

REPORT ON THE MISSISSIPPI PHILOSOPHICAL ASSOCIATION MEETING OF APRIL 21, 2001

The 51st annual meeting of the MPA was held at Millsaps in Olin 240, about 27 attending.

Shawn Fitzgibbons (UM) presented the first-prize student paper, "The Minimal Theory of Truth and Its Account of Generalization." Paul Horwich contends that our entire understanding of truth is captured by our disposition to accept instantiations of the bare equivalence schema, "<P> is true if and only if P." Can truth be so trivial, though? The point of truth is to allow generalizing, but the minimal theory cannot account for the truth of generalizations by the fallible mind. In discussion it was noted that minimalism's empirical appeal to generalization might create problems for the requirement that truth be closed across entailment and for bivalence.

Steve Smith (Millsaps) suggested that "Three Appeal Arguments in Philosophy after Kant"--the value-philosophy of Rickert, Buber's philosophy of I-You relation, and Heidegger's phenomenological ontology--rework the Kantian motif of a supreme appeal of reason in instructively conflicting yet complementary ways, aiming our appeal-responsiveness toward (respectively) future possibility, presently constituting actuality, and already-constituted reality. Each argument risks theoretical "strangeness" for the sake of responding adequately to exteriority, but (Smith maintained) they do not violate limits of language or philosophy in doing this.

At the mid-morning break, Vice-President Bruton displayed the new Addresses of the MPA volume published by Rodopi and expressed appreciation to its editor, Bennie Crockett. Dr. Crockett was called elsewhere by his children's soccer fortunes but saluted the MPA in a written statement read by Dr. Bruton.

To celebrate the 100th year of the APA, Gerald Gaus (Tulane University) was invited with support from USM and Millsaps to address "Taking the Bad with the Good: Some Misplaced Worries about Retributivism." Gaus defended the notion that punishment, as harmful, can right a wrong by relocating our worries about punishment to the principle of desert. If it's mysterious how punishment can "square away" a situation, it's mysterious for reward as well; if punishments are hard to justify because they're not beneficial, rewards aren't necessarily beneficial either (as "Behind the Music" proves on VH1). In discussion, Gaus suggested that how to apply the desert principle (e.g., whether to groups as well as to individuals) will depend on one's political philosophy, and that a better political philosophy is one that will be harder to use for obviously bad ends.

In "Trauma and Speech in Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Perception," Kristen Brown (Millsaps) argued that appropriate foundations for the interpretation of trauma experience (as by Judith Herman in Trauma and Recovery) will be found in Merleau-Ponty's account of mind-body-world relations, which admits indeterminacies and permeable boundaries, and in Elaine Scarry's account in The Body in Pain of the dependence of consciousness on articulation (revealed negatively in the squelching of articulation by torture). It was asked whether any account centered in a subject's experience reinforces a commitment to ego-domination.

We went to Keifer's for lunch, where we were presented with one bill for \$140. Reimbursements of the bill-payer were sufficiently generous that \$19 extra went into the MPA treasury. If we went to lunch more often we could accomplish anything.

In our business meeting, we elected Sam Bruton President, Patrick Hopkins Vice-President, and Steve Smith Secretary-Treasurer and agreed to meet again at Millsaps next year.

The officers reported that Tommy Blanton's proposal to start a journal with MPA sponsorship has gone through a round of discussion and is still on the table. A sticking point appears to be finding an academic person to take on the main editorial work. Anyone who wants to know more about the proposal or who wants to help realize the journal may contact any of the officers or Mr. Blanton. (See the enclosed letter on this subject from Sam Bruton.)

Two suggestions were made for future programs: that former students and colleagues who moved out of state but are still philosophically active be invited back to share their current work, and that more time be allowed for discussion of papers.

The balance in the treasury is \$98.15, up from last year's \$23.92.

In the afternoon, Ken Curry (Biology, USM) and Paula Smithka (USM) made a joint presentation on the concept of species. In "The Species Crisis in Biology: Some Recent Views Concerning the Nature of Species," Curry argued that a robust concept must reconcile morphological similarity and traceable descent as bases of species identification and must accommodate our growing understanding of how various factors work in evolution. We may come to see species as byproducts of evolution rather than as "units of evolution." Smithka's paper, "Ontological and Epistemological Concerns Regarding Species: Are They Kinds or Individuals?" offered a non-relativist, minimalist, functionalist theory of species as kinds (they just don't seem like individuals) inspired by Michael Lynch's theory of truth in Truth in Context. The thin universal meaning of species is "a set of organisms whose lineages are grounded in evolution"; this meaning is multiply realizable depending on which questions are being asked (e.g. in cladistics, in genetics, in field biology). In discussion, it was objected that "functionalism" is concerned with the multiple realizability of a substantively interesting factor (like full-fledged mind in brain or in machine) as opposed to a minimal commonality among contexts.

Yolanda Estes' (MSU) Presidential Address was on the theme "Why Fichte Now? Reflections on the Vocation of a Scholar in Mississippi." Fichte asserted in a 1794 lecture course that the vocation of scholars is grounded in the vocation of all humanity to actualize freedom and attain truth. This ideal must be pursued by endless approximation and in social collaboration. Scholars' role is to help all human beings develop knowledge both a priori and a posteriori. Whether or not their activity seems to be rewarding, it is their duty; thus, we who are scholars today shouldn't be too much discouraged by lack of public understanding and support for education. In discussion, Estes distinguished those who misrepresent philosophy (who are indeed worthy of censure) from those who seriously problematize philosophy from within.

Patrick Hopkins (Millsaps) added a twist to a Nozickian thought-experiment in "On the Value of Simulated Worlds and Experience Machines." Nozickians, i.e. those who would refuse to be put in an Experience Machine (EM) that would give them all the experiences they want, would only be unhappy in an EM if they believed themselves to be in an EM; what they need, therefore, is to believe they're in a real world. If the EM's simulation can in fact satisfy them by giving them this belief also, why should they object to the EM? It was pointed out in discussion that Nozick puts ethical weight on what we desire as opposed to what makes us happy. Also it was asked how the ethical issues in a scenario of brainwashing (which can be remedied by con-sciousness-raising, e.g. that of feminism vis-à-vis patriarchal culture) differ from those of EM.

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

Respectfully submitted, Steven G. Smith, Secretary-Treasurer