

An Attempt at a Universal Ethic I: Introduction



Send him mail. [f](#) [t](#)

"One Voluntarist's Perspective" is an original column appearing most Mondays at Everything-Voluntary.com, by the founder and editor Skyler J. Collins. Archived columns can be found [here](#). OVP-only RSS feed available [here](#).

Morality and ethics is a contentious area of philosophy, but I don't think it needs to be. Rather, if we peel away the layers upon layers of religious and philosophical obfuscation, and return to original meaning, what we find is a very simple and basic conception with incredible explanatory power. In the following six part series, I will define objectively morality and ethics, give both abstract and particular examples of ethical and unethical behavior, demonstrate the acceptability of qualifying ethics, explain why morality and ethics seem to have a subjective quality, make sense – in light of my definition – of the phenomenon of moral outrage, attempt to universalize the ethic and integrate alternative moral philosophies into my framework, and finally to offer answers to the best objections I have heretofore received and will no doubt receive along the way. This is seemingly the most ambitious thing I've ever done, but if I don't try it will continue to occupy my mind and distract me from the rest of life. So let's go!

Morality and Ethics

To get things started, I will first define my terms, then proceed to give examples of objectively ethical and unethical behaviors with accompanying explanations, followed by analyzing qualifications such as "personal ethics" and "business ethics."

Ethics is from the Middle English *ethik* and the Old French *etique*, and means simply, "the science or study of morals; moral philosophy." Morality is based on the Latin *moralis*, which also means simply, "proper behavior of a person in society." Society in the sense that it will be used throughout this series is from the Old French *societe* and Latin *societatem*, meaning, "friendly association with others; fellowship, association, alliance, union, community, fraternity." It is *not* used in the sense that originated in the 1630s meaning "people bound by neighborhood and intercourse aware of living together in an ordered community."

Therefore, the ethic, or set of objective moral principles, that I am presenting and

defending in this series is the following:

Ethical behavior is that which maintains or strengthens the society between individuals; unethical behavior is that which diminishes or destroys the society between individuals.

The first objection to this might be one about the duty of adopting and practicing this ethic. Nowhere in the ethic is there a claim that one has a duty to follow it. This is as designed. It is my opinion that any ethic claiming a duty to be followed without qualification fails to consider that following any ethic is primarily the result of a subjective determination that doing so is in the best interest of the follower. Ethics cannot be prescribed by others. If this sounds nihilistic, that's because it is; a *bona fide* nihilistic moral philosophy. How is that possible? It's possible because my ethic is without prescription. It's merely an attempt to objectively describe the moral standing of different behaviors.

Whether one has a duty to follow it depends on whether one values maintaining society between himself and others. Human beings evolved as social animals, therefore most or virtually all human beings value maintaining society between themselves and others. It would also not be incorrect to say that society with others is a basic human need. While I will not prescribe my ethic to everyone *en masse*, I will prescribe it as a wise and necessary component toward maintaining society with others for those who wish to do so. In other words, if you value society with others and desire to maintain or strengthen that society, then you should follow my ethic. If you don't, then you shouldn't. Now, let us move on to analyzing the unethical moral standing of various behaviors.

Examples of Unethical Behaviors

I will only be analyzing behaviors (in the abstract) that are unethical according to the above ethic. This is because that is where the most controversy exists. Once the ethic is completely understood, applying it to the consideration of any type of behavior is only a matter of logic and reason. The behaviors that I will be analyzing and demonstrating as objectively unethical are murder, rape, and theft. Before that, I just want to add that as society is diminished or destroyed between individuals, its opposite replaces it (nature abhors a vacuum). I believe the opposite of society as defined above is enmity, from the Old French *enemite* and the Latin *inimicitia* meaning, "hostile feeling, rivalry, malice; internal conflict." If ethical behavior is that which maintains or strengthens the society between individuals, and it is according to the above ethic, then unethical behavior is that which maintains or strengthens the enmity between individuals. (Concordantly, if unethical behavior is that which diminishes or destroys the society between individuals, then ethical behavior is that which diminishes or destroys the enmity between individuals. Behavior

that neither destroys nor strengthens the society or enmity between individuals are amoral, or without moral standing.)

