WHAT IS EVIL?

NYU – CAS
First-Year Seminar

Fall 2020
4:55-7:25pm
Course number : FYSEM-UA 770

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Office Hours : by appointment.

Course Description and impact

« Video meliora proboque, deteriora sequor » (Ovid, Metamorphoses, VII, 20-2).

I see the better way and approve it, but I follow the worse way.

When we try to describe, understand and respond to various atrocities such as rapes, genocides, or serial killings, we often use the word “evil”. A wide range of questions arise when we try to think critically about the relevance of this term within the various discourses we are surrounded with.

Should we use the term ‘evil’ in our moral, political, and legal discourse and thinking, or is evil an outdated or empty concept which should be abandoned?

What is the relationship between evil and other moral concepts such as badness and wrongdoing?

What are the necessary and sufficient conditions for evil action/ for evil character?

What is the relationship between evil action and evil character?

What happens when we qualify something as being evil?

What causes our moral judgement, and what effects may have this judgement?

We will be discussing the historicity of the concept of Evil, its relativity, and the diversity of feelings that it inspires us, such as fear, disgust, shame, despise, hate, or compassion. We will try to analyse the complexity of this concept, and its many symbolic representations.
This course will also provide an introduction to moral philosophy, or ethics. We will begin by examining certain problems that arise when we try to make moral judgments: problems such as cultural relativism ("What’s right here is not necessarily right there"), subjectivism ("What’s right for me is not necessarily right for you"), and the role of religion in morality. We will consider several historically important approaches to be able to better understand questions about right and wrong. We will seek not so much to form definitive judgments about specific moral issues, but to improve our thinking about the considerations that may count as reasons for and against the moral judgments we are tempted to make, by commenting different examples of actions that may be considered as evil.

### Learning outcomes

Engaged and active course participants in this course will:

- Master and evaluate classic deliberations on the traditional “problem of evil” in the Western intellectual tradition, from Biblical texts up to the modern period.
- Analyze a set of contemporary “evils” including genocide, terrorism, war, and mass/serial killing.
- Integrate, respond to, and construct models of engaged, intellectual responses to manifestations of what is considered as evil today.
- Evaluate the usefulness, applicability, and potential dangers of the “evil” concept itself in light of multiple disciplines, with a special emphasis on philosophical critique and analysis.
- Identify ethical issues and controversies in various contexts.
- Analyze and articulate multiple perspectives on ethical issues.
- Construct arguments that are grounded in ethical and other analytical perspectives in support of their own judgments.
- Define key concepts relating to ethics.
- Be better prepared to recognize, confront, and think critically about difficult questions about contemporary issues that we all encounter in our daily, personal and professional lives.
Course Requirements

Participation:
This class requires active participation. You will have to put an honest effort into attempting to understand and discuss the issues we talk about in class (disagreeing with each other is more than acceptable; it is energizing for an Ethics class, as long as you remain respectful). In order to do that properly, you will need to prepare for class by reviewing what we did the week before. Your participation grade is calculated based on how often you talk during discussion times, but also on how relevant your questions and remarks are.

Short Papers:
Two short papers of approximately 5 pages (typically about five double-spaced pages) each are required. The first is due on Wednesday, October 2nd, and the second is due on Wednesday, November 13th.
Each paper must defend a substantive philosophical thesis concerning an ethical question related to what we call evil. For instance, I might ask you a question (such as « Are we responsible for committing evil action? »), or give you a short excerpt (50 to 150 words) to comment on, from the references listed below.
For very helpful advice on writing a philosophy paper, see http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/writing.html.

Research and public speaking:
During the course of the semester, each student will, with 1 or 2 other classmate(s), work on a presentation (PowerPoint recommended) of approximately 25 minutes that will (1) contextualize, (2) analyze, and (3) stimulate discussion of an issue either directly related to the required reading’s content, or about a movie, a piece of Art, a book, a piece of news, a part of history you might have read about that deals with what we call “evil” actions or characters. Dates and groups will be discussed in class.

Final paper:
A final paper (approximately 10 pages) will be due Wednesday, December 11th. (same possible topics as listed for short papers)
Please note: grammar, clarity, precision are key criteria that will determine a considerable part of your grade on written assignments.

Grading:
Each short paper will count for 20% of the final course grade, as will the group presentation. The final examination will count for 30%. The quality and quantity of contributions to discussion (participation) will count for 10%.
Policies

Attendance is essential, especially for a once-a-week class. For extended periods away from school, refer to the office of Student Services/Academic Advising as soon as possible. *There will be direct grading implications for missing classes, unless there is clear proof that you didn’t have any other choice at all.* Any unjustified absence will directly affect your participation grade. Please note that students will not be penalized for religious or pregnancy- or childbirth-related absences. Absences for these reasons will not be counted toward the allowed number of absences in this course. Please inform me about absences related to pregnancy, childbirth, or religious observation. If you have to be absent for *any* reason, *you* are responsible for recapturing what you missed.

