

FFC 100 – Dangerous Ideas aka Utopias and Dystopias

Fall 2026

INSTRUCTORS: Professor Keith Hankins (hankins@chapman.edu) and Professor Michael Valdez Moses (mimoses@chapman.edu)

COURSE MEETINGS: MW 4–5:15pm – Wilkinson 220

OFFICE HOURS: We will have joint office hours by request. Try to give us some notice, but we are usually available in the afternoons before class. We're also happy to meet with you individually about matters that don't directly concern your work for the course.

PREREQUISITES: None

COURSE COMMUNICATIONS: The vast majority of classroom communications will take place through email (typically via the dedicated course Canvas site). **YOU ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR MAKING SURE THAT YOU RECEIVE THESE COMMUNICATIONS.** We are a team, so if you email one of us, email both of us.

Description

In 399 BC, Socrates was sentenced to die by drinking hemlock because he dared to challenge the traditional beliefs of Athens. In 1859, John Stuart Mill summoned Socrates' ghost by waging a vehement defense of free speech on the grounds that coercing silence "is robbing the human race." Across history we see examples of dissenters, gadflies, heretics, and revolutionaries in figures as prominent and heralded as Martin Luther, Galileo, Karl Marx, Harriet Tubman, Susan B. Anthony, and Salman Rushdie. Yet we so often reserve our approval of their dissidence only once the dust has cleared and we can see with distance and with clear eyes the moral superiority of victors. That is, we approve dissent only if we are already convinced that it is in the name of moral progress. In this course, we will force such patterns of thought to a halt. By engaging each week with a contentious and perhaps intractable—perhaps, in some cases, even unspeakable—issue that is salient and pressing in our society today, we will force ourselves to assess dissenting voices before the dust has settled. Our method of approach will be rigid and rigorous: we will reconstruct the arguments and assess the quality of evidence relied upon by parties wading into these debates with their dangerous ideas.

Note: This course was once listed under the alternate title "Utopias and Dystopias," and some of you may have signed up for that version. The change in title reflects the fact that this course will be taught using a method shared by several other FFCs that share the Dangerous Ideas title. As described in the original course designation we will be watching and discussing several films over the course of the semester. Many of the topics we will be discussing are also ideas that commonly get labeled dystopian or utopian (depending on one's perspective). Our hope is that this course will help you develop the skills needed to engage in thoughtful conversations about important but controversial topics so that we don't slide down the path towards dystopia.

Units and Debate Resolutions

The course is organized around four units, each of which culminates in a formal debate over a resolution. Each unit also includes a film session and a data workshop. To give you a sense of the stakes, and of how far apart serious people stand on these questions, each unit opens with a pair of provocations.

Unit 1: Billionaires

Resolved: That there should be no billionaires.

“Billionaires should not exist.”

— Senator Bernie Sanders, on X (2019)

"One of the most patriotic things that you can do as an American is go out and get filthy, stinkin' rich, create a ton of jobs, invest in your company and others, and then pay your taxes."

— Mark Cuban, *What's Next? The Future with Bill Gates* (Netflix, 2024)

Unit 2: Science, Authority, and the Pandemic

Resolved: That the state was justified in imposing lockdowns and mandatory vaccination during the COVID-19 pandemic.

“If everything we do saves just one life, I’ll be happy.”

— Governor Andrew Cuomo, announcing the New York lockdown (March 20, 2020)

“... anyone who has studied history will recognise here the classic symptoms of collective hysteria.”

— Lord Jonathan Sumption, former UK Supreme Court Justice, on the public clamor for lockdowns, *BBC World at One* (March 30, 2020)

Unit 3: Political Parties

Resolved: That American political parties are not powerful enough.

“Modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of the parties.”

— E.E. Schattschneider, *Party Government* (1942)

“I have already intimated to you the danger of parties in the State ... Let me now take a more comprehensive view, and warn you in the most solemn manner against the baneful effects of the spirit of party generally.”

— George Washington, *Farewell Address* (1796)

Unit 4: AI and Creativity

Resolved: That there should be no limits on the use of AI in creative industries.

“I like the idea of open sourcing all art and killing copyright.”

— Grimes, on X, inviting AI-generated songs in her voice (2023)

“...a grotesque mockery of what it is to be human.”

— Nick Cave, on a ChatGPT-written song “in the style of Nick Cave,” *The Red Hand Files* (2023)

Required Texts and Materials

All readings, podcasts, and film information will be posted or linked on Canvas. Films should be viewed before the class session in which we discuss them.

