

Andrew Stuart Bergerson, K. Scott Baker,  
Clancy Martin, Steve Ostovich  
The Happy Burden of History

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Andrew Stuart Bergerson, K. Scott Baker,  
Clancy Martin, Steve Ostovich

# The Happy Burden of History

From Sovereign Impunity  
to Responsible Selfhood

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# Contents

List of Illustrations .....	ix
About this Book .....	xi
Myths .....	1
Selfhood and Responsibility.....	2
Sovereign Impunity .....	3
Self-Cultivation .....	5
Historical Responsibility .....	7
Our Approach .....	9
Myths of the Self .....	11
Progress .....	11
Systems of Violence.....	13
The Self.....	15
Academic Traditions .....	17
Our Challenge.....	22
The German Sisyphus .....	22
The Source of Meaning.....	24
Slave Narratives .....	25
The Nazi Past .....	27
Responsible Selfhood.....	28
The Happy Burden of History .....	31
Lies .....	35
The Kaiser's New Clothes .....	36
Our Lying Selves .....	37
Our Approach .....	38
The Ease of Being Duped .....	39
Nietzsche on Vanity.....	40
Nietzsche on Hypocrisy.....	42
Social Lies .....	44
Theodora's Aspirations.....	46
Social Climbing .....	48

Fascist Lies . . . . .	50
The Sincere Deceiver . . . . .	51
The Dupe's Paradox . . . . .	52
Why We Believe Liars . . . . .	54
Theodora's Decision in Principle . . . . .	56
The Lie of Normalcy . . . . .	58
Hans the Perfect Aryan . . . . .	59
Hans the Bystander . . . . .	62
Hans and Heinrich . . . . .	65
Performing Lies . . . . .	68
Goffman on Selling the Self . . . . .	68
Brecht on Performing the Self . . . . .	69
Galy Gay the Performer . . . . .	71
Galy Gay and the Soldiers . . . . .	72
Galy Gay the <i>Poseur</i> . . . . .	74
Galy Gay the Murderer . . . . .	76
The Lie of Coherence . . . . .	78
Benjamin on History . . . . .	79
Benjamin on the Self . . . . .	82
Brecht on Forbearance . . . . .	83
Metz on Remembrancing . . . . .	85
Hans in Fragments . . . . .	88
Owning Up to Our Lies . . . . .	90
Non-Conformity . . . . .	93
A Walk in the Woods . . . . .	94
Our Unruly Selves . . . . .	95
Our Approach . . . . .	97
Acting on Principle . . . . .	97
Kant on Ethics . . . . .	98
Nietzsche on Resentment . . . . .	99
Adolescent Rebellion . . . . .	102
Working for Utopia . . . . .	104
Schreyer's New Man . . . . .	106
Gerhard and Hartmut . . . . .	110
In the Middle of Things . . . . .	113
Hasenclever's <i>Son</i> . . . . .	116
Rejecting Politics . . . . .	119
The Conviction to Have No Convictions . . . . .	120
Theodora the Unpolitical . . . . .	122
The Algermissen Civil War . . . . .	124

Sovereign Impunity . . . . .	128
Günther the Non-Conformist . . . . .	128
Theodora the <i>Führerin</i> . . . . .	131
Theodora the Teacher . . . . .	135
Everyday Knowledge . . . . .	139
How We Take Sides . . . . .	141
Arendt on the New . . . . .	142
Nietzsche on the Child . . . . .	146
The Unruliness of the Child . . . . .	149
Thilly and Sarah . . . . .	150
Ruth and an Anonymous Hitler Youth . . . . .	152
Irony . . . . .	155
Yes, <i>Hitler</i> , No? . . . . .	156
Our Ironic Self . . . . .	156
The Challenge of Irony . . . . .	158
Our Approach . . . . .	159
Defining Irony . . . . .	161
Hamann on Reason . . . . .	162
Irony and Dialectics . . . . .	164
Irony as Criticism . . . . .	166
Liberating Irony . . . . .	168
Hamann on Enlightenment . . . . .	168
Brecht on Bourgeois Theater . . . . .	169
Reinhard in Bourgeois Society . . . . .	172
Ironic Politics . . . . .	176
Some Idiot . . . . .	177
Macheath the Generous . . . . .	178
Reinhard the Clever . . . . .	181
Too Clever . . . . .	185
The Consequences of Nihilism . . . . .	187
Jürgen the Apprentice . . . . .	187
Jürgen the Hitler Youth . . . . .	189
Jürgen the Mechanic . . . . .	191
Jürgen and Sarah . . . . .	191
Committing Irony . . . . .	194
Hamann on Intersubjectivity . . . . .	195
Brecht's <i>Mother Courage</i> . . . . .	199
Anna's Choices . . . . .	202
Larmore on Committing Ourselves . . . . .	205
Beauvoir on Maneuvering in Doubt . . . . .	206

The Finish. . . . .	209
Outside Himmelsthür . . . . .	210
Epic Scholarship. . . . .	219
Macular Degeneration . . . . .	225
Open Models. . . . .	232
One Way To Imagine It. . . . .	237
Bibliography. . . . .	239
Interview Collections. . . . .	239
Books etc. . . . .	239



