

# PH3A7-15 Philosophy of Evil

**24/25**

**Department**

Philosophy

**Level**

Undergraduate Level 3

**Module leader**

David Bather Woods

**Credit value**

15

**Module duration**

10 weeks

**Assessment**

100% coursework

**Study location**

University of Warwick main campus, Coventry

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## Description

### Introductory description

When things stop making sense, philosophers start asking questions. Nothing raises questions like evil. Evil presents a significant obstacle for our ability to make sense of the world, each other, and ourselves. Why do evil things happen to good people? What, if anything, explains an evil act? Are all of us capable of evil?

In this module we look to the history of philosophy for answers to the questions raised by evil. We distinguish between different kinds of evil and formulate the specific philosophical problems that they pose. We examine the responses that philosophers have offered on the evil of natural events (e.g. the Lisbon earthquake), on doers of moral evil (e.g. Nazi official Adolf Eichmann), and on places of atrocious evil (e.g. Auschwitz). We study how philosophers of religion have attempted to make sense of evil, pain and suffering, including their reflections on hell, the devil, and the Crucifixion. We raise and address broader issues about how philosopher should respond to evil, what questions they should or should not pose, and the extent to which the concept of evil continues to be relevant to contemporary philosophy.

This modules draws on a rich array of literature from the history of philosophy, including Plato, Plotinus, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, G. W. Leibniz, Voltaire, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Immanuel Kant, Arthur Schopenhauer, Friedrich Nietzsche, Theodor W. Adorno, Hannah Arendt, and Simone Weil.

## Module aims

The module principally aims to: (i.) engage students in answering key philosophical questions concerning the nature and significance of different varieties of evil; (ii.) engage students with figures from the history of philosophy who have made significant contributions these questions; (iii.) engage students in close readings of relevant primary and secondary source materials on the history of philosophical responses to evil; and (iv.) engage students in critical analysis of these source materials in order to develop their own view and arguments on the topics.

## Outline syllabus

This is an indicative module outline only to give an indication of the sort of topics that may be covered. Actual sessions held may differ.

Sample syllabus (subject to change):

1. Evil: What and Why?;
2. Evil Deeds (1): Explaining Evil with Plato, Euripides and Seneca;
3. Evil Deeds (2): Kant on Radical Evil;
4. Evil Doers (1): The Devil in Dostoevsky;
5. Evil Doers (2): Arendt on Eichmann and the Banality of Evil;
6. Evil Events (1): Weil on the Crucifixion, Affliction, and the Love of God;
7. Evil Events (2): The Lisbon Earthquake with Voltaire and Rousseau;
8. Evil Places (1): Hell with Aquinas, Augustine and Dante;
9. Evil Places (2): Adorno on Poetry after Auschwitz.

## Learning outcomes

By the end of the module, students should be able to:

- Students will acquire a knowledge and understanding of significant figures of the history of philosophical responses to evil
- Students will acquire an understanding of theoretical and technical knowledge in the area of the philosophy of evil
- Students will practice and enhance their written and oral communication skills by engaging in learning sessions and completing assessments
- Students will practice and enhance their skills in independent research, analysis and presentation of primary and secondary source materials
- Students will practice and enhance their skills in critical analysis of source materials with a high degree of complexity
- Students will practice and enhance their ability to develop and defend their own philosophical arguments for philosophical positions

## Indicative reading list

Primary sources:

Adorno, 'Cultural Criticism and Society';

Arendt, Eichmann in Jerusalem;  
Aquinas, Summa Theologiae;  
Augustine, City of God;  
Dante, Divine Comedy;  
Dostoevsky, The Brothers Karamazov;  
Euripedes, Medea;  
Kant, Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason;  
Plato, Republic/Protagoras/Meno;  
Rousseau 'Letter to Voltaire Concerning the Lisbon Earthquake';  
Seneca, Medea;  
Voltaire, 'Poem on the Lisbon Disaster';  
Weil, 'The Love of God and Affliction'.

Secondary sources:

Andrew Chignell (ed.), Evil: A History (Oxford, 2019);  
Todd Calder, 'The Concept of Evil' (Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, 2018);  
Peter Dews, The Idea of Evil (Wiley-Blackwell 2008);  
Susan Neiman, Evil in Modern Thought, 2nd ed. (Princeton, 2015);  
Thomas Nys and Stephen de Wijze (eds.), Routledge Handbook of the Philosophy of Evil (Routledge, 2019);  
Luke Russell, Evil: A Philosophical Investigation (Oxford, 2014).

## **Research element**

Students will produce essays that require research into relevant primary and secondary literature and the development of independent critical analyses and arguments.

## **Subject specific skills**

Students will be able to discuss clearly in speech and in writing the issues raised by their close reading and critical analysis of the set texts and materials. Students will be able to engage with these texts in a way that demonstrates relevant and appropriate philosophical and scholarly skills. Student will be able to critically evaluate the relevant secondary literature.

Students will be able to analyse and critically evaluate the key ideas and arguments presented in the primary texts and materials, and come to an independent assessment of their merits with the aid of relevant secondary literature. Students will acquire an appreciation of how key figures in the history of philosophy have shaped our understanding of evil and responses to evil

## **Transferable skills**

Students will acquire a sound and incisive understanding and knowledge of several key topics and issues in the philosophy of evil, and an informed appreciation of how ancient and modern philosophers have made seminal contributions to our understanding of evil and responses to evil. Students will be able to offer relevant support for and critical responses to the arguments and views set out in the texts and materials examined during the module.

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# Study

## Study time

Type	Required
Lectures	18 sessions of 1 hour (8%)
Seminars	8 sessions of 1 hour (4%)
Private study	124 hours (56%)
Assessment	70 hours (32%)
Total	220 hours

## Private study description

No private study requirements defined for this module.

## Costs

No further costs have been identified for this module.

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## Assessment

You do not need to pass all assessment components to pass the module.

Students can register for this module without taking any assessment.

## Assessment group A4

	Weighting	Study time
1000 word essay	20%	20 hours
2500 word essay	80%	50 hours

## Feedback on assessment

Students will have their essays returned with written comments. Students can share or discuss a one-page plan for each essay and will receive either verbal or written comments (as preferred).

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## Availability

## Courses

This module is Optional for:

- UPHA-V700 Undergraduate Philosophy
  - Year 3 of V700 Philosophy
  - Year 3 of V700 Philosophy