

# Phl 440 The Generativity of Being and the Status of the Human I: **Spinoza's *Ethics***

Professor Franklin Perkins  
fperkins@depaul.edu

## **Description and Objectives**

This course will use a historical/comparative approach to think through some of the consequences and problems that follow the rejections of transcendence and radical dualisms. In positive terms, it will examine philosophical positions based on immanence and that take being as inherently dynamic and generative. While we will examine the ontological foundations for such a view, we will focus largely on the consequences for the status of human beings. We will examine these issues from two perspectives, that of Spinoza's *Ethics* (in the fall) and that of the early Daoist text the *Zhuangzi* (in the winter). Spinoza remains one of the European thinkers to most relentlessly think through a world with nothing super-natural: no transcendent God, no objective categories of good and evil, and no transcendent subject or free will. For Spinoza, the human condition is to be part of a whole that develops necessarily and is indifferent to human values and desires. While the *Ethics* can be seen as an attempt to think through a world in which human beings are not very special, Spinoza in many ways remains a rationalist and a humanist (an element that will become clearer through contrast with the *Zhuangzi*). This class will be a close reading of Spinoza's main work, the *Ethics*, examining the foundations of his philosophy with particular attention to the status of human beings.

This course is meant to be part of a two course sequence with PHL 500 in the winter quarter.

## **Requirements**

Reading: This course will not just present Spinoza's philosophy but also discuss its problems and implications. While the text is not that long, it is dense and complicated. I expect you to come to class not just having read the text but having done your utmost in understanding Spinoza's arguments. That is, by the time you come to class, you should already know what issues need to be clarified and addressed. I will give you some materials to help guide your reading.

Presentations: Each student will give one presentation explaining a proposition from the *Ethics*. You should talk for no more than ten minutes, concluding with one or two problems or questions that the class can discuss. You should not read anything aloud, but you may distribute written material ahead of time. The presentations will follow the sequence of the text

Final Paper: Since this course is part of a two course sequence, you have two options for a final paper.

- You can write an article length paper (approximately 20 pages) at the end of the **winter quarter**. That paper will have to deal with both Spinoza and Daoism, although it need not focus on the two equally (that is, you can focus on one and use the other to set up a problem or contrast). This paper would determine your grade for both the autumn and winter courses.
- You can write a final paper, approximately 12 pages long, on any aspect of the *Ethics*. This would be due at the end of the **autumn quarter** (tentatively, 11/27). You should discuss your topic with me ahead of time. Note that you can take this option even if you also plan on taking the winter course, in which case you would write a second paper for the winter quarter.

**Required Texts**

*A Spinoza Reader*, translated by Edwin Curley

**Tentative Schedule of Readings**

We may fall slightly behind, but we will finish the whole Ethics. I have left out the dates because we already need to schedule a make up session.

Class Session	Topic/Reading
1 9/19	Introduction
2	Read all of Part I
3	Discuss problems in Part I; Begin Part II (read through Prop )
4	Read all of Part II
5	Discuss problems in Part II
6	Read all of Part III
7	Read all of Part IV
8	Problems in Parts III and IV
9	Read all of Part V
10 11/14	Problems in Part V; Concluding Discussion: Individualism in an Intercultural Perspective (read Hansen)