

History of Analytic Philosophy—spring 2023, seminar—description

Ordinary language philosophy (OLP) has long been a contested tradition within analytic philosophy. What should we make of it? This seminar is concerned with significance and philosophical and political reception of the work of major figures in this tradition, above all, J.L. Austin and Ludwig Wittgenstein. It is designed for students who have and have not studied these philosophers closely. The first third of the seminar will be dedicated to an introduction to some major themes of their thought. We will then turn to how, in late '50s and early '60s, figures in Anglo-American philosophy and European philosophy argued that Austin, Wittgenstein, Austin, and others counseled a stymied and uncritical approach to political as well as philosophical problems. We will discuss respects in which, since then, philosophers on both sides of the so-called Continental divide have continued in this vein, inviting us to regard OLP as conservative or even reactionary. This will bring us to the work of philosophers, such as Stanley Cavell, Cora Diamond, and Hannah Pitkin who argue that conservative readings of this philosophical corpus are untenable. In connection with this material, we will consider the possibility of a fresh positive articulation of OLP's political interest. We will look at those who reject suggestions of conservatism and align OLP with classical liberalism or strains of Marxist thought, and we will conclude by considering the possibility that this tradition is politically pertinent, and contested, precisely because it equips us to challenge both late capitalism's emphasis on instrumental reason and the conception of political rationality, central to contemporary liberal thought, that is the counterpart of this image of reason.