

CHAPMAN UNIVERSITY

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As team teachers, we will hold office hours together,
please email both professors to schedule a meeting

COURSE SYLLABUS

ECON-ENG-PHIL 357
Fall 2025

Topics in Humanomics: Justice-fying Property

Catalog Description:

Prerequisites: Permission of instructor.

This course will explore a question central to modern commercial society: what is the nature and significance of ownership and debt? Drawing upon texts from across time and place, combining readings from philosophy, literature, and economics, and working with professors from Political Economy and Philosophy, students will have an opportunity to explore ideas of equality from multiple perspectives.

Among the questions we will discuss are: What is property, and why do we have it? Do we possess objects, or do objects possess us? What does it mean to owe a debt? Can we owe debt without being owned ourselves? Under what circumstances, if any, are relations of ownership and debt compatible with justice? This course dialogically explores Bart Wilson's *The Property Species*, David Graeber's *Debt: the First 2,000 Years*, and John Steinbeck's, *The Grapes of Wrath* to shape how we understand these relationships.

Humanomics classes (like this one) adopt a distinctively interdisciplinary approach. Throughout the term, we will address these questions through the lenses of economics, philosophy, and art. We will not just ask what these disciplines have to say about our topic independently of one another; we will also ask how these disciplines interact, enrich each other, and have unique ways of capturing parts of reality. The overarching idea is that there are many ways of expressing important ideas and that focusing on any one form of expression (social scientific, philosophical, artistic) in isolation is bound to leave important aspects of those ideas unstated, or incompletely expressed. Moreover, by working with media situated in a variety of historical contexts, we will necessarily ask why a set of ideas have been expressed in different ways in different times and places, and how this form of expression affects what's being said.

As the term “Humanomics” suggests, the Smith Institute’s “Topics in Humanomics” course, ENG/ECON/PHIL 357, seeks to dissolve the boundaries that currently separate the disciplines of economics, literary studies (and art in general), and philosophy. Because the objects of study in these disciplines are rapidly converging due to the recognition that the human condition must be studied *in toto* rather than piecemeal, they can no longer be studied in isolation. While neoclassical economists constituted *homo economicus* as a kind of human calculator who constantly assesses risks and opportunities in the context of self-interest, contemporary economists acknowledge that economic behavior is far more complicated and deserves more holistic scrutiny. Thus, modern economics often draws upon perspectives from other disciplines that examine not just how humans make choices but why. Literature and philosophy have just as much to teach economists as does economic science and vice versa. In turn, economics, when understood as the study of motivation and “origins” of behavior rather than the study of mere means, ends, and outcomes, has a great deal to teach other disciplines that are equally concerned with how humans find or create meaning in their lives. In every version of 357, students read literary, economic, and philosophical texts to understand how each mode both represents the world through its own conventions and raises the kinds of questions that cannot be confined to any given academic silo.

3 credits. (GE categories: VI, SI, AI)

– Artistic Inquiry Learning Outcome

Students will create and analyze artistic expressions. Their writing assignments will include both short creative pieces as well as one of the two longer works students will produce during the term. Through class discussion, instruction, and several writing assignments of various lengths and genres, students will acquire the tools to produce, interpret, and question artistic forms and approaches. The significance, role, importance, and impact of artistic approaches and forms will thus be highlighted. Students will consider the various evaluations and depictions of the role and significance of debt and ownership, asking how these might be sensitive to the mode of artistic depiction or analysis used. How does the form of the novel and play shape the depiction of debt and ownership? Does it serve to uphold the value of this mode of economic life, or does it open up avenues for critically reflecting on it? We will explore these questions as well as the ways the form of expression shapes our understanding of the world. Students will be challenged to explore through class discussion and instruction, as well as active participation in the creation of artistic expressions of their own.

– Social Inquiry Learning Outcome

Students identify, frame, and analyze social and/or historical structures and institutions in the world today.

– Values and Ethics Inquiry Learning Outcome

Students articulate how values and ethics inform human understanding, structures, and behavior.

– Program Learning Outcomes (Economics):

- Knowledge of Economics: Each student will demonstrate knowledge of modern microeconomic theory and apply it to analyze economic policies and problems.
- Communication: Each student will be able to communicate clearly, concisely, and professionally in both written and oral forms.

