

The Morally Decent Person

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I. Introduction

We say that an employer treats his workers decently, that a choir gives a decent performance, and that we pay a decent price for a bike. Or we hear the US President address the decent American people. Decency-talk is pervasive. Philosophers talk about decency mostly to pass positive judgements without using concepts overloaded with philosophical heritage, e.g., justice. But even though its prominence in ordinary moral discourse and philosophical discussions of morality more than warrants a closer interest in the concept of decency, there is little systematic treatment of decency itself.¹ A notable exception is Margalit (1996), who discusses a decent *society*. However, this only increases the demand for an account of the arguably more basic idea of a *decent person*.² In this essay, I try to close this gap in our understanding of moral vocabulary. More precisely, I submit an account of a *morally decent person*. This specificity is necessary because talk about decency with regard to persons does not always pertain to moral discourse. Such talk may involve connotations of “mainstream”, “normal” persons, leading unspectacular lives, respecting social norms, and caricatured by people striving for a different kind of life. Or such talk may involve connotations of manners and polite conduct. E.g., Hobbes, in chapter XI of the *Leviathan*, defines decency “as how one man should salute another, or how a man should wash his mouth, or pick his

teeth before company, and such other points of the *Small Moralls*.” Or we may talk about somebody's being a decent teacher or a decent driver in much the same way as we may talk about a good teacher or a good driver, i.e., without thereby making any moral statement. Rather, in such contexts a person's performance in a specific area (such as driving or teaching) is evaluated in some way. In this essay, I neglect all extra-moral connotations of decency except the connotation with manners. The association between “decency” and “manners” is strong enough, and morality and etiquette close enough, to warrant an examination of whether an account of an etiquette-abiding person is illuminating for an account of a morally decent person.³ Therefore, in section II, I explore this line. Unfortunately, the results are largely negative. In section III, I start anew. I present some observations to prepare the grounds for the account of the morally decent person that I develop in section IV.

II. Etiquette: Elaboration on a Hobbesian Theme

(II.1) Can an account of the etiquette-abiding person help us understand the morally decent person? To approach a reply, I discuss the difference between morality and etiquette to assess the moral significance of etiquette.⁴ Evidently, morality and etiquette are not identical: Some moral commands are not part of etiquette (“Do not kill innocent persons”), and vice versa (“Hold your fork in the left hand”). Yet simple accounts of their difference fail. E.g., characterizing etiquette as “social practices and forms prescribed by convention or by authority” (*American Heritage Dictionary*) sorts out features that morality shares. Margalit (1996) characterizes etiquette as setting high society apart. Yet this is too narrow since, say, working class families also have greeting codes. One may also claim that violations of etiquette affect lives less than violations of morality. That is so if we

contrast “You should not kill” with “You should hold your fork in your left hand.” But think of a wealthy person who is not affected by a medium-size theft, but by being greeted disgracefully by a socially inferior. The *symbolic significance* of etiquette dooms distinctions of morality from etiquette in terms of how much violations hurt unless we contrast etiquette with moral commands forbidding *physical cruelty*.⁵ But such cases differ both from etiquette and the rest of morality.

(II.2) Difficulties in distinguishing etiquette from morality arise because there are two kinds of etiquette. An example of the first kind is the command “Hold your fork in your left hand.” Such forms of etiquette shape a *refined life* in which we do not simply eat, but dine according to certain rules, or in which we do not simply talk but have conversations. An example of the second kind is “Greet older people deferentially.” Such forms of etiquette express *respect* for others. Possibly not all commands of etiquette fall into one of these categories, but I think they are close to being exhaustive. (Mutual exclusiveness is not an issue.) Using this distinction, can we now distinguish etiquette from morality, and can we see whether the etiquette-abiding person helps us understand the morally decent person? Clearly, *at most* the etiquette-abiding person in the second sense can contribute to our inquiry about the decent person. So we focus on that person. To distinguish that second kind of etiquette from morality, one may argue that the former is about behaving respectfully, i.e., about *expressing* respect, while what matters for the latter is *having* respect. It follows, so this line of reasoning continues, that looking at the person obedient to this kind of etiquette does not illuminate the morally decent person. Yet this is too quick. For although one may show respect without having it, it is dubious that one may have it without showing it. Since respecting people is morally significant, showing respect for people would be so too if one could demonstrate that showing respect is necessary for having it. It seems this position that behaving

respectfully is a *necessary* condition for having respect demarcates the *most favorable* viewpoint for the idea that an account of the etiquette-abiding person illuminates the morally decent person. However, even if we succeed in defending this viewpoint, we will at best obtain a *necessary* condition for being a morally decent person. This path is unpromising. I prefer pursuing a different approach, which in due course also shows why this initial one was bound to fail.

