

College of the Humanities
HUMS 4902

Spinoza's *Ethics*
Fall 2016

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Seminar Description:

This seminar will be devoted to the thorough study of Spinoza's *Ethics* – undoubtedly one of the greatest, most influential, most challenging, and most incendiary works in the history of philosophy. Published posthumously in 1677 – Spinoza having ultimately decided against its publication during his lifetime because of well-founded concerns for both his own safety and that of his circle of friends – the *Ethics* is a supremely systematic work on the Euclidean model that promises to lead its readers “by the hand, as it were”, from an account of the ultimate nature of reality and its causal order “to the knowledge of the human Mind and its highest blessedness”. In other words, it is a work that seeks to demonstrate the character of the highest human good (or human salvation) and the means to its realization “in geometric order” on the basis of an exposition of all relevant metaphysical, epistemological, physical, and psychological truths. Such a project alone – the outgrowth of a mind steeped in classical Greco-Roman philosophy, but also heavily under Descartes' influence – would have struck some of Spinoza's more conservative readers as deeply problematic. But what ultimately earned Spinoza's *Ethics* such notoriety, and even got it banned, were the claims that began to circulate (even before its publication) regarding its more specific contents. For example, it was reported that: (1) its metaphysics affirms the ultimate collapse of any strong ontological distinction between God and his effects (i.e., the world or Nature as a whole); (2) its theory of mind involves the denial that humans are in possession of free will; (3) its psychological theory implies that we are fundamentally incapable of any purely altruistic act; (4) its moral theory reduces the good to what we desire (and evil to what we have an aversion to) and denies the adequacy of any knowledge of good and evil; and (5) its soteriology rejects the possibility of personal and/or bodily immortality. In carrying out a general, historically informed reading of the *Ethics*, we will seek to determine which of these claims (among others) can legitimately be ascribed to it and in what precise sense. But we will also probe the soundness and tenability of those doctrines we determine should be attributed to it.

Prerequisites: fourth-year standing in the Bachelor of Humanities program or special permission from the instructor.

Seminar meetings: Fridays, 8:35 a.m. to 11:25 a.m.

Required Text:

- Spinoza, Benedictus. *The Collected Works of Spinoza: Volume I*. Tr. & Ed. E. Curley. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1988.

This work is available at Singing Pebble Books (206 Main Street, across from Saint-Paul's University and a few doors down from the Green Door restaurant; tel. 613-230-9165).

Grades: Grades will be based solely on individual, academic merit as judged against absolute standards. They will not be adjusted to achieve a supposedly normal distribution or manipulated in any other way.

Grades for the course will be based on the following:

- (1) Class participation, for a total of 25% of the final mark;
- (2) One annotated bibliography with 10 entries, due on the final day of class, and worth 25% of the final mark
- (3) One term paper, approximately 10 to 15 double-spaced pages in length, worth 50% of the final mark, due on the last day of the December examination period.

Regulations Applying Specifically to HUMS 4902:

General Course Requirements: To pass, students must regularly attend and do the readings assigned for the seminar meetings, as well as complete all of the course assignments, all unless formally excused by the Instructor because of illness or some other legitimate reason. Failure to complete *all* of the course assignments will result in the grade 'F'.

Attendance: Students are responsible for all material covered, announcements made, and course documents distributed, whether they are present in class or not.

Late Assignments: Assignments will be docked one third of a letter grade (e.g., from a B+ to a B) for each day after their due-date. Late penalties on assignments accompanied by a medical certificate or other proof of a legitimate reason for lateness will be adjusted accordingly.

Submission Guidelines: All written assignments for this course are to be uploaded to cuLearn.

Meeting and Reading Schedule:

1	9 September	Introduction: Spinoza's life, times, and philosophical project	<i>Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect</i> , paragraphs 1-18; pp. 3-12 in Curley
2	16 Sept.	Metaphysics I	<i>Ethics</i> I Definitions, Axioms, and Propositions 1-20; pp.408-429 in Curley
3	23 Sept.	Metaphysics II	EI Propositions 21-34 & Appendix.; pp. 429-446 in Curley
4	30 Sept.	Epistemology I	EII Definitions, Axioms, Propositions 1-13, and the "Short Treatise on Physics" that follows P13; pp. 446-462 in Curley
5	7 October	Epistemology II	EII Propositions 14-39; pp. 462-475 in Curley
6	14 Oct.	Epistemology III	EII Propositions 40-49; pp. 475-491 in Curley
7	21 Oct.	Psychology I	EIII Preface, Definitions, Axioms, and Propositions 1-30; pp. 491-511 in Curley
8	4 Nov.	Psychology II	EIII Propositions 31-59 and Definitions of the Affects; pp. 512-543 in Curley
9	11 Nov.	Moral Theory I	EIV Preface, Definitions, Axioms, and Propositions 1-36; pp. 543-564 in Curley
10	18 Nov.	Moral Theory II	EIV Propositions 37-73 and Appendix; pp. 564-594 in Curley
11	25 Nov.	Soteriology I	EV Preface, Axioms, and Propositions 1-20; pp. 594-606 in Curley
12	2 December	Soteriology II	EV Propositions 21-42; pp. 607-617 in Curley
13	9 Dec.	Concluding remarks and general discussion	No readings