

God, Freedom, and Evil

HUEN 3200 803

Wes Morrison
Department of Philosophy
Hellems 280
303-492-8297
Wes.Morrison@Colorado.EDU

Office hours: Tu 12:00pm - 1:30pm, Fri 1:30pm – 3:00pm, and by appt.
I'm also generally available after class.

Description

Short version:

This course will deal with several interconnected questions. Does God exist? If so, why is there so much evil in the world? Is human freedom the main source of evil? If so, does that get God off the hook? Or are all these questions based on a mistake? Should we simply abandon traditional theism with its "duality" of "moral good and evil"?

Long version:

GOD

We'll be primarily concerned with issues connected with the traditional belief in a personal creator. How likely is it that there is a being? What sorts of evidence might help us decide? Is there anything about the way the universe is put together that suggests intelligent design? Does the mere existence of the universe provide evidence of a creator?

Why think the creator/designer (if there is one) is anything like the "perfect being" of western theism? What difference would it make if a God like that existed? Is God needed, for example, to provide a foundation for morality? Or to give meaning and purpose to life?

EVIL

We'll spend much of our time wrestling with the problem of evil. If God exists and is as powerful and good and wise as people say, why is there so much evil in the world? Why, for example, do bad things happen to good people? A challenging argument *against* the existence of God is suggested by these questions. According to this argument, an omnipotent, omniscient, and wholly good God would not allow the amount and variety of evil that actually exists.

FREEDOM

One of the most popular theistic responses to the argument from evil is the "free will defense". Focusing specifically on the evil that human beings do to one another, the free will defense asserts that God places great value on the freedom to choose between good and evil. This commonly held view raises a number of new issues. What is free will? Are human beings free in the required sense? If God exists and has complete and infallible foreknowledge, can anyone be free in that sense?

A "NON-DUAL" PERSPECTIVE

Along the way, we'll take a look at an alternative stance that provides a striking contrast to Western style theism. Stephen Mitchell's Zen-inspired interpretation of the biblical book of Job, along with his personal "answer" to the problem of evil in the key chapter of his entertaining book, *Meetings with the Archangel: A Comedy of Spirit*, will be the subject of extended

discussion. The central issue here will be whether the right kind of “enlightenment” undercuts the questions and problems inspired by Western theism – putting us in a position where we can see the world, and even love it, without judging it, viewing it from a point of view that lies beyond the “dualities” of good and evil, right and wrong.

Assigned texts

David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*

Marilyn and Robert Adams, eds., *The Problem of Evil*

The Book of Job (tr. & ed. by Raymond Scheindlin)

Stephen Mitchell, *Meetings with the Archangel: A Comedy of the Spirit* (We'll devote most of our attention to the “standalone” chapter titled, “Zen Judaism”.)

A number of other required readings will be available online.

Course format

Most class periods will begin with a short lecture, explaining some of the more difficult concepts and arguments and setting the stage for the day's discussion. I'll generally kick off the discussion by posing some question for the class to consider. Students will do their best to listen to each other and respond to what's been said. I'll do my best to make sure the discussions stay on track. Occasionally, I'll raise a new topic for discussion and debate. But students should feel free to raise issues that they would like to explore.

Course requirements

Regular attendance and participation (twenty five percent of your course grade)

Being there, making an occasional comment, asking helpful questions, listening carefully to what others have to say and responding appropriately are all valuable contributions to the class. This includes the final examination period, which will be devoted to the viewing of a movie, followed by a short discussion.

Weekly short reaction papers (twenty five percent)

Each Tuesday, you will hand in a short paper reacting to some issue or argument discussed in class the previous week. Papers should take a position on the issue you have chosen to address and should give a reason for taking that position. Papers should be double-spaced and *no more than* one page in length.

First paper (twenty five percent) due in class on Thursday, March 13, 2008.

A *four to six page* paper on a choice of assigned topics. Topics will be drawn from the subjects we have discussed in the first half of the course. Papers should have a clear thesis, give an argument for that thesis, and show an awareness of possible objections and an ability to deal with those objections.

These are *not* research papers. Additional background reading for the paper is not required.

Second paper (twenty five percent) due at the beginning of the final exam period.

A *four to six page* paper. You will develop your own topic in consultation with me. You should have settled on a definite topic by the beginning of the last week of classes. Otherwise, the instructions are the same as those for the midterm paper.

Final exam period (Saturday, May 3, at 4:30pm).

During the exam period, we'll view Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal* and have a short discussion of it. Then we'll say goodbye.

Outline of topics/readings

The concept of *God*

A general discussion of the Western concept of God – ranging from “First Cause” to “Perfect Being” – and contrasting it with alternative conceptions. We'll also spend a bit of time just getting to know one another.

God and the foundations of morality

Craig vs. Sinnott-Armstrong, A debate on whether the existence of God is needed for objective moral truth

(<http://www.colorado.edu/philosophy/wes/lad/craig-sinnott-armstrong.pdf>: username and password required)

Adams, “Abraham's Dilemma”

(<http://www.colorado.edu/philosophy/wes/lad/abraham.html>: username and password required)

God and the meaning of life

Craig, “The Absurdity of Life Without God”

(<http://www.bethinking.org/pdf.php?ID=129>)

Nagel, “The Absurd” (<http://www.colorado.edu/philosophy/wes/lad/TheAbsurd.pdf>: username and password required)

Why do the righteous suffer?

The book of Job

Beyond Good and Evil? A non-Western, non-dual dissolution of the problem of evil

Mitchell, Introduction to his translation of book of Job

(<http://www.colorado.edu/philosophy/wes/job-stuff/job-mitchell.html>: username and password required)

Mitchell, *Meetings with the Archangel*, chapter II (“Zen Judaism”), and chapter V (“Biography of an Awakened Master”)

Intelligent design?

Hume, *Dialogues*, II - VIII

An article on the “fine-tuning” argument by Robin Collins

(<http://www.colorado.edu/philosophy/wes/lad/Collins-fine-tuning-paper-revised-for-web.pdf>: username and password required)

Why is there anything at all?

Hume, *Dialogues*, IX

Hume's take on the problem of evil

Hume, *Dialogues*, X – XII

Readings from the Adams's anthology on the problem of evil

Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence" (Adams, p. 23)

Plantinga, "God, Evil and the Metaphysics of Freedom" (Adams, p. 83-91 *only*, supplemented by some notes that I'll give you)

Divine foreknowledge and human freedom

David Hunt (<http://www.colorado.edu/philosophy/wes/5600/foreknow-5600.pdf>: username and password required)

Back to the problem of evil

William Rowe, "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism" (Adams, p. 126)

Stephen Wykstra, "The Humean Obstacle to Evidential Arguments from Suffering: On Avoiding the Evils of 'Appearance'" (Adams, p. 138)

Hick, "Soul-Making and Suffering" (Adams, p. 168)

Diogenes Allen, "Natural Evil and the Love of God" (Adams, p. 189)

Evil and God's love for individual persons

Robert Adams, "Must God Create the Best?" (A PDF file will be circulated.)

Marilyn Adams, "Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God" (Adams, p. 209)