I    Introduction

According to John Dewey, “The separation of warm emotion and cool intelligence is the great moral tragedy,” (238). For when it comes to morality, this “cool intelligence” is trusted to stand alone. The legitimacy of reason is blindly respected in our society. It is the language of leaders and a value that affects our conduct as individuals and as a whole. The moral tragedy comes into play as hindsight reveals the failure of this approach to inspire ethical behavior. In this paper, I will argue that when making decisions about intervention, sentiment ought to trump reason. Unfortunately, sentiment-based decision making will not become the norm until current habituated dependencies on reason-based justifications are challenged. Two historical events of the twentieth century will be used to show contradicting results of this imbalance. A wave of illogical action at the start of World War I, and a void of necessary action during the Rwandan genocide were results of decision makers valuing reason far above sentiment.

II    Progressive Sentiment over Ineffective Reason

Though often overlooked, sentiment is overwhelmingly important in moral decision making. David Hume wrote that “reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them” (167). Hume identifies ways in which reason is inadequate for the job of moral activity. Reason connects sentiments with logic, but does not have the ability to determine good from evil. Furthermore, it is “morals [that] excite passion and
produce or prevent actions,” which leaves reason ineffective in the shadow of sentiment when dealing with intervention (p.170). Thoughts motivated by sympathy move through a situation similarly to that of reason, though they produce more effective results. Hume specifies that sympathy is a process that recognizes the cause and effect of emotions and thus produces sentiment which is the root of human motivation (175). These three strengths of sentiment, being the ability to determine good from evil, produce action, and understand that action, are highly important in cases of war and genocide where so many decisions presented are decisions of morality.

Annette C. Baier refers to “the care perspective,” which is concerned with the good of others and thus holds the same responsibility and weight as Hume’s sympathy (445). Both Baier and Hume are prescribing a more important role for emotion in our society. Jonathan Glover, author of *Humanity: A Moral History of the Twentieth Century*, values sentiment, though less for its motivational qualities and more for it preventative ones. He argues that sentiment is necessary to avoid Nietzsche’s version of ethics as self-creation which results in selfishness, dominance and a “festival of cruelty;” this proves to be insightful in the light of poorly made moral decisions (17). He seems to respond to Baier with the stance- “My caring about the sort of person I am motivates the project of self-creation. Why should not my caring about other people set limits to it?” (17). Hume, Baier and Glover all hold “the others” as a moral focus. When making ethical decisions it is sentiment, not reason, that is more effective as it takes “the others” into account.

**Reason as a Bad Habit**

Though sentiment-based decision making would be more valuable in the case of intervention, habituated dependencies to rely on reason continue to prevail. According to John Dewey, “To change the working character or will of another we have to alter objective conditions which enter into his habits” (p.22). The bad habit is reliance on reason, and through certain instances of intervention the halting qualities present when sentiment is absent become clear. Consider that from the
assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria on June 18 of 1914 to the British Entry of the war on August 3 of the same year, the leaders of multiple countries reasoned themselves into a World War (Glover part 4). The way in which World War I started seems to have been a series of “if-then” ultimatums. Austria-Hungary told Serbia that if they accepted an ultimatum to suppress propaganda, tighten boarder controls, and arrest certain groups and individuals, than they would not be invaded (179). On July 29 Germany declared that if Russia mobilized, than they would mobilize as well. Germany then sent an ultimatum to France stating that if they did not stay neutral, than they would be invaded. The invasion took place on August 2, the same day that the ultimatum from Britain stating that Germany invading Belgium was grounds for war was broken. These “if-then” statements are soaked in reason, leaving little room for sentiment to be noticed, with no chance of their being intellectualized for motivation. Glover wrote of the countries involved “they misperceived each other and miscalculated each other’s responses – they were sleepwalking into war,” (185).

WWI was not an isolated incident. Others can be identified where lack of focus on sentiment resulted in conflict. One of these instances is the genocide that took place in Rwanda in the mid-1990’s. Hume creates for us a picture of “the judicious spectator,” which is the ability of us all to experience feelings of approval or disapproval when we reflect from a common point of view on the people affected by an action (178). This should be a powerful way for those in leadership positions to make decisions that affect others. However, there is a flaw in our current employment of the judicious spectator. Though there may be reflection from a common point of view regarding the people affected by an action, we are disregarding our own feelings of approval or disapproval (sympathy) that result from reflection. It is because of this flaw in thought process that the situation in Rwanda was able to happen under the watch of the rest of the world. In the midst of evacuation of non-Africans from Rwanda, intense hate propaganda, and public mass killings, Bill Clinton was able to address the people of America and the people of the world with the message that the United States would not
intervene in a humanitarian crisis void of interest for our own country (Barker). It is clear that those responsible for making this decision were indeed reflecting on who would be affected from common point of view. It is also clear that in this reflection there was no true sentiment allowed to have an effect on the decision. It was Hume who pointed out that sympathy can be used as aversion. In Clinton’s speech he expressed a deep regret for the people involved, but if the sentiment was true, there would have been a motivation to act. We didn’t even interfere with the radio broadcast messages telling Hutu that now was the time to slaughter their Tutsi neighbors (Barker). Reason justified that this would have been a violation of the Constitution’s freedom of speech, regardless of the right to life which is still found in our constitution mid-genocide (Barker). As I will demonstrate, sentiment would have told us that at this point any act of prevention, no matter how small, was completely worthwhile.

