

**PSY 492-13**  
**THE PSYCHOLOGY CAPSTONE**  
Tuesdays and Thursdays, 11:30 a.m. – 12:45 p.m.  
415 Eberhard Center

**Brian Bowdle, Course Instructor**

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**Course Description**

The purpose of this capstone course is to explore different theories of human nature, the relationships among these theories, and their implications for personal insight and growth, for contemporary culture and its institutions, and for the future of our species. Throughout this course, we will also consider the proper scope, role, and conduct of psychological science. Our various explorations will revolve around the central theme of **self and society**, and we will adopt a seminar format (guided student discussions as opposed to formal lectures) for most of our class meetings. This course is worth three credits.

**Learning Objectives**

Upon successfully completing this course, students should be able to (a) identify concepts associated with major theoretical perspectives in psychology, (b) describe the strengths and weaknesses of competing psychological perspectives, (c) determine whether and how competing perspectives can be integrated, (d) apply theories and basic research findings to real-world situations, (e) recognize sources of bias in psychological research, (f) appreciate interdisciplinary approaches to psychological questions, and (g) write in a professional style.

**Blackboard**

Our Blackboard website is an integral component of this course. Among other things, you will be using Blackboard to access required articles and films, as well as to submit all our writing assignments. And I will be using Blackboard to post important announcements and to send messages to members of this class, which means that you should regularly check your GVSU student email account.

**Course Materials**

Throughout the semester, we will be grappling with several provocative books, a variety of short articles drawn from both academic and nonacademic publications, and even a few films. These materials are described below to help you prepare for our intellectual journey. The dates of all reading and film assignments are given in our course schedule.

**Required Books.** There are seven (yes, seven!) required books for this course, which are listed here in the order we will be reading them:

- Sigmund Freud (1930) – *Civilization and Its Discontents*
- B. F. Skinner (1948) – *Walden Two*
- Viktor E. Frankl (1962) – *Man's Search for Meaning*
- Ursula K. Le Guin (1971) – *The Lathe of Heaven*
- Pascal Boyer (2018) – *Minds Make Societies*
- Patricia S. Churchland (2019) – *Conscience*
- Francis Fukuyama (2022) – *Liberalism and Its Discontents*

Understanding the relationship between individual and collective processes ideally involves an interdisciplinary approach, and some of the above books come from outside of the field of psychology. Nevertheless, nearly all of them closely align with particular psychological perspectives on self and

society. Our discussions and assignments will refer extensively to these books and, as you read each one, you should keep the following questions in mind:

- How does the author conceptualize human nature?
- How are the dynamics between the self and one's society (or civilization or culture) viewed from this psychological perspective?
- What are the potential moral, civic, and/or political implications of this perspective?
- Do you agree with the author's claims, and why or why not?
- How does this psychological perspective relate to previous perspectives we have explored?

In order to get the most out of these books, I encourage all of you to (a) **pace your reading of each of the texts**, with the aim of reading a chapter or two each day during the week or so prior to our first write-ups and discussions of the material; (b) **engage in a "mental dialogue" with the author as you read the text** – that is, actively question (rather than passively accept) each of the author's claims; and (c) **take notes as you progress through the text**, keeping track of your various reactions to and struggles with the material.

**Additional Readings.** Alongside the books listed above, a small number of articles will be assigned throughout the semester to tie in with specific discussions and homework assignments. These articles should be treated as essential readings – they will serve to reify certain theoretical claims from the books, to update older ideas in light of newer empirical evidence, and to fill in important conceptual gaps between the psychological perspectives we will be considering. All such articles are available on Blackboard via the Target Articles page.

