

01:730:404

Spinoza

Fall 2018

Carolina Flores

Office: 106 Somerset, Room 517

Office Hours: Tuesdays 4-5; by appointment.

Email: carolina.flores@rutgers.edu

Required Texts

Our central text will be Spinoza's *Ethics*. We will use Curley's translation:

Spinoza, B. (2005). *Ethics (Penguin Classics)*. Trans. Curley, E. London: Penguin Classics.

You are expected to have your own copy and bring it to every class.

All other readings, handouts, assignments, and announcements will be posted on Sakai.

Course Description

In this course, we will do a close reading of one of the most important and original works in the history of philosophy: Spinoza's *Ethics*. Against 17th century orthodoxy, Spinoza defended that there is only one substance, that God is not a person who rewards and punishes, that everything has a mind, and that nothing could have been other than it is. Studying Spinoza's work broadens the philosophical imagination by making us engage with ideas that initially seem absurd but turn out to be well-supported on closer inspection.

The course will be split in three units: Reality and God, The Mind, and The Good Life. We will follow the structure of the *Ethics* and begin by considering Spinoza's substance monism, his views on possibility and free will, and his criticism of religion. We will then move on to discussing how Spinoza thinks of the relationship between mind and body, and his views on the content and structure of human minds, including consciousness, mental representation, and the nature of the emotions. We will finish by discussing Spinoza's views on happiness and on immortality.

We will focus on understanding and analyzing views discussed in the text, with close attention to clearly articulating Spinoza's arguments and responding to them. The seminar will be discussion-oriented.

Course Goals

In this course, you will develop:

- In-depth understanding of Spinoza's central views in the *Ethics*, and how they fit together.
- A clear grasp of the arguments which Spinoza puts forward to support his central views, and the ability to articulate them in your own terms.

In pursuing these course-specific goals, you will also acquire the following general skills:

- The ability to engage in close and charitable readings of sophisticated arguments, even when these take a very different starting point and approach from your own.
- The ability to articulate views and arguments in a clear, concise, and accessible manner.

- The ability to criticize other views by giving focused objections to them and anticipating replies.
- The ability to engage in respectful, reasoned, and passionate debate with peers about complex topics that lack clear answers, and to use such debate as a tool in understanding difficult texts.

My hope is that you also acquire enthusiasm for exploring the wide range of ideas defended throughout the history of philosophy, and the confidence to engage with texts at a significant historical distance.

Course Requirements

- Attendance and participation (15%)
- Weekly posts (20%)
- In-class presentation (15%)
- One short paper, 2-3 pages (20%)
- A final paper, 7-8 pages (30%)

Attendance and participation

Attending every class is compulsory. Please notify me in advance if you expect to miss a class, and let me know the reason why.

This course will be a collaborative investigation of Spinoza's *Ethics*. Our goal is to collectively make sense of the text and assess its claims and arguments. This means that the class depends on your active participation and appropriate preparation. You must pay attention in class, be engaged, and ask questions and make points which advance the class's understanding of the text. And you must carefully do the assigned reading before every class. The *Ethics* is not an easy text, and the terminology and style take getting used to, so you will need to be patient in reading. The weekly piece of secondary literature is meant to give you guidance in understanding the text. Reading it will save you time and make reading Spinoza a much smoother experience!

Weekly posts

Once a week, **everyone** will post a comment to the relevant week's Sakai forum. This can be an independent post or a reply to someone else's post. It should be a **short paragraph** engaging with the reading for that week. It can be a question: for example, a request for clarification on what view Spinoza is putting forward in a passage, a question about how the argument for a view works, or a question on how the view connects to other claims in the *Ethics*. It can also be an objection. In each case, you should write enough to explain the reasons for your comment, and indicate what passages in the text you are focusing about.

I expect you to work hard at understanding the text by yourself, and then let me know in your comments what points you found particularly puzzling or are interested in discussing further. We will then collectively address these during the two classes that week.

Comments are due on **Monday at 5 pm**. You can **miss or drop two posts** over the course of the entire semester without penalty.

In-class presentation

You will present once (in pairs, randomly assigned in the first class) on the secondary literature assigned for the week. These presentations will be on Thursday. Your presentation should be about **15 minutes**

long, and you should produce a handout and send it to me **by Tuesday before the class**. The presentation must include a clear summary of the paper, an objection – either to the interpretative thesis of the paper or to Spinoza’s view as understood in the paper -, an anticipated reply to your objection, and a response.

This has two main goals. First, your presentation will serve as a springboard for discussion of the topic in the class. Second, this will allow you to practice some of the skills you need to write a good final paper, where you will defend an interpretation of one of Spinoza’s views and assess it.

Papers

Papers should be blinded and submitted as .pdfs (with the last four digits of your RUID as the title) through Sakai on the due date. Except in extreme conditions, extensions must be granted well before the due date; late papers will be downgraded 1/3 grade per day.

