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Thick and Thin – or Political?

Judith N. Shklar and Avishai Margalit on Betrayal

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Abstract: Judith Shklar and Avishai Margalit both pay significant attention to the notion of betrayal; in doing so they pinpoint some of the most intractable problems of belonging, and in particular of political belonging, faced by human beings. Each examines the idea across multiple contexts, and is sensitive to the ambiguities of betrayal. Yet despite some profound similarities of approach, we argue that Shklar delivers a cleaner, more political and yet pared-down account of betrayal than does Margalit, and that she thereby avoids some significant problems that are evident in the latter's approach, not least his attempt to use the language of thick and thin to differentiate relations of different types.

Keywords: betrayal, humiliation, thick and thin, politics, society, community

This article is largely an intertextual exercise in political theory. We are not interested in intertextuality per se. Instead, we are led by the question of what we owe to others, and specifically what our obligations entail for polities, be they small communities or entire societies. We focus on elements in the work of Judith N. Shklar and Avishai Margalit that centre on the question of betrayal. We focus on betrayal because the notion of betrayal helps us more clearly to think about the condition of belonging. Both Shklar and Margalit concentrate on betrayal and belonging and their limits, but whereas for Shklar this is primarily a political question that concerns society at large, for Margalit belonging centres on the possibility of a community of primarily thick relations, and betrayal is correspondingly betrayal of a thick relation. Both raise issues of the size, extent and limits of a polity, but we maintain that Shklar enables us to think more fully about the complex layering of forms of political belonging and political alienation that characterise our relations with others. In contrast, Margalit seems to have created a categorical whirlwind ('thick' and 'thin') whose proper demarcations remain obscure where this unnecessarily complicates matters in relation to political obligation.

The differences between Shklar and Margalit are important for both political theory and political practice. At a time of increasing emphasis on the part of states on borders, and of the

growth in numbers of refugees and other migrants, questions of what ties us to others, and what we owe them, are endemic in political life and political theory.

Our paper first outlines some significant similarities between Shklar and Margalit. Both writers develop negatively strong arguments focusing on what we should aim to avoid. Both do so through the use of examples and narratives rather than by focusing primarily on normative system building. Next we look at how Shklar conceives of betrayal in *Ordinary Vices,* paying attention to how her phenomenological account opens up the multiple meanings of betrayal. Shklar identifies some paradigmatic shifts in the ways in which betrayal is conceived and experienced; most notably she distinguishes modern conditions from previous ones. Talking about vices like betrayal has become more complicated not least because with the arrival of modern social and political organisation conceptions of political obligation have changed fundamentally. Some of these changes are described in the latter part of the chapter on betrayal in *Ordinary Vices*; they are also implicitly touched upon in *The Faces of Injustice*; and they make a final reappearance, differently phrased, in Shklar's last lectures, *On Political Obligation*. In a third step we examine Margalit's take on betrayal in his study, *On Betrayal*, which we regard as an attempt to fill some of the argumentative gaps in his earlier work, *The Decent Society*. We explore how he moves back and forth between philosophical and historical and sociological modes of discussion in trying to differentiate between thick and thin relations, and look at how this creates tensions in his account. We contextualise each theoretical attempt by attending to each author's respective mode of argumentation and framework of reference. In a final step we pull together the contributions of each, without negating their significant differences.

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Starting with the worst: the negative anthropology of Margalit and Shklar

More than twenty years ago, in a review on the occasion of the German publication of Avishai Margalit's *The Decent Society*, the publicist and political theorist Otto Kallscheuer hinted at the parallels but also the differences between the argument presented by Margalit in his book and Judith Shklar's argument, made 12 years earlier, in her book *Ordinary Vices* (*Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 7 November 1997). The reviewer pointed out that any attentive reader could detect a kind of negative competition between the two with respect to what each regarded as the worst vice: for the political theorist Shklar, cruelty, for the moral-philosopher-cum-ethicist Margalit, humiliation.

This paper seeks to demonstrate that both thinkers exhibit a similar orientation to thinking, focusing on the question how to avoid what each thinks is the worst. Both also share similar views about how to achieve such a critical perspective, namely by providing a more realistic description of our world and thus contributing not only to new ways of seeing but also to solving some of the most burning questions of contemporary politics. Yet, as we will see by focusing on their respective notions of betrayal, there are also some crucial differences between Shklar and Margalit both in their treatment of the concept and in their respective overall narratives.

Both thinkers discuss betrayal in the larger context of what Hannes Bajohr has termed 'negative anthropology' (Bajohr 2019). Bajohr's phrase denotes an approach that does not look at those features and qualities in man which might contribute to the construction of a theoretical and practical *summum bonum* but instead focuses on what helps to avoid only the worst – the *summum malum*. To be sure, Shklar and Margalit had deep admiration for John Rawls and the solidity and 'architectural' achievement of his *Theory of Justice*. At the same time both have been reluctant themselves to contribute to that undertaking called 'grand theory'.

