

John Kekes

Enjoyment: The Moral Significance of Styles of Life.

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With his characteristic clear and unadorned style, John Kekes, professor emeritus of philosophy at University of Albany, presents us with a particularist ethics based on what he calls ‘styles of life’. Making his case against universalist, ‘moralist’ ethical theories, and for a particularist, ‘realist’ ethics that takes individual lives and circumstances into account, he illuminates his theory with a summary of the lives of six actual and literary characters. This is a thoughtful, insightful, and personable take on a subject that too often concentrates solely on dry argumentation.

Kekes’ ethics of moderation and balance is an elaboration of Character Ethics and Stoicism. ‘Styles of life’, in Kekes’ sense, are not so much *what* one does with one’s life but *how* one lives and makes life decisions. A style of life is the measure of control we exert on the decisions we make in pursuit of our deepest concerns. Theories are often best set in opposition to competing theories, and the point of contrast here is what Kekes, rather simplistically, calls ‘moralism’, by which he means theories—for instance, the categorical imperative, the greatest happiness principle, and the ten commandments—that appeal primarily to reason and are based on overriding rules or principles. What these ‘universalist’ theories miss, according to Kekes, is the acknowledgement that individual lives are subject to different circumstances, circumstances that should be taken into account when determining how one’s life is to be lived.

If the main theme of the book is how to achieve profound and meaningful enjoyment in one’s life, then the major subtheme is that literature is the best way to learn how to live one’s life, by example from the lives of (real and fictional) others. Literature—broadly construed to include autobiography, poetry, religion, history, novels, biography, philosophy, etc.—enables us to gain instruction from a wide array of moral agents in diverse and complex circumstances. According to Kekes, our own friends and acquaintances tend to live lives as confused and erratic as our own. Literature allows us to peek into highly complex lives, with more vivid detail and concreteness, and derive inspiration and innovation in patterning our own styles of life. Readers of philosophers like Martha Nussbaum and John Gibson will recognize similar themes in their work.

The marrow of the book is contained in the second, third and fourth parts. Part 2, ‘Styles of Life’, makes the case that one’s manner of carrying out one’s life projects determines enjoyment, the amount of which is the main indicator of a good life. A good style of life is held in place on one side by how well one expresses one’s individuality, and on the other by how well one engages in what Kekes calls ‘personal evaluation’. Individuality develops to the extent that one’s projects express what one cares about

most. Personal evaluation is achieved by gauging how enjoyable one's life is. In Part 3, 'The Evaluation of Styles of Life', Kekes goes into more detail about how personal evaluations can be justified, the place of styles of life in morality in general, and the proper status of reason in developing one's style of life. Lest one think that 'personal evaluation' sounds like a relativist endeavor, Kekes holds that even though enjoyment is the standard we should use to determine how our lives are going, the judgments others make about the coherence of our goals keeps the process from becoming too subjective and unhinged from reality. In contrast to writers like John McDowell, who argue that one's standard can only be judged against one's form of life, which can vary from community to community, Kekes argues that there are universal needs that require satisfaction. Such basic needs in this *universal dimension* include education, the absence of terror and self-loathing, protection against crime and illness, and the like. There can of course be conflicts between this universal dimension (i.e. basic needs), the *social dimension* (relationships to others), and the *personal dimension* (individual goals), and it is precisely these conflicts that make Kekes' three-pronged morality an individual and particular matter.

The fourth part of the book, 'Some Particular Styles of Life', contains Kekes' description of six characters, fictional and actual, who exemplify six lives, three good and three bad. Kekes' purpose is to show 'through them how some lives can be said to succeed or fail when evaluated from the moral point of view' (250). The three examples of a good life demonstrate order and critical thoughtfulness. Madame Goesler, a character in some of Anthony Trollope's novels, displays integrity, in that she is realistic in her attitude to life, she doesn't allow her feelings to cloud her judgment, and her attitude is enduring, in that her attitude is dependably expressed in action. David Hume's life displays reflectiveness, in that he cultivates a philosophical manner and temper in such a way as to acknowledge the adversities while at the same time moderating the passions that are responses to those adversities. Michel de Montaigne serves as an example of 'self-direction'. Montaigne developed a well-ordered mind that was responsive to outside tribulations while keeping a hard core of independence. All three examples of a bad life reveal disordered and incoherent styles of life: the passions out of proportion to one's true interests in the case of Mishima (a Japanese author who killed himself spectacularly); the over-the-top moralism of the Greek politician Marcus Porcius Cato; and the overly 'exuberant' style of artist Benvenuto Cellini, whose attitude and manner were inconsistent with his desire for fame and fortune.

Kekes' book is very pleasurable to read, and his points are often enlightening, though I do have two complaints. First, Kekes' criticisms of the moral theories he disagrees with tend to be a bit too crude and uncharitable. For instance, in reference to Kantianism, he says that a man would not know what action to perform unless 'he already knew what everyone should do' (265). But according to the categorical imperative, one learns what one should do precisely *when* one asks what everyone *could* do in a given situation. So Kantianism is interpreted to insist that a moral agent must

already have a moral choice in mind even before entering the decision making process. This is an oversimplification of Kantian theory. Second, as with all theories that emphasize *how* one should live, rather than *what* one should do (e.g., virtue ethics, Kekes' particularism, etc.), success in one's goals in life is of minor importance here. In one place Kekes even explicitly writes that 'there is no necessary connection between the enjoyment of life and the success of one's projects ... [A] life may be enjoyable even if its projects are not successful' (50) . This is certainly overstated, and implies that goals may not matter at all. Is it really possible for someone whose projects are *never* successful nevertheless to find enjoyment in life? While it may be true that there is no logically necessary connection between the success of one's goals and the level of one's enjoyment in life, I think it extremely unlikely that profound life enjoyment could in fact be had without at least *some* success.

Nevertheless, *Enjoyment*, suitable for both researchers and undergraduates seeking practical advice about how to go about living in the real world, is a welcome addition to the sub-discipline sometimes referred to as Philosophy of Life. It is an engaging book that offers many fair criticisms of several major moral theories that tend to overemphasize reason. Many of these ethical theories can handle clear cut moral choices; what is in short supply are theories recommending how ordinary people should live happy and satisfying lives. *Enjoyment* is the kind of book that can enhance one's life, as well as bring knowledge to it.

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