

## BOOK REVIEW

*Executing Justice: The Moral Meaning of the Death Penalty*

(Lloyd Steffen, 2006)

Wipf & Stock, Eugene OR.

Reviewed by John Barnes

Lloyd Steffen is a University Chaplain, Professor and Chair of the Religious Studies Department at Lehigh University Bethlehem Pennsylvania. He has written books on Life Choice; Abortion and the power of religion to either restrain or promote violence.

This book is important to those of us concerned with rising levels of crime and those concerned with a growing number of inmates facing execution. The book is also useful for those teaching and studying ethics. The book comprises a Preface; Nine chapters; Notes (in place of a reference list) and an Index.

Details of the US criminal justice system are explained and the fact that some US states maintain capital punishment provisions for aggravated murder; though these are rarely enforced.

The true case of an innocent man (Willie Darden) who was jailed for many years and ultimately executed in the electric chair is discussed in detail with many instances of perversion of justice identified.

Steffen then considers capital punishment from the perspective of Utilitarian ethics of Jeremy Bentham and John Stewart Mill both of whom favored the execution of murderers. In fact, late in life Bentham changed his position on the issue.

Another Utilitarian John Locke's position on capital punishment is also discussed and he too favored capital punishment in cases of aggravated murder. Interestingly Locke worked hard and was successful in reducing the large number of crimes (170 at the time) which attracted capital punishment sentences during his lifetime.

An extensive study of the philosophy of Immanuel Kant which focusses on Duties and Rights follows. Steffen incorporates comments by present day philosophers of Kantian ethics who take both a supportive and a retractive position on Kant's original philosophy, especially regarding capital punishment.

Steffen's approach in discussing these earlier philosophies is balanced throughout. He then advances his own theory of A Just Retribution for Murder. In the best of academic form Steffen then proceeds to rebut it through testing via practice and theory.

As a teacher of religion Steffen then discusses the role of religion and Christianity in forming attitudes to capital punishment both historically and currently.

This book deserves careful reading and reflection for two reasons. It discusses an emotionally charged issue namely the death penalty and it clearly demonstrates an even-handed approach when discussing competing theories even one's own theory. Doctoral and master's level students can learn valuable lessons from that approach when writing their theses and dissertations.

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