

Ethical Analysis of Canadian Museum Regarding Censored Content

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Introduction

For approximately two years a human rights museum in Canada censored LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning) content for specific groups of individuals. In order to analyze the situation from the point of a business ethicist, this paper will be divided into four main sections. The controversy itself will first be explained. Following the description, all of the morally relevant facts will be presented from the loose sides of both censoring the content and not censoring the content. Next, the ethical values at stake, primarily with regard to Utilitarian, Kantian Ethics and Virtue Ethics, will be listed. Finally, a personal opinion will be offered, based on the supporting facts and values at stake. This paper will argue from the ethical standpoint that the museum did something morally wrong and was unethical.

Ethical Controversy

From January of 2015 until the middle of 2017, the Canadian Museum for Human Rights allowed the self-censoring of displays for specific groups. The museum accepted requests from donors, diplomats and, more notably, religious school groups to cover up content that promoted the discussion of sexual orientation or gender identity. And so, arises the debate from ethicists whether or not the Canadian Museum for Human Rights violated an ethical obligation by censoring homosexual content for certain customers.

Morally Relevant Facts*Supporting Pro Censor*

There are several morally relevant facts that both support or go against the museum censoring the content. To begin with the facts supporting the right of the museum to censor the content; the museum accepted requests from guests for approximately two years. Secondly, staff members were asked to not speak about any topics regarding the LGBTQ+ community as well as hide or avoid any displays that included such topics. According to Liam Green, a former employee, it was commonly known internally that staff members could be asked to obstruct the view of content for certain customers. If a staff member was against hiding content, then they could have requested to have a different tour group or they could have quit. The mission statement of the museum is, “we strive to build understanding, promote respect and encourage reflection”(“Mandate”). Nowhere does the mission statement mention anything about being ethical or trying to educate people.

Supporting Anti Censor

There are also facts that could support the museum not censoring the content. For example, the action that provoked the museum to change its policy occurred when a LGBTQ+ staff member was asked to cover a homosexual display with their body. Secondly, customers chose to attend the human rights museum knowing that LGBTQ+ content would be shown there and could have attended an alternative museum. In addition to this, museum employees would not go into the job expecting to be asked to cover human rights content. After the requests for covered content were discontinued, visiting high school staff members covered up the displays with their bodies, which they could have done to begin with. The final morally relevant fact is

that the museum's operating budget is covered by the Canadian government. Ticket sales are important to the museum so that they can purchase special exhibits, which retain seasonal customers and encourage customers to return. If the museum is allowing these requests to be fulfilled so that the museum can make a profit, the question is if the museum really needs the money from these groups or if they are being greedy.

Ethical Values at Stake

Utilitarian

There are also several ethical values at stake when determining if the museum did anything morally wrong when they covered up LGBTQ+ content for certain guests. Utilitarians believe that an action is morally right if, out of all the options available, the action produces the greatest possible balance of happiness over unhappiness for everyone affected by the action (Perez, Slide 14). Before the story was released to the public, a Utilitarian could argue that the action of censoring the content would produce a greater ratio of happiness over unhappiness. The museum was looking out for the happiness of the numerous groups and individuals who requested for the content to be removed from sight. In addition, it could be possible the museum had the happiness of the staff members in mind as well because the museum was trying to increase profit so that the museum would be more successful. However, the museum did not take into account the happiness of the staff members by not considering the emotional labor that certain members had to exert. The museum did not want the requests of the groups to be put on paper. Did the museum do this to try and protect both their customers and the LGBTQ+ community or as a way to hide from the LGBTQ+ community?

Kantian Ethics

Kantian Ethicists or Duty Based Theorists rely on universability, reliability, treating people with respect and making sure to treat people as an end in themselves as opposed to a means to an end. By upholding the wishes of their customers, the museum is showing them respect. On the other hand, the museum is disrespecting their employees who are a part of the LGBTQ+ community, the community as a whole as well as employees who stand for human rights. There is also the question if the museum violated the fairness requirement of the categorical imperative. An anonymous former staff member commented that employers would tell them, “all groups are special, some groups are just a bit more special and there are some things that shouldn't be put on paper”(Grabish). Was the museum treating the groups of customers fairly or were they demonstrating special treatment? Furthermore, the act violates the consistency requirement because if everyone in the world allowed content to be censored in museums if they did not like it, then there would be no business. The final debate regarding Kantian Ethics, is if the museum is treating the customers as a means to an end or as an end in themselves. In other words, is the museum accepting these requests as a way of respecting customers or as a way of increasing profit and maintaining customers?

