

"Kekes: The Conservative in the Middle?"

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Kekes, John. *A Case for Conservatism*.

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Perhaps the most interesting thing about John Kekes' newest book, *A Case for Conservatism*, is that it simultaneously makes one think they too are conservative and that conservatism is obviously false. Kekes accomplishes this by ostensibly taking a middle road approach on key theoretical issues. In this brief commentary, I explain his approach and indicate some shortcomings from a liberal perspective. As will be obvious, Kekes' view is distinctly his own, though aspects of it appear in the historical literature.

Kekes believes there are four fundamental beliefs at the core of conservatism: skepticism, pluralism, traditionalism, and pessimism. Each of these provides a middle ground between two extremes. To understand them, one must understand Kekes' distinction between primary and secondary values and his "three-level conception of political morality" (p. 92).

"Primary values are based on benefits and harms that must count as such in all good lives, ... secondary values derive from benefits and harms that vary with social and individual forms of good lives" (p. 50). Primary values are those goods and evils that derive directly from human nature, be they physiological, psychological, or social. Although there is room for debate about some of the values Kekes includes, at least some are beyond debate: oxygen, nutrition, and rest are goods for any human (p. 51). While "some secondary values are the particular traditional forms in which primary values are interpreted," others "enrich life by representing possibilities beyond the requirements set by primary values" (p. 58; regarding the first sort, one thinks of the "thick"/"thin" distinction).

Primary and secondary values play different roles at each of the three levels of Kekes' political morality. At the "universal" level are conventions required for the protection of primary values; at the "social" level are variable conventions that protect culturally relative secondary values; finally, at the "individual" level are the "limits and possibilities" allowed for by various combinations of available secondary values (p. 93).

Skepticism is a via media between rationalism, defined as a belief that there are universally objective reasons, generally rooted in a metaphysics (p. 28-29), and fideism, defined as a "belief that all forms of reasoning are ultimately based on assumptions that must be accepted on faith" (p. 30; some might call this "subjectivism"). Skepticism offers middle ground by insisting on rationalism only on the universal level (with claims about human nature), so that what objective reasons there are on the social and individual levels are not universal (p. 200).

Pluralism is the via media between absolutism and relativism. Absolutism has a "rationalistic basis" and is the view that any "diversity of values is apparent, not real" (p. 32; some would call this "monism"). Relativists claim that the diversity is real and that "What counts as a value ... depends ... on the consensus of a society" (p. 33; one thinks of Richard Rorty's pragmatism). In contrast, Kekesian pluralists believe "there is a universal and objective standard, but [that] it is applicable only to some values" (p. 34). There are objective facts about primary values and so conventions required to protect them. On the social and individual levels, though, there is a genuine—though limited—plurality of values and so only contingent conventions (p. 192). Given this, Kekes does not foolishly insist that there be only one convention guiding an individual; he recognizes that there may be "several possible conventions [that] ought to guide agents in a particular situation" and so insists that we not blindly accept traditions, but "creatively participate" in them (p. 113). This direct recognition that there are likely to be competing values and conventions

guiding citizens goes some distance toward rapprochement with contemporary cosmopolitan-minded liberals.

Kekes' pluralism seems laudable as it insists on basic universally necessary values and leaves secondary values to the choice of society and individuals. One wonders, though, how seriously to take Kekes on this score when he refuses to grant respect to "such absurdities as ... martial artists in strip malls ... and yogis in gyms" (p. 134). This is only worsened when Kekes defends his refusal by asking if we should respect "racists, anti-Semites, ... paedophiles, ... and so forth" (p. 135). Comparing those on the first list to those on the second is insulting. Of course, Kekes thinks we have to *tolerate* those on the first list; he simply thinks they are alien to our culture and not due *our* respect. On his view, conceptions of the good life are due both toleration and respect in a society only if they conform both to the required and variable conventions of that society; if they violate required conventions they "do not deserve even toleration;" if they "conform to required conventions, but violate the system of variable conventions," they are due toleration but not respect—indeed, "people should be discouraged ... from adopting them" (p. 131-132).

