

Review Essays

PHILOSOPHY: BELIEFS, ATTITUDES, AND JUSTIFICATION

GILBERT HARMAN

Princeton University

JOHAN KEKES in *The Nature of Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell; Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1980) holds that philosophy is or ought to be ultimately concerned with finding a rationally justified "worldview," a conception of one's place in the world that indicates what one's attitude should be to the world, other people, and oneself. According to Kekes, philosophy cannot be identified either with science or with ideology, although it shares features with both. Science attempts to find a rationally justified view of the world but is concerned only with the facts and not with the attitude one should take toward the facts. Ideology is concerned with the attitude one should take toward the facts but not with the rational justification of that attitude. Only philosophy is concerned with the rational justification of a full worldview, including the attitudes involved.

This is a traditional, but mildly controversial, conception of philosophy—controversial because of widespread skepticism about the possibility of rationally justifying attitudes of the sort involved in a worldview. Kekes observes that such skepticism can lead to either of two views about the nature of philosophy, depending on which aspect of the traditional view of philosophy is stressed. If stress is placed on the idea that philosophy is concerned with rational justification, philosophy comes to be seen as mainly a critical discipline, possibly continuous with science. If stress is placed on the idea that philosophy should indicate what attitude to take toward one's place in the world, philosophy comes to be seen as a source of prescriptions that can in the end only be accepted by virtue of an irrational leap of faith. Kekes says both of these limited conceptions of philosophy are wrong and that the traditional conception is right. Philosophy can and should aim at rationally justifying a worldview.

Most of the book is concerned with spelling out what this con-

ception of philosophy involves: There are certain "enduring problems" all normal people must face, involving their relationship with external reality, other people, and themselves. These problems are enduring in the sense that they cannot be solved once and for all. So policies have to be developed for dealing with the problems. These policies will involve certain disputable goals or "ideals." Philosophical argument is concerned to formulate and rationally justify particular ideals and policies of this sort.

Surprisingly, Kekes's discussion of rational justification concentrates on the justification of straightforward factual or descriptive beliefs and does not say very much about the special problems that arise concerning the justification of goals and attitudes. So, in the end, Kekes does not really argue for his conception of philosophy. Consequently, the book is rather abstract as an account of "the nature of philosophy" and at some distance from philosophy itself.

THE LIMITS OF JUSTIFICATION

Kekes's discussion of justification is marred by a failure to distinguish between the question whether a given person is justified in holding a certain attitude and the question whether there is a rational resolution of a dispute between two people with conflicting attitudes. These are different questions, since two people might each be rationally justified in taking different attitudes without there being a rational way to settle the dispute between them.

Kekes's failure to make this distinction affects his discussion of the so-called coherence and foundations theories of justification, against which he raises similar objections. To the foundations theory, which says that certain privileged basic attitudes are directly justified and other attitudes are to be justified in terms of their relations to basic attitudes, Kekes objects that different worldviews treat different attitudes as basic, and the foundations theory provides no justification for choosing one set of basic attitudes over another. To the coherence theory, which says that one is justified in having a belief or other attitude to the extent the attitude coheres with one's overall view, Kekes objects that false beliefs can cohere as well as true beliefs, and the coherence theory offers no way to choose between two equally coherent worldviews.

This sort of criticism rests on a misunderstanding of these theories. Consider the coherence theory. The theory points out that one has a great many beliefs, goals, attitudes, etc., and it is always an issue whether one has any reason to make changes. In this view, one ordinarily has no special reason to change a given belief or

other attitude, and one is therefore justified in continuing to accept it. Furthermore, in this view, reasons to change one's beliefs and other attitudes must come from elsewhere in one's beliefs and attitudes, since there is nowhere else they could possibly come from.

More generally, the coherence and foundations theories are theories of *individual justification*. They are not theories of *conflict resolution*. They attempt to say when a particular person is justified in having the attitudes he or she has; they do not try to say how people with conflicting attitudes might rationally settle their disagreements.

Kekes's objections to these theories concern how disputes might be rationally settled, not what attitudes it is rational for a particular individual to hold; his objections concern rational conflict resolution, not rational justification. He is right: the coherence theory does not indicate how to resolve an issue that arises between two people with different overall systems, nor does the foundations theory indicate how to settle a dispute between two people who treat different attitudes as basic. This shows that these theories are not theories of rational conflict resolution. But they were never thought to be. They have been always advanced, rather, as theories of individual rational justification.

