

THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

Professor James S. Cutsinger

“Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then is He impotent. Is He able, but not willing? Then is He malevolent. Is He both able and willing? Whence then is evil?”

This is the philosopher David Hume’s classic statement of the problem of evil, a problem that has bedeviled theologians and philosophers from time immemorial, and the number one reason for thoughtful atheism. If God exists, and if this God is supremely good, wise, and powerful, then why are children raped and murdered? Why do tsunamis and earthquakes claim the lives of thousands of people? Why all the seemingly pointless suffering, disease, and death?

Our aim in this seminar is to wrestle with these difficult questions while pondering the answers provided in a variety of philosophical, theological, and literary works ranging from antiquity to our own day: Aeschylus’s *Oresteia*, Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy*, Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, David Hume’s *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, and David Bentley Hart’s *The Doors of the Sea: Where Was God in the Tsunami?*

Method:

The seminar will be conducted as a Socratic discussion. Each class begins with a question about the assigned reading for the day, and students are expected to join the instructor and each other in a shared conversational inquiry. A premium is placed on precision, explanation, and defense. Students will be held doubly accountable: for courteously listening to the contributions of others and for patiently justifying their own observations.

While it is sometimes thought that Socratic conversation is less rigorous than a more didactic and professorial style, its rigor is simply of another kind. In the serious cross-examination of a text, the course of conversation is often unpredictable; it is certainly less linear than in the “traditional” classroom. But the intellectual commitment required—the daily vigilance—demands a preparation and yields a mental fitness not promoted by other forms of learning. These advantages will be pressed to the full in this course.

Requirements:

1. *Reading.* In keeping with Socrates’ observation that “it is better to deal thoroughly with a little than unsatisfactorily with a lot” (*Theaetetus*, 187e), reading assignments are relatively short. Students are expected to study the assigned texts very closely and carefully; underlining important words and passages and maintaining a dialogue with the authors through copious marginal comments are essential preparations for class discussion.

2. *Attendance*, both prompt and regular. Two unexcused absences are permitted; a penalty of one letter grade is imposed for each additional unexcused absence. And attendance means punctuality; tardy arrivals and seminars are a disastrous mix.

3. *Constructive participation.* For obvious reasons, this course is not for students who prefer an education they can simply ingest as the passive takers of notes. It is for those who enjoy the acts of thinking and reflection and

argument. Frequent contributions to class discussion are not merely desirable; they are essential. One-third of the final course grade will be based on class participation.

4. *Essays*. Students will write three essays of 5-6 pages each. Neither book-reports nor research-papers, these essays should be viewed instead as continuing conversations in which their authors wrestle in writing with the ideas opened up by at least three of the books. (Basing an essay or essays on more than one book is perfectly acceptable. Early submissions will be gratefully received.) Professor Cutsinger's *Breviary of English Usage*, which can be found on his website under "Teaching", will be used in his grading and commentary. Grades received on the two best essays will be used in calculating the final course grade (one-third each).