Book Review: Moral Wisdom And Good Lives

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Contemporary philosophers devote little attention to the very subject that the name of their discipline suggests would preoccupy them most—wisdom. Perhaps their reluctance to tackle the subject stems from widespread doubts about the religious and metaphysical worldviews in which accounts of wisdom are frequently embedded. *Moral Wisdom and Good Lives*, by John Kekes redresses this neglect by offering us an insightful, scholarly and, in the final analysis, flawed account of moral wisdom. By returning to classical Greek sources, Kekes develops a cumulative argument for an account of moral wisdom that is eudaimonistic—centering on good lives for human beings; pluralistic—recognizing incompatible yet equally viable accounts of the good life and moral wisdom; secular—naturalistic in its metaphysics, and opposed to the idea of cosmic justice; individualistic—grounded in the individual’s personal conception of a good life; and agonistic—realized only amidst struggle, much effort, and without guarantees of success.

Agents are morally wise, on Kekes’s view, if they have four key traits. First, they must have a reasonable conception of a good life. Second, they must have a suitably rich general knowledge of the goods and evils present in their own character and in the world in which character formation takes place. Self-knowledge of our enduring habits and behaviors is therefore indispensable to moral wisdom. Third, they must bring this general knowledge of good and evil to bear on their evaluations of the real-life situations in which they are forced to act. Finally, morally wise persons must exercise sound judgment in deciding how best to negotiate the morally difficult and complex situations life presents to our efforts to pursue the good life.

While historical and cultural studies reveal a plurality of conceptions of the good life, Kekes nevertheless claims that not just any conception will do. “Moral wisdom requires that these conceptions should not merely seem good to us but that they should be genuinely good” (p. 12). Nature imposes certain invariable constraints on any conception of a good life. At a minimum, any conception must acknowledge the necessity of our satisfying the “primary goods” that are unvarying among humans. But once requirements such as food, intellectual and psychological growth, and a stable social order are accounted for, there is room for tremendous variation among “secondary goods,” such as friends, choice of profession, surroundings, long-term plans, and other factors contributing to a good life. For example, some persons may construe a good life as one dedicated to the polis and to social activism while others may contend that we achieve the best life through contemplation and monastic isolation. A part of moral wisdom consists in the “reciprocal adjustments” we make between our conception of a good life, and the secondary values made available by our traditions and circumstances. We make adjustments by “changing ourselves, by adjusting our conceptions of a good life and character to the world, rather than changing the world” (p. 209). We also make such adjustments by
learning to exercise control over our appetites and behavior so as to bring them into conformity with the good life as we construe it.

But moral wisdom is not easy to cultivate, and significant obstacles of both internal and external sorts await those who put forth the effort. Kekes has a profound understanding of the barriers that routinely stymie and even defeat our growth in wisdom. Unlike Socrates, Kekes believes that not all attempts to grow in wisdom are guaranteed success, nor are those who achieve a measure of wisdom guaranteed happiness. Socrates, says Kekes, failed to appreciate the ways in which the adversities of contingency, conflict, and evil can thwart our pursuit of moral wisdom. Kekes devotes the bulk of his book to explaining these adversities along with the steps one can take to try and overcome them.

Contingency, conflict, and evil, though not insurmountable, constitute "permanent adversities," enduring features of the human condition. By contingency, Kekes means our lack of control over the external and internal goods necessary for achieving our conceptions of a good life. External goods obtain when states of affairs in the world and the actions of others coincide with our pursuit of a good life. This does not always happen. Nature and society seem to conspire against our pursuit of the good life by overwhelming us with serious handicaps, disabling sickness, sub par or debilitated cognitive, emotional and volitional capacities, and living conditions marked by strife, terror, and injustice. Conflict too poses a barrier to our pursuit of a good life. Not only does conflict in the form of disagreements about the good arise between people—reasonable people can devote themselves to God, their ethnic group, social activism, or the will to power—but we realize that each of us must select from among the genuine yet incompatible goods our circumstances make available to us. The problem is compounded, according to Kekes, because we lack any sort of method or standard by which to adjudicate between the different goods available to us, with the consequence that we regret the loss of goods we might have had but which were incompatible with the ones chosen. And if these barriers are not formidable enough, we also face our own evil. "We often deliberately do not do what we know is good, and we also deliberately choose to do what we know is evil in preference to what we know is good" (p. 49).

