

# Vices of Questioning in Public Discourse

Lani Watson

University of Edinburgh

[philosophyofquestions.com](http://philosophyofquestions.com)

# OVERVIEW

- What is bad questioning
- An incomplete taxonomy of bad questioning
- Bad questioning in public discourse
- Conditions for bad questioning in public discourse

© 1999 ROBERTSON

WWW.ROBERTSON.COM



"I didn't ask for a nuanced explanation, it's a very simple question. Is he or is he not on the naughty list?"

# WHAT IS BAD QUESTIONING

The **good questioner** acts competently in order to elicit worthwhile information.

- Worthwhile – concerns what you ask
- Competent – concerns when, where, who, and how you ask

The **bad questioner** goes wrong in at least one of these ways:

- The subject matter of the question is not worthwhile
- The asking of the question is incompetent

**Bad questions *qua* questions** impede or prevent epistemic progress.

**Bad questioning and intellectual vice:**

Bad questioning is not itself an intellectual vice. Bad questioning is an intellectual incompetence that features in many of the intellectual vices e.g. dogmatism, prejudice, arrogance, closed-mindedness,

# AN INCOMPLETE TAXONOMY OF BAD QUESTIONING

<b>Aggressive questions:</b> Questions asked in an aggressive manner.	<b>Inapt questions:</b> Questions asked using an unsuitable medium.
<b>Categorical questions:</b> Questions containing absolutes ('always', 'ever')	<b>Inefficient questions:</b> Questions asked in a long-winded way.
<b>Closed questions:</b> Questions that require a yes or no answer.	<b>Leading questions:</b> Questions that favour one answer over others.
<b>Compound questions:</b> Questions with a compound presupposition.	<b>Loaded questions:</b> Questions with a contentious presupposition.
<b>Double-barrelled questions:</b> Questions that ask more than one thing.	<b>Rude questions:</b> Questions asked in a rude manner.
<b>Inappropriate questions:</b> Questions asked in an inappropriate context.	<b>Unclear questions:</b> Questions that lack clarity.
<b>'The wrong question':</b> A question is the 'wrong question' if its subject matter is trivial or disvaluable, or it is irrelevant or insignificant given the questioner's aims and context.	

# AN INCOMPLETE TAXONOMY OF BAD QUESTIONING

<b>Aggressive questions:</b> Questions asked in an aggressive manner.	<b>Inapt questions:</b> Questions asked using an unsuitable medium.
<b>Categorical questions:</b> Questions containing absolutes ('always', 'ever')	<b>Inefficient questions:</b> Questions asked in a long-winded way.
<b>Closed questions:</b> Questions that require a yes or no answer.	<b>Leading questions:</b> Questions that favour one answer over others.
<b>Compound questions:</b> Questions with a compound presupposition.	<b>Loaded questions:</b> Questions with a contentious presupposition.
<b>Double-barrelled questions:</b> Questions that ask more than one thing.	<b>Rude questions:</b> Questions asked in a rude manner.
<b>Inappropriate questions:</b> Questions asked in an inappropriate context.	<b>Unclear questions:</b> Questions that lack clarity.
<b>'The wrong question':</b> A question is the 'wrong question' if its subject matter is trivial or disvaluable, or it is irrelevant or insignificant given the questioner's aims and context.	

# BAD QUESTIONING IN PUBLIC DISCOURSE

## Closed questions:

Closed questions are not always bad questions. They can be exactly what is needed in order to start a discussion, to clarify a position, to get the precise information you want, and so on.

Closed questions are bad questions when they impede or prevent epistemic progress.

