

May 08

2. Are reason and emotion equally necessary in justifying moral decisions?
Michael Roeterink, American School of the Hague

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Michael Roeterink
000768-037
The American School of The Hague
May 2008
Word Count: 1600

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On December 24th, 2004, Wanigaratna Karunatileke was working as the official guard on board the “Queen of the Sea Express” when the tsunami hit. The force of the waves knocked the train from its tracks and proceeded to sweep it out to sea. Instead of abandoning ship and attempting to swim to safety, Karunatileke entered the sinking cabin, explaining, “At that time, I forgot my government duty and only acted as a human being. I tried to help people.”¹ What would you have done? Survival maintains personal safety above all else and, in that case, Karunatileke had every right to flee for his life and forget the passengers. But this is not how Karunatileke decided to behave; in that instant, minus the time for a reasoned weighing of the potential danger, his sheer humanity prevailed. That raw primal emotion that suggests an innate aversion to letting others die when we have the capacity to help, trumps reason. Karunatileke might search later for a more reasoned explanation for his actions, but as Hume would contend, emotion will rule the day. In this respect, it appears that emotion can indeed be an evaluative judgment and in its own way as rational as the cold hand of logic.

In order to set some basic parameters, a clarification of *what* constitutes a moral decision is required, in company with an explanation of *when* the justification process for such a decision takes place. Most human beings have their own moral code or personal belief system with respect to what is right and what is wrong. A moral decision, therefore, arises due to an individual’s perception of right and wrong. An individual’s sense of morality is largely dictated by the emotions experienced in response to a particular situation and consequently reason has a limited influence in the justification process. It is unlikely that an individual when faced with a moral dilemma will be swayed by reasoning over emotion. Granted, reason will have some impact in the justification process; nevertheless, at the end of the day you have to be able to live with the decision that was made. This means that in the final justification process, your emotions will be the decisive factor that fully justifies and allows you to be at peace with your decision. It is important to note that different situations involve different justification processes. The role of reason

¹ Dissanayake Samanthi, “Divided island remembers tsunami,” BBC News, 26 December 2005, 15 December 2007, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/4560598.stm>.

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and emotion in the justification process differ for a snap-decision versus a decision which can be made over a longer period of time.

Snap decisions arise from situations in which an individual is forced to come to a verdict with little time. As a result, it seems unlikely that an individual will possess sufficient mental clarity to have the ability to reason to a logical justification; moreover, in that brief moment, it seems logical that one's emotions will be the guiding force. I recently experienced a situation that required me to make an instantaneous decision during an ice hockey game. One of my teammates was being beaten up quite severely by a much-larger opponent. I felt obligated to step in and protect my teammate; however, in doing so I knew that I would be ejected from both that game and the subsequent one. In the split-second before I jumped into the fight, I justified my decision with the knowledge, that, in my heart, it was the right thing to do. I can't recall going through a reasoned internal debate; it was intuitive. Anger can be a legitimate justification as it requires the belief that one has been wronged and that the source of injury or offense deserves punishment. In this scenario, my anger, at his being attacked, and empathy, for his vulnerability, were powerful in creating the belief that my decision to take action and risk suspension was morally justified.

From a scientific standpoint, there is a physiological explanation detailing why my emotions were the deciding factor in my decision to protect my teammate. Numerous scientific investigations have been conducted seeking to explain why students fare more poorly when they are subject to increased levels of stress.² The answer lies within the human brain. The triune brain is composed of three major parts: the neocortex, the limbic system, and the brain stem.³ When the brain detects a perceived threat, it goes into a 'fight versus flight' response and shifts processing from the neocortex to the limbic system and brain stem. This phenomenon is called downshifting as the brain downshifts from the neocortex to "rely more heavily on the survival and emotional processing brain stem and limbic system"⁴ and once this has transpired any sort of learning or rational thought is inaccessible. This indicates that the human brain acts as a sort of defense mechanism and is

² Gene Van Tassell, "Downshifting," Layered Curriculum, 2004, 16 February 2008, <<http://www.brains.org/down.htm>>.

³ "Lesson 4: Brain Structure and Function," 16 January 2008, <http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/army/rotc_brain_function.pdf>: 14.

⁴ "Lesson 4: Brain Structure and Function" 15.

