

# The Phi Sigma Tau

Bulletin

A Publication of the Department of Philosophy, Southwest Texas State University

Spring, 1997

In Memory of Professor Mark Williamson

Issue 4

## Popular Professor will be Missed

by Dave Madden

Early in December, SWT suffered a great loss with the death of philosophy professor Mark Williamson, who had been an instructor here since 1986. Professor Williamson was remembered by family, coworkers, students, and friends at a memorial service on December 6th.

Since his death, those who knew Professor Williamson have had time to reflect upon the impact he made on their lives. At the same time, they have struggled with questions about his death. His suicide left them saddened, confused and wondering "Why?" Friends speculated that at the time of his death, Williamson himself was engaged in a struggle with the depression which had plagued him at times in the past. Regardless of the manner of his death, Professor Williamson will always be known to his students and fellow professors as a gifted teacher.

Professor Williamson had a loyal following of philosophy students, many of whom chose to fill many of their upper division course requirements with his classes. Former student Ryan Kane took seven of Williamson's courses in addition to working as his teaching assistant. According to Kane, Williamson never taught the same class twice in the same way, meaning that he deliberately varied the content of his courses each semester.

Professor Williamson was known for his ability to challenge his students.

"Williamson wasn't afraid to go over students' heads with the material in his classes," Kane said.

Another student, Carlos Armintor, described Williamson's approach to philosophy as intellectual power lifting.

"A power lifter lifts very heavy weights for strength as opposed to the bodybuilder who lifts lighter weights for the appearance of strength. Williamson wanted his students to get stronger intellectually through difficult reading assignments and intense debates."

Both Kane and Armintor recalled that one of the ways Williamson challenged his students was through his use of aphorisms.

"Once he asked me what my minor was and I told him it was history," recalled Armintor. "I was shocked when he said history is a lie told by the victors and the only thing history has taught us is that history teaches us nothing, but it did make me think about history in a different way."

(See "Popular Professor," page 2)

## A Professor Remembers by Bob Dyal

Mark Williamson's death is *tragic*, not only in the sense of immense and premature loss to his family, friends, colleagues, students, and the profession of Philosophy. He is Aristotle's Tragic Hero, "the intermediate kind of personage, a man not preeminently virtuous and just, whose misfortune, however, is brought upon him not by vice and depravity but by some error of judgment,..." (Poetics), i.e. a person with whom *each of us* can identify vicariously and empathetically, rather than standing in judgment of him.

Since my office is directly across from Mark's and both are somewhat removed from the cluster of offices housing our colleagues, we shared many moments of conversation, many of which were over philosophical ideas and teaching tactics, but also over more mundane topics, and sometimes personal matters. I learned a lot from my much younger colleague and was inspired by his enthusiasm for teaching, "love of wisdom", and creative, independent thought. I greatly admired Mark's commitment, long-delayed, to obtain the Ph.D. he would surely have earned. I worried, however, regarding his ability to endure the rigors involved in the commute between SWT and Rice and the enormous work load involved in the division of his labors between the two--not to mention the impact of all this upon his recent marriage (the early years of which are typically challenging).

Albert Camus, in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, contends: "There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy." Camus himself concluded that even if one construes human existence

(See "Professor Remembers," Page 2)



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**("Popular Professor" from page 1)**

Williamson's aphorisms could be irreverent and always seemed designed to challenge traditional views.

"One in particular that I remember his saying was that religion was superstition with a collection plate," Kane said.

Even students who had taken several classes with Professor Williamson agreed that they could have learned so much more from him.

"I still feel as if I was only on the tip of the iceberg of what he could teach me....He taught me how to be human and how to understand people," said Kane.

Williamson's reputation for assigning lengthy, challenging readings and bi-weekly defense papers did not deter students from signing up for his classes in droves. Discussing these demanding readings was a difficult but intellectually rewarding exercise.

"While you were reading your paper aloud, anyone could interject at any time and question your statements," Armintor reported. "And Williamson was a master at playing devil's advocate."

Kane described how, by simply talking to Professor Williamson, one could see that the man truly loved both to practice and teach philosophy. He was adept at opening students' eyes to the many different approaches to philosophical problems, and his enthusiasm and energy spilled over to his students.

