



“Guernica” by Pablo Picasso (1937)

The artist’s response to the Nazi’s firebombing of the Rebel-stronghold Basque town, Guernica, during Spanish Civil War. The fascists reigned until the death of Franco in 1975.

## Phil 3510: THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

Professor Elvira Basevich, Ph.D.

Room: Riverview Suites 145 - SC

Email: [elvira\\_basevich@uml.edu](mailto:elvira_basevich@uml.edu)

Office: Dugan 200E

Office Hours: 12:30-1:30pm Tues & Thurs or by apt

This course will guide students in a comparative study of the philosophical problem of evil in the context of American and European twentieth-century political history, focusing on Jim Crow segregation in the U.S. and the rise of fascism in continental Europe. We will begin the course by exploring the conceptual differences between natural evil, moral evil, and systematic social injustice. We will seriously consider that moral evil is the result of the failures of judgment of ordinary human beings. The course will thus explore the nature of moral judgment and the disparate pressures that might lead one to reject the authority of the moral law. In this course we will also undertake a close reading of major figures in the history of philosophy, including Leibniz, Kant, Du Bois, and Arendt. I expect students to consider, with intellectual honesty and moral courage, the following questions: what would you do in the face of human-made evil? Can you imagine what it is like to live in the world as a so-called ‘second-class’ citizen? Why does evil stubbornly persist in the modern era and what does it mean to avoid complicity in it? By the end of the semester, I expect my students to have the capacity to consider these questions thoughtfully and to live more responsible and fulfilling lives. To expand our moral and cultural sensibilities, I have included a wide selection of poems that provide students a first-

person perspective on the lived experience of suffering, resistance, and hope. My own hope is that in doing these readings together we will increase our sense of self-respect and our shared capacity for compassion.

## COURSE OBJECTIVES

The following course objectives reveal my motivations as an instructor—they are *always* on my mind in my communication and interaction with students.

- To provide you with an introduction to and understanding of major figures in the history of philosophy and the real-world application of their thought.
- To help you develop your critical thinking, critical reading, and writing skills. To develop these skills, it is important to understand the difference between a good and a bad argument, and to have the ability to analyze the arguments of others. This course should also teach you to write more sharply-organized, focused, and effective essays.

*By the end of the semester, I wish for you to know the following general things about philosophy:*

- Philosophy is *useful* and *valuable*.
- Philosophy is *diverse*.
- Philosophy could be *fun* and *interesting*.
- There *are* good and bad arguments, regardless of whether or not you agree with its conclusion.
- Your argument is only as sound and cogent as your consideration of and responses to the *objections* against it.

## REQUIRED BOOKS

(available in the campus bookstore)

Du Bois, W.E.B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. Oxford University Press. ISBN: 9780199555833

Du Bois, W.E.B. *Darkwater*. ISBN 978-0-486-40890-3

Arendt, Hannah. *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. Penguin, 2006. ISBN: 9780143039884

## CREDIT HOUR STATEMENT

This is a 3 credit course, as defined by federal regulation. You should expect to complete 6 hours of out of class work each week for approximately 15 weeks, for a total of 90 hours outside-of-class work.

## COURSE SCHEDULE:

### I. Introduction: Evil & the Problem of Suffering

1/22 A brief history of violence: the 20<sup>th</sup> c. in America & Europe

1/24 Jewish Bible, *The Book of Job* (excerpt)

*Poem*: Dunya Mikhail, “The War Works Hard”

## II. Leibniz & The Lisbon Earthquake

1/29 Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought*, pp. 1-14.

1/31 Leibniz, *Theodicy* (excerpt); Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought*, pp. 14-31

2/5 Leibniz, *Theodicy* (excerpt)

2/7 Leibniz, *Principle of Nature and of grace, founded on Reason*”

2/12 Leibniz, *Monadology*; Gregory Brown, “Leibniz’s Moral Philosophy”

2/14 Voltaire, *Candide*; Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought*, pp. 31-36.

