

# Question

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## What Even Is a Question?

*Questions as Care — An Architecture of Asking*

### ABSTRACT

Questions are studied across linguistics, cognitive science, developmental psychology, and the philosophy of language primarily as instruments of information-seeking. This paper argues that beneath that familiar role sits an older function the literatures have observed in pieces but not yet pieced together: the question is the means by which a community maintains and repairs the shared sense that makes information intelligible in the first place. Drawing on **Vico's** *sensus communis*, **Heidegger's** analysis of involvement (*Bewandtnisganzheit*) and Care (*Sorge*), **Gadamer's** hermeneutics, and **Stephen H. Daniel's** account of communal *reading*, we characterize that shared sense as **an information architecture**, in an older and broader sense than the industry term, and propose that questions are the principal tool that tends it. **Jesse James Garrett's** pair, *association* and *juxtaposition*, sits on a layer beneath these four, as the cognitive substrate by which the community's reading is composed.

We offer a model for analyzing any question along three dimensions, **Opening**, **Direction**, and **Displacement**, wrapped by a normative criterion drawn from **Christopher Alexander**, **Good Fit**. The model is called **ODD**. A typology of twenty interrogative varieties, ten *hooks* and ten *nets*, is situated within the Direction dimension. We close by drawing out implications for information architecture, pedagogy, organizational repair, and the practice of asking across communities whose readings differ.

*Keywords: information architecture, sensus communis, Bewandtnisganzheit, questions, Care, Sorge, ODD Model, Good Fit, association, juxtaposition, hermeneutic phenomenology, hooks and nets, Heidegger, Vico, Gadamer, Daniel, Alexander, Garrett*

## § 1. INTRODUCTION: THE QUESTION AS AN ACT OF CARE

Questions have been studied from many directions. Linguistics has mapped the interrogative as a grammatical form (**Bromberger** 1966; **Stromswold** 1995; **Zeshan** 2004). Cognitive science has modeled question-asking as a driver of curiosity and comprehension (**Otero** and Graesser 2001; **Boyce-Jacino** and DeDeo 2020). Developmental psychology has traced how children acquire the practice of asking (**Harris** 2020). The philosophy of language has placed the question among the speech acts (**Searle** 1962; **Carruthers** 2020). Across these literatures the question is treated, for the most part, as an instrument of information-seeking: a device by which an asker closes a gap between what is known and what is needed.

Comparatively little attention has been paid to a more ancient, more fundamental role the question appears to serve. Before a question can retrieve information, asker and answerer must already share a sense of what would count as an answer. This shared sense is built, strained, and repaired continuously, and the question, we will argue, is among the principal tools by which the repair is done. On the reading offered here, the question is less an instrument for acquiring information than an act of care for the shared meaning that makes information intelligible.

This paper proposes an account of the question as *care*, together with a model for analyzing any question along three dimensions (**Opening**, **Direction**, and **Displacement**), wrapped by a normative criterion drawn from **Christopher Alexander**, **Good Fit**. The model is called **ODD**. The argument proceeds by conceptual analysis in the hermeneutic-phenomenological tradition, drawing principally on **Vico**, **Heidegger**, **Gadamer**, and **Daniel**.

One premise warrants stating plainly: the capacities by which humans live are held, to an unusual degree, *outside* the individual body. The premise has an old illustration worth recalling, not as evidence but as a way of fixing the idea.

In **Plato's** *Protagoras* (321c–d), **Epimetheus** is charged with distributing the means of survival among the creatures and works through them in turn, giving fur to the cold-dwellers, claws to the hunters, speed to the prey. By the time he reaches the last creature on the bench he has given everything away, and that creature — *homo* — is left in a body lacking adequate built-in equipment: no fur, no claws, no speed, no instincts tuned to a niche. **Prometheus** steals from Hephaestus and Athena to repair the omission, and what he steals is specified carefully: not fire alone but ἔντεχνον σοφίαν σὺν πυρί (*entechnon sophian sun pyri*), "the wisdom of the arts together with fire." The gift to *homo* is *technē*, the technical wisdom by which an unfinished creature makes its own equipment.