**Film Screenings.** We will also be watching six films this semester and discussing them in relation to our various readings. These films are *Network* (Sidney Lumet, 1976); *The Truman Show* (Peter Weir, 1998); *It's Such a Beautiful Day* (Don Hertzfeldt, 2012); *Moolaadé* (Ousmane Sembene, 2004); *The Ballad of Narayama* (Keisuke Kinoshita, 1958); and *Dreams Rewired* (Manu Luksch, Martin Reinhart, and Thomas Tode, 2015). You can find all these films on Blackboard via the Feature Films page, where I have embedded them as Panopto files. You should be able to play them on a wide range of devices, but I encourage using the biggest screen and the best speakers available to you.

Please note that the films assigned for this course are not your typical Hollywood productions – they exist more as provocations to thought than as mere entertainments, and you may find some of them disturbing in terms of the attitudes and behaviors they portray. But the field of psychology ideally covers the full range of human thought and activity, and I urge you to approach each of these films with an open mind and a clinical eye.

### **Course Evaluation**

The maximum number of points you can receive in this course is 100, and point totals will be translated into grades at the end of the semester using this scale:

93 – 100 points = A	73 – 76 points = C
90 – 92 points = A-	70 – 72 points = C-
87 – 89 points = B+	67 – 69 points = D+
83 – 86 points = B	63 – 66 points = D
80 – 82 points = B-	60 – 62 points = D-
77 – 79 points = C+	59 points or less = F

Your grade will be cumulatively determined by the following:

**Attendance and Participation.** Your attendance will be recorded, and – along with your in-class participation – is worth 25 points. Each unexcused absence will deduct one point from your attendance score.

Given the nature of this course, everyone is expected to keep up with our assigned readings and film screenings, and to be fully present during our class discussions and activities. And, of course, everyone should do their very best to arrive to class on time.

When you look over our course schedule, you will see that all our required class meetings are listed in **bold**. You will also see that although this is a Tuesday/Thursday course, we will not officially convene on Tuesdays during our six film screening weeks. (Everyone will be watching the assigned movies on their own time instead of during class.) However, I will be hosting informal coffee klatches on these six Tuesdays. Our coffee klatches are strictly optional events – they are intended to be more social than academic, and I will not be taking attendance during these gatherings

**Peer-Responded Journal.** During the second week of class, you will be assigned to a journal group consisting of yourself and two other members of the class, and your group will be given its own page on Blackboard. The online journaling that you will do with your group is one of the most important components of this course, both pedagogically and grade-wise, and it is worth 35 points. Please read the following very carefully.

Seven times during the semester, you will submit a substantial (**600 words minimum, no maximum**) journal entry engaging with whichever book we have just finished reading. These entries should be written informally – although I expect you to write using complete grammatical sentences, you should not be composing formal essays with polished beginnings, middles, and endings. Rather, jump into the material whenever something strikes you as provocative, problematic, or perplexing. Do not merely summarize the material or attempt to demonstrate your “mastery” of the text. Instead, **struggle** with it – the greater the struggle, the better the journal entry.

**Keep in mind that I am using the term “struggle” in the broadest and most positive sense possible. That is, you should not limit the focus of your journal entries to aspects of the material that you found difficult to comprehend, but should more generally (and more importantly) discuss things that challenged your customary beliefs and perceptions, that sparked new questions in your mind, that led to new insights or even inspired you in some way, that raised red flags for being logically inconsistent or factually incorrect, or that otherwise prompted a strong reaction from you. In other words, do not simply treat the term “struggle” as being synonymous with “confusion.”**

(And to the extent that you do write about confusions you had with any given text in your journal entries, the struggles you describe should be deep as opposed to shallow ones. For example, if you simply write something like “I have no idea what Freud was getting at in Chapter 1 of *Civilization and Its Discontents*” without saying anything else about the chapter, this hardly suggests much effort on your part in trying to work out possible interpretations of the material. Likewise, if you come across an unfamiliar word, concept, reference, or allusion in any of the assigned readings, you should try doing a web search for clarification before citing it as a point of confusion. The bottom line here is that you should treat every initial roadblock to comprehension as an invitation to further thinking and learning, rather than as an excuse to check out until the going gets easier.)

