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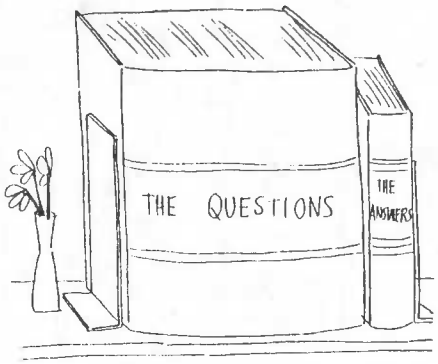
THE QUESTIONS WE CAN ANSWER AREN'T IMPORTANT

COROLLARY: Not all the questions we can't answer are important.
SCOPE: This Thinksheet is about the important questions human beings can't decisively (i.e., to everybody's satisfaction) answer but (because they are important) everybody should respond to.



1 For a long time now, as (among other motives) an insult to the Information Age, I've been shocking folks into conversations of consequence (& audiences into more than the usual polite responses) by baldly asserting this Thinksheet's title. In this visual on its current ad, COMMONWEAL, a Catholic periodical of vigorous intellection, is up to the same trick.

2 The contrarian in me wonders what would happen if for "The Answers" one were to substitute "The Responses." How thick would that book have to be to include all the responses, through time & throughout the world, to the question "What will happen to me after I die?"? Materialists say "Nothing! It's not even a question!" A stupid reply, since it's been & remains a question, an important question, for most of humanity: the book of responses to the question would be thick indeed.

3 For more reasons than that it keeps my old brain up to speed, I love to read the Talmud. When you come upon a tough question, you may have pages of rabbinic responses (*responsae*). Right after a rabbi with a dim-bulb response will come a rabbi whose response is a shining-sun of wisdom. The Talmud models for humankind the democracy, indeed the communion, of what Rilke called **"living the questions."**

4 God (in revelation) has answered for us some important questions we couldn't have answered on our own, without privileged information. The Bible presents many of these as **paradoxes** (i.e., truths that reverse common-sense expectations). His enemies expected Jesus to stay dead: Cross/Resurrection is the Bible's central paradox (1Cor.1.22-25), resolving some others-- e.g., God's justice/mercy (demands [Ex.20; Mt.5.20-48] / forgiveness [Hos; L.15]--as in Jn.3.16). God, who sends the blood into our feet, presents us with questions/problems/puzzles/paradoxes; if we don't do our part, our spirit dies (as our body dies if we don't return the blood up our legs by moving our feet)....In his PHILOSOPHICAL FRAGMENTS (1844), S.K. (Kierkegaard), lover of paradox, has this: "The paradox is the source of the thinker's passion, and the thinker without a paradox is like a lover without feeling; a paltry mediocrity." A famous paradox (same book): Even if God didn't exist, you couldn't prove it; "and if he does exist, it would be folly to attempt" to prove it.

5 **Stories** are the most satisfying & nourishing response to the perennial etiological (origins, causes) *who/what/when/where/why/how/whence* questions (let's call them the W-questions) nobody can answer indisputably (i.e., without dissenters). Long ago, a child of ours on a family walk one night asked "*Who* hung the stars in the sky?" STORY-response: The creation. Long long before that, an Israelite child asked "*Why* do our neighbors sacrifice children but we only a lamb?" STORY-response: The akedah (Gn.22.1-18--which also is a *whence* story). "When biblical man confessed his faith, he did so by telling the STORY of his past, interpreted by his faith. He learned to present his faith in the forms of hiSTORY [caps mine, G.E.Wright & R.H.Fuller, THE BOOK OF THE ACTS OF GOD, Doubleday/57/Anchor/60, 10]."....A movie is a story, & each of the film's frames is a still photograph--a "still"--in its story. We "understand" (the Gk. base of "epistemology") through our (agglutinative) ability to see the movie (the story, the paradigm) while examining its stills (words/phrases/ideas). Jesus "did not tell them anything without using stories. But when he was alone with his disciples, he explained everything to them" (M.4.34 CEV; Mt.13.34: "Jesus used stories [parables] when he spoke to the people. In fact, he did not tell them anything without using stories."). And even when to his inner circle he explained his parables, he did so within the Bible's Great Story. +

