

GIGANTOMACHY
Philosophy 310F-1 Leibniz & Locke on Human Understanding
American University of Beirut, Spring 2010
T & TH 4:00 – 6:30 Fisk 141

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“Let us then suppose the mind to be, as we say, white paper, void of all characters, without any ideas: How comes it to be furnished?” John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (II.i.i).

“This *tabula rasa* of which one hears so much is a fiction, in my view, which nature does not allow and which arises solely from the incomplete notions of philosophers....” Gottfried Leibniz, *New Essays on Human Understanding* (II.i.i).

Course Description:

The above quotations fairly characterize the central point of disagreement between these two philosophical heavyweights, Locke and Leibniz. But the disagreement over innate ideas represents only one out of many topics on which they agree and disagree, topics relevant not only to the history of philosophy, but to contemporary debates as well.

In this course we will examine key selections of Leibniz’s *New Essays on Human Understanding* (1706) in which he responds point-by-point to almost every paragraph of Locke’s *Essay on Human Understanding* (1690). Few texts are as well-suited to mapping out and investigating the major philosophical concerns of the 17th Century, and no other text places two major historical figures in (nearly) direct dialogue with each other. In addition to their respective arguments on innate ideas (both speculative and practical) we will examine key concepts such as perception, apperception, “petite” perception, the nature of matter, soul, and mind, the relationship between body and soul, the concept of substance, of force, the (supposed) freedom of will, personal identity, some fundamental epistemic positions, including our (supposed) knowledge of our existence and of God’s—and anything else that gets tagged along. We will find that the labels “rationalist” and “empiricist,” typically characteristic of Leibniz and Locke respectively, will require revision. I also suspect we will find that many of Locke’s philosophical notions, as Leibniz suggests above, leave a lot to be desired. Our goals will be to gain a richer understanding of their respective arguments and philosophical systems, to gain a deeper understanding of the history of philosophy (specifically of 17th century metaphysics, epistemology, and philosophy of mind) and to practice the art of thinking philosophically.

Class time will be spent reading, discussing, and explicating the text. Participation will be encouraged. There will be frequent, short writing assignments, and a 10-page term paper. This class is open to Master’s students and qualified undergraduates.

Required Texts:

G. W. Leibniz, *New Essays on Human Understanding*, tr. and ed. P. Remnant and J. Bennett (Cambridge, 1985).

J. Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. P. Nidditch (Oxford, 1984).

Course Assignments

- Reading Response papers: probably 6, making up 40% of course grade
- Final paper, 60% of course grade

Reading Response papers: See Course Schedule for due dates. Response papers should be one to two pages, double-spaced, focusing on a portion of the text assigned that week. That means you will have read the assigned text and written about it before handing it in. Focus on an issue of interest to you. Explicate the argument, identify any problem or question you have about it, and try to suggest an answer. Or, explicate the argument and tell us what you think is interesting about it. Or, if the passage is especially difficult to understand, try to identify what needs to be understood, and take your best shot. We will discuss your responses in class. Responses will be graded 95, 85, 75, 65, according to the following criteria: accuracy in representing arguments, clarity in exposition (organized thoughts,

clear expression), and creative thinking (going beyond the argument at hand and speculating on its implications).

Term Paper: Write a 10-page (no more than 12) on any topic we read about and substantially engage in. Keep your Response papers as a record of your interests and questions. You will need to engage at least two substantial outside sources (journal articles or books).

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

Week	Reading and Assignments
1. 18/02	Introduction: Who are these guys? Preface to <i>New Essays on Human Understanding</i> §44-52 (innate notions and the blank slate) §52-58 (perceptions below conscious awareness) §59-62 (whether matter can think) §65-68 (on matter, intelligibility, gravitation, immateriality of soul, natural religion)
2. 25/02 <u>Innateness</u>	Book I Ch. i Whether there are innate principles (§69-88) Response 1 due
3. 04/03	Book I Ch. ii That there are no innate <i>practical</i> principles (§89-101) Ch. iii Other considerations concerning innate principles, speculative & practical (§102-108)
4. 11/03 <u>Ideas</u>	Book II Ch. I, Ideas in general, whether the soul always thinks (§1-25) Ch. ii Of simple ideas (§1) Ch. iii Of Ideas of one sense Ch. viii Further considerations (primary & secondary qualities) (§9) Response 2 due
5. 18/03	Book II Ch. ix Of perception (§1-14) Ch. x Of retention (§1-2) Ch. xi Of discerning (§1-17) Ch. xvii Of infinity (1-18)
6. 25/03	Book II Ch. xix Of modes of thinking (§1-4) Book II Ch. xx Of modes of pleasure and pain (§1-17) Response 3 due
7. 01/04	Easter Break no class
8. 08/04	Book II Ch. xxi Of power and freedom (§1-73) (free will, desire, minute perception, happiness, perfection)
9. 15/04	cont. Response 4 due
10. 22/04	Book II Ch. xxvii On identity and diversity (§1-29) (personal identity) Response 5 due
11. 29/04	Book II Ch. xxviii Of moral relations (§1-19)
12. 06/05	Book II Ch. xxix Of clear, obscure, distinct, confused ideas. Ch. xxx Of real and chimerical ideas. Ch. xxxi Of complete and incomplete ideas. Ch. xxxii Of true and false ideas. Ch. xxxiii Of the association of ideas.
13. 13/05 <u>Knowledge</u>	Book IV Ch. ii Of the degrees of our knowledge (§1-page 364; 367-368; §9-15) Ch. iii Of the extent of human knowledge (thinking matter) Ch. vii (§7-9) Response 6 due
14. 20/05	Book IV Ch. ix Knowledge of our existence (§1-3) Ch. x Knowledge of existence of God (§1-19) Response 7 due
15. 27/05	Wrap up, discussion of final papers (last class)
16.	03/06
17.	10/06 Final Paper Due

15/06 end of semester