

IDS 2935/REL1411: Why Is There in Evil in the World?

Quest 1: The Examined Life

I. General Information

Credit Hours: 3

Class Meetings (in-person)

- MW 9 (4:05-4:55 PM)
- In Person
- LIT0201

Tutorial Section Meetings (in-person)

- F5 11:45 AM – 12:35 PM (TUR 2342)
- F6 12:50-1:40 PM (RNK 0215)
- F7 1:55-2:45 PM (RNK 0106)

Instructor

- Yaniv Feller
- 122 Anderson Hall
- Office Hours: Mondays 11:30am-12:30pm and by appointment using the following link: <https://calendly.com/yfeller-1/30min>
- Email: yfeller@ufl.edu

Teaching Assistant

- Abigail Ryan
- Office Hours: Fridays 3-4 PM and by appointment
- 119 Anderson Hall
- Email: abigail.ryan@ufl.edu

Course Description

The problem of evil has been a focus of intense reflection by philosophers, theologians, psychologists, and novelists. Students will address this key theme in the human condition in this course. The class will enable students to analyze this question in written form and orally by drawing on a variety of methodologies from different fields in the humanities, including philosophy, religion, history, and art. Students will not only read and analyze classical texts from the Western canon such as the biblical Book of Job, ancient Christian

texts, Nietzsche, and Kant, as well as contemporary interpretations such as the movie *A Serious Man*. The case studies examined, historical and contemporary alike, include Egypt in antiquity, Italy of the Middle Ages, and twentieth-century Germany and France.

Course Objectives

- Students will study how key texts in the Western canon (e.g. the Book of Job, Nietzsche, Kant) express the problem of evil.
- Students will study how to think critically about key philosophical and religious theme such as the problem of evil.
- Student will study various methods including literary analysis, film analysis, and philosophical argumentation.

Student Learning Outcomes

At the end of this course, students will be expected to have achieved the [Quest](#) and [General Education](#) learning outcomes as follows:

- Identify, describe, and clearly explain key concepts in discussion of evil, including the banality of evil, theodicy, and the distinction between evil and bad. **Assessment (Q1, H):** Reflection papers, all assignments.
- Critically analyze competing points of views, assessing each of them based on logical consistency and rigor. **Assessment (Q1, H, N):** Reflection papers, all written assignments, in-class discussions.
- Develop and present in writing difficult ideas about the meaning of evil in the world. **Assessment (Q1, H, N):** Reflection papers, all written assignments.
- Connect philosophical and religious ideas to explain contemporary popular culture. **Assessment (Q1, H):** Reflection papers, Media assignment, likely final paper.

Experiential Learning: Depending on the year, experiential learning would include visits to the Price Judaica Library and the engagement with sacred objects, visits to the Harn Museum, and participation in university sponsored events including films and lectures. These would be marked in the syllabus in advance.

Quest and General Education Credit

- Quest 1
- Humanities
- International
- Writing Requirement (WR) 2000 words

This course accomplishes the [Quest](#) and [General Education](#) objectives of the subject areas listed above. A minimum grade of C is required for Quest and General Education credit. Courses intended to satisfy Quest and General Education requirements cannot be taken S-U.

Required Readings and Works

- Arendt, Hannah. *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin, 2006). ISBN: 978-0143039884
 - A copy has been placed in Course Reserves
 - There are many editions. This is the most readily available, including used copies.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. *No Exit and Three Other Plays*. Translated by Stuart Gilbert. Reissue edition. New York: Vintage, 1989. ISBN: 978-0-679-72516-9
 - The edition quoted above is the one we will use, but we will read only the play “No Exit.” Any edition of that play is therefore fine, but it is your responsibility to get one.
 - Free copies should be available to borrow online in Internet Archive: <https://archive.org/search?query=sartre+no+exit>
- All other required readings will be provided by the instructor via Canvas. Please see the schedule below for full bibliographic information.

Material and Supplies Fee: N/A (there are no materials you are required to purchase)

Recommended Writing Resource: Strunk and White, *The Elements of Style* (4th edition), ISBN: 979-8-848-36592-4.

II. Graded Work

Attendance Policy: Attendance is a prerequisite for success in this class. It will be factored in as part of the participation grade (see below and the grading scale). Requirements for class attendance and make-up exams, assignments, and other work in this course are consistent with university policies that can be found at:

<https://catalog.ufl.edu/ugrad/current/regulations/info/attendance.aspx>

Participation (10%): Further information is provided in the participation rubric below. I recognized talking in class, especially a large one such as this, can be intimidating for some. You will receive participation grade twice, once around the midterm, and once at the end of class.

