

Modern Philosophy

Last Updated: Mon, 12/08/2025

Course prefix: PHIL

Course number: 3103

Section: AC

CRN (you may add up to five):

28671

Instructor First Name: Clint

Instructor Last Name: Johnson

Semester: Spring

Academic year: 2026

Course description:

Why did modern scientific thought emerge when it did and not thousands of years earlier? What can the history of inquiry into the natural world tell us about why we think the way we do today? Does the history of science matter for scientific practice today?

To answer these questions, this course will trace through Western intellectual history from the Renaissance into the modern age and finish in the early 20th century.

Often, scientific revolutions have been characterized by questioning and altering fundamental assumptions about self and world understanding. By seeing the developments that led to the modern world, we can bring to light our own assumptions and better understand the philosophical assumptions implicit in scientific theories. Knowing where the boundaries of thought are and why they are there can be critical in overcoming them. By participating in an ongoing dialog about the worldview changes that shaped philosophical thought from the Renaissance to the 20th century, students will see how modern thought emerged, why it emerged when it did and what implications this has for creative scientific thought today.

Course learning outcomes:

By the end of the course, you should be able to describe how the ground was fertile for the emergence of the modern world and the thought behind early science. You should be able to describe what the intellectual climate was like during the Enlightenment, how that changed in the nineteenth century and what changes were underway in the beginning of the twentieth century.

Required course materials:

Required Texts (physical books)

Tarnas, Richard. *Passion of the Western Mind*. ISBN: 978-0345368096

Required Texts (eBooks available through GT library)

Blumenberg, Hans. *Legitimacy of the Modern Age*. (eBook available through the library)

Kenney, Anthony. *A New History of Western Philosophy*. (eBook available through the library)

Russell, Matheson. *Husserl: A Guide for the Perplexed* (eBook available through the library)

Other articles and books made available on Canvas in the Files tab in the Readings folder or on the library's website.

Grading policy:

The best way to gain a comprehensive grasp of philosophical history in the ancient world is to be continuously engaged with the material. We will accomplish this principally through discussions in class that are fueled by the commentaries in your philosophical journals. Our ongoing dialogue will be supplemented by the other graded assignments. The final exam for this class is the final paper, which is to be submitted electronically no later than the class' final exam time. All written assignments must be submitted on Canvas. All assignments are due by 11:59pm on the date listed above. In other words, if they have the correct day stamped on them, they are on time. Otherwise, they are late (see below for the late policy).

Graded Assignments

Video journals and mind maps (weekly, 4 total)	25% total
Debate (paper and in-class debate)	25%
Philosophical analysis paper and video	25%
Final exam	25%

Video journals and mind maps

- Mind map:
 - diagram of all of the major ideas and the philosophers
 - arrows, annotations, drawings or anything else to show how the ideas and people relate to each other

- If it doesn't make sense to someone who is not in the course, it needs more detail
- Video:
 - 3-5 summary of all of the major ideas and people
 - It should make sense to someone who is not in the class
 - A casual conversation in addition to the summary (no time limit) describing:
 - Your reaction to and thoughts on the ideas
 - Anything you don't understand (you are not expected to understand everything you read the first time - please be honest!)

The mind map should be so detailed that it covers all significant ideas and people so that it will still make sense to you a year from now (when you're in the middle of another class and realize that you've seen the idea before when you were taking philosophy...) or even to someone who is not in the class. Make it as clear and simple as you can.

I am principally looking for engagement with the material. Videos communicate a lot of information about how you are thinking about the material and how much time and energy you have put into understanding them. If you read the material, summarize it clearly, and reflect thoughtfully on the ideas, you will do well on this assignment. This does not have to be a difficult assignment... but there are no shortcuts.