**Stiegler** (1998) interprets Prometheus as the founding philosophical account of the human as a *prosthetic* being: a creature constituted by what it makes, not merely supplemented by it. Fire and the wisdom of the arts are equiprimordial: given as one gift, neither prior to the other. The tool, the word, the city, the calendar, the recipe, the law, the lullaby: each is an externalization. Each sits on the same existential plane as the fire. Each capacity that lets *homo* be *homo* is held outside the person, in the collective.

The most essential of these externalized capacities, we will argue, is the shared sense by which a community knows what belongs together and what does not. **Vico** named it *sensus communis* (*The New Science*, 1744, § 142), and the term carries the argument forward. Without that shared sense the other externalizations appear to go inert: the fire is just heat, the tool a stone, the word a sound. The shared sense is what lets the rest of it count as anything. It is the infrastructure whose maintenance, we will argue, is the job that questions do.

## § 2. THE BEING THAT LIVES IN THE PREDICAMENT: CARE

**Plato's** Prometheus explains *homo's* special predicament among the creatures. Twenty-three centuries later, in *Being and Time* (1927, § 42), **Martin Heidegger** retells **Hyginus's** creation myth to explain why *homo's* way of being is so peculiar.

**Cura** was walking by the primordial ooze of the Earth. She reached down, brought up a handful of clay, and began forming a figure. She asked **Jupiter** for breath. Once the figure was alive and clearly wonderful, **Earth** claimed the body. The clay was hers. **Jupiter** wanted his share of the credit, too. The dispute went to **Saturn**, who is Time. His judgment was final: at death, **Earth** takes back the body and **Jupiter** the spirit; while it lives, it belongs to **Cura**. Its name, like its body, would be made from the ground: *homo*, from *humus*.

This creature, whose capacities live outside its body, cannot hold itself together unattended. Withdraw the tending and what was *homo* returns to *humus*. Care does not exempt the creature from this; Saturn's verdict has already been rendered. What Care does, in the interval, is skillfully cope with the coming apart.

*Sorge*, in Heidegger's vocabulary, names this comportment, and what it points to is structural: a shape of how *homo* is at all rather than something *homo* takes on. The unfinished creature reaches ahead of itself, takes up what is already given, and stands alongside others doing the same. Care is the attunement that comes with that standing-alongside.

*Cura* is Latin for "care." It is also the root of *curiosity*, the alert attention that pulls toward what has not yet been figured; and of *curation*, the tending of what a community has gathered so that it does not fray. Curiosity and curation are two modes of the same Care.

The two myths are best read as vantage points on a single observation. The Promethean predicament names the *condition* of the prosthetic creature. The myth of Care shows how that creature *carries on* in spite of the condition. The remainder concerns the medium of the carrying-on, the dynamics of tearing and mending, and the tool that mends.

### § 3. SENSUS COMMUNIS: THE INFRASTRUCTURE OF BELONGING

The capacities that let *homo* be *homo* are held outside *homo*, in a shared medium. Care is what keeps them held there. That medium has a name. The name is nearly three hundred years old.

**Vico** introduced *sensus communis* in *The New Science* (1744). On Vico's account, *sensus communis* is a community's pre-articulate sense of what is fitting: held in common, carried in practice, older than any member's attempt to put it into words. Humans figure the world *tropically*, he argued, before they figure it logically; a community's grammar of meaning is a poetic construction, not a deductive one.

Two centuries later, **Gadamer** (*Truth and Method*, 1989) recovered the term against the narrower uses to which the intervening period had reduced it. For Gadamer, *sensus communis* is where practical wisdom lives, and the medium reaches further than language in the narrow sense. "*Sein, das verstanden werden kann, ist Sprache*": being that can be understood is language. Bodies trained by apprenticeship, thresholds worn smooth by use, meals whose taste names a region, the rhythms of a trade: the whole of it takes place within what Gadamer calls *the languaging of language*.