What about conflict resolution? Well, it is widely thought that interpersonal conflicts in attitude cannot always be purely rationally resolved, without negotiation and compromise. Kekes believes that, at least in philosophy, there is always a purely rational resolution of such disputes, purely through reasoning, without bargaining and compromise. But he does not make it clear why he believes this.

THE PROBLEM AS BASIS

If participants in a philosophical dispute accept different overall systems with different basic attitudes, where is the common ground that would allow them to resolve their dispute? Kekes answers that there is common ground in the very fact that they are disputing with each other, for they must be disputing over how to resolve a particular enduring problem. The disputants must, therefore, at least to some extent, agree on the problem and its presuppositions; and, according to Kekes, this provides enough common ground to allow them to resolve their dispute. However, he does not say why he thinks this much common ground is sufficient, and a reader might be excused for being skeptical.

Let us look more closely at what Kekes says in this connection.

He says we should distinguish two aspects, or "contexts," of justification: first, the "introduction" of a number of theories as possible solutions to the problem involved; second, the "acceptance" of one of these theories as providing the best solution to that problem. These different contexts involve different considerations, he says, since there is a difference between showing that something is a possible solution and showing that it is the best of competing solutions, where "best" means "closest to the truth."

This appeal to closeness to the truth simply ignores the problems of justifying attitudes. When an issue concerns goals and ideals, as it will according to Kekes if it is a basic philosophical issue, different solutions will attempt to obtain somewhat different goals in somewhat different ways. Deciding between possible solutions will, therefore, involve a kind of balancing that is not just a matter of deciding what is true.

PERENNIAL ARGUMENTS

According to Kekes, philosophical arguments are concerned with what ideals should be valued. These arguments are "perennial" in that they are recurrent and endless.

In Kekes's view, a perennial argument occurs when certain people have a problem and argue concerning the ideals in terms of which the problem should be solved. The basic problems are problems of life: how to relate to nature, other people, and oneself. And a theoretical framework is rational if (among other things) it contributes a possible solution to such problems of life.

Perennial problems are enduring rather than removable. Their solution does not consist in the elimination of the problem but of finding a *modus vivendi*, a policy for dealing with the problem. Such problems tend to require theoretical reflection. But these problems are not scientific or technological problems, since scientific and technical problems are removable problems rather than enduring problems in this sense.

Kekes offers the following examples of enduring problems:

Typical enduring problems in one's attitude to himself [sic] have to do with the meaning and purpose of one's life, the importance and attainability of self-knowledge and the possibility and method of forming and shaping oneself. Some of the enduring problems which arise in one's relations to humanity are the nature of one's responsibility to and for others, one's attitude toward authority, the resolution of inevitable conflicts between altruism and self-interest, and the extent of one's allegiance owed to institutions, friends, one's coun-

try. Characteristic enduring problems connected with the relation between a person and nature are whether one should attempt to live in harmony with or make use of his environment, or whether nature is properly viewed as hostile, benevolent, or indifferent. [P. 39]

There are no general answers to perennial questions because the answers vary with the situation. For example, consider the perennial argument about morality.

In a pure laissez-faire economy, altruism should be stressed; in times of revolutionary changes, emphasizing the importance of moral rules against the fervid pursuit of ideals is likely to serve the ideal implicit in morality. But in a static, ritualistic society, reminding moral agents of the ideals of moral behavior may redress the balance; just as in a tightly organized political system, the claims of individuality should be stressed. [P. 39]

Kekes suggests, implausibly, that perennial arguments are recurrent because the background situation changes over time in this way. But that would not explain why philosophical arguments continue even in periods during which the background situation remains the same.

CAN PHILOSOPHICAL THEORIES BE JUSTIFIED?

Kekes notes that there are grounds for thinking philosophy cannot provide a rationally justified worldview. Success at justifying a worldview would seem to require philosophical knowledge, but there does not seem to be any instance of such knowledge in the 2,500-year history of philosophy. There have been methodological advances but no settled conclusions concerning

whether there is a spiritual element in reality, what things are good or bad, how to live well, whether anything exists that we can not observe, whether human beings are determined or free, what sort of society is the best, and so on [p. 5].

One indication of this is that most great philosophers feel they must begin again, from the beginning. Philosophy does not seem to be cumulative in the way that other knowledge-seeking inquiries are.

