

GERM/ENVI/POLI 274

Spinoza's Eco-Society:
Contractless Society and Its Ecology

A. Kiarina Kordela



Samuel Hirszenberg, *Excommunicated Spinoza* (1907)

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A. Kiarina Kordela

Spring 2024

T—R 3:00-4:30

HUM 401

Office Hours: by appointment—just send me an email to schedule one!

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Spinoza (1632-1677) has been called the “savage anomaly” of the Enlightenment because his philosophy enables an alternative or ‘hidden’ modernity based on the interdependence of beings rather than their hierarchy. Ever more political theorists, environmentalists, and ecologists are turning to Spinoza’s vision of a nonhierarchical union of nature and society that rejects anthropocentrism as the promise for a more equitable and sustainable life. In this course we shall focus on the foundation of Spinoza’s unconventional thesis: his intertwined conceptions of the human being as part of nature—as opposed to the prevailing notion of the human as an autonomous “imperium” in, yet above, nature—and of society as a continuation of nature—as opposed to the dominant theories of the “social contract” that ground society on its break with, or repression of, nature (Grotius, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Kant). We shall examine Spinoza’s entailed radical revision in understanding both the “political” and the “environment.” Beyond Spinoza’s *Ethics* and his *Theologico-Political* and *Political* treatises, we shall read major commentators both on Spinoza’s ethical and political theory and on his role in environmental ethics and Deep Ecology.

—All readings and class taught in English; no pre-knowledge required

—Core course toward the Critical Theory concentration

—Fulfills Internationalism GenEd requirement

Required Text:

—Baruch Spinoza, *The Ethics, Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect, Selected Letters*, trans. Samuel Shirley, Indianapolis: Hackett, 1992. ISBN: 978-0872201309

—Beth Lord, *Spinoza's Ethics (An Edinburgh Philosophical Guide)*, Edinburgh University Press, 2010. ISBN Paperback: 9780748634507

The rest of the assigned texts will be available on moodle.

MASKS ARE REQUIRED IN THIS COURSE

Course Goals, Guidelines, and Requirements

Course Goals

The main goal of this course is to familiarize students with the work of Spinoza and its influence on other thinkers, particularly thinkers since the twentieth century, regarding philosophy, political, and environmental theories and questions.

On a more general level, emphasis will be placed on cultivating the following skills:

- Critical reading of texts and ability to reconstruct their arguments
- Critical and productive dialogue with the texts
- Analytic ability (to identify the same concept or logical structure in different texts/discourses) and synthetic ability (to combine different concepts and structures towards a further argument)
- Academic argumentation

General Guidelines & Suggestions

- Check the syllabus for the exact pages that are assigned for reading from the files posted on moodle.
- When you read the assigned texts, always look up unknown words, including words in foreign languages.
- When I am lecturing feel free to interrupt and comment or ask questions. Do not let things you do not understand just pass by.
- Budget your time. On a day with a light load of reading you may begin reading the texts for the next time.
- Everything we say or write during this course is not private property but public, available for anyone to use productively. Your written work may be shared with your peers (anonymously, unless you grant permission).

Classroom Etiquette

- Electronic devices (e.g., laptops, cell phones, tablets) are not allowed in class
- Always bring a hard copy of the assigned reading and a notebook for your notes
- Arrive to class timely (see also “attendance” below)
- No food or chewing gums

Course Requirements:

- **Reading Assignments**

The assignments are mentioned in the daily syllabus. If you are absent, make sure to check with your peers for possible changes.

- **Reading Performance (or, how to read in preparation for active participation in class)**

Engage seriously with the readings so as to be prepared to respond in class to questions regarding your knowledge and comprehension of the assigned texts. To be able to do so, it is advisable that you take notes while you are reading the texts; e.g., give brief titles to paragraphs, so that you can easily identify and summarize the passage(s) relevant to the given questions. Your reading performance can be further enhanced through comments and questions that reflect your critical reading of the assigned texts.

