The Importance of Emotions in Dealing with Ethical Dilemmas Markus Wolf

In this essay I shall argue that our emotions play an important role in our making moral judgements, by serving as a valuable heuristic guide. Emotions are not essential for moral judgement, but can be greatly facilitative. I shall first prove that it is not irrational to be guided by subjective factors when making decisions. This shall be followed by an examination of the possible connections between emotions and moral judgements with an evaluation of each position. Emotions are part of a motivational process that facilitates our deliberations, most importantly moral ones. In the final section I shall deal with the issue of faulty emotional information, i.e. how to distinguish between reliable and unreliable emotional information.

Prudent satisfaction of subjective factors, such as desires, is rational

It is commonly held that to view, judge, or act rationally is to do so unemotionally, i.e. to lay aside subjective factors influencing one, such as attitudes, emotions, or beliefs. The agent is expected to be objective. Contingencies of background and upbringing also frequently are obstacles to rational deliberation. By urging someone to be objective, it is maintained, we are urging him not to be influenced by the contingent aspects of his character, personality, emotions, moods, feelings, or subjective life-settings. Descriptions of reality are held to be objective when they are verifiable by numerous observers with different interests and natures.1

In making decisions we are sometimes irrational, i.e. when we give precedence to our present desires, desires that override our awareness of long-term interests or future desires. Prudence requires that the present is not given priority, but that we rather overcome the influences of presently felt desires and preferences in order to survey longer portions of our lives, thereby rationally comparing the values of presently desired objects with those we may desire or require in the future.

This external point of view is, however, irrelevant to the practical decisions with which we are confronted daily. To elucidate this, let us imagine that I am faced with having liver-spread or marmalade on my bread for breakfast. If the external (objective) perspective requires that I ignore my tastes and preferences, then it can provide no assistance. On the contrary, it would be irrational to adopt this point of view since the factors it requires me to ignore are precisely those that are relevant for making a decision in this instance. To demand that one make choices involving taste by ignoring the taste factor is to be arbitrary and irrational. This example is indicative of the fact that the rational point of view and the external perspective do not coincide.2 If I choose liver-spread instead of marmalade, my choice is guided not only by taste and felt desires, but also by adherence to the following rational principle:

2 Ibid., 197-198.
Given a choice between A and B, where X prefers A to B, it is rational (all things being equal) for X to choose A.\(^3\)

This is a principle of rational choice that could be acknowledged by a being indifferent to both A and B. To recognise this principle is therefore not to express one’s irrational preferences.

To adopt an external perspective as a test for values is to overlook the difference between the following two questions:

1. Would a purely rational being, one possessing only cognitive powers, necessarily choose A over B?
2. Would a rational being, with such traits as particular goals, preferences, needs, or desires, necessarily choose A over B?\(^4\)

The former question yields the nihilistic answer because it is indifferent to A and B, and has no ground for choosing between them; the latter question, by contrast, refers to the contingent features of the being making the choice, thereby allowing for judgements of rationality. To ignore one’s own preferences, leave one’s own needs unmet, and thwart one’s own goals, is under normal circumstances regarded as irrational. Seen from this perspective, it becomes clear that rationality is linked to prudent satisfaction of desires and preferences.

**Emotions as a valuable guide to moral judgements**

The claim that moral judgements are untenable if they are based on subjective factors, such as emotions and attitudes, is not correct. In order to clearly demonstrate this point, let us examine whether any emotions are facilitative for making correct moral judgements.

M.S. Moore examines four ways in which emotions may be relevant for moral judgements, either to their origin or justification:

1. The first is the Kantian position maintaining that emotions play no role in moral judgements. Moral judgements are to arise and be in accordance with the rational will alone, free from any emotional contamination. The truth or falsity of a moral judgement is to be established wholly by the use of reason, not by any emotional experience. This position holds that there is absolutely no relation between an emotion and moral truth. Emotions could otherwise falsify true beliefs or assert false ones. Emotions neither give rise to, nor justify moral judgements.\(^5\)

The untenability of this position is brought out by an example dealing with punishment of criminal offenders. Most of us believe that culpable wrong-doers are deserving of punishment. When we hear of murders, rapes, molestations of children, and other atrocious crimes, we believe that the responsible beings deserve to be punished. Many of us will qualify our beliefs by adding that punishment is necessary as deterrence, or rehabilitation, or other consequential effects. Moore responds that our reasons are just rationalisations for what we believe on instinct. Imagine that the same crimes were being

