

Professor: Zdravko Planinc  
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Office: UH B127, but it's not in use this term.  
Office hours: Through video-conferencing; please make arrangements by e-mail.

Course times: Tuesdays, 12:30 – 2:20; Thursdays, 1:30 – 2:20.  
Course form: The course will be offered through a combination of synchronous and asynchronous online methods. Students will be required to attend Zoom classes and use Avenue (A2L). Details will be discussed in the first class.

## 1. The Course

### *Description*

What is the nature of evil, suffering, and injustice? Is physical, spiritual, and existential suffering inescapable in human life? How can an omnipotent, benevolent God be just, given the terrible things – pandemics, earthquakes and tsunamis, mass killings and nuclear warfare – that human beings have suffered? How could God allow the Shoah or any genocidal war to occur? What are the predominant forms of evil in society today? This course will discuss such fundamental theological, philosophical, and political questions by studying how they have been addressed in several recent important books and works of art.

### *Objectives and pedagogy, in a pandemic*

This is a liberal arts course. It is not intended to provide students with information or data and test their memories. A basis of contextualizing information will be established whenever necessary and assumed in our analyses and interpretations of the course materials. The primary pedagogical purpose of the course is to cultivate literacy in the traditional sense and, more ambitiously, to promote better insight, understanding, and moral judgment by encouraging students to reflect on intrinsically meaningful, challenging, or at least interesting books, articles, works of art, and products of the entertainment industry.

No one needs to take a university course to be persuaded to be opposed to evil, since everyone already is; however, people do have profound disagreements in identifying the evils of the world and deciding what ought to be done about them. A liberal arts course, at its best, is a forum in which such disagreements can be raised and clarified through discussion and reflection. In this course we will discuss the nature of evil with our authors – for reading is fundamentally a discussion with an author – and among ourselves; and the discussion we have among ourselves will take place in both the “lecture” and the “tutorial” sections of the class.

To use a term favoured by administrators, the “content” of this course is discussion – informed and mindful discussion in the shared circumstance of a classroom. The “content” is also the

engagement with the course texts and other materials; and the “content” might also be said to be the assignments. But the “content” of this course is most definitely *not* information or data that can be accessed, delivered, and reproduced in one way or another indifferently. If a course were nothing but the delivery of known information, there’d be no reason for a university; it would be sufficient for each of us to scroll through web searches and watch videos on our own.

The ongoing pandemic – among its many other, more catastrophic consequences – does present a challenge to liberal arts courses in compelling universities to go online. “Asynchronous content delivery” is not conducive to engaged discussion. In order to best preserve this course’s particular “content,” therefore, classes will be held through video-conferencing on the Zoom platform, supported through A2L and e-mail contact as necessary.

There will be no formal distinction between the Tuesday “lecture” and Thursday “tutorial” sections of the class. In so far as there will be lecturing on Tuesdays, it will not be the delivery of information that can substitute for becoming familiar with, and reflecting on the assigned readings before class. Tuesday classes will always include opportunities for open discussion, both collectively and in break-out groups. And Thursday classes won’t be tutorials in which one’s memory of information is reinforced or tested. That sort of tutorial will be replaced by the Zoom Forum. I’ll make the time and space on Zoom available to students for a variety of purposes, depending on your needs and interests. We’ll discuss the range of possibilities in the first class. The Forum can take any shape you prefer – anything within reason, of course.

### *Required course texts*

There are three books that we will read in their entirety:

Albert Camus, *The Plague*

Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*

Spalding Gray, *Swimming to Cambodia*.

There will be other shorter texts and course materials, all of which will be either posted on A2L or made available through links and such – no worries there. Getting hold of the three main course books in good time is the primary concern. There are several ways to do it.

