

Spinoza and His Critics: Nihilism, Pantheism, and the Crisis of Reason

PHIL 4198-11/HONR 2054-80

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W, 3:30-6:00

Monroe Hall, Room 350

Fall 2015

Dr. Joseph Trullinger

Email: trullinger@gwu.edu

Phone: (202) 242-6043 (Mt. Vernon Office)

Foggy Bottom Office: Phillips 510A, Mt. Vernon Office: Ames 101E

Office hours (Foggy Bottom): W, 2:15–3:15 PM, (Mt. Vernon): TR, 11:30–1:00 PM

Course Description

Can anything exist apart from everything? This question is central to the thought of Benedict de Spinoza, who (in)famously argued that God and Nature are the same all-encompassing Reality, and all things that we usually suppose to be independent substances—a tree, a rock, the White House, you, me, this syllabus, and so on—are all just fluctuating parts of this one Being whose everlasting power allowed them all to arise in the first place. To some, Spinoza's system appears to be atheism by another name, for better or for worse; if everything is divine, then nothing is. To others, Spinoza's system appears to be the most devout affirmation of God possible; if everything is divine, there is nowhere God isn't.

These conflicting interpretations, and the extent to which they display or distort the essence of Spinoza's rigorous thinking, will form the subject matter of this Philosophy Proseminar. We will spend the first half of the semester closely studying the entirety of Spinoza's masterpiece, the *Ethics*. We will spend the second half of the semester looking at the critical responses Spinoza posthumously provoked in late 18th century Germany, where an intellectual firestorm about the consequences of Spinozism was so intense that it broke up friendships, alarmed the authorities, and was said to have stressed one philosopher to the point of death. In this way, we will see how this controversy set the stage for major currents in 19th century European philosophy, and by extension, our contemporary world.

Learning Outcomes:

The purpose of this course is to introduce students to one of the most important works of philosophy ever written. By course's end, students will be able to:

- identify basic problems, questions, and themes that recur in our readings and guide their debates
- effectively analyze the texts within which these problems, questions, and themes are developed and debated
- synthesize disparate arguments
- evaluate and critique claims encountered in our readings
- think deeply and seriously about some of modernity's most pressing questions

Required Texts

Benedict de Spinoza. *A Spinoza Reader: The Ethics and Other Works*. Ed. and trans. Edwin Curley. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. 1994. ISBN: 0691000670

Moses Mendelssohn. *Writings on Judaism, Christianity, and the Bible*. Ed. Michah Gottlieb. Trans. Curtis Bowman, Elias Sacks, and Allan Arkush. Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press. 2011. ISBN: 1584656859

Friedrich Jacobi. *The Main Philosophical Writings and the Novel Alhwill*. Trans. George di Giovanni. McGill-Queen's University Press. 2009. ISBN: 0773536299

Recommended Texts (required for graduate students)

Genevieve Lloyd. *Spinoza and the Ethics*. Princeton, NJ: Routledge. 1996. ISBN: 0415107822

Frederick Beiser. *The Fate of Reason: German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. ISBN: 067429503X

Course Requirements:

Our goal will be the cultivation of your capacity to engage in critical thinking and analytic reasoning in both your written work and in our classroom discussions. Your grade will be based accordingly on your written work and your contribution to classroom discussion.

1.) Writing Assignments (60%):

- a.) One research essay, 18-20 pages in length (40%)*
- b.) Two drafts of a term paper prospectus, with working bibliography. Each student is expected to meet individually with the professor to discuss his/her topic for the term paper in advance of submitting a term paper prospectus. 3-5 page drafts of the term paper prospectus are due on Wednesday, November 18th. The final draft of the prospectus (5-7 pages) is due on Wednesday, December 2nd. (10%)
- c.) 2 response papers (see where they are assigned), *no longer than 1 page in length*, submitted in class. Each response paper is due at the beginning of class on the day the reading is due. I will not accept late papers. (5% each, for a total of 10%)

2.) Oral presentation with Q & A (15%)

Students will make one oral presentation over the course of the semester. Presentations will focus on primary and secondary literature (supplementary readings marked as "optional" on the reading schedule) selected to illuminate our course readings and enlarge our conversation. Your oral presentation should be approximately 15 minutes in length (with 5-10 additional minutes afterwards for Q & A with your classmates). The presentation should cover the major arguments presented in the reading as well as your critical reaction to those arguments.

