

The Importance of Asking the Right Questions

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Graduates and families, I congratulate you on this achievement. To get to this point you've endured an endless sequence of measurements of your knowledge in the form of tests. You've taken IQ tests and standardized tests. The faculty here have examined you repeatedly to determine what fraction of the material they hoped you would learn that you actually did learn. And you're not done. If you've not seen them already, many of you will in the future confront things called the GRE, MCAT, LSAT and GMAT.

In all of these, your examiners defined the questions and you provided the answers. Indeed, most of the academic world behaves as if we believe that the critical skill society needs of us is to know the right answers. Too often, as a result, we overlook an obvious fact: finding the right answer is impossible unless we have asked the right question.

A turning point in my intellectual life occurred while I was an MBA student at the Harvard Business School, discussing a case study about a peanut butter company. I was taking notes about what the management of the company should have done differently, when I put down the pen with a troubling realization: I was not going to work for a peanut butter company – and even if I did, the problems I'd see most likely would be very different than these. So why was I taking notes about what the managers should have done ten years earlier? Just then, a woman in the class made a brilliant comment. Rather than write down the answer she gave to the instructor's question, however, I wondered, "What question did she ask when she was preparing for the discussion that led her to such a great insight?" So I wrote that question down. A bit later another classmate made a similarly insightful comment. Again, I asked, "What question did he ask that led to that answer?" I wrote that question down, too.

That afternoon when I was preparing for the next day's discussion, I put those two questions on the table while I read, and asked those questions of the case. They helped me get insights that I otherwise would have missed. From that time on, as I participated in the class discussions I would keep noting what questions led to the important insights. I would add them to my list and use them to prepare the next day's case. Sometimes I'd find that a question that had been useful for a specific case rarely was useful on others, so I'd cross it off my list. Over the course of the semester I iterated towards my custom method for thinking through each category of problem. The valuable skill, I realized, was to ask the right question. That done, getting the right answer was typically quite straightforward.

Unfortunately, most of us are so eager to begin implementing the answer that we often forget to think about whether the right question has been asked. Let me illustrate this by exploring two institutions, democracy and capitalism, which Americans broadly believe to be the right and enduring answers, seemingly without having asked the salient questions.

America seems to have played a role in the ouster of rulers with names like Batista, Duvalier, Marcos, Allende, Ortega, Suharto and others, so that we could help the people in the nations they ruled experience the blessings of democracy and free markets. We have spent trillions of dollars and tens of thousands of lives trying to bring the freedoms of democratic governments to Lebanon, the Balkans, Haiti, Afghanistan, Iraq, Liberia, Rwanda, Pakistan, Nigeria, and many more countries. We anguish that democracy is giving way to dictatorship in Russia. Trying to make trial-by-jury work in Iraq and Afghanistan is like climbing a mudslide: People are committing heinous crimes at a much faster rate than a legal system grounded in democratic principles can handle.

All of these efforts have been built upon an assumption that in every situation, democracy is the best form of government. An important question to have asked, however, is, “Is there a situation where democracy won’t work?”

I learned the importance of this question in a conversation 12 years ago with a Marxist economist from China who was nearing the end of a year’s fellowship in Boston, where he had come to study two topics that were foreign to him: democracy and capitalism. Before he left I asked my friend if he had learned here anything on these topics that was surprising or unexpected. His response was immediate and, to me, quite profound: “I had no idea how critical religion is to the functioning of democracy and capitalism.” Though de Toqueville also had observed this, I had never made this association between religion, democracy & capitalism in my mind. But it was like this guy parachuted in from Mars – and this is what he saw. He continued,

“In your past, most Americans attended a church or synagogue every week. These were institutions that people respected. When you were there, from your youngest years, you were taught that you should voluntarily obey the law; that you should respect other people’s property, and not steal it. You were taught never to lie, and to respect the life and freedom of others the same as your own. Americans followed these rules because they had come to believe that even if the police didn’t catch them when they broke a law, God would catch them. Democracy works because most people most of the time voluntarily obey your laws.

“You can say the same for capitalism,” my friend continued. “It works because Americans have been taught in their churches that they should keep their promises and not tell lies. An advanced economy can function only if people can expect that when they sign contracts, the other people will voluntarily uphold their obligations. Capitalism works only when nearly all people voluntarily keep their promises.”

My friend then invited me to look around the world at those countries where, in his words, “America had snapped its fingers at the country and demanded, ‘We want democracy here, and we want it now!’” Unless there was already a strong religious foundation in those countries, he asserted, democracy has failed miserably. There are religions in every country, of course. But he made clear that democracy-enabling religions are those that support the sanctity of life, the equality of people, the importance of respecting others’ property, and of personal honesty and integrity. Those religions also had to be strong enough that they held power over the behavior of the population. People had to believe that God would punish them even if the police and court system did not. He then gave some examples.

In Russia, for instance, there are religions – but few people are influenced by them. As a result many people avoid taxes, and the government cannot collect them. Murder, bribery and stealing are a part of everyday life. American foreign policy has been naïve in Haiti and the nations of Africa that have been torn by such brutal civil strife. “You just think that because democracy works for you that it will work everywhere. It *only* works where there is a strong foundation of this particular type of religion.”

