

PHIL 481
Topics in Philosophy:
Spinoza on Religion and Politics

Tuesdays / Thursdays, 11:35 – 12:55, Leacock 15

INSTRUCTOR

Prof. Carlos Fraenkel (carlos.fraenkel@mcgill.ca)
Office Hours: Wednesdays 3–4:30; Leacock 823

COURSE DESCRIPTION

In this class we will discuss 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* (PT), 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." Although published anonymously, Spinoza was soon identified as the author and became notorious throughout Europe as a religious subversive and political radical who sought to promote atheism. Some modern scholars have reinforced that image while turning curse into praise and celebrating Spinoza as the founding figure of the "radical" Enlightenment. I think that this is a distortion of Spinoza's project in the TTP and the PT. Be that as it may, we will strive for a sober assessment of his views on prophecy, chosenness, divine law, miracles, holy scripture, true religion vs. superstition, freedom of thought and expression (including, importantly, the freedom to do philosophy), religious pluralism, social contract, political authority, the purpose of the state, and different forms of government.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

- 10% Class Participation: I expect the students to have done the readings and to be prepared to actively contribute to the discussions in class. Since I don't want to penalize students who work hard but are timid, the grade for participation will not be below the average grade for the other components of the evaluation.
- 20% Presentation in class of the assigned text (or texts) for one session. The presentation must include (a) a concise summary of the main argument (or arguments) set forth in the text and raise (b) two critical questions about the argument that will introduce the class discussion. Presentations should be about 15 – 20 minutes long. Important: A handout clearly laying out the main ideas of the text must be distributed before the presentation.
- 25% Short paper of ca. 1500 words, due on 27 February. The paper must clearly present and critically discuss one of the topics that Spinoza deals with in the theological part of the *TTP* (chapters 1-15). The text discussed in the paper may not be the same as the text that you presented in class.
- 45% Final paper of ca. 3000 words, due on 15 April. The final paper must engage Spinoza's broader project in the *TTP* and *PT*. The texts selected for the short paper or for the presentation cannot be the main texts for the final paper. You should clearly explain

Spinoza's goal and how he argues for it and present a well-informed and critical conclusion. All topics must be submitted for feedback at the latest on 31 March.

Note 1: To get a good grade for the papers you must carefully select, analyze, and critically assess primary texts. Papers that reproduce the class discussion or heavily depend on secondary sources are not what I am looking for.

Note 2: 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 two books are available at "The Word" Bookstore on 469 Milton Street (payment in cash or cheque only):

1. Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, Hackett.
2. Spinoza, *Political Treatise*, Hackett.

B. All other readings will be made available in pdf form via email and on MyCourses.

SCHOLARLY LITERATURE

Apart from a couple of introductory readings, we will be working with the primary texts in this class. If you are interested in critically engaging the scholarship on the *TTP* and *PT*, you may start with three recent comprehensive publications: (1) Y. Melamed and M. Rosenthal, *Spinoza's Theological-Political Treatise: A Critical Guide*, Cambridge, 2010; (2) Steven Nadler, *A Book Forged in Hell: Spinoza's Scandalous Treatise and the Birth of the Secular Age*, Princeton, 2011; (3) Susan James, *Spinoza on Philosophy, Religion, and Politics: The Theological-Political Treatise*, Oxford, 2012.

SYLLABUS

January

INTRODUCTION

- 7 Introduction: Topic of the course; course syllabus
- 9 Background: (a) Spinoza's life and works. (b) The intellectual context of his theological-political thought.
Reading: Steven Nadler, *A Book Forged in Hell: Spinoza's Scandalous Treatise and the Birth of the Secular Age*, chapters 1 and 2, pp. 1-35 (available as scan via email and on MyCourses).

THEOLOGICAL-POLITICAL TREATISE: (A) RELIGION

- 14 (a) *Letter 30* to Henry Oldenburg, laying out the project of the *TTP* (available as scan via email and on MyCourses)
(b) *TTP* Preface
- 16 *TTP* 1: On prophecy
- 21 *TTP* 2: On prophets
- 23 *TTP* 3: On the vocation of the Hebrews [The concept of “chosenness”].
- 28 *TTP* 4: On the Divine Law
- 30 *TTP* 5: On the reason for the ceremonial observances and Biblical narratives

February

- 4 *TTP* 6: On miracles
- 6 *TTP* 7: On the interpretation of Scripture
- 11 *TTP* 8 and *TTP* 11: Authorship of the Hebrew Bible; the New Testament and the Apostles
- 13 *TTP* 12 and *TTP* 13: On the true original of the Divine Law; the teachings of Scripture.
- 18 *TTP* 14 and 15: Fundamental principles of faith; separation of the theology and philosophy

THEOLOGICAL-POLITICAL TREATISE: (B) POLITICS

- 20 Justin Steinberg, “Spinoza’s Political Philosophy,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (available as pdf via email and on MyCourses).
- 25 *TTP* 16: The basis of the state: natural and civil right.
- 27 *TTP* 17 and *TTP* 18: On the Hebrew state at the time of Moses; political lessons drawn from the analysis of the Hebrew state

March

- 4 STUDY BREAK
- 6 STUDY BREAK

- 11 *TTP 19*: Matters of religion are subject to the power of the political ruler
- 13 *TTP 20*: Freedom of thought and expression.

POLITICAL TREATISE

- 18 *PT 1* and *PT 2*: Introduction; natural right
- 20 *PT 3*, *PT 4* and *PT 5*: Sovereign powers; the highest goal of society
- 25 *PT 6*: On monarchy
- 27 *PT 7*: On the organization of monarchy

April

- 1 *PT 8*: On aristocracy 1.
- 3 *PT 9* and *PT 10*: On aristocracy 2; on the organization of aristocracy
- 8 *PT 11*: On democracy
- 10 Concluding discussion