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The Good Society

Amitai Etzioni¹

This essay explores some of the elements of what makes for a good society—or community—from a communitarian viewpoint, with consideration from a combination of social facts as seen by a sociologist. Additionally, ethical considerations, with special attention paid to exclusivity and to equality, are addressed.

COMMUNITIES DEFINED

A key concept I draw upon in the following characterization of a good society is the term *community*. I define it as follows:

Community is a combination of two elements: A) A web of affect-laden relationships among a group of individuals, relationships that often crisscross and reinforce one another—rather than merely one-on-one or chainlike individual relationships; B) A measure of commitment to a set of shared values, norms, and meanings, and a shared history and identity—in short, to a particular culture.²

The observation that social entities that meet the above two defining criteria can be identified and that they resemble those entities most people informally refer to as *communities* does not claim that such social entities are good in the normative sense. Furthermore, this definition leaves open the amount of conflict that occurs within a given community, but identifies it as a social entity that has the elements necessary—bonds and shared values—to contain conflict within sustainable boundaries. Lastly, the definition indicates that communities need not be territorial. Indeed, there are many ethnic, professional, gay, and other communities that are geographically dispersed; that is, the members of these communities reside among people who are not members. Often, these communities are centered around

particular institutions such as places of worship, hiring halls, bars, or social clubs. So, with these caveats in mind, I will examine both the elements of community-bonding and the common moral culture.

THE VALUE OF BONDS AND THEIR LIMITS

The idea that people ought to be related to one another by bonds of affection rather than merely treat each other as instruments is widely established. From Kant to Marx, many consider the dominance of the instrumental orientation a major threat to human well-being. Others have drawn on empirical research to document that people are social creatures and require bonding with one another for their mental and physical well-being. Thus, it would at first seem that bonds are good *per se*.

This view reflects a Western context, in which bonding is believed to have declined over the last century, as noted in the work of Robert Putnam.³ More attention, however, should also be paid to the condition in which bonding is excessive. Here, I refer not only to hierarchy, power relations, or oppressive legal or moral codes, all of which have negative aspects. But also, I refer to communities in which bonds, even those among peers, are restrictive, preventing proper development of self, cramping individuality, spontaneity, and creativity, a condition which, until recently, many have associated with the Japanese society.

Novelists have been especially effective in describing the loss of self-identity and autonomy of those slavishly in love; of women who lose their self identity when defined merely as mothers and wives; of teenagers and gang members who are lost in their peer groups.

It follows that both frayed bonds and tightly knit ones are incompatible with basic human needs;⁴ that social bonds are essential for human well-being, but only if they remain rather slack; and that one attribute of a good society is that it is one in which strong communal bonds are balanced by powerful protections of self. Such a society is not simply communal, but also firmly upholds both social ties and autonomy, social order and liberty. Thus, different societies may need to move in opposite directions—to

approach the same point of balance. For example, some societies must shore up their weakened social bonds, while others must loosen them.

EXCLUSIVITY LIMITED BY LAWS

Given the realities of social life, all communities have built into them by their very nature a serious normative defect: they exclude. All communities draw distinctions between members and nonmembers, and they usually treat nonmembers less well than members. Exclusivity arises out of one of the two defining elements of community—that of bonding. There are severe limits to the number of people any one person can bond with. Moreover, bonding is much more achievable with people who are similar in social background and perspective than with those whose social attributes are different. Finally, turnover must be limited if bonds are to solidify.

The fact that communities exclude is normatively troubling to the point that one may regard communities negatively merely on this ground and prefer to limit social relations to those based on universal criteria such as individual achievements. Consistent champions of this approach reject treating legal immigrants differently than illegal immigrants or members of our national community differently than those of others. However, a society that seeks complete elimination of exclusivity will grossly neglect the profound human need for social bonds.

Given this background, the quest for a good society points to one that allows communities to maintain some limitations on new membership while at the same time greatly restrict the criteria that communities may use in forming such exclusivity. The criteria for exclusion cannot be race, ethnic origin, religion, sexual orientation, or a host of other criteria based on ascribed statuses. Rather, the bonds of good communities, it follows, should be based on affinities whose nature remains to be defined.