Three out of Four Quizzes (3x7=21%): Four times throughout the semester, in the dates listed below, class will begin or end with a 15-minute short quiz covering all the materials from the last quiz (or start of the semester). Questions will be straightforward and might include explaining a passage or quote from the reading, matching thinkers to ideas,

multiple-choice, etc. If you have done the reading and attended class (while being attentive), this should be straightforward. **Only the three highest quizzes will count toward the final grade.** Deadline: Sep. 15, Oct. 1, Oct. 29, Nov. 17.

Creative Commentary Exercise (20%): This 600-900 words assignment requires you to choose a biblical text that we discussed in class (Job, Genesis 1-3). You will **introduce** the text in one paragraph, then **show** how it raises the problem of evil. You will be **analyzing** the text in such a way that explains possible solutions that emerge inherently from the text (at least two), before **critically assessing** them, explaining why they work or where they fall short. This counts toward the Writing Requirement. Deadline: Sep. 24, 4 PM

Reimagining Hell (20%): In this 600-900 words assignment you get to think about hell as a place and idea. You will imagine the set for a remake of Sartre in 2025. Begin by **describing** the problem the text raises as you understand it, then **explain** how your dramaturgic choices (set, dress of the characters, who will play them) and **express** the issue in a way that relates it to at least one of the readings we made for class. This counts toward the Writing Requirement. Deadline: Oct. 27, 4 PM

Thinking With Arendt: Applied Case Study (29%): You would be assigned a text and/or movie from recent years. In 900-1200 words, **describe** the case study at hand. **Explain** how radical or banal evil can be applied to this case study. Then, **critically assess** the consequences of the argument made, e.g. can evil really be banal? Does thoughtlessness justify capital punishment? This counts toward the Writing Requirement. Deadline: Dec. 10, 7:30 PM.

Note that except for extenuating circumstance, late submission would result not only in a penalty but also potentially in an INCOMPLETE grade. Feedback would be available one week after the final submission deadline.

Bonus events (1% per event, up to 3%): There are many opportunities to enhance your learning outside the classroom. I will post in advance some academic events that are of interest. You will attend the talk at the given date, and upload a one-page summary of what you took to be the key takeaway and one or two questions you had afterwards. Deadline: no later than a week after the event.

First speaker would be on **Sept. 4 6:30pm** (reception with free food!): James Loeffler (Johns Hopkins University), “How Charlottesville Changed America.” Event is free but registration required: <https://shorstein.ufl.edu/forum-for-fairness-in-discourse/>

Grading Scale

For information on how UF assigns grade points, visit:

<https://catalog.ufl.edu/UGRD/academic-regulations/grades-grading-policies/>

Grading ¹ Rubric(s) Writing	A	94 – 100%		C	74 – 76%
	A-	90 – 93%		C-	70 – 73%
	B+	87 – 89%		D+	67 – 69%
	B	84 – 86%		D	64 – 66%
	B-	80 – 83%		D-	60 – 63%
	C+	77 – 79%		E	<60

Assessment Rubric and Statements

	SATISFACTORY (Y)	UNSATISFACTORY (N)
CONTENT	Papers exhibit at least some evidence of ideas that respond to the topic with complexity, critically evaluating and synthesizing sources, and provide at least an adequate discussion with basic understanding of sources.	Papers either include a central idea(s) that is unclear or off-topic or provide only minimal or inadequate discussion of ideas. Papers may also lack sufficient or appropriate sources.
ORGANIZATION AND COHERENCE	Documents and paragraphs exhibit at least some identifiable structure for topics, including a clear thesis statement but may require readers to work to follow progression of ideas.	Documents and paragraphs lack clearly identifiable organization, may lack any coherent sense of logic in associating and organizing ideas, and may also lack transitions and coherence to guide the reader.
ARGUMENT AND SUPPORT	Documents use persuasive and confident presentation of ideas, strongly supported with evidence. At the weak end of the Satisfactory range, documents may provide only generalized discussion of ideas or may provide adequate discussion but rely on weak support for arguments.	Documents make only weak generalizations, providing little or no support, as in summaries or narratives that fail to provide critical analysis.

¹ Roundup to the next percentage point will occur after X.55. That is to say, 83.53% is a B- whereas 83.56% will be rounded to 84% and count as a B.

