Inconvenient Truths

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1 Motivation

This advanced seminar, which will be spread over consecutive Fall and Spring semesters, takes a level look at what it means to be human. The theme for Fall 2018 is INDIVIDUALS; the theme for Spring 2019 is SOCIETY. A brief history of the idea behind this seminar can be found in chapter 0 of the draft titled Inconvenient Truths, which is included in the course pack, made available via Blackboard.

Our discussions will focus on a series of frank, and therefore far from rosy, assessments of human nature and the human condition, taking up select topics that range from art, beauty, children, consciousness, death, happiness, hope, and love to memory, old age, parenthood, poetry, stupidity, suffering, wisdom, and zealotry. One of the possible outcomes of our deliberations will be the emergence of a counterbalance for, and perhaps an antidote to, the popular “positive psychology” literature. The discussion materials and the readings for each topic are based in part on a distillation of views gleaned from literature, philosophy, and the arts and in part on a synthesis of dozens of academic papers and books in psychology, neuroscience, and computational cognitive science, including some by the instructor.

An annotated provisional reading list, with the readings grouped by weekly topic, appears in section 3, following some important notes for seminar participants. Minor changes to the readings, based in part on your feedback, may be made as the semester progresses.

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’lI 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.

\[\text{The remarks in section 2.1, which are specific to this course, are intended to supplement the official Cornell statement on diversity and inclusion, which covers dimensions such as gender, race, socio-economic background, etc., and which can be found here:} \text{http://diversity.cornell.edu/edu/aic.cfm} \text{In addition, the Cornell academic integrity code (https://cuinfo.cornell.edu/aic.cfm) applies, as always.}\]
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. For each of at least 10 of the meetings, post on Blackboard a question or thought based on the weekly readings, which could be used in discussion. Please include the week number in the post title.

2. Participate in two separate weekly presentations. Each presentation/discussion will be led by a team of three or 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 Labor Day (Sept. 3). To sign up for one of the presentation slots, follow this link.

   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;
   • 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.

3. A week after the last meeting, submit a written summary of your impressions and lessons from the seminar, in a short-essay form (about 1000 words).

Final grade components:

Weekly questions and participation: 30%
Presentations: 50%
Final essay: 20%

3 Weekly topics and readings

Representative readings, grouped by topic, are listed below. They also appear in alphabetical order at the end of the document.

3.1 Meeting 1: Introduction (August 27)

Why this seminar, and what the readings are like. Regarding “positive psychology.” The case for realism.

Readings:

Optional:


### 3.2 Meeting 2: Existence (September 10)

**Anti-natalism and anti-anti-natalism. Mind wandering. Mindfulness.**

Readings:


Optional:


### 3.3 Meeting 3: Time (September 17)

**Time perception and emotion. Depressive realism.**

Readings:


Optional:
3.4 Meeting 4: Beauty (September 24)

The imminence of a revelation. Evolutionary bait and switch. Between the world and a grain of sand. The pathos of things. The seven tragic senses of beauty.

Readings:


Optional:


3.5 Meeting 5: Youth (October 1)


Readings:


Optional:


3.6 Meeting 6: Happiness (October 15)

**Bossed around by evolution. What it costs. Forget about it.**

Readings:


Optional:


3.7 Meeting 7: Perception (October 22)

**The world as will and representation. Not what it seems; also not otherwise.**

Readings:


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Optional:


### 3.8 Meeting 8: Memory (October 29)

**The Waters of Lethe by the Plains of Elysium. Remembering and Forgetting. How does it feel? The Time Machine. Running in circles.**

Readings:


Optional:


### 3.9 Meeting 9: Old age (November 5)

**Comfortably numb. Catabasis. Cassandra’s later years. Volver.**

Readings:


Optional:


3.10 **Meeting 10: Death (November 12)**

**Eru’s Gift. Only in Silence The Word.**

Readings:


Optional:


### 3.11 Meeting 11: Consciousness (November 19)

**A firefly over a pond. Whose feelings? Lucid dreaming and lucid wakefulness. Altered states.**

Readings:


Optional:


### 3.12 Meeting 12: Suffering (November 26)

**One hundred words for snow. War profiteering. Psychache. Radical soteriology.**

Readings:


Optional:

### 3.13 Meeting 13: Closing discussion (December 3)

**ALWAYS COMING HOME.**

Optional reading:


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**References**