CONFLICT WITHIN CONSENSUS

The concept of society as a community has long been criticized. After all, this notion is Durkheimian in the sense that it presupposes one societal

entity and asks if the conditions that its continued integrity requires are met. Critics, from Jeremy Bentham to Margaret Thatcher, have argued that the very concept of society is a fiction; rather, there are only aggregates of individuals.⁵ Indeed, social conservatives historically used to call for national unity, urging people to refrain from fighting for that which was due them individually, so as to preserve the organic whole. Left-leaning scholars such as Lewis Coser have maintained that the concept of community conceals that society is an arena of conflict, not one of unity.⁶

Nevertheless, the concept of society as a community is viable, especially if one treats it not as a given but as a variable. That is, some societies are much more of a community than others, and their communal quality changes over time. Most importantly, there is nothing inherent in the concept of society or community to exclude conflict. The only assumption that the concept makes is that conflicts are contained by an overarching commitment to the bonds and values that define the whole. If this is not the case, we do not have one community or society. Therefore, it might be most productive to stop viewing consensus and conflict models strictly as alternatives and instead see them as combinable. After all, there is room for conflict within consensus, as long as such clashes do not break out of the containing bonds and culture. One may well wish to study the conditions under which conflicts are sustained within communal boundaries as opposed to outside the community. But such an approach only highlights the value of the basic concept—that of community—rather than finding it invalid or biased.

A good society, it follows, is one that keeps conflicts within the bounds of shared bonds and culture. However, there is nothing in the definition of community, and hence society, that requires that the said bonds themselves will not be changed over time.

COMMUNITY AND INEQUALITY

An additional normative issue raised when one seeks to assess the value of communities is the relationship between the close social bonds that exist within communities and the allocation of resources. Much has been written

about this subject; the following are merely a few observations about this discussion.

Most observers readily agree that equality among members, as a general attribute, is neither possible nor desirable. For instance, there are considerable limits on the extent to which beauty and musical talents can be equalized, and it is not immediately obvious that all these kinds of equalities would be good. Even achieving *merely* equality of economic assets, power, and social status—if by that one means every community member receives the same share, or even “from each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs”⁷—is an extremely elusive goal and not necessarily a good objective. For instance, these ideas are believed to grossly undermine efficiency and productivity, which no community can completely ignore. We should therefore be concerned with greatly reducing inequality, rather than with equality as the end state.

A good society can reduce inequality to a larger extent than the one provided by the Rawlsian rule of approving of increased inequality as long as the have-nots benefit from the increased resources that result from the growing share of the haves even when the haves’ share increases much more than that of the have-nots.⁸ This formula puts no upper limit on how much more the haves may gain or on the growing disparity between the haves and the have-nots. For example, in the 1990s, worker salaries increased by 32% while Chief Executive Officer salaries increased by 535%.⁹ Such high and rising levels of inequality threaten to split society into two separate camps: One is a bit better off, but falls ever further behind the first camp, while the other is affluent and gaining. Given that control of economic resources is correlated with political power, growing inequality must be expected to undermine not merely the societal bonds but also the democratic elements of society. It follows that a good society would not only secure a “generous minimum” for all its members, but would also labor to cap inequality by slowing down increases in the slices of the total resources gained by the higher strata.¹⁰ These rules would apply to each community.

When the discussion focus moves from the level of communities to that of societies, the latter is often depicted as if it were an aggregate of individuals. Thus, typical discussions of American consumers, voters, or even citizens evoke the image of millions of individual actors, each acting on his or her own, and, in accumulation, affecting the direction of the economy, polity, and society. Actually, even in the most modernized societies, many individually are members of communities. Indeed, it is best to think about societies as communities of communities, which also contain a fair number of unaffiliated individuals.

