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Activism and offense : a philosophical analysis

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ACTIVISM AND OFFENSE:
A PHILOSOPHICAL ANALYSIS

A Thesis Submitted
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Designation
University Honors

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Introduction

In the realm of interpersonal interactions, there are many pieces of conventional wisdom that dictate how most Americans ought to behave. One such example of this is that Americans ought to “do good” in the world. This could mean simply acting kindly to others, but more often it is meant as taking explicit action to promote positive change in the world. Another social norm is that Americans, particularly Iowans and other Midwesterners¹, ought to “avoid causing offense.” It is not difficult to see how these two norms sometimes collide, since positive change often entails the transformation of social norms that some deeply value. In this paper, I will examine the question of whether “doing good” in the sense of social activism may sometimes necessarily entail offense. I will argue that it is indeed the case that social activism and causing offense are typically linked, and more importantly, that a deeper understanding of this conflict of norms will provide a framework to guide those who wish to engage in social justice activism.

Methodology

My approach to this thesis will be a philosophical analysis of an issue in applied ethics. I will first be creating a definition of both activism and offense. However, unlike most research, the construction of these definitions will be not merely foundational, but central, to my thesis. These definitions will not be simplified like a typical dictionary definition, but will rather attempt to capture the complexities entailed in each concept. I will do this by analyzing various dictionary definitions, explicit definitions found in various literature, and implicit definitions by virtue of how the terms are used in various literature.

¹ Though the claim that Midwesterners have adopted this norm more so than others may be partially based on popular stereotypes, Rentfrow et al., 2008 have found that those in the West North Central and East North Central U.S. Census regions (which together make up the what is commonly known as the “Midwest”) have high levels of “agreeableness” based on the Big Five personality domains (Rentfrow 2010). This trait would seem to coincide with wanting to avoid causing offense.

After clarifying my working definitions and my understanding of each concept, I will then further analyze each concept in terms of how the two are connected. This will entail a philosophical analysis of each, using relevant literature in ethics, political philosophy, and other conceptual analyses. In addition, I will demonstrate the connection between activism and offense through real world examples.

Finally, I will use these analyses to argue that effective activism and avoiding causing offense are incompatible goals. Given this, I will conclude that critical ethical reflection is necessary on the part of activists; in particular, I will explore how one could answer the question, “Is the cause I am undertaking worthy enough to justify causing offense?”

Definitions

Before analyzing the intersection of activism and offense, I will construct a definition of each. I will do this by analyzing various dictionary definitions, explicit definitions found in various literature, and implicit definitions by virtue of how the terms are used in various literature. My goal is to create a pragmatic definition of each, thereby getting to the root of the concepts I am exploring rather than trying to capture every possible usage of the terms.

Activism

I considered the following dictionary definitions of “activism” in developing my working definition. I have only included the portion of the definition that pertained to my research specifically.

Webster’s New World College Dictionary, Fourth Edition

The doctrine or policy of taking positive, direct action to achieve an end, esp. a political or social end.

American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition

The use of direct, often confrontational action, such as a demonstration or strike, in opposition to or support of a cause.

The Oxford American College Dictionary

The policy or action of using vigorous campaigning to bring about political or social change.

The Oxford English Dictionary, Second Edition

A doctrine or policy of advocating energetic action.

Among these definitions, all seem to highlight two particular concepts: action and progress. As for “action,” this can be seen both from its explicit usage and from the implication of action through words and phrases like “vigorous campaigning” and “advocating.” Though “progress” is not used explicitly, the concept is strongly evoked through words and phrases such as “positive...political and social end,” “support of a cause,” and “political or social change.”

In the very basic sense of the word “action,” it simply means “doing something.” However, in the context of activism, it contains a more specific implication. To this end, Twentieth century philosopher and political theorist Hannah Arendt argues that there are three main human activities: labor, work and action (Arendt 7). Regarding action, she writes, “To act, in its most general sense, means to take an initiative, to begin,...to set something into motion.... Because they are *initium*, newcomers and beginners by virtue of birth, men take initiative, are prompted into action” (Arendt 177). What she means by this is that by simply being born a unique human being, all people are capable of starting something new; this initiation of “set[ting] something into motion” is what is entailed in when one takes “action.”

