

Honors Students as Philosophers and Detectives

KAITLIN A. BRIGGS

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MAINE

An unlikely meeting of minds might be the minor English philosopher and member of the Bloomsbury Group G. E. Moore and the Swedish mystery writer Henning Mankell's detective Kurt Wallander, yet both—one real and the other fictional, one historical and one contemporary—are characterized by an unrelenting inquisitiveness integral to their personalities and professions. A member of the notorious but secretive Apostles while at Cambridge along with his friends Leonard Woolf, Lytton Strachey, E. M. Forster, Clive Bell, and John Maynard Keynes, Moore established his intellectual reputation by always asking “What exactly do you mean?” (Cohen). In order to probe more deeply, Mankell's Wallander uses this same question in his line of work. In the first mystery in the series, *Faceless Killers*, Wallander's superintendent Björk reports, “Our colleagues don't sound happy. . . . It's never anyone's idea of fun to bring in someone from your own force. It's going to be a wretched winter because of this.” To which Wallander replies, “What do you mean by wretched?” (267).

Appearing across such diverse cultural sites, this “what do you mean by_____?” question has multiple educational uses as an interlocutor's conversational gesture during classroom discussion, as a text-based prompt for both encoding/writing and decoding/reading, and as a rhetorical device for an effective oral presentation. The question functions as a way to break down and analyze language, to unpack academic terminology across disciplines, and to enter more broadly an alternative paradigm for understanding, one with profound epistemological and pedagogical implications for students that shifts the locus of meaning so that it is not fixed and stable as in a dictionary but instead is work that they can participate in: an ongoing, active, cultural construction in the present occurring all around us.

The question “what do you mean by_____?” operates as its own method, as what I have termed elsewhere a “deconstructive tool” (212) for reflecting on language, whether in speech, writing, or reading, and ultimately as a mode of being that transcends all of these. Rather than discuss this question in the abstract, I will use a nuts-and-bolts approach in this essay, enacting these many uses to demonstrate how the question works: its structure, facets, possibilities, effects, and affects.

INTERNALIZING THE QUESTION BY SHIFTING PRONOUNS

In my complementary introductory examples, Moore and Wallander both used this “what do you mean by ____?” question relationally and conversationally, foregrounding a give-and-take, back-and-forth inter-subjective dynamic facilitating critical thinking. However, a conversation with others can become a conversation with oneself. Readers who are familiar with Mankell’s Wallander will know of his colleague and friend Rydberg, who, not unlike Socrates, has an extraordinary ability—after digesting the scene, details, evidence, and relationships—to come to conclusions that elude other less clever, less patient, less penetrating minds and to see what others do not or cannot or will not. Rydberg, we find out, has cancer and begins to retreat into the background of the investigation at hand, and in Mankell’s second book, *The Dogs of Riga*, Rydberg has in fact died. Nonetheless, all is not lost because Wallander—like Montaigne, whose close friend died as he approached middle age and who in that empty space started writing and conversing with the reader, in many respects inventing the essay in the process—internalizes Rydberg, the dialogical structure of their exchanges, when actual conversation between the two colleagues is no longer possible, and he starts talking with himself, imagining what Rydberg would consider, think, deduce, conclude.

The question’s power holds up, perhaps strengthens, when it is internalized, warranting a shift in pronouns from the second person to the first, from calling the words of others into question to calling into question one’s own: “What do you mean by internalized?” becomes “What do I mean by internalized?” Adapted from Metcalf and Simon’s “Proprioceptive Writing™,” in my honors courses I use this internalized, first-person version of the question, termed in kind by Metcalf and Simon as the “Proprioceptive Question” (PQ), to facilitate in-class process writing.

What do I mean by “Proprioceptive”? Proprioception is a physiological term. In aggregate, the proprioceptors, attached to the muscles, constitute an interior involuntary body system through which we are able to move through space, constantly adjusting and readjusting to new information, contexts, and details, i.e., moving around an impediment like construction work or wet concrete or a street vendor or a tricycle while walking on a sidewalk. A 1932 Nobel Prize recipient, Sir Charles Scott Sherrington discovered this integrated, comprehensive system, sometimes referred to as the sixth sense, in 1906. In one of his case studies, “The Disembodied Lady,” Oliver Sacks points out that through proprioception we experience and recognize our bodies—fluidly, specifically, and non-generically—as belonging to us (43). His patient Christina had no functioning proprioceptive system and thus could not move.

