In *The Human Condition*, John Kekes argues that we ought to reject the false comforts of religion, as well as such pessimistic doctrines as fatalism, nihilism, epistemic relativism, and skepticism. For there is available a secular outlook on life that is non-ideological, realistic, and hopeful. Despite our fallibility and our vulnerability to contingencies, we can increase our control through critical reflection and thereby improve our lives. Such reflection will lead us to a better understanding of well-being, which requires a coherent set of values that are in sync with our biological and psychological needs and anchored in unconditional commitments. We must stay loyal to these values, but also face up to the fact that there is evil in the world. For human nature is not good and rational but ambivalent: we all have malevolent desires, and we can be tempted by false ideologies that license malevolence. Still, we can deal with evil-doers by blaming them and combating the widespread boredom that makes evil-doing appealing. We have the resources for overcoming such boredom in the plurality of values embedded in Western aesthetic, literary, moral, philosophical, and political traditions.

The individual chapters of Kekes’ book elaborate on the various elements of this outlook. Here, I summarize these discussions and raise a few critical questions about them. Several of Kekes’ central arguments left me dissatisfied, and there is some overlap between this book and others by Kekes that I have read. But the strength of this book is that it ties together and succinctly communicates the elements of a reasonable and optimistic secular outlook on life.

Through critical reflection and we can change the attitudes that lead to our actions. When we make our actions the effects of such “internal causes,” we increase our control (pp. 42-3). But if the internal causes that lead to our actions themselves have antecedent external causes, can we really increase our control? Kekes says yes: though it may be impossible to increase control from the point of view of the law-governed world, it is possible to increase control “from the human point of view” (p. 41). This may sound like compatibilism, and Kekes at one point describes it as a version of compatibilism (p. 33). But he later rejects the label because he believes compatibilists are committed to the false view that the capacity for critical reflection marks the threshold of moral standing and responsibility. This view in turn commits compatibilists to thinking that critical reflection “consists in doing some one specific thing,” according to Kekes (p. 39). Kekes does not clearly explain why the former view entails the latter – or why compatibilists must accept both views.

Critical reflection will enable us to arrive at a harmonious system of values anchored in one or more *unconditional commitments*. We need unconditional commitments, according to Kekes, because without them, we will be “doomed to perpetual uncertainty about the identity and strength of the values and limits to which we should commit ourselves” (p. 59). But Kekes does little to address concerns about the danger of inflexible commitments to ideals that turn out to be unreasonable or out of date, or which prove to be too costly.
He does allow that particular commitments can be mistaken; we are not the “final judges of our own conception of well-being” (p. 68). People need a coherent, structured conception of well-being, whether they realize it or not. And coherence is not enough. In addition, “the furtherance of truth...is necessary for well-being”; we ought to be “realists” (p. 86). Does Kekes, then, think one must be committed to objectively good ends in order to be doing or faring well? No. Rather, one's commitments must “conform” to “the social conditions formed of the system of values of our society and the psychological condition that includes our various attitudes formed by our desires, beliefs, emotions, and motives” (p. 84). Perhaps Kekes means to say that one ought to choose a role that is socially recognized and sanctioned – one that also suits one's emotional nature. It is unclear, though, how coherence of this form aims at “the furtherance of truth” and why it should count as a version of “realism.”

There is another aspect of Kekes' view that seems more deserving of the “realist” label. He holds that there are three dimensions of value on which well-being depends: the human dimension, the cultural dimension, and the personal dimension. That is, one's well-being depends on fixed physiological and psychological needs common to all human beings, as well as adherence to culturally specific norms that enable one to have a cultural identity, as well as the realization of one's individual projects. If one's values cannot be fit into a broader system of values that adequately addresses all these dimensions, then even if they are coherent, they are not reasonable (pp. 76-81, p. 239).

The pursuit of well-being presupposes yet other modes of evaluation. One could not value things at all, much less realize one's projects, if one did not see paintings as beautiful or ugly, poems as profound or insipid, actions as right or wrong, philosophical theories as true or false, societies as just or unjust, ways of living as meaningful or meaningless (p. 165). There are bound to be conflicts among these modes of evaluation, as well as among the human, cultural, and personal dimensions of well-being. The resolution of such conflicts must be “particular and personal, not universal and impersonal...[W]hat is practically reasonable for particular persons to do is likely to be different from what it is practically reasonable for other persons to do” (p. 183).

Perhaps Kekes is merely claiming that practical reasoning is difficult because subtle variations in context make for important variations in reasons. Indeed, he proposes something that resembles a master practical principle: “[W]hen values and evaluations conflict in particular situations ... the reasonable course of action is to opt for ones that are more important for our well-being in that situation at that time...there is usually one that is objectively the best and most reasonable in any particular situation” (p. 205). However, his considered view is that there is no feature or set of features that all rational actions have in common (p. 182, p. 242). The foregoing principle is “substantive,” not “formal,” and so no analysis of justifying reasons or the “just-plain-ought” is possible (p. 238). For example: if a given feature of a case does not provide a reason of similar weight in all similar contexts, how can it be that previous cases have relevance for deciding about new cases? And why do the considerations he presents to justify this view not support outright skepticism about practical reason instead of particularism?