The shared rejection of grand theory finds a parallel in the way in which Shklar and Margalit reflect upon their respective preferred approaches and their 'method'. Instead of system building they each prefer narratives and real case-studies, and each frequently uses literary examples and references, including the Bible. They see such stories – for better or for worse – not only as legitimate explorations but also as poignant ways of sounding out the complex day-to-day moral and ethical implications of the decisions we make. However, while some of their concerns and narratives overlap, there are also some significant differences between the two writers. We argue that what accounts for these differences is the larger frame of reference; for Shklar that is, as pointed out above, cruelty and how to avoid it, for Margalit it is humiliation and how to prevent it.

Judith N. Shklar: Betrayal from the Perspective of Cruelty and Fear

For Shklar, betrayal is one of those ordinary vices that when seen in the context of cruelty and fear turns into a second order concern. Under modern political and societal conditions betrayal can take many possible forms and have a range of meanings. Like other ordinary vices such as hypocrisy, snobbery and misanthropy, betrayal has personal and private

dimensions. It also has political meanings, treason being the obvious charge in this regard. Yet, with modern differentiation and a much wider range of possible scenarios comes a loosening of the moral condemnation that traditionally accompanied betrayal, both personal and political. In other words, in modern society not all of betrayal's features must necessarily be regarded as being detrimental under all conditions.

As Shklar explains further, liberal and secular constitutional democracies shouldn't be bound by any particular prescribed virtues or thickly described account of the 'good' life; and, to take the argument one step further, they must even allow for extreme individual choices – at least as long as these choices don't lead to unlawful and therefore potentially punishable actions. Thus, under modern liberal conditions and constitutions the old religious catalogue of the seven sins, including betrayal, has been reduced to 'ordinary' status with multiple meanings and possible outcomes. As such these vices should no longer be regarded as posing an existential threat to liberal democracy (Shklar 1984, 2-3).[1]

This does not imply that betrayal, along with other vices, no longer constitutes a problem at all, nor that there are no tensions within the civil sphere or between strongly opinionated citizens, or between opinions voiced in the civil sphere and the practices of the constitutional democratic state. It just means that in the light of the *summum malum* of totalitarian experiences of the 20th century other, less evil vices such as betrayal begin to look rather like ordinary problems of secondary significance. Instead of pondering the disadvantages of these ordinary vices in general philosophical terms, Shklar urges us to zero in and to think about liberal democracy more as 'a recipe for survival than a project for the perfectibility of mankind' (4). If that is accepted there is then still space for dealing with the catalogue of 'secondary' vices – just in a more differentiated and de-dramatised way.

How does Shklar deal with betrayal as one of those secondary vices after the suggested change of perspective? Betrayal, seen from this different angle, still remains a common human experience that stems from a feeling of having been abandoned or deserted (139). However, that common experience can take on multiple meanings on a spectrum that ranges from childhood memories to large kin group experiences and from religious denominations to nation-states. Shklar refers to the extensive vocabulary that indicates the whole range of possible connotations associated with betrayal: abandonment, disappointment, disloyalty, faithlessness, treasonable acts, unreliability, deception, lack of trustworthiness, and lack of a

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[1] Treason is a special case and appears further down.

sense of mutual obligation (139-148); betrayal is often also associated with the experience of personal injustice somewhat removed from politics and power structures.

Considering the changing contexts and the many different constellations to which each instance of this enormously wide range of attributes and impressions refers, Shklar points out that there are contradictions even on the most basic level of such characteristics of betrayal. For instance, one can feel subjectively betrayed despite the fact that no real betrayal has occurred (151); betrayal can happen when we confide in a person if that trust turns out to be more projected than real (153). Trust is often built on the fact that we cannot know the future; it therefore serves as a kind of insurance policy: betrayal is then measured against that unknowable future and the trust already invested becomes a potential source of disappointment (ibid). And while disappointment is not always equivalent to betrayal, it is often seen as corresponding with it. Different conceptions of the private and the public complicate matters further; for example, the fact that somebody has been unfaithful to a partner or friend does not mean that he or she should be generally distrusted, or that all trust in that person has to be abandoned in relation to his or her actions in the public sphere. And the reverse also applies: having failed in the public realm doesn't necessarily imply that in the private realm that person shouldn't be regarded as trustworthy anymore.

