

# Kekes on Problem-Solving and Rationality

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Rationalists<sup>1</sup> maintain that a rational belief or action is one which is justifiably held, or done because it is in conformity with some standard of rationality. Sceptics maintain that the rationalists' rationalism is merely a disguised form of fideistic commitment. They reach this view by demanding that the rationalists provide a justification for their standard of rationality. If the rationalist demurs, the sceptic argues that the adoption of the standard is an unjustified commitment. If the rationalist offers a justification, the sceptic argues that (given the rationalists' model of justification as conformity to a standard) this justification either begs the question or leads to an infinite regress. Either way, then, the rationalists are fideists according to the sceptic.

Rationalists generally seek to meet this challenge by offering a nonquestion-begging and nonarbitrary ground for their standard which does not engender a regress. John Kekes has developed one of the most promising of such accounts.<sup>2</sup> He maintains that 'problems constitute the fundamental link between theories and the world' (CPS, p. 410). It is always against a background of problems that theories are advanced and they are advanced to solve these problems. The solution of problems, then, is taken as the primary test of the adequacy of theories and of the rationality of beliefs or actions. Kekes believes that the problems themselves provide a ground for the rational standard of problem-solving which meets the sceptics' challenge. Unfortunately his defense of rationality begs the question.

Problems will provide the promised sort of ground for the rational standard of problem-solving only if some problems are theory-independent. Recognizing this, Kekes points out that there are problems which we all are *forced to confront*. He calls such problems 'problems of life'. Here conformity to the standard of problem-solving is not a matter of choice: 'if problems of life are not solved, the agent is damaged... solving problems of life is required by what a person regards as his well-being' (CPS, p. 412).

While it is not logically necessary that one have these problems or that one adopt this problem-solving orientation (there could be some possible worlds where human beings were not forced to confront such problems), these problems are ones *we* can not avoid. Thus he terms them 'conditionally necessary':

- 1 Here 'rationalism' is used in contrast to 'irrationalism'; thus empiricists are rationalists in this sense.
- 2 Kekes works include: *A Justification of Rationality*, Albany 1976, hereafter cited as JR; 'Rationality and Problem-Solving', *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 7, 1977, 351-66, hereafter cited as RPS; and 'The Centrality of Problem-Solving', *Inquiry*, 22, 1979, 405-21, hereafter cited as CPS. The latter work as well as Part II of his book provide excellent reasons for maintaining that the problem-solving orientation is more promising than other responses. Another recent development of this orientation is Larry Laudan's *Progress and Its Problems*, Berkeley 1977.

'human nature and the environment jointly make it inevitable that human beings have problems which they must solve' (RPS, p. 364). This necessity and inevitability of these problems, then, grounds the rational standard of problem-solving. Rather than being an unjustified fideistic commitment, the rationalists' adoption of this standard is externally, universally, and nonarbitrarily forced upon us.

If this defense of the rational standard is to be successful, Kekes' talk of human nature must not beg the question. Here a problem arises however. The assertion that the problem-solving orientation is naturally, necessarily, and nonarbitrarily forced upon us derives *its* justification from various empirical inquiries into the nature of the environment and into human nature. That is to say, the characterization Kekes offers of ourselves and our environment is one which is to be justified by empirical scientists who offer it as a response to various problems they face.

Here the problem are those which Kekes calls 'problems of reflection'<sup>3</sup>—problems which arise as we attempt, in thought and theory, to resolve problems of life without actually trying out rival solutions in practice. These problems are theory-relative.<sup>4</sup> They arise only given the presupposition of one of the rival solutions to the problem of life and are successfully resolved only upon the adoption of the problem-solving methodology. The adequacy of a solution is judged relative to the underlying problem of life, the theories held by the agent, and the various alternative theories and resolutions available.<sup>5</sup> Thus the solution the empirical scientists offer to their problems of reflection—here their characterization of ourselves and our environment as one wherein we must confront and seek to resolve problems of life—is one which is offered and advanced only relative to the theories they hold and to the problems of life which they confront. These problems of life, then, exert a regulative influence over their theorizing.

Kekes recognized that if what counts as a problem depends upon what theories we hold, problem-solving could not serve as a nonquestion-begging rational standard. Thus he discusses the problems of life which universally, necessarily, and independently force both themselves and the problem-solving orientation upon us. The sceptic, however, inquires into Kekes' ground for so characterizing ourselves and our environment. It is justified by appeal to the results of various empirical inquiries into certain problems of reflection. The resolutions of these problems, in turn, are justified only if certain problems of life are met and only if the rational methodology is employed. The ground for the rational standard, then, is one which presupposes it, and the 'conditional necessity' of the characterization he appeals to is established only given the necessity of the problems of life at the core of the empirical inquiry. The justification of the characterization he appeals to, then, hinges upon an acceptance of this characterization. Clearly the ground offered will not satisfy the sceptic.

