

PHIL 644: Political Theory

Topic: Spinoza's *Ethics*

Winter 2017, Mondays 11:35-2:25

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Office Hours, Friday 10-12, and by appointment (Ferrier 415)

Description: This class will consist in a close reading of Spinoza's *magnum opus*. Typically studied as a work of metaphysics, the name of Spinoza's great work – *Ethics* – signals it as a work, first and foremost, of practical philosophy. We will study Spinoza's metaphysics as a necessary condition for understanding his extended examination of the affects, human servitude, and liberation. We will pay particularly detailed attention to the role of the affects in Spinoza's account of finite existence and the transition from slavery to freedom. You will need to familiarize yourself, if you aren't already, with part I of Descartes' *Principles of Philosophy* and *The Passions of the Soul*. I suggest that you read the latter in parallel with parts III and IV of Spinoza's *Ethics*. You will also profit from reading the first six chapters of Spinoza's *Political Treatise*.

Any methodological approach (contextualist, literary, analytic, feminist, ecocritical, etc.) to the study of Spinoza's *Ethics* is welcome in the seminar. Our main goal will be to interpret the text and make sense of the arguments, but, if they are of interest to you, you are invited to discuss recent interpretations or applications of Spinoza's philosophy in class or in writing. Any advanced student in philosophy (or cognate field) is welcome in the seminar, as long as you are keen to read and *re-read* the material, discuss ideas, profit from what others have to say, and strive to write well.

Required texts:

Benedict de Spinoza, *Ethics*. Penguin Classics. (Available at *The Word* Bookstore, 469 rue Milton).

- NB: Any edition translated by E. Curley is fine. We will not refer to page numbers but rather to part, proposition, etc.
- If you would like the most widely used scholarly edition, you need *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, volume 1. (I have requested that *The Word* order a couple.)
- In French, there is an inexpensive bilingual Latin-French version (éditions de Seuil), translated by Bernard Pautrat.
- Please keep an eye on our course web page for resources.

Requirements:

1. Participation (15% of final grade): The success of the seminar 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. Please plan to re-read the text each week and bring questions you have.
2. Presentations (30% of final grade): Twice you will be asked to present for 6-7 minutes (two pages double-spaced) on a selected part of the text. Your goal will be to (1) propose an interpretation of the passage (often a proposition); (2) point out any ambiguities or problems, signaling other possible interpretations; and (3) remark on the implications of the passage at hand for practical philosophy.
3. Final Paper (40%): You will write a research paper on a topic of your choosing that engages substantially with Spinoza's *Ethics*. Since this is a political theory course, your paper must concern his practical philosophy, broadly construed. You are encouraged to consult me about your topic. **Due April 21.** (2500 – 4500 words)
4. Final Paper Proposal (15%): You must submit in writing (1,000-1,200 words, plus references) your final paper proposal no later than **March 6**. The proposal should name, describe, and *motivate* the proposed research. It should briefly note the most significant established positions (if applicable) and stake out your own (allowing that this could change in the course of further research). Further instructions will be posted.

Grading:

If you turn in work late, you may not receive written comments from me and your grade could be negatively affected. Please do not request a "K" (incomplete) grade for this course, unless you have a truly exceptional reason that is supported by formal documentation.

How to Interpret Graduate-Level Grades:

A:	Good work (clear presentation, insightful analysis)
A-:	Satisfactory (meets the standards of graduate level writing and research)
B+:	There is a problem with what you submitted
B:	There is a substantial problem with what you submitted
B-:	Lowest possible passing grade in a graduate course; indicates a major problem but not a failure
C+ or lower:	Officially considered a “fail” by the Graduate Studies Office.

Statement on Academic Integrity: McGill University values academic integrity. Therefore, all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offenses under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures (see www.mcgill.ca/integrity for more information).

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.

Schedule

January 9	Intro	
January 16	<i>Ethics I</i>	Recommended: Descartes, <i>Principles of Philosophy</i> , pt. I
January 23	<i>E I</i>	
January 30	<i>E II</i>	
February 6	<i>E II</i>	
February 13	<i>E II-III</i>	Recommended: Descartes, <i>Passions of the Soul</i> .
February 20	<i>E III</i>	
February 27	<i>Reading Week</i>	
March 6	<i>E III</i>	<i>Paper Proposal Due</i>
March 13	<i>E IV</i>	Recommended: Spinoza, <i>Political Treatise</i> , Chs. 1-6.
March 20	<i>E IV</i>	
March 27	<i>E IV</i>	
April 3	<i>E V</i>	
April 10	<i>E V</i>	