

Spinoza on Religion and Politics: JWST 504/ PHIL 644

Fall 2017 | Wed 11:35-2:25

Professors Carlos Fraenkel & Hasana Sharp

Office Hours: Fraenkel (Lea 914) Tue 1:30-3 | Sharp (Lea 912) M/F 12:30-1:30 & by appointment

Description:

This course will consist in a careful study of 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* (TP), 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." The text includes Spinoza's notorious treatment of scripture and miracles as thoroughly natural phenomena, governed by knowable relationships of cause and effect. Although published anonymously, Spinoza was soon identified as the author and became infamous throughout Europe as a religious subversive and political radical who sought to promote atheism. The remainder of his work would have to be guarded by his friends and published after his death.

While the TTP served as a direct intervention into theological-political controversies occurring in the United Provinces during Spinoza's day, it also made a lasting contribution to fundamental issues in political theory, including the relationship between church and state, freedom of thought and expression, religious pluralism, and toleration. It can also be read as a founding document of modern democratic theory, promoting democracy as the "most natural" form of commonwealth and outlining a kind of social contract as the basis of the state. Much of the book ascertains the origin and decline of the Hebrew state as an example of a democratic agreement between Jews and God, mediated by the earthly sovereignty of Moses. The TTP's critique of the religion also came to play an important role in the Jewish tradition: it marked the end of the interpretation of Judaism as a philosophical religion as set forth by the medieval Jewish philosopher Maimonides, for example, and opened a space for secular Jewish thought.

Unlike the TTP, which entered into the debates of its time and place, Spinoza's *Political Treatise* constructs a general theoretical outline of the foundations of political power. Missing from the TP are a theory of the contract, any significant discussion of religion or theocracy, and a rhetorical emphasis upon freedom. While the TP remains committed to Spinoza's naturalism in the *Ethics* and the TTP, it presents itself as a general account of how each form of state—be it monarchy, aristocracy, or democracy—might be organized so as to be as "absolute" as possible. One question we will examine is whether the notion of "absoluteness" comes to replace freedom as the organizing principle and *raison d'être* of the commonwealth. We will observe what happens when the TP translates the republican language of freedom into a more naturalistic, philosophical idiom of power and its limits. This course will examine both texts and consider Spinoza's impact on the Jewish tradition, as well as a range of interpretations, as Spinoza has been aligned with liberals, communists, libertarians, deep ecologists, feminists, and radical democrats alike.

Texts:

The Collected Works of Spinoza, volume 2, ed. & trans. Edwin Curley. Princeton University Press, 2016.

Available at "The Word" Bookstore on 469 Milton Street (payment in cash or cheque only).

Recommended scholarly literature (an additional list by topic will be posted on MyCourses):

- Susan James, *Spinoza on Philosophy, Religion, and Politics*. Oxford, 2012.
- Y. Melamed and M. Rosenthal, *Spinoza's Theological-Political Treatise: A Critical Guide*. Cambridge, 2010.
 - Available electronically at McGill University Library.
- Y. Melamed and H. Sharp, *Spinoza's Political Treatise: A Critical Guide*. Cambridge, forthcoming.
 - Typescript available on MyCourses.
- Steven Nadler, *A Book Forged in Hell: Spinoza's Scandalous Treatise and the Birth of the Secular Age*, Princeton, 2011.
 - Available as hardcopy at McGill University Library.

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 read carefully, take notes, and bring questions you have.
2. Presentations (30% of final grade): Twice you will be asked to present. The presentation must include (a) a concise summary of the main argument for one of the chapters assigned that week and identify (b) one critical issue, problem, or controversial aspect to explore in class discussion. Presentations should be about 15 minutes long.
Important: A handout clearly laying out the main ideas of the text must be distributed before the presentation.
3. Final Paper (40%): You will write a research paper on a topic of your choosing that engages substantially with Spinoza's *TTP* and/ or *TP*. You are encouraged to consult us about your topic. **Due Dec 20.** (ca. 3,000 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 **November 22**. 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.

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."

