



“It’s Not Wrong, If It Feels Right!”

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Many people today believe that moral judgments and values are merely expressions of sentiment. They deny that moral values are fixed or universally true, and instead, argue that we have changing emotions that may or may not correspond to the moral feelings of those around us.

This can play out in various real-life situations when people say, for example, “You can’t really know what it’s like to have an unexpected pregnancy if you haven’t been in the situation yourself, so you can’t tell me it’s wrong to get an abortion.” The morality of terminating a “problem pregnancy,” according to this view, depends on “being in the moment,” and experiencing the mother’s desperation, fears and sentiments.

Most of us, in fact, have probably granted our emotions leeway to trump our better moral judgment somewhere along the line. We can relate to stories of friends who make various solemn declarations like: “You don’t know how hard it’s been for me in this painful marriage, and you don’t understand how it feels to fall in love with somebody who really cares for you, so you can’t say it’s wrong for me to be in a relationship with someone else.”

Philosopher Alisdair MacIntyre notes that this emotive approach to moral thinking has gained broad societal approval:

“To a large degree people now think, talk and act as if emotivism were true, no matter what their avowed theoretical standpoint may be. Emotivism has become embodied in our culture.”

In light of our tendency to try to justify our misdeeds, it can be appealing to imagine that ethics are always “first person” — from my vantage point — and to suppose that no one else can identify moral obligations regarding another’s situation. “How do you feel about it?” becomes the guiding principle, and leads to the view that morals are relative, context dependent, and subject to emotional confirmation. Reducing ethics to feelings, however, is a seriously deficient approach to thinking about right and wrong. It also, in the final analysis, doesn’t work.

Imagine what would happen to the practice of medicine if physicians could treat patients only if they personally experienced and felt the diseases their patients

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had. Consider the miscarriage of justice that would occur if judges ruled only when they could feel and experience everything the perpetrator felt and experienced at the time the crimes were committed, and had to decide cases in line with those feelings. Such sentimentalism completely misses the objective foundations and concerns of morality.

Those objective foundations begin with the recognition that all men and women have a shared human nature, so whatever is always morally bad for one of us will also be bad for any of us. If it is immoral for me to steal the electronics out of your house, it will likewise be wrong for you to rob me or anyone else; and it will be equally wrong for the president of the United States or the Pope to do so. If I rob others, it is objectively bad because it harms others by depriving them of their goods, and it transforms me into a thief, the kind of person who cheapens his humanity and degrades his integrity by stealing the goods of others. Even those who believe in a “feelings-based” morality are quick to decry certain actions as always wrong, at least when it comes to their own vehicles and homes being plundered, irrespective of whether the robbers

might have their own moral sentiments favoring the practice.

To think clearly about morality, we need to start by acknowledging that certain moral duties do not depend on context or emotion, but are universally binding on us, having even a “commandment-like” quality. Professor William May, a remarkable teacher of moral theology at the John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family, had a penchant for choosing clear and memorable examples when he would lecture. He used to tell his students that we all know certain actions are wrong, regardless of circumstances. One of his most graphic examples, recounted by his students even decades later, was his undeniable assertion that we all know barbecuing a baby is wrong. Similarly, he stressed that everyone recognizes the wrongness of adultery, an act, so often shrouded in secrecy, that attacks the good of our spouse and seriously violates an important and defining personal commitment we have made.

Even if something “feels right” in the moment, it can be very wrong for us to do it. Quite apart from the context or circumstances, certain kinds of acts, without exception, are incompatible with human dignity be-

cause, by their very nature, they are damaging and destructive to ourselves and to those around us.

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