A PHILOSOPHICAL INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY OF HISTORY

The purpose of this course is to build on the insights of the late Wittgenstein in order to confront the metaphysical assumptions underlying the modern study of history. Chief among the latter are the beliefs that there is some such thing as a past that has gone from the present; that knowledge of the past accordingly requires reconstructing or representing the past; that reconstructions and representations of the past must be founded on the systematic study of evidence; and that the systematic study of evidence ought to trace past economic, social, and cultural conditions (“social science”) and/or enter into the minds of past people in order to understand them in their own terms (“hermeneutics”).

The purpose of this course is not to introduce you to the philosophy of history. Most of the writings that can be classified under the heading "philosophy of history" share the very assumptions—or at least some of them—that I would like you to examine with a skeptical eye. This will not prevent us from consulting writings like R. G. Collingwood's *The Idea of History* and Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, which may be regarded as dealing with the philosophy of history. But we shall read such works mainly for the clarity with which, for better and for worse, they are founded on the assumptions in question.

The purpose of this course is better described as therapeutic. It is meant to focus your attention on the damage done to our understanding of the past by the unthinking acceptance of some of the most basic principles underlying even recent historical work. The damage consists largely of forcing the study of history into certain conceptual dead ends where it is drained of meaning. The most prominent among those dead ends are the abandonment of reference to the real world, the substitution of causal explanation for understanding, and the confusion of understanding with entering into somebody else's mind. My hope is to put you in a position from which you will be able at least to recognize what the dead ends are, and perhaps to find ways of avoiding them. To the extent that you are planning to devote yourself to the study of history, this should make you better historians—though it may very well put you at odds with the profession.

Achieving the purpose of this course is a tall order. It will require your willingness to suspend some dearly held beliefs, at least for the sake of argument, and to engage in sustained reflection on some difficult questions. Students taking this course will come with different expectations and different levels of preparation, especially if they come
from different departments. Those who have some knowledge of philosophy will be bored by elementary discussions of Wittgenstein and befuddled by the debates exercising historians. Those who are familiar with history will find it difficult to grasp the implications of Wittgenstein's thought for their work in archives and libraries. Moreover, this is the first time I will teach this course. I therefore have no previous experience on which to base my judgment of how best to overcome these obstacles or how long it will take.

For these reasons I reserve the right to change course in midstream. I have laid out a straightforward syllabus with the customary list of readings below. But if it turns out that we need more time to deal with a particular set of readings than anticipated, or that other readings might be more fruitful to consider than the ones I have put on the syllabus, I will be more than happy to spend more time on a particular assignment and jumble the sequence in which I have arranged them. I am more interested in moving steadily towards the goal I have set for this course than in covering any amount of material or sticking to any preconceived schedule. If we need to slow down, we will slow down. If we need to speed up, we will speed up. If we need to change direction, we will change direction. There is no point in rushing along a predetermined path unless the path actually leads to the goal established for this course.

With this proviso, I am planning to proceed in three steps. We shall begin with a detailed examination of pertinent selections from Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, amplified by the commentaries of G. P. Baker and P. M. S. Hacker. Our emphasis will be on developing two central points:

1. **The problem with the Augustinian conception of language and its contemporary analogues** (the idea that words represent objects; that meaning is a kind of object; that understanding consists of grasping that kind of object; and that language is a means of communication with which to transfer meaning from one person to another)

2. **The problem with the Cartesian definition of the self** (the idea that the self is a kind of thing; that I know my own self better than anything else; and that I know other selves only by analogy to my own)

We shall also consider alternatives suggested by Wittgenstein, namely, that (1) meaning is not an object of any kind at all, but rather what is given by an explanation (such that understanding must precede explanation and interpretation, rather than being a consequence of it); and (2) that there is a radical asymmetry between first-person statements and third-person statements (such that first-person statements in the present indicative, so far from expressing a particularly certain kind of knowledge, express no knowledge at all). Familiarity with these points will clarify the degree to which contemporary historical practice, including postmodern historical practice, remains indebted to Cartesian assumptions about reality, society, and consciousness.

In the third part of the course we shall bring Wittgenstein's anti-metaphysical perspective to bear on a small, but telling sample of standard writings in history and the philosophy of history from Hegel to Foucault. What I have said about flexibility above applies particularly directly here. The readings I have listed below are really nothing more than suggestions. I have thought about them carefully, and I believe they will be useful, even if we do not read them in the sequence I have suggested. But we may never get to them in the first place and, even if we do, by the time we have done so we may have identified other readings that seem more promising. If so, I will proceed accordingly.

**REQUIREMENTS**

For students taking this course for letter credit there are three straightforward requirements. First, I expect you to do the readings. Second, I expect you to explain your understanding of the readings in class. Third, I expect you to write a paper of no less than ten and no more than twenty pages on a topic to be determined in consultation with me. Obvious possibilities consist of (a) writing an analysis or review of one of the books suggested for further reading and (b) examining the writings of one or more historians from the perspective developed in this course. The paper is due one week after the last meeting of the class. Students taking this course for R credit are expected to do the readings and attend class meetings, but not to write a paper. I will make up my mind about students who merely want to "sit in" when I know how many students have formally registered for this course.

**REQUIRED READINGS**

Required readings will be taken from the following books and articles, listed in the order in which they are assigned. For the complete schedule of readings, see further down below.

Don't get scared by the number of titles on this list. In all but two weeks of the quarter readings as currently planned will amount to less than 200 pages per week, sometimes a lot less. The exceptions are seventh week and ninth week, in which the readings amount
to, respectively, just under 400 pages from a single book, and about 250 pages of selections from three books.


Books marked with an asterisk are books that I believe you ought to purchase, if you do not already own them. They are in print, and they should be in the library of anyone with a serious interest in the subject matter of this course.

I have asked Regenstein Library to place the required readings on reserve. Some of them will be available on electronic reserve. I have also asked the Seminary Coop to order copies of the required readings. You should note, however, that some of the required readings are expensive and/or out of print. In some cases you may be able to obtain used copies from abebooks.com or amazon.com. Photocopying and planning your reading well in advance may be more cost-efficient. You should also note that the commentaries by Baker and Hacker have been published in different editions in which the contents (analytical exegesis and synthetic essays) are arranged in different ways. It doesn't matter which edition you use, but please make sure you read the essays I have assigned.

SCHEDULE OF READINGS

First week: Introduction to the course

PART ONE: WITTGENSTEIN

Second week: The Augustinian picture of language; meaning and understanding

Third week: Following rules; the impossibility of a private language
Fourth week: Thought, intentionality, and memory
Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, §§316-465, §§571-610, §§661-694

PART TWO: FROM WITTGENSTEIN TO HISTORY

Fifth week: Science, truth, and freedom in traditional and analytical philosophy
Ernst Tugendhat, lectures 1, 5, 6, 7, and 15 in Traditional and Analytical Philosophy: Lectures on the Philosophy of Language, trans. P.A. Gorner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 3-11, 50-89, 192-206

Sixth week: Philosophy and social science

Seventh week: Philosophy of history
PART THREE: HISTORY

Eighth week: The golden age

Ninth week: Historians in trouble

Tenth week: The ghost of Descartes
SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Readers:

**History in a Subjective Mode**


**History in an objective mode**


**Philosophy etc.**