Murder. The premeditated killing of another individual is unethical because of its destructiveness towards the society between the murderer and the victim, the murderer and the victim's loved ones, and the murderer and anyone who values not being murdered.

Rape. The initiation of non-consensual sexual intercourse with another individual is unethical because of its destructiveness toward the society between the rapist and the victim, the rapist and the victim's loved ones, and the rapist and anyone who values not being raped.

Theft. The stealing of property from another individual is unethical because of its destructiveness towards the society between the thief and the victim, the thief and the victim's loved ones, and the thief and anyone who values not being stolen from.

The second objection to this might be on the fact that different cultures around the world view the moral standing of murder, rape, and theft (and other behaviors) differently, quite in contrast to my claim that these behaviors are objectively unethical. The next part of this series will address this objection. Let us assume for the time being that this does not alter my determinations of the moral standing of these behaviors.

Murder, rape, and theft are obviously unethical as they obviously destroy the society and strengthen the enmity between individuals. Other behaviors are just as obviously unethical, ie. assault, battery, fraud, blackmail, and any other form of coercion or aggression. But many behaviors are not as obviously unethical and still others are defined too imprecisely to attempt a determination at all. In any event, every conceivable behavior, once defined as precisely and clearly as possible, may have its moral standing (or the lack thereof) objectively determined through logic and reason. Let us now look at possible qualifications to the above ethic.

Personal Ethics

One might wonder if the above ethic applies to the person without society; if there is anything unethical about the way a person behaves as it effects only themselves. If we qualify society in our ethic, then we can see how it would apply. If the ethic were "Ethical behavior is that which maintains or strengthens the intrapersonal society between parts of the self; unethical behavior is that which diminishes or destroys the intrapersonal society between parts of the self," then our ethic applies intrapersonally.

What are the implications of a personal ethic-creating qualification? To determine behaviors that maintain or strengthen intrapersonal society between parts of the self. These parts could be the ego, superego, and id, or they could be conscience,

subconscience, and unconscious minds, or they could be various parts of the mind and body. Psychology and biology informs us on the sorts of behaviors that strengthen either society or enmity within the body. Some examples of unethical personal behavior may be consuming harmful substances and disrespectful inner-dialogue. Qualifying the ethic to apply intrapersonally is acceptable, as is qualifying it by type of group.

Qualified Ethics

Qualifying the ethic by type of group has the effect of telescoping in to the unique set behaviors that one finds within each group. This time the qualification is on the type of individual. Here are two possible qualifications:

Family Ethics: Ethical behavior is that which maintains or strengthens the society between family members; unethical behavior is that which diminishes or destroys the society between family members.

Business Ethics: Ethical behavior is that which maintains or strengthens the society between individuals engaging in commerce; unethical behavior is that which diminishes or destroys the society between individuals engaging in commerce.

While this is unlikely to change our determinations on which behaviors are generally unethical, it does serve to focus on the groups in particular, the point of which is to determine the moral standing of behaviors among members of the group specifically. For example, is it unethical for parents to spank their children? And another, is it unethical for sellers to withhold vital information about their products from buyers? Family ethics would be of interest to those who value maintaining and strengthening society and diminishing enmity between family members, and business ethics likewise between individuals engaged in commerce. Another possible qualification would apply the ethic to the society between man and beast, ie. Human/Animal Ethics, for those who value society with non-human animals.

Final Thoughts

My attempt at a universal ethic will not be complete until the end of this series. In the next part I will explain why it seems that every person and every culture around the world (and universe) has their own idea on what constitutes ethical and unethical behavior. This fact will be dealt with and it will be revealed that it does not alter the ethic in any way. Different people and cultures have different moral standards, and that's okay. I would expect them to considering the diversity we witness in other areas of life.

An Attempt at a Universal Ethic II: Subjective Identification

An Attempt at a Universal Ethic III: Moral Outrage

An Attempt at a Universal Ethic IV: Universality

An Attempt at a Universal Ethic V: Integrating Alternatives
An Attempt at a Universal Ethic VI: Answering Objections

Read more from “One Voluntaryist’s Perspective”: