

An Attempt at a Universal Ethic VI: Answering Objections



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- An Attempt at a Universal Ethic I: Introduction
- 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

This series has been a delight to think and write about. I admit that I was a bit apprehensive at the beginning to get into this, but having done so it has been a weight lifted from my shoulders. In this final part I answer twelve objections that I received and hope my responses are sufficient. This will likely be a topic to occupy my time in the future, and I welcome all interested thinkers to give me their input on any part of this series. We can only grow by considering the strengths and weaknesses of any argument. Let us proceed.

Objection One

Your definitions of morality and ethics aren’t consistent with what philosophers tend to think of them as. Typically, morality is just “what you ought to do” or “what is the good as such,” not necessarily how social relations ought to be maintained. This is problematic since you seem to equivocate between the ethical and the social without justification.

My justification is given in the introduction to part one. This attempt at a universal ethic is an exercise in removing the obfuscation that has occurred over centuries by philosophers

and religionists. No, I don't expect my definitions of morality and ethics to be totally consistent with what these kinds of thinkers tend to think of them as, but nor are they totally different, as seen in part five. Further, my definitions are based on their etymological roots, again as given in part one.

Objection Two

“Ethical” and “moral” may be defined by others differently than your definition, and they may claim moral standing on a behavior on different grounds than whether it benefits or harms society between individuals.

Indeed, philosophers and religionists may claim moral standing of a behavior on different grounds than I. For example, religionists may claim the moral standing of a behavior based on the grounds that God approves or disapproves of it. It becomes their challenge to prove that God even exists, and is not a figment of the imagination, but also, to show why moral standing should be determined on these grounds. Even so, I think this approach integrates well into my ethic. What is the result of people behaving ethically according to their shared belief of God's will? The society between them is maintained or strengthened. And what is the result of people behaving unethically according to their shared belief of God's will? The society between them is diminished or destroyed. This is always the result, even when one party who believes in God's will and another party who does not relate in certain ways. Each party will still subjectively identify the particular instance of behavior according to their matrix of values, whether or not this includes God's will, leading to either the maintenance or the destruction of the society between them.

Objection Three

Ethics are the rules of conduct recognized in respect to a particular class of human actions or a particular group or culture. You're discussing moral philosophy and sociology, not ethics, and certainly not a universal ethical code.

I believe I addressed rules of conduct on the qualified ethics section in part one. For example, “business ethics” concerns the society between individuals engaged in commerce with one another. If these individuals desire to remain engaged in commerce with one another, then they'll behave in ways that each subjectively identify as that which is ethical (maintains or strengthens the society between them and others). The same goes

for any other particular group or culture.

Objection Four

It seems to violate Hume's law when you say that humans have evolved to be social creatures and value the social. Just because that is how it is doesn't produce any normative content.

I am not attempting to produce any normative content outside of one's desire ends. When I wrote that humans evolved to be social creatures and generally value society between themselves and others, this was not attempt to produce normative content, but rather an attempt to show that humans generally desire the end that is society between themselves and others. As such, ethicists and moral philosophers can prescribe appropriate means to that end, which prescription is freely adopted or not by those desiring that end.

Objection Five

Immanuel Kant, perhaps the greatest and most revolutionary moral philosopher to ever live, said that a pragmatic approach to ethics is just a cop out, and we ought to create universal oughts based upon our constitute nature as rational beings.

My question to Kant: Why? And on and on. As it stands I find myself attracted to philosophical nihilism. I can't conceive of universal oughts outside of one's values-based desired ends. However, I think that it is not irrational to make assumptions about a person's likely desired end, and perhaps this allows us to bridge the gap between Kant and nihilism. For example, it is not an irrational assumption to say that a person going about their business, enjoying themselves, relating with others, and so forth, desires to maintain society between himself and others. Once the assumption is made, based only on observation, we then proceed to prescribe oughts and ought nots for this person to achieve this desired end (which is likely a means to another end). That doesn't mean that he must accept these prescriptions, but he will if he can see that they are sound and appropriate toward his desired end.

Objection Six

"Murder," "rape," and "theft" are mere words, arbitrary symbols which are subjectively assigned concepts, and therefore it cannot be

said, in context of your ethic, that they are objectively unethical, as the lingual is inherently disconnected from the objective.

While it seems that what this objections points out about the subjectivity of language is true, I'm not sure its conclusion is. Yes, language and the definitions of the noises made by our mouths are whatever we say they are, if we are interested in effectively communicating to others, then we must agree on language and definitions. I defined, perhaps not precisely enough, murder, rape, and theft before explaining why those behaviors are unethical. If I were writing this in Spanish, I would have used a different combinations of letters and noises, but I would hope that I was clear enough with my meaning so as to be understood. In any event, it is a behavior whose moral standing is being determined, not a word's, and so as long as I clearly and precisely describe the behavior in my reader's language, I can effectively and objectively argue moral standing.

