the philosophy of history, the connection between history and phenomenology, and those interested in Stein studies.


*Review by Michelle Ciurria, York University.*

*The Violence of Victimhood* is both a personal manifesto and a scholarly analysis of the ethics of victimhood, otherness and identity politics in the 20th century. Begun as a response to a student's accusation of racism, Diane Enns' book argues that the "victimized other" has been elevated to sacrosanct status and defined as "the good," giving perceived victims epistemic and moral authority over issues of oppression. This authority, according to Enns, is misplaced, and prevents us from holding victims legitimately responsible for their complicity in systemic oppression and violence. Moreover, the urge to participate in the dichotomous language of victim/perpetrator gives rise to a reluctance to hold anyone responsible for anything, insofar as everyone is, on some level, both a victim and a perpetrator. This ambivalence, in turn, engenders a self-defeating moral relativism which stymies any attempt to formulate a pragmatic political program for resolving conflict in war-torn countries.

Enns' book is divided into seven chapters. In the first chapter, Enns accuses Continental philosophy, and particularly the scholarship of Emmanuel Levinas and Frantz Fanon, of venerating the "victimized other" as purely innocent and impervious to criticism. The unintended consequence of this view, she says, is a radical, perverse moral relativism and political impotence. This is also the chapter in which Enns describes the plight of having to defend her lectures, on two separate occasions, against formal charges of "racial discrimination and harassment" to the faculty dean and her colleagues. One cannot help but empathise as she relates this harrowing experience, which was no doubt an unintended consequence of her earnest disquisitions; but, at the same time, one encounters passages that are liable to cause discomfort in liberal-minded readers. For example, on the moral status of rape victims, she writes, "That victims are not all the same does not mean that someone deserves to be victimized, but it does mean that some victims take risks that increase that possibility." (90) Construed in the wrong light, this could be taken to mean that rape victims are responsible for eliciting male sexual interest and violence; but what
Enns seems to mean, more plausibly, is that all (or most) women are complicit in perpetuating the conditions of power that sustain patriarchal dominance. This claim is less discomfiting, but also less interesting, for it has arguably been the received view in Continental philosophy at least since the publication of Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*.

In Chapter 2, Enns argues that we tend to justify the violence that victims inflict on others, and also to privilege the perspective of the victim in moral and legal discourse. This tendency, she says, is exemplified in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, where commentators tend to choose sides and refrain from criticising their preferred faction. In Chapter 3, she examines the phenomenology of victimhood, and characterises victims as suffering from “pathological responses” to violence, such as vindictiveness, melancholy and resentment (in the Nietzschean sense). She holds that victims have a responsibility to relinquish these sentiments, or, at least, to “act as if” they have relinquished them. (72) Here, Enns considers resentment only in its strongest, pathological form; but later, in Chapter 6, she dismisses the common objection from transitional justice scholars that resentment can be a form of moral indignation that is both morally legitimate and conducive to reconciliation. She prefers to address resentment only as a negative emotion, intrinsically antithetical to forgiveness and reconciliation.

In Chapter 4, Enns appeals to Hannah Arendt to explain moral judgement, and to show that it can be appropriately applied to victims in certain circumstances. Enns finds in Arendt a kindred spirit, insofar as the latter was accused of “blaming the victim” after arguing that members of the Jewish Councils were responsible for cooperating with Nazis in World War II. Arendt correctly points out that victims can be held legitimately responsible for independent harms. For her part, Enns is particularly concerned with the judgement of moral responsibility, but she does not explicitly distinguish this kind of moral judgement from others, such as blame, liability, accountability and character ascription, which are often conflated or used interchangeably with responsibility in casual conversation. However, for philosophical purposes, these distinctions are critical. For instance, when Enns writes that victims can be held responsible for “choosing the lesser evil under duress” (97), one has to wonder if she means, rather, that victims can be held blameworthy, or accountable, or liable, or deemed vicious, for so choosing under duress. Ordinarily, duress is considered exculpating in considerations of responsibility and liability, but not necessarily in judgements of blame, character, and quality of will. One explanation for this imprecision is Enns’ insistence that moral judge-
ment should be distinguished from “moralism,” which is characterised by an “obsession with moral regulations.” (99) Moral judgement, by contrast, is intrinsically messy, contingent, intuitive, contextual, uncodifiable, and vague. This distinction, in turn, explains why Enns does not attempt to articulate any formal criteria for when it is appropriate to hold someone morally responsible, instead preferring to rely on intuitive examples to provide rough guidelines for this process. At times, however, this approach can be vexing, particularly as her examples often go against widely held intuitions—such as in the case of wrongdoing under duress and in children.