III. Preparing the Ground

(III.1) Let us start anew. I discuss three observations about what it is to be a decent person to prepare the ground for section IV. To begin with, I argue that the morally decent person is not a person with a specific *virtue*. Rather, I suggest that calling somebody a decent person is giving a certain positive overall evaluation of this person's character.⁶ Secondly, I explore ways of denying somebody's being decent. Thirdly, I argue that not every agent comes up for an evaluation in terms of decency.

(III.2) The morally decent person is not a person with a certain virtue. My strategy is to show that the concept of decency behaves differently from virtue concepts. The challenge is to make this claim independent of the *unity-of-virtues thesis* (UT), i.e., the thesis that having one virtues implies having all virtues.⁷ The first argument is this. Virtues constitute genuine *parts* of a person's character in the sense that having one or more virtues does not conceptually imply a positive evaluation of the person's whole character. (It does not do so *conceptually* although it may do so *causally*.) Thus a virtue could be operative in a person whose character we evaluate negatively in the end. Yet in view of how we use the concept of decency, there cannot be a decent person whose character we evaluate negatively. So decency is not a virtue. This argument assumes the falsity of UT.

The next argument is arguably independent of UT: Statements like “Person X has virtue Y” indicate how we may expect X to act under those kinds of circumstances to which Y applies. Suppose X is modest, and this is all we know about X. We are then in a good position to predict X’s behavior, say, when X is asked about her past achievements. Yet we have no clue how X acts in situations, e.g., when courage matters. Decency operates differently. Just how decency operates is my concern in section IV, but it is clear enough that decency is not associated with a *specific* kind of situation in a way in which virtues are. Thus decency is not a virtue. Here is an objection: “This argument is not independent of UT. For we would know how the modest person acts when courage matters. For, remember, having one virtue means having them all, according to UT.” Reply to this argument: The statement “Person X has virtue Y” indeed only tells us what to expect from X when Y applies. We need UT as an *additional premise* to warrant the inference to X’s also having virtue Z. So the information about X’s behavior when Z applies is not contained in the original statement itself. Yet an advocate of UT – say, Socrates in Plato’s *Laches* or *Protagoras* -- denies that we need an additional premise, claiming that spelling out the meaning of the original statement leads us to other virtues. So we do not yet have a conclusive argument independent of UT.

However, consider the following two points: For one thing, even if we need to resort to other virtues to spell out one of them, we do not need to resort to the concept of decency to do so. However, when spelling out decency, we may have to resort to virtue talk. This is not because being a decent person implies having specific virtues. Yet it may imply having some *portion* of courage, or some *share* of modesty, etc. This indicates that virtue talk is more basic than decency talk. For another thing, calling somebody a decent person means bestowing smaller praise than ascribing a virtue. The virtuous person stands out by displaying exceptional behavior in difficult situations,

while the decent person merely handles ordinary situations reasonably well. These two points show that the decent person is not aptly understood as a person with a certain virtue *even if UT is true*.⁸

Instead, I suggest that a decent person is a person with a character meriting a certain positive overall evaluation, in line with being a good person, being a saint, or being a righteous person. Section IV elaborates on what kind of character is described by calling somebody decent. Let me just defend this suggestion against one objection. This objection is that considering somebody a decent person may also be a positive evaluation of his overall *performance* rather than of his character. But this is wrong. Suppose we are clear about what a decent person would do in a variety of cases and observe somebody doing these things. It may be that his actions coincide with what decency demands under those circumstances, but he may be motivated by prudence or custom. So under different circumstances, he may deviate from what decency demands. Such a person would *behave decently* at times, but he would not be a decent person. This does not imply that a person's actions are irrelevant for his being judged a decent person. If he fails too many times to live up to what a decent person should do, we could not reasonably think of him as a decent person. There must be a certain consistency of passing this judgement with his acting; his decency must "show". But being a decent person does not *reduce* to showing a certain kind of performance.