The form of our politics and economics makes things more complex. Delegation and representation presume trust and refer to a sense of mutual obligation (145); modern markets usually require some trust but also often invite actions that are associated with vices such as disloyalty, treachery and betrayal (147). Complications can also occur when different types and spheres of affiliation and commitment clash or are confused, as they do in situations when we have to choose between our family and friends and our role and commitments as citizens; or when values clash such as our commitment to an ideal which conflicts with reality, or when we are forced to rethink our relationship with a partner, a circle of friends, or a cultural, social or political community to which we belong. In such situations acts of betrayal can often, though not always, be based on conscious moral choices. Shklar reminds us in this context particularly of totalitarian regimes in which showing loyalty would be simply wrong and where instead dissent and exit, treason and betrayal might be the right or commendable course of action (155-161).

In the final part of the chapter on betrayal in *Ordinary Vices* Shklar focuses on the main *political* paradigm shifts that have occurred with modernity, including the new dilemmas and

contradictions that those shifts have caused: political authority is nowadays democratically legitimated and no longer seen as God-given or as legitimised by blue blood and family lineages; collective decisions are arrived at democratically and mainly through means of representation; complex decision-making processes have turned once obedient subjects and believers into critical citizens with a conscience; democratic conditions demand rule over oneself and over others – difficult operations at the best of times (1984: 173-191). Add to that the fact that in the 21st century, tyranny and dictatorship are no longer regarded as acceptable forms of government (although they remain a threat). In short: we no longer live by a catalogue of traditional virtues, and we no longer follow rulers or governments by obeying them blindly. Both democratic politics and civil society today confront us with making more choices and declaring our preferences more frequently than ever before. We must distinguish one thing from another. It is thus only right to reflect on betrayal as a differentiated phenomenon and to look at the spheres in which distinct conceptions of the notion apply today.

In her late lectures *On Political Obligation* (2019) Shklar argues that the main factors responsible for these new ambiguities and possible contradictions are also reflected in changed notions of obligation, obedience and loyalty. The shift from ancient to modern republics, and then from faith-based state religions to modern, secular constitutional and representative democracies has put new pressures on citizens and their understandings of what they should and should not do. This has led to a situation where complex understandings of the distinction between public and private spheres now find themselves existing alongside individual notions of freedom and choice. What does it mean to talk about betrayal under such new circumstances?

As Shklar stresses, the phenomenon of individual conscience is perhaps not entirely new in history but under modern democratic conditions it is certainly no longer just a rare occurrence as it was in pre-modern times (1-14). In the fight against totalitarian dictatorships, single-track and limited notions of political obligation and political freedom have been replaced by more complex ideas of what disloyalty, treason and subversion, as well as exit and exile can mean. Betrayal now no longer automatically looks like a vice that undermines democratic will-formation, or, even worse, that undermines liberal democracy.

'Only fools are cocksure', Shklar quotes Montaigne (1984: 228): All those who accept the idea of unchangeable, that is universal character traits that transcend space and time,

including a corresponding sense of unquestionable duty, should think again. Of course, liberal democracy needs competent and conscious citizens; however, as pointed out above, it can no longer rely on a list of classical and Christian virtues (235). Instead, we might have to face the unpleasant fact that bad characters will never entirely disappear. If that is true, liberal democracy is not there to make us good; "it merely argued that it would remove the most horrible obstacles to any ethical undertaking that we might conceivably try" (236).

To sum up, Shklar's liberalism of fear puts notions of betrayal into perspective. Indeed, if cruelty and fear of cruelty are 'irreducible' (237), betrayal simply isn't. Relegating vices like betrayal, hypocrisy and snobbery to second place under conditions of pluralist liberal democracy constitutes not just a paradigmatic revolution but also allows Shklar to maintain, with a critical eye on Rawls' grand theory understanding of justice, that 'justice itself is only a web of legal arrangements required to keep cruelty in check' (ibid). This notion of justice, she insists, should not be confused with the liberalism of rights. The rights revolution would only come later.

The crucial difference that Shklar notes between vices is reflected in a distinct narrative approach to how to report on or refer to a problem or possible contradiction. For Shklar, storytelling is not like grand justice argumentation. It helps us to identify and to think about injustice more concretely. As she argues in *The Faces of Injustice* (1991) such empirical and historical experiences can't just be subsumed to represent the negative flipside of justice. This later insight of hers qualifies her earlier discussion of betrayal to a considerable extent. It urges us to look at the many possible meanings of betrayal more politically, thereby separating ordinary meanings of betrayal from those that are related to more explicitly political notions such as loyalty, trust and treason.[2]

Avishai Margalit: Humiliation and Betrayal; thick and thin

In his book *On Betrayal* (2017) Avishai Margalit refers directly to the work of Judith Shklar only once, and that is in the introduction (2017: 20). There he takes issue with Shklar's notion of betrayal as being ordinary and ambiguous but does not spend much time querying why Shklar thought about betrayal in the way she did. For that we have to look into Margalit's earlier study *The Decent Society* (1996) where he rhetorically calls into question whether we

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[2] For a discussion of Shklar's injustice and its place in the development of her political theory see Hess (2014).

must 'first establish a bridled society according to Judith Shklar's principle of "putting cruelty first", and only afterward seek to prevent humiliation; or [whether we] should…avoid establishing an order of priorities among the types of society' (Margalit 1996: 148). He provides an answer to his question a few lines later by devising his own ranking of ideal type societies: 'I advocate a lexicographical order of priorities in which the bridled society comes first, the decent society next, and the just society last. This order is cumulative – that is, the decent society must also be bridled and the just society must also be decent' (148-9).

