

2010-11 Executive Precept

“Evil”

Google, technology’s Golden Calf of omniscience, enjoins its employees: “Don’t be evil.” This is good advice, but it begs the question of what we are talking about. Sam Harris, a contemporary atheistic writer, believes that evil is pain, good is pleasure and both can be quantified using suitable metrics derived from evolutionary biology. This leaves us with the problem of how to derive an “ought” from an “is.” Is evil identical with pain?

In the book of Isaiah (45:7), it is written, “I form the light, and create darkness: I make peace, and create evil: I the LORD do all these things.” Yet it is hard to fathom how God could be the Author of evil. Is belief in evil compatible with a belief in God? Is belief in evil impossible except through a belief in God? Milton wanted to justify God’s ways to man, but if God creates evil, his task seems impossible.

Is evil subjective and relative to the doer? Prince Hamlet said that “there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so” (2.2.249-250). However, the experience of many people is that evil is larger and more permanent than any mere human being. Would evil not exist if we did not imagine it?

Our discussion of evil will require an examination of our foundational beliefs about ourselves and the world. Evil is abstract and esoteric but it is also as immediate and concrete as the six o’clock news. Evil touches upon every conception of human nature. We hang uneasily in the balance between the human condition as it was described by Shakespeare and by Swift:

“What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason, how infinite in faculty, in form and moving how express and admirable, in action, how like an angel, in apprehension, how like a God, the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals...” -Shakespeare

“I cannot but conclude the bulk of your natives to be the most pernicious race of little odious vermin that nature ever suffered to crawl upon the surface of the earth.” –Swift

**James Madison Program, Princeton University
Washington, DC Executive Precept
2010 – 11**

- Session One (November 12, 2010):** Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, “Preface” and “First Essay”
- Session Two (December 17, 2010):** Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, “Second Essay”; *Genesis 2-3*
- Session Three (January 21, 2011):** Euripides, *The Trojan Women*
- Session Four (February 18, 2011):** Machiavelli, *Mandragola*
- Session Five (March 18, 2011):** Dante, *Inferno* (excerpts); Milton, *Paradise Lost* (excerpts)
- Session Six (to be scheduled):** Poe, “The Tell-Tale Heart”
- Session Seven (to be scheduled):** Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*
- Session Eight (to be scheduled):** Qutb, “The America I Have Seen”; Dershowitz, *Why Terrorism Works*, Chapter 4: “Should the Ticking Bomb Terrorist Be Tortured?”
- Final Princeton Precept:** (Date and readings to be scheduled)

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