

E/M 540: Evil, Trauma, and Ambiguity
January Intensive 2010
January 19 - 22
Meadville Lombard Theological School
5701 S. Woodlawn
Chicago, IL 60637

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NOTE: There will be no class, Monday January 18. There will be mandatory evening class, Tuesday, January 19; and group work on Thursday evening, January 21.

Description:

William James wrote, in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, that:

healthy-mindedness is inadequate as a philosophical doctrine, because the evil facts which it refuses positively to account for are a genuine portion of reality; and they may after all be the best key to life's significance, and possibly the only openers of our eyes to the deepest levels of truth.

Is James opinion persuasive? What can the phenomena of evil tell us about the process of becoming moral selves? What ontological windows can it open for us, (i.e., what can it tell us about reality)? What can it tell us about the connection between the dynamics of human development, the capacity for ethical reflection, and the practices of religious community life?

The phenomena of evil can be approached from several vantages points. This course addresses the specifically human forms of evil. This endeavor will crisscross the descriptive presentations of several authors on evil using sociocultural, psychological, and ethical lenses. For the purposes of this course, a precise definition of evil will be bracketed. The danger in such an approach is one of vertigo and disorientation. The possibility is a richer ontological and epistemological map from which to explore the human experiences of evil. Within Western ethical traditions, the construct of evil has presented a continuous challenge to the coherence, consistency, and explanatory power of ethical systems in their efforts to articulate an ordered and meaningful description of human society and of human life. Ethical analyses tend to focus on one of three aspects: the ethical object (the end of human life), the ethical subject (motivations for human behavior based on an understanding of human nature), and the relation between the motives of behavior and the concrete circumstances of lived experience.

This course privileges an understanding of evil as both a moral and a psychological category. Psychologically, evil is often a practical problem of daily living. Of particular importance are the recurrent dynamics of violence, shame and dread in the constitution and expression of selves in relation to others. These psychological dimensions are contextualized within the patterns of family, societal, and institutional interactions.

Course Objectives:

1. An appreciation of the manifold complexity of evil in its ethical, social, and psychological dimensions.
2. An appreciation of the dynamics of violence, shame, and dread as psychologically significant in the formation of destructive behaviors.
3. An appreciation of one process approach to ethics, which links ontological, epistemological, and ethical claims.

Requirements:

1. Class attendance
2. Active participation in class activities
3. Individual and/or group study of reading and written assignments
4. Satisfactory completion of written responses to texts, submitted to the instructor at the end of the course.
5. Satisfactory completion of course project

Grading:

Learning in this course derives from your engagement with the readings, class sessions, written assignments, other students, instructor, and your reflections. Students who attend all class sessions and complete all class work will receive an "A." Failure to complete two written assignments reduces the final grade to a "C." Failure to complete more than two assignments reduces grade to an "F." If an extension for final project is needed, consult with instructor before the end of the course.

Assignments:

1. Six texts are required reading for the course. For each text, excluding *Sunflower*, write a two page response. Your written responses serve as a "jumping off point" for class discussions. Your response should include the following:
 - a. highlight what are, for you, the key insight(s) of the text,
 - b. how they contribute to your understanding of either an ethical or psychological dimension of evil, and
 - c. identify two questions you would ask the author.

2. Bring to the first session of class, some item that represents or embodies “evil” for you. This should be something about which you are free to converse, and that can be left in the space of the classroom for the duration of the course.
3. Come prepared to respond to the following questions:
 - a. Whether you have experienced evil in your own life;
 - b. What is, in your opinion, the most powerful story (in whatever medium) about evil.
 - c. Give thought to what, in each case, is the qualitative dimension of evil to which you are responding.
4. After reading *The Sunflower*, write your response to the question Wiesenthal poses. Choose to respond from either a theological or an ethical perspective. Take care to elaborate your ethical and/or theological thought process. Limit your response to no more than five pages. These responses will be the basis for small group discussions. Bring four additional copies of your response to class.
5. The final project is a teaching module developed around a particular film or series of films (of your choosing) with teaching notes. Imagine using this film(s) as a teaching tool within a ministry setting. The focus can be weighted toward various perspectives: ethical, pastoral care or religious education. Keep in mind Gilligan’s claim that a chief task of cultural institutions (and therefore, religious institutions) is to offer mediums in which evil can be symbolically negotiated. Of particular importance is the use of symbolic forms (stories, visuals, etc.,) in this endeavor. Due March 30, 2010.
6. The space in which this course unfolds will be held with ritual. Consider whether you are willing to open or close the day. If so, bring whatever material and frame of mind /spirit needed. These openings and closing should be no more than five minutes in length.
7. **Please note that on Tuesday evening, January 19th and Thursday, January 21st, there will be evening class sessions. On Tuesday evening, January 19th,** we will view a selected film which will serve as the basis for in class group presentations.
8. Please keep all of your assignments for class together until the last day of class. They are for your in class use. Consider assembling all of your assignments within a binder that you can bring to class and leave with the instructor on the last day.

Required Texts:

Alford, C. Fred. *What Evil Means to Us*. London: Cornell University Press, 1997.

Ferre, Frederick. *Living and Value*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001.
Focus on chapters 1, 3, 5, 7; Approach chapter 2 as background.

Gilligan, James. *Violence: Reflections on a National Epidemic*. New York: Vintage Books, 1996.

Means, Jeffrey. *Trauma and Evil: Healing the Wounded Soul*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000.

Steffen, Lloyd. *The Demonic Turn: The Power of Religion to Inspire or Restrain Violence*. Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 2003.

Wiesenthal, Simon. *The Sunflower: On the possibilities and Limits of Forgiveness*. revised and expanded, eds. Harry James Cargas and Bonny V. Fetterman. New York: Schocken Books, 1997.

All of the required texts are available through Amazon.com. Most should be available as used copies.

Statement Regarding Adaptation or Accommodation

NOTE: Students experience difficulty in this course for a variety of reasons. If you need course adaptations or accommodations because you are differently abled, please make an appointment with me as soon as possible. Likewise, see me if you encounter difficulty with the course or feel that you could be performing at a higher level, or have a learning style issue that provides a challenge. As an instructor, my obligation is to ensure that the work you encounter is relevant to your needs and is accessible. Unless you negotiate inadequate conditions, I will assume your learning needs are being met.