

ARTS 6002 Advanced Studies in the Humanities:

A Variety of Idealism

Course Outline

Time : Wed 2:30pm-5:15pm

Location:

TBC

Course overview

This course offers a comprehensive introduction to the diverse forms of idealism, a philosophical tradition that emphasizes the central role of mind, concepts, and language in structuring reality. The guiding question is: *In what way, and to what extent, does the mental constitute the physical?*

We will examine various branches of idealist thought from the 20th and 21st centuries to illuminate fundamental philosophical questions with relevance across multiple disciplines, including linguistics, psychology, physics, and theology. By exploring how consciousness, language, and conceptual frameworks shape our experience and understanding of reality, students will acquire theoretical tools to enhance interdisciplinary analysis and independent research.

No prior background in philosophy is assumed. Guidance will be provided where technical difficulty arises.

Learning outcomes (as shown on CUSIS)

1. Understand the historical and cultural conditions of forms of thought.
2. Grasp the role of forms of language for thinking.
3. Develop a critical view on the role of conceptual frameworks.
4. Grasp the potential of ways of thinking in promoting intercultural understanding.
5. Develop students' ability to research independently on the issues taught.

Topics

1) Arguments against Physicalism

- The topic introduces philosophical challenges to physicalism—the view that reality is exhaustively physical. While the success of neuroscience and brain imaging has bolstered reductionist accounts of consciousness, philosophers like David Chalmers have resisted these views using conceivability arguments, which suggest the irreducibility of subjective experience. Students will reflect on the explanatory gaps physicalism leaves behind.

2) Linguistic Idealism

- This topic explores the claim that language does not merely describe but also constitutes reality. The linguistic turn in the 20th century has galvanized philosophers' awareness of the importance of language, formal or natural, in conducting philosophical inquiry. How does it lend support to idealism? Two cases are made on the basis of subject-predicate structure and fact-terms: idealist philosophers argue that these linguistic tools not only determine our reference to facts that make up reality, but also entail the effability of all facts. This topic prompts reflections on how linguistic frameworks underpin the referentiality of the world and whether discrepancy across different languages is enough to refute linguistic idealism.

3) Conceptual Idealism

- Nicholas Rescher proposed another route to idealism that takes recourse to features of reality that are not necessarily linguistic but whose explications necessarily involve operations of some mind. For instance, the identification of objects in space and time and their causal character are mind-involving, which means the explication of their identification conditions and their counterfactual conditions is intelligible only with reference to some mental operations. In a similar vein, Kenneth Pearce suggests that the unity of composite objects is the result of a plurality's being subsumed under a concept. This view is subtly moderate, for it does not claim

that the brute existence of objects is dependent on the mental, but only that the specification of the way things exist is dependent on the mental. This topic prompts reflections on the idealistic implications when we take what appear to be anthropological conditions to bear on the specification of external objects.

4) Epistemic Idealism

- The fourth theme investigates an alleged theoretical merit of idealism, namely that it reconciles the intuitive aspects of our epistemic beliefs about ordinary objects with the acknowledgement of a mind-independent world. What do our ordinary object terms (e.g., ‘apple’ and ‘tree’) refer—the world of objects as presented in experience, or an external world beyond experience? Epistemic idealists argue that they refer to our experiential objects—the manifest world. Two thought experiments intended to show this, respectively proposed by John Foster and Robert Smithson, will be introduced and discussed. Appealing to spatial intuitions and folk epistemology, they argue that truths about ordinary objects supervene on truths about actual and counterfactual experiences. This topic prompts reflections on the metaphysical significance an account of perception and epistemic beliefs can have.

5) Physical Idealism

- While the problem of consciousness has been a classical motivator of idealism, some of its modern sprouts grew in an unexpected territory, the foundation of physics. This topic explores contemporary perspectives on how the fundamental constituents of reality might be closely tied to mind-like or abstract entities rather than purely physical objects. Drawing on the renowned physicist and Nobel-prize winner Eugene Wigner’s reflections on the “unreasonable effectiveness” of mathematics and his “Wigner’s Friend” thought experiment, we examine the provocative idea that consciousness plays an essential role in determining the outcomes of quantum measurements. This topic prompts reflections on the classical boundary between mind and matter.

6) Idealism with or without God

- The final topic deals with a historically enduring question within idealist philosophy: must idealism inevitably invoke the existence of God, or can idealism be coherently defended without reference to any divine being? For theistic idealists such as John Foster, the coherence and stability of the world of our experience is ultimately inseparable from God’s continual perception and sustenance. In contrast, non-theistic idealists such as Helen Yetter-Chappell reject reliance on any divine mind and emphasize an inherent structure of phenomenological laws and objective relational properties without reference to any divine source. This topic prompts reflections on idealism’s metaphysical possibilities and the necessity (or lack thereof) of divine involvement—without the need to deal with biblical exegesis in theology.

