

REPORT ON THE MISSISSIPPI PHILOSOPHICAL ASSOCIATION MEETING OF MARCH 18-19, 2002

We held the 52nd annual meeting of the MPA in the Leggett Center at Millsaps College, about 23 attending. Ronald Bishop brought a big contingent of Jones County Junior College students.

On the evening of Monday, March 18, Robert Bernasconi (U. of Memphis) gave the annual Dunbar Lecture at Millsaps, entitled "When Race Was Everything: A Philosopher Looks at 19th-Century Anthropology." Eschewing a single explanation for the popularity of Disraeli's proposition that "race is everything"--which apparently means that the constitution of a physically distinctive, true-breeding human group is all-determining of the prospects of human flourishing--Bernasconi examined a sample of race anthropologies offered by Kant and others. Much discussion revolved around the role of slavery in motivating and shaping race-thinking. Some philosophers repaired to the Blues Cafe at 930 Congress after the Dunbar reception.

In our regular program on Tuesday, Bennie Crockett (William Carey) paid tribute to Mortimer Adler (d. 2001) with a paper called "The Ghostbusters Failed this Time: Mortimer J. Adler on Human Nature." Much in the Aristotle-Aquinas tradition, Adler was a stalwart proponent of an immaterially real human intellect, conceived however as a set of powers rather than as a substance. Humanity is unlike all other animal species in its essential potentiality: humans have free will and differ from each other. Crockett concluded that Adler didn't overcome the problems of dualism and didn't acknowledge biological information that tells against his view of human difference. It was noted that Adler's concept of "powers" is not indebted to Whitehead or Locke but is driven by his commitment to freedom.

In "Neither/Nor: Two Absurdities in Kierkegaard Scholarship," Bill Lawhead (UM) offered a kinder, gentler view of Kierkegaard's religious epistemology than is commonly taken. S.K., like Kant, sets a limit to the religious competence of reason, but is not an irrationalist or completely relativist subjectivist: "truth is subjectivity" means only that truth must be subjectively enacted. Nor does S.K. espouse absurdity for its own sake, his point being rather that Christian life is incongruous with life under a different paradigm. A point made in discussion is that S.K. needs the tension of his "paradox," that the paradigm shift he recommends isn't as smooth as e.g. that between Newtonian and Einsteinian physics. How do we tell acceptable from unacceptable paradoxes? Why embrace Christian rather than Buddhist paradox?

Paula Smithka (USM) took up "The Problem With Taxa and Categories: Dispelling the Myth of the A Priori Species," followed by Ken Curry's (USM) "Understanding the Species Concept: Taxa and Categories." Members of species are not parts of wholes in the usual ontological sense. Various cohesion principles determine the referents of species concepts. For clarity, we may call "species taxa" the sets of organisms that are perceived to cohere as groups genotypically and phenotypically. Taxa can change and disappear while the epistemic "species categories" retain fixed sense for purposes of classification. It may be epistemologically necessary that we employ species categories, but their content is not a priori. We must avoid confusion of epistemological and ontological requirements yet be aware that "epistemology gestures at ontology [while] ontology beckons epistemology." In discussion, it was pointed out that the application of

"endangered species" policy depends on whether species is conceived as a physical type or as a (breeding) population.

The first-prize student essay by Kamper Floyd (UM) concerned "A Meaningful Self-Concept: Some Possibilities for Kant's Pure Unity of Apperception." Kant ruled out knowledge of a metaphysically substantial self but continued to affirm the connection of an "I" with all meaningful experience. This self develops a character in interaction with the world. A self that has interacted and is interacting richly with other beings is morally preferable to a self formed by poorer interaction. As Arne Naess suggests, an ecologically attuned self may be morally best of all. Self-identifying in relationship with other beings is warranted (the example was given of twin siblings' substantial identification with each other). The objection was brought up that "self" and "identification" are intrinsically problematic points of reference from e.g. a feminist or Buddhist perspective. How are significant Others most appropriately identified?

Sam Bruton (USM) gave his Presidential Address on "Imperfect Obligations and Human Nature" in Kant's ethics. He argued that Kant himself takes a tenable middle way between current Kantian interpretations of imperfect duties that are too rigorous (the duty of beneficence requires constant dedication to serving the welfare of others) and too lax (the duty of beneficence is fulfilled by one day's Habitat for Humanity outing). We must allow for judgment and discretion in the sphere of imperfect duty. Discussion explored the problem of finding standards for such judgment in situations that can't be resolved more directly from the categorical imperative.

In the business meeting next year's officers were elected: Patrick Hopkins as President; Bob Barnard as Vice-President, contingent on his acceptance; and Steve Smith as Secretary-Treasurer. We expect to meet at Ole Miss next spring.

Sam Bruton reported that the idea of publishing an MPA-sponsored journal is held up for the time being by the excessive expense involved in supporting an editor on the one editorial proposal that has been offered. Questions about the character and publication mode of the journal are still open. Patrick Hopkins said he is willing to set up an MPA website once he works out his relationship to the Millsaps computer system.

The balance in the treasury is \$112.85, up from last year's \$98.15.

Bill Lawhead offers these observations to mark the passing of long-time Ole Miss philosopher and MPA member Tom Flynn:

Thomas J. Flynn, Professor Emeritus and former Chair of the Department of Philosophy and Religion of the University of Mississippi, died on January 20, 2002 of heart failure. He was born in Grand Junction, Colorado on November 2, 1919 and grew up in Grand Forks, North Dakota and in San Francisco.

After his undergraduate education, which focused on the study of Greek and Latin, he earned a M.A. degree in philosophy from Gonzaga University in Spokane, Washington in 1944. In 1956

he earned a Ph.D. in philosophy at Fordham University with a dissertation on "Philosophical and Empirical Arguments for the Human Survival of Bodily Death."

Tom became Chair of the Philosophy Department at the University of Mississippi in 1964 and made the department flourish during difficult times for the University. He served for over two decades as the Chair and taught there until his retirement in 1990. Tom loved the classics. In his office one would find copies of the works of Aristotle in Greek, and of Thomas Aquinas in Latin. But there was more to Tom than just the erudite scholar. He enjoyed communicating the insights of philosophy and the humanities to laypersons. For this reason, he was actively involved in the founding of the Mississippi Humanities Council in 1970. Over the years he logged many miles in his car, traveling throughout the state speaking on philosophy and issues of contemporary social concern. Many of his university students testify that one of the most striking experiences they had in college was when Tom led them on a field trip to the state prison to see the penal system up close and to interview prisoners. Tom played a large role in creating a community-based solution to the problem of homeless animals with his help in founding the Lafayette County Humane Society.

The writings of Aristotle were one of the most important influences on Tom. Aristotle said that the highest level of happiness for a human being consists of a noble character, friendship, and a life of contemplation and philosophic wisdom. If Aristotle was correct, we can surely say that the life of Tom Flynn was a happy one.

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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