THE FOUR QUESTIONS

The process of asking questions does not conclude once the point of stasis has been identified. Ordinarily, the determination of the question for debate will give rise to other questions. Ancient rhetoricians devised a list of four questions, or stases, that would help them refine their grasp on the point at issue.[1]

1. CONJECTURE *(stasis stochasmos)*—"Is there an act to be considered?"
2. DEFINITION *(stasis horos)*—"How can the act be defined?"
3. QUALITY *(stasis poiotes)*—"How serious is the act?"
4. POLICY *(stasis metalepsis)*—"Should this act be submitted to some formal procedure?"

If someone is accused of theft, for example, the first question that must be raised is conjecture: "Did she do it or not?" If all parties agree that she took the property in question, the stasis moves to a question of **definition:** "Was it theft?" (She might have borrowed it). And if everyone agrees that the act can be defined as theft, the stasis becomes: "Was it right or wrong?" (The theft might be justified on any number of grounds—she took liquor from the house of a friend who is an alcoholic, for instance). The ancients called this stasis **quality,** and we will use this term as well. Last, if the question of quality is agreed upon, the stasis then becomes: "Should she be tried for the offense?" This is the question of procedure or **policy.**

THE FOUR QUESTIONS

Conjecture: Does it exist? Did it happen?

Definition: What kind of thing or event is it?

Quality: Was it right or wrong?

Policy: What should we do?

When a rhetor begins to examine an issue, according to Cicero, he should ask:

Does the thing about which we are disputing exist? (Latin *an sit*)

If it exists, what is it? (*quid sit*)

What kind of thing is it?" (*quale sit*)

Cicero said that the first is a question of reality, the second of definition, and the third of quality (*On the Parts* xviii 62). If, for example, a rhetor were concerned with the theoretical issue of justice, she might employ the three questions as follows:

A. "Does justice exist in nature or is it merely a human convention?"

B. "Can justice be defined as that which benefits the majority?"

C. "Is it advantageous to live justly or not?"

The first question forces the rhetor to conjecture about whether justice exists and, if so, where; the second, how it can be defined; and the third, what its value is, and to whom. Cicero and Quintilian insisted that only the first three questions were really necessary to the preparation of arguments to be used outside the courtroom. Nevertheless, the fourth stasis, policy, is sometimes useful in nonlegal settings. People who deliberate in assemblies often have to decide how to regulate practices.

Stasis theory is as useful to writers as it is to speakers, since rhetors must assess the probable response of an audience to their work. Cicero recommended that speakers and writers work through the questions in order. The process of working through questions of conjecture, definition, and quality, in order, will help rhetors to find the points about which they and their audience agree; it will also establish the point from which they must begin the argument—the point where they disagree. In the first stasis, the rhetor determines whether or not he and his audience agree about the existence of some being or the commission of some act. If they do, this stasis is no longer relevant or useful, having been agreed to—waived—by both parties. In the second stasis, the rhetor determines whether or not he and his audience agree about the classification of the being or the act; if so, the stasis of definition may be passed by. Third, the rhetor determines whether he and his audience agree about the value of the being or the seriousness of the act. That is, what is its relevance to the community as a whole? According to Cicero, in the third stasis, there is a controversy about the nature or character of an act when there is both agreement as to what has been done and certainty as to how the act should be defined, but there is a question nevertheless about how important it is or in general about its quality: for example, was it just or unjust, profitable or unprofitable? (*De Inventione* I viii 12).

ELABORATING THE QUESTIONS

Each of the four questions can be elaborated into other sets of questions. According to Cicero, there are four ways of dealing with a question of conjecture (*Topics* xxi 82). One can ask

Whether the thing exists or is true?

What its origin is?

What cause produced it?

What changes can be made in it?

Some modern rhetoricians call the issue of conjecture "the question of fact." However, the Greek term *stochasmos* is more literally translated as "a guess" or "an inference." Since the term *fact* connotes the sort of hard physical evidence we discussed in the first chapter of this book, it is misleading here. The stasis of conjecture does not establish anything at all about the truth or fact of the matter under discussion; rather, it represents an educated guess about what might be or what might have occurred. And since reality may be perceived very differently by people who occupy different social and political positions, people may paint very different pictures of that reality. For example, a man who tells a dirty joke to his colleagues at work may think that he is only being friendly, while a woman colleague who hears the joke may feel that it belittles women. Or, in another example of conjecture, a recipient of aid to Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) might describe a welfare check as the only means she has for feeding her children. A politician who is opposed to welfare, however, might characterize that very same check as a handout to freeloaders. These people have all offered conjectures about the way the world is or how people behave. In the examples given here, each party has some stake or **interest** in picturing the joke or the welfare check in the way that they do. Their disagreement about these facts is what renders conjecture rhetorical.