A chief task of morally wise persons, then, is to gain as much control as we can over the permanent adversities which threaten our realization of a good life as we conceive it. While complete control will always elude us, Kekes nevertheless believes that three kinds of reflection allow us to gain a measure of control. The first mode of reflection ingredient in wisdom, according to Kekes, is moral imagination, by which we enlarge our understanding of different desires and courses of action that are each compatible with our vision of a good life. Though adversity may frustrate some of our desires, our power to imagine alternative possibilities, to widen our visions of the good life, and to see other paths consistent with our vision of the good life, allows us to cope with momentary setbacks and get on with our quest. Through self-knowledge, the second important mode of reflection, we aim to understand the strengths and weaknesses of our own characters, and how we might transform their enduring patterns of desires, capacities, values, and motivations (interestingly Kekes omits beliefs from the list of
items comprising our character) so as to realize our conception of the good life. Self-knowledge, as Kekes depicts it, requires us to develop a coherent interpretation of the various aspects of our characters so as to make them consistent with our ideas of the good life. Once again, reality as well as persistent unpleasant features of our own characters impose constraints on the interpretations we generate. Our point of view about ourselves must always be measured against the "human point of view." That point of view that "is necessarily shared by all normal and mature human beings. It is a point of view imposed on us by our nature, and so it is universally human, historically constant, and culturally invariant" (p. 138).

To appreciate the third and final mode of reflection characteristic of moral wisdom, "moral depth," we must again consider the permanent adversities that Kekes believes obstruct our every effort to learn about and control our characters and the environments in which they take shape. Again these adversities are both internal and external. In our world the wicked often prosper; slumlords get rich, crooked businessmen and politicians squirrel away fortunes in foreign banks with impunity, and oppressors of widows and orphans lie down at night and sleep like babes. And the morally virtuous, thinks Kekes, have no assurance that their pursuit of moral wisdom and a good life will meet with success. "Nothing we can do will alter permanent adversities. Once we have moral depth we know this to be the human condition. . . . But if we understand that conditions beyond our control endanger our aspiration to live good lives, then we can, to some extent, control our attitude toward this regrettable fact" (p. 174). "We recognize that the good may suffer and the wicked may flourish, even in the long run, even when all things are considered. . . . [W]e do not believe in cosmic justice . . . that there is a moral order in reality guaranteeing that lives of moral worth will be satisfying and that wicked lives will not be" (p. 183). "Contingency, conflict and evil may derail us no matter what we do" (p. 217). And herein lies moral depth: that we take a realistic and mature attitude toward adversity that allows us to continue struggling. Moral wisdom requires that we lose whatever innocence or illusions—here Kekes includes religious perspectives—that might cause us to ignore or downplay the extent of permanent adversities in our lives.

But why should we not succumb to hopelessness? Why continue struggling toward a life that may never come to fruition? Kekes’s answer to this question prompts my first objection. He says we must adopt a tough-minded, hard-nosed realism about the world and its unrelenting obstacles to our happiness, and adjust our attitudes accordingly. "What is left is not much, but it is enough to fend off hopelessness" (p. 181). I disagree. Historically, most philosophers have sought motivation for the moral life in notions like a rationally ordered cosmos (the Stoics), or a supernatural source of goodness (Plato), if not in a Deity who is able to rectify this world’s injustices (Kant). Kekes dismisses these moves, referring to them as “succumbing to the transcendental temptation,” a move he labels “a false hope,” “unreasonable,” and “futile.” Yet he nowhere argues for their unreasonableness, nor the possibility that theism possesses superior resources to motivate the moral life. With Hume, Kekes believes that “fellow-feeling” is a natural sentiment arising in the human breast that evolutionary theory can probably
account for. Yet why should we not debunk this natural and widespread sentiment in much the way Freud discredits inclinations to believe in God generated by evolution? Kekes nowhere tells us why this natural sentiment should be indulged while these others should be suppressed.