This is in part an illusion. In fact, philosophical inquiry has often resulted in knowledge, but the result has always been counted part of some other discipline. When philosophy is successful, the successful part splits off and becomes a separate science, like physics or psychology. On the other hand, such success has always been success at solving factual, descriptive problems. There has been no

progress at finding general solutions that everyone can accept to problems about what attitudes to take toward reality, other people, or oneself.

I have already mentioned Kekes's suggestion that perennial arguments are perennial because of changing circumstances that require new answers. That is unpersuasive, since philosophical disputes continue even in situations with fixed circumstances. One obvious reason for such continued disagreement is that people attach different weights to the values they accept—for example, the relative importance they place on general happiness as against cultural achievement. It is unclear how this sort of disagreement could be resolved except through negotiation and compromise.

Alas, nothing in Kekes's discussion indicates how one might find a purely rational justification for theories that would answer the sorts of problems he mentions: whether there is a spiritual element in reality, what things are good or bad, and so on.

Kekes asserts incorrectly that people who say fundamental questions are incapable of being rationally answered

disqualify themselves from having a right to object to other people holding other ideas which are vicious, harmful, destructive, and abominable. For if all they have in favor of their ideals is unreasoned commitment, then they cannot very well object to other people's commitments. [P. 22]

This begs the question by assuming a principle, about when one has the "right" to object to something, that would not be accepted by those who hold the view in question.

Kekes also asserts implausibly that, if one's basic choices are irrational in the sense that they cannot be rationally justified, "the prospects for civilized life are poor" (p. 27). This is to overlook two points. First, some basic choices can be made in various ways without affecting the prospects of civilized life. And, second, where this is not the case, disputes about basic choices can often be settled by negotiation and compromise.

THE CURRENT STATE OF PHILOSOPHY

Kekes's unhappiness with the current state of philosophy leads him to say a number of absurd things. For example, "The disappearance of philosophers would make no difference to the intellectual life of our society" (p. 4). This is absurd, since philosophers are intellectuals, and their disappearance would by definition make

a difference to the intellectual life of our society. Furthermore, there are ongoing interactions among philosophers and psychologists, as represented, for example, in the pages of the journal *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, and among philosophers and linguists, as represented, for example in the pages of the journal *Linguistics and Philosophy*. And there are many other examples of interaction between philosophers and economists, statisticians, lawyers, political scientists, etc. I would think that the disappearance of philosophers would matter to those psychologists, linguists, economists, lawyers, and so forth whose work intersects the work of some of those philosophers. Some examples are the psychologist Richard Nisbett, the linguist Noam Chomsky, the economist A. K. Sen, the statistician Glenn Shaffer, the lawyer Ronald Dworkin, the political scientist Michael Walzer. I could give many more names in each category. These people are certainly intellectuals; so, since the disappearance of philosophers would affect their work, it would affect the intellectual life of our society.

Kekes might argue that, inasmuch as their work intersects the work of philosophers, Chomsky, Dworkin, et al. are in part philosophers, who must therefore disappear when the philosophers disappear! But would he want to say that this disappearance would have no effect on the intellectual life of our society?

Perhaps what Kekes means is that philosophers have no impact on ordinary people. This would be to assume falsely that psychology, linguistics, economics, statistics, and so on have no impact on ordinary people.

Perhaps the point is supposed to be that philosophers are not read by such ordinary people. But is that so? John Rawls's *Theory of Justice* has been widely read and has had a great impact on the intellectual life of our society. The same can be said for Robert Nozick's *Anarchy, State and Utopia* and Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation*. It is true these are all works in ethical, political, or legal philosophy; but of course that is exactly the aspect of philosophy Kekes thinks philosophers have been ignoring. And other areas of philosophy have had an impact in such widely read books as Daniel Dennett's *Brainstorms*.

THE RELEVANCE OF HISTORY TO PHILOSOPHY

Kekes accepts the widely held but, I believe, wholly erroneous view that a knowledge of history is useful in philosophy. I see no evidence for this. Kekes says, "The attempt to understand perennial arguments merely by examining the contemporary state of the

debate and by offering a general description of that domain on the basis dooms one's conclusion to absurdity." This is, he says, because only by examining tradition "can one discover what the problem is that forms the background of various approaches in perennial arguments" (p. 41).

