

Evil: Perspectives from Moral and Legal Philosophy and Moral Psychology

Reading Seminar

Summer Term 2021

Evil has long puzzled philosophers, from theological discussions about how to reconcile the presence of evil in the world with the existence of benevolent divine creator in antiquity and middle ages to modern attempts to comprehend genocides and massive murderers of the twentieth century. Today, the questions about the nature and origin of evil did not lose their importance, and seem to attract scholars from different fields such as philosophy, psychology, and law.

On the one hand, contemporary philosophers aim to describe necessary and sufficient conditions for evil (Calder, 2018). On the other hand, scientists try to explain social and psychological factors involved in it (e.g., situational-factors such as authority, or personality traits like psychopathy, narcissism, or low empathy, e.g., Zimbardo, 2007; Baron-Cohen, 2012). Finally, evil is challenging for the lawyers, as its paradigmatic instances of unjustified and harmful actions against others, are frequently associated with criminal liability.

During the seminar we will discuss and confront different accounts and responses to evil that come from moral philosophy and psychology, and legal philosophy (this will include discussion of classical and contemporary philosophical texts on the nature of evil, recent empirical findings on social and psychological factors involved in it, and legal philosophical questions about whether and what type of punishment it deserves).

The goal of the course is to acquaint the students with one of important problems of philosophy, science and daily life, but also to help them strengthen their critical thinking, writing and argumentative skills.

Basic Information about the seminar

Instructor

Dr. Karolina Prochownik
Office hours (GD 2/419 or via Skype/Zoom): on appointment
Email address: karolina.prochownik@rub.de

Language

English

Available Certificates and Credit Points

Law students:

Grundlagenschein gem. § 39 Abs. 3 Nr. 2 SPO
Promotionsschein gem. § 3 Abs. 2 PromO
Fremdsprachenschein gem. § 7 Abs. 1 Nr. 3 JAG

Students of philosophy, cognitive science and other disciplines:

Master Students: 6 ECTS
Bachelor Students: 4 ECTS

Assignment

Written commentaries (ca. three pages each) on the text(s) we are currently discussing submitted before the class. In total, **five** commentaries are expected during the term (formal requirements—font: Times New Roman, 11; line spacing: 1.5; standard margins). Students will be able to choose which texts they want to comment on. The commentaries should be submitted to the email address karolina.prochownik@rub.de a day before the seminar (i.e., by midnight).

Commentaries should: a) provide a summary of the main thesis of the text and the main argument(s) in favor of the thesis presented by the author(s) and b) critically discuss this thesis or the argument(s) or examine potential implications for the law. In short, a commentary should provide a concise answer to two questions: what the author thinks, and what you think about it.

Additionally, students are expected to actively participate in the seminar (i.e., participate in group work including group discussions and presentations).

Attendance

The requirements regarding attendance differ depending on the type of certificate students would like to get at the end of the seminar. Those students who would like to obtain Fremdsprachenschein should attend 10 full sessions out of 12 (in addition to handing in their commentaries on time). Students who want to receive Grundlagenschein or Promotionsschein should attend at least 8 sessions (and hand in their commentaries on time). Please note that the first introductory session will be short and is not considered an attended session. It is possible for a student to receive two certificates (e.g., Fremdsprachenschein and Grundlagenschein), if all the requirements are met.

Materials

All materials will be available via Moodle. Password to the seminar's page on Moodle will be provided to registered participants via email before the first introductory session. Participants can also contact the instructor directly by email and ask for the password.

Registration

To sign up for the course, please register via eCampus. Should you experience any problems with registration, please contact the instructor.

