

## **Stasis Theory: Finding Common Ground And Asking Pertinent Questions**

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Stasis theory was first developed by Hermagoras, a Greek rhetorician who taught in Rome during the 1<sup>st</sup> Century B.C. The techniques were refined by Roman rhetoricians Cicero and Quintilian and used for many centuries to invent arguments for debates, persuasive speeches, and trials.

The first step is to agree on the question being discussed. Quintilian says, “Every question is based on assertion by one party and denial by another” (III vi 7). However, a lot of questions are never resolved because the two sides are not asserting and denying the same question. For example, in the debate about abortion, the “pro-life” side generally asserts that “Abortion is murder,” while the “pro-choice” side argues that “Women have a right to choose what happens to their own bodies.” These parties cannot productively debate until they agree on what question they are debating. Reaching agreement on the question is called “achieving stasis.”

### **Definite and Indefinite Questions**

Quintilian says that questions are either definite or indefinite. Indefinite, or general, questions can be argued without reference to a particular person, time or place. Definite questions, on the other hand, involve particular people, times and places (Quintilian III v. 6-10).

A definite question is always encompassed by a larger, indefinite question. For example, the Supreme Court case known as *Brown versus the Board of Education* was in part about a definite question concerning the right of African-American families in Topeka, Kansas in 1952, among them Oliver Brown and his daughter Linda, to send their children to white schools in their neighborhoods. However, the decision also involved an indefinite or general question about whether segregated schools, even if the physical circumstances and other tangible factors may be equal, can ever truly be equal. Supreme Court decisions often derive general principles from arguments about particular, definite questions. These cases then establish a precedent for decisions about other definite questions in lower courts.

It is often useful to think about the general question behind the definite question that arises from the particular circumstances of the immediate situation. The writer or speaker can then decide whether it is better to argue the general question or the definite one.

### **Stasis Questions**

Once the question under discussion has been formulated, the stasis questions come into play. Cicero argues that “Every subject which contains in itself any controversy existing either in language or in disputation, contains a question either about

a fact, or about a name, or about a class, or about an action” (*De Inventione* I viii). These are the four basic stasis questions:

Question of Fact or Conjecture: Does it exist? Did it happen?

Question of Definition: How can the act or event be defined?

Question of Quality: What is the character of the act?

Question of Policy: What should we do?

These questions can help a writer or a speaker think about the question at issue. In the ancient world, the stasis questions were often applied to legal questions and trials. For example, let’s look at the situation of the persona in Bob Marley’s “I Shot the Sheriff.”

I shot the sheriff, but I did not shoot the deputy.

I shot the sheriff, but I did not shoot the deputy.

All around in my home town

They’re trying to track me down.

They say they want to bring me in guilty

For the killing of a deputy,

For the life of a deputy.

If the court were trying him for the murder of the sheriff, it is not a question of fact because he admits to the shooting. However, according to the song, the community thinks he is guilty of killing the deputy, which he denies. Thus, the dispute actually is about, “Did it happen?”

About the sheriff the speaker says,

I shot the sheriff, but I swear it was in self-defense.

On the issue of the sheriff then, the question is one of definition. Is it correct to call this killing “self-defense”? From that we move to the issue of quality, or “Was the killing just or unjust?” And then to the question of policy, “What should we do about it?” which in this case would be “What should the sentence be?”

### **Exploring Arguments**

The stasis questions can also be used to discover arguments that can be used to persuade the audience. For this purpose, a more elaborate set of questions is useful. The following is based on the presentation in Cicero’s *Topics* (XXI) and on Crowley and Hawhee, *Ancient Rhetorics for Contemporary Students* (68-73).

1. Fact or Conjecture: Does it exist? Did it happen?
  - a. Is it true, or is it only opinion?
  - b. Where did it come from? How did it begin?
  - c. What is its cause?

- d. Can it be changed?
- 2. Definition: How can the act or event be defined?
  - a. What kind of thing or event is it?
  - b. To what larger class of things does it belong?
  - c. What are its parts? How are they related?
- 3. Quality: What is the character of the act?
  - a. Is it a good or a bad thing?
  - b. Should it be sought or avoided?
  - c. Was it right or wrong?
  - d. Is it honorable or dishonorable?
  - e. Is it better or worse than something else?
  - f. Is it more or less important than something else?
- 4. Policy: What should we do?
  - a. Should some action be taken?
  - b. What actions are possible or desirable?
  - c. How will proposed actions change the current state of affairs?
  - d. How will proposed actions make things better?

### **A Sample Issue**

Let's take the issue of climate change as an example. First we have to agree on the main issue. Some people say that global warming is a current threat and that we have to take immediate action, such as reducing the emissions of greenhouse gases, to combat it. Others say that there is no global warming, or if there is, it is part of a natural cycle and we can't do anything about it. Others say that even if there is global warming, and it is caused by humans, reducing greenhouse gases will harm our economy, so we can't do anything. All of these positions seem to be included in the question, "Should we take action to stop global warming?"

If we apply the stasis questions to the issue of climate change, we might get questions like these:

Fact or Conjecture: Does it exist? Did it happen?

Is the Earth's climate changing? If so, is it warming up, cooling down, or both?

How and when did these changes start?

What causes these changes? Are they caused by human activity? Do they happen naturally?

Can they be slowed or stopped? Can they be hastened?

Definition: How can the act or event be defined?

Can these climate changes be defined as global warming or as something else? If so, how should we define global warming?

How does global warming fit into the other aspects of climate change? How does it fit into the natural climate changes that led to ice ages in the past?

What are the different parts of the process of climate change?

Quality: What is the character of the act?

Is climate change harmful?

Is it right to try to stop it?

Is economic prosperity better than energy conservation?

Which is more important, the short-term health of the economy or the long-term stability of the climate?

Policy: What should we do?

Should we try to stop climate change? What will happen if we do nothing?

Should we act to reduce emissions of greenhouse gasses?

Should we try to conserve energy?

Should we switch to nuclear power?

Will any of these actions reduce global warming?

Will these actions create other problems?

Developing and answering these questions will provide a very thorough exploration of the issues related to global warming, and will provide a sound basis for a research project, a persuasive speech, or an analysis of articles and reports on global warming. Stasis theory provides a framework for inquiry into any imaginable issue, and should become a useful part of any student's reading and writing tool kit. As a key to remembering the stasis questions, students should memorize the four key terms.

Fact

Definition

Quality

Policy