

What is Gone? Moral Dilemma, Moral Choice and Moral Act in *Gone Baby Gone*

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Abstract

The film adaptation of Dennis Lehane's novel Gone Baby Gone (Ben Affleck, 2007) is based on a moral questioning about right choice and right act although, on the surface, it appears as a detective film in which the mystery is unexpectedly uncovered by discovering the "good criminal". The obligation to make a moral choice in case of a moral dilemma results in the conflicted moral attitudes of the characters, which invites the spectator to question the validity of each. In the film, the basic moral choice that should be made by the characters is whether to take an abducted little girl back to her careless, and also drug user mother, or to let her stay with her abductor, but a respectful police captain who grants a promising future for her. The matter becomes much more problematic when the characters adopt contradictory moral attitudes varying from moral absolutism to moral subjectivism, two opposite poles, and also including moral objectivism, which could be accepted as a moderate breeze between them. In this sense, this study examines how moral dilemmas, exercising their influence over the spectator as well, reveal various moral attitudes that have been essentially discussed in the history of philosophy on the basis of the choices made by the characters. The study, analyzing Gone Baby Gone in terms of moral dilemma, choice and act, aims to trace what is gone –namely what is left behind by the choice, or the moral would-be possibilities as they were not chosen– within the context of moral philosophy.

Key Words: *Gone Baby Gone, Ben Affleck, moral choice, moral absolutism, objectivism and relativism.*

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Yitik Olan Ne? *Gone Baby Gone*'da Ahlaki İkilem, Ahlaki Seçim ve Ahlaki Eylem

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Özet

Dennis Lehane'in romanından uyarlanan *Gone Baby Gone* (Ben Affleck, 2007) filmi, her ne kadar yüzeyde "iyi suçlu" nun ortaya çıkarılmasıyla gizemin beklenmedik bir şekilde çözüldüğü bir dedektif filmi olsa da temelde doğru seçim ve eylem hakkında ahlaki bir sorgulama üzerine kurulmuştur. Ahlaki bir ikilem söz konusu olduğunda ahlaki seçim yapma zorunluluğu, seyirciyi de her birinin geçerliliğini sorgulamaya davet eden, karakterlerin birbirleriyle çatışan ahlaki tutumları ile sonuçlanır. Filmde, karakterler tarafından yapılması gereken temel ahlaki seçim, kaçırılmış küçük bir kızı sorumsuz ve uyuşturucu kullanan annesine geri vermek ya da onun, kendisini kaçıran, fakat ona parlak bir gelecek vaat eden, saygıdeğer bir baş komiserde kalmasına ses çıkarmamaktır. Sorun, karakterler iki zıt kutup olan ahlaki mutlaklıktan ahlaki göreceliğe, ve bu ikisinin arasında ılıman bir meltem olarak kabul edilebilecek ahlaki nesnellığe çeşitlenen ve birbirleriyle çatışan ahlaki tutumlar benimsedikleri zaman daha da sorunsal hale gelir. Bu bağlamda, filmde seyirciyeye de sirayet eden ahlaki ikilemler aslında felsefe tarihinin tartışmakta olduğu farklı ahlaki görüşleri karakterlerin kararları üzerinden vermektedir. *Gone Baby Gone* filmi ahlaki ikilem, görecelik ve seçim bağlamında irdeleyen bu çalışma, seçim ile arkada bırakılmış eylemin ya da seçilmediği için gerçekleşmemiş ahlaki olasılıkların, yani "yitik" olanın, ahlak felsefesi bağlamında izini sürmeyi amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Gone Baby Gone*, Ben Affleck, ahlaki seçim, ahlaki mutlakçılık, nesnellik ve görecelik

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Introduction

Gone Baby Gone (2008), based on the novel by Irish-American writer Denis Lehane, and directed by Ben Affleck, who places “its protagonist, and the cinematic audience along with him, in a moral dilemma” (Krzych, 2017: 120), is open to be studied as a philosophical debate of the characters who put forward different moral arguments and invite the spectator either to sympathize with proposed moral ideas or to disapprove them. The setting of the novel that is Dorchester, the south Boston suburb, which is an uncanny environment populated by working class people brings about the matter of crime and punishment from the beginning of the story, and the setting brings into question how crime and punishment are challenged to be identified in a simple way.

