

8 Difficulties with Subjective Morality

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1) Moral progress is Impossible

In a blog post attempting to outline [Six reasons why objective morality is nonsense](#), Cole Hellier stated the following:

“We humans have a lot to be proud of: by thinking it through and arguing amongst ourselves, we have advanced morality hugely, with Western society today giving vastly better treatment to individuals, to women, children, religious minorities, foreigners, those of other races, the disabled and mentally ill, criminals, etc, than any previous society.”

We can envision moral **change** as a view moving from A to B. Moral **improvement** is moving from A to B which is closer to C (the standard). Without a standard we only have **change**, not **improvement**. Contrary to what the author above asserts, we can't actually call something a moral *advance* unless we have an objective standard by which we can measure moral change. A person could define their own moral system and set their own objective standard by which they could then measure everything else. But the real problem is how does one compare one moral system with another moral system? Abolition is moral progress to the slave but not the slaver. The person who owned slaves saw the process as theft of their legally owned property. Without an external, objective standard, this is just a matter of opinion, like preferring chocolate ice cream over vanilla. What is to stop a person from adopting a standard that prioritizes white males and excludes or views “women, children, religious minorities, foreigners, those of other races, the disabled and mentally ill, [and] criminals” as sub-human?

Imagine you draw a map outlining the United States using a small number of straight lines. In a revision you erase several of the lines and replace them with a lot of smaller jagged ones. You then declare: “My new map is better than the other one.” But if there is no actual coastline to the United States that exists outside your head, how could your map actually be a **better** representation of it? C. S. Lewis said something similar:

“The reason why your idea of New York can be truer or less true than mine is that New York is a real place, existing quite apart from what either of us thinks. If when each of us said ‘New York’ each means merely ‘The town I am imagining in my own head,’ how could one of us have truer ideas than the other? There would be no question of truth or falsehood at all.”

As a thought experiment, imagine if we changed “moral progress” to “religious progress.” Imagine if I embraced a religion that I believed was not objectively true, but then said my religion is the best one and everyone else should agree with it. Further imagine that I use my own knowingly subjective religion as a standard by which all other religions should be judged. Does this seem appropriate?

2) Subjective Moral Progress is Narcissistic

As noted above, subjective morality lacks the ability to identify genuine moral progress. In response to this an intelligent atheist once told me:

“One knows that morality is better by using our subjective appraisal of morality.”

The claim is that we can have a subjective moral system and measure growth towards or away from that moral system from within it. I do not disagree. A person can subjectively claim whatever they want and anyone is free to subjectively disagree with them. But defining moral progress in relation to your own subjective standard is analogous to throwing a dart at a piece of wood and declaring wherever it hits is the bullseye. My response to a person espousing this view would be:

Your subjective standard for “moral advance” boils down to “people agreeing with you.” When society or people become *more like you* and share *your beliefs*, you call it advance or more progress. When society or people become *less like you* and disagree with *your beliefs*, you call it moral regress. Subjective morality comes with a blatant narcissism when progress is defined in terms of your own personal outlook. This is a form of the Texas sharpshooter fallacy. If the standard for “better” is “what you currently think,” then you are always perfect by definition. Does the sun also revolve around you?

The subjectivist has constructed the perfect echo chamber where anything they articulate is the truth by default. Claiming the rest of the world and all of human history is only morally good or has made moral progress when they agree with your own subjective standard is the pinnacle of self-absorbed delusion.

3) Moral Relativism Makes Prison Unjust

A criminal does not do something objectively wrong; they simply violate the subjective moral preferences of those in power. If they are convicted and sentenced to jail, they do not actually *deserve* this. Prison is not moral justice; it is merely those in power enforcing their will—their subjective preferences—on the weak.

Imagine a world where justice is an illusion, where prisoners who have not done something *really* wrong, and don't really deserve their punishment, are deprived of freedom and sent to jail because they act out on desires either the people in power or the majority of the population just don't like. Now, this is a *reductio ad absurdum* argument and admittedly, it does not demonstrate morality is objective. A conclusion being unpleasant does not make an argument false. If morality is truly subjective, it is not actually wrong to imprison people for disagreeing with you. But I would say, insofar as you believe justice is a real part of the world, it must be grounded in an objective morality.

