

Book Review

Wisdom: A Humanistic Conception

By John Kekes.

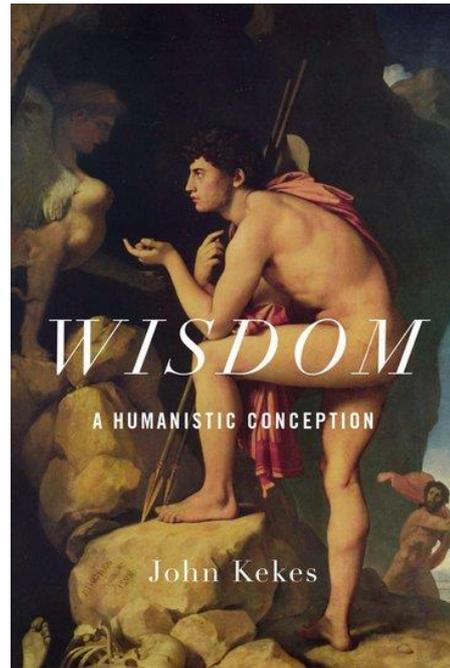
A Review By
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John Kekes has had his writings involved in the analysis of wisdom for many years. The writings show his relentless efforts to carry out philosophical research of the nature and importance of wisdom. Again, this present book provides an analysis of human wisdom in the nature of practical wisdom. The analysis is also unique in the sense that humanistic philosophy can be an interesting basis for the analysis of human wisdom. Moreover, to a great extent, the present book is intended as a correction of his previous book *Moral Wisdom and Good Lives* (Kekes, 1995) which he thinks that the analysis was based too much on the tragedies of Sophocles (p. xi).

Kekes' incisive assessment of human wisdom would go like this. Wisdom is considered in its aspect of "a *personal* attitude" that is for a person to evaluate his or her own conditions of living. A person has a group of beliefs that make up some "*basic assumptions*" for life (p.1; Kekes' italics).

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Wisdom is the one that decides what beliefs should be classified as the underlying assumption. In the life of a person, when he or she has to take into account any decisions or options in life that he or she has made, that person inevitably has what is known as “a *reflective understanding*” that is created to determine what identity he or she is as a particular human being. In addition, attempts made by a person to determine and evaluate what he or she has done good or bad, or made to decide rightly or wrongly, when analyzed in conjunction with the length of life he or she has already had, it is assumed that there is a “*depth*” that he or she has demonstrated which wisdom is (pp. 2-3; Kekes’ italics). These outstanding academic terms are among the author’s use for introducing us with the wisdom in a new philosophical way which the author himself sees as giving a different kind of assessment especially from the traditional one.

What sort of the traditional assessment is Kekes’ assessment different from? From the Greek philosophers’ conception of the term ‘wisdom,’ it can be considered that wisdom is analyzed as a human capability to make a judgement in one’s life in accordance with some believed canon of criteria of how to make one’s life perfected. The conception is identified, to some arguably extent, as the point of view of “The Good” which is to guide one to live well. However, the pinnacle of perfect life according to the traditional conception has encountered the problem questioning about its existence and its adaptability to personal style of living. What is offered instead by Kekes is that one’s life should be considered as “terroir” for one to cultivate one’s own vineyard of one’s appropriate practical art of living (pp. 4-6). Nevertheless, this is not for us to consider that Kekes is arguing for a relative conception of life-style according to individual preferences even though he accepts that his conception of wisdom is “*pluralist*, not absolutist.” (p. 3). If life is to be compared with a house construction, it can be considered that there is no completion of house maintenance because things can always go wrong with it as time passes by. An individual person must either encounter hardship and some contingencies in his or her life, and, therefore, be in a gradual need of living improvement (pp. 14-15).

When the individual person is to be engaged in a process of problem solving, he or she needs a framework of consideration. However, must the framework be the only idealist correct one with which every individual who is to be engaged in the process begins? And for an individual to be considered wise enough, he or she should use the framework? From a humanistic approach of wisdom, Kekes argues that in the real-life setting one is guided by one’s own personal attitude with its “inscape” or the inward components of one’s experiences and beliefs (pp. 15-20). The first-person perspective of inscape is a necessary condition of human wisdom, but not a sufficient one because wisdom should contain more of a distinctive self-reflection of those experiences and beliefs. This characteristic of wisdom is one of the crucial characteristics of humanistic approach of wisdom, and it is for Kekes to differentiate the humanistic approach from the other previous approaches of wisdom including the classical, the

epistemological, the psychological, and the moral ones (*pp.* 36-63). Moreover, the humanistic conception of wisdom is not trapped by the two conflicting assumptions of the realist and the idealist. The realists would say that every individual is to make a decision on one's own motivated by the individual's belief from his or her first-person perspective that it is good. Contrastively, the idealists would believe that there is a definite criterion of The Good which the wise men think that it should be kept in observance. The humanistic conception of wisdom is to argue that the good should be pluralistic, and human motivation is full of uncertainties (*pp.* 64-92).

The latter half of the book is for Kekes to give us the details of his argument for the new conception of humanistic wisdom. It is undeniable that when we are engaged in a question and a process of reasoning about what we should do with our life, the answer must be from our first-person perspective of inscape. Practically, we are already with our personal attitude with underlying assumptions about what is appropriate for our situation. However, the inscape should include more of reflective understanding about the judgement made for or against something. The evaluation of lifelong reflections would result in the thing called depth of life understanding that we as human beings are imperfect. What we need to do with our life is that we should always have self-criticism for our own self-improvement (*pp.* 230-243).

In my opinion, the main tenet of argument in the present book of Kekes that is also the strongest one comes from his arguments against the believed existence of The Good and against the non-ambivalent characteristics of human motivation (*p.* 91). This tenet is widely endorsed in today's philosophical pragmatism as well as another practical philosophy. It is considered that the dreams of correct philosophical theories which are always immune to revision are delusive. We are to accept that we are overwhelmed by many difficulties and contingencies, and we are not perfect enough to get them all solved completely within our power. The final definite answer to those problems is not yet in our reach. However, what is the next best thing for us to do is that we are not to be deluded no more by the illusion of the ideal.

Finally, I think this book is not just only good for philosophers to have more books with an insightful philosophical view of wisdom, but also for the general readers to have more precious books on their shelves because the book is truly with understandable language uses.

Reference

Kekes, John. (1995). **Moral Wisdom and Good Lives**. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press.