

TOK ESSAY

Prescribed title no. 2

**Are reason and emotion equally necessary in justifying moral
decisions?**

Arni Lehto

0571-012

Helsingin Suomalainen Yhteiskoulu

1598 Words

May 08

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

Arni Lehto, Helsingin Suomalainen Yhteiskoulu

There are several idioms in the English language such as “let’s try to be rational,” “don’t be so emotional” and “let’s try to think reasonably” that reflect the general idea that decisions should be made while in a rational state of mind. However important it may be that a person has a “clear mind” while deciding between right and wrong, doing so consistently is an unattainable goal. On the other extreme occasions will arise when the actions of one can only be explained by primal emotions. Even though there are groups supporting thought in one extreme or the other (reason: Stoics, rationalists, emotion: romanticists), the most optimal situation can be found in a suitable equilibrium between the two. However, justifying moral decisions relies more on reason than emotion, even though both are necessary.

The relationship between reason and emotion can be seen in different ways. The common idea seems to be that emotion and reason are two completely separate parts of the human psyche. However, studies suggest the exact opposite, that they are actually linked together. *Psychology Today* reported (04/22/2005) that “emotion and reason appear to battle for the upper hand while making decisions”¹ and claimed that “the socio-emotional part of the brain pushes towards decisions based on universal moral rules and the rational part towards utilitarian goals.”¹ This suggests that emotion and reason, instead of being separate, can be seen as the two extremes of a continuum.

When considering the general direction of the effect of emotion and reason, I have to disagree with the suggestion that emotions lead to decisions based on moral rules. Emotions, according to my own experience, seem to have a tendency to create personal needs and desires that seek fulfillment or in simpler terms: they create a higher level of self-interest. The actions resulting from an overflow of emotion do not seem to have a larger goal for the future that the act will work in favor of besides personal gain. It could be said that decisions made on an emotional basis generally result (or attempt to) in an increase in the well-being and/or situation of the person committing the act. An example of this can be found in the abuse of performance enhancing drugs in sports. Clearly the use of these drugs is an immoral act that is very unsportsmanlike in nature and violates with the rules set by the governing organizations in athletics. In addition, their use will most probably result in serious health issues. However, several athletes continue to use drugs such as hormones and

¹ Aaronson, Lauron, “Moral Combat: Emotion and Reason”

EPO because their desire to succeed is so great that it overpowers 'rational' thinking. It can be said that in this case emotions result in a decision that leads to short-term individual benefit i.e. possible victory, and thus emotion will lead to poor moral decisions.

Another "side effect" of being controlled by emotions, is that emotions can cloud one's judgment. The phrase "I don't know what came over me" is a much too common symptom of this occurrence. How could one not lose control of oneself on a certain level when it has even been chemically proven that emotions are actually caused by chemical reactions in the brain? Love, considered to be one of the strongest emotions of all, has been clinically proven to be caused by such chemicals as "dopamine, norepinephrine, phenylethylamine (PEA) and other natural cousins of amphetamines, stimulants and painkillers"² which according to the article "gives us the sensation of being on drugs." When a person is under the influence of chemicals, which cause such effects, it is safe to say that one will act irrationally and under "control" of their emotions. Since our own body is capable of relieving reason from its duty, one can argue that the natural way of making and justifying moral decisions is with emotion. This could be a very adept argument if, as stated earlier, using emotion led to decisions based on "universal moral rules".

However, when such influential drugs silence reason, the results can be quite "headless". An exquisite example is the attempted assassination of President Ronald Reagan by John Hinckley in Washington on March 30, 1981. Preceding the assassination attempt Hinckley had created an obsession with actress Jodie Foster. When Foster didn't notice him, he decided to get her attention. This was an act dominated by emotion up to the point that reason was left to the side. Hinckley's "reasoning" was clearly muddled due to the strong emotions linked to Foster. Hinckley distorted information into justifications based on poor reasoning, so that he could live in his fantasy world of Foster. This led to the situation, where emotion resulted in the justification of a completely immoral act, murder. When emotion plays too large of a role in justification, it inhibits one from using valid reasoning, as one will not accept any answer than the one being looked for. Thus emotion, on its own, cannot be considered to be an adequate means of justifying moral decisions.

