



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.

Keywords: cultural values; global ethics; internet ethics; offence; religious values

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 Auswitch. 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 is intended to offend (although it might be) but the action must be intentional (to emphasis the point, I am ignoring the fact that actions are often defined as intentional). An intentional action can give offence in a way that an unintentional one will not. Public nudity is often considered offensive but if on some occasion, it is a result of someone

escaping a burning house, it is not likely to be seen as such. Many things done intentionally cause offence unintentionally. Often we do not know that something that we do will be offensive to some. Much offence too is a result of carelessness. Some people may not bother perhaps too much about the feelings of others. It is not that they want to cause offence, it is rather that they do not care enough to avoid causing offence or perhaps are just not perceptive enough.

Many things are described as offensive, ranging from public nudity and copulating to racist and religious actions and blasphemy, from snubs from acquaintances to insults about one's appearance. These offences are what Tasioulas (2006) calls *norm-governed*. In these cases certain norms have been violated, or at least the offended party believes so. Tasioulas distinguishes these offences from what he calls *primitive* offences. Offensive smells, for example, dihydrogen sulfide (rotten egg gas), are an example. Norm-governed offences are the ones of interest here.

Discussions of giving offence are commonly conducted in the context of freedom of speech and possible restrictions that might be justified by offensive material, or in the context of criminalisation of certain actions (Feinberg, 1973; Tasioulas, 2006). Much everyday offence is of course more personal. I am offended when I alone am not invited to the party, or when someone implies that I am incompetent or poorly dressed. Most of this kind of offensive behaviour is not seen as the proper concern of the law, except perhaps in the workplace where it can be related to harassment or bullying. The most important instances of offence however, at least in the public arena, concern things like racist language, blasphemy, and indecency (although personal offence to a prominent figure can cause widespread public offence).

Taking offence might be said to involve three elements: the hurt, the judgement that the action was wrong, and some action, for example, demanding an apology or recompense. The argument here will be that, contra Barrow (2005), action is not properly part of

taking offence but that, contra Tasioulas, some judgement is.

First, Barrow suggests that offence involves a demand of an apology or compensation and on this he builds his case for there being a duty not to take offence, an argument to which we will return later. The position taken here, however, is that any demand for an apology or compensation is a consequence of taking offence but not part of taking offence itself. If I am offended I might or might not demand that anything be done about it. It depends on the severity of the offence, my timidity, and other factors.

Taking offensive, however, does involve a judgement that the offending action is wrong, something that should not be done. Tasioulas (2006, p. 152-153), argues that this, while perhaps commonly the case, is not necessary. His counter-example is of a middle-aged man who has overcome his strict upbringing but still takes offence at a same-sex couple holding hands in public, even though he does not believe it wrong. He simply cannot overcome his feelings. It seems to me that a better way of describing this situation is that he does not take offence at all but merely feels uncomfortable. Having been raised a fundamentalist Lutheran, I feel uncomfortable, sometimes extremely, with certain blasphemous language even though I no longer believe it to be wrong in itself (even though I almost expect a bolt of lightning to strike the blasphemer), but to describe my feelings as offence would be inaccurate. I might judge it wrong, however, in certain contexts because it offends others.

WRONGNESS AND OFFENSIVENESS

Taking offence is clearly associated with our beliefs, in that taking offence at any particular action can only occur in certain contexts where certain beliefs are held. If I say or do something potentially offensive but nobody takes offence, it is not at all obvious that I have given offence. Perhaps it will be objected that what is important is not *giving* offence but *offence*, pure and simple. However, unless there is an *objective* norm-governed offence, something

that will be contested, it is not clear that there is anything interesting in offence apart from its giving and taking. When offence is discussed as a reason for criminalising or banning certain behaviour, it is because it is offensive, that is, it gives offence and some people take offence. The behaviour might still be wrong in the absence of giving or taking offence but that is another matter that has nothing to do with offence. Feinberg divides offensive actions into two categories, those that are offensive because they are wrong and those that are wrong because they are offensive. Racist language is offensive because such language is wrong while not being invited to a party is wrong, if wrong at all, simply because it is offensive. I prefer to say that racist language is both wrong *and* offensive. It is wrong because, at least, it is disrespectful to a race and it is offensive when members of that race are subjected to it and take offence. When those racial members are subjected to it, it is doubly wrong; wrong because of the lack of respect and because it gives offence. If there is nobody around to take offence, it is still wrong but hardly offensive.

