
Book Marks

The New Golden Rule: Community and Morality In a Democratic Society

By: Amitai Etzioni

A Book Review By:

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Introduction

In this second year of the new millennium, ethical issues from the 20th Century are still foremost in the minds of public administrators and public managers. Issues such as how we approach our new global societies, how we sustain individuals and communities, how we govern those communities, and how we enhance our desire for a safe, stable world must be addressed. How we do this is the context of continuing discussions in the public sector.

One of the discussions focuses on the field of virtue ethics, which emphasizes virtues, or moral character, in contrast to approaches which emphasize rules or duties (deontology) or consequences of actions (teleology). Additional components include “...moral education, moral wisdom or discernment, friendship and family relations, a deep concept of happiness, the role of emotions in our moral life, and the questions of what sort of person I should be, and of how we should live” (Hursthouse, 1999, p. 3).

The concept of the golden rule has also been discussed as a component of virtue ethics. Cruise and Brannon (2002) used it in selecting articles on virtue ethics for their symposium in *Public Administration & Management: An Interactive Journal*. Lynch and

Lynch (1999) considered it to be “the essence of global ethics.” (p. 84). Gazell (2000) discussed seven dimensions, based on the golden rule, which he felt would lead to a consensus on a global ethic. Some of those included: human rights, democratic government, a government-regulated economic system, and a respect for the environment (p. 318).

Amitai Etzioni (1996) also addresses the concept of the golden rule as a world ethic, but develops it further by presenting an idea he calls the “new golden rule.” As stated in his introduction:

the old golden rule (actually, *rules*, because this precept appears in many cultures, albeit in somewhat different versions) contains an unspoken tension between what ego would prefer to do to others, and that which the golden rule urges ego to recognize as the right course of action. And the old rule is merely interpersonal. The new golden rule proposed here seeks to greatly reduce the distance between ego’s preferred course and the virtuous one, while recognizing that this profound source of social and personal struggle cannot be eliminated. And it seeks a good part of the solution on the macro, societal level rather than merely, or firstly, on the personal one. I shall argue that a new golden rule should read: Respect and uphold society’s moral order as you would have society respect and uphold your autonomy (p. xviii, emphasis added).

This review discusses Etzioni’s new golden rule, and presents some of his implications for public policies and community and management practices.

Communitarian Philosophy

Etzioni is the founding president of the Communitarian Network. The Communitarian philosophy, simply stated, espouses a “good” society based on social virtues, shared values, and a balance between individual rights and social responsibilities. “The communitarian agenda, as I see it, is to seek a way to blend elements of tradition (order based on virtues) with elements of modernity (well-protected autonomy) (p. xviii).” Contrary to popular notions that more social order implies less individual autonomy, and vice versa, the Communitarians believe that these are two approaches to the same basic state of equilibrium, although from opposing sides.

The Communitarian agenda became most widely known during the 1990s, although elements of it can be found throughout history. It has been viewed as a social force and as an antidote for societies in which individualism has been perceived as excessive (p. 40). How can this Communitarian balance between order and autonomy be developed and maintained? Etzioni's suggestions follow in this next section.

Creating and Sustaining the Equilibrium

The moral voice

"The moral voice is a peculiar form of motivation: It encourages people to adhere to values to which they subscribe" (p. 120). Etzioni writes that the moral voice is something individuals can "hear", and something that encourages them to do what is right. When they listen to their moral voice, they experience "a special sense of affirmation" that reinforces their behavior (p. 121).

The moral voice contains two components: the internal or personal voice, and the external or community voice. The community voice, developed from the personal voices of its members, enables members to adhere to their own personal voices and creates a social order that is based on voluntary compliance.

The moral voice is the main way that individuals and groups in a good society encourage one another to adhere to behavior that reflects shared values and to avoid behavior that offends or violates them. The moral voice is often ignored by casual observers (and, to some extent, by social scientists) because it is informal, subtle, and highly incorporated into daily life. It often works through frowns, gentle snide comments (and some that are not so gentle), praise, censure, and approbation (p. 124).

