

Asceticism may be seen at its best in the writings of St. John of the Cross. In his *Precautions* he takes care to point out that, although suffering in itself is an evil for the one enduring it, it is most often the cause of great benefits. According to St. John, suffering expiates and sanctifies, it frees the soul from debasement and selfishness, and it renders us most like our Lord Jesus Christ. In other words, suffering has a clearly defined instrumental value. It is valuable because it purifies and greatly strengthens our spiritual and moral character. Moreover, suffering is of the greatest value, and is sacred, because it confers upon those whom it rends the most intimate resemblance to the sorrowful Son and does so in a perfectly egalitarian way. While all men can find God, those in the most pain, the greatest distress, are in an especially fortunate position to do so.

There are several reasons why this view should be rejected: first of all, why would a benevolent and all-powerful God insist that we must come to Him through suffering and mortification? Why would a truly loving father want his children to suffer?

Second, if suffering is to be viewed as a blessing, as almost the greatest gift of God's love, then why do anything to reduce it? If we are enjoined to view our own suffering as being blessed, then what logically prevents us from drawing the conclusion that all human suffering is good? Why not follow the example of Paneloux, the priest, who, in Camus's book *The Plague*, concludes that it is illogical for a true religious believer to call in a doctor or struggle against affliction?

Finally, let us recognize the palliative value of this outlook. Let us admit that it often cloaks, softens, and at its height seems to transubstantiate suffering. But even the use of a relatively good palliative has its limits. Suppose we compare the ascetic attitude towards suffering with the use of a drug like alcohol. The modest drinking of alcoholic beverages often enables an individual to escape temporarily from the woes of this world. But this is not in itself an argument for excessive drinking. Nor is it an argument for facing every problematic situation with bottle in hand. Similarly, wisdom seems to command that we endure suffering when it is irremediable. But it does not demand that we endure suffering that can be intelligently diminished or eliminated. Nor does it suggest that we overdose with ideological palliatives, or that we begin to worship our natural enemy.

One of the most persuasive advocates of extreme egoism is Ayn Rand. In a series of intellectually absorbing novels (including *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged*), and in *The Virtue of Selfishness*, Rand states that man is (and therefore should be) objectively egoistic, that is, rationally and completely selfish. She maintains that an individual's achievement of his own happiness is his highest moral purpose. What makes this position

On Suffering*

Marvin Kohl

It is generally admitted that the presence of suffering in the world poses a problem for theistic religion insofar as it seems to contradict the notion of an all-powerful benevolent God. It would seem that if God were good, He would not want His creatures to suffer, and if all-powerful, He would be able to prevent their suffering. In this note I will suggest that the presence of enduring pain also poses a problem for the humanist, a problem that cannot be met simply by rejecting theism or by embracing egoism. Then I shall proceed to present an outline of a Promethean humanist's position, an outline that I hope will encourage further inquiry into the nature and limits of remedial suffering.

We can roughly distinguish two radically different and extreme ideological positions, one which holds that all suffering is good and a second which holds that all suffering is bad. Fortunately, few hold, and even fewer would be prepared to defend, these positions. Let us therefore confine our attention to two parallel claims, namely, the belief that almost all suffering is extrinsically good and the belief that, since almost all suffering is bad and happiness good, a person should place his own happiness or interests above the happiness or interests of all other persons. For the sake of convenience, I shall call the former "mortifying asceticism" or "asceticism"; I shall call the latter "extreme egoistic hedonism" or "egoism" for short.

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different, and open to acclaim or scorn, is that Rand rejects all forms and acts of altruism, believing that they are unnecessary and dangerous to the human good. She repeatedly suggests that she knows of no worse injustice than the giving of what is undeserved. From this perspective, an altruistic person is, at best, misguided or weak and, at worst, immoral. Similarly, a charitable or welfare society is morally degenerate, and one that is in danger of destroying itself.

