

Fourteen pieces on the politics of virtue

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280. Plato and Aristotle

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There are both important affinities and important differences between Plato and Aristotle. When Aristotle was a pupil of Plato, his thought was closer, later he deviated more, and then Plato followed his thought to an important extent.

Here I follow the account given by Alasdair MacIntyreⁱ. He proposed, and this is most important, I think, that Plato and Aristotle shared a basic perspective and programme concerning the good life. MacIntyre reduced a complex debate, over centuries, to a choice between two basic perspectives.

First, the perspective shared by Plato and Aristotle entails a striving for *excellence in pursuing a set of goods*. Virtues are traits of character needed for achieving a good.

The alternative view was held by the sophists contemporary to Plato and Aristotle, and was adopted in our presently dominant view, in the West, of liberal individualism. It entails a striving for *effectiveness in satisfying desires*. For (neo)liberalism the engine for achieving that is the market.

For example, for the sophists public speech is not aimed at achieving the truth, which is ephemeral, but to convince people of one's view (rhetoric). In markets, the aim of advertising is not truth but affecting preferences.

For Plato and Aristotle, who or what determines what is the good, or the ranking of multiple goods, and corresponding virtues? For Plato it is more the individual, though instructed by philosophy. For Aristotle it is the community, the *polis*, such as the Athens of his time. Here I side with Plato, though in my view philosophers should inform, not dictate ethical debate.

An important difference between Plato and Aristotle is the following. For (the early) Plato experience, and the complex, variable world we experience, are disparate from the underlying forms according to which reality is ordered. For Aristotle, experience is the basis for inferring and understanding forms. Here I side with Aristotle. However, in his later work Plato approached Aristotle's views.

Of particular interest for my endeavours in philosophy and economics is Aristotle's notion of *phronesis*, practical wisdom. Experience and judgement in the world are too complex and variable, and context-dependent, to be based on fixed, universal ideas or rules.

Yet, and this is a problematic point in Aristotelian philosophy, Aristotle, like Plato, assumed ultimate harmony between different goods. Any conflict between them is due to imperfect reason. Here I disagree with both. I think tragedy is real. Conflicts between goods arise that cannot be resolved by reason alone. I will return to this in a later item in this blog.

Now, my project is to bring in, or bring back, in public discourse (and economics), considerations of the good life and corresponding virtues. However, rather than having goods and their ordering imposed by the state, I would leave them to personal choice, but subject to

public debate, with guidance from people who have mastered phronesis, recognising the occurrence of tragedy while still trying to grapple with it. I might sum this up as follows: I want to combat liberalism by liberal means.

Important for my project is also the claim, by both Plato and Aristotle, that virtuous conduct is not just instrumental to pursuing the good life, but an integral part of it, with intrinsic value. The virtuous person enjoys virtuous conduct for itself.

Also, relationships, in particular friendship, entail the sharing of a project, with mutual interest, care for the partner, and willingness to yield, to some extent, without expectation of material reward or gain.

These are crucial for the goodness of life and for the quality of society.

Finally, especially Plato, but also still Aristotle, rank as the highest, purest good, contemplation (the original meaning of ‘theory’) of ultimate, eternal, universal truths. Phronesis and political virtue are subordinate to that, even though they are necessary to achieve it (according to Aristotle, and the later Plato, perhaps). To me, that is an illusion. I think we cannot achieve more than ongoing ‘imperfection on the move’.

281. Principles for combining virtue and freedom published 17-9-2016

In the preceding item of this blog I said that I would combat liberalism with liberal means. What does that mean? In an earlier item (257) I made an attempt in terms of ‘liberal communitarianism’. Here I make a second, related attempt.

Concerning society there is a fundamental dilemma. On the one hand there is liberal society as we (largely) now have it, in the West. There, values, considerations of what is the good life, and corresponding virtues, are private, not a matter for the state or public discourse. There is a separation not only of state and religion but, more widely, of state and ethics.

The state should aim for optimal satisfaction of whatever people choose to pursue. Freedom of choice, initiative, participation, expression, etc. That is a great idea and a great achievement.

However, there is in fact, explicitly or implicitly, an underlying choice of an ethic, in the form of an ethic of utility, with the market as its engine. As I argued before (item 180), economics is not value-free. The market is driven by self-interest and competition, efficiency is central, it is about the utility of outcomes, not the quality of motives. It supports the view that ‘greed is good’. The neglect of public debate on values is hypocritical: as if those values do not play a role. It makes the underlying values implicit and withdraws them from democratic control on the basis of debate.

What lies behind preferences in terms of views of the good life is irrelevant. Marketing, in markets and increasingly also in politics, is aimed at influencing or shaping preferences, without discourse about underlying conceptions of the good life.

Any moral objection to conduct, in abuse of market power, destruction of the environment, misleading customers, avoiding taxes, hiving off business risks onto society, stands ‘off-side’,

is not part of the language game. They are appropriately called 'externalities' that cannot be incorporated in the price mechanism of markets.

In opposition to this, voices are raised to revise the system, and economic theory, on the basis of a virtue ethic, such as originally proposed by Aristotle. There, life is to be lived according to virtues, defined as traits of character needed to strive for the good life.

But who decides what the good life is? The answer of Plato was: philosophers. The answer of Aristotle was: the community ('polis', such as the Athens of his time).

Now, in my view, philosophers help to reflect but are seldom competent to decide. Mutual agreement on what is the good life, the ordering of goods, and requisite virtues, may be viable in smaller and relatively homogeneous communities such as the Athens of Aristotle, but not in society as now have it.

Above all, imposition of the good by the state eliminates freedom.

So, how to escape from the dilemma? How to preserve the freedoms of liberalism while curtailing its vices and adding virtues?

For this, I propose the following principles.

First, appreciate and allow for variety of values. A necessary condition for this is justice: conditions for exercising a variety of virtues.