The main moral dilemma of the film is based on the choice –in the novel, *choice* is frequently emphasized and described as “all that separates us from animals” (Lehane, 1998)– of the private detective Patrick Kenzie, who is hired to find an abducted girl. The core of the dilemma is, after finding out the little girl, whether to take her back to her mother or let her stay under the guardianship of a *better* family. Just in the beginning of the film, moral suspicions about taking the little girl, four-year-old Amanda, back to her mother are given within striking scenes. When Patrick Kenzie and Angie Gennaro –both his co-partner and girlfriend– initiate the investigation, they visit the apartment where Amanda lives with her single mother and witness that both the residence and her mother Helene are away from being ideal. The scene is full of dirty dishes, a dusty and untidy living room accompanied with a mother, who is actually portrayed as an *un-maternal* figure. Helene McCready, consistently cursing, is not only a drug-addicted mother but also a drug dealer who has “alcoholism” in her genes as his brother informs the investigators. It is revealed by the detectives later on that on the night of the abduction of Amanda Helene was in a bar at least for two hours snorting cocaine when Amanda was left at home alone. Furthermore, it appears that Helene has not refrained from putting Amanda’s life in jeopardy by stealing a significant amount of drug from her boss, a local drug dealer, for whom she works with her boyfriend. Although it turns out that her boss is not involved in kidnapping of Amanda, the negative conditions created by Helene’s ignorance clearly announce the forthcoming disaster.

The “murky-morality of *Gone Baby Gone*” (Moore, 2017) is based on the main moral dilemma of Patrick, who discovers that Captain Jack Doyle, a respectable police captain who is about to retire, has kidnapped Amanda with the help of Amanda’s uncle Lionel, whose wife (Bea McCready) has actually hired Patrick to find his niece by being totally unaware of her husband’s part in the planned abduction. In this sense, Patrick finds himself in a tough situation trying to make a moral choice that is either to leave Amanda with Doyle who can provide a better life for her or to deliver Amanda to her reckless mother by unveiling the real story of the kidnapping. Patrick’s moral choice is on behalf of the latter option that is to take Amanda back to her mother and to surrender Captain Doyle, “a failed Samaritan” (O’Brian, 2007: 68), to justice although Doyle’s intention is to save a little girl from a possible corrupted life. The film ends with Patrick’s decision of turning Amanda back to her mother and her unpromising future; thus, Doyle and Amanda’s uncle Lionel, who kidnapped Amanda and delivered her to Doyle considering that Amanda will have a better life than his sister Helene

could provide to her, are confined; Angie, who wants Patrick to leave Amanda with Doyle, abandons Patrick because of his choice; and Helene continues to be a careless mother. In the last scene, Patrick appears to be baby-sitting Amanda in the messy living room as Helen dates a man whom she did not meet before. Although Patrick is prepared to get the responsibility of his moral decision, his mood is portrayed unsatisfied –or at least not fully satisfied– about the final situation. The film closing with the scene of the living room with the TV in the middle of the frame, and Patrick and Amanda sitting on the couch focusing on the screen, makes the spectator who focuses on another screen question Patrick’s moral decision. Especially, by the time Patrick awakens to the fact that Helene misknows the name of Amanda’s favorite toy (not Mirabelle as Helene informed the TV reporters, but *Anabelle*), his moral choice is called into doubt in the last instance with “a close-up shot” revealing “a defeated look on Patrick’s face, followed by a cut to a long shot framing Patrick and Amanda on opposite sides of the couch” (Krzych, 2017: 121).