First, if at all possible, I’d recommend having print copies. All three are available as relatively inexpensive paperbacks. The McMaster bookstore, better known as the Campus Store, will attempt to acquire print copies in sufficient numbers and is offering “free shipping across Canada with a minimum purchase of \$75 (combination of textbooks, supplies and clothing).” There are also many other online sites, both Canadian and American, from which you might purchase new and used copies of the course texts. If one of them is more convenient, please ensure that you purchase the right editions: *The Plague* is a Penguin; *Survival in Auschwitz* is a Touchstone book; and *Swimming to Cambodia* (the book, *not* the video) is published by the Theatre Communications Group (or Husion House). There should be no problem finding many copies of the Camus and Levi books on sale; the Gray book might be harder to come by.

So, second: digital editions. I think it’s good practice to mark up a paperback while reading it, scribbling initial reactions and reflections in the margins, but if no paperbacks are available

a digital book will have to do. All three course books are available on Kindle in the US; the Camus and Levi books are on Kindle in Canada. And as usual, the digital editions are less expensive than the print editions. It might even be possible to find the Camus and Levi books for free.

Third, digital editions of the Levi and Gray books are available through the McMaster Library's arrangement with the HathiTrust Digital Library, but I discourage you from attempting to read them that way because of the time and user restrictions imposed by HathiTrust.

Finally, if anyone has difficulty in purchasing or getting access to any of these texts, please don't hesitate to contact me directly.

## **2. The Assignments**

### *Course requirements and evaluation*

Participation (over the term)	10%
Response paper #1 (due: Sept. 28)	15%
Response paper #2 (due: Nov. 2)	15%
Essay (due: Nov. 23)	30%
The final (following the last class)	30%

### *Participation (10%)*

This should be self-explanatory. Participation presumes attendance, for instance. The details will be discussed in class.

### *General requirements for all written work*

Use only the course materials for your assignments. In other words, don't consult any secondary sources or reference works – and don't even think of searching the internet. It's simply not necessary. All your written work should be your own considered thoughts expressed in your own well-chosen words, based on your own reading of the course texts and your participation in class discussions; and any textual references made in your work should be to the course materials alone. Any evidence of anything else will be penalized. As well, your written work must be proof-read the old-fashioned way for spelling and grammatical errors and clarity of style: relying on spelling and grammar functions of your software will not be enough.

### *Response paper #1 (15%)*

Students will write a short response to anything read and discussed in the first three classes (Sept. 8 – 15, inclusive). The paper will be (no more than) 3 typed pages, standard essay format (double-spaced, normal margins, 12-point font). It is due on Sept. 28.

### *Response paper #2 (15%)*

Students will write a short response to the documentary shown in class on Oct. 22. The paper will be (no more than) 3 typed pages, standard essay format (double-spaced, normal margins, 12-point font). It is due on Nov. 2.

### *The essay (30%)*

The general topic for the essay is Camus's presentation of the nature of evil in *The Plague*. Each student is required to select a specific topic, to formulate an argument, and to demonstrate it with appropriate textual exegesis, presenting everything as elegantly as possible.

Will it be possible to discuss in ongoing pandemic in the essay? Yes, but ... only indirectly. It cannot become the topic of the essay. Students interested in making comparative references to the pandemic must have their topics cleared by the professor or the TA.

The finished essay will be approximately 8 pages (*not* counting title page and any apparatus) – in other words, no less than 7 and no more than 9 pages – standard essay format (double-spacing, normal margins, 12-point font). It is due on Nov. 23 – or sooner, if you like.

As part of the process of working up the essay, students have the option of submitting an outline and discussing it with the professor or the TA. An outline should be approximately two typed pages; and it must be written in prose, i.e., not in point form. Neither the outline nor the meeting will be graded, of course.

### *The final (30%)*

I'm sure we're all relieved, and for many reasons, that there won't be a Registrar-scheduled sit-down final exam in this course. There will, however, be a final "take-home" assignment, to be completed at some convenient time shortly after the end of classes. The format, content, procedures and timing of the test will be decided in class, before the end of term, with student suggestions welcome and taken into consideration. Some things about it can be safely inferred now, though: it will cover Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz* and Gray's *Swimming to Cambodia*; and attendance and participation throughout the course will be assumed. One aspect of it is non-negotiable: students will be required to respond to questions in prose. In other words, there will be *no* multiple-choice questions on the final.