In the course of researching more deeply the issue my friend posed I happened upon an elegant summary of what he taught me, penned by Lord John Fletcher Moulton, the great English jurist, who wrote that the probability that democracy and free markets will flourish in a nation is proportional to “The extent of obedience to the unenforceable.”

My Chinese friend heightened a vague but nagging concern I’ve harbored – that as religion loses its power over the lives of Americans, what will happen to our democracy? Our prosperity? We are living on momentum. The ethic of obedience to the unenforceable was established by vibrant religions. Some of these teachings have become a part of our culture. As a result, today there are many Americans who are not religious, who still voluntarily obey the law, comply with contracts, value honesty and integrity and respect other people’s rights and property. This is because certain religious teachings have become embedded in our culture. But is culture a stalwart, active protector of democracy’s enabling values? I don’t think so.

Those who seek to minimize the role that religions can play on the public stage are making two very serious mistakes that stem from their not having asked the right questions. First, they are seeking to minimize the very institutions that have given us our civil liberties in the first place. And second, the debate swirling in judicial discourse about the separation of church and state is a false dichotomy. If we broadly define them as philosophical traditions, there are two classes of religions: theistic religions and atheistic ones. Zealots of atheistic religions who assert that theistic religions must be separated from our fabric of democracy, even as they knit the doctrines of *their* religions into our legal and regulatory frameworks, are asking the wrong question, and therefore giving us an answer that may well prove to be toxic to democracy.

My Chinese friend’s insight has helped me understand what the valuable question really is: “***Because democracy is possible only when most people most of the time voluntarily obey the laws, what institutions can we rely upon to inculcate this instinct amongst the American people? And how can we strengthen those institutions, so that they do this better?***”

When the instinct of even a minority of people in a society is to steal what belongs to others, lie when it suits their selfish purposes, evade taxes, demand bribes and disregard the rights of others, then ***capitalism*** won’t work, either. Just look at our current economic crisis. It didn’t take many Americans whose instinct was to take what belongs to others and to stretch rather than obey the rules, to cause capitalism very nearly to collapse.

When the extent of ***dis***obedience to the unenforceable grows, not just democracy, but prosperity becomes in jeopardy. We treasure democracy because it gives us freedoms of speech and the press. But attempting or imposing democracy without near-universal obedience to the unenforceable strips from us other crucial freedoms, which include the freedom from want, and

the freedom to be employed. I again ask what I believe is a crucial question for America: *Because capitalism and the prosperity it brings are possible only when there is near-universal voluntary obedience to the laws, what institutions can we rely upon to inculcate this instinct amongst the people, before they arrive in our executive suites and on Wall Street? And how can we strengthen the institutions that teach these things, so that they do it better?*

When a nation lacks the requisite foundation of extensive obedience to the unenforceable, what form of government will work? Unfortunately democracy and capitalism won't. It requires the rule of a strongman who defines the rules and then wields the power required to compel obedience. Living proofs of this hypothesis cover the globe. Just run this experiment. The next time you're in a taxi with a Haitian cab driver, just ask whether things are better now under democracy than they were under the corrupt rule of the Duvaliers. I guarantee that every one of them pines for the day when there was an iron-fisted ruler who had the instinct and ability to stomp his heel into the chest of those who didn't follow the rules.

It's not a coincidence that the countries that have transitioned from poverty to prosperity in the last 40 years – including Korea, Chile, Taiwan, Singapore, Portugal and the Dominican Republic – all were led by relatively iron-fisted dictators, who had the instinct and ability to wield power quite ruthlessly, in some instances, to break the vested interests of those that profited from the corruption that had trapped those nations in poverty. Impoverished countries with democratic governments such as the Philippines, in contrast, struggle to prosper because imposition of democracy has simply democratized corruption to the point that capitalism won't work: The investments that would stimulate prosperity simply cannot be made, because you can't bribe enough people to make anything happen. The fact that Medvedev and Putin are usurping political and economic power in Russia is a manifestation that Russia isn't yet in a situation where democracy will work.

Those who assume that the atheistic religions of secularism are a better backbone for freedom and prosperity than the theistic ones that they are trying to push under the back seat, have a huge burden of proof which they've not had the intellectual fortitude to discuss, let alone bring forward. Because the love of God or the fear of God play no role in the religion that they are imposing upon our democracy, what institutions are they establishing that will have the power to inspire universal and voluntary obedience to unenforceable laws?

Graduation often is the occasion on which we pronounce the education of the graduates to be complete. I cannot do that, because I fear that many of you, like most Americans, have yet to be schooled in the discipline of asking the right questions. I hope that as you leave to seek happiness in your families and success in your professions; and as you seek to bring greater prosperity, peace and freedom to our country and the world; that learning to ask the right questions becomes a powerful intellectual compass for you.

As a member of the board of trustees of this university I am grateful for the honorary degree you have given me. And I am grateful to be able to say that your president, Paul LeBlanc, more than anyone else I know in American higher education, is a man who has a remarkable

instinct for asking the right questions as they relate to the future of higher education. We don't yet know all of the answers, but because he's asking the right questions I am confident, rather than fearful, for the future of SNHU. I hope that his instinct for asking the right questions increasingly becomes the point of academic distinction for this university.

Again, to our graduates and their families, I give you my warmest wishes and congratulations. May God be with and bless each of you.