

The Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy Online

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As a undergraduate student, I coveted my friend's encyclopedia of philosophy. Here, it seemed, compressed between the covers of one almighty tome, lay the accumulated knowledge of centuries of philosophical labour, all summarized in the most concise prose, adorned with exemplary references, and neatly arranged in alphabetical order. Here were the great thinkers who had carved their names across millennia—the canonical list of dead white males—mixed indiscriminately with the lesser luminaries who had deigned to challenge their authority. If one could make no sense of a particular debate (and this was often the case), more could be learned by sourcing the essays listed at the end of each article in the university library. Alternatively, if one lacked the time or tenacity for such scholarship (and, again, this was often the case), one could follow internal references from one article to another, skipping across traditions on lateral tangents, pursuing strange lines of thought.

With the publication of the online version of the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, the benefits of the philosophical encyclopedia are now (potentially) as close as the nearest computer terminal. Of course, the fact of having such a resource at hand does not thereby make it valuable. An encyclopedia of philosophy should offer a broad range of quality content, together with suitable mechanisms for accessing and assembling this content—mechanisms both for referencing material within the text and for relating it to material without. I am pleased to say that the REP Online excels on both counts. But the real strength and innovation of the publication lies in the way the encyclopedia capitalizes on its online status. Unlike standard print-issue encyclopedias, the REP Online can be constantly revised and updated, so as to incorporate new themes and issues and thus reflect the changing form of philosophical inquiry. The encyclopedia also offers extensive links to relevant web-sites, thus making it the ideal first stop for anyone looking for quality, philosophical material on the Internet.

In terms of visual appearance, the REP environment is stylish and smart. Articles

appear in black font on a neutral background, framed in a distinctly British red and navy blue. The articles load centre-right of screen. Down the left-hand side of the page appears a list of the contents of the article, divided into separate sections. At the top of each page, there is a toolbar with various search functions for getting around the encyclopedia, and below this a set of minor functions specifically related to the article at hand. As far as screen-layout goes, I found myself with only one small gripe: the screen loads in a small font that is often difficult to read. I discovered, however, that clicking, dragging, and releasing the lower right-hand corner of the screen causes it to reload in another, larger font, which appears to be Times 12. Much better.

The problem when browsing through any encyclopedia is always where to begin. In this respect, REP Online certainly doesn't make things any easier. The encyclopedia features over 2000 original articles from over 1300 leading international experts. These cover a vast range of subject-matter, spanning the history of philosophy ancient, medieval, and modern. I found the globalism of the content particularly impressive. The encyclopedia offers articles not only on the Anglo-American and continental traditions, but also on 'world philosophy' (Indian, Tibetan, Japanese, Chinese, Korean, Slavonic, African, and Latin American), and various world religions. The articles that I read were, for the most part, clear and engaging. As one would expect from an encyclopedia, the focus of the discussion tends to be more on overview than details, though most subjects get five or more sections devoted to them. Each section deals with a specific aspect of the topic in question. For the most part, sections are divided according to dominant themes, though some articles (typically one on more famous philosophers, such as Plato) offer sections devoted to specific books. All in all, I found the content of the encyclopedia to be both extensive and well researched.

There are four ways of searching the REP Online. The most straightforward option is the 'quick title search', which can be accessed from the toolbar at the top of each screen. This function does not search for book titles (as I at first assumed), but article titles. This makes it handy if one knows what one is after, but otherwise it can be quite frustrating. For those with less idea of what they are looking for, the 'full text search' is perhaps the best way to begin. This is the most thorough of the various search functions available, scanning the complete encyclopedia text. While extensive, the downside of the full text search is that—much like any online search-engine—it tends to produce a long list of stray references and odd articles, from which one must then weed-out the valuable material. A more direct approach is offered by the 'A-Z view' function. The A-Z search offers an alphabetical index of key terms, themes, and names featured in the encyclopedia. A similar approach is offered by the 'subject guide' search, which takes us to a page divided into four sections: philosophical themes (aesthetics, metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, etc), world philosophies, periods, and world religions. By clicking a subject one is able to view all encyclopedia articles related to this area.

Search functions are not the only way to get around the REP Online. Like a print encyclopedia, the REP Online also has references built into the article—25,000 of them,

in fact. By clicking on the blocks of text highlighted in red, one is instantly transported to a page devoted to the philosopher or problem in question. For my money, this is probably the most interesting and enjoyable way to browse the encyclopedia. It is particularly useful for locating thinkers in the context of their philosophical communities, or for drawing out the complex connections defining traditions and schools. Another way of exploring options is to click on 'related articles', again at the top of the page. The 'related articles' function would prove useful to anyone interested in exploring the themes discussed in an article in more detail. The Dostoyevsky page, for example, offers related articles on 'emotion', 'existentialism', 'nihilism', 'polyphonics', 'Russian materialism', and 'tragedy', to name only a few. A similar service is provided by the 'links' function, which presents us with a page listing related sites on the web. While we are assured by the editor of REP Online that pages are 'linked only to major sites that have survived the scrutiny of the editorial team and appropriate experts', I found that the relationship between articles and internet links was often somewhat lateral. To be fair, however, this probably reflects the tangential nature of much of the material published on the web more than anything else. In the final analysis, the links function provides an excellent way of accessing the confusing profusion of philosophical material online.

The unique feature of the REP Online is that it is a dynamic resource, updated quarterly with revised articles, refreshed bibliographies, new subject reviews and research news. As the editor proudly notes, 'properly conducted and supported, REP Online need never, will never, go out of date'. The REP Online already adds to the print version by virtue of the inclusion of articles on Philosophy of Food, Genetic Modification, Globalisation, Integrity, Simulation Theory, and Sustainability. More new articles and reviews are to follow. One idea that is currently being considered is to invite the directors of major research projects (those supported by the world's main funding bodies) to report on their enterprise and its current state of progress. Another is to invite specialists in specific fields to report on the most recent action in their fields.

At present, REP Online is available only to institutions. Pricing is based on the size of the institution and the number of students served.

The Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy Online, www.rep.routledge.com

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