

Seminar on History of Western Thought (Hist 630)

Class: Fayard 241
Meets: Mondays 5:00-7:45
Office Hours: MW 9:30-11:00am, M 3:30-5pm

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Course Description

The current iteration of this course will look at the history of western thought in three phases. In the first we will take a conventional, mainstream approach, and thus an approach one will often find in standard history of philosophy courses. Bertrand Russell's *A History of Western Philosophy* will be the primary text during this phase. During the three weeks we cover this text we will also discuss short excerpts from classic texts from the three time periods that form the major divisions of Russell's text – the Ancient, Catholic, and Modern periods. In the next phase we will take up the fact that philosophy is more than a western phenomenon. Julian Baggini's book, *How the World Thinks: A Global History of Philosophy*, will be our primary text at this point, and for the three weeks we discuss this book we will also discuss Lao Tzu's *Tao te Ching*. This book will also set the stage for the third phase, and the guiding premise of this seminar—namely, that philosophy involves a tension between state and non-state ways of thinking one's life in the world, with state understood in the political sense. Russell will be seen to exemplify a philosophy that tends towards a state way of thinking (what one might call Royal Philosophy), and the final two primary texts—Graeber and Wengrow's *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity*, and James C. Scott's *Seeing Like a State*, will tend towards a non-state way of thinking (or what one might call Anarchist Philosophy). The supplementary texts in this phase will take up the manner in which both historians and philosophers address the accounts of the lives of native peoples as these reports began to circulate throughout Europe at the turn of the sixteenth century. We will revisit some of the authors from the first phase at this point, such as Plato, and as we draw the course to a close, I hope the result will be that we gain an enriched understanding of the history of western thought.

Requirements & Grading

There are four primary texts for the semester and a number of supplemental readings that are designed to complement and add to the discussion of the primary text. The general reading load for each week will be roughly 200 pages a week. Each week, with the exception of the first class, everyone will present a written summary of the primary text and connect this text to one of the supplementary readings (for instance, what one could have done at the first meeting, if an assignment were required, would be to discuss what Russell says about Plato and bring in the supplemental text (*Euthyphro* in this case) as an example to support (or not) his claims. These summaries are to be roughly 3-4 pages and will account for 40% of your grade. Class participation will account for 10%, and a final term paper of roughly 15-20 page, due at our last class (at some restaurant, my treat), will be worth the remaining 50%. We will discuss each person's paper during this final class. I grade on a 10 point scale.

Class Structure

Each week we will begin by spending the first half of the seminar with everyone reading their summary for that week, beginning with the readings for January 24. This will provide a context for our discussion of the reading. The second half of the seminar, at approximately 6:30pm after a 15 minute break, we will continue discussing the reading and continue to relate this discussion to the supplementary texts for the week. All of the supplementary texts will be online (at moodle). I view a graduate level seminar as a cooperative venture where we will all engage in the discussion and work through the material together. The Graeber and Wengrow book has only recently been published, and it is considered by many to be an intellectual event that is likely to have a lasting impact in a number of areas. This seminar will thus give us an opportunity to work together through the latest, cutting-edge research. As we work together through this material, it is hoped that we will each learn from one another.

Term paper

This will consist of 50% of your grade and is due the last week of class. At this class everyone will present a short *précis* of their essay (1-2 page summary). What I am looking for in this essay is for everyone to take seriously Russell's claim that philosophy is 'an integral part of social and political life: not as the isolated speculations of remarkable individuals, but as both an effect and a cause of the character of the various communities in which different [philosophical] systems flourished' (HWP ix). What this will entail, in most cases, is taking up a particular philosophical position and world view and then show how it is reciprocally related to the historical conditions that give these ideas life, and how these ideas in turn affect and produce historical conditions themselves. Cross-cultural and historical comparison essays are another approach you can take in your essay, such as comparing philosophies of Eastern and Western cultures (the Baggini book will be helpful here), or comparing ideas of democracy, liberalism, truth, etc., as they were understood in different historical periods, and then using the differences in these historical periods as part of the explanation of the differences between these ideas. Yet another possibility is to address the idea of indigenous critique as Graeber and Wengrow understand it and show how both philosophers and historians have wrestled with the immanent presence of this critique throughout the modern era (and likely before as well). Which approach you take to your final essay is up to you. A short one paragraph prospectus is due April 25, and everyone will present it to the class.

Core Readings These are the works we will read (original source texts listed in calendar):

1. Bertrand Russell – *A History of Western Philosophy* (HWP)
2. Julian Baggini – *How the World Thinks: A Global History of Philosophy*
3. David Graeber and David Wengrow – *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity*
4. James C. Scott – *Seeing Like a State*

Supplemental Readings (read above for how these will be used and read)

Calendar

- January 24 Russell, HWP Book 1. Ancient Philosophy
Plato, “Euthyphro” (online)
Epicurus, “Letter to Menoecus” (online)
Epictetus, “Enchiridion (Manual),” first 20 aphorisms (online)
- January 31 Russell, HWP Book 2. Catholic Philosophy
Augustine, “The Teacher” (online)
Aquinas, “Five Ways” (online)
Duns Scotus, “Nature of Man’s Knowledge” (online)
- February 7 Russell, HWP Book 3. Modern Philosophy
Descartes, *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*, first 10 rules (online)
Hume, *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, sections 1-3 (online)
Russell, “The Ultimate Constituents of Matter” (online)
- February 14 Baggini, *How the World Thinks*, Parts 1-2
Lao Tzu, *Tao te Ching* (online)
- February 21 Baggini, *How the World Thinks*, Part 3-5
Finish *Tao te Ching* (online)
- February 28 No class. Mardi Gras.
- March 7 Graeber and Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything*, Chs. 1-2
Schiller, “On the Nature and Value of Universal History” (online)
Montaigne, “On Cannibals” (online)
J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, “On the Situation, Feelings, and Pleasures of an American Farmer” and “Distresses of a Frontier Man,” (1782) in *Letters from an American Farmer* (online)
William Robertson, *History of America*, Volume I, Book 3 (1772)
<http://onlinebooks.library.upenn.edu/webbin/metabook?id=workswrobertson>
- March 14 Graeber and Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything*, Chs. 3-5
Baron de Lahontan, *New Voyages to North America*, Volume 2 (1703)
<https://onlinebooks.library.upenn.edu/webbin/book/lookupid?key=olbp21532>
Aristotle, *Politics*, (online)
Graeber, “Notes on the Politics of Divine Kingship” (online)
- March 21 Graeber and Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything*, Chs. 6-7
Plato, *Phaedrus* (online)
Havelock, “Plato’s Politics and the American Constitution” (online)

- March 28 Graeber and Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything*, Chs. 8-9
Childe, “The Urban Revolution” (online)
Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* (online)
- April 4 Graeber and Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything*, Ch. 10
More, *Utopia*
- April 11 Graeber and Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything*, Ch. 11
Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (online)
- April 18 No Class. Spring Break.
- April 25 Graeber and Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything*, Conclusion
James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State*
Essay prospectus presentations
- May 2 Last Class (at Tommy’s Pizza [my treat])