Review Of "Moral Tradition And Individuality" By J. Kekes

Richard Thomas Eldridge
Swarthmore College, reldrid1@swarthmore.edu

Recommended Citation
https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-philosophy/305
Moral Tradition and Individuality (review)

Richard Eldridge

Philosophy and Literature, Volume 14, Number 2, October 1990, pp. 387-394 (Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: 10.1353/phl.1990.0002

For additional information about this article
http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/phl/summary/v014/14.2.eldridge.html

Discussed by Richard Eldridge

HISTORICISM, OLD AND NEW, has taught us how much of human thought, speech, and action stems not from pure reason and its ideas, but from the particularities of cultural contexts. Given our awareness of historico-cultural diversities of expression and action, it is hard not to be impressed by Richard Rorty's recommendation that we follow Freud and see the person not as "a formed, unified, present, self-contained substance, something capable of being seen steadily and whole," and something the sight of which might ground an objective morality, but instead as "a tissue of contingent relations, a web which stretches backward and forward through past and future time."1 Yet, despite this, it remains hard to give up the ideal of an objective morality grounded in the nature of persons. Rejecting all objective self-legislation on the part of humanity seems to amount to saying that anything goes, as long as the context is drawn peculiarly enough. Human ingenuity in narrating contexts being what it is, this seems intolerable. A synthesizing compromise of historicism and objectivism seems called for, leaving room for adventuristic personal improvisations inside a frame of objective public morality. This is just what we find in the most interesting recent works of moral philosophy, in the books of figures such as Nagel,2 Hampshire,3 Stout,4 and Stocker,5 where a lingering regard for public, procedural justice is combined with pleas for personal experimentalism.

Philosophy and Literature, © 1990, 14: 387-394
and condemnations of grand moralizing. And this is also what we find in John Kekes's *Moral Tradition and Individuality*, a work that both continues this impulse to marry historicism and objectivism and deepens it enormously by sketching and illustrating a compelling moral psychology.

Kekes synthesizes Aristotle's essentialist eudaimonism, Hume's emphases on the centrality of sentiment and custom in human life, and Mill's defense of individuality. The result is a liberal eudaimonism or "eudaimonistic objectivism" (p. 204), relying on ontologically subjective but epistemologically objective standards for leading a good life and falling between subjectivist voluntarism and traditionalist essentialism. This liberal eudaimonism is urged through careful elaboration of the central notion of a *moral perspective*, a hierarchy of partly tradition-afforded and partly self-created commitments. Kekes describes the processes of developing and deepening a moral perspective throughout one's life principally by noting the various successes and failures of figures such as Oedipus, Strether in *The Ambassadors*, Ivan Ilych, and Montaigne. Strether and Montaigne succeed in leading good lives, for good reasons, by developing suitable moral perspectives and living according to them, where Oedipus and Ivan Ilych fail—Oedipus by relying too much on himself against the grain of his culture, as a subjectivist voluntarist might urge, and Ilych by relying too much on the stale, surface mores of a dying culture, as a traditionalist essentialist might urge. Only appeal to a suitable moral perspective can enable us to achieve the balance of "deep private promptings and conventional forms" (p. 108) necessary for a good life. Moral perspectives draw their contents from three overlapping sources, roughly correlatable with Aristotle, Hume, and Mill.

(1) Deep natural conventions derive from certain "universal human characteristics," specifically "facts of the body, self, and social life" (p. 28). People lead less good lives when they are injured or malnourished or sick, when they are unable to develop their talents or to do what they like, and when there is no customary social authority or an unjust division of labor. The deep natural conventions enjoin us not to produce these kinds of universal harms. (It is noteworthy that these deep conventions chiefly prohibit public harm to others. There are no deep, universal conventions of personal morality, which is more constructivist than realist. This is a deeply anti-Platonic, anti-Kantian theme in Kekes's writing and in much recent moral philosophy. Flexibility and liberality are purchased at the loss of systematic concern for the structure of the soul and its motives.)
(2) There are variable conventions of decency. One does such things as shake hands, tell jokes, offer congratulations, and observe birthdays. These rituals differ widely across societies. But participating in some such variable conventions is a central way of expressing and reinforcing a shared social identity, and this too is necessary for a good life. Though both variable and deep conventions can be inconsistent or faulty, for example as a result of nonmoral technological developments, what they prescribe is nonetheless prima facie good.

(3) Lastly, there is personal morality. We must all develop our characters in one way rather than another, balancing our talents against the possible identities afforded by our social background. Doing well here is a matter of responding to complex moral situations, where intuition, rooted in awareness of deep and variable conventions, breaks down. At this level, all moral theories based on conceptions of human nature must be rejected. No single good of character is necessary for a good life. Moral principles are here at best abstractions from concurring judgments about how to balance tradition and individuality well, and they must be subordinated to these judgments, not taken as their guides. Character is prior to volition and its principles.

In sounding these last themes, Kekes echoes the recent views of Williams, Hampshire, and Nagel, but he notes, against them, that conflict is not central to our moral lives. Normally at least, given the background guidance afforded by the deep and variable conventions and given our capacities for creative moral reflection, we are able to achieve a reasonable understanding of how we might live well here and now. Though it requires resolution, honesty, and (contrary to Plato and Kierkegaard) significant material support, it is not in the end so hard to lead a good life. “The ultimate test of the goodness of our lives is whether they involve the lasting possession of external and internal goods and whether the satisfactions derived from their possession outweigh, in quantity and quality, such hardship and suffering as we experience. Only lives with deep roots in personal and social morality can pass this test” (p. 202). To have these roots in one’s life is to have both self-direction, or the ability to live according to one’s developed moral perspective, and decency, or the natural and tradition-afforded habit of living cooperatively with others. To have these things is normally to come pretty close to leading a good life.

*Moral Tradition and Individuality* is a thoroughly relaxed, reasonable, decent, clear, and serious book. The appeals to literary cases are sensitive and dramatic. It expresses with exemplary attractiveness and care a conception of the moral life that is very much in the air and that possesses
real power. Its force and charm are undeniable. But here are some interrelated Kantian reservations.

First, Kekes's arguments against voluntarism—the view that ought implies can—are not compelling. It is true that education and character are prior to particular choices; in that sense, contrary to existentialism, "choices do not make moral agents" (p. 42). But it does not follow that ought fails to imply can and that we may be rightly blamed for what we were unable not to do. The reason is that, as Kekes elsewhere notes, we can change our psychological states and actions through moral reflection (pp. 158–59). His careful reading of Strether's development in The Ambassadors would itself seem to be a case of partly willed and partly reasoned change of character, achieved over a period of time through moral reflection. If this is how characters are typically developed, then we are over time more responsible for our characters than Kekes holds us to be in criticizing voluntarism. A second argument, turning on the claim that people experience moral dilemmas, seems to rely on an equivocation on "moral." It is true that people experience dilemmas related to action, dilemmas that are in just that sense moral, but it does not follow, as Kekes seems to take it to follow, that there are no categorical action-related values universally commanded for us by the fact that we have wills and consistently realizable in a fully just world. Respect for persons, oneself and others, may well be such a value, even if it is contingently impossible to realize this value universally in our world as it stands.

Second, following Julia Annas, Kekes misreads Kantianism as encouraging us to be cold-hearted monsters of duty, without regard for either feelings or the satisfaction of natural wants (pp. 178–79). But, as Marcia Baron has replied to Annas in this journal, that is neither Kant's view nor is it the most plausible version of Kantianism. Instead, it is of a piece with respecting persons that one regards certain feelings and wants, in others and in oneself, as natural and deserving of moral standing.

Finally, Kekes's treatment of the crucial issue of the adequacy of a moral perspective is unclear and inadequate. He argues that

a moral perspective conforms to minimal standards of adequacy, and it will foster good lives if it satisfies the wants created by the facts of the body, self, and social life, prompts the observance of the appropriate deep and variable conventions of a healthy social morality, and if it has order, coherence, richness, realism, appeal, and latitude. Conformity to these
minimal conditions is necessary but not sufficient for the justification of eudaimonistically conceived moral perspectives. (p. 184)

Thirty pages later the condition seems to be a sufficient one. "What makes it reasonable to regard moral perspectives as adequate is that they meet the three conditions discussed above" (p. 214). Here it is hard to be confident that there is a difference between its being genuinely reasonable (for everyone) to regard a moral perspective as adequate and its actually being so. When it comes to the evaluation of moral perspectives, it is hard even to distinguish epistemological correspondism from epistemological coherentism. To what fact could our judgment that a certain moral perspective is adequate correspond, apart from its being fully reasonable to take it to be adequate? It matters little whether we take its being reasonable to regard a moral perspective as adequate as an object to which our views might correspond or as something required for the coherence of our beliefs. What matters is the reasonableness itself.

More importantly, however, are there ever fully healthy social moralities that do not call for significant revision? Participants in prevailing social moralities who lead creative, coherent, flexible, and fulfilling lives, shaped by moral perspectives meeting the conditions listed, can fail to engage with the structural defects of the social moralities they inhabit and may in that sense not lead good lives. It is not far-fetched to regard the lives of most Americans, for example, as marred in this way. Rewards and opportunities in our society continue to be distributed out of habit and culture on the basis of morally irrelevant features such as race and class membership, even when there is personal good will present between individuals. This persistent structural social fact mars the lives of all members of societies in which it obtains, and to fail to challenge it is to fail in one way to live well. Some talk of justice may then be necessary in order to construct a more adequate account of the adequacy of a moral perspective. It may be that all and only moral perspectives that include a significant concern for justice or fairness in the ordering of the world are adequate. Kekes leaves us with a morality of preventing gross public harms, of conformity to mores, and of quasi-aesthetic improvisation, not a morality of justice.

Against this thought, Kekes offers us the figure of Montaigne, who in Kekes's reading, "faced a fundamental conflict between public and private life" (p. 228) and resolved it by giving his energies over to the requirement that the public world be reordered in the interests of justice.
only en mesure. "He will soil himself [with public service] up to a point but not beyond it" (p. 229). Following Montaigne's example, so understood, "what must be done is to make only 'limited and conditional' commitments to external goods; the right attitude is, 'I frankly tell them my limits'" (p. 230). So much for public service, and no more: one needs "freedom, tranquility, and leisure" either "to write and to reflect" or otherwise to do what one will (p. 228).

How compelling is this reading of Montaigne and his moral exemplariness? It is notoriously hard to fix Montaigne's life and character in view, as he himself recognized. "Irresolution," he tells us, "seems to me the most common and apparent defect of our nature. . . . We are all patchwork." He does not shrink from acknowledging his own inconsistency. In commenting on what he calls "my own unstable posture" (p. 155), he observes that "I cannot keep my subject [myself] still. It goes along befuddled and staggering with a natural drunkenness" (p. 313). His intelligence is aphoristic and occasional, rather than systematic and disciplined, in keeping with his skeptical view that man is "the investigator without knowledge, the magistrate without jurisdiction, and all in all, the fool of the farce" (p. 379). Politically, his pyrrhonism and humanism support a moderate, anti-Scholastic reformism, as Kekes suggests.

Yet Montaigne's thought, in its skepticism and anti-Scholasticism, is equally the radically Augustinian and Kantian inwardizing of Christianity. In tracing his own and our defects and inconsistencies, he is everywhere conscious of the unforeseeable divine judgment that is to come. The moral of our ignorance and incapacity is that we stand in need of God's grace.

Nor can man raise himself above himself and humanity; for he can see only with his own eyes, and seize only with his own grasp. He will rise if God by exception lends him a hand; he will rise by abandoning and renouncing his own means, and letting himself be raised and uplifted by purely celestial means. It is for our Christian faith, not for his Stoical virtue, to aspire to that divine and miraculous metamorphosis. (p. 253)

If we do not have jurisdiction over our fates, it is because God does. We can do nothing either to merit or to anticipate our salvation. We are, in consequence, thrown back on the cultivation of our nature and character as God has given them to us. "I love life and cultivate it just as God has been pleased to grant it to us" (p. 451). But this acceptance
of one's character is not quite or only the relaxed worldly humanism that Kekes urges on us. It is Stoic acceptance in the face of our ignorance, coupled with the hope of unmerited divine forgiveness. One must and will do what one's nature will have one do, though even here that will mean rejecting idleness: "the soul that has no fixed goal loses itself" (p. 7). This may well mean making measured compromises with the demands of public life. But these compromises and the more general shapings of our lives by our characters are made less in assurance and self-confidence than in despair.

Here is a picture of human life that resonates not with Hume's, but with Kant's sense of the tragedy of our existence. One way of appreciating Kant's moral psychology and moral theology is to notice that, in his view, we are allotted by practical reason two conflicting sorts of open-ended, perfect duties: duties toward others and duties toward ourselves. We are bound simultaneously to maximal benevolence and maximal cultivation of our talents. No one can satisfy both demands fully. We are all bound to assert ourselves, and to err, on one side or the other, refining our palates while ignoring the hungry, or helping the impoverished while sacrificing our individuality. Yet one must do what one can and will with a whole heart, with acknowledgment of error, and with hope of forgiveness. It may be that Montaigne balanced his private life against the needs of the public in this spirit, not in the spirit that Kekes discerns, though it is not clear that we are in a position to judge this. Kantian voluntarism and liberal objectivism may not be incompatible.

This picture of human life will perhaps sound tyrannically religious against the relaxed and historically sensitive picture of human life that Kekes develops by following Hume, as though, in addition to inheriting customs, we also always stood under the judgment of either a stern but just God or our own consciences. The difficulty of Kantianism is that it threatens to be too severe and unlivable; it makes morality too hard. But the difficulty of a moral view inspired by Hume is that it threatens to make morality too comfortable, aspiration-denying, and distanced from justice. Can there be a moral theory that plausibly accepts our Kantian obligations and our continuing failures in them, but that is nonetheless natural and livable in offering us the hopes of our forgiveness of one another?


