The Wisdom of the Heart

Affectivity...
All moral experience is grounded in affectivity, in the foundational moral experience of the value of persons as persons. With this spoke, however, we are not just speaking of the grounding of ethics in affectivity or feeling as we did in chapter 2. We are now speaking more specifically of how a recognition of the cognitive nature of the affections can afford a higher level of moral awareness. As it goes about addressing particular cases, ethics should take account of the value awareness that comes to us through our feeling or affection. “Affection, from intense love to mild favor,” write John Dewey and James H. Tufts in their work Ethics, “is an ingredient in all operative knowledge, all full apprehension of the good.” Affectivity, in many morally informative ways, is our rapport with the ethical world. Feeling is not totally separate from intelligence or affectivity from knowledge. Feeling is a knowing experience. It is a form of reality-contact. Failure to recognize this fact shows
a flaw in moral evaluation. Incomplete awareness of how we know and of how we make moral decisions is a hazard to be avoided in ethical method. Whether we take account of them or not, our feelings arise in the face of a morally adjudicable situation. Furthermore, they arise not as neutral outbursts but as informed, evaluative reactions (positive or negative). Feelings are a cognitive reaction of knowing and they may be as mixed and contradictory as abstract and intellectual reasoning. Although feelings do not comprise the whole of moral awareness, they are important enough to be listened to. The awareness that comes through feeling is spontaneous and integral to the knowledge of morality. You may have feelings that are misleading, biased, or wrong, but they are integral and must be appreciated for what they are, and if necessary, corrected to conform to the foundational moral experience.

The following should illustrate the natural appearance of evaluative affectivity. The purpose of the example is, first, to show that feelings enter into an evaluative role with or without invitation, and, second, to suggest the positive value of having those feelings. Feeling responses, one way or another, give us an initial position on a particular subject even before we begin the needed systematic analysis that is required of holistic ethics.

In 1984 Corinne Parpalaix, a twenty-three-year-old widow, was denied access to her late husband’s sperm, which had been deposited at the Center for the Study and Conservation of Sperm. Around the time Alain and Corinne Parpalaix met in 1981, he had testicular cancer and was warned that treatment could cause sterility. It was then that he decided to deposit his sperm. Alain and Corinne were married on December 23, 1983; two days later Alain died. The sperm bank, located near Paris, argued that it was obliged to refuse Mrs. Parpalaix’s request because her husband had not stipulated what he wanted done with his sperm in the case of his death. On August 1, 1984, a Paris court ruled in her favor.

It is improbable that one can hear of this case and not have an immediate evaluative feeling response. Because it involves a course of action that befits or does not befit the reality of what persons are with all their unique needs and possibilities, the Parpalaix case is also a matter for moral and not just legal judgment. (Law, remember, is simply applied ethics.) Someone hearing the story for the first time would have a preliminary, tentative stance before beginning a complete ethical analysis of it. Some persons may side with Mrs. Parpalaix and be angered by the audacity of the center to hold back her late husband’s sperm. Others might respond by agreeing with the decision of the center to stand by its principles. The case evokes an affective, evaluative response. In that affective response to it we are already doing ethics, though not in all the ways that a full ethical treatment would demand.
An affective response is part of the evaluative process of ethics and qualifies as a kind of moral knowledge. We should listen to our feelings. They may, at times, be smarter than our abstract reasonings. It is possible that some persons might not be able to explain or defend their affective responses, yet they have them. It is also possible that some people might go on to think about their first feelings on a moral matter and reverse their position. A negative response might, upon further reflection, yield to a positive judgment or vice versa. Any change should occur within a process that is morally informed. The change should be one from knowing to knowing better. Something happens in the affective response that must be called knowledge, and that knowledge leads us on to subsequent rational analysis that may confirm or deny the original feeling.

Affective response is not the completion of ethical decision making but the beginning, and it is not cut off from further moral intellec-
tualization. Abstract knowledge or knowledge of certain facts may be virtually free of affectivity, but all moral knowledge is pervaded by it. Feeling, abstracting, and reasoning are interrelated in the knowing process in everyone. In sound moral insight there is not a purely affective or a purely conceptualized judgment. Conception and affection are essentially intertwined. Yet, the distinction between the two is not without a difference. Affective knowledge is not the same as conceptualized knowledge any more than experiential knowledge is the same as theoretical knowledge. A qualitative distinction to imply a total separation between affective and conceptualized knowledge has been too often and too drastically made. Affective knowing is one mode of cognitive reality contact.