→ First Short Response Due

## III. On the Unconditional Value of Humanity

2/19 No class! **\*\*Classes follow a Monday Schedule\*\***

**Note: We’ve a lot of Reading for next time, so start reading!**

2/21 Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork*, Preface & Section I (complete); Velleman, “A Brief Introduction to Kantian Ethics”

2/26 Kant, *Groundwork*, Section II (selections); Christine Korsgaard, “Morality as Freedom” Strongly Recommended (esp. for those new to Kant); Korsgaard’s “Kant’s Formula of Universal Law” & Barbara Herman, “Leaving Deontology Behind”

2/28 Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought*, pp. 57-83.

Strongly Recommended (esp. for those interested in grad school in philosophy): Kant, *Groundwork*, Section III & “On a Supposed Right to Lie” (complete); Korsgaard, “The Right to Lie: Kant on Dealing with Evil”

3/5 Kant, *Religion*, pp. 69-85

Strongly Recommended (esp. for those new to Kant): Bernstein, *Radical Evil*, chp 1.

3/7 Kant, *Religion*, pp. 85-97.

→ Second Short Response Due

**\*\*Spring Break 3/11-3/17\*\***



15-year-old student, Elizabeth Eckford and a hostile white crowd opposed to the desegregation of Little Rock Central High School in Arkansas (1957)

#### **IV. Jim Crow America**

3/19 Danielle Allen, *Talking to Strangers*, chp. 1

3/21 W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*. Forward and Chp 1-2; Robert Gooding-Williams, *In the Shadow of Du Bois*, “Introduction”

3/26 Du Bois, *Souls*, cont’d. chps. 4, 7; Melvin Rogers, “The People, Rhetoric, and Affect: On the Political Force of Du Bois’s ‘The Souls of Black Folk’”

3/28 Du Bois, *Souls*, cont’d. chps. 13-14

4/2 Du Bois, *Darkwater*, pp. 1-29.

*Poems*: Claude McKay, “The Lynching” & “If We Must Die”

4/4 Du Bois, *Darkwater*, pp. 78-94

*Poem*: Kevin Young, “The Living”

4/9 Du Bois, *Darkwater*, pp. 95-108; Laurie Balfour, “Representative Women”

→ **Stage 1 of Research Paper Due**: Introductory paragraph, thesis statement, and bibliography (in MLA format).

#### **V. Inspiration for a Fascist Imagination**

4/11 Little, “How the Nazis were inspired by Jim Crow”; Whitman, *Hitler’s American Model: The United States and the Making of Nazi Race Laws* (excerpt)

4/16 Whitman, *Hitler’s American Model*, cont’d; Jason Stanley, *How Fascism Works* (excerpt)

→ **Stage 2 of Research Paper Due**: Outline of supporting arguments

4/18 – No class – I’ve a conference

## VI. The Political Rise of Fascism in Europe

4/23 Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, chp 1; Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought*, pp. 238-39;

*Poem*: Yehuda Amichai, “I Wasn’t One of the Six Million: And What Is My Life Span? Open Closed Open”

4/25 Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, chp. 3; Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought*, pp. 240-65.

Recommended: Jay Ladin, “After the end of the world: poetry and the Holocaust”

→ **Stage 3 of Research Paper Due**: First complete draft (2-3 pages)

4/30 Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, chps. 6 & 7; Claudia Card, “The Moral Powers of Victims”

*Poem*: Rachel Mennies, “How Grandmother Paid her Passage to New York”

5/2 – Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, chps. 15 & Postscript; Claudia Card, “Gray Zones: Diabolical Evil Revisited”

*Poem*: Ilya Kaminsky, “Musica Humana”

**\*\*Complete Final Papers are due 5/7\*\***



The Jewish artist in exile, Marc Chagall, paints a portrait of his wife. He invites you to ask yourself: “What does hope look like for you?”

### *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). Both documentaries are available to stream on Amazon Prime. Even if you do not take the extra credit option, you should watch these documentaries to grow your brain.

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 academic 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.

