



Something Bothering You?

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Have you ever woken up in the middle of the night and wondered whether knowledge about social relations and the environment in which they take place is possible? Whether it is ethical to stay in a marriage after love is dead? Why Utilitarianism is rubbish? Or, why philosophy is so difficult?

If so, help is now at hand. These are all questions that have been sent to and answered by a new website, www.AskPhilosophers.org. Its founder, Amherst College professor Alexander George, explained to me the rationale behind the site.

"There is a 'paradox of philosophy'. On the one hand, philosophy is ubiquitous: no one goes through life, or perhaps even a week, without asking himself questions of a philosophical nature. On the other hand, philosophy is scarce in the culture: it is a subject taught only at the university level, a luxury that most people in the United States (and certainly elsewhere) have no access to.

"AskPhilosophers was created to ease this 'paradox' by having professional philosophers volunteer to do a public service that they are uniquely trained to perform, namely to make accessible to a general public the glories of philosophy: its questions, its answers, its arguments. The goal is to have members of a large panel of philosophers (there are now close to forty), drawn from around the country, even different countries, with a wide range of areas of expertise, answer questions of a philosophical nature submitted by the public."

At the time of writing, and only six weeks after its launch, 582 questions had been posted, receiving 765 responses. George is understandably encouraged by this. "The philosophers on the panel have risen to the challenge: they have responded to almost all of the hundreds of questions posted thus far, with entries that are humorous, kind, clear, and at the same time sophisticated, penetrating, and informed by the riches of the philosophical tradition in which they have been trained."

These panellists are selected so that they "collectively have a wide range of expertises – so that if someone has a question that concerns the philosophy of sex or Islamic philosophy or the philosophy of mathematics, we've got someone who can handle it."

However, George is perhaps too generous in praising his team. Some panellists had been very busy in the first six weeks, with Peter Lipton having posting 124 answers, Richard Heck 123 and George himself 130. However, several hadn't answered any questions at all. For the endeavour to be sustainable, the burdens are surely going to have to be distributed more widely.

"I do think that those who are answering a lot of questions are doing so not out of duty to take up any kind of slack, but because they're having a lot of fun," says George. "That said, the ideal would of course be to have all panelists engaged, partly for reasons of sustainability, but also because the more voices on the site the more interesting it will be to read."

If the answers have been encouraging, the questions have been even more so. "The flood of questions submitted vindicates the central premise behind the project," claims George. "These questions have poured in from all around the world. And they have been sent by people at all stages of life: from the elderly wondering when to forgo medical intervention and "go gently into that good night", to successful professionals wondering about the value of life, to teenagers wondering about why people are mean, to ten-year-olds (via their parents!) wondering what the opposite of a lion is. Topics have ranged from the ethics of sex toys, to whether Katrina proves there is no God. The questions illustrate the variety of human thought as it reflects on the world, on human nature, and on our place in the world. They give voice to perennial philosophical thoughts that have nagged, taunted, and terrified us for as long as we have been around to think."

The site has gained a lot of media coverage, in Australia (the *Age*, the *Sydney Morning Herald*), Britain (the *Guardian*, *The Times*, the *Times Higher Educational Supplement*), and the US (the *New York Times*, the *Chronicle of Higher Education*). This could easily have somewhat irritated Geoffrey Klempner, whose similar site Ask a Philosopher (www.philosophypathways.com/questions) has been running for much longer. He is also due to launch a companion Ask a Business Philosopher site early in 2006 (see www.isfp.co.uk/businesspathways). But Klempner is magnanimous in his praise for the new competition. On his blog and philosophical notebook, The Glasshouse Philosopher, he wrote, "If a philosophy student (in a year's time, say) facing an essay crisis asked me which site to go to first, I would say AP. Head to head, the average AP answer will score higher than the average AAP answer. Their team will always have more concentrated mental muscle than ours. But I couldn't give a f***."