As Robert Cumbow remarks, the film is “not just about decision-making, but also about the consequences of decisions” (2009), and additionally our style to correspond to them. Similarly, Scott suggests that

the ending offers no conclusive judgment about Patrick’s decision. Rather, the ending depicts the commitment necessary to live with the *consequences* of an ethical decision and the impossibility of grounding the aftermath in anything more stable than another decision—to choose once again what one has already chosen once before. (Krzych, 2017: 123)

In this sense, it makes the spectator question how a moral dilemma should be responded, or whether it is possible to decide on an absolute moral choice being totally satisfied with it. In the film, two significant moral choices are revealed. The first one is the murder or the execution of Corwin Earle –a pedophile who rapes and murders a seven-year-old boy– by Patrick when he witnesses the horrible scene of the crime. His testimony to that crime is reflected on the screen with blood, violence, and torture to death of an innocent child. Patrick’s response to that crime is shooting the criminal in the back of the head out of a momentary temper and hatred. Without thinking on the dialectic of crime/punishment and his right to punish a person with death, he goes into “a vigilante act tacitly endorsed by the police detectives” (Krzych, 2017: 130). The momentary decision of Patrick is actually approved by all of the other characters as the disgust against child molesters rationalizes to murder them. However, Patrick’s second essential decision to take Amanda back to her ignorant mother and to send Jack Doyle into prison because of abduction, even though Jack’s real intention was only to *save a child*, is not approved as a correct moral choice and it does not muster up support from the others, except Helene. The additional conflict is while Patrick does not approve his own vigilantism though it is respected by the others, he strongly asserts his moral decision to take Amanda back home though it is not supported, moreover opposed, by the others. Then, what kind of moral judgment forces Patrick to make those conflicted moral decisions?

Moral Absolutism, Moral Objectivism and Moral Relativism in *Gone Baby Gone*

Moral choice has been a frequently and permanently discussed notion within various points of view since antiquity. In terms of the right moral decision, the right moral choice and the right moral action, there are basically three approaches that are moral absolutism, moral objectivism and moral relativism. As John Ladd states, moral relativism claims that “the moral rightness and wrongness of actions vary from society to society and there are no absolute universal moral standards binding on all men at all times” (qtd. in Pojman and Fieser, 2012: 14). In terms of accepting objective moral principles, though with a matter of degree, both moral objectivism and moral absolutism consider that moral relativism is incorrect as it does not accept universal moral standards. Moral objectivism defends the idea that “[t]here are objective universal moral principles, valid for all people and all social environments” (Pojman and Fieser, 2012: 31-32). At that point, moral absolutism agrees with moral objectivism in terms of demanding the existence of objective universal principles. However, moral objectivism appears mostly as moderate objectivism which accepts the universal norms as moral absolutism does, but disagrees with moral absolutism that those norms are non-overrideable or exceptionless. In this context, the moral decisions, choices and actions that are adopted by the characters in the film vary depending on which moral attitude they embrace.

The attitude of Detective Patrick, the central figure, towards moral decision and taking a moral action is based on objective, and even deontological perspective, that leaves no room for relativity. Patrick, who has a Catholic background, gets closer to Kant’s moral absolutism and deontology in terms of making moral choices. That idea is related to David Hume’s claim that “[t]here is a great uniformity among the actions of men, in all nations and ages, and that human nature remains still the same, in its principles and operations” (qtd. in Pojman and Fieser, 2012: 30). Thus, according to Kantian deontology, the main target of moral philosophy should be internalizing definite and objective moral principles based on the steady and constant part of human nature. When Patrick chooses to give Amanda back to her mother – though she could have a better life with Doyles–, he clearly adopts Kantian moral absolutism. Considering Kantian moral comprehension, the result of an action cannot legitimate that action if the means adopted to arrive at conclusion are not fair; thus, an *unfair* action for a possible *fair* result cannot be morally acceptable. In this respect, for Patrick, even to bestow Amanda a life with caring substitute parents within a good level of welfare does not legitimize lying and suppressing the crime of Jack that is *to steal* Amanda from her real mother. Disregarding his girlfriend’s insistence on letting Amanda stay with Jack and Francine Doyle as they could give Amanda a promising future, Patrick claims letting Amanda stay with Doyles is unfair by affirming that “Helene *is* her mother” and Amanda has the right to be with her mother whatever Doyles’ circumstance is. Krzych states, Patrick “places responsibility for his (in)decision elsewhere, specifically in the norms of kinship relations” (2017: 134); besides, above all, he adopts following the rules as his main duty to secure the justice. Just like a stoic, he behaves with the motto of “Let justice be done, though the heavens fall”. The two different manners adopted by Patrick and Jack in terms of their moral choices are clearly reflected in the dialogue below when they stand face to face towards the end of the film.

