

r e v i e w Community Rules

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

by Amitai Etzioni

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Reviewed by Aeon Skoble

It is ultimately pointless to review this book. Readers of this journal, for the most part individualists, are already predisposed against communitarianism, which announces itself as a reaction to individualism. But a magazine with a largely communitarian readership wouldn't run this review, which will be negative, because the reviewer is one of those blinkered individualists. A 'mainstream' magazine might run it, but that would be pointless too – and the reason indicates the main problem with this book, and with the communitarian movement in general: the book contains no new arguments against individualism, and this review's criticisms will be as completely ignored or caricatured as every other criticism of communitarianism.

Amitai Etzioni is generally regarded as a 'leader' of the communitarian movement, so his book will be taken seriously. But the problem is not so much that communitarianism continues to be taken seriously, but that communitarians do not argue honestly. Their criticisms of individualism are built around caricatures and straw men. When taken to task for this in mainstream publications, their response is: nothing. The next manifesto contains the exact same mistakes and misrepresentations. Not even Marxists are so blatantly ignorant of their critics. Most ideological movements proceed by advancing a theory, considering criticisms, and then responding to those criticisms or modifying the theory. Communitarians do none of these things.

Etzioni's most recent book is called *The New Golden Rule*, a title that simultaneously evokes both a widely-held moral intuition and a sense of 'progressive' thinking. Such evocative rhetoric, built around emotional appeals and caricatures of their ideological opponents, is a staple of communitarian theorists left and right. Instead of advancing a theory and responding to criticisms, communitarians prefer to evoke a sense of community, of neighbors sitting on their porches while children play in the yards, and then contrast this image with the spectre of the selfish individualist, who doesn't care about anyone but himself.

This contrast is rarely made explicit, partly because the sort of individualism being rejected is the invention not of liberal thinkers, but of critics of liberalism – Marx-

ists, fascists, and others. Etzioni's descriptions of the 'liberal self' are generally borrowed from such theorists as Michael Sandel and Charles Taylor, who actually reject the liberal notion of the self.

According to these theorists, liberalism views people as atomistic units, unencumbered by social ties or moral sense or fellow-feeling. Individualism is said to promote excessive selfishness, alienate people, and be destructive of the common good. Hence, the individualist paradigm must be replaced by communitarianism, which gives proper weight to shared social values.

The problem is that only anti-liberal theorists describe the liberal self this way. Etzioni typically begins passages with 'according to liberalism ...' without referring to actual liberals. The reason is undoubtedly that liberal theorists – such as John Locke, Adam Smith, J.S. Mill, Herbert Spencer, F.A. Hayek, Milton Friedman, John Rawls, Robert Nozick, Tibor Machan – all recognise that there is a social component to human well-being, and that communities are good things. They object, of course, to the coercive establishment of artificial communities, but place high value on voluntary, co-operative communities.

Etzioni complains that liberal individualists don't value co-operative activity, which is simply false. The markets praised so highly by liberals, for instance, depend on elaborate networks of co-operative activities. Co-operation and self-interest need not be seen as conflicting, of course, but that makes an easy contrast. Etzioni doesn't make any sort of argument that there actually is such a conflict, or that self-interested activities are somehow not really co-operative. Instead, Etzioni says 'some strong individualists argue that ... shared values are not necessary because people ... will come to agree on public measures that they all consider compatible with their individual formulations of the good' (p. 87). What individualist ever said anything like that? But the next paragraph details

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Sandel's criticism of this straw man.

Etzioni frets that we suffer from 'rampant selfishness' and 'excessive individualism,' but he cites as evidence only his own writing, or that of other communitarians such as Robert Bellah or Sandel. Is it really excessive individualism, though, which is responsible for religious and racial intolerance?

When he does bother to use real liberal individualists, Etzioni gets them wrong, and in suspicious ways. For example, he claims that Milton Friedman 'argued that [business] had no social obligations' (65). But Friedman's view, of course, is that corporations do have an obligation: to make profits for the shareholders, an obligation whose pursuit encourages investment and creates jobs. Corporations have other obligations also, such as respecting others' property rights. Etzioni's point is that corporations do not have the charitable 'obligations' that he thinks they should have. Similarly, he gets Mill very wrong, and in a transparent way, when he claims that Mill sees no difference 'between the coercion of the laws and the urging of the moral voice' (132).

Etzioni complains that liberals place too high a value on autonomy, which according to him leads to de-valuing the community. That just doesn't follow. There is no logical contradiction in the notion of a voluntary community, or in the notion of communities which respect individual autonomy. In any case, Etzioni also praises autonomy, and explains that his ideal society wouldn't be coercive. But a non-coercive community which respects individual autonomy sounds like liberalism, so this may be a case of wanting to have it both ways. Worse, it may suggest that the 'real' way to have a good life is to live in a community (which is probably true, but uncontroversial) and that individualism won't allow this (which is false).