## List of Illustrations

Figure 1.	L. Mikelle Standbridge, <i>Sisyphus</i> , 2008 . . . . .	1
Figure 2.	Bertolt Brecht, <i>A Man's A Man</i> , Stick Figures, 1925 . . . . .	35
Figure 3.	Bertolt Brecht, <i>A Man's A Man</i> , "Elephant Sale," 1925 . . . . .	73
Figure 4.	Paul Klee, <i>Angelus Novus</i> , 1920 . . . . .	80
Figure 5.	Jochen Löber, <i>Portrait of Günther Seidner</i> , Winter 1944 . . . . .	93
Figure 6.	<i>Regiment</i> , France, 1940 . . . . .	130
Figure 7.	<i>Air-Reconnaissance Installation</i> , Lippstedt, Germany, 1940 . . . . .	155
Figure 8.	<i>Comrades</i> , Magdeburg, 1940 . . . . .	183
Figure 9.	Bertolt Brecht, <i>Mutter Courage</i> , "Singing At the Church," 1939 . . . . .	201
Figure 10.	Andrew Bergerson, <i>Reinhard with Caricature</i> , 1993 . . . . .	209



## About This Book

We should admit to some things up front. This book is unruly. The “introduction” and “conclusion” break with generic expectations for an academic monograph. The analysis also transgresses the conventions of our disciplines. Like most academics we have been trained to exclude those questions from the scope of our investigations that do not fit our disciplinary paradigms. It is precisely the questions that fall between the cracks, however, that concern us in this book. This kind of work is often described as *interdisciplinary*, but it would be better to describe this book as *integrative* as we have tried to develop a coherent approach to a problem—responsible selfhood—that is inherently incoherent. We justify this epistemological juggling act because it fits how we operate in everyday life.

You may be interested in knowing who we mean by “we.” Often we are referring to the four authors of this book. It would be rather hypocritical of us if we were to write a book about historical responsibility and ignore our own. We also play the role of ethnographers at times and participate in our own study. So we should tell you a little more about us. For the most part, we have lived a privileged life. Our families immigrated from Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Steve was born in the 1950s in Wisconsin. Clancy, Drew, and Scott were born in the 1960s in Ontario, New York, and Oregon. We are all now professors with tenure. Steve currently holds a position at the College of St. Scholastica in Duluth, Minnesota; the rest of us are at the University of Missouri-Kansas City.

Politically we are inclined more or less to the Left and philosophically towards existentialism. Drew comes to these postures through Judaism; the others more or less through Christianity. Steve even toyed for a while with a career in the clergy. We are all men and heterosexual for the most part; we are all currently married with children, though not all for the first time. We share a similar kind of intelligence, which made writing this book easier. We identify with liminality and try to act as allies for those who are less fortunate.

At times, we use “we” in the much broader terms of philosophers and theologians, who tend to speak in terms of human beings in general. And yet this universal “we” is never far removed from the particular contexts of the Third Reich. We are not saying that our German informants are representative in a statistical sense of all of humanity. We are also not trying to suggest that Germans are unique or uniquely prone to historical irresponsibility.

Rather we are saying that there is something to be learned about selfhood and responsibility from the extreme nature of the historical situation in which Germans found themselves during the Third Reich. This case is also useful to us as academics because the debate on historical responsibility in Germany has already developed to sophistication.

Yet that claim does not really clarify the situation either, insofar as we four authors actually inhabit an ambiguous position inside and outside of our study group. We have spent many years in Germany and have established lasting relationships there. This book stands in a long tradition of vibrant transatlantic dialogue regarding German culture and history. It would be a mistake to ignore our deep appreciation for Germany as well as the contributions we have made to German Studies just because we were not born into German citizenship or families. One of our points about selfhood is that we are a *bricolage*.

So please do not read this book as yet another accusation by Americans of how the Germans have failed to come to terms with the Nazi past—what the Germans call *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. If we are not quite Germans, we are still Germanists, which means that we must look critically at ourselves. We do so in this book in terms of our academic traditions because it is the world in which we are most intimately involved, but we could easily have focused on other aspects of our past and present. Even as North Americans, however, the Third Reich is very much about who we are too. The Nazi past challenges our notions of responsible selfhood no matter who “we” are.

In the end, we come to this project as German scholars who have devoted the bulk of our lives to seeking answers to German questions. These are the sources and the setting in which we live. So for instance, Drew has spent many years conducting research into the history of everyday life in Hildesheim, a mid-sized provincial town in north-central Germany. A detailed description of his oral history research method can be found in his 1998 dissertation, “A History of Neighborliness,” and 2004 book, *Ordinary Germans in Extraordinary Times*. From the larger set of 38 interview partners, Drew chose ten to serve as informants for our study. Their pseudonyms are: Theodora Algermissen, Ruth Busche, Jürgen Ludewig, Sarah Meyer, Gerhard Mock, Reinhard Oetteling, Martha Paul, Günther Seidner, Hartmut Teufel, and Thilly Tappe. Drew selected them because of the ways in which their particular life stories raise interesting questions about selfhood or responsibility. If you pushed us to identify a protagonist to our story, it would probably be Theodora. Drew’s first interview partner from Hildesheim, she stands out because of the way she raised the issue of responsible selfhood herself.