To explain further what is meant by this, it is necessary to tie in Arendt’s concepts of “freedom” and “plurality” as they relate to action. While the consequence of initiation is action,

what allows for this initiation in the first place is the fact that every unique human being is born with freedom. This is one aspect that distinguishes action from labor and work; unlike the latter two, action is impossible without human freedom (Arendt 177). Plurality is another distinguishing factor between action and labor/work. Labor and work occur by way of automatic human processes, and thus do not theoretically require different individuals, or plurality, for their functioning. By contrast, action can only occur when there is a plurality of human actors; more clearly defining this, Arendt writes, "...the human condition of plurality...[is] living as a distinct and unique being among equals" (Arendt 178). Action requires that there be other individuals with whom one makes contact, because without this plurality, there cannot be said to be a society; being in the context of a society is what makes action significant in the first place, insofar as it affects and engages the other human actors who make up that society. Further, without the *uniqueness* of each person, which plurality entails, there would be no difference of opinion or behavior, and therefore no societal problems; it is the overcoming of these conflicts that provide the purpose for engaging in action.

Arendt's conception of action adds nuance to my current definitional basis for activism. It reinforces the idea of bringing forth something new, whether it be an idea, an argument, a physical action, or a combination of those. This relates to the dictionary definitions that referenced the bringing about of change--itself a concept that implies something different than that which is already occurring. In addition, Arendt introduces the idea of plurality as being necessary to action, which is very relevant to how activism functions. For instance, if there hypothetically existed only one person in the world (or perhaps someone stranded on a desert island with no possibility of future human contact), then activism would be impossible. This is because there would be nothing to take action for; societal change requires the existence of a

“society,” which cannot occur with only one person.

This connects to “progress” in activism, which goes further to imply not only change, but change toward a better state of affairs than society is in currently. To be clear, one person’s “progress” is another’s “regress,” or what they would consider to be the opposite of progress. Discussing societal progress in this context is not intended to be an objective moral statement, but rather that, from the perspective of the activists in question, they see a particular social end or goal as being positive. It is necessary that the definition of activism concord with this point to ensure there is no bias in my ethical assessment of activism-caused offense. In other words, I must be able to morally justify offense even in a case where I would be the one feeling offended. The examples employed later on in this paper will clearly demonstrate the usage of “progress” and “activism” in this way.

This assessment brings me to a pragmatic definition of activism: *Activism is initiating an action toward the goal of societal progress.* This can take many forms; “social” progress does not necessarily imply stereotypical grassroots activism, such picketing at a protest (though it does certainly include this form of activism). Rather, activism can come in the form of a Washington lobbyist advocating for same-sex marriage, or pushing for the implementation of a particular corporate loophole in exchange for reelection campaign finances. Even though corporate lobbyists are not typically thought of as activists, all lobbyists are activists given that they are pushing for what they see as societal progress in the form of policy changes that benefit their company or organization (which they likely view as important to the economy, particular segments of the population, and/or society as a whole). While this may seem to be an unconventional example of activism, it is an important one to analyze so as to set the boundaries for what is included in the activity; this is necessary to giving an accurate analysis of the

interaction between activism and offense later on.

Offense

As with “activism,” I utilized definitions of “offense” from four reputable dictionaries in developing my working definition, and have only included that which pertains to my specific research.

Webster’s New World College Dictionary, Fourth Edition

The act of creating resentment, hurt feelings, displeasure, etc.

American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition

A violation or infraction of a moral or social code; a transgression or sin.

The Oxford American College Dictionary

A thing that constitutes a violation of what is judged to be right or natural. Annoyance or resentment brought about by a perceived insult to or disregard for oneself or one’s standards or principles.

The Oxford English Dictionary, Second Edition

Feeling of being hurt, painful or unpleasant sensation, pain. Offended or wounded feeling; displeasure, annoyance, or resentment caused (voluntarily or involuntarily) to a person.