"Professor Williamson was a true explorer and philosopher who offered a great deal to students," said Dr. Vince Luizzi, Chair of the Philosophy Department. "He seemed to glide about, above human foibles. Every day he would sit down in my office and deliver a monologue about his latest thoughts and observations."

Often absorbed in reflection, Williamson believed that contemplation, discussion, and reading were the path to wisdom. He cared little for high technology, the latest trends, or bureaucratic complexities.

"He did not even want to learn the terminology of computers," Dr. Luizzi said. It seems that Professor Williamson viewed such things as obstructions.

According to both Armintor and Kane, nothing escaped philosophic scrutiny within the confines of Professor Williamson's classroom.

"Nothing was sacrosanct," agreed Dr. Luizzi. "He was an inquirer at heart."

Dr. Jeffrey Gordon, Professor Williamson's colleague, friend, and frequent philosophical sparring partner, also reflected on Professor Williamson's love of teaching and his broad and complex philosophic interests.

"He wanted to be a classic philosopher," said Dr. Gordon. "He had a good sense of humor...and he was gutsy," he added, referring to Professor Williamson's willingness to challenge vigorously students' dearest convictions in a way which made them laugh and think at the same time.

Professor Williamson's wit and encouragement of open debate, both during and after class, endeared him to his students and colleagues. He will be sorely missed by those who knew, worked alongside of, and learned from him.

Our thanks to *The File* for allowing us to print an adapted version of Dave Madden's article "Remembering Mark Williamson" which appeared on January 13, 1997. *The File* is published every other Monday by Academics First, a non-profit, student organization at Southwest Texas State University.



**Thoughts on the Death of A. Mark Williamson  
by Ryan Kane**

In many ways, the death of Professor Williamson changes this world only slightly. The semesters come and go. People group, disperse and regroup. We stand in reflection of the things once believed.

From another perspective, nothing could ever be the same again. Your death, Mark, violent and unnecessary, resists my most fervent efforts to make sense of it. Perhaps you had no other option. These alternatives, however, are neither sensible nor relevant to the loss at issue.

Regretfully, the desire to understand what you had to say is greater now than it ever was when you were alive. I sincerely miss you. Never had I realized what a relief it was to know that what ever question I could propose, whatever unusual concern gnawed at me, you could provide a route to grasping it—at the least, you gave me a facet of the jewel. With respect to my ignorance, you probably gave much more. You made the world less frightening. I never told you this. I couldn't, as this thought has only become real in these words Zarathustra says:

*I now go away alone, my disciples! You too now go away and be alone! So I will have it. Go away from me and guard yourselves against Zarathustra! And better still: be ashamed of him! Perhaps he has deceived you. The man of knowledge must be able not only to love his enemies but also to hate his friends. One repays a teacher badly if one remains only a pupil. And why, then, should you not pluck at my laurels? You respect me; but how if one day your respect should tumble? Take care that a falling statue does not strike you dead! You say you believe Zarathustra? But of what importance is Zarathustra? You are my believers: but of what importance are all believers? You had not yet sought yourselves when you found me. Thus do all believers; therefore all belief is of so little account. Now I bid you lose me and find yourselves; and only when you have all denied me will I return to you ....*

— Ecce Homo, Nietzsche, 1888

**("Professor Remembers"  
from page 1)**

as dread and despair, as absent of meaning—one is free to create meaning where none exists; hence, life, however degraded, is given worth. Despite this affirmation, Camus' own life ended prematurely in an automobile crash which many suspect was deliberate. Psychologists believe there is a valid distinction between "rational" suicide and "pathological" suicide.

As with Camus, I am persuaded that Mark's suicide was of the latter variety, inasmuch as I witnessed more than once his ability to create meaning, his affirmation of life.

I don't know the circumstances of Mark's despair and depression; I suspect, however, that the causes are manifold and deep and ought not be attributed to any one factor. I do know that my memories of Mark Williamson are overwhelmingly positive. In his advanced courses, he seemed to attract the best and the brightest, both philosophy majors and students from other fields. They flocked to his office, sometimes overflowing into the hall, seeking more from him than he had time to present in the classroom, absorbing his presence, engaging in animated dialogue. Mark seemed always to make the short list of "outstanding teachers" among this cluster of bright and lively students. I believe this was because they found him not only to be accessible, but also bright and lively, witty and artistic, open and responsive, and deeply in love with his chosen field of philosophy. These students will profoundly miss Mark. Future students will be denied this opportunity, and *that*, too, is tragic.

**The Phi Sigma Tau Bulletin**

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## SUGGESTED READING

### *Sophie's World*

A novel about the history of philosophy by Jostein Gaarder, translated from Norwegian by Paulette Møller. (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995). Reviewed by Jo Ann Carson. Price: \$6.95 (On order at the University Bookstore).

Philosophy begins in wonder, and soon-to-be fifteen Sophie Amundsen suddenly has a lot to wonder about. Her mother and her best friend Joanna think Sophie has gone weird on them, but what looks to them like strangeness is the natural result of discovering just how astonishing it is to be alive.

It's spring. The trees are greening, the daffodils are blooming, and Sophie is puzzling about the extraordinary items which are appearing in her mailbox. Envelopes containing enigmatic questions (Who am I? Where does the world come from?) are soon followed by what seem to be the lecture notes of an unidentified philosophy professor. Who is the writer of these mysterious missives and why is she the recipient of them? And why is she also receiving birthday cards and letters from the father of someone named Hilde, when she has no earthly idea who this Hilde is?

Sophie begins to investigate. First, she discovers the identity of her teacher--one Alberto Knox. Together, Sophie and Alberto embark on an intellectual journey in search of the secrets of reality and the author of their existence. (Hint: take this literally.) The quest soon turns into a life and death struggle, and the ideas of history's greatest thinkers become a map to their very survival.

Intrigue, suspense, and whimsy complement the multidimensional themes of *Sophie's World*. This is a "survey approach" to philosophy with some interesting twists. In addition to the all-time greats of the Thinking Pantheon, there are cameo appearances by the likes of Alice, Noah, Little Red Ridinghood, Goofy, Ebenezer Scrooge and Winnie-the-Pooh. Even hard-core realists, who may at times be put off by the idealist overtones of the book, are likely to be somewhat enchanted by Gaarder's attempt to resurrect the dry bones of intellectual history as a grand and glorious existential quest.

On the down side, the historical passages of this book sometimes seem plodding and may require slower going than most students are accustomed to in a novel. They do become more captivating as the plot thickens. (Editor's note: Read them again, they're good for you.) Also, the summary accounts of complex philosophical views are sometimes superficial--any "expert" on Philosopher X will likely find much to quibble with about the author's presentation of Philosopher X's ideas. Just remember that *Sophie's World* is not meant to be a substitute for scholarly erudition and rigorous argument. It is, however, an engaging way to introduce philosophy to those who know nothing about it, an entertaining refresher course for those who do, and a refreshing change for any of us who might occasionally feel the need to recapture the wonder of it all.



### ATTENTION WRITERS!




Do you have an undergraduate philosophy paper of high quality written for a course at SWT during 1996? If so, you may want to consider submitting it as an entry in the Writing Center Essay Contest sponsored by the Therese Kayser Lindsey Chair of Literature and the Department of English. The winner in each of four categories will receive a cash award of \$150.00. The deadline for entries is Friday, March 14, 1997. Winners will be announced in April. For entry forms and further information contact Professor Jo Ann Carson at 245-3143 or 245-2285.