\(^3\) Ibid., 198.
\(^4\) Ibid.

committed, but that there were no consequentialist reasons for punishing because the offender has undergone a religious conversion, for instance, and is therefore remorseful and no longer dangerous, and the crime can go undetected so that general deterrence is not required. Should we still punish? Do we still have a reason for punishing? Most of us will agree with Moore\(^6\) that such persons still deserve to be punished because we as society have a right to express our anger and indignation at the offender. This we do through the institution of punishment.\(^7\) Another exemplification of the acceptability of our emotions is that society generally holds it morally acceptable and appropriate to celebrate one’s war victories, even though war itself may be an undesirable state.

We not only make judgements about the bad actions a person wills, but also about the bad emotions a person feels. Stocker\(^8\) aptly illustrates a situation in which a person receives a loyal visitor in hospital. The patient appreciates the visitor’s engagement under difficult conditions. He comes to realise that his visitor has not done this out of love or friendship, but merely out of duty - believing it to be his obligation to visit a sick acquaintance. How would the patient feel? Surely the visit would be of greater value if it were done out of love or friendship, rather than mere duty. Another example will strengthen the argument. Suppose a person rescues his child from drowning. Would we not assume the action to have sprung out of love? If we are then honestly told by the rescuer that his only consideration was duty, how would we react? Even if the drowning person were a stranger, we would assume the rescuer to act out of care for others, to be motivated by affection towards beings in distress. An action out of mere duty is similar to seeing it as a job to fulfil. Surely, moral actions cannot spring out of duty, but should be done out of love, care for other beings, or similar motivations. A person having no compass for the objects of his charity, seeing them as no more than objects for the manifestation of his virtues, is morally not as good as one whose actions are no better, but who has compassion.

(2) The opposite position holds that emotions have everything to do with moral truth. Conceptualists or relativists hold this view. Patrick Devlin, for instance, argues that homosexual behaviour is immoral and may be legally prohibited whenever enough people feel deeply enough that it is immoral.\(^9\) This position maintains that the emotions of a society determine moral truth. If most people hold practice A as immoral, then it is immoral; and if they hold practice B as moral, then it is.\(^10\) This argument rests on a shaky foundation. If it were shown that the emotions of a moral practice are contradictory or unfounded, then the truth of the derivative judgement would be undermined.

If a majority holds any action, belief, practice, or expression of an emotion as morally acceptable, then it is not acceptable by virtue of this fact alone. Majority approval is not a sufficient condition for moral acceptability. At this stage it is appropriate to ask

\(^6\) Ibid., 99.
\(^7\) Let it be noted that I am not advocating a retributivis stance towards punishment. My position on this matter is that punishment should pursue at least five goals, only one of which is retributivist in nature. My position in dealing with offenders is that the primary emphasis ought to be on rehabilitation, constrained by clear deontological principles. Consequentialist and restitutional elements need, however, also be taken into account.
whether it is not also the case that our expressions of anger and indignation at offenders are morally unacceptable? Are we as the majority morally justified in expressing such negative emotions? Do not perpetrators have a fundamental right to be protected against vindictiveness and hatred of their victims? The burden of proof rests on those claiming such rights. Murphy\(^1\) therefore claims that those maintaining that revenge is unjustifiable ought to prove that this is indeed the case. Those wishing to take up this challenge have two avenues open to them. They may either argue that (a) the emotions are inherently irrational, or (b) are evil, such as sadism or unprovoked malice.

With respect to (a), it must be pointed out that emotions are not of the same nature as sensations such as tiredness, toothaches or cold. Describing a toothache, for instance, as irrational would be making a category mistake. Emotions are different, however. Fears that result in phobias are described as irrational, for example. Emotions are usually considered irrational when they are excessive or unwarranted. If it is possible to describe something as irrational, then it must also be possible to describe it as rational; the same must therefore hold for the description of emotions. When emotions dominate one's character to such an extent that normal functioning is precluded, such as when one is afflicted by phobias, we label them irrational. Why are the emotions of revenge, however, considered as irrational, while positive emotions, such as Mother Teresa's or Albert Schweitzer's unconditional love for the poor and needy, are not? Is it because the former generally break the law, while the latter do not? Is it primarily a legal issue, rather than a moral one?

