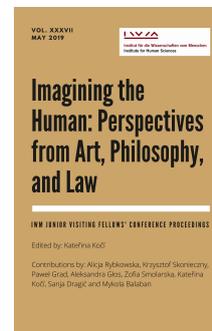


Trust in the Decent Society

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Introduction

The decent society is one with respect at its heart. In the decent society, institutions and their agents, such as policemen, judges, clerks and doctors do not humiliate the citizens. Decent society is thus built not only on freedom, but on freedom with honour[1]. As such, it invites trust. Obviously, public institutions that do not humiliate the citizenry will be much more readily trusted than those that provide their services in a negligent and disrespectful manner. Furthermore, a society built upon trust in the word of the other, and in which promises are kept, will be more decent than a society that lacks basic respect for a person's word. The interconnection between trust and decency also operates in the opposite, negative, direction: distrust creates humiliation, and humiliation creates distrust. An employer who distrusts his employees will incessantly monitor and check them; a distrustful husband can be tempted to breach his wife's privacy, and a father who mistrusts his children will try to control them and dictate what they do. Even these brief, preliminary examples suffice to show that trust and decency are closely and deeply interrelated, and that the knot bounding it is the knot of respect.

The title of this paper has a double meaning, which indicates its twin aims. These are firstly to revive the ideal of the decent society as one worthy of trusting in our post-truth, populism-prone times. Secondly, to detangle this not so obvious – yet crucial to the well-being of our societies – relationship between the idea of the decent society and the concept of trust. This will unfold as follows: in the first part, I will dust off the idea of decent society as it was introduced by Avishai Margalit. In the second part I will analyse the concept of trust and argue that we can understand it as a form of altruism, wherein the content of the gift altruistically given is nothing more or less than respect.

The importance of being decent

The idea of the decent society is a paradoxical one. The demands of decency seem rather modest. Common expressions such as ‘a decent wage’ and a ‘decent minimum of healthcare’ suggest that it refers to some rather low, barely satisfactory minimum. ‘Decent clothing’ does not delight, but it does not repel us either. A ‘decent man’ is not a hero, nor a saint, but a respectable person, someone worthy of our trust. Similarly, the idea of the decent society sets only a humble, minimum standard for the goodness of society. It does not delude us with overambitious projects to fix the world, nor does it expand upon any vision of a brave new social order, but following Orwellian traces, it tracks down patterns of humiliation and warns us against them. Yet, despite these modest ambitions, it is very rich in meaning and consequences. These consequences can be clearly seen through the negative lenses of breaches in decency. Decency goes unseen, but Indecency can cause earthquakes in social relations. As ‘indecent’, the cruellest crimes, that bring shame to humanity, are usually described. Finally, what brought the idea of decency to light in modern times were the atrocities of World War II. The ideal of decency may thus seem very basic and earthbound, but its potential rebuttal can shift or even remove common ground. As such, it is worth closer scrutiny.

The idea of the decent society was introduced by Avishai Margalit in his compelling book of the same title[2]. Margalit defines it in minimalist, negative terms: the decent society is one whose institutions do not humiliate its citizens. He distinguishes it from civilized society as one in which the citizens do not humiliate one another. Whereas in the decent society, the focus is on institutions which do not, either by the laws they issue or the conduct of their agents – clerks, judges, policemen and doctors (in the case of publicly-financed healthcare) – humiliate the recipients of their services in the way they provide them. For example, Czech and Polish societies under communist rule could in many aspects be described as civilized, however not as decent, as their institutions relentlessly and programmatically breached the demands of human decency.

