

Egoism*

Marvin Kohl

Professor Machan's letter (FI, Spring 1981) has little to do with the issues raised by my article, "Morality Without Religion." He takes the opportunity to extol the apparently overlooked virtues of ethical egoism. Machan believes that egoism is a sound theory and therefore that there is no need for another kind of enforcement factor.

Personal egoism is generally held to be unsound because it confuses a necessary condition with necessary and sufficient ones, and because it tends to confuse normative psychology with ethical theory. Of course it is true that, since a creature must live before it can act, the acts by which each maintains his own life must generally precede in imperativeness all other acts. But from this it does not follow that a person should place his own happiness or other interests above that of all other persons. Similarly, ethics differs from normative psychology in at least two respects. Since ethics must in part be concerned about interpersonal relations, and since egoism generally prides itself in being unable to resolve conflicts of interests, it is to that extent inadequate. Moreover, egoism cannot respond to the charge that ethics is necessary because men's desires conflict and that, since the egoistic belief is the primary cause of this conflict, it must be

rejected.

Suppose we are mistaken. Suppose we tentatively accept Machan's amorphous egoism. Does it then follow that there is no need for an enforcement factor? I suspect not. There is no evidence that rational self-interest, especially as Machan interprets it, eliminates the need for external rewards and punishments. Machan seems to believe the human species consists of reliable, rational, decent people, influenced by truth and objective standards, who can be safely released from the outward restraint of most government regulation and any form of moral enforcement. Beneath the rhetoric we find a nonworkable utopianism.

I do not oppose all forms of egoism. I only oppose doctrines that, when applied to the conduct of human affairs, too easily become equivalent with personal egoism. Machan and others fail to understand that, even though they seem to prefer to call their theory "universal egoism," if the theory generally comes down to the more brutish forms of personal egoism, then what one calls it is largely irrelevant.

Marvin Kohl is professor of philosophy at the State University of New York at Fredonia.

* Free Inquiry 2:1 (1981), 39