An explanation may lie in their comprehensibility. Emotions that are unintelligible to us are prone to be judged irrational. Rawls argues that it is simply irrational to want someone to lose a benefit, especially if that benefit would not be transferred to us.\(^2\) However, this does not prove that all emotions of vindictiveness or hatred are irrational. Are these emotions irrational when directed towards the attainment of justice in response to an injustice suffered? Is the expression of such emotions irrational even when they are not excessive, when they do not exceed the harm suffered? The burden of proof still rests on those wishing to discredit such emotions.\(^3\)

We need not dwell extensively on (b) in order to reject it. Punishment of offenders need not be, and ought not to be, sadistic in any way. Punishment can and ought to be humane. There is nothing intrinsic to punishment that would deny this latter claim. We are therefore justified in drawing the conclusion that it is morally acceptable to express one's anger and indignation at the offensive actions of criminals. The importance of this finding is that we have found an instance in which the emotions of anger and indignation serve as a guide for determining how to act towards criminals.

(3) The third way suggested is the view advocated by intuitionists. They hold that our emotions stand analogously to moral judgements as do perceptions to scientific judgements. They see morality and science as having distinct realms, each with its own experiential base. For the intuitionists, emotions are absolutely essential to morality, since they generate one's moral insight. Applying this to retributivism, the intuitionist, if they wish to be consistent, must hold that the felt inference that it is right to punish for its own sake is good evidence that it is right to punish for its own sake. They must allow, however, that the inference, just as inferences in science, could be mistaken.\(^4\)


\(^{12}\) Ibid., 138-139.

\(^{13}\) Ibid., 138-140.

The fourth position enables us to avoid the difficulties posed by intuitionism. We can avoid the difficulties of how to settle disputes, for instance, when contrary intuitions are in question, by seeing emotions as heuristic guides by which we can gain moral insight, but not out of which moral theory is constructed. Such a view could hold that moral knowledge does not depend on its own mode of experience. If we take culpability, for instance, it is true that we cannot see it, but must infer it from other properties, such as volition, accountability, intention, causation, and other similarly connected phenomena. These properties are however also not directly perceptible. We infer them from other observable phenomena, such as a person’s actions. Culpability is no different from intention, volition, causation: all must be inferred from other evidence. Nevertheless, this does not require a special mode of existence, or a special mode of knowing.\textsuperscript{15} Emotions, therefore, seem not to be essential for attaining moral knowledge. We could well imagine someone making the right kinds of inference on moral issues without possessing any emotional faculties. Needless to say, the being would not ‘feel’ about injustice as we feel about it, but would be able to identify it and disapprove of it. Our emotions are thus heuristic guides to moral judgements, an extra source of insight we can gain from wholly experiential or inferential sources of knowledge. It is similar to John’s intention to study for a degree in philosophy. We have to infer his intention from evidence on which he is not dependent, he just needs to introspect to determine whether he intends studying for a philosophy degree. The point made is, emotions are not essential for attaining moral knowledge, but they serve as a valuable heuristic guide to making them. Nevertheless, it is possible that emotions are fallible. It is this possibility, and the means of distinguishing between reliable and unreliable emotional informative content, that now demands our attention.

\textbf{Distinguishing between reliable and unreliable emotional information}

We may assert with Moore that our emotions are our main heuristic guide for establishing what is morally right. Our emotions tell us that the killings and displacements of innocent people in war was wrong; it is our emotions that tell us that rape of the women and girls is morally wrong. All of us are prone to feeling emotions of anger and intense outrage at witnessing deep and brutal injustice. This is even more so when the person wronged is one with whom we have a close relationship. If, for example, someone we know is murdered without any provocation by the victim, it is natural for us to feel intense anger and resentment. Surely, it is not virtuous to feel nothing more than sympathy for those forced to suffer grave injustices at the hands of wrong-doers. In addition, one’s unwillingness to express anger and outrage against the perpetrators may be a result of an unwillingness to recognise the evil committed. This attitude becomes even more strongly expressed if one sides with the perpetrator by, for example, choosing not to punish him, by arguing that punishment cannot undo the harm already done. Our emotions can be trustworthy guides to moral insight. Emotions are rational when they are appropriately proportionate to their objects, when they are not contradictory, when they are intrinsically distinguishable, and exhibit consistency. Abolishing the whole institution of legal punishment, as well as its accompanying safeguards, merely because the institution is connected to our emotions, would lead to unpalatable consequences. Imagine doing away with the principle that innocent people ought not to be punished because this principle rests on moral insight motivated by our emotions. Of course, this is