(III.3) Next I explore three ways of denying that somebody is decent. One such way is trivial, whereas the other two lead to interesting points. The trivial denial is to say that a person is *not decent*. Whatever account of the decent person we submit, we deny that somebody is covered by it by saying that he is not a decent person. The second denial is calling him *indecent*. The meaning of being an indecent person is focused on the area of sexual behavior. People involved in prostitution

and pornography tend to be considered indecent. People who display lack of care to exchange intimacies in a private place strike us as indecent, and so do those who only incompletely cover their erogenous zones, or cover them with the wrong material, e.g., go to the beach in underwear. Also, we may call people indecent who expose their emotional life to strangers or who tell sexual jokes under inappropriate circumstances. More generally, an indecent person is not sufficiently concerned with preserving her privacy. It seems that we not only grant people a *right* to privacy, but also impose a *duty* to keep this private sphere to themselves and their friends.

In (III.2), I suggested that being a decent person means having a certain type of good character. How do these observations about calling somebody indecent fit in there? Denying that somebody is decent by saying that she is not decent is more general than saying that somebody is indecent. Calling somebody indecent is only one among various ways of saying that somebody does not have the specific type of good character that we ascribe to the decent person. It is striking that this kind of violation of privacy makes enough of an impression on us to warrant, as it were, a special place among possible characters that are not decent. This indicates how deeply the demand that what is considered private has to stay private is integrated in our ideas of interacting with each other.

There is a third way of denying that somebody is a decent person. We may say that there is *no reason* to call this person decent. It is instructive to investigate how denying that somebody has a certain virtue by claiming that there is no reason to say so, is different from denying that somebody is decent by claiming that there is no reason to say so. First, virtues occupy the (positive) extreme end of a spectrum. Saying that somebody has such and such a virtue means bestowing very high praise. So claiming that there is no reason to call somebody a person with this virtue may mean that

we agree on (possibly high) praise, even though we would not be willing to grant highest praise. Second, one feature of virtues is that we ascribe them to people in view of their behavior in extreme situations. Yet we do not frequently observe people in such situations. So saying that there is no reason to say that somebody has a certain virtue may mean that we do not have sufficient evidence to judge whether somebody has a certain virtue or not. Both points are different with regard to decency. As for the first point: “Decent” operates like “appropriate”. Calling somebody or something decent or appropriate means to express a small compliment, *minimal praise*. There is no conceptual space left to deny that somebody has this feature without actually saying something negative. Other expressions like that are “acceptable”, “alright”, “reasonable”, “competent”, “normal”, or “regular”. This feature of decency as minimal praise is important in section IV. We have now also arrived at another way of seeing the difference between decency and virtue. As for the second point: evidence for calling somebody decent is more easy to come by than evidence for ascribing virtues to people. Judging somebody a decent person draws on experiences made in situations of the kind that we all tend to be involved in. That is partly why the decent person is “one of us.”

(III.4) Let me proceed to the third observation. In the novel *Sophie's Choice*, a Nazi officer makes Sophie choose between the life of her daughter and the life of her son. Was he decent? Surely, we reject any claim to this person's decency. Yet this answer is unsatisfactory. After all, he made a mother choose between the lives of her children. It is more appropriate to deny that this question even arises, and to say that we need to give up on such a person as a moral agent. Such considerations apply to Hitler, Stalin, or Nero and other more locally known people who are

notorious for their cruelty. These people are used to teach children what being evil is all about. Similar phenomena exist on the other end of the spectrum. To ask whether somebody is a decent person who is introduced as a saint would be equally odd. In Catholic areas, children encounter saints as personifications of what it *is* to be good. (Likewise with respect to the Christian God.) So it seems that decency talk does not range over the universe of all moral agents. In order for somebody to come up for this kind of consideration, we must be able to take him seriously as a moral agent (she is not deeply evil) without describing him in a way that renders him beyond any moral dispute (she is not a saint).⁹ One may object that calling a moral monster indecent may still be true, but as a matter of pragmatics we are not inclined to speak like that. This objection misses the point: Surely, we can enforce the principle of bivalence and ask whether it is true or false that some evil person is decent. But the phenomenon to be accounted for is why there is something amiss.

