

# GIGANTOMACHY II (battle of the giants over Being)

Philosophy 310J and 260H

Special Topics in the of History of Philosophy

The Concept of Substance in Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz

American University of Beirut, Spring 2013

T & TH 11:30 – 2:00 Fisk 141

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| Instructor: Dr. Chris Johns            | Office: Fisk, 139                                  |
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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*, Book 4

## **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 includes the *attributes* which belong to primary being, i.e., the properties that “inhere” in primary substances (material or otherwise) and depend on them. While it may be said that Plato was also concerned with primary beings (i.e., the Forms), and even the pre-Socratics were already committed to a “scientific” (as apposed to mythological) investigation into primary being (e.g., the four elements, atoms, etc.) Aristotle is the first to have rigorously established an investigation into primary being. Thus Aristotle initiates a philosophical, scientific, and ongoing investigation into Substance and Attribute, that is, into primary beings and their dependents (modes, properties, qualities, etc.). In sum, the question of substance attempts to explain how everything (the many) may be explained by a single principle (the primary *one*, or the many primary ones).

After a brief introduction to Aristotle, we will examine in depth how three Modern rationalists, Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz, attempted to answer the question: *what is substance?* We focus on these three philosophers because they, more than anyone else, formulated rigorous and highly influential answers to the question. What are the features that substances must have? Are there one, two, or infinitely many? What are their principle attributes? How are substances related to each other? How are properties related to their substances? And how do we *know* any of these answers? Some answers in fact depend on what it is possible to know. More specifically, we will encounter questions about the nature of matter, of natural laws, of thinking substance, of God, and how all of these things may be coherently related to form one world system. We will also take a brief look at how two empiricists, John Locke and David Hume, answered the question of substance.

Class time will be spent reading, discussing, and explicating the texts. Participation will be encouraged. Readings will average around 50 pages per week. There will be weekly, short writing assignments, a midterm paper and a 10-15 page term paper. This class is open to Master’s students and qualified undergraduates. Requirements will be somewhat different for undergraduates, as I will specify later.

## **Required Texts:**

- Descartes, René. *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes* (volumes I and II). Trans., Cottingham, Stoothoff, Murdoch. Cambridge UP, 1985. These are excellent collections, 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. Available at Antoine Books (soon).
- Leibniz, G.W. *Philosophical Essays*. Trans., Roger Ariew and Daniel Garber. Hackett Publishing Company; 1989. Available at Antoine Books (soon).

## **Course Assignments**

- Weekly summary and reflection papers, making up 40% of course grade
- Midterm paper: 20%
- Final paper, 40% of course grade

**Weekly summary and reflection papers:** Grad students will write at least 1500 words (approximately a page and a half single spaced), while undergrads will write at least 950 words. The paper will be based on the reading assigned for the upcoming week (so, the first paper will be on Descartes' *Principles of Philosophy*, due Feb 13<sup>th</sup>). Compose a focused summary of the reading. Don't summarize everything; rather focus on a few of the points you take to be most important for an understanding of the text. The last paragraph should then be devoted to a reflection on your overall sense of the point of the reading. You should also pose a question that you would like to put to the class. Summaries will be graded 90, 82, 75, 65, according to the following criteria: accuracy in representing arguments, clarity in exposition (organized thoughts, clear expression), and creative or critical thinking (i.e., finding a relevant problem with the main idea of the text or with one of its key claims). The paper is due by class time. Upload your paper on Moodle, using the function "sum-reflection paper" located under the "News Forum." I will return your paper to you with comments via email. Also, bring a copy of your paper to class, so that you can ask your question.

**Midterm paper.** Write a five page paper on any topic we have read about and substantially engaged in. Keep your weekly papers as a record of your interests and questions.

**Final Paper:** Write a 10-15 page on any topic we read about and substantially engage in. You will need to engage at least two substantial outside sources (journal articles or books). Additional details will be provided soon.

**Note:** Although this is a graduate level class, I must remind you that all of the usual warnings and penalties regarding plagiarism will apply. For details, please see supplementary materials in the "syllabus" section of Moodle. I also expect you to attend every class.

**See next page for Course Schedule**

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

| <b>Week</b>  | <b>Reading and Assignments</b>  |
|--------------|---|
| 1. Jan. 30   | Introduction: What is substance?  |
| 2. Feb 6     | These readings are available on Moodle<br>Aristotle, <i>Categories</i> , parts 1 – 5<br><i>Metaphysics</i> (Book IV, parts 1 -3)<br><i>Metaphysics</i> (Book VII (Z))   |
| 3. Feb. 13   | Descartes: <i>Principles of Philosophy</i> . Sum-reflect 1 due  |
| 4. Feb. 20   | Descartes: <i>Meditations on First Philosophy</i> (skip Med 4) Sum-reflect 2 due  |
| 5. Feb. 27   | Descartes: <i>Fifth Set of Objections and Replies</i> (Gassendi) Sum-reflect 3 due  |
| 6. March 6   | Descartes: Fifth set continued Sum-reflect 4 due  |
| 7. March 13  | Spinoza: <i>Ethics</i> , First part of the Ethics, on God (pp. 85 - 114)<br>No sum-reflect paper due<br><b>Midterm paper due Saturday, March 16, 3 PM</b>   |
| 8. March 20  | Spinoza: <i>Ethics</i> , Second part of the Ethics, on the Nature and Origin of the Mind (pp. 115 – 151)<br>Sum-reflect 5 due   |
| 9. March 27  | Spinoza: <i>Ethics</i> Third part of the Ethics, Of the Origin and Nature of the Affects (pp. 152 – 197) Sum-reflect 6 due  |
| 10. April 3  | Leibniz, from <i>Philosophical Essays</i> :<br>“Primary Truths” (4 pp)<br>“Discourse on Metaphysics” (34 pp) Sum-reflect 7 due  |
| 11. April 10 | Leibniz, from <i>Philosophical Essays</i> :<br>“A New System of Nature” (8 pp)<br>“From the Letters to de Volder” (15 pp) Sum-reflect 8 due   |
| 12. April 17 | Leibniz, from <i>Philosophical Essays</i> :<br>“On Body and Force, Against the Cartesians” (optional, 7pp)<br>“Comments on Spinoza’s Philosophy” (9 pp)<br>“Preface to the <i>New Essays</i> ” (16 pp, special attention to pages 294-299). |
| 13. April 24 | “Principles of Nature and Grace, Based on Reason” (7 pp)<br>Leibniz: <i>Monadology</i> §1 – 45 (6 pp) Sum-reflect 9 due   |
| 14. May 1    | Leibniz: <i>Monadology</i> §45 – 90 (6 pp) Sum-reflect 10 due   |
| 15. May 8    | Locke and Hume on substance (Readings TBA)  |
| 16. May 15   | <b>Final Paper Due Monday, May 20<sup>th</sup> 3 PM. (semester ends May 24)</b>   |