

# 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,<sup>1</sup> 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:

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<sup>1</sup>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/>.

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

Whether or not you're presenting in a given week, please come prepared with questions or comments regarding the readings.

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:

Presentations:	70%
Participation in the discussions:	10%
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:

1. R. S. Lazarus. Does the positive psychology movement have legs? *Psychological Inquiry*, 14:93–109, 2003a. doi: 10.1207/S15327965PLI1402\_02.

2. R. S. Lazarus. The Lazarus Manifesto for positive psychology and psychology in general. *Psychological Inquiry*, 14:173–189, 2003b. doi: 10.1207/S15327965PLI1402\_04.
3. B. S. Held. The negative side of positive psychology. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 44:9–46, 2004.

Optional:

- S. Edelman. *The Happiness of Pursuit*. Basic Books, New York, NY, 2012.

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

ANTI-NATALISM AND ANTI-ANTI-NATALISM. MIND WANDERING. MINDFULNESS.

Readings:

1. D. Benatar. Why it is better never to come into existence. *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 34: 345–355, 1997.
2. E. Harman. *Critical Study*. David Benatar. *Better Never To Have Been: The Harm of Coming into Existence* (Oxford: Oxford university press, 2006). *NOÛS*, 43:776–785, 2009.
3. M. A. Killingsworth and D. T. Gilbert. A wandering mind is an unhappy mind. *Science*, 330:932, 2010.

Optional:

- K. Johnson. 26 monkeys, also the abyss. *Asimov's*, 32:81–89, July 2008.

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

TIME PERCEPTION AND EMOTION. DEPRESSIVE REALISM.

Readings:

1. S. Droit-Volet and S. Gil. The time-emotion paradox. *Phil. Trans. R. Soc. B*, 364:1943–1953, 2009.
2. S. Droit-Volet, S. Fayolle, M. Lamotte, and S. Gil. Time, emotion and the embodiment of timing. *Timing & Time Perception*, 1:99–126, 2013.
3. D. E. Kornbrot, R. M. Msetfi, and M. J. Grimwood. Time perception and depressive realism: judgment type, psychophysical functions and bias. *PLoS ONE*, 8(8):e71585, 2013. doi: 10.1371/journal.pone.0071585.
4. C. Stetson, M. P. Fiesta, and D. M. Eagleman. Does time really slow down during a frightening event? *PLoS ONE*, 2(12):e1295, 2007

Optional:

- T. S. Eliot. *Four Quartets*. Harcourt, 1943.
- Y. Dolev and M. Roubach, editors. *Cosmological and Psychological Time*. Number 285 in Boston Studies in the Philosophy and History of Science. Springer, 2016

### 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:

1. T. Armstrong and B. Detweiler-Bedell. Beauty as an emotion: the exhilarating prospect of mastering a challenging world. *Review of General Psychology*, 12:305–329, 2008.
2. W. Kintsch. Musings about beauty. *Cognitive Science*, 36:1–20, 2012.
3. J. Schmidhuber. Simple algorithmic theory of subjective beauty, novelty, surprise, interestingness, attention, curiosity, creativity, art, science, music, jokes. *Journal of SICE*, 48:21–32, 2009.
4. A. A. Briellmann and D. G. Pelli. Beauty requires thought. *Current Biology*, 27:1–8, 2017. doi: 10.1016/j.cub.2017.04.018.

Optional:

- W. L. Rusho. *Everett Ruess: A Vagabond for Beauty*. Peregrine Smith Books, Salt Lake City, UT, 1983.

### 3.5 Meeting 5: Youth (October 1)

AN IMPOSSIBLE DILEMMA. SILVER SPOON OR BALL AND CHAIN. CHOICE AND CHANCE. JANUS INTROVERSUS.

Readings:

1. G. W. Evans. Childhood poverty and adult psychological well-being. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science*, 113:14949–14952, 2016. doi: 10.1073/pnas.1604756114.
2. J. J. B. Mijis. The unfulfillable promise of meritocracy: Three lessons and their implications for justice in education. *Social Justice Research*, 29:14–34, 2016.
3. G. Gigerenzer and R. Garcia-Retamero. Cassandra’s regret: the psychology of not wanting to know. *Psychological Review*, 124:179–196, 2017.
4. G. C. Patton, C. A. Olsson, V. Skirbekk, R. Saffery, M. E. Wlodek, P. S. Azzopardi, M. Stonawski, B. Rasmussen, E. Spry, K. Francis, Z. A. Bhutta, N. J. Kassebaum, A. H. Mokdad, C. J. L. Murray, A. M. Prentice, N. Reavley, P. Sheehan, K. Sweeny, R. M. Viner, and S. M. Sawyer. Adolescence and the next generation. *Nature*, 554:458–474, 2018.