IV. An Account of the Decent Person

(IV.1) The decent person is a person whose character deserves minimal praise. I take this to mean the following: *Calling somebody a decent person is to pass a bottom-line judgement that this person has a basic concern for other people, their reasons and feelings, but this judgement is consistent with his not having many morally desirable properties and with his having morally significant flaws.* My strategy for expanding on this claim is as follows: I begin by taking for granted an idea of what it is to have a basic concern for others and their reasons and feelings; roughly synonymous expressions are to care about others to some extent, or that they matter to some extent. I first explain

(in IV.2 and IV.3) what kinds of weaknesses and flaws do not prevent us from ascribing to a person the basic concern for others required to call him a decent person in the bottom-line judgement. Then, in IV.4, and IV.5, I say more about the positive part of this judgement. I elaborate on what it is about this person that makes us pass the positive judgement as opposed to what we would put up with without cancelling that judgment. I explain having a basic concern for others in terms of acting proportionately in situations involving basic human needs and concerns.¹⁰ In IV.6, I explain why I say that our bottom-line judgement is *consistent* with the lack of certain character traits. Finally, in IV.7, I raise some problems with my account. We are working in a very amorphous area of our moral discourse, but I hope that this discussion brings into better focus what it is to be a decent person.

Here are two examples. Suppose we encounter the decent person as an employer. She pays appropriate (but no unusual) wages, does not humiliate her employees, and does not abuse the asymmetry in power. She does not go out of her way to accommodate her employees and puts priority on her business interests, but she considers their interests. The grounds on which we call such an employer a decent person are well reflected in the statement that she has a basic concern for her employees and cares about their reasons and feelings. Suppose next that we encounter the decent person as a teacher. This might mean that she makes her expectations reasonably transparent to the students, does not openly discriminate in the classroom, and makes some effort to accommodate students in difficulties. Yet she does not go out of her way and sometimes cannot help taking her bad moods out on her students. We may aptly call her decent, and this judgement reflects our impression that she has a basic concern for her students' reasons and feelings. (Recall from the Introduction that

we do not discuss a "decent teacher" or a "decent employer" if that expresses an evaluation of a person's performance *as* a teacher or *as* an employer. We discuss decent people and assign professions to them here in order to flesh out the cases.)

(IV.2) Let us explore what limitations on such a concern still allow for calling somebody a decent person. Consider the *supererogatory* and the *heroic*, i.e., two ways of doing more than the appropriate. Clearly, the supererogatory and the heroic differ. Sometimes the less than supererogatory is already heroic. Suppose that by jeopardizing his own life, a person could save many people, and that he is strongly obligated to each of them. He could be morally required to jeopardize his life and therefore would not act in a supererogatory way. But it would be heroic. The difference between an action's being supererogatory and its being heroic is that the first depends on the situation, whereas the second depends on someone's capacities. The decent person is neither a hero nor a person who tends to do the supererogatory. Both kinds of persons are grotesquely underdescribed as decent persons. It follows that the decent person is not simply the person who does what is morally required. For what is morally required may demand a heroic deed. The decent person merely does what is *in proportion* (more on that later). The decent person does not even have to do occasional heroic or supererogatory deeds. For we count statements like "But this would have been heroic/supererogatory" as excuses for failing to act. A person on whom we only bestow small praise is excused without thereby losing this praise.

Still, decency may require heavy sacrifices. For example, somebody may have to sell his shop and go out of business in order to make an important operation possible for a relative towards whom he has obligations. Suppose that he would not be reduced to starving, but that his wealth would be

heavily diminished. He did nothing supererogatory or heroic. Although such cases are exceptional, the fact that something involves heavy sacrifices does not *by itself* exempt the decent person from doing it. Requiring that somebody be decent may be asking for “much” in terms of how it affects the agent, but not “much” from a moral point of view. (In examples I must ask for the reader’s good will: It is possible to add details to such stories that undermine their point; but in each case, or so I trust, such details can also be filled in to support the point at issue. This remark is not supposed to immunize the cases from criticism. Yet the alternative to asking the reader’s good will is to do without examples or to describe them in tedious detail.)

(IV.3) Evidently there are agents who deserve more than minimal praise although they neither do the supererogatory nor the heroic. The *good person* is like that. To distinguish the good from the decent, I argue next that aptly considering somebody decent is consistent with his having *morally significant flaws*. Such flaws are flaws for which we blame somebody and which weigh strongly against evaluating his character positively. They prompt objections to any positive evaluation of his character (“But he has such and such flaw”) that we could not simply dismiss. Rather, we would have to grant the objection, or to argue something like “Yes, that is true, and it does matter a lot, but all things considered, it does not turn out to be decisive in my evaluation.” I claim that somebody may be considered a decent person and still have such flaws. Calling this person decent means giving a bottom-line judgment that is not oblivious to objections in terms of morally significant flaws, but that does not count them as successful in refuting the positive judgment.