Opening — Free Inquiry

Ruth Simmons interview (details on Canvas).

Unit 1: Billionaires

Robeyns, Ingrid. "What, if Anything, Is Wrong with Extreme Wealth?" *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities* (2019).

Carnegie, Andrew. "The Gospel of Wealth" (1889).

Huseby, Robert. "The Limits of Limitarianism." *Journal of Political Philosophy* (2022).

Cowen, Tyler. *Big Business: A Love Letter to an American Anti-Hero* (2019), chapter on CEOs.

Film: *Citizen Kane* (1941).

Unit 2: Science, Authority, and the Pandemic

Great Barrington Declaration (2020).

John Snow Memorandum, *The Lancet* (2020).

Banerjee, Amitav. "The Great Barrington Declaration" and "The John Snow Memorandum": Two parallel lines which are destined to meet." (2021).

Agamben, Giorgio. *Where Are We Now? The Epidemic as Politics* (2021), selections: "The Invention of an Epidemic," "Clarifications," "A Question," "Biosecurity and Politics," and "Medicine as Religion."

Douthat, Ross. "Rational Panic but also Rational Hope," *New York Times* (March 28, 2020), and "The Coronavirus and the Conservative Mind," *New York Times* (March 31, 2020).

Herby, Jonung & Hanke. Meta-analysis of the effects of lockdowns on COVID-19 mortality, *Public Choice* (2025).

Oster, Emily. "Let's Declare a Pandemic Amnesty," *The Atlantic* (2022).

Film: *Contagion* (2011).

Unit 3: Political Parties

Madison, James. *Federalist No. 10*.

Tocqueville, Alexis de. *Democracy in America*, Vol. 1, Part 2, Ch. 2.

Rauch, Jonathan and Raymond La Raja. "Too Much Democracy Is Bad for Democracy," *The Atlantic*.

Katz, Richard and Peter Mair. "The Cartel Party Thesis," *Perspectives on Politics* (2009).

Podcasts: an episode with Julia Azari, and an episode with Katherine Gehl or John Matsusaka [links to be posted on Canvas].

Film: *Lincoln* (2012).

Unit 4: AI and Creativity

Chiang, Ted. "Why A.I. Isn't Going to Make Art," *The New Yorker* (2024).

Benjamin, Walter. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1935).

Writers Guild of America, 2023 agreement, AI provisions.

Boden, Margaret. "Creativity and Artificial Intelligence: A Contradiction in Terms?"

Film: *AlphaGo* (2017, documentary).

Course Schedule (subject to change, assignments updated as we go)

Date	Session	Readings / Materials	Assignment Due
Mon, Aug 24	Course intro and free inquiry	Introductions, Ruth Simmons interview, and argument maps	
Wed, Aug 26	Intro and free inquiry, cont.	More introductions, film and arguments	Entrance survey
Unit 1: Billionaires			
Mon, Aug 31	The limitarian case	Robeyns, 'What, if Anything, Is Wrong with Extreme Wealth?' (2019)	Robeyns paragraph argument map (in class, group)
Wed, Sep 2	Wealth, desert, and stewardship	Carnegie, 'The Gospel of Wealth' (1889)	Data Workshop 1 introduced (Forbes list)
Mon, Sep 7	NO CLASS — Labor Day (University closed)		
Wed, Sep 9	The reply to limitarianism	Huseby, 'The Limits of Limitarianism' (2022)	Huseby paper argument map (individual, due before class)
Mon, Sep 14	Film session	Citizen Kane (1941) — view before class	Film reflection (Canvas, before class)
Wed, Sep 16	Data workshop	Cowen, Big Business, chapter on CEOs; Forbes list discussion	Data Workshop 1 (Forbes list)
Mon, Sep 21	Debate Club 1	Resolved: That there should be no billionaires.	Debate Club 1
Wed, Sep 23	NO CLASS — canceled		
Unit 2: Science, Authority, and the Pandemic			
Mon, Sep 28	Duelling manifestos	Great Barrington Declaration (2020); John Snow Memorandum, The Lancet (2020); Banerjee editorial [cite TBD]	Data Workshop 2 introduced (pandemic impact)
Wed, Sep 30	Biopower and the state of exception	Agamben, Where Are We Now? (2021), selections: 'The Invention of an Epidemic,' 'Clarifications,' 'A Question,' 'Biosecurity and Politics,' 'Medicine as Religion'	Agamben chapter argument map (in class, group)
Mon, Oct 5	The conservative mind and the pandemic	Douthat, 'Rational Panic but also Rational Hope' (NYT, Mar 28, 2020) and 'The Coronavirus and the Conservative Mind' (NYT, Mar 31, 2020)	Douthat paragraph argument map (individual, due before class)
Wed, Oct 7	Film session	Contagion (2011) — view before class	Film reflection (Canvas, before class)
Mon, Oct 12	Data workshop	Herby, Jonung & Hanke meta-analysis (Public Choice); Oster, 'Let's Declare a Pandemic Amnesty' (The Atlantic, 2022)	Data Workshop 2 (pandemic impact)