A subjectivist might pivot to consequentialism and argue prison serves the valid purpose of protecting the future. But I would still ask why this is preferable? Why *ought* we lock up criminals to protect the future? Sure, locking up criminals would protect the future, but the relativist cannot show we *ought* to do this. They have merely widened the subjective circle.

It seems that political power and majority opinion is the standard, as opposed to objective truth. We know how fickle both of these can be. “Might vs right” is problematic because it makes justice arbitrary.

- Imagine if the majority of those in power (men) decided that a woman who makes eye contact with a man in public deserves to be stoned. Shall the subjectivist say we “ought” to stone her to maintain social order (patriarchy)?
- What if a majority implements anti-miscegenation laws to maintain white supremacy (“protect the future”)?
- Or what if a fugitive slave act was enacted to protect the integrity of society?
- Or how about the Nuremberg laws of Nazi Germany?

Without objective moral truth, these laws—which most consider heinous, and three of which are historical facts—are not “wrong.” They are simply the rules and rules that could be greatly multiplied by a cursory examination of history.

4) Subjective Morality Undermines Itself

David Hume is well known for the “is/ought” distinction. We cannot derive moral “ought” statements from factual “is” statements. The fact that something causes pain (descriptive) does not entail that you *ought* not do it (prescriptive). Unless we accept final causality or *telos* (end purpose or goal), there is no real way to bridge the is/ought divide.

This leaves the subjectivist in a dilemma. If they demonstrate that something is true in a debate, this comes with the built-in notion that we “ought” to believe it on account of its truthfulness. But this itself is just a subjective value judgment. Even if a person demonstrates to us their version of subjective morality was true, they cannot logically move from this to the idea that we “ought” to believe it. Facts do not dictate duties. John Frame wrote the following:

“The truth is what we ought to believe and what we ought to speak with one another. And those oughts are oughts of ethical value. If they were merely subjective, we would be free to believe and maintain whatever we liked, unconstrained by evidence, logic, or revelation. If ethical values were merely subjective, we could make no ethical case against someone who refused to consider facts and who consequently lived in a dreamworld of his own making.

The assertion that ethical values are merely subjective is self-contradictory, like all other statements of subjectivism or skepticism. For the subjectivist is telling us that we have an objective moral obligation to agree with subjectivism, while telling us that no one has an objective moral obligation to do anything. Subjectivists regularly make this error. Jean-Paul Sartre, for example, argued vehemently against objective values, but he also demanded that we admire those who “live authentically” by affirming their own freedom and creating their own meaning. If “authentic existence” is not an objective value, why should we admire it or, indeed, care about it at all? And if it is, then Sartre has refuted himself.” John Frame -- Apologetics. “

A subjectivist might bite the bullet and claim that they have no intention of burdening us with an obligation to agree with them; instead, they are merely stating their personal preference that we do so. Of course, this renders every discussion trivial—no more significant than arguing over a favorite color. However, in my experience, subjectivists—like everyone else-- are often quite vehement in their arguments which indicates to me that deep down, they really do think we should agree with the truth. By their fruit we know them.

5) Subjective morality is *invented*, not *found*.

Anyone who goes to New York City can find the Empire State Building because it really exists. Anyone who goes to New York City cannot find the Fountain of Youth, because it is imaginary. That makes it an invention of the human mind just like subjective moral systems. A person could of course believe the Bethesda Fountain in Central Park is the long-lost Fountain of Youth and that if they bathed in its medicinal waters their aging would stop. However, simply believing the water possesses such magical properties does not make it so.

There is no scientific test that we could conduct to prove that racism or murder is morally wrong. Without objective standards, we cannot even offer philosophical arguments that amount to anything more than “my opinion vs. yours.” We can only hope that we share the same subjective standards to approach an issue from, but we have no way of actually demonstrating that the standards we adopt are correct.

To be clear, I do not believe morality is imaginary like the Fountain of Youth. It is an objective fact that humans are moral creatures. However, if morality is subjective, so too is human meaning. Subjective moral arguments cannot traverse the is/ought divide; they are extremely narcissistic and no more compelling than asserting your favorite color is the “true” color or arguing the big and fluffy clouds are nicer than the thin and wispy ones. The quote from C.S. Lewis used earlier is appropriate here as well:

“The reason why your idea of New York can be truer or less true than mine is that New York is a real place, existing quite apart from what either of us thinks. If when each of us said ‘New York’ each means merely ‘The town I am imagining in my own head,’ how could one of us have truer ideas than the other? There would be no question of truth or falsehood at all.”