Vices are morally significant flaws, but they do not exhaust the field. We also blame somebody short of calling him vicious in some regard. E.g., we may say that somebody lacks courage in many

situations in which it matters or may even be morally required, but we would not therefore necessarily call him a coward *per se*. Suppose somebody is little inclined to face conflicts. He puts up with a lot himself and is not easily willing to stand up for others. Still, in situations in which the other side pushes it too far he does stand up for himself or for others. Or think of somebody who searches for ways to let other people know how smart a woman she is, but does not do so in any obnoxious way. We may not want to call her immodest, but we do want to speak of a morally significant flaw. The concept of a morally significant flaw is weaker than the concept of a vice, but ascribing to somebody a morally significant flaw is stronger than blaming her for an occasional omission.

I now discuss two cases to explore the limits of our willingness to call somebody decent. Suppose somebody gets drunk regularly and sometimes turns violent then. The next day, he always regrets his conduct. Yet he likes going out with his friends, and so drinks again. Also, he is ill-tempered and rude at times. Such bad character traits are morally significant. We blame this person for not trying harder to abstain from drinking, and we blame him for taking his ill temper out on others. Still, this is compatible with his being a fair-minded employer or a helpful neighbor, i.e., considerations that may be strong enough for us to consider him a decent person. We may say “All things considered, he is a decent person, but there are these things which he just does not manage to get a grip on”, or “He sometimes has odd days, when it's better to stay out of his way.” Reconstructing this situation such that we *excuse* his flaws would be wrong. We do consider his flaws in passing an overall character judgment, but in the end, these considerations do not succeed.¹¹

Consider a more involved case. Survivors of the death camp Sobibor report that the SS guard

overseeing the kitchen occasionally passed some extra food to the prisoners (Novitch (1978)). Sobibor was a place of sheer horror where the prisoners spared from immediate gassing had to work under humiliating circumstances. I do not possess more information about this guard, but since historical accuracy does not matter here, I try to tell a story that gives plausibility to my claim that a decent person may have morally significant flaws. Suppose that this guard “somehow ended up” in Sobibor; that his SS career was not the career of a fervent supporter of Anti-Semitism who made a point of treating Jews cruelly. Suppose that he himself did not kill any prisoners, and that his motivation for doing service in the kitchen in Sobibor was to avoid the Eastern Front. These stipulations are not implausible for a time when most males of a certain age range had to be soldiers. We can tell a story in which this guard gave bread to the prisoners because he had a basic concern for them, i.e., because he was a decent person. One may deserve that kind of minimal praise even under such circumstances. Still, we do want to blame him. Since tens of thousands of Jews were murdered in Sobibor, we are not willing to *excuse* anybody because he did not himself kill anybody or because he was trying to avoid service at the Eastern Front. Yet let us not carry this discussion too far into extreme cases. I meant to show that being a decent person is compatible with having morally significant flaws, and nothing depends on precisely how far we are willing to go here.

(IV.4) I have argued that calling somebody a decent person means passing a kind of positive judgment on her character that is consistent with her having morally significant flaws. Also, I claimed that it is her basic concern for other people that makes us pass that judgment in the first place. The account is still unsatisfactory because I need to say more about what it is that makes us positively evaluate this person *in spite of* the absence of virtues and the presence of morally

significant flaws. I need to say more about what the judgement is actually *grounded on* as opposed to what it is *consistent with*.

Having a concern for other people is seriously considering them in one's decision making. This does not mean that one counts oneself only as one among those who are affected by a decision. The decent person may put priority on the pursuit of her own plans. Yet others affected by his actions should enter his deliberations at least in ways such as the following: If the decent person has to choose between actions A1 and A2 such that A1 leads to a noteworthy, but not considerable improvement compared to the outcome of A2, but implies considerable disadvantages for another person, which is avoided by choosing A2, then the decent person chooses A2. Or if the choice of A2 over A1 leads to a strong improvement of the other agent's situation, whereas A2 leads to a noteworthy, but not considerable deterioration for the decent person as compared to A1, then again she chooses A2. Here is an example of the first case. Suppose a chain store owner could open a store either at location L1 or at location L2. He knows that a store at L1 ruins a small business next door which would survive otherwise. According to the chain store owner's calculations, opening his shop at L1 is a little more profitable than opening it at L2. Opening his store at L2 drives nobody out of business. The decent person opts for L2. Here is an example of the second case: Suppose somebody has a choice between going on vacation to some lovely seashore resort and visiting his (estranged) sick sister who may die soon and to whom it matters a lot to see him again. The decent person chooses to visit his sister. (I must remind the reader of the request for good will. It *is* possible that the store that is being run out of business is a front for some morally atrocious activity. But that is beside the point.)