I do not understand this. History, including the history of philosophy, can be a fascinating subject, at least when pursued as history and not merely as an attempt to read currently fashionable ideas into ancient texts. However, the question is not whether history, including the history of philosophy, is *interesting* but whether it is *useful in philosophy*. Kekes says history is useful because it is useful to know what problem *originally* gave rise to a dispute. But that is false. What is needed is to consider the problems that *currently* drive a dispute, which are almost certainly different in various ways from the original problem or problems. I have never seen the slightest reason to suppose that knowledge of the history of philosophy is any more help in philosophy than knowledge of the history of physics or chemistry is of any help in physics or chemistry.

THE ROLE OF LOGIC IN JUSTIFICATION

Kekes's account of the role of logic in justification is mistaken. Indeed, his whole account of justification is puzzling.

He says that, to determine which of competing theories has the best chance of being true, one must compare them on the basis of "logical consistency, adequacy of interpretation, and capacity to withstand criticism" (p. 111). One obvious and mildly troubling point here is that these are not three independent criteria. A theory that is logically inconsistent or whose interpretation is inadequate is subject to criticism on that account, so the third criterion includes the first two. More significantly, the theories in question are already supposed to be consistent by the time we consider which has the best chance of being true, since according to Kekes they are supposed to be "possible" solutions to the background problem. So we shouldn't have to worry about consistency at this stage.

So far, these are minor worries. Kekes goes on to observe that different theories may involve different logics and, therefore, different notions of logical consistency. In order to decide which logic is to be accepted, he says, one must compare the problem-solving capacity of the theories. But this is much harder than he supposes. He overlooks the crucial difficulty that the theories may disagree about their relative problem-solving capacities. Theory A might say

that A has a greater problem-solving capacity than B, and B might say the reverse.

In any event, and here is my main complaint, Kekes argues that logical rules are themselves extracted from practice.

Logical rules are the rules which guide successful practice. They are crystallizations of methodological principles that have proved successful in the past. Logical rules are implicit in the past. Logical rules are implicit in practices we wish to perpetuate and their discovery consists in making explicit and codifying what has been implicit before. [P. 113]

This is quite wrong. It confuses inference and implication. Logic is the theory of implication. It is not a theory of method or inference in the sense of a theory telling one what to infer under certain circumstances. A logical principle such as *modus ponens* says that certain propositions imply another proposition. It does not say, for example, that if one believes certain propositions one may infer another specified proposition in the sense that one may accept that other proposition. The implied proposition is sometimes absurd, so that what one should do is reject one of the premises rather than accept the conclusion. Even if no absurdity is involved, one should not normally clutter one's mind with logical consequences of one's beliefs. ("If the sole aim of inquiries were the accumulation of likely truths, we would end up with an enormously large amount of trivial and useless information" [p. 120].)

The relation between logic and inference or reasoning is obscure. There is no adequate account of it of which I am aware. The relation is certainly not direct and immediate. It may or may not be true that principles of inference and other methodological principles are abstracted from successful practice (I doubt it); but logical principles certainly are not.

True, an important test of one's overall view is how well it enables one to resolve one's problems. And logic, which is part of that scheme, is therefore indirectly subject to the test as well. But logic is not what is abstracted from the practice of problem solving. Something may indeed be abstracted from that practice, but not logic.

POPPER'S ADEQUACY TEST

Kekes accepts, on dubious grounds, Popper's test of adequacy for a theory. In this view, one should not take a theory seriously unless one knows what would indicate that the theory is mistaken,

and a theory is acceptable if it survives one's best attempts to show that it is mistaken. Kekes argues fallaciously that this test is a consequence of the fact that:

A theory is an interpretation of some set of facts. The interpretation it offers is incompatible with other possible interpretations. The absence of anything that could be incompatible with an interpretation is conclusive evidence of its inadequacy. [P. 117]

But this makes the question-begging assumption that, if one interpretation is incompatible with another, there must be some test, some crucial experiment, that would decide between them.

Kekes goes on to offer a confused account of the relation between acceptability, knowledge, and truth. He says, "A true theory would have to survive all possible criticisms and be preferable to all possible rivals" (p. 121). But the truth does not always survive criticism. It is sometimes mistakenly rejected, as in this very remark of Kekes's, as well as in the conclusion he draws—namely, that "theories cannot be known to be true," which, by the way, is in striking contrast with his earlier, more sensible claim in the introduction to the book: "The ideals we hold should be rationally justified. If they are not, we have no way of *knowing* whether the policies we adopt in accordance with them can be satisfactory solutions of our problems" (p. xi, emphasis added).