Schedule

September 6	Introduction to Course, Read in class selections from the <i>Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect</i> and <i>Letter 30</i> to Henry Oldenburg.
September 13	Spinoza, <i>Theological-Political Treatise (TTP)</i> , Preface, Ch. 1-2; Spinoza, <i>Ethics</i> , Part I, appendix (on MyCourses). Recommended: Jonathan Israel, "Introduction" to Cambridge edition of <i>TTP</i> (posted on MyCourses); Yitzhak Melamed, "Charitable Interpretations and the Political Domestication of Spinoza, or, Benedict in the Land of the Secular Imagination" in <i>Philosophy and its History</i> , eds. Laerke, Smith, and Schliesser, Oxford, 2013 (available as e-book in McGill library).
September 20	<i>TTP</i> , Chs. 3-5.
September 27	<i>TTP</i> , Ch. 6-7.
October 4	Susan James, "Spinoza's Project," in <i>Spinoza on Philosophy, Religion, and Politics</i> (e-book available via McGill Library); Donald Rutherford, "Spinoza's conception of law: metaphysics and ethics," in Melamed & Rosenthal, <i>Spinoza's Theological-Political Treatise: A Critical Guide</i> (available as e-book via McGill Library); Steven Nadler, "Scripture and Truth: A Problem in Spinoza's <i>Tractatus Theologico-Politicus</i> " and Carlos Fraenkel, "Spinoza on Miracles and the

Truth of the Bible,” in *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 74/4 (2013): 623-658 (available on MyCourses).

October 11

TTP, 8-11.

Recommended: Richard Popkin, “Spinoza on Bible Scholarship,” in *The Books of Nature and Scripture*, eds. R. Popkin & J. Force, Dordrecht and Boston, 1994, 1-20 (available on MyCourses); Warren Z. Harvey, “Spinoza on Ibn Ezra’s “secret of the twelve”, in Melamed & Rosenthal, *Spinoza’s Theological-Political Treatise: A Critical Guide* (available as e-book via McGill Library).

October 18

TTP, 12-15.

Recommended: Carlos Fraenkel, “Spinoza’s Philosophy of Religion,” in *Oxford Handbook of Spinoza*, ed. M. Della Rocca, Oxford, 2017 (available as e-book via McGill Library); Hasana Sharp, “‘The Whole Law Consists Only in Loving One’s Neighbor:’ Spinoza on What the Bible Commands of All Mortals” (MyCourses).

October 25

TTP, 16-17.

Recommended: Garrett, “Promising Ideas” in Melamed and Rosenthal; and Balibar, “*Jus, pactum, lex*” (MyCourses).

November 1

TTP, 18-20.

Recommended: Justin Steinberg, “Spinoza’s Curious Defense of Toleration”, in Melamed & Rosenthal, *Spinoza’s Theological-Political Treatise: A Critical Guide* (available as e-book via McGill Library); Michael Rosenthal, “Spinoza on Why the Sovereign Can Command Men’s Tongues but Not Their Minds” in *Toleration and its Limits*, eds. M. Harris & J. Waldron, New York and London, 2008, 54-77 (available as e-book via McGill Library); Julie E. Cooper, “Freedom of Speech and Philosophical Citizenship in Spinoza’s *TTP*.”

November 8

Political Treatise (TP), Chs. 1-5.

November 15

TP, Chs. 6-7.

Recommended: Chantal Jaquet, “Longing for vengeance as the foundation of the commonwealth,” in Melamed and Sharp.

November 22

TP, Chs. 8-10.

Recommended: Mogens Laerke, “Spinoza on National Religion,” Steinberg, “Spinoza and Political Absolutism,” in Melamed and Sharp.

November 29

TP, Ch. 11. Hasana Sharp, “*Violenta imperia nemo continuit diu*: Spinoza and the revolutionary laws of human nature”; Michael Rosenthal, “The siren song of political revolution: Spinoza and the art of political change”; Susan James, “Democracy and the good life in Spinoza’s philosophy.”

Recommended: Sharp, “Eve’s Perfection: Spinoza on Sexual (In)equality”; Steinberg, “Spinoza on civil liberation.”