Divine Indifference (IDSEM-UG 1541)  Aaron Tugendhaft
Fall 2011  atugendhaft@gmail.com
Tuesdays 6:20-9:00  Office Hours: Wednesdays 12:00-12:45
Silver 506 (100 Washington Square East)  1 Washington Place, Room 431

Course Description:
What does it entail for us to live in a secular world? What might it mean to say that the
gods or God play(s) no role in human life? This course will explore these questions
through a rigorous reading of four authors who have contemplated the possibilities and
implications of “divine indifference”. By taking “indifference” as our object of inquiry,
we aim to bracket the ontological question of divine existence. Instead, we give
preference to the pragmatic question of how the divine involves or fails to involve itself
in human life, exploring how human beings orient themselves to their world according to
the conceptions of God—and God’s absence—that they adopt. Topics to be explored
include: fate and human freedom, guilt and sin, fear of death, divine law and the laws of
nature, nihilism and the affirmation of life.

Required Texts:
Spinoza, Ethics, translated by Samuel Shirley (Hackett).

Course Outline:

Session 1  Before Divine Indifference: The Traditional Claims of Piety
9/6

Session 2  Sophocles I: Blame and Guilt
9/13  Readings: Sophocles, Oedipus Rex

Session 3  Sophocles II: Fate and Character
9/20  Readings: Sophocles, Oedipus Rex; selected criticism
First Paper Due

Session 4  Lucretius I: Physics

Session 5  Lucretius II: Ethics
10/4  Readings: Lucretius, On the Nature of the Universe, Bks. V-VI
10/11 No class

Session 6 Interlude of Divine Difference
10/18 Readings: Selections from the Bible
Second Paper Due

Session 7 Spinoza I: “Deus, sive Natura”
10/25 Readings: Spinoza, Ethics, Part I

Session 8 Spinoza II: On Human Nature
11/1 Readings: Spinoza, Ethics, Parts II & III

Session 9 Spinoza III: On Human Bondage
11/8 Readings: Spinoza, Ethics, Part IV

Session 10 Spinoza IV: On Human Freedom
11/15 Readings: Spinoza, Ethics, Part V
Third Paper Due

Session 11 Nietzsche I: Ressentiment
11/22 Readings: Nietzsche, Genealogy of Morals, Preface and First Essay

Session 12 Nietzsche II: Bad Conscience
11/29 Readings: Nietzsche, Genealogy of Morals, Second Essay

Session 13 Nietzsche III: The Ascetic Ideal
12/6 Readings: Nietzsche, Genealogy of Morals, Third Essay

Session 14 Nietzsche IV: Amor Fati
12/13 Readings: Nietzsche, selections from The Gay Science
Fourth Paper Due
Course Requirements:

Four short papers of 3-4 pages each will be due over the course of the semester. Short does not mean easy to write. I am expecting you to think hard and clearly about each topic, reducing what you write to the essential demanded by your argument. Papers should be emailed to me by 5pm or submitted in hardcopy at the beginning of class on the day that they are due. Late papers will be penalized.

Regular attendance is expected. Repeated absences will negatively influence your grade.

All students are required to attend class with the book and having done the reading. The texts we will be studying this semester are complex and nuanced; “reading” in this context means re-reading several times. As Nietzsche puts it in the “Preface” to The Genealogy of Morals: “To be sure, one thing is necessary above all if one is to practice reading as an art … something that has been unlearned most thoroughly nowadays … something for which one has almost to be a cow and in any case not a ‘modern man’: rumination.”

By far the most important thing is to read the primary material closely and numerous times. However, should you like to push further in your study I will be happy to assist you in choosing helpful secondary discussions of our material.

Plagiarism is absolutely unacceptable. Plagiarized work will result in automatic failure of the assignment and possible failure of the course. If you are unsure, ask.

Grade Breakdown:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tr>
<td>Four papers</td>
<td>80%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Preparation/Participation</td>
<td>20%</td>
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Odds and Ends:

As long as there is interest, I will hold an informal discussion section on Wednesdays, 12:45-1:45, in Room 431 of Gallatin. These are strictly optional. Feel free to bring lunch.

Please, no eating in class. On the other hand, drinking coffee is encouraged. And please make an effort to arrive to class on time.

If you bring a laptop computer to class, please use it for taking notes only. I.e., no checking e-mail, IM-ing, reading blogs, playing video games, uploading photos onto Facebook, etc. Please shut off your phones. Texting is absolutely verboten!
Paper Topics:

First Paper:

At one point, Iocaste states: *No, mortals have no need to fear when chance reigns supreme. The knowledge of the future is denied to us. It is better to live as you will, live as you can* (ll. 9777-79; p. 22). What does she mean? What are the implications of her position? Is she right? Why or why not?

Second Paper:

What is Lucretius’ argument for the indifference of the gods to human beings? What does he think the consequences of this indifference are for human life? Is his argument convincing?

Third Paper (choose one):

1. In Letters 19 & 21, Spinoza presents his understanding of the “true meaning” of Genesis 2-3. How does his understanding differ from the “vulgar understanding” of that passage? What are the consequences of his understanding for human life? Make reference to arguments in the *Ethics* where necessary.

2. What does Spinoza mean by the terms “virtue,” “good,” and “evil”? How do his definitions differ from traditional understandings of these words? What is at stake in his re-definitions?

3. Explain Proposition 19 of Book V: “He who loves God cannot endeavor that God should love him in return.”

4. Consider the conception of freedom held by the “wise man” as compared by the “multitude” articulated by Spinoza in the Scholium to Proposition 41 of Book V (and elsewhere). How do these two conceptions of freedom differ? What is Spinoza’s argument that the multitude’s conception is actually no freedom at all? Is Spinoza convincing as to the freedom achieved by the wise man?

Fourth Paper (choose one):

1. What does Nietzsche mean when he says that the Jews revalued their enemies’ values (GM I.7)? How does this Jewish revaluation relate to the spread of Christianity? Make reference, in particular, to the notions of revenge and love.

2. Nietzsche calls the notion of a “subject” distinct from its deed to be a fiction similar to the separation of lightning from its flash (GM I.13). What does this
fiction allow one to do? Why might this be desirable? What harm does it do? What would it mean to live life without this fiction?

3. In GM II.21, Nietzsche states that though one might think that with the victory of atheism man might be set free from the feeling of guilty indebtedness, “the reality is, to a fearful degree, otherwise.” Explain Nietzsche’s argument for why this feeling of guilt remains in the modern world despite the decline of faith in the Christian God. What are the prospects for overcoming this guiltiness? What would such “redemption” entail?

4. With the “death of god” modern man loses the orienting principle according to which he has hitherto organized his world and assigned values in his life. What guiding principles seem to be at work in Nietzsche’s writing that may supply alternative means for orientation? Are these successful?