

Emotions & Moral Knowledge: A Plausible Christian Perspective

Most of us are familiar with the Biblical story of how Israel conquered the Holy Land in the days of Joshua whereby God commanded the Israelites to kill many men, women and children in order to establish His people in the land (Joshua 2-12 ESV). These timeless stories often bewilder modern readers and evoke powerful emotions of sadness toward the loss of life, fear and anger at a God who could command such a thing and an indignant attitude of disgust towards the Israelite invaders and anyone else who could possibly defend such narratives morally. In short, most of us, even Bible-believing Christians, “feel” that these Biblical pericopes contain deeply immoral teachings. This instance of emotions pertaining to a moral situation is hardly unique to Bible stories as it is very common for morally relevant situations to evoke various emotional experiences within us. An obvious question arises here; what possible role could emotions play when they are the primary sources for how we come to know moral truths?

Our emotions are powerful phenomenological sensations that aid us in various ways and perform a variety of functions. With respect to our ability to know “objective” moral truths, emotions seem to primarily serve as affective availability heuristics for when we lack the proper time or information necessary to engage in more reflective moral reasoning. In this way, when confronted with a moral situation requiring instant judgement, emotions serve to make us aware of the applicability of one or more moral values and principles and indicate whether the “moral ideal” has been upheld or not thereby prompting the formation of a proper moral evaluative judgement within us. More importantly, while it is true that emotional moral heuristics are attuned to respond to moral values and principles, they do not seem “designed” to adjudicate on the actual morality vs. immorality of certain complex or nuanced moral dilemmas involving conflicts within the moral hierarchy. Thus, any attempt to cultivate our emotions to function as reliable assessors of complicated moral dilemmas would constitute an overextension of their usefulness and thereby be more likely to result in emotional recalcitrance and/or false moral beliefs.

1. Understanding Our Emotions

Our first task in trying to understand the role that emotions might play within moral epistemology is to better understand the nature of emotions and which of their inherent qualities might be relevant to the moral epistemology. Philosophers of emotion have typically focused on three fundamental issues

pertaining to our emotional experiences, these include the phenomenology, intentionality and epistemology of emotions (Deonna and Teroni, p.1). The phenomenology of emotions refers to the “felt” sensation of our emotions, the “what it is like to feel” aspect of anger or sadness or happiness; typically, the phenomenological aspects of emotion serve to focus our attention and motivate us in some way (Deonna and Teroni, p.1-2; Brady, p.140). One of the main phenomenological features of our emotions is that they exhibit “automaticity” in the sense that we are passive with regard to their occurrence and they are not directly subject to our will (Tappolet, p.207). In this light, emotions often arise very quickly and do not require burdensome drawing upon conceptual resources, instead our emotional representations and outputs tend to be non-conceptual in nature (Tappolet, p.211-212; Sziget, p.853).

Another major phenomenological feature of our emotions is their “polarity”, otherwise referred to as the issue of emotional “valence” in scholarly philosophical and psychological parlance. A hedonic perspective cashes out the valence of emotion in terms of the “felt quality” of a given emotion as being either “positive” or “negative” (Deonna and Teroni, p.14-16). While there may be some exceptions¹, we typically classify emotions like joy, admiration, pride, etc. as being “positive” phenomenological experiences, whereas emotions like sadness, shame and indignation are thought to be more “negative” kinds of sensations (Deonna and Teroni, p.14).

Shifting the focus away from phenomenology, emotions are also inherently “intentional”; that is to say that they are “object-directed” or are “about” other objects outside of themselves.² For example, consider the cases of someone being scared of the growling bear in front of them or angry at their pet dog for spilling their water dish on the floor (Scarantino and De Souza). In this sense emotions are said to be directed at objects in the world (i.e. they have a “mind to world” direction of fit) (Deonna and Teroni, p.3-6). What’s more, emotions seem to have a wide intentional scope in that they can be directed toward various types of “objects” (often simultaneously³) as our emotions are dependent upon and derive from the information provided by their various “cognitive bases”. It is the cognitive bases that link our emotions to their intentional objects such as in the case of nostalgia depending on the

¹ Many philosophers of emotion point to the emotion of “surprise” as a case in point for example.

² Note that there is some nuance here in that “object tracking” is not necessarily the same as “representation” so the “ofness” or “aboutness” of intentionality is different than the mere tracking of object directedness. The former is the main intentionality aspect that applies to our thesis.