Jack: When the lights go out and you ask yourself, "Is she better off here or better off there," you know the answer. And you always will. You... You could do a right thing here. A good thing. You walk away from it, you may not regret it when you get home. You may not regret it for a year, but when you get to where I am, I promise you, you will. I'll be dead, you'll be old. But she... She'll be dragging around a couple of tattered, damaged children of her own, and you'll be the one who has to tell them you're sorry.

Patrick: You know what? Maybe that'll happen. And if it does, I'll tell them I'm sorry, and I'll live with it. But what's never gonna happen and what I'm not gonna do is have to apologize to a grown woman who comes to me and says, "I was kidnapped when I was a little girl", "and my aunt hired you to find me". "And you did, you found me with some strange family". "But you broke your promise and you left me there." "Why? Why didn't you bring me home?" "Because all the snacks and the outfits and the family trips don't matter". "They stole me". "It wasn't my family and you knew about it" "and you knew better and you did nothing". "And maybe that grown woman will forgive me, but I'll never forgive myself."

In the present case, Patrick's moral choice is justified by his belief in moral absolutism. "The absolutist believes that there are nonoverrideable moral principles that one ought never violate. Moral principles are exceptionless. For example, some absolutists hold that one ought never break a promise, no matter what" (Pojman and Fieser, 2012: 32). While Patrick acts in accordance with moral absolutism, Jack and Angie adopt moral objectivism.

The objectivist shares with the absolutist the notion that moral principles have universal, objective validity. However, objectivists deny that moral norms are necessarily exceptionless. The objectivist could believe that no moral duty has absolute weight or strict priority; each moral principle must be weighed against other moral principles. For example, the duty to tell the truth might be overridden in a situation where speaking the truth would lead to serious harm. (Pojman and Fieser, 2012: 32)

In this respect, moral objectivists and moral absolutists agree that there are universal and objective moral principles. In this sense, justice is vital for both Patrick and Angie. However, moral objectivists, e.g. Jack and Angie, defend that moral norms are sometimes exceptional. At that point, both Jack and Angie try to convince Patrick that the moral decision about Amanda's condition is possible to be seen as an exception, and they try to oblige Patrick to make an exception while making his decision. They believe Helene's ignorance and carelessness annihilate her right to be the mother of Amanda and assert to break a law might be excused for "the good of the child," as Jack states. However, Patrick behaves as an absolutist though he knows his decision will not be approved; his girlfriend Angie will leave him, moreover she will hate him throughout her life because of his choice.

In the film, the moral attitude of Angie, Captain Doyle and Amanda's uncle Lionel gets close to moderate moral objectivism. "What is central to moral objectivism, then, is not the absolutist position that moral principles are exceptionless and nonoverrideable. Rather, it is that there are universal and objective moral principles, valid for all people and social environments" (Pojman and Fieser, 2012: 38-39). The core morality of moderate objectivism requires a basic objective moral set including some principles such as *do not kill innocent people, do not cause unnecessary pain or suffering, do not lie or deceive, do not steal or cheat, keep your promises*

and honor your contracts, do justice treating people as they deserve to be treated, and so on (Pojman and Fieser, 2012: 39). The essential core morality including those principles is necessary for a better life of an individual and the society as well as for prosperity of humanity. However, those principles are not absolute, exceptionless and nonoverridable though those *prima facie* principles are necessary for social harmony and individual welfare. Namely, a principle might be overridden when it is in conflict with other principles. That point of view is against moral relativism and moral nihilism at the same time as a core morality is adopted; however, unlike moral absolutism, one moral principle could be disregarded in case of the significance of another. In terms of moral objectivism, morality is situational and the moral principles could be applied differently in different contexts. In the context of the events, Angie and Jack ask Patrick to lie, to shut his eyes to the crime and to deprive Helene of her daughter; namely to break his promise of bringing Amanda back home. In other words, Jack and Angie force Patrick to behave like a moral objectivist who overrides one moral rule (Do not lie) for the benefit of the other (Save the kids). However, Patrick still chooses to make a decision in terms of moral absolutism by not breaking the rule of "Do not lie" and "Do justice" whatever the result is.

