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## Food for thought on Web - Amherst prof, colleagues field philosophy queries

BY MATT CASEY

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AMHERST - Have you ever wondered what the opposite of a lion is?

Maybe you've wondered if it's moral to take a shortcut to avoid traffic, when the shortcut causes more traffic.

Now there's a place to pose questions like this.

Alexander George, chairman of the philosophy department at Amherst College, started AskPhilosophers.org to answer such confounding queries.

He said he wanted to bring philosophical expertise to people who might never take a philosophy class and 'have no way of accessing this great tradition.'

George pulled together a group of philosophers interested in bringing their knowledge to laypeople, and a couple of Amherst College students to program the Web site.

The result is a reverse-blog, where anyone can make posts, but only the panel can make comments.

Every Thursday, George posts new questions, and members of the panel answer them when they can.

To cover the diverse topics the site deals with, George recruited more than 30 experts, mostly philosophy professors from around the globe. Most are from the U.S., eight from the five colleges, but one works in Iceland and a handful teach in England.

As of Nov. 11, the site featured 506 questions, with 477 answered.

These vary widely in length, depth and content.

The question of the day for Friday, Nov. 11, spent three paragraphs asking if there was a crisis in philosophy. The reply said philosophers are currently debating that very issue.

A question posted Oct. 21 asks: 'Are there any arguments against allowing gay marriage that aren't religious or bigoted or both?'

Gabriel Segal of King's College in London responded with a simple answer.

'There are no good arguments meeting that description.'

But for each of these questions, George said he threw two out.

During an interview at the chess table in his orderly office at Amherst College, George said he had posted 477 questions from the 1,500 he had received since the site went live Oct. 1.

He said he rejects those that deal directly with religion, science and personal issues that can't be applied more broadly. Ditto for questions that sound like exam questions, those that sound too educated, and anything that sounds 'insane.'



CAROL LOLLIS  
Alexander George, who chairs the philosophy department at Amherst College, says AskPhilosophers.org gives people access to a great tradition.

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'If it's a question that seems to be from someone that doesn't have a lot of background in philosophy, on which I philosophically can say something interesting, then it gets posted,' George said.

George said putting the site together presented more than a few challenges.

He thought the technical part was going to be easy. He planned to survey blogging software, figure out which fit best and use it.

Unfortunately, none of them fit at all.

In the end, he found the one that came closest and had a student 'hack it to death.'

George also ran into trouble when his site got publicity in England.

'The site has collapsed a number of times because of the traffic,' he said. He added that Amherst College has since upgraded its computers.

Collecting philosophers to post on the site presented another problem. He was seeking people who knew what they were doing, could communicate clearly to the uninitiated, and thought it was a good idea.

He sought individuals with varied expertise. He knew the site would attract a broad range of questions, and he needed experts to deal with them.

The subjects range from art to death to race to love and sex.

'It's not as easy as I would have thought to say something philosophically worthwhile in a conversational tone,' said Lynne Rudder Baker, a philosophy professor at UMass Amherst who posts on the site.

Baker said that she has high expectations for AskPhilosophers.org. She knows that the panel will change, and that George might even step out eventually, but she thinks that the site will go on.

'A lot of people don't take philosophy classes, but that doesn't mean they don't have philosophical questions,' Baker said. 'There's a lot philosophers can't do. We can't cure AIDS or anything, but this is one thing we can do.'

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