Leibniz and His Correspondents
A Guided Tour of Leibniz’s Republic of Letters

Course Description

Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1647-1716) is widely considered one of the towering geniuses of the early modern period. “When one compares the talents one has with those of a Leibniz”, a despairing Denis Diderot writes, “one is tempted to throw away one's books and go die quietly in the darkness of some forgotten corner.” But Leibniz was not only good at philosophy. He was also exceptionally good at something that we usually take to be a hallmark of our modern world today: networking. Hundreds of years before the advent of Facebook, Twitter, and blogs, Leibniz exchanged ideas and letters with more than 1300 of his contemporaries, among them such illustrious figures as Isaac Newton, the Czar of Russia, and the Princess of Wales. Never having gotten around to writing a magnum opus, Leibniz’s correspondence contains many of his key philosophical ideas, bearing out his frequently quoted comment that “he who knows only what I have published does not know me.”

This course will take you on a guided tour of Leibniz’s personal Republic of Letters. By embarking on it, you will learn more about Leibniz’s own philosophical views: Which questions and issues was he struggling with, when did he do so, and why? At the same time, you will also gain some insight into the philosophical thought of a number of his contemporaries. Traversing countries and continents, we will encounter famous and not so famous philosophers and theologians, distinguished ladies, and even some Jesuits in China. We will learn about Leibniz’s views on the nature of bodies and minds, his theory of knowledge and stance towards skepticism, his account of freedom and virtue, his answer to the problem of evil, his views on natural theology, and, of course, monads.

Audience & Format

This is an upper-level course aimed at advanced undergraduate students with some background in philosophy. The format of the course is a discussion-based seminar.

Learning Objectives

Among may other good things, looking at Leibniz in dialogue provides us with an alternative way to become acquainted with Leibniz’s philosophy. The existence of a philosophical interlocutor to whom Leibniz must explain and justify his opinions often leads him to expose his views more clearly and in more detail than in his other writings, and it also provides us with both a historical and a philosophical context within which to place them.
Hence, if you engage successfully in the materials and assignments in this course, by the end of it you will…

- have developed a better understanding of Leibniz’s main philosophical positions, the reasoning by which he supports and defends them, and be able to identify some of their strengths and weaknesses
- have a better sense of some of the central topics of discussion among philosophers of the 17th and 18th centuries, including sensitivity to their main motivations and historical context, and proficiency in reconstructing these positions precisely, and in evaluating them critically
- have gained some valuable insight into the workings of what is now famously called the “Republic of Letters”, the early modern long-distance intellectual community which fostered communication among 17th and 18th century intellectuals.

More generally, by taking this course, you will improve your ability to…

- read philosophical texts in a critical and engaged fashion. You will practice to identify guiding questions, to charitably reconstruct the positions that are staked on them, and to critically evaluate these positions.
- write cogent philosophical prose. You will be asked to carefully characterize philosophical problems, state proposed solutions, and critically assess the merits of these solutions.

Main Texts


# Topics & Readings

## 1. Who was Leibniz? A Very Short Introduction

A brief introduction to Leibniz’s life and works, and to the philosophical themes this course will address.

**optional reading:** Jolley, Intro & chap. 1 (“Life and Works”), 1-35

## 2. Putting Leibniz on the Map: Leibniz’s Network, or What It’s Like to Be a 17th-Century Intellectual

What was the Republic of Letters? And what was Leibniz’s place in it? Taking a more historical perspective, we open a window into the turbulent exchanges between enlightenment intellectuals.

**read:** Ultée, “The Republic of Letters: Learned Correspondence, 1680-1720”; Garber, “Thinking in the Age of the Learned Journal”

## 3. Looking Ahead: Leibniz’s Final System

We begin our journey into Leibniz’s philosophy by looking ahead to the very end, and become acquainted with Leibniz’s final metaphysical system as he lays out in his most famous and probably also most cryptic text, the *Monadology* (1714). We will also take a look at a possible source of Leibniz’s views, the vitalism of Anne Conway.

**read:** *Monadology* (AG 213-224); Conway, *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy* (selections posted online)

**optional:** Jolley, chap. 3 (“The Theory of Monads”, 66-92)

## 4. Back to the Beginning: The Discourse on Metaphysics

We take a look at the text that kicked off Leibniz’s first major correspondence: The *Discourse on Metaphysics* (1686), which presents us with a first attempt by Leibniz to systematically lay out his philosophical views.

**read:** *Discourse on Metaphysics* (AG 35-68)

**optional:** Jolley, chap. 2 (“The Metaphysics of Substances: Unity and Activity”), 36-65

## 5. Corporeal Substances and Complete Concepts – The Correspondence with Arnauld

For the next two weeks, we delve into Leibniz’s correspondence with the French philosopher, mathematician and theologian Antoine Arnauld. Topics: The nature of substance, contingency and necessity, and Leibniz’s theory of action.