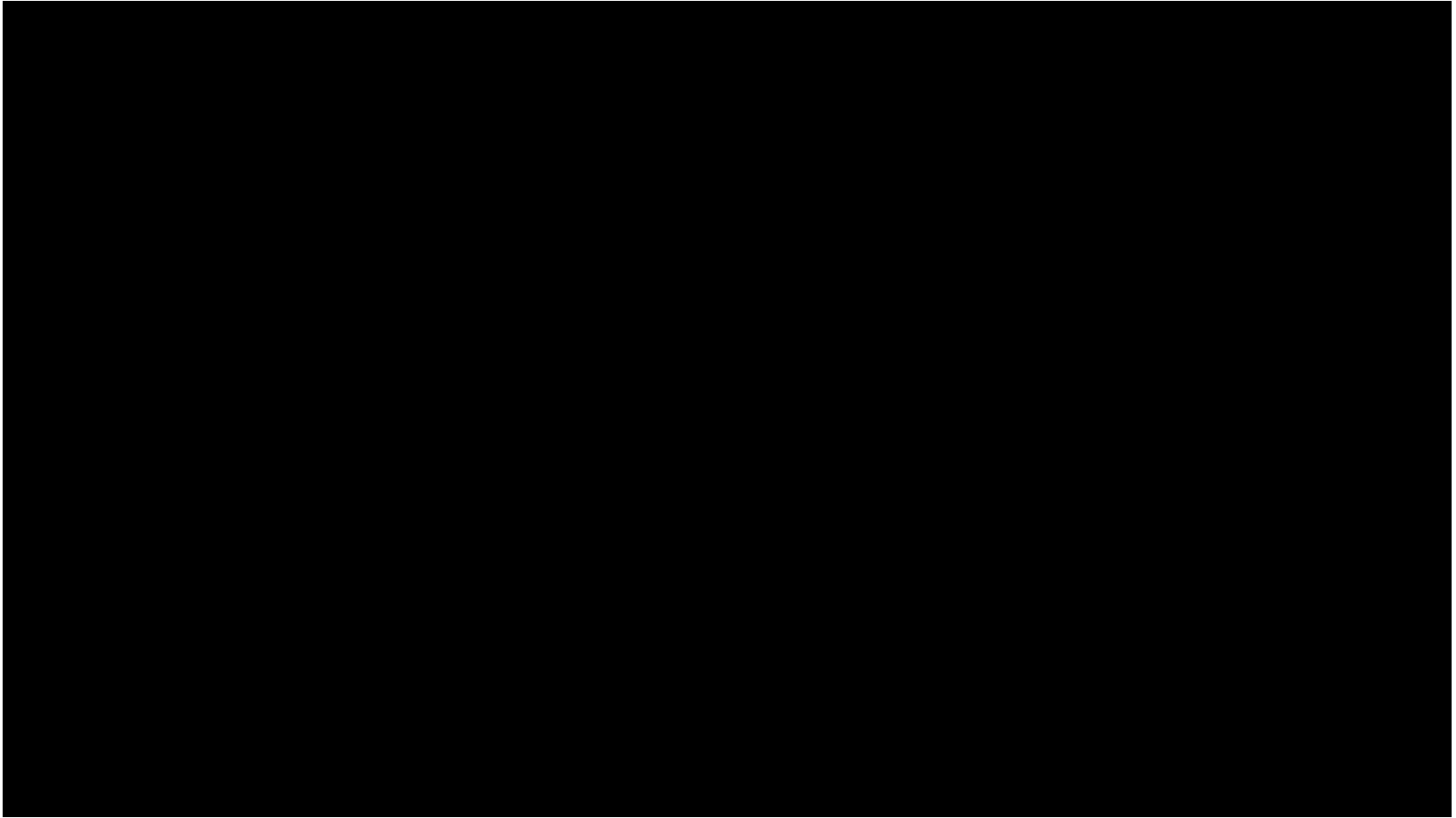
This is most often the case when a closed question is asked where a more complex or nuanced answer is required or preferable. The respondent is forced to select one of a limited number of options (for example, yes or no), thereby restricting, sometimes drastically, the information they can offer.



"I didn't ask for a nuanced explanation, it's a very simple question. Is he or is he not on the naughty list?"

# BAD QUESTIONING IN PUBLIC DISCOURSE

**Closed (and slippery) questions:**



# BAD QUESTIONING IN PUBLIC DISCOURSE

## **Compound and loaded questions:**

Compound (aka complex) and loaded questions are not always bad questions. They are bad questions when they impeded or prevent epistemic progress.

Often this is because they are used in a way that obscures the respondent's true commitments and/or forces the respondent to commit to a contentious or unjustified assumption.