- **Class Participation**

Your reading performance (see above) is a major part of your in-class participation. You receive points for participating actively in class in ways that show that you have read carefully the assigned text(s), follow the lines of argumentation, comprehend the introduced concepts, and see connections/relations to other texts we read in this class.

Your participation in critical and productive dialogue reflects and refines not only your ability to read and view critically texts but also:

a) Your ability to be an active listener, which includes listening not only to me but also to your peers.

b) Your ability to overcome intimidation and ask about words, concepts or arguments you encounter in the texts or in class and you do not understand. Do so even if you have the impression that you are the only person who does not understand only because nobody else asks questions. Most likely this is a wrong impression, and everybody else is in the same situation to one extent or other.

Generally, to participate in dialogue means respectful participation, that is, you may disagree with a position but not attack an individual. Be also respectful with regard to the amount of time you take up talking in class (too much is disrespectful toward the rest of the participants, and potentially to you, since you deprive yourself of opportunities to hear other approaches or opinions).

- **Alternative active participation**

If you do not feel comfortable speaking in public you may make up for class participation by turning in summaries of the assigned texts or, if I have posted questions, responses to these questions (follow the instructions under "Attendance").

- **Discussion Leadership Assignment**

Once during the semester you will lead the class discussion on the material assigned for that day for *half an hour*. This is not a straightforward presentation but rather it is about conducting the class by asking the students questions relating to the comprehension of the assigned text(s) and then monitoring and refining their responses. Whenever I provide a list of questions on the assigned reading, select which ones you want to address in class and let me know which you have selected by noon on the day before the class of your presentation. I recommend that you select the questions you consider the most important and/or those that reconstruct a coherent line of thought or argument. If in uncertainty, you may ask me to specify the questions you should address. Otherwise you should prepare the questions yourselves and send them to me again by noon on the day before the class of your presentation.

- **Writing Assignments:**

—You are required to submit two *reading reviews*. Each reading review will consist of (a) a recapitulation of that day's assigned text(s) (around 300 words, font Times New Roman, size 12), and (b) an argument/thesis regarding the line of thought presented in the assigned text, possibly also drawing on other texts assigned in this class (around 150 words, same format).

See the daily syllabus below for deadlines (by alphabetical order of last name).

It is important that you incorporate actual passages from the assigned texts in your own text. In these reviews you want to exhibit (a) good comprehension of the assigned texts, as well as (b) your ability to think critically and to establish relations among different lines of argumentation.

Although in these reading reviews you are not responding to the list of questions I provide, I strongly recommend that you consult it as a guide regarding substantial points that need to be addressed.

- **Attendance:** Please do not attend class if you are sick and/or COVID positive or exposed to someone who tests positive. One of the best things we can do to limit the spread of all kinds of illnesses is to stay home in these cases, so I encourage you to miss class when you are sick. For this reason, you can **make up for absences** by responding to the questions on the text(s) assigned for that day that are posted on

Moodle or, if no questions are provided, by turning in a summary of the text(s) assigned on that day (1 double-spaced page, i.e., around 300 words, font Times New Roman, size 12); in either case, incorporate actual passages from the assigned texts in your own text and send me your makeup work as an attached Word or Google document prior to the next class.

If you have to miss a class, **send me an email** prior to the class to let me know and **contact another student** after class to share notes on the class discussion and to find out about possible changes in the syllabus. It is crucial to read all assigned readings and to follow the class discussions because this course constitutes a thematic unit in which each class builds on preceding class discussions and assigned materials.

Coming **late to class or missing any part** of the class also amounts to deduction of attendance points; therefore, let me know in advance if you need to absent yourself for any part of the class. More than two absences **without make-up summaries will result in a lower grade**: three absences amount to half a grade lower; four absences to a whole grade lower; five absences to two grades lower; six absences amount to failing the course.

My Availability

Feel free to meet with me regarding any aspect of the class. Please send me an email to arrange a meeting in person or on Zoom depending on my schedule.

Grades

Reading comprehension and class participation: 30%

Discussion Leadership: 20%

Reading Review 1: 25%

Reading Review 2: 25%

Total: 100%*

*Attendance is also a factor in the grade (see above).

