

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 at times, emotions seem relevant. 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 (Chicago) argues that such stories provide important information about the *feelings* of people involved. This is crucial since whether something is “good” or “bad” depends on how it affects people, physically, mentally, *and emotionally*. Thus, stories can transmit key information that is not gained just by reading statistics.

Ruth Chang (Rutgers) describes another kind of case where emotions seem relevant. Sometimes we face “hard choices”— where we basically know all the pros and cons and yet the right choice remains unclear. (Think about deciding on a career.) In a hard choice, Chang suggests that we should decide partly by what emotionally resonates with our deepest held values.¹

Yet even when emotions are relevant, they are not the *ONLY* thing that is relevant! An appeal to emotion is committed if emotions are seen as *deductive* support for a conclusion. In thinking about the grieving mother, we should also consider, e.g., if an increased drinking age greatly affects the rate of drunk driving accidents. (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?)

The Point: So although emotions do not provide deductive support, they often provide relevant information. It remains, however, that often your emotions are not relevant *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 acknowledging that sometimes emotions are indeed relevant to deciding what is right.

¹ Unfortunately, a choice can *change* our deepest held values. **L.A. Paul** (Yale) describes the choice to have a child in this way. Having a child would be “transformative” of your values, and so you cannot trust your present values to judge whether you will like being a parent. Yet your decision should be based (partly) on whether you will like being a parent. Paul therefore suggests that in such cases, we must try to anticipate what our future values would be.