

# What Is Evil?

Theological & Philosophical Investigations

Thursdays, 2:00 - 3:30pm (- Oct 12)

[frederickuu.org/fcc](http://frederickuu.org/fcc)

# Covenant

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- Use **“I” statements**: *Speak from your own experience.*
- **Ask permission before sharing** other participants’ stories outside the group.
- **Lean-in/back**: be conscious of the level of participation that you bring to the conversation. Allow everyone a chance to speak before you speak again.
- You always have **permission to “pass.”**



# Check-in

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- Attendance
- “Evil” show & tell
- TWD



# The Walking Dead

- Some people are evil. I've seen it. That's why I have to get back now.
- Nobody's evil. They just decide to forget who they are.



U.S.

# Trump Commemorates Sept. 11 Attacks With Vow to Conquer 'Evil'

By GLENN THRUSH SEPT. 11, 2017



President Trump and Melania, his wife, participated in a September 11th observance at the Pentagon National

✦ “Our eyes were opened to the **depths of the evil** we faced, but in that hour of darkness we also came together with renewed purpose. Our differences never looked so small, our common bonds never felt so strong.”

✦ The country was committed to **“destroying the enemies of all civilized people.”**

✦ “We are making plain to these **savage killers** that there is no dark corner beyond our reach, no sanctuary beyond our grasp, and nowhere to hide anywhere on this very large earth.”

The New York Times

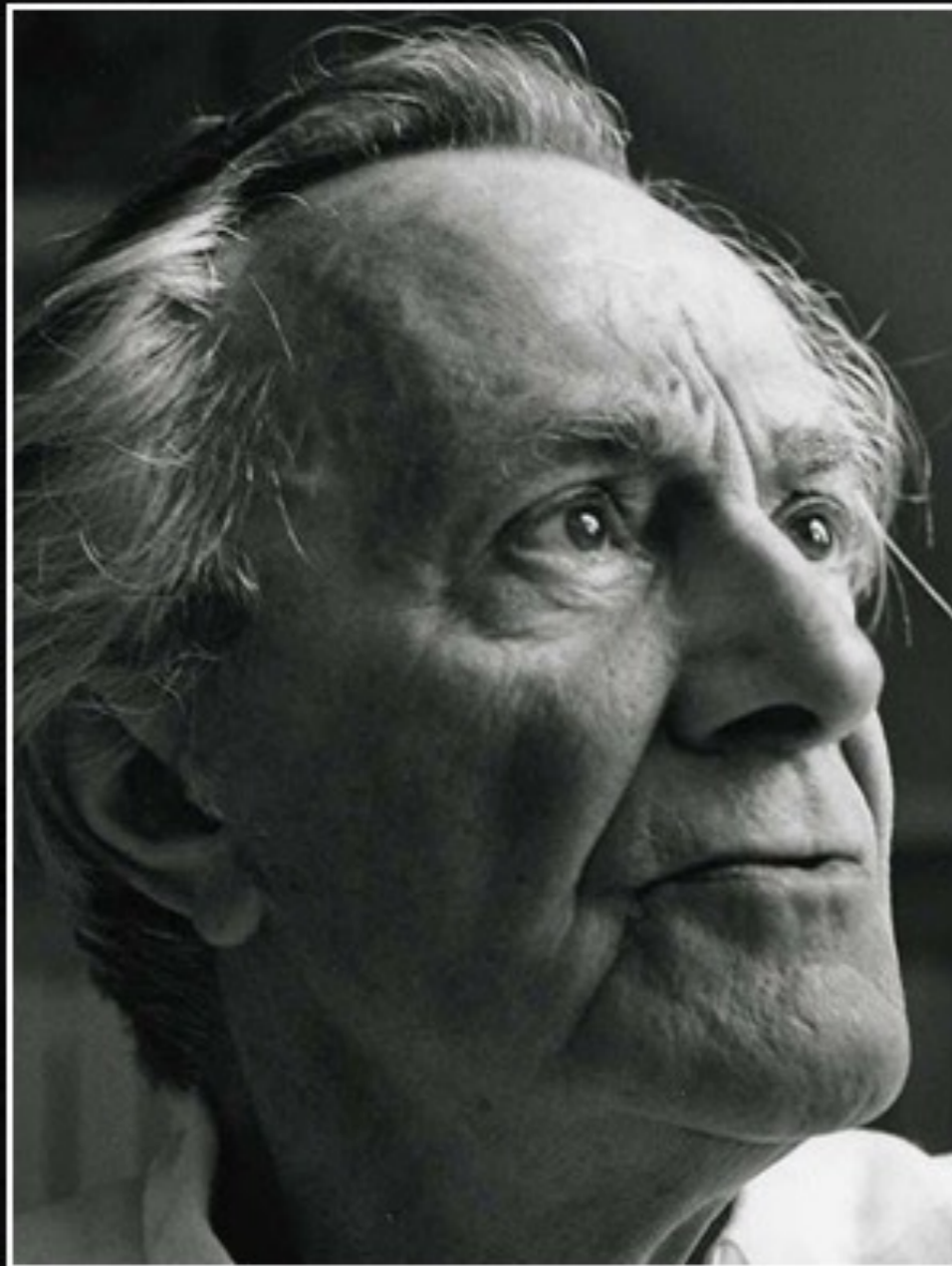
*Sept. 11 Attacks With Vow to Conquer ‘Evil’*