Learning activities

The course aims to be both a “research lecture” and a “discussion lecture”. It will consist of prepared inputs by the teacher as well as presentations by the students, based on the texts supplied. Adjustments can be made according to the needs of the students.

Assessment scheme as prescribed on CUSIS (revise if necessary)

<i>Task nature</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Weight</i>
Essays	Final essay	50%
Literature Review	Short review of selected literature	30%
Presentation	Presentation in interactive discussion session	20%

Remarks on Assessment Scheme (if any)

Grade Descriptor

Please refer to: http://phil.arts.cuhk.edu.hk/~phidept/UG/Grade_descriptors.pdf

Recommended learning resources

- Adams, Robert. (2007). Idealism vindicated. In Peter van Inwagen & Dean Zimmerman (Eds.), *Persons: Human and Divine* (pp. 35-54). Oxford University Press.
- Ballentine, L.E. (2019). A Meeting with Wigner. *Foundations of Physics* 49, 783–785.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10701-019-00283-x>
- Bealer, George. (2010). The self-consciousness argument: functionalism and the corruption of content. In Robert C. Koons and George Bealer (Eds.), *The Waning of Materialism* (pp. 137-158). Oxford University Press.
- Chalmers, David J. (1996). *The Conscious Mind: In Search of a Fundamental Theory*. Oxford University Press.
- . (2020). Idealism and the mind-body problem. In William Seager (Ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Panpsychism* (pp. 353-373). Routledge.
- Foster, John. (1982). *The Case for Idealism*. Routledge.
- . (2008). *A World for Us: The Case for Phenomenalist Idealism*. Oxford University Press.
- Frank, Philipp. (1941). *Between Physics and Philosophy*. Harvard University Press.
- Gaskin, Richard. (2019) From the unity of the proposition to linguistic idealism. *Synthese* 196, 1325–1342.
DOI: 10.1007/s11229-016-1081-5
- Geach, Peter. (1969) *God and the Soul*. Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- George, H. Thomas. (1976). Berkeley's God does not perceive, *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, Vol. 14, No. 2, 163–168, DOI: 10.1353/hph.2008.0688
- Goldschmidt, Tyron & Pearce, Kenneth L. (eds.) (2017), *Idealism: New Essays in Metaphysics*. Oxford University Press.
- Guyer, Paul and Rolf-Peter Horstmann, "Idealism", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2022 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), forthcoming URL = [<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2022/entries/idealism/>](https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2022/entries/idealism/).
- Hofweber, Thomas. (2019). Idealism and the harmony of thought and reality, *Mind*, Vol. 128, Issue 511, 699–734, DOI: 10.1093/mind/fzy086
- Kodaj, Daniel. (2021). Humean Idealism, *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, DOI: 10.1080/00048402.2021.1973521
- Lebens, Samuel. (2020). *The Principles of Judaism*. Oxford University Press.
- . (2017). Hassidic idealism: Kurt Vonnegut and the creator of the universe, In Tyron Goldschmidt and Kenneth L. Pearce (Eds.), *Idealism: New Essays in Metaphysics* (pp. 158-177). Oxford University Press.

