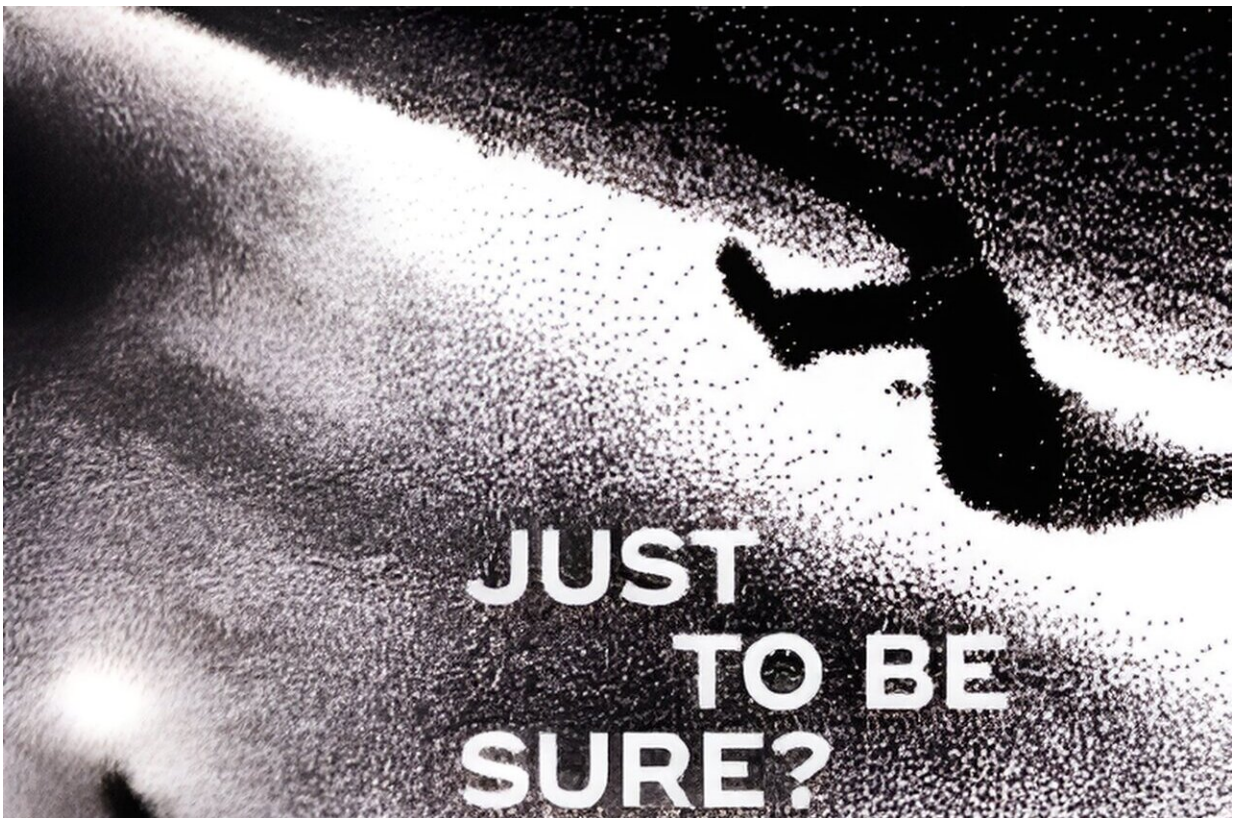


An analysis of security in relation to the values of well-being, freedom and equality

May 8 2024



Credit: Leiden University

Security seems to most people a basic necessity of life, a prerequisite for a good life. But if you think about it a little longer and more deeply, as political philosopher Josette Daemen has done, you realize that security

sometimes comes at the expense of other important goods, such as freedom and equality.

How much [security](#) should we really want? And how to administer the social–political domain accordingly? Daemen chose an all but secure existence as a doctoral student and wrote a dissertation on this dilemma. The defense was held on 2 May 2024.

"I have investigated the concept of security, which could also be translated as safety. I tried to unravel that as best I could," says Ph.D. candidate Daemen. The key concepts in today's political philosophy are freedom and equality. Daemen wanted to know how security relates to these. "With the underlying question of whether security is something a society should strive for."

In her dissertation, "Just to be sure? An analysis of security in relation to the values of wellbeing, freedom and equality," Daemen explains that security has a factual, cognitive and emotional side. "Safety means that you are sure of something in the sense that you can count on it in the future. You believe that a certain good, in the broadest sense of the word, is and will remain at your disposal. You are not afraid that this good will somehow be withheld or taken away from you."

In our personal lives, we want to know where we stand, what to expect, that our well-being is secured. "Think of the security of a steady job, owning a house or a steady relationship," Daemen explains.

Security also plays an important role in politics. "We expect the government to provide for our security, in areas such as defense and health care." Many people feel that the state should also take care of its citizens on a socioeconomic level. "This refers to *bestaanszekerheid* (security of existence), about which there is so much to do in the Netherlands these days," Daemen adds.

Happiness

But security is not only blissful: it can also get in the way of our well-being. "Changes, surprises and a certain degree of indeterminacy can also contribute to our happiness in life," Daemen believes.

The relationship between security and freedom is also ambiguous. In political debates and [public policy](#), you often see that security and freedom are at odds. "The two, it is often said, must be in balance with each other. During the last corona pandemic we saw how difficult that is," says Daemen, who wrote part of her dissertation during the lockdown.

"In my dissertation, I contrast certainty with different forms of freedom. Long story short: sometimes one comes at the expense of the other; sometimes security and freedom reinforce each other."

Egalitarian society

Nor is the relationship between security and equality straightforward. Daemen states, "I argue that for an equal, egalitarian society, three types of security are important: (1) moral security: respect for and peaceful dealings with each other; (2) economic security: access to means of existence, education and an income; (3) political security: the ability to form one's own opinion, participation in social decisions and freedom from arbitrariness on the part of the government."

A society cannot and should not promise more than this. "At least not if we want security and equality to apply equally to everyone," Daemen concludes.

Not an end in itself

Daemen also links her findings to practice. Her [theoretical framework](#) can help in making difficult decisions. "When a society faces a pandemic, terrorist threat or [climate change](#), the first thing to do is to specify what form of security is at stake. Then one must assess to what extent that is a problem and what response, if any, is appropriate for a liberal democracy.

"Of course, this is not the last word on the subject," Daemen says. "But my dissertation offers pointers. Personally, I hope that we will no longer continue to regard security as an end in itself. Security only has value when it contributes to well-being, freedom and equality."

Public debate

Writing columns for the Dutch national newspaper NRC and Leiden University's weekly Mare and several public appearances were a welcome change to Daemen's diligent academic thinking and writing.

"I have found that political philosophers can make a valuable contribution to the public debate. Especially when it comes to the meaning and importance of values. In [ethical issues](#), or in sharp contradictions between political camps, as a political philosopher you can often establish some clarity."

And after the defense? "First I'm going to recover from all those years of hard work. After that? Who knows? I love doing research and teaching, so maybe I'll try my luck in the job market for academics. Which offers little job security, of course. But it's not for nothing that I state in my dissertation that security is not an end in itself."

Provided by Leiden University

Citation: An analysis of security in relation to the values of well-being, freedom and equality (2024, May 8) retrieved 11 July 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2024-05-analysis-values-freedom-equality.html>

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