Affectivity is not the only evaluational resource or spoke in the wheel model of ethical inquiry. There is no infallible feel for moral truth in any of us, but there is an initial feeling response. Moral situations evoke a felt response. We may call this initial response a hunch or intuition or "gut reaction," but it is evaluative and should be attended to and tested.

_**Feeling and Character as Conduits of Truth...**_

There is an intrinsic relationship between our character and our affec-
tions, between who we are and what we choose, love, and do. The reality of character is basic to an understanding of the moral life. Char-
ter is the embodiment of our moral orientation and affections. It is the moral thrust of our personalities, which are given their direction from our moral history and from the values we nourish and from the decisions we make. Morally we are what we do and fail to do. Character refers to this fact. It is the kind of person we have chosen to be. Character is not a superficial disposition or passing emotion. It is a
substantial moral development from the values with which we identify through our choices.

Because character reflects the roots and moral center of the personality, it has a certain stability and expectation. Atypical behavior is questioned. It is seen as "uncharacteristic." Sudden and major shifts in character are not to be looked for. A ruthless political operative who suddenly becomes morally transformed and religiously fervid is duly and properly suspect for a time. Character involves personality direction that has been established over a long period. It affects our way of seeing reality.

Character has considerable momentum and cannot go immediately into reverse. Obviously, there is no one who has a purely good or bad character. We are all amalgams of values and disvalues. However, certain overall moral traits are discernible in persons. We are instinctively alert to these traits or characteristics when "sizing people up." We do not perceive persons as a page filled with unconnected dots. We find connections and patterns, enough to make some judgment on "the kind of person" they are and the kind of thing they are likely to do. What we glimpse is called character. It is a factor in moral knowledge. People in business and the professions are constantly judging moral character. They are well advised to think about what it means.

We may intellectually know about moral values without their being a part of our character or of our affections. Affectivity engenders character and offers a fuller experience of moral knowledge, an experience that goes beyond abstract intellectuality. What we merely know abstractly we can be detached from because it allows for distance. What we love we become through our affections. Love is a unitive force and the basis of moral meaning. The foundational moral experience is an affective response to moral value and the source of moral character. A good character is a source of moral wisdom. Aristotle advised us to trust the judgments of good people, i.e., of those who have a good character. The unjust person might be a whiz at ethical theories of justice but his or her knowledge of justice is flawed by a lack of affective experience. A good character makes us not just knowers of moral truth, but connoisseurs. Our characters are lenses through which we perceive reality.

On Delight and the Sense of Profanation...

Your delights show us who you are. In the phenomenon of delight and in its opposite, the sense of profanation, we have two of the most perceptible manifestations of the cognitive capacity of affectivity and character. If we delight in the acts that pertain to a certain moral value, we know that this value has woven its way into our character. But if we perform certain moral acts begrudgingly, we know the opposite is
true; our delights do not rest there. That which is morally good should resonate delightfully in the person who is morally sensitive.

In delight there is an affective response to a particular value option that is experienced as congenial and suitable and in accord with one’s moral orientation. A response of delight amounts to an endorsement of that which is perceived and implies an enveloping awareness of value that we enjoy in ourselves. That which is delightful we want to enjoy fully. If we delight in the value of persons and the values that enhance all life, we tend to absorb them into the tonality of our moral consciousness. Delight weaves its object into our beings. Situations involving those values will touch on our delights and affections. Even with all the help we need and get from clever reasoning in assessing these situations, feeling, too, will instruct us and direct our reach for the truth. The just person delights in justice and has a “feel” for just solutions.

The sense of profanation is the nether side of delight. It is the shock and withdrawal that we feel when the value of life is debased. If persons are valued as persons, their violation in any way, as we pointed out in chapter 1, can evoke the feeling of profanation. As was true with the feeling of delight, the feeling of profanation extends to the worlds of nature and art. Sometimes that which is valuable is taken for granted, and only after the sense of profanation that follows upon violation or destruction might we become sensitive to the delight that we in our apathy had missed. The emerging ecological awareness that is taking place internationally might come to illustrate this point. We used nature and subdued it abusively — and we still do. As shock begins to register on our obtuse consciousness, there are signs of reawakening affections and enthusiasm for the earth that bore and sustains us. If this is more than lightly romantic and ephemeral, a new capacity to delight in the richness of the good earth might be born of the new and shocking awareness of eco-catastrophe.

