

## PHILOSOPHY 399: THE CONCEPT OF *EVIL*

**Instructor:** Ron Wilburn, Ph.D. (Philosophy: UCLA, University of Pennsylvania)

**Office Hours:** Tuesdays, 1-2 pm via Zoom. On Thursdays I would like to focus on assigned group discussion questions, but this period can also serve as office hours. Moreover, I will also respond to any emailed inquiries or concerns within 24 hours of receiving them.



### Introduction

Evil, in the sense we will deal with during our time together in this class, has only become a serious topic for investigation by English-speaking philosophers (as well as scientists, journalists, political theorists and others) since the middle of the Twentieth Century. To a large degree, this was due to the holocaust, which, despite not being the first genocide in modern times, was arguably the most bloody, ruthless and systematic. People in the Western world felt overwhelmed by the holocaust and other criminal events largely because they assumed that such heinous occurrences belonged to a bygone age, and that the social and psychological forces which had made them possible in the past had succumbed to the civilizing influence of the European Renaissance and Enlightenment. The last major crusade against Moslems had occurred in 1272; the last major religious war in Europe had concluded in 1648; the last European executions of convicted witches had been in the 18th century. “Evil” seemed like a dead concept to many, a thoroughly superstitious concept whose time had come and gone. But since heinous acts on a mass scale didn’t stop in the 20th Century, people felt obliged to ask, “what the hell?” To call genocide or ethnic cleansing, or even senseless serial killing, merely “bad” or “very back” or even “wicked” did not seem enough to many folks. Thus, they came to wonder if the category of “evil” still has some role to play in our descriptions of life and experience.

In this course we will address a number of questions which have arisen, often repeatedly, in the course of humanity’s efforts to figure out the role and character of “evil” in our moral discourse. Our approach will be historical, as we look at literary, religious and philosophical texts ranging from the 10th Century B.C. Sumerian Epic of Gilgamesh to the mid-Twentieth Century works of Hannah Arendt. Those we cover along the way is subject to change: this depends upon the pace which folks find reasonable. However, at the very least we can expect to look at works by Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Anselm, Dante and Milton, Kant and Arendt. The questions we will address will include the most perennial ones which people ask.

- The What of Evil: What do or should people mean when they use the term “evil?” Does or should this term have a single, univocal meaning? And if not, are there at least common themes which run through the different senses of “evil” which people invoke?
- The Why of Evil: What do or should people mean they ask why evil occurs in the world? They aren’t typically asking about the causal sources of evil. So, what do they mean? Again, does or should this question have a single, univocal meaning? And if not, are there at least common themes which run through the different senses which people have in mind when they ask it?
- How Avoidance of Evil: How is evil best avoided on the accounts of its nature which we will describe: And, of course, once again does or should this question have a single, univocal answer? And if not, are there at least common themes which run through the different answers which people have in mind when they ask it?

### **Prerequisite(s)**

There are no prerequisites for this course.

### **Required Texts**

Every single text I will be using in this class is either in the public domain or authorized for distribution by fair-use laws, and thus available online and/or in the “Readings” module. By consulting the readings module, you can see what they are.

### **Films**

In addition, there will be various that I will recommend that you look at from time to time (although doing so is never mandatory). These are available through the “Films on Demand” module. By consulting the “Films” module, you can see what they are.

### **Grading**

The grading will be modular, not comprehensive (e.g., exam #2 will deal only with material covered since exam #1). There is only one minor exception to this (e.g., one question on the third exam which refers to previously covered material on the *Book of Revelation*).

1. Three (3) essay exams, collectively worth 75% of the course grade. They will be paper assignments. However, they will be formatted in a way that allows you to submit them through the D2L quiz function. Each exam will require a set of responses *collectively* amounting to the equivalent of 10-12 pages of text (1 inch on all sides, 12-point Times New Roman font, double-spaced).
2. Fifteen (15) discussion assignments, collectively worth 25% of the course grade.

Note that these discussion assignments consist of two parts:

- (a) For simply responding to each discussion question with an original thread of your own, you will receive four **(4) points** (if I judge your response to be reasonably sincere and reflective, which is to say no snow jobs and no bullshit). Each such question requires a response a couple of paragraphs long (or one very substantive paragraph). However, I leave paragraph length up to your own judgment. These are due at the very end of the academic week for which they are assigned.
  