Inventing my own ethical system in a subjectivist framework where human life has no intrinsic meaning seems as artificial as inventing my own religion while knowing God did not exist. Even though fictions can be helpful, the purpose or end of rationality is to seek truth. An Invented moral rule in such an instance is comparable to an invented deity. A further difficulty is that subjectivist moral systems are knowingly playing make believe but they don’t act like it. Moral systems generally consider themselves superior to those that disagree with them. Suppose blue is your favorite color while mine is red. I don’t think my color choice is actually better than yours. I simply think it is my favorite color and blue is yours. I’d say we are both correct. I would not say this about two moral systems that differed on the issue of pedophilia. But this is where subjective moralists leave us: demanding others adhere to their personal inventions.

To avoid a false dichotomy, I admit a third category exists between real physical objects (the Empire State Building) and imaginary ones (the Fountain of Youth). There are social constructs— inventions such as money or traffic laws that are real because we agree they

are real. We have decided that red means stop and green means go but we could have reversed the colors or chosen other ones to achieve these same effects. The subjectivist might treat moral laws in the same sense as traffic laws –human inventions that keep us from dying. I do not deny the utility of traffic laws in preventing death or injury, but utility is not the same as moral obligation. We are back to Hume. That our traffic laws have utility doesn't mean anyone "ought" to follow them. If I want to cut people off, run red lights, speed, drink and drive, text and drive, or close my eyes and drive, who is to say I am morally wrong or that I ought not do this? Subjectivists traffic laws work on a conditional if/then basis. If you want to be safe you will stop at red lights, especially at busy intersections. But they tell us nothing of moral obligation.

The comparison between morality and traffic laws breaks down because the latter are actually dependent on the former. Traffic laws are meant to preserve and protect something real: human life. If human life has no intrinsic value or meaning, traffic laws are no more important than the rules of monopoly and we no more have an *obligation* to follow traffic conventions than we do the rules of Monopoly while driving. As C.S. Lewis wryly observed, ““We castrate and bid the geldings to be fruitful” Subjectivism attempts to create a traffic system where no destination matters and the passengers have no intrinsic value. Subjectivists demand we follow the rule of the road while simultaneously viewing the road, car and the people using them all as meaningless accidents (pun intended).

6) Subjective Morality, the is/ought problem and sociopaths

If we start with the assumption that human life has no intrinsic value or purpose, then human rights are just (useful) fictions. I don't have to agree with you on whether or not abortion is right or wrong any more than whether or not lilies are prettier than daffodils. Neither is objectively true and both are matters of opinion. Moral values reduce to expressions of sentiment, preference or social conditioning and they lack rational authority over those who disagree with them. No one has any obligation to agree with anyone else on any subjective issue. Well, perhaps you should agree that chocolate ice cream is the best flavor. Any other view is beyond redemption.

Some people genuinely lack sympathy, empathy and guilt. We might refer to them as sociopaths and we can punish, restrain or dislike the serial murderer or child predator, but we cannot say their behavior is wrong or that our sentiments and moral preferences are actually better than theirs. We can only disagree with them. We can be passionate about our views, like our favorite football team or baseball player, but I think most people recognize morality belongs in a different category. I certainly won't try to lock you up in jail because you don't think Tom Brady is the greatest quarterback of all time.

Some people seem to have little regard for human life and if we describe the world without *telos*, can we really blame them? Expecting something to have a high view of life when we claim it has no intrinsic meaning or purpose is like expecting something to be fruitful and multiply after castrating them. Subjective morality has little to say to the sociopath or person who does not share the same views. Ed Feser wrote:

"And for that reason the Humean has nothing to say to the sociopath who simply happens not to share these attitudes, other than that he is not like most people. Nor does he really have anything to say to a group of sociopaths – Nazis, communists, jihadists, pro-choice activists, or whomever – who seek to remake society in their image, by social or genetic engineering, say. The Platonist, Aristotelian, or Thomist can say that such people are behaving in an inherently irrational and objectively wicked manner, given human nature. All the Humean can say is "Gee, hope they don't succeed." [The last *Superstition*]

