



# The Fundamental Question

---

Lincoln Stoller, PhD, 2020. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International license (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0)

[www.mindstrengthbalance.com](http://www.mindstrengthbalance.com)

---

*“You only live once, but if you do it right, one is enough.”*

— Mae West

## The Beginning

What would you say is the most fundamental question? Would it be the origin of the universe, or the meaning of life? What about, “Does God exist?” or “Is there other intelligent life in the universe?” I suggest there is a deeper question that underlies them all. I suggest the most fundamental question is, “How do we understand anything that we don’t already know?”

A person who is blue-green color blind cannot distinguish blue from green. They can see both, but they cannot tell them apart. How can you describe the difference between blue and green to a blue-

green colorblind person? If you said, “It’s like the difference between pink and orange,” would that make any sense?

What if there was someone who knew the answer to some tremendously important question-- let's call them a prophet--and they gave the answer in terms that used the words we didn't know, would we call that an answer? What if they explained it in words we did know but we couldn't make sense of?

Let's say the prophet is a mathematician, and they gave you formulas that answered the important question and these formulas were mathematically correct but exceeded your understanding. Would that answer your question?

The answer in each of these cases is no, because to ask any question presumes you will be able to understand the answer. That is, it presumes that you could see what you're looking for if you only knew where to look. All of the questions we ask make this presumption.

In fact, they are not really questions in the sense of looking for a new understanding. All of our questions only make sense as questions of location or arrangement. They are questions of the same form as, “Where did I leave my keys?” or, “Which one of these choices is correct?”

The fundamental difference between physics and mathematics is that physics answers are based on observation, while mathematical answers are based on consistency. These two approaches are largely independent. There are an infinite number of logically consistent mathematical expressions, and there are an infinite number of things that can be observed, but most of the expressions have no correlate in observation, and most observations have no mathematical expression.

Both physics and mathematics have a criteria for accepting novelty. It's because of the infinity of possible observations and proofs that these two fields can accept any innovation that satisfies one of these criteria: physicists will accept anything that's certifiably observable, and mathematicians will accept anything that's proved.



## The Middle

We don't live in either of these two worlds. No one but a physicist or mathematician is satisfied with an explanation grounded entirely in one of these fields. When we ask fundamental questions, we're expecting something personally meaningful. What is our basis for accepting an answer?

The answer to the question, "What is an answer for us personally?" depends on whether we're offered an answer we already knew but didn't think of--such as locating our keys--or whether we're offered an answer that we can't understand. Of course, it's the conflict between the kinds of answers we'll accept that makes all the difference.

If we're given a tangible answer, then we're sort of in the physics camp: we can touch and test the answer and it satisfies whatever need generated the question. We're satisfied. If we're given an intangible answer, then it could go either way. Usually, if you've got something you can apply to a problem, then you might call it an answer, even if it doesn't always work. If it doesn't work at all, then you're clearly in the market for a different answer.

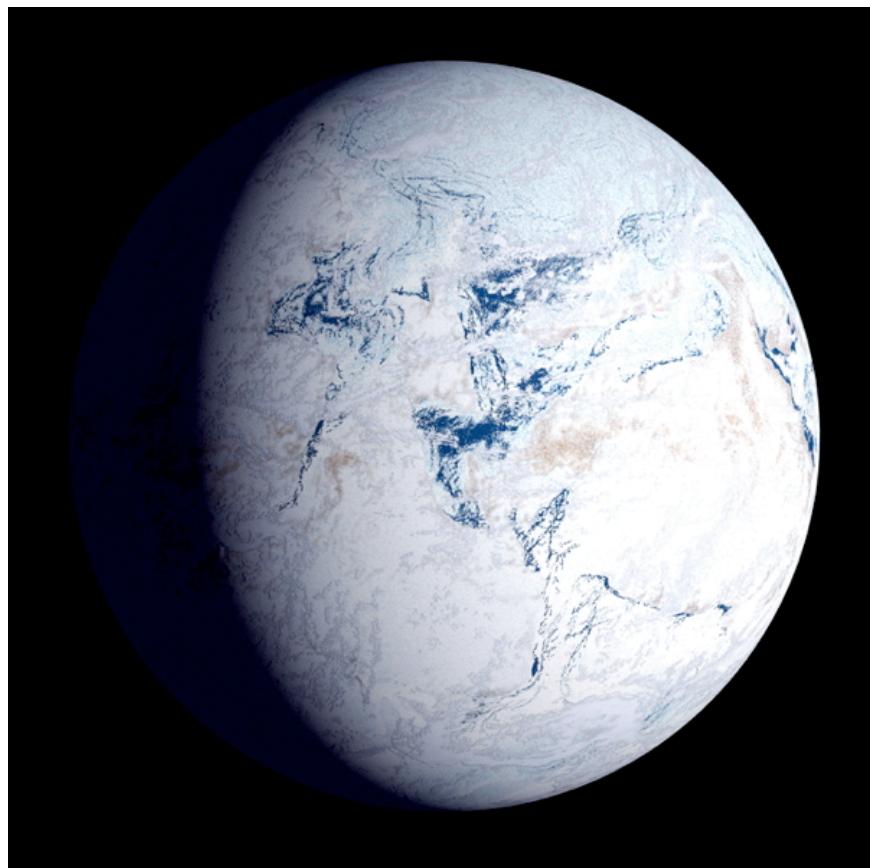
If you want rain or the crops to grow, then you might accept a solution that entails performing a ceremony because it sometimes works. Seeding clouds with dry ice and farming with nitrogen fertilizer might work better, though not always, so you might call those better answers.

