

The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology

UG Course Syllabus (tentative)

Course Code: HUMA 3900

Course Title: Philosophical Inquiry into the Modern World

Course Offered in: Fall 2026 Course (3 Credits)

Mon 16:30 - 17:50 & Fri 12:00 - 13:20 (LG5102, Teaching Hub)

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Office Hours: By email appointments

Course Description

This course traces how rationality has been understood, developed, and transformed throughout the history of Western thought, from the Renaissance to the twentieth century. It examines the changing meanings and forms of rationality in relation to knowledge, science, history, and society, and considers how rationality has shaped the modern worldview and provided the foundation for the growing power and influence of modern science and technology. At the same time, the course critically examines the reduction of rationality to calculation, efficiency, and control, as well as the forms of domination that may result from this reduction. By following these historical debates, students will reflect on the significance of rationality in contemporary society and develop new insights into the ways it continues to shape human life and our understanding of the world.

Intended Learning Outcomes (ILOs)

Upon completion of this course, students are expected to be able to do the following:

	Course ILOs	Weighting (%)
1	Develop an understanding of the historical development of rationality in Western thought from the Renaissance to the twentieth century.	20%
2	Critically examine how philosophical conceptions of rationality have changed in relation to knowledge, science, history, society, and technology.	20%
3	Analyze and critically evaluate philosophical texts and arguments concerning the meaning, possibilities, and limits of rationality.	10%
4	Develop the ability to formulate clear and well-supported philosophical arguments in the format of an academic essay.	20%
5	Examine the relationship between rationality and modern science and technology, including the reduction of rationality to calculation, efficiency, and control.	20%
6	Reflect on the significance of rationality in contemporary society and develop philosophical insights into its continuing influence on human life and our understanding of the world.	10%

Weekly Topics

Week	Topic	Activity / Discussion	Assessment
1	Rationality and the Modern World	Core Question: What is rationality, and why has it become central to the modern world? Focus: This week introduces the course's central theme: the historical development and transformation of rationality in Western thought. It considers the Renaissance as a period in which new conceptions of human agency, knowledge, nature, and intellectual autonomy began to emerge; syllabus overview. Readings: Pico della Mirandola, <i>Oration on the Dignity of Man</i> (selected excerpt) Francis Bacon, <i>The New Organon</i> (selected excerpt)	
2	Descartes: The Rational Subject and Certainty	Core Question: How does Descartes establish the rational subject as the foundation of knowledge? Focus: This week examines methodological doubt, the cogito, and the search for indubitable foundations. It focuses on the relationship between rationality, subjectivity, certainty, and the mathematical model of knowledge. Readings: René Descartes, <i>Discourse on the Method</i> (selected excerpt) René Descartes, <i>Meditations on First Philosophy</i> (selected excerpt)	
3	Kant I: The Possibilities and Limits of Reason	Core Question: What can human reason know, and what are the limits of rational knowledge? Focus: This week explores Kant's critical transformation of rationalism. It examines the conditions of knowledge, the distinction between phenomena and noumena, and the attempt to determine the legitimate scope of reason. Readings: Kant, <i>Critique of Pure Reason</i> (selected excerpt)	
4	Kant II: Enlightenment and Autonomy	Core Question: What does it mean to use one's own reason? Focus: This week examines Kant's understanding of Enlightenment, intellectual maturity, and autonomy. It considers the relationship between rationality, freedom, public reasoning, and the possibility of independent thought. Readings: Kant, "An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?" (selected excerpt)	
5	Hegel: Historical and Dialectical Rationality	Core Question: How does rationality develop through history and society? Focus: This week examines Hegel's conception of reason as historical, social, and dialectical. It considers the role of contradiction, mediation, institutions, and freedom in the development of rationality, and concludes the first stage of the course with a comparison of Descartes, Kant, and	Individual Essay and Group Presentation Briefing

