

## 17<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY PHILOSOPHY: PHIL 360

Fall 2010 MWF 10:35 - 11:25

Leacock 110

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### Course Description:

Seventeenth century rationalism is at least as preoccupied with the irrational elements of existence – passions, dreams, somnambulism, and imagination – as with the scope and power of reason. This course will comprise a comparative study of Descartes and Spinoza on the relationship between reason and passion. Both philosophers present compelling portraits of psychic life and offer distinct therapeutic programmes to mitigate the suffering of passions. Although famed for their commitments to the life of reason, they dedicated themselves to the practical problem of how to respond to the intense feelings that attend grave misfortune and interpersonal conflicts and attachments. Hence, Descartes' great work of metaphysics takes the form of a series of meditative practices, and Spinoza's unique ontology is presented in a work called *Ethics*.

Through an examination of Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy*, *Passions of the Soul*, and correspondence with Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia, and Spinoza's *Ethics*, we will pursue the roots and development of each thinker's rich psychology. The aim of this course is to familiarize ourselves with the major doctrines of Descartes and Spinoza. As we examine their texts, we will pay special attention to their concerns with unreason – passion, affect, corporeality, and servility. By virtue of their divergent views on the relation between body and soul, they offer different “remedies” for the ills that accompany the passions and thus diverse paths to the perfection of reason.

### Texts:

René Descartes, *Passions of the Soul*, (Hackett, 1989).

Benedict de Spinoza, *Ethics*, (Penguin Classics, 2005).

Plus selected correspondence between Descartes and Princess Elisabeth (available on MyCourses). Available at “The Word” bookstore on 469 Milton Street.

Note on French: Descartes' *Passions of the Soul* was originally composed in French. You are welcome and encouraged to read any edition of the original. There is an affordable bilingual edition (French-Latin) of Spinoza's *Ethics* published by *éditions du Seuil*, translated by Bernard Pautrat. I did not pre-order these texts, but recommend *La Librairie Olivieri* on 5219 chemin de la cote-des-Neiges. These texts are common enough, however, that you may find them at any bookstore with a decent philosophy section in French. If necessary, you can always order the texts by way of “the internets.”

### Requirements:

Reading & Participation: Come to class having read the day's assignment and prepared to discuss the material. Please note that you are responsible for all of the assigned material even if we do not get around to a detailed discussion of it in class.

In-class Writing: Several times during the term you will be asked to reflect in class upon an aspect of the text that was assigned for that day. The day of such writing assignments will not be announced in advance and the reflections will be graded. You can miss one assignment with no penalty. (10% of grade)

*NB: The period prior to the course add deadline is not considered optional. You are responsible for the reading and any assignments during that period.*

Two short papers: You will be asked to provide a sensitive analysis (close reading, or exegesis) of selected passages of the text. (25% each)

*NB: Written assignments will not be accepted by email. Late assignments will suffer a 1/3 grade deduction per day. Thus an evaluation of A- will become a B+, should it be one day late. There will be no exceptions without valid medical documentation that is promptly submitted to the professor.*

Peer review of rough drafts: You will be required to exchange rough drafts *in class* with one of your peers and fill out an evaluation form. The feedback you provide on your peer's paper must be thoughtful and constructive. It will be graded. (5% each)

Take-home exam: You will write a brief comparative essay on Descartes and Spinoza. (30% of grade)

Grading Criteria: To do excellent work in this course, you need to be able to do more than just reiterate what various authors have said in your reading or what was said in class. An "A" indicates that you not only understand and comprehend the material, but that you have thought critically about it, fully fleshing out its subtleties and implications so that you can creatively apply the material at many levels. A "B" reflects an above-average understanding of the material without any major errors; however, "B" work doesn't capture the complexity of the issues and tends toward accurate summary rather than independent analysis. A "C" suggests a struggle with the material that manages an average, basic comprehension of it but is flawed by some significant misunderstandings or errors. A "D" indicates only a rudimentary comprehension of part of the material with most of the material being misunderstood. An "F" indicates no understanding of the material.

Academic Integrity: McGill University values academic integrity. Therefore all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offences under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures (see <http://www.mcgill.ca/integrity> for more information). Note that the code stipulates that any assignment suspected of plagiarism should be submitted directly to the associate dean for review.

Notes: In the event of extraordinary circumstances beyond the University's control, the content and/or evaluation scheme in this course is subject to change.

In accord with McGill University's Charter of Students' Rights, students in this course have the right to submit in English or in French any written work that is to be graded.