³ For example, the “formal object” of fear is the property of “dangerousness” whereas the particular “target” object may be a growling bear to which “dangerousness” has been ascribed. See other possible “object” distinctions in Scarantino and De Souza, 2018.

cognitive base of our memories of the past or happiness depending on the cognitive base of our belief in an afterlife (Deonna and Teroni, p.5).

A final feature of our emotions that will be relevant to moral epistemology is the intimate connection between emotions and evaluative judgements. At one time, the predominant theory as to what emotions were, was known as *Judgementalism*, the view that emotions just were identical to the phenomenological manifestation of actual propositional evaluative judgements or beliefs. While there are still a few philosophers of emotion who hold to modified versions of this view, such as Jerome Neu and Martha Nussbaum, the vast majority of philosophers have come to reject the Judgementalist perspective whilst still affirming the intimate association between emotion and evaluative judgements; instead, most see emotions as non-doxastic (i.e., non-belief-like) experiences of value that help to inform our judgments. (Scarantino and De Souza). One of the main reasons for this near universal rejection is due in large part to another fundamental aspect of our emotional experience; recalcitrance. Recalcitrant emotions are emotions that conflict with our evaluative judgments on a given matter, so for example, one may judge and therefore believe that a given spider is too small to be harmful to humans and is thus not dangerous, while at the same time still being intensely afraid of it (Tappolet, p.208-210).

2. Metaethics & The Nature of Moral Truths

The next task in establishing the central thesis of this paper, is to gain some understanding about the nature of moral truths themselves before trying to explain how emotions might relate to them. In the first place, some ethicists have adopted a *Non-Cognitivist* position, denying that moral statements are capable of being true or false; for them there are simply no such things as “moral truths” to being with (Moreland & Craig, p.417). Without getting side-tracked on assessing the arguments for and against the various metaethical positions, suffice it to say that the more likely theory, on Christian Theism, is that of *Cognitivism*. Cognitivism holds that moral statements are in fact indicative statements conveying descriptive factual information that can be either true or false (Moreland & Craig, p.419). What’s more, on this view, moral truths are best understood as being “objective” in nature⁴, thus allowing us to assign moral value to an object or state of affairs entirely independent of any individual or culture’s own subjective preferences (Moreland & Craig, p.419; 434; 500-505).

⁴ Typically, Christian Theists tend to think that these “objective moral truths” are grounded in God’s necessarily morally perfect nature.

Looking a little closer at the nature of these moral truths reveals that they have some key discernable features which will be relevant to the central thesis of this paper.⁵ The first criterion that helps us to identify and define moral truths is that they involve *prescriptive imperatives*⁶ recommending actions, attitudes and motives rather than a mere factual description of such (e.g. one *ought* to do something vs. one *is* doing something) (Moreland & Craig, p. 414-415). Secondly, moral truths are *universalizable* in that they hold true and apply equally to all morally relevant similar situations; they cannot be both be true and false or arbitrarily applied in situations where the morally relevant facts are sufficiently similar (Moreland & Craig, p.415).⁷

Given these criteria, it would seem that a plausible theory on the nature of moral truths would include some kind of Deontological moral rules of some kind. Moral truths then, involve “objective” moral rules that serve as prescriptive imperatives about proper actions, attitudes and motives that are universally true in all morally relevant similar situations. Such moral truths can come in two varieties, generalized higher moral values or principles and specific or contingent moral duties which derive from and are consistent with the higher moral values or principles. To illustrate, many philosophers believe that there is a *Principle of Life Preservation* where a human or sentient being’s life is of such intrinsic value that, in general, one ought to preserve and protect all such life whenever possible; this represents the moral ideal (Moreland & Craig, p.436). As such, the preserving of a human life is morally ideal in that it upholds this moral principle whereas the taking of a human life is immoral in so far as it violates the moral principle.

However, it is important to note that this general moral truth (i.e. the Principle of Life Preservation) applies universally in a qualified sense, namely provided there are no morally relevant differences or contingencies in a specific situation which allow for a morally justified exemption to that principle. For example, having to kill someone during a “just war” or in self-defense are cases where the moral ideal is not maintained (someone’s life has not been preserved), but yet no immoral violation of the moral principle occurs due to the presence of a morally justified exemption. Consequently one might feel

⁵ Though, according to Particularism, one need not establish a complete set of necessary and sufficient conditions before one can know clear cases of a given thing, nevertheless, on the basis of some of the clearer cases of moral truths that we can and do know about, we can discern at least some of the distinctive criteria that help us to identify and understand them.