Every time a journal entry is due, there will be two journal responses due three days later. These responses should be substantial (**300 words minimum, no maximum**) engagements with the journal entries you receive from the two other members of your peer-responded journal group. In these responses, you should spend little time praising – and no time condescending to – either the journal entry or the journalist. Instead of making judgments, grab on to some of the points raised by the journalist and further the discussion. Once again, no formal beginning, middle, and ending is expected or desired. In all your responses, please speak directly to your classmates – that is, do not refer to them in the third person. I will be reading everything you write, but you are each other’s primary audience. And yes, you should read the responses you receive from the other members of your journal group – and you can reply to these responses whenever you would like to turn a discussion into a conversation.

No individual journal entry or peer response will be graded, but an overall score will be given for your entire set of entries and responses. You will not be scored in terms of “getting the right answers,” as

there is no such approved list for any of our books. To receive high marks for your efforts, do the following on a regular basis:

- 1) **Produce a sufficient quantity of relevant writing in a timely manner.** (If you do this, it will be hard to get less than 23 out of 35 points.)
- 2) In addition to (1) above, **struggle, be engaged, open up, and deal with the difficult.** That is, along with describing the sections of the book that struck you as provocative, problematic, or perplexing, discuss **why** you found these sections provocative, problematic, or perplexing – and how you attempted to come to grips with the material. And refrain from simply rehashing your original entries in your peer responses. (If you do these things, it will be hard to get less than 26 out of 35 points.)
- 3) In addition to (1) and (2) above, **demonstrate significant improvement from the beginning of the semester to the end.** (If you do this, it will be hard to get less than 29 out of 35 points.)
- 4) In addition to (1), (2), and (3) above, **demonstrate intellectual imagination.** In other words, extend your thinking beyond the covers of the book, and try to approach the material in nonobvious yet illuminating ways. And write your peer responses in the spirit of collaborative exploration. (If you do these things, it will be hard to get less than 32 out of 35 points.)
- 5) If you want to receive the maximum number of points possible for the peer-responded journal, **do all the above in the extreme**, which will typically require you to go well beyond the minimum word counts. And keep in mind that the best submissions will grapple in some way with the “big picture” being painted by the author(s) of the book.

Detailed instructions for how to submit your journal entries and peer responses will be posted on Blackboard during the second week of class.

**Homework Assignments.** Six homework assignments will be due this semester, all of which will be made available to you on Blackboard via the Homework Assignments page. As often as not, these assignments will ask you to extend whichever psychological perspective we have been considering to a new set of ideas or observations, and they will typically require you to engage with one of the readings from our Target Articles page. Each of the six homework assignments is worth 5 points, for a combined total of 30 points. Homework due dates can be found in our course schedule. Every assignment will be posted at least two weeks in advance of when it is due. **Late homework assignments will not be accepted.**

All homework assignments must be completed using APA style. Guidelines for formatting and submitting these assignments can be found at the top of the Homework Assignments page.

**Panel Discussion.** Once during this semester, you and two or three of your classmates will be assigned to a panel to discuss whichever book we have just finished reading in front of the rest of the class. A few days in advance of each panel discussion, a short list of questions about the material (and the psychological perspective it represents) will be announced on Blackboard. Acting in the role of moderator, I will pose these questions to the panel at appropriate points during the discussion. The panel members will take turns responding to these questions and are encouraged to engage with one another (in a civil manner, of course) whenever differences of opinion emerge.

Each panel discussion will be divided into two parts. For the first 45 minutes, the discussion will primarily be between panel members. For the remaining 30 minutes, the discussion will open up to include the rest of the class, who can then offer their own opinions or pose their own questions to the panel.

