Name

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Discussion

Emotions play an important role in ethics and morality. Philosophers have long observed that ethics and morals are the derivations of emotions. Two great moral philosophers who wrote on this were David Hume and Adam Smith. In particular, they suggest that the ability to empathize with others is the source for many of the ethical principles. Recent research provides strong evidence that the “moral sentiments” are part of human nature and the result of millions of years of evolution. We, human, are born with a sense of fairness and other feelings that lead to ethical principles. Jonathon Haidt has shown that there are fundamental moral sentiments among all people regardless of culture. The innate sense of right and wrong has served humans well as a species and we have come to dominate the earth.

The problem is that what worked for humans in pre-history and early civilization does not always work in a contemporary global society. Much human progress over the last several millennia has entailed building cultures and political systems to put constraints to the emotions. People cannot rely too much on their feelings to guide their moral behavior. An individual’s personal code of ethics — those rules that each of us use to guide how we live — is important, however, those ethics need a solid grounding. There is danger in basing them just on how people feel or what is best for them individually. Developing the groundwork that allows people to have a personal code of ethics that works for them and their fellow humans are what philosophy is all about.

The emotions play a pivotal role in most of the ethical decisions people make. Emotions such as shame, guilt, and embarrassment which are inner-directed negative emotions encourage people to act morally. On the contrary, outer-directed negative emotions serve the sole purpose of punishing people. For instance, more often than not people direct their outer-directed emotions such as contempt, anger, or disgust at those who behaved unethically. Positive emotions that include admiration and gratitude prompt people to become a helping hand for others. Besides, sympathy and empathy are the derivations of suffering, and such emotions would also prompt people to help others and act ethically towards others. So, it is beyond any doubt that emotions are pivotal in ethical decision making.