

## PHIL 444: Early Modern Political Theory

Winter 2023, T/Th 14h35 – 15h55  
Lea 927  
Prof. Hasana Sharp

Office Hours: Friday 12h00-14h00,  
& by appointment  
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**Territorial acknowledgement:** McGill University is on land which is the traditional and unceded territory of the Kanien'keha:ka (Mohawk), a place that has long served as a site of meeting and exchange amongst nations.

### Description:

This course will examine understandings of liberty and servitude in Spinoza (1632-1677), Gabrielle Suchon (1632-1703), François Poullain de la Barre (1648-1723), John Locke (1632-1704), and Mary Astell (1666-1731). The early modern period is celebrated for defending universal natural freedom and equality. Yet, those who regarded “human beings” to be free and equal by nature, and thus deserving of moral and political liberty, typically carved out exceptions that amounted to most of humanity: women, workers, servants, and foreigners, for example. It was also the same period in which the transatlantic slave trade (1527-1867) came to be a major economic and political force, structuring the competition between the imperial nations in which our authors wrote. We will analyze how the different authors understand liberty and servitude, consider the scope of the freedom they advocate, who they imagine is able to enjoy such freedom, to whose servitude they most forcefully object, and whether and how colonial slavery is reflected in their texts. We will read a significant portion of Spinoza’s two political treatises and all of Locke’s *Second Treatise on Government*. Studying the other figures will allow us to reflect on the core concepts of liberty and servitude from the points of view of authors advocating for women. We will rely on more recent scholarship to consider how racial and colonial slavery may affect the authors’ analyses.

Note: There is a pre-requisite of at least one political philosophy course. I will accept political philosophy courses taken in other departments. I will also accept courses taken in the history of philosophy.

### Texts:

Spinoza, Benedict de. *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, vol. 2. Princeton 2016.

Locke, John. *Political Writings*. Hackett, 2003.

Other texts available on *My Courses*.

Available at “The Word” Bookstore at 469 Milton Street.

This Class is supported by *MyCourses*.

### Requirements:

Evaluations will be based upon attendance, participation, and weekly questions posted on *MyCourses* (25%); one short paper (25%); paper topic submission (5%); peer review (5%), and one final paper (40%).

Weekly questions (x10)/ responses (x4): You must submit a weekly question to the discussion board about the reading **10 times** during the term (you are very welcome to post more). They can be clarificatory questions/ requests (what did the author mean by X? I did not follow argument Y, please help), or they can concern implications (if the author is right about A, what does it mean for B?), or they

can be solicitations of others' responses (I was worried about claim Z for the following reasons. Do others share these concerns?). I expect everyone to respond on the discussion board to the questions of your peers at least **4 times** during the term (I will also respond occasionally). More responses are strongly encouraged. I will review them to prepare in-class discussion, so please post questions in advance of class and no later than mid-day on Monday or Wednesday concerning the reading for the following class. Your mark will be based primarily upon weekly questions and responses, but active attendance and participation will benefit your mark. I will communicate with you before reading week to let you know how you are doing.

Short paper: The short paper is an opportunity to reflect carefully on a complex passage or concept from our readings. You only need to read carefully and give yourself time to craft and revise your writing to do reasonably well. You will not be expected to do supplementary research. (1,000 words)

Paper Topic: You will be required to submit a description of your paper topic with a tentative thesis. Your paper can be on any topic of your choosing as long as it (i) meaningfully engages the course material, (ii) discusses one author in depth, and (iii) cites at least two assigned texts. You may relate these texts to other philosophers you have studied, or to contemporary issues, if you like.

Peer Review: There will be a mandatory peer review workshop on the last day of class. This is an opportunity to get feedback on your paper before you submit it, and to practice providing feedback for others. You should have a rough draft of your paper and be prepared to read and reflect critically on a paper by one of your peers. Forms will be provided and must be attached to your final draft, along with your rough draft. Do your best to offer suggestions about the thesis and the ideas in the paper, although you may point out some mechanical improvements to be made.

Final paper: You will submit a final thesis-driven term paper that reflects your engagement with the course material. Further instructions and grading criteria will be posted on *MyCourses* no later than mid-term. (3,000 words, give or take 200 words)

### General Grading Criteria:

An "A" indicates that all of the expectations and requirements have been met, but the work goes beyond them in significant ways. For instance, a paper of this quality may do one or more of the following: demonstrate an exceptional understanding of the wider questions and philosophical significance of the issues; present a research agenda of its own that promises to make a substantial contribution to the existing scholarship; is exceptionally well-composed and well-argued.

A "B" reflects having fully met all of the expectations and requirements with regard to deadlines, length, content, argumentation, and so forth. It demonstrates full and adequate understanding of the assigned readings, of the lectures, and of the specific task of the assignment. A "B" paper may, for example, propose a well-defined thesis and argument, yet it is not particularly original, challenging, or subtle.

Work that earns a "C" generally meets the expectations of the assignment and demonstrates adequate understanding of the course material, but falls short in crucial respects. For example, the work is too short, key concepts or aspects are not mentioned, the thesis statement of a paper is especially obvious, the argument lacks coherence or logical structure, the work is not well written and/or displays too many grammar and spelling errors, and so on.

A "D" assignment does not meet the general expectations and requirements of the assignment. While it endeavours to meet the specific criteria, it shows flaws and gaps in the understanding of the

course material that prevent it from being coherent or from taking into account the relevant sources, ideas, and arguments.

Work that receives an “F” is absent, incomplete, or makes no serious attempt to meet the formal and substantial requirements. The flaws and gaps in understanding are so grave that the reader cannot detect a concerted effort to appropriate and use the course material.

### **Academic Integrity:**

McGill University values academic integrity. 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).

### **Other 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.
- As instructor of this course, I endeavor to provide an inclusive learning environment. If you experience barriers to learning in this course, do not hesitate to discuss them with me and the Office for Students with Disabilities, 514-398-6009.
- I will gladly honor your request to address you by the name or gender pronoun you indicate. Please be in touch to advise me.