**Stephen H. Daniel** (1989) extends the line into both topology and *tropology*. "The topology of topography," he writes, "ultimately subsists in its tropology." A community coheres, he argues, because its members participate in a shared activity of figuration: what he calls a *reading*.

A river is water moving through terrain until a community figures it into a place: fished, crossed, mourned at, prayed to. Without a reading, no place. A place exists in the *displacement* between bare fact and figured significance, a term we return to in § 6.3.

All three name one infrastructure of belonging from three positions. *Sensus communis* is what a community holds together by. Hermeneutic understanding is the practice of standing inside that holding. *Reading* is the running record of every figure the community has proposed, contested, absorbed, or refused. An outsider, on this account, is not someone who lacks a key. An outsider stands inside a different figuration, with different tropes and a different *sensus*.

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#### § 4. THE ARCHITECTURE OF INVOLVEMENT: BEWANDTNISGANZHEIT

The world a community inhabits is enacted, on **Heidegger's** account in *Being and Time*, in three interlocking totalities. The *Zeugganzes*, the equipmental whole, is the totality of tools, instruments, and made things. The *Verweisungsganzheit*, the referential whole, is the network of assignments and skills by which any one tool points to and depends on the others. The *Bewandtnisganzheit*, the involvement whole, is the context of *what-for* and *to-which-end* that embeds those references in shared practices.

A hammer is not first a present-at-hand lump to which a use is attached afterward. A hammer shows up as a hammer because it already sits inside all three totalities at once: equipment (hammer, nails, boards, saw), references (the hammer points to the nails, which point to the boards, which point to the dwelling), and involvement (someone is making a place where someone else will live). Context, the matrix through which *homo* moves, is what lets the hammer be the thing it is. Remove the context and what remains has stopped being a thing in any sense that matters.

We propose that equipment, skills, and practices, taken together, are how *sensus communis* is constituted. Working as one matrix, the three totalities compose a community's felt sense of belonging. **Vico** arrived at *sensus communis* from the side of communal feeling; Heidegger arrived at the three totalities from the side of structural analysis. The two accounts are complementary, and Heidegger may be read as supplying the architecture within which Vico's felt sense is the inhabited experience.

The largely-invisible coordination apparatus by which equipment, references, and involvement-purpose hold together as a single fabric is something the community moves through and inhabits without having to think about it. That's good information architecture. Like any working architecture, information architectures are most evident when they fail; a coordination matrix in good repair allows its own infrastructural aspects to disappear from view.

The matrix is tended *with* questions and *through* questioning. *With*: a question is the tool a community uses to repair a torn place in the matrix. *Through*: the ongoing practice of asking is what keeps the matrix functioning at all. Questions, on this account, are the maintenance the architecture does not advertise.

## § 5. QUESTIONS AS THE MECHANISM OF REPAIR

A community's reading is never static, and it does not maintain itself. New situations arise. Old figurings prove inadequate. New members must be brought inside the figuration. The question of what fits is one a community is always asking.

Questions are how a program of info-architectural maintenance gets done in real time. They prune, graft, extend, and let go of what a community holds together by. An unfamiliar word in a book can often be guessed from the surrounding sentences. But something like *elevated troponin levels*, said in an emergency room examination by a physician, will not yield to contextual inference, and the patient must ask. In asking, the patient proposes to participate in a figuration the community has already made and the asker has not yet absorbed.

Every new member of an organization who senses that something is *off* but cannot yet name it has a special opportunity to ask a question that, when it lands, can reconfigure what the organization had taken for granted. The pre-question is itself a tending; the asking, when it comes, is the cut. A civic body whose settled reading no longer answers the cases arriving on its docket is a community in need of high-displacement questions. The alternative is what **Le Corbusier** named in *Vers une Architecture* (1923): *Architecture or revolution. Revolution can be avoided.*

Questions are the principal tool, and perhaps the only one, for ripping out the seams around a piece of *sensus communis* that no longer holds and stitching a replacement in its place. To ask, on this account, is to perform an act of Care for the shared meaning that binds a community together. The architectures of *Bewandtnisganzheit* and *sensus communis* are kept in repair by the many questions each of us uses, daily and mostly without noticing, to be the *homo* we are and to relate well to one another and to our things.

