
The first part of Keshen’s subtly (and somewhat overtly) ambitious book has two general aims: (a) to provide thorough analyses of self-esteem, reasonableness with respect to self-esteem, and the nature of the Reasonable Person (RP), and (b) to show how the RP evaluates certain reasons for self-esteem and subsequently rejects them from or incorporates them into his “ideal self”. For Keshen, self-esteem involves experiencing feelings of enhancement or diminution of one’s self, and such feelings are ordinarily connected with, and defined in terms of, my beliefs that (a) I exemplify some property X, and (b) the having of X has positive/negative worth. Because our self-esteem feelings are typically grounded on such beliefs, then, we have reasons for feeling enhancement/diminution, and these reasons are subject to critical evaluation and revision.

The standard according to which our pre-existing reasons for self-esteem are to be appraised are the six guidelines of reasonableness (which, while specified in terms of self-esteem, are supposed to be generalizable to most, if not all, other reasons): (1) the felt aspect of the self-esteem experience should roughly correspond to the weight attached to its underlying reason; (2) the self-ascriptions involved in one’s reasons for self-esteem ought to be as truthful/accurate as possible; (3) inconsistent attributions of worth ought to be revised to eliminate the inconsistency; (4) reasons for self-esteem are to be revised if they involve self-ascriptions having neither intrinsic nor derivative worth; (5) attributions of worth are, where appropriate, to be universalized (that is, if I judge attribute X to be worthy when exemplified by me, I should also judge X to be of equal worth when exemplified by any other person); and (6) one’s overall values are to be brought into harmony, as much as possible, with one’s reasons for self-esteem (and vice versa). The RP, then, is simply defined as someone who, from the outset, cares deeply about “having reasonable beliefs through an application of [these] critical guidelines” (p. 7).

Is this a reasonable conceptual analysis of what we mean by “reasonableness,” though? Or, more to the point, just how inclusive is the scope of the “we” supposed to be here? Keshen’s analysis may be adequate for most of us in the western world, but it may well be too strict for adherents to certain eastern religions or traditions, people for whom reasonableness occasionally seems to involve a greater tolerance for inconsistency or a multiplicity of “truths.” Are these folks then unreasonable? I sincerely doubt it, but if they are not then we must admit the relative nature of the concept, and so qualify any remarks made about the “ideal” of reasonableness accordingly, which Keshen simply does not do. I return to this general point later.

The second aim of the first part of the book is to show how the RP evaluates those types of unreasonable self-esteem, feelings of enhance-

ative way), (b) competitive reasons (reasons for self-esteem stemming from the various ways in which one compares oneself to others), and (c) derived reasons (reasons stemming from groups with which one identifies and whose interests one evaluates as being morally superior to one’s own). Keshen’s general (and quite successful) strategy is to show that any attempt by the RP to rationalize such feelings in accordance with the critical guidelines will itself undercut the problematic self-ascriptions at issue. Indeed, what makes each type of self-ascription problematic is ultimately that its source is external to oneself.

The positive characterization of the RP, then, is of a person whose self-esteem is grounded in qualities issuing from himself, that is, his self-esteem must be grounded in inherent reasons. His feeling of enhancement, say, derives from his belief that he has voluntarily contributed to some valuable state of affairs, and in so doing his sense of his distinctness as an individual is deepened. Keshen’s claim in the second half of the book, then, is that deepening the weight of such person-distinctness yields for the RP the significant moral good of meaning in his life—rendering this sort of life intrinsically desirable—and this meaning has two sources. On the one hand, the RP, by identifying with a tradition of reasonableness, comes to recognize himself (qua RP) as having intrinsic moral worth (“self-respect”). On the other hand, the RP, in virtue of his being an RP, comes to recognize himself as having equal moral status to all other persons (“egalitarian respect”). Keshen connects the notion of self-esteem to that of self-respect in the following way: when I experience enhanced self-esteem for being an X, and when the worthiness of being an X is justified by the worthiness of a tradition of X-ing, then I am justifiably said to be a self-respecting X. For Keshen, a tradition involves “simply a set of skills, practices, styles of thinking, which is passed on, subject to evolution, over a series of generations” (p. 94). But if this is the case, then reasonableness itself is a tradition, and so the RP gains self-respect just insofar as he identifies (in the proper way) with this tradition. And one specific way to contribute to this tradition (and thus generate meaning for one’s life) is by contributing to one of its most important strands, viz., science (either by being a scientist or by merely appreciating science), a point Keshen discusses at length.