Objection Seven

I would argue that the breaking or building of society is generally the result of identifying behaviors that are seen as unethical or ethical, not that they are seen as unethical or ethical because they break or build society.

This objection seems to ignore the difference between analyzing a given behavior in the abstract versus a particular instance of behavior in reality. The same particular instance of behavior in reality can be identified as any given behavior in the abstract. I see a man raping his wife, you see a wife dishonoring her husband. Identification is subjective, and only after a behavior is identified can the result to the society between the individuals involved result, but that doesn't mean we can't determine the moral standing of each possible identification of a particular instance of behavior.

Objection Eight

A vacuum that is neither society nor enmity is not only possible, but quite common, and can be observed in any two individuals who exist in proximity, ignore each other's presence, and mind their own business.

This doesn't seem as much an objection as a clarification of something that I didn't focus

on explicitly. I agree with this. There are behaviors that don't seem to have any effect, positive or negative, on the society between individuals. This is true in the abstract as well as for particular instances. If two people have only ever behaved in these ways toward each other, then between them there would be neither society nor enmity.

Objection Nine

What about ethical gray areas? Some actions (ie. stealing from an orchard to feed a starving family) seem to build society between some (the thief and his children) and destroy society between others (the thief and the farmer).

This is a matter of the different individuals involved identifying the activity in their own way. The thief and his children identify it as "saving our lives," while the farmer identifies it as "stealing." The results to the society between the individuals involved result, ie. the thief's a hero to his children but a villain to the farmer. It is possible that the farmer never notices that a very small part of his crop is being absconded with, in which case he can't identify a behavior that he is unaware of. It is also possible that the farmer does notice, but understands the thief's motives, and chooses not to interfere. In this case it seems the farmer, too, identifies the behavior not as stealing, but as saving the lives of children. Perhaps we can say that "ethical gray areas" are those which the people involved will most certainly identify the behavior differently.

Objection Ten

Socialization, while arguably a major factor, is not the sole determining factor as to why people feel moral outrage in their particular way, as individual analysis of values must be factored in as well.

I agree that socialization is not the sole determining factor toward feeling moral outrage. This is not so much an objection as an amendment to part three. Socialization, enculturation, education, and the repeating of these processes all effect why people feel moral outrage in their particular way.

Objection Eleven

It is my understanding from your ethic that if Person A does an action

Z that degrades the society or builds enmity between himself and Person B then it is by definition unethical. What if Z was performed to increase the society between Person A and a third party, Person C? Is Z ethical if it creates more society between Persons A and C than enmity between Persons A and B? If so then “society” must also be objectively quantifiable, I don’t think that it can be.

The moral standing of action Z is determined by virtue of how it is identified by the individuals involved. As explained in part two and Objection Nine, every person involved will identify the particular instance of behavior (Z) subjectively. This identification may be the same or may be different than others. Person B and Person C each identify this behavior differently as evidenced by the result to the society between them and Person A. If Person B and Person C each identify the behavior the same, the result to the society between them and Person A will be the same.

Objection Twelve

If Person A steals something from Person B, but Person B fails to ever notice, does that mean the theft committed by Person A is not unethical?

In a way, yes, that particular instance of behavior in reality, if never identified, is never determined to be ethical or unethical. Of course different parts of Person A might identify the behavior differently, and intrapersonal society will be affected. There is always that possibility, but this is only an analysis of a particular instance of behavior in reality, not of a given behavior in the abstract. What if we make it so? What if we define this as “undetected theft” in the abstract. This is a qualification on theft, which I analyzed in part one. Can we say that undetected theft is unethical? Possibly. How about... though it might be undetected by the victim, it is not undetected by the thief, and the various parts of the thief (ego, id, conscience, conscious, unconscious, and so forth). Therefore it would seem that “undetected theft” is an oxymoron, an impossible behavior, and so we must drop the qualification and either find another one, or settle on “theft” which we *can* show to be unethical behavior.

Final Thoughts

These objections were pretty good I think, and they were a bit of a challenge to respond to. This marks the completion of my attempt at a universal ethic. I don’t know how it will be

received by those much more knowledgeable than me, but I'm excited to find out. While I think that my arguments here have merit, I am not married to them. My commitment in life is to understanding the truth and value of any idea. This series was an exercise for me in understanding the phenomenons of ethics and moral outrage, and why people react differently to the same behavior. While I never explicitly argued for a particular code of ethics to be followed, I think I demonstrated the kinds of considerations we should make if we desire to maintain society with others. If you desire to maintain society with others, then I think you can figure out your own code of ethics, to which I will say: Godspeed!

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