

The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology

UG Course Syllabus

Course Code: HUMA 2831

Course Title: Metaphysics: Study of Reality and Existence

Course Offered in: Spring 2026 Course (3 Credits)

Mon 12:00 - 13:20 & Wed 12:00 - 13:20 (4620)

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Office Hours: By email appointments

Course Description

Metaphysics explores the fundamental nature of reality and humanity's place within it. While science dominates modern thought, humans remain metaphysical beings; scientific knowledge alone cannot fully explain existence, identity, causation, free will, or possible worlds.

This course introduces these core questions through everyday examples and scholarly arguments, helping students reflect on assumptions, knowledge evaluation, and both physical and non-physical reality.

The course format includes two 1-hour lectures (L1) and two 20-minute tutorials (T1) per week, fostering deeper metaphysical thinking for daily life.

Intended Learning Outcomes (ILOs)

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

	Course ILOs	Weighting (%)
1	Acquire comprehensive knowledge of metaphysical issues in the history of philosophy	20%
2	Acquire the ability to critically examine philosophical issues	20%
3	Acquire the ability to demonstrate close reading and analytical thinking skills through writing a philosophy paper	10%
4	Obtain the ability to formulate philosophy arguments	20%
5	Acquire the ability to answer to fundamental metaphysical questions and be able to evaluate and apply metaphysical theories they have learned to reflect upon their value system and behavior	20%
6	Acquire the ability to evaluate the intellectual development of philosophy throughout history	10%

Weekly Topics

Week	Core Question / Topic	Activity / Discussion	Assessment
1	Introduction to Metaphysics	<p>Core Question: On human subjectivity</p> <p>Focus: Limits of self-knowledge, the illusion of full self-awareness: introduction to metaphysics as the study of the principles underlying how we understand and interact with the world.</p> <p>Reading: Kant. <i>Prolegomena</i>. pp. 15-23 (§§1-2)</p>	
2	Can we ever know the world as it is?	<p>Core Question: Can knowledge reveal reality itself, or only how we think about it?</p> <p>Focus: Knowledge is structured by our mind; truth vs our perception</p> <p>Reading: Kant. <i>Prolegomena</i>. pp. 37-47 (§§13-14)</p>	Assignment due
3	Is there a world beyond our perception?	<p>Core Question: Does reality exist independently of our consciousness?</p> <p>Focus: Reality vs consciousness; the separation of mind and world</p> <p>Reading: Kant. <i>Prolegomena</i>. pp. 42~46 (§13 Note II & III)</p>	
4	Is time and space real or only in our mind?	<p>Core Question: Are time and space actual entities, or forms of perception?</p> <p>Focus: Kantian notion: time and space as <i>a priori</i> forms</p> <p>Reading: Kant. <i>Prolegomena</i>. pp. 32-34 (§§6-9)</p>	Assignment due
5	Are our perceptions reliable?	<p>Core Question: Can our senses or reasoning ever give us true knowledge?</p> <p>Focus: Subjectivity of perception, limits of human cognition</p> <p>Reading: Kant. <i>Prolegomena</i>. pp. 24-31 (§§4-5)</p>	
6	Is self-knowledge an illusion?	<p>Core Question: How real is the “self” that we think we know?</p> <p>Focus: The constructed nature of self-identity.</p> <p>Reading: Kant. <i>Prolegomena</i>. pp. 85-89 (§§46-49)</p>	
7	Human vs Nature: Are we fundamentally different?	<p>Core Question: What separates humans from the natural world?</p> <p>Focus: Unique human consciousness vs the physical/natural world</p> <p>Reading: Kant. <i>Prolegomena</i>. pp. 90-100 (§§50-55)</p>	
8	Integration Week	<p>Core Question: How do knowledge, self, perception, and reality connect?</p> <p>Focus: Recap first half; connect metaphysical insights to everyday thinking</p> <p>Review previous summaries</p>	Midterm
9	How does language shape reality?	<p>Core Question: Does the way we speak influence how we understand the world?</p> <p>Focus: Language, meaning, and the limits of conceptual frameworks</p> <p>Reading: Kant. <i>Prolegomena</i>. pp. 47-50 (§§15-18)</p>	
10	How do values and morality arise?	<p>Core Question: Are ethical norms independent or constructed?</p> <p>Focus: The role of human perception and reasoning in moral judgments</p> <p>Reading: Kant. <i>Groundwork</i>. pp. 7-18</p>	
11	Are we free to choose?	<p>Core Question: Do humans have free will, or are we determined by nature and society?</p> <p>Focus: Limits of freedom, responsibility, and determinism</p> <p>Reading: Kant. <i>Groundwork</i>. pp. 7-18; Kant. <i>Prolegomena</i>. pp.123-134</p>	

12	How do we understand similarity and difference?	Core Question: What does it mean for things (or people) to be “the same” or “different”? Focus: Identity, classification, and conceptual distinctions Reading: Kant. <i>Prolegomena</i> . pp. 36-45 (§§12-13)	
13	What makes humans different from AI?	Core Question: In what ways are humans fundamentally different from artificial intelligence? Focus: Human consciousness, creativity, moral judgment, and metaphysical uniqueness compared to AI	Final essay

Assessment and Grading

This course will be assessed using criterion-referencing and grades will not be assigned using a curve. Detailed rubrics for each assignment are provided below, outlining the criteria used for evaluation.