Hans F., who appears in the chapter on Lies, is neither a pseudonym nor a Hildesheimer. Hans taught with Drew’s mother at a private school in New York; Drew interviewed him in 1989. As the reader will discover, however, the

interview process did not end in 1989, or in the case of the Hildesheimers, with Drew's return to the States in December 1994. Ethnographic research involves returning to the material, the place, and the people repeatedly over time. This book is the latest stage in that long-term process of critical engagement.

Clancy, Scott, and Steve decided which German philosophers, playwrights, and political theologians respectively should be included in this study based on the degree to which these literati addressed our concerns about responsible selfhood. Like Bertolt Brecht, Friedrich Nietzsche, or Johann Baptist Metz, their biographies or reception were often intertwined with the Third Reich, which allowed us to bridge the gap between theory and practice. In other cases, like Albert Camus and Simone de Beauvoir, we included people who were not German *per se* but whose lives and letters were so implicated in the Third Reich that they, too, must be counted as participants in this German question.

We know that there are many other examples that we could, and perhaps should, have addressed in this study. Ours is ultimately a rather small sample. Encouraging you, our readers, to apply insights gained from these cases more widely is the whole point of this exercise. We look forward to your responses.

The reader may also be interested in how four people did the actual work of co-authoring a monograph. Drew brought us together gradually through a series of conference panels and attempted articles. He met Steve in December 1998 at a workshop hosted by Alon Confino and Peter Fritzsche on "The Work of Memory" at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. He met Clancy in 2003 at UMKC when Clancy first joined the Philosophy Faculty. Clancy, Drew, and Steve began their work with the problem of self-deception. Drew invited Scott to participate in a panel for the German Studies Association in 2006 in the context of expanding the project to irony. It was at this point that we first outlined the larger book project including chapters on Non-Conformity and Myths. We now suspect that we should have included a chapter on humor as well, but the book seems long enough as it is.

As we presented our individual papers at academic conferences and workshops, we discovered many similar patterns in the lives and letters of ordinary and intellectual Germans. The process of integrating these themes into coherent chapters involved clarifying terms which held specific meanings in different disciplines; moving evidence to follow the line of argumentation rather than disciplinary focus; adapting arguments gleaned from one author to draw out new insights from the evidence of the others; and many rounds of revisions guided by the detailed advice from the series editors at de Gruyter, led by Irene Kacandes.

The plot of our argument emerged first in the chapter on Lies. While compiling Irony, Drew noticed that it began to fall into roughly the same logic. Steve drafted Non-Conformity with this interpretive structure in mind.

We discovered the overarching themes of responsible selfhood and sovereign impunity relatively late in the game. Much of this criticism can be found in the chapter on Myths and in The Finish. These chapters were drafted in a more traditional way by Drew and revised by the team thereafter.

We accrued many debts in writing this book. Drew's interviews were funded by the Friedrich Weinhausen Stiftung in Hildesheim. At the University of Missouri-Kansas City, support was provided by the Bernardin Haskell Fund, the University of Missouri Research Board, the Dean of the College of Arts & Sciences, the Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching, the Office of Research, the School of Graduate Studies as well as the Departments of History, Philosophy, and Foreign Languages & Literatures. At the College of St. Scholastica, financial support was provided by the Philosophy Department, the School of Arts and Letters, its Dean, and the Faculty Development Committee. Additional funding was provided by Cornell University.

Much of the material discussed here has been presented as lectures at Kansas State University, St. John's University in Collegeville, Santa Monica College, and the University of Michigan; at annual conferences of the Association for Integrative Studies, the German Studies Association, the Midwest Modern Language Association, the New Directions in the Humanities Conference, and the Trans-Missouri German Studies Symposium; and in our courses.

Elements from or versions of these chapters have appeared in print. Some of the material from Non-Conformity and Irony appeared in Bergerson, "Eigensinn, Ethik und das nationalsozialistische *Reformatio vitae*," *Sehnsucht nach Nähe: Interpersonale Kommunikation in Deutschland seit dem 19. Jahrhundert*, hrsg. Moritz Föllmer, 127-56 (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2004) and in Baker, "Bertolt Brecht and the Insufficiency of Irony," *Brecht Yearbook* 34 (2009): 206-24. Material about Hamann and Nietzsche have appeared in Martin, "Hamann on Reason, Self-Knowledge, and Irony," *Socrates: Reason or Unreason as the Foundation of European Identity*, ed. Ann Ward (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2007) and "*Mundus Vult Decipi*, or, The Pleasure of Being Duped," *International Studies in Philosophy* 39/3 (2009).

We would like to thank Mikelle Standbridge and Todd Wade for their photographs; James Bell for his early collaboration on the idea; Katrin Dalitz for her help with the interviews; Broadway Cafe in Kansas City for their hospitality; Joanne Brownstein for her sage advice; Kevin Baker, Dustin Stalnaker, and Manuel Vaultont for their help with copyediting; and Drew's interview partners for sharing their stories.