Optional:

- J. Brodsky. In praise of boredom. In *On Grief and Reason – Essays*, pages 104–113. Penguin, New York, NY, 1995.
- Y. Stephan, A. R. Sutin, A. Kornadt, J. Caudroit, and A. Terracciano. Higher IQ in adolescence is related to a younger subjective age in later life: Findings from the Wisconsin Longitudinal Study. *Intelligence*, 69:195–199, 2018.

- S. Dobrow Riza and D. Heller. Follow your heart or your head? A longitudinal study of the facilitating role of calling and ability in the pursuit of a challenging career. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 100: 695–712, 2015.

### 3.6 Meeting 6: Happiness (October 15)

BOSSED AROUND BY EVOLUTION. WHAT IT COSTS. FORGET ABOUT IT.

Readings:

1. D. M. Buss. The evolution of happiness. *American Psychologist*, 55:15–23, 2000.
2. R. M. Nesse. Natural selection and the elusiveness of happiness. *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society, series B*, 359:1333–1348, 2004.
3. J. W. Schooler, D. Ariely, and G. Loewenstein. The pursuit and monitoring of happiness can be self-defeating. In J. Carrillo and I. Brocas, editors, *Psychology and Economics*, pages 41–70. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2003.
4. J. Gruber, I. B. Mauss, and M. Tamir. A dark side of happiness? How, when, and why happiness is not always good. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 6:222–233, 2011.

Optional:

- S. Edelman. *The Happiness of Pursuit*. Basic Books, New York, NY, 2012.

### 3.7 Meeting 7: Perception (October 22)

THE WORLD AS WILL AND REPRESENTATION. NOT WHAT IT SEEMS; ALSO NOT OTHERWISE.

Readings:

1. T. S. Lee. The visual system’s internal model of the world. *Proceedings of the IEEE*, 103:1359–1378, 2015.
2. R. A. Rensink. Visual sensing without seeing. *Psychological Science*, 15:27–32, 2004.
3. G. L. Malcolm, I. I. A. Groen, and C. I. Baker. Making sense of real-world scenes. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 20:843–856, 2016.
4. Y. Miyamoto, R. E. Nisbett, and T. Masuda. Culture and physical environment: Holistic versus analytic perceptual affordances. *Psychological Science*, 17, 2006. in press.
5. T. Felin, J. J. Koenderink, and J. I. Krueger. Rationality, perception, and the all-seeing eye. *Psychonomic Bulletin and Review*, 24:1040–1059, 2017. doi: 10.3758/s13423-016-1198-z.
6. S. Edelman. Varieties of perceptual truth and their possible evolutionary roots. *Psychonomic Bulletin and Review*, 22:1519–1522, 2015. doi: 10.3758/s13423-014-0741-z.

Optional:

- W. H. Warren. The dynamics of perception and action. *Psychological Review*, 113:358–389, 2006.
- B. K. Stafford and A. D. Huberman. Signal integration in thalamus: labeled lines go cross-eyed and blurry. *Neuron*, 93:717–720, 2017.

### 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:

1. S. J. Lynn, J. A. Knox, O. Fassler, S. O. Lilienfeld, and E. F. Loftus. Memory, trauma, and dissociation. In G. M. Rosen, editor, *Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: Issues and Controversies*, chapter 9, pages 163–186. John Wiley & Sons, Chichester, West Sussex PO19 8SQ, England, 2004.
2. M. Wimber, A. Alink, I. Charest, N. Kriegeskorte, and M. C. Anderson. Retrieval induces adaptive forgetting of competing memories via cortical pattern suppression. *Nature Neuroscience*, 18:582–589, 2015.
3. D. T. Gilbert and T. D. Wilson. Propection: experiencing the future. *Science*, 317:1351–1354, 2007.
4. K. S. LaBar and R. Cabeza. Cognitive neuroscience of emotional memory. *Nature Reviews Neuroscience*, 7:54–64, 2006.
5. M. L. Rogers and T. E. Joiner. Rumination, suicidal ideation, and suicide attempts: a meta-analytic review. *Review of General Psychology*, 21:132–142, 2017.

Optional:

- B. A. Richards and P. W. Frankland. The persistence and transience of memory. *Neuron*, 94:1071–1084, 2017.
- S. Edelman. Identity, immortality, happiness: pick two. *Journal of Evolution and Technology*, 28: 1–17, 2018.

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

CATABASIS. A GHOST IN THE SHELL. LOOKING BACK. CASSANDRA'S OTHER GIFT.