Although Helene's unchanging careless attitude towards her daughter goes on as observed at the end of the film and it makes Patrick question his moral choice, Patrick has adopted moral absolutism that is consistent with his moral decision. In this respect, Patrick's other vital moral choice when he kills the pedophile clearly reveals how he conflicts with himself and bitterly repents as he violates his adopted moral rules, namely as he overrides his core principles and he disrupts his moral absolutism. When Patrick rushes into the room of Corwin Earle, the pedophile, with the hope to save the victim and faces the terrible scene of the terrible crime, he shoots Corwin without thinking a moment though Corwin begs him to "Wait". His choice to shoot Corwin is mostly different from his decision about Amanda that he concluded after thinking over and over again. His decision to take Amanda back to her mother is made out of reasoning rather than being momentary and out of temper. When Patrick finds out and witnesses that Amanda has been abducted by Jack Doyle and lives a happy life with Doyles, he does not call the police immediately; rather, he discusses the case both with Jack and Angie; he listens to their arguments and puts his anti-arguments against them. Upon his girlfriend Angie's words that she is happy and better off with Doyles, he responds with a class-conscious point of view asking "Why? Because he's got money [...]?" By rejecting her justification that "because he loves her", Patrick defends Helene as a mother who loves her daughter, and he does not accept to leave Amanda with Doyles.

Contrary to Patrick's moral decision about Amanda which is based on arguments and discussions, and which results in a semi-satisfactory mood of Patrick, the moment he kills Corwin he appears totally repentant because of his act. The reason for his repentance is that he violates an *inviolable* moral rule out of his fury. To cease his remorse and convince him what he did is praiseworthy, Angie claims his moral choice to kill Corwin is fair and the sin of that murder is not unforgivable. Angie insistently approves what Patrick did saying "I'm proud of you. That man killed a child. He had no right to live."; similarly, Detective Remy Broussard confirms his killing a child-molester and murderer; another police officer congratulates Patrick

in the funeral of Remy's partner, Nick Poole, who died at the gunfight on the same night. However, while Patrick is leaving the hospital where that police-officer has been staying in intensive care unit waiting his death, he is badly regretful as he has murdered a person without thinking and violated his moral principles though everybody around him affirms what he did. When Jack is leaving the hospital, the appearance of the sign of the hospital's name that is "Our Sister of Infinite Mercy" just for a few seconds on the screen brings a main question to the fore; whether it is necessary to show forgiveness, mercy and justice in the presence of even the most evil crimes. While he is leaving the hospital with the sign behind him, the film paves the way for a questioning about moral choices. The scene clearly reveals that Patrick is miserable and ashamed of violating his moral principles and breaking the law. His internal feud shows itself in the following dialogue when he debates the homicide with Remy who adopts a totally opposite moral attitude to Patrick's moral absolutism:

Patrick: My priest says shame is God, telling you what you did was wrong. Murder's a sin.

Remy: Depends on who you do it to.

Patrick: That's not how it works. It is what it is.

According to Remy, as the kids are incapable of protecting their own rights, they have to protect them and even take revenge for them. "Remy upholds the innocence of the Child as a sacred object whose violation justifies violence in excess of the law, a typical defense of vigilantism" (Krzych, 2017: 131). Remy reveals his moral point of view in terms of moral dilemma and moral choice not only within an extreme case that is pedophilia but also with an earlier incident he tells Patrick when they are rowing about the homicide. Remy tells Patrick that years ago, "back in '95", he used a fake evidence to sentence an irresponsible father who was taking his kid to heroin parties. By planting heroin in the father's home, Remy makes him be sentenced to nine years and believes the kid is "better off without his father". The question here is: "That was the right thing?" And his answer is "Fucking A". He argues the basic thing in moral action is to take side, and he also calls Patrick to take side with the innocent. He assaultively says to Patrick: "You molest a child, you beat a child, you're not on my side. If you see me coming, you better run, because I am gonna lay you the fuck down! Easy." At that point, the film asks the spectator again "to question whether well-meaning actions performed in the name of helping children can or should ever trump those laws that may hinder these actions" (Atherton, 2010: 127). Patrick's answer would be that *well-meaning actions cannot trump the laws* as we could easily deduce from his statement that he does not "feel easy" like Remy does; and to Remy's question whether he would "clip" Corwin Earle again, he answers with a precise "No". Patrick's remorse coming just after his deed clearly shows that his "act includes no positive content on which he could model his behavior or determine future actions; the act does introduce, however, a certain limitation to Patrick's conception of himself – or it should" (Scott, 133). When both of the events are considered, Remy is observed having behaved with a totally different moral attitude from Patrick. Based on both his statements when they were quarrelling about the murder of the pedophile and the story about the fake evidence, it might be evidently stated that Remy, with regards to his moral decisions, adopts moral relativism to which "[a]ll moral principles are justified by virtue of their acceptance by an individual agent him-or herself" (Pojman and Fieser, 2012: 16).