Second, it is necessary also to avoid tolerance in the form of indifference, in what I would call active tolerance: having an interest in and trying to understand the values of others. This is even a matter of self-interest. I argued in this blog that the highest form of freedom is freedom from one's prejudices, and for that one needs the opposition of the other. For this it is necessary to stimulate and facilitate debate across value systems/cultures.

Third, this requires freedom of expression, but also an ability to express one's ideas and to assimilate those of others. The other side of the same coin is the ability to accept criticism and democratic defeat. This further requires empathy: the ability to imagine oneself in the shoes of others. It also requires trust, in the ability to give space to actions of others and when encountering disappointment, give the other the benefit of the doubt and engage in 'voice' (see items 164, 259).

This requires acceptance of uncertainty in relations, to be seen, in principle, as a promise and an opportunity. It also requires acceptance of responsibility, for oneself and for others.

For all this, people need the resources for developing their individual identities. This requires access to adequate intellectual, cultural, and social capital, as part of justice.

All this may not seem very different from existing liberal parliamentary democracies. One important difference is that values and virtues behind markets and their failures are made explicit, subject to debate and part of education.

In the following item in this blog I will develop these principles into more specific policies.

In the foregoing item in this blog I proposed principles for reconciling freedom of choice of values and views of the good life with the introduction of morality and virtues in the public domain. I argued that the liberal stance that markets are value-free is illusory since it is based on the often hidden choice of utility ethics rather than some other ethic, and that markets create institutions that affect values and virtues, such as justice, trust, empathy, and care.

Here I develop those principles into more specific policies.

First, in education and schooling introduce, or bring back, a survey, and debate, of different forms of ethics and conceptions of the good life. Christian ethic of faith, hope and love, utilitarian ethics, Kantian duty ethics, and Aristotelian virtue ethics. Stoicism, also, perhaps. This is to serve the development of individual identity as well as good citizenship, with the interest and ability to debate alternative ethical views and moral systems. This is to form the basis for a tolerance that is based on interest and understanding of a variety of values.

Second, against the liberal dogma that they do not belong to the public sphere, bring back ethical and moral debate in politics and the formation of policies. What ethical and moral principles are served with legislation and public endeavours? What freedoms and cultural variety are allowed? The law must apply equally to all, but tolerance based on mutual interest and understanding is needed to allow for cultural variety. This is needed, among other things, to avoid the increasing cultural polarization now taking place, in Western countries, e.g. with respect to Islamic immigrants.

Then, on the basis of ethical debate, give room for markets where they work, but limit them where they fail or produce perverse effects regarding welfare or justice. In addition to existing regulations of many kinds, change institutions or extend market regulation with measures based on public ethical and moral debate.

For example, measures should be taken to weaken or eliminate the pressure of multinational companies on governments to extend advantages in taxes, regulation, energy prices, etc. with the threat that otherwise activities will be relocated elsewhere.

For an example of the need for a change of institutions, consider present efforts of some firms to shift the present purpose focused only on shareholder interest to wider interests of stakeholders such as personnel, customers, the environment, and the community. The bottom line is this: can one afford to be fair and transparent to those stakeholders even when this means forgoing opportunities for higher profits. Many of such ventures are viable only for family businesses or cooperative businesses, shielded from threats of takeover to exploit the potential for unethical profits.

As I argued in the preceding item in this blog, mutual agreement on what is the good life, the ordering of goods, and requisite virtues, may be viable in smaller and relatively homogeneous communities such as the Athens of Aristotle, but not in nations as we now have them. But it can be approached by utilizing present opportunities for decentralization to establish the smaller scale, localized debate on shared ethics and morality, based on personal contacts and cooperation in local projects. Those may concern care for the sick and elderly, for shaping

public space, developing public facilities, local finance for entrepreneurial ventures, sports, cultural events, education, etc.

284. Which virtues?

published 8-10-2016

In this blog I pleaded for a virtue ethics in the tradition of Aristotle, rather than the utility ethics that dominates economics, or a Kantian duty ethics. But there are so many virtues flapping around, with much variation in which virtues take precedence. Are they all relevant? Is there some coherence or unity between them? To answer this question I make use of the work *After Virtue* by Alasdair MacIntyre.

For Aristotle, a central virtue is justice, since that yields the conditions for exercising other virtues. Another key virtue for him is the use of reason, in particular practical reason (phronesis), needed to balance virtues in action. That includes the virtue of truthfulness. Further, there are the virtues of moderation, empathy, prudence, courage, and commitment/perseverance. These virtues converge in the so-called classical 'cardinal' (i.e. pivotal) virtues of reflection, courage, moderation, and justice.

Central Christian, biblical virtues are faith, hope and love. And also humility, modesty, and forgiveness. Aristotle would hardly include those, but to people who grew up in a culture of Christian heritage, even when not being practising Christians, such virtues do seem to have their self-evident place.

So, what virtues when, and in what order?

From Aristotle, Alasdair MacIntyre picked up two things that I want to mention here.

First, the idea that virtues are character traits needed to strive for the good life. They arise in relation to practices, as required to excel in them. Since there is a large variety of practices, it is no surprise that there is a variety of virtues and their constellations. Being a good soccer player requires other virtues than being a good surgeon. They may, however, share some virtues, such as perseverance to achieve excellence.

It is important to note that this notion of virtues as required for good performance presupposes a notion of what a good practice is, and this notion needs to be shared. The practice entails certain types of actions, and rules of the game. Aristotle was oriented towards the human being as a 'political' (i.e. social) animal, and his ethics is oriented towards shared, social practice, a common good. Friendship is having a shared project, a shared interest, with no separate, individual ownership. It is not up to the individual to decide what a good play is. He/she needs to submit to its rigours in order to be a legitimate player. I would compare it to Wittgenstein's notion of a 'language game' that I used in preceding items in this blog.