		Hegel. Readings: Hegel, <i>Phenomenology of Spirit</i> (Preface, selected passages)	
6	Heidegger I: Modern Rationality and Being	Core Question: What philosophical assumptions about being underlie modern rationality? Focus: This week begins the critical examination of modern rationality through Heidegger's critique of subject-centered philosophy. It explores the relationship between rational inquiry, the question of Being, and the limits of modern philosophical frameworks. Readings: Heidegger, <i>Being and Time</i> (Introduction, selected excerpt)	Submission of group presentation outline and division of responsibilities.
7	Heidegger II: Technology and Calculative Thinking	Core Question: Does modern technology represent the highest development of rationality, or a reduction of thinking? Focus: This week examines calculative thinking and Heidegger's analysis of modern technology. It considers how the technological worldview transforms nature, objects, and human beings into resources for calculation, ordering, and control. Readings: Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology" (selected excerpt) Heidegger, "Memorial Address"(selected excerpt) Group Presentation: Teams 1–2	
8	Freud I: The Unconscious and the Rational Subject	Core Question: Can human beings be understood as fully rational and self-transparent subjects? Focus: This week introduces Freud's challenge to the modern ideal of the rational subject. It examines the unconscious, repression, desire, and the ways in which human thought and action exceed conscious rational control. Readings: Freud, <i>The Interpretation of Dreams</i> (selected passages) Freud, "The Unconscious" Group Presentation: Teams 3–4	Individual Reflection Essay Assignment due
9	Freud II: Reason, Desire, and Civilization	Core Question: How do desire and repression shape rational human life? Focus: This week considers the tensions between reason, desire, individual happiness, and civilization. Freud's account of repression raises questions about whether social order depends upon the limitation of human drives and whether rationality can be separated from unconscious motivation. Readings: Freud, <i>Civilization and Its Discontents</i>(selected excerpt) Freud, <i>The Future of an Illusion</i> (selected excerpt) Group Presentation: Teams 5–6	

10	Adorno I: Enlightenment and Instrumental Reason	Core Question: How can rationality become a form of domination? Focus: This week examines the transformation of Enlightenment reason into instrumental reason. It considers the relationship between knowledge, mastery, nature, social organization, and domination in modern society. Readings: Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, <i>Dialectic of Enlightenment</i> (selected excerpt) Max Horkheimer, <i>Eclipse of Reason</i> (selected excerpt) Group Presentation: Teams 7–8	
11	Adorno II: Society, Culture, and Domination	Core Question: How does rationality operate through modern social and cultural institutions? Focus: This week explores Adorno’s critique of standardization, conformity, and the culture industry. It examines how social systems shape consciousness and how rationality may become associated with administration, efficiency, and the reproduction of domination. Readings: Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, <i>Dialectic of Enlightenment</i> (selected excerpt) Group Presentation: Teams 9–10	
12	Rationality, Instrumentality, and Modern Technology	Core Question: Can rationality be distinguished from calculation, efficiency, and technological control? Focus: This week brings the major themes of Heidegger and Adorno into direct comparison. It revisits the relationship between rationality, science, technology, instrumental thinking, and social domination, while considering whether a non-instrumental form of rationality remains possible. Readings: Theodor W. Adorno, <i>Negative Dialectics</i> (Introduction, selected passages) Group Presentation: Teams 11–12	
13	Rationality in Contemporary Society & Synthesis	Core Question: What does rationality mean in a society shaped by science, technology, and artificial intelligence? Focus: The final week synthesizes the historical development of rationality from Descartes to Adorno. It considers the continuing significance of rationality in contemporary life, including the promises and dangers of scientific and technological development, and asks whether rationality can still provide critical insight rather than merely serve efficiency and control. Readings: Jürgen Habermas, <i>Technology and Science as “Ideology”</i> (selected excerpt) Group Presentation: Teams 13–14	

Assessments:

Assessment Task	Descriptions	Contribution to Overall Course grade (%)
Group Presentation	Students will deliver a group presentation on a philosophical topic concerning rationality. The presentation topics will be announced in Week 5, after the completion of the lectures on Descartes, Kant, and Hegel. Each group will select one topic and prepare its presentation based exclusively on the lectures and readings covered in Weeks 1–5. The presentation should demonstrate a clear understanding of the relevant philosophical ideas and develop a focused argument concerning the historical development of rationality. Presentations will begin in Week 7 and continue through Week 13. * To minimize free riding, each group must submit a brief outline before the presentation identifying the responsibilities of each member. A short progress update will also be required one week before the presentation. Peer evaluation may be used to assess individual contributions.	20%
Individual Reflection Essay	Students will write an individual reflection essay based <i>on their selected group presentation topic</i>. The essay should draw on the philosophical discussions of rationality covered in Weeks 1–5, particularly the ideas of Descartes, Kant, and Hegel. While the essay should be related to the group presentation topic, it must develop an individual and more focused analysis of the relevant philosophical issue. Students should engage closely with the assigned readings, reflect on the development of rationality, and present a clear, well-supported philosophical argument rather than merely reproduce the content of the group presentation.	20%
Final Examination	Students will take a final examination after the completion of the thirteen-week course. The examination will include short-answer questions and brief essay-style questions based on the assigned readings and lecture materials. It will assess students' understanding of the development and transformation of rationality throughout the course, as well as their ability to compare philosophical positions and discuss the contemporary significance of rationality, science, and technology.	40%
Attendance and Course Participation	Students are expected to attend class regularly, engage seriously with lectures and assigned readings, and participate actively in group presentations, questions, and class discussions. Participation will be evaluated based not only on the frequency of contributions but also on the relevance and quality of students' engagement with the philosophical issues discussed in class.	20%

* Assessment marks for individual assessed tasks will be released within two weeks of the due date.