Across disciplines, as psychologists, scientists, and literary critics have attempted to understand the interface of body and mind, research interest in proprioception has increased. *PsycINFO* lists 99 peer-reviewed articles that

refer to “proprioception” between 1990 and 1999 but 521 between 2000 and 2012. Similarly, the biological sciences database, part of the Web of Knowledge, *BIOSIS Previews* lists 633 articles referencing “proprioception” between 1990 and 1999 but 3,977 between 2000 and 2012. Proprioception has also been considered in relationship to language. The beat poet Charles Olson titled a 1974 poem *Proprioception*; and the literary critic and theorist Charles Altieri reads an Elizabeth Bishop poem as a series of “Proprioceptive Adjustments” (250) to capture emotive shifts in the linguistic structure. But Metcalf and Simon were the first to formulate the Proprioceptive Question as such and to structure it as a formal element into a process writing method. They use the descriptor metaphorically, suggesting that mental shifting and changing parallels physical shifting and changing (11). Just as in this fluid proprioceptive sense we must experience our bodies as our own, as our property, in order to function, so the flow of thought is also non-generic; it is inscribed with our own distinctive notions, worries, sensations, memories, ambitions, experiences, and imaginings.

THE PROPRIOCEPTIVE QUESTION AS A DECONSTRUCTIVE TOOL: CLASSROOM APPLICATIONS

In the proprioceptive method, writers learn to have in-class sessions in which they enter thought flow, follow it, record it, and explore it. While Metcalf and Simon call these “writes,” the students in my honors courses call them “think and writes.” The writing begins with a prompt or an excerpt from a text or as a completely open-ended proposition.

In my Honors Thesis Workshop, I use in-class writing throughout the semester to afford students the opportunity to track, formulate, and develop their individual thinking and to do so collectively. Having asked students in an email before the semester begins to be ready to present their possible thesis focus in writing, I begin this practice the first day of class. After five to ten minutes of writing, students then read what they have written out loud. This writing serves a double purpose: to begin the process of committing their ideas to paper and to introduce themselves and their scholarly interests to the others through writing rather than conversation.

In the middle of the semester, the focus of this in-class writing shifts to the research they have been doing, the patterns and themes that are emerging, and particularly the contradictions and tensions within them. The linguistic framework “on the one hand/on the other hand” has proved to be a provocative prompt for locating these tensions. Functioning like correlative conjunctions, these parallel prepositional phrases subvert the tendency and need to tie things up in a neat bow and prioritize instead entering the complexity of a subject. In many ways we have conditioned students into simplistic solution-oriented thinking and writing in high school with the five-paragraph theme and in

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college with what Downs and Wardle describe as a universal academic discourse (552): the standard five-page paper. Toward the end of the semester, the writing prompts shift toward considering the significance of the research to date, sometimes referred to colloquially as the “so-what?” of a project.

In Metcalf and Simon’s Proprioceptive Writing™ method, as the sentences unfold out on the page, writers are asked not to purge their thinking as they might with Elbow’s freewriting method but rather to engage it by hearing, feeling, and entering certain words already thought and written: asking, writing out, and then answering in writing “What do I mean by___?” I introduce the question by asking students to go back over what they’ve written and then to locate and underline words or short phrases that they feel might warrant further exploration. Following this instruction, past honors thesis students have considered an array of terms: “cognitive appraisal” in psychology research about stress and college students; “accumulative change” in research on the learning embedded in gaming; “new monasticism” in sociological research about contemporary communal religious practices; and “quality of life” in a research project examining gender differences in stroke patients. In a blog post, a student asked and responded to the question “What do I mean by ‘cybernetics?’”:

I believe that this is a good question to ask myself at this early juncture . . . To be frank though, I feel like I don’t really know what this term is *supposed* to mean, so it is difficult to say what I am trying to get at with it. To be sure, I grasp the wiki-overview insofar as cybernetics is the study of regulatory systems. Yet, as with the closely-related systems theory, the interdisciplinarity of this field makes it difficult to figure out where one is supposed to learn its basics and its history, which is to say, there is no Cybernetics 101 in 2009.

. . . Yet, perhaps I’m being evasive about all this. What I am trying to get at is that I am used to thinking of cybernetics as this relatively brief attempt to unite the sciences to articulate a kind of general ontology of relations, a theory built not on the study of atomistic units (literal atoms, organisms, words, singular human beings, etc.) but rather the processes and systems that these individuals emerge out of . . .

