Feelings and Ethics?

If the majority view does not determine the rightness of an action, should each person make moral decisions based on his or her own feelings, desires, preferences?

Individuality is highly prized today. In fact, to be like others is considered very undesirable to some who think of themselves as individualists. Even people who almost completely adopted the views and values of the majority or their immediate peer group manage to maintain the illusion that everything about them is unique. This preoccupation with individuality spills over into ethical positions. It is fashionable to believe that morality is subjective and personal—that no act is always and everywhere right or wrong. This in essence means that whatever a person believes to be right is **right for that person**, and what a person believes to be wrong is **wrong for that person**.

The next logical conclusion is that no one person’s view is preferable to another’s. One person’s sin might be another person’s sacred ritual. No one other than the individuals themselves has any right to pass judgment.

**Two Key Contributors to Feelings as an Ethical Guide**

Two individuals are especially important in the development of ethical relativism and are largely responsible for its emphasis on feelings rather than reasoned judgment. French philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau wrote in the 18th century: “What I feel is right, what I feel is wrong is wrong.” Children, in Rousseau’s view, were inherently good; the only corrupting influence is society which imposes artificial constraints.

In the 1970s an educational approach, values clarification, built on Rousseau’s foundation. It asserted that no universal, objective moral standard exists. The job of the educator is to encourage students to choose for themselves and then to affirm and support whatever they chose. The teacher’s role is to be completely nonjudgmental, withholding all criticism of student choices. In *Values and Teaching*, Louis Rath advises teachers that clarifying responses to moral or ethical questions is extremely important: “It avoids moralizing, criticizing, giving values, or evaluating. The adult excludes all hints of “good” or “right” or “acceptable in such responses.” Rath goes on to identify 30 clarifying responses teachers should use, including “Are you glad about that?,” “How did you feel when that happened?,” and “Is that very important to you?”

More influential than values clarification in education is the role of humanistic psychology, particularly the work of Carl Rogers. Rogers assigned feelings a central role in guiding behavior: “one of the basic things which I was a long time in realizing, and which I am still learning, is that when an activity feels as though it is valuable or worth doing, it is worth doing. Put another way, I have learned that my total sensing of a situation is more trustworthy than my intellect.”

Rogers’s goal in therapy was to persuade his clients not only to “listen to feelings which he has always denied and repressed,” including feelings that have seemed terrible or abnormal or shameful, but also to affirm those feelings. Rogers was convinced that the therapist should be totally accepting of whatever the client expressed and should show “an outgoing positive feeling without reservations, without evaluations.”

According to Rogers, the only question that matters for a healthy person is “Am I living in a way which is deeply satisfying to me, and which truly expresses me?” Pleasing others or meeting external, objective standards of behavior—such as the moral code of one’s society or religion—has no role in Rogers’s process.

Rogers’s impact on American thought has been profound. Rogers developed and implemented a plan to promote his
value-free, nonjudgmental, nondirective approach for both psychology and ethics. Several generations of psychologists, guidance counselors, social workers, and clergy workers were trained in Rogers’s method and counseled millions of people to follow their feelings.

Feelings have become the dominant ethical standard for many. As Allan Bloom concluded “Our desire is now the last word, while in the past it was the questionable and dangerous part of us.” Choice used to mean freedom to what we ought to do, what we had determined was right to do, Bloom continues, but “now, when we speak of the right to choice, we mean that there are no necessary consequences, that disapproval is only prejudice and guilt only a neurosis.”

Not all psychologists subscribe to the Rogerian approach. William Doherty, a professor of psychology, argues that “It is time for psychotherapists to stop trying to take people out of their moral sense… I don’t believe that all moral beliefs are created equal. The moral consensus of the world’s major religions around the Golden Rule—do unto others as you would have others do unto you—is a far better guide to moral living than the reflexive morality of self-interest in mainstream American society.”

Are Feelings Reliable?

Can feelings be trusted to guide human behavior? It is completely true that some feelings, desires, and preferences are admirable and excellent guides. Albert Schweitzer’s feelings of “reverence for life” led him to devote his life as a medical missionary in Africa over scholarly pursuits in Europe. Martin Luther King Jr.’s passion for justice led him to heroic leadership in the civil rights movement. Mother Teresa’s compassion for the world’s poor inspired a life of self-sacrificing service to others. And countless caring people around the world, who will never become well known, are moved by love of their neighbor to make the world a better place.

