

Chapter II

Giving and Taking Offence in a Global Context¹

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the concept of offence, both its giving and taking, and argues that such an examination can shed some light on global ethical issues. It examines the nature of offence, what, if anything, is wrong in giving offence, the obligations on the offended, whether or not offence is objective, and offence in a global setting. It argues for the view that choice and context provide some way of distinguishing between offence which is a serious moral issue and that which is not. It is morally worse to offend those who have no choice in the area of the offence, for example race, than in areas where there is choice. Intermediate cases such as religious belief, choice depends largely on education and exposure to alternatives. Context is important in that offending the vulnerable is morally worse than offending those in more powerful, or privileged groups.

INTRODUCTION: WHY BOTHER WITH OFFENCE?

A study of the concept of offence can shed some light on global ethical issues. While offence is frequently not taken very seriously, the contention here is that it should be. A better understanding of why offence is taken and why some instances of giving offence are reprehensible and others are not can assist our understanding of what is necessary in a global ethics. The argument here focuses on the morality of giving offence rather than on what kinds of offence, if any, should be subject to legal restrictions. The recent case of the Danish cartoons illustrates the importance of the notion of offence. Unless offence is taken seriously, that case has no interesting moral dimension. It is simply an instance of someone exercising their legitimate right to freedom of expression and others unjustifiably objecting. The Danish publisher was right to do what he did and the offended Muslims were wrong to object. If, however, offence is taken seriously, then the

question of who was right and who was wrong becomes more problematic, and the issue can be seen as a real clash of values. In liberal democratic states, freedom of expression is highly valued, but this is not universal. Perhaps it should be, but when considering ethics in a global context, we are not starting with a clean slate. The realities of the world are where we start. In some parts of the world the general notion of freedom of expression is not even entertained. It simply is not an issue to be taken into account. Social cohesion and religious beliefs are all important. The society rather than the individual comes first. Once that is realised, the offence that was taken is more comprehensible. From the perspective of the offended, there is a good reason for taking offence; there has been a violation of an important religious value for no apparent reason other than denigration of the Muslim faith. While the situation was undoubtedly more complicated and some took advantage of the cartoons for their own ends, the fact is that it was relatively easy for them to do this, partly because of a lack of understanding of the importance of freedom of speech in most Western countries and the feeling that their religion was not being respected.

It is impossible to limit offence to national or cultural borders given the current state of the electronic media, particularly the Internet. Some action, acceptable in one country or culture, can be extremely offensive in another. As noted above, cartoons have played a prominent role in recent times in causing offence in countries other than those in which they were published, particularly those published in Denmark. Those cartoons depicted the prophet Mohammad in ways that much of the Muslim world considered blasphemous. Earlier a cartoon in Australia depicted a scene in which certain Israeli actions were compared with Nazi actions at Auschwitz. This cartoon was severely criticised because of its offensiveness to Jews and was withdrawn. More recently an Indonesian newspaper published a cartoon showing

the Australian Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs as copulating dogs. This was in response to Australia granting temporary visas to a group of illegal immigrants from the Indonesian province of Papua. In retaliation, an Australian newspaper published a cartoon of the Indonesian President and a Papuan as dogs copulating, with the President in the dominant position. Each of these cartoons was condemned in the other country as being offensive. These cases highlight various cultural differences, for example, different views on freedom of speech and expression, and on blasphemy. Where there are incompatible positions on fundamental issues, some way must be sought to solve or avoid conflict. In the Danish case mentioned, the offence caused by the cartoons led to a tragic loss of life as well as to tension between various countries. The offensiveness of the cartoons of the copulating dogs too led to an increase in tensions, in this case between Indonesia and Australia. Given the importance of the concept of offence in the global arena, it warrants examination in that context.

WHAT IS OFFENCE?

Offence is some sort of hurt or pain, displeasure, disgust, mental distress or mental suffering of some variety (see Feinberg, 1985, p. 1). Something is offensive if some people do not like it in a certain way; it hurts their feelings, it disgusts them, or something of that ilk. Strictly speaking, things do not give offence; people do through their actions. An outcrop of rock shaped like some part of the human anatomy is not offensive although a sculpture of the same shape might be. While it is common to talk of pictures, cartoons, and language as offensive, what is really offensive is that someone has acted in some way, by photographing, painting, drawing, talking, writing, or some similar activity. Giving offence involves intention. It need not be the case that the action

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