

Dangerous Ideas

Fall 2026 — MWF, one text per session

INSTRUCTOR: Professor Brennan McDavid (mcdavid@chapman.edu)

COURSE MEETINGS: MWF 11–11:50am — WH 220

OFFICE HOURS: By request. Try to give me some notice, but I will usually be available before and after class.

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.**

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 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.

Module Questions

Module 1: Gun Rights: Is there a moral right to own a firearm weighty enough to survive what we know about gun violence — and does the Second Amendment, as the Court now reads it, track that right or exceed it? The module runs deliberately from principle to consequence.

Module 2: The Great Feminization: Has the movement of women into elite institutions changed what those institutions are for, and would that be a loss?

Module 3: Natalism: Is creating a person a benefit to the world, a harm to the person created, or a duty owed to everyone else? (Two books in conversation.)

Module 4: Race Realism and the Ethics of Inquiry: Are there questions we should decline to investigate, and who decides? We take the question up through a controversy that a peer-reviewed journal conducted in public, on its own pages.

Required Texts, Cases, Viewing, and Listening Assignments

Foundational reading

Mill, John Stuart. 1859. On Liberty, ch. 2, 'Of the Liberty of Thought and Discussion.'

Marcuse, Herbert. 1965. 'Repressive Tolerance.' In *A Critique of Pure Tolerance*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Gun rights

DeGrazia, David, and Lester H. Hunt. 2016. *Debating Gun Control: How Much Regulation Do We Need?* New York: Oxford University Press.

Huemer, Michael. 2003. 'Is There a Right to Own a Gun?' *Social Theory and Practice* 29(2): 297–324.

District of Columbia v. Heller, 554 U.S. 570 (2008). Excerpts.

New York State Rifle & Pistol Association v. Bruen, 597 U.S. 1 (2022). Excerpts.

United States v. Rahimi, 602 U.S. 680 (2024). Excerpts.

United States v. Hemani, No. 24–1234 (18 June 2026). Excerpts.

Wolford v. Lopez, No. 24–1046 (25 June 2026). Excerpts.

Lott, John R., Jr. *More Guns, Less Crime*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Selections.

Donohue, John J., Abhay Aneja, and Kyle D. Weber. 2019. 'Right-to-Carry Laws and Violent Crime.' *Journal of Empirical Legal Studies* 16(2).

RAND Corporation. *The Science of Gun Policy*. <https://www.rand.org/research/gun-policy.html>

The Great Feminization

Andrews, Helen. 2025. 'The Great Feminization.' *Compact*, October 16.

Douthat, Ross. 2025. 'Did Liberal Feminism Ruin the Workplace?' *Interesting Times*, *The New York Times*, November 6. <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/11/06/opinion/women-workplace-feminism-conservative.html>

Clark, Cory J., and Bo Winegard. 2022. *Quillette*.

Fine, Cordelia. 2017. *Testosterone Rex: Myths of Sex, Science, and Society*. New York: W. W. Norton. One chapter.

Gneezy, Uri, Kenneth L. Leonard, and John A. List. 2009. 'Gender Differences in Competition: Evidence from a Matrilineal and a Patriarchal Society.' *Econometrica* 77(5): 1637–1664.

Rauch, Jonathan. 2021. *The Constitution of Knowledge: A Defense of Truth*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press. One chapter.

Yglesias, Matthew. 2025. 'Women's Professional Rise Is Good, Actually.' *Slow Boring*.

Hanania, Richard. 2025. 'The Feminization Talking Point as Partisan Hackery.'

Reeves, Richard V. 2022. *Of Boys and Men*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press. One chapter.

Natalism

Minkin, Rachel, Juliana Menasce Horowitz, and Carolina Aragão. 2024. 'Reasons Adults Give for Not Having Children.' *Pew Research Center*, July 25. <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2024/07/25/reasons-adults-give-for-not-having-children/>

Boswell, Jack. 2024. 'Should Humans Die Out? An Anti-Natalist Documentary.' December 19, approx. 45 min. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tnjC4GCHvA8>

Benatar, David. 2006. *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming into Existence*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Chs. 1–2.