⁶ Most Christian Theists would argue that such prescriptions are more in tune with Immanuel Kant’s notion of a “Categorical imperative” as opposed to a mere “Hypothetical imperative”.

⁷ There are other conditions that ethicists have developed pertaining to the nature of moral truths, for example they must involve or pertain to at least one or more moral agents and/or they must reference proper human well-being and flourishing, however these criteria are not directly relevant to the central thesis of this paper.

emotionally guilty as it is true that the “moral ideal” of preserving all human life has not been maintained, but yet in reality they would not be considered immoral for doing so because there was a justified exemption of the relevant moral principle which thereby prevented an actual violation of that principle.⁸ Having now briefly established a plausible Christian notion of the nature of moral truths, the next section will turn to the subject of moral epistemology and lay out a plausible thesis as to the specific role that emotions might play in our coming to know these moral truths.

3. Moral Epistemology: Emotions as Moral Heuristics

The philosopher András Szígeti has persuasively argued that emotions function as *sui generis* affective availability heuristics with respect to normative values (aesthetic, moral, epistemic, etc.). Heuristics are essentially epistemic procedures that generate “fast and frugal” reasons for factual or evaluative beliefs and they work by substituting a “target attribute” for a “heuristic attribute” (i.e. an attribute which is easier to process when time and information are scarce). Providing a sort of “heuristics-heuristic”, Szígeti defines heuristics as, “*mental short cuts or rules of thumb... we are dealing with a heuristic whenever a difficult question is answered by substituting an answer to an easier one* (Szígeti, p.847-848).

Reasoning by analogy, one can readily see that emotions, like heuristics, are often fast, automatic and frugal. What’s more, Szígeti lays out a powerful case for the plausibility of associating emotions with heuristics based on various lines of empirical evidence. Among the more persuasive of these evidences are cases where our emotions function as moral heuristics via cases in experimental psychology.

Emotions have been readily demonstrated to affect our reasoning abilities and most people often rely directly on their emotions for information and evaluative cues when making instant moral judgements and decisions (Szígeti, p.849).⁹ Furthermore, evolutionary accounts of the adaptive value of emotions show that they often “*provide quick-and-ready salient evaluative cues in **standard situations** [emphasis mine] when there is no time or no (perceived) need to undertake a more detailed cognitive assessment... also these [same] evolutionary accounts [also] appear to converge with the heuristics-model as to what emotions cannot do for us.*” (Szígeti, p.851). The evidence showing that phylogenetic history has hard-wired basic emotional propensities into humans illustrates why emotions serving as heuristics makes

⁸ It is important to note that over-riding morally justified exemptions are not the same as exceptions and so the higher moral value or principle still *universally* applies to the situation even if it is over-ridden in a specific instance (Moreland & Craig, p.436).

⁹ For example, people’s views on the appropriate severity of punishment for wrongdoing is governed by a so-called “outrage heuristic” dictating that penalties should be a proportional response to the felt *outrageousness* of the act. Likewise, it’s plausible to assume that future research may also demonstrate how a “shame heuristic” or “blame heuristic” similarly impacts on people’s moral judgments of shamefulness or blameworthiness.

sense in that a basic emotion like instantly feeling fear at the sense of a snake wriggling around at our feet aids our survival in that we immediately jump away from the perceived danger. At the same time however, such emotional cues do not seem to be able to distinguish between the harmless garden snake and a deadly cobra without the need to involve more reflective cognitive assessment.

