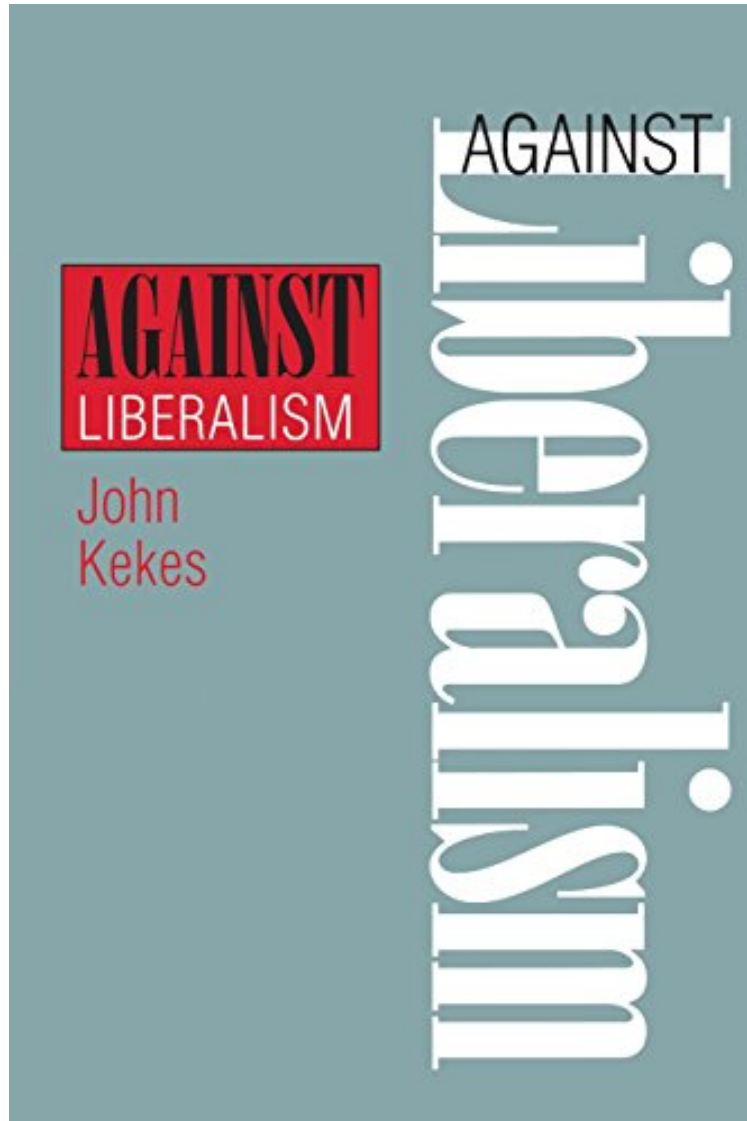


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## Against Liberalism

*John Kekes*

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#2166153 in Books John Kekes 1999-01-14Original language:EnglishPDF # 1 8.90 x .60 x 5.90l, .70 #File Name: 0801484006256 pagesAgainst Liberalism | File size: 44.Mb

**John Kekes : Against Liberalism** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Against Liberalism:

15 of 28 people found the following review helpful. worth reading for liberalsBy A ReaderThis book is worth reading for liberals and conservatives alike. I'm not, in the end, convinced that Kekes has made his case against liberalism. (I think that liberals can answer all of his charges) but he presents interesting challanges that liberals must consider. He's much more rigerous than most conservatives and actual makes arguments rather than just fighting staw men or expressing his own opinion. It's a good book both for liberals, to see what a sophisticated conservative challange to

liberalism looks like, and also for conservatives who are dissatisfied with the relatively simple-minded views of someone like Kristol or Buckley (anyone who thinks that Rush Limbaugh is worth listening too will probably not be smart enough to get the book!) 4 of 5 people found the following review helpful. Exposing Inconsistencies with Liberalism (on Many Levels). By Kevin Currie-Knight