The focus of this article is on behaviour that is, in Feinberg's terminology, wrong because it is offensive, that is, *offensive nuisances*. This of course includes, for the purposes here, behaviour that is both wrong in itself and wrong because it is offensive if offence is taken, but the focus here is on the latter.

Is giving offence really wrong? We are talking here, it must be emphasized, of things that are wrong (if they are wrong as all) *because* they are offensive, not things that are wrong in themselves and are offensive on that account alone. Nor are we talking about everything that the offended parties judge to be wrong on the grounds that they are offended. Essentially what we are talking about are those cases of offence where the offended justifiably judge that they have been wronged. One may be inclined to say that there are no such cases; that is, that there is nothing really wrong with giving offence where the only wrong is the offence itself. After all, if people are so sensitive that they become offended at something heard or seen, so much the worse for

them. While this contains an element of truth, it is not the whole story. It is probably true that any offence taken at not being invited to a dinner might not matter much, but the mocking of a physical disability or a tragedy, for example, might be extremely hurtful and offensive even for those not overly sensitive. However, most offence discussed in the contest of freedom of expression or criminalization is not of these kinds. Rather it involves blasphemy, sexually explicit language, racial vilification, ridicule of culture, public nudity, or sexual activity, and a host of other things.

In order to understand more about what is wrong with giving offence, if anything is, we will consider why people take offence. Obviously, offence is taken for different reasons by different people and over a wide range of areas. Three areas will be considered. The first of these concerns things which are not necessarily directed at any person or group, such as sexually explicit language and public nudity. Some people are offended by certain language and pictures. Part of the explanation for the offence taken clearly has to do with upbringing and socialization. This, however, is not a complete explanation. Taking offence is more than merely not liking. There are many things that I do not like that do not offend me, for example, certain types of music and art. If I find something offensive, I take it personally in some way. I am *hurt*. A reasonable explanation of why I am hurt is that I identify closely with beliefs that this sort of behavior or material is wrong, and in a way I feel violated. If you expose me to these things that you know I do not like, then you are not showing me the respect that I deserve as a person. Even if it was not directed at me in particular, I may feel that people like me, those who hold the beliefs that I hold, are not respected enough. In both cases, that is, where it is directed at us in particular and where it is not, we may feel devalued as persons.

The second, and related, area is the ridiculing, mocking or even just criticizing of beliefs, commitments, and customs, particularly those based on religion and culture. We tend to identify with a set of beliefs or with a group in a way that makes those beliefs or that group part of our self-image. So when ridicule is directed at those beliefs or that group,

we feel that we are being mocked or ridiculed, and again can feel that we are not being respected as persons. Those who are mocking or criticizing portray themselves as being superior to us.

The third and final area is the offence taken at language or conduct which is racist or sexist. What these share is that there is no choice involved in being a member of either of these groups. There is a real sense here in which our identity and self-image is inextricably linked with groups of these types of which we find ourselves members. Here there seems to be a particularly close link between offence and self-respect.

These three examples all show that there is a close connection between the taking of offence and respect, both respect for others and self-respect or esteem. When someone makes a remark or exhibits conduct that we find offensive, we may feel that we are not being respected as persons in the way that we ought to be. Our self-respect may be lessened to some extent. Too much of this conduct may cause us to see ourselves as people of little worth. If something which is an integral part of me is mocked – say, my height, race, gender, or intelligence – this is evidence that others do not value me as a person to the extent that they ought. They are not showing me the respect that I deserve as a person. If I identify very closely with a political party or with a religion and if that party or religion is mocked, I may feel the same (although it will be argued later that there are relevant differences in these cases). So perhaps we can say that what is wrong with giving offence in general is that it is showing a lack of respect for others and that it may cause them to lose some of their self-respect.

It is not being argued here that showing disrespect to someone will always lead to a loss of self-respect by that person, nor does it imply that all that is wrong with showing a lack of respect is this link with self-respect. However, it is claimed that there is an important link. Not everyone has enough self-confidence to disregard all instances of perceived disrespect.

This account that links offence with respect fits our intuitions in at least two ways. First, it explains why offence connected with race, gender, and physical disability, for example, seems to be much more serious than offence related to

football or political allegiances, musical taste or sensitivity to pictures of naked humans or to not being invited to the party. If we make a commitment to something, or admit that we do not like something, we should be prepared, to some extent anyway, to accept the consequences of making that commitment or admission. At any rate, there is an important difference between areas in which we have some choice, like football team allegiance, and those in which we do not, for example, race.

