

Fall 2018: PHIL 481

Philosophy as a way of life?

Spinoza and the Stoics

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Classes: Tuesday-Thursday: 10h05 – 11h25 in Birks Building 111

Office hours: Thursday 3-4:30 in LEA 914

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course will examine Spinoza's masterwork, the *Ethics*, in light of his critical engagement with Stoicism in its ancient and early modern form.

Pierre Hadot famously described ancient philosophy as “a way of life.” In antiquity, he argued, philosophy wasn't just a theoretical discipline, taught by specialists to specialists in seminar rooms, but a guide to living well whose practitioners aimed at *eudaimonia*: a good, flourishing, happy life—godlike rather than merely human. Both the Stoics and Spinoza arguably link the theoretical and the practical in this way.

Founded in 300 BCE by Zeno of Citium, Stoicism emerged as the dominant philosophical school in the Hellenistic period and in imperial Rome, with Epicureanism and Skepticism as its chief intellectual rivals. The distinctive moral thesis of the Stoics is that we need virtue to be happy and that virtue is all we need. To be virtuous means to live in accordance with nature—human nature or reason (i.e., the defining feature of human nature); and the order of nature, identified by the Stoics with the activity of divine reason which determines all things. A virtuous and happy life, then, is one in which human and divine reason align as we grasp and embrace the order of nature and the fate it has assigned to us. The Stoics, like Plato, conceive God as a divine craftsman who has crafted the best possible world, comparable to a master violin maker who crafts the best possible violin (though the divine craftsman of the Stoics is *immanent* in the world: he *is* the natural order). And since the Stoics also hold that the best state of the whole coincides with the best state of its parts, we can't do better than grasp, affirm, and help to implement God's providential plan. Stoic ethics, then, is arguably grounded in the belief that nature is teleologically ordered. If this is the case, Stoic ethics—or Stoicism as a way of life—would seem indefensible if one rejects a teleological order of nature.

For Spinoza, too, philosophy is “a way of life” in Hadot's sense, and the conceptual affinities between Spinoza and Stoicism are many, from metaphysics to ethics. They have been catalogued and discussed in detail in Jon Miller's recent book, *Spinoza and the Stoics* (2015). In fact, Spinoza's conception of a good and happy human life can be restated in Stoic terms: it is a virtuous life in which human and divine reason align once we grasp and embrace the natural order and our place in it as determined by *Deus sive Natura*, Spinoza's immanent God. But, as Miller stresses, Spinoza is *not* a Stoic: he disagrees with Stoicism on many important points.

Our goal in this class will not be to trace Stoic “influences” on Spinoza, but to understand Spinoza’s critical engagement with Stoic ideas: *why* he adopted, revised, or dismissed some of them. One issue of particular interest will be his categorical rejection of teleology. Spinoza’s *Deus sive Natura* is decidedly not a divine craftsman who sets out to craft the best possible world. We will ask how Spinoza justifies key Stoic ethical commitments without the teleology that seems to underpin them.

We will first familiarize ourselves with Stoic philosophical theology and ethics through Cicero’s summaries in *On the nature of the gods* and *On moral ends*. Then we will turn to the main champion of Stoicism in the early modern period: the Flemish humanist Justus Lipsius (1547-1606) who tried to Christianize Stoicism. We will read *On constancy*, a dialogue inspired by the writings of the Roman Stoic Seneca, in which Lipsius argues that Stoic ethics best equips us to live happily in a time of suffering and upheaval (the dialogue’s setting are the political and religious conflicts in the Netherlands of the 16th century). The main part of the class will be devoted to a close reading of Spinoza’s *Ethics*, together with Miller’s book, *Spinoza and the Stoics*, to help us identify the Stoic themes in Spinoza’s philosophy.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

- 15% **Participation.** This is an advanced undergraduate class whose success also 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. Unexcused absences (without a medical note etc.) will be penalized by 1/3 grade (i.e., A- instead of A etc.).
- 20% **Presentation.** The presentation must include (a) a concise summary of the main argument of the *primary* text assigned that week and identify (b) *two* critical issues, problems, or controversial aspects to explore in class discussion. A handout clearly laying out the main ideas of the text and the questions for discussion must be distributed before the presentation. If you do a presentation on Spinoza at least one of the two questions must relate to the Stoic themes in Spinoza. Presentations should be about 15 minutes long. The quality of the presentation, the handout, and the critical questions will determine the grade.
- 20% **Short paper** of ca. 1200 words, due on October 2. The short paper will consist in a careful examination of the argument of one of the Stoic texts by Cicero and Lipsius which we will discuss in the first part of the course. The text you examine in the paper cannot be the same as the text on which you present.
- 45% **Final paper** of ca. 2500 words, due on December 17. The final paper will consist in a careful examination of one theme in Spinoza’s *Ethics* that can be fruitfully related to Stoicism. You should briefly sketch the Stoic approach to the theme in question, based on our readings in the first part of the course. Then you should carefully examine Spinoza’s views. The goal is not to show some Stoic “influence” on Spinoza, but to think about how Spinoza critically engages Stoicism: why he adopts, revises, or rejects Stoic ideas. You can refer to the texts on which you presented or wrote the short paper, but the final paper must be clearly distinct from the other assignments.

To do well on the short and final paper you need to read and engage the primary texts carefully, cite key passages, and present the arguments you choose to focus on as clearly as you can.

