

**Philosophy 310N Special Topics: Substance in Modern Philosophy**  
**American University of Beirut, Fall 2015**  
**Thursday 3:00 – 5:30 Fisk 141**

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“There is a science which investigates being as being and the attributes which belong to this in virtue of its own nature. Now this is not the same as any of the so-called special sciences; for none of these others treats universally of being as being . . . Now since we are seeking the first principles and the highest causes, clearly there must be some thing to which these belong in virtue of its own nature.”

--Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 4, iv.

I also like this:

“Indeed the question that was, is, and always will be asked, and always will cause difficulty—that is, the question ‘What is being?’—*is* the question ‘What is substance?’ This it is that some say is one, some more than one; that some say is finite in number, some infinite. And so we too must consider chiefly and primarily and (so to say) exclusively what it is that is in this way.”

--*Metaphysics* Zeta (VII) i.

**Course Description:**

The above quotation may be said to be *the* starting point for an investigation, not into beings of various kinds, but rather into being as *being*, or in other words, an investigation into what constitutes *primary being* or *substance*—or, in yet other words, an investigation into what is *ontologically primary*. This is of course a complicated and potentially all-encompassing investigation, since, as the quote indicates, it “treats universally of being as being.” This means an investigation into what all beings have in common—their structure (attributes, modes, properties) and which sorts of beings and structures are *primary*. In short, it is an investigation into the nature of primary being. While Plato was also concerned with primary beings (i.e., the Forms), and even the pre-Socratics were already committed to a “scientific” (as opposed to mythological) investigation into primary being (e.g., the four elements, atoms, etc.) Aristotle is the first to have rigorously and explicitly established an investigation into primary being. Thus we embark on an investigation into fundamental ontology. In short, the investigation into substance attempts to explain how everything (the many) may be explained by a single principle (the primary one, *or* the many primary ones).

After an initial engagement with Aristotle’s *Categories* and *Metaphysics*, we will examine in depth how four Modern philosophers--Descartes, Locke, Leibniz, and Spinoza--dealt with the question of substance. We focus on these philosophers because their theories are systematic and widely influential, even today. In Descartes we will examine mind-body dualism; in Locke we will grapple with his “I don’t know what”. In Leibniz’s substance “monadology” we find a complex critique of the dualism of his contemporaries, while in Spinoza we find a rigorous substance monism having fascinating *ethical* consequences. Along the way we will answer questions such as: What determines something to be a substance, as opposed to a *thing* or object? What are the structures of substances? Are there one, two, or infinitely many substances? How are substances related to each other? And by what means do we investigate these matters? More specifically, we will encounter questions about the nature of matter, of thinking substance, of natural laws, of God, individuation, and how all of these things may be related to form one world system. Indeed, we will see how a philosophical system depends largely on an initial conception of substance. We will also see what bearing these issues have on current philosophical and scientific viewpoints.

A course on the topic of substance has several advantages: it provides an in-depth understanding of key topics and figures in the history of philosophy; it provides a powerful way of understanding how various aspects of reality are supposed to be related; it exercises the brain over matters of fundamental importance, and encourages reflective thinking. There is *much* reading, some required, some optional, all recommended and quite difficult, averaging 50 pages per week. Class time will be spent reading, discussing, and explicating the texts. You will be encouraged to figure

things out for yourself. You are required to ask questions in class. Short “question papers” are due almost weekly. Two short papers and a longer term-paper are assigned. This class is open *only* to Master’s students and seniors majoring in philosophy.

**Required Texts:** All books should be available at Antoine. Other required readings are available on Moodle. See “course schedule” for detailed reading assignments.

- Descartes, René. *Descartes: Selected Philosophical Writings*. Translators: Cottingham, Stoothoff, and Murdoch. Cambridge University Press; 1988. ISBN-13: 978-0521358125. This is an excellent collection, not widely available, of Descartes’ best-known works.
- Spinoza, Benedict. *A Spinoza Reader: The Ethics and Other Works*. Translator, Edwin Curley. Princeton University Press, 1994.
- Leibniz, G.W. *Philosophical Essays*. Trans., Roger Ariew and Daniel Garber. Hackett Publishing Company; 1989. An essential collection of Leibniz’s best-known works.

### **Graded Assignments**

- Weekly question papers (500 words each), 25% of course grade
- Paper One (1500 words) 15%
- Paper Two (2000 words) 25%
- Final paper (5,000 words) 30%
- Presentation of reading (15 minutes) 5%

### **Weekly “question papers”**

The questions papers (500 words each) are designed to generate class discussion, to practice writing and thinking, to practice formulating meaningful questions, and to let me know what you need to know. For each paper, you are to formulate a total of four questions, distributed among all or most of the readings due on that day. For each question, provide a brief explanation for why it is a question for you. Choose one question to attempt to answer yourself. We will discuss that question in class. Papers will be graded around 92, 85, 75, 65, points, according to the following criteria: your questions should reflect thoughtful engagement and sustained attempt to understand the text. Your writing must be clear, organized, and grammatical. The questions must be uploaded onto Moodle before class time. I will return your paper to you with comments via email. Be sure to bring a copy of your paper to class, so that you can ask your question. If you do not upload your question paper by class time, you will not receive points for it. Your lowest grade will be dropped from your total score. However, if you did not submit the last two question papers, the lowest grade will not be dropped. Keep these papers as a running log of ideas for your longer papers.