Our inability to condemn the sociopath stems from the categorical gap between facts and values. "Is" statements are descriptions of things. "Ought" statements are about actions or what you should do. We cannot logically move from "is" to "ought" without other premises. This argument goes back to Hume and without final causality or *telos* in the world, the Humean gulf between "is" and "ought" is infinite in extent. Here are Hume's own words:

"In every system of morality, which I have hitherto met with, I have always remark'd, that the author proceeds for some time in the ordinary ways of reasoning... when of

a sudden I am surpriz'd to find, that instead of the usual copulations of propositions, is, and is not, I meet with no proposition that is not connected with an ought, or an ought not." [A Treatise on Human nature]

An example of this will be helpful:

1. Cyanide is poisonous to humans.

2. Bob is a human.

Therefore, you should not give Bob cyanide.

This argument is not valid. The conclusion does not follow from the premises. We would need to smuggle in a hidden premise such as "It is wrong to poison humans." But this is the exact premise subjectivists cannot demonstrate is true. What happens if we add a few more premises:

1. Cyanide is poisonous to humans.

2. Bob is a human.

3. If you give Bob cyanide he will suffer.

4. If you give Bob cyanide he will die.

5. If Bob dies his family will be sad and miss him.

Therefore, you should not Give Bob cyanide.

Even if all five premises are true, the argument is still not valid. We could stack one million descriptive or "is" statements but it will not matter. We cannot deduce morals or values from statements that don't already have them. Just because something "is" does not mean we ought. Now someone might claim, "Well, harming innocents is obviously bad" but this is not a universal fact like the law of gravity in a subjective framework. It is a shared preference, one that the sociopath is perfectly free to ignore.

7) Subjective Morality and Infanticide

Thanks to the dry sands of Egypt, a letter from 1 B.C. survived in “the rubbish dump of ancient Oxyrhynchus.” A pregnant wife, concerned that her husband (who was also her brother, following Egyptian custom) had forgotten her, sent him a letter. Here is the response from the husband (Hilarion) to his wife (Alis) :

“Hilarion to his sister Alis many greetings, likewise to my lady Berous and to Apollonarion. Know that we are even yet in Alexandria. Do not worry if they all come back (except me) and I remain in Alexandria. I urge and entreat you, be concerned about the child and if I should receive my wages soon, I will send them up to you. **If by chance you bear a child, if it is a boy, let it be, if it is a girl, cast it out [to die].** You have said to Aphrodisias, “Do not forget me.” How can I forget you? Therefore I urge you not to worry. (Year) 29 of Caesar [Augustus], Payni 23. (White 111–12; see also Hunt & Edgar 1.294–95; Davis 1933:1–7)”

John Dominic Crossan has described this letter as both tender and terrible. The operative part for our purposes is: “If it is a girl, cast it out.”¹ Infanticide has been widely practiced the world over. Laila Williamson reports:

“Infanticide has been practiced on every continent and by people on every level of cultural complexity, from hunter gatherers to high civilizations. Rather than being an exception, then, it has been the rule.”²

Wikipedia similarly reports:

“Most Stone Age human societies routinely practiced infanticide, and estimates of children killed by infanticide in the Mesolithic and Neolithic eras vary from 15 to 50 percent. Infanticide continued to be common in most societies after the historical era began, including ancient Greece, ancient Rome, the Phoenicians, ancient China, ancient Japan, Pre-Islamic Arabia, early modern Europe, Aboriginal Australia, Native Americans, and Native Alaskans.”

In modern times, the practice is *almost* universally condemned but more recent examples include a staggering number of missing girls due to China’s “Longer, Later, Fewer” policy that predated its one-child policy. It is estimated that over 200,000 girls went missing, some due to abandonment and neglect.

¹ Another example is from Apuleius’ Metamorphoses: “a man setting out on a journey orders his wife, who is in expectation of becoming a mother, to kill the child immediately if it should prove to be a girl” Deissmann (Ancient Near East) cited by White (Light from Ancient letters).

² Williamson, Laila (1978). “Infanticide: an anthropological analysis”. In Kohl, Marvin (ed.). *Infanticide and the Value of Life*. New York: *Prometheus Books*. pp. 61–75.