The manuscript benefitted greatly from the suggestions of friends and colleagues: Alan Berkowitz, Jacques Cukierkorn, Susan Feagin, Sven Felix Kellerhoff, Elissa Mailänder Koslov, Alf Lüdtke, Maria Mitchell, Sandra Ott, Larson Powell, and Paul Steege. We are deeply indebted to Scott Denham,

Irene Kacandes, and Jonathan Petropoulos, the series editors at de Gruyter, for their close critical readings of our manuscript. Above all we would like to thank our wives and children for supporting us over the many years. In so many ways they made this project possible. We dedicate this book to them—in love.

August 2010

Kansas City/Duluth





## Myths

It is during that return, that pause, that Sisyphus interests me.  
— Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 1942

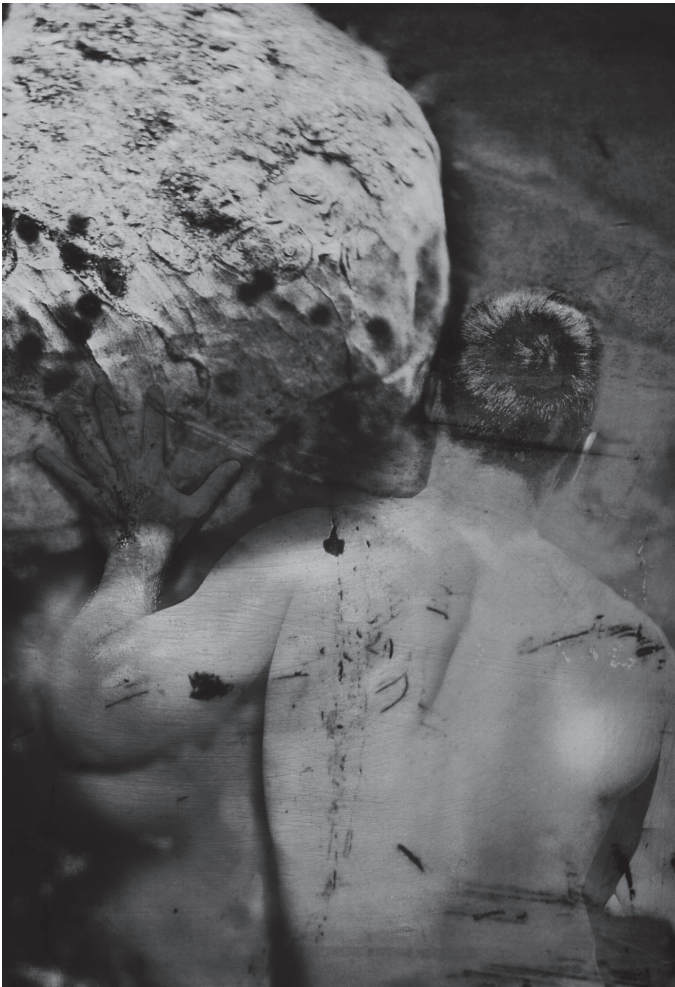


Figure 1. L. Mikelle Standbridge, *Sisyphus*, 2008.

## Selfhood and Responsibility

Do you remember Sisyphus? He was the poor guy in Greek mythology whose fate was to push a boulder up a hill only to watch it roll down and then to have to push it up again—over and over, condemned to do so for *eternity*. He is a symbol of meaninglessness in our culture. But what more can be said about him? What more is his story telling us? And how was it that he ended up in this condition anyway?

Ambiguity characterizes the life story of Sisyphus. He was the king of Corinth, but it is unclear whether he founded the city or received it as a gift. He proved with clever creativity that Autolycus was a cattle thief, but used the commotion of the confrontation between the victims and the thief to seduce Autolycus's daughter. When the Oracle told Sisyphus that his offspring by a niece would aid him in his fight with his brother, Sisyphus seduced and impregnated her. When she learned why he had seduced her, she killed their children—and he killed her in turn. Contemporary Greek sources lauded him for promoting commerce and sea travel but also claimed that he was fraudulent, greedy, and disreputable. Yet none of these actions earned him his boulder.<sup>1</sup>

In his classic essay, "The Myth of Sisyphus,"<sup>2</sup> Albert Camus, the twentieth-century French existentialist, offers a reading of Sisyphus that we find helpful to make sense of these ambiguities. To Camus, Sisyphus demonstrated "a certain levity in regards to the gods." More specifically, "he stole their secrets." Camus tells the story like this: Aegina was the daughter of Aesophus, a god. When she was carried off by none other than Jupiter, Aesophus was shocked, and complained to Sisyphus. Sisyphus, who knew of the abduction, "offered to tell about it on condition that Aesophus would give water to the citadel of Corinth."<sup>3</sup> In other words, Sisyphus tried to leverage a god.