This student’s first move is to wonder about a pre-existing definition, what this term is supposed to mean, consulting with Wikipedia to check. But cybernetics is a complex area that incorporates many facets and sub-disciplines, so its definition is elusive. From this insight, the student’s second move is to take the plunge and develop his own definition. Asking the Proprioceptive Question is a humanities move, even when the content moves outside of the humanities.

What do I mean by “humanities move”? Rather than taking a word or phrase at face value, even when it is generally accepted in their academic discipline, scholars in the humanities take it up, consider it, and inscribe it in their

own thought. Metcalf and Simon's Proprioceptive Question foregrounds this kind of ownership, echoing the Latin derivation of the word "*proprius*," meaning "one's own" (*Random House* 1552). Given the critical importance of reading, writing, and thinking in scholarly work, the PQ provides students with a deconstructive tool not only to unpack academic terms and classified nomenclature but also to translate disciplinary discourse into their own words, operationalizing a counter-strategy to plagiarism through the process. Moreover, forging these connections in their studies helps students write committed papers that reflect their questions and concerns and imaginings, motivating them to sustain their efforts and to revise and thus improve their writing.

In addition, the Proprioceptive Question can be a powerful means for breaking down language more generally. In one class this past semester, we discussed how certain words circulate—words like creativity, spirituality, poverty, sustainability, and difference—so that after a while their meaning gets diluted, assumed, genericized, and deadened. For instance, I asked students to consider and write "What do I mean by 'difference'?" After writing, we went around and read our responses out loud. In aggregate, apart from the dictionary, the Internet, and the experts, the result was a polyglot collective definition that got at the word's complexity, its many nuances, meanings, and even stereotypes. One insight revealed through this process was that "difference" depends on relationships and is never neutral; this is the very point that Lévinas makes when he emphasizes the asymmetry of the "face-to-face encounter" (Bergo).

Students were able to construct this idea on their own through writing, using the PQ and then deprivatizing their thinking by reading what they wrote out loud. Furthermore, this in-class writing using the PQ segued into focused in-depth class discussion.

PROPRIOCEPTIVE READING

Although Moore and Wallander used their "What do you mean by _____?" question in the exchange of conversation, it has clear parallel possibilities for interviewing, whether in journalism, qualitative research, or psychotherapy, and also for reading, revising, editing, and note taking. As a specific reader response technique, the Proprioceptive Question in its second-person form helps writers consider their work from the imagined reader's point of view. Straub explains that such commentary serves "to dramatize the presence of a reader whose needs and expectations can and should influence writing" (15). Writers have access to the fullness of what they are trying to say, but readers do not, so at times readers need more information, explanation, and specificity to guide their understanding. I recently peer-reviewed a book chapter draft about a virtual school used to train Australian teachers; after reading "We want to allow novice teachers opportunities to become critically conscious of the cultural oddities they experience in order to question them," I wrote in the track commentary margin, "What do you mean by 'cultural oddities'?"

On the other hand, writers can use the Proprioceptive Question as readers of their own work, as a productive strategy for meaningful revision and expansion of their own drafted writing. If a page-length requirement is not explicitly stated in an assignment description, or if it is given as a range, students often want further specification. More often than not, this need for clarification arises from concern about being able to write enough, particularly for a longer paper. As a way to address this concern, I recently posted the following on a course Blackboard site: “Go over your paper and underline key words or phrases (but no more than 3 words). In a process mode, ask in writing, ‘What do I mean by _____?’ or ‘What does so and so mean by _____?’ Write out a careful, fuller, deeper explanation. PUSH YOUR THINKING. Then take what you’ve written and insert it into your paper, leaving out the question.”

The second question above, focused on someone else’s ideas, can be used as a note-taking strategy as well. As culture shifts and high-speed digital technologies continue to proliferate, students increasingly read in fragmented, multiply literate modes and read less and less in a sustained, focused manner. Thus quality note taking is a problem despite the array of online methods for taking notes. To counter this reality, I have developed a research template to provide students with a framework for interacting in writing with what they are reading, and I periodically ask that students turn in one set of stellar research notes using this template, which includes a prompt drawing on the second-person version of the Proprioceptive Question (see Appendix).

