

# Log on to discuss why we are here

**Anthea Lipsett**

Have you ever wanted to know what wasn't art, or the difference between ethics and morality, or if, assuming there is no afterlife, it's irrational to fear death? Now members of the public with a desire to have such profound questions answered can turn to a website launched last month by professional philosophers.

The idea behind AskPhilosophers.org, hosted by Amherst College in the US, is to put the skills and knowledge of philosophers at the service of the public.

Already signed up are Simon Blackburn and Peter Lipton, both of Cambridge University; Roger Crisp, fellow and tutor in philosophy at St Anne's College, Oxford University; and Gabriel Segal, head of the philosophy department at King's College London.

Professor Lipton, head of Cambridge University's department of history and philosophy of science, said the project created

a "philosophers' commune".

"It's very important that philosophers get out more. It's a profession, and we have highly technical literature — but we are asking questions that lots of people are interested in," he said. "I find it refreshing to answer questions that are non-academic."

The tricky part was writing clearly enough for a general audience while not boring the other philosophers on the panel, Professor Lipton said. "It's a challenge, but it really is fun. I'm addicted."

The site was set up last month by Alexander George, chairman of Amherst's philosophy faculty. So far, the 36 panellists have answered 380 questions.

Of more than 1,100 questions submitted since the site's launch, some 360 were posted, and they drew almost 500 responses. Questions run the gamut of existential angst: why are people sometimes mean; why is stupidity not painful; and is happiness possible?

[anthea.lipsett@thes.co.uk](mailto:anthea.lipsett@thes.co.uk)

## ART, LIFE AND DEATH: SAMPLE OF POSTINGS ON ASKPHILOSOPHERS.ORG

**Q: Assuming there is no afterlife, is it irrational to fear death?**

A: It's irrational to fear what death will feel like if you know it won't feel like anything; but it doesn't follow that it is irrational to fear death. It's not irrational to look forward to the pleasures of living, and if we know that death will take these away, the fear of losing those pleasures doesn't seem irrational either.

**Peter Lipton, head of department of history and philosophy of science, Cambridge University**

**Q: Are there arguments against gay marriage that are not religious, bigoted or both?**

A: There are no good arguments meeting that description.

**Gabriel Segal**

**Q: What is not art?**

A: Lots of things: the orange in front of me, the bus outside my window, George Bush, the number four, Palo Duro Canyon and so on.

What makes something not art calls for a definition of art. Once we knew what the defi-



STEVE PLACE

instantiated in a person's life (well-being, friendship, virtue of character, aesthetic qualities and so on), and morality as the narrower domain of moral obligation only (right and wrong, what is forbidden and permitted and so on).

**Roger Crisp, Uehiro fellow and tutor in philosophy at St Anne's College, Oxford University**

**Q: Should education be a means to an end?**

A: I do not see anything wrong with using education as a means to an end, such as when I suffer through a dreary course on car mechanics so that I can learn how to fix my own engine.

Having said this, I don't think education is always merely a means to an end.

Not only can it be fulfilling to learn certain things even if this knowledge is put to no practical use, but the very process of educating oneself can be fulfilling independently of any value practical or otherwise in the things learnt.

**Joseph G. Moore**

inition was, we could determine what did not fall into the category. I suspect this is not the

best way to go.

**Aaron Meskin, lecturer in philosophy, Leeds University**

**Q: What is the difference between ethics and morality?**

A: A distinction is

sometimes drawn between ethics as concerning all the values or goods that might be

## Ability to link teaching and research should decide jobs, academy says

An academic's success in landing the right job and climbing the career ladder should depend on his or her ability to link teaching and research, the Higher Education Academy said this week, writes **Anthea Lipsett**.

Mike Prosser, the academy's director of research and evaluation, told *The Times Higher* that all types of institution — research-intensive and teaching-led — must develop the link between teaching and research.

Dr Prosser was speaking ahead of next week's HEA conference on teaching and research links at which the agency will launch a guide on encouraging such links.

"To be appointed, academics would have to show they integrate research and teaching, and a key aspect in staff getting promoted would be manifesting that research in their teaching," Dr Prosser said.

"Students should graduate having developed inquiry and

### HEA STRATEGY

■ Develop curriculum requirements to link teaching and research across all courses

■ Develop specific projects that link institutional teaching and research strategies to benefit student learning

■ Fund projects to support innovations in particular areas of the curriculum, such as dissertation

■ Ensure the promotion structures reward staff who effectively link teaching and research

■ Ensure that research strategy helps support the (undergraduate) curriculum

research-based skills, which needs a good relationship between teaching and research.

"Institutions have to set out to develop that relationship and set up structures, policies and processes to allow that to happen."

The HEA conference comes on the back of £25 million in government funding to encourage research-informed teaching announced in October.

Dr Prosser said that while universities were not obliged to forge links between teaching and research, it was definitely in their interests to do so.

He said: "Different sorts of institutions will think about it in different ways. Most will want to ensure their curriculum is informed by the most up-to-date research in their field."

"I would also like to see the research aspect of the university integrating with teaching."

For instance, he said, one of the criteria for securing a research grant from the US National Science Foundation was to show how research related to the

undergraduate student experience.

The guide was written by Alan Jenkins, higher education professor at Oxford Brookes University, and Mick Healey of Gloucestershire University.

It is designed to help institutions review their policies and decide on what other measures they might introduce to strengthen the teaching-research relationship.

Professor Jenkins said: "We must move away from this exclusive and very narrow emphasis on the individual teacher being both a good teacher and researcher to an emphasis on student learning."

"The key thing is to organise institutions and departments so that all students have research-informed teaching, since that's what distinguishes higher education."

The guide is available at [www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources.asp](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources.asp).

## Industry lures Oxbridge staff

**Anna Fazackerley**

GlaxoSmithKline has netted two top Oxbridge researchers and more academics could follow as the company moves to narrow the university-industry divide.

Paul Matthews, director of the Centre for Functional MRI (magnetic resonance imaging) of the Brain at Oxford University, confirmed this week that he had accepted a position as vice-president for imaging in translational medicine and genetics at the pharmaceutical research giant.

Ed Bullmore, professor of psychiatry at Cambridge University, has accepted a part-time post as director of GSK's Clinical Research Unit at Addenbrooke's Hospital in Cambridge. Professor Bullmore's time will be split 50-50 between the university and the company in what looks likely to be a new model for attracting leading academic to industry.

Professor Bullmore said: "The academic-industry divide is a less

clear-cut division than it has been for years. A lot of major pharmaceutical companies feel they need to address more basic science questions if they are to develop better drugs faster. Government agencies, too, are shifting towards the clinical end of the spectrum."

Both scientists said they were tempted by the scientific opportunities at GSK. But access to high-tech resources and cash to fund their research were also key. The company spends about £1 billion a year on research in the UK.

Professor Matthews will head a new imaging centre, which is being built at Hammersmith Hospital in partnership with Imperial College London and the Medical Research Council. He said: "It will be the biggest purpose-built translational medicine and imaging centre in Europe. It will have remarkable facilities."

The centre has recruited about 25 people, including chemists from the US and Sweden. It aims to up this number to 60 by next year.