Additional Services and Information

Class Recordings

In order to accommodate students who may have to miss a class, I will try to record our class sessions in a manner consistent with Macalester's classroom recording policy, which states:

Instructors may record their own class sessions, but must notify students via email in advance. The instructor may publicly disseminate the recording, but if the recording includes the spoken word, image, or other identifying characteristic of any students, then the instructor must secure the written consent of those students prior to any dissemination. The Instructor is responsible for ensuring that any use or sharing of any recording that includes student information is consistent with the written consents and not used or shared for any other purpose. The Instructor will retain the written consents so long as the recording is retained.

Please note that the recording policy clearly states that **"you may not share, replicate, or publish any class recording, in whole or in part,** or use any of the recordings for any purpose besides knowing what happened during the class period, without the written approval of the instructor." If I use any recorded content from any of our classes for purposes beyond our class, I will—in accordance with the policy—obtain your written permission to do so.

Disability Services

In some circumstances, course design may pose barriers to a student's ability to access or demonstrate mastery of course content. Reasonable academic accommodations can be implemented in such circumstances. If you need an accommodation for a disability, please contact the Office of Student Affairs at 651-696-6220 to arrange for an appointment with the Dean of Students, Kathryn Kay Coquemont, or the Disability Services Staff, Shammah Bemudez, Director of Disability Services, or Josie Hurka, DS Coordinator. Additional resources and information regarding the accommodations process for students with disabilities can be found at:

<https://www.macalester.edu/disabilityservices/>

Health and Well-Being

Investing time into taking care of yourself will help you engage more fully in your academic experience. It is important to acknowledge any stressors you may be facing, which can be mental, emotional, physical, financial, etc., and how they can have an academic impact. Sleeping, moving your body, and connecting with others can be strategies to help you be resilient at Macalester. If you are having difficulties maintaining your well-being, please reach out to one of the resources listed here:

<https://www.macalester.edu/healthandwellness/>

Academic Integrity

Students are expected to maintain the highest standards of honesty in their college work. Forgery, cheating and plagiarism are serious offenses and students found guilty of any form of academic dishonesty are subject to disciplinary action. For more information on what precisely constitutes these breaches of integrity and what the consequences of such breaches are, please visit the Academic Programs website: <https://www.macalester.edu/academicprograms/academicpolicies/academicintegrity/>

Artificial Intelligence (AI) Use Policy

Using AI can impede your learning. The assignments in this class challenge you to develop creativity, critical-thinking, and problem-solving skills that AI does not have. Using AI technology could limit your capacity to do this type of work, and as the instructor, I urge you not to miss out on the educational opportunities that this course will provide. I assume that work submitted by you will reflect both your own *ideas* and your own *language* and that you will properly cite any resources you have consulted, including all types of generative AI (text, code, images, video, audio, translation, ChatGPT). If you have any questions about citation or about what constitutes academic honesty in this course or at Macalester College in general, please see the above link.

Intellectual Property

Course materials of published work posted on Moodle and distributed in class are intellectual property belonging to the author. Students are not permitted to buy or sell any course materials without the express permission of the instructor. Such unauthorized behavior constitutes academic misconduct.

Daily Syllabus

R. Jan. 18—Introduction

Part I

Spinoza's "Anomalous" Philosophical System (while thinking of Eco-Society)

T. Jan. 23—Lord, Beth, *Spinoza's Ethics* [Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010], 10-34.

—Spinoza, Baruch/Benedict de (Netherlands, 1632-1677), *Ethics* [1677], part of "Part I: Concerning God," 31-40; def.-prop. 14, cor.2.

R. Jan. 25—Lord, Beth, *Spinoza's Ethics* [2010], 34-48.

—Spinoza, Baruch/Benedict de, *Ethics* [1677], rest of "Part I: Concerning God," 40-62; prop. 15-appendix.

T. Jan. 30—Lord, Beth, *Spinoza's Ethics* [2010], 49-73.

—Spinoza, Baruch/Benedict de, *Ethics* [1677], first part of "Part II: Of the Nature and Origin of the Mind," 63-82, including prop. 24, proof.

