

## **Philosophy 4900: ST: Spinoza, Nietzsche, Emerson: USU, Fall 2014**

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Office hours W 1- 3 p.m. and by app.'t

In this seminar we will study selected works of Benedictus de Spinoza (1632-1677), Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), and Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882). All three philosophers were *naturalists* in some sense: they sought to find philosophical meaning within a natural world, without any appeal to a divine personal being. But beyond this overall similarity, there are big and important differences among them. Through reading, thinking, and active discussion, we will draw out the important differences and similarities, and subject them to critical analysis.

Some of the key questions we will pursue in relation to each of these thinkers:

- (1) What is nature? What are nature's powers? What are its origins, limits, and ends (if any)?  
In short: what is each philosopher's **metaphysics**?
- (2) How does nature shape the **ends** of human life? How does it tell us what to do? Along with this, what morality does nature teach (if any)?
- (3) What sort of worldview is each philosopher challenging? Who is the **enemy**, and what does the enemy believe?

The most important component of this class will be **participation**, which will constitute roughly two-thirds of the final grade. Students should carefully study the readings and come to seminar ready to discuss in detail or even lead discussion. There will be written work as well, to be determined in seminar discussion. Expect around 15 pages in all.

**The books are required, in the print editions**, because we will be discussing them in class and focusing on particular passages. Spinoza, *Ethics, Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect, and selected letters* (Hackett); Nietzsche, *The Nietzsche Reader* (Blackwell); Emerson, *Essential Writings* (Modern Library).

**Recommendation:** how to prepare for seminar -

1. Skim the assigned reading - make note of any obvious structure (numbered subsections, list of topics to be addressed, etc.).
2. Read the work more carefully, so that in the end you can offer a clear summary of what is being said and what the main supporting thought or reasoning is. (This is when you'll do most of your underlining and marginal comments.)
3. Skim/read the work again, to see if you are right about what's being said - look for problems, or sections that don't seem to fit with what you think is going on.
4. Think hard about problems, questions, or objections that can be raised - how would the author try to address them? How effective would those responses be? Again, go back to the work to see if perhaps these problems and questions have already been addressed.
5. Finally, be ready to offer, if called upon, a decent summary of the work, along with a brief discussion of what you take to be the most interesting thoughts or questions raised by the work.