Program Learning Outcomes (English):

- Skill in critical reading, or the practice of identifying and interpreting the formal, rhetorical, and stylistic features of a text.
- Skill in crafting a compelling thesis-driven essay, with substantiating evidence.

Program Learning Outcomes (Philosophy):

- Critical Reasoning: Ability to construct and analyze complex arguments and distinguish good reasoning from bad.
- Ethical Reasoning: Ability to reason logically, effectively, and respectfully about ethical matters.

Course Objectives:

Upon completion of the course, students will be able to:

1. Explain and critique Bart Wilson's claim that "property is a universal and uniquely human custom."
2. Propound their own theory of justice and apply it to a conception of property and the relation of debt.
3. Explain Graeber's challenge to debt as a moralized concept.
4. Place contemporary debates about debt and ownership in their historical context.
5. Integrate Steinbeck's treatment of debt and poverty with other texts into an understanding applicable to economics.
6. Demonstrate how Steinbeck and Forster create narratives exploring debt and ownership by composing narratives in the form of a story or play.
7. Challenge and deconstruct the perceived tension between economics and the humanities.
8. Ask cogent, thought-provoking questions based upon critical reading of texts across a range of genres and disciplines—short stories, novels, economics, law, and philosophy.
9. Apply experience in economic experiments to ideas in literary, social, and philosophical texts.

Required Texts to Purchase (physical book, not e-book):

- Wilson, Bart. (2020) *The Property Species*. Oxford University Press ([link](#))
- Graeber, David. (2012) *Debt: The First 5,000 Years*. Melville House ([link](#))
- Steinbeck, John. (2002) *The Grapes of Wrath*. Penguin ([link](#))
- Shakespeare, William (2009). Folger Shakespeare Library ([link](#))

Articles and Selections (available on Canvas):

- Locke, John. (2003) *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. P. Laslett. Cambridge University Press. Ch. 5: "Of Property"
- Rose, Carol. (1994) "Seeing Property." In: Carol Rose, *Property and Persuasion*, pp. 267-304
- DeScioli, P., & Wilson, B. J. (2011). The territorial foundations of human property. *Evolution and Human Behavior*, 32(5), 297–304.

Essential Facility:
Seminar setting

Instructional Methods:

This course uses a combination of hands-on learning in Socratic roundtable discussions of texts, economic experiments, question development, and demonstration of discovered meaning through expository and creative papers.

Evaluation:

1. *Participation in Class Discussions* [20%]

Class discussion provides an opportunity for students to explore questions about exchange and the human condition, challenging the common perception of economics as distinct from the humanities. Through this shared inquiry, students gain experience reading for meaning and communicating complex ideas; thinking reflectively about an interpretive problem; and supporting and testing thoughts through dialogue with peers. Class discussion fosters the flexibility of mind to consider problems from multiple perspectives and the ability to analyze ideas critically. Students must enter the discussion with specific questions generated by all our texts as well as a desire to probe and reevaluate ideas. It is essential that students bring texts and questions to each class session. This part of your grade will also reflect participation in the writer's workshop.

2. *Written Questions* [15%]

Shared inquiry is a process for exploring the central ideas of the course. This means students must read for meaning, identifying possible interpretative problems they would like to address in discussion. For each class period with an assignment, students will word process in advance two questions to be handed in before class starts. Asking a good question is harder than providing a good answer. The student's task is to delve into a claim that doesn't appear correct or consistent with the human condition. Explore with your question why the claim is surprising, unexpected, or just plain unsettling. Why is there a clash? Such questions will prepare the student for their daily writing.

The main ingredients of good questions are the following. A good question:

- a) Is clearly phrased,
- b) Is singular; i.e. asks one thing, and one thing only, and
- c) Focuses on an *idea* relevant to our course on which we can make some progress through discussion. (Please avoid factual questions, which require us to google, questions about the plot in the novel, etc.)

3. *Laboratory Experiments* [5%]

Part of the experiential learning in this class involves participating in laboratory exercises involving concepts that we will discuss in a future class. All you need to do is show up on time and make the decisions you deem to be the best for the situation presented to you.

4. *Expository and Creative Writing* [40%]

Students will write 250 polished words nearly each week. An important component of these assignments is to understand each week's texts in their social, philosophical, and/or artistic context. Another important part will be the students' engaging in their own artistic expression. Students will encounter a variety of writing assignments for the workshop, including both critical and creative works.

