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Theory of Knowledge

Essay on a Prescribed Title

Are reason and emotion equally necessary in justifying moral decisions?

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2. Are reason and emotion equally necessary in justifying moral decisions?

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As human beings, we are constantly faced with moral dilemmas—questions of right and wrong whose answers determine how we should act in each situation. Instinctively, we use our emotions to determine our actions; we repeat actions which make ourselves and others happy, and we avoid actions which leave us with a feeling of guilt or remorse. And yet, since the days of Plato and Aristotle, the vast majority of ethicists have used reason—not emotion—to develop and justify their moral structures. More recently, some psychologists have countered this trend, arguing that morality is indeed a purely emotional affair. So which is more important in justifying moral decisions, reason or emotion? Or are they indeed equally necessary? In order to determine the relative importance of reason and emotion with regard to our morals, I will focus on the problems associated with both before attempting to reconcile the two.

It does not take much intellectual prodding to see that pure, cold logic will hardly suffice to solve all our ethical dilemmas. If we were to examine our present global overpopulation crisis with a purely logical eye, for example, we might very well be able to deduce that wiping a few billion people off the earth would be the simplest and most effective solution to the problem. Very few human beings, myself certainly not among them, would agree, however, that this mass slaughter is by any means a moral approach to the problem at hand—it is clearly not the right thing to do. This is because our emotional reaction—especially the feeling of sadness or empathy for those killed—overwhelms the practicality of such slaughter.

We can see, then, that emotion is necessary to some extent in the justification of our moral decisions; even Aristotle, who determined his ethics on a rational basis, found

happiness to be the ultimate goal of morality and pleasure the crowning good.¹ Modern psychologists have taken the emotional approach to its fullest extent, arguing that morality is nothing more than a combination of emotions. Richard Beck, a professor at Abilene Christian University, is one proponent of this theory. He argues that our morality is comprised only of “moral emotions” : empathy, gratitude, remorse, and moral indignation (i.e. anger at a morally reprehensible act).² If we do not experience these emotions when appropriate, then we are “evil”—that is, immoral.

It seems to me, however, that this approach leads us on too dangerous a path; certainly, these four emotions are necessary in order for us to be moral, but they are not the crux of morality, and such an emotionally-oriented mode of thought can easily draw us into an over-reliance on emotion—a slippery slope for many reasons.

Emotions are different for everyone and very much subject to influence by external factors which could include anything from specific events to deeply-rooted psychological conditions. They can be violent and turbulent; sometimes, they defy our very nature and cause us to do things we would not normally to. If, for example, one is overwhelmed with grief after a friend is killed by a drunk driver, it might seem just to avenge said friend by murdering the irresponsible driver; one might even feel satisfied having done such a thing. Very few would agree, however, that it is moral to kill the driver. Even if we are able to feel the “moral emotions” in most cases, stronger opposing emotions may overrule them and cause us to commit immoral acts at other times.

Other examples of problems associated with emotion can be found in Nazi Germany, where Hitler manipulated his people’s emotions through strong, violent

¹ Aristotle. "Nicomachean Ethics." The Complete Works of Aristotle. Ed. Jonathan Barnes. Princeton UP, 1984. 1729-1760.

² Beck, Richard. "Being a Good Person: the Moral Emotions." Experimental Theologian. 3 Apr. 2006. 23 May 2007 <<http://experimentaltheology.blogspot.com/2006/04/being-good-person-moral-emotions.html>>.

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rhetoric in order to coerce them into support of his evil regime and plans for domination, and in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, where Macbeth's greed overrules his morals and causes him to kill for power. Even in day-to-day scenarios, we find that our emotions often contradict our morals. For example, I once met a group of teenagers in London who were generally amicable and shared many of my interests. As they were showing me around the city, one of them threw a clump of mud in the direction of an Arab couple for spiteful fun. Shocked and disgusted as I was by this blatantly racist act, I never openly condemned the responsible boy; my moral outrage was clouded over by a fear of being alienated and rejected, and I kept my ethical grumblings to myself. We face similar, if less drastic, situations much more often than we would admit, especially as teenagers; "peer-pressure"—based on our innate fear of alienation—dictates how we act in many scenarios, in a much more subtle way than drug-awareness commercials will have us believe.