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 114.
not to endorse the view that our emotions ought to be allowed to override our rational insight. But our emotions can, under many circumstances, serve as valuable stimuli for rational deliberation.\textsuperscript{16} Firm moral convictions may be generated by intense emotions, by emotions that do not override the rational faculties of deliberation. Any emotion may be pathological, even benevolent ones, but, returning to the example of punishment, retributive urges do not always arise from an excess of emotions. We should criticise and reject emotions that dominate reason, but this need not be the case with retributive ones. We may be outraged at seeing a murderer go unpunished, but this outrage need in no way override our faculty of reason. There is no reason to reject emotions that give rise to moral judgements when the emotions do not override reason.

An important distinction is made by Moore\textsuperscript{17} between the correct manner of judgement in respect to some institution, practice, act or agent (‘epistemic connection of an emotion’) and the moral worth of an emotion in respect of a given action, or set of actions (‘substantive connection’). Surely there is a connection between the two. If a specific emotion makes us more virtuous, then that emotion is a good heuristic for determining whether moral judgements are true, and vice versa.

If emotions can be valuable heuristic guides to moral judgement, but are nevertheless sometimes fallible, how are we to distinguish between emotions possessing reliable, and those possessing unreliable informative content? The answer lies in experience. Let me clarify this by turning to science for a moment. We know that sensory experience is sometimes fallible, such as when we have taken certain medications, are subject to illusions, or similar deceptive experiences. Science depends on experiential data. However, we do not require an explanation of our experiences before we employ them for our scientific theories. Rather, we rely on the scientific theory itself to justify exclusions of experience from the data.\textsuperscript{18} We rely on further sensory evidence when present sensory information about a given matter is inadequate or contradictory. On hearing a specific sound, I may first believe a motorcycle to be coming in my direction. A few seconds later, however, I may revise my judgement, believing it to be a motorcar, which is shortly followed by more sensory information that supports the latter judgement. We know through experience that, for instance, sensory perceptions are altered when under the influence of certain drugs, therefore we may discard perceptual data made under such conditions.

The same applies to emotions pertaining to moral judgements and actions. This means that if I was faced with a given situation in which I experienced a specific emotion, and upon reflection I found that the emotion motivated me towards performing the right action in that situation, then it would be reasonable for me to act upon my emotion whenever I were faced with a similar situation. If, for instance, I hear of a brutal crime, and thereby experience the emotions of anger and indignation at the offender, and upon reflecting I find that my emotions motivated me towards punishing him, and punishment is what I hold to be right when reflecting on the case in an unemotional way (taking my needs and those of society into account), then whenever I am again faced with criminal injustice and experience anger and indignation at the offender, I may hold it appropriate to act upon my emotions without extensive deliberation. By contrast, imagine that I experience intense hatred in the same situation, hatred that would motivate me towards torture and execution of the criminal. Upon reflection I find that this emotion was not in accordance with what I hold appropriate subsequent to reflection, even when taking my

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 104-105.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 116.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 119.
needs and those of society into account. In this instance, my emotion cannot serve as a valuable heuristic guide for dealing with situations of a similar nature. It should be clear that an emotion should not be acted upon when experienced for the first time. One first needs to reflect upon the emotion in the situation in which it was experienced, before being able to adopt it as a suitable heuristic in future relevantly similar situations. Emotions ought not to dictate reason, but only facilitate moral judgements, i.e. they are part of a motivational process when making moral judgements.

I hope to have clearly argued that our emotions are not essential for making moral judgements, but that they are valuable heuristic guides for doing so. Without emotions we would almost certainly be impoverished moral beings, being capable of acting morally only with intense deliberation, rather than almost by instinct, as now is the case.

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