The Ethics of Anger, Revenge and Forgiveness
Winter 2013, Phil 297-01

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Office Hours: Tuesday and Thursday
4-5pm and by appointment

Course Description
Our attitudes towards anger, revenge and forgiveness are complicated. Anger is generally seen as a volatile and damaging emotion, but when people fail to get angry at atrocities like child abuse or genocide we tend to see their lack of anger as a moral failing. Likewise, personal revenge is often condemned even though many of us take pleasure in revenge stories. Forgiveness is usually seen as virtuous, but sometimes we criticize those who forgive truly monstrous deeds.

As we dig into these issues, many questions will arise. Is anger necessarily negative? Is revenge always wrong? What is the difference between revenge and punishment? What is the nature of “evil”? Are there monstrous people or only monstrous actions? Are there any acts so terrible that forgiveness is impossible? Should we forgive even when the wrongdoer fails to repent?

The course will be divided into four sections. The first four weeks will focus on Trudy Govier’s book, *Forgiveness and Revenge*. Govier argues that forgiveness is always the moral response to anger and resentment, even when the wrongdoer does not repent. Govier covers a wide range of topics and will provide a good foundation as you begin to think about your own research topics.

Next we will briefly discuss the emotion anger and what makes anger a moral emotion. We will further discuss the difference between anger and hate. Both anger and hate give rise to the desire for revenge. We will consider whether or not the emotion effects the ethics of revenge.

In the third section we will turn to revenge and punishment. We will consider what is morally problematic about revenge and whether or not it is ever good to seek revenge. We will also discuss punishment and how it is different from revenge, considering specific cases like the death penalty.

Finally, we will turn to forgiveness. Some philosophers claim that forgiveness is not even logically possible. In this final section we will focus on the question of whether or not forgiveness makes sense as a concept and will finish the section looking at forgiveness in the face of true evil, such as the holocaust.

There are many interesting topics relating to the ethics of anger, revenge and forgiveness—more than we can cover in ten weeks. The readings for class are intended to provide a foundation for your own research projects.

Required Texts

- Trudy Govier, *Forgiveness and Revenge*, Routledge, 2002
- All other readings are posted on Nexus.
Resources

Writing Center: The Writing Center (second floor of Schaffer Library) provides free one-on-one consultation, both by appointment and as available on a walk-in basis. I encourage you to visit the writing center for any and all writing assignments. http://www.union.edu/Resources/Academic/writing/index.php.

Accommodations: It is the policy of Union College to make reasonable accommodations for qualified individuals with disabilities. If you have a specific disability that qualifies you for academic accommodations, please bring your accommodation ID card to your instructor’s office hours as soon as possible. Your instructor will then discuss with you any necessary special arrangements. No accommodations will be provided to students who do not have an accommodation ID card from the Office of Student Support Services (x8785).

Assignments
10% Participation
15% Nexus posts
20% Class Presentation
25% First Short Paper
30% Final Research Paper

Description of Assignments

Participation: This is a discussion-based course. Active student participation will be a central feature of the learning experience. Class discussion, office hours (in which we discuss class material), and participation in the online forums all count towards your participation grade. In order to ensure successful participation, it is important that you attend to two main tasks:

• Reading Assignments: You should complete the assigned reading prior to the class for which they are assigned in order to contribute meaningfully to class discussion. If you have not read philosophy before, you may find the readings difficult at first. Don’t give up! As you read try to identify core claims and arguments. Take notes, jotting down questions or critiques.

• Class Discussion: You should contribute to class discussions regularly and in a respectful manner, either by asking questions relating to the topic or contributing your own meaningful insights. Discussion will be based on the reading assignments. One way to prepare for class discussions is by trying to answer the study questions at the end of the reading assignments.
**Discussion Board**: In order to get the maximum amount of points you must post by **9am** before class for 15 classes (which means there is one reading on which you do not have to post). I will not count posts that are entered after 9am. There is no way to make up a missed post. If you do not post on the discussion board by 9am you will not receive any points for that post. You should post at least one paragraph (approx. 5 sentences) in response to the readings for that day. You may respond to other posts on Nexus, but it must be clear from your post that you read the material. Each post is worth 10 points. I will take off points if the post does not attempt to answer the question and if there are numerous spelling and grammar mistakes. Please keep in mind that the discussion board is worth 15% of your grade so it is very important that you keep up with this assignment.