As their statements directly suggest, Remy defends a notably subjective and relativist moral understanding while Patrick defends moral absolutism; namely to behave and act in accordance with inviolable rules. Remy's moral relativism is actually defended by some moral philosophers, who support the idea that moral rightness and wrongness of actions may vary from society to society or even from person to person, while it is criticized by some others. Pojman and Fieser criticize offering moral relativism as reasonable since it has been used and is still used to justify many morally wrong actions; for instance, colonialism of the nineteenth century justified itself by using the subjective/relativist idea of morally "reforming the *poor pagans*" (2012: 14). That subjective point of view has justified not only colonialism but also racism in the colonized and non-colonized countries. Based upon this example, Pojman and Fieser clarify how moral subjectivism could result in a "very bad thing" that is ethnocentrism:

Since the nineteenth century, we've made progress in understanding cultural diversity and now realize that the social conflict caused by "do-gooders" was a bad thing. In the last century or so, anthropology has exposed our fondness for ethnocentrism, the prejudicial view that interprets all of reality through the eyes of one's own cultural beliefs and values. (2012: 15)

In this sense, as a reaction to moral relativism that could result in bad actions such as racism, moral objectivism defends that there are and should be "universal and objective moral principles valid for all people and social environments" (Pojman and Fieser, 2012: 15). In terms of moral relativism, all moral principles might be defined, justified and affirmed on behalf of the moral agent. As "[m]orality is in the eye of the beholder, [o]n the basis of subjectivism, Adolf Hitler and the serial murderer Ted Bundy [who justifies his murders by saying he did those to 'become truly free'] could be considered as moral as Gandhi, as long as each lived by his own standards whatever those might be" (Pojman and Fieser, 2012: 16-17). If moral subjectivism is applied to the act of convicted pedophile Corwin, he could defend himself -as he does in the film- that he did not intend to kill the boy; or if a hypothetically defense by him is considered, he could claim that he is coming from a family or society that does not accept sex with kids as immoral or illegal. As Pojman and Fieser state, "[s]ubjectivism implicitly assumes moral solipsism, a view that isolated individuals make up separate universes"; however, as John Donne writes in his famous poem "No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent" (2012: 18). Thus, subjective moral relativism will inevitably result in chaos as it adopts a solipsist moral understanding rejecting common moral principles for all people.

In the film, Remy's actions result from that kind of moral relativism. Remy even attempts to kill Amanda's uncle Lionel with whom he made the plan of kidnapping Amanda. As he does not want their plan to be discovered, he wants to *silence* Lionel in case he tells the true story to Angie and Patrick. As it is obviously perceived, Remy's subjective moral relativism, which violates universal moral rules and claims that subjective moral choice might annihilate the determined moral rules, undermines the basic and the most significant moral values. In this sense, any individual who defends the rightness of her/his deeds stands against her/his moral deed to be called into question; thus, any child kidnapper could justify her/his act based on subjective moral relativism. As Pojman and Fieser confirm, if moral relativism is accepted,

“then racism, genocide of unpopular minorities, oppression of the poor [that could be related to the idea that it is justifiable to take the kids from their parents who are born into a lower socio-economical circumstance that is not their choice such as Dorchester] slavery, and even the advocacy of war for its own sake are as moral as their opposites” (2012: 22). The vital paradox of subjective moral relativism is that it weakens our moral duties before law. The vigilante acts of a group of policemen, who exercise their own subjective rules by using their authority in accordance with their own moral choices (though they are essentially to exercise the law), create chaos and conflict resulting in a moral struggle among people. As it is observed, the moral attitude of detective Patrick, a must-be law follower, contradicts with that of the other police officers who are expected to enforce law. Consequently, moral relativism leads to subjectivism and subjectivism results in moral solipsism which means to annihilate all of the moral norms. Remy’s attempt even to kill Lionel for the sake of *his moral truth* demonstrates how subjectivity is possible “to boil down to anarchistic individualism, an essential denial of the interpersonal feature of the moral point of view” (Pojman and Fieser, 2012: 27).