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wired such that in a moment of extreme crisis we revert back to our primal emotions. Once in this ‘survival of the fittest’ mindset, it is our emotions that take account of the situation. But if we extend this premise, how far is too far? There are limits to this explanation in terms of understanding the role of emotion. As mad as I was at the attack on my teammate –and as others might have empathized and even supported my retaliation– I clearly would not have killed the other player. Are we intuitively hard-wired to know when ‘too far is too far’? Incest and cannibalism usually elicit an immediately “yuck” or sense of disgust. There appears a clear correlation between the moral concept of right and wrong and the emotional aversion to the taboo. Can we form the belief that something is wrong simply by having a negative emotion to it? Support for this may lie in the psychopath, who by definition is deficient in both negative emotions (sorrow or fear) and the moral concept of right and wrong. Minus empathy or guilt, killing implies only something against the law rather than something ‘wrong.’

But what about a situation where one has time to reason through, not only the decision, but the rationale and is not subject to any outward pressures? This justification may take place before the decision or after in an attempt to substantiate one’s actions in the aftermath. This is illustrated in Joshua Green’s “trolley” dilemma that requires a decision about whom to save. A trolley is heading down a track towards five people who will die unless you pull a lever that will divert the trolley on to a separate track, where one person will die instead. Most people reason that minimizing the loss of life, or the utilitarian tenet of the greatest good for the greatest number of people, is the right path; however, when the situation is altered so that pushing an innocent bystander into the path of the trolley is the only way to bring it to a stop, the human emotions of guilt and responsibility takeover. Green,⁵ a Harvard psychologist, takes brain scans of individuals as they ponder the trolley problem and his results indicate that emotion is the decisive factor in justifying whether or not it is acceptable to push an innocent person into the trolley’s path. The scans illustrate that the emotional aversion competes for control with the rational portion of the brain and in most cases, comes out on top, indicating that the human emotional response to a life-and-death situation is much stronger than our reasoning capabilities.

⁵ Robert Wright, “How We Make Life-and-Death Decisions,” *Time*, 29 January 2007:116.

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The previous example is purely hypothetical, but what about situations where an individual seeks to justify behaviour after the fact? An individual may make up a list of objective pros and cons; nevertheless, in the end, it is emotions that determine whether the decision was justified. Ian Wilmut, in delivering a lecture on genetics in 1999, and underscoring the potential of cloning, posed the ethical question: would cloning be ethically acceptable? While his response was an unqualified yes, “as long as the animals are given as normal a life as possible,”⁶ critics quickly weighed in on the moral implications. Family members personally touched by disease or genetic disorders felt cloning to be acceptable as it offered the potential to save loved ones through medical advancements. On the other hand, some individuals were vehemently opposed to the idea of “Dolly” as their fear led to the imagining of a Jurassic Park or out-of-control cloning. Religious groups were also up in arms, arguing who gave these men the right to play God?⁷ In the end, Wilmut and Campbell felt justified in creating a clone because emotionally they understood their actions to be right and for the benefit of science and technology. Reason may have led to a list of factors supporting or opposing their scientific feat; however, they could not feel truly justified in making their moral decision without knowing that deep down what they did was right and, in the long run, could help the scientific community as a whole.

Scottish philosopher David Hume once said, “Morality is more properly felt than judged of; though this feeling or sentiment is commonly so soft and gentle, that we are apt to confound it with an idea.”⁸ Wanigaratna Karunatileke did not clamber back aboard the sinking train because reason told him this was his best chance of survival. No, he returned because he knew in his heart that it was the right thing to do. Although reason can shape the justification of a moral decision, in the end it comes down to the emotions one feels in response to that particular situation. We may like to believe that our views on right and wrong are rational but ultimately they are grounded in emotion.

⁶ Karen Robinson, “Dolly Cloner, Geneticists Debate Ethics Issue,” *The Tech*, 16 March 1999, 22 February 2008, <<http://www-tech.mit.edu/V119/N13/genetics.13n.html>>.

⁷ Eunice Yoon, “Dolly pioneer on the cloning debate,” *CNN.com*, 4 March 2005, 12 February 2008, <<http://edition.cnn.com/2005/TECH/03/04/spark.alan.colman/index.html>>.

⁸ Wright 116.

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