# PHILOSOPHY DIALOGUE SERIES

Phone: 245-2285

## SWT - SPRING 1997

Room LA 367

Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
<b>26 JAN</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>1 FEB</b>
<b>Feminist Theory</b>	1 PM <i>Intro for Feminist Theory</i> Prof. Rebekah Ross-Fountain		3:30 PM <i>Chicana Feminism</i> Stephanie Reyes	12 Noon <i>Is Justice Irretrievably Masculine?</i> Prof. Lynne Fulmer	1 PM Film: <i>Simone de Beauvoir</i>	
<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4 Ask a Philosopher</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>8</b>
 <b>Happiness</b>		3:30 PM <i>Happiness Theories: An Overview</i> Prof. Vince Luizzi	2 PM <i>The Happiness Box: A Thought Experiment</i> Prof. Jo Ann Carson	2 PM <i>Happiness According to Andrews</i> Chris Andrews	1 PM Film: <i>Epicureans &amp; Stoics on Happiness</i>	
<b>9</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Post-modernism</b>	11 AM <i>Is Postmodernism Beginning or Ending?</i> Prof. Paul Cohen		3:30 PM <i>Jean Baudrillard: A New Sophistry?</i> Josh de Koning	3:30 PM <i>What is Poetry?</i> Ryan Kane	1 PM Film: <i>Philosophy &amp; Postmodern Culture</i>	
<b>16</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>Post-modernism</b>		2 PM <i>Can We Really Transcend the Body?: Toward a Critical Post-modernism</i> Prof. Mark Hansen		2 PM <i>Heidegger and Postmodernism</i> Shane Denson	3 PM $\Phi\Sigma\tau$ Meeting LA 367	
<b>23</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>1 MARCH</b>
<b>M</b>	<b>T</b>	<b>W</b>	<b>T</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>S</b>	<b>M</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Hume</b>	1 PM <i>Hume in Historical Context</i> Prof. Dean Geuras			2 PM <i>Hume on Miracles: Then and Now</i> Prof. Gil Fulmer		
<b>9</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>15</b>
	<i>Spring Break</i>					
<b>16</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>The Intersection of Philosophy &amp; Psychology</b>	2 PM <i>Freud on Dreams</i> Prof. Jeffrey Gordon		2 PM <i>The Interface of Philosophy &amp; Psychoanalysis</i> Prof. Tim Hulsey		$\Phi\Sigma\tau$ Initiation & Reception	
<b>23</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>Phenomenology</b>		11 AM <i>Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology</i> Prof. Rebekah Ross-Fountain	3:15 PM <i>Phenomenology &amp; Religion</i> Prof. Bob Dyal	11 AM <i>Husserl: An Intro to Phenomenology</i> Prof. Peter Hutcheson		
<b>30</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>1 APRIL</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
TEAGUE LECTURE TO BE ANNOUNCED IN APRIL						

## FACULTY NOTES:

The New Mexico/West Texas Philosophical Association will meet in Albuquerque, New Mexico, in April. Professors Gil and Lynne Fulmer will present the following papers:

### Gil Fulmer: "Schlesinger's Theodicy"

The problem of evil is historically the most refractory problem faced by theism. For millennia theists have struggled to explain how their God, opined to be both infinitely powerful and infinitely good, can cause and permit such and so much evil in his creation. Believers and skeptics alike have wondered why so puissant a deity could not improve the world if he would, or why so benignant a one would not if he could.

George N. Schlesinger has proposed a theodicy that would, if successful, defend God against any possible formulation of the problem of evil; God cannot be blamed for any possible evil world, Schlesinger argues, since he could always make a better world than any one that exists. Therefore it is logically impossible for him to fulfill the moral obligation to create the world that is the best that it is possible for him to create.

I argue, first, that if Schlesinger's reasoning is correct it must force the conclusion that God is *always* blameworthy, rather than that he *never* is. And, second, Schlesinger's argument has the consequence that moral predicates can never be applied to God. Thus it is necessarily false that he is good *at all*, much less *infinitely good*.

### Lynne Fulmer: "EQUAL OPPORTUNITY: Anti-Liberal and More?"

This paper looks at John Schaar's claim that Equal Opportunity is not the beneficial, liberal doctrine so many think it is. He argues that it is anti-liberal (because it perpetuates the values of the status quo), anti-egalitarian (because it perpetuates a class of elites), and anti-democratic (because it perpetuates hierarchy and oligarchy among supposed equals).

I argue that Schaar's claims are mistaken because he is arguing against a straw man. The picture he presents of equal opportunity is not one that finds much favor in our society, so his claims do not establish the unsatisfactory character of equal opportunity.

Furthermore, Schaar fails to provide crucial proof for some of his claims.

♂ ↔ ♀

Lynne and Gil Fulmer will also present the following papers in San Antonio, Texas, March 26-29, at the Southwest/Texas Popular Culture Association Convention:

### Lynne Fulmer: "Can This Marriage be Saved? Will Feminism Survive the Pornography/Sexuality Debate"

For many reasons, feminists have been reluctant to exclude anyone from the feminist table. As one result, feminists are deeply divided over pornography. Feminist positions include the anti-porn MacKinnon/Dworkin feminists, the anti-anti porn feminists, and the porn-producing dominatrixes. The approaches of these feminists seem so radically different as to raise doubts about the coherence of any future feminist theory or feminist activism.