The decent society has at its heart the most basic of human goods, which is a desire not to be humiliated, or to put it positively, to be respected and to respect oneself. It is important to understand what kind of regard is at stake here. In Margalit’s vision the self-respect at stake is something very basic – the respect due to every human being, for being human. He writes: “*The appropriate concept of honour is the idea of self-respect as opposed to self-esteem and social honour*”[3]. The kindred, yet opposite concepts of social esteem and social honour depend on merits, personal achievements, ranking traits, and ultimately an axiology of a given society (or even a given social group). The grounds for social esteem will be different in Japan and different in Morocco, and as different for an academic as for a business man, even within the same society (not to mention further cultural, social and religious differences). Self-esteem is based on the same ranking traits; however it can easily surrender to subjective deformations. As Margalit lucidly notes, it’s possible that a person, let’s say an ultimate perfectionist, can be highly honoured socially, while still holding themselves in low esteem. In any case, entrance into these socially advanced esteem-seeking games is guarded by the kind of respect that decency has at its core. The decency kind of respect is due to every human being, for the very fact of being human, and as such remains naked and unornamented in any of the polychromatic, axiological decors. It thus occurs on a different, much deeper level and should not be the

object of social games. It's founded upon the simple act of recognition of someone as belonging to the same all-encompassing group – the Family of Man. Although this simple feature of being human may seem self-evident and inalienable, the history of mankind knows many cases of its denial. Margalit distinguishes five ways of treating humans as non-humans, which constitute at the same time clear examples of humiliation: 1) treating humans as objects; 2) as machines; 3) as animals; 4) as subhuman, and – as has proved particularly disastrous in human history – 5) as beasts or demons spreading absolute evil or destroying humanity. Interestingly, Margalit argues that such an attitude is based on counterfactual logic, which invites seeing persons *as if* they were beasts, objects, tools, numbers in a queue to annihilation, etc. This way of seeing does not look through a 'natural eye', as he puts it, but deploys a distorted stigmatizing perspective grounded in an ideological vision of reality. The dialectics of the simplicity of the recognition of human as human, and ideological infatuation, are well expressed in the following quote from Simone Weil's 'The Iliad or The Poem of Force':

Anybody who is in our vicinity exercises a certain power over us by his very presence, and a power not exercised by him alone, that is a power of halting, repressing, modifying, each movement that our body sketches out. If we step aside for a passer-by on the road, it is not the same thing as stepping aside to avoid a billboard. Alone in our rooms we get up, walk about, sit down again quite differently from the way we do when we have a visitor... But this indefinable influence that the presence of another human being has on us is not exercised by men [such as one's adversary in warfare] whom a moment of impatience can deprive life, who can die before even a though has a chance to pass sentence on them. In their presence people move *as if* they were not there[4].

This quote from Weil illustrates very well the three elements crucial to Margalit's conception. Firstly, it expresses the simplicity of recognising a fellow human being as human, and the *indefinable*, yet compelling *influence* that their presence exerts on us – if another human being enters into our space, we automatically and subconsciously recognize the presence of a fellow consciousness and change our behaviour accordingly. Moreover, just as Margalit puts it, the denial of the recognition is rooted in the same hypothetical 'as if' logics. This counterfactual element suggests that the humanity of the other cannot be denied on the ontological plane, but can be on the normative (which not infrequently leads to factual annihilation). Margalit also clearly identifies the most common grounds for such denial, based on the political figure of an 'enemy', and fuelled by the basic human fear of 'violent death'.

Secondly, Weil perfectly introduces into the subject the socially-meditated nature of our self-respect. This may seem paradoxical: self-respect is, eventually, the worth that we hold for ourselves, in our own-eyes. So do we really need the recognition of others to respect ourselves? Margalit argues that yes, self-respect while being self-referential, is nevertheless dependent on the respectful attitude of others towards oneself. Furthermore, that this depends not merely on psychological reason, but also conceptual reason. In explaining this point, he refers to the classic Humean analysis of causality in concept formation. For example, no general concept of the colour red could be formed, he argues, even when faced with one's own blood, if there were only one red thing in the entire

universe. If our thinking and our language – as Wittgenstein proved a few centuries later – are socially mediated, so then, even more so, is our identity and self-respect. Clearly, this vision of mind and personhood rejects the subjectivist Cartesian concept, and all the subsequent modern visions of consciousness as a private theatre, in which knowledge of self is achieved through introspection and evokes the ancient Aristotelian tradition of human beings as *zoon politikon*.