Now, is there one universal good life for Man? Or is it determined by the community, as Aristotle suggests. As I discussed in preceding items in this blog, that would be fundamentally opposed to liberal individualism. There, choice of the good life is to be left to supposedly autonomous individuals. There should be freedom based on individual preference. How freedom and virtue may be reconciled is discussed in the preceding items in this blog. However that may be, one needs to conform to rules of language games, and a tension with authentic, individual choice remains.

The second idea that MacIntyre adopted from Aristotle is that virtue is oriented to a life that is good as a whole, oriented to some overarching good, with projects connected in the totality of a life. He then arrives at the following characterization: ‘The good life of Man is the life spent in seeking the good life of Man’ⁱⁱ.

One might then add as a virtue the ability to select projects that contribute to the good life envisaged. There, one needs to find a way between on the one hand coherence and concentration of virtues and skills in a limited range of projects, not to spread one’s talents too thin, and on the other hand variety to explore novel opportunities.

Aristotle does not postulate that one knows beforehand what the good life is, and allows for trial, error, and learning in seeking it. That sits well with the pragmatist approach that I take in this blog. Action forms knowing.

My choice of a good life, which I stated several times in this blog, is as follows. Make the best use of your talents to contribute to what you leave behind after death, which is the only hereafter there is. That gives a meaning to life that transcends one’s own life, but developing and utilizing one’s talents is also gratifying, joyful. This gives a guideline to what projects to choose in the development of one’s life.

What about radical innovation of practice, in ‘creative destruction’? What are the virtues for that? The virtues of rebellion? I mentioned the tension between conformity to rules and developing an authentic self (see items 266 and 268). I will return to that issue in the following item in this blog, in a discussion of Nietzsche and Aristotle.

285. Nietzsche and Aristotle

published on 15-10-2016

Nietzsche did not and Aristotle would not have adopted Christian ethics, utility ethics, and duty ethics. Notoriously, Nietzsche demolished Christian morality as a mask for the exercise of a universal will to power. Morals of humility, pity, modesty and self-sacrifice have arisen as the revenge or pre-emption on the strong by the weak, their victims. Being pre-empted in the exercise of their will to power on others, the strong then turn against themselves in guilt and self-sacrifice.

Here, Nietzsche went back not to Aristotelian virtues of the citizen in society, the *polis*, but to the Homeric virtues of the single hero, the man of action who wins and dominates.

But then Nietzsche ended up in a phantasy of the strong-willed, autonomous Overman, beyond good and evil, who creates his own values, independently from others, in what Alasdair MacIntyre called ‘moral solipsism’.

Earlier in this blog, in item 60, I called this ‘Nietzsche’s mistake’. My argument was as follows. Will to power becomes acceptable, even a virtue, in a joy of overcoming obstacles, when it is not aimed at suppressing or dominating others, but is sublimated in overcoming obstacles in oneself in the effort to transcend oneself, in an Aristotelian striving after the good life. Nietzschean solipsism is self-defeating because one needs openness to the opposition from others to escape from one’s own prejudices and blindness, which is the highest degree of freedom.

On the other hand, according to Alasdair MacIntyre, Aristotle, here in agreement with Plato, thought that in spite of the multiplicity and apparent conflict between multiple virtues harmony between them existed, and conflict between them was evil.ⁱⁱⁱ

There seems to be some tension between this and the acknowledgment, by Aristotle, of the difficulty of *phronesis*, practical wisdom, in finding a good balance between rival virtues, depending on the specific conditions at hand. What if in the exercise of his genius someone neglected his duties as a father? Or betraying a friend to save a country? Aristotle acknowledged that there are no universal rules for this, and that proficiency in *phronesis* is rare.

Nietzsche, by contrast, relished conflict as a source of renewal, in ‘creative destruction’ (a term from the economist Schumpeter, not Nietzsche). Pain is part of transformation and transcendence of a limited self. Here I side with Nietzsche.

Here there is a problem with Aristotle’s view of virtues as needed to perform well in socially established and accepted ‘practices’, or language games, as discussed in preceding items in this blog. What if the practice is evil, or unduly constrains liberty?

Consider, for example, the present difficulty of getting away from the socially perverse practices of bankers and leaders of businesses more widely, in maximising their personal gain rather than the interest of society, indeed in damaging that interest, in avoiding taxes, destroying the environment, fooling customers, dodging rules, hiving risks off onto citizens. Some of them relish the virtue of being excellent in playing the game well, cleverly tricking customers to buy harmful financial products, and thereby violating the virtue of serving customers.

How to transform such practices, or escape from them? What are the implications for virtue? What are the virtues of rebellion? Where lies the boundary between having to accept and respect the rigours and virtues of how to perform a practice well, and the virtue of resisting and changing any perverse practice? That has been a major theme in this blog (see items 266 and 267). I still value that transformative, rebellious feature of Nietzsche.

286. Creative conflict and criticism

published 24-10-2016

Present culture wars in Western societies, with shouting matches between nationalists and cosmopolitans, ‘elites’ and ‘commoners’ or ‘grass roots’, highly and low-educated, free traders and protectionists, are due, in large part, I think, to an unwillingness and inability to engage in uttering and absorbing constructive criticism. At the same time there is an urge towards expression and self-assertion. Together, they have disastrous effects of polarization, with mutual indifference, or intolerance and escalation of negative conflict.

Conflict can be creative but that demands the effort and ability to engage in giving and accepting, appreciating, constructive criticism, based on openness and curiosity, aimed at mutual understanding. Those may be based on Christian virtues of faith in the positive potential of people, hope of its realization, and love for the give and take of relationships. It may also be based on traditional, cardinal values of reflection, courage, moderation and justice. We seem to have lost all of those, somehow.

What is happening?

First, young generations, not having suffered the horrors of war, racism and nationalism, have grown up in a safe, protective environment, robbing themselves of the need to deal with hardship that builds strength and resilience.

This has fed risk avoidance, in an obsession with safety and control. That has produced excessive control mechanisms in many realms of work, which stifle professional initiative, kill intrinsic motivation of work, and narrow room for improvisation and for catering to variety of taste and circumstance.

