NEWS

Philosophy and the Information Superhighway

The extraordinary capacity of computers to hold text is familiar to anyone who uses a word processor: an average book will fit comfortably onto a 3.5" floppy disc. With the growth of easy means of communication between computers an immense quantity of information has become available on a world-wide basis. The links may not yet amount to a 'superhighway', but they are fast, efficient and increasingly user-friendly. Moreover, like the roads, the system is free to users (though the Clinton administration has made some ominous noises about introducing charges). It is open to anyone with access to a computer connected to JANET (the Joint Academic Network in Britain), INTERNET, or one of the other electronic communications networks that now span the globe. That means almost everyone teaching at an institution of Higher Education in this country, often including postgraduate students, and sometimes undergraduates as well.The material available on-line falls into three broad categories.

Library Catalogues and Bibliographic Indexes

It is now possible to consult remotely not only one's local library catalogue, but those of many other major libraries both in this country and world-wide. Most allow free access, but not the British Library. Scandalously, its information services are being run as a commercial enterprise. Numerous indexes and abstracts of journal articles are also on-line, but again often only commercially. For example, *Philosopher's Index*, *Sociological Abstracts*, *Citations Indexes* and *Current Contents* are all available – at a price. The recently started 'International Philosophy Pre-print Exchange' (IPPE), however, is free. It holds pre-publication drafts of philosophical articles, which can be downloaded, and also the Contents pages of a growing number of philosophical journals (including *Radical Philosophy*).

Bulletin Boards and Discussion Lists

Bulletin Boards and Lists are another source of information. They work via e-mail. Bulletin Boards are just that. Items of news and notices about meetings, conferences, jobs, etc., are posted out electronically to subscribers and are there to be read when you log in. Discussion lists are more participatory. People send in points for discussion, questions or comments to the list, and they are sent on to all subscribers. Anyone can then reply or not as they wish. Since electronic communication is so fast, a culture of brief and immediate response has grown up among e-mail users. The proceedings on a List are more like a conversation than a series of written exchanges. Lists are thus a sort of leaderless seminar between participants scattered all over the world; and, like other forms of leaderless discussion, of variable interest.

There is a huge and ever-growing variety of Lists and Bulletin Boards catering to all interests. For example, PHILOS-L, a philosophy bulletin board run from Liverpool by Stephen Clarke, is a useful source of information about philosophy in this country (there are equivalents for N. America and Australasia). The DERRIDA List is a lively and active discussion group, covering not just that philosopher's thought, but a broad range of topics in both continental and analytical philosophy. PSN (Progressive Sociologists Network) is both a bulletin board and discussion list for left wing social scientists (mainly N. American); SWIP-L is for feminist philosophers. There is a HEGEL list; others have recently been started focusing on NIETZSCHE and HEIDEGGER; and there are many, many others. Quality and interest vary. Try them and see.

The World of Gopher

Numerous books and articles are now available on-line, and the number is growing rapidly. Many classic works of philosophy, literature, politics etc., are available free. The gopher system has made them easy to access and acquire. It is entirely menu driven and constitutes a great leap forward in user friendliness. Texts can be downloaded at the press of a key onto your local system and from thence, if you wish, to your own PC. The advantage of having texts in electronic form is that they can be searched very rapidly for words or phrases. For example, you may want to find the references to 'human nature' in Marx's *1844 Manuscripts* (available from the Marx-Engels-Archive at PSN). A job like this, that would previously have taken a great deal of painstaking labour, can now be accomplished almost instantly.

A staggering amount of material is available, and it is growing more rapidly than systems to index it all. Although 'gopher space' can be searched (with a facility called 'veronica'), it can still be difficult to locate what you want. Good places to start are the American Philosophical Association and the PSN gophers. A remarkable feature of the gopher system is that from any gopher site you can connect directly to any other, world-wide. Starting at the PSN gopher, you may locate another useful looking site. You can then connect to it and repeat the process if necessary, until you find what you are looking for.

Talk of an information 'superhighway' is exaggerated. It is more like a maze of lanes and byways, connecting a mass of villages and townships, depots and warehouses, amongst which one can as easily get diverted and lost as arrive where one wants. Happy hunting.

Some useful addresses:
Bulletin Boards and Lists:
PHILOS-L@liverpool.ac.uk;   PSN@cfs.colorado.edu;
DERRIDA@cfrvm.earn; HEGEL@villvm.earn; SWIP-L@cfrvm.cfr.usf.edu; HEIDEGGER and NIETZSCHE: thinknet@world.std.com

Gophers:
PSN: cfs.colorado.edu; APA:apa.oxy.edu; IPPE: apa.oxy.edu; catfish.valdosta.peachnet.edu (philosophy texts)

Sean Sayers (sss@ukc.ac.uk)