Kekes maintains that there are two problems of rationality. First there is the question 'What makes a theory rational?' Here he holds that rationality is an 'objective property' of theories—a theory may be rational though none recognize it as such. Kekes answers this question with his discussion of problem-solving. Rational theories are those which provide solutions to the problems they were advanced to meet. The 'conditional necessity' of the problems of life, ultimately, provides him with his 'objective ground' here. The second question is 'what makes the acceptance of a theory rational?' (RPS, p. 352). Here he

3 Cf., CPS, pp. 412-13.

4 Cf., *ibid.*, p. 413.

5 Cf. JR, p. 154. Indeed, the greater portion of Chapter 9 is important here. Also see Laudan, *op. cit.*, Chapter 2.

offers an 'Aristotelian' answer: 'the reason rational theories should be accepted and irrational ones rejected is that doing so is in the best interests of the agent' (RPS, p. 363). Here he falls prey to the same difficulty we encountered in his answer to the first question. The assertion that problems are destructive and that the problem-solving orientation will lead to a better life (one which better fulfills our goals) is justified by his analysis of our nature and of the environment. That is, ultimately it is defended by an appeal to the very problem-solving method in question. Neither of Kekes' answers, then, allows one to avoid the sceptical problems.

A possible reply to my criticism is suggested by a distinction William Alston draws between one's *being justified* and one's *showing or knowing that one is justified*.<sup>6</sup> According to Alston, the 'criterion sceptic' fails to recognize this distinction. Such a sceptic demands that a justified belief conforms to a rational standard and then argues that one's belief is justified only if one is justified in supposing that there is such a rational standard to which one's belief conforms. Here the sceptic initially demands only that there be a 'valid epistemic principle' if one's belief, *p*, is to be justified. Thus, one's knowledge of the principle and one's justification for supposing its existence are irrelevant. These are relevant only when we question the justifiability of the higher-level belief, *q*, that one is justified in believing that *p*.<sup>7</sup> This sceptic then, has confused epistemic levels demanding a degree of justification for the lower-level belief *p* which is appropriate only for the higher-level belief *q*.

Kekes might reply to my criticism similarly, maintaining that the 'conditional necessity' of the problems of life provides the 'valid epistemic principle' which grounds the rational standard of problem-solving.<sup>8</sup> The demand that the rationalist be justified in believing that this is the case is relevant not to the standard's being justified but, rather, to one's being justified in believing that the standard of problem-solving is justified.

This sort of reply is not open to Kekes however. He takes himself to be responding to the most fundamental form of scepticism—one which:

is directed against the rationality of standards of rationality. It demands a rational justification of these standards and its challenge is the claim that such justifications turn out to be question-begging, lead to infinite regresses, or are, themselves merely disguised fideistic appeals. [JR, p. 21.]

Here the sceptic challenges the rationalists to *show* that their standard is different from the fideists'—to *justify* it. In accepting this challenge the rationalist undertakes the task of justifying their rational standard. They may not be content with the unsupported claim that while the rational standard is justified the rationalist need not be aware of this fact. If their standard is to be distinguished from the fideists' and the sceptical challenge is to be met, they must offer a rational justification for their standard. This, of course, is where the talk of the 'conditional necessity' comes in. The sceptical challenge is met here, however only as long as the sceptic fails to query the rationalists' rational justification of the rational standard.

One might try claiming that there is a justification for the assertion that the rational standard is justified (a 'valid epistemic principle' which supports it)

6 Cf. Alston's 'Level-Confusion in Epistemology', *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 5 1980, 135-50.

7 Cf., *ibid.*, p. 148.

8 This criticism was suggested by Alan Goldman in a reply he made when an earlier version of this paper was read to the Florida Philosophical Association.

though the rationalists need not be aware of this ground. Here, however, we embark upon a regress of levels of justification which is vicious. The rationalists accepted the sceptical question as legitimate and they must, then, offer a rational justification of their standard of rationality—it is *showing* that one is justified which is relevant here, not merely *being* justified. Kekes' characterization of ourselves and our environment is to provide such a justification. Unfortunately, it begs the question at issue.