The attempt to provide a more convincing and complete answer to his question remains, however, strangely incomplete, especially when we look at the book's concluding remarks. In his final reflections in *The Decent Society* Margalit answers his own question with an eye on Rawls' *Theory of Justice* only. He notes that while a just society is by definition also a decent society, the reverse is not necessarily true: a decent society remains open to questions of justice but it is as such differently conceived so that justice is not a *sine qua non* condition for decency (284). The question of the bridled society and Shklar's prioritising of cruelty and fear simply drifts into the background, almost to the point of oblivion. The reason for this, we argue, lies in Margalit's conceptualisation of humiliation and non-humiliation, and in his assuming the existence of community.

Where exactly humiliation begins remains unclear. By his own admission, Margalit's use stands on shaky ground partly because humiliation, and non-humiliation (plus equal non-humiliation), remain largely defined only *ex negativo*. He readily admits, for example, that different people react differently to humiliation and to suggestions of non-humiliation (85). Similar things apply to symbolic humiliation (ibid).

In the end Margalit appears committed to simply calling for a 'stance of "respect and suspect"', independent of grading and circumstances (84). For somebody who set out to sharpen the conceptual toolbox this could not possibly be a satisfactory way of tackling the problem of humiliation and how to avoid it, even if we concede that Margalit, like Shklar, would in principle be happy to work with a negative list of what needs to be avoided.

Obviously, something had gone amiss in *The Decent Society*. An argumentative gap remained and no talk of non-humiliation, equal non-humiliation or respect would easily fill that empty space. We argue that *On Betrayal* can be regarded as the attempt to clarify what went amiss or was never satisfactorily addressed in *The Decent Society*.

That Margalit is aware of some of the shortcomings of so-called 'analytical' approaches in philosophy is made clear right from the start of *On Betrayal*. There, he agrees with the comment of one of his teachers that analytical philosophy is the ever sharpening of knives with no beef to cut (2017: ix). In order to discuss 'chaotic notions such as betrayal', Margalit suggests using his 'Swiss Army knife', by which he means mainly using historical and literary examples, including religious texts (x). The result, so Margalit argues, is a phenomenological account that moves between analytical and Continental philosophy and storytelling, an option that, he argues, is particularly enriched when the latter takes the victims' perspective into account (ibid).

To make this account more relevant to modern experiences and conditions Margalit introduces the distinction between thick and thin relations. Thick relations are about strong ties and belonging. Adultery (among married adults) and treason (among citizens who belong to the same political community) would be the two obvious 'companions' of betrayal on that level (x-xi). For Margalit, thick relations are the subject of ethical behaviour; morality, in contrast, deals with thin relations (xii).

The distinction between ethics and morality throws up some problems when it comes to the size of political communities. Larger social institutions and societal relations are explicitly not Margalit's concern, a choice that puts him close to the communitarian camp.[3] His choice, however, gets him into trouble: the topic of political betrayal becomes either reduced to personal ties and relationships in smaller political units and communities or runs aground – by means of definitional exclusion; it is deemed inapplicable to larger polities.

Margalit's own preferred solution seems to be to take recourse to the notion of a thick-thin *continuum* whenever his argument moves outside the thin zone and into a more complicated societal situation and when, almost by default, his original thick/thin and ethical/moral distinction clashes with a more complex empirical reality. His notion of fraternity seems a

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[3] It should come as no surprise that Michael Walzer, a first-line defender of communitarian ideas, wrote a very positive review of Margalit's book (*New York Review of Books*, May 11, 2017). The reviewer never questions the distinction between a thick community and thin societal/international relations; it seems to be a subjective matter of degree where one begins and the other ends. To use one example, both Walzer and Margalit refer to France as an example of a community (not a society) in which a spirit of fraternity seems to be a sociological given. Apart from the notion of community applied to a country of substantial size, they seem to have forgotten that fraternity is in the first instance a normative concept, a rhetorical tool to rally support for a political cause. In our view it doesn't make it a sociological reality, at least not without certain sociological and political qualifications.

case in point and invites (probably unwarranted) speculation as to the closeness between his argument and his own experiences and lifeworld.[4]

It is even harder to follow Margalit's view that strong fraternity bonds increase the chance of bringing about justice (2). Or take trust. For Margalit, trust is crucial for thick bonds. Contracts, in contrast, help regulate thin relations – such as those found in interactions in the marketplace. They serve as a substitute for trust. Margalit is right in pointing out that 'contracts can never guard against all contingencies' (12) and in arguing that we therefore also need some thin trust. He is also aware that trust, in both thick and thin forms, does not provide a total insurance against betrayal. However, despite such qualifications, he still insists that betrayal of thick relations is of a different quality (ibid), as if there were some deeper levels or properties in personal relations than in political ones.