PROPRIOCEPTIVE THINKING AS A METHOD FOR IDEA DEVELOPMENT

The Proprioceptive Question, as used in my honors courses, forges connections between texts, between self and others, between writing and reading, and between what I’m thinking about and what I’m encountering, hearing, reading, taking in, noticing. This back and forth mutuality strikes a path through academic study that allows for a high quality of engagement, participation, commitment, motivation, and energy, prompting sustained thought and avoiding the stasis of black/white, either/or thinking. What follows is a detailed example of how I used proprioception to navigate through ideas and develop a paper for a conference on interdisciplinarity with the over-arching theme of “Sustainability and Ethics.”

A twenty-year habit of informing my thinking by asking the Proprioceptive Question led me to scrutinize the obvious and begin by asking, “What do scholars and institutional policy makers and activists even mean by ‘sustainability’?”

The Alliance for Sustainability, for example, provides the following definition: “ecologically sound, economically viable, socially just and humane, meaning to embody our highest values—how we treat people, animals and the

Earth" (1984), a multi-faceted, integrated definition in which the adverbs—"ecologically," "economically," and "socially"—must interact. However, this definition, as indicated by the first-person plural pronoun, "we," proposes a unity that the tensions within sustainability negate. On the other hand, the 1987 United Nations' *Our Common Future* definition, one that is well established and widely cited, addresses a critical tension within the field by bringing in a prospective emphasis: "meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs."

The United Nations definition sets up a provocative longitudinal tension between the present and the future, between now and then, between us and them. What do I mean by "future"? Having to project into the future or thinking in terms of human generations requires a geometry of thought, an act of imagination, taking in others who are an extension of us but who also are not us, others down the line whom we can only imagine and anticipate; these are ghosts in a sense, ghosts of the future.

But the conference focus is not only about sustainability. What about that ethical component, what specifically people do or do not do in the present? What do I mean by "ethical"? In his lectures on morality, Theodor Adorno proposes that morality, the ethical turn, necessitates an agent, a first-person perspective: "all ideas of morality or ethical behavior must relate to an 'I' that acts," Adorno claims (28). From the first-person perspective, the past can be reflected upon—"what have I done?"—as well as the future considered—"what ought I to do?" Adorno's claim raises the question whether ethical sustainability is even possible. In the post-"Inconvenient Truth"/Al Gore era, as the scientific and technological data flow in, the pressing need for change in the face of our dire global predicament demands that we think beyond individual circumstance, the first-person perspective, the "I" that acts. But what happens to this first-person perspective, considered necessary for ethical thinking by Adorno, under that pressure?

What do I mean by "pressure"? Adorno's contextualized "I" and the pressing need to think beyond that "I," to think in terms of human generations, contradict one another. Public issues represent individual troubles, but individual troubles also represent public issues. This idea evokes C. Wright Mills's notion of "sociological imagination," which describes humans as social and historical actors "who must be understood, if at all, in close and intricate interplay with social and historical structures" (158). Metcalf and Simon emphasize the "focus on attention" in their writing method (xxiv), and the word "interplay," like an embroidery stitch, sticks out, captures my attention, and strikes me as critically important.

What does Mills mean by "interplay"? What do I mean by "interplay" in this context? To progress and develop an ethics of sustainability, Mills's "interplay" must be the operative dynamic: interplay of self and other, individual and context, micro and macro, the sociological and the scientific, the "I" that acts as necessary for the ethical turn and the leap of thought necessary to think in terms of human generations.

As it turns out, the centrality of interplay appears in various guises in the sustainability literature across disciplines. Economist Neva Goodwin, for example, differentiates five categories of capital—financial, natural, produced, human, and social—all of which “are stocks that have the capacity to produce flows of economically desirable outputs” (1) that must effectively interplay for sustainable economic development. And the zoologist C. L. Holling attempts to construct a new language, “panarchy” versus hierarchy, in order to capture how complex systems—both human and ecological, over time and space, and across scale—must allow for “interplay between change and persistence, between the predictable and the unpredictable” (396).

Finally, this notion of interplay warrants some deconstruction, a trip to the dictionary because of the tendency of words to destabilize and lose their clarity. If we use them for too long, they start to look foreign, rune-like, as though we are seeing them for the first time. Historically and etymologically, the first two usages of the word “interplay” came in the nineteenth century. First in 1862, in his *Manual of Geology*, James Dwight Dana described two different winds occurring simultaneously. He writes, “The two pass into one another in mutual interplay” (OED). And second, in 1870 the poet James Russell Lowell wrote about: “That interplay of plot and character which makes Shakespeare more real than other dramatists” (OED). One of these usages occurred within the sciences and the other within the humanities, but Lowell’s usage is the one that effectively captures the more complex model of an ethical sustainability that I am attempting to address: the interplay of plot and character as equivalent to the interplay of the longitudinal view needed to think in terms of human generations and the first-person perspective necessary for moral action as claimed by Adorno.