Such reasoning is about *proportionality*, and it is not exhausted by these two kinds of cases. Proportionality reasoning plays a major role in everyday interaction. Just what the decent person should do in the outcome of such proportionality reasoning may be a matter of controversy. For frequently it is not clear how to assess the significance of what is at stake for the people involved. Yet in many cases it is clear enough what the decision should be. After all, we are comparing goods about whose relative standing we have fairly clear and commonly shared views. This seems true for the two cases discussed above.

(IV.5) However, the proportionality reasoning involved in explaining what a basic concern for others amounts to is not any proportionality reasoning *per se*. Suppose two wealthy oligopolists meet to distribute market shares. Suppose neither of them *needs* such a market share in any serious sense of “need.” Then it seems odd to assess their dispute in terms of decency. Rather, the decent person acts proportionately when basic human needs and concerns are involved. The chain store owner opening a store at L1 is not decent because he puts a small gain in profit above the basic needs of the weaker competitor. The decent employer does not take advantage of times of economic hardship, and Zola’s *Germinale* depicts employers who are not decent people. *Basic human needs and concerns* are not only needs pertaining to one’s survival, although those are an important subclass. They are, more broadly, needs and concerns relating to one’s quality of life in a serious sense. For example, if A can build his house such that it would take away all of B’s view, but (at a small loss for his gardening plans) could also build it elsewhere, it would not be decent for A to obstruct B’s view (assuming that having his views obstructed would indeed affect B’s quality of life). What counts as affecting one’s quality of life in a serious sense is context-sensitive and even

then frequently arguable, but no less important for that.

We do not require a tangible victim in order to evoke such proportionality reasoning. In 1996, German police discovered that several hundred highly ranked physicians and hospital officials systematically purchased human organs for too high a price and shared the benefits with the company distributing the organs. These people strike us as not decent because they make a lot of money, and it is out of proportion for them to enrich themselves in such ways. But it would be hard to point to victims other than the members of the insurance companies and the tax payers, who are only marginally hurt. Yet these crimes affect the quality of life of the community as a whole, even if no single person is strongly affected.

Let me highlight three important aspects of the proportionality reasoning in situations involving basic human needs and concerns that I use to explicate what I mean by having a basic concern for other people. First, being able to apply this kind of proportionality reasoning presupposes having what is colloquially called a sense of “what life is all about.” It involves enough good sense to perceive and understand what it is like for people to be under constraints, to live under hardships, etc. Second, this proportionality reasoning is local in the sense of Elster’s (1992) studies in *local justice*. He studies the multitude of ways of allocating scarce resources or dividing burdens practiced on a local level. One of his theses is that it is hardly possible to reduce these procedures that make sense locally to principles of a theory of fairness of which they could be instantiations. This proportionality reasoning is of that kind too. Yet I tried above to give some patterns of relevant proportionality reasoning and exemplified them with the chain store case and the hesitant brother case. Third, the decent person does not have to be a person who goes through this kind of reasoning

explicitly. Rather, she might just do what she does, and proportionality reasoning is a rational reconstruction rather than a recipe. The decent person does not have to be reflective.¹²

(IV.6) I need to elaborate on the point that the absence of virtues and the presence of morally significant flaws is *consistent* with the overall judgement that somebody is a decent person. I present different paradigmatic cases of the decent person which should make clear why I want to talk this way. One such agent is a person whom we consider decent and who has morally significant flaws. We pass this minimally positive judgement on his character in spite of the presence of these flaws, possibly because these flaws do not interfere too frequently or too heavily or in too many areas of this person's interaction with other people. A second agent I have in mind does not have any morally significant flaws. There is no major objection against his character. But still, simply the absence of such flaws should not make this person a good person. His concern for other people may be so small that this judgement would be exaggerated. So somebody may deserve only minimal praise although there is no morally significant flaw to hold against him. This seems plausible also because it would be odd for an analysis of what it is to be a decent person to imply that, whenever we address somebody as a decent person one needed to ask "Okay, what is his flaw?" A third agent comes to mind: the person who possesses some virtues and some morally significant flaws. (This assumption presupposes the disunity of virtues.) Could she be considered a decent person? It seems odd to evoke the picture that virtues and flaws may "cancel each other out" such that the overall judgement would be that she is decent. Yet there may be such people. So an account of what it is to be a decent person should not depend on the absence of virtues in the sense that a judgement of somebody as decent would be inappropriate as soon as somebody has some virtue. The possibility of such agents prompt

me to talk about consistency of the overall judgment with the presence of undesirable properties rather than about some entailment relation.

