

CIVIC VIRTUES FOR A DEMOCRATIC CULTURE

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Introduction: plurality of values

However much we desire a world of shared values, discussions about the true universality of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights show how diversity in a globalized world implies a plurality of values. And not all values that people hold dear go smoothly together. Even pretty fundamental values may collide. For instance, people universally seem to value freedom. But in practice their judgments may differ: are we allowed to criticize the religious beliefs of others or are we thereby abusing our freedom of speech? There are good reasons for each position. Likewise we hold different views about the limits of freedom: should women be free to decide whether to have an abortion, or under which conditions do people have the right to end their own lives? Likewise we may universally support the ideal of justice. But in practice there is much to be discussed: is it about equality of opportunity or equality of outcome? Is it about providing each according to their needs, or each according to their merit?

Democratic culture

If a democratic society wishes to uphold universal human rights, it should cherish this plurality of values. Rather than aiming at *prevention*, its laws and institutions should be aimed at a peaceful *regulation* of conflicts. But such laws and institutions will only work if they are grounded in a democratic culture. And for a democratic culture to thrive, its citizens need to develop and practice several civic virtues.

Some of these are *social virtues*, like solidarity, empathy and responsibility. These virtues enable people to connect, to truly live together. They contribute to feelings of safety and trust.

However, for a diverse modern society to thrive it is not only required that people are able to *live together*, but also that they are willing and able to *let others live* according to their own values, even if these are quite distinct from our own. For this, they also need to exercise certain *democratic virtues*.

Democratic virtues

The core virtues of a democratic culture are *assertiveness* and *tolerance*. While social virtues are helpful to sustain and improve relations with people who are familiar to us, democratic virtues enable

us to move comfortably in the company of ‘strangers’. While social virtues contribute to a much needed sense of certainty, democratic virtues enable people to deal with uncertainty.

Assertiveness consists of, first, the ability to fend for one’s own rights. Second, it consists of the capacity to ‘bicker’, i.e. the capacity to engage in a debate with people with whom one seriously disagrees, but also the capacity to stick up for oneself in the hustle and buzzle of everyday life, to be quick-witted and tough-skinned (Van den Berg 2002). Finally, assertiveness consists of the ability to question dominant norms and to advocate one’s own (Ramadan 2004; WRR 2007).

In a viable democratic culture, the necessary counterpart to assertiveness is *tolerance*. Toleration presents us with a paradoxical task. It is the virtue to allow something that on reasonable grounds we actually reject (Forst 2001). Hence, we are asked to tolerate precisely in situations where we have difficulty tolerating something. This obviously raises the question is: how can it be good to allow something to happen or said that you consider (for good reasons) to be bad? (Williams 1996)

The paradox of tolerance

To answer this question, let us consider three different forms, or rather degrees, of tolerance.

First, there is the practice of toleration as *permissiveness*, which is best illustrated by long tried (but gradually disappearing) Dutch policies of toleration (in Dutch: *gedogen*). For instance, before its legalization in 2000, prostitution was tolerated in the Netherlands. And buying and using soft drugs is tolerated till this very day. In cases of toleration as permissiveness, there is a considerable difference in power between the subject of toleration and those whose views or activities are being tolerated. Institutions and people tolerate (*gedogen*) an opinion or a practice that they actually find morally objectionable. The reasons for such toleration are mostly pragmatic: this particular evil (prostitution, soft drugs) is tolerated because it is a lesser evil than what could happen if it were oppressed. Governments for instance may permit certain practices for the sake of social stability, or to prevent them from going underground making them uncontrollable, or because they accept that a truly open society inevitably comes with societal fringes. Hence, rather than a safeguard for social stability, toleration as permissiveness is a precarious form of pacification.

Second, we can distinguish toleration as *forbearance* (in Dutch: *verdraagzaamheid*). This form of toleration is practiced regarding a practice or opinion we find repulsive or annoying. We have the power to fight or suppress it, but we decide not to do it. We can do so for pragmatic, but also for moral reasons. We may for instance forbear a view that we entirely disagree with out of respect for the autonomy of the other, for example his freedom of opinion. Or we may forbear a faith that in our eyes is entirely false, because we are convinced that faith can only come from the inside (hence using force

is useless). Or we may simply not wish to put otherwise good relations on the line. Toleration as forbearance can occur in asymmetrical, but also in more equal relationships: individuals or groups may forbear each other's views, habits or practices.

Third, we may practice toleration as **indulgence** (in Dutch: *inschikkelijkheid*). This is the case when we go along with a habit or practice that to us carries little moral weight, but is of great (moral or personal) interest to someone who is dear to us. Thus an atheist may be prepared to actively participate in the religious wedding ceremony of a friend, or a public school with many Muslim pupils may decide to earmark the Sugar Feast as an official holiday.