It follows that, in seeking to characterize a good society, inequalities in allocation of resources *among* communities and not just among individuals must be taken into account. For example, in 1997, a public school located in New York City's Greenwich Village was poised to layoff a teacher considered a fine instructor by her school because of budget pressures.¹¹ Concerned parents raised funds to enable the district to keep the teacher on its payroll.¹² The chancellor of the city's school system objected on the grounds that these parents were giving something *extra* to the children of their community rather than to all of the city's children.¹³ But the sociological rules of gravity again assert themselves. As in thousands of school districts across the country, where parents do extra things for *their* school despite court rulings calling for inter-district equality, the Greenwich Village school was allowed to keep the teacher with the district paying the teacher's salary.

However much one may cherish equality, the quest for a good society must recognize that equality among communities has never been approximated, even during the heyday of the Soviet regime, or under Cuban socialism, or even among Kibbutzim. Instead, a good society applies to inter-community allocation of assets the same rules already outlined for members of any one community. No community should be left without a rich and rising minimum, and the shares attained by any one community ought to be capped. In short, a good society is one in which inequality within each community and among them is being significantly reduced.

WHOSE VALUES? MORAL DIALOGUES AND THEIR LIMITATIONS

The second element of community, as defined here, is much more difficult to evaluate and raises numerous taxing questions. A community is not merely a social entity whose members are bound by a web of crisscrossing affective bonds but is also one in which members share a set of core values—a moral culture. A good society, rich in communities, is by definition one governed not merely by contracts, voluntary arrangements, and laws freely enacted, but also by a thick layer of mores that are in turn derived from values. This raises several questions: *Where do these values emanate from? Are they justifiable? Are they good?*

A common answer is that values are handed down from generation to generation and, in this sense, are traditional. Tradition, however, is clearly not the only source of values. So, what are the other major sources of values and how does one determine the moral standing of any particular set of values, regardless of their source?

In addressing this question, it is important to distinguish between the initiation of values and their establishment as social norms. New value formulations are often the work of one person such as a rebelling clergy member like Martin Luther, a public leader like Rachel Carson, or a social philosopher like Martin Buber.¹⁴ In order for values to acquire social significance, however, they must be embraced by a considerable number of people. For members of a community to integrate new values into their moral culture, these values must undergo a process I refer to as a “moral dialogue.”¹⁵

Moral dialogue is a process by which people engage in deliberations that involve not merely facts and logic, reasoning, and rational exchanges, but also intensive discussions in which their normative commitments are engaged. Over recent decades, American society has had moral dialogues on matters such as our obligations to the environment, to marriage partners, and to children. There have also been moral dialogues about proper race relations, relations between men and women, relations between heterosexuals and homosexuals, as well as numerous other subjects. Dialogues such as these are often complex and massive, and they frequently appear disorderly. How-

ever, several of these have advanced to a point that resulted in extensive, although never universal, changes in the values endorsed by members of the society. Thus, the values of American society regarding many of the subjects listed above, from commitments to the environment to relationships among people of different social categories, have changed significantly over the last decades.

A good society relies heavily on such moral dialogues to determine the values that will constitute the shared cultures of its communities; it does not merely base its values on tradition. Moreover, to ensure broad and genuine adherence to values, a good society relies on the moral voice—the informal controls members of communities exert on one another—rather than law.

The law has often been viewed as the tool of society that ensures that millions of its members will live up to the prescriptions contained in the society's values. Indeed, one obvious sociological function of the law is to prescribe how people are expected to behave (from paying taxes to meeting obligations to caring for children). The law also prescribes what people should refrain from doing (from smoking in defined public spaces to selling, buying, or consuming crack cocaine). Usually, laws also contain penalties to be meted out and sometimes rewards to be accorded for those who ignore, or live up to, these normative prescriptions.

