PEOPLE ARE SELFISH

‘Can Hogs Be Penned?’
Agora Says They Can’t

By SYD NATHANS

Ten days ago, the Agora, Rice philosophical society, dismissed any questions as to the selfish nature of people with an incisive and decisive “Yes, we’re all hogs.” This past Tuesday, Newton Burkett presented to the society his attempt to develop an “ethical system” which would preserve freedom, while simultaneously assuring that selfish people would not abuse other selfish people in the pursuing of their primarily selfish objectives: “But hogs can be penned.”

A Modest Task

To accomplish this modest task, Burkett selected and elaborated on two forms of social organizations which he claimed could be moulded into such an ethical system: the family and the state. He declared that the cardinal ethical principle of the family is love, and the ethic of the state is to function such that equality is guaranteed in the control and distribution of material possessions. With both premises conditionally accepted in hopes of the ethical system to come, the discussion continued around Burkett’s thesis that the essence of the family is love and the essence of the state is its function.

The essence of the system would be found in a non-enforcement treaty between love and function: mechanistic function should not undermine the pure love which ideally motivates all family relationships, and love should not subject the state to the bias and supra-material idealism which implies. The family’s function should be love.

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and the state’s love should be function.

Landing Instructions!
After circling the issue in this manner for a time, the group finally appealed for landing instructions which it never received. A workable ethical system was never formulated because its proposed foundations were unrealistic. Burkett designed his premises in spite of, and not to spite, inherent human selfishness.

The Ideal State
His ideal state was created on the assumption that people are essentially rational and fair, and his ideal family was based on the assumption that people like to love as much as they like to be loved. Nothing less than the clear antithesis of these assumptions — the innate selfishness of people — was the social condition Burkett was supposed to have thwarted. It seemed that even idealist Burkett, bloody and somewhat bowed, would have to go along with the initial Agora conclusion: People are no damned good!