STYLE	Documents use a writing style with word choice appropriate to the context, genre, and discipline. Sentences should display complexity and logical sentence structure. At a minimum, documents will display a less precise use of vocabulary and an uneven use of sentence structure or a writing style that occasionally veers away from word choice or tone appropriate to the context, genre, and discipline.	Documents rely on word usage that is inappropriate for the context, genre, or discipline. Sentences may be overly long or short with awkward construction. Documents may also use words incorrectly.
MECHANICS	Papers will feature correct or error-free presentation of ideas. At the weak end of the Satisfactory range, papers may contain some spelling, punctuation, or grammatical errors that remain unobtrusive so they do not muddy the paper's argument or points.	Papers contain so many mechanical or grammatical errors that they impede the reader's understanding or severely undermine the writer's credibility.

- The Writing Requirement (WR) ensures students both maintain their fluency in writing and use writing as a tool to facilitate learning.
- The instructor will evaluate and provide feedback before the end of the course on all of the student's written assignments with respect to grammar, punctuation, clarity, coherence, and organization.
- WR course grades have two components. To receive writing requirement credit, a student must receive a grade of C or higher and a satisfactory completion of the writing component of the course.

Participation Rubric²

	Excellent 9-10	Good 8	Average 7	Insufficient 6	Unsatisfactory 0-5
Knowledgeable: Shows evidence of having done the assigned work.	Consistently makes excellent contribution	Contributes to most class discussion	Regularly contributes to class discussion	Sometimes contributes to the discussion	Never or rarely contributes to class

² Coming to class, having done the readings and ready to discuss them, is essential for your success in this course, and for the enjoyment of all of us. If you cannot make it to class because of a valid reason (religious observance, illness etc.) please let me know as soon as possible. Other than that, see the "attendance policy" above.

	s to the overwhelming majority of class discussions in a way that shows excellent preparation of the relevant class materials.	s in a way that shows good preparation of the relevant class materials.	s and is able to explain their position based on the reading.	in ways that do not necessarily show good preparation of class materials.	discussions , and the contribution do not prove evidence of reading.
Thoughtful: Evaluates carefully issues raised in assigned work.	Consistently makes excellent contributions to the overwhelming majority of class discussions by raising important questions, relating to other comments, or making connections across readings.	Contributes to most class discussions by raising important questions, relating to other comments, or making connections across readings	Regularly contributes to most class discussions by raising important questions, relating to other comments , or making connections across readings.	Sometimes contributes to the discussion in ways that show the ability to carefully evaluate issues raised.	Never or rarely contributes to class discussions , and the contributions do not amount to careful evaluation of the material.
Considerate: Takes the perspective of others into account and listens attentively. ³	Always respectful to others, and takes their comments seriously.	Respectful to others and attempts to engage their comments.	Respectful , and sometimes relates to others' comments	Rarely takes into account how others might perceive	Does not take into account other people's feelings and

³ Religion is a sensitive topic for many people. You may come from a faith tradition, or you may not. We are here together to learn more, so any question that comes from an honest desire to learn is a good question. Our goal is to explore and learn, but not to judge either each other's traditions, or ignorance about them. You do not ever need to volunteer anything about your own beliefs, traditions, practices or opinions (or lack thereof) but if you do, make sure that you speak in the first person, thereby making clear that you are representing yourself and not an entire tradition in the discussion.

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III. Annotated Schedule

This schedule is subject to change based on class discussions and unforeseen events such as hurricanes. The professor will alert students to changes.

Preliminaries

Aug. 22: Syllabus in tutorials make sure to go to the correct tutorial group.

Aug. 25: Ursula Le Guin, "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas," *The Unreal and the Real* (New York: Saga Press, 2016), 329-336

Aug. 27: Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 2010), 27-46

Sep. 1: Labor Day – No Class

I. Biblical Theodicy and the Art of Midrash

Sep. 3: 1. Gen. 22: 1-22 (Sefaria JPS translation online, but use any translation of your choice, noting which one you read)

2. Jams Kugel, *How to Read the Bible?* (New York: Free, Press, 2008) 3-17

Sep. 8: *The Book of Job* (selection from NRSV translation). 20 pages.

Sep. 10: Ethan and Joel Cohen, dir. [A Serious Man](#) (2009). 106 minutes

II. Is Creation Good?

Sep. 15: Gen. 1-3 (JPS translation) **First Quiz**

Sep. 17: Elaine Pagels, "God the Father/God the Mother," *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York, Vintage, 1989), 48-69.