—**Reading Review 1 (B-C) due**

R. Feb. 1— Lord, Beth, *Spinoza's Ethics*, 73-83.

—Spinoza, Baruch/Benedict de, *Ethics* [1677], rest of "Part II: Of the Nature and Origin of the Mind," 82-101.

T. Feb. 6—Lord, Beth, *Spinoza's Ethics*, 83-95

—Spinoza, Baruch/Benedict de, *Ethics* [1677], first part of "Part III: Concerning the Origins and Nature of the Emotions," 102-121.

—**Reading Review 1 (D-H) due**

R. Feb. 8—Lord, Beth, *Spinoza's Ethics*, 95-103

—Spinoza, Baruch/Benedict de, *Ethics* [1677], continuation of "Part III: Concerning the Origins and Nature of the Emotions," 122-141, prop.31-prop. 59 scholium.

T. Feb. 13—Lord, Beth, *Spinoza's Ethics*, 103-122

—Spinoza, Baruch/Benedict de, *Ethics* [1677], first part of "Part IV: Of Human Bondage, or the Strength of the Emotions," 152-176, including prop. 37, scholium 2.

—**Reading Review 1 (K-Mac) due**



Part II Spinoza and Ecology

R. Feb. 15—Næss, Arne. 1977. "Spinoza and Ecology." *Philosophia* 7: 45–54. (Standard Reception of Spinoza in ecological discourses); and
—Spinoza, Baruch/Benedict de, *Ethics* [1677], continuation of "Part III: Concerning the Origins and Nature of the Emotions," 141-151, just read the definitions (not the explications)

T. Feb. 20—Lloyd, Genevieve. 1980. "Spinoza's Environmental Ethics." *Inquiry* 23: 293–311.

—Reading Review 1 (Mar-N) due

R. Feb. 22—Næss, Arne, "Environmental Ethics and Spinoza's Ethics: Comments on Genevieve Lloyd's Article." *Inquiry* 23 (1980): 313–325.

—Respond to the questions in the file:

"NaessEnvironmentalEthics+SpinozaCommentsOnLloyd'sArticle"

—Sharp, Hasana, excerpt from "Spinoza and the Possibilities for Radical Climate Ethics," in *Dialogues in Human Geography*, volume 7(2) (2017): 157-160.

T. Feb. 27—Watson, Richard A., "A Critique of Anti-Anthropocentric Biocentrism," in *Environmental Ethics*, vol. 5 (Fall 1983): 245-256

—Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: a Political Ecology of Things*, preface, vii-xix.

—Andreas Malm's *The Progress of this Storm: Nature and Society in a Warming World* (Verso, 2018), excerpt from the chapter "On What Matter Does: Against New Materialism" (one page)

—Slavoj Žižek, "Materialism, Old and New: No Gods? No Matter," in *Strike*, issue 8, (November-December, 2014): https://issuu.com/strikemagyo/docs/strike_8_issu

—Reading Review 1 (R-S) due

R. Feb. 29—Lord, Beth, *Spinoza's Ethics*, 122-136

—Spinoza, Baruch/Benedict de, *Ethics* [1677], rest of "Part IV: Of Human Bondage, or the Strength of the Emotions," 176-200, prop. 38-appendix

T. Mar. 5—Lord, Beth, *Spinoza's Ethics*, 136-157

—Spinoza, Baruch/Benedict de, *Ethics* [1677], "Part V: Of the Power of the Intellect and of Human Freedom," 201-223

—Reading Review 1 (P-W) due

R. Mar. 7—Midterm Course Interview

Mar.11-17: No classes—Spring Break

Part III

Summing up Spinoza's "Anomaly" and Thoughts for (both) Eco-Society

T. Mar. 19—Deleuze, Gilles: *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy* [trans. Robert Hurley, San Francisco: City Lights Books, (French 1970/revised 1981) 1988], chapter 2, "On the Difference Between the *Ethics* and a Morality" [1970], 17-29.

