

ECON/ENG/HON/PHIL 357
Topics in Humanomics: What Is Competition?
Interterm 2026



INSTRUCTORS: Professor Erik Kimbrough (ekimbrou@chapman.edu) and Professor Brennan McDavid (mcdavid@chapman.edu)

COURSE MEETINGS: M-Th 1:00-3:50 – Location WH 220

OFFICE HOURS: We will have joint office hours by request. Try to give us some notice, but we will usually be available before and after class.

PREREQUISITES: None

RESTRICTIONS: Permission of instructors required for enrollment

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: It would not be an exaggeration to say that human life and history has been shaped principally by the forces of competition. In natural and sexual selection, in the military clashes between great nations, in our favorite pastimes of sport and entertainment, and in the marketplaces of commodities and ideas, the drive to outperform others is the root cause of all momentum. What is competition? If it is possible to set out a single definition that unifies all instances, then we must be able to identify something that naval battles and film festivals and the market for smartphones all have in common. What is that common thread? In this course, we will explore the motivations, mechanisms, and outcomes of competition through the examples of widely different competitive activities. And we will do so both with historical distance, by taking the competitive environment of Ancient Greece as a case study, and by examining competition among our contemporaries. The Greeks of the fifth century B.C. competed in everything imaginable: in the battles between city-states, in traveling dramatic competitions, in specialized production of consumer goods, in giving speeches, in looks (literally, their beauty), and certainly in Olympic sport. In the midst of all this *agon* (that's Greek for "contest"), they managed to achieve what is widely regarded as a cultural Golden Age. Did they achieve this flourishing because of or despite their embrace of competition? Likewise, what are the sites of competition in our age? Are these contests productive in the way they were for the Greeks? Is cooperation preferable to competition? How do we harness the power of competition to gear it always to the good?

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 (particularly ancient poetry and modern cinema). 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 different dimensions 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. Below is a brief sketch of how we aim to fill out our study.

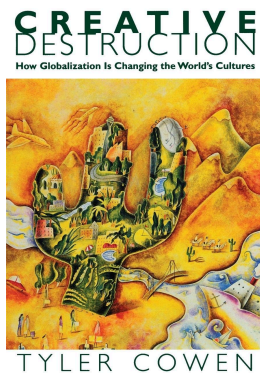
Artistic Inquiry: Our engagement with art is multi-dimensional. Students will encounter multiple forms of artistic expression, exercise judgment as critics, and express their own views about competition in an artistic mode of their own choosing. The forms engaged in our syllabus are epic poetry (Homer's *Iliad*), narrative poetry (Ovid's *Metamorphoses*), high tragedy (Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*; Euripides' *Medea*), biography (Plutarch's *Lives*), sports drama film (*Chariots of Fire*; *Moneyball*; *Rocky*), documentary (*Hoop Dreams*), and stylized essay (Nietzsche's "Homer's Contest"). All of the works included are selected in part for their engagement with the course's theme of competition, but the range of artistic forms has been deliberately curated for reflecting on the relative success of a given form (or given instance of a form) in relation to others. The Greeks self-consciously pitted art against art in dramatic festivals where judges and audiences evaluated productions, conferred prizes, and explicitly shaped the theatrical world by setting the standards to which everyone directed their efforts. The same processes shape the film industry today, opening the question of whether competition has all been to the good or the ill of artistic expression and aesthetic experience. Our engagement with stories (if we may be permitted to count Homer, Ovid, and Plutarch as storytellers, distinct from the spectacle-makers in theater and film) will survey several of the greatest authors of the ancient world, all of whom aspired to immortality in their work and so vied with one another, in succession, to live in the memory of all generations to come. What makes these stories succeed in that goal? The answers are in the form more than in the content, so it is the form that we must isolate for consideration.