When values are less and less heeded, it is often argued that the society requires more laws, more regulations, stronger sanctions, more law enforcement resources and powers, and more severe punishments for those who violate the laws. Indeed, in most Western societies, one can observe that over the past several decades as social order has deteriorated, there have been increasing demands for more and harsher punishments, more police, and more powers to various public authorities. However, the rising economic and social cost of this approach to value-enforcement—as demonstrated by the failing war against controlled substances and the fact that while crime has recently declined in the United States, it is still at much higher levels than it was a generation ago—shows that the high reliance on law enforcement for value fortification does not make for a good society.¹⁶

In contrast, for a society to be good, much of the social conduct must be *regulated* by reliance on the moral voice rather than on the law, and the scope of the law itself must be limited largely to that which is supported by the moral voice. This is the case because the moral voice can be made more compatible with a high level of respect for self, with autonomy, and, hence, with a good society. Here again, the good society is defined as one that balances two values, social order and autonomy, rather than maximizing one.¹⁷

If people ignore the law, their wages are garnished, their mortgages are foreclosed, and their homes are sold out from under them; they are jailed or even executed. Their autonomy is restricted or curtailed. The notion advanced by some philosophers that the actor always has a choice, even if he or she has to choose to die, is belied by those who are forced to change course by being restrained, jailed, or forcibly evicted from protest sites. For example, in 1995, individuals from Greenpeace were removed from nuclear testing sites by French authorities.¹⁸ Their choices were curtailed if not preempted entirely. In contrast, when one disregards the moral voice one may still proceed, although some social costs may be attached. That is, the person's basic autonomy is maintained. Therefore, law in a good society is first and foremost the continuation of morality by other means.

The limited ability to rely on law to introduce social changes that are not backed up by values members of the community truly accept, and the severe distorting effects that result if this is tried, are highlighted by the failure of many prison authorities to prevent inmates from dealing drugs in jails. If authorities cannot enforce a law there, where they have the perpetrators locked up twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, under constant and close supervision, with almost no autonomy, how can one expect to enforce a law this way in a free society?

Often, when one points to the merits of greater reliance on the moral voice and less on law enforcement, which is an approach that assumes that one seeks to mainly sustain values that are supported by the moral dialogues of the communities, one is asked which public policies would serve this purpose? What public policies, regulations, and administrative acts should be introduced?

The answer that is compatible with the vision of a good society spelled out here is that the best way to change the direction of a society is to have megalogues about the substance of members' values and the intensity of their commitments to values they affirm. By megalogue, I mean a society-wide dialogue, one that links many community dialogues into one, often nationwide, give and take. While at first it may seem that it is impossible to have a society-wide dialogue, such megalogues, often triggered by some dramatic event or deliberately staged drama, occur almost incessantly about one topic or another. For example, oil spills served to trigger megalogues about the environment; the Thomas-Hill hearings about sexual harassment; the impeachment hearings about what constitutes offenses that will drive an elected official out of office. It is true that megalogues are fuzzy in the sense that one cannot determine a priori with any precision when the process will be completed, which values will prevail, or which new public policies will be endorsed. In effect, one can only predict that the process often will be disjointed, emotive, repetitive, and meandering. But these qualities are earmarks of processes that truly engage a mass of people in examining, redefining, and redirecting their values and moral commitments; they point to the kind of moral dialogues that are essential for truly endorsed social change.

All this is not to deny that laws and public policies have a place in societal change, including moral regeneration, but rather to stress that they are not the main factor. Most importantly, in order for a good society to evolve, the laws and public policies themselves must reflect the change in values rather than significantly diverge from them. This is the case because the more a society relies on members' convictions that the societal demands on them are just, and the more they conduct themselves voluntarily in line with these values because they themselves subscribe to them, the better the society. To put it more sharply, the good society is not first and foremost one of law-and-order, but one based on shared moral values that the members affirm.

A main criticism of my position is that the outcomes of megalogues reflect not the true preferences of the members of the society, but rather those preferences fostered by the media and the organizations and people that

control its various forms, since use of the media is an essential tool of megalogues. Because this is a subject that cannot be properly treated as an aside in an essay of this scope, I will simply state that, to the extent the power structure of a society prevents authentic megalogues from encompassing most members of the society, it cannot be a good society. In a good society, the public would own large segments of the media, which is somewhat the case with BBC and NPR. Social restructuring and public education would have to ensure that people have the basic economic, social, and intellectual conditions that enable them to participate in the megalogues. For instance, to the extent that megalogues take place on the Internet, with widespread access, and are not burdened by economic concerns to the point that people cannot find the time and energy to participate, the conditions for an authentic megalogue exist. At the same time, it should be noted that although all media, even small town gossip, have some distorting effects, the magnitude of such distortion is often vastly exaggerated.

