Notes on Historiography

1. Sir Richard Sorabji, "Is Time Real?"
    a. An English-bred, Oxford-trained philosopher of Indian descent, Sorabji (b. 1934) has spent most of his life exploring the intricacies of Aristotelian philosophy from every possible angle. He combines the strengths of the modern-day analytic philosopher (precision, clarity, succinctness) with the learned scope of the historian of philosophy. He is especially to be applauded for his shedding much-needed light on neglected corners of late ancient intellectual history (cf. the later Neoplatonists, from Damascius and Philoponus to Simplicius).
    b. Sound philosopher that he is, Sorabji wants to introduce us to the fascinatingly arcane debates about time that became common in ancient and late ancient philosophy. Much of this philosophizing has to do with time-related paradoxes and their possible solutions. While we may not be up to the task of solving all of these paradoxes, we can at least take Sorabji as a solid introduction to the finer points of temporality as it was understood (or not) in the ancient Mediterranean world.
2. Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History*.
    a. Löwith (1897-1973) was also philosophically trained, although many of his publications (especially this one) are much more legible and accessible to the non-philosophically-inclined reader. Coming up in the phenomenological school, he was forced to flee Nazi Germany and take up positions on the east coast of the United States (the New School & Hartford Seminary). Eventually, he was able to return to a position of prominence in the German university system.
    b. His goal here is obviously to draw attention to the not-so-obvious religious background lying behind our modern, seemingly secular notions of history and progress. He argues that our tendency to narrate history in terms of linear progress owes a debt to the specifically Christian, eschatological view of history as heading toward some kind of culmination. And yet, at the same time, by losing the hiddenness of the apocalyptic eschaton, we risk locating the culmination of history 'now' or in the very near future, with obviously dangerous (or at least confusing) results. (Cf. Fukuyama's mangling of Hegel.)
3. Arnaldo Momigliano, "Time in Ancient Historiography."
    a. Momigliano (1908-1987), like Löwith, was displaced by anti-Jewish laws, though he was fleeing the Italian fascists rather than the Nazis. He wound up in England, which would prove his intellectual home for most of the subsequent decades (though he did make regular appearances at the University of Chicago!). He was regarded as the world's leading expert on the writing of history in the ancient world.
    b. In this article, his goal is to dispel certain confusions and assumptions surrounding the notions of time in the ancient world. However, he is poised to defend more against Löwith than against Sorabji, because the former talks about history whereas the latter cares most about philosophy. Momigliano, arch-historian that he is, has little concern for the vagaries of the history of philosophy. Yes, Plato may have had a theory of time that strikes us as intriguingly strange, but that doesn't mean Herodotus or Thucydides or Polybius shared any such philosophical views. Generally speaking, Momigliano wants to critically restrain the claim that there are fundamentally different experiences of 'historical time' at work in ancient Greek society as opposed to later Jewish or Christian conceptions. In part, he wants to kick philosophy out of history, at least with regard to the question of temporality.

4. Hayden White, "Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality."
    a. White (b. 1928) is the most North American of these authors, trained at Michigan and teaching for many years at Stanford and Santa Cruz (tough life). Like Momigliano, he is more a historian than a philosopher, although he clearly is not so interested in policing the lines between those disciplines. Originally a medievalist, he eventually broadened his reflections on medieval historiography out to include the topic of historiography itself.
    b. As this reading indicates, White is skeptical of the power that the form of narrative has to reshape our sense of temporal events (or 'historical events in time'). Historical narrative may feel 'natural' to us, but, upon closer inspection, it turns out that narrative reshapes the blank succession of events in neutral time into a meaningful whole. White characterizes this as the creation of a story with a moral, not so entirely different from what an author of imaginative fiction does. If his critique holds, then we clearly have to take account of how historical narrative reshapes our experience of both (a) historical time and (b) time more generally. (And so: Ricoeur.)
5. What They All Have in Common.
    a. Clearly, all of these authors are dealing with questions of time, such as:
        i. Is there one 'real' time that we all experience together?
        ii. Does the normal way we talk about time make sense?
        iii. Are there many different ways of talking about time?
        iv. Are there many different "times" depending on history, culture, etc.?
        v. Does our sense of time, in other words, change over time?
        vi. Does our theory of time affect how we think of history?
        vii. Does how we talk about history condition how we talk about time?
        viii. Or are Time and History two totally different objects?
6. How They Relevantly Differ.
    a. These four authors are not all equally interested in the same eras of history. Sorabji cares about antiquity and late antiquity, as does Momigliano. White is more focused on the Middle Ages. Löwith, finally, tries to have it all, philosophically ranging his way from modern times (Burckhardt) all the way back to the patristic and Biblical periods. Luckily, for our purposes, the scope of our course brings us from antiquity through late antiquity and up to the early Middle Ages. And so we can plug each of these authors into their appropriate chronological position.
    b. The authors disagree on questions of discipline and how best to approach historiography in an intellectually satisfying way. Löwith thinks we need more awareness of religion in our history; White thinks we need some philosophy and literary studies (e.g., genre analysis). Momigliano, meanwhile, thinks we've let far too much philosophy pollute our historiography already, which is a proposition one cannot see Sorabji enjoying.
    c. Momigliano—often for good, anti-racial and anti-prejudicial reasons—seems to push us in the direction of the uniformity of time and temporal experience. At the end of the day, he implies, Greek and Jewish conceptions of time were not so different. And this is especially the case for historical time (and historical consciousness?). Löwith and White would presumably disagree. The former would see the advent of Christian eschatology as pushing historical time in a strange new direction, while the latter would point out that there are many options to choose from when it comes to representing historical time to ourselves. So: where do we want to come down on all this? What are the reasons for siding with the 'one-time-only' crowd? Or with the 'many temporalities based on culture and religion' crowd? Is there any way we could have our cake and eat it too?