September 11th observance at the Pentagon National

# Outline

1. *Why Study Evil?*
2. **September 14: Postmodernism & Evil**
3. September 21: Evil & Theodicy/Freedom
4. September 28: Evil & Conscience/Intention
5. October 5: Evil as Sickness; “Us & Them: Evil as Distance”
6. October 12: Personal Definitions of Evil & Commitments (~500 words?)



Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives.

— *Jean-Francois Lyotard* —

AZ QUOTES



# Postmodernism

- ✦ Distrust of modernism.
- ✦ Skepticism about progress, objectivity, reason, certainty
- ✦ Rejects grand theories and ideologies that explain in simple and absolute terms (“human nature” or metaphysics)

# MODERNISM

I am a  
genius



# POST-MODERNISM

The category of genius is  
a theoretically untenable  
cultural construct



OUCH!.. YOU'RE  
STANDING ON  
MY NECK!



WELL, THAT'S ONE POINT  
OF VIEW... BUT ONE  
COULD ALSO SAY THAT  
YOU'RE TRYING TO  
TRIP ME WITH  
YOUR NECK...



YOU SEE, IN THE POSTMODERN  
CONDITION WE CREATE OUR OWN  
REALITY BASED UPON OUR  
INTERNALIZED PRECONCEPTIONS.  
SINCE THERE IS NO LONGER  
ONE OBJECTIVE TRUTH, WE ARE  
FREE TO CREATE OUR OWN  
TRUTH... SO YOU SEE, THERE  
IS NO RIGHT AND WRONG  
JUST AN INFINITE  
NUMBER OF EQUALLY  
VALID "STORIES"



BUT YOU'RE  
STILL STANDING  
ON MY NECK!

YOU NEVER  
WENT TO COLLEGE  
DID YOU?



# Postmodernism



PREMODERN



"Because God put it there and that's the way it's always been."

MODERN



"Onwards and upwards with inevitable progress!"

POSTMODERN



"Bllpppggghljsdlkfjowejfalsk djflksdjflksjldjldjl;aldfkj;;;df"

# Postmodern Turn

- ✦ Global trauma of the First World War
- ✦ *from* a trust in One Grand, Overarching Narrative of Progress
- ✦ *to* a much more fragmented worldview of many competing and even contradictory narratives about how the world is and should be.