Second, postmodern philosophy has generated, mostly as a result of misunderstanding, an excessive, perverse relativism, according to which any view is as good as any other. Opinions are as good as arguments, and everyone has a right to his or her own. There is no common ground for debate, and criticism is seen as intolerant, offensive, power play.

The misunderstanding is this. I accept relativism in the form of renouncing absolute objectivity and truth, accepting that one's views, and even observations, are biased by forms of thought, based on one's biological and cultural inheritance, and formed along one's individual path of life. However, the resulting difference in ideas and views, in what earlier in the blog I called 'cognitive distance', form a reason not for abandoning debate, but, on the contrary, for engaging in it. Precisely because our views are biased, the only chance we have at correcting them lies in looking at other, conflicting views. As I argued at several places in this blog, one needs opposition from others to achieve freedom from one's prejudices and errors.

In contrast with this, an ethic has arisen where respect is seen as avoiding criticism, rather than valuing opposition. People congregate with whom they agree, cuddling their conformity.

Third, there is a romantic urge for individual self-expression, authenticity. In combination with unwillingness and inability to voice and absorb criticism constructively, this becomes a noisy celebration of narcissism.

At some schools, students are bedded in safety, in a pact of mutual non-aggression. Trust is seen as softness, conflict avoidance. Instead, students should be educated to voice and absorb constructive criticism. It is precisely because there is trust that one can tell each other 'the truth'. Returning to the cardinal virtues: one should learn to listen and reflect on what is said, what to say, and how to say it. Have the courage to take the risk of giving and evoking criticism. To be moderate and modest in one's claims, and just in judgement.

This issue is connected with the notion of cognitive distance. To recall: cognition here is a wide notion, including knowledge as well as moral views concerning the conduct of relationships. Distance is bothersome, makes collaboration difficult, but also yields the potential for learning. Ability to cross cognitive distance enhances learning by interaction. It is good for society as well as the individual.

One can make a distinction between distance in substantive knowledge and moral/ relational distance. The latter is more difficult to cross than the former. Constructive conflict is best

served by reducing moral distance, in order to better cross distance in knowledge. Dealing with each other while disagreeing.

287. The crisis of liberalism

published 29-10-2016

There are various forms of liberalism. Loosely, it means liberty of choice for the individual. But what kind of liberty? Choice of what? What does it mean for an individual? The cardinal present form of liberalism consists, I think, of the following principles.

First, autonomy of the individual (as opposed to its social constitution).

Second, a focus on negative freedom; lack of interference with the individual. This stands in contrast with positive freedom, to pursue one's view of the good life, on the basis of corresponding values, virtues, and competencies. In liberalism that is left up to the individual, free from public meddling.

That has indeed been liberating, with its contribution to momentous achievements such as human rights, legality, ownership rights, police monopoly of violence, equality under the law, being innocent until proven guilty, independent judiciary, and different forms of emancipation.

Third, the assumption and ideal of rationality driving human action and public policy.

Fourth, a reduction of human nature to the drive of self-interest, even at the expense of others. Other human features that might keep this back, oriented at relationships rather than autonomous agents, such as benevolence, care, trust, empathy, and altruism, are not regarded as being part of human nature, and are felt to be 'wishy-washy', intangible, not satisfying rational requirements of objectivity, logical rigour, and measurability.

And then there are markets. Their miracle is that through self-interest they promote maximum material welfare. Without that, liberal self-interest would not have been palatable.

As noted by Milbank and Pabst^{iv}, while values and virtues, as instruments for positive freedom, are seen as up to individuals, beyond the pale of politics, the potential for vice, in excessive self-interest at the cost of others, is a public matter, since it limits negative freedom. Containing the hazards of self-interest then becomes the only moral task of government. No appeal can be made to virtues since those are outside public discourse, and are too vague, various and 'irrational' to have any bite. Only imposition of control is left.

This idea goes back to Hobbes' idea of the need for a 'Leviathan' to contain the 'war of all against all'.

To be rational and without regard to individual values, motives, talents, experience and conditions, control has to be bureaucratic, uniform and impersonal (one thinks of Weber here), imposed by the state (or in name of the state^v). As a result, conduct is increasingly regimented and strangled by an accumulation of control.^{vi}

Efficiency is objective and measurable, as minimum monetary cost, while value is subjective and hence unwieldy, if it goes beyond mere exchange value, expressed in price. This reduction of value to exchange goes by the name of 'commodification'.

As a result, in the realm of rational policy efficiency always wins. If quality is to play a role, it is to be fixed in objectified, quantifiable, standards of skill, process or outcome, which contributes to the accumulation of stifling control.

As noted by Milbank and Pabst, taken together, this explains the puzzling phenomenon, in present society, of an alliance between market ideology, demanding maximum negative freedom for self-interested conduct, with centralized control of such conduct, to limit threats to negative freedom. Socialist ideals of a strong state can thus ally with liberal ideals of negative freedom. A requirement for this was only that socialism drop its old ideals of upholding social justice beyond the decrees of laws, in humane conduct, protecting the weak, and guiding and ‘uplifting’ the populace with education and culture.

This results not only in a reduced scope for positive freedom, for the pursuit of a flourishing life, but, ironically, even of negative freedom, in that limitation of scope. And so liberalism swallows its own tail.

288. The politics of virtue

published 5-11-2016

Given the crisis of liberalism, discussed in the preceding item of this blog, there is a need for a politics of virtue that looks beyond mere negative freedom, allowing for virtues that open up positive freedom for the pursuit of the good life. To enable people to develop wider values and virtues than only those of consumption.

Having negative freedom is ‘being left alone’: freedom from interference such as coercion, imposition, molestation, and authoritarianism. However, as recognized by Milbank and Pabst^{vii}, this fear of interference has led to ‘leaving people alone’ in a wider sense, with lack of care and concern for others, such as parents offer their children, in upbringing, teaching and guidance.