### *Assignment policies*

Assignments will be submitted either on A2L or as email attachments; announcements about the most appropriate means will be made in class and posted on A2L. Assignments will be graded using McMaster's scale: <https://registrar.mcmaster.ca/exams-grades/grades/#tab-3> Late assignments will be penalized one grading scale increment a day, and weekends will count as two days. Late penalties will be applied if assignments are submitted after deadlines without prior notification and submission of appropriate documentation.

### 3. The Schedule

#### *Week 1*

Sept. 8

Introduction to the course

Discussion: What is evil?

Sept 10

What is “theodicy”?

= Skim excerpts of texts by Leibniz and Voltaire (available on A2L)

#### *Week 2*

Sept. 15

The theodicy “problem:” logic vs. literature

= Read Antony Flew, "Theology and Falsification," and the first four pages of J.L. Mackie, “Evil and Omnipotence” (available on A2L)

= Brush up your Harry Potter; skim excerpts from J.K. Rowling’s series (available on A2L)

Sept 17

= Read excerpts from *The Book of Job* (available on A2L)

#### *Week 3*

Sept. 22

Introduction to Albert Camus, *The Plague*

= Read Parts I and II of Camus’s *Plague*

Sept 24

Zoom Forum

#### *Week 4*

Sept. 29

Camus’s *Plague*, continued

= Read Parts III and IV

Oct. 1

Zoom Forum

#### *Week 5*

Oct. 6

Camus’s *Plague*, conclusion

= Read Part V

Oct. 8  
Zoom Forum

*Week 6*      Reading week – no classes

*Week 7*

Oct. 20  
The Milgram experiments  
= Read Stanley Milgram, “Behavioral Study of Obedience” (available on A2L)

Oct. 22  
= In-class documentary screening and discussion (details t.b.a.)

*Week 8*

Oct. 27  
Introduction to Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz* (a.k.a. *If this is a man*)  
= Read the first half of Levi, *Auschwitz*

Oct. 29  
Zoom Forum

*Week 9*

Nov. 3  
Levi’s *Auschwitz*, conclusion  
= Read the second half

Nov. 5  
Zoom Forum

*Week 10*

Nov. 10  
Survival in the Theresienstadt concentration camp  
= Screening: Viktor Ullmann, *The Emperor of Atlantis*

Nov. 12  
Depictions of hell in popular culture (links available on A2L)

*Week 11*

Nov. 17  
Introduction to Spalding Gray, *Swimming to Cambodia*  
= Read Part One of Gray’s *Cambodia*

Nov. 19  
Zoom Forum

*Week 12*

Nov. 24  
Gray's *Cambodia*, conclusion

Nov. 26  
Zoom Forum

*Week 13*

Dec. 1  
= In-class documentary screening and discussion (details t.b.a.)

Dec. 3  
Zoom Forum

*Week 14*

Dec. 8  
Wrapping up the course  
Discussion: What is evil?

#### **4. The Word**

*Spelling counts*

Written work will be marked on grammar, clarity of expression, organization and presentation, as well as on the quality of its content and analysis. Students who wish to improve their writing skills might visit any of McMaster's various support services. There are no shortcuts, however. The best way to improve is to write a lot and, more importantly, to read a lot – "indiscriminately and all the time with [your] eyes hanging out" (Dylan Thomas).

*Words and power*

In everything they write, students should follow five fundamental rules recommended by George Orwell in "Politics and the English Language" (1946):

1. Never use a long word where a short one will do.
2. If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.
3. Never use the passive where you can use the active.
4. Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.
5. Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous.