Now, for Margalit, such assumptions need to be proven. It is almost as if he were running a screening programme for an ideal type, where the ideal types are loaded with strong normative assumptions. However, through his strict boundary-marking and the sharp juxtaposition of thick and thin he limits his reflections early on to the micro-level,[5] a decision with serious consequences for the potential reach of his account of betrayal. He basically cuts the problem into two halves with the consequence that this overburdens thick relations and ethics and reduces thin relations to morally 'light' behaviour (13-14).[6]

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[4] The French revolutionaries' rallying call of *liberté, egalité and fraternité* in 1789 had always been one of aspiration rather than one of factual description: it suggested that thick brotherly or sisterly relations could emerge where there really hadn't been any and that a revolutionary event like the French Revolution was in that sense a cathartic moment. From there it is quite a long shot to suggest, as does Margalit, that betrayal can only happen where fraternal relations exist. In principle, the case can certainly be made, but it would involve considerably smaller political nations or communities that may be bound collectively perhaps by traumatic events or major existential moments and /or threats. Does France really qualify in this sense? And, to complicate matters even further: surely, the author doesn't want a philosophical argument reduced to the author's particular lifeworld and experience (in this case Israel). Be that as it may be, Margalit's communitarian view on fraternity stands in stark contrast to Judith Shklar and her reflections on exile. Any closer look into exiled communities will notice that the very condition of exile makes fraternity perhaps not entirely impossible; however, relations among exiled and exiled groups are often fraught and often burdened by existential questions. It would be naïve to suggest that people who were forced into exile or shared some other traumatic event and experience become virtuous or better people by and through that very fact.

[5] The macro/micro distinction also occurs in *The Decent Society*, at the outset, where he distinguishes the macro and micro ethical, attributing concern for a decent society and the avoidance of humiliation to a focus on institutions, whereas he argues a civilised society focuses on the micro level of individuals' ethical behaviour.

[6] Margalit's thick-thin distinction seems to repeat some arguments made almost 150 years ago by Tönnies in his community-society distinction and by Durkheim in his distinction between mechanical and organic solidarity, yet without acknowledging either of them or discussing their pros and cons. His argument seems entirely hooked on Michael Walzer's discussion of moral arguments and his distinction between thick and thin; it is thus sociologically thin.

Margalit is of course aware of the fact that talking about betrayal is like following moving sand dunes (14): where thick and thin meet in the real world is by no means always clearly demarcated. Having first made a case for providing more meat for his Swiss Army knife, a few pages into the book Margalit has thus already reduced his programme to addressing real-world tensions (the meat) with a, conceptually speaking, blunt knife (and mixed his metaphors so carelessly that we might ponder why one would try to tidy a sand dune with a Swiss army knife…). This makes his treatment of betrayal no less interesting, but the attentive reader will notice that this is both a much reduced programme and a much messier argument – perhaps against all intentions.

There is a tension in his understanding of how concepts work that is difficult to grasp and even harder to accept as a way forward. He acknowledges the contribution that Shklar has made in clearing some of the confusion about modern conceptions of betrayal (20). Like Shklar, Margalit recognises that there are many notions surrounding betrayal: '"perfidy", "treachery", "double-crossing", "sell-out"' and so on (21). But unlike Shklar, Margalit runs into trouble conceptualising betrayal when it comes to extended (=thin) societal and political relations.

As Margalit admits, 'moral constraints' need to come in at one point when we speak about betrayal, even if we agree that notions of betrayal can shift (26). But this is where the confusion starts; having determined that ethics is for thick relations and morals for thin relations, Margalit constantly has to smuggle in the need for morals and moral constraints and a societal perspective on thin relations through the backdoor.

While he seems happy to agree that 'betrayal is no longer what it used to be' (26) his own choice of examples doesn't make it easy for the reader to understand what he is aiming at. Introducing even more variables like motivation, intentions and means-ends logic doesn't throw more light onto the problem; nor does the flight into Freudian language when it comes to ambiguities and ambivalences. While interesting in terms of the psychological underbelly of betrayal the sub-or unconscious explains very little in relation to traitors and whistle-blowers apart from giving us some highly suspect speculations about motives.