For the first half of the semester, these will take the form of short essays. Later, longer pieces are expected also. Each long written work will be worth 10% of the final grade. The average of the short essays will be worth 20%. More details will be discussed in class.

5. *Oral Final Examination* [20%]

The oral final examination is an opportunity for you to synthesize your ideas across the texts. Note: it will involve dice. Other details will be discussed in the final week of the course.

Because of the interactive nature of the class, attendance is an essential component. Excessive tardies constitute absences; *three* absences may result in failure (Undergraduate Catalog, "Academic Policies and Procedures"). Please keep this in mind. Missed in-class work cannot be made up.

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Letter Grade by Numerical Score:

A	94-100	C+	76-79.9
A-	90-93.9	C	74-75.9
B+	86-89.9	C-	70-73.9
B	84-85.9	D	64-69.9
B-	80-83.9	F	0-63.9

Academic Integrity Policy

Chapman University is a community of scholars that emphasizes the mutual responsibility of all members to seek knowledge honestly and in good faith. Students are responsible for doing their own work and academic dishonesty of any kind will be subject to sanction by the instructor/administrator and referral to the University Academic Integrity Committee, which may impose additional sanctions including expulsion. Please see the full description of Chapman University's policy on Academic Integrity at:

<https://www.chapman.edu/academics/academic-integrity/index.aspx>.

Students with Disabilities Policy

In compliance with ADA guidelines, students who have any condition, either permanent or temporary, that might affect their ability to perform in this class are encouraged to contact the Disability Services Office. If you will need to utilize your approved accommodations in this class, please follow the proper notification procedure for informing your professor(s). This notification process must occur more than a week before any accommodation can be utilized. Please contact Disability Services at (714) 516-4520 or visit <https://www.chapman.edu/students/health-and-safety/disability-services/index.aspx> if you have questions regarding this procedure or for information or to make an appointment to discuss and/or request potential accommodations based on documentation of your disability. Once formal approval of your need for an accommodation has been granted, you are encouraged to talk with your professor(s) about your accommodation options. The granting of any accommodation will not be retroactive and cannot jeopardize the academic standards or integrity of the course.

Equity and Diversity Policy

Chapman University is committed to ensuring equality and valuing diversity. Students and professors are reminded to show respect at all times as outlined in Chapman's Harassment and Discrimination Policy. Please see the full description of this policy at <http://www.chapman.edu/faculty-staff/human-resources/eoo.aspx>. Any violations of this policy should be discussed with the professor, the dean of students, and/or otherwise reported in accordance with this policy.

Tentative Schedule

Date	Reading
8/26	Graeber, ch. 1
8/ 28	Steinbeck, chs. 1-6
9/2	Wilson, Prologue, ch. 1 <i>First short paper due</i>
9/4	<i>Experiment #1</i>
9/9	Graeber, ch. 2 <i>Second short paper due</i>
9/11	Wilson, ch. 2 & Wilson and De Scioli
9/16	Steinbeck, chs. 7-10 <i>Third short paper due</i>

9/18	Graeber, ch. 3
9/23	Steinbeck, chs. 11-15 <i>Fourth short paper due</i>
9/25	Wilson, ch. 3
9/30	Steinbeck, chs. 19-21 <i>Fifth short paper due</i>
10/2	WRITING WORKSHOP
10/7	Graeber, ch. 4
10/9	Locke, "Of Property"
10/14	Locke, "Of Property"
10/16	Wilson, ch. 6 <i>First long paper due</i>
10/21	Graeber, ch. 8
10/23	Wilson, ch. 7
10/28	Steinbeck, chs. 22-23 <i>Sixth short paper due</i>
10/30	Graeber, ch. 11
11/4	Steinbeck, chs. 24-26 <i>Seventh short paper due</i>
11/6	Rose, "Seeing Property"
11/11	<i>Experiment #2</i>
11/13	Wilson, ch. 9
11/18	WRITING WORKSHOP
11/20	Graeber, ch. 12
	<i>Thanksgiving break</i>

12/2	Shakespeare, <i>The Merchant of Venice</i>
12/4	Steinbeck, chs. 27-30 <i>Final creative paper due</i>