Having established that emotions plausibly function as heuristics of value (at least in certain circumstances), one might ask how exactly it is that they allow us to come to know moral truths in particular. The first and perhaps most important aspect of our proposal for how moral epistemology works with regards to emotions, is to focus on their intentionality or “mind-to-world” directedness and ask what is it that our emotions are directed towards or “latch onto” within a moral context (beyond the sensory perceptions of the given situation itself)? In Section 2, we argued that many Christian Theists have plausibly argued that objective moral truths are constituted by two fundamental types; i) Generalized moral values or principles and, ii) Derivative moral duties specific to contingent moral situations. I propose that when we encounter a given moral situation and we lack the necessary time and resources to properly deliberate on it, our emotions “track” the higher moral values and principles rather than the specific moral duties that derive from those values and principles. Before moving on, just to clarify, I’m not saying that our emotions directly “track” the moral principles themselves, rather our emotions indirectly track their applicability by being attuned to our moral consciences- the faculty which directly tracks the moral values/principles and their applicability or non-applicability in a given situation. As such, our emotions are salient and serve to focus our attention to the fact that one or more of these moral values or principles applies to the given situation by tracking the moral consciences’ immediate responses to it.¹⁰ Furthermore, through emotional “polarity” (i.e. valence), our emotions can be used heuristically to suggest that the “moral ideal” (i.e. the equal upholding of all moral values and principles without exemption) has either been upheld in a situation (via a “positive” emotion) or the moral ideal has not been upheld in a situation (via a “negative” emotion).

The activation of the appropriate affective emotion then focuses our attention and incites our cognitive faculties to produce a corresponding properly basic belief (a belief that is not derived from any prior beliefs) regarding the moral situation which is sufficiently warranted by virtue of its immediate independent warrant (independently of any derivative warrant). In this way, we propose that one can

¹⁰ The response in this case being in the form of “value intuitions” or a “evaluative sense” which will be discussed further below.


gain at least two properly basic beliefs; i) that one or more moral values or principles apply to a given moral situation and, ii) that the “moral ideal” has or has not been upheld in a given situation. Thus, one is then motivated toward some sort of moral duty and/or state of moral “action-readiness”.


However, it is apparent from our take on the internal mechanisms involved with how emotional moral heuristics work, that our emotions are too blunt a tool to discern between the two types of non-morally ideal situation; they don’t seem able to distinguish between an actual violation of a moral value or principle and a mere justifiable exemption of such. For this reason, I suggest that emotional moral heuristics can induce reliable beliefs regarding moral duties with respect to simple moral situations, but one cannot rely on them with respect to complex or nuanced moral dilemmas involving two or more conflicting moral values or principles within the moral hierarchy (Moreland & Craig, p.466-467).¹¹

Szigeti reinforces my own notion of the moral inadequacy of emotions by stating that affective heuristics typically tend to break down when they are applied to in these kinds of “hard cases” (Szigeti, p.856-859). Using the infamous “Sophie’s Choice” moral dilemma to illustrate the inadequacy of emotions in such contexts, Szigeti explains that this example posits Sophie receiving a command from a Nazi soldier to choose between her two children as to which one should be shot and killed, otherwise both will be killed. Sophie then chooses one of her children so that only one child is killed. Upon reflection, Sophie may indeed form the proper moral judgment that she has not behaved immorally in her unfortunate yet unavoidable situation (as she has not actually violated a moral principle), yet many of us would still expect Sophie to feel emotionally “guilty” because her emotions would respond to the broadly “non-morally ideal” nature of having one of her children killed based on her “choice” (Szigeti, p.857). In this case, our proposal about the inherent limitations of the moral heuristics model of emotions can plausibly account for Sophie’s emotional recalcitrance due to the affective heuristic remaining active despite its irrelevance and/or inadequacy with respect to the given moral situation; in other words, the recalcitrant feeling of “guilt” results from an overgeneralized (or rather overextended) heuristic failing to perform properly within the limits of its customary environment (Szigeti, p.855).

The reason why our emotions become irrelevant or inadequate here is in large part due to the inherent limits of how availability heuristics work, namely via the mechanism of attribute substitution. In

¹¹ Of course, this isn’t to say that our emotions would never deliver true information about such moral situations, after all even a broken clock is right twice a day, rather the claim is that our emotions are not generally reliable when serving as moral heuristics.

Sophie's case, the proper "target attribute" (such as there being an actual violation vs. upholding of a given moral value or principle) is "swapped out" for a "heuristic attribute" that is easier for her to process (such as the non-moral idealness or apparent *prima facie* violation vs. upholding of a moral value or principle). As such, emotional moral heuristics do not seem to penetrate deep enough, in isolation, to make us cognizant of any justifiable exemptions to the relevant moral principles that may be applicable in a given situation. 