**Discussion Forum Bonus:** You can receive two points toward the current week’s Question paper grade by posting a thoughtful, inquiring, confession of your confusion over Thursday’s reading/class discussion. Post your paragraph on the “Discussion Forum” on Moodle by the following Sunday. I will respond (and you may as well) to these posts, time permitting.

**Papers One and Two.** Write a 1500 and 2000 word paper on any topic we have read about and substantially engaged in. These papers must have an *argument*. Paper One’s topic must be drawn from the earlier readings, while Paper Two must be drawn from the later ones. Detailed grading criteria are posted on Moodle under the “syllabus” section.

**Final Paper:** Write a 5,000 word paper on any of the readings and related topics. You will need to engage at least two substantial outside sources (journal articles or books). Additional details will be provided on Moodle.

**Presentation of Reading:** You will present one of the assigned readings of your choice. The aim of your presentation shall be to explain the author’s main argument, and then to raise two questions for discussion. You will have 15 minutes to make your presentation.

**Attendance and classroom behavior:** I like to maintain a relaxed, fun, non-threatening atmosphere, but also serious. That means we listen and respond to each other; it means no cell phones; it means you (and I) come to every class and arrive on time. Three late arrivals will generate 4 points off of your final grade. Three absences (for any reason) will generate 10 points off. Four absences results in automatic course failure. If a serious physical or mental health issue should arise during the course, you must notify me to make any contingency plan.

**Work-related conduct:** I take plagiarism very seriously. Any written assignment that contains any amount of plagiarism will receive at zero points. Dismissal from the course is also possible. For details on plagiarism, see supplementary materials in the “syllabus” section of Moodle. I am happy to discuss your grade and my grading criteria (also posted on Moodle). However, I do not change grades, and any attempt to bargain for them will result in a reduction of your grade.

**Communications:** You must maintain an authenticated AUB email account. Feel free to e-mail me at any time.

**Course Schedule:** This schedule is subject to change, although any changes will be announced well in advance.

Week	Readings (to be read before class)	Assignments
0. Summer preliminary readings--	Required: Aristotle, <i>Metaphysics</i> , Book I (Alpha) Optional: My notes on <i>Metaphysics</i> Book I. Aristotle, <i>Physics</i> , Book II, parts 3 & 7 (on the four causes)	
1. Sept. 03	Introduction to Course: What's the matter? Why should we care? Discussion of preliminary readings. Aristotle, <i>Categories</i> , 1-5 Matthews, "Aristotelian Categories" from Blackwell Companion	Questions paper 1 (not given)
2. Sept. 10	Aristotle, <i>Metaphysics</i> (Book IV, parts 1-3) Aristotle, <i>Metaphysics</i> (Book VII (Z)) Cohen, "Substances," from Blackwell Companion	Questions paper 2
3. Sept. 17	Aristotle, wrap up.	Questions paper 3
4. Sept. 24	<b>No Classes (Wed. - Fri.) Al-Adha</b> Descartes: <i>Principles of Philosophy</i> , Parts I & II Optional: Cottingham, "Cartesian Dualism: theology, metaphysics, science." Garber, "Descartes' Physics." Makeup meeting Saturday 2pm.	Questions paper 4
5. Oct. 01	Descartes: <i>Meditations on First Philosophy</i> Optional articles: Amelie Rorty, "Thinking with the Body"	Questions paper 5 <b>Paper One due</b>
6. Oct. 08	Descartes: <i>Selections from Objections and Replies</i> In class: selections from Descartes' correspondence with Princess Elisabeth (available on Moodle)	Questions paper 6
7. Oct. 15	<b>No Classes, Hijra New Year</b> Make up class Tuesday Oct. 20 <sup>th</sup> . 6-8 pm Locke on Substance, B2.23 <i>Essay Concerning Human Understanding</i> Leibniz's dialogue with Lock on B2.23 Both readings available on Moodle	Questions paper 7
8. Oct. 22	Leibniz, from <i>Philosophical Essays</i> : "Preface to the <i>New Essays</i> " (16 pages., special attention to pages 294-299).	Questions paper 8
9. Oct. 29	Leibniz, from <i>Philosophical Essays</i> : "Primary Truths" (4 p.) "Discourse on Metaphysics" Sections 8 – 30. "A New System of Nature" (8 p.) "On Body and Force, Against the Cartesians" (7 p.) "From the Letters to de Volder" (15 p.) Alternative (long and complicated): "A Specimen of Dynamics"	Questions paper 9
10. Nov. 05	Leibniz: <i>Monadology</i> §1 – 45 (6 pp) Article TBA	Questions paper 10
11. Nov. 12	Leibniz: <i>Monadology</i> §46 – 90 (6 pp)	Questions paper 11
12. Nov. 19	Spinoza: <i>Ethics</i> , First part, on God (pp. 85 - 114) Article TBA	Questions paper 12 <b>Paper Two due</b>
13. Nov. 26	Spinoza: <i>Ethics</i> , Second part, Nature and Origin of the Mind. (pp. 115 – 151)	Questions paper 13
14. Dec 03	<b>Last official class.</b> Spinoza: <i>Ethics</i> Third part, of the Affects (pp. 152 – 197)	Questions paper 14
15. Dec. 08	Reading and Final Exam period begins.	
16. Dec 15	<b>Final paper Due (semester ends Dec. 19)</b>	<b>Final paper due</b>