perhaps WHETHER THEY COMMUNICATE WITH EACH OTHER. However, as is clear for anyone with some experience of married life, this discussion probably turns around a different and deeper question, although it would take time and patience, and even the help of a marriage counsellor, to find out what that question actually is. In fact, the triggering question may sometimes be even more banal, say WHEN EXACTLY IS SOMEONE GOING TO WASH THE DISHES or WHOSE TURN IT IS TO BRING THE GARBAGE OUT, but once the discussion around such a banal question really starts going, people know at some level that they are asking very different questions, in fact they may actually be questioning their entire relationship.

This is well known from everyday discussions of the sort described, but a moment's reflection shows that it happens all the time in political life. Think of the way politicians love to shift the discussion when things get rough for them or their policies. The same is true of life and work within organizations, as when a boring administrative issue is belaboured again and again during a meeting, but behind that boring issue there lies a struggle for power (Saran 1985). Even in the world of academic discourse, where people are supposed to be objective and only search for the truth of the matter, we are often able to recognize that something deeper is being discussed once the parties start being impolite to each

other.[17] If we call the real question at issue the *underlying* question, then we may usefully distinguish it from the *triggering* question.

10. Conclusion

In the absence of a definition which cannot be given within the theoretical sketch offered here, I at least hope that these few remarks and examples will help the reader grasp the import of the concept of a question, which I wish to posit as the basic concept of erotetic pragma-dialectics. Other argumentation theories, from Aristotle's *Topics* down to Walton's theory of dialogue (Krabbe & Walton 1995, Walton 1998) have also tried to incorporate questions as part of the discussion process in which arguments can only be presented and exchanged; but they have always dealt with them either at the syntactic level (interrogative sentences, whether formalized or not) or at the pragmatic level (illocutionary acts, requests). By doing this, they have left questions as such out, questions in the proper sense of the word, which are abstract objects.

I am, of course, perfectly aware of the difficulties inherent in referring to questions in this way. Western civilization has been aware of the problematical status of abstract objects ever since Plato started the ball rolling. But it is not by ignoring abstract objects that we can aspire to a theory of argumentation. In fact, argumentation theory already brims with abstract objects, even if we leave questions out of the picture. It is impossible to go very far in studying argumentation without positing, for instance,

propositions and arguments. These are as abstract as numbers or sets. And no attempt to get rid of any of them has ever been successful. Even Quine, the arch-reducer, had to give up (1981, §22).

If the traits described above make sense to the readers, if they see them as constituting a valuable framework for talking about questions and their crucial role in argumentation and critical discussion yet cannot abide talk of abstract objects, then let them try to reconstruct all the things I have said without talking about questions as abstract objects. As far as I can see, it cannot be done. However, I keep an open mind, for it is not abstract objects *per se* that I wish to keep but only the things than can be *said* thanks to them.

As for pragma-dialectics, I believe to have shown in other papers how questioning works within the standard theory and how the theory performs when this perspective is explicitly added. The distinction between single and multiple differences of opinion is better understood from the perspective of questions and, through the new understanding, it allows us to see the phenomenon of philosophical disagreement in a new light (Leal 2019). Again, the distinction between mixed and non-mixed differences of opinion is shown to be in need of broadening, at least as far as philosophical questioning is concerned (Leal 2020a). Finally, questions and requests can be shown to play a larger role within each stage of the model of a critical discussion (Leal 2020b). However, in all those papers I had simply assumed erotetic concepts without trying to clarify them. I am perfectly aware that there are still many things that need to be said about the relation between questions and pragma-dialectics; but I hope that the above is at least a start in the right direction.

---

[17] I believe this is very much the case in the intemperate attacks dealt to otherwise respectable scholars who have dared to question Darwin's theory of natural selection as the preferred explanation for the facts of evolution (see, for a very good example, the debate in *The London Review of Books*, October 18, Nov. 1, 15, 29, 2007; January 3, 2008).

Leal, F. (2021). On questions in standard pragma-dialectics
Quadripartita Ratio: Revista de Retórica y Argumentación, **6**(11), 41-54. ISSN:
2448-6485

References

Alon, U. (2009). How to choose a good scientific problem. *Molecular Cell 35* (6), 726-729.

Carnap, R. (1928). *Der logische Aufbau der Welt*. Berlin-Schlachtensee: Weltkreis-Verlag. [Engl. transl. by R. A. George: *The logical structure of the world*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967.]

Chamberlin, T. C. (1890). The method of multiple working hypotheses. *Science 15* (366): 92-96.