There are, of course, some cases which are anything but clear-cut, for example, religious belief. We will return to that in a later section.

The second way that this account of offence fits in with common feelings is that it also helps to explain why it seems more objectionable to mock or ridicule the disadvantaged than the advantaged. If someone takes offence at some mockery of an advantaged group, that person must first identify him or herself with that group; that is, they must see themselves as privileged in some way. If they can only take offence to the extent that they identify with some favored section of society, their self-respect is unlikely to suffer much. Barrow (2005, pp. 272-273) discusses this kind of case and comes to a conclusion not so different from that espoused here. He argues that he, as an Englishman and clearly in a privileged position in English society, can be offended by certain anti-English remarks, but that he has no grounds for taking any action; he has not been morally wronged.

THE DUTY NOT TO TAKE OFFENCE

Barrow argues that there is a duty not to take offence. He cannot, and does not, mean that there is a duty not to have the hurt feeling. We have little choice about that, at least in the short term. We may over time no longer feel the hurt over certain comments or actions that we once did, but it is not something that we can just turn on and off like a tap. His view is more plausible if taking offence involves judging to be wrong. We might not be able to stop the hurt but we might have some control over whether or not we judge something to be wrong. But again, while over time we change our minds regarding what

we judge to be wrong in some cases, it is not something that can be done just on cue. What he really means is that there is an obligation not to demand an apology or compensation or something of that ilk when one takes offence, and this is certainly plausible. In essence, this is a plea for tolerance. I might be offended by some action; that is, I feel the hurt and I judge the action to be wrong, but it does not follow that I have a right to demand anything in return. This is of particular importance in the global context created by the electronic media. Given the variety in cultures, customs, and religions that now come into regular contact at many different levels of society, there is bound to be much that is said and done that many find offensive. If there is to be any hope of living together more or less peacefully, not only must there be an effort not to give offence but also, and equally important, tolerance of the views and actions of others even when we find them, perhaps, extremely offensive. It has been argued here that the actions to which Barrow objects are not part of taking offence itself, so it is more accurate to say that there is a duty not to demand compensation or retribution when offended. While there is no duty not to take offence, there is a duty not to demand action as a result of the offence taken.

ARE SOME OFFENCES OBJECTIVE?

Tasioulas argues so (2006, pp. 157ff). We are talking here just of norm-governed offences, those that violate some norm. Objective offences are, or are supposed to be, actions that are offensive in themselves regardless of whether anyone takes offence at them. They violate some moral norm and moral norms can be objective and therefore so can offence. Objective offences have properties that constitute a reason for being offended. Tasioulas gives two examples of such offences: racist language and public copulation. The former has more plausibility than the latter. Racist language reveals lack of respect and lack of respect is always wrong. If I am shown lack of respect, then I have a reason for being offended. Public copulation

is more problematic. While it *in fact* violates norms in, for example, Australia, it is not at all clear that it necessarily does. A society could presumably function perfectly well if public copulation were the norm. In such a society it would not be showing any lack of respect and nobody would be harmed in anyway, and it would be difficult to make a case that it was objectively morally wrong. If public copulation were the norm and was not showing any lack of respect for those who might witness the event, it is difficult to see how it could have properties that would constitute a reason for taking offence. In countries where it does violate a norm, as in Australia, it can still be considered wrong on the grounds that it is offensive (and not merely because it is against the law), but that implies nothing about it being objectively wrong in any sense.

Is racist language objectively offensive? Suppose that in some homogenous society, racist language is common. No one takes offence because there is nobody of the despised race around and none of the locals care. A good case can be made that the behaviour is wrong regardless of whether anyone takes offence because, if for no other reason, it reinforces the view that one race is inferior to another. But that seems quite different from saying that it is offensive. Things are offensive in a context. Jokes ridiculing particular Australian traits are not offensive if told by an Australian in a room full of Australians, but might be in another context. In any case, not everything that is wrong is offensive, except in a trivial sense in which our moral sensibilities are offended by all wrong actions, but then the offence taken at those actions is not worth discussing. We can get what we want just by considering the wrongness of the actions. It might be argued that the fact that it is happening at all is offensive to people of that race simply because they know that it is occurring even though none is exposed to it. We will return to this issue later.

It could still be argued of course that the mere fact that nobody is in fact offended by racist language does not show that it is not inherently offensive. Consider offensive smells.