Date	Session	Readings / Materials	Assignment Due
Wed, Oct 14	Debate Club 2	Resolved: That the state was justified in imposing lockdowns and mandatory vaccination during the COVID-19 pandemic.	Debate Club 2
Unit 3: Political Parties			
Mon, Oct 19	Faction and party, founding-era	Federalist 10; Tocqueville, Democracy in America, Vol. 1, Pt. 2, Ch. 2	Data Workshop 3 introduced (election forecasts)
Wed, Oct 21	The case for strong parties	Rauch & La Raja, 'Too Much Democracy Is Bad for Democracy' (The Atlantic); Julia Azari podcast [TBD]	Argument map (individual, due before class)
Mon, Oct 26	The case against parties	Katz & Mair, 'The Cartel Party Thesis' (Perspectives on Politics, 2009); podcast w/ Gehl or Matsusaka [TBD]	Argument map (in class, group)
Wed, Oct 28	Film session	Lincoln (2012) — view before class	Film reflection (Canvas, before class)
Mon, Nov 2	Debate Club 3 (eve of Election Day)	Resolved: That American political parties are not powerful enough.	Debate Club 3; deadline to register election predictions
Wed, Nov 4	Post-election debrief / data workshop	Discuss midterm results and evaluate election forecasts	Data Workshop 3
Unit 4: AI and Creativity			
Mon, Nov 9	Can a machine make art?	Chiang, 'Why A.I. Isn't Going to Make Art' (The New Yorker, 2024)	Argument map; reminder about AI creative project
Wed, Nov 11	Reproduction and the policy question	Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (1935); WGA 2023 agreement, AI provisions	
Mon, Nov 16	The affirmative case	Boden, 'Creativity and Artificial Intelligence: A Contradiction in Terms?'	Argument map
Wed, Nov 18	A case study	AlphaGo (2017, documentary) — Move 37 as case study; view before class	Film reflection (Canvas, before class)
Mon, Nov 23	NO CLASS — Thanksgiving recess (students only)		
Wed, Nov 25	NO CLASS — Thanksgiving recess (students only)		
Mon, Nov 30	Debate Club 4	Resolved: That there should be no limits on the use of AI in creative industries.	Debate Club 4
Wrap Up			

Date	Session	Readings / Materials	Assignment Due
Wed, Dec 2	Class debrief (last meeting)	Class debrief and creative project evaluation	Creative project critical evaluations due
Mon, Dec 7	FINAL: Roundtable oral examination	Held during the assigned final examination period	All grades due Mon, Dec 21

Assignments and Grading

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. Your grade is composed of six components: participation is worth 25% of your final grade, and each of the remaining five components is worth 15%.

1. Participation in Class Discussion [25%]

The purpose of this course is for you to develop skills of listening, seeking clarification, and articulating your viewpoint in difficult conversations. You cannot develop these skills if you do not participate in class each and every time that we meet. Classes will mostly be structured as Socratic discussions. Each discussion will be moderated by one of the faculty, who will keep a queue in order to manage the discussion and track your contributions. Your grade will reflect both the quality and quantity of your contributions over the course of the semester.

2. Debate Club [15%]

At the beginning of the semester the class will be divided into 8 teams of 3–4 students. Each of the four Debate Club days will feature 2 teams debating the resolution, 2 teams acting as amici curiae (“friends of the court”) who supplement the debaters’ cases with additional arguments and evidence, and 4 teams acting as judges. Each judging team will deliberate collectively, question the debating teams, and render a verdict. Over the course of the semester every team will debate once, serve as amicus curiae once, and judge twice. You will be graded on your performance in each of these roles.

3. Argument Maps [15%]

You will complete two argument maps (visualizations of how premises and conclusions fit together in specific assigned readings) for each unit, using the software MindMup. One map in each unit will be completed in class in small groups; the other will be completed individually and is due before we meet. One of the two maps in each unit will focus on a single paragraph that we identify in advance; the other will map an entire article or chapter. The units alternate which of these (the paragraph map or the full-text map) is the in-class group exercise, so that by the end of the semester you will have practiced both scales of analysis both collaboratively and on your own.