Number of participants

30 (available on a first-come, first-served basis)

Seminar Schedule

Session	Topic
Intro session 13.04.2021, Tuesday, 14:00-15:00	General information about the seminar (<i>attendance optional</i>) If you are interested in the topic of the seminar you may also check: Calder, T. (2018). <i>The concept of evil</i> . In E. Zalta (Ed.), <i>The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy</i> (Fall 2018 ed.). Retrieved from https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2018/entries/concept-evil
Session 1 <i>Philosophy</i> 20.04.2021, Tuesday, 14:00-16:00	St. Augustin of Hippo, <i>Confessions</i> : Books I, II and VII.
Session 2 <i>Philosophy</i> 27.04.2021, Tuesday, 14:00-16:00	Kant, I. (1793/2009). Religion within the bounds of bare reason. Indianapolis/Cambridge, Hackett Publishing Company, Inc. (or other edition): Book I “The bad principle existing alongside the good, i.e. the radical evil in human nature” (first piece; pp. 17-61).
Session 3 <i>Philosophy</i> 04.05.2021, Tuesday, 14:00-16:00	Arendt, H. (1963/2006). <i>Eichmann in Jerusalem. A report on the banality of evil</i> . Penguin Classics: Chapter 2 “The accused” (pp. 21-35) and chapter 3 “Expert on the Jewish question” (pp. 36-55).
Session 4 <i>Philosophy</i> 11.05.2021, Tuesday, 14:00-16:00	Midgley, M. (1984/2003). <i>Wickedness. A philosophical essay</i> . London/New York: Routledge: Chapter 1 “The problem of natural evil” (pp. 1-16) and chapter 5 “Fates, causes and free will” (pp. 95-115).
Session 5 <i>Psychology</i> 18.05.2021, Tuesday, 14:00-16:00	Zimbardo, P. (2007). <i>The Lucifer effect: Understanding how good people turn evil</i> . New York: Random House: Chapter 12 “Investigating social dynamics: Power, conformity, and obedience” (pp. 258-296).
Session 6 <i>Psychology</i> 01.06.2021, Tuesday, 14:00-16:00	Baumeister, R. F. (2012). Human evil: The myth of pure evil and the true causes of violence. In M. Mikulincer & P. R. Shaver (Eds.), <i>The social psychology of morality: Exploring the causes of good and evil</i> (p. 367–380). American Psychological Association.
Session 7 <i>Psychology</i> 08.06.2021, Tuesday, 14:00-16:00	Baron-Cohen, S. (2012). <i>The science of evil: On empathy and the origins of cruelty</i> . New York: Basic books: Chapter 2 “The empathy mechanism: the bell curve” (pp. 15-42) and chapter 6 “Reflections on human cruelty” (selected fragment: pp. 167-178).

	Supplementary reading (synopsis of the book by the author): http://www.themontrealreview.com/2009/The-science-of-evil-by-Simon-Baron-Cohen.php
Session 8 <i>Psychology</i> 15.06.2021, Tuesday, 14:00-16:00	Blair, R. J. R., Peschardt, K. S., Budhani, S., Mitchell, D. G. V., & Pine, D. S. (2006). The development of psychopathy. <i>Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry</i> , 47(3-4), 262-276.
Session 9 <i>Law</i> 22.06.2021, Tuesday, 14:00-16:00	Feinberg, J. (2003) <i>Problems at the roots of law</i> . Oxford: Oxford University Press: "Evil" (selected fragments: pp. 125-131, pp. 142-144, pp. 165-179, pp. 190-192).
Session 10 <i>Law</i> 29.06.2021, Tuesday, 14:00-16:00	Morse, S. J. (2008). Psychopathy and criminal responsibility. <i>Neuroethics</i> , 1(3), 205-212.
Session 11 <i>Law</i> 06.07.2021, Tuesday, 14:00-16:00	Barry, P. B. (2015). Capital punishment as a response to evil. <i>Criminal Law and Philosophy</i> , 9(2), 245-264.
Session 12 <i>Law</i> 13.07.2021, Tuesday, 14:00-16:00	Arendt, H. (1963/2006). <i>Eichmann in Jerusalem. A report on the banality of evil</i> . Penguin Classics: "Epilogue" (pp. 253-279).