Patrick, disapproving the moral subjectivism adopted by Remy, approves moral absolutism that is the opposite of subjectivism. According to moral absolutism that reflects Kant’s deontological ethics, the rightness or wrongness of an action is not determined by the result of it but by some essentials or the principles that pave the way of the action. In terms of Kant’s deontology:

The end never justifies the means. For example, there is something right about truth telling and promise keeping even when such actions may bring about some harm; and there is something wrong about lying and promise breaking even when such actions may bring about good consequences. Acting unjustly is wrong even if it will maximize expected utility. (Pojman and Fieser, 2012: 121-122)

In this context, for Patrick, lying Helene about Amanda’s being kidnapped by police officers with the help of her own brother or not telling her that he found Amanda, concealing the crime though Amanda will live in a much better circumstance, and killing a person (even though he is a criminal of pedophile and also a murderer) are wrong, illegal and immoral in spite of their possible good consequences. Thus, Patrick is a character who “is influenced by factors such as duty”, and so, he is inclined “to utilize a non-consequentialist approach” (Atherton, 2010: 126). At that point, contrary to consequentialist approach, Kant’s essential, absolute and universal moral truth is clearly observed. According to Kant, a rationalist and an absolutist philosopher, a moral act is valuable in itself and “one must perform moral duty solely for its own sake” (Pojman and Fieser, 2012: 128). The happiness that would come as a result of an act does not make the action moral. Additionally, in Kant’s deontology, although good intention is required, it is not enough for moral action. As a saying goes, “The road to hell is paved with good intentions”; and the good intention behind kidnapping a little girl would not make the act moral in terms of Kant’s deontology. The police officers claim to be acting in good will, just like Patrick does, and consider the end justifies the means; however, the good will alone is not enough for morally correct action.

To crosscheck the right moral action, Kant asks to universalize a moral rule as the

categorical imperative. To him, all of the moral rules should be based on categorical imperative which universalizes the principles of any action by commanding the moral agent as follows: “Act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law” (Kant, 2006: 31). In this sense, first of all, the maxim by which the agent will act should be determined. For Patrick, that maxim is as follows: “If there is a child who is kidnapped and deprived from her/his family, I must turn her/him back to home.” Then, “[t]he second step is to consider whether this maxim could be universalized to apply to everyone” (Pojman and Fieser, 2012: 128); such as “When anyone comes across a child who is kidnapped and deprived from her/his family, s/he must turn the child back to home”. The maxim that could be universalized and applied to everyone should also be in accordance with three principles: 1-The categorical imperative principle of the law of nature which requires to act related to the laws of nature and to the will of the agent. 2-The principle of ends which requires to treat yourself or other people as an end not a means. This principle suggests: “Each person as a rational being has dignity and profound worth, which entails that he or she must never be exploited or manipulated or merely used as a means to our idea of what is for the general good (or to any other end)” (Pojman and Fieser, 2012: 135). 3- The principle of autonomy which requires to act by the autonomy of the agent not by the authority of others. In this respect, Patrick’s moral decision to take Amanda back to Helene is in accordance with Kant’s categorical imperative based on those three principles. Krzych asserts “Patrick never makes any active decision whatsoever; instead, he relies on the authoritative status of the law, normatively conceived, to decide in his stead” (2017: 134). Commenting on Patrick’s moral choice and act, Krzych remarks Patrick’s choice could be truly moral if he had acted in accordance with his own drive, “irredeemable by any external authority” (2017: 135). However, it would be incorrect to label Patrick’s moral choice as an outcome of an external authority since he acts by challenging the authority, which is represented by high rank detectives and police officers.