Golden mean

From the perspective of Aristotelian ethics, a virtue is the golden mean between two extremes. Hence, democratic virtuousness is about walking the fine line between too little and too much of the good. Someone who lacks assertiveness will be docile and trifled with, while too much assertiveness ends up in intimidation and aggression. Too little tolerance makes for bigotry, but too much leads to indifference.

When facing the increasing ethnic and religious diversity, and consequently the multiplication of conflicting values, in contemporary Western democracies concerns are focused on the 'too much'. When does assertiveness (defending one's religious creed, or one's national identity) turn into intimidation? And when does tolerance (regarding for instance 'other' ideas about sexual modesty or respectability) turn into indifference? Is there a criterion on the basis of which we can decide that the critical turning point has been reached where virtue turns into vice?

Against humiliation

The critical line is crossed, I would suggest, when one's words or actions amount to cruelty. It hardly needs any further explanation that *physical cruelty* is categorically wrong and should therefore not be tolerated: murder, torture or rape in most countries are considered serious crimes. But not everyone is equally aware of the evil of *moral cruelty* (Shklar 1984; Rorty 1989). Moral cruelty is done when individuals are treated as if they were not fully human, but an animal, an object, a baby or a number – that is to say, when they are *humiliated*. Humiliation refers to all sorts of action that give people good reasons to feel harmed in their self-respect (Margalit 1998).

In 2010, a young Israeli woman placed a picture on Facebook, on which we see her laughing while standing in front of two blindfolded Palestinian prisoners. In the comment she wrote that she had had a wonderful time in the army. She failed to see that (first) taking and (then) showing the picture was

humiliating to the Palestinian men. To show humiliation, even if it is meant to critically expose it (like I'm doing now) is always, in some form, a repetition of that humiliation, and should therefore be avoided as much as possible.

Decent and civil society

Not only human beings, but also laws and institutions can humiliate. This is the case when for instance groups of people are systematically denied certain rights, like when women could not vote because they were considered incapable of independent judgment, or when Israeli laws treat Arab Israeli as second-class citizens because they are not Jewish.

If we take cruelty to be the greatest evil, then we ought to organize our institutions and laws such that they do not humiliate those who depend on them. Only then may we call our society a *decent* society. If, on top of that, citizens do not humiliate each other, we may even speak of a civilized society, a truly *civil* society (Margalit 1998). Admittedly, the ideals of a decent or civilized society are quite modest compared to that of for instance a just society, aiming at the just and fair distribution of goods and an equal recognition of identities. On the other hand, the quite high-minded ideal of justice applies only to the treatment of those who are formally recognized as members of a particular society, i.e. to 'us', its official citizens and permanent residents. But decency is what institutions, such as the police or hospitals, owe to anyone who needs their services: not only to invited guests like tourists and highly-skilled immigrants, but also to asylum seekers and illegal residents. And civilized citizens do not humiliate others, whether it is their homosexual neighbors, a colleague with a headscarf or a waiter with a foreign accent.

If moral cruelty or humiliation is the greatest vice, then assertiveness turns into *intimidation* when individuals fend for themselves by humiliating others. Not only actions can have a huge impact, so can words or gestures (Butler 1997). By for instance calling the Islamic headscarf a headrag (*kopvod*), as the Dutch right extremist politician Geert Wilders once did, or depicting nonbelievers as 'lower than dogs', as preached by some Islamist imams, one violates the dignity of Muslima's and atheists respectively. When on the other hand we keep silent when we hear or see evil, i.e. that people are being humiliated, then tolerance has turned into *indifference*.

Sympathetic distrust

Tolerance turns into indifference not only when someone humiliates another person or group, but also when she does things or expresses ideas that are humiliating to *herself*. Take for instance a woman who blames herself for her husband's abusive behavior, or who agrees that if she menstruates she is impure and should avoid contact with others. By cherishing such ideas, women do themselves wrong.

They degrade themselves, even if they deny doing so. Such internalizations of negative self-images are humiliating to a person because they damage her sense of dignity, her self-respect. In such cases tolerance should make way for what I call *sympathetic distrust*: from an attitude of sympathy we let the person involved know that we do not trust her own judgment about what is best for her (Prins 2008). This does not mean that we should *force* these women to do what we think is best for them. But, being a democratic society, we do have the power to develop policies and legislation that send them (as well as the people around them) the message that, as a society, we cannot tolerate them doing this to themselves. And we will instruct social workers, police officers and other involved professionals to attempt, with ever so much caution and sympathy, to explain that we respect them as persons, but nevertheless (or precisely because of that) distrust the reasons for their choice (Thaler and Sunstein 2008). We interfere with their lives, but avoid being overly assertive about our own norms and values on the one hand, while on the other hand refusing to be simply indifferent to their fate.

In short: a truly democratic culture thrives on its citizens fighting out their conflicts in a peaceful way, 'armed' by the virtues of assertiveness and tolerance, whose only limits are set by the evil of physical and moral cruelty - to others as well as to one self.

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