The Soviet experience shows that, even when a state has near total control of the media as well as the educational systems, it still cannot control public opinion. Moreover, the results of American megalogues are often not in line with what one would assume those who own or control the media would prefer. Most importantly, to return one more time to sociological realism rather than utopian writing, the media can be much improved but not circumvented if society-wide megalogues are to take place.

GOOD V. "BAD" VALUES

Although sharing values is a defining attribute of communities, to reiterate, one should not assume that all communities, or communities *per se*, are good. An essential part of their evaluation entails determining not merely whether they share values, but the moral standing of the values they do share.

Some have argued that if shared values arise out of moral dialogues, whether limited to communities or extended to society-wide megalogues, the resulting consensus legitimates the outcome. Others have posited that if certain procedures are followed the results will be morally sound. However,

a simple mental experiment raises troubling questions about consensus and other procedure-based criteria: If the members of a given community agree unanimously to lynch strangers who stray onto their turf, burn books, or treat women as second class citizens, obviously this consensus does not make these agreements morally good ones. That is, we are drawing on external and substantive criteria to evaluate the values that communities have come to share as a result of dialogues judging the moral standing of values handed down from previous generations.

Ethicists have developed some criteria to determine which values are morally superior to others. For instance, those values that are symmetrical, applying to ego the same way they apply to alter ego, are deemed superior to those that do not.¹⁹ But the quest for the values defining the good society may well not be satisfied by such formal criteria.

Several attempts have been made to find the elusive criteria. Some recently have turned to biology; after all, we are all said to be hardwired one way or the other. But even if this is true, one wonders whether such wiring serves merely as a constraint on what a community can do or whether it also provides opportunities from which a community can build. In any case, biological factors do not define that which is good. Others have tried to base their ethical systems on those values all societies share, that every human society endorses.²⁰ While there are disagreements over the reach of this list, it is actually rather meager. Thus, even health care and freedom from starvation are not seen as universal values.²¹ Still others have developed a calculus of harm according to which acts that cause less harm than others are deemed moral, a criteria that is extremely situational.²² Moreover, it hides the implicit value judgments evident in decisions such as how far into the future consequences are taken into account as well as the weight one assigns to various affected groups.

A possible source for overarching criteria are those values that, to use the language of the founding fathers of the republic, are “self-evident.”²³ In ethics one refers to deontology, a system based on the values that convey compelling moral causes.²⁴ A case in point is the observation that truth-

telling is, on the face of it, morally superior to lying—excluding such limiting conditions as, for example, if one were hiding Jews and a Nazi asked of their whereabouts. Analysis—for instance, along the Kantian line that if one person lies, soon others will follow, and then the liar will suffer—follows and might cement or undermine the initial judgment, but its original and basic source is the fact that certain moral truths speak to us in compelling terms.²⁵

Ultimately, the quest for the values of the good society may require combining all these sources: local consensus, worldwide parallelism, formal and procedural criteria, as well as the sense that certain values are self-evident. One may follow different considerations, but without some such combination of ethics and sociology, a good society cannot be characterized.

¹ This essay draws from ideas previously published by the author.

² AMITAI ETZIONI, *THE NEW GOLDEN RULE* 127 (1996).

³ See generally ROBERT D. PUTNAM, *BOWLING ALONE: THE DECLINE AND REVIVAL OF AMERICAN COMMUNITY* (2000) (describing how social capital has declined dramatically since the 1970's using factors such as membership in voluntary organizations and levels of philanthropy).

⁴ These include some needs that are biologically anchored, such as the need for caloric intake, and some that are socially but universally implicated, such as the need for affection. See Amitai Etzioni, *Basic Human Needs: Alienation and Inauthenticity*, 30 AM. SOC. REV. 870 (1968).

