

Rituals - Moral - Ethics

To be viable and competitive, any collective needs a certain degree of order. While animal species organize based on natural instincts and/or learning processes, human collectives are organized in diverse cultures. At those rituals, morals, and ethics are of particular significance.

A **ritual** is a repetitive social practice, set off from the routines of day to day life, following some sort of schema. They often have their roots in myth and religion, bound to ancient practices between the divine and humans. However, rituals not only include the worship rites and sacraments of organized religions and cults, but also rites of passage, atonement and purification, oaths of allegiance, dedication ceremonies, coronations and presidential inaugurations, marriages and funerals, school traditions and graduations, club meetings, sporting events, Halloween parties, veterans parades, Christmas shopping and more. Many activities that are ostensibly performed for concrete purposes, such as jury trials, execution of criminals, and scientific symposia, are loaded with purely symbolic actions prescribed by regulations or tradition, and thus partly ritualistic in nature. Even common actions like hand-shaking and saying hello may be termed rituals.¹

What the words **moral and ethics** denote is much less clear than the meaning of the word *ritual*. According to the prevailing opinion moral and ethics widely intersect as referring both to questions of good and evil, must and must not. This interpretation is often differentiated by denoting moral as being identical with valid norms of thinking, feeling, and behavior while ethics denotes the philosophical reflection of such norms.²

Although this differentiation appears to be historically and logically consistent it is not enough to understand the issue. Since ethical criteria and norms are reflected not only in a specialized philosophy (following the example of Greek antiquity); they are rather subject of public discussion and norm-building. Through this development they become charged in a democratic sense referring to criteria of public goods and public institutions. That's why ethics differs from classical moral and moralism substantially:

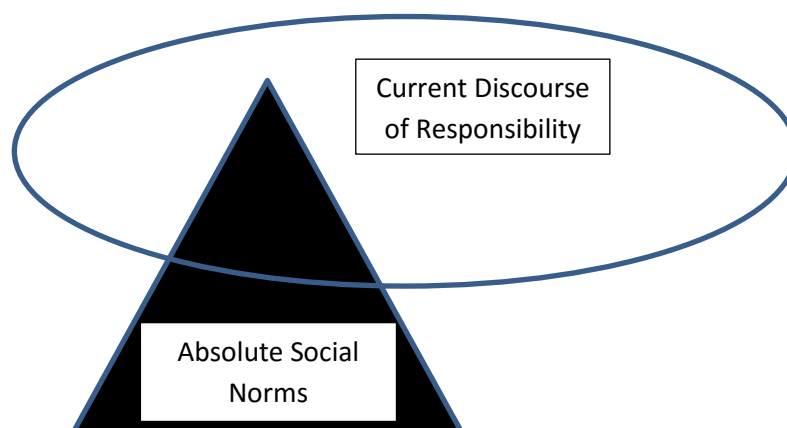
¹ Slightly modified version of: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ritual>

² <http://philosophy.lander.edu/ethics/types.html>; <http://grammarist.com/usage/ethics-morals/>;
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ethics>

- **Moral** (etymologically from Latin *mores* = *accepted customs*) is about allegedly pre-given, that is metaphysical, norms in terms of good and evil. How people think, feel, and behave is questioned and possibly condemned against the background of those absolute norms. Above all religions render and rule morality, resulting in religious catalogues of fiats and bans that claim absolute obedience also after centuries or even thousands of years. Since moral condemnation easily changes into marginalization, tabooing, or even sanctified violence against divergently thinking people or groups, moralism usually works strictly anti-pluralistically.
- **Ethics** (etymologically from the Greek word *ethos* = *accustomed place* and *ta ethika* = *study of morals*) is about assessing human behavior in discourses. The results of these discourses are valid norms, but notably human products that may be changeable. Ethics is particularly to settle human conflicts in a fair, broadly accepted manner. A central point of reflection is responsibility in terms of how harmful and detrimental consequences for a civil community can be minimized, respectively how people can live together in peace and according to their free wills.

Starting from these basics, some specific differences come to the daylight: While moralistic rule operates with claims of absolute verity and legitimation towards addressees who have no right to deviate or to counter, ethics argues in a discourse of principally equal citizens. Therefore different interests and open ways of arguing or protesting are not sanctioned here while moral condemns deviations as absolute social norms in an anti-pluralistic way. At that they are mostly directed against isolated or otherwise weak individuals respectively groups.