Virtue Ethics

Virtue Ethicists stand by an action being morally good when it is an action that a morally good person would do. Therefore, first a person needs to be virtuous or display virtues. The museum is accepting of the religious school groups, donors and diplomats and of their requests. By complying with the requests the museum is displaying kindness, consideration and respect. In a way, the museum is also displaying gratitude to the donors who help keep the museum running.

However, the museum also contradicts these virtues. The museum is being disrespectful, unkind and ungrateful to their employees, especially exemplifying a lack of consideration towards LGBTQ+ employees. A Virtue Ethicist also believes that the individual needs to have the right reasons for performing that action. If the museum accepted the requests, believing that they were doing something unethical and were hiding the incidents by not documenting occurrences, then they could also be accused of having bad integrity. The final requirement for a Virtue Ethicist is to have the right attitude and emotional responses following the action.

Ethical Stand

There are many reasons to come to the conclusion that the Canadian Museum of Human Rights did something morally wrong when they accepted requests to cover displays pertaining to LGBTQ+ content.

Utilitarian Perspective

To begin, the theory that the museum was trying to make their customers happy and trying to make their business profitable, is understandable. However, not only were the number of people affected negatively increasing more than the number of people who were affected positively, but their unhappiness levels were far greater than the happiness that the customers received when the displays were covered. The museum did not truly give their employees a choice when they “asked” them to cover the content. Former program developer and tour guide, Gabriela Agüero, remarked in an interview, "When I complained about it, [management said], 'Well, that's what we request and we have to honour the requests from the schools because they pay us for those tours'"(Grabish). If the employees did not desire to cover the displays then their only option was for them to quit and for some employees that may not have been possible. It

should also stand to reason that a human rights museum would not stand for covering up exhibits of human rights. The emotional labor of an employee involved potentially losing their job if they did not comply, having to disrespect a human rights group and potentially hiding part of their identity. Personally, this burden sounds like it outweighs the discomfort of a customer who would not like seeing a display. Finally, in the definition of what a Utilitarian stands for, are the words “out of all of the options available”. Due to the fact that the religious high school teachers hid the content of their own accord after the policy was removed, the museum did not need to accept the requests in the first place. The museum could have stated instead something along the lines of, “I apologize but it is against policy, however, here is a route that does not have these exhibits” or “you are free to cover the content if you wish however we cannot ask our staff to cover up these exhibits”.

Kantian Perspective

A Kantian would appreciate the museum for respecting their customers and their values. However, as stated above, it could have been possible for the museum to have accomplished this without forcing employees to comply. Instead, the museum could have respectfully mentioned an alternative. In the words of Milton Friedman, “the business of business is business”. The museum's job should be to present their displays to the public. Due to the opinion that the museum could have respected their customers while utilizing an alternative method, a reasonable conclusion can be drawn that the museum's goal was only to reach a profit as opposed to accepting the requests as a way of respecting their customers. A Kantian would deem this act as morally wrong because it is treating their customers as a means to an end.

Next is the issue if the museum was covering up their paper trail as a way of respecting both parties or as an expression of guilt. The Canadian Museum of Human Rights has a history of covering up other human rights conflicts, such as racial insensitivity in the workplace. Based on their history as well as other supporting evidence, it can be assumed that the museum was hiding the requests as an expression of guilt. A Kantian would then further deem this act unacceptable because it violates the fairness and consistency requirements of the categorical imperative.

Virtue Ethics Perspective

A Virtue Ethicist would greatly appreciate the museum's efforts to express kindness, consideration, respect and gratitude towards their customers. However, a Virtue Ethicist would not stand by the lack of kindness, consideration, respect and gratitude directed by the museum towards their employees and the LGBTQ+ community. The requests for specific displays to be covered were allowed for approximately two years and many complaints were expressed from the staff over this time period. Gabriela Agüero commented during an interview, "It was horrendous because then I had to go sit with my gay friends on staff and tell them I did that. It was a horrific sense of guilt and very painful"(Grabish). The likelihood of the museum disclosing the request information as a way of respecting the LGBTQ+ community, is very low. Other than dismissive, there are no written accounts of how the museum reacted emotionally to these complaints. The most reasonable conclusion that can be drawn is that the museum did not do the right thing, for the right reasons or with the correct attitude/emotional responses.

Conclusion

To conclude, the case of the Canadian Museum for Human Rights censoring content for specific visitors, was first explained. Then, the morally relevant facts surrounding the case were evaluated. After all of the information on and surrounding the case had been presented, the ethical values at stake were recounted. In the end, a personal opinion based on the evidence presented was given with the conclusion that the museum was morally wrong to censor content for specific groups.

Works Cited

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