

Ethics and Wisdom: Insights from Robert Kane's *Ethics and the Quest for Wisdom*

By Walter G. Moss

Philosopher Robert Kane's [*Ethics and the Quest for Wisdom*](#) (2010) conveys valuable insights regarding how to live wisely in our modern age. This age he correctly maintains is characterized by uncertainty and pluralism. In the twenty-first century it is more evident than ever that none of us possesses the whole truth and therefore a plurality of views should be tolerated. Does that mean, however, that we are stuck in a relativist universe where we must accept that one view is as good as another? Kane thinks not. He believes that we can still arrive at central, objective truths, both in our private lives and in the public sphere.

Rather than bemoan the loss of certainty, he makes a virtue of it. Given our uncertainty, we should emulate the ancient philosophers who sought wisdom “about what is objectively true and good,” about “right action” and how to live a good life. This quest “involves a persistent striving to overcome, to the degree possible, narrowness of vision that comes from the inevitable limitations of finite points of view.” We should, Kane suggests, all be humble, tolerant, open truth-seekers, and this should be a lifetime quest.

Kane's approach to knowledge is similar to that of the Pragmatist philosopher William James. In his essay “On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings” (1900), he wrote: “Neither the whole of truth nor the whole of good is revealed to any single observer, although each observer gains a partial superiority of insight from the peculiar position in which he stands.” Like James, Kane eschews any dogmatic approach and stresses the need for “experiments in living” (John Stuart Mill's notion) and “experiments with truth” (Gandhi's term).

Kane's views are also similar to those of wisdom scholar and psychologist Robert Sternberg in that both men believe that wisdom-seekers should care deeply about the treatment of others. Sternberg [writes](#), “People are wise to the extent that they use their intelligence to seek a common good. They do so by balancing, in their courses of action, their own interests with those of others and those of larger entities, like their school, their community, their country, even God.” Kane insists that we should all treat other people as ends in themselves and not just as a means to gain something from them. He quotes from Kant's “so-called Formula of Humanity”: “Act so that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of another, always at the same time as an end and never as a means only.”

Kane's emphasis on teaching values clarification is also close to Sternberg's view. Sternberg believes we should “help children develop positive values of their own that promote social welfare.” We should “give students a framework in which to develop those values—seeing things from others' perspectives as well as one's own, and thinking not just about one's interests but also about a common good.”

Kane recognizes the danger of governmental bodies favoring one set of beliefs over another. But he thinks that society could agree that advancing certain core values or virtues, such as “*honesty, respect, responsibility, fairness, trustworthiness and caring,*” could further the public good. He quotes favorably James Madison’s conviction, “If there be no virtue among us, no form of government can render us secure. To suppose that any form of government will secure liberty and happiness without any virtue in the people is a chimerical idea.”

Kane advocates what he calls a “moral sphere theory” (MST), where MST “is defined as a sphere in which all persons can be treated with openness by all others in the sense of being allowed to pursue and realize their desired ends or purposes, and hence to pursue their ways of life, without interference (without being prevented, for example, from doing so by the pursuits of others).” He realizes, however, that individuals and groups sometimes violate the moral sphere, and that we should attempt to prevent or stop such violators—for example, Nazis persecuting Jews. He writes, for example, “in the interests of preserving the moral sphere in the future, we can act preemptively if we see it is about to be broken. Those who read Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* could see that his lifeplan was a moral sphere-breaker and they had every right to intervene by force if they saw he was about to carry it out.”

After dealing with such violators, we can try “to restore and preserve conditions in which the ideal of openness to all can be followed once again by all. . . . Making efforts to restore this sphere when it has broken down is thus as close as we can come to maintaining the ideal of openness to all points of view and ways of life in adverse circumstances when we must depart from that ideal to some degree, no matter what we do. And maintaining this ideal to the degree possible is our way of expanding our minds beyond our own limited points of view to find out what should be recognized as good or valuable *from all* points of view, not merely from our own.”

In Kane’s final paragraph he sums up the relationship he sees between ethics and wisdom: “Inquiry into the truth about ethical matters and the nature of the good life must involve practical engagement in the world, including engagement with others. But such practical engagement, if it is to yield ethical insight, must be part of an overall search for wisdom, in the sense of a search for what is objectively true and good.”

Thus far I have merely summed up some of Kane’s main points, but his 260 pages of text offers up much more than summarized above. Besides the ideas of Kant and John Stuart Mill, the ethical thinking of many other philosophers from ancient times to the present is considered. For some of the ethical problems Kane treats he recognizes there are no easy answers. One is the “demandingness problem,” the problem that in a world (or in conditions) of widespread chronic need, such as widespread poverty, malnutrition and even starvation, morality may become too demanding. It may require that persons abandon the pursuit of their own ways of life in order to devote themselves to helping others with

chronic need.” Kane devotes considerable space to trying to discern what our moral obligations in such a world are.

He also writes intelligently when he notes, “Humans are prone . . . to leap to violence too soon as a means of resolving conflicts. We often use more force when less force will do.” He correctly observes that Gandhi applied his term “experiments with truth” to his trying out of non-violence tactics in India. In a more ethical world, leaders and other individuals would use more such non-violent experiments before resorting to the violence that so often produces unnecessary tragedies.

In summary, those of us interested in wisdom can gain much from reading *Ethics and the Quest for Wisdom*.