Developing potential, enabling for action, judgement, communication, conflict resolution, moderation, courage, empathy, fairness, justice, and striving for excellence. Those contribute to positive freedom: capabilities for a flourishing life, not only being ‘free from’ constraints but also ‘free to’ develop and exercise talents. They are virtues, traits needed to achieve a good life.

But all that has come to be seen as meddling, paternalism, not as enabling but as constraining negative freedom, even in schools. The choice of a good life and associated virtues are seen as up to the individual, not to be meddled with at school. But like education in general, schools should have the task of furthering positive freedom with its corresponding virtues.

The motive behind the rise of liberalism was to get rid of religious and political indoctrination and manipulation, but that has strayed into absence of any concern for values. Separation of state and church has become separation of state and values.

All this has contributed to the lack of ability to exercise and absorb criticism, discussed in item 286 of this blog. Criticism is seen as an affront to autonomy. A public drive against obesity can be blamed for hurting the self-regard of obese people.

Next, flight from criticism yields indifference and lack of courage, dressed up as respect for the integrity of the other. But, I propose, true respect entails interest in another’s contrary opinions, and the other as worthy of one’s critical attention.

The paragon of negative freedom is the market: freedom from interference in conducting economic activities, no matter at what cost of perversities of gluttony, extortion, make-believe, avoidance of public and environmental responsibilities, commodification of intellectual, spiritual and cultural values, primacy of efficiency over quality, and only instrumental rather than also intrinsic value of work and relationships. The latter violates the ethical principle of treating another as having not only instrumental but also intrinsic value.

Under the pressure of competition trust cannot survive and is left to personal relations of love and friendship, so economists say.

Deirdre McCloskey has recently argued that markets have produced bourgeois virtues, the classical virtues of reflection, courage, temperance and justice, and that those virtues are needed to operate in markets. Reflection is needed for good business decisions, courage is needed to take the risk of investment, and temperance and justice are needed not to antagonize customers. That may be true in the ideal, the utopia of economic theory, and may have been true in fact in earlier stages of capitalism, but in present capitalism, dominated by multinationals, not much of that is to be seen now.

Decisions of top management of multinationals are often not in the rational interest of the firm, but are motivated by hubris, self-aggrandizement, and mimicry (e.g. in mergers and acquisitions, as has been well-documented in research), banks have hived off risks onto the public, producing the 2008 financial crisis, the drive for salary, bonuses and conspicuous consumption seems to be without limit, and with power play on governments special favours have been obtained and laws and regulations are avoided or bent to achieve more profit.

In sum, the nurturing of virtues for positive freedom should be brought back as a public endeavour. However, the challenge is to do so while leaving the choice of a good life up to individuals, with all their differences in talents and preferences.

As discussed earlier, in items 281 and 282 of this blog, this entails the development of virtues on a meta-level of striving for mutual understanding and collaboration in the pursuit of what people variously make of the good life. As discussed, that includes the old Christian virtues of faith (in the human potential for good), hope (for the realization of that potential), and love (in reciprocity and an adequate degree of altruism), as well as the classical cardinal virtues of reflection, courage, moderation, and justice. Those should be taught and trained, in families, schools, and organization of work.

289. Multiple causality of virtues

published 12-11-2016

In a politics of virtue, which values and virtues are to be held in common, and which are to be left to individual choice? If we want to go beyond the negative freedom of being left alone, to include positive freedom for developing and realizing one's choice of the good life, what competencies and conditions are required, and which corresponding values and virtues? Which are of public and which only of private concern?

In this blog I have employed the multiple causality of action proposed by Aristotle (items 96 – 100). Would that help here as well?

To recall: Aristotle distinguished the following causes: *efficient* (agency), *final* (goals), *material* (means), *formal* (method, competence, technology), *conditional* (surrounding conditions surrounding), and *exemplary* (role models). What is the scope of one's agency: what room does one have to act, what does one want, what does one need for it in means and method, what are external conditions, and what are good examples to follow?

Here, the question would then be: which values or virtues belong to what causes, of action, and to what extent are they public or private?

For agency (*efficient cause*), the question is whether one is recognized as a legitimate agent, without discrimination, say. That is a public issue of *justice*, connected to human rights. But it is also a private issue, with the virtue of *taking responsibility* for one's actions.

The *final cause* is the choice one makes for the good life. That is a private issue, though developed in human relations, in the course of developing one's identity. It requires the virtue of *courage* to make a choice and stand by it, with *commitment* and *perseverance*. A minimum of courage is needed, but some people more than others relish risk and restlessness, in their striving for excellence, excitement, creative destruction, or adventure. That is fine, provided that it pursues positive, not negative power, as a matter of *justice*. Other people attach more value to composure, equilibrium, peace of mind. In Nietzschean terms: more Dionysus or more Apollo.

What is fitting, viable, or desirable, depends on talent, age, stage of development, being single or not, having children or not, the environment one lives in. Different activities have different standards of *excellence*. What is shared depends on groups. People congregate to share more values or virtues.

I think virtues are dynamic, in a double sense. They change as one develops, and they are needed to achieve development.

For positive freedom one needs access to what is needed for choosing and realizing the good life, in terms of means (*material cause*) and competence (*formal*). Those are in large part a public issue, with sufficient income and housing as a material need, and access to education, schooling, for the formal cause. That is part of *social justice*.

The *conditional cause* is the most complicated, in a mix of private and public. It entails legal institutions, ensuring justice. That includes assurance of negative freedom, with constraints on one's freedom for the sake of the freedom of others, but with a minimum of meddling, control, imposition, constraint. That entails the virtue of *moderation* and self-restraint, and, again, a matter of *taking responsibility*.