Remembering that emotions are derived from their associated *cognitive bases*, it must be admitted that emotions can and often do arise as a reaction to fully developed cognitive moral evaluations and judgements made upon deep reflection and deliberation. However, in this paper we are only concerned with situations where the emotions are function as moral heuristics and serve as the primary source for our true moral beliefs¹², which we have seen, only occurs when the necessary time or information to make proper reflective judgements is insufficient. Therefore, we must ask an additional question, when emotions function as moral heuristics, what is it that is serving as their cognitive base if not a proper moral evaluative judgement? Some philosophers have proposed a less intellectually demanding type of evaluative cognition called a "value intuition" which might serve as a relevant cognitive base for our emotions. Following the lead of many eminent philosophers of emotion, we posit that one can simply "intuit" or "sense" that a given evaluative property (e.g. the applicability of moral values or principles and the moral idealness or lack thereof) pertains to a moral situation (Deonna & Teroni, p.94-95). 

3.1 Why Limit the Scope of Emotional Moral Heuristics to "Moral Idealness" Only?

On the face of it, the proposed inherent limitation as to what sorts of beliefs correspond to our emotions (when serving as moral heuristics at least) may seem obvious to most philosophers of emotion; after all, emotions just are non-doxastic *experiences of values* and so it should come as no surprise that they would only relate to truths of that nature via the higher moral principles and values themselves rather than to the specific moral duties that derive from those higher values. That said, there may be some question as to why one should think the reliability of emotional moral heuristics

¹² Note that such beliefs would be more likely to take the form of properly basic beliefs grounded in our emotional experiences rather than beliefs logically inferred from the emotion through reflective reasoning. Although it is of course, plausible that multiple beliefs can arise chronologically simultaneously such as a derivative belief about one's moral duty in a given situation arising at the same time one's emotions induce a properly basic belief that the moral ideal is or is not being upheld and serves as the foundation for the derivative belief.

would be inherently limited to assessing overall moral idealness vs. non-idealness instead of penetrating deeper into the actual morality vs. immorality of a situation through a moral principle/value violation vs. justified exemption distinction.

 In this respect, Christian Theism posits that Adam and Eve were created in what theologians call the “state of integrity” and thus, in such a state, humans weren’t meant to be privy to complex moral dilemmas or situations that entailed multiple conflicting moral principles or values in the first place. This original scenario in which our emotions were “designed” by God reflects the insights of Immanuel Kant who held to an “unqualified moral absolutism” whereby it is possible for humans to uphold all moral maxims (i.e. principles/values) equally without worry of conflict with other moral maxims or principles (Moreland & Craig, p.467). Given the Biblical teaching and Kant’s own musings on the possibility for an “unqualified moral absolutism”, it is therefore plausible to think that originally our emotions were designed to function within an environment more along the lines that Kant envisions (where it is possible to uphold the moral ideal at all times in every situation one encounters) and hence emotions that were limited in this way would be entirely sufficient for humans to know all moral truths or facts via their emotional moral heuristics alone in such an ideal environment. Of course, after the Biblical account of the “Fall of Man” where Adam and Eve freely committed “Original Sin”, we no longer live in an ideal environment (morally or otherwise as all of creation was said to be “cursed” as result of this fateful “choice”) and as such contra Kant, most philosophers think that we now encounter moral dilemmas or nuanced situations where it simply isn’t possible to uphold all moral principles and values equally. The kind of environment we now inhabit inevitably entails the need to adopt a “conflicting moral absolutism” position, where one is often compelled adopt a “lesser of two evils” approach to many of the nuanced moral situations that we encounter (Moreland & Craig, p.467). This Biblical line of reasoning about the inherent limitations of our emotions’ design in relation to moral truths seems to correspond with and has good explanatory power and scope in explaining the secular data showing that emotional heuristics often break down and result in recalcitrant emotions and/or false beliefs when applied to complex moral dilemmas (Szigeti, p.857-858).

3.2 The Possibility of Emotional Moral Refinement

A possible objection that may be lodged against the seemingly simplistic model of emotional moral heuristics given above, may stem from the fact that humans undergo emotional development over time. Many philosophers of emotion have noted that one's emotional depth and understanding often becomes more refined or nuanced as one grows older. As such, it may be possible to argue that as one hones their moral character to be increasingly virtuous and learns to deepen their emotional capacities, perhaps it may be possible to develop the ability to adjudicate directly on the morality or immorality of complex moral dilemmas via emotional moral heuristics; to go beyond the original divine design plan as it were.