Note well: your presentation should not recapitulate what happens in the text. We all did the reading, so there is nothing more dull than a “blow by blow” summary! Your presentation should begin by swiftly summarizing the *main* claims made by the text(s), then it should move into your informed reaction to that material. I recommend putting your reaction into a well-written page of text so as to keep yourself focused. *You are required to do the reading ahead of time, and then meet with me before the presentation day to discuss what you plan on doing.* After presenting your reaction, pose three good questions for class discussion, and open up the floor for discussion. Some criteria for a good question are as follows:

- 1) it avoids a simplistic “dis/agree” format
- 2) it cannot be tidily answered in just one sentence, but promotes discussion
- 3) it captures what is distinctive about this text (i.e., it displays an understanding of why we are reading this text and not some other one)
- 4) for example, it would not simply ask, “What does author x mean by term y ?”, but should point toward what is thought-provoking or counter-intuitive about author x attaching meaning z to term y

When you make your presentation, you are responsible for providing everyone with a handout outlining your presentation and its argument. When you answer questions from fellow students, be generous to any challenges they may present and do your best to answer them concisely, clearly, and with the attitude that you are here to learn from each other. *Similarly, students will also be graded on the extent to which they pose thoughtful questions to the presenter.* Sitting back passively and failing to engage with the presentation will negatively impact your participation score.

3.) **Term Paper Presentation** (5%)

In our final class meeting, each student will give a presentation (of a minimum of five minutes) that provides an overview of what he or she will write about in the term paper. Presentations should synopsise guiding research questions, indicate how they might be addressed, and summarize how you will incorporate the scholarship.

4.) **Weekly Postings** (10%)

Each week, every student is required to post at least one thoughtful question about the reading that will be discussed at the upcoming meeting. A good reading question is one that directly and explicitly engages the text. Your question should concern a specific passage, term, concept, or idea that you are puzzled about, and it should offer your interpretation in a brief and meaningful way. It should be focused on something that genuinely puzzles you in the reading, and which you can assume that others find puzzling or confusing as well. There will be no pre-assigned questions for you to answer; rather, you are expected to bring up a couple of discussion questions that have sparked your curiosity while doing the reading. The weekly postings should be paragraph-long and posted on Blackboard by **7 PM every Tuesday**. Late postings will not be counted.

5.) Class Participation (10%)

Our course this semester will be discussion-based. Classroom discussion will be collective, guided by our questions and concerns. You will be expected to participate thoughtfully and regularly in our discussions. As we grapple with our often subtle and complex readings, our goal will be both interpretive and evaluative. We will seek, so far as is possible, to correctly interpret the meaning of an author's claims, and we will attempt, so far as possible, to evaluate the validity and truth of these claims. Because of the challenging nature of our readings, it is to be expected that our interpretations and judgments of our readings will differ widely. Our discussions are therefore to be viewed as open-ended opportunities to test competing readings, interpretations, and evaluations of an author's ideas and assumptions through thoughtful and responsive conversation. Through dialogue, it is hoped and expected that new insights will be gained by all. As you prepare for classroom discussion, please keep in mind that contributions to our dialogue can take many forms: posing relevant questions, pointing out perplexing problems, or listening and responding thoughtfully to your peers' ideas and interpretations. Finally, let us readily admit that sharing one's thoughts and ideas in a group setting can be a difficult and challenging experience in its own right. In addition to thoughtful reading and reflection, it requires a certain courage. While that is asked of you in this course, it is also expected that we will collectively cultivate a conversational space in which room is given for a wide range of voices and perspectives, in which all can be heard and engaged. The task is a serious one for all of us.

Breakdown of the Final Grade:

Research essay*	40%
Term paper prospectus	10%
First response paper	5%
Second response paper	5%
Oral presentation with Q & A	15%
Term paper presentation	5%
Weekly postings	10%
Class participation	10%

<i>Total:</i>	100%

*** Additional Expectations for Graduate Students:**

For graduate students, the final research essay must be 25 pages in length. In addition to the coursework outlined above, graduate students must write an annotated bibliography (4-5 pages in length), which reconstructs and evaluates the arguments of four authors in the scholarship relevant to this course. The annotated bibliography will be turned in with the final paper and evaluated along with it for a single grade. Graduate students are also expected to read all material that is marked as “optional” for undergraduates.

Attendance Policy:

One unexcused absences will result in a one-step final grade reduction for the semester. For example, upon the second unexcused absence your final grade will fall from a B+ to a B. Absences may be excused in cases of significant illness, family emergencies or other situations of similar seriousness. Please inform me as soon as possible.