Nevertheless, while Keshen admits “that it is not usual to regard reasonableness as a tradition” (p. 95), and he obviously intends to make up for that oversight, it seems that in doing so he perhaps stretches the concept too far. He rightly delineates a tradition in terms of a defining purpose, but in conceiving the goal of the “tradition” of reasonableness as being the aim “to increase our understanding of the world and of the best way to act” (p. 97), he does not do enough to distinguish reasonableness from many other traditions. After all, several traditions share this general aim, and it is difficult to see in just what
ideal within most traditions, indicating that it is more plausibly construed as one way of being an adherent to some tradition or other, and so does not constitute its own separate tradition.

In showing how the RP accrues the second good—egalitarian respect—Keshen first distinguishes between its two components: treating ourselves as (a) not having lower moral status than others ("egalitarian self-respect"), and (b) not having higher moral status than others ("other-respect"). Keshen then argues convincingly that the general belief in the basic moral equality of all human beings simply cannot be given an adequate impersonal justificatory grounding, so what he proposes to do instead is argue for the possibility of separate personal justificatory groundsings for each of the two components of egalitarian respect. And the person for whom such justifications will be most compelling is—you guessed it—the RP.

First, because of her defining commitment to the guidelines of reasonableness, the RP "believes that no other conceivable point of view has the right to impose itself on her point of view, [and so] it follows that she has a concept of her self-identified good as worthy of not being transgressed by any other's self-identified good" (p. 137). So the RP's disposition to have egalitarian self-respect is essentially implied by her commitment to being an RP.

However, there is no such connection between this commitment and the RP's being disposed to other-respect, and here Keshen suggests why being an RP might "support the trait of other-respect" (p. 147) by focusing on how two sorts of experiences RP's might have lead them to cultivate and maintain this trait: (a) the experience of our all being equally subject to death, and (b) the experience of our all being equally subject to arbitrary moral luck (both good and bad). Because people in all sorts of cultures/eras have in fact been moved by these experiences to adopt other-respect, it is obviously possible for such regularly-occurring experiences to move the RP to do the same. One often undergoes a kind of gestalt switch upon experiencing these things, such that one literally comes to see one's fellow human beings as fellows, as having the same moral status as oneself. And in adopting this perspective, the RP is particularly well-suited to express her new beliefs in action, by actually treating her fellows as equals and contributing to their good. Consequently, insofar as contributing "to the good of others is, for all normal people, part of a meaningful life" (p. 146), the RP is ideally constructed for accruing such benefits.

I am quite suspicious, however, of granting a place for this "ways of seeing others" approach into the realm of legitimate moral argumentation. After all, it would then seem perfectly acceptable to try and manipulate others to come round to your own moral point of view via purely emotional appeals, for example, in the way certain pro-lifers try to get wavering pro-choicers to abandon their positions by showing them pictures of developing foetuses, or bloody foetuses in trash cans, etc., in order to play on their sympathies and get them somehow to "see" the foetuses as possessing equal moral worth. Now perhaps they do, but that is not the point. Rather, the point is that, while "seeing" an entity from a new perspective certainly has brought reasonable people to consider that entity to be equally morally worthy, the same process has also brought reasonable people to consider certain entities as having lower, or even non-existent, moral worth. One need only look to the effectiveness of Nazi cartoons/propaganda about Jews to see this point. The knife cuts both ways when it comes to this kind of moral "vision," and it strikes me as rather dangerous to allow such appeals, let alone provide a privileged place for them, in moral argumentation.

Further, Keshen argues at the end of the book for why he thinks the drive to exercise our capacities to experience self-esteem is a fundamental aspect of human nature, so fundamental that "we could not cease to exercise these capacities without ceasing to be human, and in this sense the ups and downs of our self-esteem are an ineliminable part of our lives" (p. 166; my emphasis). But it seems to me that the efforts of some Buddhists (and perhaps even some Stoics) to eliminate such ups and downs and to overcome the "natural" desires of the given self can occasionally be successful, and their attempts to undertake these journeys strike me as reasonable, worthy, and altogether human. To dismiss such persons as probably being "less capable of doing good rather than more, and more self-occupied rather than less" (p. 168) is once more to fail to take seriously the ideals of some non-western forms of human life, forms of life that often seem to be far more meaningful than those grounded in western, highly individualistic values.

Nevertheless, once we limit the target of Keshen's conclusions to those of us humans who do find ourselves drawn to the life of (Keshen-esque) reasonableness, there is much of value here, including a range of clearheaded insights into the ways many of us do or ought to view ourselves and others. And this more limited conclusion is still an accomplishment in which Keshen can (reasonably) take pride.

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Richard King has written a clear, modern, up-to-date, wide-ranging and accessible introduction to the principal doctrinal positions and debates in Indian philosophy. It is a balanced book, free from bias in favour of one school or another. King is an accurate, reliable and well-informed expositor. I would say that it is by some margin the best popular survey of Hindu and Buddhist philosophical doctrines on the market today.