

PHIL 300: The Nature of Evil

Course Overview

In the last week of December, 1978, the bodies of 27 murdered young men were found carefully arranged beneath John Wayne Gacy's Chicago home. Gacy, it seems, is the sort of person for whom we reserve a special sense of the word "evil": his character or actions are among the most morally reprehensible that we can imagine. What makes a person or action evil in this sense? Is evil innate to human nature or alien to it? Why are some people apparently so attracted to evil when the rest of us find it unthinkable to do what Gacy did? How can we draw the line between evil and insanity? And how can we respond to evil — without becoming evil ourselves?

Through a mixture of classical and contemporary readings, this course will initiate students to some influential philosophical responses to the challenge that evil poses to understanding human (and divine) nature. Through written work and exams, students will also plot the relationships among all the questions listed above as they hone their philosophical skills.

Course Readings

All required readings are to be completed before class. Readings marked with an asterisk (*) are recommended, not required.

Evil and Human Nature

Week 1 Concepts of Evil
**The Act of Killing* (film)

Chinese Perspectives
The Mencius, 6A6, 6A15
Perrett - Evil and Human Nature

Week 2 Aristotle's Virtue Theory
Nicomachean Ethics, Book I, Chs. 1-7

Original Sin & Inherent Evil in Protestantism
Calvin - *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* (selection)
Edwards - Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God
**Exodus* (selection)

- Week 3 Kant on Radical Evil
Wood - *Kant's Moral Religion*, 210-226
*Kant - *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, 6:19-39
- The Romanticism of Evil
Marquis de Sade - *Philosophy in the Bedroom* (selection)
Nietzsche - *Beyond Good and Evil* and *The Genealogy of Morals* (selection)
*Baudelaire - *To the Reader*

Evil: Comprehensibility and Responsibility

- Week 4 Sociopathy and Unthinkable Evil
Allen - *Assault With a Deadly Weapon* (selection)
DSM-IV - Diagnostic criteria for sociopathy
Frankfurt - *Rationality and the unthinkable*, §§III-IV
- All-Too-Thinkable Evil
Milgram - *Obedience to Authority* (selection)
Feinberg - *Evil*, pp. 125-45, 183-192

- Week 5 Free Will I
Ayer - *Freedom and Necessity*
- Free Will II
Strawson - *Freedom and Resentment*

- Week 6 Insanity, Freedom, and Responsibility I
Kadish, Schulhofer, & Steiker - *The Defense of Legal Insanity*
- Insanity, Freedom, and Responsibility II
Watson - *Responsibility and the Limits of Evil*

Contemporary Accounts of Evil

- Week 7 Evil Action: Defiance
Hampton - *The Nature of Immorality*
- Evil Action: Extreme Wrongdoing

Russell - Evil Action

Week 8 Evil Persons: The Dispositional Account
Russell - Dispositional Accounts of Evil Personhood

Evil Persons: Character First
Haybron - Moral Monsters and Saints

Responding to Evil

Week 9 Punishment
Kadish, Schulhofer, & Steiker - What is Punishment?
*Harrington - Violence in the Pursuit of Justice

The Utilitarian Justification of Punishment
Bentham - *Principles*, Chs. 1 and 13

Week 10 Retributivism
Morris - Persons and Punishment (selection)

Dirty Hands I
Walzer - The Problem of Dirty Hands

Week 11 Dirty Hands II
Neilson - There Is No Problem of Dirty Hands

Dirty Hands III
Levy - Punishing the Dirty

Week 12 Forgiveness I
Murphy - Forgiveness and Resentment

Forgiveness I
Hampton - Forgiveness, Resentment and Hatred

Is God Evil?

Week 13 The Problem of Evil I
Dostoevsky - The Grand Inquisitor

Rowe - The Problem of Evil

The Problem of Evil II

Adams - Must God Create the Best?

Week 14 The Problem of Evil III

Lewis - Divine Evil

Last Class: Happiness

Last updated: November 15, 2015