BOOK REVIEW


‘We are all liberals now’, used to be a fairly accurate description of contemporary political philosophy. Among the many who have recently challenged that consensus, John Kekes’s particular contribution is to argue that liberalism’s fundamental defect is its inconsistency. Kekes identifies three major inconsistencies: (i) Liberals are committed both to the positive aim of promoting autonomy and to the negative aim of avoiding evil. But more autonomy often means more evil. (ii) Liberals hold “freedom, equality, rights, pluralism and distributive justice” to be essential for good lives. Yet these basic liberal values and the policies that go with them often make lives worse. (iii) Liberals treat autonomy and the other basic liberal values as overriding. This is incompatible with their affirmation of pluralism, according to which there is no overriding value. Crucial for this threefold attack on the liberals’ core value of autonomy (or rather its priority) is the rejection of the ‘liberal faith’ that people are naturally good. Once we acknowledge the ‘prevalence of evil’, Kekes thinks, it becomes clear how increasing autonomy will lead to even more evil. And surely, liberals don’t want that.

*Against Liberalism* is a provocative and engaging book, but it is far from dealing the ultimate deathblow to liberalism. The main challenge it poses to liberals is to be clear about which beliefs they hold and to which values they are committed, for the inconsistencies Kekes claims to discover seem to be due largely to either a misunderstanding or misrepresentation of their views.

i) Why say that liberals have two incompatible aims? They are committed to autonomy and whatever it takes to realize this core value. It is no news to them that this often includes restricting some liberties. More autonomy need not mean that there will be more evil, but it may mean that there must be less autonomy for those who endanger it. Of course, liberals oppose evils such as “dictatorship, torture, poverty, intolerance, repression, discrimination, lawlessness”, but they do so precisely for the reason that they make autonomous lives impossible. And there is no reason why they should not care about peace or a healthy environment, when it is quite
obvious that war or polluted air severely restrict people’s ability to act as they want to. It is misleading to say that liberals are committed to two incompatible ends if the evil they want to avoid is just what prevents people from leading autonomous lives. Equally mistaken is Kekes’ attack on the view that agents are only to be held responsible for their autonomous actions. Even granted his objection that this account of moral responsibility does not effectively prevent evil, it hardly proves liberalism’s inconsistency. It is of course debatable what the requirements for autonomous action are, but it seems clear that, regardless of whether we are liberals or not, the appropriateness of holding someone morally responsible does not depend on what the effects of doing so are. Pragmatic considerations may influence our practice of holding someone legally responsible, but that is a different matter.

ii) Kekes is on firmer ground in his critique of what he calls the “basic liberal values of freedom, equality, rights, pluralism and distributive justice”. If their justification is supposed to be that they are necessary for good lives, it is a good question indeed why equality, for example, should be more important than some minimal prosperity. But again that doesn’t prove Kekes’s point that the liberal conception of equality or the liberal conception of justice are incompatible with good lives. There simply aren’t such definite conceptions. Liberals disagree among themselves about the nature, scope and above all the value of equality (nor is there a lack of liberal debate about Rawls’s account of justice). While Kekes is right in repeating the familiar point that strict egalitarianism easily leads to strange results, it needs to be said that liberals can certainly care about equality precisely because and insofar as it is conducive to good lives.

iii) Unlike Isaiah Berlin, who took pluralism to go naturally with his version of liberalism, Kekes argues that they are incompatible. It is here that the problem of misidentification becomes pervasive. Despite having written an entire book on the subject (The Morality of Pluralism, 1993), Kekes hasn’t quite made up his mind what pluralism is meant to be. Sometimes he presents it as a thesis about the number and structure of values, sometimes as a thesis about the diversity of conceptions of a good life, sometimes as itself a value. The most explicit characterization involves the idea that there is a plurality of values none of which is overriding. This is an interesting thesis, but it is hard to see why liberals should, indeed how anybody could, be committed to it as a value. Further confusion is due to the failure to distinguish between pluralism concerning prudential values and pluralism concerning political values. Even if autonomy is not the only ingredient of a good life, it may still be the overriding or even only political value.