Before examining some of the difficulties of this position, it may be well to try to understand why many humanists, after leaving the abode of asceticism, readily move to this extreme. After all, why not shift from a philosophy of self-sacrifice to a modest egoism? Why not say that, since almost all suffering is bad and happiness good, a person should place his own happiness or interests above that of any other individual? Or why not be content to say that since the rational end of conduct for each individual is the maximum of his own happiness or interests, most (but not all) forms of altruism are undesirable? The most obvious answer is that these positions do not go far enough. And I suspect that we would once again be reminded by the advocate of egoism that all forms of altruism are to be rejected; that, to the extent a person is rational, he must place his own happiness, not merely above that of any other person, but above the happiness of all other persons, taken collectively.

Let us, therefore, ask a different question. Let us ask the egoist, what is the task of morality? He probably would reply that morality has to do with how we are to treat ourselves and how we are to maximize our own happiness. In more candid moments he may even suggest that, while asceticism stultified his own pursuit of happiness, egoism allows for its most natural and fullest expression. This is an important clue. For the radical shift from asceticism to egoism often seems to be grounded in a combination of the desire to be happy and the belief that the best way of doing so is by adopting an ethical theory that views this end to be the highest good.

Knowing this takes much of the sting out of the first criticism of egoism. For we are often told: via the linguistic mode, that while the value judgments of the egoist may be maxims of prudence or self-love, they are not, literally speaking, moral judgments; or, via the material mode, that it is eminently clear that morality primarily has to do with how we should treat one another, and not primarily with how we are to treat ourselves. The difficulty with both arguments is that they appear to beg the question: the first by assuming that we must accept the apparent nonegoistic bias of ordinary language, one of the very points at issue; the second, by assuming that it is somehow self-evident that morality is primarily concerned with the good of others. An objection that does not beg the question and has

more force is as follows: Ethics is necessary because men's desires conflict, and since the egoistic belief—the belief that it must always be an agent's positive duty to do what is best for himself—is the primary cause of this conflict, egoism must be rejected.

A second objection is that egoism is inaccurate in its assessment of the worth and viability of the welfare state. The historical evidence does not substantiate Rand's claim that a welfare state cannot ultimately protect its best and brightest and therefore must fail. Experiences in Great Britain, Sweden, and the United States indicates that, while grave difficulties may result in a social welfare state which emphasizes almost complete social and economic equality, a social security state which aims at a guaranteed minimum-type protection is more than viable.

There is yet another reason why this view should be rejected. It may be held that even if it is reasonable for a man always to act in the manner most conducive to his own happiness, it is not reasonable for society (and most groups) to accept this as its own credo. For example, it may be reasonable for a man to open a nuclear power plant before it has been properly checked out in order to obtain tax benefits, and thereby maximize his own profits or interests, as seems to be the case in the Three Mile Island situation. But it is certainly not reasonable for the fifty people who will die prematurely of cancer because of the radiation leak, to acquiesce. Nor is it reasonable for the hundred thousand or so individuals who were threatened to support this purported ethic. In fact, most disinterested parties would be inclined to say that the support of egoistic belief in this and similar situations is more than unreasonable—it is irrational. It is irrational because one of the primary functions of a society is to provide for protection against general suffering. And when we say this we imply that so long as man requires a rational social life, selfishness cannot be the supreme principle of ethics.

And finally even if this analysis were mistaken, egoism is not an alternative open to humanists who claim Prometheus as their patron saint. Promethean humanism must be universalistic and altruistic. Prometheus stole fire from the gods and gave it as a gift, knowing that he might be blamed or punished, because he took pity on the helplessness of men. As Byron suggests, his only God-like crime was to be kind, to render less the sum of human wretchedness. To the extent that we emulate this great and loving Titan, we should be caring *and* giving to our fellow creatures, even though this, at times, may entail considerable risk or sacrifice.

But a Promethean approach also has its difficulties. The greatest danger is that it excites in many minds, among them the most compassionate in feeling and benevolent in purpose, the belief that all suffering can be eliminated. But can this really be accomplished? Even if we could eliminate

war, poverty, and disease, can we eliminate the possibility of failure, accident, and the pain that normally accompanies the loss of loved ones? In other words, if one of our major goals is to eliminate suffering, and if it is true that this cannot be done (at least not in the foreseeable future), then the goal is a futile one. And if the pursuit of futile goals is often (though not always) a cause of misery, it follows that the attempt to eliminate all suffering is often a cause of misery, and thereby self-defeating.