Certain smells just are offensive to humans. That is just a fact of the way that we are, and presumably is a result of our evolution. There was survival advantage in avoiding things with particular smells. So in this sense some smells are objectively offensive. Why then resist the view that some actions are also objectively offensive? Offensive smells, as we know, frequently become less offensive once we have been continually exposed to them for some time. By analogy certain actions are offensive in themselves, and the fact that some people do not see them as such is no argument that they are not. Some people and some cultures simply have become desensitised or have not yet developed the sensitivities to recognise them as such. It is well-known that we can develop our sense of smell (and other senses) by practice. We can learn to notice smells that we had not before and learn to make distinctions that previously we had missed. The point of this is not that offensive smells are subtle and require learning to be noticed. Rather it is that the fact that some smell is not noticed or recognised does not show that it is not there in an objective sense. Similarly, actions might be offensive but not recognised as such simply as a result of undeveloped sensitivities.

It is odd though to say that some smell that we no longer find offensive is really offensive. If the smell, in the sense of a physical event, does not cause an offensive olfactory sensation, then surely it is not an offensive smell, and in the same way, if racist language does not cause offence it is not offensive, even if wrong. Something about the smell is objective, its physical properties, but its offensiveness is not objective. The utterance of the racist language is objective, but the offensiveness is not.

It might be objected that the analogy is not a good one because the offensiveness of smells does not rely on beliefs in the way that norm-governed offences do. But the situation is not so simple. The information that we receive through our senses is mediated to some extent by our beliefs and concepts; it is to some extent “theory-laden”, so the difference between primitive and norm-governed offences is one

of degree rather than one of kind, at least with respect to beliefs. What is different is that in the second case, but not the first, we make a judgement about the moral wrongness of an action, but that is irrelevant here where we are only concerned with the supposed objectivity of some offensiveness.

OFFENCE IN A GLOBAL CONTEXT

We will now focus on offence in a global setting. The previous sections have discussed or raised various aspects of offence that will be used to highlight its importance in discussions of global ethics. In particular we will consider the subjectivity of offences, the role of choice, that is, the difference between offences related to what we choose and those related to what we are, the context in which the offensive actions were performed, and finally indirect offence, that is, offensive actions that those offended only hear about or otherwise know about but do not directly experience.

Subjectivity

It is plausible to argue that some things are just wrong regardless of any cultural beliefs or practices. For example, murder, human sacrifice, female genital mutilation, and slavery are surely wrong even if they are an accepted part of some culture. Bernard Gert (1999) argues that there are morals that all impartial, rational persons would support and lists 10:

- Do not kill
- Do not cause pain
- Do not disable
- Do not deprive of freedom
- Do not deprive of pleasure
- Do not deceive
- Keep your promises
- Do not cheat
- Obey the law
- Do your duty

While these are not absolute and can be overridden, they are objective in the sense that

they would be agreed to by impartial, rational persons. If this is correct, then there is an obvious starting point for a global ethics. If it were the case that some offences were wrong in themselves, that is, objectively, then another rule could be added to Gert's 10, something like "Do not perform any actions that are objectively offensive". If some actions were offensive in an objective sense, then those actions, even if only wrong because offensive, would be wrong irrespective of culture. Suppose, for example, that blasphemy is objectively offensive. Publishing the Danish cartoons then was wrong regardless of the attitudes toward them in Denmark and other Western countries. We have argued however that offence is not objective, so if it is to play any role in a global ethics, that role must lie elsewhere. The offensiveness rule could of course be modified to "Do not perform any actions that are offensive" but this is much too broad and could prohibit almost anything. What is required is some way of distinguishing between different offences that does not rely on some being objective. It will be argued that choice and context give some indication of how to delineate those instances of giving offence that are serious and those that are not.

Choice

The question of choice was raised in an earlier section where it was noted that there is, or seems to be, a difference between mocking one for wearing outlandish clothes and mocking one's race. It could be argued, as it has been by Barrow, that saying something that could be taken as offensive, for example, ridiculing religious beliefs, could be a sign of respect. That person is considered an autonomous human being who is mature enough and secure enough in his or her beliefs not to take offence when those beliefs are criticised or held up to ridicule. There is something in this. Treating people as mature adults is showing more respect than treating them as people who must have their feelings protected. This argument, if it holds at all, only holds in those areas where there is genuine choice. I have no control over my race, so ridiculing that can hardly be a sign of respecting my