Kekes justifies withholding respect from conceptions of the good life that violate only variable conventions by insisting that any society must limit what is accepted on the social level in order to provide a distinct "moral identity of its own people" (p. 134). In this way, Kekes' conservatism ends up as a provincialism insisting individuals could not lead good lives as cosmopolitans. But Kekes is wrong that "Traditions are to human lives what countries are to the Earth ... [as if] If you leave one, you enter another" (p. 209). I need not leave one tradition to enter another and I need not be in only one at a time (as Kekes insists on p. 39). Moreover, many have argued convincingly that good lives require only cultural contexts and not particular cultures with particular identities. Maintaining a distinct moral identity does not justify failing to respect secondary values.

Kekes argues that the third core conservative belief, *traditionalism*, operates as an appropriate via media between individual autonomy and social authority. Autonomy is a constituent of many good lives, but Kekes rightly denies that “a life cannot be good unless it is autonomous” (p. 37). Many individuals lead good lives by accepting the authority of others. Moreover, since autonomous individuals can engage in evil, autonomy will need to be limited. Given the above, though, we might wonder if Kekes would endorse too many limits.

Pessimism, the final basic conservative belief, is the via media between an Enlightenment optimism regarding human perfectibility and the “fatalism, despair, or cynicism that rests on the belief in irredeemable human corruption.” Kekes' common sense approach is to insist that “Human beings are neither basically good nor basically evil—they are basically ambivalent” (p. 213) and at the same time to recognize the “limited control a society has over its future” (p. 42). As such, Kekes wants to emphasize the need to hinder evil as much as the need to foster good but also insists we recognize that the “prevalence of evil ... is a permanent condition” (p. 42). How much evil exists is largely an empirical question, but Kekes is surely wrong to talk as if none of us Faithful to Enlightenment ideals recognize its natural occurrence. Surely, we think much evil results from bad political arrangements; just as surely, we recognize that some evil is due directly to individuals.

Kekes' conservatism is defined as adherence to skepticism, pluralism, traditionalism, and pessimism. Skepticism and pluralism will be appealing to liberals, but liberals are unlikely to think Kekes treats the latter seriously enough. Traditionalism seems to offer no problems for any political theorist (it does not deny the value of autonomy). Finally, Kekes is likely right that liberals have been too optimistic regarding human nature and his pessimism is a welcome corrective.

A major difference between Kekes and his putative opponents is his reliance on historical analysis. Whereas liberals use some ideal (say, an “original position”) to judge

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society, Kekes “start[s] with a presumption in favor of the existing political arrangements” because he takes “the endurance of the traditional arrangements of quite good and not-so-bad societies to be a strong initial reason for supporting them ... [as] the arrangements are unlikely to have endured unless they helped those subject to them to live good lives” (p. 15). Surely, no one will deny that it matters whether a society successfully provides its citizens good lives and that doing so is strong prima facie reason to defend it. Just as surely, most political philosophers will be less sanguine about recent history (e.g., post WWII America (p. 6)).

At the end of the day, Kekes offers a challenge to political philosophers: show why change should be permitted at the cost of damage to a social system (p. 6-8). However, that challenge can frequently be met; the presumption in favor of existing arrangements is easily defeasible. What is needed is an account of the good life. Without that, the claim that conservatism “is not a mindless defense of ... prevailing political arrangements ... [because these] must be good to merit conservation, and what makes them good is that they enable the people of a society to make good lives for themselves” (p. 46) is empty. We need to know which secondary goods are acceptable and which are not. Because he obfuscates that distinction, much of what Kekes says sounds right, but *obviously* right. Still, he does, in various ways, tighten our focus on the debates between those who advocate for traditions and those who do not. Anyone interested in those debates or in conservatism should read this book.