**Jesse James Garrett**, in his 2020 foreword to *Advances in Information Architecture: The Academics / Practitioners Roundtable 2014–2019* (Springer, 2021), places this primal practice at 300,000 years before the common era, coextensive with the appearance of *homo sapiens*. At that moment, seven to nine hominin species walked the earth together; the practice belonged to all of them. The shared sense the rest of this paper has been describing is older than our species. He locates its mechanism, at the cognitive level, in two moves: *association* puts things together as belonging, *juxtaposition* holds them apart as not. Garrett does not draw the pair this strictly. For our purposes, either one or the other of library and information science's two symbolic fetishes: lumping or splitting.

## § 6. THE ODD MODEL: AN ARCHITECTURE OF THE QUESTION

**Opening** is the size and location of the conceptual space the question carves within a community's settled reading. **Direction** is where the question points within that space: hook or net. **Displacement** is how much rearranging the question asks of the listener's understanding. The three correspond to **Heidegger's** *three temporal ecstases of Care: thrownness, projection, and being-alongside-things* (*Being and Time*, § 39). Wrapping the three is a normative criterion drawn from **Christopher Alexander, Good Fit**.

### § 6.1 OPENING

Every question opens a space within what a community already understands, and the size and location of that space are choices the questioner makes, often without noticing. *What time is it?* opens a small space. *What is time?* opens a vast one. Neither is superior in the abstract. An opening too small for its case is starved; an opening too large is diluted, the inquiry losing its grip on what it needed. The opening is well chosen when its size and location match the questioner's case. In Heidegger's vocabulary, the opening is where the asker is already standing: *thrownness*, the situation the asker did not choose but asks from.

### § 6.2 DIRECTION

Within the space a question opens, it points somewhere. A **hook question** aims at one specific thing. *Is the patient allergic to penicillin?* The hook returns one answer, or none. A **net question** gathers. *What factors contribute to urban decay?* Nets return whatever they catch. Each suits different cases. A surgeon needs a hook; a researcher often needs a net. The choice is not a matter of style but of what the case requires.

The directional aspect admits systematic analysis. We identify twenty interrogative varieties across the two directions, ten hooks and ten nets, arrived at by a comparative reading of the terminology used across the literature cited at the back of this paper. The twenty are not the last word; a twenty-first and twenty-second wait to be found and named. Tables 1a and 1b set forth our draft questions typology, with each question mapped to its interrogative function and illustrated with an exemplar interrogative form.

## HOOK QUESTIONS

1A

TYPE	FUNCTION	EXAMPLE
POLAR	<i>Expects yes or no</i>	“Are mudra always or only based on hand poses?”
GAP-FILLING	<i>Fills a specific hole in understanding</i>	“How many distinct meanings can the <i>hasta-mudra</i> of classical Indian dance express?”
CONVERGENT	<i>Guides toward a single best answer</i>	“Which mudra does the Buddha display when he touches the earth with his right hand?”
ADVICE-SEEKING	<i>Requests guidance or recommendation</i>	“Should a student of Bharatanatyam learn the single-hand mudra before the double-hand ones?”
REASON-SEEKING	<i>Demands justification</i>	“Why does the Abhaya mudra use an open palm facing outward?”
WHEREFORE	<i>Asks for cause, purpose, or principle</i>	“For what reason did Buddhist iconography standardize only a handful of mudra across centuries of sculptural tradition?”
TAG	<i>Small confirmation appended to statement</i>	“The Dhyana mudra signifies meditation, doesn’t it?”
ALTERNATIVE	<i>Presents options, requests selection</i>	“Is the Vitarka mudra a gesture of teaching, of debate, or of both?”
IMPERATIVE-ELICITING	<i>Seeks a command as answer</i>	“Which mudra should I use to represent fearlessness?”
CONFIRMATIVE	<i>Verifies understanding</i>	“So you’re saying the Bhumisparsha mudra depicts the moment of enlightenment?”