If humans lack intrinsic value and meaning, then the specific method of their disposal is morally irrelevant. It is certainly not wrong to cast out unwanted infants like trash to die of exposure; nor, by that same logic, would it be immoral to use them as piñatas, shark bait or for bayonet practice. If the infant is not a person, neither act is a crime. This may seem sensationalistic, but the latter scenario actually occurred during the Nanking Massacre. The following is a quote from David Ray Griffin:

“To affirm atheism is to hold the view of John Mackie, Gilbert Harman, Bernard Williams, and Richard Rorty, . . . according to which moral norms do not belong to the fabric of the universe. According to this view, morality is simply a social convention, which human societies have invented. As Mackie said, it is generally thought that “if someone is writhing in agony before your eyes,” you should “do something about it if you can.” However, said Mackie, this is not an objective requirement “in the nature of things.”

Griffin provides quotes from Harman and Rorty to the same effect. He also notes that “atheism implies that we have no obligation even to the next generation. If no moral norms exist in the fabric of the universe, we are doing nothing wrong if we use up all the remaining fossil fuels, even if this brings about the end of civilization.”
[*God Exists but Gawd Does Not*]

Griffin is painting with a broad brush as an atheist can certainly believe morality is objective. However, from my perspective it seems typical of materialists to embrace subjective morality. Williams finds this outlook to stem from the death of the teleological worldview. For the subjective moralist, an infant (like everyone else) has no intrinsic value or meaning. A number of modern ethicists and philosophers have concluded that infanticide is not a moral crime. A few quotes are illustrative:

- “Human babies are not born self-aware, or capable of grasping that they exist over time. They are not persons”; therefore, “the life of a newborn is of less value than the life of a pig, a dog, or a chimpanzee.” [Ethicist Peter Singer]
- “[a human being] “possess[es] a serious right to life only if it possesses the concept of a self as a continuing subject of experiences and other mental states, and believes that it is itself such a continuing entity.” [Philosopher Michael Tooley]
Infants clearly do not qualify.
- On infants, philosopher Jeffrey Reiman has asserted they do not “possess in their own right a property that makes it wrong to kill them” and “there will be permissible exceptions to the rule against killing infants that will not apply to the rule against killing adults and children.” This comes from Reiman’s *Critical Moral Liberalism* but was accessed via [[Death With a Happy Face](#)]

The idea is that since an infant does not possess the concept of self, it does not yet qualify as a person. In widely read material on abortion³, Mary Anne Warren put forth several criteria—some of which she thinks a living being needs to possess—in order to classify as a person with moral rights: sentience or consciousness, the ability to reason, self-awareness and a few others. Since fetuses do not possess these, they do not have moral rights and thus, abortion is not wrong in her view.

The problem is her own criteria lead not just to abortion being okay, but infanticide as well. Infants do not possess the requisite mental faculties needed to classify as a person with moral rights either. She anticipates this objection and includes a postscript addressing it. Warren agrees that killing an infant can never be murder but is wrong insofar as it – I kid you not – makes other people sad. Her own words:

“The needless destruction of a viable infant inevitably deprives some person or persons of a source of great pleasure and satisfaction, perhaps severely impoverishing their lives.”

Peter Singer has said something similar:

“We should certainly put very strict conditions on permissible infanticide, but these conditions might owe more to the effects of infanticide on others than to the intrinsic wrongness of killing an infant.”

Now it should be noted that plenty of people who could be classified under the heading of “objective moralists” have also engaged in the practice of infanticide. Like so many moral issues, the actual position you adopt isn’t defined by what heading you fall under (objective or subjective). Merely subscribing to or paying lip service of any form of objective morality is not going to determine whether infanticide is right or wrong. It is how you understand the nature or essence of what it means to be human that will decide this issue. There is one important parallel between abortion and infanticide. Many people who are pro-choice do not generally consider themselves to be “murdering a baby” but instead terminating the biological function of a “clump of cells” existing inside a woman’s body. It would seem that the same type of logic can and has been used to justify infanticide. If infants are not fully human, then disposing of them is not intrinsically evil.⁴

Given that subjectivists do not think there is any intrinsic meaning or purpose to human life, moral absolutes cannot exist. The is/ought divide spans an infinite distance for them, yet most still empathetically grant humans basic “subjective” rights. But why would these rights extend to infants who lack self-awareness, consciousness and the ability to reason?