Three conditions are necessary for building character and the moral voice in individuals: internalization, social formations, and reducing the tension between individuals and society. Internalization refers to the incorporation of values within the self. Social formations refer to the idea that procedures and practices which recognize and understand the values of its members must be developed within the community. These formations should also be responsive to the

members by reducing the inevitable tensions between the group and the individual (p. 165). Families and schools are major social formations that contribute to the development and maintenance of the moral voice, both internal and external.

Thick social order

Although all societies must have some sort of order to exist, Etzioni proposes a “thick” social order. By this he means some sense of shared values among members, and a sense of obligation by the members to the society. The obligation must be voluntary, and must be based on what members feel is their moral obligation to maintaining their society and the good life. In turn, the obligations of the members should reflect their moral beliefs and commitments.

Since human beings are social beings, their social connections enhance their individual potential. “The social fabric sustains, nourishes, and enables individuality rather than diminishes it” (p.26). However, the social fabric must be maintained in such a way that it does not diminish individuals.

The key elements of a “thick” framework include: democracy as a value and the core values embedded in the Constitution and the Bill of Rights; layered loyalties, including one’s family, group memberships (including voluntary associations), one’s community, and the community at large; respect for the values of others; the limitation of identity politics in order to decrease group competition; continued “values talks” or “moral dialogues” throughout society (see next section); reconciliation between communities, and a core language (pp. 199-210). Etzioni recommends English as the language of “the community of communities (p. 211).”

Core values

“*Shared* values are values to which most members of the society are committed (p. 85).” A set of core values serves two purposes. First, they maintain the social order by not relying solely on law enforcement and government regulations. (It should be noted here that law enforcement is recognized as a necessary element of any society, even a Communitarian one). Etzioni maintains that a large number of society’s members, “maybe as many as 98 percent” must voluntarily

adhere to the core values for this to happen (p. 86). Second, shared values enable a society to create social policies based on principles, as opposed to interest group politics. Values can also help to establish support for policies once they are made (p. 86).

How does a society decide on the values it will share? Etzioni recommends “values talks” or “moral dialogues (p. 102),” in which values are discussed and debated as to their normative value and the standing they have in the community. Several procedures can be followed. First is the “appeal to an overarching value (p. 102),” as a way to resolve issues between two values in conflict. An example is the debate between smokers and non-smokers. Since non-smokers do not impose on the personal space, or health, of smokers, the argument could be made that non-smoking rights should take priority (p. 103). Second, a third value may be introduced when two values are in conflict. An example is an attempt to establish a coalition among ethnic groups who might be in conflict, but who are ultimately committed to justice in society (p. 103). Finally, leadership, persuasion and values education can be utilized to persuade individuals to embrace a particular value; although, Etzioni cautions that each of these procedures can be abused (P. 105).

There are also rules for value talks and moral dialogues that can enhance the whole experience. First, the parties in conflict should not “demonize” each other, nor should they insist that the other view is only negative. Second, the moral beliefs of each group should be respected. Third, the language in the dialogues should focus on needs, interests and wants, instead of rights. Fourth, and last, the dialogue should not contain all elements and issues that could possibly be discussed. A more narrow focus might enable the conflicting groups to recognize their shared interests. (For an example of this type of group process, see Brannon, 1999).

What are the values societies should share? Which ones should be encouraged and developed? Etzioni asserts that “*certain concepts present themselves to us a morally compelling in and of themselves* (p. 241).” The values are both self-evident, and ones that represent the foundations of a good society. The basic social virtues for Etzioni are “a voluntary moral order and a strong measure of bounded individual and subgroup autonomy, held in careful equilibrium, the new golden rule (p. 244).” Secondary to these are social justice, equality, promoting peace,

some feminist values (not defined) and stewardship of the earth. Compassion and a sense of obligation - to one's values and to one's community - are important. Religious ideologies and secular ethics may or may not be included in society's shared values.