TABLE 1A. TEN VARIETIES OF HOOK QUESTIONS.

## NET QUESTIONS

1 B

TYPE	FUNCTION	EXAMPLE
HYPOTHESIS-SCANNING	<i>Tests possibilities without foreclosure</i>	“Could mudra have preceded spoken language as a system of meaning?”
ECHO	<i>Repeats to invite elaboration</i>	“Five hundred different meanings from hand positions alone?”
DIVERGENT	<i>Deliberately seeks multiple possibilities</i>	“What if, as an operative, we included facial expressions in our discussion of mudra?”
OPEN-ENDED	<i>Invites extended response</i>	“Tell me about the relationship between mudra in sacred ritual and mudra in classical dance.”
GENERAL INQUIRY	<i>Broadly explores a topic</i>	“What is the history of mudra across Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain traditions?”
VARIABLE	<i>Uses who/what/where/when/why/how</i>	“How did mudra travel from Indian temple sculpture to Southeast Asian court dance?”
RHETORICAL	<i>Makes a point; doesn't seek answer</i>	“If a single gesture can mean five hundred things, is any gesture truly simple?”
DEEP	<i>Explores causes and structures</i>	“Why do cultures separated by thousands of miles independently develop symbolic hand gestures?”
WHAT-IF	<i>Imagines alternatives and consequences</i>	“What if mudra were recognized as a writing system rather than a performance tradition?”
RELEVANCE	<i>Probes significance and connection</i>	“Why does the persistence of mudra matter for understanding how humans communicate without words?”

TABLE 1B. TEN VARIETIES OF NET QUESTIONS.

The full periodic-table rendering of the twenty types, which sorts them by surface and depth as well as by direction, appears in Appendix A. In Heidegger's vocabulary, Direction is *projection*: the asker's reach forward into what is not yet given.

## § 6.3 DISPLACEMENT

The third dimension measures how much rearranging a question asks of the listener's understanding. A **low-displacement question** leans on what a community already takes for granted. *What is the capital of France?* asks for an answer long since settled; it fits comfortably inside the existing reading. A **high-displacement question** proposes something the community has not yet absorbed. *Should artificial intelligence systems have legal rights?* asks the listener to entertain a category the community has no agreed way to handle.

A high-displacement question is, by analogy, the conversational equivalent of moving a load-bearing wall. A room can take one now and then, but only if the rest of the structure is buttressed as the wall comes down; remove it without that bracing and the house leans. Some questions go unasked and unheard not because they are wrong but because the coordination matrix does not or cannot yet accommodate them, structurally.

Between the poles sits a broad middle, where most questions live: questions that lean on what a community holds while quietly displacing a piece of it in a way that, once absorbed, refigures the rest. **Daniel** (1989) puts the point sharply: only in the displacements of figured expression does a reading emerge at all. The community's reading is not a stockpile but a running tally of every figure proposed, contested, absorbed, or refused. On that ledger, the size of a question and its value sit in different columns.

A question that displaces a great deal is not, on that ground alone, more valuable than one that displaces little; many small displacements, well placed, go further over time than a single grand one a community cannot absorb. In Heidegger's vocabulary, Displacement is *being-alongside-things*: the question's effect on what is already given.

## § 6.4 GOOD FIT

Wrapping the three dimensions is a normative criterion, **Good Fit**, in the sense **Christopher Alexander** gives the term in *Notes on the Synthesis of Form* (1964). Alexander defines fit as the absence of misfit between form and context, and his method works backward from the misfits: list every point of friction between a form and its situation; the well-fitting form leaves nothing rubbing.

Applied to questions, the operation is the same. List the points of friction between the question and the moment; the well-fitting question, after being skillfully coped with (**Dreyfus**, *Being-in-the-World*, 1991), leaves nothing rubbing. A question can be well-formed at the level of ODD, its Opening, Direction, and Displacement all deliberately chosen, and still misfit. A clumsy question can fit. The two are not the same, and the canny question-asker reads the fit before asking.