³ [Warren, MA](#) (1973). "On the Moral and Legal Status of Abortion". *Monist*. **57**

⁴ It should be noted that abortion has also been defended as morally acceptable on the basis of Thomson’s violinist thought example. The argument suggests that even if a fetus has a right to life, the mother does nothing wrong in having an abortion on the basis of bodily autonomy. This viewpoint would carefully distinguish between abortion and infanticide. See the [SEP](#) for a discussion.

A compelling reason why these sacks of developing flesh (as materialism would view them) should be given human rights is not forthcoming for the subjectivist. Not to mention, babies born weak or disabled are a burden and resources were limited at certain times in the past. Consequentialist or utilitarian arguments in the form of population control could be used to justify the practice of infanticide for subjectivists.

The difficulty of infanticide has no logical force in and of itself without justifying the idea that humans--and infants specifically-- have intrinsic value and inalienable rights. If babies do not have intrinsic rights, and their parents are not obligated to take care of them, then it is not morally wrong to throw a baby outside to die of the elements or be eaten by wild animals. This has been a widespread practice the world over into modern times. It is difficult for many modern people to justify why this is objectively wrong but natural moral law is adequate to that task.

The *telos* or ends of sex are both procreative and unitive since our offspring are helpless for so long. Both infants and pregnant women remain vulnerable and require sustaining care. Exposing infants frustrates the natural end of procreation and the purpose of the parent-child relationship in that role. Natural law says the value of a human infant is inherent to its nature, not its current capacity to reason. This will be spelled out in more detail later. While natural moral law can provide the philosophical basis for why infanticide is wrong, we have Jesus to thank for why Western civilization finally recognized this truth.

The morals of Jesus form the backbone of Western society and infanticide is so widely despised today because of Him. The Christian tradition teaches that all humans are created in the image of God (*imago dei*) with intrinsic rights due to their nature. This part of Genesis 1 was originally polemic against contrary views that saw only Kings and rulers as being created in God's images. Genesis disagreed and said *all people* are made in God's image. Whether we are Christians or atheists, or if we believe in objective or subjective morality, taking this teaching seriously would erase so many problems in the world. It means we cannot kill the mentally ill or old if they are burdens simply because we do not want to bear them. It would mean we could not enslave other humans and we certainly could not conquer them and steal their land. This simple truth should have undercut so much evil that has happened in the world.

It is unfortunate that so many people, including many Christians, never took it seriously. Instead, they chose to see those not like them as sub-human. It was not all bad, however. Christians created hospitals, Christian abolitionists ended slavery and a number of early Christians took in and cared for exposed infants. A significant number of early Christians did speak out against the widespread practices of both infanticide and abortion. A few quotes on the former issue are listed below:

- **Didache:** “And the second commandment of the Teaching; You shall not commit murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not commit pederasty, you shall not commit fornication, you shall not steal, you shall not practice magic, you shall

not practice witchcraft, you shall not murder a child by abortion nor kill that which is born. (c. 50-110 CE)

- **The Letter of Barnabas:** “Thou shalt not slay the child by procuring abortion; nor, again, shalt thou destroy it after it is born” (*Letter of Barnabas* 19 [c. 70-132 CE])
- **Athenagoras:** “For it does not belong to the same person to regard the very fetus in the womb as a created being, and therefore an object of God’s care, and when it has passed into life, to kill it; **and not to expose an infant, because those who expose them are chargeable with child-murder**, and on the other hand, when it has been reared to destroy it” (c. 177 CE)
- **Tertullian:** “nor does it matter whether you take away a life that is born, or destroy one that is coming to birth.” (c. 200 CE)
- **Apostolic Constitutions:** Thou shall not slay thy child by causing abortion, nor kill that which is begotten. . . . (c. 400 CE)

An incident in the gospels shows how this is an extension of Jesus’s own thoughts. People were bringing little children to Jesus and the disciples rebuked them, attempting to prevent their access. Apparently, the disciples thought little children weren’t important enough for Jesus to bother with. Most of us know how the story ends. Jesus famously corrected them and said, “Let the little children come to me.” He accepted, hugged and blessed these small children. Infants and small children were nobodies in paternal Mediterranean culture. They were powerless and disposable. Infants, especially those infirm or female, could be tossed out to die in polite society. Jesus’s words take on their strongest meaning in this context. This originally was not just a metaphor about how people need to become like children with blind trust to enter the kingdom of God. When Jesus said, “for the kingdom of God belongs to *such as these*,” this is a statement by Jesus that small children are included in the Kingdom of God. This was quite an astonishing view. Adela Yarbro Collins writes:

“The rabbis debated whether children would be raised from the dead and included in the age to come. Rabban Gamliel argued that the children of the impious in Israel would have no share in the age to come. Rabbi Joshua argued that they would. The rabbis agreed that the children of non-Israelites would neither be raised nor judged.¹² They debated what age an Israelite child had to have reached before death in order to be included in the age to come. One taught that all who had been born would be included; another, only those who had begun to speak; another, from the time when they could answer “Amen” in the synagogue with understanding; another, from the time when they are circumcised. Near the end of the collection of rabbinic views, the opinion that all those who have been born are included is restated. The passage ends with the declaration by Rabbi Elazar, that even children who have been miscarried will be raised; he based his opinion on a midrashic reading of Isa 49:6.13

The fact that the rabbis needed to engage in such a debate and the portrayal of the disciples as not wanting Jesus to be bothered with children both indicate the

relatively low status of children in the ancient world in comparison with adults.¹⁴ Jesus' indignation and his statement that "the kingdom of God belongs to such as these" indicate not only that children are included in the kingdom of God but also that they represent the type of person who is especially associated with the kingdom of God (cf. Mark 9:33-37)." [Mark, Hermeneia Commentary)

Per Jesus, the Kingdom of God is not only open to, but belongs to what many people only saw as disposable burdens or growing sacks of flesh. Famous for role reversals where the first are last, in elevating these nobodies, Jesus completely dismantles any defense of disposal for his followers.

8) Subjective Morality and Utilitarianism

If morality is not an objective part of reality that is discovered but instead is constructed by humans on the basis of social value, it tends to collapse in parts to pragmatism or utilitarianism. The Catholic Philosopher Peter Kreeft said the following of subjective morality:

“There are no moral absolutes; we may kill or lie or torture if that’s the only way to get a better result in the end. Only if there is an all-wise and all-good and all-powerful God writing the story of human history can we say that our job is to obey the absolute commandments God gave us and let the resulting chips fall where they may, even if those chips, those consequences, would be bad, because God will pick up the pieces. The justification for framing an innocent man, for torture, for Hiroshima, for “Sophie’s choice” (Have you seen that movie?) is utilitarianism, or consequentialism: the end justifies the means—if there is no God. If He does not exist and commands us to obey His laws always and promise to take care of the consequences, then we have to take care of the consequences. So atheism naturally leads to pragmatism, utilitarianism, relativism.”

If morality is subjective and based on value or social utility, human beings cease to be sacred ends in themselves; they more easily become variables or chess pieces for the “greater good” of society. This means we could justify sacrificing one innocent to save two innocents –all other things being equal – and commit other moral horrors in the name of pragmatism and or utilitarianism. I recognize that not atheists are strict utilitarians and note that many Christians often appeal to utilitarian principles. Utilitarianism is often considered an objective morality by its proponents in that its central principle is taken to be something true about the world. Good is defined in terms of that which increases happiness or utility. I do not think bare utilitarianism can traverse the is/ought divide and even if we tie utilitarianism into natural law, its foundational principle leads to all sorts of internal problems. Since society and human views do change, it turns out that the same action can both be good and bad at different times throughout human history. In this sense, I consider utilitarian morality subjective in its output. I think these are the chief logical difficulties with utilitarianism. What follows are classic examples demonstrating how utilitarian thinking can lead to viewing actions as good that many people understand as immoral.

Difficult Thought Experiments for Utilitarianism

- **The Sheriff’s Dilemma:** suppose a violent crime was committed, and the town is on the brink of a riot that will destroy the community and cost dozens of lives. The

Sheriff knows the real killer escaped but he has a homeless drifter in a jail cell. Would it be ethical for the sheriff to frame this innocent person in order to stop the riot and save multiple lives? Utilitarianism says yes.