First, I should say that people should read Kekes is only because he does what philosophers should. He writes in a clear way and he spends the lion's share of his time doing original philosophy (rather than citing other writers and getting into narrow academic technicalities). And, here, he questions - as good philosophers should - a position that is seldom questioned (especially from his unique conservative vantage point). Now, the argument. John Kekes's aim is to challenge the conceptual coherence of liberalism - mostly 'left liberalism' - on many fronts. First, liberals tend to value personal autonomy over other values, suggesting that most evil acts are the products of non autonomous action and that crime is mostly a problem of people not having full autonomy. (Notice that liberals have often tended to look at crime and poverty as things largely fixable by changing environmental causes, and focus on rehabilitation of criminals more than punishment.) Kekes does not deny that crime and poverty do often flow from people not being autonomous, but suggests that liberals faith in the power of autonomy is over-stated. Why do we suppose that autonomy will lead to more goodness? Can't autonomous people use their autonomy just as easily to commit cleverer crimes, 'milk the system,' and other bad acts? Increasing autonomy among people might lead to more good acts and fewer bad ones, but this is a faith that, Kekes says, is grounded in a view of humans' innate goodness unsupported by fact. (To Plato's question, why think that those who know the good WILL do the good?) Kekes also attacks liberalism's frequent belief in group responsibility (the rich are responsible for taking care of the poor, whites are responsible for 'reparations' to atone for slavery, etc). More specifically, he is attacking this idea as inconsistent with liberals (often simultaneously held) belief that we can only hold people accountable for THEIR autonomous actions. Just as someone may want to exonerate x from punishment because, prior to the crime, he had a horrendous childhood, shouldn't we also exonerate x white person from paying reparations to atone for someone else's crimes of the past? Again, Kekes is not arguing against the idea of group responsibility (he suggests it is legitimate in certain cases), but only questioning whether one can hold both of these beliefs - in personal responsibility and group rights - coherently at the same time. Kekes also questions - and denies - that one can coherently be a liberal and a pluralist at the same time, as many liberals (William Galston, George Crowder, Isaiah Berlin) want to do. If one is a liberal, then one must value autonomy over other values, and suggest that ways of life not autonomously chosen shall not be permissible in a liberal politic. Yet, if one is a pluralist, then autonomy becomes one of many values that CAN be overridden by other values in certain cases. If liberals accept pluralism, then liberal autonomy becomes one value among many (and one must be prepared to accept illiberal ways of life as legitimate). If one values liberalism over pluralism, then one must accept the idea that one is not neutral on the subject of what kind of lives we should 'allow' to be led. I should also mention that there is a really good chapter devoted to problems with Rawls's arguments, particularly those arguing against the notion of desert. If desert is a dead concept (because, says Rawls, everything we do can be traced to some luck factors we did not deserve), then he cannot also argue that the worst off deserve to be made better off (a desert claim). Kekes also suggests that Rawls does not focus anywhere on the problem of what happens, once the rules of society are set by contract, when some people decide to defect from rules (particularly people who came into society after the 'original position'). It is the last argument I am least convinced by (even though I personally am on the fence about whether liberalism and pluralism are incompatible). To my mind, and to George Crowder's (see Liberalism and Value Pluralism (Political Theory And Contemporary Politics)), pluralism requires autonomy, because if values clash, the only way to resolve them seems to be by using one's autonomy - one's capacity for choice. To put this a bit differently, let's say that there is an illiberal way of life (say, a faith that requires religious indoctrination to keep everyone feeling a strong sense of community). Now, let's say we want to know if the value of strongly felt community is enough to outweigh the value of autonomy. It is difficult to see how we are going to decide this without, in some sense, asking the people involved to tell us - autonomously! - whether they are happy with their lifestyle and would choose it among rivals. But of course, they cannot, because their community disallows for autonomy. But is there some other way to find out if their way of life is good, other than by appealing to whether members in the society are happy enough to choose that life autonomously? I don't see it. All of this is to say that I am not sure how value pluralism can really be exercised without the idea of liberal autonomy as a non-negotiable value. (This isn't to say they don't conflict per se, but it is to say that if there is a conflict, it is only because autonomy is necessary to save value pluralism.) Of course, what we don't really get in this book is an argument about what should take liberalism's place. That is reserved for Kekes's subsequent A Case for Conservatism. In this book, Kekes's case is wholly a negative one, against liberalism. And it could certainly be objected that Kekes is engaging in straw man arguments or caricatures (he actually cites no liberals who simultaneously believe that both the responsibility requires personal autonomy and that group members can be held responsible for other members acts). I think Kekes's depictions of left-liberalism are more or less accurate, but certainly, there are left-liberals who hold views contra to those Kekes attacks. Either way, this book gives some good challenges, I think, to what Kekes calls "the liberal faith." 13 of 18 people found the following review helpful. Autonomy is not enough

By Kurt J. Acker

In this excellent, clearly-written book, John Kekes argues that Liberalism

(not "classical liberalism", but "60's liberalism") embraces aims that are inconsistent, takes a view of human nature that is naively optimistic, and promotes a conception of equality that is self-defeating. Several of the main points of this book can be summarized as follows: 1. According to Kekes, Liberals don't deny that evil is prevalent, but insist on blaming - not human nature, which they assume to be fundamentally good - but factors that interfere with the exercise of free choice, e.g. poverty, tradition, poor education, a harsh environment. Thus their all-purpose remedy for whatever ails the human race is to increase its autonomy. But since autonomous choices are frequently wicked, the remedy is counterproductive. Liberalism thus undercuts effective policy. 2. By the same token, since Liberals assume that people behave badly because of factors that limit their autonomy, and since only fully autonomous acts merit punishment, Liberals are often inclined to exempt evil-doers from moral responsibility. It is not uncommon for Liberals to excuse malefactors whose autonomy has been diminished - by such factors as lousy parenting or poor schools - while at the same time giving short shrift to their innocent victims. Liberalism thus undercuts moral responsibility. 3. In the Liberal conception, people are all born with innate goodness and are roughly equal in moral merit. It follows that an unequal distribution of goods is inherently objectionable and that those who are worse off must have been treated unjustly. This kind of egalitarianism alienates Liberals from the bedrock ideal of true justice, which is that people should get what they deserve. In contrast, those who take merit seriously will not find inequality objectionable in itself and are more likely to think that before we can assist those who are worse off, we must consider the possibility that they are to blame for the predicaments they find themselves in. Liberalism resists that approach and thus undercuts justice. Condensed to a single sentence, Kekes teaches that Liberals, starting from premises that are overly optimistic and foolishly egalitarian, have a tendency - in the absence of any empirical evidence - to assume that unequal distribution is unfair, that the poor are victims of injustice, that the poor are not responsible for their bad behavior and that we can improve both individuals and societies by removing all impediments to free choice, from traditional attitudes to lousy education. Kekes explores these issues with great verve and intelligence. The book is recommended both for Conservatives who would like a deeper understanding of Liberalism, as well as broad-minded Liberals, who don't mind challenging their own principles.