There were some who stayed in Rwanda and put this mentality to use. Philippe Gaillard was the individual leading the Red Cross in Rwanda during the genocide. From his position he experienced the massive amount of violence, and he experienced it quickly judging from the estimated 100,000 people killed in the first week alone. When a Red Cross van was stopped by the extremists and the six wounded inside were killed, he was faced with the decision of whether or not to make the information public. Despite the Red Cross dictum of neutrality through public service, and the danger he was putting himself in, he spoke of what he saw. The publicity embarrassed the extremists and the Red Cross was granted safe passage throughout Rwanda. Gaillard said that “in such circumstances if you don’t at least speak up, clearly, you are participating to the genocide. If you just shut up when you see what you see, and morally, ethically you can not shut up, it’s a responsibility to talk” (Barker). Carl Wilkins, an Aid worker for the Adventist Church, protected an orphanage of children by simply speaking to the Prime Minister of Rwanda. In reflection he later said, “In each one of us there is such a potential for good and such a potential for evil” (Barker 2004). These men and other individuals expressed their inability to
leave the situation without trying to help. They said they would feel wrong. Moreover, and more importantly, they would feel responsible. Hume would describe these people as virtuous for “virtue is nothing but to feel a satisfaction of a particular kind from the contemplation of a character,” (174). There actions, which were fueled by sentiment-packed perspectives of the genocide, are even more heartbreaking next to episodes of apathy. For on the other hand, Hume describes that one can have a general desire to achieve good and avoid evil without involving emotion (169). Mix this reason based concept of good and evil, with empty words of sympathy, and the disassociating distance between America and Rwanda, and a disaster like genocide can pass unrestricted so completely by the people with so much power.

**How to Shake a Bad Habit**

John Dewey set out to describe an ethical program which was to use “the intelligent acknowledgement of the continuity of nature, man and society” to secure a morality free from the weight of ineffective habits (13). These habits, once established, are not thought of as needing reevaluation. As society changes drastically between generations; through wars, genocides, invasions, and revolutions, it is absolutely necessary to look at the habits that fuel values. Dewey writes that “instead of constantly utilizing unused impulse to effect continuous reconstruction, we have waited till an accumulation of stresses suddenly breaks through the dikes of custom,” (96). The build up of ineffective behavior leading to the release of effective action happens under some circumstances. Unfortunately, the situation of how to deal with genocide-related issues has not yet reached this point. Throughout history, an act of genocide leads to the general conclusion of “never again.” However, our blind social forces seem to have created an “accidental morality” in which it is ethical and excusable for a present episode of genocide to be ignored (292). In the case of war and genocide it would be in the best interest of humanity to take a proactive approach to replace ineffective behavior with habits that can make a positive difference.
Sentiment and reason are both going to show up within people habitually. The question becomes which of the two will be valued in human conduct? Dewey describes this as a choice “between the development of a technique by which intelligence will become an intervening partner and a continuation of a regime of accident, waste and distress,” (254). If sentiment becomes a habit of society it will be valued among its members. Our values affect and are affected by our environment as well as our conduct. Impulses and actions from our up to date experiences will act as informants and keep the system of nature, man, and society up-to-date with the reality of interaction.

III Kant and Reason

The sentiment-based philosophy of Hume was different than that advised by his immediate predecessors. Let us, for example, consider how what I have said here stands up to the framework provided by Immanuel Kant. Kant argues that the only way in which to establish moral rules is through reasoning (Kant, 2007). If approached in this manner, morality will become indisputable and universalizable. This perspective is a problem if it is to be incorporated into Dewey’s ethical program. A moral truth that is expected to be universalizable is expected to apply to all people and appeal to human reason. Without reflection over the success or failure of past activities when seeking moral truths, habituated, ineffective tendencies will become the norm. Reason alone is a stagnant moral plan. In the case of intervention, Kant would push decision makers to reason through the situation, and dismiss any emotion that may get in the way. As it was made clear through World War I, reason can not stand on its own to produce a morality from a situation that makes sense. In this case, reason resulted in the action of war before anyone involved had time to gain a feeling of the situation. Rwanda, however, was not about senseless action but rather a lack of activity caused by reason based holdups. Kant may argue that emotions are too airy and subjective to hold any of the weight of moral decision making. But judging from these historical events and more it would do humanity good not to leave reason-based decision-making habits in
place.

IV Conclusion

Ethical dilemmas are very prominent in times of violent conflict. If sentiment is valued over reason in war and genocide-related matters, then the chance of the moral effects of a situation getting out of control is reduced. There is intuition built into sympathy and sentiment. Hume writes that “the moment we perceive the falsehood of any supposition, or the insufficiency of any means our passions yield to your reason without any opposition,” (168). We know this to be true. If one desires something but is convinced of otherwise, they desire it no more. Emotion is not stagnant; it responds intuitively to a situation as the situation changes with human conduct and environmental concerns. Sentiment holds the flexibility needed to work with Dewey’s ethical program and, if habituated, will help change human behavior in a more productive direction.
Works Cited


