Editor’s comments.

At a special session of our recent 25th annual convention at Marquette University John Lachs’s offered historical reflections, urged the Society to continue its exploration of the riches of the American philosophical tradition and he challenged the executive committee and SAAP members devote a significant part of future annual meetings to “real world” issues: “We (John and his wife Shirley) shall establish a new prize, to be awarded annually at our national meeting, to reward the best essay on the program offering a philosophical approach to some living problem.”

It was decided that SAAP members be invited to offer their reflections on our Society’s past and future and that NEWSLETTER #81 (October) be a celebration of our 25th anniversary. Morris Grossman is in the process of updating and expanding his “A Brief and Tentative Sketch of the Founding and Early History of the Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy” (previously published in SAAP NEWSLETTER #65 (June 1993: 14-21) and James Campbell has compiled “An Informational Report” containing a record of SAAP presidents, executive committee members and officers along with meeting dates, places, themes, program committees and special sessions. Campbell’s record begins with two unofficial meetings in Chicago (26 April 1973) and Atlanta (28 December 1973) and continues with each and every meeting from the inaugural meeting at Vanderbilt (8-9 March 1974) to our latest at Marquette (5-7 March 1998).

Two Society members have already offered reflections (James Cambell on Douglas Greenlee’s impact on SAAP and Micah Hester on graduate students and SAAP). Here then are Lachs’s comments and challenges.

REMARKS ON THE 25TH ANNIVERSARY OF SAAP

At the time of its founding, The Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy was desperately needed. The APA had at that point distanced itself from the concerns of its members. The Eastern Division was run out of a few East Coast graduate schools. Its annual meetings featured topics of hair-raising irrelevance discussed with hair-splitting precision. The style of presentation was solipsistic and yet aggressive; commentators were expected to lay waste to the thesis presented and, if possible, to heap ridicule on the person who dared to present it.

The cruelty of the day is difficult to recapture in memory. The symbol of it in my mind is a distinguished philosopher after dinner and a couple of drinks openly sobbing
over the shambles made of his ideas by the intellectual gang-violence of the department he was visiting.

At one point, I was moved to write a letter to the Secretary of the Eastern Division of the APA, detailing the in-breeding and self-dealing that had become the APA norm. I noted that APA committees were serving as revolving doors, concentrating decision-making power in the hands of a small coterie of individuals. For example, the head of an East Coast department was appointed chair of the Program Committee twice in nine years. On the second occasion, more than 10 philosophers, nearly every breathing person, from his department found themselves in prominent positions on the program.

By contrast, we wanted a community that would respect its members and view their errors not as ludicrous boners but as natural events in the process of seeking the truth. We wanted a community in which interest in all topics and approaches was welcomed. And we wanted a community whose leaders would not use it to their own advantage and would be willing to serve and then step aside to make room for others.

Beth Singer, John McDermott and a few others discussed the possibility of founding such a community. I sent a letter of invitation to interested people to meet with us in my room in Boston at the APA in December 1973. Our frustrations had crystallized in the form of the determination to do what we could to open up philosophy in this country and to revitalize it. None of us had started a society before, and hence no one knew much about what to expect and how to proceed. Nevertheless, we felt we were doing something important and long overdue. We understood little of the broader significance of our actions and we had no way of foretelling their outcome.

What we founded came to be called The American Philosophy Group. With courage bordering on recklessness, we called for a national meeting of people interested in American philosophy, to take place at Vanderbilt in March 1974. Joe Grassi, who has recently left us to live with the immortals, looked over sample constitutions and pieced together something that looked like it might serve as a founding document. I had obtained a yearlong grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities to create programs about human rights for the Nashville community.

With money from that grant, we invited a distinguished cast ranging from Joel Feinberg, who confessed to me over cocktails that Santayana was one of the heroes of his youth, to Andy Reck, our new president, who was in the midst of working on the philosophy of the Founding Fathers, to talk about human progress as we view it in this country.

We decided that the name "American Philosophy Group" would have to be upgraded. There were concerns about the favored new name SOCIETY FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF AMERICAN PHILOSOPHY because its acronym, SAAP, failed to suggest the dynamism we hoped would characterize our new society. Confirmation that SAAP was to become an important factor in the development of
American philosophical life came almost immediately. The night before the business meeting, at a party at the Anchor Hotel that is now only a vague memory near the Vanderbilt campus, we made decisions about who would serve on the Executive Committee of the new organization. The regular term of service would be 3 years but, initially, some would serve for one year and some for two in order to assure a regular rotation. We placed slips of paper of uneven length in a hat; those pulling the shortest would stand for election to a three-year term while the others would serve for two years or for one in accord with the length of their slip.

A colleague wanting to run for office drew one of the long pieces of paper and his face fell. He pulled to the back of the group and was observed furtively clipping the slip to lengthen his term of service. This will surely be an important organization, I thought to myself, if people take such measures to serve it.

