Philosophy 120 – The Continental Rationalists
Fall 2009
Syllabus

Important Information:

Lecture: Tuesdays and Thursday at 11:00, Sever Hall 310
Professor: Jeffrey McDonough
Office Hours: TBA
E-mail: jkmcdon@fas.harvard.edu
Course Web Page: http://www.courses.fas.harvard.edu/~phil120/

Discussion Sections: TBA
Teaching Fellow: Allison Kuklok
Office hours: TBA
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Required Texts (available at the Coop):


Leibniz, *Philosophical Essays*, ed. and trans. R. Ariew & D. Garber (Hackett), Abbreviated below as AG.

Course Description:

The seventeenth century was one of the most exciting and revolutionary periods in the history of philosophy. Among the prominent philosophers working in that period, Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz have traditionally been grouped together under the label “Rationalists” in virtue of their willingness to lean heavily upon rational reflection to make bold conjectures about the nature of the world and the relation of humans to it. In this course, in addition to gaining an overview of the development of early modern rationalism, we will try to dig more deeply into a number of its central issues, arguments and controversies. Topics will include, among others, philosophical method, skepticism and its refutation, the nature of substance and matter, the relationship between mind and body, and natural philosophy.
Requirements and Grading:

1. Reading

The ability to read texts carefully and thoughtfully is one of the most important skills the study of philosophy can help to foster. In order to better understand what is being taught, and to promote informed classroom discussions, required readings should be completed before lecture. Those readings are typically very short, but also very difficult, and students who wish to do well in the course are advised to read assigned texts several times.

2. Exams (undergraduates only)

One of the aims of this course is to help students to gain an overview of some central themes in early modern rationalism. To promote that aim, as well as to provide students with an alternative means of being evaluated, three undergraduate exams will be administered over the course of the term. They are intended to test comprehension of the material covered in required readings, lectures, and discussion section, and will not require outside reading or research. Furthermore, exams will be primarily non-cumulative and designed to test material in association with one of the three philosophers that we are studying (although comparison questions – especially where those comparisons have been highlighted in lecture – will be fair game).

3. Writing Assignments

Undergraduates will be asked to complete two kinds of writing assignments. Each exam will include a take-home element that will require writing a 2-3 page essay. These short essays are intended to give students an opportunity to further develop their philosophical writing skills and receive feedback on their written work prior to the end of term. Undergraduates will also be required to complete an 8-12 page term paper. The term paper is intended to provide students with the opportunity to develop their own thoughts in greater detail and may be an extension of one of their shorter writing assignments. Graduate students will be required to complete three 3-5 page papers and a term paper of 12-15 pages (which likewise may be an extension of one of their shorter essays). Further details concerning writing assignments will be discussed in sections.

4. Grading

For undergraduates, each exam will count for 25% of one’s final grade. Term papers will also count for 25%. For graduates, each short writing assignment will count for 20% of one’s final grade, and the term paper 40%. Regular attendance in lecture and discussion section, as well as participation in discussion section, is expected of everyone, and grades for most students will not be affected by participation. Exceptionally helpful contributions to discussion, or conversely failure to become productively involved in discussion, may result in the raising or lowering of a student’s final grade by up to a third of a full letter (e.g. from a B+ to an A- or from a B+ to a B). Any student with four or more unexcused absences should expect to receive a failing grade for the course.
5. Special Needs and Emergencies

Students requiring special assistance are encouraged to inform either the professor or teaching fellow. Absences from class or exam periods, and late papers, will be dealt with in accordance with the policies described in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences handbooks. Students should expect that failure to attend an exam without an excuse deemed legitimate by those policies will result in a score of zero for that exam, and under the same circumstances, late papers will be marked down a third of a letter grade for each day that they are late and not in the hands of the person who will be grading it. Requests made to the professor or teaching fellow prior to an absence or due date may result in special accommodation – if something is coming up, let us know ahead of time; we must be fair, but we will do our best to accommodate your needs.