Please keep in mind that a panel discussion is typically defined as discussion of a particular topic by a small number of speakers in front of an audience. Given this, you should treat the first part of your panel discussion as a focused conversation between yourself and your fellow panelists. In other words, you should be talking mostly to each other, rather than directing all your responses at the moderator (me) or

at the rest of the class. Of course, all bets are off when we open things up during the second part of the panel discussion.

I realize that it can be difficult to publicly hold forth on a topic that you have only recently begun to grapple with. And it would be unreasonable to treat every member of a discussion panel as an “expert” on the assigned text. But your panel discussion can and should extend beyond the covers of the book. Each of you has a wealth of personal experiences – and probably some long-held beliefs about human nature (which you should continuously reexamine as you progress through this course) – that can potentially be related to the material you are discussing. Moreover, I have little doubt that all of you have read and talked about theories and findings in other courses here at GVSU that can be brought to bear on any of the psychological perspectives being explored in this class. I encourage you to cast a wide net as you prepare for your panel discussion, and to refer to things that you have observed, felt, done, and learned in other contexts as you react to the assigned text.

Your panel discussion is worth 10 points. Panel assignments will be posted on Blackboard during the second week of class.

### **The Capstone Forum**

I suspect that most of you will wind up feeling strongly about at least two or three of the readings, films, or psychological perspectives that we'll be exploring in this course and might appreciate the opportunity to engage further with some of your classmates as we progress through these works and theories. Therefore, I have created a tool for enabling such discussions outside of class – the Capstone Forum – that can be accessed via Blackboard.

Perhaps you'd like to continue a conversation we had during class. Perhaps you'd like to start a debate. Perhaps you'd like to survey the opinions of your peers. Or perhaps you'd like to bring new observations, ideas, or questions to the table that can be used to further explore the relationship between self and society. The Capstone Forum will allow you to do any of the above.

Participation in this forum is optional, not required. That being said, thoughtful contributions to the Capstone Forum can boost your grade for this course. To the extent that you (a) contribute to the Capstone Forum on a regular basis throughout the semester, (b) involve yourself in existing discussion threads as a true conversational partner, and (c) take the time to create (and remain active in) a few threads of your own, **participation is worth up to five extra credit points.**

Oh, and should you choose to engage, feel free to have some fun with the Capstone Forum! For instance, adding a little humor here and there is always welcome. And if you can use some of your contributions to help us get to know you better, I encourage you to do so.

If you are unfamiliar with Blackboard discussion forums, a short tutorial can be found at <https://www.gvsu.edu/elearn/help/blackboard-using-the-discussion-board-53.htm>.

### **Students with Disabilities**

If anyone in this class has special needs because of a cognitive, physical, or other disability, please let me know, and contact Disability Support Resources (DSR) at (616) 331-2490. Although students with disabilities are held to the same academic standards as all other students, accommodations will be provided as appropriate.

### **GVSU Policies**

This course is subject to all the GVSU policies regarding enrollment, grading, academic integrity, and fairness listed at <http://www.gvsu.edu/coursepolicies/>.

## COURSE SCHEDULE (PSY 492-13)

Unless otherwise stated, all our required class meetings (and optional coffee klatches) will begin at 11:30 a.m. in 415 Eberhard Center.

### INTRODUCTION

- January 10     **Class meeting** – overview of course.  
Start reading *Civilization and Its Discontents* after class.
- January 11     Read “Is Google Making Us Stupid?” and “Is Stupid Making Us Google?”
- January 12     **Class meeting** – reading, writing, and thinking in the digital era.

### SELF AND SOCIETY, PART ONE: CLASSIC CONCEPTIONS

#### The Psychoanalytic Perspective (and the Nature of Social Motives)

- January 16     Watch *Network* today, tomorrow, or on Wednesday.
- January 17     Morning coffee klatch.
- January 19     **Class meeting** – movie musings.
- January 20     Finish reading *Civilization and Its Discontents* and submit your journal entry.
- January 23     Submit your journal responses.
- January 24     **Class meeting** – panel discussion of *Civilization and Its Discontents*.  
Start reading *Walden Two* after class.
- January 25     Homework 1 (“Social Psychology as History”) is due.
- January 26     **Class meeting** – further considerations.

