

# REL 480: Problems of Evil

Dr. Nathan Loewen

[nrloewen@ua.edu](mailto:nrloewen@ua.edu) / 205-348-3467

Office: 3033 Houser Hall (See myBama or Blackboard for hours)

## Course Description

Depending upon your point of view, much is going wrong in the world. But what counts as “evil” may depend upon your viewpoint. This course is therefore about problems of evil (in the plural). This seminar explores the current academic discourses on evil alongside several alternative approaches to it. Our discussions will turn from evil, as a traditional Western challenge to the existence of God, towards considering what it may mean for “things to go wrong” according to a variety of global viewpoints.

## Course Objectives

1. Students will be introduced the philosophy of religion as a subfield of both philosophy and religious studies.
2. Students will consider issues in both fields pertaining to the topic of evil.
3. Students will develop critical thinking skills in a variety of forms (reading, discussion, writing).
4. Students will develop skills related to written argumentation.

## Learning Goals/Outcomes

At the conclusion of the course, students will be able to:

1. Demonstrate familiarity with the broad critical trends and debates in religious studies.
2. Critically engage discourses on the topic of evil.
3. Apply various theoretical approaches in connection with the academic study of religion.
4. Develop professional and analytical writing skills in relation to research, grammar, style, and clarity.
5. Collaborate with peers to improve writing and editing skills.

## Outline of topics

Over the course of the term, our class will study the following topics:

- "Evil" in the intellectual history of Western modernity.
- Themes and topics related to "evil" in public media discourses.
- "The Problem of Evil" among analytic philosophers of religion.
- Approaches to the critical study of religion.
- Themes and topics related to "evil" in the works of post-structural philosophers.

## Readings

Please see the course schedule in Blackboard for the list of readings. Be sure to complete the entire class session readings beforehand.

Required textbook:

*Evil in Modern Thought*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. Susan Neiman (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015). Marked EMT on the schedule.

Additional readings will be accessed through Blackboard, too.

### **Attendance and Decorum**

Since REL490 is a seminar, you are responsible for contributing to your learning experience as well as that of everyone else in the course. Regular attendance and participation in the course is expected both in class and online.

The Code of Student Conduct requires that students behave in a manner that is conducive to a teaching/learning environment. Students who engage in behavior that is disruptive or obstructive to the teaching/learning environment will be subject to disciplinary sanctions outlined by the [Code of Student Conduct](#). The University of Alabama is committed to an ethical, inclusive community defined by respect and civility. [The UAact website](#) provides a list of reporting channels that can be used to report incidences of illegal discrimination, harassment, sexual assault, sexual violence, retaliation, threat assessment or fraud.

You are strongly advised to take hand-written notes during this course. Your use of technology in the classroom will be at the discretion of the professor. Unless otherwise asked, please put your cell phone on silent or airplane mode during class. If you bring a laptop or tablet to class, please be ready to be called upon for information or to use it during in-class activities.

### **Disability Accommodations**

If you are registered with [the Office of Disability Services](#), please make an appointment with me as soon as possible to discuss any course accommodations that may be necessary. If you have a disability, but have not contacted the Office of Disability Services, please call 348-4285 or visit Houser Hall, Suite 1000, to register for services.

### **Assignments**

For the schedule of assignments please review the proposed course schedule in the final section of this syllabus. Note : Any changes will be posted as Blackboard announcements as well as updated in the course schedule to be posted on Blackboard.

### **Weekly Critical Responses (40%):**

Each week, you will turn in a 250-word reflection on your readings and class discussions. Rather than summarize the texts/discussions, you are to experiment with your own ideas and questions. For example: What do you find useful or problematic about various claims? What you find puzzling? These are due at the beginning of class each week.

### **Short Critical Writing Assignments (20%):**

You will write several 500-word pieces in order to critically reflection on topics chosen from questions/themes generated by our discussions of everyone's critical responses (see above). They are to be written according to general writing guidelines provided in-class at the beginning of the semester.

### **Peer Edits (20%):**

Based on a set of writing guidelines provided in-class, you will practice peer editing with the short critical writing assignments as well as with the Final Paper (see below). You will be editing someone's work and yours will be edited. Most peer-editing will take place as homework outside of class sessions. You are expected to be thorough and to spend a good amount of time with the paper(s) and your own comments so as to be as helpful to your colleagues as possible.