Tentative Schedule

(1) Thursday, September 3: Introduction to Early Modern Rationalism

*Required Reading:* Syllabus

- DESCARTES –

(2) Tuesday, September 8: Descartes’s Early Method


*Optional Reading:* Discourse on Method, Parts I-V=CSM 1:111-141

(3) Thursday, September 10: Epistemology: Doubt

*Required reading:* Meditation 1=CSM 2:12-15; “First Objection and Reply” from Third Set of Objections=CSM 2:121.

*Optional reading:* Dedication, Preface, and Synopsis to the Meditations=CSM 2:3-11.

(4) Tuesday, September 15: Epistemology: Certainty

*Required reading:* Meditations II-V=CSM 2:16-49

(5) Thursday, September 17: Cartesian Matter


(6) Tuesday, September 22: Eternal Truths

*Required reading:* Letter to Mersenne 27 May 1630=CSMK 25-26; Reply to Fifth Set of Objections (selection)=CSM 2:261-3; Meditation 6 (selected paragraph)=CSM 2:54; Section 6 from Sixth Set of Replies=CSM 2:291-292; “For [Arnauld] 29 July 1648- Section 6=CSMK:358-59; Letter to Gibieuf 19 January 1642=CSMK 201-204.


(7) Thursday, September 24: The Real Distinction between Mind and Body

*Required reading:* Meditation VI=CSM 2:50-62; Selection from the Fourth Set of Objections=CSM 2:139-144.

*Optional reading:* Principles 1:60=CSM 1:213; Selection from First Set of Objections=CSM 2:72-73; Selection from First Set of Replies=CSM 2:85-86; Selection from Second Set of Replies - Proposition IV=CSM 2:119-120; Selection from Discourse on Method, Part 4=CSM 1:127; Selection from Preface to Meditations=CSM 2:7; Fourth Set of Objections=CSM 2:139-144; Fourth Set of Replies CSM 2:154-162; Point 5 from Fifth Set of Objections=CSM 2:238-239

(8) Tuesday, September 29: Mind-Body Union

*Required reading:* Descartes to Princess Elizabeth 21 May 1643=CSMK 217-220; Descartes to Princess Elizabeth 28 June 1643=CSMK 226-229; The Passions of the Soul Part I, Article 30=CSM 1:339; Descartes to Regius December 1641=CSMK 200-201; Letter to Regius January 1642=CSMK 205-209.

*Optional reading:* Passage from Gassendi’s Fifth Set of Objections=CSM 2:236-7; The Passions of the Soul, Part I, Article 34=CSM 1:341; Selection from Sixth Meditation (again)=CSM 2:56-62; “Gravity Example” in Sixth Set of Replies=CSM 2:297f; Arnauld to Descartes [July 1648] AT 5:215 (not in CSMK); More to Descartes 11 December 1648 AT 5:238-39 (not in CSMK).

(9) Thursday, October 1: EXAM ON DESCARTES
(10) Tuesday, October 6: Spinoza’s Methods
Required reading: The Emendation of the Intellect, Paragraphs 1-49 (available on course web site); Also quickly look through the Ethics for a feel of its presentation and structure.

Optional reading: The Emendation of the Intellect, Paragraphs 50-110 (available on course web site); Letter 37 (all of Spinoza’s letters listed in the syllabus will be available on the course web site).

(11) Thursday, October 8: Substance and Modes
Required reading: Ethics 1d3, 1d5, 1p25c.

Optional reading: Descartes, Principles 1:51=CSM 1:210; Descartes, Second Set of Replies, “V. Substance” CSM 2:114.

(12) Tuesday, October 13: Attributes
Required reading: Ethics 1d4, 1d6, 1p4d, 1p10ds, 1p11, 2d2, 2p47d, Letter 9

Optional reading: 1p13cs, 1p19ds, 1p28ds, 2p7s, Letter 10, Letter 64

(13) Thursday, October 15: Spinoza’s Master Argument for Monism, Part I
Required reading: Ethics 1d6, 1p5, 1p11, 1p14

Optional reading: Letters 2, 3, 4 (all to Henry Oldenburg)

(14) Tuesday, October 20: Spinoza’s Master Argument for Monism, Part II
Required reading: Ethics 1d2, 1d3, 1p6-1p11, 1p14.