Emotions like fear, then, act as a veritable obstacle to correct moral action, and it is clear that each individual's subjective emotions cannot be relied on as a basis for moral decisions. Instead, we need a fixed reference point upon which we can base such choices. For many years, the Bible was cited as such a source, but given that it relies on blind faith in a God whose existence is highly debatable, it does not represent, to me, a valid moral guidebook. Let me add, then, that we need a more *objective* point of reference, and this can only be obtained through the use of reason. Reason has long been accepted as the most objective way of knowing, and it has been, for most philosophers, the path to truth.

Many thinkers have attempted to construct a logically sound ethics system from which we can base our moral choices. Resulting systems have included Aristotle's virtue ethics, Kant's duty ethics, and Bentham's utilitarianism. Here we encounter a problem of

knowledge, however: all three ethicists and many others claim to use logic and yet they arrive at different—if not totally irreconcilable—conclusions. While Aristotle argues that human virtue lies at the mean between extremes—courage, for example, lies between rashness and cowardice—and that we must act in accordance with virtue, Kant claims that ethical actions correspond to the categorical imperative—to duty. The utilitarian thinkers, meanwhile, argue that pleasure is the only deciding factor in moral decisions and that we should calculate the pleasure and pain caused by each action in order to judge its ethical worth.³ All three theories are derived from rational thinking, and yet they differ significantly. This undermines logic's main value as a way of knowing: its objectivity. If even logic cannot be entirely objective, then what can be?

Perhaps it is impossible to create a completely fixed point of objective moral reference after all; we must satisfy ourselves by examining the different ethical theories and using our logic to formulate our own basic moral principles. Having done this, we can then rely on our moral emotions—on our “gut feelings”—to help sort out practical ethical concerns.

Let us examine, for example, the rational moral premise that it is never right to kill—justifiable under the Platonic view that it is never right to do harm, and that to kill is harmful, or under Kant's categorical imperative.⁴ Even this tenet, though it is one of the most basic and widely accepted, sometimes needs to be supplemented by our emotions. In the United States, where gun violence is so prevalent, we often hear of cases where policemen shoot and kill dangerous criminals. Only minutes before I began writing this, a radio report informed me that a murderer of three was shot dead on the scene of the crime

³ Hughes, Glyn. “Squashed Philosophers.” October 2003. 20 Nov. 2007.
<<http://www.btinternet.com/~glynhughes/squashed/index.htm>>

⁴ Hughes, Glyn. “Squashed Philosophers.” October 2003. 20 Nov. 2007.
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by a security guard. This guard has been praised for having, in all likelihood, saved the lives of many, but I see his actions as fundamentally wrong, based on the basic moral principle we began with.⁵ Nevertheless, if the situation ultimately boiled down to the guard's death or the killer's, as it may have, then it becomes much more tricky. This is where our gut feeling—instinctive “moral indignation,” as Richard Beck calls it—has its place.⁶ In a kill-or-be-killed situation, where the opponent is a dangerous criminal, our instinctive emotional reaction may justly override our initial rational premise. This demonstrates that certain situations require a more nuanced reaction than rational principles alone can provide—that emotions, too, have their place in morality.

Having seen that both reason and emotion have their place in justifying our moral decisions, and that neither alone can suffice when it comes to making such decisions, we find that it is necessary to strike a balance between the two; pure logic is too cold, but over-reliance on emotion may lead us on a dangerous path, away from our moral concerns. In order to be truly moral, we need a logic-based moral framework which we then complement with the “moral emotions” to make the appropriate ethical decisions in all cases. Therefore, reason and emotion are equally important in practical morality.

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⁵ McFadden, Robert D. "Police See Links in Colorado Shootings." New York Times 10 Dec. 2007. 10 Dec. 2007 <<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/10/us/10cnd-shoot.html?ex=1354942800&en=3574059b2c433838&ei=5088&partner=rssnyt&emc=rss>>.

⁶ Beck, Richard. "Being a Good Person: the Moral Emotions." Experimental Theologian. 3 Apr. 2006. 23 May 2007 <<http://experimentaltheology.blogspot.com/2006/04/being-good-person-moral-emotions.html>>.

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