These dictionary definitions mainly focus on offense being a negative feeling connected with some sort of violation of a belief or norm that one holds dear. Words and phrases such as resentment, anger, displeasure, insult, hurt feelings, disregard for, wounded feelings, annoyance, and disgust all evoke a strong sense of negative emotions. With regard to what one does when they cause feelings of offense in another, several related concepts are present, such as creating negative feelings in another, breaking a commonly accepted rule or principle, violating what is judged to be right or natural, wounding the feelings or susceptibilities of another, and inciting

negative emotions. On the receiving end of offense, these definitions focus on the perception of a violation of, attack on, and insult to one's moral law, divine law, social code, standards, or principles.

While the dictionaries do not say this directly, there is reason to believe that offense can also occur in connection with a perceived attack on one's identity. As one's beliefs and one's identity tend to be connected, having others advocate against those beliefs can be viewed as a personal affront. Even if the activism is not against the person in particular, but rather directed toward a larger group to which they belong, the nature of collective identity is such that an attack on one's personal identity will still likely be felt (Meyer et.al. 47).

Psychologists David R. Sigmon and C.R. Snyder have constructed the following definition of offense-taking for the purpose of a study: "Offense-taking is defined as the perceived deprivation of what is rightfully due to a person" (445). Further, they write, "For offense-taking to occur, the offended person must ascribe responsibility for the deprivation to another person or object. Also, the phrase 'what is rightfully due' implies that the individual taking offense has an applicable concept of justice, and is holding that other person accountable for having transgressed against that justice concept" (445-446).

Sigmon and Snyder may not realize it (though it is possible they may), but they have engaged in a philosophical analysis of the concept of offense. The rest of their study focuses on the factors that make one susceptible to offense-taking, but the definition they use as the basis of their study has come about mainly through philosophical, not scientific, means. However, this definition is still likely based on their empirical observations of what self-identified "offense" looks like. In particular, the idea of transgression of one's concept of justice seems to fit with what has been discussed previously about a perceived attack on the social norms to which one

subscribes.

Based on this analysis of offense, I have constructed the following working definition: *Offense is a perceived unjust attack on or violation of one's deeply held beliefs, norms, and/or sense of identity.* To be clear, individuals' reactions to feeling offense may differ greatly; this point will be covered in greater detail later in the paper. However, this does not change the definition of what it is to *feel* offense.

Intersection of Activism and Offense

Based on the definitions I have developed, I see there being a definitive intersection between activism and offense. First, Arendt's conception of action, which entails freedom and plurality, implies that offense is likely. This is because action is not intelligible without a plurality of unique actors who represent varied perspectives, interests, values, and norms. To reiterate, if there were hypothetically only one person in the world, there would be no society in which to act and no norms or policies to attempt to change. The same can be said for offense, in that a single individual cannot offend or be offended; other human actors with whom to interact are necessary. Thus, there being a plurality of free actors is a necessary condition for both activism and offense to take place.

Second, the social change which can be brought about by activism often entails the transformation of social norms that some people deeply value. By the "social norms," I mean ideals that are taken as given in everyday interactions. Thus, when one sees another person working to transform one's deeply held ideals, one will naturally experience offense.

Finally, as discussed earlier, the close connection between beliefs and identity, including identities associated with membership to a larger group, tends to be a catalyst for feeling offense when action is taken against those particular beliefs. Because activism entails advocating for

social change, those who identify with opposing beliefs, which support current norms, will view the activism as being an attack on their identity, thus resulting in offense.

If my argument thus far is correct, then it follows from the previous discussion of the intersection of activism and offense that doing effective activism and simultaneously avoiding causing any offense are incompatible goals.

Examples

In order to demonstrate the real world application of these philosophical ideas, I will give four examples of activism (two from history and two that are existent currently) and point out how they exemplify my above analysis of the relationship between activism and offense, namely that the former almost always entails the latter.²

Civil Rights

Civil rights activists pushed for full social and legal equality for African-Americans, especially during the 1950s and 1960s. Some of their activism tactics included engaging in civil disobedience such as sit-ins and having black students show up to whites-only schools, holding marches and rallies, and promoting voting registration among African Americans (Bankston 2013). As civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. wrote in his *Letter from a Birmingham Jail* about the actions of white civil rights activists, “They, unlike many of their moderate brothers, have recognized the urgency of the moment and sensed the need for powerful ‘action’ antidotes to combat the disease of segregation” (King). This displays how these activists were taking action in order to affect what they viewed to be important social progress.