maturity regarding my beliefs. Ridiculing my outlandish clothes, at the other extreme, does not seem so important. I choose to wear them and could wear others, in a way that I cannot become a member of another race. Culture and religion, often closely interwoven, present an intermediate and more difficult case. Religion and culture are a bit like race in that they help define who we are. I identify with them as I do with my race. On the other hand, I do have some choice in a way that I do not with my race. I can choose to be a Christian but cannot choose to be Caucasian. The situation clearly is not so straightforward. While I can choose to become a Christian or choose to leave the faith if I were one, it is not quite like choosing a new brand of breakfast cereal. The choice will usually be a culmination of belief changes over time. But choose to join or leave religions we do. There is however a difference between those with a moderately good education and those without. An educated person who knows about other religions, about scientific explanations of the world and so on, can make an informed choice in a way that someone lacking those advantages cannot. They have a greater ability to weigh up evidence and to then make their choices based on that process. An illiterate peasant farmer has probably never entertained the possibility that his religious beliefs might be, or even could be, false. Given upbringing and culture, there is little choice but to believe.

What does this have to do with giving offence? We are talking here of actions that are wrong because they are offensive. The suggestion is that there is a relationship between the degree of wrongness and the amount of choice that someone has. Mocking of race is worse than mocking of the wearing of outlandish clothes because (at least partly) one has no choice in the former while one does in the latter. Mocking the religious beliefs of an uneducated peasant, who has no real choice, is worse than mocking the religious beliefs of a well-educated person who has the ability to weigh up the evidence and make an informed choice. In the latter case, the mocking could be a sign of recognising that person's autonomy and affording him or her

the opportunity to defend his or her beliefs. In the former case, this is not so. It can only be interpreted as showing disrespect.

This issue of choice clearly has relevance for offence in the global arena, even apart from offence related to race. A large proportion of the world's population is poor and relatively uneducated and without easy access to sources of information, including the Internet, that would increase their range of options regarding life-style and belief. If the argument of this article is correct, it is more important to try to avoid actions that would be offensive to these people than to those who are more privileged. Mocking those without choice is not respecting them as they deserve to be respected as persons.

Context

The context in which offensive actions are performed is important in assessing their wrongness. What are essentially the same actions can be very different with regard to their offensiveness. It is instructive to consider Barrow's examples (2005, pp. 267, 272-273). He suggests, though does not say explicitly, that saying offensive things about the English, Pakistanis, and Nazis is more-or-less the same; one is no worse than the others. However, being English or Pakistani is racial, in the sense that the terms are being used here. In this sense, those called Pakistanis, even if born in England, are not considered English, because of their race. On the other hand, being a Nazi is a result of choice. On the argument of the preceding section, offending Pakistanis because that is what they are is worse than offending Nazis. One is born a Pakistani but one is not born a Nazi.

The main point of this section however is highlighted by comparing offending the English and offending the Pakistanis, in England. The kind of offensive actions in mind are ones such as mocking of race, culture, or religion. Is it worse to offend Pakistanis in England than it is to offend the English in England? Barrow, as we saw, suggests not, but there are reasons for thinking otherwise. Consider again the case of the cartoons published in Denmark that seriously offended many Muslims around the

world, sparking riots and a considerable number of deaths. The context in which these cartoons were published is clearly relevant to assessing the morality of the action. Many Muslims, if the press is to be believed, feel under threat. The powerful Western nations are perceived as having exploited Muslim nations for decades, and this perception has been given impetus by recent invasions and talk of invasions. Regardless of the rightness or wrongness of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, they are clear signs of who has the military and economy power and who has not. In this situation, it is not surprising that the cartoons caused offence. It could be easily seen as just another sign of Western lack of respect for the Muslim religion. In a different context the action might not have been wrong. Suppose that a Muslim newspaper published cartoons ridiculing Christ. In countries where Christians were dominated by Muslims, it may well cause extreme offence if the Christians felt under threat, but in the Christian world at large, it probably would not, at least in the affluent West. The difference in the situations reflects how many Christian and Muslim groups see themselves relative to the other in the current world.