Readings:

1. A. J. Dutt and H. W. Wah. Feeling sad makes us feel older: Effects of a sad-mood induction on subjective age. *Psychology of Aging*, 32:412–418, 2017. doi: 10.1037/pag0000179.
2. B. Demiray and A. M. Freund. The psychological distance of memories: Examining causal relations with mood and self-esteem in young, middle-aged and older adults. *Consciousness and Cognition*, 49:117–131, 2017.
3. M. Ardelt. Wisdom and life satisfaction in old age. *Journal of Gerontology: Psychological Sciences*, 52B:P15–P27, 1997.
4. L. L. Carstensen and J. A. Michels. At the intersection of emotion and cognition: aging and the positivity effect. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 14:117–121, 2005.
5. M. Ramscar, P. Hendrix, C. Shaoul, P. Milin, and H. Baayen. The myth of cognitive decline: non-linear dynamics of lifelong learning. *Topics in Cognitive Science*, 6:5–42, 2014.

Optional:

- A. Kuhn. Heterotopia, heterochronia: place and time in cinema memory. *Screen*, 45:106–114, 2004.
- S. Edelman. Identity, immortality, happiness: pick two. *Journal of Evolution and Technology*, 28: 1–17, 2018.

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

ERU'S GIFT. ONLY IN SILENCE THE WORD.

Readings:

1. N. G. De Santo. What death is. A literary approach between fears and hope. *Ann. Ist. Super. Sanità*, 50:249–265, 2014.
2. S. Laureys. Death, unconsciousness and the brain. *Nature Reviews Neuroscience*, 6:899–909, 2005.
3. S. Nichols, N. Strohminger, A. Rai, and J. Garfield. Death and the self. *Cognitive Science*, 42: 314–332, 2018. Suppl. 1.
4. J. Borjigin, U. Lee, T. Liu, D. Pal, S. Huff, D. Klarr, J. Sloboda, J. Hernandez, M. M. Wang, and G. A. Mashour. Surge of neurophysiological coherence and connectivity in the dying brain. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science*, 110:1443214437, 2013.
5. P. J. Cozzolino, L. E. R. Blackie, and L. S. Meyers. Self-related consequences of death fear and death denial. *Death Studies*, 38:418–422, 2014.

Optional:

- C. Payne. Unbearable witness. *JAMC*, 163:1176–1178, 2000.
- M. Mikulincer and P. R. Shaver. Helplessness: A hidden liability associated with failed defenses against awareness of death. In P. R. Shaver and M. Mikulincer, editors, *Meaning, mortality, and choice: The social psychology of existential concerns*, pages 37–53. American Psychological Association, Washington, DC, 2012.
- L. Iverach, R. G. Menzies, and R. E. Menzies. Death anxiety and its role in psychopathology: Re-viewing the status of a transdiagnostic construct. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 34:580–593, 2014.

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

A FIREFLY OVER A POND. WHOSE FEELINGS? LUCID DREAMING AND LUCID WAKEFULNESS. ALTERED STATES.

Readings:

1. J. Panksepp. Affective consciousness: Core emotional feelings in animals and humans. *Consciousness and Cognition*, 14:30–80, 2005.
2. T. Metzinger. The subjectivity of subjective experience: A representationalist analysis of the first-person perspective. *Networks*, 3-4:33–64, 2004.



3. J. F. Kihlstrom. The rediscovery of the unconscious. In H. Morowitz and J. Singer, editors, *The Mind, the Brain, and Complex Adaptive Systems*, volume 22 of *Santa Fe Institute Studies in the Sciences of Complexity*, pages 123–143. Addison-Wesley, Reading, MA, 1995.
4. S. LaBerge. Lucid dreaming: psychophysiological studies of consciousness during REM sleep. In R. R. Bootzen, J. F. Kihlstrom, and D. L. Schacter, editors, *Sleep and Cognition*, pages 109–126. American Psychological Association, Washington, DC, 1990.
5. R. L. Carhart, R. Leech, P. J. Hellyer, M. Shanahan, A. Feilding, E. Tagliazucchi, D. R. Chialvo, and D. Nutt. The entropic brain: a theory of conscious states informed by neuroimaging research with psychedelic drugs. *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience*, 8:20, 2014.
6. M. Chadha. Time-series of ephemeral impressions: the Abhidharma-Buddhist view of conscious experience. *Phenomenology and Cognitive Science*, 2014. doi: 10.1007/s11097-014-9354-2.

Optional:

- D. C. Dennett. Who’s on first? Heterophenomenology explained. *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 10:19–30, 2003.
- J. J. C. Smart. Consciousness and awareness. *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 11:41–50, 2004.
- T. Metzinger. Splendor and misery of self-models: Conceptual and empirical issues regarding consciousness and self-consciousness. *ALIUS Bulletin*, 1(2):53–73, 2018. Interviewed by J. Limanowski and R. Millière.