Alexander returned to the idea fifteen years later in *The Timeless Way of Building* (1979) and called the felt judgment of fit **The Quality Without a Name (TQWaN)**. It points up the same textures and fabric the older rhetorical tradition names *sensus communis*: what a community recognizes as fitting before anyone has worked out why. Good Fit is, in the terms of the Myth of Care, Saturn's verdict: the temporal judgment on whether an act of Care fits *now*, in *this* community, on *this* reading. Saturn, who is Time, settled the original dispute in Care's favor; here too the deciding vote is his. Timing, as the old saying has it, really is everything.

## § 7. IMPLICATIONS FOR INFORMATION ARCHITECTURE, PEDAGOGY, AND ORGANIZATIONAL REPAIR

The framework is offered as an operative model, not as a set of conclusions or a definitive explanation. Three areas where its implications play out seem to us especially interesting.

**For information architecture.** The structural dynamics of meaning-bearing wholes are, on this account, the dynamics of *sensus communis* and *Bewandtnisganzheit*, and questions are how those wholes are repaired and extended. An information architect who attends only to the artifact, the website, the report, the schema, and not to the ontological and epistemological repair the artifact participates in, is doing half the job. **Garrett** (2020) puts the diagnostic plainly: “every fracture in our culture wars is the result of clashing, incompatible information architectures.” The ODD Model offers parameters for truing the wheel those clashes get ground out on, and a way to read them. It is not a way to solve cultural clashes. It is a way to maintain the mechanism by which culture handles them.

**For pedagogy.** The risk here is contemporary and, we think, acute. A student now arrives in the classroom with a device that will answer almost any question, almost instantly, at no apparent cost. The device is trained to return the answer the asker seems to want. Often that answer is true; often it is not. The student frequently lacks the equipment to tell the difference.

The equipment to tell the difference *is* the practice of asking: opening the question, choosing its direction, weighing what it would displace if absorbed, and testing whether it fits the moment. A device that returns answers without requiring the asking can short-circuit the very practice by which a student would become a competent questioner.

The defaults compound the difficulty. Trained to please, such a system leans toward low-displacement responses: confirmations of what the asker already half-believes, restatements in flatter language, answers shaped to feel useful rather than to refigure anything. The high-displacement question, the one that might have taken down a piece of the student's settled reading and built something better in its place, risks being answered as though it were low-displacement. Direction can collapse too, the system returning a hook where a net was needed and a net where a hook was. Good Fit is largely invisible to a system whose training signal is the user's next click. Pedagogy that does not protect the practice of asking, and does not teach the asking architecturally, through ODD or some equivalent vocabulary, risks ceding the figuration of the world to a system with only half of **Garrett's** engine under its hood: it associates without juxtaposing. It can place anything next to anything, with a sense of what fits but not of what does not. It can predict and permute all day long but at the end of the day (as at the beginning and middle) understands nothing.

**For organizational repair.** Organizations that wish to absorb change might attend to the conditions under which high-displacement questions can be heard. These are the questions most likely to refigure what an organization has taken for granted, and most likely to feel threatening. The architecture of the question, its Opening, Direction, Displacement, and Fit, gives an organization a means of inspecting its own load-bearing capacity for repair.

## § 8. CONCLUSION

This paper has proposed an information architecture of asking. On the account offered here, the question has a role in *homo's* being that's older and more profound than filling information gaps; it's a structural feature of how *homo* makes and remakes shared meaning, a tool so basic that a community without it would be frozen in whatever figuration it happened to inherit.

## LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE WORK

Several questions remain open. We have said little about how Direction and Displacement interact: a hook question can, in principle, carry high displacement, and a net question can lean entirely on settled tropes. The dynamics differ in ways that merit separate treatment.

We have set aside the distinction between direct and indirect questioning. Each of the twenty types in our analysis can be posed either way, and the choice carries a social weight that deserves its own study.

We have not addressed how questions function across the boundaries between communities, where different readings collide and translation becomes necessary. This may be where questions prove most essential, and most difficult, and we would love to see others take it up. We will have questions.

