Narratives of Evil:
EGL 375/PHI 373 (Spring 2014)
Professor Andrew Flescher
andrew.flescher@stonybrook.edu
Teaching Assistant: Daniel Irving
danieljirving1@gmail.com
Humanities Bldg, Poetry Center, Room 2001
Tuesday, Thursday: 10:00-11:20
Office Hours Tuesdays 11:30-1:00 and by appointment, HSC, Level 3-112B

Course Description

What is the nature of evil? Is evil adequately described as the presence of a satanic or monstrous entity, something at once unalterable and recognizable to everyone it threatens, something potentially for which the one who performs evil is genetically predetermined? Or is evil, rather, to be conceived as something which is part of or at least necessary to know the good, something, which like death, is a natural part of the life cycle? Alternatively might we see evil as no more than “evil,” that is, as a mere label, and as such, a perspective from which we can wrest ourselves with the right sort of self-reinvention? In this case “evil” is a subjectively internalized, or at least a culturally informed, designation. Or, finally does it make most sense to see evil as not the presence of something, but rather the absence of a goodness without which humans languish? In this case, evil consists of the most mundane human activities, activities in which, given the right situations, we ourselves can come to participate.

The course divides into four sections examined under the following headings: (1) “evil as the presence of badness” (i.e. evil as substantively and radically separate from the good; Manicheanism); (2) “evil as the presence of goodness” (i.e. evil as tantamount to the good; theodicy); (3) “evil as the absence of badness” (i.e. evil as perspective; subjectivism and relativism); (4) “evil as the absence of goodness” (i.e. evil as privation; Augustinianism). We will address the problem of evil from scientific, social-scientific, and philosophical perspectives and from fictional and non-fictional narrative accounts, as well as from cinematic sources, paying close attention to recent empirical evidence that supports one or more of the four models described above. Some concrete case studies include the idea of “evil genes” and connecting psychopathy to damaged brains (section 1); meaning in the context of disease, death and the dying process (section 2); cross-cultural conceptions of “good” and “bad” medical practice (section 3); and the examples of “obedience to authority” (a defense employed in Nuremberg by captured Nazis) as depicted by Zimbardo in his Stanford prison experiments (section 4).
Protocol

This course is **highly interactive**. Attendance and class participation are absolutely crucial. Each class will be a combination of lecture and discussion. You are expected to play an active role in the discussion, both by asking questions and by raising points that emerge from the readings. In order to ground our discussion, it is of the utmost importance that you bring the assigned texts with you to class. The readings listed under each session **are to have been completed** by the day of that session. We will not be reading a textbook in this class. You have only primary sources. There are no tests in this course, only papers. We will be doing a lot of reading, writing, and re-writing.

Requirements (All assignments need a passing grade in order for you to pass the course).

20%: Participation. Please note, attendance is mandatory; 5 absences results in course failure.
20 % Paper 1 (Six pages), due: **2/18**
20 % Paper 2 (Six pages), due: **3/13**
20 % Paper 3 (Six pages), due: **4/15**
20 % Paper 4 (Six pages), due: **5/13**

Eight Books **Required for Purchase (They are collectively affordable):**

Albert Camus, *The Fall*
Annie Dillard, *For the Time Being*
Anne Fadiman, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*
Herman Hesse, *Demian*
C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*
Barbara Oakley, *Evil Genes*
Amélie Oksenberg Rorty, *The Many Faces of Evil: Historical Perspectives*
Philip Zimbardo, *The Lucifer Effect*

One Book Suggested as Supplementary Reading:
Andrew Flescher, *Moral Evil*

Learning Outcomes

At the end of taking this course, you will have accomplished at least the following learning objectives:

- Read texts closely with attention to nuances of language, content and form; such texts include published works and drafts of student writing for the purposes of peer review.
- Write focused, organized and convincing analytical essays in clear, standardized English prose, making use of feedback from teachers and peers.
• Locate, evaluate, synthesize and incorporate relevant primary and secondary source materials into thesis-driven, interpretive essays of increasing length and complexity.
• Participate in discussions by listening to others’ perspectives, asking productive questions, and articulating ideas with nuance and clarity.
• Communicate complex ideas clearly in formal presentations through speaking, writing and use of digital media.
• Read non-Western literatures with attention to aesthetic traditions particular to these bodies of literature and awareness of how texts emerge from, respond to and shape historical and cultural contexts.

Academic Honesty:

Plagiarism constitutes the worst possible thing that you can do as a student. It is automatically grounds for failure of the course. More will be said about academic honesty in our discussion about writing papers before the first assignment is due. For more comprehensive information on academic integrity, including categories of academic dishonesty, please refer to the academic judiciary website at http://www.stonybrook.edu/uaa/academicjudiciary/

Americans with Disabilities Act:

If you have a physical, psychological, medical or learning disability that may impact your course work, contact Disability Support Services, ECC (Educational Communications Center) Building, room128, (631) 632-6748. They will determine with you what accommodations, if any, are necessary and appropriate. All information and documentation is confidential.