4. Film Reflections [15%]

Each unit includes a film that speaks, sometimes obliquely, to the unit’s central question. Before the class session in which we discuss each film, you will post a short reflection to the course Canvas discussion board. Your reflection must (a) describe what you take one of the messages of the film to be, and (b) provide at least one concrete example of something that the writer, director, actors, or another aspect of the production does to convey that message. These are not full reviews; they are exercises in identifying how a work of art advances a claim without stating it as an argument.

5. Data Workshops [15%]

For each unit you will complete a data workshop in which you apply basic statistical and empirical ideas to understand an important aspect of the debate. Each workshop involves individual work completed outside of class, followed by in-class group work that draws on the individual products.

Workshop 1 (Forbes list): You will explore the Forbes billionaire list and write short reports answering a series of questions about at least 3 billionaires of your choosing (no student may repeat another's picks).

Workshop 2 (Pandemic impact): You will identify aspects of well-being that might have been impacted by COVID-19 and the policy response to it, think about how those aspects could be measured, and try to identify published work that assesses them.

Workshop 3 (Election forecasts): Before Election Day you will register a set of predictions about the results of the midterm elections, which we will then evaluate together in the post-election debrief.

Workshop 4 (AI creative project): This exercise runs over the course of the semester. You will attempt to generate a creative work using AI. You may do as much prompting as you like, but no direct editing of the output. You will then submit the work for anonymous peer scrutiny, and in our final meeting we will discuss the outcomes of the exercise.

6. Final Oral Examination [15%]

In lieu of a traditional final exam, we will instead meet as a group during the assigned final examination period for an oral final examination. During the examination each student will be asked to respond to questions posed by the professors that reflect the course objectives. Questions will be developed over the course of the semester and will draw on questions raised during class discussion and in the texts. The goal of the assessment is for students to demonstrate in a conversational setting that they have critically reflected on the ideas and material covered in the course over the semester. The questions posed to each student will be selected through a random process that still provides the students some control over the questions they get asked.

Grading Scale:

A: 94–100; A-: 90–93; B+: 87–89; B: 83–86; B-: 80–82; C+: 77–79; C: 73–76; C-: 70–72; D: 65–70; F: 0–64

If you are still reading at this point, we really appreciate your attention to detail. To prove that to you, you can have 2 bonus points on the final exam if you send us a photo of somewhere you went over the summer by midnight on Friday of the first week of class.

Course Learning Outcomes

- Identify the components of argumentation (premises and conclusions), or else their absence, in written and oral polemics.
- Reconstruct and map the structure of arguments in contemporary academic and popular writing.
- Identify the type of evidence relied upon, the source of that evidence, and the quality of both type and source in contemporary academic and popular writing.
- Assess the merit of arguments to a debate with fairminded appeal to argumentative form and quality of evidence.
- Articulate the positions of historical defenders and critics of free and open inquiry.
- Defend the value or disvalue of engaging both orthodox and heterodox opinions in academic settings, public settings, and in private.
- Defend the value or disvalue of open inquiry and free speech, pertaining both to inquiry in general and to particular topics.

Chapman University's 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 review the full description of Chapman University's policy on Academic Integrity at www.chapman.edu/academics/academic-integrity/index.aspx.

A note on this course: the AI creative project in Unit 4 is the only assignment for which the use of generative AI is permitted, and there it is required. For all other assignments, the ordinary expectations of the Academic Integrity Policy apply.

Chapman University's Students with Disabilities Policy

Students who seek an accommodation of a disability or medical condition to participate in the class must contact the Office of Disability Services and follow the proper notification procedure for informing your professor(s) of any granted accommodations. This notification process must occur more than a week before any accommodation can be utilized. Please contact Disability Services at (714) 516-4520 or DS@chapman.edu if you have questions regarding this process, or for information and to make an appointment to discuss and/or request potential accommodations based on documentation of your disability. The granting of any accommodation will not be retroactive.

Chapman University's Anti-Discrimination Policy

Chapman University is committed to ensuring equality and valuing diversity, including of backgrounds, experiences and viewpoints. Students and professors are reminded to show respect at all times as outlined in Chapman's Harassment and Discrimination Policy. Please review the full description of the Harassment and Discrimination Policy. Any violations of this policy should be discussed with the professor, the Dean of Students and/or otherwise reported in accordance with this policy.