

10-1-1998

Review of: Living with One's Past: Personal Fates and Moral Pain by Norman Care

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Citation

Kay, Judith W.. 1998. "Living with one's past: Personal fates and moral pain." *Journal Of Religion* 78(4): 652-652.

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CHICAGO JOURNALS

Living with One's Past: Personal Fates and Moral Pain by Norman Care

Review by: Judith W. Kay

The Journal of Religion, Vol. 78, No. 4 (Oct., 1998), p. 652

Published by: [The University of Chicago Press](http://www.press.uchicago.edu)

The Journal of Religion

has ushered in the reign of self-interest as the sole reliable basis for political life. There are wise and interesting observations here and there throughout this book, but the overall structure of its grandiose argument is completely untenable.

WILFRED M. McCLAY, *Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars*.

CARE, NORMAN. *Living with One's Past: Personal Fates and Moral Pain*. Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996. xiii+203 pp. \$57.50 (cloth); \$22.95 (paper).

Norman Care explores the moral problems associated with past wrongdoing about which the ascription of agency and responsibility is controversial and that causes anguish sufficient to interfere with future moral agency. Care uses liberal philosophy to determine if moral reconciliation to one's past is possible. He concludes that the liberal view of human nature leads to morally inappropriate blame or praise, cannot explain the moral pain that some experience, and fails to provide the entitlement to go on living. His observations about the moral pain faced by alcoholics in coming to terms with their past, for example, prompt him to conclude that humans may differ in their basic constitutions. While overcoming deep difficulties may be supererogatory, overcoming constitutional flaws may be impossible.

Care does a great service to victims of abuse by demonstrating that they deserve neither reproach nor blame for the ways they act subsequent to their trauma. Given their psychic disabilities, they were doing the best they could at the time. However, in attempting to protect them from moral censure, he confines some to a life without the possibility of integrity. Their moral fate is sealed by his conviction that psychic damage may be permanent, leaving them unable to "do right." "That we can in general expect or demand morally . . . that people overcome, recover, resist, and do right—as if they were dealing with weaknesses, or the stress that we expect the ordinary in-control person to bear—no longer seems right to me" (p. 85). (Unfortunately Care does not deconstruct the liberal view of the will and never explores why exhortation and harangue do not effect change.) New norms of personal justice are needed toward the constitutionally flawed, such as generosity, patience, tolerance, and withholding blame.

Unfortunately Care does not expose readers to the rich theological literature that would have brought into the discussion concepts such as sin, grace, habits, and forgiveness. Nor does he draw on the significant feminist literature, which has already demonstrated the fallacies and inadequacies of liberal moral anthropology. Care could have been more careful to apply his own insights to his conclusions. He notes that "perhaps oppression is successful when it imposes a concept of person on one and also brings it about that one's sense of choice in the matter is completely lost" (p. 67). He does not use a hermeneutic of suspicion to question his own ascription of "fixed" habits to inherent nature as a possible expression of his own internalized oppression.

The book is a useful exploration of the everyday, lived tensions of dealing with the harm associated with one's past, especially when one is not sure if one is responsible for this harm and when one finds the available tools from Enlightenment philosophy in the dominant culture wholly inadequate, if not downright pernicious, for making moral sense of one's life. The book would be suitable for undergraduate and graduate study as well as for use by therapists and pastoral counselors.

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