

THOMISTIC PSYCHOLOGY: THE MEANING OF EVIL

SEMINAR SYLLABUS

[FALL 2021]



DESCRIPTION

Every human being has some notion of *evil* as that which is opposed to a good: the good that one desires, the good that one honors - or, perhaps, the good that one wishes one honored or desired more than one does. Even persons who might consider themselves at quite home with the official or trendy relativisms of the day frequently find themselves possessed with anger at states of affairs, ideas, and other persons they clearly judge to be evil. Might not the frenzy of the anger, as well as the lack of humility it evinces, suggest a deeper questioning? For if we are honest, we must admit that, despite every good intention, we ourselves have some share in the mysterious reality of evil in the world.

This seminar aims to deepen our questioning concerning the meaning of evil, beginning with the nature of the goods to which various evils are opposed.

This introduction will lead us to the seminar's main concern, which is with *moral evil* as a kind of primary rupture in the world of free beings, and the questions that evil poses for moral psychology: If moral goodness represents nothing other than the excellence of the human way of acting, what then does it mean *willingly* to oppose the norm of that excellence? In the end, this will lead us to a consideration of how we might move beyond an account of moral evil merely as privation, and the possibility of addressing the shortcomings of the traditional account from a semiotic point of view. The hope is that the seminar as a whole will be of some real assistance for the examination of our own consciences and the better fulfillment of our vocations as human persons.



METHOD

The seminar is 8 weeks long, with one recorded lecture and one discussion session each week. Each discussion session is structured around readings from Aquinas and/or other authors. Participants are expected to have read the assigned reading and listened to the lecture prior to the session, so that they may engage in a semi-structured discussion directed and moderated by the instructor. As this is an advanced seminar, one *cannot* participate well without a *deep engagement* with the assigned reading. Moreover, *continual discussion* will foster that participation and engagement throughout the week. Participants will be expected to partake in these discussions on a regular basis, and will be challenged to do so directly.

READING

The texts for this seminar are either available online, or will be provided via Teams. Readings will be drawn from works of Thomas Aquinas, Jacques Maritain, and other authors. **Readings are subject to change.**

LECTURE

Each week there will also be a 20-40+ minute audio lecture, posted to Teams at the beginning of the week. This lecture will be based upon the assigned reading, but will also stray into related topics, or may use the reading as a launching point for addressing some related issue (perhaps one more general, or perhaps one more specific). The primary (but not sole) purpose of these lectures is to help clarify some of the more difficult concepts and arguments contained within the reading, as well as to raise specific questions that should help structure and guide our discussion sessions.

There *may* be accompanying visual aids (not necessarily) in order to provide some clarity as to textual points, but one *should* be able, in most cases, to simply listen to the lecture (and perhaps consult the visual aids later). This should allow more flexibility: making the lectures suitable accompaniment for a commute, while doing chores, going for a run, etc.

DISCUSSION

The heart of the seminar is the discussion session (**Saturdays at 10:00-11:00am ET**): where all the thoughts emergent and encountered throughout the week—via the reading, lecture, and on-going conversations in the Teams channel—are brought into explicit conversation. This allows us to attempt a concerted effort at bringing resolution to our difficulties, and—failing such a resolution—to direct our inquiry further.

Each discussion session will begin with a brief synopsis of the week's material and a focusing on whichever aspects of that material seem most pressing. Beyond the direction provided by the instructor, participants are encouraged to bring their own concerns explicitly into view and to engage with the instructor and one another in civil debate and collective inquiry.

CONTRIBUTION

It is hoped and expected that each participant in the seminar will provide a contribution: a piece of writing, recorded presentation, or something else, within one month of the seminar's conclusion, as a way of coalescing what has been learned in a demonstrative manner. Topics are suggested, and the instructor is available for discussions and assistance in composing your contribution.

SESSION SCHEDULE

October 2	<p>“To Be Completely” Lecture : The Anatomy of the Good Readings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thomas Aquinas 1266-1268: <i>Summa theologiae, prima pars</i>, qq. 4-6. • Jacques Maritain 1950: <i>An Introduction to the Basic Problems of Moral Philosophy</i>, chapters 2-3.
October 9	<p>Is Evil a Thing? Lecture : Evil as Privation Readings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thomas Aquinas 1266-1268: <i>Summa theologiae, prima pars</i>, qq. 48-49. • Thomas Aquinas 1269-1272: <i>Quaestiones disputatae de malo</i>, q. 1, aa.1-2. • Kirk Kanzelberger 2020: “Reality and the Meaning of Evil”, section 1.
October 16	<p>The Inclined Plane, Or, “Is Not the Life of Man on Earth a Trial?” Lecture : Freedom and the Moral Universe Readings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jacques Maritain 1950: <i>An Introduction to the Basic Problems of Moral Philosophy</i>, chapters 4-6.
October 23	<p>The Evil Act Lecture : Moral Evil as Voluntary Deficiency Readings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thomas Aquinas 1269-1270: <i>Summa theologiae, prima secundae</i>, qq. 71-75 (selections). • Thomas Aquinas 1269-1272: <i>Quaestiones disputatae de malo</i>, q. 1, a. 3.
October 30	<p>Evil and the Powers of the Psyche Lecture : Introduction to Moral Psychology Readings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thomas Aquinas 1269-1270: <i>Summa theologiae, prima secundae</i>, qq. 76-78, 84.
November 6	<p>Introduction to a Semiotic Account of Evil Lecture : The <i>Umwelt</i> as the Proper Locus of Moral Acts Readings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • John Deely (selections). • Kirk Kanzelberger 2020: “Reality and the Meaning of Evil”, section 2.
November 13	<p>Evil as Transgression Lecture : Two Predications of Evil: The Limits of Privation Theory Readings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gregory Reichberg 2002: “Beyond Privation: Moral Evil in Thomas Aquinas’s <i>De malo</i>”. • Kirk Kanzelberger 2020: “Reality and the Meaning of Evil”, section 4.
November 20	<p>Evil and the Sign Lecture: The Moral Causality of the Sign Readings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kirk Kanzelberger 2020: “Reality and the Meaning of Evil”, sections 5. • J. R. R. Tolkien, “On Fairy-Stories”.