

Are Emotions Relevant?

We know that **emotions** can sway judgment in irrational ways; this is why we are wary of the “appeal to emotion” and emotionally manipulative rhetoric. But other times, emotions seem important to judging a situation. Consider, for example, the following narrative presented to voters in the 1980s:

I am a mother though my child is dead. He did not die of an incurable disease, of a virus beyond the ken of medical science. He was not taken from me by a foreign enemy while defending his country. No, he was needlessly slaughtered on the highway. A drunk driver ran broadside into his motorcycle. My son was shot fifty feet through the air by the collision and hit the blacktop at forty-five miles per hour.

My son’s assassin is not yet out of high school and yet that boy was able to walk into a liquor store and purchase two sixpacks of beer, most of which he drank that evening. This boy does not have the mental capability to graduate from high school in the prescribed time (he was held back in his senior year), and yet the law has given him the right to purchase alcohol and decide for himself what is appropriate behavior with regard to alcoholic consumption. I do not trust most of my adult friends to make such mature judgments. How can anyone trust the eighteen-year-old?

...I lost my son, but why do any of the rest of us have to suffer as I have? Please, support legislation to increase the drinking age to twenty-one.

The mother’s story is effective at provoking sympathy and indignation. But is her story simply an appeal to emotion?

Martha Nussbaum (University of Chicago) is a philosopher who argues that such stories provide relevant information—information about the *feelings* of people involved. This information is crucial since whether something is “good” or “bad” often depends on how it affects people, physically, mentally, *and emotionally*. In which case, such stories convey important knowledge which is not to be gained just by reading statistics.

Still, even if the emotions are relevant to a decision, they are not the *ONLY* thing that is relevant! An appeal to emotion would be committed above if our emotional reactions were seen as *decisive* or *deductive* support for the conclusion. But we should also consider, e.g., whether an increased drinking age affects the rate of drunk driving accidents, and by how much. (As it happens, increasing the drinking age reduces such accidents significantly...but even knowing this, there are still other relevant considerations. Why wouldn’t we increase the legal drinking age to twenty-five? To thirty?)

So in such cases, emotions do not provide deductive support, although they indeed inform us in ways that provide some support. Yet it remains true that often emotions provide no support *at all*. If the idea of a just world is comforting to you, that is no evidence that the world is just! (Cf. the just-world hypothesis under cognitive biases.) But it is worth recognizing that in some cases, emotions are indeed relevant to deciding what is right.