# World War I

- ✦ No longer could we members of Western Civilization pretend that modern technology and increasing global interconnection was going to inevitably unite us
  - ✦ “Fatherhood of God
  - ✦ Brotherhood of man
  - ✦ Leadership of Jesus,
  - ✦ Salvation by character, and the
  - ✦ Progress of mankind onward and upward forever.” (*James Freeman Clarke*)

# World War I

- ✦ Instead of “the universe bending toward justice”
- ✦ Science tells us that the universe ultimately tends toward *entropy*, toward disorder
- ✦ Yeats: “The falcon cannot hear the falconer...the centre cannot hold....”
- ✦ WWI: realizing how much devastation we could wreak on ourselves as a species on a global scale,
- ✦ The twentieth-century was barely getting started.



# World War I

- ✦ Many historians: about “narrow national rivalries and selfish imperial interests”
- ✦ Harry Patch (last soldier actually to have fought in the war’s trenches and who died in 2009 at the age of 111): ‘Two civilized nations, British and German, fighting for our lives.... What the hell we fought for, I now don’t know...’
- ✦ “[The] politicians who took us to war should have been given the guns and told to settle their differences themselves, instead of organizing nothing better than legalized mass murder”

# POSTMODERNISM & EVIL

- ✦ Medieval & Modern: “evil” as conversation-stopped, ending exploration: “get behind me, Satan.”
- ✦ Postmodern: “evil” as remnant of obsolete dualisms?

**EVIL**

# POSTMODERNISM & EVIL

- ✦ Elie Wiesel: The opposite of love is not hate, but *indifference*.”
- ✦ Rent: “The opposite of war is not peace, but *creation*.”
- ✦ Evil people? Evil deeds?
- ✦ Evil? (but not irrational? cowardly?)
- ✦ Responses: War, Patriot Act



# Motives? OBL "Letter to America" (2002)

- U.S. support of:
  - Israel
  - "attacks against Muslims" in Somalia
  - Russian "atrocities against Muslims" in Chechnya
  - Indian "oppression against Muslims" in Kashmir
- Pro-American governments in the Middle East (who "act as your agents")
- Presence of U.S. troops in Saudi Arabia
- Sanctions against Iraq



# POSTMODERNISM & EVIL

- ✦ What images, words, or moments haunt you from the September 11th terrorist attacks?
- ✦ Why do you suppose you are haunted by these specific images, words or moments?
- ✦ Is evil shown or exhibited by these images, and if so, how?
- ✦ Or choose a different life experience that comes to mind.



# POSTMODERNISM & EVIL

- ✦ Fundamentalism: thoughtlessly *applying* term evil
  - ✦ Does not shy away from labeling the other “evil”
  - ✦ Evil useful word to justifying violence against an “other”
- ✦ Relativism: thoughtlessly *discarding* term evil
  - ✦ refrains from moral judgements
  - ✦ apathy, fear of offending, bland tolerance



evil

After Postmodernism

HISTORIES • NARRATIVES • ETHICS

histories narratives ethics

Edited by Jennifer L. Geddes

# Evil & the Limits(?!) of Postmodernism?

- Is evil merely a holdover from metaphysical/religious vocabularies that have been revealed to be oppressive, binary, totalizing, and exclusionary.
- Middle Way: thoughtful consideration
  - What it might mean to call something or someone evil?
  - What might be achieved and/or lost by such a categorization?