One example of the offense caused by these activists is that the reforms for which they

² It is worth pointing out that not all of these social movements are ones that I support. This is important because if I only chose to exemplify offense caused by social movements I do support, I would risk giving a biased analysis. By including a movement whose activism offends *me*, I am exhibiting the universal nature of the framework.

advocated conflicted with many people's beliefs and norms about race. In addition, the message of equality on the part of the activists violated some white people's sense of identity in society; the activists fought directly against their notion of white people holding a superior place in the social hierarchy than people of color. This can be seen in much of the rhetoric of the segregationists, including this excerpt from a 1942 newspaper editorial: "The negro has his rightful place in the American way of life...as for accepting on a plane of equality, as is being advocated by some negro leaders--it must and shall not be done" (Ward 41).

Women's Suffrage

Women's suffrage activists in the United States fought against laws barring women from the right to vote. During the movement that spanned from the mid 1800s until the ratification of the 19th Amendment in 1920, activists held conventions and formed organizations to bring publicity to the issue, mobilizing women to be vocal and participate in public demonstrations such as marches (Encyclopedia Britannica 2013). In this way, women's suffrage activists attempted to (and eventually did) affect what they saw as positive social change.

Like the civil rights activists (though before them, chronologically), these activists offended others based on the fact that they caused people to question their norms and beliefs about a particular group which also entailed the questioning of their identity in relation to that group. This can be seen by the fact that the work of women's suffrage activists conflicted with many people's beliefs and norms about gender, exemplified by one anti-suffrage petition that deemed the suffrage movement as "radical and its followers as immoral and antifamily, in 'rebellion against the laws, human and Divine'" (Marshall 22).

In particular, for some men, the notion of women's opinions having equal weight at the ballot box called into question their identities in both the public and private sphere. Because men

had previously been the only ones given full access to the political affairs entailed in the public sphere and women had been limited to private sphere matters of the household, some men felt that women having more power in the public sphere would dilute and undermine their power and privileged status, thus threatening their identity as ruling member of the family.

Anti-Abortion

Anti-abortion activists, self identified as having a “pro-life” stance, fight against legalized abortion. Some of their tactics include protesting outside of abortion clinics and holding demonstrations with graphic depictions of aborted fetuses, though they are also engaged in political action by mobilizing people to vote for referenda that will limit legal abortion and politicians who will work to do the same. Given that they view embryos and fetuses in the womb as having the same rights as someone post-birth, anti-abortion activists deem legally terminating a pregnancy to be a form of murder in which the state is complicit (Kaplan et al. 2013). In fighting against this, anti-abortion activists are promoting what they view as positive social change: a world in which murder is drastically reduced, and no longer a legal and state-supported option.

For those who see abortion as a right for women (at least up to some point in a pregnancy), they may be offended by the message of anti-abortion activists. Some people may see anti-abortion activism as conflicting their with their value of or belief in personal choice in which freedom and moral responsibility are grounded. Because they view an embryo or fetus as being part of the body of a woman, they believe that a pregnant woman should be on able to choose if she wants an embryo or fetus connected to and dependent on her body. This rhetoric is apparent in pro-choice activism today, as seen in the following excerpts of a 2005 *New York Times* letter to the editor: “It’s my body. There’s a reason that’s a rallying cry for the pro-choice

movement...It is a nightmare to imagine that [the law] could require a woman to relinquish control over her body and life in order to become an unwilling vessel” (Ritchie). Additionally, anti-abortion activism may attack some women’s identities as being an ethical decision makers. This is due to the fact that anti-abortion activists view abortion as murder, and murder of innocents in particular; this is an act universally regarded as profoundly immoral.

Same-sex Marriage

Same-sex marriage activists, self identified as advocates of “marriage equality,” fight for legal marriage to be extended to same-sex couples. Though much of their activism involves direct political action by mobilizing people to vote for same-sex marriage or politicians who support the issue, they also hold protests and marches (Pritchard 2013). Because they see homosexuality as being an equally legitimate form of sexuality to heterosexuality, these activists believe same-sex couples should be afforded equal legal marriage rights; to them, this fight is causing societal progress, since it is extended the ideal of equality to another minority group that has been denied equal treatment under the law.