When Affective Knowledge Is Disdained...

Cognitive awareness is not limited to intellectual knowledge alone. As we have been discussing, there is also affective awareness that can cradle initial moral insight. Affective knowledge has often been rejected in ethical theory. There is even a wider cultural denial of affectivity that is discernible in the cultural disparagement of things associated with women. We have tended to associate the intuitive and affective insight with women. The lack of the role of affectivity has a damaging effect on ethical thought. More generally, ethics has gone forward with heartless head in command. There would, of course, be havoc if headless heart were in charge of human affairs. But there is a greater capacity for cruelty in heartless head.
Ethics seeks the alliance of head and heart. Those ingenious military planners who coolly and cleverly calculate in terms of megadeaths are an example of the perils of unfeeling mind. Those who would lyrically imply that politics could be done without reference to the category of power would be an example of headless heart. Heart and head together would be in pursuit of expressions of power that can be effective without resort to slaughter. In moral persons, head and heart unite. Affections keep us close to the flesh and find the reality of persons beneath abstractions and statistics. This knowledge is the affective contribution to the living mind in pursuit of values.

*How Practical Affective Knowledge...*

One reason modern ethics has not been attentive to affective evaluation is that it is no simple matter to say precisely how one incorporates affectivity into a systematic ethical treatment. It is a more manageable task to speak of moral principles because there is a lot we can get a grip on. We can discuss the history of principles, the relationship of the general to the exceptional, the meaning of universalizability, and so on. With principles, there is the reassuring feeling that this is indeed workable turf. In addressing particular cases, we can summon relevant principles to test their applicability, and, in so doing, we can have a good sense of knowing what we are about. But how do we summon affectivity when attempting to analyze the moral import of a situation? Should we repair to a meditation room and allow our feelings to play upon the cases at hand and then bring back a report to the table where the hard ethical analysis is going on?

These questions, of course, are misconceived. In setting up the wheel model of ethical method, we are not implying that all the evaluational processes and resources signified by the spokes can be similarly employed in ethical inquiry and in every case. Two spokes yet to be discussed, for example, relate to humor and tragedy. Obviously, one could not do ethics by reasoning and analyzing for a while, by applying principles for a while, and then by looking for the comic side of the matter. There are times when a comic evaluation would show insensitivity or times when it would not be germane.

What we are stressing in this method is that the unfolding of moral consciousness is pluri-form. Sensitivity to the moral dimension of existence is not achieved only through reasoning or through the application of principles or even through the exercise of creative imagination. An ethics that stresses only one or some of the evaluative processes is partial. Unfortunately, such partiality has been a common failing in ethics. A complete ethics should seek to develop an awareness of all the ways in which consciousness awakens to moral reality. Some of the ways are more easily describable processes. Some may have no particular
relevance to certain cases. Some will point us more toward the background and presuppositions of our thought. And some will involve a bit of all these aspects and more. How, then, does affectivity operate in ethical analysis? It is necessary to be aware of the fact that our evaluation is affectively as well as intellectually actuated. If we assumed that our ethical thinking proceeds with limpid and undiluted intellectuality, we would not only be naive but, worse yet, the easy prey of untested affective forces that can easily be partial and biased in their sway. Affective orientation is not foolproof. Just as a lawyer wants to know the vested interest of a client, so must we be aware of where our feelings are, where they are pulling us and why. The vested interest that affects our thinking may make us more or less drawn to the truth. The morally wise person is one who learns from the heart that feeling has its own insights...and prejudices.

Uncritical thought undermines good ethics. Thus, whoever denies the cognitive side of affectivity will not be proceeding critically. Full moral judgment, however, cannot be made from feelings alone. Feelings tell you something, but not everything. One may need to step back from feelings and pause, and then make a moral judgment while remembering the insights that feelings have given. Misconceptions about the potential negative dimensions of affectivity could only have an unhappy yield along the way of ethical inquiry. No system of ethics can ignore this fact. Bigots, after all, speak from the heart. They are surely feeling people. Fanaticism, too, is an offspring of heightened affectivity. Adolf Hitler is alleged to have said, "I think with my blood." Affections unaided by discipline and analytical activities of working reason can lead to moral chaos. As we pointed out in the opening of chapter 8, the spokes are to be trusted and distrusted because they can be used and misused. Affectivity, along with all the other spokes, must be tested and balanced.

