Practical Approaches to Saving the World*

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And it is not our part here to take thought only for a season, or for a few lives of Men, or a passing age of the world. We should seek a final end to this menace, even if we do not hope to make one.

_The Lord of the Rings_, vol. 1, Book 2, chapter 3, “The Council of Elrond”

— J. R. R. Tolkien

## 1 Motivation

What does “the world” mean to you? Does it need saving? Does it merit saving? Can it be saved? How? What might the new world look like?

In this seminar, we shall focus on the single most important concept that underlies these questions and binds them together: _suffering_. A world in which suffering is pervasive and endemic would seem to be in trouble for this reason alone, no matter what else can be said about it.

A focus on suffering is thus indispensable both in identifying the causes of the world’s troubles and in working out possible remedies.

### 1.1 The key concept: preventable suffering

Of the many inconvenient truths that define the human condition (Edelman, 2020), the ubiquity of suffering is the most glaring one. Quoting from Ursula K. Le Guin’s novel _The Dispossessed_ (1974b, p.60),

> Suffering is the condition on which we live. And when it comes you know it. You know it as the truth. Of course it’s right to cure diseases, to prevent hunger and injustice, as the social organism does. But no society can change the nature of its existence. We can’t prevent suffering. This pain and that pain, yes, but not Pain. A society can only relieve social suffering — unnecessary suffering. The rest remains. The root, the reality.

The key phrase uttered by Le Guin’s protagonist — “unnecessary suffering” — marks an opening for us. This semester, let us concentrate on the challenge of, first, identifying the causes of such _preventable_ suffering, and, second, on thinking of ways to abolish it.

### 1.2 The tools: readings, thinking, discussions

The plan is for us to read a selection of papers, academic and other, as well as optional book-length materials, and to discuss these in class (virtually, due to the pandemic-related constraints). Each week, the discussion will be led by a team of student presenters, whose role will be not so much to exhaustively cover that week’s readings, as to highlight key points and to facilitate and steer the discussion. An annotated reading list, with the materials grouped by weekly theme, appears below in section 3, following some important notes for seminar participants.

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1In particular, the abolition of suffering arguably takes precedence over the pursuit of happiness, if the latter is construed in purely individualistic terms, as in Edelman, 2012.
2 Notes for participants

This section contains essential information for participants: the inclusion statement, ground rules for discussion, and credit requirements.

2.1 Diversity, inclusion, and ground rules for discussion

Unlike in a large-enrollment lecture-based course, in which some students may choose, and succeed, to remain virtually anonymous, in a small-class seminar setting you are required to speak in front of the class (when presenting) and are expected to contribute to the discussion on other occasions. Because your informed opinion on every aspect of the material is unique and valuable, I shall strive to facilitate the conversation so as to make all voices heard. In this, I’ll be counting on your help, and on the help of your classmates.

Even matters of “consensus” are not always easy to talk about, as the rare dissenters who dare voice their opposition know full well; how then should we approach potentially controversial topics? With care and compassion, diligence, openness, and daring: care for our shared humanity; diligence with regard to the relevant knowledge and findings; openness to informed dissent; and daring to venture into uncharted territory, as befits good education.

If at any point during the semester (no matter whether in class or after hours) you feel that you need to talk about any of these things, please let me know immediately — doing so will be my top priority.

2.2 Credit and grading

There are three components to getting credit for this seminar:

1. Attend and contribute to the discussion during the weekly meetings.

2. By noon on each Monday, submit via email questions on the readings assigned for the corresponding class. Be prepared to ask these questions in class.

3. Participate in two separate weekly presentations. Each presentation/discussion will be led by a team of two to four students. The presenters should be ready for clarification questions and interruptions at any time during the presentation.

IMPORTANT: please choose your two topics and co-presenters by Tuesday, Sept. 8. A link to an online tool for signing up for presentations will be made available on the instructor’s home page.

A typical presentation should include

- a brief introduction to the theme and an overview of the background to each paper and its methodology;
- the findings, as illustrated by the plots or (in the absence of graphics) by a concise verbal description;
- a critique of the paper’s approach;

The remarks in section 2.1, which are specific to this course, are intended to supplement the official Cornell statement on diversity and inclusion, which covers dimensions such as gender, race, socio-economic background, etc., and which can be found here: http://diversity.cornell.edu/
• a summary of the paper’s conclusions and their significance for the weekly theme and for the seminar’s topic at large.

The presenting teams are required to meet with the instructor ahead of their presentation, to address any questions and coordinate the details.

4. The day after the last meeting, submit via email a written summary of your impressions and lessons from the seminar, in a short-essay form (about 1000 words, PDF). It is advisable to start working on this essay well before the end of the semester.

Final grade components:
- Presentations: 44%
- Weekly questions 26%
- Participation in the discussions: 10%
- Final essay: 20%

3 Weekly themes and readings

Representative readings, grouped by topic, are listed below. They also appear in alphabetical order at the end of the document. [Note: in what follows, IT refers to Edelman, S. (2020). Life, Death, and Other Inconvenient Truths. MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, to be published on Oct. 13, 2020; view-only access to a PDF copy will be arranged via Cornell Box file sharing system.]

Introduction

1. **Sept. 7** Introduction and Overview. The key concept: preventable suffering. The key disciplines: psychology, sociology, anthropology, history, political science.

   Readings:
   - IT: [ch.32, Suffering].
   - Optional:
     - IT: ch.31 (Stupidity), ch.25 (Politics).

3.1 Part I: Some of the causes of preventable suffering


   Readings:

(d) IT: ch.27 (Poverty), ch.26 (Power), ch.25 (Politics).

Optional:


3. (Sept. 21) LACK OF HEALTHCARE. MEDICALIZATION.

Readings:


Optional:


4. (Sept. 28) DEGRADATION OF THE ENVIRONMENT.

Readings:


Optional:


5. **(Oct. 5) WORK.**

Readings:


Optional:


6. **(Oct. 12) BULLSHIT. PROPAGANDA. IGNORANCE.**

Readings:

(a) *IT*: ch.36 (Truth).


Optional:

(a) *IT*: ch.29 (Religion).

(b) *IT*: ch.30 (Science).

3.2 **Part II: Preventing preventable suffering**

7. **(Oct. 19) CAPITALISM. GROWTH.**

Readings:


Optional:


8. **(Oct. 26) A new hope (Psychology and Economics).**

Readings:

(a) Pugno, M. (2019a). The economics of eudaimonia. MPRA Paper No. 96251. Available online at [https://mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de/96251/](https://mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de/96251/)


Optional:


9. **(Nov. 2) A new hope (Sociology and Economics).**

Readings:


Optional:


10. **(Nov. 9) A new hope (Anthropology, History).**

Readings:


11. **(Nov. 30) A NEW HOPE (PHILOSOPHY, POLITICS).**

Readings:


Optional:


12. **(Dec. 7) A NEW HOPE (LIBERATION).**

Readings:


Optional:

13. **(Dec. 14) General Discussion.**

Readings:


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**References**