*41 other rules for writing good stuff*

1. Always check your spelling.
2. Proof-read to see if you any words out.
3. Verbs has to agree with their subjects.
4. Verb tense, today and always, was important.
5. Prepositions are terms one should not end sentences with.
6. Steer clear of incorrect forms of verbs that have snuck in the language.
7. The right way to use "is" is, is that it shouldn't be used this way.
8. Muster the courage to boldly refuse to incorrectly split an infinitive.
9. Don't use contractions in formal writing.
10. Use the apostrophe in it's proper place and omit it when its not needed.
11. Verb's and simple plural's don't require them.
12. Don't use no double negatives.
13. The adverb usually follows the verb.
14. Statements, like, aren't similes or guesses?
15. Write all adverbial forms correct.
16. Place pronouns as close as possible, especially in long sentences, as of ten words or more, to their antecedents.
17. Everyone should be careful to use a singular pronoun with singular nouns in their writing.
18. Avoid run-on sentences they are hard to read.
19. No sentence fragments.
20. And don't start a sentence with a conjunction.
21. If you write well and I write well, how is it that you and me don't? If this is a lesson to you, and to me as well, then why isn't it a lesson to you and I?
22. Don't overuse exclamation marks!!!
23. "It is best not to use too many 'quotation 'marks,'" he said.
24. Avoid commas, that are not necessary, and un-necessary hyphens, too.
25. Use the semicolon properly, always use it where it is appropriate; and never where it isn't.
26. Writing carefully, dangling participles must be avoided.
27. Don't string too many prepositional phrases together unless you are one of those walking through the valley of the shadow of death.
28. If you reread your work, you will find on rereading that a great deal of repetition and redundancy can be avoided by rereading and editing.
29. Never, ever use repetitive redundancies.
30. A writer must not shift your point of view in mid-sentence.
31. It's really unfair, but things such as human beings, which are animate, get to begin their subordinate clauses differently than other things such as rocks, who are not.
32. Eschew dialect, irregardless.
33. Also, avoid awkward and affected alliteration.
34. Of course, it is incumbent upon everyone to avoid archaisms.
35. Always pick on the correct idiom.
36. Take the bull by the hand and say no to mixed metaphors.

37. Avoid trendy elocutions that sound flaky.
38. From the dawn of time, we have been commanded not to utter sweeping generalizations.
39. Resist hyperbole, even if you have to remind yourself a thousand times.
40. Last but not least, avoid clichés like the plague.
41. First, lists are not arguments; and thirdly, they are often numbered inconsistently.
42. Great green dragons might exist, but green great dragons certainly don't because the mysterious rule about adjectival order in English is opinion-size-age-shape-colour-origin-material-purpose before the noun. If you don't believe me, check out my lovely little old rectangular green French silver whittling knife.

## **5. The Law**

### *Departmental policy*

Staff in the office of the Department of Religious Studies will not receive papers and other assignments. Students must submit their assignments directly to their TA or the professor.

### *University policies*

#### *1. Academic integrity statement*

You are expected to exhibit honesty and use ethical behavior in all aspects of the learning process. Academic credentials you earn are rooted in principles of honesty and academic integrity. Academic dishonesty is to knowingly act or fail to act in a way that results or could result in unearned academic credit or advantage. This behavior can result in serious consequences, e.g. the grade of zero on an assignment, loss of credit with a notation on the transcript (notation reads: "Grade of F assigned for academic dishonesty"), and/or suspension or expulsion from the university.

It is your responsibility to understand what constitutes academic dishonesty. For information on the various types of academic dishonesty please refer to the Academic Integrity Policy, located at [www.mcmaster.ca/academicintegrity](http://www.mcmaster.ca/academicintegrity). The following are only three forms of academic dishonesty: (1) plagiarism, e.g. the submission of work that is not one's own or for which credit has been obtained; (2) improper collaboration in group work; (3) copying or using unauthorized aids in tests and examinations.

#### *2. Authenticity / plagiarism detection*

*Some courses* might use a web-based service (Turnitin.com) to reveal authenticity and ownership of student submitted work. For courses using such software, students will be expected to submit their work electronically either directly to Turnitin.com or via an online learning platform (e.g. A2L, etc.) using plagiarism detection (a service supported by Turnitin.com) so it can be checked for academic dishonesty.

