

The Problem of Evil in Philosophy, Literature, and Film

Professor Jean-Pierre Dupuy

FrenchGen 265, PoliSci 338E

Ethics in Society

Winter 2014, 3-5 units



Jean-Pierre Dupuy, Professor Emeritus of Philosophy, Ecole Polytechnique (Paris), Professor of French and, by courtesy, of Political Science, Stanford University, will teach this seminar on the problem of evil in the winter quarter of 2013-14.



Cain and Abel, Bernd Krüerke, 1982

Provisional Syllabus [as of January 2013]

Course Description

This seminar will explore how the apparent existence of evil in the world has been perceived, felt, analyzed, conceptualized, and dealt with over time, from the 1755 Lisbon earthquake and tsunami to our post-Auschwitz, post-Hiroshima era. We'll take it for granted that "the problem of evil is the guiding force of modern thought", to quote from

Susan Neiman's great if controversial book, *Evil in Modern Thought*, which we'll use as background reading. We'll wonder why this is apparently no longer the case. Such philosophers as Rousseau, Kant, Hannah Arendt, Günther Anders, Hans Jonas and Ivan Illich will be our guides, as well as anthropologist René Girard. One could argue, however, that theology, metaphysics or moral philosophy are not up to the task of making sense of evil if they are not aided by literature and, today, film. Fiction can often articulate ideas that escape the grasp of philosophy. Great texts by Melville, Dostoevsky, G. K. Chesterton, Joseph Conrad, William Golding or Imre Kertész will be called for as well as a number of contemporary films.

Students: Advanced undergraduates and graduate students.

Format: The course will consist in lectures/discussions based on a selection of philosophical and literary texts as well as on the screening of a few films.

The class will meet once a week, for a three-hour session. The first part will be devoted to the professor's lectures, and the second part will be reserved for discussion and presentations.

Undergraduate students are required to write a 5-page paper for three units, a 10-page paper for five units. Graduate students are required to write a 20-page research paper on a topic they select, combining issues and readings from the class with their own research. Each student will also be responsible for a number of short presentations in class introducing the readings or commenting on the screenings. Grades will take large account of attendance and active participation.

Readings

In addition to papers, book excerpts, or dossiers relative to each class, which will be distributed in due time, the major readings will be the following. Inasmuch as possible, optional readings will be made and presented in class by at least one or two students.

Background readings

Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought*, Princeton University Press, 2002

Jean-Pierre Dupuy, "Narratives of Advanced Technologies".

Required reading [books available for purchase at the Bookstore]:

Herman Melville, *Billy Budd* (1924), any edition.

Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, translated by Richard Pevear & Larissa Volokhonsky, Vintage, 1993.

Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem, A Report on the Banality of Evil*, revised and enlarged edition, Penguin, 1992.

Optional readings [books on reserve at Green Library]:

BR115.A85 E213: Claude Eatherly, *Burning conscience; the case of the Hiroshima pilot*, told in his letters to Günther Anders. Preface of Bertrand Russell, 1961.

BJ1031 .J66 1996: Hans Jonas, *Mortality and morality: a search for the good after Auschwitz*, 1996.

BJ1453 .J6613 1984: Hans Jonas, *The imperative of responsibility : in search of an ethics for the technological age*, 1984.

D757.9 .B4 W66 2005: Anonymous, *A Woman in Berlin*, 2005.

PR6005 .O4 H4 2006: Joseph Conrad, *The Heart of Darkness* : authoritative text, backgrounds and contexts, criticism /; edited by Paul B. Armstrong.

PG3326 .B7 1993: Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Grand Inquisitor* : with related chapters from *The Brothers Karamazov*.

PR6013 .O35 L64 1962: William Golding, *The Lord of the Flies*, Introd. by E. M. Forster, 1962.

PH3281 .K3815 S6713 1992: Imre Kertész, *Fateless*, 1992.

BJ1474 .R3: Ayn Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness. A New Concept of Egoism*, 1964.

DC137 .O8 W34 1993: Michael Walzer (ed.), *Regicide and Revolution. Speeches at the trial of Louis XVI*, 1992.

DC183.5 .E445 2009: Dan Edelstein, *The Terror of Natural Right*, 2009.

Screenings

Time will permit the viewing, either individually or collectively, and the discussion of a few films only, to be chosen from the following pre-selection.

Margarethe von Trotta, *Hannah Arendt*

Fritz Lang, *M*.

Fritz Lang, *Fury*.

John Ford, *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*.

Charles Laughton, *The Night of the Hunter*.

Joseph Losey, *The Servant*.

Lars von Trier, *Breaking the Waves & Melancholia*

Frank Pierson and Kenneth Branagh, *Conspiracy* [on the Wannsee conference].

