

PHIL 444: Early Modern Political Theory

Fall 2024

Theme: Equality, Liberty, Servitude

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Territorial acknowledgement: McGill University (Tiohtiá:ke/Montreal) is situated on the traditional territory of the Kanien'kehà:ka, a place which has long served as a site of meeting and exchange amongst many First Nations including the Kanien'kehá:ka of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, Huron/Wendat, Abenaki, and Anishinaabeg. This class will strive to acknowledge these nations as the traditional stewards of the lands and waters on which we meet today.

Description:

This course will examine understandings of equality, liberty and servitude in Benedict de Spinoza (1632-1677), Gabrielle Suchon (1632-1703), François Poullain de la Barre (1648-1723), Hugo Grotius (1583-1645), John Locke (1632-1704), and Ottobah Cugoano (1757-1791). The early modern period is celebrated for defending universal natural freedom and equality. Yet, those who regarded “humanity” as 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, and more. Moreover, it is the same period in which colonialism and transatlantic slavery (1527-1867) came to be major economic and political forces, structuring relationships 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*. We will also read authors who mobilized ideas of liberty, equality, and servitude to advocate for women and enslaved Africans.

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.

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

Other texts available on *My Courses*.

Technology Policy:

In order to help us all preserve our focus for the duration of the class, I ask everyone to silence their phones and put away all electronic devices. If you must use your laptop to take notes, please close all applications other than the one needed for notetaking and do what you can to minimize screen visibility for others.

Requirements:

Evaluations will be based contributions to discussion board (MyCourses); one short paper; peer review; & a final paper.

Attendance and in-class participation: attendance and participation are necessary ingredients of a good class. Please come to class prepared to discuss the readings. There will be a penalty of 2/3 of a letter grade if you miss 10, or more (70%+) of the classes following the drop/add period (e.g., A → B+).

Discussion Board: You must submit questions – firmly anchored in the reading (and without the assistance of LLM technology) – to the discussion board **6 times** during the term. You must also to respond to your peers on the discussion board **6 times** during the term. Of the **12 total contributions**, you must make **at least 5 prior to Fall break**. Please see the **FAQ** on the Discussion Board.

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

Peer Review: There will be a mandatory peer review conducted by email. This is an opportunity to get feedback on your paper before you submit it, and to practice providing feedback for others. You will need to share a rough draft of your paper and be prepared to read and reflect critically on a paper by one of your peers. Forms and instructions will be provided.

Final paper: You will submit a thesis-driven term paper that reflects your engagement with the course material. You may bring your own research interests to bear on the paper if you like. In contrast to the short paper, you will be required to consult and cite secondary sources. Further instructions will be posted on MyCourses. (~ 3,000 words)

Assessment Values:

Discussion Board	20%
Short paper	30%
Peer Review	5%
Final Paper	45%

- Discussion board grades will be both quantitative (i.e., meeting the required number of contributions) & qualitative (i.e., contributions reflect having read and thought about the material). Posts more than 24 hours late will not be accepted.
- Papers will be graded according to the rubric below. Late papers will be marked down 1/3 of a letter grade per calendar day. Please be in touch in advance of the due date regarding accommodations.
- Peer review will be marked based on quality of feedback (e.g., comprehensiveness, responsiveness to ideas and argument of paper, weighing of evidence, etc.).

Use of Artificial Intelligence and LLM technology (e.g. ChatGPT) is not permitted in this class. My aspiration as a teacher is to help you to develop and enjoy your own powers of thinking and writing (I recognize that is sometimes arduous and not enjoyable in the moment).

Evaluation Criteria:

Paper Grading Rubric				
	A (Excellent)	B (Good)	C (Adequate)	D (Inadequate)
Understanding	Accurate (or well-justified), non-superficial grasp of core ideas; consideration of implications, significance, stakes.	Solid understanding of the assigned readings, of the lectures, and of the specific task of the assignment.	Displays a limited or superficial understanding of concepts and texts. Some errors. Misses or misconstrues implications of claims or ideas.	Significant errors and/ or misunderstanding of the assignment.
Argument	Non-obvious, clear, interesting, plausible, and contestable thesis.	Clear and plausible thesis; may be unsurprising or too easy to defend.	Thesis is confusing, vague, or especially obvious.	Thesis is missing, difficult to identify, or evinces significant misunderstanding of course material.
Evidence	Cites and analyses primary texts in a thoughtful, skillful, or original manner. Insightful and cogent analysis. Demonstrates depth of engagement with ideas from the course (and secondary sources for longer paper).	Cites and explains relevant textual evidence. Considers arguments from secondary sources when appropriate (i.e., for the longer paper).	Insufficient, unhelpful, and/ or unexplained use of textual evidence. Some misunderstandings of concepts, texts, or arguments.	Irrelevant, inappropriate, and/ or missing evidence.
Reasoning	Develops argument in an organized and focused way; explains textual evidence; justifies claims.	Can identify argument and follow paper, but justification of claims, organization, or focus needs improvement.	Reasoning and justification is incomplete, unclear, or underdeveloped. Lacks focus and/ or organization; may be disjointed and somewhat difficult to follow.	Incoherent, confused, and unfocused. Difficult to read. Or, off-topic and not sufficiently related to the course material.
Mechanics	Clear and concise; easy to follow; correct grammar, punctuation, spelling, and citation.	Coherent, readable, and proof-read. Would benefit from some editing and polish.	Problems with word choice, grammar, spelling, and coherence. *Rough* draft.	Significant problems with presentation, organization, clarity.

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 apply the course material.

Grading Scale

All work in this course will be graded on the standard letter grade scale (A to F), equivalent to the 4-point GPA scale. An A on a course component is worth 4 points, an A- is worth 3.7 points, etc. To calculate your final grade, the grade points you earn on each course component will be multiplied by the relative weight of that component, and then the scores will be added to get your final grade-point average. That average will determine your final letter grade for the course. The table below sets out the official scheme used by McGill to convert letter grades to grade points. For example, if your overall grade-point average is a 3.4, you would earn a B+ in the course. Do not rely on the calculator in MyCourses for computing your final grade, as that calculator by default aggregates grades according to the 0-100% scale and will not display the accurate final grade you have earned in this course.

Grade	Grade Points	Grade Range
A	4.0	3.85-4.00
A-	3.7	3.50-3.84
B+	3.3	3.15-3.49
B	3.0	2.85-3.14
B-	2.7	2.50-2.84
C+	2.3	2.15-2.49
C	2.0	1.85-2.14
D	1.0	1.0-1.86
F	0.0	0.00-0.99

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 and pronoun you indicate.