This "mental muscle" refers to the wider and more stellar panel that AskPhilosophers has, compared to Ask a Philosopher. "However," Klempner told me, "I also say on that page that the Ask a Philosopher pages are 'more readable'. The tone is less lecturing, more personal. Our aim is to make the case that anyone can be a philosopher. We are nothing special, just enthusiasts sharing what we've learned about this amazing subject.

"What academic philosophers are less good at is grasping where a question is coming from. Some of the best questions look rather foolish when you first look at them. We are less likely to be dismissive of clumsily formulated questions, or ideas that seem totally off the wall. But we are also less inhibited at rebuffing a question, when a rebuff is required.

"The more 'stellar' you are, the greater the pressure to give the definitive answer. What happens if, say, you give your definitive answer on realism vs anti-realism, then in a year's time decide that there was a fatal flaw in your argument. Do you go back and do a 1984? I would prefer to keep the answer as it stands, not altering it, not adding an apologetic footnote explaining where the argument goes wrong. Next time, you will answer the question differently."

The big question is whether AskPhilosophers satisfies the people it is designed for: ordinary non-philosophers with questions on their minds. I asked four such non-specialists to post questions of their own choosing, with encouraging, but mixed results.

Ian Fairman asked, "Why does anything exist? Wouldn't it be more believable if nothing existed?" He got two replies. Jay L Garfield observed that "usually when we ask 'Why?', we mean to ask how something is to be explained *given some background conditions*. But the question, 'Why is there something rather than nothing?' precludes the background against which the 'Why?' makes sense, and so might really not be a real question at all, so much as an expression of awe, or something."

Alexander George quoted his late teacher, Sidney Morgenbesser, who used to say: "And if there were nothing, you're the kind of person who would ask 'Why isn't there something?'"

"I found Alexander George's reply amusing," says Fairman, "but, fundamentally, he's not answering the question, just pointing me somewhere that might provide an answer. "As for Jay L Garfield, I found his reply somewhat more interesting. I felt he takes the question seriously and teaches me something about the nature of "why" questions (that they only make sense within a known context) which gives some insight into why, I suppose, this could be an unanswerable question. And yes, this was an answer I was happy with. As a non-philosopher I think I've learnt something by asking this question but I did feel it reinforced my view that philosophers often live in a world of books which is quite alienating to the rest of us."

This latter comment baffled George: "Alienating? How so? The incredible response to the site is in itself an indication that the questions philosophers deal with are very much part of human life."

Ellie Levenson, meanwhile, asked: "Why should I believe you?" and got five replies. "It was fun," she admits, "but the website is a bit too crowded and user-unfriendly for me to bother asking questions. Plus, once I got there I couldn't think of anything to ask. It's a nice idea though and I was impressed that people took the time to take my rather silly question seriously."

Chris Lee asked "Is faith in something intangible ultimately delusional?" and received a seriously answered from Alexander George's verdict? "Great. I have seriously considered taking a beginners course in Philosophy and reading through the website I am convinced I would really enjoy it although I may struggle with the level of intelligence required." George would reassure him. "The notion that philosophy is for the super-intelligent is a myth. Sort of like the myth that philosophers 'live in a world of books'. You'll find many degrees and kinds of intelligence amongst philosophers, just as you would amongst dentists."

Our final questioner, Phil Brame, asked "Is "dumbing down" real?" but the question didn't get posted or answered: not all submissions do. "I think that the site is a good idea," says Brame, "but there seem to be a lot of questions from 'inside the industry'. Perhaps they could reach out more to non-thinkers by having a guide to how to ask the right sort of question. Perhaps there's a question in itself?"

George points out that there is such a guide on the "Ask a question" page.

Overall then the verdict seems to be a qualified thumbs-up. The service is still very new, of course, and George says "We aim to please and we welcome feedback about ways the site could be improved."

But with both AskPhilosophers and Ask a Philosopher up running and established, at least there are places to direct your philosophical worries, even if you don't always get back what you were hoping to hear.

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