Late Papers

While I do make exceptions for people in special circumstances (see attendance requirement), late papers will not be accepted. This is class policy and cannot be negotiated. It is your responsibility to complete your work. Take it seriously so I can give you the best possible grade at the end of the semester!

Academic Integrity

All students are expected to uphold the GW Code of Academic Integrity. It states: "Academic dishonesty is defined as cheating of any kind, including misrepresenting one's own work, taking credit for the work of others without crediting them and without appropriate authorization, and the fabrication of information." For the remainder of the code, see: <http://www.gwu.edu/~ntegrity/code.html>

Disability Support Services

Any student who may need an accommodation based on the potential impact of a disability should contact the Disability Support Services office at 202-994-8250 in the Marvin Center, Suite 242, to establish eligibility and to coordinate reasonable accommodations. For additional information please refer to: <http://gwired.gwu.edu/dss/>

University Counseling Center

The University Counseling Center (UCC) offers 24/7 assistance and referral to address students' personal, social, career, and study skills problems. Services for students include: crisis and emergency mental health consultations, confidential assessment, counseling services (individual and small group), and referrals. For more information, please see:

<http://gwired.gwu.edu/counsel/CounselingServices/AcademicSupportServices>

Standards for Evaluation: An important aim of the proseminar is to acquaint you with expectations for college-level rigor in writing and participation. The following standards should be helpful to you in understanding how your written work and participation will be evaluated. (Note that + and - grades will also be used to fine tune evaluations.)

A

Writing: clear and ambitious thesis, excellent analysis and use of research; exceptionally thorough proofreading and editing.

Participation: regular, exceptional, insightful contributions reflecting very strong preparation and engagement with readings.

B

Writing: clear and relevant thesis, good analysis, effective use of research; generally effective proofreading and editing.

Participation: regular and constructive contributions; good preparation and engagement with readings.

C

Writing: clear but weak thesis, adequate analysis, adequate use of research; adequate but inconsistent proofreading and editing.

Participation: irregular contributions reflecting adequate preparation and engagements with readings.

D

Writing: confused and weak thesis, minimally adequate analysis, minimally adequate use of research; weak and inconsistent proofreading and editing.

Participation: infrequent contributions that reflect minimally adequate preparation or engagement.

F

Writing: indiscernible thesis, weak or nonexistent analysis, inadequate use of research; evident lack of proofreading and editing.

Participation: contributions (frequent or not) that reflect inadequate preparation or engagement.

Reading Schedule

Readings marked with an asterisk (*) are optional for undergraduates but mandatory for graduate students and/or someone giving a presentation on that day's material.

Spinoza

- 9/2 *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* §§1-17
Theological-Political Treatise, Preface and Ch. III-IV (excerpts A, C, and D)
A Spinoza Reader, pp. 3-10 and pp. 23-34
 * Genevieve Lloyd, *Spinoza and the Ethics*, Ch. 1, pp. 1-27
- 9/9 *Ethics*, Part I
Short Treatise on God, Man, and His Well-Being (excerpts A-C)
A Spinoza Reader, pp. 85-115 and pp. 55-58
 * Lloyd, *Spinoza and the Ethics*, Ch. 2, pp. 29-48
 * Piet Steenbakkens, "The Geometrical Order in the *Ethics*"
 * Andreas Schmidt, "Substance Monism and Identity Theory in Spinoza"
- response paper due**
- 9/16 *Ethics*, Part II
 Letters 63-66, correspondence between Tschirnhaus and Spinoza
A Spinoza Reader, pp. 115-152 and pp. 269-276
 * Genevieve Lloyd, *Spinoza and the Ethics*, Ch. 2, pp. 48-70
 * Diane Steinberg, "Knowledge in Spinoza's *Ethics*"
 * Yitzhak Melamed, "Spinoza's Metaphysics of Thought: Parallelisms and the Multifaceted Structure of Ideas"
- 9/23 *Ethics*, Part III
 Letter 32, Spinoza to Oldenburg
A Spinoza Reader, pp. 152-197 and pp. 82-84
 * Genevieve Lloyd, *Spinoza and the Ethics*, Ch. 3, pp. 71-83
 * Michael Lebuffe, "The Anatomy of the Passions"
 * Amelie Rorty, "Spinoza on the Pathos of Idolatrous Love and the Hilarity of True Love"
- response paper due**
- 9/30 *Ethics*, Part IV (IVp1-37)
Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect §§18-29
A Spinoza Reader, pp. 197-221 and pp. 48-55
 * Genevieve Lloyd, *Spinoza and the Ethics*, Ch. 3, pp. 83-98
 * Andrew Youpa, "Spinoza's Theory of the Good"
 * Daniel Garber, "Dr. Fichelson's Dilemma: Spinoza on Freedom and Sociability"

