

PHIL 325 Contemporary Philosophy: Evil and the Meaning of Life on Film
Azusa Pacific University, May 2008
MTR 8:30am-12:00pm in Duke 123

Instructor: John McAteer, filmphilosophy@gmail.com

Office Hours: By appointment in Duke 262

Course Description: Susan Neiman argues that the history of post-Enlightenment philosophy can be read as an attempt to solve the problem of evil. Here, “the problem of evil” means not just the problem of how a good God could allow evil to exist, but means something closer to the problem of the meaning of life: how are we to make sense of the world and our place in it? Julian Young gives a complementary analysis of contemporary philosophy as the attempt “to respond to the question of what can be said about the meaning of life in the light of the death of the God of Christianity”. But if contemporary philosophy is about the problem of evil and the meaning of life, then contemporary philosophy is done as much through cinema as it is through academia. We’ll watch movies such as *The Matrix*, *Memento*, *No Country for Old Men*, etc. and analyze them in juxtaposition to the thought of philosophers such as Plato, Kant, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, etc.

Course Objectives:

1. Through the assigned reading students will acquire a basic comprehension of the major figures in contemporary philosophy; through in class discussion and the final exam, students will demonstrate their understanding of these figures.
2. Through movie screenings and class discussion, students will learn to interpret the philosophical significance of movies and engage in critical conversation on the philosophical questions generated by contemporary popular culture.
3. Through class discussion students will learn to articulate and evaluate philosophical arguments in order to develop their own reasoned opinions on the major issues in philosophy.
4. Through the essays, term paper, and written final exam students will learn to analyze philosophical texts, to reconstruct philosophical arguments and to express these ideas in written form.

Grading: Grades will be based on the following criteria, weighted equally: Reading, Attendance and Participation, Two Short Essays, Final Exam, Term Paper

Reading Reports: Each class period, students are expected to come prepared to discuss the assigned reading. In order to facilitate this requirement, students will turn in a 1 page typed paper on each assigned chapter. (This means if, for example, four chapters are assigned, students will turn in four sets of notes.) Each paper should consist of three parts: (1) first, in your own

words and as clearly and concisely as you can, state the overall *thesis* of the chapter; ideally, this will be only one sentence; (2) next, state an *objection* not considered by the author; if you completely agree with the material in the chapter, then state a possible objection you imagine someone else might have; (3) finally, state at least one *question* raised by the chapter; this might be something you didn't understand about the material or it might be a topic you wish to discuss with your classmates.

Short Essays: Students will write two short essays (5-7 pages each).

Essay #1: Explain your interpretation of the author of Job's response to the problem of evil (see Job Ch. 38-41) and compare this response to the "True World" philosophies discussed by Young and the Enlightenment Theodicies discussed by Neiman. **Due 5/13.**

Essay #2: Explain your interpretation of Woody Allen's response to the problem of evil (in *Crimes and Misdemeanors* and *Deconstructing Harry*) and discuss what you think religious believers could learn from it. **Due 5/20.**

Term Paper: Students will write a 7-10 page term paper on a topic of their own choice (approved in advance by the professor). **Due via email by Midnight on 6/2.** *Late papers accepted until 6/4 with grades reduced 1 letter grade per day late.*

Required Texts: Kierkegaard, Søren. *Fear and Trembling* (available online at <http://www.sorenkierkegaard.org/texts/text6a.htm>)
Neiman, Susan. *Evil in Modern Thought*, new ed (Princeton, 2004) – 0691117926
Young, Julian. *The Death of God and the Meaning of Life* (Routledge, 2003) – 0415307902

Schedule:

- 5/6 Topic: Intro to Course
Reading Due: None
Movie Screening: *No Country for Old Men*
- 5/8 Topic: "True World" Philosophies
Reading Due: Young p. 1-28 and 57-79
Movie Screening: *The Matrix*
- 5/12 Topic: Theodicy
Reading Due: Neiman p. 1-112
Movie Screening: π : *Faith in Chaos*
- 5/13 Topic: Critique of the Enlightenment
Essay #1 Due

- 5/15 Movie Screening: *Memento*
Topic: The “Death of God”
Reading Due: Young p. 29-56 and 83-106
Movie Screening: *Crimes and Misdemeanors*
- 5/19 Topic: Anti-Enlightenment
Reading Due: Neiman p. 113-237
Movie Screening: *Deconstructing Harry*
- 5/20 Topic: Aesthetic Responses to Evil
Essay #2 Due
Movie Screening: *The Thin Red Line*
- 5/22 Topic: The Varieties of Existentialism
Reading Due: Young p. 107-212
Movie Screening: *Wings of Desire*
- 5/26 Topic: Responding to Evil in a Post-Modern World
Reading Due: Neiman p. 238-328
Movie Screening: *Requiem*
- 5/27 Topic: Christian Existentialism
Reading Due: Kierkegaard Preface, Prelude, I-IV, Panegyric, and Problemata.
Movie Screening: *Diary of a Country Priest*
- 5/29 Topic: Christian Postmodernism
Reading Due: Kierkegaard Problem I and Problem II
Movie Screening: *Babette’s Feast*
- 5/30 Final Exam