This paper looks at the tension between the anti-pornography forces, defined by Catherine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin, and the pro-sex forces, defined most recently by Nadine Strossen of the A.C.L.U., Sally Tisdale in "Talk Dirty to Me," and Laura Kipnis in "Bound and Gagged." These positions represent radically divergent accounts of feminine experience. Nor is this a minor quibble. At its core are questions about how we are to understand our culture, how we are to improve the quality of women's lives, and who we are and who our allies are in the political debate. This paper raises questions of

whether there is any common feminist core beneath such differences and draws some implications for the future of feminist studies.

### Gil Fulmer: "Hume on Miracles: Then and Now"

In his *Essay on Miracles*, Hume argues most famously that testimonial evidence can never establish the occurrence of a miracle for general epistemological reasons, leading him to conclude that miracle reports should be rejected because of *what* is reported.

In the less-studied Part II of the *Essay*, he gives several practical reasons to reject miracle claims: people are especially prone to believe the miraculous on weak evidence; this is especially true when the miraculous event supports pre-existing beliefs; and when miracles are reported as supporting religion, they are especially to be doubted. Here Hume rejects miracle reports because of *who* reports them.

All of these secondary points of Hume's apply to ubiquitous claims of miracles by contemporary televangelists, to heal the sick or raise the dead. I try here to show that most such contemporary miracle claims should be rejected on the grounds presented by Hume.

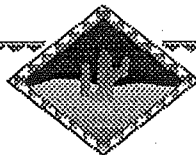
In February, the Fulmers will be teaching a short non-credit course in Philosophy of Religion at the Harambe Oaks Elder Hostel in Fischer, Texas.

Wednesday, October 23, 1996, PECOS ENTERPRISE



**RELIABLE STUDENTS** — Rick Chafey's second grade class at Austin Elementary School was noted for having the best attendance for the first six weeks of school. The class average was 99.72 percent.

**SWT Philosophy graduate Rick Chafey with the young philosophers of the Pecos school.**



## Lab Report:

### New Director and Direction for the Dialogue Room

In the Philosophy Department, we have a unique space dedicated to critical thinking, The Critical Thinking Lab (LA 367). Half of this space is designated for dialogue and the fostering of critical thinking skills through discussion. In the Dialogue Room, our intention is to examine and explore thoughts and ideas in an open forum that fosters interactive, intellectual exchange. Those who come to the discussions attend with the good faith to reason deeply and clearly, and to appreciate and value fair mindedness, empathy, and integrity. With these guidelines, we explore a variety of topics and no subject is sacred as the critical process begins and continues.

Each semester focus topics are based on the suggestions of students and faculty. Feminist Theory, Happiness, Postmodernism, Hume, The Intersection of Philosophy and Psychology, and Phenomenology are the topics for the Spring 1997 series. There will also be a week on Jurisprudence in conjunction with the Teague Lecture in early April. Students expressed strong interest in Postmodern thought, thus we have two weeks dedicated to the subject in February. Several of our Spring topics like Postmodernism and the Intersection of Philosophy and Psychology provide an opportunity to reveal the interdisciplinary aspects of philosophical discussions. We have invited faculty members from other departments, like Paul Cohen and Mark Hansen in English and Tim Hulseley in Psychology, to facilitate discussions that overlap their academic areas. Similarly, students with a variety of backgrounds and majors enhance the Dialogue Room with their contributions.

The intention of the Critical Thinking Lab is to provide a place for students to develop critical thinking skills. Thus, students are encouraged to lead discussions. Our hope is that you will not only attend the "structured" events, but that you will gather friends and colleagues, sign up on the calendar outside the room so others may join you, and begin exploring and examining your thoughts and ideas.

We publicize the Dialogue Topics and scheduled discussions by distributing a flier in advance of each week. If you would like to be added to the calendar, please contact me through the Philosophy Department at 245-2285, or come by the Lab between 9 a.m. and 2 p.m., Monday through Friday.

Rebekah Ross-Fountain  
Critical Thinking Lab Coordinator