

Critical Notices

The Roots of Evil. JOHN KEKES. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005. Pp .ix, 261.

This is an ambitious and valuable book. Kekes' aim is to argue, agreeing with a minority of contemporary philosophers which includes this reviewer, that there is a category of evil actions distinct from that of the merely very bad, and to give a general pattern of explanation for such actions. The emphasis is mostly on the second claim. It is a brave claim, since given the enormous variety of kinds of people who do awful things and their enormous variety of motives and character traits, most all-purpose explanations of evil rest on sweeping metaphysical premises. The simplest are explanations in terms of diabolical influence. Kekes' account is metaphysically more subtle, depending on assumptions that could be accepted from a range of philosophical starting points. Moreover, the account accepts the fact that when you look at the immediate motives for evil deeds you find them as varied as those for any other category of action. And that makes the interest of the book: it is an attempt to argue for a fairly sweeping account, on the basis of modest, undogmatic, psychologically plausible assumptions about the human condition.

Kekes begins with a series of case studies of evil actions and their causes: the massacres of the Albigensians, Robespierre and the Jacobin terror in the French revolution, Stangl the camp commandant, Charles Manson, the dirty war in Argentina, a typical psychopath. From these he extracts a series of motivating factors: ideological conviction, blind faith, personal ambition, honor, boredom. He is not claiming that these always lead to evil, or that they are the only causes, but that they are good topics for the beginning of an analysis: why is it that these factors, each sometimes harmless or even admirable, can lead to awful results? Kekes' diagnosis is that these are part of a list of 'passions' that can blind people to the nature of their acts. The argument for this style of explanation is by elimination. Kekes has a scheme that is meant to cover many or most of the alternatives to his account, in which all combinations of the labels 'internal' or 'external' and 'active' or 'passive' are considered. I am not really sure quite what the intended range of the labels is, but in each of the four possibilities Kekes considers a fairly simplistic instance and argues convincingly that it does not give us a satisfying explanation of evil. This leaves the ground clear for his own explanation, on pages 185–194, which is that among the ways people find meaning in their lives are some topics which arouse protective passions which can be turned against others. The fatal combination is an unsatisfactory life, a project of living according to a particular value, and a way in which that value is threatened by some individuals or groups. This combination need not result in evil; we also need a social situation in which the factors that normally inhibit atrocity, either by providing disincentives to wrongdoing or by developing the right kinds of reflection on one's motives, are not present in strong enough form. Given Kekes' emphasis on the role of blind faith and ideology, and lack of self-knowledge, it is not surprising that at several places he comes close to saying that social permission for believing claims that are not well-supported by evidence is a malogenic factor. It is

perhaps also not surprising that he refrains from saying this explicitly. Evil can be produced by varying quantities of these internal and external factors, for example by a strongly malevolent disposition even in the presence of strong social constraints or by a relatively ordinary disposition in the presence of a perverse ideology.

Kekes links his discussion of the motives for evil actions to the responsibility of evil-doers for them. It is no excuse, on his account, when people think their actions are right, or when they did not intend an easily foreseen consequence of their actions. Though for non-evil wrongdoing these factors can sometimes diminish or eliminate a person's responsibility, it is a feature of the concept of evil, according to Kekes, that lack of intention is irrelevant to responsibility. He argues, to my mind not entirely convincingly, that his paradigm evil-doers did not intend many of their atrocities, and insists that we should not take this as a reason for mitigating responsibility. He takes the concept of responsibility as a primitive here, so that he does not address the questions that someone more skeptical about the solidity of the concept might ask about, for example the anti-Albigensian crusaders. How much should our abhorrence of the actions they were causally responsible for lead us to classify them as evil people? How relevant to this is the fact that they had normal human emotions and motives for their time? There are delicate questions here, concerning the concepts of responsibility that, when one is speaking of evil rather than wrong, it is appropriate to apply, and the categorizations of evil-doers that should follow from such ascriptions.

The responsibility of non-pathological people for evils in which they are involved raises the question of wide-spread social evil in which relatively few individuals are motivated by hatred or fanaticism. It is unfortunate that Kekes' discussion of the holocaust focuses mainly on the case of Stangl. Though Stangl is a relatively undemonic figure he played a definitely active and horrible role in his list of horrors. By concentrating on him Kekes avoids Arendt-type issues of the role of conformity, lack of curiosity, patriotism, and good citizenship in permitting evil. It might be helpful to consider the case of slavery, in the ancient world or in the United States, in the course of which many ordinary well-meaning, personally kind people were accomplices in definite evils, as well as many merely very wrong acts. There are deep issues waiting for an enlightening discussion here.

Issues about the banality of the causes of evil are central when we consider ways of evil-proofing society. Kekes makes a number of natural and sensible suggestions on this topic, though we pessimists will not be assured that they are enough to block the variety of routes that people can find around moral awareness. In particular he stresses the value of immersion in the richness of a well-developed culture. It is very important to get the emphasis right here: European and Japanese history do not support much confidence that an old and rich culture gives much immunity. Perhaps it is vital *how* literature and philosophy are taught and disseminated, rather than whether. Which ways?—that is something we need to understand better.

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