At this point I identified the central idea for my paper: sustainability as interplay. For an ethical sustainability, the Alliance for Sustainability’s adverbs must be negotiated while balancing Goodwin’s categories and navigating both the tenacity and instability of complex systems. We need a contextualized “I” to consider the consequences of our past actions and the implications of our future decisions. We need both to let go of the self as an island and to learn to think, decide, and act in terms of human generations. Drawn from the Alliance for Sustainability statement, the UN declaration definition, Adorno, Mills, Goodwin, Holling, and *The Oxford English Dictionary*, this idea is knitted together proprioceptively with my own thinking.

THE PROPRIOCEPTIVE QUESTION AS A MODE OF BEING

While the Proprioceptive Question is a deconstructive tool, it is also a method: a way to approach language—whether in writing, reading, or conversation and whether as a product or process—that changes the shape and dimension of discourse. The question works reflectively, rhythmically, and

repetitively as it first contracts thought flow, attending backwards, before diverging, expanding out, and moving forward into a more complete, sustained, and thorough explanation. Barbara Johnson uses the question creatively as the opening sentence for her essay “Mallarmé as Mother” by asking, “What do I mean by *mother*?” (137). Our provost used it rhetorically as an organizing framework for three institutional initiatives at the beginning of the current academic year: “What do we mean by community engagement? . . . What do we mean by fiscal sustainability? . . . What do we mean by student success? . . .” A fuller, deeper, more specific response then followed each question. For honors students the question serves to enhance their attentiveness to language, whether their own or someone else’s, forming a linchpin for their intellectual curiosity.

However, this question is far more than a tool and a method; it becomes a way of thinking, a way of being, a mode, an on-going, ever-shifting principle of operation. It becomes a habit of thought that is contagious. Just as Leonard Woolf, an emphatic nihilist during his university years, relinquished his mantra “nothing matters” under the influence of Moore’s preferred interrogative, honors students often report that the question has spread into their thinking and taken hold while studying for other classes, thinking, walking down the street, or talking with family and friends at home for October break. The question becomes a way to enter the rush, the exuberance of life, as an open-ended intellectual proposition, as a defense against the preference for opinion over dialog and for the declarative over the interrogative as well as against the calcification of ideas: static meanings; frozen, fixed, rigid rhetoric; binary, fragmented, compartmentalized thinking. Finally, inspired by Moore’s and Wallander’s unrelenting, scrutinizing stances, the question becomes a way for our students to enact a quality of attention in relationship to language as they self-fashion into their own versions of philosophers and detectives.

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The author may be contacted at
katebriggs@maine.edu.

APPENDIX

RESEARCH NOTE TAKING TEMPLATE

Bibliographical Information

You can choose to format your paper in APA, MLA, or Chicago. However, whichever formatting style you choose, be consistent. See The Bedford Handbook (p. 49) “Choosing a documentation style” for more information. Handbooks for each are available in the USM library reference area. **One recommended shortcut is to set up the Bibliography page for your thesis now and enter each reading after you’ve finished it. This process can save you a lot of time and tedious work at the end of your project.** You don’t want to end up backtracking.

Name of article or book:

Author(s):

For articles: name of publication, volume number, date, and page numbers

For books: publisher, date, and place of publication; for book chapters, title and editor(s) as well

Notes

Make sure you put in quotation marks anything you quote verbatim, even phrases, and include page numbers as well.

The most important part of taking notes is two-fold:

1. Keeping an accurate record of the key points
2. Interacting **IN WRITING** with what you are reading.

Decide on a note taking method that works for you, e.g., on lined paper with a left hand margin or one of many online note taking systems. Whatever method you decide on, be consistent.

Strategies for interacting with what you’re reading:

1. Always use key words or phrases before a direct citation
2. **“What does so and so mean by key word or short phrase?”** Depending on the length of the article, ask this question at least 3–5 times.
3. Prompts to engage your thinking/interpretation/analysis, after underlining something, citing it or paraphrasing it: **Why is this important (to my evolving project)? This makes me wonder_____.**

Insights

For each reading, retrospectively consider the implications for your project. **How does this material inform your understanding? What patterns or themes are emerging?**