There is a dark side to feelings as well. Stalin killed 30 million Russians in the 1930s. Hitler wiped out several generations of Jews, Slavs, and other undesirables during his reign over the Third Reich. They were both following their feelings. Serial killers, such as Ted Bundy and Jeffrey Dahmer practiced murder and cannibalism to satisfy their desires.

If Rousseau and Rogers are correct in claiming that everything is a matter of personal preference and whatever feels good is good, then the concept of moral excellence is meaningless and Stalin, Hitler, Bundy and Dahmer should be considered moral equals of Schweitzer, King, and Mother Teresa. Furthermore, if Rousseau and Rogers are correct, there is no ethical basis for condemning genocide, murder, cannibalism, and child molestation. And without an ethical basis, the laws forbidding these deeds are no longer valid and the people that have been imprisoned for committing them should be released.

The Shortcomings of Feelings

In a bit of irony, to rely on one’s feelings as a guide for ethical decisions is to completely ignore other people’s feelings. Those who are acted against have feelings too and in the negative examples provided above, their feelings run counter to the feelings of those committing the actions. Few people enjoy being robbed, lied about, assaulted, or neglected in time of need. To say that we should be free to do as we wish without regard for others is to say that others should be free to do as they wish without regard for us.

Because our feelings, desires, and preferences can be either beneficial or harmful, noble or ignoble, praiseworthy or damnable, and because they can be either in harmony or in conflict with other people’s feelings, desires, and preferences, they obviously are not reliable criteria for analysis of moral issues or trustworthy guidelines for action. Feeling, desires, and preferences need to be evaluated and judged. They need to be measured against some impartial
standard that will reveal their quality. To make them the basis of our moral decisions is to ignore those needs and to accept them uncritically as the measure of their own worth.

Inquiries

1. A Little League baseball coach anticipates a poor season because he lacks a competent pitcher. Just before the season begins, a new family moves into his neighborhood. The coach discovers that one of the boys in the family is an excellent pitcher but that he is over the age limit for Little League participation. Because the family is not known in the area, the coach is sure he can use the boy without being discovered. He wants a winning season very much, both for himself and for the team. Is he morally justified in using the boy?

2. A man buys a house and later realizes he has paid too much money for it. In fact, he has been badly cheated. There is a bad leak in the cellar and through one wall, the furnace is not functioning properly, and the well is dry at certain times during the year. The cost of putting these things right will be prohibitive. He wants to "unload" the house as soon as possible, and he prefers to increase his chances of recovering his investment by concealing the truth about the house's condition. Is it right for him to do so?

3. For over half a century, a funeral home in Charlotte, North Carolina, displayed an embalmed human body in a glass showcase. The body was that of a carnival worker who was killed in a fight in 1911. The man's father, also a carnival worker, paid part of the funeral costs and asked the funeral home director to keep the body until he returned. Nothing more was heard from him. Thus the body, clad only in a loincloth, remained on display for sixty-one years. Public clamor finally resulted in its removal from public view. However, the funeral home director (the son of the original director) allegedly felt nothing was wrong in exhibiting the body, which he compared to a mummy in a museum. Is his feeling ethically sound?

4. A California businessman started a check-cashing service, operating out of a large commercial van. He charges customers 1 1/2 percent of the face value of the check for the service, and he has plenty of customers, mainly people on unemployment, welfare, social security, and disability, who lack the bank accounts and credit ratings necessary to cash their checks in a bank. His profit is estimated at almost $50,000 per year. He feels there is nothing unethical about his business. Do you agree?

5. In Mineola, New York, a police officer allegedly posed as a clinical psychologist during his off-duty hours and made phone calls to numerous women inquiring about their sex lives. Presumably, he felt that his desire to adopt the pose and make the calls was sufficient to justify his doing so. Do you agree with him?

6. A 16-year-old girl and her father were arrested in Panama City, Florida, for allegedly trying to sell the girl's unborn baby for a ten-year-old car and $500. Although selling babies is against the law, the two felt they had the moral right to do so. Is their feeling morally defensible?

Based on Thinking Critically About Moral Issues by Vincent Ruggiero