Take the interesting case of Edward Snowden, introduced by Margalit himself (2017: 42-46). What exactly drives Snowden? And is his a case of betrayal of thick relations? Of what type are thick relations in Snowden's case? Is his 'thick' relation with the secret services, or is it with the American people, or with both (add politicians as appropriate)? Or is it, as Margalit

is inclined to point out, public opinion that presumably mediates between the various actors? Margalit seems to understand the case as a clash between ethics and morality (46) but the reasons he gives for saying so stem from his own nominalist approach and his seemingly absolute hypothesis that betrayal is 'ungluing the glue of thick relations' (83).

Having followed a high-risk strategy of conceptual trial runs in the early part of the book, what Margalit needs to show is what these famous thick relations are made of, an undertaking to which he dedicates pretty much the rest of his study. This gets him into deeper and deeper trouble because almost all examples that Margalit comes up with of thick morality come to depend in one way or another on so-called thin relations.

Sense and sensibility; or the political versus the communal

So what exactly has been gained by pursuing an argumentative road in which Margalit sets out to demonstrate that 'betrayal is the betrayal of thick relations' (46) and in which he comes up with strong nominalist statements such as 'morality is forced on us; ethics is not', and dodgy distinctions, such as that between a 'human [and] natural form of life' and 'our particular [and] cultural form of life' (all 155)? This is puzzling particularly when one follows Margalit in his attempt to operationalise those conceptualisations by applying them to complex empirical environments. In terms of outcomes it is a deeply ironic situation, too.

Margalit's examples (apostasy, treason, collaboration, class) resemble in many ways those of Shklar in *Ordinary Vices* and those used in her late lectures *On Political Obligation*. The difference between the two, however, is that Shklar doesn't unnecessarily complicate or burden her arguments by drawing on the radical distinction between thick and thin, i.e. communal and societal relations. While Shklar and Margalit come to similar conclusions, Margalit has no sense of the way politics both cuts through and transcends modern communal and societal relations, nor does he seems to be sensitive to how the turn to the political provides a much more convincing explanation in relation to the pitfalls of betrayal. Instead, he has to go through lengthy detours in order to arrive at similar practical conclusions.

Margalit's statement that 'fighting injustice is much more concrete than pursuing justice on abstract principles' (288) would have surprised Shklar. It would have been news to her that injustice, which she saw as having many faces, is more concrete, or hits harder, when it's

experienced by way of thick relations. Nor does this statement provide a good explanation as to the many victims of modern bureaucratic mass murder.

Betrayal is only possible where there is belonging. Judith Shklar addresses this in both its personal and political senses, but she focuses most of her attention on the political aspects of betrayal and belonging, as seen in her concern with problems of political obligation such as conflicts of conscience, divided loyalties, and so on. She traces how conceptions of obligation, and therefore circumstances of betrayal, change with the transformation of political societies from hierarchically ordered feudal to democratically ordered differentiated ones. Her key distinction is between personal relations and political ones, where these have become distinct from one another in modern liberal societies. Margalit, by contrast, addresses betrayal and belonging through the distinction between thick and thin relations; for him, as we have seen, betrayal is betrayal of a thick relation. In this it remains unclear where personal relations end and political ones begin. This puts Margalit on the communitarian side of the liberal/communitarian divide.

What does Margalit say about political relations as such? Curiously little, at least directly. At the beginning of *The Decent Society* he writes that while he places no upper limit on the size of the political entity, the nation state is the unit he is addressing: 'smaller units will not quite do' (p4) because it is at the level of the nation state that we find provision adequate to educate a population capable of a decent society, and because the state claims a monopoly on the legitimate use of force and is thereby a key agent in underscoring those institutions that can either sustain a decent society or undermine it by producing structures that regularly humiliate citizens. (Notably no mention is made here of the state as a political unit with potential for democratic representation.) Compare Shklar: 'of all the groups that may have claims upon us, it is the state that has usually demanded our primary loyalty and that has, correspondingly, been most readily betrayed.' (1984: 161-2).

At the same time, even earlier in the text, and just after dismissing the 'extremes' of the anarchist idea that humiliation is intrinsic to being governed from outside, and the Stoic idea that no government can produce humiliation, Margalit writes of humiliation as the rejection of a person from the 'human commonwealth' (3) and of 'humiliation as rejection of a human being from the "Family of Man"' (1996: 108, see also 295 n 8), ideas that surely refer to a level beyond the nation state, to humanity as such, religiously or otherwise conceived. And

his use of the idea(l) of fraternity reiterates, via its negative in the absence of solidarity, the idea of the human as such as a creature capable of humiliation.[7]

And yet in his more detailed arguments it is clear that Margalit does not think that the whole of humanity is capable of being in one 'thick relation', and the idea of 'society' as a network of thin relations in which we agree to remain strangers (to paraphrase Habermas) has an important role in his discussion. One such example comes at the end of *The Decent Society*. It is, tellingly, the moment Margalit – having ignored this for most of the book –decides to focus on the possibility of conflicts *within* communities. He states, 'belonging to an encompassing group is one way that people give their life meaning' (277), and observes that he has 'hardly discussed' the possibility of the humiliation of people *within* the encompassing groups to which they belong.

