

THE PROBLEM OF EVIL
LSHV 466 • Summer 2014
Mondays 6:00-9:35 • White-Gravenor 213

COURSE DESCRIPTION

If God is all-good and all-powerful, why does evil exist?

This question is known as the “problem of evil,” and it poses a substantial challenge to all monotheistic faith traditions, as well as a serious obstacle to the reconciliation of religion and reason. Not surprisingly, therefore, the problem of evil has been fervently studied and debated for millennia, including by many of the greatest theologians and philosophers in human history.

The problem will not be resolved any time soon. Even in the absence of an “answer,” however, studying the problem of evil provides an opportunity to examine fundamental questions of how the moral universe is structured and what our role in that universe should be. In other words, because the problem of evil deals with what it means to be a human being who interacts with — and therefore suffers from the actions of — other human beings, the natural world, and possibly a deity, the problem resides at the core of human self-contemplation, inextricably intertwined with the ultimate dilemmas of our creation, existence, and death.

This course will examine the problem of evil and some of the most prominent theories that have been advanced in response to it. We will discuss the Old Testament (particularly the books of Genesis and Job), the theology of St. Augustine, and attempts by modern academics and clergy to respond to the problem. We will analyze the extent to which each response is effective, logically sound, and otherwise desirable. We will also take a higher-level view of the question, discussing what the problem of evil means for theologians and philosophers today, and what areas of future inquiry might prove most fruitful.

There is no textbook for this course, although use of an ecumenical bible translation (*e.g.*, the New Revised Standard Version) is *strongly* encouraged. All of the other readings will be available on Blackboard or online at the addresses provided below. Note that there is a brief reading assignment for the first class.

SCHEDULE AND READINGS

I. THE PROBLEM OF EVIL DEFINED

May 19: Divine Omnipotence and Benevolence

- James R. Beebe, “The Logical Problem of Evil,” <http://www.iep.utm.edu/evil-log/> — Sections 1-3 (“Introducing the Problem,” “Logical Consistency,” and “Logical Consistency and the Logical Problem of Evil”)

May 26: No Class (Memorial Day)

June 2: Definition, Scope, and Forms of Evil

- John Hick, *An Irenaean Theodicy*, p. 398 only (on Blackboard)
- John Paul II, *Salvifici Doloris*, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_letters/index.htm (sixth document from the bottom) — Paragraphs 1-13
- Augustine, *Enchiridion*, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1302.htm> — Chapters 10-15
- Augustine, *City of God*, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1201.htm> — Book XIII, Chap. 10
- Bring to class one dictionary definition of “evil” (as a noun)

II. FREE WILL AND ORIGINAL SIN

June 9: The Doctrine of Original Sin

- Genesis 3
- Deuteronomy 28 (skim)
- Romans 5
- *Catechism of the Catholic Church*:
 - a. Paragraphs 374-379, http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/___P1B.HTM
 - b. Paragraphs 385-421, http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/___P1C.HTM
- Augustine, *City of God*, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1201.htm>:
 - a. Book XIII, Chapters 1, 3-4, 13-15, 21
 - b. Book XIV, Chapters 1, 10-17, 23, 27

June 16: Critiquing the Doctrine of Original Sin

- Elaine Pagels, *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent*, pp. 127-150 (on Blackboard)
- Gabriel Daly, “Creation and Original Sin” (on Blackboard)

III. THE BOOK OF JOB

June 23: The Book of Job

- Job, chapters 1-13, 32-42
- Reread *Salvifici Doloris*, paragraphs 10-12

July 30: Applying the Book of Job to the Problem of Evil

- Terrence W. Tilley, *The Evils of Theodicy*, pp. 89-112 (on Blackboard)
- David B. Burrell, *Deconstructing Theodicy: Why Job Has Nothing to Say to the Puzzle of Suffering*, pp. 107-127 (on Blackboard)
- *Optional reading*: 2 Esdras (also known as 4 Ezra), chapters 3-13

IV. MORE RESPONSES TO THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

July 7: The Best Possible World Theodicy

- G. W. Leibnitz, *Theodicy*, pp. 377-388 (on Blackboard)
- Alvin Plantinga's "Free Will Defense," as summarized in Beebe, <http://www.iep.utm.edu/evil-log/> — Section 4
- MIDTERM PAPER DUE

July 14: The Vale of Soul-Making

- John Hick, *An Irenaean Theodicy* (on Blackboard)
- John Thiel, *God, Evil, and Innocent Suffering: A Theological Reflection*, pp. 32-46 (on Blackboard)

July 21: Rethinking Omnipotence

- Harold S. Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, pp. 113-131 (on Blackboard)
- Charles Hartshorne, *Omnipotence and Other Theological Mistakes*, pp. 10-26 (on Blackboard)
- James A. Keller, *Problems of Evil and the Power of God*, pp. 135-167 (on Blackboard)
- Thiel, pp. 46-52

V. REFLECTING ON THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

July 28: Do Theodicies Cause Evil?

- Terrence W. Tilley, *The Evils of Theodicy*, pp. 221-255 (on Blackboard)
- Thiel, pp. 52-60

August 4: Practical Implications

- Bring to class a recent news story that involves any form of human suffering. Be prepared to discuss how the material we have covered in the course affects your view of what the story describes.

ADDITIONAL NOTES

Grades for the course will be calculated as follows: 25% midterm paper; 50% final paper; 25% quantity and quality of class participation.

Because the first two class sessions are critical for laying the foundation for all of the material that follows, every student *must* attend those first two sessions; please do not register for this course if you are not able to attend both of them. Absences for the rest of the course should be limited; missing more than one class will likely affect a student's participation grade.

The final paper assignment will be distributed on July 21. Final papers will be due by email one week after the last class session, *i.e.*, on August 11.

MIDTERM PAPER ASSIGNMENT

Many faith traditions teach the existence of “hell,” loosely defined (for purposes of this midterm) as an afterlife in which the dead suffer commensurately with their bad acts during life. Write an essay of 1,500-2,000 words (approximately 5-7 pages) analyzing the extent to which hell is a helpful or unhelpful part of a response to the problem of evil. Include a word count on the last page of your paper.

HONOR SYSTEM STATEMENT

MALS and DLS students are responsible for upholding the Georgetown University Honor System and adhering to the academic standards included in the Honor Code Pledge stated below:

In the pursuit of the high ideals and rigorous standards of academic life, I commit myself to respect and uphold the Georgetown University Honor System: To be honest in any academic endeavor; and to conduct myself honorably, as a responsible member of the Georgetown community, as we live and work together.

DISABILITY STATEMENT

If you believe you have a disability, then you should contact the Academic Resource Center (arc@georgetown.edu) for further information. The Center is located in the Leavey Center, Suite 335. The Academic Resource Center is the campus office responsible for reviewing documentation provided by students with disabilities and for determining reasonable accommodations in accordance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and University policies.