But since the human is socially constituted, conditions should not only constrain but also enable it in the pursuit of the good life. For that it needs individual values and virtues for human interaction. But institutions also should enable interaction, in competencies for collaboration. This is both a public and a private issue. It is an important part of education, schooling, formation, which should include critical reflection, formation of identity, expression, and social responsibility and capability.

All this requires capabilities and virtues of *empathy*, *patience*, *openness*, *willingness to listen*, *courage* to exercise voice, in making and accepting criticism, friendship in the form of *philia*, in projects with shared interests, with mutual commitment and *loyalty*, balancing interests of self and other. This requires *moderation*, and attachment not only of instrumental value to relationships but also intrinsic value. Here we find the old ethical principle of never using people only as means but also as ends in themselves. It requires an ability to engage in contests and accept losing them.

The core capability here is that of 'voice'. That requires the virtue of *reflection*, being reasonable, and the ability to weigh often incommensurable or even conflicting values and

virtues, depending on specific circumstances of specific individuals, and to debate the dilemma's.

That is difficult to do well, and people who are proficient in it serve as role models, in the *exemplary* cause.

290. What virtue debate?

published 19-11-2016

Previously in this blog (item 287), I criticised present liberalism for neglecting public goals of virtue, oriented at the flourishing of life, leaving them to the individual. Of course, liberalism is not against public debate of values and virtues, but does not consider it the business of the state. And indeed such debate crops up like weed between the cracks of the public pavement that blankets what brews beneath. People are concerned with issues of virtue and they will voice it. However, the topics that emerge are next given a liberal twist that avoids the issue.

Pollution and climate change are problematic because they yield what in economics are called 'externalities': Pollution does not get reflected in the prices of goods. A way out is sought by selling emission rights, thus attaching a price to pollution, and allowing a market for such rights. As a result, these rights converge on where pollution is worst, since that is where they fetch the highest price. Worse, rather than building an ethic not to pollute, it eliminates the need for it. Violation of an ethic, or absence of it, is now bought off and thereby legitimised.

Fortunately, entrepreneurs that operate from outside vested interests are often motivated by the ethical motive to contribute to society, as a goal for a meaningful life. They are not averse to gaining a profit, and indeed they claim they have a right to it, but that is not what motivates them most. And once they manage to develop viable alternative, renewable sources of energy, and this is taken as the future for markets, oil companies are forced to go along because the value of their old fossil-based assets starts to decline, yielding a drop of the firm's share value.

At a day-care centre the staff wanted to reduce late pick-ups by imposing a fine. As a result late pick-up increased. Whereas first timely pick-up was an ethical matter of solidarity with the staff, late pick-up now became part of the product to be paid for.

Where the donation of blood began to be paid for, the quality of blood declined. It had been, and in many countries still is, an ethical sacrifice or service, not to be bought with money, and now it became a means of subsistence for the poor and unhealthy.

There are public debates on ethical issues of euthanasia, discrimination, refugees, genetic engineering, health care, pensions, homosexuality, globalisation, child labour, trade in body organs, tax evasion, and so on. These are difficult for liberalism to cope with, since they entail conflicting values and virtues, and here also there is a strong tendency to reduce the problems to economics.

Refugees are OK if they are highly skilled, or satisfy unfulfilled demand for low-quality work, and their high degree of motivation may be profitable. There is no ready tool to include any ethic of hospitality or care in the equations, so that drops out. However, refugees are widely seen as not OK since they are seen as dangerous outsiders that do not belong here, and

this now trumps virtues of hospitality and sympathy, but this is not part of the market equation.

Trade in bodily organs is generally seen to go too far, but child labour is defended on the argument that without it poverty would be even higher, rather than tackling poverty and furthering education.

More widely, emotion-laden values, and their neglect by the establishment, are now firing a populism where economic logic has an adverse effect, as we saw in Brexit and the Trump victory.

Tax evasion by multinational companies is bought off with lenient fines to avoid expensive litigation, with disregard for the symbolic and ethical import, and for the enormous political cost of populism, in what is seen as a double standard at the expense of the regular tax payer.

So what, then, do I propose? How should these things be done differently? I propose that in each of these and other cases the mutually rivalling virtues, and the practical and economic concerns involved, and the trade-offs between them, should be made more explicit, in public debate. Concerns of utility are not irrelevant, but should not routinely shove off ethical issues of virtue, such as justice, fairness, solidarity, decency and integrity.

Ethical dilemma's tend to be hidden away, but that is a mistake. They serve to bring to the fore what values are involved, and that is a precondition for debate.^{viii}

291. Need for a virtuous elite

published 26-11-2016

It is now fast becoming the currency of political correctness to blame present upheavals of populism in Western countries on 'the elite'. With good reason. The elite of top decision makers in politics and business, with assorted pundits and economic ideologues, has failed to take into account the plight of those who have lost out in globalization, with an erosion of their employment, income, and values.

However, the flipside of that coinage, and here I take a politically incorrect position, is that we do need an elite. Or something like it, though with a better ethic, an ethic of serving, not self-serving. An elite that does not congeal into an oligarchy. Given that the term is so tainted perhaps another term should be used. Guides and guardians, perhaps? But I dislike terms that softly obfuscate. We are, in fact, talking about elites.

Milbank and Pabst^{ix} argued, and they convinced me of this, that democracy requires something between the 'one' of the state and the 'many' of citizens: the 'few' of intermediary institutions. Those are needed for two reasons.

First, the development and implementation of policy, jurisdiction, education, engineering, health care, management, etc. require expertise, experience and an ethic of profession and vocation, with support from professional or vocational associations.

Second, for democracy to function in present times involvement of citizens is needed between public and private, in local forms of collaboration, in many areas: health care, schooling,

training, employment, investment and entrepreneurship, spatial ordering, public amenities, etc. They are needed to personalize democracy and make it more direct.^x

A deeper point here is that government from the centre, by the 'one', is based on a mistaken idea that policies and government can be universal, with rules and procedures that apply equally to all, regardless of specific, local conditions and personal circumstances. That has arisen from a laudable ideal of equality under the law. That should indeed apply to what is forbidden, to protect negative freedom. But for enabling people to exercise positive freedom, for a flourishing of life, it is an illusion. That needs to be locally rooted.