May, Todd. 2018. 'Would Human Extinction Be a Tragedy?' *The Stone*, *The New York Times*, December 17. <https://gulfnews.com/opinion/op-eds/would-human-extinction-be-a-tragedy-1.61019391>

Kipnis, Laura. 2015. 'Maternal Instinct.' In Meghan Daum, ed., *Selfish, Shallow, and Self-Absorbed*. New York: Picador.

Spears, Dean, and Michael Geruso. 2025. *After the Spike: Population, Progress, and the Case for People*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Joshi, Hrishikesh. 2026. 'Are DINKs Free Riders?' *Desert Philosophy*, July 16. <https://desertphilosophy.substack.com/p/are-dinks-free-riders>

Race realism and the ethics of inquiry

Reich, David. 2018. 'How Genetics Is Changing Our Understanding of "Race."' *The New York Times*, March 23.

Edwards, A. W. F. 2003. 'Human Genetic Diversity: Lewontin's Fallacy.' *BioEssays* 25(8): 798–801.

Harden, Kathryn Paige. 2021. *The Genetic Lottery: Why DNA Matters for Social Equality*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. One chapter.

Dickens, William T., and James R. Flynn. 2006. 'Black Americans Reduce the Racial IQ Gap: Evidence from Standardization Samples.' *Psychological Science* 17(10): 913–920.

Cofnas, Nathan. 2020. 'Research on Group Differences in Intelligence: A Defense of Free Inquiry.' *Philosophical Psychology* 33(1): 125–147.

Cofnas, Nathan. 'My debunked views.' *The Critic*. Companion reading to the 2020 article.

Larsen, Rasmus Rosenberg, Helen De Cruz, Jonathan Kaplan, Agustín Fuentes, Jonathan Marks, Massimo Pigliucci, Mark Alfano, David Livingstone Smith, and Lauren Schroeder. 2020. 'More than Provocative, Less than Scientific: A Commentary on the Editorial Decision to Publish Cofnas (2020).' *Philosophical Psychology* 33(7): 893–898.

Herschbach, Mitchell. 2020. 'Editor's Views.' *Philosophical Psychology* 33(7): 899–901. Read with the Larsen et al. letter and the original Editors' Note.

Kourany, Janet A. 2016. 'Should Some Knowledge Be Forbidden? The Case of Cognitive Differences Research.' *Philosophy of Science* 83(5): 779–790.

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

Date	Readings / Viewing / Listening	Assignments Due
Foundations		
24-Aug (M)	Course introduction. Mill, 'Of the Liberty of Thought and Discussion' (opening).	Sway convo
26-Aug (W)	Mill, 'Of the Liberty of Thought and Discussion' (remainder).	
28-Aug (F)	In-class work session.	Argument Map