7. Outlines
    a. Sorabji
        i. Late Ancient Philosophy underrated (thanks to Justinian, 529 CE).
        ii. Paradoxes about time proliferate.
        iii. Aristotle's solutions to paradoxes are usually best but less interesting.
        iv. Why study the history of the philosophy of time?
            1. Analogues with modern physics & philosophy.
            2. Fear of death & search for tranquility.
                a. i.e. We don't feel comfortable or at home in time.
                b. But why?
        v. Profitable comparison with McTaggart: A- & B-Series.
        vi. 'Is time real' often means 'are the past and future real.'
        vii. The present seems like it 'is.' But past 'was' and future 'will be.'
        viii. So questions of time often break down to questions of 'now.'
        ix. What is the now?
        x. Now = (1) present and (2) instant.
        xi. Sounds straightforward, but actually leads to further confusion.
        xii. Especially: what is an instant? Is time made up of instant-points?
        xiii. No—a continuum is not simply an agglomeration of points (cf. line).
        xiv. Also—instants have to be sizeless, otherwise they're divisible into past-future.
        xv. But we don't experience sizeless moments.
        xvi. Nor is (extended) time-continuum made up of sizeless (unextended) points.
        xvii. Therefore: instants are limits. They start and stop segments (cf. line).
        xviii. We don't experience now-instants. We posit them to measure time.
        xix. That's the Aristotelian insight these ancients are reckoning with.
        xx. One big problem: we confuse ourselves with language.
        xxi. We mistake tense (past-present-future) for time.
        xxii. But this is a mistake—as Momigliano would agree.
        xxiii. Time-words do not entirely dictate time-reality.
        xxiv. And this leads to strange outcomes.
        xxv. Such as the fact that we can speak of some things in the perfect tense but not the present or aorist (taken as simple past).
        xxvi. Because: x has changed, but it did not experience an instant of change, because there are no instants in that sense. (Same for 'x has ceased to be;' 'x died.')
        xxvii. This sounds messed up, but actually makes some sense if you think about it.
    b. Löwith
        i. A Philosophy of History grants meaning to the confusing mess of events.
        ii. It grants meaning most especially to suffering.
        iii. Because without greater meaning, suffering would be pointless.
        iv. Historians like to think they don't need a philosophy of history.
        v. They just tell it like it is or was—*wie es eigentlich gewesen ist*.
        vi. But perhaps historians do assume a philosophy of history.
        vii. Whether they know it or not.
        viii. In that case, where would that philosophy of history come from?
        ix. Often: from a theology of history.
        x. In many cases: a Christian-eschatological theology of history.
        xi. Historians still assume a teleological (goal-oriented) view of history.
        xii. They just cut off the supernatural eschaton.
        xiii. And replace it with ongoing progress toward this-worldly goals (justice, peace).
        xiv. But this is not the only way of thinking about historical time.

xv. Study of antiquity shows that other options existed.
xvi. One popular 'Greek' option: historical time as cyclical.
xvii. Everything comes back in one big world-year or eternal return.
xviii. Löwith and others see this in Greek thought: philosophy and historiography.
xix. As the foil for Christianity's linear eschatology. (cf. Eusebian triumphalism)
xx. But perhaps this is too hasty of a generalization…

c. Momigliano
i. A hardcore classicist likes Momigliano certainly thinks so.
ii. He wants to critique both theologians and philosophers (like Löwith).
iii. He thinks they have a cartoonish opposition of Greek v. Biblical time.
iv. Based on presumptions about race or language or religion.
v. But he counters that variety can be found on both sides.
vi. Both Greeks and Hebrews had many ways of talking about time.
vii. Some more philosophical: Plato, Qohelet…
viii. Some more historical-practical: Herodotus, Kings…
ix. Momigliano stands up for a commonsensical uniformity of time.
x. According to which time is mostly just time.
xi. We experience it the same—or at least similarly.
xii. There are no huge cultural shifts in how we think of time.
xiii. The main differences are in fact disciplinary.
xiv. Philosophers may philosophize about time.
xv. But the historian—and the man on the street—simply talk about regular time.
xvi. They care about what happens in time in a straightforward, linear way.
xvii. Cyclical theories are mostly wild philosophical propositions.
xviii. Not rough-and-ready assumptions for any good Greek historian.
xix. So we must toss out our stereotypes.
xx. And realize that linear time is there in both Greek and Biblical corpora.

d. White
i. White is up to something a little different.
ii. Although he is partially engaged with the above conversations.
iii. He too is concerned with how we speak of time.
iv. He is even more concerned with how we make sense of time.
v. Does temporality come at us in a formally coherent way?
vi. Do temporal events appear to us as a story?
vii. Or do we add in storylike elements to make events meaningful?
viii. Do we emplot events, providing a beginning and middle and end?
ix. We do—this is called narrativization.
x. Seemingly all humans narrate—sometimes fake stuff, sometimes real.
xi. But only some narrativize: i.e., make it sounds as if the past speaks itself.
xii. Historical narrative means to present the past as a story.
xiii. Not simply tell a story about the past.
xiv. But present the past as if it were secretly a story all along.
xv. Clearly historians are then engaged in a Löwith-style project.
xvi. The goal is to provide meaning to otherwise meaningless temporal events.
xvii. We can see all of the obvious therapeutic benefits to that.
xviii. But it may also come at a cost, since temporality is not a story.
xix. We have to add in the formal coherence. We thereby change historical time.
xx. Development of a historical consciousness is an alternation of temporality.
xxi. Or at least of temporal experience—and what we take time to be.