The structure of the videos should be as follows (each section is equally weighted):

What you need to get an A, B or C on the assignment is listed under each section below

1. Describe what the ideas are and how the arguments for them work

Rubric (letter grades correspond to the descriptions below):

1. Clear, accurate and thorough descriptions of the ideas, describing the philosopher's arguments for them and a discussion of how those arguments work.
 1. Good, clear descriptions of the ideas and the arguments, lacking in some details
 2. Descriptions of the ideas that are lacking in significant ways.
2. Describe how they relate to similar ideas from earlier philosophers and their own contemporaries
 1. Clear and accurate discussion of the reception history of the ideas (how others responded to them) and any objections that they address in the work
 2. A good account of how the ideas relate to earlier ideas, but lacking in some ways
 3. An incomplete history and/or an account of how others responded and objections to the ideas that is significantly lacking or absent
3. Tell me what you think about the ideas
 1. A carefully considered and detailed reflection on the ideas, including an agreement or objection that details philosophical specifics about why you agree or disagree (e.g., citing a particular passage or specific detail of the argument) that also makes use of additional external sources that were not part of the assigned reading

2. A good, thoughtful reflection on the ideas, including an agreement or objection that details philosophical specifics about why you agree or disagree (e.g., citing a particular passage or specific detail of the argument)
3. A simple summary that restates the ideas without clearly conveying your own understanding of them

Weighting:

- Mind map describing the main ideas and narrative threads 25%
- Video summary of the main ideas and figures 25%
- Video discussion – your thoughts on the material 50%

Note on the use of AI: This assignment changed when it became possible to generate the entire mind map from a single prompt with an AI image model in November 2025. I do not want to discourage you from using AI to do this to generate a first draft. It will be an essential skill for people to know how to do this with AI models. As such, I do not mind at all if you use an AI model to generate possible ideas for how to represent the material, potential narrative threads to describe, details to include, etc. That said, while AI is fairly good at philosophy, it is often rather surface-level in its detail. Your understanding of the material as a whole will be communicated with your presentation in the mind map. So it is, of course, imperative that you ultimately do your own work on the mind map itself.

The same can be said for generating a script for the video portion. *Do not read from a script.* The conversation in the video should be casual and demonstrate your understanding of the material. It is difficult to fake natural nonverbal and verbal cues that communicate understanding. These are what I am looking for. Your comfort with the material and fluidity of thought when working through the ideas are ultimately what gets communicated with the videos.

Please notice that the “video discussion” is **half** of the assignment’s value and is a casual discussion of your thoughts on the topics. I am interested in hearing you comment on the following items:

1. What was the experience like for you when reading the material for the first time?
 - Was it convincing, confusing, clearly wrongheaded, really aligned with or totally out of step with your worldview... maybe you even thought was just a series of terrible ideas – that’s ok! Many of the philosophers we will cover thought that about other philosophers’ ideas. It is important to be honest and candid here. There is no “right” answer. The purpose of this is to encourage you to introspect about what you felt and thought and why you felt and thought what you did. In the process of doing that, you will communicate a lot about how you are thinking. As I like to say, I know what the philosophers said and I’ve heard it

many times – but the thing I don’t know is what it is like for **you** to encounter the ideas. That is genuinely interesting to me!

2. What was most difficult or confusing in the reading? What was the easiest? Any surprises either way?
3. Did you find it easy or difficult to relate to the ideas? In other words, how immediately intelligible were they in the context of your existing worldview?
4. How clearly do you feel this material is connected and is a natural continuation of the historical trajectory of the previous material we’ve covered (for those who were not in my Ancient Philosophy class, we will review this on the first day). In other words, after understanding the individual arguments and getting the ideas well in hand, what happens when you take a step back and trying to look at the bigger picture of history with these ideas integrated into it? I am not expecting you to say that everything fits perfectly and you understand everything. That’s not a reasonable goal in philosophy. There are always more things to discover in history. Again, I want to know what you honestly think about the ideas and how you feel that they fit into a larger historical narrative.

Important note: The easiest way to do poorly on this assignment and have problems for the course is to not turn these in on time. They must be done *on time* to receive full credit. Please see the late assignment policy below for details.

Note that the journal entries are due *before the class meetings that cover each entry’s material*. This engages you with the material you are reading before we cover it in class and gives us a lot of fodder for class discussions.