Mapping of Course ILOs to Assessment Tasks

Assessed Task	Mapped ILOs	Explanation
Group Presentation	ILO 1, ILO 2, ILO 3, ILO 4	This assessment primarily targets ILOs 1–4. Students demonstrate an understanding of the historical development of rationality by situating their topic in relation to the thinkers and debates covered in Weeks 1–5, including Descartes, Kant, and Hegel (ILO 1). They critically examine changing conceptions of rationality in relation to knowledge, science, history, and society (ILO 2), analyze assigned philosophical texts and arguments (ILO 3), and collaboratively develop and communicate a clear, focused, and well-supported

		philosophical argument (ILO 4).
Individual Reflection Essay	ILO 1, ILO 2, ILO 3, ILO 4	This assessment primarily targets ILOs 1, 2, and 4 by testing students' comprehensive knowledge of historical metaphysical issues through short-answer questions on assigned readings and lectures (ILO 1), requiring critical examination of philosophical concepts covered in class (ILO 2), and evaluating their ability to formulate clear philosophical arguments in brief essay responses (ILO 4).
Final Examination	ILO 1, ILO 2, ILO 3, ILO 5, ILO 6	This assessment primarily targets ILOs 1, 2, 3, 5, and 6. Through short-answer and brief essay questions, students demonstrate knowledge of the historical development of rationality from the Renaissance to twentieth-century critical theory (ILO 1). They compare and critically examine different philosophical accounts of rationality in relation to knowledge, science, history, society, and technology (ILO 2), and analyze key texts, concepts, and arguments from the course (ILO 3). The examination also assesses their understanding of critiques of instrumental rationality, technological calculation, efficiency, and control in Heidegger, Horkheimer, Adorno, and Habermas (ILO 5), as well as their ability to reflect on the continuing significance of rationality in contemporary society (ILO 6).
Attendance and Course Participation	ILO 2, ILO 3, ILO 6	This assessment primarily targets ILOs 2, 3, and 6. Through informed participation in discussions, questions, and presentation activities, students critically examine competing conceptions of rationality and their social, historical, scientific, and technological implications (ILO 2). They develop their ability to interpret and evaluate philosophical texts and arguments in dialogue with others (ILO 3), while reflecting on the relevance of rationality to contemporary human life, society, and technology (ILO 6).

Grading Rubrics for Essay

Criteria	Excellent (A)	Good (B)	Satisfactory (C)	Needs Improvement (D)	Unsatisfactory (F)
Understanding of Concepts (20%)	Demonstrates a deep understanding of key concepts and integrates them effectively into the analysis.	Shows a good understanding of key concepts with some integration into the analysis.	Displays basic understanding of concepts but lacks depth and integration.	Limited understanding of concepts; fails to connect them to the analysis.	No understanding of key concepts; analysis is off-topic or irrelevant.
Reflection and Personal Insight (40%)	Provides deep personal reflection and insights on the essay prompt.	Offers some personal reflection and insights, but lacks depth.	Minimal personal reflection; insights are superficial.	Little to no personal reflection; lacks connection to course themes.	No personal reflection or insights; completely off-topic.
Argumentation and Analysis (30%)	Constructs a well-organized, persuasive argument with clear reasoning and strong evidence.	Presents a clear argument with logical reasoning and adequate evidence.	Argument is present but lacks clarity and strong evidence.	Weak argumentation; lacks coherence and supporting evidence.	No discernible argument; lacks structure and clarity.
Writing Quality (10%)	Writing is clear, concise, and free of errors; effectively communicates ideas.	Writing is mostly clear with few errors; ideas are communicated well.	Writing is understandable but contains several errors that distract from meaning.	Writing is unclear and contains frequent errors that hinder understanding.	Writing is incoherent; numerous errors make it difficult to follow.

Final Grade Descriptors:

Grades	Short Description	Elaboration on subject grading description
A	Excellent Performance	Demonstrates a comprehensive grasp of subject matter, expertise in problem-solving, and significant creativity in thinking. Exhibits a high capacity for scholarship and collaboration, going beyond core requirements to achieve learning goals.
B	Good Performance	Shows good knowledge and understanding of the main subject matter, competence in problem-solving, and the ability to analyze and evaluate issues. Displays high motivation to learn and the ability to work effectively with others.
C	Satisfactory Performance	Possesses adequate knowledge of core subject matter, competence in dealing with familiar problems, and some capacity for analysis and critical thinking. Shows persistence and effort to achieve broadly defined learning goals.
D	Marginal Pass	Has threshold knowledge of core subject matter, potential to achieve key professional skills, and the ability to make basic judgments. Benefits from the course and has the potential to develop in the discipline.
F	Fail	Demonstrates insufficient understanding of the subject matter and lacks the necessary problem-solving skills. Shows limited ability to think critically or analytically and exhibits minimal effort towards achieving learning goals. Does not meet the threshold requirements for professional practice or development in the discipline.