The short paper will be an argument reconstruction. Your task will be to re-construct one of Spinoza’s arguments in the *Ethics* in premise-conclusion form, filling in gaps where needed, and making sure you translate Spinoza’s terminology into ordinary terms. For extra credit, you will have the opportunity to criticize the argument by providing an argument against one of the premises.

The final paper will combine interpretation and assessment of one of Spinoza’s views. Like in a the papers you will present on, you will provide an interpretation of some passages in Spinoza to argue that he held a certain position on the topic in question. You will then consider either an objection to your interpretation and defend your interpretation, or consider an objection to the view you attribute to Spinoza.

Other Expectations

I expect you to be familiar with and to abide by RU’s policy on academic and intellectual integrity: academicintegrity.rutgers.edu/academic-integrity-policy. Violations of this policy include: cheating, fabrication, plagiarism, denying others access to information or material, and facilitating violations of academic integrity.

I also expect you to abide by the department’s norms for discourse (philosophy.rutgers.edu/about-us/discourse). In particular, I expect all participants to observe basic norms of civility and respect. This means stating your own views directly and substantively: focusing on reasons, assumptions and consequences rather than on who is offering them, or how. And it means engaging other’s views in the same terms. No topic or claim is too obvious or controversial to be discussed; but claims and opinions have a place in the discussion only when they are presented in a respectful, collegial, and constructive way.

If you need special accommodations because of a learning disability or any other reason, please have the Office of Disability Services (ods.rutgers.edu) get in touch with me.

Grading Rubric

Below is roughly what each letter grade means. Note that ‘+’ grades will be assigned for fine-tuning.

A

Papers: Fully answers the question in a concise and convincing manner. Provides a strong argument, with a clearly stated, relevant thesis, a transparent argument structure, and compelling premises. Considers objections and makes a persuasive effort to address them. Displays deep understanding of the original text by carefully considering a range of passages and justifying the interpretation of those passages. Writes clearly, in plain language, and uses terminology in a precise manner. Shows insight by going beyond interpretations or objections discussed in class.

Presentation: Provides a helpful handout that clearly summarizes the main points in the text and clearly articulates an objection, potential reply, and counter-response. Includes relevant passages from the *Ethics* in support of points made. Shows deep understanding of the primary and secondary literature by providing articulate justifications for points made. The oral presentation is smooth, engaging, and easy to follow. The points made provide an insightful start to class discussion.

Weekly posts: Misses or drops at most two posts. The large majority of the posts are relevant to the topic, concise, clearly written, and specific. They articulate a question or objection which reveals engagement with the text and which contributes to class discussion.

Attendance and participation: At most one unexcused absence. Comes to class fully prepared, with relevant questions or insightful comments on the reading. Regularly participates in in-class discussion in ways that contribute to others' understanding and are relevant. Is always respectful and considerate of others, and does not take up excessive time.

B

Papers: Answers most of the question. Provides a solid argument, with a clear thesis, mostly transparent argument structure, and relevant premises, though the argument may have some significant gaps. Displays understanding of the original text by considering some passages, though perhaps without articulating points independently or while showing confusion about some significant interpretative point. Writes mostly in a clear manner, though there might be inaccuracies that compromise the points made.

Presentation: Provides a handout that captures the main points in the text and includes an objection, though there might be confusion regarding some important points. Includes some passages from the *Ethics* in support of points made, though their relevance may be unclear. The presentation is comprehensible to the audience.

Weekly posts: Misses or drops three or four posts. Or: Almost all posts are more-or-less relevant to the topic, but some may be poorly articulated or fail to engage with a specific point in the text. Only a minority of the posts meet the criteria for an A.

Attendance and participation: Two or three unexcused absences. Or: Shows evidence of having done the reading each session, but in many cases in an uncritical manner. Participates in in-class discussion in more-or-less relevant ways. Is respectful of others.

C

Papers: More-or-less off-topic and unclear. Fails to provide an argument and shows significant confusion about major interpretative points.

Presentation: Shows significant difficulties with the text, fails to provide a handout that is at all relevant. Does not contribute to in-class discussion.

Weekly posts: Misses or drops five to seven posts. Or: more than a third of posts are irrelevant or off-topic.

Attendance and participation: Three to five unexcused absences. Or: In many classes, does not appear to have read the material. Fails to participate in relevant ways. The tone of participation is sometimes not fully respectful of others.

D and below: scarce evidence of effort or understanding along all dimensions.

F: dishonest work.

Schedule of Topics and Readings (provisional, subject to change)

All classes meet at 6:10-7:30pm at AB-2150 (CAC).

Reality and God

Week 1. Introduction and Spinoza on Substance.

Sep 4. Nadler, 'Why Spinoza Still Matters'

Sep 6. *Ethics* Part I: Definitions and Axioms.

Melamed, 'The Building Blocks of Spinoza's Metaphysics: Substance, Attributes, and Modes', Substance section (pages 2-6 of PDF)

Week 2. The Argument for Substance Monism.

Sep 11. *Ethics* Part I: Propositions 1-14.

Sep 13. Schmidt, 'Substance Monism and Identity Theory in Spinoza'

Week 3. Attributes and Modes.

