

The Problem of Evil in Philosophy and Popular Culture

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Professor Edward McCrossin, SAS - Philosophy

TH 9:50A-12:50P

Honors College Rm S120

College Ave Campus

Will Count Towards SAS-Philosophy Major

Will Count Towards SAS-Philosophy Minor

The “problem of evil,” commonly phrased as the question, “why do bad things happen to good people, and good things to bad?,” began its life as a theological problem, as far back as the Old Testament’s Book of Job, but it’s also a modern secular problem, which began its life at least since Rousseau’s public dispute with Voltaire midway through the eighteenth century, as Susan Neiman has convincingly argued in her 2002 *Evil in Modern Thought* (www.susan-neiman.de/docs/b_preface.html). The secular version poses a threat not to God’s standing, but to human reason’s—how can we make reasonable sense of the world, if we can’t make sense of it teeming with unreasonable suffering?—and yields primarily two competing perspectives, one beginning with Rousseau, insisting that “morality demands that we make evil intelligible,” the other beginning with Voltaire, insisting that “morality demands that we don’t.” The seminar will be devoted to identifying and clarifying the various sorts of evidence of these competing perspectives we find in philosophy, literature, and popular culture.

On the philosophy side of things, we will want to clarify the nature of “Optimism” as a philosophical perspective. On the literature and popular culture side of things, choices will be driven in part by seminar participants’ backgrounds and preferences, but will also include at least some of the following: the nineteenth-century Gothic novel tradition (*Frankenstein*, *Dracula*, and so on), their many visual interpretations, together with certain twentieth-century additions (*The Walking Dead*, for example); paraphrases and extensions of the parables of Job and *Candide*; the dystopian novel tradition, as a whole, but in particular as marketed increasingly to younger audiences (*Harry Potter*, *The Hunger Games*, *Divergent*, among others); certain combinations of authors (for example, Dostoevsky, Conrad, and Camus), and of works of individual authors (for example, DeLillo’s *Mao II*, *Cosmopolis*, and *Falling Man*, Harris’ *Hannibal Lecter* series, Malick’s *The Thin Red Line*, *The Tree of Life*, and *To the Wonder*, Morrison’s *Beloved*, *A Mercy*, and *Home*, and Updike’s *Rabbit* quartet and *Terrorist*), and how certain of their narratives are being taken up provocatively in serial television (for example, *Hannibal* and *Homeland*).

TRIP MCCROSSIN has been with the Philosophy Department at Rutgers for over ten years, working in various ways on the history and philosophy of the Enlightenment, and its legacy in contemporary ethics, politics, and popular culture. He attended college at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, and graduate school at Stanford and Yale. He’s working on several

longish publications on the problems of evil and personal identity, and has essays periodically on these and other subjects in Open Court's Popular Culture and Philosophy series. He lives in Brooklyn with his eighteen-year-old son.