Questions of Conjecture

Does it exist? Is it true?

Where did it come from? How did it begin?

What is its cause?

Can it be changed?

For an example, let's return to the case being prepared by the astronomer who wants a dark-sky ordinance to be passed in her city. Under the question of conjecture, the astronomer can ask:

Does light pollution exist in the city?

What is the origin of the pollution?

What causes it?

What will change it?

When she tries to answer these questions, the astronomer learns that she will probably need to provide evidence that light pollution does indeed exist. She will need to provide further evidence that the pollution is not natural (that is, that it doesn't originate from moonlight or starlight). She will have to establish that the pollution is caused by billboards and streetlights, and she will need to establish further that elimination of these two sources

will produce a level of light that will make astronomic observation possible.

Use of the stasis of conjecture is often productive in just this way—that is, it demonstrates to rhetors what evidence they need in order to mount their arguments. Sometimes, use of the stasis of conjecture also establishes that there is no issue, or that a rhetor has framed the issue incompletely, or that he wants to change his mind about the issue. Because heuristics often produce surprises—that is what they are for, after all—rhetors must be prepared for shifts in their thinking. When using the stases or any means of invention, then, rhetors should always allow time for intellectual development to occur.

If all parties to the discussion agree about the conjecture—the description of the state of things—the search for stasis moves on to matters of definition.

Questions of Definition

What kind of thing of event is it?

To what larger class of things does it belong?

What are its parts? How are they related?

Definitions are rhetorical because they can determine on whose ground the question will be taken up (see Chapter 9, on the sophistic topics, for more about definition). In this case, the astronomer can take advantage of the rhetorical aspect of definition to compose one that suits her interest. She is the probably the only party, other than thieves and lovers, who has an interest in defining light pollution.

Definition requires that the astronomer name the particular or proper quality of light pollution and divide it into its parts. Let's say that she defines light pollution as "that level of light which is sufficient to interfere with astronomical observations." She might then divide such light levels into light caused by

billboards,
streetlights,
home lighting, and
natural sources.

This **division** demonstrates to her that she needs evidence that establishes the level of pollution caused by each of these sources (see the chapter on the sophistic topics for more about division). It tells her further that if the evidence demonstrates that natural light is not an important factor in creating light pollution, she can concentrate her major arguments on the other sources of light, all of which can be mitigated by a dark-sky ordinance. As it does here, the stasis of definition will sometimes produce a way of dividing up the discourse—producing what ancient rhetoricians called the **partition** (see Chapter 10, on arrangement, for more about partitions).

Other parties concerned about this issue might, on one hand, return to the question of conjecture to assert that there is no such thing as light pollution, in an attempt to render the astronomer's definition irrelevant. If they succeed in this, she too will be forced to return to the stasis of conjecture if all parties wish to continue the discussion. If they accede to her definition, on the other hand, the argument is in stasis and all parties can turn to the next stasis, quality. If they do accept that light pollution exists and that it can be defined as the astronomer asserts, she has been able to set up the discussion in terms that favor her interest.

Questions of quality may be asked in two ways: simply or by comparison. Simple questions of quality attempt to determine the worth of the issue—its justice or rightness or honor—or how much the community desires it. Comparative questions of quality put the issue in the context of other qualities, comparing it with related issues in order to determine its priority among the community's values. If asked simply, then, the question of quality is "Is light pollution a good or a bad thing?" If asked comparatively in this case, the question could become "Is the safety of citizens more important than the needs of astronomers?"

According to Cicero, there are three kinds of simple questions of quality:

what to seek and what to avoid,

what is right and what wrong,

what is honorable and what base. (*Topics* xxi 84)

Questions of Quality

Simple Questions of Quality

Is it a good or a bad thing?

Should it be sought or avoided?

Is it right or wrong?

Is it honorable or dishonorable?

Comparative Questions of Quality

Is it better or worse than something else?

Is it more desirable than any alternatives?

Is it less desirable than any alternatives?

Is it more or less right than something else?

Is it more or less wrong than something else?

Is it more honorable than something else?

Is it less honorable than something else?

Is it more base than something else?

Is it less base than something else?

Thus our astronomer might ask the following simple questions of quality:

Should lower levels of light pollution be sought or should they be avoided?