Date	Readings / Viewing / Listening	Assignments Due
Module 1: Gun Rights — from principle to consequence (31 Aug – 18 Sep)		
31-Aug (M)	Hunt, <i>Debating Gun Control</i> , Part I, chs. 1–3.	Argument Map
2-Sep (W)	Huemer, ‘Is There a Right to Own a Gun?’ (2003).	
4-Sep (F)	<i>District of Columbia v. Heller</i> (2008), excerpts.	
7-Sep (M)	Labor Day — no class.	
9-Sep (W)	<i>New York State Rifle & Pistol Assn. v. Bruen</i> (2022) and <i>United States v. Rahimi</i> (2024), excerpts.	Sway convo
11-Sep (F)	<i>United States v. Hemani</i> (2026) and <i>Wolford v. Lopez</i> (2026), excerpts.	
14-Sep (M)	DeGrazia, <i>Debating Gun Control</i> , Part II.	
16-Sep (W)	Data workshop.	Data Workshop
18-Sep (F)	Resolution: That the moral right to own a firearm is not outweighed by the social harms of private gun ownership.	Debate Club 1
Module 2: The Great Feminization (21 Sep – 9 Oct)		
21-Sep (M)	Andrews, ‘The Great Feminization’ (Compact, 2025).	Argument Map
23-Sep (W)	Clark & Winegard (Quillette, 2022) and Fine, <i>Testosterone Rex</i> , one chapter. the Douthat debate (Andrews v. Libresco Sargeant) .	
25-Sep (F)	Data workshop.	Data Workshop
28-Sep (M)	Rauch, <i>The Constitution of Knowledge</i> , one chapter.	
30-Sep (W)	Yglesias, ‘Women’s Professional Rise Is Good, Actually’ (Slow Boring).	
2-Oct (F)	Hanania, ‘The Feminization Talking Point as Partisan Hackery.’	
5-Oct (M)	Reeves, <i>Of Boys and Men</i> , one chapter.	Sway convo
7-Oct (W)	In-class work session.	
9-Oct (F)	Resolution: That the rising share of women in elite institutions has degraded those institutions’ capacity for truth-seeking.	Debate Club 2
Module 3: Natalism (12 Oct – 30 Oct)		
12-Oct (M)	Pew Research Center, ‘Reasons Adults Give for Not Having Children’ (2024), with Boswell, ‘Should Humans Die Out? An Anti-Natalist Documentary’ (2024, 45 min.).	Sway convo
14-Oct (W)	Benatar, <i>Better Never to Have Been</i> , chs. 1–2.	
16-Oct (F)	May, ‘Would Human Extinction Be a Tragedy?’ (New York Times, 2018).	Argument Map
19-Oct (M)	Kipnis, ‘Maternal Instinct’ (2015).	
21-Oct (W)	Spears & Geruso, <i>After the Spike</i> , opening chapters.	
23-Oct (F)	Data workshop.	Data Workshop
26-Oct (M)	Spears & Geruso, <i>After the Spike</i> , ch. 6 and closing chapters.	

Date	Readings / Viewing / Listening	Assignments Due
28-Oct (W)	Joshi, ‘Are DINKs Free Riders?’ (Desert Philosophy, 2026).	
30-Oct (F)	Resolution: That people who choose not to have children are free riders.	Debate Club 3
Module 4: Race Realism and the Ethics of Inquiry (2 Nov – 20 Nov)		
2-Nov (M)	Reich, ‘How Genetics Is Changing Our Understanding of “Race”’ (New York Times, 2018).	Argument Map
4-Nov (W)	Edwards, ‘Human Genetic Diversity: Lewontin’s Fallacy’ (2003).	
6-Nov (F)	Data workshop.	Data Workshop
9-Nov (M)	Harden, <i>The Genetic Lottery</i> , one chapter.	
11-Nov (W)	Dickens & Flynn, ‘Black Americans Reduce the Racial IQ Gap’ (2006).	
13-Nov (F)	Cofnas, ‘Research on Group Differences in Intelligence: A Defense of Free Inquiry’ (Philosophical Psychology, 2020).	
16-Nov (M)	Larsen et al., ‘More than Provocative, Less than Scientific’ (Philosophical Psychology, 2020), with the Editors’ Note and Herschbach’s reply.	Sway convo
18-Nov (W)	Kourany, ‘Should Some Knowledge Be Forbidden? The Case of Cognitive Differences Research’ (2016).	
20-Nov (F)	Resolution: That research into the genetic basis of group differences in cognitive ability should be pursued without restriction.	Debate Club 4
Wrapping Up: Dangerous Ideas		
23-Nov (M)	Marcuse, ‘Repressive Tolerance’ (1965).	
25-Nov (W)	Thanksgiving break — no class.	
27-Nov (F)	Thanksgiving break — no class.	
30-Nov (M)	Mill, ‘Of the Liberty of Thought and Discussion’ (revisited).	
2-Dec (W)	Closing discussion.	

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.

Grading

1. Participation in Class Discussion and Debates [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. You will be given a 1 or a 0 for each class, the former if you contribute to the class discussion and the latter if you do not.

