Where does our sense of right and wrong come from?

In life, we all have to make decisions, whether they are right decisions or wrong decisions depends on the circumstances, time, place and even your frame of mind and emotion at that moment. However, there are many basic notions of what is right versus what is wrong. This basic understanding of what right and wrong is common across all cultures, race and religion. This enables us to understand each other’s action and reaction which in turn helps us co-exist with each other on a very basic level. When people commit a wrong thing that is clearly against the rules of a group or society they belong to, then there will be consequences of the law as defined by the group/society. But why do people make wrong decisions or for that matter, make the right decision? This essay will assess the reasons of where our sense of right and wrong come from.

“Right is right even if no one is doing it; wrong is wrong even if everyone is doing it.”
— Augustine of Hippo

Some people would argue that religion has a significant part to play in where our moral sense comes from. Religion is a belief that tells us a set of rules to follow and commit to like the 10 commandments in Judaism or the teachings of Confucius. If the religion tells us to help the needy and do charity as it is the right thing to do as a follower of that religion, that teaching will reflect on us, on our decisions and actions. If the religion says that stealing is totally wrong, the follower of the religion may not do it. If a person follows his religion faithfully and follows its laws, the person will change his/her way of life to what his religion expects of him. This turn will unconsciously affect his sense of right from wrong. Different religions can have a slightly different sense of righteousness but in the end the basis is the same.

Media encompasses widely the TV, radio, movies, newspapers, magazines, internet, social networks. All these are sources that affect hugely on what is seen as acceptable or not which then influences our own personal outlook on what is right or wrong. People who are tuned in to shows which are bad will be influenced by what they see and hear and slowly but surely, will be affected in their sense of judgement as to what is morally right or wrong. On the other hand, the same media, if it imparts values like honesty, caring, sharing and family and society unity through its various form of media, will have an effect on its
readers/viewers to share those same moral qualities. This will affect how they see and judge right decisions from wrong ones.

The environment and the surroundings of a person plays a great deal of importance to the way one lives. Whether one lives in a country run by a democratic government or a communist one will challenge the person’s sense of right and wrong. For example, North Korea is the only country run by strict communism in these day and time. Their citizens are not allowed to travel and they basically worship their leader like a God. So even if their leader makes a decision that brings hardship on its people, because of the strict communist environment they are brought up in, the citizens will accept this as a right decision for them. No one will utter a word against the leader because nothing he does is wrong to them. This kind of brainwashing in a society is bound to affect the individuals and influence their sense of right and wrong in the long term.

Another factor that may affect your sense of right and wrong may very well come from the people who are close to you – primarily your parents, siblings and the community you are born into. A parents own upbringing will be reflected on how they raise their child, how siblings interact will reflect on future relationships and how the culture of the community they are born into, will define values that are deemed acceptable or otherwise. For example, an abused child who was abused by his parents might end up being an abuser to his own kids as he might think that it is right way of showing love just as he received it from his parents. Though, other parents may think differently. Another example, parents from Asian countries typically think that they have to enhance their children education from a very early stage in their lives with lots of extra tuition and extra activities. On the other hand, parents from Western countries feel that children should not be burdened with too much schoolwork and should have time to enjoy their childhood. These are two different set of thoughts but both parents feel they are doing the right thing for their child’s future. Is any one of them wrong?

In school, children interact with other kids and teachers. Then there is a school’s code of conduct that determines what is expected of a student behaviour. Here again in a school environment, a student’s thinking is moulded into what is right versus wrong in that school and society setting.
Your sense of right or wrong is based on your values, sometimes plain common sense and
general knowledge when interacting with others. If you passionately believe an action is
right, you should do it no matter how many people will go against you. William Wilberforce
who fought against slavery and Martin Luther King Junior who fought against racism knew
their debate would be an enormously big struggle, but still they went ahead with their
actions as they believed passionately in the cause of their struggle despite the majority of
the society being against them at that time. Many knew or felt that slavery and racism was
wrong but no one had the courage to do what they did.

In conclusion, empathy is good and will help one make decisions that will be more
acceptable to ones elf and others. If you put yourself in the other person’s shoes you will
find that it is easier to do to him or her what you would want done to yourself. In life the
choices you make can either be right or wrong, you can’t have a right and wrong choice just
like in a maths test, it is not possible to have a right and wrong answer. There are many
different sources from where our sense of right and wrong come from. This topic – ‘Where
does our sense of right and wrong come from’ - is hugely based on what your life
experiences are, which includes factors such as family background, cultural norms and
values, interaction with society, religion and even which country you live in. As you progress
through the different stages of life, different factors that will steer your sense of right from
wrong. Your sense can change.

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