

BITE-SIZED EXISTENTIAL CRISIS

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EP 3: OBJECTIVE MORALITY?

[river/wildlife ambient sfx]

Lobito Bay, Angola, circa 1920. Little over a half-dozen local guides are hired for a crocodile-hunting expedition. The man that brought them together towers over them at 6 feet tall and certainly doesn't appear to need the help of eight guides. Nonetheless, they set off with the brooding stranger. As their canoe wound down the river, there wasn't a crocodile in sight.

[pause for a beat, let the sfx play]

[shotgun cocks sfx]

But this man was hunting a different kind of prey.

[gunshot sfx]

After shooting every crew member on board, Carl Panzram sodomized their corpses and dumped their bodies for the crocodiles to feed on.

[river/wildlife ambient sfx fades out]

Carl Panzram is seen today as one of the most sadistic serial killers in history. He defined himself as "rage-personified" with the sole purpose of wreaking havoc wherever he went. This left a self-proclaimed, bloody trail of 21 murders and over 1,000 rapes, including boys as young as eleven. In Panzram's autobiographical anthology of his crimes, appropriately titled, *Killer: A Journal of Murder*, his sadism shines as he seethes, "For all these things, I am not the least bit sorry."

So, clearly not a bedtime story.

But, in all seriousness, this brutal statement hits like a punch in the gut. It mocks and tears apart the innermost fiber of our being that cherishes love and empathy. We're left with this aimless confusion of, "How could someone do something like this?"

Oftentimes, we attribute this same confusion to violence as a whole. Whether it be terrorist attacks, serial killers, human trafficking, it's all baffling. Since we can't fathom why people would commit seemingly senseless acts of violence, we assume they lack the moral code that would prevent them from doing so. This is when amateur diagnoses such as "sadist" or "psychopath" are thrown around as half-hearted explanations. However, for the majority of all violent acts, it is quite the opposite. It is their moral code that *pushes* them to commit violence, rather than prevent it. "How could this be?", you may ask, "Don't they know what they're doing is wrong?" But, what if everyone's definition of right and wrong is different? Does objective morality exist?

I'm Maylee O'Brien, and welcome to your Bite-Sized Existential Crisis.

Everyone likes to believe that they have proper moral boundaries. This way, they know what's required to be a 'good person' and fit well in society. But, the problem is, everyone is inclined to believe that their boundaries are proper. So, what does that mean when you cross someone else's boundary you didn't even see? When these moral guidelines clash, is it possible for one to reign true over another? Lucky for us, there are several theories that address this very issue.

According to cognitivism, moral statements, such as "Stealing is bad", can be true or false or "truth-apt". This is the mindset that most everyone opts for because it's easier to categorize acts as 'right and wrong', than to consider the possible inbetween. On the surface, this may appear as a foolproof way to maintain social order. We follow

the good guidelines, punish the bad, and maintain balance. Sure this would be easy to implement and follow, but its shortcoming is found in its simplicity. The majority of conflict is much more complicated. Even for a statement as straightforward as “Killing is wrong”, what if it’s done in self-defense? Or, consider how war is built off of killing the enemy. Yet governments enact war, rather than make it illegal. This complexity pushed theorists to consider an alternative

Emotivism reigns over the opposite end of the spectrum. Emotivists believe that moral statements only appear to be truth-apt, or they only appear to be true or false . This perspective advocates a subjective view of morality, meaning that moral statements simply express the current attitude of the speaker. Essentially, it’s providing a personal approval or disapproval of certain actions and values. The issue with this is that it takes away the conflict between different moral standpoints through taking away right and wrong altogether. No longer can morals guide our decisions because they don’t mean anything beyond personal opinion.

Since both cognitivism and emotivism fail to address all the critical aspects of morality, another theory arose to provide yet another perspective. This is known as game theory. While it may not sound like an official philosophical term, it is likely the perspective that most people hold without realizing it. Game theory claims that morals provide guidance on how people should behave when addressing interdependent decision problems. This is a problem where the outcome depends on the choices and actions taken by multiple individuals. The general purpose of this guidance is to satisfy the needs and preferences of everyone involved to the best of their ability. Essentially, game theory proposes that morality is Compromise 101.

However, I discovered that all of these theories debating objectivity and subjectivity make up just one side of morality's coin. An equally urgent question is whether morality is absolute or relative. Basically, are morals universally held beliefs or do they differ between smaller units, such as cultures? Most everyone would agree that morals *are* relative, due to the fact that different cultures would not exist without differing beliefs. While this answer is obvious, it's crucial to acknowledge the relativity of morality because it allows us to conclude the objective vs. subjective debate. Relativity narrows our question down from "is morality objective?" to "is morality objective to the individual?"

As we discussed with emotivism, subjective morals carry little weight because if only personal opinion matters, there's nothing stopping anyone from doing whatever they want. Even if rules exist, all you have to do is disagree with them and you're on your way. This perspective gives people such as Carl Panzram a license to wreak havoc as they please without any repercussions. Therefore, in order to prevent anarchy, morals must be objective to the individual. Additionally, while it's arguable that relativity takes away the guiding power of morals, if morality were absolute, then how would we determine which set of morals is destined to guide us all? Rather than anarchy, the world would swing to the opposite extreme of organized chaos between dictatorships battling to define Absolute Morality. In contrast to the extremes of subjectivity and absolutism, relatively objective morality allows everyone to decide which morals to follow while still giving morals the power to lead.

Huh, maybe morality is just Compromise 101.