Robert Kane
Ethics and the Quest for Wisdom.
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How should philosophers seek the truth about the right and the good? The approach of the ancient philosophers might be characterized thus: in the pursuit of wisdom, philosophers should discuss and think about what is good and what is right. Robert Kane agrees with this approach, and he believes it to be the key for determining what has value today. This wide-ranging book provides a singular way of coming to answers about morality, about values, and about the good life.

Living in the modern world, Kane argues, poses difficulties to philosophers that were not present in the ancient world. Two such difficulties are the plurality of value systems that we know exist alongside ours and the uncertainty we face when trying to come to know what is objectively valuable. Kane uses these challenges as a springboard for his unique approach to questions of morality and value.

We are invited to think of a situation in which people of different outlooks come together for a retreat. Each of the parties involved believes their view is correct. They come together to convince others of their views and to listen to others make their case. Such a retreat will bring all the participants to confront the plurality of ethical outlooks head on. Kane believes that the described retreat, and the kind of discussion that must be had to move ethical thought forward, provides the basis for overcoming plural ethical outlooks, as well as our uncertainty about overcoming them. This central idea of the book is summed up by him: 'Inquiry into the truth about ethical matters and the nature of the good life must involve *practical engagement in the world*, including engagement with others. But such practical engagement, if it is to yield ethical insight, must be *part of an overall search for wisdom*, in the sense of a search for what is *objectively* good and right and hence should be recognized as good and right from every point of view, not merely what is recognized as good or right for oneself or from one's own point of view' (20).

The kind of thought experiment behind this will be familiar. Imagining people getting together to determine what is moral is in the contractarian tradition. But it is the fusion of ideal contract conditions with real-world considerations that gives Kane's argument its distinctive force. The real-world considerations come into play at several points. Having the participants of the retreat arriving at a final agreement for living is not the only aim. Rather, the participants must come to a certain agreement to even continue the discussion of outlooks. And what is necessary for doing that is a commitment to being open to others' views. We find out what is moral by asking whether or not a given action will involve treating a person with openness, that is, being open to their way of life. If an action doesn't allow for treating another participant's way of life with openness, then such an action is considered a breakdown of the 'moral sphere', 'a sphere in which all persons can be *treated with openness* by all others in the sense of *being allowed to pursue and realize their desired ends or purposes... without interference*' (17).

Imagine that Jones assails Smith. That would be an example of a breakdown of the moral sphere. Its consideration sets the stage for a crucial step in Kane's moral argument. We might think that openness commits us to letting Smith and Jones work out their differences. And some might hesitate to stop Jones, for by doing so we wouldn't be open to Jones's values. Jones obviously values assaulting Smith. Kane argues that to maintain the ideal of openness, other retreat participants have to make a choice. They can either stop Jones or let Jones assault Smith. What they *cannot* do is be open to both Jones's plans and Smith's plans. Why not? Because Smith's plans don't involve being assaulted by anyone. This justifies our stopping Jones, by force if necessary, out of our commitment to the ideal of openness. One insightful element of Kane's approach here is to consider not just actions but plans as well. For assessing plans is necessary in order to prevent future violations of the moral sphere, a point overlooked by those taking a relativistic outlook.

There are other ways in which a commitment to practical engagement supports Kane's case. On the side of values and the good life, he invites us to think about the grounds on which we should accept other people's views on such matters. One factor often ignored in recent ethical thought is how the value systems of individual agents work out in practice. Each of us, and each of the participants in the retreat, is engaged in 'value experiments' on a small scale and in what Mill described as 'experiments in living' on a larger scale. What is a value experiment? A career is a value experiment, 'as is a marriage, a vacation, a party, a date, a fishing trip with old friends, a business enterprise, a research project, an economic policy, a political program, and so on' (77). Everything we do, it seems, is a value experiment. This is another point on which Kane signals his commitment to a way of determining what is right and good that is at once empirical and that would have been natural to ancient philosophers.

Kane's theory of dimensions of value is the part of his system the widest variety of ethicists will embrace. The modern focus on explanatory reduction led classical utilitarianism to regard pleasure as the value to which all others can be reduced. At the beginning of the 20th century, it was thought that all values could be reduced to a non-natural good. More recently, it seems that frustration with the options for value theory has led to there being no clear candidate for explaining value and to many ethicists sidestepping the issue. Kane's focus is not on explaining value but, once again, on determining how values connect with practical engagement. He claims there are four dimensions of value. Dimension one is experiential, and it includes such phenomena as pleasures and pains. The second dimension involves activities and attachments. An example of the first would be writing a philosophy paper. A friendship would an example of an attachment. Moving from the first dimension of value to the second, Kane tells us, 'value becomes more objective, and less subjective' (80). The third dimension includes pursuit of excellences or virtues in practices we engage in. The fourth and final value dimension covers 'worth that should be recognized by everyone from every point of view' (95).

Three points are worth briefly noting about Kane's dimensions of value. First, the claim is made that each dimension that is higher than others overrides those beneath it. So an attachment, such as a friendship, should override a pleasure, no matter how intense. The value dimensions, in this way, provide decision priorities. Second, value theorists of all stripes can make use of Kane's value hierarchy. Hedonists, for example, will agree that a prospective

pleasure that threatens a friendship ought not to be pursued. But on the explanatory side, they will explain why this is so in terms of the greater long-term pleasures of friendship over a transitory pleasurable experience. The third and most crucial thing to note is that establishing the fourth value dimension is tantamount to providing the values which all of the participants in the retreat could consider worthy of pursuit.

There are a number of things to which opponents might object in the way Kane lays out his system. But if one remains convinced throughout Kane's discussions of morality, values and the good life, then the discussion of rival normative systems will only further cement that conviction. This is one of the stronger and best substantiated parts of the book. The discussions of the shortcomings of Kantianism, intuitionism, consequentialism and different contract theories are thorough and well thought out. Realistically, however, it is likely that members of each of these schools will only find criticisms of the other schools fully effective.

The general argument of *Ethics and the Quest for Wisdom* has many things to recommend it. But it seems that in Kane's quest to avoid a priori options for explaining moral knowledge, a question hangs over the entire procedure: why think that consideration of Kane's retreat explains why humans who *don't* participate in the retreat ought to not assault others? In the quest for wisdom and for practical engagement with the world, it seems we have to ask it. This book is remarkable for the way it ties together its different parts, as it is remarkable for making sure that we see the connections. Given Kane's meticulous and detailed approach, we are in as good a position as possible to see if his system answers the necessary question just asked.

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