The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology

Course Title: Philosophical Inquiry into the Modern World

Course Code: HUMA3900

Name: Plato Tse

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Office Hours: By appointment

Course Description

Modern philosophy was born from a series of provoking questions: Can anything be known with certainty? What is the relation between mind and body? Is the world ultimately material, mental, or something deeper? Do human beings possess genuine freedom in a universe governed by laws of nature? This course introduces the thinkers who first framed these problems in their modern form. Through the writings of Descartes, Spinoza, Locke, Leibniz, Berkeley, Hume, and Kant, we examine how philosophy responded to the rise of modern science and religious conflict. Students will encounter Descartes' search for indubitable foundations of knowledge and his puzzling dualism of mind and body; Spinoza's bold claim that everything is a single substance governed by necessity; Locke's attempt to ground knowledge in experience; Leibniz's vision of a rationally ordered universe of monads; Berkeley's challenge to materialism; Hume's skeptical doubts about causation and the self; Kant's revolutionary proposal that the structure of the human mind shapes the very possibility of experience. The course combines lectures with close reading of primary texts and guided discussion aimed at cultivating the skills of philosophical interpretation and argument.

Intended Learning Outcomes (ILOs)

By the end of this course, students should be able to:

1. Explain the central doctrines of major modern philosophers and situate them in historical context.

2. Analyze philosophical arguments concerning knowledge and metaphysics.

3. Compare rationalist and empiricist approaches to key problems.

4. Construct clear written arguments using philosophical concepts.

5. Critically engage with primary texts and contemporary interpretations.

Weekly Schedule:

No. of Week	Date	Topic
1	Feb 2	Introduction, Descartes
2	Feb 9	Descartes
3	Feb 16	Spinoza
4	Feb 23	Spinoza
5	Mar 2	Locke
6	Mar 9	Take-Home Assignment
7	Mar 16	Leibniz
8	Mar 23	Leibniz

9a	Mar 30	Berkeley
9b	Apr 6	Mid-Term Break
10	Apr 13	Hume
11	Apr 20	Hume
12	Apr 27	Kant
13	May 4	Kant

Assessments:

Assessment Task	Contribution to Overall Course grade (%)	Due date
Take-Home Assignment	25%	09/03/2026
Reflective Participation	25%	Weekly
Final examination	50%	18/05/2026

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

Generative AI tools may be used to support comprehension, brainstorming, and language improvement, but students must not submit AI-generated text as their own original work. Any use of

AI must be declared in a short statement attached to the assignment, explaining how the tool was employed. The intellectual responsibility for all submitted work remains with the student.

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

Attendance is mandatory and may be recorded at the beginning of class. Missing classes makes it progressively more difficult to follow the arguments and historical context on which later topics depend. Late submission of assignment will be penalized. No make-up examinations or quizzes will be provided. In exceptional and justified circumstances (such as serious illness or family emergency), the instructor may approve a make-up assessment, which will be of comparable or greater difficulty to the original task and may take a different format. Requests must be supported by appropriate documentation and submitted as soon as practicable.

Required Texts and Materials

Anthony Kenny, *The Rise of Modern Philosophy*

Selected primary readings from Descartes, Spinoza, Locke, Leibniz, Berkeley, Hume, and Kant will be provided on Canvas:

Descartes, *Meditations*

Spinoza, *Ethics*

Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*

Leibniz, *Monadology*

Berkeley, *Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous*

Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*

Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*

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.