

A Non-Manual for Developing Responsible Selfhood

Roger Dale Jones

Abstract:

How can average individual citizens take responsibility for past crimes against humanity? How can they take active part in developing solutions without participating in the same systems of violence they struggle against? This book takes an interdisciplinary look at questions of responsible selfhood, and places its inspection on Germany during the Third Reich. Combining backgrounds in history, literary criticism, philosophy and theology, the four authors investigate the role that myths, lies, non-conformity and irony play in the construction of the “self”. By discussing the ambiguity behind these concepts, as well as the inherent instability of the self, the authors present strategies for developing responsible individuals who are happy to bear the burden of history.

How to cite:

Jones, Roger Dale: „A Non-Manual for Developing Responsible Selfhood [Review on: Bergeron, Andrew S.; Scott K. Baker; Clancy Martin and Steve Ostovich: *The Happy Burden of History*. Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 2011.]“. In: KULT_online 38 (2014).

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22029/ko.2014.830>

© by the authors and by KULT_online

A Non-Manual for Developing Responsible Selfhood

Roger Dale Jones

Bergerson, Andrew S.; Scott K. Baker; Clancy Martin and Steve Ostovich: *The Happy Burden of History*. Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 2011. 247 pp., Hardcover, 84.95 Euro. ISBN: 3110246368

In the globalized 21st century, questions of responsibility have taken on a new urgency. Using the past to explore the present, *The Happy Burden of History* investigates responsibility and encourages readers to reflect on themselves, their role in society, and their responsibility to the victims of history.

In this monograph, four American Germanists with backgrounds in history, literary criticism, philosophy and theology take an interdisciplinary look at questions of responsible selfhood during (and after) Nazi Germany. Their investigation begins by looking at the self, not as a product but rather as a process, focusing on autobiographical storytelling as acts of self-creation. This focus suggests that responsibility lies not just in action, but also in reflective measures that critically question coherent assumptions of historical and past events, as well as of identity and self.

To understand responsibility, the authors construct a conceptual framework of myths, lies, non-conformity and irony, which make up the four chapters that create the body of the book. In turn, these chapters are informed by a multitude of largely German scholars (philosophers, theologians, theorists and playwrights), their works, ideas and biographies. The authors then populate these chapters with Nazi-era autobiographies from “everyday” Germans taken from interviews carried out in the 1990s. These “stories” not only illustrate the conceptual framework, but also further develop its conceptual foundation. Through this approach, the authors are able to exemplify the ambiguity of responsible selfhood: Myths, lies, non-conformity, and irony are crucial for the construction of coherent selfhood, yet it is this very coherency that responsible selves must deconstruct. Following this ironic approach, *The Happy Burden of History* can be read as a manual for constructing responsible selfhood, despite the authors’ desire to avoid authoritative prescriptions.

The authors begin their investigation with the myth of self that is created when individuals attempt to make coherent stories out of complex everyday experiences. Stories of coherent self are akin to stories of mastery that not only provide utopic visions of progress but also excuse past violence for its own sake (13). While the authors agree that there is no selfhood without mastery, they claim that responsibility stems from the fragmentary self that arises from ambiguities. Further, they argue that the myth of the coherent self is the very thing that

responsible individuals must work against producing. Myths thus provide not only the foundation for historical thinking, but also for its unraveling and reworking (38). Lies, on the other hand, perpetuate the myth of the coherent self (78). Furthermore, as the book's examples illustrate, individuals lie to themselves in order to be free from societal restraints and human relations (78). In turn, these self-liars easily become the dupes of others' lies (39). The authors' conclusions thus suggest that lies are like myths - they are both unavoidable and essential. The question is not how to avoid them, but how to recognize them and their influence over our lives.

Individuals lie about their role in society by taking on identities as non-conformists. On the one hand, non-conformity is often seen as rebellion from society's norms, a sign of free thinking that comes from the autonomy and self-cultivation championed by modernity (97). Non-conformity can, however, lead to the ignoring of social responsibility and of the social construction of individual selves. Furthermore, non-conformity runs the risk of becoming merely performance and, like myths, often follows a utopic logic that easily excuses violence (96). The final concept, irony, is used not only to thematically connect the ambiguities of the previous three concepts, but also to characterize communication of the self. Ironic communication relies on the contingency of knowledge, of both the outer world and the inner self (205). While irony can be employed in communication to question the underlying assumptions of others, it can also be misused by the self as a strategy to avoid the responsibility of making decisions. Thus the ambiguity of irony is that while it can induce critical thinking (160), it can also provide refuge behind nihilistic helplessness (207).

Although this monograph stems from the field of German studies, its subject is relevant to anyone interested in philosophy and theory of power, history and the creation of responsible selfhood. Nazi-era Germany serves as a powerful backdrop to explore the present. Even though there is no explicit engagement in discourse on contemporary conflict and crises, the stage is set for further exploration of responsibility in the 21st century. Despite this exclusion, the authors engage in an open dialogue that attempts to balance the dangers of authoritative claims to knowledge with an instruction on responsibility. In other words, they avoid providing overly simple answers to an undoubtedly complex issue. The inclusion of autobiographical stories taken from interviews complements the theoretical constructs well and makes reading the book more personal and engaging. And the concepts, myths, lies, non-conformity and irony, serve as useful tools to analyze how the self is created. Yet despite the seriousness of the book's topic and context, the authors' approach to the self remains humane: they avoid punitive claims and authoritative prescriptions by showing the self's vulnerability, and at the same time they offer the chance of redemption by insisting that the self, just like history, is a process and not a product.