



The Decent Society

By Avishai Margalit

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The Decent Society By Avishai Margalit

Avishai Margalit builds his social philosophy on this foundation: a decent society, or a civilized society, is one whose institutions do not humiliate the people under their authority, and whose citizens do not humiliate one another. What political philosophy needs urgently is a way that will permit us to live together without humiliation and with dignity.

Most of the philosophical attention nowadays is drawn to the ideal of the just society based on the right balance between freedom and equality. The ideal of the just society is a sublime one but hard to realize. The decent society is an ideal which can be realized even in our children's lifetime. We should get rid of cruelty first, advocated Judith Shklar. Humiliation is a close second. There is more urgency in bringing about a decent society than in bringing about a just one.

Margalit begins concretely where we live, with all the infuriating acts of humiliation that make living in the world so difficult. He argues in a concrete way in the spirit of Judith Shklar and Isaiah Berlin. This is a social philosophy that resists all those menacing labels that promote moral laziness, just as it urges us to get beyond the behavior that labels other human beings. Margalit can't be earmarked as liberal or conservative. If a label is necessary, then the most suitable is George Orwell's humane socialism, a far cry from *Animal Farm* socialism with its many tools of oppression. How to be decent, how to build a decent society, emerges out of Margalit's analysis of the corrosive functioning of humiliation in its many forms. This is a thoroughly argued and, what is much more, a deeply felt book that springs from Margalit's experience at the borderlands of conflicts between Eastern Europeans and Westerners, between Palestinians and Israelis.

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Editorial Review

From Library Journal

Most recent political theorists have concentrated on requirements for a just society, but the Israeli philosopher Margalit has a different idea. He asks what constitutes a decent society, "one whose institutions do not humiliate people." Margalit carefully explores the connections between decency and concepts akin to it, such as self-respect, honor, and integrity. He then asks, "What aspect of human beings, if any, justifies respecting human beings just because they are human?" His response stresses the ability of people to make changes in their lives. Having defined and supported his view of a decent society, Margalit assesses its relevance for social issues such as welfare, employment, and punishment. Some of his policy conclusions seem questionable, but on the whole Margalit has produced an illuminating study. *?David Gordon, Bowling Green State Univ., Ohio*

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From Kirkus Reviews

Down to the last detail, an overly theoretical and abstract elaboration of exactly what would and would not comprise a decent society. In his seminal work *A Theory of Justice*, John Rawls postulated an ideal Kantian society designed along strict equalitarian lines. As a philosophical construct, it has been enormously influential. But in practical terms it has stood just a bit too far above the wicked ways of man. So, as a kind of compromise, Margalit (Philosophy/Hebrew Univ., Israel) offers a slightly more realizable societal framework, one in which ``institutions do not humiliate people.'' Roughly modeled on George Orwell's passionate brand of humanitarian socialism, this is the decent society, the next best thing to Rawls's ideal society. Margalit is aware of the possible problems, quibbles, and exceptions to his beautiful model, and he feels compelled to chase after all of them. With a syllogistic fervor worthy of Aristotle, he proves this, refutes that, and argues about the other, until the law of diminishing returns has taken over completely and he is seriously fretting about such venal trivialities as snobbery and gossip. While the formal logic behind his arguments is impeccable, he sometimes veers close to elaborate tautology (always a problem with such metaphor- and definition- based reasoning). And many of the assertions buttressing the high towers of theory are extremely debatable. For example: ``Punishment is the litmus test of the decent society.'' America has capital punishment. Mexico doesn't. Which is the more decent society? Even though his construct is more practicable than that of Rawls, Margalit seems less interested in political possibility than philosophical soundness, particularly in his absolutist conception of decency. Like a crossword puzzle, an ingeniously constructed matrix that cannot quite rise above being just a clever diversion. -- *Copyright ©1996, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.*

Review

A splendid book. It is serious without being ponderous, it is unassuming but ambitious, and it is engagingly unorthodox, both in its concerns and in the way it pursues them. At a time when the idea of decency appears in politics only in the mouths of politicians eager to keep sex off the Internet, it is a pleasure to come across an intelligent discussion of a much more serious subject, one that has had little attention from philosophers-- how to build a society that doesn't humiliate its weaker members. (Alan Ryan *New York Review of Books*)

[This] book explores the concepts of humiliation and respect and characterizes some of the central features of a decent society. What all cases of humiliation share in common, in Margalit's view, is justified feeling that the actions or omissions of another indicate that one is being rejected from the human commonwealth...A highly engaging and original book. The work is sure to be important for scholars with academic interest in the topics of humiliation and self-respect in their own right. It offers timely and

challenging corrective to the philosophical community's obsession with the problems of justice. And it will be a stimulating resource for applied political theorists working on a variety of issues of cultural and social policy. (Alan Patten *Mind* 2001-01-01)

Within philosophy much of the current thinking is in reaction to John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice*, where justice is the principle value to be striven for. In *The Decent Society*, Avishai Margalit, Professor of Philosophy at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, offers an equally wide-ranging analysis which would see decency as the primary goal...It is clear that to live by the story he tells would in itself transform our own society in ways likely to be recognized, and approved of, by many of the public house and tabloid philosophers. The state would need to adopt much greater responsibility for the condition the unemployed find themselves in; welfare would be in principle preferred to charity as a way of assisting the needy, but great care would have to be taken in its administration; in general bureaucracy is suspect, even where it is recognized as necessary. To tell the story of a decent society, appealing to the honour of your hearers, in the hope of motivating people to bring its realization about in the way that argument alone could never do, is the central goal of this challenging work. (Paul Nicholson *The Month*)

