

An Attempt at a Universal Ethic III: Moral Outrage



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An Attempt at a Universal Ethic I: Introduction

An Attempt at a Universal Ethic II: Subjective Identification

Moral outrage is an interesting phenomenon. We see people experience it for any number of reasons, and often contradictory. What is moral outrage, exactly, and when is it experienced? And more, how does it fit with the ethic as described in this series? Let’s find out.

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 foreigners 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 Moral Outrage

Unethical behavior is that which diminishes or destroys the society between individuals. As described in parts one and two, murder, rape, and theft are unethical behaviors because of their effect on the society between the individuals that identify particular instances of behavior as murder, rape, or theft. The moral standing of a behavior can be determined objectively through logic and reason, but how particular instances of behavior are identified is a matter of personal preference or cultural norm.

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 identify behaviors differently, and thus 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 identify the enslavement of blacks in the same way as someone raised in a different time or place.

The Result of Moral Outrage

When one identifies a behavior like murder, rape, or theft as a result of their socialization (or re-socialization), they will always experience moral outrage to some degree. As a result, the society between them and those behaving unethically is diminished or destroyed. I think it would be accurate to say that moral outrage is the physical manifestation of one’s identifying a particular instance of behavior as that which by definition is unethical (murder, rape, theft). The phenomenon of moral outrage is very real and can be observed all over the place and throughout time. This pairs nicely with the phenomenon of ethics. Both concern the identity of behaviors as that which either maintains or strengthens, or diminishes or destroys, the society between individuals.

Final Thoughts

Moral outrage is not limited to humans. Goodenough explained why moral outrage is a form of territoriality as seen throughout the animal kingdom. In the next part, I will address the universality of the ethic in regards to not only humans, but also the rest of the animal kingdom, including those which may be found in other parts of the universe. I don’t know if the universality of an ethic has ever been demonstrated to this degree, but mine can, so I must.

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

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