At first, the gods gave Sisyphus a relatively mild sentence for his hubris, and they were quick to parole him when asked; they allowed him to return from the underworld to life. After all, his underlying motive seemed to be humane in that he used his ingenuity to try to improve the lives of the people of Corinth. Another explanation is that he once again tricked the gods into allowing his release.<sup>4</sup> Camus identifies the seeming contradictions in Sisyphus's character. "If one believes Homer," Camus writes, "Sisyphus was the wisest and most prudent of mortals. According to another tradition," Camus

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1 Robert Graves, *Greek Mythology*, vol. 1 (New York: Penguin Books, 1960), 216-220.

2 Albert Camus, "The Myth of Sisyphus," in *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays* (New York: Vintage International Ed., 1991), 88-91.

3 Camus, "Myth," 88.

4 Graves, "Sisyphus," 217-218.

continues, “he was disposed to practice the profession of highwayman. I see no contradiction in this.”<sup>5</sup>

Neither do we. In fact we see in it a rather productive way to think about selfhood and responsibility—the subject of this book. The challenges of everyday life can require the creative solutions of the bandit. Ordinary people often develop a sophisticated set of strategies to negotiate the contradictions and demands of modern living. Being clever does not in itself discourage responsibility; there is a certain wisdom in piracy.

Still, viewing the life of Sisyphus from both a divine and human perspective can raise some disruptive questions. On the one hand, making demands of a god does not seem to us to be a sober or circumspect act. On the other hand, if banditry is wise, it is a short step to begin to wonder if the gods made the right decision in condemning Sisyphus at all. Do the gods have the right to pass judgment on human behavior? In thinking about Sisyphus, we find ourselves wondering if the gods can ever fully appreciate the nature of our responsibilities as human beings to ourselves and others.

This humanism is arguably Camus’s point of departure. He uses irony to get us to identify with Sisyphus as the protagonist of this story: even the ancient Greeks understood his name to mean “very wise.”<sup>6</sup> As a philosopher, Camus wants us to begin to think for ourselves—and to do so in existential terms. Sisyphus anticipates the wisdom that Camus wants us to discover in this fable: that responsibility is best measured on a human scale and investigated through human stories.

This book concerns responsible selfhood in complicated human situations. It is an effort to understand how we act in everyday life to become who we are and the impact of those strategies of *self-cultivation* on ourselves and others. Myths are useful as a way to ground our investigation of selfhood because myths inform our histories and biographies—that is, the way we tell the stories of our “selves.” Like Camus, we discover our responsibility while moving between the way we tell the stories of our lives and how we live them.

### *Sovereign Impunity*

If we are more like Sisyphus than we like to admit, then we should take care to figure out what he got wrong and what he got right. Sisyphus, the philosopher thief, claimed that he was thinking first and foremost of how he could help others. His behavior suggests the exact opposite: that he was asserting what we call *sovereign impunity*.

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5 Camus, “Myth,” 88.

6 Graves, “Sisyphus,” 219.

At its most basic, *sovereignty* is a claim to individual autonomy. For German princes after the Treaties of Westphalia that ended the Thirty Years War in 1648, being recognized as sovereign meant that they could sign treaties with and fight wars against other princes, the Holy Roman Emperor, or even the Pope. In modern international law, the sovereignty of states places governments on an equal footing with one another as autonomous legal entities.

*Sovereign immunity*, by contrast, refers to a particular perk that sets the government apart from the ordinary citizen—the legal nicety that the Crown cannot be sued for grievances.<sup>7</sup> Heads of state are often *de facto* insulated from criminal prosecution insofar as the laws they obey are the laws they have written. To be sure, many modern democracies build into their constitutions the ability to remove a sovereign who is caught breaking the law—for instance, through impeachment. Yet removal from office does not always lead to criminal prosecution thanks to the vagaries of politics.

Sovereignty sets princes equal to one another but in positions of autonomous mastery over their subjects. Popular parlance tells us a lot about how we think about these privileges of sovereignty. When individuals kill, they are tried for murder; but when states kill, we call it politics. Whether by divine right or simply inheritance, princes assert the right of command over their subjects. Through such tools of state as armies, police, law, and religion, they can determine life and death for ordinary people.

In republican forms of government, sovereign power is supposed to derive not from the gods but from the people. Citizenship promises us that ultimate authority is in our hands by the fact that we can remove our leaders from office. Even in modern democracies, however, we often presume that our government has to have the authority to act while it is still in office if it is to be effective. So for us moderns too, violent claims to mastery seem to be required for the defense of autonomy.

We give our rulers this considerable degree of freedom from everyday ethical obligations on the assumption that they are acting in our interests. Yet experience tells us otherwise. As a framework of *Realpolitik*, or the pursuit of power in the name of state interest, the luxury of being above the law as head of state all too often becomes an excuse for external aggression and internal oppression. Political philosophers and scientists have long debated the problem of how to constrain state authority when heads of state use their power against their own citizens and then use their office to insulate themselves from accountability.<sup>8</sup>

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7 Richard Falk, "Revisiting Westphalia, Discovering Post-Westphalia," *The Journal of Ethics* 6/4 (2002): 311-352; Don Mayer, "Sovereign Immunity and the Moral Community," *Business Ethics Quarterly* 2/4 (October, 1992): 411-434.

8 E.g., "Algeria: Truth and Justice Obscured by the Shadow of Impunity," *Amnesty Inter-*

Modern genocides put these principles into question because the presumed immunity of the head of state from prosecution seems to leave open the door for the exercise of violence with impunity even against non-combatants. This loophole was one of the reasons why the antifascist coalition that defeated Adolf Hitler in 1945 put the political leaders of the Third Reich on trial for crimes against peace, war crimes, and crimes against humanity. They wanted to set a precedent, however fragile, for holding heads of state accountable to written international laws and universal codes of ethical behavior.<sup>9</sup>

Modern individualism shares many of the same attributes of sovereignty. We presume that we are most responsible when we are capable of autonomous action. Modern political theorists like Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau even argued that the sovereignty of the state flows from the sovereignty that individuals exercise over their own lives.<sup>10</sup> Also like the early modern prince, the modern individual is defined in terms of its domination over its conditions of existence such as the natural world, everyday life, and other human beings. We tend to recognize “who we are” in terms of the things we make, earn, or buy; the mountains we climb and storms we weather; and the position of status and power we presume we deserve by our merit. Modern society legitimizes this ordinary kind of sovereign impunity in the way we imagine and cultivate a self.

So our play on words has a substantive point. More than just *immunity* from legal consequences, sovereign *impunity* presumes an arrogant disregard for any form of accountability for the violence involved in becoming who we are. In our everyday lives we find ourselves asserting the right not just to cultivate a self immune to all constraints, divine or human, but doing so without concern for the people who get hurt in the process. Here lies a paradox of modern selfhood. Grounding responsibility in autonomous selfhood enables the very sovereign impunity we find irresponsible.

### *Self-Cultivation*

Did Sisyphus act responsibly? No doubt, had we asked him, he would have said that he was acting in the interests of the people of Corinth—for instance when he negotiated water for the city in exchange for tattling on Jupiter. We

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*national*, 8 November 2000, <<http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/MDE28/014/2000/en>>, downloaded November 2008.

9 Michael Marrus, *The Nuremberg War Crimes Trial, 1945-1946: A Documentary History* (Boston: St. Martin's Press, 1997).

10 Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, introd. Herbert W. Schneider (Indianapolis: The Liberal Arts Press, 1958); John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, ed. C. B. Macpherson (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1980); Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, trans. Maurice Cranston (London: Penguin Books, 1968).

suspect that he was using these kinds of situations to cultivate an image of himself as capable of standing up to the gods. He clearly liked to imagine that he could mock Olympus with impunity.

To us his heroic persona betrays considerable selfishness. Sisyphus seemed only superficially concerned in the fate of Aegina and the suffering of her father; he took an interest in this crime solely as an opportunity for self-assertion. Similarly absent from his consideration seemed to be whether the people of Corinth wanted Sisyphus to appeal to the gods on their behalf. Might the gods have responded to his hubris by punishing the Corinthians too? Sisyphus is silent on this matter. We doubt if he thought at all about the possible consequences of his actions for others.

It is important to Camus's reading of this myth that, for most of his tale, Sisyphus remained woefully unreflective about his own self-deceptions. Sisyphus even thought he could master death itself. Trying to avoid his own punishment, Sisyphus put Death in chains. Unfortunately for everyone else, his hubris left the dead walking among the living, unable to find their proper place in the underworld. Pluto had to free Hades from his jailor just to put things back in order.<sup>11</sup>

Camus also depicts Sisyphus as a bit of a macho. Just before death he tested his wife's love. "He ordered her to cast his unburied body into the middle of the public square."<sup>12</sup> When he woke up in perdition he felt betrayed, as if *his* fate had been sealed by *her*.<sup>13</sup> In the hell of divine condemnation, Sisyphus, like many unreformed criminals, continued to deceive himself that he was the wronged victim of his story rather than its tragic protagonist. Here we see the full depths of his addiction to sovereign impunity. He acted as if he were accountable to no one for the consequences of his own behavior.

In other words, Sisyphus spent most of his earthly life as an impunity junkie. He insisted that he was above the law, and his stubborn disobedience only got worse with every new crime. His posturing remained rather consistent throughout his life. It was this continuity in his self-cultivation that allowed him to imagine that he was a coherent, autonomous, heroic individual, standing up to the gods in the name of human needs and human freedom.

By *self-cultivation* we mean the many behaviors that contribute to identity, the responses to situations that shape the kind of person we become, and the stories we tell about this development of selfhood. We chose Sisyphus as the main figure of this chapter because he is the archetype of a person who cultivated a self with impunity. Even when there were good outcomes,

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11 Camus, "Myth," 88; Graves, "Sisyphus," 217.

12 Camus, "Myth," 88.

13 Graves describes it as a trick by Sisyphus to circumvent death ("Sisyphus," 217-218). It makes sense to us that he was doing a little of both.

Sisyphus was acting irresponsibly. The only way he was able to ignore the contradictions between what he claimed he was doing and the consequences of his actions was to deceive himself, emphatically, that he was immune from the judgment of higher authorities as well as obligations to his fellow human beings.

We also tell the story of the life of Sisyphus here for the same reason they retold it in ancient Greece. It is only in the human framework of everyday life that we can discover the nature of responsibility. What the history of Sisyphus shows is that human beings are the progenitors of their own myths. To commit even his small act of hubris with Aesophs required that Sisyphus ignore how both the Olympians and the Corinthians might react to his deeds. The lies, the myth making, and the storytelling began the moment that Sisyphus convinced himself that he was clever enough to get away with it.

### *Historical Responsibility*

In this book we investigate everyday strategies of self-cultivation in order to discover how to apply them responsibly. Following Camus, we are convinced that developing an adequate answer to this question is necessary to living a good human life. Also like Camus, we believe that identifying the criteria of responsibility cannot be accomplished in abstraction from our historical condition.

Unfortunately we have been encouraged in the Western cultural tradition since Plato to try to understand our condition in the world by taking ourselves out of our changing circumstances, and moving to a level of abstract thought where we can pin things down “at last.” Modern reason is even more concerned with mastering our concepts, and through them the world in which we live, including ourselves. Rene Descartes took a crucial first step in his famous dictum, “I think therefore I am.” It authorized human beings not only to master the natural world through thinking but to ground truth in thought. He reinforced a tendency towards impunity when he further qualified “methodological” thinking in terms of skepticism, limiting ourselves to those ideas that we have—i. e. he has—determined to be “clear and distinct.”<sup>14</sup> Our conviction is very different: that we are historical beings who exist under particular, concrete conditions.<sup>15</sup> To us responsibility is not a matter of abstracting ourselves from history in a quest for control. It depends instead on how we respond to our ever-changing conditions.

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14 Rene Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. Donald A. Cress, 4th ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998).

15 See Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).



The guiding question of this book might be framed as: *what does it mean to be responsible in history?* Our responses are, of course, informed in part by intellectual traditions, cultural norms, and many other inherited factors. Historical contingencies are one reason why philosophers like to remove themselves from everyday conditions which seem to undermine our ability to derive universal principles. By contrast, we situate ourselves as philosophers in the ambiguous position within history precisely because acting responsibly requires attention to the conceptual, ethical, and even physical frameworks of the situations confronting us. By saying that these inherited ideas impact our behavior is not to prioritize or authorize them to continue to do so; it is to recognize the role that they play in our lives so that we can make well considered choices for what we wish to do with them.

The four of us share an interest in modern Germany that makes our inquiry both specific and complicated. For us, the question of historical responsibility always leads us back to the issue: *what does it mean to be responsible for Nazi crimes?* This question has plagued and inspired decades of German scholarship. Nazi crimes, especially the Holocaust, were so monstrous a set of events as to defy human understanding—they make German history into *an unmasterable past*, in the phrase of Charles Maier.<sup>16</sup>

Historians have troubled over how to relate the Third Reich to the rest of modern German history. If, because of its moral enormity, we insist on the abnormality of genocide, are we not making it inexplicable as the product of human deeds? If, however, we make genocide into simply another event in German history, are we really taking seriously its moral enormity?<sup>17</sup> Legal categories and methods for determining responsibility fail. Even the lines demarcating perpetrators, victims, and witnesses break down in this context. This situation is exacerbated as the generation of those who experienced the Third Reich passes away and as a third postwar generation begins to question whether they too should bear the burden of the Nazi past.

The meaning of responsibility in light of the Third Reich is neither a purely academic question nor a question for Germans only. The Holocaust is the paradigmatic case of a system of mass destruction that absurdly drew victims, resisters, and perpetrators into its deadly logic of irresponsibility.<sup>18</sup>

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16 Charles Maier, *The Unmasterable Past: History, Holocaust and German National Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988); s. a. Saul Friedlander, *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the "Final Solution"* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992).

17 For a discussion of these issues by a liberal defender of the Enlightenment, see Jürgen Habermas, *The New Conservatism: Cultural Criticism and the Historians' Debate*, trans. Shier-ry Weber Nicholsen (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1989); and Habermas, *A Berlin Republic: Writings on Germany*, trans. Steven Rendall (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997).

18 Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and The Holocaust* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1989);



For historians, this book may offer new insight into the “ontological” origins of this problem, in that we link dynamics in genocidal societies to analogous ones within the operation of selfhood. Modern German histories, as well as the histories of many other modern societies, are filled with examples of such dynamics. We can neither escape nor let go of the Holocaust because these potentialities are still with us.

This persistence challenges our sense of responsibility. Genocide, starvation, oppression, exploitation, prejudice, dehumanization—we want no part in them ourselves and want to find ways to prevent them from happening to others. If our conversations with our students and the wider public are any measure, you share these intentions. There are spoilers, of course, who actually prefer to use violence to solve problems;<sup>19</sup> they are obviously not our audience for a book on historical responsibility. The problem is that most of us struggle to figure out what we can do in order *not* to get drawn into these systems of violence, and we often find ourselves lacking adequate answers.

Exercising responsibility in history is a seemingly overwhelming task, as any German could attest. It is as if we are caught in a condition where being responsible in the present requires us to take responsibility for the past as well. But how can we do this? Unable to restore life to those killed by terror or genocide, how can we ever render justice to them? This situation makes us doubt that their demands can ever be satisfied. If, however, we cannot take responsibility for the past, how can we ever hope to act responsibly in the present? What can any one of us actually do to stop the violence?