At this point Margalit forwards an argument that is sociologically and ethically rich and sensitive, but which demonstrates that his own argument stands in need of some clear lines distinguishing the political from the personal that he himself fails to provide. He observes, against the liberal argument that individuals can simply leave groups that oppress them, that encompassing groups are deeply structuring of the identities of those who are members, and that this is why such groups have the capacity to humiliate: one's relation with the group is not like that of a contract that can be easily broken (279). He then argues that this means that a decent society must offer desirable alternatives to the encompassing groups within it, so that individuals can 'build a satisfying way of life within the larger society' (1996: 279).

To address this he provides his reader with something like a criterion for judging such situations: groups that oppress their members for attempts to utilise voice and exit are oppressive (279). This passing use of A. O. Hirschman's formulation of 'exit' and 'voice' is interesting. It is not returned to by Margalit (it comes very close to the end of the book) but it helps provide a dollop of liberal sensibility to massage away the problem of group-think liable to accompany 'encompassing groups' or other 'thick relations'. Interesting also is Margalit's silence here regarding the third term in Hirschman's formulation: loyalty. Loyalty, the noun between two verbs in the formulation 'exit, voice, and loyalty', is for Hirschman that which comes under strain when voice is dimmed or prohibited. Exit is the corollary of lack of voice; loyalty is the difficult stuff of working out to whom one is obliged, and why

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[7] As regards Margalit's reference to humanity as such, Shklar is much more sceptical and liable to line up with writers as diverse as Arendt, Schmitt, and Plessner on what the latter has called 'the limits of community' (Plessner 1999).

(Hirschman 1970). Perhaps for Margalit loyalty is not thematised because it is already presupposed.[8]

This brings us back to Margalit's communitarianism and to his use of the distinction between 'thick' and 'thin' relations. This is an organising distinction of *On Betrayal*, though interestingly it is displaced by the distinction between individual and collective when he writes about World War Two, both in respect of French collaboration and with regard to the *Judenräte* (see 203). It may be fruitful to trace in more detail this glitch in his text to see what it is doing. But for now, in order to pursue our analysis of the work that the thick/thin distinction does and to move toward some preliminary conclusions, let's look at what Margalit has to say about parent-child relations.

Any attentive reader is likely to be particularly struck by Margalit's observations on the relations between parents and children, especially since these run counter to most modern conceptions of such relations. In the section headed 'How bad is it to be ungrateful?' in the chapter on treason in *On Betrayal*, Margalit discusses parent-child relationships as 'the epitome of thick relations'. It's ambiguous whether he's referring to his own ideas or those characteristic of what he calls 'feudal relations' in which children should have 'eternal gratitude to their parents for being given life' (169). Margalit proceeds thus: 'The epitome of thick relations is parent-child relationships, in which there is asymmetry in gratitude. The children owe gratitude to the parents but the parents don't owe gratitude to the children, even when they find raising children gratifying.' The next paragraph begins with the observation that we may think this, 'Gratitude-centred ethics, which makes gratitude to the benefactor the foundation of thick relations, may seem to us far removed from our modern sensibilities.' Margalit argues the contrary, and points to the ways in which many citizens of developed countries complain about lack of gratitude on the part of immigrants; the latter are expected to be grateful.

There are several things to point up here. Firstly, this passage is rhetorically compelling: Margalit moves from parent-child relations to the issue of immigrants' relations with wider society without taking breath and this move invites us to equate these relations (the 'family of man'?); relations that in most liberal societies would be distinguished are thus run together in

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[8] This marks a crucial difference between Margalit and Shklar, the latter's experience of exile left her attentive to the limits of any automatic claim to loyalty.

a way that effectively points up the hypocrisy of those who would dehumanise immigrants. Secondly, however, the passage retains a key ambiguity about Margalit's own take on parent-child relations, but insofar as he argues that 'gratitude centred ethics' cannot simply be regarded as a relic, then the upshot would appear to be a backward looking reverence for community from whence we came – both our immediate family, parents, grandparents and so on, and the communities of which they are or were a part. Individuals, for Margalit, seem already to be stitched into the social and political order in a manner that requires them to be grateful.

