

Preface



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DURING THE ACADEMIC YEAR 2002/03 I had the privilege of being Laurance S. Rockefeller Visiting Professor of Distinguished Undergraduate Teaching in the Princeton University Center for Human Values. As part of my responsibilities in that position I organized a conference called Teaching New Histories of Philosophy. The conference papers and comments, as well as a record of some of the discussion, are published here.

In the past few decades a large amount of work has been done to set the major works of modern philosophy in their varied contexts. Historical classics have been reinterpreted in the light of their relations to the works of authors we have generally considered minor, to nonphilosophical writings, and to religious, social, political, and scientific changes and events. No definitive synthesis of new interpretations has emerged, and perhaps none is to be expected. But the new material should affect the ways in which we teach the history of philosophy from Montaigne and Descartes to today.

Undergraduate courses on the history of modern philosophy are among the most widely used offerings of college philosophy departments. They present the subject to those who want to know more about philosophy than they have gotten from a general introductory course. They often satisfy distribution requirements. They are usually required for a philosophy major. It is therefore important that these courses should incorporate the best understandings we now have of the works we teach in them. But the dual role of the courses—(1) general introductions to the subject and (2) mandatory preparation for advanced work in philosophy—poses a problem. Teachers suppose that those doing advanced work will have learned in the Descartes to Kant course about philosophical arguments on major topics in epistemology and metaphysics. But if we spend time on what the new history tells us about the relations

between modern philosophy and its many contexts, we have much less time for careful analysis and discussion of the arguments. Are we then still preparing students for the usual array of upper-division courses?

At the conference this issue was discussed at length, as were similar issues about teaching 19th-century history and the history of more recent, largely analytic, philosophy. The transcription of the discussions on the last morning of the conference will give the reader some idea of how lively the exchanges were on the other days as well.

I went over the transcript of the final discussion to extract from it the sections of the conversations that were fully enough preserved to make sense. I have not edited any of the papers; nor have I checked references.

I know that the conferees and the large audience attending all four sessions will join me in expressing gratitude to the Princeton Center for Human Values and to the Shelby Cullom Davis Center for the generous support they provided. The conference would not have been possible without their substantial contributions. Will Gallaher and Kim Girman were marvels of efficiency and patience in making arrangements for the many speakers, the recording of the final session, the refreshments and dinners, and everything else concerning the logistics of the conference. Dr. George Leaman of the Philosophy Documentation Center has provided us with one of his mailing lists for the distribution of this volume; I am most grateful to him for this generosity. I am additionally grateful to Dr. Gallaher and the Center for Human Values for taking on the extra and very large task of preparing the papers for distribution.

I hope that readers will find the volume useful in thinking about their own teaching of the history of modern philosophy.

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