

## **Report on the Mississippi Philosophical Association meeting of May 6, 2000**

The 50th annual meeting of the MPA was held at Mississippi State University in the Women's Studies center.

Paula Smithka (USM) began the program with her presidential address on "The Tension Between the Desire for Ethnic Self-Determination and the Quest for Global Community." Reviewing the debate between liberals and communitarians on the relation of individually and communally defined goods, she affirmed that ethnic groups stand to nations as individuals stand to communities and should analogously have the autonomy that liberalism demands for individuals. In discussion, she did not rule out the possibility that ethnic groups might rightfully secede from the U.S., although she suggested that the U.S. can and should avoid such a scenario by continuing to thrive on pluralism and voluntary allegiance.

Arnold Farr (St. Joseph's University) gave an invited address, "Between Rights and Recognition: Reconciliation and the Hope for Democracy." Farr argued that the unfinished, unclosable democratic project requires attention to the inequalities of "social capital" that make some citizens less able than others to get the benefit of formally equal rights. Habermas' proceduralist model of justice, conceiving rights as relational, responds to this problem helpfully, but so does Derrida's "cracking of all nutshells," i.e. his deconstruction of all rational validity claims (a project Habermas sees as nihilistic).

In "Ethical Philosophy of History: Two Views," Sandy Zale and Steve Smith (both of Millsaps) clashed on the merit of Enlightenment historical thinking as represented by Voltaire, Gibbon, Hume, and Herder. For Zale, sympathizing with these figures, historical study is best conceived as a cultivation of impartial moral judgment through exposure to examples of praiseworthy and blameworthy character. Smith found this view misleadingly individualistic and unworldly, like its Hellenistic antecedents, and called for a redirection of ethical attention in history to larger collective actions. The problem was raised of how to justify history against other community-shaping narratives, such as political myth and interruptive genealogy. Zale admitted that impartiality is never perfected but must be an ongoing collective pursuit.

Sam Bruton (USM) spoke on "Kant, Toleration, and the Social Contract," exploring Kant's approach to public reason and the justification of the state. Kant opposes a direct-democracy conception of collective reason. He looks more to natural law than to contract as the basis of government; but legislators must apply the heuristic test of an ideal consent by all citizens, which is best fostered by "freedom of the pen" (short of attacking the constitution). Violent revolution cannot be justified because it violates rights. Yet what reason requires is never settled once for all. Kant could support "passive resistance" as seen in the civil rights movement.

We lunched at the MSU cafeteria.

Larry Chappell (Mississippi Valley State U.) presented a paper he wrote with Bernard Bray, "On Teaching Liberal Citizens: Power, Ethics, and Theater in the Classroom." This was both a critique and defense of public standards of reasonableness. Reasonableness does need to be imposed on civil discourse, but it is not the same as empathetic communication and cannot

adjudicate conceptions of the good life. To function well in a liberal society, citizens must learn "theatricality"--in the sense not of emoting but rather of understanding and constructively managing the differences between one's self, one's roles, and others. A liberal way of life is not the same as a deep pluralism of radically self-determining individuals. Though overdone, liberalism is better than alternatives.

In "Rearing the Citizen: Conflicts Familial and Social in Neill's Summerhill and McEwan's The Child in Time," Melanie Eckford-Prossor (MSU) reviewed strategies for shaping the loyalties of children. Neill and novelist McEwan were both critical of an "authorized child care handbook" calculated to make children politically and economically docile. Neill's Summerhill school let children rule themselves. In managing and defending Summerhill, however, Neill used virtually coercive arguments that put his students in the same position as citizens required to be loyal to their country. Lockean children learn freedom by assuming responsibility, whereas on Neill's model children find their way to responsibility through exercising their freedom. It was pointed out in discussion that Neill put individual happiness ahead of social "progress."

Wallace Murphree (MSU) analyzed a phenomenon of "intellectual kidnapping" in "Evangelizing Children: Breaking the Cycle of Dogmatic Belief Systems." Children may be convinced that it is their duty not merely to hold particular religious beliefs but to hold them exclusivistically (= believing that no other beliefs can be true) and dogmatically (= believing ethically that one is obligated to accept one's beliefs unconditionally). To ask such persons to question their religious beliefs is thus to invite them to sin. Their better nature has been enlisted in the defense of dogma against all possible threats. The best philosophical strategy for approaching such persons is to distinguish their extracredal ethical belief from their credal belief and challenge the former first. There is a similar syndrome with beliefs about race, sex roles, etc.

Jay Keehley (MSU) brought us news from the real world, in which large amounts of money flow fitfully through institutional review boards, in "The Old Way: Parents Consent, Children Assent. The New Way: It's a Family Thing." A study questionnaire approved at VCU was found to ask subjects for sensitive information about their family members without the latter's consent. Now consent requirements will be more rigorous. Sample questions from questionnaires will have to be included on consent forms. There is also less latitude now for researchers to fool their subjects as part of a study. Schizophrenics remain peculiarly difficult subjects of consent.