“limits the respondent's options so that he is forced to accept propositions that he is not really committed to, and would disavow, if given reasonable chance to do so” (Walton, 1999, p.382)

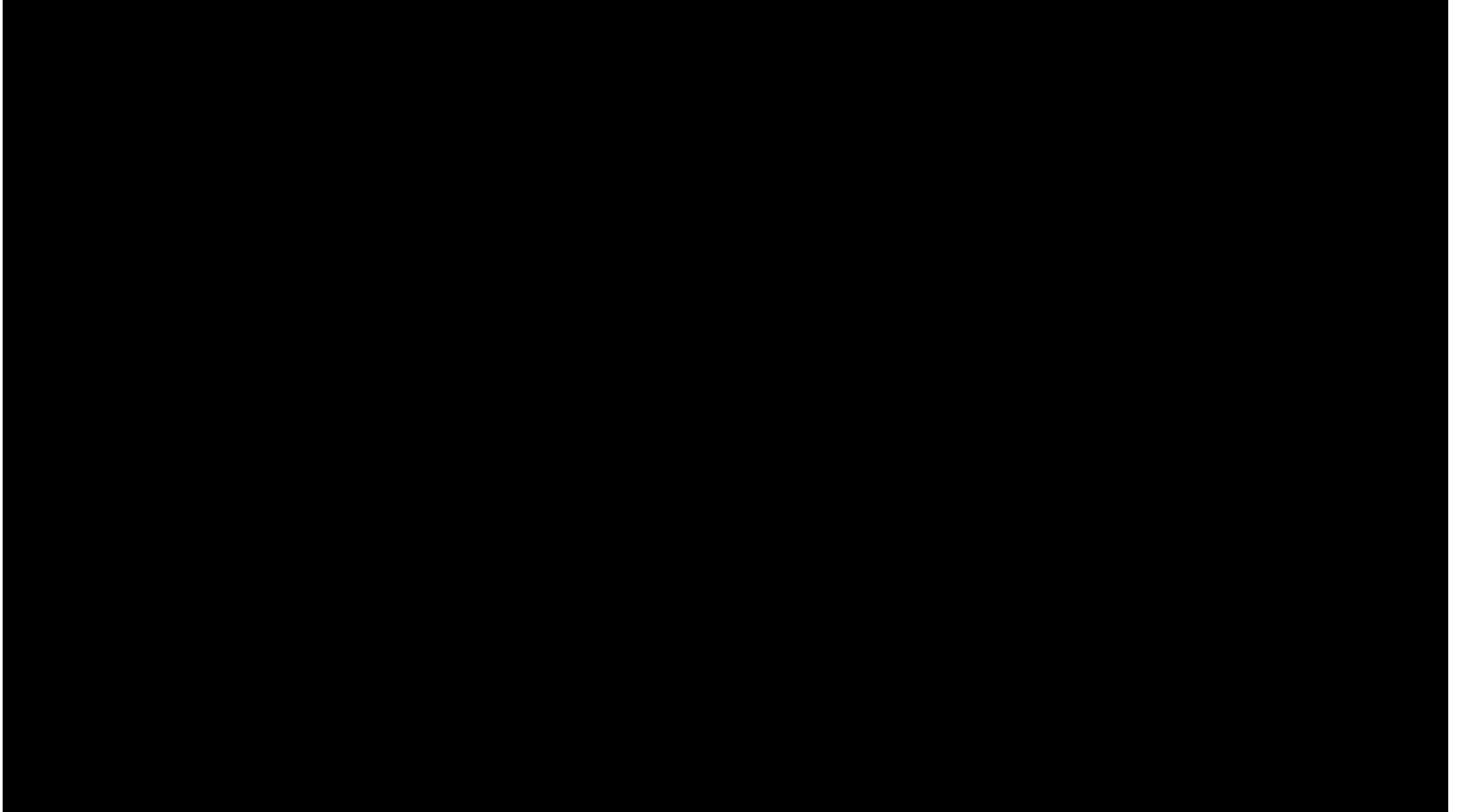
In a trial or deposition, the opposing party can object to such a question. If the objection is sustained, the question must be withdrawn and asked in a series of separate questions.

"When did you stop cheating on your income tax returns?" The question is a when-question, so, in order to give a direct answer, the respondent has to indicate some particular time like, for example, December 2nd, 1976. However, in this case, if the respondent does give such a specific time as answer, then it is clear that he has become committed to having cheated on his income tax returns and, presumably, this is a proposition which generally he would not be want to concede, or at any rate, would be prejudicial, or not in his interest to concede." (Walton, 1999, p.379)



# BAD QUESTIONING IN PUBLIC DISCOURSE

**Compound and loaded questions:**



# BAD QUESTIONING IN PUBLIC DISCOURSE

## Leading questions:

Leading questions are, once again, not always bad questions. They are bad questions when they impede or prevent epistemic progress. They are worded in such a way that a particular answer is favoured over others.

In trial or deposition, leading questions can be objected to by the opposing party.

“How fast were the cars going when they **hit** each other” vs. “How fast were the cars going when they **smashed into** each other” or “How fast were the cars going when they **bumped into** each other”.