**read:** *The Leibniz–Arnauld Correspondence* (LA, selections will be posted online); Remarks on Mr. Arnauld’s letter concerning my proposition: that the individual concept of a person contains once and for all everything that will ever happen to him (posted online)
6. Descartes’ Interactionism and Malebranche’s Occasionalism

Taking a short break from Leibniz, we get acquainted with two accounts of causation proposed by two of his famous contemporaries – Descartes and Malebranche – in preparation for what is to follow.

read: Malebranche, The Search after Truth (selections posted online); Descartes, Meditations, Correspondence with Elisabeth (selections posted online)

7. A New System

We get to know another important text which gave rise to many more letters and heated exchanges between Leibniz and his educated contemporaries: Leibniz’s New System of the Nature of Substances.

read: New System (WF 10-20)

8. Clocks, Dogs, and Living Mirrors – Leibniz and Bayle Debate Pre-Established Harmony

We take a look at the most famous correspondence sparked by the publication of the New System: the exchange between Leibniz and the famed author of the Dictionnaire, Pierre Bayle. Topics: the mind-body problem; the nature of souls; universal expression

read: PB 1 & 3 (WF 72-75, 79-86); PB 4 & 6 (WF 86-94, 107-26); Leibniz's brief exchange with Tournemine, T 1-3 (WF 247-51)


Does Leibniz’s new metaphysics pose a threat to human and divine freedom? Both the French Chaplain Isaac Jaquelot and the illustrious British Lady Damaris Masham, are deeply troubled by this worry, and Leibniz needs to find a way out.

read: J1-J12 (WF 174-20); M 1-7 & App. A (WF 203-225)

optional: Jolley, chap. 5 (“Human and Divine Freedom”), 125-54

10. First Paper Writing Workshop

A presentation on writing philosophy papers by me, and lots of exciting drafts brought to class by you!

11. Skepticism and the New System - The Correspondence with Foucher

We turn to Leibniz’s epistemology, starting with his correspondence with the French skeptic Simon Foucher. Topics: Leibniz’s “phenomenalism” and his response to skepticism about the external world.

read: F1 (WF 41-4), F3 (WF 47-52), App. A & B (WF 52-55); Letter to Foucher (1675), On the Method of Distinguishing Real from Imaginary Phenomena (both posted online)
| 12 | **12. Leibniz Defends Innate Ideas and Immaterial Souls – John Locke and the New Essays**  
Taking on (a small part of) one of the longest dialogues written by an early modern philosopher, we delve into Leibniz’s exchange with the famous British empiricist John Locke. Topics include: Leibniz’s account of innate theoretical and moral knowledge, his case against materialism.  
read: Leibniz, *New Essays on Human Understanding* (selections, posted online);  
optional: Jolley, chap. 4 (“Mind, Knowledge and Ideas”, 93-124) |
| 13 | **13. Leibniz and the Problem of Evil: The Theodicy**  
Turning to Leibniz’s philosophical theology, we take a brief look at the *Theodicy* (1709), which – prominently ridiculed by Voltaire – remains one of the most philosophically interesting responses to the problem of evil: How is divine justice compatible with all the misery in the world?  
read: Selections from the *Theodicy, Abridgement of the Argument Reduced to Syllogistic Form* (posted online)  
optional: Jolley, chap. 6 (“The Problem of Evil”, 155-75) |
| 14 | **14. Evil, Virtue and The Fate of Souls – Leibniz and the Two Sophies**  
This week, we look at Leibniz’s correspondence with two women who were likely the two most important in his life:  
In their exchanges, Leibniz and the two Sophies discuss Leibniz’s theodicy and his views of the nature of mind or immaterial substance, and how philosophical reflections about the can lead one to a happy and content life.  
read: selections from the *Two Sophies* (posted online) |
| 15 | **15. A Commerce of Light: Leibniz Receives Letters from China**  
Traveling beyond Continental Europe, this session will take us to China via Leibniz’s correspondence with the missionary Joachim Bouvet, one of the first French Jesuits to live in China. Here, we witness Leibniz’s striking attempt to deduce from Chinese philosophy a natural theology compatible with Christian principles.  
read: selections from the correspondence with Bouvet; *Discourse on the Natural Theology of the Chinese* (both posted online) |
| 16 | **16. Leibniz vs Newton: The Leibniz – Clarke Correspondence**  
Turning to one of the most famous of Leibniz’s exchanges, we follow Leibniz cross pens with the Newtonian Clarke (and thereby, as Leibniz sees it, with Newton himself). Here, we see him continuing his reflections on natural religion and the role of God in the world, but also we also watch him challenge Newton’s view of the nature of space, and discuss one of the most important rationalist principles, the Principle of Sufficient Reason. |
17 | **17. Monads and the Metaphysical Status of Bodies – Leibniz’s Exchange with de Volder**

In our last week of Leibniz, we return to the very beginning, and take a second look at the *Monadology* to see whether our understanding of it has changed through reading Leibniz’s letters. Then we will turn to our final correspondences, where we watch Leibniz debate the nature of substance and the metaphysical status of bodies with the Dutch professor Burcher de Volder.

(re-)read: *Monadology* (AG, 213-224); selections from the correspondence with de Volder (posted online)

18 | **SECOND PAPER WRITING WORKSHOP**