Debate

The in-class debate is meant to be fun. My past experience doing this at Georgia Tech has been overwhelmingly positive. It has led to great conversations and a lot of quality arguments being presented. The in-class portion of the debate will be graded mostly for participation. Take a chance with what you say, go out on a limb and offer up interesting ideas and let’s discuss them.

Basically, the in-class portion of each debate is just a more structured and well-researched version of our daily class discussions. The class will be divided into small groups, likely resulting in groups of 2-4 students per topic, with 1-2 students per side. Though the debate will be a group exercise in class, you will only be graded *individually*. Each group will select a pair of thinkers from the list on Canvas. Half of the group will argue for one side and half will argue for the other: Hegel vs. Kant, Heidegger vs. Husserl, etc. Each person will write a paper with the following structure:

1. Statement of the question

2. Articulation of arguments *against* the position that you are taking (steelman this!)
3. Articulation of arguments and marshalling of evidence *for* the position you are taking
4. A discussion which more fully explains the debate on the topic
5. Replies to the objections

YOU NEED TO RESEARCH YOUR TOPIC AND CITE AUTHORITIES

There is no substitute for research. If you're seeing the material for the first time, you won't be able to replace the scholarship of those who have spent their lives researching and writing on that particular philosopher and topic. Leveraging their work will save you a lot of time and will enrich your discussion. I highly recommend finding books from the library on your specific topic.

Feel free to number your sections. There is no requirement for the written form to look like a traditional essay. Paragraphs, citations, quotes, research and your own ideas are good. If that means copying Aquinas' structure or the structure above, using headings, diagramming the argument or any other artifice you can think of, that's fine. Use whatever will clearly communicate the ideas.

For an example of this kind of writing, look at Thomas Aquinas' disputed questions on evil (*On Evil*, trans. Richard Regan, available as an eBook through the library) or Spinoza's treatment of ethics. As you can see with Aquinas, doing this well requires concise and clear descriptions of the possible positions for each side. Most importantly, your writing needs to be *precise*. As you dissect the nature of the debate, you will need to find the clearest and fastest method for getting to the heart of each possible position. Similarly, your responses to the opposing positions must address the specific details on how your response effectively dispenses with the kernel of each objection. It is in doing this that the work with your group will be most valuable. It is often far easier to see the shortcomings and gaps in your own argumentation in conversation with others. We allow ourselves to gloss over the weak points of our stances when thinking about them in isolation in a way that we cannot do when we are compelled to try and articulate our positions so as to help another person to understand them.

This is an exercise in attention to detail in philosophical argumentation.

Please note! The debate paper is **not** a formal academic paper. Please avoid fluff and extra wordiness at all costs. Just get down to the essential elements of each step of the argument you're studying, your argument in response and the potential objections. If bullet points or diagrams work better, go for it. Just be mindful of the recommended length (~5 pages, 1000-1500 words)

The in-class portion of this assignment is 25% of the grade, with the other 75% for the written portion. For both portions, you will be graded on the clarity of your presentation and your facility with the material.

Philosophical analysis paper and video

The paper:

You will be asked to submit a paper on any substantive philosophical topic in the course. The papers should be at least 2000 words. **You must use and cite external resources.**

Research is the key to succeeding on this assignment. Citations should be done according to the Chicago Manual of Style (

https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/research_and_citation/chicago_manual_17th_edition/cmos_formatting_and_organizing_a_research_p).

In the paper, you will describe a position of a particular philosopher or philosophers (not too many – depth is key!) and do the following:

1. Say what your topic is and what your thesis is. The essay should revolve around **your** original philosophical contribution. In other words, this is not a book report.
2. Introduce the problem in the context of philosophical history – what led to this thesis being given by this particular thinker at this particular time? **USE RESEARCH FOR THIS!**
3. Describe the thesis in the context of that philosopher's thought in general (e.g., Kant's moral claims about duty fit neatly with the remainder of his philosophical system)
You'll want to use research for this too!
4. Describe your objection, modification or twist on the topic
5. Try and determine how that philosopher would have responded to your objection (AI agents are excellent for this)

To do well on this assignment, you will need to understand the figure that you discuss and his or her place in philosophical history. Although this is not an English course, since philosophers cannot often lean on numbers to make the point for them, they are left needing to clearly articulate their ideas in words. Thus, clarity in writing and grammar are important insofar as they facilitate the effective communication of your ideas.