Social Inquiry: In his “Homer’s Contest,” Nietzsche characterizes the Greek outlook on competition and envy through a personification of Eris (Strife): “She drives even the unskilled man to work; and if someone who lacks possessions looks upon another who is rich, the first will hurry himself to sow and to plant in the same way as the other and to order his house well. Neighbor competes with neighbor, striving for wealth. This Eris is good for humankind.” This vision of competition as a productive enterprise has taken shape as a testable hypothesis in the modern era. Hayek jump started a now extensive literature in social science when he proposed in his famous paper “Competition as a Discovery Procedure” that competition is “a kind of impersonal coercion that will cause many individuals to change their behavior in a way that could not be brought about by any kind of instructions or commands.” In other words, competition redirects and changes human behavior. It is one of the most compelling tools that human beings possess for upsetting the status quo. We will read Hayek’s famous paper, Tyler Cowen’s *Creative Destructive*, and several experimental studies for considering the (sometimes measurable) impact of competitive processes in domains like science, markets, sport, cultural change, and the entertainment industry. We return to the Nietzschean (and Greek) sentiment in order to ask the question: is competition good for us or bad?

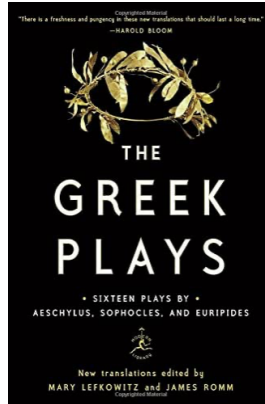
Value Inquiry: One aim of the class is to open our minds to how ubiquitous competition is in human life. We compete in everything, everywhere. This ubiquity suggests that something in human nature, or even in the nature of biological life, is tethered to and dependent upon competition as a procedure for reaching desirable outcomes. Our good might not lie with competition itself, but it very well might lie among the outcomes of competition, making competition a necessary means to human flourishing. Our course will examine many manifestations of competition in human life: conflict in war, rivalry in love and in politics, races to bring products to market, races to win footraces, film and theatrical contests, and the perpetual churn of seekers to GOAT status. We will consider the value accrued to humanity by competitive processes and we will also consider the emotional and physical toll left in the wake.

Required Texts:

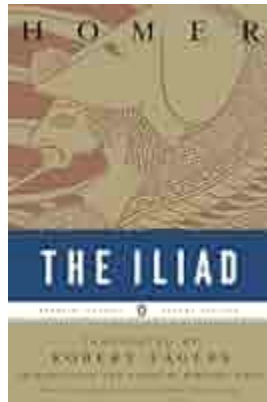
1. Cowen, Tyler. [*Creative Destruction: How Globalization Is Changing the World's Cultures*](#). 2004. Princeton University Press. ISBN: 978-0691117836



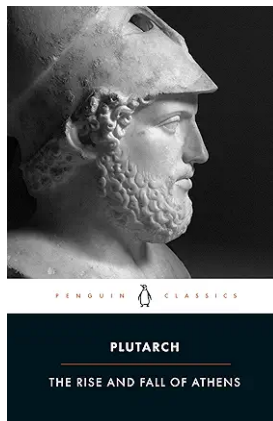
2. [*The Greek Plays: Sixteen Plays by Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides*](#). 2016. Random House. ISBN: 978-0812993004



3. [*Homer: The Iliad*](#). 1998. Bernard Knox. ISBN: 9780140275360



4. [*Plutarch. The Rise and Fall of Athens: Nine Greek Lives*](#). Penguin. ISBN: 9780140441024



Articles:

- [Richerson, P., Baldini, R., Bell, A.V., Demps, K., Frost, K., Hillis, V., Mathew, S., Newton, E.K., Naar, N., Newson, L. and Ross, C., 2016. Cultural group selection plays an essential role in explaining human cooperation: A sketch of the evidence. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 39, p.e30.](#)
- [Cowen, Tyler. 2004. *Creative Destruction: How Globalization Is Changing the World's Cultures*. Princeton University Press.](#)
- [Deck, Cary A. and Bart J. Wilson. 2008. "Experimental Gasoline Markets." *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization*, 67\(1\): 134-149.](#)
- [Fang and Casadevall. 2015. "Competitive Science: Is Competition Ruining Science?"](#)
- [Hayek, Friedrich. 1968. "Competition as a Discovery Procedure."](#)
- [Kimbrough, Erik O., Kevin A. Laughren and Roman M. Sheremeta. 2020. "War and Conflict in Economics: Theories, Applications and Recent Trends." *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization*, 178: 998-1013.](#)
- [Kimbrough, Erik O., Roman M. Sheremeta and Timothy Shields. 2014. "When Parity Promotes Peace: Resolving Conflict Between Asymmetric Agents." *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization*, 99: 96-108.](#)
- [Nietzsche, Friedrich. 1872. "Homer's Contest."](#)
- North, J. (1992), 'The Development of Religious Pluralism', in: J. Lieu, J. North, T. Rajak, eds., *The Jews among Pagans and Christians in the Roman Empire*, London, 174-93.
- [Ridley, Matt. 2003. "The Peacock's Tale" in *The Red Queen: Sex and the Evolution of Human Nature*. Harper Books.](#)
- [Smith, Vernon L. 1982. "Markets as Economizers of Information: Experimental Examination of the Hayek Hypothesis" *Economic Inquiry*, 20\(2\): 165-179.](#)
- [Stigler, George. 1957. "Perfect Competition: Historically Contemplated" *Journal of Political Economy*, 65\(1\): 1-17.](#)

Films:

- *Chariots of Fire* (1981)
- *Hoop Dreams* (1994)
- *Moneyball* (2011)
- *Rocky* (1976)

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

Date	Readings	Assignment
Week One	<u>Competition and Conflict</u>	
2-Jan	Hesiod; Aeschylus' <i>Prometheus Bound</i>	Writer's Workshop 1
3-Jan	<i>Iliad</i> Books 1, 3, 9; Kimbrough et al. 2020	[movie day]
4-Jan	<i>Iliad</i> Books 16, 19; <i>Rocky</i>	Experiment
Week Two	<u>Competition and Rivalry</u>	
9-Jan	<i>Iliad</i> 23, 24; Kimbrough et al. 2014	Debate Club 1
10-Jan	Nietzsche ; Plutarch's <i>Life of Themistocles</i>	Writer's Workshop 2 [movie day]
11-Jan	Euripides' <i>Medea</i> ; Ovid's "Callisto" and "Philomela"	Draft of Paper 1 Due
12-Jan	Plutarch's <i>Life of Alcibiades</i> ; <i>Chariots of Fire</i>	Project 1 Due ; Experiment
Week Three	<u>Competition and Discovery</u>	
16-Jan	Stigler 1957 ; Smith 1982	Experiment
17-Jan	Hayek "Competition as Discovery" ; Deck and	Writer's Workshop 3 [movie day]

	Wilson 2008	
18-Jan	<i>Moneyball</i> ; "Is Competition Ruining Science?"	Data Graphic Brainstorm
Week Four	<u>Competition and Culture</u>	
22-Jan	Cowen Ch. 1-2; Ridley "Peacock's Tale"	Data Graphic Presentation
23-Jan	Cowen Ch. 3-4; Richerson et al. 2016	Debate Club 2 [movie day]
24-Jan	<i>Hoop Dreams</i> ; Cowen Ch. 5-6	Writer's Workshop 4
25-Jan	Final Oral Examination	Project 2 Due

Course Learning Outcomes:

- Challenge and deconstruct the perceived tensions between economics and the humanities.
- Ask cogent, thought-provoking questions based upon critical reading of texts across a range of artistic, philosophical, and historical genres—film, fiction and non-fiction.
- Explain theories of competition, including their assumptions and their implications.
- Examine how our notions of competition shape our behavior, our understanding of the world and our relation to social structures.
- Explain the relation of notions of competition to systems and structures in historical, political and social context: ancient Greece, contemporary society.
- Explain methods used to study competition (e.g. formal theory, experiments, history).
- Explore the relationship between competition, economic institutions and economic decision-making.
- Examine formal and aesthetic characteristics of film (particularly choices in lighting, editing, cinematography, music and soundscape, performance) and ancient verse (characterization, narrative structure, metrical choices, ekphrasis, and symbolism).
- Scrutinize formal aspects of artistic works for the effects of competition on form.
- Explain how artistic works may reflect competition between people, institutions, and societies in their historical context.
- Articulate how texts across the disciplines are co-constitutive of knowledge, ethics, and aesthetics.
- Demonstrate thoughtful rhetorical choices in creative and expository prose.

