

**PHIL 660: 17<sup>th</sup> Century Philosophy**

**Topic: Spinoza's *Ethics***

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Office Hours: by appointment (zoom or phone)

**Format:** The default format for this class will be remote. Since it is a seminar, based on discussion and active participation of students, meetings will be synchronous (2 hours, usually 12h00-14h00, always on Thursdays). If all participants are in Montreal and there is *universal* interest in meeting in-person (and public health directives allow it), I will organize 2-4 meetings in-person. If any students cannot attend in-person, we will have all of our seminars on zoom. No one will ever be asked to participate in-person who objects for any reason. If safety conditions can be met, I will offer small group in-person office hours occasionally for those who would like to talk in-person about the material. I am available for individual office hours on zoom or phone, by appointment.

**Description:** This class will consist in a close reading of Spinoza's *magnum opus*, the *Ethics*. 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 Spinoza's understanding of servitude (Part 4) and the transition from bondage to freedom. The remote format will provide us with the great fortune of guest appearances from several Spinoza scholars during the term. We will read their interpretations and have the opportunity to ask them questions. For Parts 1 Yitzhak Melamed will join us. Michael Della Rocca will be our guest for Part 2. For Part 3, we will have the chance to talk with Justin Steinberg. Our guest for Part 4 is not yet confirmed. And for Part 5, we Sanem Soyarslan will share her work with us.

If you would like to prepare in advance, I recommend studying part I of Descartes' *Principles of Philosophy* and *The Passions of the Soul*. You may choose to read the latter in parallel with parts III-V of Spinoza's *Ethics*. To enrich your understanding of Spinoza, you will also profit from reading the first six chapters of Spinoza's *Political Treatise* and parts of the *Theological-Political Treatise* (especially the preface, Chs. 4, 16, 17 (first few pages), and 20).

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 demonstrations. 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.

**Requirements:**

1. Goal setting exercise/ Self-evaluation (5%): At the beginning of term, each student will reflect on their objectives for the course and the skills upon which they would like to improve. At the end of term, they will assess their own performance in the class and reflect on whether they met the goals they set for themselves at the beginning of term.
2. Weekly Questions (30% of final grade): For each week, you will submit a question each week, no later than Wednesday at noon on our group discussion board. When we have guests, your question will be shared with them in advance. You can ask a series of simple questions, or a single, more elaborate question. Your weekly submission should be 200-300 words.

3. Participation (10% of final grade): You will be asked to contribute to weekly discussion live or on the class discussion board. You might choose to respond to questions posed by other students. You might identify a particularly vexing passage and propose the best way to understand it.
4. Final Paper Proposal (10%): You must submit in writing (1,000-1,200 words, plus references) your final paper proposal no later than **Nov. 16**. 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.
5. Peer Review (5%): Everyone will have the opportunity to receive and provide peer review of the final paper.
6. 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 Dec 14.** (2500 – 4500 words)

**Grading:**

If you turn in work late, you may not receive timely written comments from me and your grade could be negatively affected.

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](http://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.
- 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.
- McGill University is on land which is the traditional and unceded territory of the Kanien'keha:ka (Mohawk), a place which has long served as a site of meeting and exchange amongst nations.