Margalit, Avishai. *The Decent Society.*
Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996. Pp. xi+304. $35.00 (cloth).

The title of this book will surely pique the interest of political philosophers who have spent much time and energy in recent decades trying to capture the idea of justice. Margalit believes that in the quest for justice, decency has

been overlooked. A decent society may or may not be a step to a just society, but decency is not a lesser concept and raises important issues on its own.

A society is decent, according to Margalit, when its institutions do not humiliate people. Institutions humiliate when they give a person sound reason to consider his or her self-respect injured. Margalit puts forward three types of humiliation. One is treating humans as if they were not humans, but "as machines, beasts, or subhuman." The second is taking away a person's control over important elements of her life. The third is rejection of or by the group one identifies with (what Margalit calls an "encompassing group"). Since group membership is expressive of humanity, this is also rejection of a person from the human "family."

When institutions humiliate in these ways, a person is not respected as a person, and, as a result, their self-respect is injured. Margalit puts forth three strategies for defending the Kantian notion that everyone deserves respect as a person: a "positive" one that appeals to a trait common and unique to humans; a "skeptical" one that grounds respect, not on a common trait, but because in our way of life we do in fact respect each other; and a "negative" one that gives up any attempt to justify respect but sees humiliation as wrong because it is cruelty—mental cruelty.

Margalit's defense is problematic. The third strategy does not try to justify respect, and the second raises questions of relativism: are people unentitled to respect if their form of life does not respect them? Only the first of the three strategies seriously tries to justify respect, but the trait Margalit picks, "radical freedom," is open to a number of objections. I do not think, however, that this matters much. Margalit could use the concepts of respect and self-respect without having to justify the principle of respect, since one can use a principle to illuminate a topic, even if a successful defense of the principle requires a different occasion. Further, the strength of the book, in my view, is not in its abstract account of concepts like humiliation and respect, but in the discussions of whether particular actions and conditions humiliate. Here are two of many examples:

Culture. The culture of a decent society must be nonhumiliating. But what about the use of stereotypes in art, for example, Shylock, which may humiliate Jews. Can a decent society allow this? If not, may it censor? If we say it may not censor, that seems to show that decency is too high a price to pay for certain valuable things. Margalit's response is to distinguish between a decent and a civilized society. A society is decent when its institutions do not humiliate; a society is civilized when its people do not humiliate each other. Thus, in a decent society, institutions do not humiliate, but individuals might. Humiliating images and symbols are protected so long as the state does not officially embrace or subsidize them. This response is sensible, but it seems to require that the state, through an agency like the National Endowment for the Arts, deny support to high-value, but humiliating, art. Is it wise to put a nonhumiliation condition on state subsidization?

The welfare state. Margalit argues that poverty is humiliating. Those who are poor lose the ability to satisfy basic human aims, such as providing adequate nourishment or shelter for their children. Poverty closes off one's life options and is seen by both the poor and others as failure as a human being. It is humiliating in the loss of control and the lesser humanity it implies. There

are two possible responses, charity or entitlement. Margalit argues that the "charity society" is also humiliating. It is based on pity. It typically involves a sense of superiority in the giver and the expectation of gratitude from the receiver. This humiliates, especially when poverty is beyond one's control. The welfare state is preferable because it makes assistance a matter of entitlement. The welfare state may be humiliating in practice (e.g., through assistance from rude bureaucrats), but Margalit argues that this is not essential to it. It is less humiliating than charity since it protects control and need not imply the stigma of second-class citizenship.

Margalit also discusses citizenship, snobbery, privacy, bureaucracy, unemployment, punishment, military training rites, and concepts such as rights, dignity, integrity, honor, self-esteem, servility, cruelty, and more. The discussions throughout contain insightful remarks which could be developed at length.

What, finally, is the relation between decency and justice? Margalit uses Rawls's two principles and argues that on Rawls's theory it seems possible that a just society could fail to be a decent one. A society that involves a (Rawlsian) fair distribution of goods may give these out in a humiliating way. It may also humiliate nonmembers under its jurisdiction, and its encompassing groups may humiliate their own members. These make the society nondecent, and thus it appears a society could be just but not decent. The appearance, Margalit says, is deceiving, since a Rawlsian theory requires a fair distribution of the bases of self-respect, and that means the rejection of such humiliation. So justice, after all, requires decency. Is decency a step on the road to justice? It seems that it would be since you can't have justice without decency. Margalit, however, suggests that a strategy for achieving a decent society may differ from a strategy for achieving a just society. We may need to choose between a lower probability of achieving justice and a higher probability of achieving decency. For this reason, we should take decency more seriously than we have.

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