Michael Haneke, *The White Ribbon & Amour*

Cohen Brothers, *Fargo*.

Jean-Xavier de Lestrade, *Sin City Law (Justice in Las Vegas)*.

Francis Ford Coppola, *Apocalypse Now*.

Alfred Hitchcock, *Shadow of a Doubt*.

Andrzej Wajda, *Danton*.

Bryan Singer, *The Usual Suspects*.

David Fincher, *Se7en* and *Fight Club*.

Guillermo del Toro, *Pan's Labyrinth*.

Jean-Pierre Dupuy is Professor emeritus of Philosophy, École Polytechnique, Paris; he was the founding director of C.R.E.A. (Centre de Recherche en Épistémologie Appliquée), the philosophical research group of the École Polytechnique; he is Professor (1/3rd time) of French and, by courtesy, of Political Science, Stanford University. He is also a Stanford C.S.L.I. Researcher and is affiliated with the STS program, the Anthropology Department and the Symbolic Systems Program.

SCHEDULE

I. CLASS 1: INTRODUCTORY LECTURE

Why does Evil seem no longer to be a “problem” in contemporary thought? What was the “Problem of Evil” in a religious and a secular context? How did the sharp distinction between natural and moral evil come to emerge? How are we to interpret the progressive blurring of that distinction and its eventual collapse?

General overview: authors, texts, films, major case studies in the form of disasters and catastrophes, natural and/or moral: Lisbon (1755); Auschwitz-Birkenau (1942-45); Hiroshima-Nagasaki (1945); New York (2001); the looming environmental disaster and the near-collapse of the world economy.

Background reading: Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought [EMT]*, Introduction.

Reading: Introductory Lecture (posted on CourseWork).

II. CLASS 2: MAN’S NATURAL GOODNESS OR ORIGINAL SIN?

1. Rousseau’s anthropology of evil: from theodicy to “anthropo-dicy”. Lisbon’s philosophical tsunami and the fundamental Rousseau – Voltaire bifurcation. Contemporary illustrations: reactions to the 2004 South-Asia tsunami and to Katrina.

Readings: Rousseau’s *Second Discourse*, *Social Contract*, and *Emile* (excerpts); Voltaire’s *Poem on the Lisbon Disaster, or An Examination of the Axiom “All Is Well”*; Rousseau’s “Letter to Monsieur de Voltaire Regarding the Poem on the Lisbon Earthquake” [excerpts].

Background reading: *EMT*, Chapter I, p. 14-57; and Chapter II, p. 128-148.

2. A thought-experiment on a return to the state of nature: William Golding’s *The Lord of the Flies*.

Screening and discussion of theater director Peter Brook’s film adaptation of the novel.

Special session

Screening of Billy Budd, Benjamin Britten's opera, libretto by E. M. Forster and Eric Crozier, BBC production. A special session will be organized for a collective screening. Those who won't be able to attend it will have to watch it on their own.

III. CLASS 3: THE CASE AGAINST ABSOLUTE GOODNESS: *BILLY BUDD*

1. The case against the French Revolution: in her *On Revolution* (1963), Hannah Arendt asserts that it requires a poet to teach us that "absolute goodness is hardly any less dangerous than absolute evil, that it does not consist in selflessness and that it is beyond virtue." Neither Rousseau the philosopher nor Robespierre the politician was capable of dreaming a goodness beyond virtue, "just as they were unable to imagine ... that there could be wickedness beyond vice."

How different the history of mankind would have been if Abel had slain Cain? Goodness is awkward with words (it "stammers") and is no less violent than elemental evil. How pity-inspired virtue can become, in the case of Robespierre and the French Revolution, absolute, boundless evil. See Saint-Just: "Nothing resembles virtue so much as a great crime."

Readings: Herman Melville, *Billy Budd*.

Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*, Chapter 2 "The Social Question" [excerpts].

2. Contemporary analytic moral philosophy on the "hard case" of Billy Budd: "the primacy of the agent's perspective". Confrontation of analytic and "continental" philosophy in this case.

Readings: Peter Winch, "The Universalizability of Moral Judgments", in *Ethics and Action*, London, 1972; David Wiggins, "Truth, and Truth as Predicated of Moral Judgments", in *Needs, Values, Truth. Essays in the Philosophy of Value*, London, 1991; Joseph Raz, "The Truth in Particularism", in *Engaging Reason. On the Theory of Value and Action*, Oxford, 1999.