R. Mar. 21—Macherey, Pierre: *Hegel or Spinoza*, transl. Susan M. Ruddick [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, (French 1979) 2011], excerpt from chapter 4, "*Omnis Determinatio Est Negatio*," 127-146 and 170-174

—Reading Review 2 (B-C) due

T. Mar. 26—Balibar, Étienne. *Spinoza: From Individuality to Transindividuality*, [Eburon Delft (Lecture 1993), 1997], first part, 1-23.

R. Mar. 28—Balibar, Étienne. *Spinoza: From Individuality to Transindividuality*, [Eburon Delft (Lecture 1993), 1997], second part, 23-36.

—Reading Review 2 (D-H) due



Part IV Spinoza and Socio-Political Theory

T. Apr. 2—Spinoza, Baruch/Benedict de, *A Theologico-Political Treatise* (1670) [*A Theologico-Political Treatise and A Political Treatise*, trans. R. H. M. Elwes, New York: Dover, 1951], chapters IV, XIV, XVI, and excerpt from XVII, 57-68, 182-189, 200-213, 214-215 [208-209 in Cambridge edition], and (endnotes) 276-277. [Note that the files may include more pages than the ones assigned.]

—Respond to the questions in the file: "SpinozaTTPCh.IV+XVIQuestions"

R. Apr. 4—Balibar, Étienne. *Spinoza and Politics* [Edited by Warren Montag. Translated by Peter Snowdon. London; New York: Verso, (French 1985) 1998], excerpt from chapter 4: "The *Ethics*: A Political Anthropology," 76-95.

—Respond to the questions in the file: "BalibarSpinoza+Politics76-95Questions"

—**Reading Review 2 (K-Mac) due**

T. Apr. 9—Spinoza, Baruch/Benedict de, *A Political Treatise* (1670), in *Collected Works* [ed. Edwin Curley, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016], chapter IV, 525 – 528; [or in *A Theologico-Political Treatise and A Political Treatise*, trans. R. H. M. Elwes, New York: Dover, 1951, chapter IV, 309-312].

—Macherey, Pierre, *In a Materialist Way: Selected Essays* [ed. Warren Montag, transl. Ted Stolze, London: Verso, 1998], from the essay "Spinoza, the End of History, and the Ruse of Reason" [French 1992], the section "Political Realism," 139-145.

R. Apr. 11—Foucault, Michel (France, 1926-1986), excerpt from "The Subject and Power," [afterword in *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, also in *Critical Inquiry* 8 (Summer 1982), 777-795; also in *Michel Foucault: Power*, eds. James D. Faubion, New York: The New Press, 2000, 326-348] in *Art after Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, 417- 428 [326-342]

—Respond to the questions in the file: "FoucaultSubject+PowerQuestions"

—**Reading Review 2 (Mar-N) due**

T. Apr. 16—Kordela, A. Kiarina, "Spinoza's Biopolitics: Commodification of Substance and Secular Immortality" in *Spinoza's Authority, Volume 1: Resistance and Power in Ethics*, ed. A. K. Kordela and D. Vardoulakis [London: Bloomsbury, 2018], 197-217.

—**Reading Review 2 (R-S) due**

R. Apr. 18—Instead of class—CRITICAL THEORY SYMPOSIUM: F. Apr. 19, 5:00pm, Smail Gallery

T. Apr. 23—"Marx's Affect (and Its Exploitation)," special issue, ed. by Matthew Bost, on "'Communication, Biopolitics, and Social Reproduction," *Cultural Critique*, vol. 120 (Summer 2023): 43-60.

—Screen first part of documentary: Brett Story, [The Prison in 12 Landscapes](#) (Canada, 2016)

—**Reading Review 2 (P-W) due**

R. Apr. 25—Stark, Jose, "Anomalous Alliances: Spinoza and Abolition" in *Deleuze and Guattari Studies*, vol. 16, no. 2 (2022): 308-330.

—Screen second part of documentary: Brett Story, [The Prison in 12 Landscapes](#) (Canada, 2016)

—End-of-course surveys