2. Argument Maps [25%] — You will complete argument maps (visualizations of how premises and conclusions fit together in specific assigned readings) using the software MindMup. These maps will be completed in small groups.

3. Data Workshops [25%] — For each module, you will complete a data workshop in which you apply basic statistical ideas to understand an important aspect of the debate. These will involve a mix of in-class and take-home work.

4. Final Oral Examination [25%] — In lieu of a traditional final exam, we will 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 professor 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: 93–100 A-: 90–92 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, I really appreciate your attention to detail. To prove that to you, you can have 2 bonus points on the final exam if you send me a picture of an adorable dog or cat by midnight on Friday of the first week of class.

Chapman University's Academic Integrity Policy (required statement)

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.

Chapman University's Students with Disabilities Policy (required statement)

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.
<https://www.chapman.edu/students/health-and-safety/disability-services/policy.aspx>

Chapman University's Anti-Discrimination Policy (required statement)

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.

Debate Resolutions and Workshop Prompts

Gun Rights

Resolution: That the moral right to own a firearm is not outweighed by the social harms of private gun ownership.

Workshop prompt: The right-to-carry wars. Lott finds that permissive carry laws reduce violent crime; Donohue, Aneja and Weber, using panel data and synthetic controls, find that they raise it. Reconstruct the disagreement — specifications, control states, time windows — and then ask what RAND's synthesis concludes and why it declines to adjudicate some questions at all. Huemer argues the harms would have to exceed the benefits several times over to justify prohibition. Does either body of evidence come near that threshold?

The Great Feminization

Resolution: That the rising share of women in elite institutions has degraded those institutions' capacity for truth-seeking.

Workshop prompt: Competition under incentives. We run the experiment in class first, then read Gneezy, Leonard and List. Men enter competitions at higher rates than women among the patrilineal Maasai; among the matrilineal Khasi the pattern reverses. If competitive disposition bends to social structure, what follows for the claim that a feminizing institution must lose its edge — and what follows if it does not bend here and now, whatever the Khasi do?

Natalism

Resolution: That people who choose not to have children are free riders.

Workshop prompt: Stated reasons against operative causes. Start where the module started, with the Pew distribution: preference first, then affordability, then the state of the world. Now test whether the stated reasons predict behavior. Norway offers twelve months of fully paid parental leave and has a fertility rate of about 1.44 — below the American rate of roughly 1.6 — and across the OECD the relationship between generous family policy and fertility is weak at best. Kearney, Levine and Pardue find that the American decline since 2007 resists the standard economic explanations altogether. So if affordability is the most-cited remediable reason, and relieving it does not raise fertility, what is the survey measuring? Then take up Pew's DINK figures, which are stranger than either side of the argument

assumes. Dual-income married couples without children have a median household income near \$193,900 against \$151,900 for dual-income couples with children — roughly \$42,000 more a year — and yet their median wealth is lower, about \$214,700 against \$361,500, largely because they are less likely to own a home. Two questions follow. If the extra income is not becoming wealth, where is it going, and is ‘consuming a surplus’ the same accusation as ‘free riding’? And homeownership is offered as the mechanism, but which way does it run — do couples buy houses because they have children, or have children because they bought a house? No cross-section will tell you. Close with the arithmetic: test Joshi’s exponential claim directly — at a fertility rate of 0.7, how many grandchildren do a hundred adults of childbearing age produce? — and keep score of which side each finding helps. Joshi aims his charge only at those who simply do not want children, so the size of that group is the reach of his argument.

Race Realism and the Ethics of Inquiry

Resolution: That research into the genetic basis of group differences in cognitive ability should be pursued without restriction.

Workshop prompt: Variance partitioning against classification. Lewontin’s observation is that roughly 85 percent of human genetic variation is found within populations rather than between them, and the conclusion usually drawn is that racial classification is biologically empty. Edwards’ reply is that classification accuracy from many loci jointly can approach certainty even so. Compute both. The object of the exercise is to leave class able to state precisely why two claims that sound contradictory are in fact jointly true, and to say what each does and does not license.