(IV.7) I close by discussing some problems with this account. The first problem is that it is still dubious how precisely to distinguish between the decent person and the good person. Could not somebody be a good person who is very much like the third character introduced in the preceding paragraph? Possibly. However, it seems that we simply cannot expect a sharp demarcation. Our moral discourse is vague here. All we can hope for is a distinction between paradigmatic cases, and this is a distinction that my account allows for.

The second problem is related. My account treats the decent person as one who deserves minimal praise. So how can we accommodate expressions like “He had *a spark* of decency left”, or “That was *extremely* decent of him”? Two points in reply. For one thing, the mere fact that the decent person is one who deserves minimal praise does not by itself exclude that there is some variation within the range of decent people. That there is indeed such variation follows from my discussion in (IV.3), where I consider the limits of our willingness to call somebody a decent person. The SS guard may be a person with a spark of decency. It is futile to argue whether this means that he is at the lower end of the range where this judgement is still appropriate or that he is not “really decent” any more. For another thing, the application of expressions like “extremely”, or even “very” to expression like “appropriate”, “competent”, “reasonable”, or “decent” (discussed at the end of III.3) renders difficult a clarification of these latter expressions with regard to expressions like “good”, “righteous”, etc. For what is appropriate or reasonable is not as highly praised as what is good, but what is called extremely reasonable or very appropriate tends be praised more highly than what is

called good. It seems that the best way of making sense of such expressions is to think of them as hyperbolic.

A last problem is this. A well-known example of proportionality reasoning appears in Thomson (1971). She discusses cases of abortion, recommending that assessments of the legitimacy of abortions should be made by comparing the death of the fetus to the sacrifices involved for the woman. The decent action for Thomson is an action in accordance with such proportionality reasoning. She elaborates by distinguishing between the Minimal Samaritan and the Good Samaritan. The Good Samaritan shows a strong concern for other people. The Minimal Samaritan shows merely some concern and is a decent person in my sense. Thomson's considerations draw our attention to a tricky issue. How are the results of such proportionality reasoning related to what is *morally required*? Thomson refers to the case of two children one of whom owns a piece of cake and has therefore a right to eat it all by himself. But since the second child makes big eyes on the cake, it seems decent to share. Is the first child morally required to share? An affirmative answer entails that he is morally required to disrespect his right, contrary to what it means to have such a right. A negative answer entails that doing the decent thing means doing *more* than what is morally required, contrary to our analysis of the decent person as a minimally praiseworthy character who does not tend to do the supererogatory. I am committed to the view that it sometimes is morally required not to exercise a right. I am inclined to accept this and dismiss the right since having a right is consistent with there being overriding obligations not to exercise it. (A similar issue also lurks behind the chain store case, since the chain store owner probably has a right to open the shop where he likes.)¹³

V. Literature

- (1) Baahwar, Neera K (1996), “The Limited Unity of Virtue”, *Nous* 30, 306-329
- (2) Bolnow, Otto (1968), “Die Anständigkeit”, in: Bolnow, *Einfache Sittlichkeit*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht
- (3) Cooper, John (1998), “The Unity of Virtue”, *Social Philosophy and Policy* 15, 233-274
- (4) Elster, Jon (1992), *Local Justice*, New York: Russell Sage Foundation
- (5) Foot, Philippa (1978), “Morally as a System of Hypothetical Imperative”, in Foot, *Virtues and Vices*, Oxford: Blackwell
- (6) Foot, Philippa (1978), “Virtues and Vices”, in Foot, *Virtues and Vices*, Oxford: Blackwell
- (7) Hampshire, Stuart (1989), *Innocence and Experience*, Cambridge (Mass): Harvard University Press
- (8) Hobbes, Thomas, *Leviathan*
- (9) Hume, David (1972), *An Enquiry into the Principles of Morals*, edited by L.A. Selby-Bigge, Oxford: Clarendon Press
- (10) Kant, Immanuel (1923), “Pädagogik”, in Volume 9 of *Kants Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by Royal Prussian Academy of Sciences
- (11) Mann, Thomas (1960), *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen*, in Vol. 12 of *Gesammelte Werke Thomas Manns*, Oldenburg: Fischer
- (12) Mann, Thomas (1960), “Über die Wiedergeburt der Anständigkeit”, in Vol. 12 of *Gesammelte Werke Thomas Manns*, Oldenburg: Fischer
- (13) Margalit, Avishai (1996), *The Decent Society*, Cambridge (Mass.): Harvard University Press

