I negate and value **morality**. There is a distinction between factual and moral claims – the statement “This door is blue,” contains no moral judgments, and the command “Close the door,” does not describe natural features of the door itself. It follows that moral judgments are not truth-apt, but instead express an agent’s attitudes towards features of an action. Alexander **Miller[[1]](#footnote-1)** explains:

Ayer denies that moral judgments express beliefs: rather, **moral judgments express emotions**, or sentiments, **of approval and disapproval. Since these emotions** and sentiments are unlike beliefs in that they **do not** even purport to **represent how the world is, the judgments which express them are not truth-apt.** Compare your belief that there are children in the street, which purports to represent how the world is, with your horror at the fact that the children are torturing a cat. The belief has a representative function: it purports to represent how the world is, and it is true if and only if the world actually is as it represents it. The emotion of horror, on the other hand, has no such representative function: it is not the sort of thing that can even be assessed for truth or falsity. In short, moral judgments are neither true nor false: they do not state anything, but rather express our emotions and feelings. As Ayer puts it in a famous passage: “**If I say to someone, ‘You acted wrongly in stealing that money’,** I am not stating anything more than if I had simply said, ‘You stole that money’. In adding that this action is wrong, I am not making any further statement about it. **I am simply evincing my moral disapproval about [stealing]** it. **It is as if I had said, ‘You stole that money’, in a** peculiar **tone of horror, or** written **with** the addition of some special **exclamation marks. The tone, or the exclamation marks, adds nothing to the literal meaning of the sentence. *It merely serves to show that the expression of it is attended by certain feelings in the speaker.***”(Ayer [1936] 1946: 107; emphases added) It follows that: “**If I now** generalize my previous statement and **say, ‘Stealing money is wrong,’ I produce a sentence which has no factual meaning** – that is, expresses no proposition that can be either true or false.” ([1936] 1946: 107)

Moral truth is not derivable from practical reason because reason only exists as ‘the slave of the passions.’ The only considerations that can sway an individual toward an action must be those which represent it as a means of attaining what she wants. Therefore, the only considerations that count as reasons for action are those which appeal to her antecedent interests and desires.

Moreover, emotions operate on a higher level than practical reason. Logical reasoning only tracks empirical circumstances because it appeals to mental representations of reality; actions and passions *constitute* the world so they cannot be pronounced true or false by reason. Jonathan **Harrison[[2]](#footnote-2)** writes:

He thought that **the fact that reason [is] the slave of the passions follows from the fact that actions or passions themselves cannot properly be described as reasonable or unreasonable.** According to Hume, **the only things which may be described as reasonable** or unreasonable **are** ‘ideas’. By ‘ideas’, in this context, he means **beliefs. Ideas are copies of what they represent**, or purport to represent, **and so can be true copies, or false copies, in which latter case they are ‘contradictory to truth and reason’. Actions and passions, on the other hand, are ‘real existences’, not copies, and have**, unlike ideas, **no reference to anything else. Actions and passions, therefore, cannot be true or false, conformable or contrary to truth or reason.** The only two ways in which a passion can be unreasonable is when it is founded upon a false or unreasonable belief, as when I fear something that I wrongly take to be dangerous, or when, in seeking to achieve its object, it acts upon a false or unreasonable belief about the means to securing this object (416). But ‘where a passion is neither founded on false suppositions, nor chuses means insufficient for the end, the understanding can neither justify nor condemn it.’

Reason only deals with the way the world *is,* not the way it *ought* to be, so it is not sufficient to ground prescriptive moral duties. Thus, moral claims must be consistent with our emotional responses to actions.

As individual agents, we experience negative emotions when other people judge us. To avoid condemnation, we align our personal feelings with the general sentiments we observe in others. This means that moral judgments are made by adopting a general point of view. Adam **Smith[[3]](#footnote-3)** writes:

But Nature hasn’t left us with absolutely no remedy for this important weakness—she hasn’t abandoned us entirely to the delusions of self-love. **Our continual observations of the conduct of others lead us unconsciously to construct general rules about what is fit and proper to do** or to avoid. Some of their actions shock all our natural sentiments. We hear everyone around expressing the same detestation of them, which conﬁrms and even increases our natural sense of the actions’ ugliness. **We’re satisfied that we are viewing [our natural sentiments]** them **in the proper light when we see other people viewing them in the same light. We resolve never to** be guilty of such actions, and never to **do anything that would** in this way **make us objects of universal disapproval. In this natural way we lay down for ourselves a general rule that all such actions are to be avoided because they tend to** make us odious, contemptible, or punishable—i.e. **[be] objects of the sentiments for which we have the greatest dread and aversion.** On the other side, other actions call forth our approval, and we hear everyone around us express the same favorable opinion about them. Everyone is eager to honor and reward them; they arouse all the sentiments for which we have by nature the strongest desire—the love, the gratitude, the admiration of mankind. We come to want to act in those ways, and thus naturally lay down for ourselves a rule of another kind, that we should always be on the watch for opportunities to act in this way.

The general point of view is an intersubjective standpoint – the only relevant sentiments are those shared by all individuals. Accordingly, the criterion is **avoiding universal emotivist condemnation**. This means that moral judgments must be made *without* considering individual identity or circumstances.

Even if empirical considerations do produce emotional responses, categorical judgments trump context-dependent ones because they apply to every instantiation of that judgment. This means that even if our sentiments toward an action considered *in context* may declare it permissible, if general features of the action would render it impermissible, those judgments would come first.

I contend that in general, intra-familial homicide arouses negative moral sentiments. Shirley-Ann **Botha[[4]](#footnote-4)** writes:

**Regardless of the origin, homicidal violence directed at a family member is widely regarded as the most dreadful and frightening of all crimes. Killing a family member may seem especially depraved as families are**, at least according to popular myth, **warm, loving, peaceful units where members** loyally protect, **defend and nurture each other. Of course,** growing awareness of **domestic violence**, increasing divorce rates and other forms of family strife have **[has] undermined this [idealism.]** idealistic representation of family life. **However,** modern **society continues to revere family life as a vital, sacrosanct institution. Thus, killing a family member does more than threaten the viability of the family in which it occurs – it strikes a blow against an institution at the core of civilized life.** Furthermore, it is a phenomenon to which all of us are potentially vulnerable. We are, after all, a society of families (Ewing, 1997).

And, even if there are negative sentiments attached to domestic violence as in addition to murder, the severity of our reactions to killing make it the worst harm because of the resentment it creates. **Smith 2** concludes:

**Death is the greatest evil** that **one** man **can inflict on another, and it arouses the highest degree of resentment in those who are immediately connected with the person who has been killed.** Thus, of all the crimes that affect only individuals murder is the most atrocious—in the sight of mankind, and in the sight of the murderer. **Being deprived of something that we now possess is a greater evil than being disappointed in some expectation of receiving a certain good. That is why theft and robbery (which take our possessions) are greater crimes than breach of contract (which merely disappoints our expectations). So the most sacred laws of justice**—the ones the violation of which seems to call loudest for vengeance and punishment—**are the laws that guard our neighbour’s life** and person; next in line come those that guard his property and possessions; and lastly those that guard what are called his personal rights, or what is due to him from the promises of others.

1. Miller, Alexander. “Rejection of Non-Naturalism.” *Introduction to Contemporary Metaethics.* Oxford: Polity, 2003. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Harrison, Jonathan. *Hume’s Moral Epistemology*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1976. Google Books. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Smith, Adam. *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 1759. EarlyModernTexts.com. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Botha, Shirley-Ann. “Abused Women Who Kill Their Partners: A Psychological Study.” Diss. Rand Afrikaans U., 2008. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)