- McCouat, H., Prokhovnik, S. (1994). The Influence of Idealism in 20th Century Physics. In: Barone, M., Selleri, F. (eds) *Frontiers of Fundamental Physics*. Springer, Boston, MA.
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4615-2560-8_27
- Meixner, Uwe. (2017). Idealism and panpsychism. In Godehard Brüntrup and Ludwig Jaskolla (Eds.), *Panpsychism: Contemporary Perspectives* (pp. 387-405). Oxford University Press.
- Pelczar, Michael. (2015). *Sensorama: A phenomenalist analysis of spacetime and its contents*. Oxford University Press.
- . (2019). Defending phenomenism, *The Philosophical Quarterly* 69(276), 574-597.
- Psillos, Stathis. (2022). Idealism and science. In Joshua Farris and Benedikt Paul Göcke (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Idealism and Immaterialism* (pp. 576-588). Routledge.
- Rescher, Nicholas. (1991). Conceptual Idealism Revisited. *The Review of Metaphysics*, 44(3), 495–523.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/20129056>
- . (1995). *Satisfying Reason: Studies in the Theory of Knowledge*. Springer.
- Robinson, Howard. (1982). *Matter and Sense: A Critique of Contemporary Materialism*. Cambridge University Press.
- . (2003). The general form of the argument for Berkeleyian idealism. In Timothy O'Connor and David Robb (Eds.), *Philosophy of Mind: Contemporary Readings* (pp. 81-102). Routledge.
- . (2009). Idealism. In Ansgar Beckermann, Brian P. McLaughlin, Sven Walter (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Mind* (pp. 189-205). Oxford University Press.
- . (2012). Qualia, qualities, and our conception of the physical world. In Benedikt Paul Göcke (ed.), *After Physicalism* (pp. 231-263). University of Notre Dame Press.
- Seager, William. (2018). Idealism, panpsychism, and emergentism: the radical wing of consciousness studies. In Rocco J. Gennaro (Ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Consciousness* (pp. 64-77). Routledge.
- Smithson, Robert. (2021a). Idealism and illusions, *European Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 29, Issue 1, 137–151, DOI: 10.1111/ejop.12563
- . (2021b). Edenic idealism, *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, DOI: 10.1080/00048402.2021.1981804
- Tse, C. Y. Plato. (2022). Metaphysical idealism revisited. *Philosophy Compass*, 17(7), e12856. <https://doi.org/10.1111/phc3.12856>
- Wigner, Eugene Paul. (1967). Remarks on the mind-body question. In Jagdish Mehra (Ed.) *The Collected Works of Eugene Paul Wigner. Vol. 6: Philosophical Reflections and Syntheses* (pp. 247-260). Springer.

Course schedule

<i>Week</i>	<i>Topics</i>	<i>Required reading</i>	<i>Tutorials</i>	<i>Remarks</i>
1	Introduction			
2	Arguments against Physicalism			

3	Arguments against Physicalism			
4	Linguistic Idealism			
5	Linguistic Idealism			
6	Conceptual Idealism			
7	Conceptual Idealism			
8	Epistemic Idealism			
9	Epistemic Idealism			
10	Physical Idealism			
11	Physical Idealism			
12	Idealism with or without God			
13	Idealism with or without God			

Details of course website

Contact details for teacher(s) or TA(s)

Teacher	
Name:	Prof. Tse Chiu-yui Plato
Office location:	
Telephone:	
Email:	

TA	
Name:	
Office location:	
Telephone:	
Email:	

Academic honesty and plagiarism

Attention is drawn to University policy and regulations on honesty in academic work, and to the disciplinary guidelines and procedures applicable to breaches of such policy and regulations. Details may be found at http://www.cuhk.edu.hk/policy/academic_honesty/

With each assignment, students will be required to submit a signed **declaration** that they are aware of these policies, regulations, guidelines and procedures. For group projects, all students of the same group should be asked to sign the declaration.

For assignments in the form of a computer-generated document that is principally text-based and

submitted via VeriGuide, the statement, in the form of a receipt, will be issued by the system upon students' uploading of the soft copy of the assignment. Assignments without the receipt will not be graded by teachers. Only the final version of the assignment should be submitted via VeriGuide.

Use of Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) Tools in Teaching, Learning and Assessment

Use of generative AI tools

Approach 3 – Use only with explicit acknowledgement

Students are allowed to use AI tools in any learning activities and/or assessments as long as they explicitly cite or otherwise acknowledge the use of these tools.

In this course, students are permitted to use generative AI tools for the purposes of literature search and writing assistance (such as grammar correction, rephrasing, and proofreading). They may use large language models (LLMs) including but not limited to: ChatGPT, Google Gemini, Microsoft Copilot, Claude, Perplexity AI. However, the use of AI tools must strictly adhere to the following conditions:

1. Permission
 - a. Searching for relevant literature and summarizing its content
 - b. Clarifying complex academic concepts or terminology
 - c. Improving the clarity, grammar, structure, and style of student-written work (proofreading only).
2. Prohibition
 - a. Students must not use generative AI tools to generate assignment content or substitute for required reading and comprehension.
 - b. References or quotations generated by AI must not be trusted at face value. Students must independently verify all references, quotations, and claims made with the support of AI tools by consulting the sources.
3. Acknowledgement and Responsibility
 - a. Any use of generative AI tools must be explicitly acknowledged in submitted work (e.g., footnote, appendix, or a brief statement at the end of the assignment indicating which tools were used and how).
 - b. Students are fully responsible for any factual inaccuracies, misrepresentations, fabricated citations, or stylistic inconsistencies that arise from their use of AI tools.
 - c. Improper use of AI, such as presenting AI-generated content as one's own or failing to disclose AI use, constitutes a breach of academic integrity and may result in penalty.