- (b) Reflective response commentary on at least two discussion entries by other students (or a single other student). This is a requirement for receiving full credit for your discussion assignments. These commentaries are each worth additional two **(2) points apiece**. These are due at the very end of the first academic week after which they are assigned.

This means that you can receive up to eight **(8) points** per discussion assignment.

For grading I use a *contact system*. By this I mean the following:

- (a) If you complete all the discussion assignments leading up to the first exam and take the first exam with a passing score (60% or above), you will receive an C+ in the course.
  
- (b) If you complete all the discussion assignments leading up to the second exam and take the second exam with a passing score (60% or above), you will receive an B+ in the course.
  
- (c) If you complete all the discussion assignments leading up to the third exam and take the third exam with a passing score (60% or above) you will receive an A in the course.

Note what this means. It means that to get a C+, you must do (a). To get a B+, say, you must do both (a) and (b). To get an A, you must do (a) and (b) and (c).

Moreover, the course is self-paced so that you can take it on your own schedule (just so long as you submit all the discussion assignments and exams by the end of the summer session). I make my distance ed courses self-paced to accommodate students who have non-academic work and family responsibilities. *Having said this, however, I still recommend that you follow the general pacing schedule suggested in the calendar in general outline to avoid falling too far behind (at least if you're aiming for an A).*

There is no registrar-scheduled final exam for this course.

### **Course Organization and Lesson Plan**

The schedule below is organized around a simple organizational scheme. For each block of material, you are asked to

- 1) Read the assigned material (if any is assigned).

- 2) Think about and answer the correlated discussion assignment questions.

You can find these assignments and submit your responses through the discussion folder linked to the course desktop. These responses will be visible to me and all of your classmates. What I am looking for in the case of each of your submissions is a reasonable and honest effort which has been informed by the reading(s). That is, don't simply give me your opinions. Give me the considered and sincere opinions you form after doing the pertinent readings.

- 4) Listen to and look at the correlated narrated PowerPoint lecture presentation.
- 5) Comment on each other's discussion assignment entries for that block.

Needless to say, I don't expect you to comment on all of the posted submissions, as this would take years and cost millions of lives. But I would like to see at least two commentary entries from each of you in connection with each discussion assignment. As much as anything else, I am concerned in this course to encourage focused discussion of the issues we are dealing with. Thus, I take this commentary component seriously, and may occasionally send entries of my own (anonymously) to stir up discussion. To repeat once again, your submission of these commentary entries factors into your own discussion assignment grade. That is, you cannot receive full credit for your own discussion assignment submissions if you do not comment on at least two submissions by another student (or students), at which point I will rescore your submission.

- 6) Once you have submitted a given discussion assignment, look at the set of so-called "suggested responses" to these discussion questions located on your desktop. There will also be "suggested responses" provided for your exam questions once you have submitted the appropriate exam and I have graded it. For the most part, this "suggested responses" are not offered as sole possible or "correct" responses. They are intended, rather, to give you a sense of the sort of things I am looking for. They are intended to show you what an adequate answer looks like.

## **IMPORTANT DEPARTMENTAL, FACULTY AND UNIVERSITY INFORMATION**

### **Academic Accommodations**

It is the student's responsibility to request academic accommodations according to the University policies and procedures. The student accommodation policy can be found at [ucalgary.ca/policies/files/policies/student-accommodation-policy.pdf](http://ucalgary.ca/policies/files/policies/student-accommodation-policy.pdf).

Students needing an Accommodation because of a disability or medical condition should communicate this need to Student Accessibility Services in accordance with the Procedure for Accommodations for Students with Disabilities: [ucalgary.ca/policies/files/policies/procedure-for-accommodations-for-students-with-disabilities.pdf](http://ucalgary.ca/policies/files/policies/procedure-for-accommodations-for-students-with-disabilities.pdf). Students needing an Accommodation in relation to their coursework or to fulfil requirements for a graduate degree, based on a protected ground other than disability, should communicate this need, preferably in writing, to their instructor.

