

NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY DEPARTMENT OF RELIGION



SYLLABUS AND COURSE GUIDE

**GOOD AND EVIL: A CLOSE READING OF LEVINAS AND ARENDT
SPRING QUARTER, 2015
PROFESSOR LAURIE ZOLOTH**

2-3:20—ANNENBERG HALL G28

WELCOME

COURSE DESCRIPTION

Welcome to an experimental seminar in text, in learning and in a curious content. We will spend this quarter slowly and simply reading. Our goal is to reflect on a puzzle: why do humans choose to be good or evil? Note how the shape of the question is complex and self-reflective, assuming that moral action is a choice. But is it? How do we understand the human capacity for good and for evil? What is meant by these categories?

This seminar will respond to the complexities of this question by reading the work of two master Jewish philosophers, Emmanuel Levinas and Hannah Arendt. They share a certain history and a fascination with the question: both were gifted students and favorites of Martin Heidegger, the German philosopher who joined the Nazi Party promptly and enthusiastically. Both narrowly escaped from the Holocaust (Shoah.) Both then turned their research toward the problem of human relationally, duty, judgment and moral action. Both produced a large body of dense, intricate moral theory that has come to define post-modern Jewish thought.

We will read two of their works word by word, using the manner of classic text study that characterizes the study of Talmud and Torah in Jewish religious life. The first 5 sessions will focus on Levinas, reading Otherwise Than Being, considered by many to be his masterpiece. The next 5 sessions will focus on Arendt's Responsibility and Judgment. Both texts respond to our puzzle of moral agency, responsibility and moral action.

Since participation is everything, please email me if you cannot come to the seminar so I will not worry about you and we can make other arrangements.

BEING GOOD

Of course, in a class about ethics you should be good.

Do not cheat. Don't plagiarize. It is great to quote an article or text you like at length- just cite it in proper footnote form. Please be ethical, honest and kind to your fellow class citizens. Detailed lists that expand the idea of honesty, integrity and kindness to all are available online in the student handbook. Each seminar I teach is an attempt to create a thoughtful, serious and creative scholarly community. So, please help to create such a place.

This does not mean that you will agree with every idea presented in the course, or the readings, or the discussion of your honest and kind fellow course citizens. Deep and passionate arguments are the hallmark of all Jewish thought. Learning to argue on behalf of your position logically is one of the skills of academic scholarship. Please come to see me after class with any concerns about this issue.

Things Professor Zoloth prefers

I, too, am tempted by cell phones and computers. Thus, I ask you to turn these seductive implements off during class. Do not end your sentences with a dangling participle and please remember to use inclusive language, for our language shapes our thought.

OFFICE HOURS AND EMAIL

How to find me/ Please find me:

Crowe 4-140

lzoloth@northwestern.edu

Open office hours: Monday 3:30- 4:30 and Wednesday 12-2

Or make an appointment for another time (email me to schedule)

Class Structure

This is a seminar, with the primary point being thoughtful reading and talking about the ideas in the texts. It will be taught in the style of a Cambridge seminar, with short, weekly "A-papers" of one page due to me on the Monday of each week of class. We will begin each week by reading and defending your papers, and then we will read, carefully and closely through the book. The goal is to understand it: the goal is not to read "to the end" without carefully grasping each idea. After 4 weeks, we will have a midterm and we will turn to the next book.

GRADING

The class will use several different methods of evaluation. Every class you will be required to reflect on what we have read together and produce a short (500 word) "A" paper. This is based on British methods (the name of the standard size paper in England is called an "A-4" not "8 1/2 by 11," thus "an A paper") in this paper you will first summarize the arguments in the reading assignment and then you will evaluate the author's argument. I will grade this weekly. You will also be graded on your class participation, and your ability to orally defend arguments persuasively. Finally, there will be a short essay midterm and an 8 page essay final. You will use your weekly paper as the basis for the midterm and final.

Participation is KEY.

This class is a discussion. As such, students are required to attend all classes and actively participate by asking questions. **Please bring your book to every class.** This class is **highly interactive**. I will be evaluating your participation along several criteria: initiating discussion and questioning the text, responding to your fellow students kindly and honestly, logical using the text in supporting your points. Oral participation is expected and encouraged, and since each of you matters, please email me if you will not be in class. Remember that the College asks you to stay home if you have fever and a contagious illness. You are required to attend all classes. If you are ill, have a family emergency, or a pressing work or community obligation, please email me in advance, for I am concerned, as your teacher, for your welfare. As you will learn from the texts we read, each person is responsible for each other.

SCHEDULE FOR THE CLASS

1. WEEK ONE: THE SUBJECT IS ETHICS

MONDAY: MARCH 30:

INTRODUCTION: HOW TO BE GOOD? WHAT IS EVIL?

CASE DISCUSSION: GERMANWINGS CRASH

WEDNESDAY: APRIL 1

NO CLASS MEETING (NOT A JOKE!): WATCH A CASE IN ETHICS IN REAL TIME: BIOETHICS AND JEWISH ETHICS: THE CASE OF MT DNA TRANSFER NATIONAL ACADEMIES INSTITUTE OF MEDICINE WEBSITE. WE WILL MAKE THIS DAY UP IN MAY.

WEEK TWO: WHAT IS TOTALITY?

MONDAY APRIL 6: WE MEET PROFESSOR LEVINAS

WEDNESDAY APRIL 8: WE BEGIN OTHERWISE THAN BEING

WEEK THREE: WHAT IS BEING?

MONDAY APRIL 13:

WEDNESDAY APRIL 15:

WEEK FOUR: HOW TO BE GOOD?

MONDAY APRIL 20: MIDTERM HANDED OUT TODAY: DUE ON MONDAY APRIL 27

WEDNESDAY APRIL 22: COMPLETE OUR LEVINAS AND SUMMARIZE.

WEEK FIVE: WHAT IS EVIL?

MONDAY APRIL 27: WE MEET PROFESSOR ARENDT

WEDNESDAY APRIL 29: READING RESPONSIBILITY AND JUDGMENT

WEEK SIX: FOR WHAT WOULD YOU GIVE YOUR LIFE?

MONDAY MAY 4:

WEDNESDAY MAY 6:

WEEK SEVEN: AM I RESPONSIBLE FOR EVIL?

MONDAY MAY 11:

WEDNESDAY MAY 13:

WEEK EIGHT: HOW TO BE GOOD IN DARK TIMES

MONDAY MAY 18:

WEDNESDAY MAY 20:

A SPECIAL MAKE UP CLASS: AT YOUR PROFESSOR'S HOUSE, SATURDAY MAY 23.

1232 HINMAN AVENUE (AN EASY WALK)

2-4 PM: PIRKE AVOT: READING THE CLASSIC TEXTS OF MORALITY AT THE CLASSIC TIME FOR STUDY.

WEEK NINE: IS EVIL BANAL?

MONDAY: MAY 25: FILM—HANNAH ARENDT

.

WEDNESDAY: MAY 28: HOW OUGHT I TO LIVE?

WEEK TEN: FINAL EXAM: ARENDTIAN CITIZENSHIP IN ACTION

FINAL EXAM: THE PAPER SHOULD BE AT LEAST 7 PAGES AND NO MORE THAN 8. INTRODUCTION AND DESCRIPTION, ANALYSIS, USE OF ARENDT IN YOUR ACTIONS, CONCLUSION.

The final paper is due on June 10, 2015.