Schedule

1/28: Introduction to Course: “Evil” and Evil

Section One: Evil as the Presence of Badness

1/30: Manicheanism and the Duality of Good and Evil

Reading:
Andrew Flescher, Moral Evil, Introduction (optional)
2/4:  **The Seduction of Evil**

**Reading:**
- William Blake, “Shame is Pride’s Cloak,” in Rorty, pp. 198-205.
- Andrew Flescher, *Moral Evil*, Introduction, continued (optional)

2/6:  **Criminality and Human Cruelty**

**Reading:**
- Barbara Oakley, *Evil Genes*
- Andrew Flescher, *Moral Evil*, Chapter 1 (optional)

2/11:  **A Close Look at the Psychopathic Mind**

**Reading:**
- Barbara Oakley, *Evil Genes* (continued)

2/11:  **Film---Night time TBA: No Country for Old Men** (Written and Directed by Joel and Ethan Coen)

**Reading:**
- Oakley, *Evil Genes* (finish)
- Andrew Flescher, *Moral Evil*, Chapter 1, continued (optional)

2/13:  **Evil and Human Nature (discussion)**

**Writing Papers (discussion)**

**Section Two: Evil as the Presence of Goodness**

2/18:  **The Problem of Theodicy**

**Reading:**

2/18:  **Paper One is Due**
2/20: Is Tragic Loss Compatible with an All-Loving Deity?

Reading:
Abu Hamid a-Ghazali, “There is no Evil in Allah’s Perfect World”
C.S. Lewis, A Grief Observed
Andrew Flescher, Moral Evil, Chapter 2, continued (optional)

2/25-2/27: Film Viewing: Jacob’s Ladder

Reading:
Andrew Flescher, Moral Evil, Chapter 2, continued (optional)

3/4: Pain as the Counterpart to Pleasure, Suffering as the Counterpart to Redemption

Reading:
Begin Annie Dillard, For the Time Being
Andrew Flescher, Moral Evil, Chapter 2, continued (optional)

3/6: Theodicy Criticized

Reading:
Annie Dillard, For the Time Being, continued
Andrew Flescher, Moral Evil, Chapter 2, continued (optional)

3/11: Review of Theodicy and Guest Speaker: Reverend Stephen Unger,
Director of Chaplaincy Services
Section Three: Evil as the Absence of Badness

3/13: “Beyond Good and Evil”---Introduction to Perspectivalism

Reading:
Friedrich Nietzsche, “Beyond Good and Evil,” in Rorty, pp. 222-235
Andrew Flescher, Moral Evil, Chapter 3 (optional)

3/13: Paper Two is Due

March 18th and March 20th: Spring Break
(Read Hesse and Fadiman over Spring Break)

3/25: “Evil” as Self-Re-invention

Reading:
Herman Hesse, Damien
Andrew Flescher, Moral Evil, Chapter 3, continued (optional)

3/27: Overcoming Convention

Reading:
finish Hesse, Damien
Andrew Flescher, Moral Evil, Chapter 3, continued (optional)

4/1: “Evil” in the Context of Cultural Relativism

Reading:
Anna Fadiman, The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down
Andrew Flescher, Moral Evil, Chapter 3, continued (optional)

4/3: Medical Mores in West versus East and the Case of Tuskegee

Reading:
Anna Fadiman, The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down, continued
Andrew Flescher, Moral Evil, Chapter 3, continued (optional)
4/8 and 4/10  Film: *American Beauty* (Directed by Sam Mendes, Written by Alan Ball),

Reading:
Andrew Flescher, *Moral Evil*, Chapter 3, continued (optional)

Section Four: Evil as the Absence of Goodness

4/15:  St. Augustine and the Privation Thesis (Evil as Absence of God)

Reading:
Peter Abelard, “Sin Moves Inward,” in Rorty, pp. 56-64.
Andrew Flescher, *Moral Evil*, Chapter 4 (optional)

4/15:  Paper Three is Due

4/18:  Evil and Moral Responsibility

Reading:
Begin reading Albert Camus, *The Fall*
Andrew Flescher, *Moral Evil*, Chapter 4, continued (optional)

4/22:  Camus’s Judge Penitent

Reading:
Finish Camus, *The Fall*
Andrew Flescher, *Moral Evil*, Chapter 4, continued (optional)

4/24:  The Banality of Evil and the “Bad Barrel” Theory

Reading:
Philip Zimbardo, *The Lucifer Effect*.
Andrew Flescher, *Moral Evil*, Chapter 5 (optional)

4/29-5/1  Film: *Changing Lanes* (Director, Roger Michell, Written by Chap Taylor)

Reading:
Andrew Flescher, *Moral Evil*, Chapter 5, continued (optional)

5/6:  The Nazis Were Parents Too
Reading:
Finish Philip Zimbardo, *The Lucifer Effect*
Andrew Flescher, *Moral Evil*, Chapter 5, continued (optional)

5/8: The Contingency of Good and Evil

Reading:
Andrew Flescher, *Moral Evil*, Chapter 5, continued (optional)

5/8: Final Class Discussion

Final Paper (Four) Due, May 13th