evil

After Postmodernism

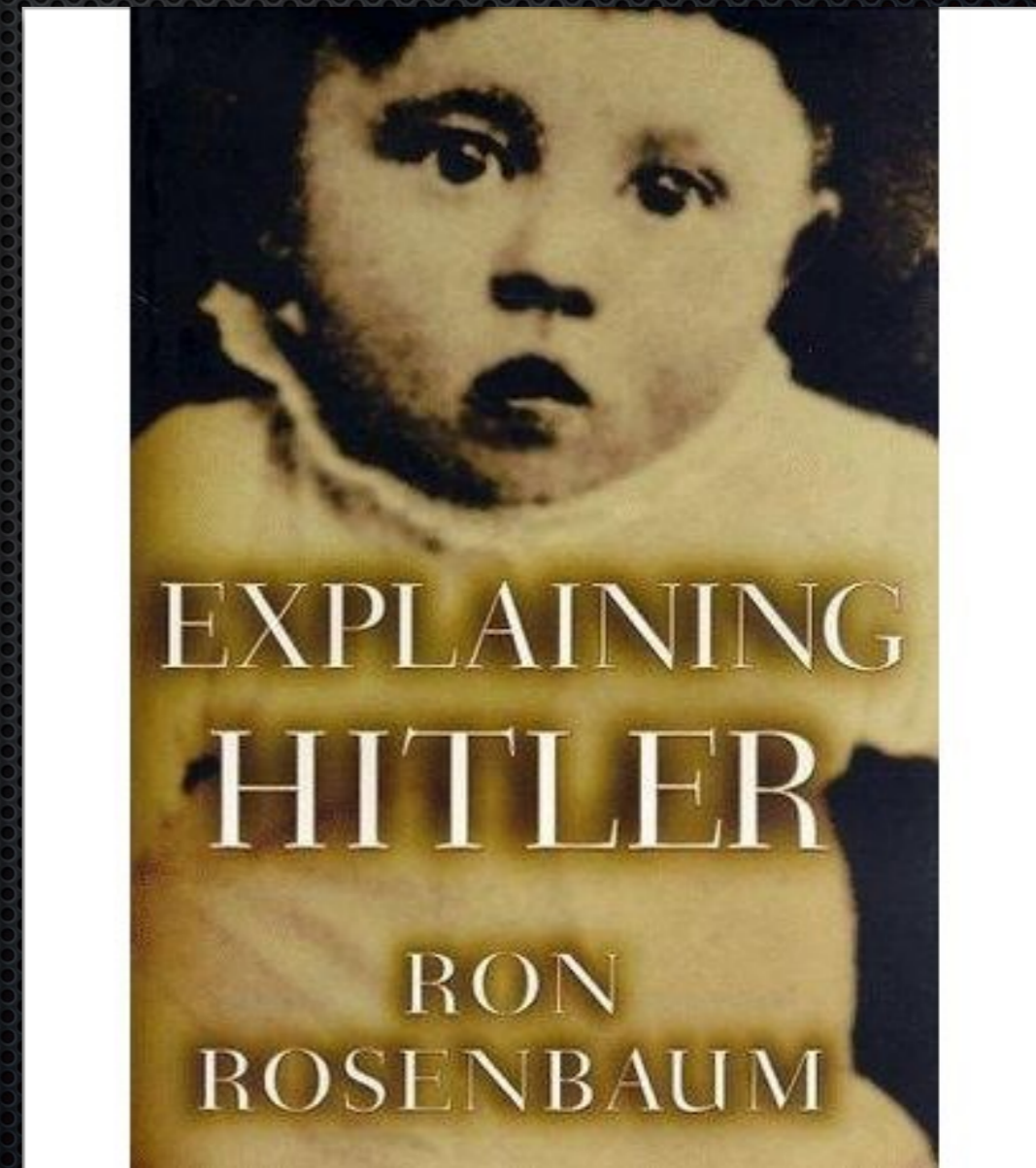
HISTORIES • NARRATIVES • ETHICS

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# Evil & the Limits(?!) of Postmodernism?

- ✦ Did Hitler have a conscience?
- ✦ “If we are not free to choose evil, we are not free to refuse it.”





# Milligram Obedience Experiment: Reflecting on Our Capacity for Evil

- ✦ [youtube.com/watch?v=fCVII-4GZQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fCVII-4GZQ) (10 min)
- ✦ Why should/would/could you question authority?

# 21st-century, postmodern perspective

- ✦ What is evil?
- ✦ What is/are the *source(s)* of evil? (Why does evil exist in history? Why does evil exist in the human heart?)
- ✦ What is/are the *nature(s)* of evil? (How is evil at work?)
- ✦ How we might best respond individually & collectively?

# Discussion Questions

- ✦ Do you use the word evil?
  - ✦ Are you *comfortable* using the word “evil?” Why or why not?)
  - ✦ Should I/you/we/they be using the word evil more or less in such a time as this?
- ✦ Do you have a felt sense of what you mean when you regard something as “evil?”
  - ✦ Can you describe what it is that makes something “evil?”

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