Arrive on time and stay in class once you’re there. If you’re consistently late or regularly moving in and out of class while it’s in session, I will stop marking you present. We will take a break at the mid-point of each session.

*Computer/cell phone policy.* The use of technology in the classroom is not allowed. Mobile devices cannot be used and have to be turned off/ in silence mode and put away.

*Lateness.* Late papers go down by 1/3 of a letter (i.e., from B to B-, etc.) for each day of lateness. Please note that the written assignments are a required (and essential) element of the course. Even if a paper is not all you want it to be or is significantly late, you have to turn it in. Format: Papers should be word-processed and double-spaced. Word counts should be followed carefully.

Academic Integrity

Plagiarism is the written use without attribution of either the words or the ideas of another person. Plagiarism in assigned papers and the use of unauthorized materials or assistance during examinations are both contrary to the requirements of academic integrity. Plagiarism or cheating will result in a failing grade for the assignment and a written report to the appropriate College Dean.

For the complete College of Arts and Science policy on academic integrity, see https://cas.nyu.edu/content/nyu-as/cas/academic-integrity.
Disability Disclosure Statement

Academic accommodations are available for students with disabilities. The Moses Center website is www.nyu.edu/csd. Please contact the Moses Center for Students with Disabilities (212-998-4980 or mosecsd@nyu.edu) for further information. Students who are requesting academic accommodations are advised to reach out to the Moses Center as early as possible in the semester for assistance.

Required readings

Eagleton, *On Evil*, Introduction (available online)
Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*
Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*
Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*
Zola, *Thérèse Raquin*, (Introduction and Excerpts)

Some additional excerpts will be posted online for you to read.

Suggested materials

Larrimore, *The Problem of Evil* (Anthology)
The Bible
Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*
Augustine, *Confessions*
Machiavelli, *The Prince*
Kant, *The Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals, Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*
Sade, *Justine, or The Misfortunes of Virtue*
Dostoïevsky, *Notes from Underground*
Franz Kafka, *The Metamorphosis*
Mauriac, *Thérèse Desqueyroux*
Maupassant, *The Horla*
Wilde, *The picture of Dorian Gray*

Recommended movies:

**Recommended Series:**

*Game of Thrones*
*Black Mirror*
*Top of the Lake*
*The night of*
Course Tentative Schedule

All dates to be changed

September

4th General presentation of the course’s aims - Syllabus, Logistics, Opening Discussion

11th Evil-Skepticism versus Evil-Revivalism, Dualist and Privation theories of Evil
(Read Eagleton, On Evil, https://www.academia.edu/9378123/Eagleton_Terry_-_On_Evil – 90 pages)

18th Religion and Evil: The Problem of Evil, original sin and demonization of sexuality
(Read excerpts posted online about the Fall, Genesis, the deadly sins, Leibniz theodicy. Approx. 70 pages)

25th Introduction to the main moral theories: a global view on the History of Ethics:
  Relativism and its dangers (Read excerpts posted online. “What is moral philosophy?”, approx. 70 pages)

October

2nd Evil and the Ethics of virtue (Read excerpts posted online, approx. 70 pages) Careful:
  1st Essay due

9th Deontology versus Consequentialism (Read excerpts posted online, approx. 70 pages)

16th Kant on Evil (Read excerpts posted online, approx. 70 pages)

23rd Nietzsche's on Evil (Read 1st essay of On the Genealogy of Morality
  https://www.gutenberg.org/files/52319/52319-h/52319-h.htm- until p. 58)

30th Nietzsche's on Evil (Read 2nd essay of On the Genealogy of Morality
  https://www.gutenberg.org/files/52319/52319-h/52319-h.htm- from p. 59 to p. 118)

November

6th Levi, Survival in Auschwitz https://archive.org/details/primo_levi_if_this_is_a_man/
p. 1 to 70,71 to 142, 143 to 206. 3 groups of readers)
13th Arendt on Evil (Read excerpts from Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*; beginning to page 55.)
Careful: 2nd Essay due

20th Arendt on Evil, the Milgram and Stanford Experiments (Read excerpts from Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*; p. 56 to 111)
Wrongdoing and Harm: Motivation behind and affects due to the “evil” action

27th RECESS

December

4th Questions around Terrorism, Animal Rights, and any other topic we might need to go back to. (Read excerpts posted online)

11th Final paper due. Closing discussion.