

TWENTIETH-CENTURY PHILOSOPHY: THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

Professor Elvira Basevich, Ph.D.

This course will provide students with a map of some of the key issues in 20th century philosophy in the context of American and European political history. We will focus on the relationship between the development of philosophical schools and major historical episodes of trauma engendered by socially-created evil, such as Jim Crow segregation in the U.S. and the Holocaust in continental Europe. The course will place a special emphasis on the lived experience of injustice, uncertainty, evil, and oppression, and will expect students to engage such questions as, what would you do in the face of evil and the pressure to conform to omnipresent evil? What is it like to live in the world as a so-called ‘second-class’ citizen? Why do injustices that derogate and destroy entire sections of the population stubbornly persist in modern societies? By the end of the semester, I expect my students to have the capacity to answer these questions thoughtfully and to live their lives more responsibly, in the face of day-to-day injustice, and with a greater sense of meaning and purpose.

REQUIRED BOOKS

(available in the campus bookstore)

Du Bois, W.E.B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. Oxford University Press, 2009. ISBN: 9780199555833
Arendt, Hannah. *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. Penguin, 2006. ISBN: 9780143039884
Neiman, Susan. *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy*. Princeton University Press, 2002. ISBN: 9780691168500

COURSE OBJECTIVES

After completing this course students will be able to:

- 1) Explain what philosophy is and several of the major theories in philosophy
- 2) Identify premises and conclusions in the context of written and oral arguments
- 3) Provide evidence for some of the major questions of 20th century philosophy
- 4) Show the relationship between philosophical theories of the 20th century and their relationship to culture, politics, social identity, and moral and political resistance

COURSE SCHEDULE:

Week One: **Introduction**

9/7: The first half of the 20th c. in American & European Philosophy

Week Two:

9/12: NO CLASS

9/14: Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought*, “Introduction” & first half of Chp 1

Week Three: An Ideal of Citizenship in a Democratic Society: American Pragmatism

9/19: John Dewey, *The Public and its Problems*, 1; Both Rogers's and Dewey's "Introductions"

9/21: John Dewey, *The Public and its Problems*, 4-5

Week Four: Black Democratic Politics during Jim Crow

9/26: W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*. Forward and Chp 1; Robert Gooding-Williams, *In the Shadow of Du Bois*, "Introduction"

9/28: Du Bois, *Souls*, chp. 2-3.

Week Five:

10/3: Du Bois, *Souls*, cont'd. Melvin Rogers, "The People, Rhetoric, and Affect: On the Political Force of Du Bois's 'The Souls of Black Folk'"

10/5: Du Bois, *Souls*, 4, 7, 13-14

Week Six:

10/10: James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*

10/12: Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (cont'd)

Week Seven: The White European in an Irrational Society: How to Make Life Meaningless and Evil Possible

10/24: Jean Paul Sartre "Existentialism is a Humanism"; Simone de Beauvoir, "Introduction," *The Second Sex*; Beauvoir, *Brigitte Bardot and the Lolita syndrome*

10/26: Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*; Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*

Week Eight:

10/31: Adorno & Horkheimer, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*

11/2: Adorno & Horkheimer, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, cont'd

Week Nine:

11/7: Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man* (excerpt)

11/9: Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization* (excerpt)

Week Ten: Afro-Caribbean and Anti-Colonial Thought Considers the World

11/11: Franz Fanon, *Black Skin / White Masks* (excerpt)

11/13: Aimé Césaire, *Return to my Native Land* (complete)

W.E.B. Du Bois, *The World and Africa* (excerpt)

Week Eleven: Why is Resisting Evil so Hard?

11/14: J. Kohn "Evil: The Crime Against Humanity," (link via the Hannah Arendt Papers), Film: "Obedience (Milgram Experiment 1962), T. Butler-Bowdon "Obedience to Authority," A.

Fenigstein "Milgram's Shock Experiments and the Nazi Perpetrators"

11/16: Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Intro, chps 1-2; Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought*, second half of chp 1

Week Twelve: 11/21: **Thanksgiving Recess 11/23**

Week Thirteen:

11/28: Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, chps. 3-5; Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought*, chp 4

12/30: Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, chps. 6-7

Week Fourteen:

12/5: Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, chps. 8-9; Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought*, chp 4, cont'd

12/7: Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, chps 14, 15

Week Fifteen:

12/12: Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Epilogue; Martin Luther King, Jr. "Letter from a Birmingham Jail."; Danielle Allen, *Talking to Strangers*, chp 4, 9, 11; selected Holocaust poetry

The Mask of Evil

by Bertolt Brecht

translated by Michael R. Burch

A Japanese carving hangs on my wall —
the mask of an ancient demon, limned with golden lacquer.
Not altogether unsympathetically, I observe
the bulging veins of its forehead, noting
the grotesque effort it takes to be evil.

Extra Credit Option:

Please watch either one of these documentaries [The Act of Killing](#) (2012) or [I Am Not Your Negro](#) (2017).

Extra credit could add up to **THREE (3)** points to your final grade. Since the idea of extra credit is to have students earn extra points by demonstrating scholarly excellence that goes beyond the normal class requirements, expect it to be difficult. If you choose to pursue this option, you would have to analyze the central themes of a documentary above in light of the issue of resistance to omnipresent, socially-created evil. Speak to me after class or during my office hours if you're interested in pursuing this option.