

ETHICAL NORMS AND SOCIAL RITUALS

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Summary

Social rituals lie at the very foundation of actual social or moral practices. Ethical norms that actually and reliably influence conduct do so by becoming habitual ways of acting, habits of the heart, so that they are realized in concrete, particular, socio-historically conditioned contexts. As a result, in actual ethical communities, it is easy to say what one should do, apart from any articulation of abstract, philosophical, or moral criteria. An ethical norm that does not find itself living in actual community practices will not endure and will lack sufficient social specificity to guide conduct reliably.

Keywords: social ritual, ethical norms, living ethical practices.

I. Introduction: Why Social Rituals are so Important

The practices that most reliably shape and guide conduct are those which have become integral to the fabric of actual ethical conduct in a particular social context. In appreciating and articulating this fundamental truth, G.W.F. Hegel (1770-1831) contrasts morality (*Moralität*) with ethics (*Sittlichkeit*). In doing so, Hegel underscores a distinction important to an adequate account of appropriate behavior. At stake is what constitutes the difference between what Hegel characterizes as morality (*Moralität*) in contrast to what Hegel characterizes as ethics (*Sittlichkeit*). Morality for Hegel is the domain of Kantian attention:

Kant's further form – the capacity of an action to be envisaged as a *universal* maxim – does yield a more *concrete* representation of the situation in question, but it does not in itself contain any principle apart from formal identity and that absence of contradiction (Hegel, 1991, p. 162). [Die weitere *Kantische* Form, die Fähigkeit einer Handlung, als *allgemeine* Maxime vorgestellt zu werden, führt zwar die *konkretere* Vorstellung eines Zustandes herbei, aber enthält für sich kein weiteres Prinzip als jenen Mangel des Widerspruchs und die formelle Identität (Hegel, 1986, p. 253).]

Addressed in ethics or ethical life in part three of Hegel's *The Philosophy of Right* is what Michael Inwood characterizes as «the ethical norms embodied in the customs and

institutions of one's society» (Inwood, 1992, p. 92) as opposed to the more conceptually abstract character of morality, *Moralität*, treated in part two of *The Philosophy of Right*.

The word *Sittlichkeit*, usually translated in Hegel's works as 'ethical life', but occasionally as '(social or customary) morality', etc., derives from *Sitte*, the native German for a 'custom', a mode of conduct habitually practised by a social group such as a nation, a class or a family, and regarded as a norm of decent behaviour (Inwood, 1992, p. 91).

Hegel's account of normative issues is built around this watershed distinction. Ethics possesses substance and a concrete orientation that frames the character of proper action. As this article argues, ethics is only fully realized through social rituals.

Social rituals are examined in order to better take account of Hegel's momentous distinction between *Moralität* and *Sittlichkeit*. What is involved is illustrated through two examples of the ethics of medicine: the rituals of informed consent and of the eschewal by physicians of sexual intimacy with patients. These practices both defend the moral integrity of the profession of medicine and secure the professional character of physicians by placing them in a matrix of concrete sustaining behaviors. These social practices function as constitutive social rituals, illustrating the ritual-framed nature of major ethical undertakings. This examination of the character and importance of social rituals provides a detailed and concrete gloss on the distinction between morality (*Moralität*) and ethics (*Sit-*

tlichkeit). For instance, in the United States, medical informed consent and the avoidance of sexual intimacy with patients are not disembodied abstract concepts or norms, but ways of behaving that shape the concrete life of the medical profession. Only when social practices secure a habitual nature (i.e., become structured by social rituals) do they possess a taken-for-granted character and, more importantly, effectively shape how persons see and experience themselves as being, acting, and relating to others as professionals. It is such practices that constitute the socially embodied fabric of established behavior. This short article explores how ethical norms are established through societal rituals that give definition and support for reliable social deportment.

■ II. Beyond Abstract Moral Norms

Behavioral rules unconnected to habits of the heart, moral rules that have not become established and habitual ways of acting do not reliably shape concrete deportment. Without being buttressed through social rituals, they remain largely social pieties. They resemble the Anglo-American norms for ethical and political deportment that were exported to the Third World, as in the case of the Philippines after they had been placed under American control beginning with the first American governor in 1904. These moral and political behaviors were realized at best piecemeal and superficially. For example, a cardinal source of the differences distinguishing the Philippines from Australia lies in the latter effectively and reliably embodying Anglo-Saxon