In Chapter 5, Enns addresses the difficult issue of determining the moral status of child soldiers, who are normally excused of moral responsibility for their crimes. She gives a number of examples of former child soldiers, including the now-famous human rights advocate, Ishamel Beah, and contrasts them against other children who managed to evade ideological indoctrination at the hands of opportunistic warlords. Enns maintains that, “we must acknowledge, respect, and encourage children’s moral agency, like that of their adult counterparts, if we are to understand how war seduces—‘narcotizes’—its participants, effectively immunizing them from accountability.” (15) She makes it clear that she considers children to be full moral agents, sufficiently capable of discerning right from wrong to be held morally responsible for their behaviour, and she supports this claim with testimony from reformed child soldiers attesting to the fact that when they committed their crimes, they believed that they were acting rightly. In spite of this testimony, however, one has to wonder whether these children actually had the capacity to discern right from wrong, regardless of whether they believed that they were doing the right thing. Normally, in democratic societies, children are excused from responsibility on grounds that they lack the moral and epistemic capacities to make responsible decisions, and this places the onus on adults to provide children with a safe and hospitable environment. Enns wishes to shift the responsibility onto children themselves, but it is unclear what this is supposed to accomplish given that most children lack both the cognitive capacities and material resources required to administer their own lives. Nonetheless, it must be acknowledged that Enns’ account of responsibility comports with a popular view in moral philosophy, according to which individuals are responsible for actions that stem from their settled character traits regardless of whether they had a fair opportunity to develop normative competence. But this is at best a dubious view, and since Enns does not give us independent reasons to adopt it, we are left wondering what normative and pragmatic advantages can be had from holding
children responsible for decisions and actions which they might not have been in a position to critically evaluate or resist.

In her final two chapters, Enns emphasises the ambivalence that we naturally feel toward child soldiers and other victim-perpetrators, and argues that moral judgement must be tempered with compassion. This rebuts the popular belief that justice must be retributive, and supports an approach of leniency and restorative justice. One might think that excusing victim-perpetrators would follow from this view, but Enns insists that we must hold individuals responsible for their actions, even if there are extenuating circumstances. However, this approach is compatible with showing clemency. In her final chapter, Enns makes a case for “laying down our arms” and refusing to resort to violence even in the face of unimaginable brutality. While she does not use the word “pacifism,” this chapter seems to be a call for pacifism. It is here that Enns’ underlying purpose for the book shines through in its most appealing light, whereas elsewhere her arguments sometimes have the appearance of insensitivity, or, at least, of placing undue pressure on individuals who seemingly could not have done otherwise in their circumstances. Here, however, we see that Enns is ultimately concerned with generating the conditions for a post-violence world, one characterised by peace, love, compassion, friendship, and solidarity. Thus, even if we differ with her on the particulars of her arguments, we can identify with her ambition of fostering peace and reconciliation on a global scale.

All things considered, The Violence of Victimhood is an interesting and intelligent treatment of an important locus of moral thought: how to judge victims who perpetrate violence against others. What it lacks in analytical rigour, it makes up for in earnestness, eloquence and attention to compelling anecdotal cases from a range of sources.


Compte rendu d’Yves Laberge, Université Laval.

Comme tout bon « Companion », ce recueil de douze chapitres ne comprend pas d’écrits du philosophe Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) mais plutôt une série d’études récentes et inédites sur différents aspects de son œuvre touchant à la fois la théorie sociale, la philosophie de la culture, les études urbaines, la sociologie de l’art, et la modernité en général. Penseur phare de la modernité, il reste une in-