

Ethics

Discussion

Rejoinder to Robert Hartford, “Objectivity and the Proof of Egoism”
(Spring 2007)

A Brief Comment on Hartford

Tibor R. Machan

In his comment on my portion of the *JARS* exchange on Ayn Rand’s metaethics,¹ Robert Hartford (2007, 291) writes as follows:

Machan takes “the choice to live [as a] fundamental commitment” and does not provide a proof of the validity of that choice. His focus on the “choice to live” as “a kind of ‘on/off’ choice” and its characterization as “the first choice that brings morality into play” reflects the importance of the choice but is too narrow for validation of the Objectivist ethics, especially in the context of competing ethical theories.

I do not understand what it means to prove the validity of anything, including the choice to live. Validity is a property of a proof. If one proves that there must be a choice to live before ethics becomes part of one’s life, that proof would have to be a sound one, which is to say it would have to have true premises and a valid form. Otherwise, it isn’t a proof.

My entire discussion of the issue in the paper to which Hartford refers constitutes a proof—although not necessarily consisting of syllogisms. And if it is a proof, then its argument must be valid. So, in the only respect in which one can provide “a proof of the validity” of something, my discussion does indeed contain such a proof. However, I am not at all sure this is what Hartford had in mind when he used what I consider an infelicitous expression, “not provide a

proof of the validity . . .” Until I get some clarification on what this means, I can do no more than reiterate what I said in my paper. Of that, perhaps the most relevant thing to stress here is that prior to the choice to live/think, a human being cannot be aware of any principle of ethics. So the choice to live/think cannot rest on such a principle. Only once that choice has been made—however incrementally, gradually, by fits and starts—can one be rationally expected to live a principled life.

Notes

1. See Machan 2006. I elaborate and develop some of the points in this paper in a forthcoming *Social Philosophy & Policy* essay, “Why Moral Judgments Can Be Objective.” See also Machan 2004.

References

- Hartford, Robert. 2007. Objectivity and the proof of egoism. *The Journal of Ayn Rand Studies* 8, no. 2 (Spring): 291–303.
- Machan, Tibor R. 2004. *Objectivity: Recovering Determinate Reality in Philosophy, Science, and Everyday Life*. Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate.
- _____. 2006. Rand and choice. *The Journal of Ayn Rand Studies* 7, no. 2 (Spring): 257–73.