The third element is the minimisation of the recognition of humans as human, as illustrated by Weil's quotation, which exposes another important aspect of Margalit's conceptions – to wit its humble, negative-only form. Margalit defines the decent society only in negative terms, and he tends to abstain from any form of positive definition, as his discussion with Honneth[5] explicitly proves. He gives three reasons for his 'thin' negative approach – moral, logical, and cognitive. The moral reason is his conviction that eradicating evil is more urgent than promoting good. This idea is reinforced by the logical reason, according to which special goods such as respect and trust are often by-products of behaviour, and cannot be demanded at will, nor forced (so positive politics can in fact be counterproductive). The cognitive reason is that, as it is easier to identify illness than health, so it is easier to discern humiliating attitudes than respectful attitudes.

Interestingly, though, Margalit does offer one positive justification: for the respect due *simpliciter* to every human being (although it does not lead to justification of positive politics). He claims that the respect is due, even towards the cruellest evildoer, for bearing the universal human trait of radical freedom. The concept of radical freedom is a very interesting one. How is the cruellest evildoer radically free? Well, he could repent, Margalit says. He could ask to be pardoned, and thus clear his debts with the past and start anew, thus changing his future. It is merely the capacity to live a moral life that ultimately makes people worthy of respect, even if it is only a presumption about the moral person that no matter how well grounded they are in proven trustworthiness, they will continue being so; and towards the evildoer, it is a presumption that no matter how improbable, they could be willing to change their life. Decency-obliging respect thus ultimately hinges on mere probability, a benevolent hypothesis, on the "faith of a man in a man"[6], on trust that he can choose a moral life. While Margalit does not seem to see this similarity, this concept of radical freedom is perhaps most beautifully expressed by Hannah Arendt in her metaphor of freedom as the miracle of a new beginning, a breach in automatism (or an *initium*, as Arendt's intellectual guru Saint Augustin would say). As she writes in one of her most moving passages:

No doubt human life, placed on the earth, is surrounded by automatic processes by the natural processes of the earth, which, in turn, are surrounded by cosmic processes, and we ourselves are driven by similar forces insofar as we too are a part of organic nature (...). Every act, seen from the perspective not of the agent but of the process in whose framework it occurs and whose automatism it interrupts, is a "miracle" that is, something which could not be expected.[7]

Similarly to Margalit, she distinguishes two potent forms of using this capacity for miracle-making (which nevertheless dwells within ordinary human faculties): forgiveness, as the power to change our past, and promise, as the power to shape our future.

Trust and respect

As it was said, the interrelation of trust and decency comes through the concept of honour. To better understand this relation, it is important to take a look at the concept of trust. In the contemporary theory of trust, there are two notions dominating: the altruistic and the calculative one (or in the nomenclature of Carolyn McLeod 'good will-based' and the 'risk-assessment-based'[8]). The first one, although altruistic, it is not a moralized concept and neither should it mean that trust-relationships are always morally good, but only that trust can be given for moral reasons, and as such can have moral value in itself. This altruistic notion of trust can be best understood in juxtaposition with the calculative concept of trust, which is prevalent today. This is because, in stronger or weaker forms, especially in the realm of practical reason, the instrumental model of rationality is still dominant. The theory of rational choice is one form of this paradigm and is influential in areas of experimental trust-research, such as behavioural economy and game theory. It makes two assumptions about the human condition: 1) a formal assumption, that it is (or could be, under favourable conditions, perfectly rational); and 2) a material assumption that it is, ultimately, egotistical. From this perspective, trust is defined as a form of 'encapsulated interest'[9] on the grounds of which I can trust you if and only if your stakes lay within the scope of my interests, and secondly, if your stakes are so tightly enclosed in mine that, upon my calculation of probabilities, it is simply not worth your while to betray me. As even the language of this theory vividly suggests, with words such as 'enclosed' and 'encapsulated', it paints a rather gloomy picture of human affairs, wherein monads without windows lead lonely, nasty lives, reaching out to one another (if ever), with just the poorly-understood aim of self-satisfaction.