² Block, Susan, "Chemistry of Love"

May 08

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

Arni Lehto, Helsingin Suomalainen Yhteiskoulu

On the other hand, the general trend in the world seems to be one in which decisions are made on the basis of “good” reasoning. The idea seems to be that decisions should be made through deductive reasoning where the best option available is selected by carefully contemplating all of the available, e.g. in politics decisions are commonly based on what will bring the largest amount of well-being to the largest amount of people i.e. utilitarian goals. This reflects the earlier statement that using reason leads to utilitarian decisions. However, when reason is in too crucial of a role and emotion is left out of play in the mental activity of man, it causes one’s actions and decisions to seem inhuman. No matter how much emotion can cloud your judgment a total lack of it will lead to irrational behavior based on completely rational grounds. This could be explained by the fact that emotion aids in the selection of the right choice from all the available by excluding the ones you simply don’t want to do. Decisions involving self-gain are replaced by thoughts towards utilitarian goals, as suggested above.

An extreme example of a situation where reason is in total control can be found in Phineas Gage. Gage was impaled by a tamping iron through his skull, and the frontal lobes of his brain, which control emotions, and social abilities, were severely damaged. The effects on Gage have been recorded as him turning “fitful, irreverent, and grossly profane, showing little deference for his fellows.”³ At quite a superficial inspection it seems that with his emotional side “out of order” his decisions and actions were rash and impulsive. With nothing in control of how he should act he acted in a way that was considered socially unacceptable perhaps even immoral, with him having no clear understanding of empathy or emotional intelligence. The case of Phineas Gage shows that a complete lack of emotion is not an ideal approach to justifying moral decisions.

An area of knowledge where work is done mainly with reason, with a minimal amount of emotion is science. In science results gained through experiments and the use of technology are not affected by emotion. Therefore, these results can be used as justifications of reason for moral decisions. Referring back to the example of performance enhancing drugs, it is a known fact that these drugs cause health issues, e.g. EPO may cause cardiovascular complications. Thus the use of these drugs can be considered immoral for the simple reason that their use harms someone, the user.

³ Macmillan, Ian & Macmillan, Malcolm, “Phineas Gage Information”

2. Are reason and emotion equally necessary in justifying moral decisions?
Arni Lehto, Helsingin Suomalainen Yhteiskoulu

Therefore in science valid justifications can be reached without the use of emotion, however, it occurs outside of the human mind.

Religion, however, is a complication in this dilemma between reason and emotion. Especially Western religions (e.g. Catholicism) believe in an objective moral law that is based on God's will. However, God, or God's will, cannot be proven with reason. Therefore, the basis on which moral decisions are justified by in religion is emotion, as only with emotion (faith, belief etc.) can you claim the existence of God. If one were to attempt to justify a decision with the use of reason, one can only refer to the moral law (e.g. the Ten Commandments). The Catholic Church considers polygamy an immoral act. However, the only argument against it is that the Bible states it as being a wrongful act, thus with reason you can provide an argument against polygamy, but not justify the argument. The argument is justified by belief in its validity, i.e. emotion. Thus all justifications made through religion are justifications based on emotion. Religious dogma is, however, in my opinion somewhat a last resort, a moral guideline you refer to when your own mind fails to provide a valid argument.

Finding equilibrium between emotion and reason is crucial for one to be able to make moral decisions that can be justified in an acceptable manner. When the point of balance between the two is closer to one extreme, irrational decisions and actions follow. The ability to balance these two can be very challenging, especially in situations where the emotional side of the brain attempts to take control. It should be kept in mind that emotions can keep reasonable thinking from turning into irrational behavior (e.g. Gage), and are therefore an important component if one wishes to justify ones actions, and emotions role should not be undermined by the expected role of reason. However, I believe that it is better to justify moral decisions with emphasis on reason, for the simple fact that emotion is something that one cannot control, and truly justified decisions are made in complete control of ones thoughts.

May 08

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

Arni Lehto, Helsingin Suomalainen Yhteiskoulu

Bibliography

Aaronson, Lauron, "Moral Combat: Emotion and Reason", April 22 2005, Psychology Today, accessed Jan. 27 2008, <http://www.psychologytoday.com/articles/pto-20050422-000004.html>

Block, Susan, "Chemistry of Love", Feb. 12 2005, Counterpunch, accessed Jan. 27 2008, <http://www.counterpunch.org/block02122005.html>

Macmillan, Ian & Macmillan, Malcolm, "Phineas Gage Information", Aug. 15 1999, Deakin University, accessed Jan. 27 2008, <http://www.deakin.edu.au/hmnbs/psychology/gagepage/index.php>

Wolf, Julie, "John Hinckley Jr.", 2000, The American Experience, accessed Jan. 27 2008, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/reagan/peopleevents/pande02.html>