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

ONE HUNDRED WORDS FOR SNOW. WAR PROFITEERING. PSYCHACHE. RADICAL SOTERIOLOGY.

Readings:

1. T. Metzinger. Suffering, the cognitive scotoma. In K. Almqvist and A. Haag, editors, *The Return of Consciousness*, pages 237–262. Axel and Margaret Ax:son Johnson Foundation, Stockholm, 2017.
2. S. Brinkmann. Languages of suffering. *Theory & Psychology*, 24:630–648, 2014.
3. D. Summerfield. Cross-cultural perspectives on the medicalization of human suffering. In G. M. Rosen, editor, *Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: Issues and Controversies*, chapter 12, pages 233–246. John Wiley & Sons, Chichester, West Sussex PO19 8SQ, England, 2004.
4. E. L. Garland and M. O. Howard. A transdiagnostic perspective on cognitive, affective, and neurobiological processes underlying human suffering. *Research on Social Work Practice*, 24:142–151, 2013. doi: 10.1177/1049731513503909.
5. E. S. Schneidmann. Anodyne psychotherapy for suicide: a psychological view of suicide. *Clinical Neuropsychiatry*, 2:7–12, 2005.
6. M. E. Renna, J. M. Quintero, A. Soffer, M. Pino, L. Ader, D. M. Fresco, and D. S. Mennin. A pilot study of Emotion Regulation Therapy for generalized anxiety and depression: findings from a diverse sample of young adults. *Behavior Therapy*, 49:403–418, 2018.

Optional:

- U. K. Le Guin. The ones who walk away from Omelas. In R. Silverberg, editor, *New Dimensions 3*, pages 1–8. Nelson Doubleday, 1973.
- E. L. Paluck, E. Shafir, and S. J. Wu. Ignoring alarming news brings indifference: Learning about the world and the self. *Cognition*, 167:160–171, 2017. doi: 10.1016/j.cognition.2017.03.017.

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

ALWAYS COMING HOME.

Optional reading:

1. U. K. Le Guin. *Always Coming Home*. Harper & Row, New York, NY, 1985.

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- T. Armstrong and B. Detweiler-Bedell. Beauty as an emotion: the exhilarating prospect of mastering a challenging world. *Review of General Psychology*, 12:305–329, 2008.
- D. Benatar. Why it is better never to come into existence. *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 34:345–355, 1997.
- J. Borjigin, U. Lee, T. Liu, D. Pal, S. Huff, D. Klarr, J. Sloboda, J. Hernandez, M. M. Wang, and G. A. Mashour. Surge of neurophysiological coherence and connectivity in the dying brain. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science*, 110:1443214437, 2013.
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- S. Brinkmann. Languages of suffering. *Theory & Psychology*, 24:630–648, 2014.
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- R. L. Carhart, R. Leech, P. J. Hellyer, M. Shanahan, A. Feilding, E. Tagliazucchi, D. R. Chialvo, and D. Nutt. The entropic brain: a theory of conscious states informed by neuroimaging research with psychedelic drugs. *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience*, 8:20, 2014.
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- B. Demiray and A. M. Freund. The psychological distance of memories: Examining causal relations with mood and self-esteem in young, middle-aged and older adults. *Consciousness and Cognition*, 49:117–131, 2017.
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- J. Gruber, I. B. Mauss, and M. Tamir. A dark side of happiness? How, when, and why happiness is not always good. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 6:222–233, 2011.
- E. Harman. *Critical Study*. David Benatar. *Better Never To Have Been: The Harm of Coming into Existence* (Oxford: Oxford university press, 2006). *NOÛS*, 43:776–785, 2009.
- B. S. Held. The negative side of positive psychology. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 44:9–46, 2004.
- L. Iverach, R. G. Menzies, and R. E. Menzies. Death anxiety and its role in psychopathology: Reviewing the status of a transdiagnostic construct. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 34:580–593, 2014.
- K. Johnson. 26 monkeys, also the abyss. *Asimov's*, 32:81–89, July 2008.
- J. F. Kihlstrom. The rediscovery of the unconscious. In H. Morowitz and J. Singer, editors, *The Mind, the Brain, and Complex Adaptive Systems*, volume 22 of *Santa Fe Institute Studies in the Sciences of Complexity*, pages 123–143. Addison-Wesley, Reading, MA, 1995.
- M. A. Killingsworth and D. T. Gilbert. A wandering mind is an unhappy mind. *Science*, 330:932, 2010.
- W. Kintsch. Musings about beauty. *Cognitive Science*, 36:1–20, 2012.
- D. E. Kornbrot, R. M. Msetfi, and M. J. Grimwood. Time perception and depressive realism: judgment type, psychophysical functions and bias. *PLoS ONE*, 8(8):e71585, 2013. doi: 10.1371/journal.pone.0071585.
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