

## **REPORT ON THE MISSISSIPPI PHILOSOPHICAL ASSOCIATION MEETING OF APRIL 2, 1994**

The 44th annual meeting of the MPA was held at Millsaps College.

1. In her second-prize student essay, "Caring Ethics and Moral Philosophy: A Conversation," Ursula Allen (Millsaps College) argued that philosophy does not have a fated male bias; it can be reshaped. Gilligan's and Nodding's work on woman-associated ethics raises the question, How should human nature be invoked by ethics? Mill's skepticism about gender is preferable to any definite gender scheme like Rousseau's in *Emile*. The ideal of autonomy can be reconciled with caring ethics once it is seen how integrity and self-awareness properly attach to compassion. -- Questions were raised about whether autonomy can encompass self-nurturing; whether Heidegger's concept of care is usefully deep and inclusive; and whether there is any way of making distinct male and female experiences a source of moral insight (Allen warned against this, recommending that we supersede gender with a non-foundationalist "humanity" understood as a fabric of connecting experiences).

2. Marshall Smith (University of Mississippi) presented the first-prize student essay, "Wittgenstein and Ethics." Wittgenstein has a view of ethics though not a theory. The crucial variables--self, language, and world--are approached one way in the *Tractatus*, another way in the later work. Although the later Wittgenstein brings the self into the world, in a fashion, and makes more liberal allowances for significant uses of language, he still does not admit that there are significant ethical propositions; ethics still has to do with intending a transcendent telos of a form of life. --In discussion we looked at the difficulty of self-reflection from various angles. To the question, Why can't philosophical ethics be accepted as a language game?, Smith replied that Wittgenstein's emphasis, like Kierkegaard's, is on subjective passion rather than objectively specifiable meaning. Pressed, Smith revealed an inclination to Kant.

3. John Meadors (Mississippi College) criticized Plantinga's negative apologetics in "Objections to the Proper Basicity of Belief in God." Plantinga opposes the evidentialist account of rationality but finally must rely on evidence of some sort to distinguish viable basic beliefs from absurd ones. Plantingan religious belief can be too isolated; religious views are better seen as possessing "vast scope" (Swinburne), i.e. as usable in the broadest pursuit of truth. Moreover, the way in which Plantingan belief is inductively grounded makes it inappropriately vulnerable. -- There was some discussion of the Calvinist epistemological theses of (a) a natural human orientation to know God, and (b) a universal human depravity. It was asked whether Plantinga works against philosophy in sheltering basic beliefs from criticism. It was commented that Aquinas and Locke's conceptions of noetic structure (both invoked by Plantinga) pull in quite different directions.

We lunched at Kiefer's.

4. Bennie Crockett (William Carey College) surveyed the debate among diverse epistemological idealisms and realisms in "Epistemological Realism: What Is It?" Most idealisms and realisms can cover the same bases. The nonstarters are naive and commonsense realism, which are simplistic and fail to account for error. Both realism and idealism can say "There is a reality to know," but what do "represents" and "corresponds to" mean in claims relating acts of knowing to

objects of knowing? Possibly the elucidation of rivalry between epistemological positions will reveal a rivalry of values. --It was suggested in discussion that the crux, on any approach, is a pragmatic one: Can we talk (about a world)? A question was raised about the impact of a Buddhist perspective on the problem. We were reminded of the distinction between the metaphysical problem of relationship between mental and extramental reality and the specifically epistemological problem.

5. Bill Lawhead's Presidential Address (University of Mississippi) dealt with "Some Common Misinterpretations of Hegel," achieving what seemed like a new plenitude of Wissen. Lawhead urged us to let Hegel's language offer new arguments and insights--above all, to watch what Hegel does rather than apply to him any pat formula for "dialectic," "contradiction," "necessity," etc. Hegel means to follow the self-development of reality, not impose a concocted "method" on reality. The logic of that development is that more adequate conceptions supersede less adequate ones; the progression "thesis-antithesis-synthesis" isn't necessary. Hegel is a rationalist who discovers how the world hangs together to make sense and should not be classed with Spinoza-like rationalists who think that everything in the world can be deduced from a first principle. Hegel is comparable to Kierkegaard in using philosophy to find a way out of despair. -- Discussion revolved around how Hegel is a Christian thinker (he isn't an orthodox one--his view of spirit actually transcends the categories "theism" and "atheism"), Hegel's recognition of the historically limited horizon of all thought (including his own), and his agreement with process thinkers that creative process rather than an achieved Absolute is fundamental.

Business meeting

Ted Ammon, Bob Bergmark, Ronald Bishop, Bennie Crockett, Roy Davison, David Holley, Bill Lawhead, John Meadors, Steve Smith, Forrest Wood, Bill Yount, and Zhenming Zhai were present. Secretary-Treasurer Smith reported a bank balance of \$88.65 as compared with last year's \$70.66. The officers elected for 1994-95 were: Secretary-Treasurer, Steve Smith; Vice President and Program Chair, David Holley; and President, Ronald Bishop.

The MPA was invited to the University of Southern Mississippi for the 1995 meeting, to take place not on the first Saturday in April (when Daylight Savings Time strikes), but perhaps on the second Saturday in April or the last Saturday in March.

Some members have paid their dues for 1994-95; 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 1994-95 are respectfully solicited!