For those against homosexuality, they may be offended by what is advocated for on the part of same-sex marriage activists. Some people may see same-sex marriage as conflicting with both social norms and their religious views of what marriage entails. In this sense, some view same-sex marriage as being doubly wrong--it goes against both their notion of a correct society and what they believe to be true as communicated by a religious authority or sacred text. This is apparent in much of the rhetoric of those opposed to same-sex marriage, as demonstrated by these excerpts of a 2013 letter to the editor in the *Myrtle Beach Sun News*:

The Bible condemns homosexuality as an immoral and unnatural sin. Leviticus 18:22 identifies it as an abomination, a detestable sin...In regard to the family, psychologists

contend that a union between a man and woman in which both spouses serve as good gender role models is the best environment in which to raise well-adjusted children... 'Marriage is a very sacred union between a man and a woman, and to call same-sex unions marriage is a tragedy' (Bethel).

Adding to this, same-sex marriage could cause some to question their heteronormative identity; that is to say, they are unfamiliar with how a marriage operates when there is not one man and one woman in the relationship, and this causes them to feel less secure in their identity as being part of a marriage defined by heteronormative gender roles.

A Framework for Activists: Ethical and Practical Considerations

As with much of practical philosophy, the solution to the question of how to reconcile effective activism while also causing offense is not without ambiguities. Both ethical and practical implications must be considered in doing so.

For some, it is central to their conception of an ideal world that offense be limited. For others, it is imperative that social progress be made, despite the cost of how it affects detractors emotionally. Given this state of affairs, weighing various options against each other is inevitable. That is to say, there may not be a perfect option for how to create social change and also abide by the accepted social norms, but then again, if society functioned in such a morally unambiguous fashion, it is unlikely social change would have to occur in the first place; all people with the capacity for both rationality and moral judgment would behave the same way. Since this is not the case, it is inevitable that ethical judgments must weigh two or more less-than-ideal cases in order to find the one that best concords with one's principles and goals.

This being said, there are varying degrees of "less-than-ideal" cases, and I argue that in the realm of social change, offense in itself is not an ethical reason to abstain from the activity. In

addition, as a framework for activists, pragmatism must always, in some way, be taken into the equation. After all, activism is not only about sitting around in armchairs, so to speak, and discussing what a better, more just, more ethical world would look like. Though critical reflection and discussion over what constitutes a just cause are necessary *precursors* to activism, truly *engaging* in activism requires action; it is an activity that seeks to actually change the minds and behavior of others so that that better, more just, more ethical world may come into existence. Ignoring the psychological and other research behind what actually causes people to change their minds and behavior makes for ineffective activism, which arguably is not much “activism” at all. This means that, to the best of their knowledge and ability, activists ought to act in such a way that they can, in good conscience, know that they have done the best they can to realistically affect social change.

This is supported by Kant’s notion of the “good will,” which is his basis for moral action. As he writes in the first section of *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, “Nothing in the world--indeed nothing even beyond the world--can possibly be conceived which could be called good without qualification except a good will” (Kant 9). What this means is that even if one’s actions result in an undesirable outcome, as long as they had a good will, their action can be considered moral. By “good will,” Kant means a will to action that respects the integrity and dignity of those with whom one interacts.³ Applied to activism specifically, this means that activism is morally good if and only if the activist in question had a good will.

This being said, the norm in question--“don’t offend”-- is not entirely without basis; it does not appear to be human nature, after all, to “enjoy” being offended. Some people seem more prone to offense than others, but regardless of what causes the psychological sensation, it is

³ This is found in the second formulation of Kant’s Categorical Imperative, which will be explained in greater detail later on in this paper.

not regarded as a happy or fulfilling experience. However, there are still two arguments as to why offense ought not be avoided outright.

First, on the societal level, if the change for which one acts is positive, then it is worth causing the feeling of offense in others, both ethically and pragmatically. While this could certainly be considered a subjective value statement, most mainstream ethical theories would support such an assessment, because a state of affairs that is more positive by definition includes a more positive *ethical* state of affairs. And, pragmatically, even if some members of a society are offended, there may be others who, by this action, discover the opportunity to organize as a group and advocate for their cause.