Clementson, D. E. (2018). Deceptively dodging questions: A theoretical note on issues of perception and detection. *Discourse & Communication 12* (5), 478-496.

Collingwood, R. G. (1939). *An autobiography.* Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Creath, R. (Ed.) (1991). *Dear Van, Dear Carnap: The Quine-Carnap correspondence and related work.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Eemeren, F. H. van (2010). *Strategic maneuvering in argumentative discourse: Extending the pragma-dialectical theory of argumentation*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Eemeren, F. H. van, & Grootendorst, R. (1983). *Speech acts in argumentative discussions*. Amsterdam: Foris.

Eemeren, F. H. van, & Grootendorst, R. (2004). *A systematic theory of argumentation: The pragma-dialectical approach*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Eemeren, F. H. van, & Snoeck Henkemans, A. F. (2017). *Argumentation: Analysis and evaluation*. 2nd edition. New York: Routledge.

Finocchiaro, M. (1980). *Galileo's art of reasoning: Rhetorical foundations of logic and scientific method*. Dordrecht: Reidel.

Geach, P., & Black, M., translators (1960). *Translations from the philosophical writings of Gottlob Frege*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Gigerenzer, G. (1993). The Superego, the Ego, and the Id in statistical reasoning. In G. Keren & C. Lewis (Eds.), *A handbook for data analysis in the behavioral sciences: Methodological issues* (pp. 311-339). Hillsdale (NJ): Lawrence Erlbaum.

Gilbert, M. A. (1999). Gilbert, M. A. 1999. Reply to Sharon Bailin's 'Truth and reconciliation: Some comments on coalescence'. *OSSA 1999: Argumentation at the century's turn*. Retrieved from https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/ossaarchive/OSSA3/papersandcommentaries/65/ on 8 March, 2020.

Inwagen, P. van (2008). How to think about the problem of free will. *The Journal of Ethics 12* (3-4), 327-341.

Kahane, H. (1984). *Logic and contemporary rhetoric: The use of reason in everyday life*. 4th edition. Belmont (CA): Wadsworth.

Kerbrat-Orecchioni, C. (2004). Introducing polylogue. *Journal of Pragmatics 36* (1), 1-24.

Kluge, E.-H. W., translator (1971). *Gottlob Frege: On the foundations of geometry and Formal theories of arithmetic*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Lawn, B. (1993). *The rise and decline of the scholastic 'quaestio disputata' with special emphasis on its use in the teaching of medicine and science*. Leiden: Brill.

Leal, F. (2019). On philosophical argumentation: Towards a pragma-dialectical solution to a puzzle. *Journal of Argumentation in Context 8* (2), 173-194.

Leal, F. (2020a). ¿Qué es una postura en filosofía? Un enfoque pragma-dialéctico. *Revista Iberoamericana de Argumentación 21*, 80-106.

Leal, F. (2020b). On the importance of questioning within the ideal model of critical discussion. *Argumentation 34* (4), 405-431.

Lewiński, M., & Aakhus, M. (2014). Argumentative polylogues in a dialectical framework: A methodological inquiry. *Argumentation 28* (2), 161-185.

Matthews, P. H. (1974). *Morphology.* Cambridge (UK): Cambridge University Press.

Novikoff, A. J. (2013). *The medieval culture of disputation.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Platt, J. R. (1964). Strong inference. *Science* 146 (3642), 347-353.

Quine, W. V. O. (1981). *Mathematical logic.* Revised edition. Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press.

Rogers, T., & Norton, M. I. (2011). The artful dodger: Answering the wrong question the right way. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Applied 17* (2), 139-147.

Russell, B. (1914). *Our knowledge of the external world as a field for scientific method in philosophy.* Chicago: Open Court.

Saran, R. (1985) The use of archives and interviews in research on educational policy. In R. G. Burgess (Ed.), *Strategies of educational research: Qualitative methods* (pp. 207-241). London: Falmer Press.

Walton, D. N. (1998). *The new dialectic: Conversational contexts of argument.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Walton, D. N., & Krabbe, E. C. W. (1995). *Commitment in dialogue: Basic concepts of interpersonal reasoning.* Albany: State University of New York Press.

Weijers, O. (2013). *In search of the truth: A history of disputation techniques from antiquity to early modern times.* Turnhout: Brepols.

Ziliak, S. T., & McCloskey, D. N. (2008). *The cult of statistical significance: How the standard error costs us jobs, justice, and lives.* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.