Description:

This course will consist of a careful study of Spinoza’s views on religion and the state, in particular how he envisaged their role in the life of the citizen. We will focus on the *Theological-Political Treatise* (TTP), published in 1670, and on the *Political Treatise* (TP), left incomplete and published posthumously. The TTP is likely the most scandalous book in the history of philosophy. When it came out, it was denounced as “a book forged in hell ... by the devil himself.” The text includes Spinoza’s notorious treatment of scripture and miracles as thoroughly natural phenomena, governed by knowable relationships of cause and effect. Although published anonymously, Spinoza was soon identified as the author and became infamous throughout Europe as a religious subversive and political radical who sought to promote atheism. The remainder of his work would have to be guarded by his friends and published after his death.

While the TTP served as a direct intervention into theological-political controversies occurring in the United Provinces during Spinoza’s day, it also made a lasting contribution to fundamental issues in political theory, including the relationship between church and state, freedom of thought and expression, religious pluralism, and toleration. It can also be read as a founding document of modern democratic theory, promoting democracy as the “most natural” form of commonwealth and outlining a kind of social contract as the basis of the state. Much of the book ascertains the origin and decline of the Hebrew state as an example of a democratic agreement between Jews and God, mediated by the earthly sovereignty of Moses. The TTP’s critique of the religion also came to play an important role in the Jewish tradition: it marked the end of the interpretation of Judaism as a philosophical religion as set forth by the medieval Jewish philosopher Maimonides, for example, and opened a space for secular Jewish thought.

Unlike the TTP, which entered into the debates of its time and place, Spinoza’s Political Treatise constructs a general theoretical outline of the foundations of political power. Missing from the TP are a theory of the contract, any significant discussion of religion or theocracy, and a rhetorical emphasis upon freedom. While the TP remains committed to Spinoza’s naturalism in the Ethics and the TTP, it presents itself as a general account of how each form of state—be it monarchy, aristocracy, or democracy—might be organized so as to be as “absolute” as possible. One question we will examine is whether the notion of “absoluteness” comes to replace freedom as the organizing principle and *raison d’être* of the commonwealth. We will observe what happens when the TP translates the republican language of freedom into a more naturalistic, philosophical idiom of power and its limits. This course will examine both texts and consider Spinoza’s impact on the Jewish tradition, as well as a range of interpretations, as Spinoza has been aligned with liberals, communists, libertarians, deep ecologists, feminists, and radical democrats alike.

Texts:


Recommended scholarly literature (an additional list by topic will be posted on MyCourses):

  - Available electronically at McGill University Library.
  - Typescript available on MyCourses.
  - Available as hardcopy at McGill University Library.
Requirements:

1. Participation (15% of final grade): The success of the seminar depends upon your active participation and your respectful engagement of other participants. You are expected to attend every class, complete all of the reading, and contribute in an informed way. Please plan to read carefully, take notes, and bring questions you have.

2. Presentations (30% of final grade): Twice you will be asked to present. The presentation must include (a) a concise summary of the main argument for one of the chapters assigned that week and identify (b) one critical issue, problem, or controversial aspect to explore in class discussion. Presentations should be about 15 minutes long. **Important:** A handout clearly laying out the main ideas of the text must be distributed before the presentation.

3. Final Paper (40%): You will write a research paper on a topic of your choosing that engages substantially with Spinoza’s *TTP* and/or *TP*. You are encouraged to consult us about your topic. **Due Dec 20.** (ca. 3,000 words)

4. Final Paper Proposal (15%): You must submit in writing (1,000-1,200 words, plus references) your final paper proposal no later than **November 22.** The proposal should name, describe, and motivate the proposed research. It should briefly note the most significant established positions (if applicable) and stake out your own (allowing that this could change in the course of further research). Further instructions will be posted.

Mandatory components of the course syllabus

**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 [www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/honest/](http://www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/honest/) for more information).

**Language of Submission:**

“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. This does not apply to courses in which acquiring proficiency in a language is one of the objectives."

**Schedule**

September 6
Introduction to Course, Read in class selections from the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* and Letter 30 to Henry Oldenburg.

September 13


September 20
*TTP*, Chs. 3-5.

September 27
*TTP*, Ch. 6-7.

October 4

**October 11**


**Recommended:**

**October 18**


**Recommended:**
- Hasana Sharp, “‘The Whole Law Consists Only in Loving One’s Neighbor:‘ Spinoza on What the Bible Commands of All Mortals” (MyCourses).

**October 25**


**Recommended:**
- Garrett, “Promising Ideas” in Melamed and Rosenthal; and Balibar, “*Jus, pactum, lex*” (MyCourses).

**November 1**


**Recommended:**
- Julie E. Cooper, “Freedom of Speech and Philosophical Citizenship in Spinoza’s *TP.*”

**November 8**

*Political Treatise (TP)*, Chs. 1-5.

**Recommended:**
- Chantal Jaquet, “Longing for vengeance as the foundation of the commonwealth,” in Melamed and Sharp.

**November 15**

*TP*, Chs. 6-7.

**Recommended:**
- Chantal Jaquet, “Longing for vengeance as the foundation of the commonwealth,” in Melamed and Sharp.

**November 22**

*TP*, Chs. 8-10.

**Recommended:**

**November 29**


**Recommended:**
- Sharp, “Eve’s Perfection: Spinoza on Sexual (In)equality”; Steinberg, “Spinoza on civil liberation.”