### **Final Paper (20%):**

Your final paper will serve as the on-going and culminating project for the course. It will also serve in place of a final exam. You will write an abstract/proposal (approximately 1-2 pages) for the topic that will be subject to my approval. Your work on the paper will begin at mid-term and progress to the end of the course with time spent on each of the stages of the writing process. It should be approximately 3,000 words.

### **Assignment Policies**

#### **Technology problems**

Technology problems are not considered emergencies and do not excuse late assignments, absences or missed tests, quizzes and exams. Please take precautions to protect your grade in this course by managing your time and backing up your work.

#### **Plagiarism**

Plagiarism is a serious scholarly offence and amounts to using the intellectual labor of another author without proper quotation, citation, and acknowledgment. If the instructor suspects that a student has copied the work of another author (whether that author is a peer, classmate, or published author), the case will immediately be referred to the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences.

#### **Missed Assignments**

Unless noted otherwise, late assignments will be marked off one letter grade for each day that they are late (including weekends and holidays). Extensions will be granted only with the prior approval of the instructor only in cases of extraordinary circumstances. The late penalty will be waived if you are unable to submit an assignment due to legitimate circumstances beyond your control such as a documented illness, a serious family emergencies, or severe weather.

#### **General Policy on Missed Exams and Coursework**

An excused absence for any missed exams or coursework will require evidence of your legitimate absence, such as a documented illness, a serious family emergencies, or severe weather, to be presented to the professor in a timely fashion if you wish not to lose marks on your grade. You must contact the professor as soon as reasonably possible to explain your absence

#### **Grading**

Final grades are calculated as follows: 100-93=A; 92.9-90=A-; 89.9-87=B+; 86.9-83=B; 82.9-80=B-; 79.9-77=C+; 76.9-73=C; 72.9-70=C-; 69.9-60=D; 59.9-0=F

No grades of "T" (Incomplete) will be assigned in this course. Please speak with me well in advance if you are having difficulties satisfactorily completing the course's requirements on time or if you anticipate your absence from class becoming routine and thus a problem. Although I cannot guarantee that an accommodation can be made for all occasions that may arise, speaking with the professor before a problem arises will greatly enhance our ability to address the situation in a way that is both fair to your classmates and beneficial to you. No extra credit will be offered as substitutes for any assignments, nor will extra credit be offered to "boost" final grades.

## University of Alabama's Code of Academic Conduct

All students in attendance at the University of Alabama are expected to be honorable and to observe standards of conduct appropriate to a community of scholars. The University expects from its students a higher standard of conduct than the minimum required to avoid discipline. Academic misconduct includes all acts of dishonesty in any academically related matter and any knowing or intentional help or attempt to help, or conspiracy to help, another student. The Academic Misconduct Disciplinary Policy will be followed in the event of academic misconduct.

The University of Alabama is committed to helping students to uphold the ethical standards of academic integrity in all areas of study. Students agree that their enrollment in this course allows the instructor the right to use electronic devices to help prevent plagiarism. All course materials are subject to submission to Turnitin.com for the purpose of detecting textual similarities. Turnitin.com may be used as a source document to help students avoid plagiarism in written documents.

### **UAct Statement**

The [UAct website](#) provides an overview of The University's expectations regarding respect and civility.

### Severe Weather Protocol

In the case of a tornado warning (tornado has been sighted or detected by radar; sirens activated), all university activities are automatically suspended, including all classes and laboratories. If you are in a building, please move immediately to the lowest level and toward the center of the building away from windows (interior classrooms, offices, or corridors) and remain there until the tornado warning has expired. Classes in session when the tornado warning is issued can resume immediately after the warning has expired at the discretion of the instructor. Classes that have not yet begun will resume 30 minutes after the tornado warning has expired provided at least half of the class period remains.

If you have not done so already, please set up your weather advisory through Connect-ED--faculty, staff and students ([sign up on myBama](#)). Alternatively, you can listen to weather advisory broadcasts over WVUA 90.7 FM, Alabama Public Radio 91.5 FM or [use WVUA 7 Storm Watch](#), which provides a free service you can subscribe to that allows you to receive weather warnings for Tuscaloosa via e-mail, pager or cell phone.

### **Course Schedule**

As this is a seminar, the course schedule will be a topic of discussion in the first week of class. Once decided, the proposed course schedule will be posted on Blackboard.