What do you do if you're offered two answers, one that you understand and one that you don't? Let's say you've got a disease and you want a cure, and your religion says pray, and your doctor says it's hopeless. What then?

Well, naturally, you'll pray. What else could you do? Perhaps you'd abandon the whole question and go out and have fun, but that would be cheating because that doesn't answer the question.

The issue lies here: is an answer something you do or something you know? Those two paths have formed the warp and the woof of the fabric of human history. And it's because we have those two elements--and no other animal seems to have gotten as caught up in them as much as we have--we have made our species special.

However, this in no way means that we can answer fundamental questions. It means that humans have created a new kind foundation on which we can build things, but it is not a foundation that can support everything.



The insightful approach to the fundamental question is to recognize how we structure answers, and to consider how this defines what an answer can be. It turns out that as robust and inclusive we may

feel is our ability to formulate answers, there is an infinite area beyond this foundation.

I take it as proved that there are an infinite number of logically consistent possibilities that we are not able to observe, and an infinite number of things we can observe that we cannot logically explain. It is the intersection of these two domains--those things that we can both observe and explain--that satisfies our demand for answers. The domain of that space, the proportion of explanations that meet our criteria compared to the explanations that don't, is, to use a mathematical term that you will understand, "a space of measure zero."

This should be somewhat deflating. It certainly casts doubt on our search for the ultimate answer. Worse than that, it casts doubt on our ability to find any fundamental answers, at all. But I don't think things are as bad as all that.

The problem is here: what are we to do with answers that we don't understand? Or, to put it another way, how are we to come to new understandings? I have answers to both of these questions, and they are not trivial answers, either.

Consider answers we don't understand, such as, "There is a god," or, "The universe is a hologram." We accept these as answers, at least some of us do, so what does this tell us? It tells us that in some cases, and for some people, a fundamental answer lies along a dimension that has two extremes: the answer can mean nothing or it can mean anything.

"There is a god," which is an answer similar in form to the statement, "The purpose of life is to be happy," means nothing in itself. It's actually the name of a program, and it's the program that provides a practical answer to a fundamental question. This program does not provide a logically consistent answer. Some fundamentalists might disagree, but they are out of their territory.

Religion is not logically consistent and it's a fraud to claim it to be. It can never win the logic battle and, as far as its adherents are concerned, it does not need to. Religion answers the practical side of the question of existence, and it can provide a much better answer in that domain if it sticks to the criterion of practicality. Unfortunately, religions don't patrol their practicality well, but that's a different problem.

At the other end of the nothing/anything dichotomy lies those answers that we cannot understand, and we cannot even think we understand them. Here lie the logically consistent answers that we cannot observe, or we cannot understand what we observe.

The statements such as “the universe is a hologram,” or, “before the Big Bang time did not exist,” or, “everything exists because of fundamental equations,” may all be true. At least, there may exist logically consistent demonstrations of them. But do they really answer our fundamental questions?

They do not. They answer their own questions, or questions that only have a use within the mindset of a holographer, an astrophysicist, or a mathematician. Actually, holographers, astrophysicists, and mathematicians with perfect integrity would never claim their answers applied to you, which is why they have no interest in religion.

These two forms of answer to our fundamental questions--nothing and anything--are two forms of the same answer. A nothing answer leaves space for anything, and an anything answer gives no direction.



## The End

You may think that our discussion has brought us nowhere, but that's not the case. It's brought us to the conclusion that unless you can formulate your answers in terms that are practical, you don't have a valid question. All you've got is a program, and that program can amount to anything or nothing at all.

This focuses us on the practical: a useful answer must have practical meaning. Practical meaning refers to something that you have experienced, something that has told you something about how the

world works and indicates to you how you should work in it. Neither god nor equations fulfill this requirement. It's the program, the prescription, the algorithm, or the instructions that constitute the answer.

But we're not quite done. There's one small path that we need to traverse, and that's the path of learning. Whenever we learn something, we expand the range of what we can do. This expands what we can admit to our program, the range of our algorithm, and the possible instructions that we can follow. If we never learn anything, then the limits of our program are circumscribed. That may still leave us a large domain of possibilities, but, from a practical point of view, we're constrained to think and act within a limited range.

Important kinds of learning involve things that provide new options. How do we do that? How do we learn something that we don't know? Is that not a fundamental question? Does it not have the same answer as the answer we've just determined? Is it not the case that in learning something totally new, which is not constrained or attached to anything we already know, it can mean nothing, anything, or something in between?

Defining the realm of answers brings us to the question of how we enlarge the realm of answers. This, in turn, returns us to the question of what we knew before, and how we add to that.

I assert that it can be proved the set of possible answers is infinite, and that the process of expanding out from our limited domain of understanding is recursive. That is, there can be no answer to how we learn because we can never define what it is to know, in the first place.

In summary, all those who want fundamental answers are doomed. It never made any sense and, while we now have ziga-bytes of answers, they only amount to instructions for finding our metaphorical keys somewhere in an increasingly large house of facts. As far as the fundamental questions go, our answers are still some combination of nothing and anything, and no combination of that form meets the requirement of practicality.

I've performed a slight of hand. This has been a shell game, and perhaps you've missed it. I've distracted you to consider fundamental answers when the real trick lies in recognizing the fundamental questions. And the truth of the matter is that none of the fundamental questions make any sense.



By Lincoln Stoller, PhD, CHt, <https://www.mindstrengthbalance.com>

---

To subscribe to the *Change Your Life Newsletter*, [\*\*CLICK HERE\*\*](#).