The Majority View and Ethics

Shouldn’t the majority view determine moral values? After all, we live in a democracy. If citizens determine something is right, doesn’t that make it right?

Opinion polls are part of national news every day. Politicians follow them closely, but so do regular citizens. We may begin to believe that the majority view is the wisest, most informed view.

But if we examined a group constituting a majority and compared their individual thinking on an issue, we would probably find that the actual knowledge of the issue being discussed varied widely among individuals. Some would be well informed. Others would have some information, but not a complete understanding. Still others would know little about the issue but also probably be unaware of their ignorance.

In addition, we would find significant variations in the degree and quality of consideration given the facts. Some individuals would have read or listened to the views of authorities, evaluated each authority's position carefully, and weighed all possible interpretations of the facts. Others would have abandoned any efforts at inquiry and just assumed their own intuition is correct. Most individuals would probably have made some inquiry, but it would have been less than exhaustive.

Finally, there would be wide differences in the quality of judgment on the issue. Some would have judged it objectively and fairly, avoiding preconceptions and prejudices. Others would have been been ruled by pure emotion, unsullied by reason. Most would probably occupy a middle ground, in which thought and emotional reaction were intermingled to produce more or less objective conclusions.

A Test Case—Killing Enemy Civilians

How would these differences work in an actual ethical issue? Let’s look at the question “Is it wrong to kill enemy civilians in time of war?” We ask this question of a representative sample of the American public. Most respondents have answered “No” in some form. What variations in knowledge, inquiry, and judgment would the statistical results cover? What would have been the lines of reasoning of different respondents? Here are some possible responses:

Mr. Adams—“If the enemy started the war, then they are responsible and deserve no mercy, civilians and soldiers alike.”

Mrs. Bell—“It isn’t wrong if it helps shorten the war. By dropping the bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, we shortened World War II and saved the lives of both Americans and Japanese.”

Ms. Curtis—“It’s a complicated question and depends on the circumstances. The bombings of Hiroshima, Nagasaki, Dresden, and other cities was wrong in my opinion as they were civilian, not military targets. Their destruction was meant to demoralize the enemy and innocent civilians were killed by the thousands. No military goal justifies that. In a guerrilla war, the situation is different, as it is difficult to distinguish between friend and foe. Soldiers are often disguised as civilians. And civilians often perform military actions, such as bombings, sometimes against their will. In such a war, there are some circumstances where the killing of civilians is justified. For example, when a soldier is in doubt whether the civilian approaching him is armed and most choose to shoot or jeopardize his own or his comrades’ lives. Is it wrong to kill civilians? Not necessarily.

None of these responses is perfect, but Ms. Curtis’ is much more thoughtful and balanced than the other two. It shows a willingness to consider nuance and degrees of rightness in different types of wars. Finally, it recognizes that the individual soldier con-
fronted with a life or death decision that must be made instantly, without time for reflection.

In a statistical report, the thoughtfulness of Ms. Curtis’ response would be ignored. In fact, her response is “No,” the same as the other two individuals, even though their thinking is much more shallow.

The majority view is clearly less than perfect. If 51 percent of a group favors a position, it does not make it either thoughtful or right. Majority ignorance can be as common as majority wisdom. Majorities have supported outrageous deeds and practices in the past, including abandoning girl infants, allowing children to work in mines, or committing genocide. Until 1967, it was illegal in some southern states for racial intermarriage to take place.

If the majority view determines right and wrong, then slavery was not wrong when it was practiced in America until 1865. It was right as long as the majority accepted it and became wrong only when legislators, acting on behalf of the majority, passed the 13th Amendment. If the majority is right on moral issues, then the religious persecution that led many to flee to America were good, not evil actions. In fact, slavery and religious persecution would be no less immoral if every country in the world voted for them. There is more to right and wrong than a show of hands.

We must concede that in a democracy, the majority view is important. Legislators need to listen to constituents when passing laws which we have seen are based in ethics. But majority counsel is not necessarily the counsel of wisdom. And in a spirit of modesty, we must admit that later generations judge our views and laws as immoral, just as we have viewed certain prejudices and practices of the past as morally indefensible.

How then should we react to the views of majorities on ethical issues? We should give them careful consideration but resist the temptation to accept them uncritically. We should examine each issue for ourselves and adopt the most balanced, reasonable views. In some cases, that will be the majority view; in others, it will not.

**Inquiries**

1. Animal rights activists continue to lobby and demonstrate to outlaw the use of animals in laboratory experiments, particularly those in which the animals suffer extreme pain. Since a majority of Americans have supported the use of animals in lab experiments, at least implicitly by purchasing products and medicines developed with the use of these animals, could one argue that animal rights protests are unethical?

2. Environmentalists in Oregon have driven spikes into trees to prevent the lumber industry from harvesting them. If the trees are harvested, the spikes break the huge, expensive saws and sometimes injure the workers. Is the use of spikes by environmentalists unethical?

3. In 1971 a military court found Lt. William Calley guilty of the premeditated murder of 22 unarmed civilians in the Vietnamese village of My Lai and sentenced him to dismissal from the army, forfeiture of pay, and life imprisonment. A national poll revealed that 79 percent of the American public disapproved of the verdict and punishment. Were the verdict and punishment ethically justifiable?

4. Polls indicate that a majority of Americans favor outlawing the Communist party. Is it ethically valid in a democracy to outlaw any political party?

5. A 14-year-old girl visits a birth control clinic and asks to be put on the pill. Since she is a minor, the doctor notifies her parents, as this is the state law many places. Is his action ethical? Would it be different if she were 17 years old?

Based on *Thinking Critically About Moral Issues* by Vincent Ruggiero