We will return for a moment to the copulating dogs cartoons published in both Indonesia and Australia. If the press is to be believed, there seems to have been more offence in Indonesia over the Australian cartoon than in Australia over the Indonesian one. If this is so, context provides one reason. In recent times, the relationship between Australia and Indonesia has been uneasy at best, particularly from the time that Australia took an active part in East Timor's fight for independence from Indonesia. The granting of visas, albeit temporary ones, to a group of illegal immigrants from the Indonesian province of Papua, where there is also an independence movement, was seen by the Indonesians as a sign that Australia was supporting that movement. It was also seen as evidence that Australia believed the Papuans claims that they were being persecuted by the Indonesian authorities. Additionally, the Australian government had been taking a very

hard line against illegal immigrants and the approach to the Papuans appeared to be much more lenient. In this context, the retaliatory cartoon published in Australia could be seen as just another sign of contempt and lack of respect for the Indonesians. In Australia, while some politicians claimed that the Indonesian cartoon was offensive, the reaction has been more muted. In Australia there are no independence movements and nothing that could be interpreted as an attack on its sovereignty by Indonesia. The context is quite different.

Indirect Offence

According to Tasioulas, at least regarding criminalization, the only offences that should be taken into account are direct offences, that is, those that are directly experienced. Seeing a copulating couple in a public park is offensive in a way that merely knowing that it is happening is not. Feinberg's position regarding pornography is similar:

When printed words hide decorously behind covers of books sitting passively on bookstore shelves, their offensiveness is easily avoided. ... There is nothing like the evil smell of rancid garbage oozing right out through the covers of a book. When an "obscene" book sits on the shelf, who is there to be offended? Those who want to read it for the sake of erotic stimulation presumably will not be offended (or else they wouldn't read it), and those who choose not to read it will have no experience by which to be offended. (1973, p. 45)

The example given by Feinberg makes his argument look plausible, and it is commonly used in relation to television programmes containing explicit sex and violence. If you do not like it, do not watch it. However, those who find something offensive commonly do not need to directly experience it to be offended. That it is happening at all is offensive. Wolgast makes this point in relation to pornography:

The felt insult and indignity that women protest is not like a noise or bad odor, for these are group-neutral and may offend anyone, while pornography is felt

to single women out as objects of insulting attention. ... With pornography there is a felt hostile discrimination. (1987, p. 112)

A similar point can be made with regard to the Danish cartoon case. Most of those who took offence would not have seen the cartoons, certainly those in regions where the Internet is not widespread. But this lack of direct experience was largely irrelevant. The *fact* that they were published was offensive.

If offence is related to respect for others and to self-respect, as was argued earlier, the issue of reasonable avoidability does not arise. If women or some race or any particular group is singled out for treatment which shows lack of respect and which is of the type to lower self-respect, it is not an issue whether or not someone can easily avoid some instance of that type of offensive action. Some members of the racial group might avoid hearing some racially offensive language, some religious members might avoid seeing offensive cartoons, and some woman might avoid seeing pornography, but these individuals are still being shown less respect than they deserve, simply because they are members of these targeted groups.

It must be noted of course that neither Tasioulas nor Feinberg are claiming that actions or material are only offensive when directly experienced. Their argument is rather that in those cases where it is not, it is not a serious contender for criminalisation. The suggestion here is that even in at least some of those cases, indirect offence needs to be taken seriously. This is particularly so in the global case. Most of those offended by some action will be aware that it has occurred but will not have directly experienced it, but that is largely irrelevant. *That* it occurred is what is important.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of the article was to examine the concept of offence and on the basis of that examination to show its importance in considerations of a global ethic. The argument has been that offence, even actions that are thought wrong merely because they are offensive but not

wrong in themselves, should not be overlooked. Careful thought should be given to actions that could be deemed offensive to certain groups, even if we think that those actions are protected by freedom of speech or expression, or by some other right or principle. It was argued that actions that offend because of attributes over which people have no choice are of more concern than those which offend because of attributes over which there is choice, and context is important. Giving offence in some contexts, for example, where the offended already feel vulnerable, is worse than giving offence in contexts where they do not. In murky areas such as religious belief, the amount of choice is related to the options available, and this in turn is related to the level of education and the information readily accessible. This suggests that one way of alleviating some problems of offence is to make a greater effort to make more information readily available to a greater number of people. On the other hand there is a duty not to take action against those who have offended. Tolerance of the views of others is always important and is especially so in a global community where there is no common legal framework and disputes are frequently settled by violence.

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ENDNOTE

- ¹ Parts of this article are based on earlier work published in Weckert, J. (2003). Giving offense on the Internet. In S. Rogerson & T. W. Bynum (Eds.), *Computer ethics and professional responsibility* (pp. 327-339). Basil Blackwell Publishers, and in G. Collste (Ed.), *Ethics and information technology* (pp. 104-118). New Academic Publishers.

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