### *Our Approach*

Greek myths present us with two different models for thinking through the problem of responsible selfhood. On the one hand, we have Prometheus whose crime of hubris leaves him passive: chained to a rock, a victim of buzzards who daily peck out his liver. On the other hand, we have Sisyphus who was condemned to spend eternity rolling a boulder up a hill. We are drawn to Sisyphus because his rock is his task and not just his condition.

The labor of Sisyphus involves not only struggling to move the rock up the slope but also to watch it roll back down and have to begin his work over and over again. His tale reminds us that our rock of responsibility is always waiting for us. It cannot be avoided. Neither can we delude ourselves that we will ever succeed in keeping it in its place—that is, in the past.

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Lawrence L. Langer, *Versions of Survival: The Holocaust and the Human Spirit* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1982).

19 Stephen John Stedman, “Spoiler Problems in Peace Processes,” *International Security* 22/2 (1997): 5-53.

The labors of Sisyphus capture the Germans' struggle to deal with the Nazi past, or *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. We use the German Sisyphus as a figure for our work to understand the nature of historical responsibility. Camus tells us:

The gods had condemned Sisyphus to ceaselessly rolling a rock to the top of a mountain, whence the stone would fall back of its own weight. They had thought with some reason that there is no more dreadful punishment than futile and hopeless labor.

Dealing with the Nazi past can certainly feel like a futile and hopeless labor. And yet Camus finishes his essay ironically. He demands of the reader: "One must imagine Sisyphus happy."<sup>20</sup> How was this possible for Camus's Sisyphus? How could it be possible for the German Sisyphus? And what can it possibly mean for us as a model for cultivating a historically responsible self?

Before we go any further in exploring these questions, a word of warning from Camus. "Myths are made for the imagination to breathe life into them."<sup>21</sup> Myths encourage subversive reinterpretations by the reader. So it is only fitting that a chapter on myths has its own non-conformist logic. It is not your typical introduction; but then again Germans probably did not top your list of successful models of historical responsibility either. The Third Reich has cast its pall over Germany and German Studies for decades; it is next to impossible to laud successes in light of so many failures. This chapter is more akin to a political fairy tale. In it, we read historical facts through a mythic text to winnow out of the complex history of German memory a model for an on-going engagement with the Nazi past. The pay-off, we hope, will be a better understanding of how to cultivate a responsible self.

Our approach is existential. Academic readers tend to expect analyses that emphasize the beginnings and endings of stories. Scholars are trained to use introductory and concluding chapters to abstract truth claims out of everyday details. A chapter about myths has to be more self-critical. We offer you no Archimedean point before, above, or beyond everyday life from which to observe it in safety. We need to provide you with some background to the events in our story that you may or may not already know. We do so, however, in the recognition that we are all embedded in a story already in progress.

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20 Camus, "Myth," 88, 91.

21 Camus, "Myth," 89.

## Myths of the Self

We have inherited from the Enlightenment and Romanticism mythic constructions of the self as a *heroic individual*. Built into our respective academic disciplines of historical, literary, philosophical, and theological criticism, the tropes of the historical subject are not simply *master narratives*: that is, overarching tropes that frame the ways in which individual stories are told, based on the perspective of the powerful.<sup>22</sup> They are also *narratives of mastery*. To be a historical subject is to exercise the authority of a heroic individual over oneself, others, and one's circumstances.

These narratives of mastery contributed to the political tragedies of the twentieth century by legitimizing particularly violent modes of being, behaving, and believing. Here we are criticizing the specific case of the Aryan *Übermensch*, or superior type of human being, who served as the protagonist in both the Nazi revolution and its genocidal war to conquer *Lebensraum*, or living space. We also see the cultivation of mastery operating across the political spectrum in much of modern German lives and letters.

In many respects, we are reasserting a familiar postmodern critique of modern reason. This critique perceives reason to be infected by violence thanks to the way it seeks to eliminate difference.<sup>23</sup> To be rationally responsible is to master a situation in a quest for a kind of control that seeks to eradicate whatever resists mastering in its stubborn otherness. In the story we will now tell, we want to draw your attention to how the violence of mastery is built into the way we understand what it means to do history and live historically.

### Progress

The nineteenth century was characterized by attempts to render history as an academic discipline "scientific."<sup>24</sup> This professionalization was accomplished in two major ways. In the *historicist* approach, history was defined as an empirical science reliant on a critical method to uncover the facts of the past the way it "actually was." The historian was responsible for integrating these facts into coherent, meaningful, and allegedly objective narratives. In the *hermeneutic*

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22 Konrad H. Jarausch and Michael Geyer, *Shattered Past: Reconstructing German Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

23 Herculine Barbin, *Being the Recently Discovered Memoirs of a Nineteenth-Century French Hermaphrodite*, introd. Michel Foucault, trans. Richard McDougall (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980); Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1977); Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (New York: Vintage Books, 1988).

24 Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1995).