

Values in practice

March 31, 2026

A seminar on the role of values in people's lives, within work organizations—especially in the public sector and, in particular, in research contexts. The speakers were philosophers Paolo Costa and Lucia Galvagni, senior researchers at FBK-ISR.

Agorà is an initiative launched within the FBK community in the second half of last year as an open space for dialogue, aimed at exploring the **relationship between research and fundamental human rights**. It promotes initiatives to better align daily practices with the values each individual brings.

What role do values play in people's lives? What role can and should they play in organizations? What role can ethics play in the public sphere, and particularly in research contexts?

These questions shaped the **first seminar** organized by FBK staff involved in the initiative.

Paolo Costa and **Lucia Galvagni** offered insights and interpretations, engaging an audience of several dozen participants, both in person and online. The meeting opened with a more theoretical presentation by Costa, followed by Galvagni's reflection on organizational contexts and a discussion with participants.

Costa began by distinguishing between strong and weak values, clarifying how closely values are tied to self-definition. Moving from the individual to the collective level, he emphasized the difficulty of establishing a shared framework of values and noted how emotional reactions often stem from actions, gestures, or words that exceed our threshold of acceptance. This kind of negative reasoning allows us to gain insight into who we are—to ask ourselves once again who we are through what we find tolerable or intolerable.

Strong values and their role in shaping personal identity

Values are not mere preferences but fundamental reference points that guide choices and shape identity. They can be divided into **strong values** (enduring commitments, such as love for a child) and **weak values** (contingent preferences, such as skipping a meal for a pleasurable activity).

Strong values are tied to deep emotions and a **sense of self**; they cannot be reduced to a "price list" or rational calculation, because their violation leads to disorientation and

identity crisis. They are resilient in the face of adversity and generate tension, especially in situations of conflict. Articulating them is a complex, often opaque process that requires ongoing self-reflection and adjustment, particularly in an age when moral “certainties” are rare and fragile.

Rationalization and conflict: how modern societies manage values

In complex societies, the coexistence of strong values and pluralism requires strategies of **rationalization**. Max Weber described this as the “polytheism of values” and the process of “disenchantment”: modern individuals must learn to manage their value commitments with a degree of detachment to avoid unsustainable conflict. Two main neutralization strategies emerge: transforming values into **duties** (universalizable norms, such as ethical codes or laws) or into **interests** (negotiable, as in market dynamics). However, these strategies create fragile equilibria. The segmentation of value spheres (private, public, professional) can lead to **cognitive dissonance**. A film or a family crisis, for instance, can suddenly reactivate dormant moral tensions, showing that the separation between spheres is never definitive.

Collective values: between shared identities and structural dissonance

Collectives—such as nations, organizations, and communities—also hold values, but managing them is more complex. Modern **social ontology**, shaped by individualism, makes it difficult to determine who “owns” values within a group: individuals, institutions, or the collective as a whole. Values emerge through social relationships and are constantly redefined, as seen in major historical transformations (for example, women’s emancipation). **Vagueness** and ongoing negotiation help mitigate dissonance, but the risk of hypocrisy or opportunism remains. Politics, understood as a space for public deliberation, becomes the arena where values are clarified and negotiated, and where human freedom is expressed through responsibility to oneself and others.

Values—both individual and collective—are therefore a constant challenge, a dynamic balance shaped by identity, conflict, and responsibility.

Galvagni then shifted the focus to the context of a research institution, where knowledge is both the core and the driving force. Research aims to explore, critically understand, and contribute to knowledge. At FBK, scientific excellence and social impact are core elements and function as organizational values.

In complex organizations, values provide possible directions of meaning. They offer a map for orientation, a horizon that guides behavior, and a source of inspiration and motivation.

“However,” Galvagni adds, “there is always, inevitably, a gap between stated values and actual practices. As philosopher Jean-François Malherbe notes, ethics has the task of ‘bridging the gap that always exists between declared values and established practices.’ For this reason, ethics can be understood and interpreted as a dynamic process in which there is a constant effort to bridge the gap between what is recognized as a guiding principle or value and the translation of these principles—and the values underlying them—into specific, everyday practices and behaviors.”

At this moment, given the attention that FBK's governance has shown toward ethics and integrity in research, there appears to be a certain alignment between the need to prioritize ethics—as reflected in the governance structure—and the need to reflect on the values that are both established and emerging within the community of professionals working at FBK: this reflects the path being taken at Agorà. The two levels do not necessarily coincide, however. This misalignment can generate dissonance (including cognitive dissonance) within the community, but it can also create opportunities for dialogue.”

Reflecting on practices allows us to examine processes through this lens and to identify points of convergence or divergence—agreement or disagreement—that may give rise to conflict when rules are not fully recognized or shared.

The decoupling of rules and values helps explain the degree of alignment between top-down prescriptions and bottom-up perceptions, from which behaviors of adoption or rejection emerge, as well as negotiation and redefinition of both values and practices.

“An effective organization,” Galvagni concludes, “requires a dual approach grounded in listening and dialogue—integrating both top-down and bottom-up dynamics.”

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