

REPORT ON THE MISSISSIPPI PHILOSOPHICAL ASSOCIATION MEETING OF APRIL 6, 1991

The MPA convened for its 41st annual meeting at William Carey College on the Coast in Gulfport. Six papers were presented. In the middle of the program, we went to Red Lobster for lunch.

1. Thomas Crocker (MSU) read the first-prize student paper, "On the Morality of Economic Institutions." He argued that Adam Smith's "invisible hand" conception of the common good is amorphous and leads to contradictions between private utility maximizing and public good, mainly by permitting us to think of fellow humans (and the natural environment too) as mere means. Instead we should respect all persons as ends-in-themselves and define the common good on this foundation. --Questioners wondered to what extent respect for others might involve leaving them alone. It was noted that decision theorists now often handle social-good problems in a utility-maximizing systems framework (e.g. in Prisoner's Dilemma analyses) rather than on the basis of a substantive conception of the common good.

(Second prize was shared by Kelly Gerald of USM for "Phonographical and Mythographical Picture Theories of Language: Ludwig Wittgenstein, Ernest Fenollosa, and Ezra Pound" and Andy Lowry of Millsaps College for "An Essay in Recursive Irony" [a critique of Contingency, irony, and solidarity by Richard Rorty].)

2. Harry Ferguson (USM) spoke on "Derrida on Metaphor in Philosophy." He was concerned to understand the role and limitations of Derrida's mode of philosophizing, which is a rhetorically free interrogation of Western ontological commitments. He applied to Derrida Kuhn's point that "divergent" thinking is creative as long as accepted paradigms still govern most cases, but can slide back into chaotic "pre-scientific" thought if paradigms are lost. Derrida knows this. Ferguson compared Derrida's role in contemporary philosophy with the role of the anarchists in the May 1968 uprising in France: both see radical playfulness as redemptive and fruitful. --In discussion, questions arose about Derrida's dependence on a theory of meaning and on a philosophical tradition generally. Quine's view of the circularity or groundlessness of conceptual systems was noted to be comparable to Derrida's view of philosophy's radical metaphoricity. Someone intimated, perhaps controversially, that nowadays there are few Carnapians stalking the landscape who would be committed to contesting Derrida's or Quine's main points.

3. Edward Shirley (Louisiana State University) read "Abortion and a 'Future Like Ours'," a critique of Don Marquis' recent Journal of Philosophy abortion paper. Shirley argued that by valuing only experience as such and not experience as desired by the person who will have it, Marquis takes away the necessity of protecting any particular fetus. Any fetus could be sacrificed for a sufficient gain in someone else's happiness. Admitting the relevance of a normative conception of human nature to our moral reckoning with people's desires, Shirley still maintained that we cannot say that a fetus would or should desire to live, because fetuses are not capable of having these desires. --In discussion, Shirley refused to be drawn into slippery-slope reasoning about the beginning of consciousness, and even admitted cultural relativity in drawing this line. He held that abortions can be bad even if they violate no one's rights (as in the case of the woman who gets an abortion in order not to miss a mountain-climbing trip).

4. In "John Calvin and Thomas Reid: Belief in God and Belief Dispositions," Tim Lytle (MSU) compared two thinkers who agree that certain belief dispositions are natural to humans but also allow for variations of belief caused by differences of apprehension. In other words, both Calvin and Reid have a situational view of reason. --We questioned whether Calvinist religious knowledge can be placed on Reidian foundations: How analogous is "I feel this desk surface [therefore] I believe the desk exists" to "I feel guilty [therefore] I believe God exists"? Also, it appeared that Reidian psychology was liable to be superseded by better psychology, or neuroscience, unless we interpret it as an account of the logical status of beliefs rather than as a description of their empirical constitution

5. Tom Flynn (UM) gave an address, "Is There a Fundamental Human Right?," that had been invited on the occasion of his retirement. Defining rights as justified claims to needed goods, Flynn asserted that a fundamental natural (not acquired) human right exists not to be deprived of anything that is indispensable to making a good life for oneself--in short, a fundamental right to well-being. Drawing on a series of formal declarations of rights, Flynn adduced numerous requirements for well-being. Natural rights are inalienable yet suspendable--they carry the proviso "normally." They can be affirmed on any view of mind-body relation. --One question that arose was, Why not let a philosopher-king, who has the best understanding of "well-being," dictate to everyone? Answer: choice-making and political participation are necessary parts of any individual's well-being.

6. Bennie Crockett (William Carey College) presented, as his Presidential Address, "A Critique of the Divine Command Theory of Ethics." He demonstrated diversity and change in the moral thinking found in biblical texts and also in official church interpretations of the Bible (for instance, the Bible was formerly used to justify slavery). Crockett traced the philosophical treatment of the issue forward from Plato's Euthyphro to the disagreement between Descartes and Leibniz as to whether God's free will directly constitutes the good, and then to Tillich's point that all stateable moral laws are too abstract to capture the moral meaning of particular situations. --In discussion it became clear that the object of Crockett's critique is monist divine command theories--theories that assert a single right content, interpretation, and logical mood of moral thinking--rather than pluralist or relativist theories that might make the connection between goodness and God more flexibly.

Business meeting

In attendance were Ted Ammon, John Bickle, Robert Bell, Ronald Bishop, Bennie Crockett, Tom Flynn, Rita Hinton, Jay Keehley, Bill Lawhead, Tim Lytle, Steve Smith, and Forrest Wood. Secretary-Treasurer Steve Smith reported a bank balance of \$72.78, up from last year's \$55.54 thanks to greatly improved dues collection. The officers elected for 1991-92 were:

Secretary-Treasurer: Steve Smith

Vice President and Program Chair: Tim Lytle

President: Bennie Crockett

We decided to meet in Jackson next year, details to be worked out between Millsaps faculty and Tim Lytle.

Trying to revive the idea of an MPA newsletter, Smith suggested that members who submit annual reports of their activities to their institutions send appropriate parts of these reports every year to the MPA Secretary. The Secretary could then relay this information to the MPA membership. If we knew more about each other's teaching and scholarship we could be more collegial. Such a newsletter might also contain hot tips on books or articles that are especially worth reading, class assignments worth trying or varying, etc.

Some members have paid their dues for 1991-92; others are reminded by a check on this page. PLEASE NOTE THAT WITHOUT YOUR DUES PAYMENTS WE CANNOT MAINTAIN OUR PROGRAM OF STUDENT PRIZES.

Respectfully submitted, Steven G. Smith, Secretary-Treasurer

_____ Your dues of \$10 for 1991-92 are respectfully solicited!

** NEWS **

A Georgetown philosophy graduate named Ken Knisely is producing a funny philosophy TV series called "No Dogs or Philosophers Allowed" on a cable channel in Arlington, VA. I have a sort of brochure on this if you want to see it. Knisely asks, "Is there an outlet for this show in your community? Would you like to review a copy of the show?" The address is P. O. Box 10325, Arlington, VA 22210.