In conclusion: of sand dunes and Swiss army knives

It has been our wager in this paper that the thick/thin distinction denotes a problem, it is not a solution. What Margalit fails to focus on is law and politics, and the necessity of legal systems in organising complex social relations. Margalit's *On Betrayal* and Shklar's *On Political Obligation* share many examples, from Socrates to Shakespeare's *Richard II* to T.S. Eliot's *Becket*. But they appear to be opposed pieces of work. This is hinted at already in their respective titles: 'betrayal' already implies belonging, it evokes the 'thick relation'; whereas 'obligation' points toward law and suggests that there is something limited and which requires justification. It is important to note, then, that the lexicographical ordering of the bridled, the decent, and the just, such that 'the decent society must also be bridled and the just society must also be decent' (Margalit 1996: 149) means that attention to preventing cruelty comes first, and regard for avoiding humiliation only second: Margalit's work comes after Shklar's in more than a temporal sense.

Nonetheless, there exist several notable similarities between Shklar and Margalit. In *The Ethics of Memory* Margalit (2004) distinguishes 'illustrators', those who reason their arguments through stories, and 'explicators', those who attempt to pin down abstract definitions and general principles. He states that while he sees merits in both he considers himself 'an e.g. philosopher' (ix). This points to some of the ways in which Margalit and Shklar share a manner of working that involves attentiveness to specific examples and problems, and which enables them to think from the ground up. But Margalit's texts move back and forth between this mode of operating and something more conventionally philosophical, the setting out of apparently general logical definitions and principles. When we read him attentively we begin to see a struggle between idioms that reflects the struggle to

work through the claims of specific community (thick relations) in the face of the necessarily thin 'family of man'/claim of humanity as such. Shklar is more circumspect, and therefore more thoroughly political; though we might also ask whether her work is thereby more suited to settled polities than to the work of working out the contours of the polity to begin with (see Ashenden and Hess 2016 regarding Shklar and Arendt on this point).

Similar phenomena emerge when one looks to *The Decent Society*. Here Margalit discusses what he calls the difference between 'sense and sensibility'. He points out that the former, the development of logical understanding, does not necessarily involve feeling anything; however, sensibility connects sense and sensitivity (1996: 290). He argues that the central terms in the book are ones of sensibility, and that understanding them requires description not hypotheses. Margalit thus relies on his readers' sensibilities: the book exhorts. The closest Shklar comes to this is in *The Faces of Injustice* (1991), but she doesn't write – or at least not explicitly – to get her reader on side by rousing their sensibilities. The stakes of this are important, since both would surely agree that no amount of rational argument can, on its own, motivate; but they seem to have different sensibilities toward their readers.

At the end of *On Betrayal* Margalit comes to a conclusion somewhat at odds with the rest of the book: the 'ordinary vices' (Shklar goes unmentioned here, perhaps because she has been a silent but significant interlocutor throughout the book) of hypocrisy and betrayal are 'by-products of civilised life' and 'a price worth paying' (2017: 305, 306). In the end Margalit's is an argument against transparency, and seemingly – despite his preference for 'decent' over 'civil' in *The Decent Society* (1996: 2) – for civilisation and its attendant individualism.

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We stated in the beginning that we see our intertextual analysis of Shklar and Margalit as more than just as another example of textual exegesis. We rather maintain that the concern both thinkers show for the political notions of betrayal – despite their different takes on it – are symptomatic of a semantical shift in modern political thought. We have focused our discussion by pointing out some of the major distinctions in their respective interpretations and the possible weaknesses or blind spots of their analyses. These differences reflect different normative stands which derive perhaps from different lifeworld experiences that see community/society distinctions and individual/society relations and the different obligations that these distinctions entail from different observation points.

Form is condensed substance, as Adorno once observed; if we take this insight and apply it to our two thinkers and their respective theoretical and conceptual approaches, we might discover in each a deep reflection of their respective experiences. We think there is no mileage in playing out these different experiences against each other. Instead we might think of them as starting points that invite us to think critically and reflectively beyond their respective realities; they summon us to think about how to become better citizens (and maybe even perhaps better human beings). It is the strength of both approaches that they reflect on the political realities of their respective societies and the problems they confront. Shklar and Margalit tell stories not simply in order to live but in order to live better together as citizens. They invite others to join in the conversation. Theirs are attempts to include people and transcend borders instead of putting up walls. As such they have formulated important steps away from exclusionary practices. At the same time Shklar and Margalit are not simply advocating peace in the world or arguing that if we were only nice to each other this planet would be a better place. Both make distinctively political arguments – but on the basis of telling stories that any attentive reader can relate to. That is no mean achievement in a field that has a tendency to be overtly academic, dry and analytical. We think that this is indicative of an important shift in political thought – if it can only be sustained. To be sure, there have been similar attempts in the past, think of the thread that runs from Montaigne, to Nietzsche, to Stanley Cavell. What is new is that such narratives have now also come directly to influence important conceptual distinctions, not by simply writing personal experience large but by trying to mediate between traditional and proven concepts and some of the more extreme experiences of the 20th and 21st centuries.

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