### **Absence or Missed Course Assessments**

Students who are absent from class assessments (tests, participation activities, or other assignments) should inform their instructors as soon as possible. Instructors may request that evidence in the form of documentation be provided. If the reason provided for the absence is acceptable, instructors may

decide that any arrangements made can take forms other than make-up tests or assignments. For example, the weight of a missed grade may be added to another assignment or test. For information on possible forms of documentation, including statutory declarations, please see [ucalgary.ca/pubs/calendar/current/m-1.html](http://ucalgary.ca/pubs/calendar/current/m-1.html)

### **Student Support and Resources**

Full details and information about the following resources can be found at [ucalgary.ca/Registrar/registration/course-outlines](http://ucalgary.ca/Registrar/registration/course-outlines)

- Wellness and Mental Health Resources
- Student Success Centre
- Student Ombuds Office
- Student Union (SU) Information
- Graduate Students' Association (GSA) Information
- Emergency Evacuation/Assembly Points
- Safewalk

### **Academic Advising**

If you are a student in the Faculty of Arts, you can speak to an academic advisor in the Arts Students' Centre about course planning, course selection, registration, program progression and more. Visit the Faculty of Arts website at [arts.ucalgary.ca/advising](http://arts.ucalgary.ca/advising) for contact details and information regarding common academic concerns.

For questions specific to the philosophy program, please visit [phil.ucalgary.ca](http://phil.ucalgary.ca). Further academic guidance is available by contacting David Dick (Undergraduate Program Director [dgdick@ucalgary.ca](mailto:dgdick@ucalgary.ca)) or Jeremy Fantl (Honours Advisor [jfantl@ucalgary.ca](mailto:jfantl@ucalgary.ca)). If you have questions regarding registration, please email Rebecca Lesser (Undergraduate Program Administrator [phildept@ucalgary.ca](mailto:phildept@ucalgary.ca)).

### **Writing Assessment and Support**

The assessment of all written assignments—and, to a lesser extent, written exam responses—is based in part on writing skills. This includes correctness (grammar, punctuation, sentence structure, etc.), as well as general clarity and organization. Research papers must include a thorough and accurate citation of sources. Students are also encouraged to use Writing Support Services for assistance (one-on-one appointments, drop-in support and writing workshops). For more information, and other services offered by the Student Success Centre, please visit [ucalgary.ca/ssc](http://ucalgary.ca/ssc).

### **Online Resources and Electronic Devices**

Important information and communication about this course may be posted on D2L (Desire2Learn), UCalgary's online learning management system. Visit [ucalgary.service-now.com/it](http://ucalgary.service-now.com/it) for how-to information and technical assistance.

The instructor reserves the right to establish specific course policies regarding the use of electronic devices. If permitted, the use of devices must be exclusively for instructional purposes, and without disruption to the instructor or fellow students. Devices should be set to silent mode during lectures. Audio or video recording of lectures is not permitted without the written permission of the instructor.

Students violating this policy are subject to discipline under the University of Calgary's Non-Academic Misconduct policy.

### **Academic Misconduct/Honesty**

Cheating or plagiarism on any assignment or examination is as an extremely serious academic offense, the penalty for which will be an F on the assignment or an F in the course, and possibly a disciplinary sanction such as probation, suspension, or expulsion. For information on academic misconduct and its consequences, please see the University of Calgary Calendar at [ucalgary.ca/pubs/calendar/current/k.html](http://ucalgary.ca/pubs/calendar/current/k.html).

Intellectual honesty requires that your work include adequate referencing to sources. Plagiarism occurs when you do not acknowledge or correctly reference your sources. If you have questions about referencing, please consult your instructor.

### **University Policies**

The Instructor Intellectual Property Policy is available at [ucalgary.ca/policies/files/policies/Intellectual%20Property%20Policy.pdf](http://ucalgary.ca/policies/files/policies/Intellectual%20Property%20Policy.pdf)

The University of Calgary is under the jurisdiction of the provincial Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy (FOIP) Act, as outlined at [ucalgary.ca/legalservices/foip](http://ucalgary.ca/legalservices/foip). The instructor (or TA) must return graded assignments *directly* to the student UNLESS written permission to do otherwise has been provided.

All students are required to read the University of Calgary policy on Acceptable Use of Material Protected by Copyright ([ucalgary.ca/policies/files/policies/acceptable-use-of-material-protected-by-copyright.pdf](http://ucalgary.ca/policies/files/policies/acceptable-use-of-material-protected-by-copyright.pdf)) and requirements of the copyright act ([laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/C-42/index.html](http://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/C-42/index.html)).