In many cases, Etzioni's prescriptions are vague and almost contradictory: we shouldn't have too much autonomy, because that's bad for community; but we shouldn't enforce community plans in tyrannical ways, because that's bad for autonomy. Indeed, in his frequent use of the phrase 'voluntary social order,' he might at times be mistaken for a Hayekian. But he never addresses the tough questions about the proper relation between the individual and society. Should an individual be compelled to, say,

salute the flag, in order to promote the symbolic displays that make a strong community? Should print matter with offensive messages be banned, and if so, who determines what 'offensive' means? How can compulsory national service, which he endorses, be made compatible with individual autonomy, which he praises?

More fundamentally, what exactly is wrong with the various theories of individual rights which inform classical liberalism, and if communitarianism allows for some rights, what are the criteria for abridging them? Why is Mill's criterion (harm to others) insufficient? None of these questions is addressed with any specificity, let alone answered.

Etzioni is on the right track when he criticises the trend toward 'minting new rights,' but he fails to distinguish between rights-as-entitlements and rights-as-liberties. He is right, for example, when he explains that it is not censorship to deny federal grant money to an artist because the government doesn't approve of the artist's themes. And he acknowledges that society needs to be careful about creating new entitlements, since the resources to meet those new claims need to come from somewhere. But liberty is not newly minted, and respecting liberties doesn't consume resources. Hence Etzioni's communitarian slogan

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('Rights and Responsibilities!') is based on a fallacy.

Potentially even more disturbing is Etzioni's insistence on basing the community in 'shared values.' This is troubling in more than one way. First, it implies that majority consensus is the correct way to determine right and wrong. One requires little imagination to see the potential in this view for 'tyranny of the majority.' Of course, Etzioni is right when he says that democracy is better than 'values imposed by a minority elite' (222), but what does that prove? Furthermore, he claims that democracy isn't merely a means to an end, but ought to be valued as an end in itself (199). Yet he wants to distinguish himself from pure majoritarianism and complete relativism.

The second troubling thing about 'shared values' is the implication that communities have values or interests. Despite attempts to distance himself from thinking that communities are entities, he falls back on this notion at times, mostly when it is important to talk about the 'values

of the community,' as if this were something other than the values of members of the community. In this theory, the community seems really to exist as an entity: 'the community' is said to be a moral agent (187). There's a hint of old-fashioned fascism in Etzioni's conception of

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the community as an organic whole (try re-reading any passage substituting the word 'state' for 'community'). It is this sense of 'shared values' which leads to the policy prescriptions that Etzioni actually makes explicit: national service, social consensus on media and educational policies, and 'symbolic displays' of community solidarity.

In the book's final sentence, Etzioni clarifies: he wants 'a commitment to a moral order that is basically voluntary, and to a social order that is well balanced with socially secured autonomy' (257). Let's look at that very closely. The moral order is supposed to be voluntary – does that mean that I don't have to participate in national service? Or is it things like promise-keeping and generosity that are supposed to be voluntary? In either case, it's sufficient for the moral order to be 'basically' voluntary – but what exactly does that mean? The social order (as opposed to the moral order?) is to have 'socially secured autonomy' – does that mean the political structures of the society secure our individual autonomy (which sounds like liberal individualism)? Or does it mean that our autonomy is 'tied to' social security of some kind (which sounds like fascism)?

Etzioni has been criticised elsewhere, notably in *The Economist*, for making pronouncements which might be thought to entail fascism, but which are couched in such vague theories and mild policy suggestions as to be largely devoid of content. But the suggestion that communitarians are a harmless bunch, who want only to stop corporations from dumping sludge in the river and for families to have a greater say in school policies, overlooks a darker

side. Despite the ambiguities and inconsistencies, there is a coherent theme lurking in this book, and in the works of Sandel and Bellah: that society is worse off for allowing individuals to be self-determining, because they may act in ways which undermine the common good.

That raises an important question: is it individualism which undermines the common good? Recent trends towards denial of personal responsibility, which Etzioni rightly bemoans, are more sensibly attributable to an anti-individualist philosophy which holds that a person's actions are the product not of individual choice, but of social circumstances. Individualist theorists are actually more likely than others to emphasise personal responsibility.

Perhaps we could better understand the common good in terms of the good of the individuals who make up the community. In arguing that corporations should respect the rights of their workers and their neighbors, for example, individualism seems a theory to appeal to, rather than to blame. And a theory which holds that everything belongs to everyone is actually more conducive to, say, dumping sludge in the lake, than a theory that upholds robust property rights. Finally, a theory privileging the community over the 'selfish' or 'atomistic' individual is more conducive to the racial and religious intolerance Etzioni bemoans than a theory that privileges the individual.

One also wonders: which notion of 'the common good' does Etzioni think is undermined by individualism? It's safe to say that individualism does undermine at least some versions of the 'common good' (for instance, that of National Socialism). But that's precisely why those versions are unacceptable. Etzioni more likely has in mind the shared 'core values' that emerge from a consensus. But he needs a much more persuasive argument to show what those values are, where they come from, and how an individual pursuing happiness without violating anyone else's right to do the same would undermine those values.

Will these criticisms lead communitarians to rethink some of their premises, or reformulate some of their arguments? Will communitarians read more about classical liberalism and explore its nuances? Or will they continue to advance an anti-liberal agenda, and caricature or ignore their critics? Only Etzioni can say. *Policy*