

The Illogic in “The Needs of the Many...”

Trekkies, of which I claim to be one, are very familiar with the following phrase used by the half-Vulcan, half-human officer Spock many times, and subsequently by many others throughout the Star Trek universe:

The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few (or the one).

This is always presented as a logical statement, and therefore cannot be argued against without committing logical fallacy. But I don't think that's true. Here's my attempt.

The term “outweigh” strongly suggests a comparison of value judgment. How else can needs be weighed if not in terms of value? Needs come in all shapes and sizes, and people will go to greater or lesser lengths in meeting these needs. I place greater value on my needs than I do on the needs of a stranger on the other side of the world. This is proof that needs are valued differently by different people. This is true of anything that is valued because both logic and experience show that value is a subjective phenomenon.

If all needs “weigh” the same, then more needs on the left side of the value balance scale will outweigh less needs on the right. But not all needs weigh the same. To weigh needs objectively is an impossibility. You can't weight value judgments. All that can be done is the ordering of value judgments by a given person at a given time (and which order is constantly in flux).

What if the “many” on the left side were serial killers, and the “few” or the “one” on the right were innocent children? Should the right be sacrificed for the left? If your value judgments are anything like mine, you would answer no. But if your value judgments are anything like the serial killers, you would answer yes. And guess what, both answers are quite logical when we understand the subjective nature of the value judgment of human needs.

As practitioners of logic, the Vulcans would be well aware of this and never would have formulated the above illogical phrase. The only thing we can say about Spock's use of the phrase is that it must have come from his human side, or else he meant to preface it with, “In my opinion...”