Papers submitted late will be penalized by 1/3 grade per day (e.g. A- instead of A if the paper is one day late).

COURSE MATERIALS

A. The following books are available at “The Word” Bookstore on 469 Milton Street (payment in cash or cheque only):

1. Justus Lipsius, *On Constancy*, Eng. trans. John Stradling, ed. with an introduction by John Sellars, Exeter: Bristol Phoenix Press, 2006.
2. *A Spinoza Reader: The Ethics and Other Works*, edited and translated by Edwin Curley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).
3. Jon Miller, *Spinoza and the Stoics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015 (Paperback 2018). [Miller’s book is also available as an e-book in the McGill library. I encourage you to get a copy of the book, but if you opt for the electronic version, make sure to *carefully* read every assigned chapter.]

B. All other texts will be made available on MyCourses.

Always bring the texts to be discussed to class.

COURSE OUTLINE

September

A. Introduction

- 4 Introduction: (a) Course goals and syllabus; (b) Spinoza, *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, paragraphs 1-14.
- 6 James Cooper, “Stoicism as a Way of Life,” especially pp. 150-225 [MyCourses]

B. Ancient Stoicism

- 11 Stoic theology and cosmology: Cicero, *On the nature of the gods*, Book 2, paragraphs 1-72 (existence and nature of the gods) [MyCourses]
Supplementary reading: G. P. Walsh, “Introduction” and “Summary”, *On the nature of the gods* [MyCourses]
- 13 Cicero, *On the nature of the gods*, Book 2, paragraphs 73-168 (providence and the order of nature) [MyCourses]

- 18 Stoic ethics: Cicero, *On moral ends*, Book 3 [MyCourses]
Supplementary reading: Julia Annas, “Introduction,” *On moral ends* [MyCourses]

C. Neo-Stoicism: Justus Lipsius (1547-1606)

- 20 Stoic consolation: Justus Lipsius, *On constancy*, Book 1
Supplementary Reading: John Sellars, “Introduction” and “Analytic Outline of Contents,” *On constancy*
- 25 Lipsius, *On constancy*, Book 2.

D. Spinoza and Stoicism

- 27 a. Jon Miller, *Spinoza and the Stoics*, Introduction
ETHICS I: OF GOD
b. *Ethics* I “Definitions”, “Axioms”, Ip1-1p20

October

- 2 a. Jon Miller, *Spinoza and the Stoics*, ch. 1 (Monism)
b. *Ethics* Ip21-Ip32
Short paper due
- 4 *Ethics* Ip33-Ip36, “Appendix”
- 9 ETHICS II: OF THE NATURE AND ORIGIN OF THE MIND
a. Jon Miller, *Spinoza and the Stoics*, ch. 2 (Ideas)
b. *Ethics* II: “Definitions”, “Axioms”, IIp1-IIp8
- 11 *Ethics* IIp9-IIp18
- 16 *Ethics* IIp19-IIp3
- 18 *Ethics*, IIp32-IIp49
- 23 ETHICS III: OF THE ORIGIN AND NATURE OF THE PASSIONS
a. Jon Miller, *Spinoza and the Stoics*, Ch. 3 (Conatus)
b. *Ethics* III: “Preface”, “Definitions”, “Postulates” IIIp1-IIIp8
- 25 *Ethics* IIIp9-IIIp24
- 30 *Ethics* IIIp25-IIIp52

November

- 1 *Ethics* IIIp53-IIIp59, “Definitions of the Emotions”
- 6 ETHICS IV: OF HUMAN BONDAGE, OR THE STRENGTH OF THE PASSIONS
 a. Jon Miller, *Spinoza and the Stoics*, Ch. 4 (Value)
 b. *Ethics* IV: “Preface”, “Definitions”, “Axiom”, IVp1-IVp10
- 8 *Ethics* IVp11-IVp28
- 13 *Ethics* IVp29-IVp40
- 15 *Ethics* IVp41-IVp73, “Appendix”
- 20 ETHICS V: OF THE POWER OF THE INTELLECT, OR OF HUMAN FREEDOM
 a. Jon Miller, *Spinoza and the Stoics*, Ch. 5 (Happiness)
 b. *Ethics* V: “Preface”, “Axioms”, Vp1-Vp10
- 22 *Ethics* Vp11-Vp23
- 27 *Ethics* Vp24-Vp42

E. Conclusion

- 29 a. Jon Miller, *Spinoza and the Stoics*, Conclusion
 b. Don Rutherford, “Freedom as a Philosophical Ideal: Nietzsche and His Antecedents [i.e. the Stoics and Spinoza]” [MyCourses]

December

- 17 **Final Paper Due**

SUPPLEMENTARY BIBLIOGRAPHY

Jon Miller’s book contains a comprehensive bibliography (pp. 211-230) that is up-to-date until 2015. Some texts I found helpful are the following (for full bibliographical information, see Miller):

1. Susan James, “Spinoza the Stoic” (1993).
2. A. A. Long, “Spinoza in the philosophical tradition: Spinoza, Lipsius, Butler (2003).
3. Firmin DeBrabander, *Spinoza and the Stoics: Power, Politics and the Passions* (2007).

For a collection of recent critical essays and an extensive bibliography on Spinoza’s *Ethics*, see Yitzhak Melamed, *Spinoza’s Ethics: A Critical Guide*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017 [available as e-book in the McGill library].

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/ 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.”