The video:

Along with the paper, I will ask you to submit a short video. This is **not** a summary of the paper. I want you to casually describe the thought process of the paper, emphasizing points where you thought about going a different direction, didn't quite understand something or were surprised by something in your research. I want to hear about the **process** of doing the research and writing the paper. If you put a lot of thought into your own original philosophical ideas in the paper, this will be easy. Those who have AI agents write the papers for them (which is not allowed, of course – see below) will find this much more difficult.

Special note on using online AI agents like ChatGPT for the writing assignments

As we will discuss and demonstrate in class, I expect you to make use of online AI writing tools like ChatGPT, Gemini, and Claude. Using tools like this will be an important skill for you going forward. We will talk about how to use them and what the limitations are (viz., they are sometimes wrong and they haven't necessarily read the academic journals). You are of course expected to submit only your own work for the paper and not copy and paste material from these agents. That said, they provide excellent starting points and can be used to find clear and concise ways of saying things. ***Since these tools are maturing rapidly and provide clear prose with a single click, the level of clarity and writing expected by this assignment has naturally increased in kind.*** Similarly, the bar will be set higher for getting the information right. That is, since I know how easy it is to provide Wikipedia-level content for your topic from these agents, the onus is on you to make sure that the arguments are represented accurately and provide citations and quotations that support that. This will make the process of writing much easier and better in a variety of ways. I hope that it will enable us as writers in philosophy to focus more on research and quality of argumentation and less on the craft of writing and editing. While some professors are concerned about assigning papers since it is now so easy for students to have these agents write for them, I am embracing the new technology and want to help you to learn how to effectively use it.

Final Exam

You have 75 minutes to complete 50 multiple choice questions. This is what I meant when I said that if you try to look up the answers without having studied, you will not finish the exam. The questions are drawn from a large test bank. You have a fixed number of questions for each philosopher, but the questions themselves and the order of the answers are random.

You are not allowed to use external resources, notes, AI or other people. It is just like an in-class exam.

The questions are meant to interleave the lecture, original material and commentaries we've read in such a way as to make them hard to look up or to use AI to find the answers. However, if you have made comprehensive mind maps, kept up with the readings and attended class, you have a great foundation for doing well!

Attendance policy:

Since class discussions are critical for engagement with the material, **attendance is mandatory**. There will be 14 class meetings over the semester. Regardless of your performance on the graded assignments, you will receive nothing better than a "C" if you

attend fewer than 10 (the equivalent of missing an entire month of class), and nothing better than a “F” if you attend fewer than 5.

Please note: any absence related to illness will not count against you. If you are not feeling well, please do not come to class. We can make other arrangements for you to get the lecture material.

Academic honesty/integrity statement:

Students are expected to maintain the highest standards of academic integrity. All work submitted must be original and properly cited. Plagiarism, cheating, or any form of academic dishonesty will result in immediate consequences as outlined in the university's academic integrity policy.

Core IMPACTS statement(s) (if applicable):

This is a Core IMPACTS course that is part of the Humanities area.

Core IMPACTS refers to the core curriculum, which provides students with essential knowledge in foundational academic areas. This course will help master course content, and support students' broad academic and career goals.

This course should direct students toward a broad Orienting Question:

- How do I interpret the human experience through creative, linguistic and philosophical works?

Completion of this course should enable students to meet the following Learning Outcome:

- Students will effectively analyze and interpret the meaning, cultural significance and ethical implications of literary/philosophical texts in English or other languages, or of works in the visual/performing arts.

Course content, activities and exercises in this course should help students develop the following Career-Ready Competencies:

- Ethical Reasoning
- Information Literacy
- Intercultural Competence