- 10/7 *Ethics*, Parts IV-V (IVp38-Vp10)
 Letters 57-58, correspondence between Tschirnhaus and Spinoza
A Spinoza Reader, pp. 221-252 and pp. 266-269
 * Genevieve Lloyd, *Spinoza and the Ethics*, Ch. 3, pp. 98-107
 * Yirmiyahu Yovel, “Incomplete Rationality in Spinoza’s *Ethics*: Three Basic Forms”
 * Elhanan Yakira, “Is the Rational Man Free?”
- 10/14 *Ethics*, Part V (Vp11-42)
Short Treatise on God, Man, and His Well-Being (excerpts D-F)
A Spinoza Reader, pp. 252-265 and pp. 58-66
 * Genevieve Lloyd, *Spinoza and the Ethics*, Ch. 4-5, pp. 109-143
 * Don Garrett, “Spinoza on the Essence of the Human Body and the Part of the Mind That is Eternal”
 * Yitzhak Melamed, “Spinoza’s *Amor Dei Intellectualis*”
- Intermezzi*
- 10/21 Leibniz, *Principles of Nature and Grace*
 Lessing, *A Rejoinder and On the Proof of the Spirit and of Power*
 Mendelssohn, *Writings*, selections 1-3 and 20
 Hamann, *Socratic Memorabilia: Collected for the Boredom of the Public by a Lover of Boredom*,
 “To the Public, or Nobody, the Well-Known,” and “To the Two,” pp. 3-8
 * Frederick Beiser, *The Fate of Reason*, Ch. 1
- The Controversy*
- 10/28 Jacobi, *Concerning the Doctrine of Spinoza* (1785), pp. 173-251
 * Frederick Beiser, *The Fate of Reason*, Ch. 2
 * Benjamin Crowe, “F.H. Jacobi on Faith, or What It Takes to Be an Irrationalist”
- 11/4 Jacobi, *Concerning the Doctrine of Spinoza* (1785)—continued
 Jacobi, *Allwill*, Letters XX-XXI and “To Erhard O**”
 Mendelssohn, *Writings*, selections 12 and 21-23
 * Frederick Beiser, *The Fate of Reason*, Ch. 3
 * Paul Franks, “Divided by Common Sense: Mendelssohn and Jacobi on Reason and Inferential Justification”
- 11/11 Mendelssohn, *Writings*, selection 13
 Jacobi, *David Hume on Faith*, “Appendix on Transcendental Idealism”
 Kant, *What Does It Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking?*
 Kant, *Critique of Judgment* §§84-87
 * Frederick Beiser, *The Fate of Reason*, Ch. 4
 * Susan Neiman, *The Unity of Reason*, Ch. 4 (“The Structure of Faith”)
 * Reinhold, *Letters on the Kantian Philosophy*, Third Letter

- 11/18 Herder, *God, Some Conversations*, III-V
* Frederick Beiser, *The Fate of Reason*, Ch. 5
* Steven Shaviro, “Consequences of Panpsychism”
* Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, Ch. 8 (“Vitality and Self-Interest”)
first draft of the term paper prospectus due

11/25 Thanksgiving Break

Afterimages and Aftershocks

- 12/2 Hölderlin, “Being Judgment Possibility”
Hölderlin, Schelling, and Hegel, “Oldest Systematic Program of German Idealism”
Schelling, *Ideas on a Philosophy of Nature* (2nd edition, 1803)
Novalis, *Novices at Saïs*, “The Novice,” “Hyacinth and Rose Petal”
* Manfred Frank, “What is Early German Romantic Philosophy?”
* Bruce Matthews, “The New Mythology: Romanticism between Religion and Humanism”
final draft of the prospectus due

- 12/9 Fichte, “On the Basis of Our Belief in a Divine Governance of the World”
Jacobi, *Open Letter to Fichte* (1799)
Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, Part Two, Sec. I.ii
 (“Possible and Actual Theses by Lessing”)
* Daniel Breazeale, “The Standpoint of Life and the Standpoint of Philosophy”
term paper presentations

‡ term papers are due in my mailbox by Wednesday, December 16th ‡