

An Attempt at a Universal Ethic II: Subjective Identification



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An Attempt at a Universal Ethic I: Introduction

Every person and every culture that exists (or has existed) seem to have their own ideas on what constitutes ethical and unethical behavior. How do I explain this apparent phenomenon in light of the ethic I introduced in part one? If ethics seems like a subjective determination, how do I claim objectivity? I do that by separating moral standing from identification. Let me explain.

Phenomenon of Ethics

For millenia and across the globe, and likely the universe, intelligent beings have considered certain actions as "right" and other actions as "wrong". These concepts are imprecise. Right could mean ethical, just, or wise, and wrong could mean unethical, unjust, or foolish. Often the claim is on the moral standing of a given behavior (ethical vs. unethical). That ethics is a longstanding concern tells me that there must be a reason for it, and in that reason we can find its objectivity.

Objectivity of the Ethic

The ethic as introduced in part one claims that behaviors that have the effect of maintaining or strengthening the society between individuals are *ethical*, and behaviors that have the effect of diminishing or destroying the society between individuals are *unethical*. It is my belief that every time someone claims the moral standing of a behavior, it is on these grounds. This is so because the behavior in question is either compatible with their values, or it is not. If it is, then it maintains or strengthens the society between them and the person or persons engaged in the behavior. If it is not, then it diminishes or destroys the society between them and the person or persons engaged in the behavior. While their values are subjectively determined, ie. they are whatever they choose them to

be, the moral standing of a given behavior is always determined on the basis of compatibility with their values.

Moral Standing and Identification

Whether a person or a culture claims a behavior as ethical or unethical depends on how they identify that behavior. I gave the examples in part one that murder, rape, and theft are by definition unethical. Identifying a behavior always occurs before assigning it a moral standing. Its identity must be decided before a person can compare it to their matrix of values. Let me address each example separate to demonstrate what I mean.

Murder. Person B's life is ended at the hand of Person A. If Person A's action are identified as murder, and by virtue of that identification, unethical, then the society between Person A and those identifying it as murder, and thereby incompatible with their values, is diminished or destroyed. If Person A's actions are identified as self-defense, and by virtue of that identification *not* unethical, then the society between Person A and those identifying it as self-defense, and thereby compatible with their values, is not diminished or destroyed. In some cultures and by some people, self-defense may also be identified as a type of murder, in which case, by virtue of that identification, it is considered unethical.

Rape. Person A coerces Person B to engage in sexual intercourse. Because Person B dissents, they are likely to identify this behavior as rape, decide that rape is incompatible with their values, and allow the society between them and Person A to be diminished or destroyed. If Person B decides that the behavior is not incompatible with their values, then they are unlikely to identify it as rape, and thus unlikely to dissent, and thus the society between them and Person A will remain unchanged. Assuming Person B identifies this behavior as rape, they are the first to consider it unethical. As other people learn of the event, they too will identify it as either rape or not, and by virtue of that identification, its moral standing. Some people and cultures would never identify a husband coercing his wife into sex as rape. They would say that a wife, by definition, can't be raped by her husband because wives are obligated to their husbands to perform this service at the husband's, and not the wife's, discretion. You and I might disagree with this (as may the wife), but that's because we identify the behavior differently, as rape, not because we claim a different moral standing for rape. The husband would likely consider himself being coerced into sex by someone else as rape, and by virtue of that identification, unethical.

Theft. Person A coerces Person B to give him \$50. How we identify this behavior determines its moral standing. If it is identified as theft, then by virtue of that, it is unethical, and the consequence to the society between individuals identifying it as such follows. Let us say that Person A is a tax collector, and Person B a resident of Person A's area of jurisdiction. Many people would not identify this behavior as theft, but rather as tax collection, or more precisely, as collecting a fee owed by Person B to Person A's principal,

the state. Collecting an owed fee, in the abstract, can hardly be considered unethical. Other people, however, would identify this behavior as theft. They do so on the grounds that Person A's principle cannot provide any evidence of jurisdiction, and thus any evidence that Person B owes anything that Person A is charged with collecting. Thus they identify Person A's actions as theft, as a shakedown, as plunder, and by virtue of that identification, as unethical.

Seemingly Subjective

The moral standing of a particular instance of behavior (as versus the behavior in the abstract) is determined relative to its identification, which is decided on the basis of personal preference or cultural norm, ie. subjectively, of the parties involved. Ethics is not subjective, but identifying behaviors is. Let me give an analogy. They say that "beauty is in the eye of the beholder," but this is only partly true. Beauty, like ethics, has an objective meaning, ie. "a combination of qualities, such as shape, color, or form, that pleases the aesthetic senses, especially the sight." Just like as people subjectively identify qualities as pleasing to their aesthetic senses, they likewise identify behaviors as either those which maintain or strengthen, or diminish or destroy, the society between themselves and others. That's as far as this analogy goes, because unlike for beauty, certain behaviors in the abstract can have their moral standing determined through logic and reason, as shown in part one.

Final Thoughts

The ethic as explained in this series has so far been objectively defined and has accounted for the seemingly subjective nature of determining moral standing. In the next part I will make sense of the phenomenon of moral outrage in light of the preceding. Moral outrage is a feeling that is very real and always experienced on the basis of the consequences or expected consequences of behavior toward the society between individuals.

An Attempt at a Universal Ethic III: Moral Outrage

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