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2008-2009 Annual Report: Committee on Public Philosophy Elizabeth Minnich, Chair

It will not be surprising to note that these are difficult times for far-flung committees such as those of the APA. The Committee on Public Philosophy did, however, succeed in holding a face-to-face meeting in Chapel Hill (thanks to Susan Wolf, of UNC/Chapel Hill) at the end of March, 2009. It is to be hoped that new as well as continuing members will be able to meet during the Eastern, Central, and/or Pacific conferences in 2009/10, at the panels we will be sponsoring and at meetings I will try to arrange. Budget cuts, we know, make such travel less likely in these times, but one lives in hope.

Given realities, early in my tenure as Chair I asked for and received agreement that we would do our work by email. I do not pretend to have kept everyone up to date adequately, nor to have received fulsome responses, but we have indeed gotten some work done.

With the happy exception of Sharon Meagher (working with Ellen Feder), no one on the Committee in early 2009 volunteered to assemble a program for APA conferences, so we asked Kyle Powys Whyte, among others but notably, to prepare something really engaging for us. With some thoughtful contributions by Doug Maclean, Kyle has put together a fine program for Eastern APA in late 2009. Titled, "Symposium on Public Philosophy: New Arguments on Technology Assessment, Democratic Participation and Risk Perception," it could not be more timely as the nation once again takes on issues of health, insurance, equity and public policy. There will be papers on "The Conservative Disposition and the Precautionary Principle," "Public Risk Perceptions, and the Legitimacy of Emotions," and more. As Kyle Powys Whyte, who remains key to this panel, wrote in his description: "Helen Brathwaite, an asbestos activist in Harlem in the late 1970's, once said, "[I]f you assume you're going to get experts to help you, you're in trouble. Most of the time on environmental issues there are no experts, and if there were, we wouldn't have these problems." Whyte asks, "How should members of the public and technical experts, " then, "participate in policy decisions about technological risks?" For example, "Average citizens sometimes focus on aspects of risk that experts tend to ignore, such as qualitative features of a risk that may be independent of measure of probability and harm."

These are important points to explore, no matter the specific issue, in a would-be democracy.

For Pacific, Sharon Meagher and Ellen Feder are preparing discussions in "a democratized space of mutual learning and support for publicly engaged philosophers and philosophers who wish to do publicly engaged work," as well as "to support philosophers, especially younger scholars, who do publicly engaged work by providing them with the beginning both of a peer network and a mentoring network of more senior scholars...We can only do public philosophy if we learn to collaborate with one another more effectively," they write.

Central: Here, we may (no decision yet) be inaugurating a tradition of honoring philosophers whose work consistently, over years and effectively, concerns itself with public issues. This year, we will honor Lawrence Becker, whose wide-ranging work has invited us to think about "Justice, Reciprocity, and Eudaimonistic Health" (the title of this session, comprised of two panels). Panels will discuss "Justice, Reciprocity and Stoicism," and "Justice and Habilitation into Healthy Agency." Invited panelists will speak from their own ongoing work, which will be variously engaged with Becker's lifetime of work as well as his new book, still in manuscript. (Along with Thomas M. Powers and Kendall D'Andrade, Larry Becker has now joined Michael Austin, Sharon Meagher, Susan Wolf and me on the CPP. Perhaps, then, I should note that of course it was not his idea to honor his work around his 70th birthday. We are pleased that he assented, and that he, as well as the other new members, now joins CPP's ongoing work.)

True to our mandate, we hope to publicize these panels, and we certainly hope other philosophers will join us in doing so.

Other business: We are discussing possible relationships with "Philosophy Talk," the West Coast radio show first recommended for CPP and APA underwriting while my predecessor, Martha Nussbaum, was Chair. We also hope in the next year to take up more pointedly the question of how best to help a broader public locate and make good use of philosophers' works, commentary, participation. Various projects are beginning along these lines: I will report on them if and as they emerge from planning into public light.

Finally, let me note that, while it is evident that more than a few philosophers would be pleased to speak, and be heard, about public issues, how to help that happen remains a very tricky issue. Kyle Powys Whyte's panel, for example, reminds us, at the least, that "expertise" and "public interest" are by no means obviously in synch, cast in mutually comprehensible languages, engaged with the same real concerns. It is heartening that the CPP was created, and that -- as I should also report -- there are non-members of the Committee as well who are in touch and anxious to be part of engaging this field with public issues, public concern, public discussion. It would be good to find ways to expand those who work with the Committee.

In sum: While the CPP has a complex charge - from figuring out what "public philosophy" does and should mean, to enhancing publicity, to sponsoring work that forwards engaged philosophy -- we are making some progress across the board. We cannot serve APA as a public relations office might (we are not only philosophers, but volunteers dispersed across the country with no staff support), but obviously that is not the only meaning of "public philosophy."

Elizabeth Minnich, Chair

CPP

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