Admittedly, I entirely concur that emotional and moral refinement can and does happen. Often times we feel anger and indignation towards a given criminal who stole our wallets, but as we grow and learn, we begin to see some more nuance toward that person and consequently we may grow to feel other emotions such as sympathy or sadness on their behalf if we focus on differing aspects of a moral situation. Sometimes this occurs when we become privy to more information about how the criminal grew up in an abusive home or was fired and needed money to feed his family, etc. So, it is undeniably true that, as we mature and gain more morally relevant information, our emotional reactions to a given situation may change and become more nuanced. That said, the newer morally-nuanced emotions do not necessarily negate the earlier less-nuanced emotions that we felt at the moment we were robbed, one will always be right to feel anger towards the non-morally ideal situation of one's hard-earned money being stolen; no amount of new information or emotional nuance will ever change our knowledge of this moral truth. Likewise, it may also be the case that through experience and emotional honing, one is able to expand one's background knowledge and thereby apply it to new yet morally similar situations. Hence, one's emotional faculties can be cultivated or refined in such a way as to automatically experience more appropriately nuanced emotions heuristically without the same need to have the time or information to develop that nuance over time (for example perhaps my anger is appropriately diminished in intensity until I learn the circumstances surrounding the thief stealing my wallet). This kind of refinement is not problematic for our proposal as all one would need argue is that in such cases our emotional moral heuristics are set up to immediately draw upon additional cognitive bases like memories and background information when confronted with sufficiently similar complicated moral situations. In this way, the development of our emotional and moral faculties to be more in tune with that of a "virtuous person" will only ever play a qualifying role with respect to the moral knowledge



we gain through our emotions, generally speaking it will never flatly contradict the moral insights they've provided to us previously about a situation.

A final point to mention is that, given the inherently limited scope or “design-plan” of our emotions when functioning as moral heuristics, it is not possible to “develop” our emotional capacities to the point where emotions alone can adjudicate between the justified exemption of a moral principle and an immoral violation of such when confronted with a complex or nuanced moral dilemma. Consequently, trying to cultivate one's emotions to serve as moral heuristics on questions of morality vs. immorality (proper) will always be a gross misuse of our affective faculties; one should be wary about overextending one's emotions in this way as it has often led to overly hasty and/or erroneous moral judgements. Relying on our emotions to induce true moral beliefs in relatively simple moral situations may provide some reliable moral knowledge, but when confronted with increasingly more complicated moral dilemmas, it seems best to be cautious about making moral decisions solely on the basis of one's unreliable emotional responses.

4. The Emotional Moral Heuristics Model & Warrant

In the philosophy of emotions literature much has been made of the reliability of our emotions to provide one with true beliefs, however it is the concept of *warrant* as defined by Alvin Plantinga that I think provides us with the best path forward to understanding how emotions serving as moral heuristics might relate to moral knowledge. The culmination of Plantinga's trilogy of books on the nature of “warrant” is that “knowledge” can be defined as a “warranted true belief” (Plantinga, p.153). He persuasively argues that it is “warrant” that denotes the further quality which distinguishes actual knowledge from mere true belief. According to Plantinga, a belief is said to *warranted*, when that belief is produced by a set of faculties functioning properly (subject to no dysfunction) in a suitable environment appropriate for those kinds of faculties, where such faculties operate according to a design plan that is successfully aimed at truth (Plantinga, p.156).

Our central thesis is concerned with providing a plausible Christian proposal as to how we might gain knowledge of moral truths when our emotions are the primary source of warrant. As such it is important to note that studies have found that heuristics in general are indeed reliable indicators of truth, in fact “*it has been found that in certain situations heuristics can [in some cases] significantly*

outperform reflective thinking" (Szigeti, p.854). Furthermore, in some cases affective heuristics have likewise been demonstrated to "serve one well" in being reliable indicators of truth, some have even argued that emotions are "*statistically more likely to be correct than evaluative beliefs*" (Szigeti, p.846). However, the relevant issue at hand is what relationship emotions, as affective availability heuristics, might have with respect to reliability and warrant within a moral context specifically.

