

**John Kekes.** *Human Predicaments and What to Do about Them*. University of Chicago Press 2016. 256 pp. \$40.00 USD (Hardcover 9780226359458).

Moral philosophers appear to face a dilemma: they can pursue a rigorous system of ethical concepts and principles, but risk losing touch with moral life; or they can take their turn in ordinary debate, offering abbreviated arguments, but without any special claim on the attention of their listeners. After all, a philosopher's authority derives from the virtues of rationality, and every gain in precision or rigour makes an argument less accessible to a broader audience. Philosophers who know this, and yet follow Socrates in speaking to their fellow citizens, must possess courage and imagination. We find evidence of both in John Kekes' book, *Human Predicaments and What to Do about Them*, which (despite its unsocratic title) takes up this ancient challenge of reasoning with a 'nonspecialist' audience (7). The result is a deep and deeply enjoyable discussion, even if (like Plato's early dialogues) it offers few substantial conclusions – a non-trivial, but forgivable, flaw in a book that aims to tell us 'what to do'.

What is it exactly that we are meant to do something *about*? The book's title announces Kekes' interest in the diversity of moral scenarios we find ourselves in. There may be such a thing as a single, shared human nature or condition, but it must be encountered in its many concrete instantiations. Kekes writes about the Samurai, the Spanish conquistadors, and the Shilluk of Sudan, always in order to provide a revealing contrast for 'adults living in affluent, democratic societies in North America and Europe' (1). The book opens with questions you won't find in the letters of Hernan Cortes, but could hear tomorrow on *Dr. Phil*: 'Would you say that all in your life is going as you want, that you want it to continue without significant changes, and that you feel good about it?' (1). But Kekes aims to deepen these questions by exploring the full range of human experience, as it is shaped by the intellectual challenges of our time (widespread uncertainty, boredom, loss of spiritual meaning, etc.). He approaches such themes, familiar from anguished existentialist writings, with characteristic caution, moderation, and independence of mind, always suspicious of the temptation toward purity and the illusion of moral certainty. For instance, in his chapter on the existentialist theme of authenticity ('Unavoidable Hypocrisy'), he excuses criminals for 'misrepresent[ing] their record in order to get a job' (168), and teachers for hiding their real views about their students (166). These claims are meant as examples of contextually sensitive moral evaluation, and Kekes' view is that deeper understanding of human diversity and limitations will reveal the wisdom in such judgments, and improve our chances of living reasonably and well.

The book is broken up evenly into twelve chapters, but admits of division into two main parts. The first three chapters present Kekes' general outlook, which the remaining chapters then develop in connection with particular themes (e.g. 'The Force of Fate', 'The Danger of Innocence', 'The Prevalence of Evil'). In Chapters 1 to 3, Kekes argues that we can 'understand and respond to a particular problem of life reasonably, but only by considering the context-dependent conflicts, choices, and possibilities that give rise to that problem' (5). We learn that tension in one's 'evaluative framework' is normal and should not be automatically treated as a reason to revise our beliefs (9). In other words, the unexamined life *can* be worth living – indeed, 'it might be better to live with some conflicts than with some truths that self-knowledge might reveal' (12). More surprisingly, we might even have reason to 'silence imprudent advocates of self-knowledge', like Socrates (18). Kekes' unacknowledged motto is thus not 'know thyself' but 'cope' (6-7, 16, 26, 44, 67, 85, 106, 127, 139, 215, 227, etc.). This is partly because excessive reflection can destroy conviction, and the conservative Kekes' principal fear is that someone's evaluative framework might collapse or be

abandoned altogether (69, 87). Rather than risk such a catastrophe, we should accept that we sometimes 'knowingly have to act contrary to being the kind of person we think we should be' (30), since only fanatics have unconditional commitments (30); and fanaticism is an unacceptable perversion of human nature, whether its aims in a given instance are noble or base.