Second, on an individual level, offense is a subjective reaction to action and may fluctuate as time goes by; even if someone is offended at one point in time, they may not be offended at a later point. Offense is a complex emotion that may remain stagnant or augment in intensity, but it also may diminish over time. It is possible that fluctuation in the level of offense will alter the willingness of one to change his or her mind in supporting a particular cause. This means that activists who wish to be effective ought to consider, rather than disregard, the effect that offense has on individuals whose beliefs and actions they are trying to change.

It is also relevant to point out that for some activists, having been offended may have been the fuel that first ignited their sense of a call to action (Meyer et al. 128). Offense can function as a powerful source of change, but that should indicate two things to activists. First, even if they are offended, vehemently disagreeing with someone on a particular issue, they must be able to recognize the strong connection between belief and identity felt by the “other side.” Instead of demonizing the opposition, it may be more ethical and productive to recognize the difficulty of changing their strongly-held belief, particularly one that evokes the feeling offense

when not shared by others. This does not mean that activists should aim not to offend, but it does mean that they should not disregard the fact that their opposition may be offended. It is important to recognize that people believe what they do for complex reasons.

While I am not able to unpack this complexity in the context of this paper, I can point out that contributing to the complexity is the sense of community and identity many derive from holding such beliefs; as previously explained, most activists can likely relate to this. For this reason, even if activism is aimed directly at changing the ideas and actions of others, the emphasis should be on just that--changing the *ideas* and *actions* of others, and not on demonizing the people as people.

For both ethical and practical reasons, it is important that activists refrain from making those whose beliefs they wish to change into a demonized “other.” One reason it is unethical to treat the opposition in this manner may be best explained by Kant’s second formulation of the categorical imperative:⁴ “Act so that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of another, always as an end and never as a mean only” (Kant 46). For activists, this means that regardless of the beliefs of the people they are trying to persuade, they must always act in such a way that they respect their opposition’s dignity and integrity--even if they do not respect their beliefs.

As this pertains to the practical implications of offending people, not only does ignoring that the opposition has experienced offense fail to uphold Kant’s second formulation of the categorical imperative, but it also fails to consider the reality of belief transformation. Simply causing offense and not engaging the other side in a way that considers their humanity creates a barrier to potential mutual understanding and transformation. Although activists are working to

⁴ Kant’s categorical imperative serves as a deontological standard for what is considered moral action.

change the beliefs and actions of others, they must also open themselves up to dialogue with the other side, leaving open the possibility of personal transformation. This does not mean that activists must concede points they do not agree with, or even feel the need to “respect” beliefs; on the contrary, activists may often be fully entitled to think that the beliefs of the other side are immoral, illogical, irrational, and the like. However, activists must still be willing to *listen* to what their opposition has to say. This is because doing so (a) indicates that they recognize their opposition to be human beings who deserve respect, which includes at least considering their arguments, and also (b) makes for more effective activism by showing the opposition that their main concern is with making positive social change, rather than just shoving their beliefs down the throat of others or intentionally offending those who disagree. And by engaging in this dialogue, activists may, in fact, themselves experience a transformation of beliefs, or at least a transformation in the level of understanding they have of the other side. This openness to self-transformation is important in activism if the ultimate aim is to create a better society. This is because nothing is absolute, and therefore activists must be open to the possibility that they may be wrong.

Another practical consideration related to causing offense is that even when activists only intend to target beliefs, the opposition may feel an attack on their identity, evoking a much stronger, more negative reaction. Separating one’s ideas and actions from one’s identity can be extremely difficult, both personally and with reference to others. And to some degree, it may not be wise to completely rid oneself of one’s connection between identity and ideas. As seen, the sense of personal and collective identity it brings can be a very strong driving force behind one’s activism. As such, there is no perfect answer as to how to address the connection between one’s identity and his or her actions and ideas; and even if I could construct the formula for the activist

utopia, it would be almost worthless in light of the fact that the connection between identity and beliefs seems too deep in American culture to easily change.

