

Fall 2013: PHIL 360

17th Century Philosophy

Instructors: Alex Anderson and Carlos Fraenkel

Classes: Tuesday-Thursday: 10h05 – 11h25 in LEA 110

COURSE DESCRIPTION

In this course, we will study one of the great works of systematic philosophy in the history of philosophy, the *Ethics* of Spinoza, first published in the *Opera Posthuma* of 1677. By “systematic” philosophy we mean an attempt to give a comprehensive, interlinked account of each of the main traditional divisions of philosophy: metaphysics (theology and ontology), epistemology, physics, psychology, politics, and ethics. The only philosophical discipline to which Spinoza did not make an original contribution is logic. Here he takes the traditional framework for granted—the model of a deductive science laid out in Aristotle’s *Analytica Posteriora* and realized in an exemplary way in Euclid’s *Geometry*.

Studying the *Ethics* thus gives us a chance to think through all major philosophical issues. And since Spinoza’s conclusions often clash with common sense views, it also offers an excellent opportunity to test our intuitions on these issues. To begin with, Spinoza argues that there is only one substance, God or Nature, which is absolutely infinite, eternal, and contains everything. Mind and body are not separate substances, as Descartes held, but rather different “attributes” of this one substance or God. Finite individual things - stones, trees, stars, as well as human beings - are “modes” or “ways of being” of this one substance, in which they inhere. These finite things have “duration”, which is to say they are temporally delimited. Human beings are neither the most perfect modes nor fundamentally different from other modes. For Spinoza, there are three kinds of knowledge, each giving different means of access to the one substance: (i) imagination; (ii) reason; and (iii) intuition. Spinoza aims to guide his readers away from the ideas of the imagination towards those of reason and intuition as much as this can be done. For the *summum bonum* (the highest good) consists in knowing and loving God through reason and intuition.

The title of Spinoza’s work can be misleading, since only the last two parts of the *Ethics* discuss the highest good and how human beings can achieve it, i.e., “ethical” questions. The first three parts, by contrast, lay the metaphysical, epistemological, and psychological foundations for answering these ethical questions.

The *Ethics* is a notoriously perplexing work, despite its brevity, and we will thus begin with some background readings from Descartes and from Spinoza’s early writings in order to prepare ourselves for the task.

PROVISIONAL SYLLABUS

Week 1 (September 3, 5):

1. Introduction / Syllabus; 2. Lecture: overview of Spinoza's life, times, and works; *Short Treatise* reading.

Week 2 (September 10, 12):

1. Descartes, *Principles of Cartesian Philosophy*; 2. Descartes, *Principles*

Week 3 (September 17, 19)

1. Spinoza, *Short Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*; 2. Spinoza, *Short Treatise*

Week 4 (September 24, 26):

1. *Ethics*, Part I; 2. *Ethics*, Part I

Week 5 (October 1, 3):

1. *Ethics*, Part I; 2. *Ethics*, Part I

Week 6 (October 8, 10):

1. *Ethics*, Part II; 2. *Ethics*, Part II

Week 7 (October 15, 17):

1. *Ethics*, Part II; 2. *Ethics*, Part II
[Midterm paper due]

Week 8 (October 22, 24)

1. *Ethics*, Part III; 2. *Ethics*, Part III

Week 9 (October 29, 31):

1. *Ethics*, Part III; 2. *Ethics*, Part III

Week 10 (November 5, 7):

1. *Ethics*, Part IV; 2. *Ethics*, Part IV

Week 11 (November 12, 14):

1. *Ethics*, Part IV; 2. *Ethics*, Part IV

Week 12 (November 19, 21):

1. *Ethics*, Part V; 2. *Ethics*, Part V

Week 13 (November 26, 28):

1. *Ethics*, Part V; 2. Wrap-up and conclusions.
[Final paper due]

PRIMARY TEXT:

A Spinoza Reader: The Ethics and Other Works, edited and translated by Edwin Curley
(Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

EVALUATION:

(1) Midterm paper: 30%

(2) Final paper: 60%

(3) Informed (i.e. giving evidence of careful reading in preparation for class): 10%