IV. CLASS 4: ROUSSEAU AND DOSTOEVSKY IN MANHATTAN

1. Underground Psychology : Rousseau as forerunner of Dostoevsky.

Is "selfishness" or "egoism" the height of evil, as the critics of utilitarianism and economic rationality, and of their notion of "enlightened self-interest", seem to think? Wickedness as "unenlightened self-enslavement": the "underground man" is irresistibly attracted to those who spurn him and he irresistibly spurns those who are attracted to him.. The proximity between pride and self-hatred. The proud wish to be accused of egoism and gladly accuse themselves of it in order better to dissimulate the role that the

Other plays in their existence. From Rousseau's "amour-propre" to Dostoevsky's "underground psychology".

Readings: Jean-Jacque Rousseau, *Rousseau Judge of Jean-Jacques (Dialogues)*, [Excerpts].

Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*.

Dossier on René Girard's theory of mimetic desire.

2. Interpretations of 9/11 in light of underground psychology.

Readings: Dossier on 9/11 (special issue of *Substance*, 115, vol. 37, 2008: Cultural Theory after 9/11: Terror, Religion, Media). In particular: Jean-Pierre Dupuy, "Anatomy of 9/11: Evil, Rationalism, and the Sacred".

Background reading: *EMT*, p. 281-288.

Optional [Extra class]

Viewing and discussion of Andrzej Wajda, *Danton*.

V. CLASS 5: EVIL AND SACRIFICE

1. Introduction to René Girard's anthropology of violence and the sacred. The sacred *contains* violence in the two senses of the word: it keeps violence in check through violent means. The scapegoating mechanism: "The first king was a dead king."

2. The decision to kill the king of France Louis Capet, aka Louis XVI. Did Robespierre and Saint-Just get Rousseau's political philosophy right?

Readings: René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, Baltimore, 1979; *The Scapegoat*, Baltimore, 1989 [Excerpts].

Jean-Pierre Dupuy, "Panic and the paradoxes of the social order", 2003.

Michael Walzer (ed.), *Regicide and Revolution. Speeches at the trial of Louis XVI*, 1992 [Excerpts].

Optional [Extra class]

Viewing and discussion of Frank Pierson and Kenneth Branagh, *Conspiracy* [on the Wannsee conference and the "Final Solution"].

VI. CLASS 6: “THOUGHTLESSNESS” MORE DANGEROUS THAN MALICE: THE SHOAH

“That such remoteness from reality and such thoughtlessness can wreak more havoc than all the evil instincts taken together which, perhaps, are inherent in man – that was, in fact, the lesson one could learn in Jerusalem. But it was a lesson, neither an explanation of the phenomenon nor a theory about it.” Hannah Arendt, “Postscript” to her *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. “Eichmann never realized what he was doing” – *and it really does not matter*.

Auschwitz or the end of the modern conviction that evil is a moral category alone. What if evil belonged to nature, to the cosmos? Why did European Jews substitute for “Holocaust” the term “Shoah”, which means, and means only, “natural disaster”, such as earthquake or tsunami? Death camps as “nightmares of contingency”: “*Hier ist kein Warum*” [“Here there is no why”], Primo Levi. Does Auschwitz force us to accept this naturalization of evil and to claim “that a great crime offends nature, so that the very earth cries out for vengeance?”

The controversy touched off by Arendt’s reading, “the 20th century’s most important philosophical contribution to the problem of evil” [Neiman, *EMT*, p. 271.]

Readings: Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem, A Report on the Banality of Evil*.

Hannah Arendt, “The Eichmann Controversy”, in *The Jewish Writings*, New York, 2007 [Excerpts].

Richard Wolin, “Hannah Arendt: *Kultur*, ‘Thoughtlessness’, and Polis Envy” in *Heidegger’s Children*, Princeton, 2001 [Excerpts].

Background reading: *EMT*, p. 250-281.

Optional reading: Imre Kertész, *Fateless*, 1992 and/or Anonymous, *A Woman in Berlin*, 2005.

Optional [Extra class]:

Viewing and discussion of Margarethe von Trotta, *Hannah Arendt*.

VII. CLASS 7: “HIROSHIMA IS EVERYWHERE”

Günther Anders, the “philosopher of the atomic age”, on the “Obsolescence of Man”. Hiroshima irreversibly opened up the possibility of total extinction of the human race without any of the features that once seemed essential to evil. The very existence of nuclear weapons not only means the end of future history, but also destroys the concept

of history itself. The Karl Jaspers – Günther Anders controversy on the alleged alternative between the threat of nuclear destruction and subjection to Soviet totalitarianism.

“Blindness to the Apocalypse” and the invisibility of evil: our ability to make things that go beyond our imagination leads to a lack of ability to foresee the consequences of our actions. A great crime can be a sequence of innocent deeds for which no one can personally be held accountable.

Claude Eatherly, one of the Hiroshima pilots, as the “anti-Eichmann”: “not the man who proclaims machinery as excuse for lack of conscience but, on the opposite, the man who recognizes machinery as the threat to conscience that we must fear.”

