The Rationalists: Spinoza and Leibniz
Pauline Phemister

1. Course Aims and Objectives

The course will introduce students to the philosophical systems of the Dutch philosopher, Benedict de Spinoza and the German thinker, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz. Responding critically to, but still working within the framework of, Cartesian dualism, Spinoza and Leibniz respectively transformed the Cartesian philosophy in two radically different directions, resulting in (i) Spinoza’s absolute monism and, in critical response also to Spinoza, (ii) the dynamic, pluralist philosophical system of Leibniz. In this course, we will compare and assess the philosophical arguments that led each philosopher to hold similar but also radically divergent views on the nature of reality, mind and body, God, and the ethical life.

2. Lecture/Seminar Content: Provisional Outline

Lecture 1: Introduction and Substance (Spinoza)

Essential Reading: Spinoza, Ethics I, definitions, axioms and postulates

Recommended reading: John Cottingham, The Rationalists, chapter 3; Pauline Phemister, The Rationalists: Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz, chapters 1 and 3

Lecture 2: Proofs of God’s existence (Spinoza)

Essential Reading: Spinoza, Ethics I, up to Proposition 11


Lecture 3: Spinoza’s Monism and Determinism (Spinoza)

Essential Reading: up to Ethics I, proposition 14, Ethics 1, propositions 26-33


Lecture 4: Mind and Body (Spinoza)

Essential Reading: Ethics II

Lecture 5: Freedom: the intellectual love of God (Spinoza)

*Essential Reading: Ethics* V, proposition headings, *Ethics* III and IV.


Lecture 6: Substances (Leibniz)

*Essential reading: Monadology*, §§ 1-30; *Discourse on Metaphysics*, §§ 8-15; Correspondence with de Volder, Leibniz to de Volder 20 June 1703


Lecture 7: Perfection and God (Leibniz)

*Essential reading: Monadology*, §§ 31-54


Lecture 8: Bodies (Leibniz)

*Essential reading: Monadology*, §§ 55-77; *On Body and Force, Against the Cartesians*


Lecture 9: Pre-established harmony (Leibniz)

*Essential Reading: Monadology*, §§ 78-90; Correspondence with Arnauld, Leibniz to Arnauld, 9 October 1687; *New System of the Nature and Communication of Substances, and of the union of the Soul and Body*
Lecture 10 Rational Freedom and Contingency

Essential reading: On Freedom and Possibility; Remarks on Arnauld’s Letter about My Proposition That the Individual Notion of Each Person Includes Once and for all Everything That Will Ever Happen to Him; On Freedom

Recommended reading: Lois Frankel, ‘On Being Able to do Otherwise: Leibniz on Freedom and Contingency’ Studia Leibnitiana, 16 (1984), 45-59; Phemister, P. The Rationalists: Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz, chapters 10 and 11; Robert Adams, Leibniz: Determinist, Theist, Idealist, chapter 1

Lecture 11: Overview and exam revision

3. Readings

Required (Core Texts)


Also available in print edition:

Recommended (Secondary Literature)


**Further reading**