III. Theodicy after Auschwitz

Sep. 22: Hans Jonas, "The Concept of God after Auschwitz," *Wrestling with God*, eds. Steven Katz et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 627-636

Sep. 24: Martin Buber, "Religion and Reality," *The Eclipse of God* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 8-19 **CREATIVE COMMENTARY DEADLINE**

Sep. 29: Emmanuel Levinas, "Useless Suffering," *entre nous*, trans. Michael Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press), 91-101

IV. Satan and Hell

Oct. 1: Elaine Pagels, "The Social History of Satan," *The Origins of Satan*, 35-62 **Second Quiz**

Oct. 6: Trachtenberg, "Devil Incarnal." *The Devil and the Jews*, 11-31

Oct. 8: Guest Lecture: Dr. Megan Daly, Religion Librarian: How to conduct research?

Oct. 13: Sartre, *No Exit*

Oct. 15: Jesper Aagaard Petersen and Asbjørn Dyrendal, "Satanism," in *The Cambridge Companion to New Religious Movements*, eds. Olav Hammer and Mikael Rothstein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 215-230

*Note that there are no tutorials on Friday, October 17 due to Homecoming

V. Mourning after Evil

Oct. 20: Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "Remarks on Evil, Suffering, and the Global Pandemic," From the Divine to the Human, eds. Muhammad U. Faruque and Mohammed Rustom (New York: Routledge, 2023), 7-13.

Guest: Professor Ali Mian

Oct. 22: 1. Watch: Adrian Molina and Andrew Aldrich, dir., *Coco* (2017). 105 minutes

2. Selections from Antonio Caso, in *Latin American Philosophy in the Twentieth Century* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1986), 43-52.

Guest: Professor Luis Felipe Gomez Lomeli

VI. Radical Evil

Oct. 27: Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork*, 31-40 **REIMAGINING HELL ASSIGNMENT**

Oct. 29: Kant, *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, 55-65 **Third Quiz**

Nov. 3: Hannah Arendt, "Total Domination," *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 437-459

VII. The Banality of Evil

Nov. 5: Hannah Arendt, "The House of Justice" *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 3-20

Nov. 10: Arendt, "The Accused" and "An Expert on the Jewish Question," *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 21-55

Nov. 12: Arendt, "The Wannsee Conference, or Pontius Pilate." *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 112-134

Nov. 17: Arendt, "Duties of a Law-Abiding Citizen," *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 135-150. **Fourth Quiz**

Nov. 19 (**over Zoom**): Arendt, "Judgement, Appeal, and Execution," *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 234-262.

Nov. 21: NO TUTORIALS

Dec. 1: Arendt, "Epilogue," 253-279.

Dec. 3: 1. Arendt to Scholem exchange, in Arendt, *The Jewish Writings*, 465-471

2. Scholem to Arendt, in Scholem, *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis*, 300-306

Dec. 10 7:30 PM **ARENDT PAPER SUBMISSION**

IV. University Policies and Resources

This course complies with all UF academic policies. For information on those policies and for resources for students, please see [this link](#).

AI Policy

Large Language Models (LLMs) such as ChatGPT, Gemini, Claude and others are a new and exciting development. At the same time, they can hurt our ability to think and grapple with difficult ideas, still "hallucinate" (make-up stuff) way too often, and using them uncritically can harm your development as a writer and thinker. On the other hand, they are here to stay, and can be very useful when used properly. We need to learn how to work with them. If you have never used any model, know that UF has an entire suite available for free! Check out the NaviGator website (note that you might need to be on campus or VPN):

<https://it.ufl.edu/ai/navigator-chat/>

The course policies regarding the use of AI are as follows:

1. You are **not allowed** to use these models during class. It is better to pay attention to the discussion! Using AI during class not only hurts your chances to succeed in the quizzes (which are worth 21% of the grade), it is also very disrespectful. It will result in 0 on the participation grade for the entire semester. In short, it ain't worth it :-)
2. You are welcome to think with AI for your larger assignments (Commentary, Hell, Arendt). There will be some limits. Full instructions will be given on each assignment.
3. In any case, you are **obliged to acknowledge the use of AI properly**, by providing a link to your entire transcript of the conversation(s) about class. Failure to do so constitutes a violation of the Honor Code and can result in anything from a 0 on the assignment to an Honor Board disciplinary hearing and potential suspension or expulsion. Again, ain't worth it!