Figure 1: Moral and Ethics



Moral and ethics principally differ regarding their **substantial areas** of judgment: While moralists attack any deviation from their behavioral norms, ethics issues only behavior that implies interactive problems. Consequently personal orientations, such as sexual orientations and corresponding living styles, are no subject of ethical debates wherein the human right of living free and equal is underlined. In stark contrast, they are often subjects of very aggressive moralistic condemnation. Vice versa, there are grave ethical issues, for instance environmental problems, that do not play a relevant role in moralistic opinions (if yet, an ethical discourse influences moral opinion-making). This basic difference reaches until the ethical issuing of principal and special moralistic failures, such as the inability of that opinion-making to integrate different ways of thinking and feeling. Finally any ethically founded measure shall be rectifiable because no man-made work is absolutely immune from mistakes - see for instance the contradiction between moralistic proponents of death sentences and ethical proponents of its critique. While moral condemns in an absolute way, ethically founded policies aim at bettering behavior as far as possible - including the behavior of guilty actors.

Moral and ethics **correspond with different logics of interaction:**

- Ethics operates in the logic of bound governance insofar it takes freedom, equality and responsibility of all involved actors as a basis. Also the logic of integration is very relevant here because public goods and inclusive ways of considering are seminal for ethical deliberations. Associated with these logics, also behavior in the logic of interest is analyzed and evaluated as legitimate - looking at how real humans and real groups behave.
- Moral, in contrast, usually operates in the logic of integrative - that is absolute - power. Resolute moralists accept neither interest-based human behavior nor relativizing values of bound governance, such as any positive law. They rather measure everything by certain absolute, such as religious, values in contrast to what inferior human thinking and feeling prefers.

Because of these fundamental differences morally and ethically motivated **actors often are at cross purposes** - resulting in **dynamically growing conflicts**: Moralists tend to consider ethical humanists' arguments and world-views as over-complex, diffuse, and threatening. That's why they often break off communication with ethical positions and tend to favor one-sided ways of action - resulting in retreat into sects, power strategies (poor politics), or even violence. Ethically motivated actors, on the other side, in principal prefer rich

politics based on broadly accepted common institutions and peaceful behavior. But faced with over-simple and violent patterns of moralist thinking, with disrespect for pluralistic institutions or even with violence, also ethically thinking actors may change to power strategies up to police control strategies. That in turn may strengthen the impression of being threatened in the eyes of the involved moralists, and so forth - a dynamic transition process to the logic of war.

Such devastating dynamics may be hampered by **clarifying concepts used on both sides**, for instance by asking:

1. How are certain morals respectively ethical judgments supported or defended? What constellations of moral and ethical arguments are typical?
2. What are the main motives of the involved actors to use certain terms and models of morality respectively ethical humanity? What actor constellations may result?
3. How far is it possible to make certain moral judgements understandable and acceptable in terms of an ethical discourse and vice versa, how far can ethical deliberations be made clear and acceptable for religions and other promoters of certain morals.
4. How far and on what ways can moralistic (non-pluralistic) attitudes be changed into ethical (pluralistic) attitudes and discourses?

Since mostly both moralistic as well as ethical ways of thinking respectively actors are relevant in the socio-political process, diverse mixtures and complex constellations of them can be found. That's why in modern societies there is an enduring political challenge of optimally managing the relations between diverse religious and non-religious morals respectively ethical opinions.

This challenge comprises the **coordination of diverse religious and non-religious rituals with ethical needs** as respectfully and socially acceptable as possible. The scope and complexity of that challenge may get clear by shortly outlining some examples, such as the religious rituals of human and animal sacrifices, Jewish kosher slaughter and Muslim halal slaughter, female genital cutting and male circumcision, religious fasting norms, religious and legal holidays.

- **Religious sacrifices:** In times of absolutely ruling religions human and animal sacrifices were usual. With the global spreading of civilization these cruel rituals are meanwhile considered to be absolutely unacceptable. Indeed Islamic State and similar hidebound organizations conduct practices such as ritual decapitating as a kind of symbolic

advertisement - a huge crime and a straight challenge of globally accepted ethical norms.

- **Kosher/halal slaughter:** According to valid norms of animal protection cruel ways of slaughter have been banned in many countries. Rituals of kosher/halal slaughter, however, are allowed not only in Islamic countries, but also in some countries with a relevant part of Jewish and Muslim population. There is a current debate about how to combine animal protection norms and religious slaughter rites best.
- **Female genital cutting and male circumcision:** While female genital cutting is currently allowed only in a few African countries, less cruel rites of male circumcision are still a prevailing standard amongst Jewish and Muslim people. Also in many countries with a Christian tradition, but a relevant portion of Muslim or Jewish population this ritual is officially allowed.
- **Religious fasting norms** are usually considered an expression of private freedom. Only in extreme cases, such as in high performance sport or in particularly responsible jobs, compromises are searched for.
- **Religious and legal holidays:** Outside of countries with a ruling religion religious holidays are mostly handled as private matter. Indeed, also with regard to this issue there are many mixtures, for instance in the USA where workers often have a choice of holidays corresponding with their beliefs.