Full ethical inquiry must take advantage of the positive yield of affectivity. In studying particular issues in ethics, our antennae should be alerted to the wisdom of the heart, which can serve as a corrective for reason gone amuck. But sometimes when we look for the wisdom of the heart, we will hear contradictory answers. The heart, like the intellect, does not specialize in unequivocal conclusions. Here, as in all situations of disagreement, a comprehensive ethics wants to hear both sides to find the part of truth that each may be presumed to contain.

All this may sound abstract and unpractical. It is not. Parents often use the wisdom of the heart. There are no blueprints for rearing a child. There are no tidy rules that tell you when leniency or severity might be more cruel. Nurses responding to the needs of seriously ill patients often follow their feelings with all the experience those feelings contain. This is not irrational, although any decisions made in a
unique or emergency situation should be subjected to reasoned analysis later. However, we encounter circumstances where our intuitive feelings, educated as they are by experience (including past reasoning), are our only guide for the moment. It is wise, therefore, to be aware of our feelings and to discuss them. They are a crucial component of our moral equipment. Nurses, physicians, journalists, administrators, and all others in roles of authority and influence should know and experience the value of our affective “instincts.”

Culture and Feelings...
Sensitivity to affective evaluation is also essential in the ethical analysis of cultural trends. The heart has a sense of direction. Often it can catch the scent of trouble or opportunity. In affectivity, there is, as in creativity, a future referent. We feel for the future we cannot see. We can analyze the past and the causal factors operating in the present so as to make useful but tentative judgments about the kinds of effects that might continue into the future. The analysis could all be a dominantly “intellectual” enterprise, but the heart seems to have special prerogatives for conducting its own probes into the future and it should be a part of our morally analytical efforts. Affectivity can open us to greater moral creativity and discovery, often needed resources in ethical discourse. A professional atmosphere or workplace that suppresses feeling also suppresses creativity.

At times we need affective relief when dealing with ethical questions. For instance, affectivity can balance our attitude toward the appeal of expert knowledge by agitating our blind reliance on the expert. The expert, though often needed, can be one of the more oppressive authorities in the modern world. (When we discuss the spoke that relates to authority in chapter 10, we will return to this.) Although the expert may be a temporary cure for vertigo in the midst of abounding complexity, there is a hazard here. Because the expert has privileged knowledge, it would seem rash and immodest to question this person. He or she has done work that you have not and bears credentials that you do not have. Docility, then, would seem to be the expert’s due and the expert could easily become a tyrant. Expertise, however, is not infallible. It is borne by people who have their own presuppositions, their own unasked questions, and their own vested interest in the conclusions they have already taken a stand on. They can be as wrong as they can be impressive.

The power of the expert can be relativized in two important ways. First, by questioning. No expertise is beyond questions. And second (a way that may inspire the first) is by using common sense or intuition. This kind of thinking is richly endowed with affectivity and includes the incipient intellectual insight that has caught a glimpse of a solution that
is not yet grasped. This insight-affect, if we may so phrase it, gives us a feel for moral truth and has its own valid credentials. The affections keep us close to earth and thus less vulnerable prey to abstractions. Affective response is an important resource to have, as long as it is not thought to be self-sufficient and the end of the thinking process.

**Affectivity and Principles...**

A final word on our affective approach to truth relates to principles. Ethics is best seen as an art/science. Like art, ethics cannot be done simply by following a method of rules. Guidelines or principles play an indispensable role, but they do not of themselves yield moral discernment. However well instructed we are by moral principles, there is a certain point when one's humane sense of the personal and contextual factors of a case attains crucial importance. Rules and regulations cannot tell you how to approach someone who not only needs your help but also your confidence. Principles and the experience of others can be passed on and can be helpful, but only to a degree. The final judgment of the fitting way to proceed in moral cases will be based on affect, on a feeling response to what a particular situation requires. When it comes to the basic ethical necessities, such as contextual sensitivity and delicacy, a sense of timing and opportuneness, we move beyond rules and principles and into the realm of affective perception.

If reality is process, a moral decision involves a step into that process at the fitting and most potentially fruitful time. To make a moral decision on abstract grounds alone would be to operate at only one level of our cognitive capacity. To know the right time, the kairos, calls for both the genius of the intellect and the genius of the heart. Sound ethics knows that the heart is wise in its own fashion.