Margalit's book offers a great deal...A decent society would have more books like *A Decent Society*. (Alan Wolfe *New Republic*)

Arguably the most important book on social justice published since John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* 25 years ago...Margalit shows that decency is a strong moral concept in its own right. A decent society strives to eliminate the institutional humiliation of its members, which robs them of their self-respect or control over their lives. (Charles Leadbeater *New Statesman & Society*)

Margalit's discussion of these themes is full of deep psychological insight and philosophical precision. The book is a model of how philosophers, using only a fine attention to distinctions between similar-sounding moral terms, can help to clarify, and by doing so, purify our moral language. It is a noble addition to our understanding of what our political and moral ideals should be and it frees political reflection from the strait-jacket of pure rights talk. (Michael Ignatieff *Times Literary Supplement*)

Within philosophy much of the current thinking is in reaction to John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice*, where justice is the principal value to be striven for. In *The Decent Society*, Avishai Margalit...offers an equally wide-ranging analysis which would see decency as the primary goal...That [the] experience [of humiliation] should be combatted is, in his view, one of the basic positions of any morality, not a conclusion that needs to be argued for. So he offers a wealth of illustrative example, from history, contemporary life, and literature. He also knows that decency is not enough--at a number of points he would favour a civilised society, one that for instance positively values cultural diversity rather than merely tolerating it. But if tolerance will avoid humiliation, and can be achieved, he is content to settle for that *pro temp*...To tell the story of a decent society, appealing to the honour of your hearers, in the hope of motivating people to bring its realisation about in the way that argument alone could never do, is the central goal of this challenging work. (Paul Nicholson *The Month* [UK])

The Decent Society presents arguments in the rigorous style of British analytical philosophy about why no one should be humiliated. In an ideal world, we seek justice; in this world, we can realize decency, and the welfare state can help us to do so. To save the welfare state, we need to be reminded why we created one, which Margalit effectively does. (Alan Wolfe *Lingua Franca*)

Margalit provocatively inquires whether a just society is also a decent society...[His] lucid exploration of decency includes insightful discussions of bureaucracy, the welfare state, punishment, and even

snobbery...*The Decent Society* is a serious contribution to moral philosophy. (*Choice*)

I finished reading this book with the feeling that I had had a quite wonderful experience. The tone of voice throughout the book is that of a serious but unponderous human being, continuously engaged with the reader, and determined to reason not only fairly but also graciously. The book is morally passionate, but free of rancor; it is sympathetic across a wide range of contending views, but clearly self-possessed. The book is philosophical, truly and successfully. It makes a distinctive contribution to moral philosophy and political theory. (George Kateb, Princeton University)

The Decent Society develops with great subtlety a theme largely neglected in political philosophy since Rousseau. Alongside the denial of freedom, in a less than decent society, there can also be the humiliation that comes from second-class citizenship and the pain of exclusion from full humanity. Margalit's account is notable for its fine discriminations, sensitivity, and care. (Stuart Hampshire)

This is a splendid book. It is an exacting account of the macro-ethics of political institutions and social practices that is also wonderfully attentive to the detail and nuance of everyday life. At its end, decency stands alongside justice as a distinctive moral idea. (Michael Walzer)

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Maude Porter:

The book *The Decent Society* make you feel enjoy for your spare time. You can use to make your capable considerably more increase. Book can being your best friend when you getting anxiety or having big problem with your subject. If you can make reading a book *The Decent Society* to be your habit, you can get far more advantages, like add your own capable, increase your knowledge about several or all subjects. You may know everything if you like wide open and read a guide *The Decent Society*. Kinds of book are several. It means that, science reserve or encyclopedia or other people. So , how do you think about this book?

Billie Luster:

Reading a book to be new life style in this year; every people loves to learn a book. When you read a book you can get a lot of benefit. When you read ebooks, you can improve your knowledge, since book has a lot of information in it. The information that you will get depend on what kinds of book that you have read. In order to get information about your review, you can read education books, but if you want to entertain yourself look for a fiction books, these kinds of us novel, comics, and also soon. The *The Decent Society* provide you with new experience in examining a book.

Jennifer Shipley:

Many people spending their time period by playing outside along with friends, fun activity together with family or just watching TV the entire day. You can have new activity to shell out your whole day by looking at a book. Ugh, you think reading a book can really hard because you have to use the book everywhere? It okay you can have the e-book, delivering everywhere you want in your Mobile phone. Like *The Decent Society* which is keeping the e-book version. So , why not try out this book? Let's see.

Ellis Dunn:

Many people said that they feel uninterested when they reading a guide. They are directly felt the idea when they get a half parts of the book. You can choose the book The Decent Society to make your own personal reading is interesting. Your personal skill of reading expertise is developing when you like reading. Try to choose straightforward book to make you enjoy you just read it and mingle the idea about book and studying especially. It is to be very first opinion for you to like to start a book and study it. Beside that the book The Decent Society can to be a newly purchased friend when you're feel alone and confuse with what must you're doing of that time.

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