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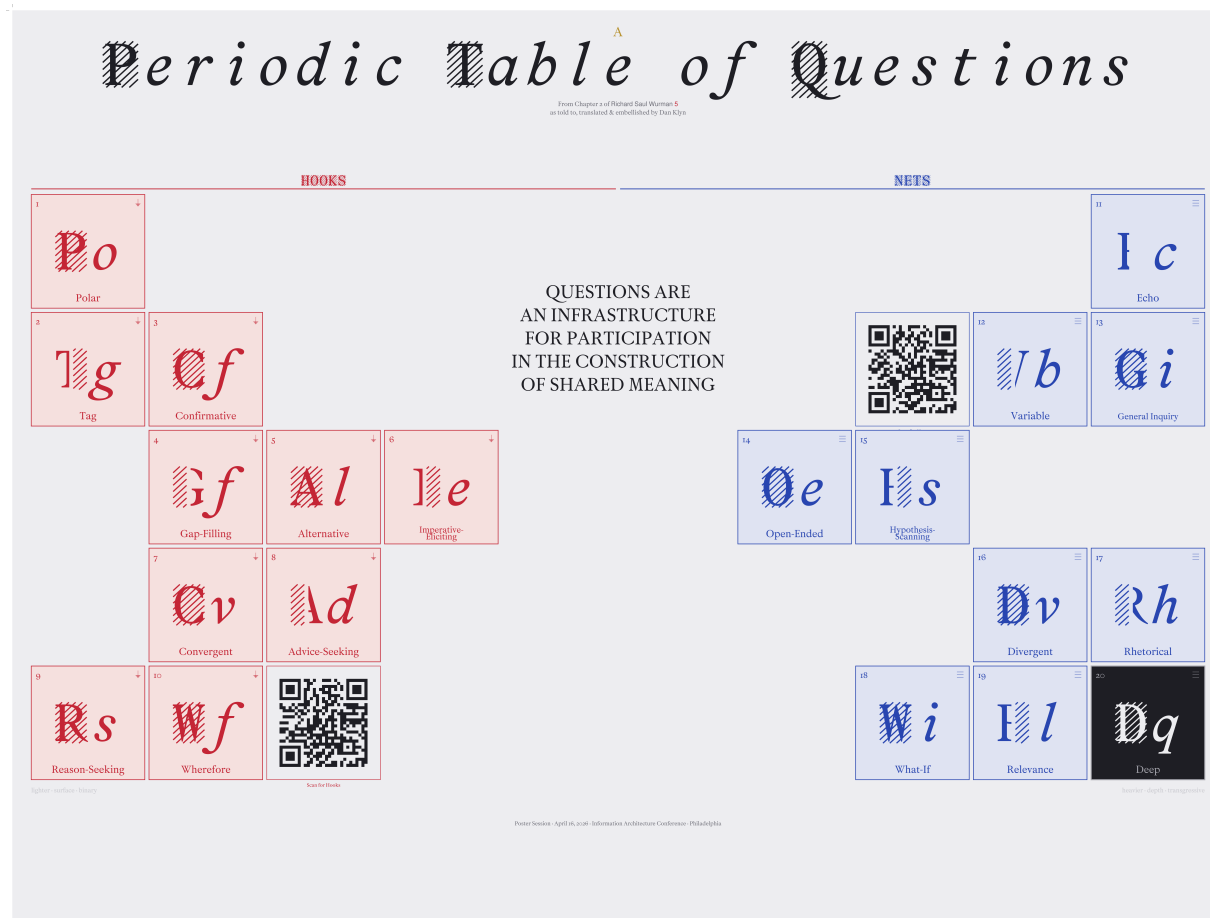
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APPENDIX A – THE PERIODIC TABLE OF QUESTIONS



From Volume 3, Research Paper, Appendix A of Richard Saul Wurman 5, as told to, translated & embellished by Dan Klyn. Available online at [danklyn.com/questions.html](http://danklyn.com/questions.html).

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