If the lower levels of light affect other situations, like citizens's safety, should they then be avoided?

That is, is it right or wrong to ask for lower levels of light?

Is it honorable to put the needs of astronomers above those of ordinary citizens?

Is it dishonorable to deprive citizens of a source of safety?

Thinking comparatively, the rhetor compares the importance of her issue to other related issues. In the astronomer's case, for example, a general comparative question of quality is:

Should the present state of affairs, which includes light pollution, be preferred to a state of affairs in which light pollution has been lessened?

A comparative specific question is:

Should the present state of affairs in Ourtown, which includes lighted billboards, be maintained in preference to an imagined state of affairs (or the actual state of affairs in Othertown) where lighted billboards have been eliminated so that astronomers can see better?

Since questions of comparison are of two kinds—similarity and difference—the astronomer will ask herself what differences will be brought about in her observations of the night sky if light pollution is reduced; under the head of similarity, she also will consider what problems might remain even if light pollution is reduced. If she is systematic in her use of the stases, she must produce all the available arguments, even those that oppose her position. She can be sure that those who disagree with her will produce these arguments, and so she must be prepared to answer them. For example, her use of the stasis of comparative difference will produce this question: will the reduction of light pollution, thus giving us a better view, alter our previous descriptions of the night sky? In other words, will astronomers be forced to revise our earlier work if we can see better?

As this example makes clear, the stases of quality are ordinarily very productive. Using them, the astronomer has generated some questions that should stimulate her to compose good arguments. The stases often allow rhetors to articulate assumptions that they take for granted but that may be controversial to others. For example, the astronomer might simply assume, without thinking about it, that other citizens value a dark sky as much as she does. Other citizens, however, will not take this proposition for granted. The police will be concerned about safety, and billboard companies will be concerned about possible loss of revenue if they cannot light their advertising signs at night. Use of the stasis, then, demonstrates to the astronomer that she must prepare arguments that defend the importance she places on a dark sky, should it become necessary to do so.

The fourth stasis, policy, is relevant in the astronomer's case, as well. In questions of policy, the rhetor proposes that some action be taken or that some action be regulated (or not) by means of a policy or law. Questions of policy are usually twofold: they are both deliberative and forensic. That is, a rhetor who wishes to put forward a question or issue of policy must first deliberate about the need for it and then argue for its implementation.

Questions of Policy

Deliberative Questions

Should some action be taken?

Given the rhetorical situation, what actions are possible? Desirable?

How will proposed actions change the current state of affairs? Or should the current state affairs remain unchanged?

How will the proposed changes make things better? Worse? How? In what ways? For whom?

Forensic Questions

Should some state of affairs be regulated (or not) by some formalized policy?

Which policies can be implemented? Which cannot?

What are the merits of competing proposals? What are their defects?

How is my proposal better than others? Worse?

Using the deliberative questions of policy, our astronomer is forced to ask herself some hard questions. She has already decided that some action should be taken. She needs now to ask herself whether her proposal to enact a dark-sky ordinance can be implemented and whether it is a good thing for the community it will affect. She needs to consider changes that its implementation might bring about—loss of revenue to Ourtown, possibly dangerous situations for citizens—and determine whether the seriousness of these changes outweighs the merits of her proposal. Turning to the forensic questions of policy, the astronomer realizes that she can enhance both her ethical and logical appeals by presenting the council with a draft of a proposed dark-sky ordinance. The draft demonstrates the depth of her concern about the situation, since she took the time to compose it. It also strengthens the possibility that her audience will use part or all of her draft when they write the ordinance, since busy people are likely to make use of work that has already been done. She can find arguments for implementing her proposal by showing how it will improve the current state of things, by showing how alternative proposals are not as satisfactory as her own, and by showing that implementation of her proposal is entirely possible. For example, she should try to counter the opposing argument that lowered levels of light can endanger citizens' safety. If possible, she should point out in her proposal that current levels of light from streetlights do not pose a problem to astronomical observation.

So if you wish, on one hand, to recommend that a policy or procedure be implemented, you must compose it. Find out how similar policies are enacted in similar situations, and compose a plan for implementing the one that you suggest. You should also determine how the policy that you recommend can be enforced. If you are recommending, on the other hand, that some public practice be implemented or changed, you must first compose your recommendation. Then find out who can make the changes you suggest, and find out what procedures must be followed in order to make the recommended change. You should also try to find out how your recommended change can be implemented and enforced and offer suggestions for achieving this.