The history of SAAP, its growth into a society with hundreds of devoted members and into a major instrument of the revival of American philosophy, exceeded our expectations even if not our hopes. When I look at this audience, especially the young people, who have worked on Dewey and Royce and Santayana and who have written dissertations on aesthetics, semiotics and medical ethics utilizing the resources of American philosophy, I know that the tradition dear to us is, once again, alive.

The future of American philosophy rests at last again in the hands of a community, rather than in the halting efforts of a few isolated individuals. I am confident that this community will not allow America’s contributions to the great dialogue of humankind ever to be forgotten again. You will make sure that we will not have to feel the embarrassment I experienced in Russia some years ago when I found that academics at Moscow State University knew more about American philosophy than most of our American colleagues.

If I were a statistician, I would, with a caress in my voice, now present some figures to demonstrate the growth of our society and the vitality of American philosophy. And if I loved details, I would linger over all the signs of spring in pragmatism, in personalism and even in American idealisms. I could speak of new journals, of new books appearing in new book series, of critical editions, of a proliferation of societies and meetings, of a growing number of dissertations, of the rehabilitation of neglected masters, including Santayana, Royce and Hocking, of vigorous activity on the Internet, of the vast interdisciplinary influence of thinkers such as Peirce and Dewey, and of the remarkable -- though still inadequate --- awareness of American thought among analytic and Continental philosophers.

Such catalogues are valuable as a resource but ruinously boring as parts of a celebration. In any case, one of the great hallmarks of American philosophy is love of the future, committing it to the details of the past only to the extent they are of value in shaping our lives. In that spirit, let me not dwell on our accomplishments, but on what
remains to be done and on what direction our Society and American philosophy need to take in the next twenty-five years.

I preface my comments by acknowledging that they are only one person's opinions. But even if they are not right, the issues underlying them ought to be topics of open debate in our community, so that critical social inquiry may correct the extremes of personal belief.

Careful study of the great texts must continue as indispensable for philosophical education and inspiration. And, as a condition of such study, we must make sure that reliable texts are readily available. This means that the critical editions now underway must receive our wholehearted support and that further editions, preeminently but by no means only of the work of Royce, need to be initiated. We don't have a clear understanding of much that Peirce and Dewey and others said; the work of interpretation, clarification and comparison must also continue apace.

But much as such activities can contribute to the future of American thought, in the end they cannot constitute it. As any living being, philosophy must not become absorbed in its past; its job is to make itself useful in the conduct of life. Dewey's motto that the focus of our concern should not be the problems of philosophy--and, by extension, the problems we find in texts --- but the problems of human beings, ought to hang over the office door of every department.

The "action," as they say, is hence in new work that addresses the social, political, personal, religious, moral, educational and aesthetic problems of our world from an American vantage point. We must use the insights of our rich tradition to shed light on human natures as they develop and change under the influence of institutional and technological factors. We need to examine the implications for morality of a world that seems suddenly small and unified, and yet contains divergent cultures and conflicting systems of values. We must not evade thinking about the dehumanizing effects of vast institutional structures and about the consequent sense of individual insignificance that plagues many even in well-ordered democracies.

This list of problems could be expanded indefinitely. Dealing with them requires us to rethink virtually every major philosophical issue and to reconstruct nearly every concept we use in the process. Such rethinking and reconstruction must sooner or later take center stage as we recover the spirit and not only the letter of American philosophy. The same point can be put in a more alarmist fashion. The American philosophical tradition will not regain its full place in our profession; it is likely in fact to lose its current vitality, if we fail to convert our technical philosophical advances, our beloved study of the texts, into instruments for the improvement of life.

Some of this conversion is likely to take place without further need of promoting it, as the national fascination with applied ethics continues to wash over people working in American philosophy. A few other thinkers will take an interest in dealing with
concrete problems because of their love of the practical or because they are good at detecting opportunities. But a warm wind does not suffice to make a garden grow. We must plant seeds and nurture tender shoots; without the sun of attention and the waters of recognition, we will not harvest a bumper crop.

This is where SAAP can play a central role. We must find ways to encourage the thoughtful consideration of current problems from the perspective of American philosophy. There are a number of ways of accomplishing this. You may think of some, and if you do, I hope you will share them with the rest of us. I will mention only one that occurred to me as I tried to dream a future for SAAP. Perhaps we can convince the Executive Committee to reserve a day of the program each year for papers offering philosophical insight into problems that beset contemporary life.

I do not underestimate the difficulty of stimulating or attracting enough good papers to fill all the slots this would open. We would have to make a concerted effort to announce, advertise and promote the new emphasis of our Society. We would have to inform colleagues and encourage graduate students to think along lines relevant to the amelioration of our difficulties. We would have to carry to the entire philosophical community a new version of the old message that our vocation has uniquely important contributions to make to the solution of human problems.

I challenge the Executive Committee to take some such initiative toward the next phase of the growth and flowering of our Society. If the Executive Committee accepts this challenge, my wife and I stand ready to make it easier for us to attract work of relevance and significance. We shall establish a new prize, to be awarded annually at our national meeting, to reward the best essay on the program offering a philosophical approach to some living problem.

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Accordingly please send your reminiscences, suggestions or comments to:

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