Students who do not wish their work to be submitted through the plagiarism detection software must inform the Instructor before the assignment is due. No penalty will be assigned to a student who does not submit work to the plagiarism detection software. *All submitted work is subject to normal verification that standards of academic integrity have been upheld* (e.g., on-line search, other software). For more details about McMaster's use of Turnitin.com please go to: [www.mcmaster.ca/academicintegrity](http://www.mcmaster.ca/academicintegrity).

### 3. *Courses with an on-line element*

*Some courses* might use on-line elements (e.g., e-mail, Avenue to Learn (A2L), LearnLink, web pages, capa, Moodle, ThinkingCap, etc.). Students should be aware that, when they access the electronic components of a course using these elements, private information such as first and last names, user names for the McMaster e-mail accounts, and program affiliation might become apparent to all other students in the same course. The available information is dependent on the technology used. Continuation in a course that uses on-line elements will be deemed consent to this disclosure. If you have any questions or concerns about such disclosure please discuss this with the course instructor.

### 4. *Online proctoring*

*Some courses* might use online proctoring software for tests and exams. This software may require students to turn on their video camera, present identification, monitor and record their computer activities, and/or lock/restrict their browser or other applications/software during tests or exams. This software may be required to be installed before the test/exam begins.

### 5. *Conduct expectations*

As a McMaster student, you have the right to experience, and the responsibility to demonstrate, respectful and dignified interactions within all of our living, learning and working communities. These expectations are described in the *Code of Student Rights & Responsibilities* (the "Code"). All students share the responsibility of maintaining a positive environment for the academic and personal growth of all McMaster community members, *whether in person or online*.

It is essential that students be mindful of their interactions online, as the Code remains in effect in virtual learning environments. The Code applies to any interactions that adversely affect, disrupt, or interfere with reasonable participation in University activities. Student disruptions or behaviours that interfere with university functions on online platforms (e.g., the use of Avenue 2 Learn, WebEx or Zoom for delivery), will be taken very seriously and will be investigated. Outcomes may include restriction or removal of the involved students' access to these platforms.

### 6. *Academic accommodation of students with disabilities*

Students with disabilities who require academic accommodation must contact Student Accessibility Services (SAS) at 905-525-9140 ext. 28652 or [sas@mcmaster.ca](mailto:sas@mcmaster.ca) to make arrangements with a Program Coordinator. For further information, consult McMaster University's *Academic Accommodation of Students with Disabilities* policy.

### *7. Requests for relief for missed academic term work*

The McMaster Student Absence Form (MSAF): In the event of an absence for medical or other reasons, students should review and follow the Academic Regulation in the Undergraduate Calendar “Requests for Relief for Missed Academic Term Work.”

### *8. Academic accommodation for religious, indigenous or spiritual observances (RISO)*

Students requiring academic accommodation based on religious, indigenous or spiritual observances should follow the procedures set out in the RISO policy. Students should submit their request to their Faculty Office *normally within 10 working days* of the beginning of term in which they anticipate a need for accommodation *or* to the Registrar's Office prior to their examinations. Students should also contact their instructors as soon as possible to make alternative arrangements for classes, assignments, and tests.

### *9. Copyright and recording*

Students are advised that lectures, demonstrations, performances, and any other course material provided by an instructor include copyright protected works. The Copyright Act and copyright law protect every original literary, dramatic, musical and artistic work, *including lectures by University instructors.*

The recording of lectures, tutorials, or other methods of instruction may occur during a course. Recording may be done either by the instructor for the purpose of authorized distribution or by a student for the purpose of personal study. Students should be aware that their voice and/or image may be recorded by others during the class. Please speak with the instructor if this is a concern for you.

### *10. Extreme circumstances*

The University reserves the right to change the dates and deadlines for any or all courses in extreme circumstances (e.g., severe weather, labour disruptions, etc.). Changes will be communicated through regular McMaster communication channels, such as McMaster Daily News, A2L and/or McMaster email.

### *And a final course policy*

If you've gone through the entire syllabus carefully, you might not be best pleased to read that this syllabus is subject to change with due notice given to in-course students. All changes will be announced and discussed in class and posted on A2L.