In this blog I have argued repeatedly against universalistic pretensions, and I have pleaded for recognition of Aristotelian phronesis: the ability to weigh and balance multiple, not necessarily commensurable and often conflicting, values and virtues, depending on local and individual circumstances. I granted that this is difficult and needs to be guided by role models. There, I propose, lies part of the task of a new elite.

A related deeper point here is, as I picked up from a recent inaugural address by Gjalte de Graaf^{xi}, that while we are putting all the weight of democracy on representation, elections, and referenda, democracy should be seen more as a process, where citizens are involved. And that process should be seen not so much in terms of interests but in terms of underlying values that meet and clash, in the process. In sum: not positioning but process.

Intermediary roles used to be performed by churches and aristocracy. Liberalism has eliminated those but has not replaced them with a new elite to perform the legitimate functions of the few. There were good reasons for abolishing the old elites, for their indoctrination, paternalism and perversities of power. But those did have an ethic of service that is now lacking in the new elite that has arisen in the vacuum, driven by personal ambition and self-interest rather than service to some higher idea or society, producing new perversities of power. Latter day robber barons.

The new elite should be one of excellence in knowledge, virtues, character, expression, understanding, and the skill of phronesis.

The objection to aristocracy was that their position depended on where one is born. Liberalism aimed to replace this by meritocracy: position based on merit. But the chance of getting on is still very much related to the position, wealth, educational level, and social contacts of parents. And as Milbank and Pabst put it, we now see how meritocracy tends to '.. throw up the ruthless and self-regarding ... (with) their incessant pursuit of a sense of entitlement'^{xii}. The merit should not be one of personal advancement but of public service with vocational excellence.

Professional and trade associations became suspect in shielding off their membership from competition and renewal. Any new elites and intermediary institutions should remain open for new ideas and for entry from all classes and regions. New elites should not congeal into oligarchy.

Earlier in this blog I discussed the relation between trust and hope (item 107) and trust as a virtue in itself (164). Here I elaborate on those two pieces, and connect them.

First I take the traditional Christian virtues of faith, hope and love, and then the ‘cardinal’ (pivotal) classical virtues of deliberation, courage, moderation, and justice. They all come together in trust.

Essential in all this is the radical uncertainty of trust. To recall: this is uncertainty where one does not know all that may happen: what opportunities will arise, what options, what dangers, with what outcomes. Then one cannot play the economist’s game of appending probabilities, calculating risks, and optimizing choice.

Such uncertainty arises especially in relationships when one does not try to force the other into one’s own, established mental framework, but allows him/her to contribute to the construction of it, as I have argued in this blog.^{xiii} Then, virtually by definition, uncertainty is radical.

In insisting on calculability of risk, as economists do, one foregoes the opportunity for novelty and self-transcendence that carry fundamental uncertainty. One sells both the other and oneself short. Under such conditions, trust requires a leap of *faith* (the first Christian virtue) in the potential for goodness that the relationship offers.

This does not, of course, eliminate the uncertainty involved, so that one needs *hope* for the potential for goodness to manifest itself. The pitfall here is the temptation to raise false hope, for the other. Few things are so dangerous for trust as creating expectations one cannot fulfil. There, I think, lies one of the reasons for distrust of politicians, making promises during elections that they know they cannot fulfil.

Next, *love* is needed in the form of friendship or *philia*, as proposed by Aristotle, who characterized friendship as having a joint project whose outcome is as yet unknown, so that one cannot at the start apportion responsibilities, duties and shares in outcomes. Then one needs to go beyond reciprocity, giving, in one’s participation in the project, without being assured of sufficient return.

The intrinsic quality of the relationship, in enjoying it, is needed to carry this. Here, one satisfies the ethical principle of treating the other not only as a means but also as a goal in itself.

The connection of trust with the cardinal values is as follows.

Courage is needed for the leap of faith.

Deliberation is needed for what in my treatment of trust, in this blog, I have called the ‘causal ambiguity’ of trust: if one’s expectations are not fulfilled, one should not immediately jump to the conclusion of untrustworthiness. There may have been a mishap involved, or lack of competence, or lack of commitment or attention. One should extend the benefit of the doubt, in the exercise of ‘voice’.

Moderation is needed not to demand the maximum of return at the expense of the other, but to grant mutual benefit.

As proposed by Aristotle, *justice* is needed to enable the other virtues to be exercised, i.e. to enable people to reflect, muster courage, exercise moderation, exercise voice, extend the benefit of the doubt in case of failure, and enable and grant their pursuit of goals.

Alas, in current culture in developed societies people have not sufficiently learned to reflect, accept risks, to be resilient under adversity, to exercise moderation and patience towards others, and to conduct voice in constructive criticism and acceptance of it.

305. Public and private virtues

published on 4-3-2017

In preceding items of this blog, I adopted the definition of virtues as needed for the good life, and I struggled with the following problem. On the one hand, I want to move from the liberal ethics of only utility, where virtues are a matter to be left to individuals, not a matter of public concern, to a virtue ethic, where at least some virtues are a matter of public concern. On the other hand, I am wary of paternalism and loss of freedom for individuals to make their own choice of what the good life is. As I put it in one item (nr. 280): I want to fight liberalism with liberal means. Here, I make a further attempt at clarification.

While the term ‘virtue’ may suggest an imposition on people to behave in a certain way, to ‘act normal’, as the Dutch prime minister Mark Rutte put it recently, my intention is to lay a basis for diversity, allowing for quirks and weirdo’s, compatriots and refugees.

The paragon of the paradox of combining diversity, going your own way, and normality, conforming to norms, arises in the combination between democracy and the law.^{xiv} Democracy aims at diversity, with the liberal freedoms to allow for it, to be guaranteed by universal law, applying indiscriminately to all.

