

Po 665 / Th 415: SPINOZA'S POLITICAL AND RELIGIOUS LIBERALISM

Boston College, Spring, 1989

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All the reading assignments are from Spinoza's major works: the Theologico-Political Treatise, the Political Treatise, and, to a lesser extent, the Ethics. As much as possible, the texts have been grouped according to natural affinity, although considerations of length also came into play. Students are expected to have done each reading prior to the session for which it is assigned. They are also urged to compile notes on these readings so as to come to a better understanding of both Spinoza's thought and his subtle art of writing.

Spinoza, one of the giants of the early modern period, is especially important as the founder of political and religious liberalism. To him we owe the most powerful arguments in favor of modern liberal democracy and the developments associated with it, such as freedom of thought and speech, religious toleration, the separation of philosophy from theology, and what is now known as the historical-critical approach to the study of the Bible.

Part of the difficulty that one encounters in reading Spinoza stems from the fact that his thought is considerably more abstract than that of his modern predecessors. Like his contemporary Leibniz, Spinoza belongs to that part of modernity which sought to restore the primacy of speculation on the basis of the intellectual revolution effected by Machiavelli and Hobbes, both of whom are much more concerned with problems of a practical or political nature than with properly speculative problems. Accordingly, the principles in which his thought is grounded, e.g., that God's understanding is identical to his will, are not as readily accessible to us as are the experiences underlying, say, Hobbes's notion of the state of nature. For the same reason one also finds in Spinoza a conception of virtue that is somewhat loftier than that of either Machiavelli or Hobbes.

Another source of difficulty is that Spinoza tried to forestall the opposition that his views were bound to arouse by accommodating himself more or less transparently to the accepted opinions of his day. It is significant that most of his works were published anonymously and only after his death. None of this prevented him from being excommunicated by the Jewish community to which he belonged.

SCHEDULE

- Jan. 19: General intro. Theol.-Pol. Tr., Preface, p. 3-11
26: Ch. 1-2, p. 13-42
- Feb. 2: Ch. 3-4, p. 43-68
9: Ch. 5-6, p. 69-97
16: Ch. 7-8, p. 98-132
23: Ch. 9-11, p. 133-164
- Mar. 9: Ch. 12-15, p. 165-199
16: Ch. 16-17, p. 200-236
23: Ch. 18-20, p. 237-266
30: Polit. Tr., Ch. 1-4: p. 287-312
- Apr. 6: Ch. 5-7, p. 313-344
13: Ch. 8-11, p. 345-387
20: Ethics, Part I (p. 31-62); Part III, Preface (p. 103-104); Part IV, Preface (p. 153-155) and Prop. 7 and 37, Scholium 2 (p. 159; 176-77); Part V, Preface, (p. 203-205).
27: General discussion

REQUIREMENTS

Grad. students: a summary and analysis (10-15 pages) of a chapter or group of chapters not yet treated in class, due on the day the chapter(s) in question are to be discussed.

Undergrads: one 5-page paper of the same sort and a final exam.

TEXTS

The following books, which will be read and discussed in class, may be purchased at the B.C. Bookstore:

The Works of Spinoza, Elwes transl., Vol. I: Political Treatise and Theologico-Political Treatise.

Baruch Spinoza, The Ethics and Selected Letters, S. Shirley transl. S. Feldman, ed.

SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY

The following books or articles, which may be of some use to anyone who wishes to come to grips with Spinoza's text and the issues that it raises, have been placed on the Reserve Shelf in O'Neill Library:

- L. Strauss, Spinoza's Critique of Religion. N.Y., 1965.
- L. Strauss, Persecution and the Art of Writing (Glencoe: Free Press, 1952), esp. Ch. 5: "How to Study Spinoza's Theologico-Political Treatise," p. 142-201.
- S. Rosen, "Benedict Spinoza," in L. Strauss and J. Cropsey, eds., History of Political Philosophy.
- R. Kennington, ed., The Philosophy of Baruch Spinoza. Washington, 1980, esp.:
Ch. 4: "Spinozistic Anomalies" (Jose Benardete).
Ch. 10: "Note on Spinoza's Critique of Religion," (H. Gildin).
Ch. 12: "Kant's Critique of Spinoza" (H.E. Allison)
Ch. 16: "Analytic and Synthetic Methods in Spinoza's Ethics" (R. Kennington).
- M. Grene, ed., Spinoza: A Collection of Critical Essays. Notre Dame, 1979, esp. p. 377-87: "Spinoza and the Political Problem" (H. Gildin).
- H. Fradkin, "The 'Separation' of Religion and Politics: The Paradoxes of Spinoza." (Xerox)

For a more complete listing of standard works on Spinoza, see the Selected Bibliography appended to the Feldman edition of The Ethics and Selected Letters, p. 259-262.