

The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology

UG Course Syllabus

Course Code: HUMA 2930

Course Title: What am I - Personal Identity and the Self

Course Offered in: Spring 2026 Course (3 Credits)

Mon 15:00 - 16:20 & Fri 10:30 - 11:50 (LT K)

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Office Hours: By email appointments

Course Description

In everyday life, we commonly think "I know myself best." But do I really know myself better than anyone else? This course begins by posing philosophical questions to such everyday self-understanding.

On one hand, we believe we know ourselves well, yet on the other, we enjoy psychological tests that reveal our personality or eagerly listen to what others say about "me." We also recognize that we are constantly changing through past and present experiences, striving to become a "me" different from our past self. Such everyday experiences on self-identity are intimately connected to philosophical inquiries into the self, personal identity, and selfhood.

This course is structured as two 80-minute lectures per week and aims to deepen students' understanding by engaging with key historical texts on personal identity, thought experiments, presentations, essays, and other participatory activities that foster critical thinking skills.

Intended Learning Outcomes (ILOs)

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

	Course ILOs	Weighting (%)
1	Develop a understanding of issues about the self in the history of philosophy	20%
2	Critically examine issues surrounding the relationships between what we are and our persistence conditions	20%
3	Enhance close reading and analytical thinking skills	10%
4	Develop the ability to formulate arguments in the format of an academic essay	20%
5	Develop skills of self-identification, judge current situation and evaluate the responsibilities of oneself	20%
6	Analyze life meaning and plan for the future	10%

Weekly Topics

Week	Core Question / Topic	Activity / Discussion	Assessment
1	Descartes (Introduction to Self-Certainty)	Core Question: If I doubt everything, what remains as "me"? Focus: Everyday self-identity paradox → <i>Cogito</i> as first solution. Readings: Descartes, <i>Meditations on First Philosophy</i> (Meditation II, Cogito): PDF pp. 13-17 (4p)	
2	Descartes (Deepening Self-Certainty)	Core Question: Does "I think" guarantee a unified self? Focus: <i>Cogito</i> limitations + workshop on certainty in daily life. Readings: Descartes, <i>Meditations</i> (continuation): same PDF pp. 17-24 (4p)	
3	Kant (Thinking Substance Illusion)	Core Question: Is the "thinking self" a real substance like Descartes claims? Focus: Kant's first paralogism – "I think" does not prove an immortal soul-substance. Simple language: reason tricks us into confusing "thinking thing" with permanent object. Readings: Kant, <i>Critique of Pure Reason</i> (Paralogisms): pp. 411-416	Assignment due
4	Kant (Deepening Substance Critique)	Core Question: Why can't we know the self as a "thing"? Focus: Inner sense vs. outer objects – self is not substance but changing appearance (experience only). Readings: Kant, Paralogism continuation: pp. 416-431	
5	Husserl (Everyday Self in Experience)	Core Question: Can we isolate "pure" self? Focus: Phenomenological reduction basics. Readings: Husserl, <i>Ideas I</i> (§33-35): pp. 63-73	
6	Husserl (Advanced Phenomenology)	Core Question: What reveals true self? Focus: Ego-less experiences. Readings: Husserl <i>Ideas I</i> (§46-49): pp. 100-112	Assignment due
7	Heidegger (Existential Self)	Core Question: What reveals true self? Focus: <i>Dasein</i> and anxiety. Readings: Heidegger, <i>Being and Time</i> (§40 Anxiety): pp. 228-235	
8	Review & Midterm	Review previous summaries	Midterm
9	Sartre (Freedom and Bad Faith)	Core Question: Am I free or deceiving myself? Focus: Bad faith intro. Readings: Existentialism is a Humanism: pp. 25-29	
10	Sartre (Deepening Freedom)	Core Question: How does freedom shape identity? Focus: Responsibility. Readings: Sartre continuation: same pp. 29-31	
11	Lacan (Imaginary Self)	Core Question: Is self just an image? Focus: Mirror stage. Readings: Lacan, <i>Écrits</i> , pp. 1-6	