The paradoxes of nuclear deterrence and the doctrine of “existential deterrence”: the renunciation of strategic rationality and the relinquishment of threats, intentions to retaliate, etc. Emergence of a new form of evil, completely disconnected from human intentions: “As the world becomes apocalyptic, it presents itself to us as a paradise inhabited by criminals without wickedness and by victims without hatred.”

Readings: Günther Anders, *Works* [Excerpts].

Claude Eatherly, *Burning conscience; the case of the Hiroshima pilot*, told in his letters to Günther Anders, 1961 [Excerpts].

G.E.M. Anscombe, « Mr. Truman's Degree », in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, vol. 3, *Ethics, Religion and Politics*, Minneapolis, 1981.

Screening: *The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara*, an interview of Robert McNamara by Errol Morris, 2003 [Excerpts].

Optional [Extra class]

Viewing and discussion of Lars von Trier, *Breaking the Waves*.

VIII. CLASS 8: EVIL AS SYSTEMIC EMERGENCE

Responsibility before the threats on the very survival of the human species

Hans Jonas: from the Principle of Responsibility to the Precautionary Principle. The ethical aporia: given the magnitude of the possible consequences of our technological choices, it is an absolute obligation for us to try and anticipate those consequences, assess them, and ground our choices on this assessment. When the stakes are high, we cannot afford not to choose consequentialism, rather than a form of deontology, as our guiding

moral doctrine. However, the very same reasons that make consequentialism compelling, and therefore oblige us to anticipate the future, make it impossible for us to do so. Unleashing complex processes is a very perilous activity that both demands foreknowledge and prohibits it. In principle, there is no obligation to do that which one can not do. However, in the technological age, we do have an ardent obligation that we cannot fulfill: anticipating the future. Need for an "Ethics of the Future": for instance, ethics of climate change, synthetic biology, nanotechnology.

Ivan Illich and the notion of counterproductivity: the "logic of the detour" gone berserk.

Readings: Hans Jonas, *The imperative of responsibility : in search of an ethics for the technological age*, 1984 [Excerpts].

Samuel Scheffler, "Individual Responsibility in a Global Age", *Social Philosophy and Policy*, 12, 1, Winter 1995, p. 219-236.

Jean-Pierre Dupuy, "Rational Choice before the Apocalypse", 2005.

Ivan Illich, *Energy and Equity*, 1973.

Jean-Pierre Dupuy, "Detour and Sacrifice", 2002.

Optional [Extra class]:

Viewing and discussion of Joseph Losey, *The Servant*.

IX. CLASS 9: THE OBLITERATION OF EVIL IN CONTEMPORARY PHILOSOPHY

1. The case for rational egoism

Paradoxes of rational choice and the problem of self-deception. Evil and self-deception.

The spontaneous emergence of cooperation in the theory of repeated games. Politics and Ethics have nothing to do with the problem of evil. Can one seriously contend that?

The case against "altruism". "The moral cannibalism of all hedonist and altruist doctrines lies in the premise that the happiness of one man necessitates the injury of another [...] Only a rationally selfish man, a man of self-esteem, is capable of love ... The man who does not value himself, cannot value anything or anyone [...] Today, the world is facing a choice: if civilization is to survive, it is the altruist morality that men have to reject." Ayn Rand, "The Objectivist Ethics", 1961, in *The Virtue of Selfishness*.

2. Social Justice and Resentment: the threat of "disruptive passions".

How do John Rawls in *A Theory of Justice*, and Friedrich Hayek in *Law, Legislation and Liberty*, vol. I, “Rules and Order” and in *The Fatal Conceit* deal with the threat of what Kant called “Radical Evil”. To what extent do they succeed?

Readings: Excerpts from the books cited.

Jean-Pierre Dupuy, “Justice and resentment”, 2007.

Jean-Pierre Dupuy (ed.), *Self-Deception and Paradoxes of Rationality*, 1998 [Excerpts].

Optional [Extra class]

Viewing and discussion of Michael Haneke, *The White Ribbon* (2008).

X. CLASS 10: EVIL, GOD, AND RELIGION: IS GOD EVIL?

The case against religion [Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Scott Atran, Pascal Boyer, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, etc.]: Is “God” evil and religion the major source of violence in our world? Can Reason eliminate religion in the same way that Saint George slew the dragon?

Readings: Hans Jonas, “The Concept of God after Auschwitz: A Jewish Voice”, in *Mortality and morality: a search for the good after Auschwitz*, 1996.

Jean-Pierre Dupuy, “Religion: Natural or Supernatural?”, 2009.

Excerpts from the books of the authors cited.