They are also problematic in research surveys.



"Objection, Your Honor. Counsel is leading the witness."

CN  
COLLECTION

# BAD QUESTIONING IN PUBLIC DISCOURSE

## **Leading questions:**

### **Referendum on Scottish Independence:**

Proposed question: “Do you agree that Scotland should be an independent country?”

Actual question: “Should Scotland be an independent country?”

### **UK referendum on EU membership:**

Proposed question: "Should the United Kingdom remain a member of the European Union?"

Actual question: Should the United Kingdom remain a member of the European Union or leave the European Union?

**The New Zealand corporal punishment referendum**, 2009 was held from 31 July to 21 August, and was a citizens-initiated referendum on parental corporal punishment.

Actual question: “Should a smack as part of good parental correction be a criminal offence in New Zealand?”



# CONDITIONS FOR BAD QUESTIONING

What are the **corrupting conditions** that lead to bad questioning in public discourse.

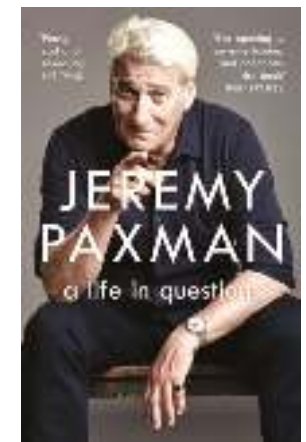
- Bad questioning is rewarded or given prominence
- Good questioning is not highly valued
- Good questioning is not well understood
- Questioning itself is not valued or understood
- Answers are valued at all costs



Dr Ian Kidd: corrupting influence

## Paxman case:

- Paxman's (bad) questioning is not only rewarded and given prominence, it is a large part of how he made his name and maintains his reputation.
- Paxman himself does not appear to value good questioning
- The media outlets that employ Paxman do not appear to value good questioning (e.g. Channel Four).
- Paxman epitomises a ruthless pursuit of answers.



# CONDITIONS FOR BAD QUESTIONING

What are the **corrupting conditions** that lead to bad questioning in public discourse.

- Bad questioning is rewarded or given prominence
- Good questioning is not highly valued
- Good questioning is not well understood
- Questioning itself is not valued or understood
- Answers are valued at all costs
- **Pragmatic and environmental constraints**
- **Accepted (unquestioned) norms**

## Academic Q&As:

- Do academic question and answer sessions **promote** bad questioning practices.



Dr Ian Kidd: corrupting influence



"We'd now like to open the floor to shorter speeches disguised as questions."

# SOME HOPE...

## Accountability and education:



Olof Scran · 5 months ago

We'll probably get nuked before Paxman lets someone finish a sentence

REPLY · 1.5K ·

View all 27 replies ▾



Kayleigh Brinkman · 5 months ago

let. JEREMY. ANSWER THE QUESTION.

REPLY · 541 ·

View all 17 replies ▾



talha naveed · 5 months ago

These debates had a lot of potential. Unfortunately paxman completely ruined it. I think he tried to be difficult but he just came across as rude.

REPLY · 312 ·

View all 7 replies ▾



Cedrik S. · 5 months ago

I'm actually really impressed by Corbyn.. I think I decided who I'm gonna vote for

REPLY · 325 ·

View all 18 replies ▾



Senora Robbie @senorag2 · May 19

Replying to @Channel4News @Channel4

Any chance women would start up long enough for Jeremy to answer a question about his own past? Please postman.

· 11 ·



Wass33 @UKWass33 · May 29

Replying to @Channel4News @Channel4

4 good news take let @JeremyCorbyn speak up like paxman don't what corbyn said. I'll will be voting for corbyn this election and so should u

· 1 ·



Sian Upton @sianu14 · May 20

Replying to @Channel4News @Channel4

It's awkward. Can't be Corbyn or you. He was a terrible interviewer and he's biased.

· 11 ·



David Herman @DavidMarkHerman · May 20

Replying to @Channel4News @MichaelLutzk @Channel4

Waste of time. Time for late TV debates they broadcast.

· 13 ·



Catherine Slater @cslater04 · May 19

Replying to @Channel4News @Channel4

You should be ashamed of Paxman. His questioning and approach is completely unprofessional and unhelpful to the nation when trying to educate

· 11 ·

Thank you!

Any (good) questions...

Lani Watson

University of Edinburgh

[philosophyofquestions.com](http://philosophyofquestions.com)