Course AI Policy

In this course, generative AI tools (e.g., ChatGPT, Gemini) may be used for preliminary research, brainstorming ideas, or grammar checking. However, all submitted work must represent the student's original thinking and analysis. Direct submission of AI-generated text as your own work is prohibited and constitutes academic dishonesty.

Students must:

- Cite AI usage (e.g., "I used ChatGPT for initial outline generation").
- Critically evaluate and revise AI outputs.
- Avoid AI for core analytical arguments, especially in essays.

Violations will be handled per HKUST Academic Integrity Policy.

Communication and Feedback

Assessment marks for individual assessed tasks will be communicated via Canvas within two weeks of submission. Feedback on assignments will include [specific details, e.g., strengths, areas for improvement]. Students who have further questions about the feedback including marks should consult the instructor within five working days after the feedback is received.

Resubmission Policy

One resubmission total is permitted **before the assignment deadline** via Canvas.

Post-deadline submissions (prior to grade release only):

- Allowed within 3 calendar days after deadline
- 15% deduction per day late penalty
- **No submissions accepted after grade release or 3-day window**

Required Texts and Materials

Before each class, the instructor will compile, summarize, and distribute the reading materials.

1	Adorno, Theodor W. <i>Negative Dialectics</i> . Translated by E. B. Ashton. New York: Continuum, 1973.
2	Bacon, Francis. <i>The New Organon</i> . Edited by Lisa Jardine and Michael Silverthorne. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
3	Descartes, René. <i>Discourse on the Method and Meditations on First Philosophy</i> . Translated by Donald A. Cress. 4th ed. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 1998.
4	Freud, Sigmund. <i>Civilization and Its Discontents</i> . Translated by James Strachey. New York: W. W. Norton, 1961.
5	Freud, Sigmund. <i>The Future of an Illusion</i> . Translated by James Strachey. New York: W. W. Norton, 1989.
6	Freud, Sigmund. <i>The Interpretation of Dreams</i> . Translated and edited by James Strachey. New York: Basic Books, 2010.
7	Freud, Sigmund. "The Unconscious." In <i>The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud</i> , vol. 14, <i>On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works, 1914–1916</i> , translated and edited by James Strachey, 159–215. London: Hogarth Press, 1957.
8	Habermas, Jürgen. <i>Toward a Rational Society: Student Protest, Science, and Politics</i> . Translated by Jeremy J. Shapiro. Boston: Beacon Press, 1970. [Includes "Technology and Science as 'Ideology.'"]
9	Hegel, G. W. F. <i>Phenomenology of Spirit</i> . Translated by A. V. Miller. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977.
10	Heidegger, Martin. <i>Being and Time</i> . Translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. Oxford: Blackwell, 1962.
11	Heidegger, Martin. "Memorial Address." In <i>Discourse on Thinking</i> , translated by John M. Anderson and E. Hans Freund, 43–57. New York: Harper & Row, 1966
12	Heidegger, Martin. "The Question Concerning Technology." In <i>The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays</i> , translated by William Lovitt, 3–35. New York: Harper & Row, 1977.
13	Horkheimer, Max. <i>Eclipse of Reason</i> . New York: Oxford University Press, 1947.
14	Horkheimer, Max, and Theodor W. Adorno. <i>Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments</i> . Edited by Gunzelin Schmid Noerr. Translated by Edmund Jephcott. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002.
15	Kant, Immanuel. <i>Critique of Pure Reason</i> . Translated and edited by Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
16	Kant, Immanuel. "An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?" In <i>Practical Philosophy</i> , translated and edited by Mary J. Gregor, 17–22. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
17	Pico della Mirandola, Giovanni. <i>Oration on the Dignity of Man</i> . Translated by A. Robert Caponigri. Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 1996.

All required readings for this course will be made available through Canvas.

Academic Integrity

Students are expected to adhere to the university's academic integrity policy. Students are expected to uphold HKUST's Academic Honor Code and to maintain the highest standards of academic integrity. The University has zero tolerance of academic misconduct. Please refer to [Academic Integrity | HKUST – Academic Registry](#) for the University's definition of plagiarism and ways to avoid cheating and plagiarism.