

Seminar in Ethics 6203 Fall 2006
Dr. Neera Badhwar

Understanding Evil

Course Description and Objectives

This course is about the nature of human evil. The term "evil" can mean "immoral" or "harmful," just as its contrary, "good," can mean "moral" or "beneficial." "Evil" can also be used to mean "egregiously immoral." Some writers use it in the first sense, to cover the entire variety of moral failings to which we human beings are prone, and the harms, great or small, that result from these failings, whereas others reserve the term only for egregious immoralities. One of the central aims of the course is to demystify evil, to bring it down from the realm of monsters and devils to the everyday realm, and show its roots in ordinary human propensities. A better understanding of immorality might challenge some of our moral theories and our practical moral ideals, and enhance our understanding of the good. Another central aim is to consider the question of how one ought to respond to evil. The right answer will avoid both the Scylla of advocating a response that encourages the evil of others – and the Charybdis of advocating a response that makes us evil. The approach will be abstract and analytic, involving theory and argument; the material used will include, in addition to standard philosophical fare, selections from the relevant social scientific literature, as well as a true tale of evil and the different responses to it.

Texts:

- 1) John Kekes, *The Roots of Evil* (Cornell, 2005). This is the latest book on evil since 9/11.
- 2) Kant, *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone* (Harper, 1960). This ed. has very useful introductions by Theodore Greene and by John Silber.
- 3) Simon Wiesenthal, *The Sunflower*.
- 4) Course pack from King Kopy of (mostly) contemporary material.