The encouragement of unrealistic expectation also tends to promote disillusionment and noncritical retreat. Because men aim too high, they often cry out as to the impossibility of any welfare program or, in moments of despair, urge that human suffering is intractable. Again: how often do we find men who, after noble battle to conquer the unconquerable, turn in their failure to the Epimethean idol, an idol which insists that we have blind faith in nature and accept life, more or less, as we find it?

In order that we may be able to avoid these and the pitfalls mentioned earlier, the following seems preferable as a preliminary stance: Man is not challenged to eliminate all suffering. Man is challenged only to know the difference between remediable and irremediable suffering, to remedy suffering wherever it can be remedied, to endure it without chronic complaint when it is irremediable, and to understand that the enemy is great and that the battle may be endless.

Comment by Paul Kurtz on Kohl Article

I agree with Marvin Kohl's indictment of religious asceticism, and also with his criticisms of egoism, but only of an exacerbated self-centered one, since some measure of reflective self-interest is essential, in my judgment, to humanist ethics. Professor Kohl raises many important issues in his short paper, but I will only focus on his concluding remarks on the Promethean saint. It is not clear to me that Promethean humanism must be universalistic and altruistic. Although Prometheus gave the gift of fire and the arts of civilization to humanity, it is not apparent that this was done solely or primarily out of a motive of sympathy and compassion. Kohl seems to be drawing the model of Christ rather than that of Prometheus. In a fundamental sense, Prometheus expresses the quality of audacity to do battle with the gods. Granted that Prometheus had a philanthropic concern for humanity; yet, he expresses independence as a chief virtue in so far as he was willing to challenge the gods. The value he represents is moral courage, a virtue especially appreciated by freethinkers and humanists. That is why

he stands as their patron saint, for they wish to cultivate the arts of intelligence in order to cope with the problems of human life. Accordingly, I don't know that the Prometheus myth implies the belief that all suffering can be eliminated. This surely would be a naive optimism. On the contrary, the Promethean myth suggests an awareness of suffering and an appreciation for the need for continuing heroic efforts to overcome it.

Kohl's last paragraph seems to me to be eminently sensible: we cannot eliminate all suffering, but we should do our best to eradicate whatever we can. To this I would add a further positive moral obligation, which is incumbent upon us: to distribute goods, wherever possible, first to oneself (a modified egoism), and second, where possible and with their voluntary consent, to our fellow humans who are within the range of our activities.

Reply by Marvin Kohl

Professor Kurtz suggests, with his usual subtlety and clarity, the Prometheus' actions fundamentally express the quality of audacity to do battle with the gods and that his form of humanism has successfully avoided a major pitfall of egoism. I have my doubts about both of these points.

In order for Prometheus to actually do great good to and for others, it was necessary for him to violate the prevailing rules of sovereignty and be prepared to do battle with Zeus. According to this interpretation, his end was that of doing good in a universalistic and altruistic sense and his means, or at least one of his means, was that of having an unusual amount of courage and even greater fortitude. If this interpretation is mistaken, and if Prometheus' defiance is not a means but the primary end (as Kurtz seems to suggest), then Prometheus is something of a megalomaniac, and I fail to see the moral worth of loving power for its own sake or of emulating those who do.

I have urged that ethics is necessary because men's desires conflict, and since the egoistic belief that it must always be an agent's positive duty to do what is best for himself is the primary cause of this conflict, egoism must be rejected. To attempt to modify this position by saying that, where possible, we have a positive moral obligation to distribute goods first to ourselves and then to others does not, in itself, meet this objection. It may be notoriously difficult to get nonaltruistic men to teach their children altruistic desires. But it is even greater folly to pretend to have successfully avoided the pitfalls of egoism when the evidence indicates that unless a theory offers a proposal that would enable us to avoid the conflicting serious interests and activities of different men it leaves the door open to unnecessary suffering and, in a significant way, welcomes the tyranny of the powerful and selfish against the majority of mankind.