- **The Organ Harvesting (Survival Lottery):** Bioethicist John Harris proposed an alarming scenario. A surgeon has five patients who will die by the end of the day without organ transplants (heart, liver, kidneys, lungs). Suppose a healthy traveler walks into the clinic for a routine checkup and he is a perfect tissue match for all five dying patients. A cold calculus suggest it would be ethical to murder and harvest the organs of this one person if it saved the life of the other five individuals. After all, five is greater than one. A variation of this is suggest a lottery where when your number is called, you are expected (and forced) to give up your life (organs) to save the lives of multiple people in need.
- **Omelas by Ursula K. Le Guin:** The city of Omelas is a paradise like the Garden of Eden. Everyone is healthy, happy and leads a wonderful life. There is a catch, however. A single child must be trapped in a basement starved, terrified, and abused. If this child is released or is ever comforted in any way, the city's utopian state will instantly evaporate. We have to ask subjective moralists: is it ethical to torture one child to ensure the happiness of millions?
- **The Coliseum:** if we could put one Christian in the Coliseum to be eaten by a lion this would be very painful to the person. Yet 50,000 spectators would gain intense joy from watching this. Wouldn't that make it good then? It appears as if utilitarian thought is perfectly fine with torturing people for entertainment. And I note that for some early Christians, to die as a martyr was a badge of honor. In the second century, the Roman Governor of Asia Arrius Antoninus appears frustrated by how willing some Christians were to die for their beliefs. Though he dispatched a few, he famously said: "Oh you ghastly people . . . If you want to die you have cliffs you can jump off and nooses to hang yourself with."
- **Ticking Time Bomb:** Could we justify the torture of a terrorist's innocent child if we believed it would reveal the location of a ticking bomb?

The scary thing is that for a strict utilitarian, if the sheriff in the above example refused to frame an innocent man for the good of many, he actually behaved immorally. It is the same with Arrius Antoninus. The strict utilitarian would consider his action immoral, not because he had people executed merely for being Christian, but because he did not execute all of them who so desired to become martyrs for Christ and failed to increase their happiness. These thought experiments are not just abstract puzzles. History is replete with examples of moral crimes committed by individuals and groups in power in the name of the greater good.

- **The American Eugenics Movement:** the US Supreme Court justified sterilization of the “unfit” to protect the greater good of society. Here is a quote from Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. (Buck v. Bell 1927) that famously defended such sterilization with pure utilitarian logic: *“It is better for all the world, if instead of waiting to execute degenerate offspring for crime, or to let them starve for their imbecility, society can prevent those who are manifestly unfit from continuing their kind.”*
- **Nazi Germany’s Euthanasia Program:** Nazis had a very narrow view of humanity based on a strict utilitarian lens. The image here is from a widely circulated magazine [Neues Volk](#), which featured a disabled man. The headline read: “60,000 Reichsmarks is what this genetically defective man will cost the people over his lifetime.” It was a time of war and the implication was clear. Killing him was the most prudent option. The magazine also featured mentally incapacitated children juxtaposed with healthy ones. The United States Holocaust Museum [reports](#): “In a 1934 speech, for example, Walter Gross mourned those “poor creatures” who are “no joy either to themselves or others. They are a burden throughout their miserable existences.” Hundreds of thousands of forced sterilizations occurred.
- **The Bombing of Hiroshima:** The justification for dropping an atomic bomb on Hiroshima was based on a mathematical calculation to save lives. President Truman said in a letter, “I knew what I was doing when I stopped the war that would have killed a half a million youngsters on both sides if those bombs had not been dropped. I have no regrets and, under the same circumstances, I would do it again -- and this letter is not confidential.” In order to save a quarter of a million combatants and end the war, a bomb was dropped that destroyed a city ultimately killing ~140,000 people – mostly civilians



None of these leaders woke up and twirled their mustaches saying, “Let’s be evil today,” For them, the ends justified the means. They were securing the future as they understood it. Now it should be noted that many crimes against humanity are actually committed by humans who accept objective morality. We must reject these actions just as strenuously – even if they attribute them to God. These examples most often occur where one group of humans sees another group as *less human* or sub-human. Humans have enough trouble getting things right from the perspective of objective morality. If humans lack intrinsic meaning and purpose then objective morality is impossible. Such a posture does not lead to moral optimism. If we are not all equally created in the image of God with inalienable

rights, we are often left to judge actions by their utility in achieving what we believe is human flourishing. I propose being wary of such systems as ethics can quickly be turned into arithmetic where subjective morality not only permits atrocities, it demands them. It becomes very easy do what is evil in the name of good. The Christian, like the natural moral law theorist, does what is right because it is the right thing to do. Not because a cost-benefit analysis led to a certain option that is more aligned with our personal desires. For Christians we put our trust in God, do what is right and let the chips fall where they may.