

Phl 500: Leibniz (and the Body)

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Description and Objectives

While Descartes's philosophy left in place the foundations of medieval Christian philosophy – God, substance, soul, free will – his shift in philosophical method ultimately threw all these concepts into question and crisis. Subsequently, some, like Spinoza and Hume, attempted to reject and think beyond them. Others, like Leibniz and Kant, attempted to save them by providing some new foundation. In this course, we will examine the philosophy of G.W. Leibniz in this historical context. The course will divide roughly into two parts. In the first half, we will attempt to get an understanding of Leibniz's philosophy as a whole. We will discuss most of his well-known philosophical ideas, their mutual relationships, and their justifications. We will structure this around a reading of the "Monadology."

In the second half, we will move beyond this basic foundation and turn toward a series of problems or tensions in Leibniz's philosophy. More specifically, we will consider three problems. 1) The tension between my identity as a monad that contains the entire world and my identity as a particular body (set of modes) within that monad. This is really a question of how I can be distinguished as finite while being inseparable from an infinite world. 2) The tension between the universality of reason and the limits of embodied experience, particularly as these come together to form a concrete "point of view." The question in part is, how is the universality of reason limited by my being a particular body in relation to others? 3) The tension between "best" as most being and "best" as a human, ethical good. Leibniz is famous for his claim that this is the "best possible world." This requires that he unite a metaphysical conception of good as being and a human sense of good as including justice and freedom from suffering. Put negatively, the question is, can metaphysical evil as lack or nothing really explain physical evils like pain and illness? These three problems are drawn together along two lines of concern. One is with human finitude, particularly as expressed in the limitation, power, and situatedness of the body. The other is with Leibniz's conception of force or conatus, which carries through to his conception of the good, of the physical world, and even of appetite and perception.

Requirements

Reading: Leibniz wrote an immense amount but nothing that serves as a full explanation of his system. Instead, we have outlines and schematic accounts of the whole and then many detailed discussions of bits and pieces. There is no alternative other than to read a lot of Leibniz, which will inevitably be a bit repetitive. I will assign readings to focus on, but by the end of the course you should have read all of the essays in the *Philosophy Essays*, as well as significant part of the *New Essays on the Human Understanding*.

Presentations: Students will give two mini-presentations. The first will explicate a section of the "Monadology." I will assign sections on the first day of class. When we get to your section, you should briefly explain it and how it follows, then raise any problems or questions. This should take only about five minutes. The second presentation will take place in the second half of the course. Each student will present on some problem in Leibniz's philosophy. This can be one of the problems we are focusing on, but it need not be. This presentation will not be an explication of the readings, and should be brief, no more than ten minutes. Neither presentation should involve you reading anything aloud.

Final Paper: One final paper, at least 12 pages long, will be required, on any aspect of the philosophy of Leibniz. A comparative paper can also be written, but it must contain at least 9 pages on Leibniz. You must discuss your topic with me ahead of time.

Required Texts

Philosophical Essays, translated by Roger Ariew and Daniel Garber

New Essays on the Human Understanding, translated by Peter Remnant and Jonathon Bennett

Optional Texts

Leibniz: A Guide for the Perplexed, Franklin Perkins (Continuum Press, 2007).

Tentative Schedule of Readings

This schedule is very tentative and will almost certainly be changed as we go. Specific readings to focus on for class discussion will be announced a week ahead of time.

1/5	Historical context, key problems, difficulties in reading Leibniz.
1/12	Orientation in Leibniz's Philosophy I: The nature of substance and interaction. Levels of perception. <u>Read:</u> Focus on Monadology; also read Principles of Nature and Grace According to Reason, Discourse on Metaphysics, selections from correspondence with Arnauld (all in <i>Philosophical Essays</i> (PE))
1/19	Orientation in Leibniz's Philosophy II: Basic principles of knowledge – contradiction and sufficient reason. Kinds of Truths. Nature and role of God. <u>Read:</u> Focus on Monadology; also read Meditations on Knowledge, Truth and Ideas; On Contingency; Primary Truths (PE 23-34).
1/26	Orientation in Leibniz's Philosophy III: Relations among monads and between a monad and the world. The nature of bodies. <u>Read:</u> Focus on Monadology; also read A New System of Nature, Notes on Foucher, Postscript (PE 138-149).
2/2	Being as striving and force. <u>Read:</u> On the Ultimate Origination of Things, selected letters to Wolff (PE 230-34), letter to Molanus (PE 240-44), Comments on Spinoza, Two Sects of Naturalists (PE 272-283); A Specimen of Dynamics, On Nature Itself.
2/9	Innate ideas, experience, and consciousness. Individuation. <u>Read:</u> <i>New Essays on the Human Understanding</i> (NE) 44-140.
2/16	Striving within each monad – appetite, passion, and will. <u>Read:</u> NE 160-212; On Freedom and Possibility (PE 19-23), On Freedom (PE 94-98), Letter to Coste (PE 193-196).
2/23	The embodiment of reason. Language and experience. <u>Read:</u> Materials for universal characteristic PE 5-18, Dialogue PE 268-272; NE 273-354.
3/2	Problems with identity – differentiation self and universe. <u>Read:</u> NE 213-254
3/9	Problems with the relation between being and goodness: the problem of evil. <u>Read:</u> Selections from <i>Theodicy</i> .