In this sense, perhaps it necessary to simply accept the connection between beliefs and identity, and not try to figure out how to parse the two. If belief transformation implies identity transformation, perhaps the latter ought to be considered as a goal of activism as well. In addition, there is not anything necessarily morally wrong with trying to change someone's identity--as long as it is done in a way that respects the humanity of the person in question, without demonizing or treating them as an "other." And to be clear, this may not be as applicable to some issues as it is for others. For instance, it may not take identity transformation to change the belief that one ought to switch to compact fluorescent light bulbs, especially if the person in question already identifies as someone who cares about the environment. However, for belief transformation that directly conflicts with someone's current identity, such as trying to convince a member of the National Rifle Association that she or he ought to support gun control legislation, identity transformation must necessarily occur as well. And it is without controversy that identity transformation is rarely an easy or rapid process, often inhibited by feelings of offense as a result of others telling them that their current beliefs and identity ought to be changed.

This brings us back to the problem in question: how do activists address the difficulty of changing the beliefs, and often the identity, of others? The primary solution, it seems to me, is to bear this problem in mind and put themselves in the shoes of their opposition. Drawing on Kant's ethics and the notion of being open to the opposition, even though people may be on different sides of a specific issue, everyone has experienced what it is like to feel personally offended; this allows activists to be able to understand, at least to some extent, the effect they are

having on the offended party. This will make both for more ethical action, and for more effective action, as well. This is because when one thinks like those they are trying to influence, they are more likely to be reminded of their humanity, as well as be more effective in influencing them. After all, we are all more open to being influenced when we see that the others with whom we are interacting care about us as persons.

Based on this analysis of ethical and practical considerations, I have constructed the following basic framework for activists: *Offense is ethically permissible if the activism that causes it seeks to affect what is, in good conscience, positive social change, and is done so in a way that respects the dignity of people whose beliefs and/or identity it seeks to change.* Activists ought also to consider what will most effectively affect positive social change, so long as the tactics used are within reasonable standards of ethical permissibility.

Significance and Conclusion

This analysis alerts activists to the difficulty of giving equal weight to the norms of "doing good" and "avoiding offense." In doing so, it calls into question the Midwestern/Iowan social norm of trying hard to avoid offense by giving a philosophical basis for why activism ought to be given greater moral weight. This makes for a more realistic and philosophically sound framework for engaging in activism.

Seeing as engaging in activism and also avoiding causing offense may yield a conflict of norms, it would follow that some activists may wish to entirely disregard the consideration of avoiding offense as an important social norm. However, this is not the message I wish to convey. Instead of ignoring offense, activists ought to recognize offense when it occurs, and use it as a reminder of the ambiguous nature of morality. In other words, if someone is offended, it indicates the existence of a difference in, and even conflict among, norms, or at least in the

implementation of those norms. Conflict reminds activists of the moral ambiguity of all normative claims, especially the fact that we do not have direct access to absolute moral norms. Taking this point into consideration, in order to exercise moral responsibility, activists therefore ought to think critically about their own values, asking in particular: “Is the cause I am undertaking worthy enough to justify causing offense?”

Although answering this question in its entirety would extend beyond the purposes of this paper, it is a question that is so intimately connected to my larger analysis of activism and offense that I will briefly address it here. In answering the above question, activists ought to consider which norms justify causing offense as a result of their activism. Though ethical evaluations are, again, ambiguous in nature, the construction of a moral framework could serve to guide activists as they critically reflect on their actions.

As an example of what this process may look like, it would likely be useful to, as an activist, ask oneself a series of questions. First, “Is there an ethical system that justifies my cause in the first place? If so, what does it look like?” If there is no system of ethics that can justify one’s cause, that would be a good indicator that the activist needs to probe at the larger question of why she or he feels this is a cause one ought to undertake. Otherwise, he or she may risk pushing for something for merely personal or emotional reasons rather than a more ethically sound justification, such as might be found in Kantian deontological ethics, Mill’s utilitarianism, Aristotelian virtue ethics, and the like. Though I do not necessarily abide by any of the aforementioned ethical systems (I find myself to be more of an ethical pragmatist,) they at least all have the virtue of being grounded in reasonable argumentation as well as being intended as universal systems; that is to say, the validity of each system lies in its hypothetical intersubjectivity, that is to say, its ability to be held as true by everyone. I find potential

intersubjectivity to be a good basis for justifying one's activism, because, if activists cannot conceive of reasonable arguments as to why *everyone* ought to agree with the system behind their activism, then they ought to reconsider how reasonable it is to push for that cause on a societal level. Falling short of the possibility of including "everyone" in the system would itself, by its very nature, fall short of the system being just, since it would privilege some people over others.