- (14) Nagel, Thomas (1991), *Equality and Partiality*, Cambridge (Mass.): Harvard University Press
- (15) Novitch, Miriam (1978), *Sobibor - Martyre et Révolte*, Paris: Ghetto Fighters' House
- (16) Rawls, John (1971), *A Theory of Justice*, Cambridge (Mass): Belknap
- (17) Rawls, John (1993), *Political Liberalism*, New York: Columbia University Press
- (18) Rawls, John (1995) Tanner lectures
- (19) Thomson, Judith J. (1971), "A Defense of Abortion", *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1:1, 47-66
- (20) Wolf, Susan (1982), "Moral Saints", *Journal of Philosophy* 79, 419-439

1. Rawls (1995) introduces the concept of decency because "its meaning is less demanding" than the meaning of the concept of justice and because decent societies are not just without qualification. In Rawls (1971) and Rawls (1993), decency plays no role. Nagel (1991) uses the concept of decency without even explicitly introducing it. Yet throughout his book, he speaks of "decent housing", "a decent standard of living" or "a decent social minimum". Hampshire (1989) also occasionally uses the concept without explaining it.

2. The only attempt to deal with this question that has come to my attention is Bolnow (1968).

3. Etiquette and morality are close, e.g., because they share important vocabulary such as "respect."

4. This question arises regardless of whether one accepts Hobbes's understanding of etiquette as *Small Moralls*, i.e., as a part of morality. If we endorse this view, we have to ask about the difference between etiquette and the rest of morality that is not covered by etiquette. If we do not endorse this view, we can raise the question in the simpler form in which we put it here. Either way, the answer would be substantially the same. Foot (1978) contains illuminating remarks on

the relation between etiquette and morality, but her concern is to highlight the similarities.

5. Schopenhauer neglected this point when he mocked the duel practice of his day in his *Parerga et Paralipomena*.

6. I shall move swiftly back and forth between talking about what it is to be a decent person and what we mean when we (aptly) call somebody a decent person. No confusion should arise.

7. The discussion of the unity-of-virtues thesis is a traditional one, and since there are easily accessible sources for it, I do not further discuss it. For a recent discussion of this issue, cf. Cooper (1998) or Baahwar (1996).

8. It may be objected that this account is hard to square with our talking about, say, exceptionally honest people, i.e., with degrees in our talk about virtues. However, on account of the first point above (virtue talk being more basic than decency talk) this issue does not raise a problem for my argument that decency is not adequately understood as a virtue.

9. I am thinking of a saint in the sense of Dostojewskij's Elder Sosima in his *Brothers Karamasov*. I.e., a saint as a life ideal, not necessarily a saint as martyr, who might have lead an unresponsive and self-absorbed life that might make it difficult to relate him to the decent person. Saints, of course, are not uncomplicated characters in ethics any more, cf. Wolf (1982).

10. I talk about "concerns" while I explain what it is to "have a concern", I but do not think that there is any vicious circularity lurking here.

11. It seems, then, that rudeness/inconsiderateness is a morally significant flaw that may be consistent with someone's being decent. It is not absurd so say "Yes, he is rude, but, all things considered, he is a decent person." This confirms my negative evaluation of the promise of further inquiries into what it is to be a decent person from the point of view of the etiquette-

abiding person. Hampshire (1989) makes this point well by saying that “[i]t became clear that high culture and good education are not significantly correlated with elementary moral decency” (p 8). We can assume that etiquette is included in high culture here. So Kant's view on decency (*Anstand*) as the socially necessary art of deceiving that everybody is well advised to possess applies at most to the decent person in the sense of being etiquette abiding, but not to the morally decent person (cf. Kant (1923), 9, 486, 22.)

12. The connotation of being unreflective and also unintellectual is emphasized for the German word *Anständigkeit* in Thomas Mann's essay “Über die Wiedergeburt der Anständigkeit” and his book *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen*. There we read about *Anständigkeit* as part of German *Kultur*, in contrast with the “cold” and “artificial” *Zivilisation* of France and Anglo-American countries.

13. For fruitful discussions about decency or comments I am grateful to two anonymous referees, to David Hilbert, Matthias Hild, Chad Mohler, and in particular Gopal Sreenivasan. Most of all, I am indebted to Harry Frankfurt for helpful comments on various earlier versions.