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.

English

- Skill in critical reading, or the practice of identifying and interpreting the formal, rhetorical, and stylistic features of a text.
- Write demonstrating proficient use of genre elements, techniques, and conventions to produce a defined work: story, poem, or creative non-fiction.

Philosophy

- Ability to reason logically, effectively, and respectfully about ethical matters
- Writing ability to state and support a thesis, apply knowledge of critical reasoning, accurately interpret philosophical sources, and clearly communicate a balanced account in writing.

General Education Learning Outcomes:

- **AI/Artistic Inquiry:** Student composes critical or creative works that embody or analyze conceptually an artistic form.
- **SI/Social Inquiry:** Student identifies, frames, and analyzes social and/or historical structures and institutions in the world today.
- **VI/Values/Ethics Inquiry:** Student articulates how values and ethics inform human understanding, structures, and behavior.

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.

1. Participation in Class Discussion and In-Class Experiments [10%]

Class discussion provides an opportunity for students to cultivate the skills requisite for productive discussion amidst diverse viewpoints. 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 the texts as well as a desire to probe and reevaluate ideas. It is essential that students bring texts and questions to each class session. Also includes grades based on participation in in-class experiments.

2. Written Questions [10%] - Guidelines for Asking Questions

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 or idea they find puzzling, exploring what has unsettled them. When writing the second paper, we will periodically use the writer’s workshop to provide waypoints on the path from research questions to the completed paper.

3. Writer’s and Presenter’s Workshop [25%]

The writer’s workshop is based on the idea that students learn to write when they write often; in this case, focusing their attention on ideas from the readings and discussions immediately preceding the workshop. An important component of these assignments is to understand each week’s media in their social scientific, philosophical, and/or artistic context. Students will encounter a variety of writing assignments for the workshop, including both critical and creative works. Students will be asked to produce a number of papers, of approximately 250 words, and submit a polished piece at the end of the hour. Also includes grades for other in-class activities (e.g. formal debates, group work).

4. Projects – Expository and Creative [40% = 2 x 20% each] - Guidelines for Paper Formatting

In addition to the writer’s workshop papers, students will complete two major projects in the course, one expository/critical and one creative in nature. These projects will provide opportunities for students to explore ideas and use texts to add to the ongoing discourse.

- Expository project: Students will produce one essay of 1,000 words (maximum) answering a question prompt provided to the class by the instructors. The question will pertain to the topic of progress as we have been analyzing it conceptually and via social scientific methods in our discussions and readings. Critical projects will be evaluated for their rigor, concision, and structure in building their analysis.
- Creative project: Students will produce one work of art in answer to a question prompt provided to the class by the instructors. The aim of this project is to utilize the question as a vehicle for exploring one of the art forms that we have been engaging with in our discussions, readings, and encounters with visual art. Students are invited to choose the form they wish to explore among painting, sculpture, film, poetry, monologue, screenplay, theatrical play or tragedy, dance, photography, music, or short story. This list is not intended to exhaust possibilities, and students are welcome to consult with the instructors in their ideas of forms to explore. Demonstration of an understanding of the skills involved in the creative process will be evaluated, as will the final product. In particular, creative projects will be evaluated for their depth and breadth of engagement, including sophistication of deployment of techniques special to the selected form of expression.

5. Oral Final Examination [15%]

Students will consider the course objectives and respond to questions posed by the professors in an oral examination during the exam period. More details will be given towards the end of the class.

Academic Integrity:

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 www.chapman.edu/academics/academicintegrity/index.aspx.

Chapman University's 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 [Office of Disability Services](#). 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 if you have questions regarding this procedure, or for information and to make an appointment to discuss and/or request potential accommodations based on documentation of your disability. Once formal approval of your need for 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 Statement:

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](#). Any violations of this policy should be discussed with the professor, the [Dean of Students](#) and/or otherwise reported in accordance with this policy.