After establishing a sound ethical basis, activists should ask: "What is the nature of the offense I would be causing? Would it be relatively trivial offense, or would it be deep offense, felt for reasons with a potentially intersubjective basis?" One way of going about this would be to assess if the beliefs, norms, and/or sense of identity that the activism is attacking are actually worthy in themselves. For instance, take activists who engage in blowing up city infrastructure as a form of environmental protest. If upon further reflection those activists come to see that their activism violates the deeply held belief that people ought not be killed unless as they as individuals did something that justifies death, those activists may realize both that they are causing a deep level of offense, and that those who are deeply offended are justified in feeling that way because a potentially universalizable moral principle (not killing those who do not deserve it) has been broken. As a result, activists may come to realize that their activism (or at least the tactics involved) are no longer justified. On the other hand, if environmental justice activists were to cause offense simply by making people question their identity as being the type of person who lives in an environmentally friendly way, the level of offense could probably be considered unharmed and trivial; as there is no reasonable ethical principle that is being broken, this alone would not provide a rationale for the activism to not be considered justified.

Finally, after considering the above, activists can go back to the original question: "Is the

cause I am undertaking worthy enough to justify causing offense?” While there is no perfect method of considering this question, I find that activists can better justify causing offense with their activism if it meets two criteria: (a) the activism itself is rooted in a potentially intersubjectively held system of ethics or principles, and (b) the offense they are causing does not come about by disregarding the humanity of those whose beliefs they are trying to change. While this type of framework, again, is still largely based on what is considered “progress” from an individual’s perspective, I believe it nonetheless adds a broader philosophical understanding to the nature of the intersection of activism and offense, including the types of larger questions activists ought to consider before engaging in activism that will, almost undoubtedly, offend.

Further Research

Though this paper gives a preliminary analysis of the ethical implications of doing activism and avoiding causing offense, there remain questions that require further research. One such area is that of the conceptual nature of intersubjectivity as an ethical norm. How does it relate to ethical action? Is there a sound basis for the assumption that an action is more ethical the more people are included in it? If answered, these questions would provide activists a more solid ethical framework.

Additionally, due to the philosophical nature of this paper, I was not able to investigate many of the empirical questions that are necessary to consider. In particular, it is important for activists to know what makes for effective activism. Do some activism tactics cause more or less offense than others? If so, what are they, and why? Answering this question would be useful for developing a more practical framework for activists, particularly in light of the second research question I would address: How does offense positively or negatively affect belief transformation? While common sense would indicate a negative correlation between having

one's beliefs challenged and changing said beliefs, it is worth researching whether there is an empirical basis for this. Hypothetically, if it were discovered that feeling offended caused the questioning of one's beliefs to the extent that they would be likely to reconsider and eventually change them, activists may then want to actually try to offend.

Even if the aforementioned questions are answered, however, one further empirical question remains crucial to an applied ethical framework for activists: Are there any harmful psychological effects to feeling offense? If so, what are they? Though most offense would not appear to be harmful in any seriously way, it is certainly possible that some deep level of offense could trigger a post-traumatic stress disorder reaction or something of the like. While this is likely the exception and not the rule regarding offense, it is still worth considering in my ethical analysis of whether or the goals of activism always take precedence over avoiding offense. If and when further research can be done on all of these questions, there will be a strong basis for activists to make good ethical and practical decisions as they go about their activism.

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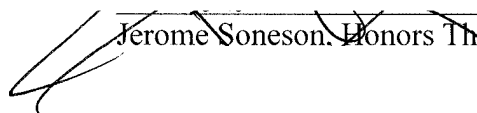
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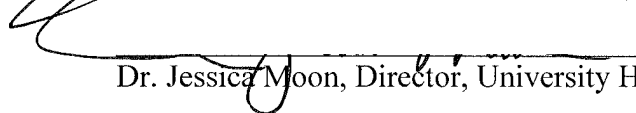
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