#### The Behaviorist Perspective (and the Utopian Impulse)

- January 30     Watch *The Truman Show* today, tomorrow, or on Wednesday.
- January 31     Morning coffee klatch.
- February 2     **Class meeting** – movie musings.
- February 3     Finish reading *Walden Two* and submit your journal entry.
- February 6     Submit your journal responses.
- February 7     **Class meeting** – panel discussion of *Walden Two*.  
Start reading *Man’s Search for Meaning* after class.
- February 8     Homework 2 (“Psychology, Ideology, Utopia, and the Commons”) is due.
- February 9     **Class meeting** – further considerations.

## **The Existential Perspective (and the Primacy of Meaning)**

- February 13 Watch *It's Such a Beautiful Day* today, tomorrow, or on Wednesday.
- February 14 Morning coffee klatch.
- February 16 **Class meeting** – movie musings.
- February 17 Finish reading *Man's Search for Meaning* and submit your journal entry.
- February 20 Submit your journal responses.
- February 21 **Class meeting** – panel discussion of *Man's Search for Meaning*.  
Start reading *The Lathe of Heaven* after class.
- February 22 Homework 3 (“First we invented stories, then they changed us”) is due.
- February 23 **Class meeting** – further considerations.

## **INTERLUDE: A QUESTION OF BALANCE**

- February 24 Finish reading *The Lathe of Heaven* and submit your journal entry.
- February 27 Submit your journal responses.
- February 28 **Class meeting** – open discussion of *The Lathe of Heaven*.  
Start reading *Minds Make Societies* after class.
- March 1 Read “The Biophilia Hypothesis and Life in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.”
- March 2 **Class meeting** – double-edged swords.
- March 5 – 12 *Spring Break*

## **SELF AND SOCIETY, PART TWO: RECENT PROPOSALS**

### **The Cognitive and Evolutionary Perspectives (and the Ghosts of Theories Past)**

- March 14 **Class meeting** – sociobiology and its offshoots.
- March 15 Homework 4 (“Religion and Intragroup Cooperation”) is due.
- March 16 **Class meeting** – cultural adaptations.
- March 20 Watch *Moolaadé* today, tomorrow, or on Wednesday.
- March 21 Morning coffee klatch.
- March 23 **Class meeting** – movie musings.
- March 24 Finish reading *Minds Make Societies* and submit your journal entry.
- March 27 Submit your journal responses.
- March 28 **Class meeting** – panel discussion of *Minds Make Societies*.  
Start reading *Conscience* after class.

March 29 Homework 5 (“Above and Below Left-Right”) is due.

March 30 **Class meeting** – further considerations.

### **The Neuroscience Perspective (and the Moral Sentiments)**

April 3 Watch *The Ballad of Narayama* today, tomorrow, or on Wednesday.

April 4 Morning coffee klatch.

April 6 **Class meeting** – movie musings.

April 7 Finish reading *Conscience* and submit your journal entry.

April 10 Submit your journal responses.

April 11 **Class meeting** – panel discussion of *Conscience*.  
Start reading *Liberalism and Its Discontents* after class.

April 12 Homework 6 (“Wisdom and How to Cultivate It”) is due.

April 13 **Class meeting** – further considerations.

### **The Political Perspective (and the Challenges of the Future)**

April 17 Watch *Dreams Rewired* today, tomorrow, or on Wednesday.

April 18 Morning coffee klatch.

April 20 **Class meeting** – movie musings.

April 21 Finish reading *Liberalism and Its Discontents* and submit your journal entry.

April 24 Submit your journal responses.  
Read “Empathy Rules.”

April 25 **Class meeting (at 10:00 a.m.)** – panel discussion of *Liberalism and Its Discontents* and closing thoughts.