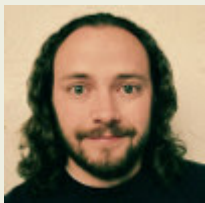


Whence Cometh Moral Outrage?



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"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](#).

Everyone seems to have their own definition of morality. Why is that? If morality is "the proper behavior for a person in society", which I think it is, then why is there such disagreement on what constitutes immoral behavior? Or put another way, what causes people to feel "moral outrage" toward certain behaviors and not toward others, and why do some feel it toward a given behavior while another does not? Why the seemingly subjective nature of moral outrage, but not of morality? Got your shovel? Good. Let's dig!

What is Moral Outrage?

Ward H. Goodenough offered an apt definition of moral outrage. He wrote, "[Moral outrage] is a response to infringements or transgressions on what people perceive to be the immunities they, or others with whom they identify, can expect on the basis of their rights and privileges and what they understand to be their reasonable expectations regarding the behavior of others." Moral outrage seems to come in at least two forms. It can be a feeling of disgust, likely rooted in the same part of the brain where we feel disgust for disgusting things like gross food or a gutted human body. It can also manifest as a feeling of "righteous wrath" or justified anger. To feel moral outrage, then, is to feel disgust and/or anger toward someone's behavior.

Personally, I feel moral outrage toward all sorts of behaviors, a list that has changed over the years. I currently feel moral outrage when I witness or hear about a parent spanking a child, a husband smacking his wife, a pervert raping a woman, a cop beating a suspect, a soldier dropping bombs on innocents at wedding parties, and so on and so forth. You may or may not feel moral outrage toward these same behaviors. You may be the parent, the husband, the pervert, the cop, or the soldier, or otherwise empathize with them and their morally outrageous behavior. Why the disparity?

The Basis of Morality and Moral Outrage

Moral behavior is that which can be considered proper for a person in society, and immoral

is that which is improper. The properness of behavior depends on its consequences to society, the community and fraternity that exists between persons. Society is either maintained or destroyed by the behaviors of society's members. Dishonesty, robbery, battery, rape, and murder are obviously immoral behaviors because they are destructive toward community and fraternity, and therefore, society. Every human behavior can thus be reasoned as being either moral, immoral, or amoral (not moral or immoral). Ethics, the science of morality, is an objective discipline which uses both reason and experience (history) to determine moral from immoral, or ethical from unethical, behavior.

If morality has an objective meaning, why do people feel moral outrage disparately? Humans are social animals. We have biological and psychological needs from birth to be nurtured by other humans. The first society that we experience are our immediate family members. As we experience this and larger society, we become socialized. Socialization is "the lifelong process of inheriting and disseminating norms, customs and ideologies, providing an individual with the skills and habits necessary for participating within his or her own society." Every person's socialization is different. Hunter-gatherers are socialized differently than white affluent North Americans because the society in which they are raised are different, sometimes greatly so.

Socialization is the reason that people feel moral outrage disparately. As people inherit different norms, customs, and ideologies, what they consider to be immunities, rights, and privileges – and transgressions against them – are likewise different. A white child being socialized in the antebellum South won't feel the same moral outrage toward black chattel slavery as those not raised to consider such slavery as normal and customary. Does this mean that slavery is moral to the white person from the antebellum South? No. Slavery is never moral, even though the white person might consider it so. Similarly for the person who feels moral outrage toward moral or amoral behavior, such as peaceful drug use or voluntary polygamy. (Or the feeling of moral outrage toward the moral outrage of another!) Morality is not a subjective determination, as previously explained. Moral outrage isn't either, but it is something felt *relative* to the socialization that someone experienced. That's why it *seems* like morality is subjective.

Changing Hearts and Minds

Even people who were seemingly socialized identically can feel moral outrage differently. I consider the existence of the state to be a moral outrage, but my siblings don't. Why do I feel moral outrage toward the state? Probably because I've learned different things about the state than they have. I see state interference in the economy as **destructive toward society** because I've studied sound economic theory. Indeed, it took economic arguments to get me interested in liberty in the first place. Likewise for parenting. Once I understood the destruction that the practice of punitive parenting creates toward society (micro and macro), I stopped spanking. In both cases, economics and parenting, it wasn't until I

understood why certain behaviors were destructive toward something I value – ie. society – that I began feeling moral outrage toward the state and punitive parenting.

This is instructive if I want to change hearts and minds, moving them toward voluntarist practices both inside and outside the home. Calling others immoral is more likely to create alienation than conversion. Actually, it stands to reason that calling others immoral, and thereby creating alienation, is destructive toward society, the community and fraternity that is a prerequisite for getting others to change their hearts and minds about what to feel moral outrage toward. I'm certainly guilty of doing this, intentionally or not. I do like to pick apart what I consider to be immoral practices. And if others are offended by that, what can I do about it? I can continually try new approaches and see how they turn out. I don't want to alienate others, but I also don't want to show tolerance for immorality. Thus is the fence I balance on daily.

Final Thoughts

As usual, more can be said. These are fascinating areas of study. Society, socialization, ethics, moral outrage, philosophy, economics, parenting, all of it. The more I learn, the more I realize how little I know and how little control I have in the world. Even within my own life I'm surrounded by other people with their own values, knowledge, wisdom, and desired ends, all of which I have no control over. I can be an example, but that's about it. And I choose to figure out and behave morally toward others because I value society and desire to see it maintained. Which desire also compels me to publicly identify and try to convince others to likewise behave morally. To each our own, I suppose.

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