DISCOVERY VERSUS JUSTIFICATION

Kekes is also confused about the familiar distinction between considerations that lead to the discovery of a theory and considerations that justify acceptance of the theory. He argues that the usual way of making this distinction is mistaken, but only because he mixes up that issue with another, namely, whether the justification of a theory ever involves consideration of the cultural influences which helped lead to the acceptance of the theory.

He asserts that the justification of ideals must take into account certain "cultural influences," namely,

the intellectual climate, the existing learned consensus about what is traditional and what is novel; the prevailing judgments about what is problematic, worrisome, or disturbing in current affairs; the general agreement about what sort of questions are fundamental as opposed to being secondary questions of detail [p. 79].

Kekes says, mistakenly, that some philosophers would object to this by distinguishing the context of discovery from the context of

justification. In this view, he says, what is relevant to the justification of a belief is not how the belief came to be held but, rather, whether the belief is true; cultural factors might explain why a belief is held but cannot show that it is true. But there are already several things wrong with Kekes's discussion of these issues.

One mistake is supposing that being justified in believing something is the same thing as having a true belief. One can be justified in believing something that happens to be false; justification does not guarantee truth. And one can fail to be justified in believing something that happens to be true, because one might believe it for the wrong reasons.

The context of discovery can be distinguished from the context of justification without confusing justification and truth. All that is needed is to notice that one might come to believe something for the wrong reasons and later find the right reasons.

Kekes says, "The view that the cultural influences within the context of discovery have any bearing on the context of justification has been called the genetic fallacy" (p. 80). That is incorrect. The genetic fallacy consists in thinking that whether one is justified in believing something is *always* determined *entirely* by what led one to believe it in the first place. That *is* a fallacy. But it is not a fallacy to think that in certain cases, even in most cases, one's reasons for believing something are the reasons that led one to believe it in the first place.

Kekes is similarly mistaken when he says in this connection, "Justification is the process of ascertaining whether" a belief is true in the sense of corresponding with reality (p. 81). Since one might be justified in believing something false, one might be justified in believing something without "ascertaining" that it is true.

In any event, it is extremely odd to attribute to anyone the view that cultural factors are *always* irrelevant to justification. Consider beliefs *about* cultural factors. Presumably, cultural factors might help to show that *such* a belief is true. And cultural factors can be relevant to whether other beliefs are true too, quite apart from any distinction between the context of discovery and the context of justification.

Kekes says that one way to defend the distinction between the context of discovery and the context of justification for philosophical claims is to argue that philosophy is concerned to bring out conceptual truths. In this view, how one came to believe or accept these truths is irrelevant—perhaps one was merely taught to accept them—but now, once one accepts them and other related truths,

they become conceptual truths. Philosophy, the study of such conceptual truths, is, therefore, taken to be an autonomous discipline that does not presuppose inquiry into cultural conditions; etc. Indeed, such other inquiry is supposed to presuppose these conceptual truths.

Kekes rejects this defense on the grounds that there is no sharp distinction between conceptual truths and factual truths, so that philosophy cannot be autonomous in this way. Justification becomes a matter of coherence; and

since the system contains psychological, sociological, historical, and other propositions as well, there is no way of excluding these propositions from having a bearing on justification. It seems, then, that if justification is a matter of coherence, discovery and justification cannot be distinguished, and thus the so-called genetic fallacy is not a fallacy at all.

The first part of this is correct; not the second. A coherence theory of justification allows cultural factors to be relevant to justification. But this does not entail that the genetic fallacy is not a fallacy. The coherence theory can allow for cases in which one is justified in believing something now, although one's original reasons were no good.

Kekes suggests that a second way to argue for the distinction between the context of discovery and the context of justification for philosophical claims is to argue that philosophy is concerned with rational reconstruction of ordinary views and that one's initial reasons need not be preserved in such rational reconstruction. Kekes objects that there is no standard for assessing the adequacy of such reconstruction that does not appeal to cultural factors.

Again, this is irrelevant. Kekes's claim reduces to the obvious point that distinguishing the context of discovery from the context of justification does not imply that cultural factors are irrelevant to justification.