We ordain that no one may communicate with him verbally or in writing, nor show him any favor, nor stay under the same roof with him, nor be within four cubits of him, nor read anything composed or written by him. – from the 1656 cherem against Spinoza by the Rabbinical Council of Amsterdam (reaffirmed in 2015)

A man of good sense would prefer to break the ground with his teeth and his nails than to cultivate as shocking and absurd a hypothesis as this... It surpasses all the monstrosities and chimerical disorders of the craziest people who were ever put away in lunatic asylums.

– Pierre Bayle, Dictionaire historique et critique

I’m not about to start jumping up and down like some sort of Spinoza...

– Anton Chekhov, “The Wedding”

The past several decades have seen a major renewal of interest in the work of the early modern philosopher Baruch Spinoza. In the continental tradition, Spinozan metaphysics and political theory essentially ground the projects Gilles Deleuze, Etienne Balibar, Antonio Negri, and Warren Montag; constitute major touchstones for Louis Althusser, Pierre Macherey, Judith Butler, and Maud Gaten; have attracted cognitive scientists like Antonio Damasio and literary theorists like Christopher Norris; etc. Contemporary notions of immanentist ontology, affective or intensive materialisms, post-Marxian ideology critique, and the conative constitution of the political sphere derive, to a large extent, from this re-engagement with Spinoza. At the same time, Spinoza’s magnum opus, the Ethics, remains relatively impenetrable to those encountering it for the first time. This seminar will provide an introduction to the text and to Spinoza’s metaphysics through close reading, historical contextualization, and philosophical appraisal. This seminar will begin by framing Spinoza’s broader project in relationship to Cartesian ontology and natural philosophy as well as examining elements of Spinoza’s relation to Hobbesian theories of method and definition. The bulk of the semester will then be devoted to a slow reading of the Ethics. Along the way, we will consider the nature of Spinoza’s radical monism, immanentism, and naturalism. These are most succinctly expressed in his formula Deus sive natura – “God or nature,” or perhaps more accurately, “God, that is, nature” – and articulated through a complex series of arguments identifying substance, God, nature, and necessity as well as a thoroughgoing critique of anthropomorphism and teleological explanation. We will also examine Spinoza’s so-called ‘parallelism’, an intriguing thesis regarding the non-reductive and non-causal identity of conceptuality and corporeality, which includes (among other claims) the twin theses that the mind is the idea of the body and the activity of the body a material correlate of cognition. In this context, we will linger on Spinoza’s dynamic account of corporeal individuation as the expression of a ‘constant ratio of motion and rest, speed and slowness’, investigating its relationship to Cartesian mechanics. This will involve a focus on Spinoza’s notion of conatus – endeavor, striving, or drive – with regard to which we will ask how a Hobbesian measure of the instantaneous directional force of a moving body could come, for Spinoza, to describe the affective life of individuals and the expression of their ‘power to act and operate’ such that, as Spinoza claims “desire is the very essence of man”. The semester will close with a focus on Spinoza’s deliberate disentanglement of a naturalized framework for moral judgment from a practice and ethos of freedom.

fulfills the Modern requirement