Assessments:

Assessment Task	Descriptions	Contribution to Overall Course grade (%)
Subjective Time Experience Log and Metaphysical Reflection	<p>This core two-part assessment explores why identical clock durations <i>feel</i> entirely different, bridging everyday perception and metaphysical reality. Submit the log by Week 2 and essay by Week 4 on Canvas.</p> <p>Week 2: Experience Log (200–300 words, 30% of assignment = 9% final) Recall three personal experiences from the past month (Dec 2025–Jan 2026) where the <i>same measured time</i> (e.g., 5 minutes, 1 hour) felt drastically different:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Examples: Airport wait (eternal) vs. phone scroll (instant). • For each: Describe exact context, your emotions, bodily sensations, estimated “felt duration” vs. actual clock time. <p>Pure description of <i>your lived moments</i>—no analysis yet.</p> <p>Week 4: Reflective Essay (500–800 words, 70% of assignment = 21% final) Analyze <i>your specific log experiences</i>: Why do objective durations warp subjectively? What limits does this reveal between sensory appearances and deeper reality? Probe metaphysically: Is time mind-dependent flow, or fundamental being? Use 2–3 examples; pose unresolved questions; connect to readings.</p> <p>Root everything in <i>your genuine experiences</i>. Overly smooth/generic work loses authenticity points (10% weight).</p>	30%
Mid-term test	Students will take an exam that includes several short-answer questions and two brief essay-style questions, all based on the assigned readings and the material covered in lecture.	30%
Final Essay	<p>Students are recommended to begin working on the philosophical essay assignment, which serves as a substitute for the final exam, starting from Week 9.</p> <p>The essay should be approximately 1,800–2,000 words in length, using Times New Roman, 12-point font, and double line spacing.</p>	30%
Attendance and Course participation	Students who actively participate, attend class regularly, and immerse themselves in the course will be given incentives.	10%

* 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
Subjective Time Experience Log and Metaphysical Reflection	ILO 1~ ILO 6	This major assignment operationalizes all six learning outcomes: historical awareness (ILO1, 6) through time's philosophical lineage; critical argument skills (ILO 2,3,4) via log-to-essay progression; and personal application of metaphysics (ILO 5) through subjective experience analysis.
Mid-term test	ILO 1, ILO 2, 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 Essay	ILO 3, ILO 4, ILO 5	This assessment primarily targets ILOs 3, 4, and 5 by requiring students to demonstrate close reading and analytical thinking skills through a substantial philosophy paper (ILO 3), formulate sophisticated philosophical arguments on metaphysical topics (ILO 4), and apply learned theories to evaluate fundamental questions about reality and personal value systems (ILO 5).

Grading Rubrics for the Assignment:

Criteria	Excellent (A)	Good (B)	Satisfactory (C)	Needs Improvement (D)	Unsatisfactory (F)
Personal Detail (25%)	Vivid, unique episodes with rich sensory/emotional depth from Dec 2025–Jan 2026.	Specific personal examples with clear context.	Some detail but slightly generic.	Vague examples, lacks specificity	Clichéd, impersonal, or absent details.
Perceptual Analysis (25%)	Precise contrasts between objective clock time vs. subjective feel, tied to log data.	Clear experiential gaps from examples.	Basic description of differences.	Weak connections between time and feeling.	No distinction between objective/subjective.
Metaphysical Depth (25%)	Bold, original inquiries into reality beyond perception; unresolved philosophical tension.	Thoughtful questions about time's nature.	Surface-level reflection on limits.	Minimal metaphysical engagement.	Avoids philosophical probing entirely.
Structure & Insight (15%)	Coherent thesis, logical progression, original synthesis of experience and ideas.	Logical flow with solid reasoning.	Readable but scattered or list-like.	Disorganized, lacks clear argument.	Incoherent or missing core elements.
Authenticity (10%)	Unmistakably personal voice with quirky, lived specificity.	Genuine personal tone throughout.	Mostly personal but some generic phrasing.	Overly polished or detached.	AI-like perfection, generic, or plagiarized.

Grading Rubrics for the 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 on metaphysical concepts.

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

Kant, Immanuel. *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics That Will Be Able to Come Forward as Science: With Selections from the Critique of Pure Reason*. Translated and edited by Gary Hatfield. Revised ed. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

Kant, Immanuel. *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. Translated and edited by Mary Gregor, introduction by Christine M. Korsgaard. Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

♦ **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.