However, the phenomenon of trust cannot be reduced to this kind of logic (although calculative/strategic theories of trust are in many respects right, and bring interesting new insights). As even common language teaches us that trust is 'credit': we give 'credits of trust' and 'the benefit of the doubt', we make 'leaps of faith', and these expressions show that trust irreducibly involves an element of uncertainty and risk that cannot be easily captured in the frame of self-interest. This wider or narrower margin of risk, which opens the window for the other person in all their impenetrable and ultimately unpredictable freedom, can be understood as a gift. This is the main thesis of the altruistic theory of trust, and at the same time also a place where trust touches honour. For depending on the moral motives for which we give the credit of trust, and the amount of risk we incur (or in other words, the generosity of the gift), we can distinguish stronger and weaker forms of altruistic trust. These influence human self-respect to a greater or lesser extent, respectively.

The weaker, more common version, can be illustrated with many real-life examples of everyday altruism[10]. Trusting does not consist in consuming someone's interest, but in opening the window for the other person, and in this overture a double value-judgement is hidden: 1) in the trustee, by inviting a trustor to trust signals that he takes them and their interest seriously and wants to be part of a worthwhile trust-relationship, and 2) in the trustor, who by giving a credit of trust expresses their high regard for the morale of the trustee. This latter is precisely the most obliging element of trusting. As Philip Pettit

argues in his fascinating book, *The Economy of Esteem*[11], the obligatory power of trust lies in the fact that we like to be esteemed and regarded as trustworthy. So if, in trusting us, someone expresses their regard for our morale, and we feel prompted to respond positively to this trust, then this constitutes the intriguing phenomenon Pettit calls the responsiveness of trust[12]. Trusting is a moral compliment, saying ‘I regard you as trustworthy’, which is something we like to hear and can be thus motivated to live up to. Especially since, as David Hume – one of the first researchers to recognize the power of promise noticed – we also don’t like paying the reputational “penalty of never being trusted again”[13].

Trust, even in this weaker form, is not only an expression of respect but can also serve as an evocation of it – and here is where altruism really begins. There are many real-life situations in which we give credits of trust with lots of space to grow into it. It happens whenever we trust a stranger on the street, or entrust a shy new colleague at work with a demanding task, or – and this is the most common and most beautiful example – when parents give huge long-term credits of trust to their children. The latter example also reveals the empowering potential of trust, elaborated on by Victoria McGeer into her “empowering theory of trust”[14] and as such proves that the gift of trust is a resource that not only welcomes the freedom of the other person, but also endows them with the respect necessary to conduct free action and to flourish.

There is, however, the stronger – heroic – form of altruistic trust where the gift is given not only beyond, but even against the objective calculation of probabilities. This was first described by political scientist Jane Mansbridge, who also introduced the notion of altruistic trust[15] and to whose concept I refer in my research. It can be best illustrated by the quite unbelievable, but nevertheless true story described by Jimmy Boyle in his autobiographical novel *Sense of Freedom*[16] (which at the same time could serve as a good argument favouring Margalit’s theory of radical freedom). Boyle could easily fit in the category of the cruellest evildoers from Margalit’s book. In the 1960s, he was considered the most aggressive man in Scotland, and was finally convicted of a brutal murder and sent to prison. Placed in solitary confinement, the turning point only came when he was later moved to an experimental prison. There, Ken Murray, a passionate social reformer, asked Boyle for help opening a parcel. He handed Boyle a pair of scissors and nonchalantly turned his back. That’s when a miracle occurred: Boyle not only didn’t stab him in the back, as one might expect, but actually helped him open the parcel. Boyle later recalled that it was directly because of the respect with which he was endowed by Murray’s heroic act of trust, that his behaviour improved so much that he was later released, and eventually went on to become a recognized artist and writer. This example, although very unique and clearly supererogatory, well exposes the ultimate reasons for placing such trust in people, which Mansbridge depicts as a Kantian respect for the humanity of the other person and Margalit grounds in the belief in a person’s radical freedom and the possibility of their repenting and changing their life. Which, as the Jimmy Boyle example shows, is not misplaced.

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