

MINOR GREAT THINKERS: Leading Paradigms of Western Culture 2026-2027

For registration please fill out the separate Minor Registration Form

Period		Title	Code	ECTS	Assessment
Period 1: 31-08-2026 / 23-10-2026	Course	The Birth of Reason	MGT3000	12	grade
Period 2: 26-10-2026 / 18-12-2026	Course	Modernity and Its Discontents	MGT3001	12	grade
Period 3: 04-01-2027 / 29-01-2027	Course	Great Books and Debates	MGT3002	6	grade

Introduction

The minor 'Great Thinkers' is an interdisciplinary programme that focuses on the intellectual roots of European culture. The courses will familiarise you with turning points in the history of ideas, such as the birth of rational thinking, the invention of individuality, the political plea for the separation of powers, and the notion of the so-called unconscious. You will study the world views of a range of thinkers, such as Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Ockham, Machiavelli, Rousseau, Kant, Nietzsche, Marx, Darwin, Freud, and Arendt. As such, the minor is meant for students who are looking for an intellectually challenging programme and are willing to invest in their *Bildung*.

Course objectives

The minor will enable you

- to gain insight into the fundamental characteristics of European culture by studying the views of important thinkers within their social and historical context;
- to train yourself in critical thinking and analytic skills;
- to reflect upon the underlying philosophical assumptions of the discipline(s) you are studying at your own faculty.

Period 1: The Birth of Reason

The first course will take you on a journey of discovery from Antiquity to early Modernity. You will study and contextualize the amazing world views of leading thinkers of Antiquity (the Pre-Socratics, Sophocles, and 'the big three', viz. Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle), the Middle Ages (among others Augustine, Thomas Aquinas and William of Ockham) and Early Modernity (featuring Machiavelli). Emphasis will be on what triggered their ideas and how these ideas contributed to today's rationalised, disenchanted and anthropocentric world view. Finally, we will discuss some conspicuous aspects of the Western intellectual inheritance with regard to environment, human rights, political (non-)inclusivity, (in)equality, animals' rights.

Course objectives

You will

- learn to recognise the theoretical assumptions underlying the dominant paradigms of today's global society;
- be able to analyse, evaluate, and reflect upon the complex arguments brought

- forward by the great thinkers studied in this course;
- enhance your critical thinking and flexibility of mind.

Period 2: Modernity and Its Discontents

The second course will cover the emergence of new ideas that structured modern life and society up to today. Many leading ideas and principles from the political, social, and cultural world (such as political ideologies, naturalised world views, and optimism about the potential of science) as well as opposition against them can be traced to Enlightenment thinkers and Romantic views. This course will present major European thinkers (Descartes, Locke, Voltaire, Rousseau, Kant, Tocqueville, Hegel, Marx, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Freud, Weber, Arendt) who shaped modern society and culture from the eighteenth to the twentieth century. Themes will include the rise of individualism, belief in progress, cultural pessimism, the death of God, the emergence of democratic movements, psychoanalysis, and the opposition between Western and Eastern philosophy.

Course objectives

You will learn about

- the intensifying processes of rationalisation that emerged during the Enlightenment;
- the opposition to these developments in the nineteenth and twentieth century, discussing such values as freedom, justice, and authenticity;
- the processes underlying the emergence of political ideologies and alternative perspectives on Western culture.
- Furthermore, you will learn to analyse, evaluate, and reflect upon the complex arguments brought forward by the great thinkers studied in this course.

Period 3: Great Books and Debates

‘Great Books and Debates’ comprises a series of sessions in which key readings of Western culture will be read, thoroughly contextualised, and discussed in depth. You will read (excerpts from) highly influential books, such as Karl Marx’s *Capital*, Nietzsche’s *Antichrist*, Freud’s *Civilization and Its Discontents*, and Carl Gustav Jung’s *Man and His Symbols*.

Course objectives

You will

- recognize the roots of some of the major controversies in contemporary Western culture, such as capitalism versus the call for social justice, perfectionism versus an ideal of completeness, Darwinism versus a religious understanding of what it means to be human, techno-optimism versus the power of the unconscious.
- learn how to analyse, evaluate, and reflect upon the complex arguments featuring in the controversies studied in this course.