

Our heritage is in caring

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Contributing Critic

"The nice thing about Manhattan is that people care about you and about strangers who move in here."

This was the conclusion reached by James Hamilton at the end of his talk, *The Importance of Having a Heritage*. Hamilton, who is an assistant professor in the department of philosophy at KSU, presented his talk as the last one in the series, Riley County: Looking Backward Toward the Future.

However, the conclusion was reached only after a thought provoking talk by Hamilton which was followed by the liveliest and longest discussion experienced in any of the sessions attended at the museum during the last six weeks.

Speaking on Thursday evening, Hamilton set out to answer the question, "What's the importance of knowing and preserving a heritage?"

He set out in pursuit of an answer to his own question by first looking at a definition of the word heritage. Taking an analogy from law, Hamilton pointed out that a heritage is that which has been inherited. This implies, he said, that there is both something to be passed on and something to be possessed. Therefore, there is something for which responsibility must be taken.

An historical heritage was treated as a mental concept, an idea. Hamilton stated that we may be interested in these ideas for utilitarian reasons or for aesthetic reasons. He had, he said, rejected both these reasons for the importance of heritage and of knowing one's history. ~~After grappling with these~~ notions for several years, he had come to his present position. This is, that the necessity for knowing one's heritage is a moral issue.

True knowledge implies an understanding, and understanding, he said, means that you must be able to ask of an issue, "Is this correct?" and "What are the limits of the issue?"

Thus, Hamilton concluded, the moral argument for the necessity of knowing one's heritage is that when you take possession of your heritage, you take responsibility for it.

When you take responsibility for your heritage you have to understand what that heritage is—what the problems of the past were, and what the alternatives for action were

tern of development might be".

It is not an easy task to make the sometimes difficult and abstract ideas of philosophy comprehensible, but Hamilton succeeded with clarity and humor. And it was with a humorous anecdote about his arrival in Manhattan that he concluded the evening's discussion—an anecdote

which made clear his statement, "The nice thing about Manhattan is that people care about you and about strangers who move in here."

Somehow, he managed to end the series of lectures at the Riley County Historical Museum with the words:

"Hi, I see you're from Texas. Can I help?"

The Manhattan Mercury A5
Monday, October 12, 1981

blems of the past were, and what the alternatives for action were.

"If you behave morally in life, you must take responsibility for your actions in society. Therefore, it is immoral not to understand your heritage."

A brief review cannot do justice to the richness of Hamilton's talk, nor to the many important side issues he touched upon in passing. Suffice it to say that his talk was lucid, entertaining, insightful, and, most of all, thought provoking.

This latter aspect prompted an hour-long discussion, facilitated by Kent Donovan, that ranged over a variety of related topics.

One concerned the effect of a large transient population in our society. "In a transient society the temptation is very strong not to take responsibilities of our place in society, but only to take advantage of its privileges," Hamilton said.

Speaking of nostalgia, of the distinction between the antiquarian and the historian, and of the development of a sense of values that arises out of an understanding of one's heritage, Hamilton said, "It is the shared sense of values that holds a society together."

Concerning downtown development, an individual in the audience asked, "Do you think that the citizens of Manhattan have treated the issues of Manhattan morally, with respect to its heritage and to proposals for downtown?"

"Yes, I do," was Hamilton's reply. "The issues have been treated as openly and fairly as possible, with consideration given for how the development of the town occurred historically, what the situation now is and what, therefore, the future pat-