**Term Papers**: There are two papers for the course. The first paper is a short paper (5-6 pages) that is on a topic of your choice. Before turning the paper in you MUST meet with me to have your topic and your secondary sources approved. I will provide you with a grading guideline and a guide to writing philosophy papers, as well as a description of all the requirements you must meet before turning in the paper. The final research paper will be based on your short 5-6 page paper. The final research paper should respond to comments I make on your shorter paper and should expand on the ideas in your short paper.

**Class Presentation**: Each student will give a 10 minute presentation on his/her research paper. Each presenter must have a one-page handout and meet with me to discuss his/her handout and presentation the week before the actual presentation. In your presentation you should lay out the problem/question that you are addressing in your paper. Both the handout and the presentation will be graded on organization and clarity as well as content (see rubric).

**Expectations and Classroom Policies**

**Attendance**
Attendance is mandatory and will be taken at the beginning of every class. You are permitted three unexcused absences (in which you do not have to notify me of your absence). Your grade will be dropped 3% for every unexcused absence after the first three. Excused absences are ones that have been approved by me in advance of the class.

**Email**
- Please feel free to email me any time, but allow me 24 hours to respond.
- If you have questions about the class or the assignments please check the syllabus first before emailing.
- If you cannot the information you need on the syllabus, then send me an email.
- If you have any questions about the content of the class or would simply like to discuss some philosophical thoughts of your own do not hesitate to come to my office hours or set up an appointment.
**General Expectations**

- Come to class prepared, on time, and with your books.
- Turn off your phone, no texting, no laptops unless absolutely necessary, no newspapers, no talking to one another unless it is part of class discussion, no sleeping.
- You are expected to pay attention and engage respectfully with your classmates.
- If you must use your laptop for note taking, please be aware that you may not use the Internet for any purpose during class and you may wish to disable it if you will be otherwise tempted. Failure to abide by this requirement will result in loss of the privilege to use your laptop in class.

**Plagiarism**

Students are expected to adhere to the Union College Academic Honor Code, which you can access at: [www.union.edu/academic_depts/ethics/union/Honor%20Code.php](http://www.union.edu/academic_depts/ethics/union/Honor%20Code.php)

**Topics and Readings**

**I. Govier, Forgiveness and Revenge**

January 8: Introduction

January 10: Preface and Chapter 1, Revenge and Retribution (pp.xii-x, 3-22)

January 15: Chapters 3, Resentment and Forgiveness (pp. 42-61)

January 17: Chapter 4, One-Sided Forgiveness (pp. 62-77)

January 22: Chapter 5, Can Groups Forgive? (pp. 78-99)

January 24: Library Visit

January 29: Chapter 6, The Unforgiveable (pp. 100-118)

January 31: Chapter 7, Monstrous Deeds, Not Monstrous People (pp. 119-140)

February 5: Chapter 8, Forgiveness and Reconciliation (pp. 141-157); Murphy, Chapter 5, Repentance, Punishment, and Mercy (pp. 39-56)
II. Anger and Hate

February 7: Excerpts from Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*; Aaron Ben-Ze'ev, “Anger and Hate” *Journal of Social Philosophy* (pp. 85-110); Marilyn Frye, “A Note on Anger” in *The Politics of Reality* (pp. 84-94)

III. Revenge and Punishment

February 12: Suzanne Uniacke, “Why is Revenge Wrong?” *Journal of Value Inquiry* (pp. 61-69); Murphy, Introduction, *Responding to Evil* (pp. 3-8) and Chapter 2, *Two Cheers for Vindication* (pp. 17-26)

**Short Paper Due**

February 14: Robert Nozick, “Retributive Punishment,” in *Philosophical Explanations* (pp. 363-397); Murphy, Chapter 3, *Vindictiveness and the Law*, (pp. 27-31)

February 19: Leo Zaibert, “Punishment and Revenge” *Law and Philosophy* (pp. 81-118)

February 21: James Finckenauer, “Public Support for the Death Penalty: Retribution as Just Deserts or Retribution as Revenge” *Justice Quarterly* (pp. 39-56)

IV. Forgiveness

February 26: Murphy, Chapter 1, *What is Forgiveness?*; Chapter 4, *Forgiveness as a Virtue* (pp. 9-16, 33-38); Joanna North “Wrongdoing and Forgiveness” *Philosophy* (pp. 499-508)


March 5: Leo Zaibert “Paradox of Forgiveness” *Journal of Moral Philosophy* (pp. 365-393)

March 7: Eve Garrard, “Forgiveness and the Holocaust” *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* (pp. 147-165)

March 12: Class Presentations

March 14: Class Presentation