Traditionally, Christian philosophers have posited the existence of a special God-designed faculty called a moral conscience to account for how human beings are able to apprehend and form beliefs about objective moral truths. This moral belief producing faculty is, under ideal conditions, "designed" to operate in accordance with our other cognitive, sense and affective faculties.¹³ Thus, when our moral consciences form an initial moral *value intuition* and thereby triggers an emotional response, it is only then that our cognitive and moral faculties operate upon that emotional moral heuristic to form a properly basic moral judgement or belief. At face value then, given the importance of humans being able to apprehend and know moral truths, it is wholly plausible to suppose that God, as an omnipotent and omniscient Designer, would have "designed" our emotion-producing faculties and moral consciences to work in harmony with each other. Hence such faculties would be expected to be successfully aimed at producing true moral beliefs. Likewise, under ideal conditions, it is eminently plausible that all the conditions for warrant, as laid out by Plantinga, could reasonably be expected to obtain.

At this point, one might think the case for plausibility is closed, given the initial assumption of Christian Theism and the inherent plausibility of a Being like God, as the necessary grounding for all moral truths who both created and designed our faculties to be in tune with those moral truths, of course Plantinga's conditions for warrant would be fulfilled under such ideal conditions.

Unfortunately, the fact of the matter is, that we don't live under ideal conditions, our emotional, moral, cognitive and sense faculties are all sometimes found wanting in various respects and the beliefs produced by such faculties sometimes turn out to be unwarranted and false. Our emotions and moral intuitions are very clearly not infallible, and as such, the real question to ask is whether or not these belief-producing faculties are *generally reliable*. On this front, there are at least a couple of key objections that might suggest our proposal may be implausible.

¹³ Note that some philosophers like Drs. Hutcheson and Shaftesbury think the moral sense or conscience is itself an affective faculty, however regardless of whether our moral consciences be affective or not, they are clearly meant to interact with other faculties, both affective and cognitive (such as our emotions).

The Appeal to Emotion Objection: An obvious reason to deny that emotions provide us with warranted moral knowledge is based on the fact that they can often be subject to malfunction. Drs. Deonna and Teroni mention various intersecting motivational states such as moods and temperaments, character traits, sentiments and desires that can have a “distorting effect” on one’s emotional life (Deonna & Teroni, p.105-113). In such cases, the affective faculties responsible for producing our emotions seem to be malfunctioning or misaligned with respect to how they interconnect to the other cognitive and affective faculties involved in forming true moral beliefs.

It is for this reason that the ancient Stoics thought of emotions as being nothing more than “false judgements” and that many logicians today claim that any *appeal to emotion* is nothing more than logically fallacious reasoning. Emotions don’t seem to be regarded as “relevant reasons” to think something is true and thus, how could beliefs derived solely on the basis of an emotional response to a moral situation provide one with knowledge of a moral truth; such a notion would seem to be *prima facie* highly implausible.

By way of retort, it must be clarified that the appeal to emotion fallacy is not universal, but instead only applies when emotional experiences are not “designed” to serve as relevant reasons for a given belief; thus, the relevancy of emotions to serve as reasons is largely context-dependent. For example, when trying to decide whether or not climate change presents us with a real threat, one’s emotions would seem to be totally irrelevant to the truth or falsity of such a proposition and thus any appeal to emotions in this context would be logically fallacious. On the other hand, if someone believes that taking a new career opportunity is the right move to make and they appeal to an improvement in their emotional state as a reason why they think this is the case, then such a context is “emotionally charged” to begin with so to speak to begin with.

Given Christian Theism and the powerful motivational role that emotions play, it seems entirely plausible that our God-designed emotional faculties would be relevant indicators of truth when confronted with a moral situation where an insufficient amount of time or informational resources are available and we are forced to make quick moral decisions. What’s more, so long as one is reasonably sure that no distorting motivational states are unduly interfering with one’s emotional experiences in a given instance, then one could plausibly infer that their emotions are indeed serving as reliable moral heuristics when confronted with particular moral situations where such would be relevant.

The Unsuitable Environment Objection: Some might argue that moral contexts are not “suitable environments” for our emotional faculties. In assessing this claim, we need to take note of Plantinga’s distinction between a *maxienviornment* (a generally suitable cognitive or faculty environment based on the relevant “macro-features”) and a *minienvironment* (a particular environment that may or may not be suitable or favourable for specific exercises of our faculties, even if such are functioning properly) (Plantinga, p.158-161). On the assumption of Christian Theism, our emotions were designed to serve as moral heuristics in certain moral situations under ideal conditions, however as we’ve mentioned above, we don’t actually live in an ideal world where all moral values and principles are able to be upheld without conflict in the moral hierarchy. Unfortunately, as was alluded to above, traditional Christianity posits that we now live in a “Fallen” world (see Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden in Genesis 1-3); a world where we sometimes encounter moral dilemmas entailing conflicts between two or more moral values and principles that apply to a situation. It is readily apparent that we are often compelled to choose the “lesser of two evils” so to speak.