Liberalism is doomed to failure, John Kekes argues in this penetrating criticism of its basic assumptions. Liberals favor individual autonomy, a wide plurality of choices, and equal rights and resources, seeing them as essential for good lives. They oppose such evils as selfishness, intolerance, cruelty, and greed. Yet the more autonomy, equality, and pluralism there is, Kekes contends, the greater is the scope for evil. According to Kekes, liberalism is inconsistent because the conditions liberals regard as essential for good lives actually foster the very evils liberals want to avoid, and avoiding those evils depends on conditions contrary to the ones liberals favor. Kekes argues further that the liberal conceptions of equality, justice, and pluralism require treating good and evil people with equal respect, distributing resources without regard to what recipients deserve, and restricting choices to those that conform to liberal preconceptions. All these policies are detrimental to good lives. Kekes concludes that liberalism cannot cope with the prevalence of evil, that it is vitiated by inconsistent commitments, and that - contrary to its aim - liberalism is an obstacle to good lives.

"One of the many merits of John Kekes's *Against Liberalism* is its careful argument that the priority attached to individual autonomy in recent liberal philosophies is unreasonable. In any sensibly pluralistic view, autonomy is only one among the necessary conditions . . . of human well-being. Others such as peace, social cohesion and a healthy environment are just as important. Further, . . . these other components of the human good cannot always be made compatible with autonomy. . . . Kekes's central, unanswerable argument is that in unreasonably emphasizing the good of autonomy, recent liberalism evades the reality of such conflicts of values. . . . Kekes's imaginative and provocative book is only one of many unmistakable evidences of the passing of the Rawlsian regime in political philosophy. The ongoing dissolution of that liberal hegemony is a sign that pluralism is at last reaching into intellectual life. As a result, political philosophy may be able to reconnect with the world that it was once supposed to be about." John Gray, *Times Literary Supplement*

"Kekes performs a useful task in identifying the contradictions in liberal political theory." Kenneth R. Craycraft, Jr., *The University Bookman*

"Incorporating his previous reflection about the relationship of character and morality, this work stands out in what is otherwise a well-populated chorus of questioners of liberalism." John J. Barrett, *Theological Studies*

"*Against Liberalism* relentlessly questions and rejects . . . common assumptions of contemporary political philosophy. . . . Unlike many of liberalism's opponents, Kekes makes a serious effort to understand liberalism's basic claims. . . . A provocative and challenging book for students of political philosophy." Samuel R. Freeman, *Ethics*

"Kekes's book is very good; it is filled with arguments that are deep, complex and lively." Shadia Drury, *Toronto Globe and Mail*

"*Against Liberalism* is a provocative and engaging book. . . . What Kekes offers us is in fact amounts to a vivid external critique, on the basis of a less optimistic view of human nature. At its best, it is a powerful reminder that liberals had better take evil seriously too." Norbert Awander, *Zurich University. Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 3:2000.

"John Kekes's *Against Liberalism* offers compelling argumentation for the position that liberalism denies the very conditions it requires for its sustenance. As a

consequence, liberal policies are inconsistent and self defeating. Rarely has such a forthright and well-constructed argument been made against liberalism's misguided flirtation with utopianism."Herbert London "This book deserves a place on the same shelf with Burke, Tocqueville, and Hayek. From now on no one counts as a serious conservative--even less, as a serious liberal--who has not paid it close attention."Wallace Matson, University of California, BerkeleyFrom the Back Cover"John Kekes's Against Liberalism offers compelling argumentation for the position that liberalism denies the very conditions it requires for its sustenance. As a consequence, liberal policies are inconsistent and self defeating. Rarely has such a forthright and well-constructed argument been made against liberalism's misguided flirtation with utopianism."--Herbert London "This book deserves a place on the same shelf with Burke, Tocqueville, and Hayek. From now on no one counts as a serious conservative--even less, as a serious liberal--who has not paid it close attention."--Wallace Matson, University of California, BerkeleyAbout the AuthorJohn Kekes is Professor of Philosophy and Public Policy at the State University of New York at Albany. He is the author of nine books, including A Case for Conservatism and Moral Wisdom and Good Lives, both from Cornell.