

## Affectivity

British Society for Phenomenology Conference, 3–5 April 1998, Oxford

The annual conference of the British Society for Phenomenology has become a most enjoyable affair. Where the current conference norm is for parallel sessions, brief papers and even briefer discussions, the BSP benefits from a leisurely format which allows ideas to be worked out at length, to be discussed constructively both formally and informally, and for connections to be established between speakers who engage with the conference theme.

The theme of this year's conference – affectivity – lies at the heart of Husserl's late work in genetic phenomenology, while also playing a decisive role in the thought of Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Derrida and Levinas, as well as contemporary French scholars such as Didier Franck and Michel Henry. It was the thought of Heidegger which dominated the proceedings, with three challenging papers devoted to his work.

While the papers by Ulle Hasse (MMU), David Webb (Staffordshire) and Jonathan Dronsfield (Warwick) ranged across the full span of Heidegger's corpus, each ultimately returned to themes explored in his lecture courses of the late 1920s, and in particular the event of Dasein's disclosure to itself as an affection of the 'subject'. In a beautifully performed paper, Hasse journeyed to the core of Heidegger's famous 1929 lecture course, *Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*. If Dasein is pre-eminently uncovered to him- or herself in moods such as boredom, then the question arises as to who or what causes these moods. Hasse's argument was that moods such as boredom are instead affects of Dasein, 'effects in themselves' – an idea he employed to understand Heidegger's claim that, ultimately, moods are conditions of possibility of the appearance of things, and hence experience in general, but that, since they are the *grounds* of experiences, they cannot, of necessity, be *experienced* as such.

David Webb used the concept of 'dimension' to interrogate the relation of givenness. Interweaving Heidegger's late essays on language with his understanding of the relation between movement and time in the 1920s, Webb sought to thematize the relation of givenness in terms of the notion of 'formal indication': the givenness of something as this or that.

Webb's critical questioning focused on the issue of whether Heidegger is able to think radically enough the differentiation – which occurs in and through the saying of language – between a thing and its horizon of givenness, which is thereby the dimension of the thing's appearance.

Concentrating on Heidegger's readings of Kant in the late 1920s, Jonathan Dronsfield turned the matter round, focusing on Dasein's 'ability' to be affected. Dronsfield foregrounded Heidegger's response to auto-affection in Kant's thinking of the categorical imperative and the transcendental schematism. He asked whether the ability to affect oneself was not, at once, the ability to be affected, a notion as apparently paradoxical as that of an effect in itself.

The papers by Paul Davies (Sussex) and Stella Sandford (Essex/UNL) provided a contrast by focusing on Levinas. Sandford's paper went beyond the familiar concerns of feminist critics with Levinas's phenomenology of erotic love and the feminine, demonstrating a descriptive similarity between Levinas's account of the vulnerability of ethical transcendence and the affectivity of Eros in *Totality and Infinity*. It inferred that the specific shortcomings which feminist readings have exposed in Levinas's phenomenology of Eros are equally applicable to Levinas's attempt to institute ethics as first philosophy.

Davies's paper was cast in the form of three 'notes' on Levinas's relation to Kant. Having rehearsed the well-known differences between Kant and Levinas, Davies went on to reveal an unexpected Kantianism in Levinas – or perhaps better, a surprising Levinasianism in Kant – to be found in their accounts of suffering and sincerity, and, ultimately, in a convergence between Levinas's phenomenology of responsibility and Kant's 'phenomenology' of respect.

The papers revealed the richness within the phenomenological tradition's thinking of affectivity, while provoking a questioning of its received interpretation. On a less exalted level, they were testament to the continuing philosophical health of the British Society for Phenomenology.

**Robin Durie**

# John Macmurray 6–9 April 1998, Aberdeen

This, the first conference to be held on John Macmurray's philosophy in his native Scotland, reflects a revival of interest in his work on both sides of the Atlantic – an interest which predates the publicity given to him as Tony Blair's favourite philosopher. Indeed the political readings of Macmurray at the conference varied from (in the red corner) my own paper pointing out that Macmurray's critique of idealism and dualism was inspired by Marx, his theory of history close to Marx's if rather more historicist, and his communist goal identical with Marx's except for his rejection of secularism; to (in the blue corner) Brenda Almond's attempt to co-opt him for neo-liberalism; via Frank Kirkpatrick's judicious use of his ideas to defend an interventionist politics of welfare in the American context. There were also friendly critiques of Macmurray's personalism from the perspectives of feminism (Susan Parsons) and analytical philosophy (Robin Downie), and fascinating confirmations and corrections of some of his theories by psychological experiments and surveys, most notably from Colwyn Trevarthan.

Macmurray was a singularly accessible philosopher, many of his works having started life as public lectures

or BBC broadcasts, and he put forward many of the ideas which we have later learnt with much tribulation from Heidegger, in lucid English, in the 1930s, without any direct Heideggerian influence that can be traced. He was also the first philosopher to contribute to the Christian–Marxist dialogue. So the ignoring of his work for so long is puzzling, and was puzzled over at the conference.

The event was interdisciplinary – mostly philosophers, psychologists and theologians – with quite a few non-academics present, some of whom had known Macmurray personally. From them, as well as from Jack Costello's biographical paper, one learnt such nuggets of information as that Macmurray privately accepted the label 'existentialist', that he would refuse to lecture if any student had pen and paper out for taking notes, that he was instrumental in getting several thinkers out of Nazi Germany, including Adorno, and that he and his wife were once chased by the monster while rowing on Loch Ness. The conference atmosphere was extremely friendly, as befits a conference commemorating a philosopher who held that friendship was the ultimate end of life and thought.

**Andrew Collier**

## LETTER Blindspot on race

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In Bob Carter's article 'Out of Africa: Philosophy, "Race" and Agency' in *Radical Philosophy* 89, an interesting aporia opens up which, in light of the imminent *RP* conference on that subject, ought to be mentioned. I refer to the way in which Carter brings up the issue of race only to confine his discussion to what black or African people think about its relation to philosophy. Carter's blindspot is that he repeats a questionable construction of the neutrality of philosophy. He confines the issue of 'race and philosophy' to those he considers as 'raced' subjects. Carter's error is that he repeats without question the assumption that non-black philosophers are not also raced subjects. Carter takes white to mean neutral and unraced. He then goes on to point to the difficulties of sustaining the concept of 'race' philosophically across a series of current books by African and African-American scholars.

It is disturbing that *Radical Philosophy* chose to publish this piece. It appears to have the effect of

raising what I take to be contemporary philosophy's great unthought troubling anxiety only to reduce it to philosophical illegitimacy. If philosophy's radical edge is occupied by thinkers who look to African and African-American scholars alone concerning the question of philosophy and race, it will find itself situated within the core of leading liberalistic ideologies.

This attitude needs to be met with the strongest challenge from what I take to be a more radical position within philosophy. As in other fields of intellectual activity, the issue of philosophy and race should be taken to involve *white* and *black*. Just as the study of gender does not equate with the study of women, so too should the study of race be inclusive of all subject positions. In this way, the question of philosophy and race opens up questions of *whiteness* as much as it does *blackness*. Only in this way can we leave the futile and sterile debates about the tenability of an 'African' philosophy behind.

**Jeremy Weate**