Within a “Fallen minienvironment”, whenever the need for a moral heuristic emerges, emotions don’t seem to serve as reliable indicators in relation to knowing our specific moral duties equally in all moral situations. Consequently, this is why flagrant errors seem to be so widespread when our emotions are applied to complex moral situations as their outputs are overgeneralized and/or overextended in such moral contexts. That said, this is not to deny the fact that statistically emotions do seem to be reliable indicators of truth when it comes to furnishing us with generalized beliefs that one or more moral principles apply to a given situation (though as to whether they reliably allow us to discern which specific moral values or principles are applicable is less certain) and further they tend to reliably indicate whether the moral ideal is being upheld vs. not upheld via phenomenological emotional polarity.

Hence, so long as we are mindful of our “Fallen” minienvironment and the inherent limitations of the scope of our emotional, cognitive and moral faculties within such a minienvironment, then any objections about the unsuitability of our emotions in the moral environment can be plausibly answered.

5. Putting Everything in Perspective

To conclude, I would like to bring us around full circle, we started this paper by mentioning some of the Biblical examples of people being commanded by God to take the lives of human beings for certain providential reasons. The fact that most of us experience emotional reactions of disgust, horror,

indignance, etc. with respect to such stories raised the question of what role emotions might play with respect to moral knowledge. We discovered that it's plausible to suppose that emotions serve as moral availability heuristics when an insufficient amount of time or information is available to properly reflect and engage in deliberative moral reasoning. Further, we held that beliefs grounded in emotional moral heuristics are warranted only in so far that they track "value intuitions" pertaining to the applicability of generalized moral values or principles. Thus, emotional moral heuristics would seem only to be broadly reliable with respect to telling us whether a situation is morally ideal or not; they are not "designed" to provide us with reliable knowledge on the morality vs. immorality (proper) of all given moral situations especially when such are nuanced or complicated moral dilemmas

The plausibility of such a proposal is best illustrated by using a real-world example; namely our immediate emotional responses to infamous Biblical "Divine-Sanctioned Killing" narratives as highlighted by the many skeptics. Christians who have defended the morality of such texts have often incurred the wrath of skeptics who claim that such events were deeply immoral solely on the basis of their emotional reaction to what they see as repugnant. When the Christian defends such passages, they in turn often appeal to deliberative moral reasoning such as assessing the situation in light of the three main sources of moral disagreement (factual differences, differences on the applicability and nature of a moral value or principle, and differences in the moral hierarchy where one conflicting moral principle must take precedence over another) to rationally think through the moral dilemma (see an application of this line of reasoning applied to the Genesis 22 story of Abraham's willingness to obey God's command to sacrifice his own son Isaac in Glover, 56:00-1:22:17).

Upon ironing out all the details, the Christian conclusion is often to say that, given one has sufficient knowledge that a *morally perfect* God did in fact give the command to kill, then it is a mere tautology to say that such Biblical events were morally justified. Yet many, even after conceding the logical reasoning of the Christian on this front, will still "feel" that killing in the name of God was somehow wrong.

In this instance, we are immediately confronted by our emotions telling us that various moral values and principles do indeed apply to these situations and via their generally "negative" valence we conclude that this whole affair does not represent the moral ideal being upheld; it *appears* there is a violation to one or more such principles. However, upon serious moral reflection we can come to a more accurate and deeper moral appraisal of the situation in realizing that such a dilemma involves two or more conflicting moral principles where moral deliberation helps us to recognize that there is a morally justified exemption to the *Principle of Life Preservation* in these Biblical cases. With no provable

violation of a moral principle, it then follows that nothing immoral obtains. This model explains why even the most devout of Christians feel recalcitrant emotions toward such Biblical stories and further it allows us to understand why so many come to false moral beliefs about the alleged immorality of such accounts via the overextension of these moral heuristics. Whether you buy that this scenario or not, the practical Biblical example definitely shows the plausibility of our proposal.

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