Few philosophers would deny that Kekes’s four point scheme—a vision of the good life, knowledge of the world in which it is to be pursued, discerning evaluations of our circumstances, and sound judgment about how to act in such circumstances—identifies some of the essential elements of moral wisdom. And most will find illuminating, as I did, Kekes’s insightful analyses of Sophocles’s tragedies as part of his broader discussion of ways our lives fall short of moral wisdom. The book is less illuminating—indeed it contains very little—in its positive suggestions for attaining moral wisdom. We are told, for example, that we must learn to control our “emotional excesses” and “correct our misguided emotional reactions” to the world. But how? What are emotions and how does one go about changing and correcting them? Kekes offers no account of the emotions nor any specific strategies for reshaping them: an unfortunate omission given the centrality of managing the emotions for moral depth. Also, Kekes offers little in the way of logical analyses of the positive traits that comprise a good character. What is generosity, for example? What are its constitutive elements? What range of motives is proper to the virtue? What features distinguish generosity in one moral tradition from generosity in other traditions: e.g., Aristotelian generosity, Stoic, Christian, or Confucian generosity? Kekes’s account of moral wisdom doesn’t provide a detailed analysis of the internal contours of the virtues and vices. Anyone looking for a map of moral wisdom that navigates between the different traditions will be left unsatisfied by this book.

Were Kekes to inquire more deeply into the grammar of the virtues as conceived by Buddhists, Christians, Confucians, Nietzscheans, and other traditions, he might see that he overestimates the power of the universal “human point of view” and natural reason to ground an objective component to moral wisdom and shape our visions of the good life. This is especially relevant for Kekes’s account of justice, which he portrays as the human substitute for a missing divine justice, whereby we endeavor to ensure that people get what they deserve, “so as to decrease the naturally occurring gap between moral worth and satisfaction” (p. 202). But do our contrasting visions of the virtuous life offer sufficient common ground to make closing that gap a real prospect?

Different forms of life not only offer different conceptual analyses of basic human goods, but even when they recognize the same basic goods, they often attribute different levels of importance to them. Our forms of life (Christian, Stoic, Aristotelian, liberal, etc.) not only specify the virtues and vices needed for a successful and fulfilled life, but shape the meanings we impart to them. Gratitude is a Christian virtue but not an Aristotelian one. Nietzsche’s Zarathustra condemns traditional accounts of virtue, especially Christian ones, as “lulling to sleep” and fostering “wretched contentment.” Compassion is conceived of and pursued differently by Stoics and Christians. As a consequence, different traditions conceive of moral wisdom in different and at times incompatible ways. A Nietzschean bent on pursuit of the will to power might grant the indispensability of “primary
goods" for the good life, yet insist that the social order that best promotes them is totalitarian. Stoics in pursuit of *apatheia* tend to depreciate the need for the physical, psychological, and social goods Kekes sees as essential to any reasonable account of the good life. They also insist that the emotions and virtues prized in a Christian conception of wisdom ought to be suppressed. In short, the "human point of view," as Kekes calls it, does not offer a sufficiently objective content to stave off radically incommensurable accounts of moral wisdom and justice. The differences among different virtue traditions jeopardize the prospects for agreement and cooperation that Kekes's account of justice requires.

I found Kekes's book melancholy, at times even grim in its tone, taking on some of the coloration of the Greek tragedies from which he draws so many lessons. "The fact remains," he writes "that permanent adversities may ruin a life no matter how much moral wisdom the person living it has" (p. 223). And when these forces overwhelm us and others we care about, we are supposed to draw comfort from knowing that we did what we could to resist them. Our misfortune is "just the accident of having stumbled into the path of the blind, impersonal, indifferent juggernaut of the natural world" (p. 223). Kekes's book provides a clear contrast to Christian and other religious accounts of moral wisdom, and for that reason contributes importantly to what I hope is a growing literature on the subject.

Due to a typesetting error in our July 1998 issue, the following review was not included in its entirety. The complete review follows below. The Editors sincerely regret the error.


FRANCES & DANIEL HOWARD-SNYDER, Western Washington University & Seattle Pacific University

This volume collects nine essays published by Peter van Inwagen between 1977 and 1995. Part I features, among other things, modal skepticism with respect to ontological arguments and arguments from evil. Part II addresses certain tensions Christians may feel between modern biology, critical studies of the New Testament, and the comparative study of religions, on the one hand, and Christian orthodoxy, on the other. Part III deploys a formal logic of relative identity to model the internal consistency of the orthodox doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation. In what follows, we summarize and reflect on five essays.

"Ontological Arguments" focuses on valid arguments by that name which claim or imply that a necessary, concrete being is possible. But how are we to tell whether necessary existence (N) is compatible with concreteness (C)? Conceptual analysis won't do, says van Inwagen; for, firstly, the compatibility of N and C is not a conceptual matter and, secondly, even if it were, analysis would help no more than it would help settle whether "7777" appears in the decimal expansion of π. Perhaps we should believe N is compatible with C anyway, since the possibility is not conceptually pre-