6 Not only Jesus' parables! In the wider epistemological sense, sense-making out of anything anybody says depends on the fact that all statements are stills within a story which provides the **assumptive field** (the nexus of assumptions) for intelligibility. Two recent instances: (1) Anent Kansas' strictures on teaching evolution in that states' public schools, a spokesperson for the National Academy of Sciences said that "biology cannot be understood [!]" without Darwin; (2) Anent the new Pentagon guidelines on homosexuals in the military, a Pentagon spokesperson said "some young people have not yet discovered [!] their sexual preference." Since I reject the assumptive field of each of those statements, neither makes sense to me--or to put it bluntly, the NAS & the Pentagon are pushing *nonsense*. The former assumes as fact a claim whose assumption is metaphysical, & metaphysical questions are in the category of unanswerables (i.e., can't be answered to everybody's satisfaction, so can't produce facts, science-as-facts): development is a *fact*, evolution is a *theory* now being falsely taught as fact in America's public schools. The latter assumes as fact something that is at least not yet answerable, viz. whether sexual preference is genetically predetermined, only awaiting case-by-case "discovery." The gay community, in paralleling race (which is genetically determined) with sexual preference, is running a propaganda number on the public & should be called to account for the apples/oranges illogic....These two instances occurred within the past three days. For clear thinking & intelligible public discourse, how important it is to distinguish un/answerable questions! Important intellectually, morally, politically, religiously, interpersonally, socially, & in self-understanding.

7 "In the old days I used to think that I knew all the answers. I finally discovered that God doesn't give *all* .... to anyone. He'll give you the clues--but it's up to you to find the answers....He created human nature and this garden we play in rather like He was founding a nursery to give His little spirits a chance to grow. Don't ever think that He isn't still tending the nursery. Life and everything in it is a gift. You're supposed to give as much of that gift to others as you possible can. That's how this nursery works. That's how you grow. ¶Real happiness is understanding that we're all in this together, that it is in giving that we escape our own prisons." (Geo.Roche, A REASON FOR LIVING [Regnery/89] 95-96). While this bit of philosophy belongs to these shortstories' author, the president of Hillsdale College (which is eminent for its libertarian-American values & its refusal of any unnecessary governmental entanglements [by refusing all tax-source money]), Dr.Roche here puts these words in the mouth of a drunk loner who when sober was taciturn. In all these stories, the storyteller uses the device of distancing (putting the storyteller's philosophy, & his specifically Christian affirmations, in the mouths of improbable evangelists); & he does it so well as to succeed (in my opinion) in fending off the criticism that these are sermons in story disguise. (Our drunk calls preachers "sanctimonious hypocrites," but on the very next page (97) he prays "You have to have Your representatives.")....In another story, a nearly suicidal physicians finds "a reason for living" (the booktitle) in saving a mother & child from freezing in an off-the-road truck. 142-3: "The only good that wins out in the end is the good that finally remembers its source. You've got to rise above the evil. Evil touches us all, all except God. Until we find ourselves in His arms, being a 'good man' just isn't enough."....And in yet another story, an aged man buries his aged sister & erects a stone reflecting his sister & the story (133): "We must seek God alone, but we will reach Him together."....The Trinity gets an orthodox statement: 98....144: "The cost of loving is very high, Charley, but the cost of *not* loving is a whole lot higher."....130: "man proposes and God disposes. I guess our job is just to do the best we can as long as we can....It doesn't really make any difference what we expect from life, but it makes a lot of difference what life expects from us...."Most of the things I thought were important haven't turned out to mean much. And the things I never gave a damn about are the ones that mattered, the ones I'd like another chance at....A boy doesn't get to be a man until he has a man's job to do....Helping others is paying your bills: 95,101,156....xii: "Our greatest and only resource is the miracle of human creativity in a relation of openness to the divine."....Geo.Gilder in the Foreword: This book is "an affirmation of the ingenuity of free and God-fearing men," through "explicitly Christian stories" crafted by a college president who fights "to preserve the values of a true American education against educational and legal bureaucracies run amok."