Andrea Zale (USM) delivered the prize student essay, "Theories are not Semantic Constructions within a Deductive Nomological System." She reviewed the relative merits of Popper's view of scientific theories (linguistic, non-verifiable) and the view of Aronson, Harré, and Way in Realism Rescued (less language- and more thing-oriented). AH&W's view better matches the practice of scientists. They stress that the laws of nature don't change as language does and aren't subject to language's limitations (cf. complementarity in subatomic physics). They express the cognitive content of science in terms of "types" rather than propositions; "types" are not defined but apparently are possibilities of physical ostension. In discussion, some thought that AH&W's view couldn't account adequately for the power of a scientific theory to generate predictions.

In Lynn Holt's (MSU) view of "Two Rival Versions of Objectivity," the modern emphasis on method and detachment has unfortunately displaced the ancient appreciation of the role of such

virtues as honesty, fortitude, and imaginativeness in acquiring objective knowledge. Methodism is good for raising the performance of the lowest, but the rules that can be followed equally by novice and expert alike tend to be empty (e.g. "buy low and sell high"). Objectivity, not to be confused with standardness, is what serves to get the knowing subject to the object. It was asked whether making the needed specification of the cultural contexts of recommended virtues would weaken the general epistemological case for virtue; it was replied that it wouldn't.

## Business Meeting

Secretary-Treasurer Smith reported a balance of \$23.92--or would have, if a figure had been asked for. Officers elected for 2000-2001 were Steve Smith, Secretary-Treasurer; Sam Bruton, Vice-President/ Program Chair; and Yolanda Estes, President. We plan to meet in the spring of 2001 at Millsaps.

Tommy Blanton brought a proposal for MPA sponsorship of a new interdisciplinary journal. The envisioned journal could publish MPA proceedings as well as invited and other papers on themes of broad and current interest. It could be published semiannually or more often. Mr. Blanton offers to take care of the initial funding for it. By a vote, the current officers were charged to explore what is involved in setting up such a journal and the prospects for MPA members sharing in the editorial work.

## NEWS

*MPA volume about to appear in Rodopi's "History and Addresses of Philosophical Societies" Series.* Bennie Crockett reports: "(1) Richard Hull, editor of HAPS, has approved the entire book. (2) After his approval I constructed the 20 page index, and he then approved it as well. (3) Robert Ginsberg, editor of the Value Inquiry Book Series of which HAPS is one part, has approved the entire book, except for the index. After his approval of the index, the book will be sent to Amsterdam for printing. (4) I expect Ginsberg's approval and sending of the book prior to June 1. "I want to thank all MPA members for their patience and kind assistance as I have edited this collection. My understanding is that contributors will receive a copy of the book when it is released. Specific questions may be addressed to me by e-mail or phone."

*Bill Lawhead's new introductory text published by Mayfield. The Philosophical Journey: An Interactive Approach* consists of a discussion of the main topics in philosophy along with short readings. What makes the book unique is the wealth of interactive exercises throughout. Each topic is introduced with a thought-provoking story or essay. After initially surveying the issue in question and the array of positions on it, a questionnaire is provided in which the student is asked to agree or disagree with a number of philosophical claims relevant to the topic. An answer key informs the students of the philosophical label associated with their answers (e.g. empiricism, hard determinism, mind-body dualism, fideism, ethical relativism, etc.). The answer key also points out possible inconsistencies in their answers. Thus, before getting into a detailed examination of each position, the students are made to realize that they are not merely spectators, watching the moves of the great minds, but they are actually players down on the field. The book also includes a number of exercises called "Philosophy in the Marketplace" in which students are asked to play Socrates by asking questions of their friends outside of class (e.g., Will science

some day be able to explain us completely?) The responses they gather provide rich material for classroom discussions and opportunities for the students to engage in philosophical evaluation. At the end of each chapter is a "Looking through X's Lens" in which students are asked to apply a particular philosopher's insights to a novel situation to enhance their understanding of the position. other exercises which call for the student to provide a response or take a stand include abundant thought experiments and questions on the readings. For more information and for ordering an examination copy, see Mayfield's web site for the book at [www.mayfieldpub.com/lawhead/index.htm](http://www.mayfieldpub.com/lawhead/index.htm).

*Steve Smith's musical comedy, REAL LIFE, THE IDEA produced as a CD.* New philosophy Ph.D. Creighton Malone thinks a college is the place to be. Can he hang on at Southeast West Virginia College once the President resolves to cut his position? Can he expect the students in his first class to understand the question, "What is a class?" Will senior business major Elizabeth Dalton take over the family chicken business and satisfy her ethical scruples? Will she and her friends manage to graduate? Does anyone know the whereabouts of real life?

Song lyrics are posted at [home.millsaps.edu/~smithsg](http://home.millsaps.edu/~smithsg). You can sample a track, "Real Work," on the Assemblers' page on [www.mp3.com](http://www.mp3.com). You can order a CD from Smith for the special MPA price of \$10 plus \$2 for shipping.

\* \* \*

Full-time employed philosophers (those who didn't pay at the meeting) are urged to send in their annual dues of \$10.

This means you: \_\_\_\_\_

Also, please make sure your listing on the enclosed Directory is accurate, and help me weed out the listings that no longer belong (to save on mailing costs).

Respectfully submitted, Steven G. Smith, Secretary-Treasurer