Optional reading: Letters 35 and 36.

(15) Thursday, October 22: Infinite Modes
Required reading: Ethics 1p21, 1p22, 1p23, 1p28, Letter 64.


(16) Tuesday, October 27: Necessitarianism
Required reading: Ethics 1p16, 1p28, 1p29, 1p33, 1p34, 1p35.

Optional reading: Letters 40, 54, 74, 75, 80-83; Ethics 1p4d2.

(17) Thursday, October 29: EXAM ON SPINOZA
(18) Tuesday, November 3: Matter


Optional reading: Primary Truths (selection)=AG 33-40; Letter to Arnauld 28 November/8 December 1686 (selection)=AG 79-81; Letter to Arnauld 30 April 1687=AG 85-89; Note on Foucher’s Objection=AG145-147; Letters to Johann Bernoulli=AG 167-171; Letter to Samuel Mason (selection) AG 228-230..

(19) Thursday, November 5: Dynamics

Required reading: A Specimen of Dynamics I = AG 118-130; Discourse on Metaphysics 17 & 18=AG 49-52.

Optional reading: Dynamics: On Power and the Laws of Corporeal Nature=AG 105-111; Letters to De Volder=AG 171-186

(20) Tuesday, November 10: Motion, Space and Time

Required reading: Letters to Clark=AG 320-346

Optional reading: Primary Truths (selection: “There is no vacuum”)=AG 33.

(21) Thursday, November 12: Two Accounts of Substance

Required reading: Editor’s introduction to “Theological Writings related to the Catholic Demonstrations” (posted on course site [L. 109]); Letter to John Frederick 1679 (posted on course site [L. 259-262]; To Arnauld (28 Nov/8 Dec 1686=AG 77-81; To Arnauld 30 April 1687=AG 81-90

Optional reading: Theological Writings related to the Catholic Demonstrations (posted on course site [L. 109-120])

(22) Tuesday, November 15: Corporeal Substances

Required reading: Discourse on Metaphysics, sections 8-14=AG 40-47; Notes on Some Comments by Michel Angelo Fardella (1690)=AG 101-105; Leibniz to de Volder 20 June 1703=AG 174-178; Leibniz to de Volder 1704 or 1705= AG 181-4

Optional reading: Leibniz to de Volder 24 March/3 April 1699=AG 171-174; Leibniz to de Volder 30 June 1704=AG 178-181;

(23) Thursday, November 19: Immaterial Substances

Required reading: Principles of Nature and Grace, Based on Reason (1714)=AG 206-213; The Principles of Philosophy, or, the Monadology (1714=AG 213-225; Leibniz to Des Bosses 5 February 1712=AG 198-199.

Optional reading: Notes for Leibniz to Des Bosses 5 February 1712=AG199-200; Leibniz to Des Bosses 26 May 1712=AG 200-201; Leibniz to Des Bosses, 29 May 1716=AG 201-206
(24) Tuesday, November 24: Incompossibility, Part I


Optional reading [note: optional incompossibility readings will be posted together in a single file on the course web site]: “On the Plentitude of the World,” [Early 1676?] (A VI.iii.524-526/DSR 85-89); “A Chain of Wonderful Demonstrations about the Universe” [12 December 1676] (A VI.iii.584-85/DSR 107-111)

(25) Thursday, November 26: No Class – Thanksgiving Recess

(26) Tuesday, December 1: Incompossibility, Part II


Optional reading [note: optional incompossibility readings will be posted together in a single file on the course web site]: “On the Plentitude of the World,” [Early 1676?] (A VI.iii.524-526/DSR 85-89); “A Chain of Wonderful Demonstrations about the Universe” [12 December 1676] (A VI.iii.584-85/DSR 107-111)

(27) Thursday, December 3: EXAM ON LEIBNIZ

----FINAL PAPERS----

Undergraduate Final Papers Due by Thursday, December 17, 5:00 pm.

Graduate Final Papers Due by Thursday, December 17, 5:00 pm.