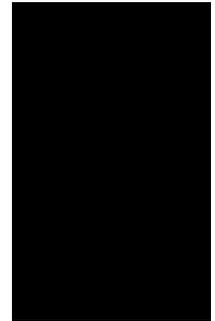




David H. Jones. *Moral Responsibility in the Holocaust: A Study in the Ethics of Character*. Lanham and New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1999. 304 pp. \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8476-9267-5; \$102.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8476-9266-8.

Reviewed by Erich H. Loewy (Bioethics Program, University of California, Davis)
Published on H-Holocaust (August, 1999)



Assessing Blame – Virtues, Character and Responsibility

This book, by Dr. David H. Jones, a philosopher at William and Mary College in Virginia, is one which must receive serious consideration by all those who wish to gain an understanding of the Nazi Holocaust and who seek to prevent it and similar occurrences. The first general thing that one must say about this truly excellent work is that it is written in easily accessible and, indeed, elegant language and yet is thorough in dealing with relevant philosophical works. Moreover, it is written in a most interesting manner which compels the reader to pick it up again and again. It is well referenced and indexed and its list of suggested readings is worth following.

Dr. Jones uses the Holocaust as a complex example to search out the meanings and nuances of responsibility. As a philosopher should, Dr. Jones takes nothing for granted. Although he notes that no one (since the Nazis) “has attempted to give philosophical justification or ethical defense” of the Holocaust, he nevertheless carefully shows us in a short section why our intuitive revulsion against the holocaust are justified. In doing so we once again are forced to review some of the basic issues in moral philosophy and end with a reasoned basis for what formerly were merely our intuitions and “gut feelings”.

Dr. Jones next turns to an examination of virtues and vices. Another book comes immediately to mind and might serve as excellent additional reading. Tzvetan Todorov’s *Moral Life in the Concentration Camps* deals with virtues and vices in a quite different manner. The

two books do not, I think, disagree: they are complementary for even if one accepts Dr. Todorov’s excellent division into the heroic and the ordinary virtues one still must search for a moral basis for enunciating such virtues as well as a basis for assessing responsibility when persons turn from them.

Two sections (on “excuses” and on “self-deception”) carefully work through the variety of excuses and the various forms of self-deception which not only were used in the holocaust but which in the human condition often happen. I think that the careful distinctions which Dr. Jones draws and the way in which he parses out the various factors which may attenuate or even abolish culpability for one’s acts are foundational not only in justifying the condemnation of individual participants but in allowing us to understand what it means to blame someone who has evidently participated in the commission of a wrong fully, partly or not at all.

Dr. Jones ends with a careful discussion about the interaction of political culture, socialization and responsibility in looking not only at this but at any problem in which responsibility must be assessed. Not only does he make us understand the role of culture and socialization better, he also presents a sound argument why such excuses are not or are not fully applicable to the situation of the Holocaust. In examining the culpability of Hitler as well as of the more ordinary participant, the author applies what we have learned to particular cases. In two beautifully and simply written chapters the culpability of

the victims for what happened (Jones argues rather convincingly against the thesis that Jews, because they allowed to happen what happened, were somehow also to blame in what happened to them) and then goes to examine what he calls “the ethics of help and rescue”.

In his conclusion, Dr. Jones tries to grapple with ways of preventing such atrocities from happening again and again. This section, clearly a work in progress, is not only fascinating in itself but fruitful; the author grapples with possible ways of approach ranging from nurturing the individual impulse to benevolence to establishing mechanisms which could serve to prevent such outrages in the future. Of course, the establishment of such mechanisms within a state or within a world community is in many ways an outgrowth of an acceptance of individual benevolence – of what Rousseau would call a “lien social” from and through which a “volente general” (a general

will) leading to the establishment of such mechanisms would be expressed.

This book is highly recommended to anyone who wishes to understand (rather than merely know about) the holocaust as well as to others who are merely interested in the problems of evil, responsibility and blameworthiness. Thus it is a book that should be on the shelves of historians, philosophers, ethicists and psychologists as well as on the shelves of persons who merely wish to more fully understand (and thus perhaps prevent) what may happen. This book will assuredly play its part in helping to turn the slogan “never again” into a living reality.

Copyright (c) 1999 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-holocaust>

Citation: Erich H. Loewy. Review of Jones, David H., *Moral Responsibility in the Holocaust: A Study in the Ethics of Character*. H-Holocaust, H-Net Reviews. August, 1999.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=3365>

Copyright © 1999 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.