

# THEORETICAL SEMINAR OF THE IPHRAS DEPARTMENT OF ETHICS

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## **Morality as a value criterion and a social fact**

Despite the fact that terms “ethics” and “morality” are sometimes used interchangeably, I think it is important to separate the two: morality is a specific value *criterion* and ethics is a *theory* about morality. Morality is part of our social *reality*, while ethics is part of philosophy.

According to what I think should be its definition, morality consists of two parts – first, it is a very peculiar criterion of evaluation, and, second, it is a social fact. These two parts are both necessarily present in morality.

One aspect of the specificity of morality is visible in the domain of its application: the *acts* and their aggregates, *practices* and *policies*. There are two demarcation lines within this domain. First, it can't be applied to natural *events*, which occur without anyone's decision according to natural determinism. Second, it cannot be applied to what is only conceived, or desired but not planned, and where an act based on a decision has not been actualized. In other words, an act has to be an event, but a very special kind of event: produced by a decision without which it would not exist at all. What is only conceived, imagined, or desired, is not part of the reality in this sense, and there is no room for an imputation of responsibility – blame or praise – as the products of the application of the moral criterion of evaluation. We may say that beings capable to act are persons, while all other beings are, in this sense, objects.

These two demarcation lines determine the scope of possible application of the moral criterion, but do not determine its specificity. To do that, we need to show the difference from other criteria of evaluation which we may call “non-moral values.” We should begin by explaining how these values come into existence in the first place: something acquires value by becoming an object of interest for someone, meaning that something nobody has any interest in is valueless or without value (value-neutral). To get value, something has to become the content of a set, desired end. Therefore, values are secondary to the acts of setting some ends. Of course, there is no necessity to set any end, as the setting is by supposition free, i.e. must not be unavoidable. Freedom is the capacity to do something in a way that would not happen without action. Values are the product of freedom – all values, both positive and negative ones.

We may distinguish moral values within this broad sphere of (all) values by showing what makes them different, and this is a specific feature of *normative universality*. Normative universality is an extremely strong requirement, not present in any other values except the moral ones. The consequence is that in the realm of non-moral values, tolerance

is part of the logic of evaluation: every value could cease to be a value. Not so with moral values, for they contain a kind of evaluational necessity which excludes the possibility of tolerance and includes a demand for the primacy of those values when they compete with some other value. This is not easy to explain, but let me try to clarify this.

Some event or action might be perceived as extremely unpleasant, disgusting and repulsive. But this perception does not automatically imply that there is any necessity for this event or action to be, for example, forbidden or assigned moral blame. Many of us might perceive eating dog meat in those terms; but our perception does not imply that we can or should blame or forbid the practice, as people who do eat dog meat may simply have different preferences (and could find our diets repulsive). However, if we replace eating dog's meat with, e. g., rape, we have quite a different situation: suddenly we would have a situation where we are forced to *necessarily assign blame*, entirely independently of any feelings of liking or disliking. Moreover, moral evaluation has a pretension to have a *primacy* over any other value, and this exclusionary requirement makes moral criterion dictatorial towards other values (other values should fall back if they conflict with moral values). To do otherwise would entail losing moral point of view: if rape were dependent on liking and disliking, it would no longer be a moral matter. In fact, the result would be the reduction of moral criterion to some non-moral criterion of evaluation, and we wouldn't have morality any longer. To exist, morality has to be different from all other evaluations, and we may say that the difference is precisely in its specificity: normative universality. It has an objectivity comparable to mathematical statements, but at the same time is deeply subjective in recognition that its criterion is in full accordance with our freedom and will. Otherwise it does not exist: if eating dog's meat and rape can be compared in their goodness, and if the blame, or praise, could in any way rely on any content of this comparison, morality would be lost. Moral blame must be necessary. This *necessity of blame* makes moral statements essentially negative ones: they leave us with our freedom to do what we choose, only making it necessary to blame if we choose against what morality demands.

We must briefly return now to the first point: morality has to be a social fact. It has to be a part of reality, not something only conceived, imagined, or desired. A criterion of evaluation that has never been applied will not produce a real evaluation. A problem is waiting there: to apply a criterion, we must first *interpret* at least some of the items contained in the process – what is the act, what turns a being into a person, and so on. And it may appear that we have a problem of relativism: as interpretation is to some extent vague, and even free, independent evaluations might end up being different. In a sense this is true, but without implying relativism: evaluation relies on the presence of some facts, like facts of perception and sensitivity. A kind of moral competence, which in part is a competence to interpret the moral relevance of existing facts, is a supposition of morality, both on the part of evaluators and on those whose acts are the subject of evaluation. This opens some room

for differences in moral judgment, and even for a moral progress of a kind, but without implying relativism.