Sep 18. *Ethics* Part I: Definitions and Axioms; Propositions 1-10, 15-16, 19.

Sep 20. Melamed, 'The Building Blocks of Spinoza's Metaphysics: Substance, Attributes, and Modes', Attributes and Modes sections (pages 6-22 of PDF)

Week 4. Determinism and Free Will.

Sep 25. *Ethics* Part I: Propositions 16-36.

Sep 27. Huenemann, 'But Why Was Spinoza a Necessitarian?'

Week 5. God and Organized Religion. Review.

Oct 2. *Ethics* Part I: Appendix.

Nadler, *Spinoza: An Introduction*, 'Pantheist or Atheist?', pp. 112-121

Oct 4. Review; how to reconstruct an argument.

The Mind

Week 6. The Mind-Body Problem.

Oct 9. *Ethics* Part II: Definitions, Axioms, Propositions 1-13. Part III: Proposition 2.

FIRST PAPER DUE.

Oct 11. Della Rocca, *Representation and the Mind-Body Problem in Spinoza*, chapter 7.

Week 7. Mental Representation.

Oct 16. *Ethics* Part II: Propositions 14-36.

Oct 18. Wilson, 'Objects, Ideas, and 'Minds': Comments on Spinoza's Theory of Mind'

Week 8. Consciousness.

Oct 23. *Ethics* Part III: Propositions 9-11. Part V: Proposition 39.

Oct 25. Nadler, 'Spinoza and Consciousness'

Week 9. Knowledge.

Oct 30. *Ethics* Part II: Propositions 37-47.

Nov 1. Primus, '*Scientia Intuitiva* in the *Ethics*'

Week 10. The Emotions.

Nov 6. *Ethics* Part III (esp. Propositions 3-12, 53-59; Definitions of the Affects, I-III).

Nov 8. Lloyd, 'Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Spinoza and the *Ethics*', pp. 70-82.

Week 11. Belief and Affirmation.

Nov 13. *Ethics* Part II: Propositions 48-49.

Nov 15. Steinberg, 'Belief, Affirmation, and the Doctrine of *Conatus* in Spinoza'

Week 12. Review.

Nov 20. Review.

Nov 22. NO CLASS – THANKSGIVING BREAK

The Good Life

Week 13. Happiness and the Good.

Nov 27. *Ethics* Part IV: Preface, Definitions, Propositions 1-41, 59.

Nov 29. Youpa, 'Spinoza's Theories of Value'

Week 14. Immortality.

Dec 4. *Ethics* Part IV: Proposition 67, Part V: Propositions 11-42.

Dec 6. Garber, "A Free Man Thinks of Nothing Less Than of Death": Spinoza on the Eternity of the Mind'

Week 15. Final Review.

Dec 11. Final Review; how to write a history of philosophy paper.

Friday, Dec 20: FINAL PAPER DUE

Student-Wellness Services

Just In Case Web App

<http://codu.co/cee05e>

Access helpful mental health information and resources for yourself or a friend in a mental health crisis on your smartphone or tablet and easily contact CAPS or RUPD.

Counseling, ADAP & Psychiatric Services (CAPS)

(848) 932-7884 / 17 Senior Street, New Brunswick, NJ 08901/ www.rhscaps.rutgers.edu/

CAPS is a University mental health support service that includes counseling, alcohol and other drug assistance, and psychiatric services staffed by a team of professional within Rutgers Health services to support students' efforts to succeed at Rutgers University. CAPS offers a variety of services that include: individual therapy, group therapy and workshops, crisis intervention, referral to specialists in the community and consultation and collaboration with campus partners.

Violence Prevention & Victim Assistance (VPVA)

(848) 932-1181 / 3 Bartlett Street, New Brunswick, NJ 08901 / www.vpva.rutgers.edu/

The Office for Violence Prevention and Victim Assistance provides confidential crisis intervention, counseling and advocacy for victims of sexual and relationship violence and stalking to students, staff and faculty. To reach staff during office hours when the university is open or to reach an advocate after hours, call 848-932-1181.

Disability Services

(848) 445-6800 / Lucy Stone Hall, Suite A145, Livingston Campus, 54 Joyce Kilmer Avenue, Piscataway, NJ 08854 / <https://ods.rutgers.edu/>

Rutgers University welcomes students with disabilities into all of the University's educational programs. In order to receive consideration for reasonable accommodations, a student with a disability must contact the appropriate disability services office at the campus where you are officially enrolled, participate in an intake interview, and provide documentation:

<https://ods.rutgers.edu/students/documentation-guidelines>. If the documentation supports your request for reasonable accommodations, your campus's disability services office will provide you with a Letter of Accommodations. Please share this letter with your instructors and discuss the accommodations with them as early in your courses as possible. To begin this process, please complete the Registration form on the ODS web site at: <https://ods.rutgers.edu/students/registration-form>.

Scarlet Listeners

(732) 247-5555 / <http://www.scarletlisteners.com/>

Free and confidential peer counseling and referral hotline, providing a comforting and supportive safe space.