⁵ See JEREMY BENTHAM, *AN INTRODUCTION TO THE PRINCIPLES OF MORALS AND LEGISLATION* 3 (Laurence Lefleur ed., Hafner Pub. Co. 1948) (1789); MARGARET THATCHER, *THE DOWNING STREET YEARS* 626 (1993) ("There are individual men and women, and there are families. And no government can do anything except through people, and people must look to themselves first. It is our duty to look after ourselves and then to look after our neighbor.").

⁶ See LEWIS COSER, *FUNCTIONS OF SOCIAL CONFLICT* (1954); LEWIS COSER, *CONTINUITIES IN THE STUDY OF SOCIAL CONFLICT* (1967).

⁷ Karl Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Programme: Marginal Notes on the Programme of the German Workers Party*, in MARX: *LATER POLITICAL WRITINGS* 215 (Terrell Carver ed., Cambridge University Press 1996) (1891).

⁸ See JOHN RAWLS, *A THEORY OF JUSTICE* (1971).

⁹ SARAH ANDERSON ET AL., *INSTITUTE FOR POLICY STUDIES & UNITED FOR A FAIR ECONOMY, EXECUTIVE EXCESS 2000: SEVENTH ANNUAL CEO COMPENSATION SURVEY 1* (2000).

¹⁰ STEPHEN NATHANSON, *ECONOMIC JUSTICE* 106 (1998).

¹¹ See Anemona Hartocollis, *Chancellor to Keep Teacher in Her Job in Parents' Victory*, N.Y. TIMES, Sept. 26, 1997, at A1.

¹² *Id.*

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ See MARTIN LUTHER, *95 Theses*, in 31 LUTHER'S WORKS 17 (Harold J. Grimm ed., Muhlenberg Press 1957) (1517); RACHEL CARSON, *SILENT SPRING* (1962); MARTIN BUBER, *I AND THOU* (Walter Kaufmann trans., Scribner 1970) (1923); AMITAI ETZIONI, MARTIN BUBER UND DIE KOMMUNITARISCHE IDEE (1999).

¹⁵ AMITAI ETZIONI, *THE NEW GOLDEN RULE* 85–118 (1996).

¹⁶ See Drug Policy Alliance, *By the Government's Own Standards, the Drug War has Failed*, at <http://www.lindesmith.org/news/pr-august08-00x.html> (Aug. 8, 2000) (on file with the Seattle Journal for Social Justice). See, e.g., *Why Crime is Still Falling*, BOSTON HERALD, Sept. 1, 1998, at 28.

¹⁷ See, e.g., ETZIONI, *supra* note 2, at 3–57.

¹⁸ See David Buchan, *French Seize Greenpeace Ships*, FIN. TIMES (London), Sept. 2, 1995, at 3.

¹⁹ See IMMANUEL KANT, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, in ETHICAL PHILOSOPHY 36 (James Ellington trans., Hackett Pub. Co. 1983) (1785) (“Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of another, always at the same time as an end and never simply as a means.”).

²⁰ See Shalom Schwartz, *Are There Universals in the Structure and Contents of Human Values?* 50 J. OF SOC. ISSUES 19 (1994); Shalom Schwartz, *Towards a Theory of the Universal Content and Structure of Values: Extensions and Cross-Cultural Replications*, 58 J. PERSONALITY & SOC. PSYCHOLOGY 878 (1990).

²¹ See RHODA E. HOWARD, *HUMAN RIGHTS AND THE SEARCH FOR COMMUNITY* 13 (1995).

²² See, e.g., JOHN STUART MILL, *UTILITARIANISM* (Oskar Piest ed., Liberal Arts Press 1957) (1861).

²³ THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE para. 2 (U.S. 1776).

²⁴ For an additional discussion about deontology, see Nancy Ann Davis, *Contemporary Deontology*, in A COMPANION TO ETHICS 205–218 (Peter Singer ed., 1993).

²⁵ See generally Immanuel Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, in ETHICAL PHILOSOPHY 14–15 (James Ellington trans., Hackett Pub. Co. 1983) (1785).