## **FINAL GRADE EVALUATION TOOLS**

### **1) Class attendance and participation (10% of final grade)**

Students must attend every class and be prepared to discuss the readings. Given the unforeseeable circumstances that inevitably arise, students are allowed **two** unexcused absences. Any additional unexcused absence will automatically result in a 2% grade deduction from this portion of the final grade. It is your responsibility to learn from your classmates what you missed.

### **2) Presentation (10%)**

You are responsible for a presentation that you will do with a partner this semester. Partners will be assigned randomly. I will distribute a presentation schedule shortly. The presentation must clearly summarize and critically engage the reading assignment for that day and take between 5-10 minutes. Students **must** distribute handouts listing key points.

*Absolutely no make-ups without a documented medical emergency. If you fail to show up for your presentation, you will receive a failing grade for this portion of your final grade.*

### **3) Blackboard Short Response (30%)**

Students must complete **two** reading responses that summarize and explain the main arguments in the reading assignment. The responses must be **typed** and **at least 500 words** long (roughly 2 pages). They will provide a springboard for discussion and test your familiarity with the assigned readings. Late papers will not be accepted.

### **4) Final Paper**

**Stage 1. (5%)** Introductory paragraph, thesis statement, and bibliography (in MLA format).

**Stage 2. (5%)** Outline of supporting arguments

**Stage 3. (10%)** First complete draft (2-3 pages)

**Stage 4. (30%) Final Paper Submission**

## **POLICIES**

- **CLASSROOM CONDUCT**

The classroom is a public space for serious work. Everybody in the classroom is expected to behave as a mature and thoughtful person who genuinely cares about what others have to say. The instructor reserves the right to take appropriate measures should this general rule be violated.

- **NO IN-CLASS ELECTRONIC DEVICES**

All cell phones, laptops, and other electronic devices must be turned off or silenced AND stored out of sight. Should a student require special accommodations, please speak with me after class or during my office hour.

- **TIMELY SUBMISSION OF THE ASSIGNMENT**

Papers are due at the **beginning** of class. Do **not** make it a habit to walk in late on the day a paper is assigned. If you cannot hand in a paper on the due date, **e-mail it to me the day before it is due**. Late papers will **not** be accepted, except in the case of a documented medical emergency.

- **GET IN TOUCH**

Feel free to talk to me about any learning issue that you might have that could impact your success in the course. Visit me during my office hours or e-mail me with any questions you might have. I am a resource to help you learn. If you are confused about the readings or about my expectations, do let me know.

- **ACCOMODATIONS**

In accordance with University policy and the ADA, I will accommodate students with documented disabilities confirmed by the Office of Disability Services and UML team athletes. If you have a disability, please contact the Office of Disability Services as soon as possible. Their office is at University Crossing Suite 300, phone: 978-934-4574, e-mail: [Disability@uml.edu](mailto:Disability@uml.edu). This documentation is confidential. Please notify me during the first week of classes in order to make sure appropriate arrangements can be made.

If you will miss class due to religious observances or other protected activities, please tell me at least 2 weeks in advance so that we can plan for make up work or dates.

Athletes must present their sports schedule for the entire semester in writing before the end of add/drop period. I am happy to make accommodations, but I am unable to make them without advance notice.

- **ACADEMIC INTEGRITY**

Academic dishonesty is prohibited in all programs at the University of Massachusetts, Lowell and sanctions may be imposed on any student who commits an act of academic dishonesty. Carefully review the university policies concerning academic honesty and integrity. More information can be found here: [http://www.uml.edu/catalog/undergraduate/policies/academic\\_dishonesty.htm](http://www.uml.edu/catalog/undergraduate/policies/academic_dishonesty.htm) In a nutshell, any use of others' writing or thinking without giving them proper credit for their words and ideas is considered plagiarism; even if you have only used a sentence without providing proper

credit. Similarly, the resubmission of your own previously produced work, for which you have already received credit in other courses or in high school, is considered a case of self-plagiarism which violates academic integrity. Both plagiarism and self-plagiarism will result in failing this course and a report to the Chair of the Philosophy Department and the Office of the Provost.