

## Philosophy 6340: Modern Philosophy—Descartes and Spinoza



Winter 2011

Professor Patricia Sheridan

Office hours: Fridays, 10:30-11:30

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### Required Texts:

*Descartes: Selected Philosophical Writings*. Edited by Cottingham, Stoothoff, and Murdoch. New York: Cambridge UP, 1998.

*A Spinoza Reader: The Ethics and other Works*. Edited by Edwin Curley. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1994.

### Recommended Texts:

*The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza's Ethics*. Edited by Olli Koistinen. New York: Cambridge UP, 2009.

*The Cambridge Companion to Descartes*. Edited by John Cottingham. New York: Cambridge UP, 1994.

### Evaluation:

2 Presentations	60%	(2x 30%)
Weekly write-ups	10%	
Paper	30%	

**\*Presentations:** *These will be substantial presentations: prepare for 1 hour presenting time. Presentations must do more than merely expository work. You must aim to explore what you take to be key points in the reading, and to present and defend your interpretation of the text. You must make clear how you are reading the text—that is, what you take Descartes or Spinoza to be saying, and you must defend that reading with reference to the text and, if necessary, with reference to other aspects of the text that might present interpretive issues of conflicts with your reading.*

You must engage with secondary literature on the issues you choose to focus on. You will be expected to consult secondary sources (articles or books by major scholars in the field) and show how your interpretation is not only defensible against other interpretations, but offers something others do not. If you are going to defend the 'standard' interpretation, then you need to explain why it is superior as an explanatory approach to divergent views.

Expect presentations to be 'dialogic' and to span the class time. I will encourage questions and discussion on various points made in the course of your presentation. In this way, presentations will run more as a kind of seminar discussion than as a straight, uninterrupted lecture.

Presentations will be graded on the basis of three criteria: 1. Understanding of the text and attention to interpretive points; 2. Clarity and organization of the presentation; 3. Attention to secondary literature and critical engagement with that literature.

**\*Weekly write-ups:** 1-2 pages. You will bring one to every class in which you are not presenting (you do not have to do a write-up for the weeks you present).

The write-up is an opportunity for you to offer to raise interpretive points and critical observations of the text. What point or points struck you as particularly interesting (i.e. that raises some interesting ideas that you think are relevant or innovative in some way), troubling (i.e. implying something worth worrying about), or problematic (perhaps inconsistent with other aspects of the text,).

You may be asked to contribute your ideas to the class, as a way of opening up some discussion.

**\*Paper:** 15 pages. The paper will be on a topic of your own choosing. The paper must take an interpretive position. You are also required to address secondary literature by way of defending your reading of the text. Ideally, you should think of this paper as something that could be presented at a conference, or worked up into a publishable paper. Thinking of it in this way will force you to come up with something original to say about the issues you have chosen to focus on, and to defend that original view. Think of yourself as contributing in some way to the scholarship on Descartes or Spinoza, or both.

**\*\*N.B.** You must each make an appointment to come see me about your papers. I will want to hear what you are working on, how you are approaching the topic, and what secondary literature you are planning to use.