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ToK

Essay:

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

When considering whether reason or emotion holds more importance whilst pursuing justified moral decisions, it is of principal importance to inquire the process that supposedly leads to such justified moral convictions. Primarily a distinction has to be made between any subject and object, to take an example, if an individual is exposed to an object or idea an emotive reaction might be triggered. This emotion may be clouded by biases and prejudices. Nonetheless, an emotion is always triggered by an object or idea, as it cannot exist by itself. Reason however judges by itself, discerning the facts that are intrinsic to the object, whilst disregarding any emotional influences that are natural to an individual, thus lastly leading to truthful moral belief. As reason is subordinate to emotion a subject may often be lead to conflicting rational and emotive convictions possibly leading to paradigm shifts within individuals. This essay will further investigate how reason and emotion relates to justifying moral decisions under consideration of several, controversial knowledge issues.

Abortion is one of the most discussed moral decisions. Although this topic has been excessively discussed it does provide a valid example of how emotion and reason both contribute to the justification of a moral decision. When it comes to abortion an individual's ethical beliefs and morals are of substantial importance, whilst pondering whether a person is for or against abortion. Evidently religious based, pre-defined socio-cultural values, which provide a base of moral and ethical views may also be a major factor. When confronted and asked whether or not abortion should be legal the initial emotional reaction often causes a biased reasoning approach.

If the emotional reaction evokes empathy for the unborn infant than one will try to argue why abortion should be illegal. Extremists even go as far as calling an abortion

murder. However, one's emotional feeling might be the exact opposite and create empathy for the woman. Especially in extreme cases, if for instance, a woman is sexually abused and due to this act of savagery is impregnated, the resulting emotional reaction often causes sympathy for the unwilling mother. Due to this emotional feeling for the foetus or mother, the respective pro and contra abortion parties will try to reason on behalf of their emotions and try to "justify" them with logical and organised arguments. Pro-abortionists may argue that women have the right to *"privacy and bodily control must prevail over a foetus's right to life"*¹, especially in societies where women are treated equally like men. On the other hand, however, the contra-abortionists might argue *"While a woman has power over her body and can choose how she would like to use it, laws can restrict her control when it infringes on the rights of others."*²

Under pro-life ethics, where life itself is to be seen as the highest end, aborting a child would be unjustifiable. The life of a child would consequently be more important than the implications it might have on the lives around it. Conversely under utilitarianism a mother should not be denied the right to decide about life or death since a birth and raising a child could be seen as too much of a burden, lastly the "ends justify the means". In essence there are numerous ways how one might argue for or against abortion however this example gives a good idea on how emotions lead to reasoning.

Another relevant example in which emotion and reason are of significance is the nuclear power controversy. In this case the initial emotional reaction may be altered

¹ <http://www.enotes.com/abortion-controversy-article>

² <http://www.enotes.com/abortion-controversy-article>

due to reasoning of arguable irrational and sceptical fear. Critics claim that the risk of a nuclear contamination is too high and other less hazardous resources available it would be unnecessary to take such a risk. However, an article published by the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette claims that *“Sulfur dioxide and nitrogen oxides help form fine airborne particles and soot, which trigger asthma attacks and cause lung and heart disease linked to more than 20,000 premature deaths a year.”*³

Meaning that in the U.S. alone 20000 people die due to fossil fuel waste. Another article written by Alex Gabbard states that *“A coal power plant releases 100 times as much radiation as a nuclear power plant of the same wattage.”*⁴ Therefore it should be questionable whether one really should be afraid of nuclear power.

The connotations that, “nuclear” holds as a word today would almost unanimously be held as negative. Considering the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis⁵ it may well be open to question whether this connotation might shape our thoughts and irrational fears.

This fear (the emotional reaction) is catalysed through the knowledge that nuclear reactors can be used as weapons. This has become well known since the days of the Manhattan project because nuclear reactors were built for military purposes instead of power generating purposes. The “Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty”⁶ has countered this fear. The fear of DNA mutation due to radiation generated by nuclear power plants is unsubstantiated according to studies by the “National Cancer Institute”⁷. On the reasoning side, studies claim that there is no correlation between the cancer mortality and whether or not people live near nuclear power plants.

³ <http://www.post-gazette.com/pg/05180/529969.stm>

⁴ Alex Gabbard. Coal Combustion: Nuclear Resource or Danger. Oak Ridge National

⁵ Lee, Penny. "The Whorf Theory Complex - a Critical Reconstruction", John Benjamins, 1996.

⁶ Syed Hamid Albar, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Malaysia, United Nations (un.org), New York, 2 May 2005, The General Debate of the 2005 Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons

⁷ <http://www.cancer.gov/>

Regarding this topic, fear is the main initial emotion and especially ever since the incident in Chernobyl people are very sceptical when it comes to nuclear power. People often forget that old Soviet nuclear power plants cannot be compared to modern ones. This example shows how emotion can cloud a judgment and how an emotional feeling (fear in this case) can cause other individuals to reason. Furthermore, it shows how reason can sometimes justify a moral decision better than emotion.

The two ways of knowing, reason and emotion, both have a significant impact when it comes to justifying a moral decision. One might argue that emotion lies at the heart of any reasoning and therefore emotion is more fundamental to a “moral” based decision. At the essence of morality lies a subjective subject, since ethics itself is evidently a subjective discipline. Given that emotion is vital to a subject, or rather an individual it is clearly arguable that emotion forms the core of morality as a “mental state that arises automatically in the nervous system rather than through conscious effort, and evokes either a positive or negative psychological response”⁸. However, when it comes to “justifying” ones moral decisions, reason is of more importance than emotion. Since to “justify” is defined as “to be reasonable or provide adequate ground for”⁹. Hence, in order to make ones emotional feelings organised and liable to others they have to be reasonable and coherent, thus implying reason as an agent to “to find by logical processes”¹⁰ and to “justify... by argument”.¹¹

⁸ en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emotion

⁹ wordnet.princeton.edu/perl/webwn

¹⁰ <http://thinkexist.com/dictionary/meaning/reason/>

¹¹ <http://thinkexist.com/dictionary/meaning/reason/>

(1327 words)

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