Democracy is substantive, concerns the content, the substance of life. The law is procedural, concerns how to proceed in dealings with other people in order to provide the room for diversity.

But laws alone do not suffice. Those say mostly what is not allowed, not to encroach upon the room for action of others. That is only negative power: constraining the room for choice. We also need positive power: providing the room and the competencies for choice.

I recall that trust is giving room for conduct, distrust is constraining it. We need as much trust as wisdom permits, giving room for action and accepting the risk of it, without becoming blind to it.

Earlier, I adopted the definition of virtues as character traits needed for the good life. Here, I change my mind. Like trust, virtue has a competence side and an intentional side. One needs virtues for the competence of leading a good life, but also for the will, the intention and commitment to do so to the best of one’s competence. Perhaps this is precisely what character entails. Those virtues, the competence and the will, need to be developed in upbringing and education.

Now, I propose that some virtues are public, as extensions of the law, and partly lying behind the law, as the source from which the law emerges, in democratic debate. Those virtues are

mostly procedural, and need to be shared, as public virtues, as a basis for allowing and enabling people to exercise their choices of the good life. Other virtues are more private, substantial, and vary with the choices that people make for the good life.

The ‘cardinal’ virtues of reason, courage, moderation, and justice are mostly, but not entirely, public. Reason is needed for being reasonable, being able and willing to listen and understand others, give and take criticism. The virtue of justice is needed to grant people their right to existence and dignity, acknowledge equality under the law, and empathy: being able and willing to understand people in their views, positions, and predicaments. That also requires the virtue of moderation, in give and take. One may be immodest in ambition and a drive for excellence, but not at the expense of others. The virtue of courage is partly private, to strive and take risks in the pursuit of the good life, but also public, in the courage to face one’s shortcomings, and to take personal and public responsibility.

Next to those classical virtues there are the Christian virtues of faith, hope and love. Those also can be public next to private, or would preferably be so. Faith in the potential for the good in people and in relations, hope that it will be realised, and the courage to risk it.

And then there is a whole range of possible, more personal virtues, depending on one’s choice of the good life, with more or less emphasis on ambition, courage, risk-taking, strength, truthfulness, loyalty, generosity, gentleness, adventure seeking, excitement, change, equilibrium, peace of mind, solitude, gregariousness, spirituality, material enjoyment, humour, seriousness, etc.

306. Public and private causes of action

published on 11-3-2017

In the preceding item in this blog I discussed which virtues are a matter of public concern, and which are private. Here is another way of looking at the issue of public and private. I use the multiple causality of action, derived from Aristotle, that I used several times before, in this blog. To recall, this causality includes: who does the doing (*efficient* cause), and why (*final* cause), with what material or means (*material* cause), according to what method, knowledge, skill, or technology (*formal* cause), under what external enabling or blocking conditions (*conditional* cause), according to what guiding examples or role models (*exemplary* cause).

In a market economy, who does what (efficient cause) is a private matter, and in a democracy the goal of action (final cause) also is a private matter. The provision of means (material cause) is a public matter of economy and government. The provision of knowledge and skill, and to a large extent also of enabling technology (formal cause), is a public matter, and so is the institutional environment, to provide the necessary enabling conditions (conditional cause). The exemplary cause also is private: different people have different heroes or role models.

How does this relate to the public and private virtues discussed in the preceding item? The efficient cause, of who acts where, is largely a matter of private virtues of taking initiative, committing to a choice, and responsibility, and the virtue of courage to do that.

The final cause also is in the realm of private virtue: ‘thymos’, the drive to manifest oneself, ambition, drive for excellence, in a striving for profit, wealth, or respect, or a striving for

balance and harmony, or for knowledge, wisdom, or discovery, or for pleasure, or for making a contribution to society, offering care, education, etc., or combinations of any of those.

Especially the conditional cause is in the realm of the cardinal virtues of reason, courage, moderation, and justice, and the Christian virtues of faith, hope and love. Those are public virtues, and procedural, aimed at creating the conditions for people to strive for the good life, in peace and cooperation with each other. Justice must also ensure the conditions for the efficient cause, in offering freedom of initiative and access to the resources needed for the good life, equality under the law, being innocent until proven guilty. It also includes safety and protection from violence.

Public also are the material causes of income, consumer goods, raw materials, and infrastructure, and the formal causes of education, training, science, and research.

In communism, public causes also include the efficient and final causes: who does what and with what goal. In radically libertarian societies, the private encroaches upon much of the material and formal causes, with private provision of services of infrastructure, safety, education, and even justice.

In populism, the largest part of the private swells up into the public. A decent society protects its private parts especially when they are small.

ⁱ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose justice, Which rationality?*, University of Notre Dame Press, 1988.

ⁱⁱ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, University of Notre Dame Press, 2015 (first published 1981), p. 219.

ⁱⁱⁱ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, Notre Dame University Press, 2015 (first published in 1981).

^{iv} John Milbank & Adrian Pabst, 'The politics of virtue', London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016.

^v As in the case of the control of hospitals, in terms of detailed protocols for work, delegated to health insurance companies, after the change of the system in 2008, in the Netherlands

^{vi} That has led me to explore a lighter form of control that leaves more room for trust, called 'horizontal control', discussed elsewhere in this blog.

^{vii} John Milbank & Adrian Pabst, *The politics of virtue*, London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016

^{viii} This point was made in an inaugural lecture at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, by Gjalte de Graaf, on 11th November 2016.

^{ix} John Milbank & Adrian Pabst, 'The politics of virtue', London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016.

^x I also argued this as part of s response to populism, in item 283 of this blog.

^{xi} On 11th November, Free University of Amsterdam.

^{xii} Milbank & Pabst, p. 221.

^{xiii} Inspired, in particular, by Levinas' philosophy of the other.

^{xiv} I was inspired to this by a lecture by Herman Tjeenk Willink.