PHL 810: Spinoza and Metaphysical Monism

“The philosopher’s philosopher” Spinoza. Baruch Spinoza is an enigmatic figure. Philosophical interest in his work has been burgeoning internationally — in both continental and analytic traditions — for the past two decades, but he has been as attractive to historians, writers, theologians, and physicists as to philosophers, making it difficult to extract Spinoza from the sometimes adulatory and sometimes damning legends.

Spinoza defends a pure naturalism and marks the first radical break with religion:

- there is nothing supernatural
- everything that is possible is actual
- happiness replaces salvation as the human goal
- human freedom consisting in activity, power, and joy, replaces “freedom of the will”
- Biblical hermeneutics replaces theology

Spinoza’s secularism and views on equality and democracy were the basis for an international underground movement that sparked intellectual and political revolutions in the 18th century (Israel), for radical European political movements in the 1960s and 70s, reinterpreting Marx (Negri), and for a radical ecological ethic (Deleuze). Spinoza’s theory of mind-body identity has had a profound influence on psychoanalytic theory (Freud), contemporary philosophy of mind (Davidson), and neurology (Damasio); and Spinoza was an important if late influence on Nietzsche. Einstein claimed “Spinoza’s god,” finding Buddhist elements in his ethics; and Spinoza’s monism provides a philosophical underpinning for the unified theory Einstein sought throughout his life.

The course will focus on Spinoza’s substance monism and necessitarianism as established in his Ethics and supported by several of his letters. Along the way, we’ll note distinctions from, and overlap with, other contemporary and historical versions of monism and quasi-monism.

Required texts:
Michael Della Rocca, Spinoza (Routledge, 2008) ISBN 9780415283304
current journal articles

Evaluation:
Participation, in-class presentations and comments on others’ presentations, and a 3,000-word term paper.