Good societies require people who can balance their religious *or* secular ethical commitments with respect for autonomy, especially the rights of others; who are willing to engage in moral dialogues rather than promote state-enforced morality; and who limit the scope of their shared formulations of the good to core values (pp. 254-255).

Policy and Management Implications

Throughout his book, Etzioni includes a variety of recommendations for community practices, policies and public management. This section presents a summary of his major recommendations.

Education

A limited, shared society-wide curriculum should be developed for public schools. The subjects should include civics, American history, and American literature. The subjects should be respectful of societal institutions and history while at the same time discuss problems and events that are less than stellar. For colleges, core courses such as those listed above, should be required for all students. "The underlying principle that needs to guide schools and colleges is that it is necessary that those who graduate will have some shared heroes, respect some shared symbols, and relate to some shared narratives, all reflecting the core of shared values (p. 213)."

Racial integration achieved by busing is not acceptable under the communitarian philosophy, because it breaks communal bonds. In order to strengthen those bonds, magnet schools which attract students from a variety of neighborhoods are recommended (p. 216).

National Service

The Peace Corps, AmeriCorps and Vista are three agencies recommended for voluntary service. Forming cross-community bonds and sharing experiences is necessary for maintenance of shared values and societal norms. Etzioni calls for an increase in volunteers for these agencies, and “for national service to be effective, it must reach at least one out of every ten members of each age cohort so that this person can transmit his or her new social insights to others (p. 213).”

Public Media

Media outlets such as C-Span and National Public Radio can enable and enhance moral dialogues, the search for shared values, and community building. Although there is some debate as to how these should be funded, by the taxpayers or by private donations, “there is, however, little doubt that such media contributes to society-building, a purpose it could not serve as well as if it were commercialized (p. 212).”

Laws

The question may be asked, are laws necessary in the good society? The answer is yes, for two reasons: first, laws are “expressive of the community’s values. Second, communitarian law helps maintain the social order by dealing with those who disregard the moral voice (p. 146).” A social order based more on shared values and moral voices than on the government is close to being a society that reflects the new golden rule.

Laws that protect individuals who help others are necessary for the good society. An example of this is the Good Samaritan Law. A medical volunteer act, which would extend protection to health care professionals, is also recommended (p. 150).

Etzioni states that there must be some recognition “that some missions are best left in the hands of the federal government (bank controls, for instance); some may indeed be best turned over to states; while still others, quite a few in fact, are best devolved to communities (p. 152).” Some missions that are best handled by communities include: establishing community courts (such as Drug Courts) to provide

rehabilitation in, and restitution to, the community; and supporting community policing and changes in the police force which recognize the cultural differences of individuals in the neighborhoods.

Housing

Designing neighborhoods to enable the development of community bonds enhances the social order. This might include fewer cars, businesses in close proximity to homes, narrow streets, wider sidewalks, and front porches acclimated to the street. Protecting and fostering public spaces (sidewalks, plazas, playgrounds) where community members meet to interact is another way to enhance the neighborhood (pp. 154-156).

Conclusion

The new golden rule is a way to regenerate society by balancing the social order with personal autonomy. Etzioni develops his idea by introducing his audience to the concepts of core values, thick social order, and the moral voice. He also proposes directions for public policy that would enhance society and enable it to operate under this new rule. His ideas and suggestions are interesting, thought provoking, and provide another dimension by which public administrators and managers might evaluate their own philosophies for public service, and what constitutes the “good society.”

The more a society relies on members’ convictions that their community has established a legitimate and just order, and the more they conduct themselves voluntarily in line with the order’s values because they themselves subscribe to them, the more communitarian the society. To put it more sharply, the communitarian society is not first and foremost one of law-and-order, but one based on shared moral values that the members affirm. It is a society primarily based on virtues and on laws that embody them (p. 140).

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