In this sense, Patrick actually makes an active decision; and his moral action can be categorized as a universal maxim that is based on reason, autonomy, good will, and treating a human being just as an end not as a means, which are the Kantian principles vital for a moral action. However, the reaction of the other characters, especially that of Jack and Angie, who conceive Patrick’s moral choice a failure, implicitly alludes to criticism of Kant’s deontology. Based on the discontent about Kant’s deontology, it is claimed that the universal rules that are exceptionless under any circumstances result in *injustice* and *failure* in terms of moral choice and act. To Kant, moral rules are universal and exceptionless in any case; for instance, in his 1797 essay “On a Supposed Right to Lie from Altruistic Motives” he states that in case of an innocent man’s taking refuge at your home escaping from a group of gangsters who intend to kill him, you must still tell the truth that he is hiding at your home (1976: 267-272). As the principle of “Never lie” is a universal moral rule, it must not be violated even though it will result in a murder of an innocent person. At that point, as a theorist of deontological ethics, W. D. Ross points out some missing points in Kant’s theory; and he develops Kant’s moral philosophy by indicating that in case of confliction of one duty with another, the stronger duty should outweigh the weaker one; for instance, the duty of “Never lie” should be violated to save the life of an innocent person. Ross’s amendment of Kant’s deontology gets him closer to

moral situationalism or moral objectivism which adopts *prima facie* duties while rejecting absolutism. Namely, *prima facie* duties could be applied differently in different contexts, or one rule might be overridden by another, to achieve a better moral result.

Conclusion

The conflicting moral attitudes are revealed in the film, basically in terms of how deontological moral theory, namely moral absolutism, conflicts with utilitarian moral theory, namely a subjectivist approach that regards the greatest happiness for the greatest numbers. While Patrick prefers acting in accordance with moral absolutism or Kantian deontology, Jack and Angie defend adopting moral objectivism or moral situationalism which takes both the rules and exceptions into consideration; and Remy embraces a totally subjective and relativist moral attitude. Although the spectator identifies with some characters and their moral choices at some points, the director Ben Affleck not only makes us consider the various moral attitudes synchronically but he also refrains from proposing to take a side. The atmosphere of chaos and crime that is foreshadowed by using some frames from Dorchester at the beginning relates the upcoming criminal deeds to the circumstance in the first place. Especially, the opening scene that is given with a voice-over by Patrick telling about how the circumstance is related to your choices and the last scene that is set in Helene's apartment question to what extent the circumstance determines a person and her/his deeds; therefore, it should not be easy to make a judgment about people and their deeds.

In the opening scene, Patrick voices, "I always believed it was *the things you don't choose that makes you who you are*—your city, your neighborhood, your family". As a resident of Dorchester, who has lived on the same block his whole life, Patrick is aware of the reality of those people "who started in the cracks and then fell through". In this sense, though Patrick does not justify Helene's being an ignorant and careless mother, he does not find her totally guilty or evil, either, like the others do. It seems like Patrick keeps in his mind Helen's airing her grievances as a response to the accusations against her: "I don't got no daycare. It's really hard being a mother. It's hard raising a family, you know? All on my own." He also shoulders the responsibility of his promise to find Amanda, who begs him to do swearing that she will not use drug anymore. The repeating scenes of Dorchester strengthen the idea that the circumstance, of which Helene is a victim, is a significant factor of a person's choices and deeds from which an individual cannot escape easily. According to Luis M. Garcia-Mainar, "this use of realistic space in order to point to the social" is accompanied with "well-known connotations of economic disadvantage and criminal life" (2013: 16); thus, it both justifies Patrick's decision, which could be hardly made by a person out of Dorchester, and makes the spectator empathize with Helene's mistakes.

To conclude, in spite of the chaotic atmosphere, Patrick makes a moral choice by taking the responsibility of his decision without renouncing his moral truths. In terms of making a moral choice and to act morally, he tries to preserve his innocence without putting Kantian reason aside. In the closing scene, Patrick's words at the beginning resound in our ears:

When I was young, I asked my priest how you could get to heaven and still protect yourself from all the evil in the world. He told me what God said to his children. "You are sheep among wolves, be wise as serpents, yet innocent as doves."

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