The remaining nine chapters take up these and other themes, elaborating on them and illustrating them with examples drawn from anthropology, classical tragedy, and historical biography. To take a representative example, Kekes returns to fanaticism in Chapter Seven ('The Divided Self'), in connection with the French philosopher Simone Weil, who is presented as a paradigm of the undivided self. Her conviction and purity of soul are often admired, but not by Kekes, who regards her as self-destructive and 'spiritually deluded' (121). Every self needs, of course, some measure of internal unity, but doubt and diversity of commitment permit the flexibility necessary for coping with a changing world. Living with permanent uncertainty and conflict is hard, however, and calls for 'negative capability' – an idea Kekes borrows from the poet John Keats, who used it to describe Shakespeare's extraordinary manner of 'being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason' (quoted in Kekes, 125). We need to develop this capability because 'not even the deepest understanding can solve [our] problems once and for all, no matter how hard and reasonably we try' (xi).

This philosophical humility is all very well, but then we must remember that Kekes' book is not called *Human Predicaments, and How to Be in Uncertainties, Mysteries and Doubts*. Instead, it promises advice about what to do, and yet we are repeatedly told that no such advice is available. Perhaps for this reason, some chapters circle around their theme without advancing any clear line of argument (Chapter 4: 'The Force of Fate'), and at least one chapter has hardly any distinctive theme at all (the inauspiciously titled Chapter 8: 'The Complexities of Problems'). Other chapters end so weakly that one begins to wonder how useful Kekes' detailed examination of historical examples has really been. Of course, he has his reasons for being against blueprints (107), formulas (170), and ideal theories (224), but the conclusions he offers in their place are sometimes at least as banal and sterile as the most abstract moral theory. We learn that humans can be good or bad (149); that hypocrisy can be good or bad (164); that we 'should favor social arrangements that encourage the expression of good will' (213); that the problem of boredom can be met by 'choosing engagements we think are genuinely valuable' (191); and that 'distinguishing between reasonable and unreasonable fear and excessive or deficient prudence is and will remain for us a serious human predicament' (88). In case this appears unduly harsh, Kekes himself confesses that he rarely has much in the way of guidance to offer: 'We can only do as well as we can in unpropitious circumstances that we have not chosen. It may be felt that this answer is feeble and that we need something more robust. This is an understandable sentiment, but it cannot be met. The best we can do is the best we can do' (171). If you don't find this helpful, you can always tune in to *Dr. Phil*.

If the most serious complaint about the book were that it offers less guidance than advertised, Kekes might reply that we should blame not him but life itself when there are no easy answers. A deeper line of criticism relates to the spectre of ethical relativism that emerges from Kekes' commendable and open-minded engagement with cultures very different from our own. While he intentionally and understandably steers clear of abstruse metaethics, the few comments he makes raise as many questions as they resolve, and a careful reader will inevitably wonder whether the various things he says add up to a defensible position. Kekes does not defend relativism, or at least not 'naïve relativism' (205), and he does not hesitate to make moral claims, usually justifying them in plainly consequentialist terms (62-3, 117, 122, 154, 209). But his commentary on Hindu and Balinese culture, in the chapter on 'Difficult Choices', points in a more relativistic direction. We are told that while 'we do not have to accept or admire' these societies, which have features (e.g. the

treatment of Untouchables) that we find abhorrent, we can still gain insight from studying them. So far, so good. But Kekes goes on to say that learning about these societies helps us to 'realize that the ancient ideal of eudaimonia that all reasonable human beings are supposed to aim at is mistaken. For Hindus aim at purity and the Balinese at faithfully enacting the roles into which they were born, regardless of their eudaimonia' (42). Further, the mere existence of the Hindu and Balinese culture is apparently enough to demolish the two great modern traditions of western ethics, since people in these societies, we are told, do not believe that reason requires us to obey the categorical imperative or that we should worry about the greatest happiness for the greatest number.

It is a lucky thing for this argument that it is addressed to nonspecialists, since your average moral philosopher would not take it very seriously. But even if, as I suppose, its appearance here signals an *unacceptable* tension in Kekes' outlook, this would give us no good reason to ignore such a unique and insightful book.

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