12	Lacan (Split Subject)	Core Question: Why is self always split? Focus: Desire/the Symbolic Readings: Lacan continuation	
13	Synthesis		Final Essay Assignment

Assessments:

Assessment Task	Descriptions	Contribution to Overall Course grade (%)
Video Presentation & Written assignment	This assessment task consists of two parts: a 2–3 minute video introducing yourself, due on Canvas by Week 3, and a short reflective essay on the limits of self-knowledge based on that video, due by Week 6. The essay should draw from personal experiences in the video and include metaphysical reflections.	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	Students are recommended to begin working on the philosophical essay assignment, which serves as a substitute for the final exam, starting from Week 9. The essay should be approximately 1,800–2,000 words in length, using Times New Roman, 12-point font, and double line spacing.	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
Video Presentation & Written assignment	ILO 2, ILO 3, ILO 5	This assessment primarily targets ILOs 2, 3, and 5 by encouraging students to critically reflect on the limits of self-knowledge through personal experience in a video (ILO 2), discover metaphysical limitations of self-awareness directly through lived experience in a reflective essay (ILO 5), and practice analytical writing grounded in personal reflection (ILO 3).
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, ILO 6	This assessment primarily targets ILOs 3, 4, 5, and 6 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), apply learned theories to evaluate fundamental questions about reality and personal value systems (ILO 5), and analyze life meaning while planning for the future (ILO 6).

Grading Rubrics for Assignment (Video + Self-Knowledge Reflection)

Criteria	Excellent (A)	Good (B)	Satisfactory (C)	Needs Improvement (D)	Unsatisfactory (F)
Video Clarity (15%)	Engaging delivery, audible, well-paced, natural presence (2-3 min).	Clear speech, steady pacing, minor hesitations.	Audible but rushed/unclear sections.	Poor audio, overly scripted, disorganized.	Inaudible or unwatchable.
Video Content (15%)	Clear, engaging intro covering background, interests, and personality (2-3 min).	Covers personal background and interests adequately.	Basic intro with minimal personal detail.	Vague or incomplete introduction.	Generic/no personal disclosure.
Essay-Video Connection (20%)	Insightful analysis of self-presentation limits revealed in own video.	Clear links between video moments and self-knowledge limits.	Mentions video superficially.	Weak or absent video references.	No connection to own video.
Metaphysical Depth (30%)	Sophisticated reflections (e.g., opacity of self, mirror stage, thrownness).	Applies 1-2 concepts accurately to experience..	Basic philosophical mentions.	Vague or incorrect ideas.	Avoids metaphysics entirely.
Authenticity & Structure (20%)	Personal voice shines; coherent argument with video evidence.	Genuine tone, logical flow.	Readable but generic phrasing	Detached/polished, disorganized.	AI-like perfection or plagiarized.

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	Descartes, René. 2008. <i>Meditations on First Philosophy: With Selections from the Objections and Replies</i> . Translated by Michael Moriarty. Oxford: Oxford University Press (Oxford World's Classics).
2	Heidegger, Martin. 1962. <i>Being and Time</i> , translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. New York: Harper & Row.
3	Husserl, Edmund. 1982. <i>Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy: First Book</i> . Translated by F. Kersten. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.
4	Kant, Immanuel. 1998. <i>Critique of Pure Reason</i> . Edited and translated by Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant).
5	Lacan, Jacques. 1966. "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function." In <i>Écrits</i> , translated by Bruce Fink, 75–81. New York: W. W. Norton, 2006.
6	Sartre, Jean-Paul. 2007. <i>Existentialism Is a Humanism</i> , including Commentary on The Stranger. Translated by Carol Macomber. Introduction by Annie Cohen-Solal. Notes and preface by Arlette Elkaim-Sartre. Edited by John Kulka. New Haven: Yale University Press.

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.