For a Soft Moral Culture
by Amitai Etzioni

“Governments and markets address instrumental needs; communities reformulate a shared moral culture.”

Americans aspire to a society that is not merely civil but also good. A good society is one in which people treat one another as ends in themselves and not merely as instruments, a society in which each person is shown full respect and dignity rather than being used and manipulated. It is a social world in which people treat one another as members of a community — a much extended family — rather than only as employees, traders, consumers, or even fellow citizens.

Several core values that characterize a good society can be directly derived from its definition. On the face of it, child abuse, spousal abuse, violent crime in general and, of course, civil and international war offend the first principle of treating people as ends. (Hence, our love of peace.) For the same reason, violating individual autonomy, unless there are compelling public reasons, is incompatible with treating people as ends. This is the ultimate foundation of our commitment to liberty.

The ethical tenet that we should treat people as ends rather than only as means is far from novel, but this hardly makes it less compelling. Less widely accepted is the very significant sociological observation that it is in communities, not in the realm of the state nor the market, that this tenet is best realized. Hence, policies that undermine community distance the good society.

The good society balances the state, the market, and the community. Much has already been made of the fact that the best way to proceed is to view government as neither the problem nor the solution but as one partner of the good society. Similarly,
the good society views the market not as a source of all that is either good or evil but as a powerful engine that must be accorded sufficient space to do its work while also being carefully guarded.

And the government and the private sector tend to focus on our instrumental needs. The community focuses on the social and moral needs. Hence, moving toward a good society requires that these three sectors work together and keep each other in check. From this viewpoint, the question of whether we ought to have a free market is just as off the mark as the question of whether we should have a big government or — as Marx envisioned — a community without either. All are needed, but only in good measure.

Although the three partners differ in their views as to what their respective roles are and ought to be, it is essential for a good society that these three sectors seek to cooperate with and contain one another. Each partner can best help contain the other two, ensuring that none usurps the missions best accomplished by the other two and, in the process, maintaining the three-way balance that is at the essence of the good society.

The centrist way, followed here, has been depicted in negative terms — in terms of that which it is not. It has been characterized as a road neither paved by statist socialism nor undergirded by the neoliberalism of the free market. (Or even more succinctly, it tilts neither to the right nor to the left.) This essay attempts to provide the centrist way with a positive and normative characterization as a public philosophy that both provides principles and points to public policy implications. Above all, it suggests changes people will have to introduce into their institutions and ways of conduct.

We need a clearer vision of where the centrist way leads or in which direction we ought to pave it. Specific policies are welcome; technical details can be fascinating; there is room for debate about specific modifications required by this or that public program or legal structure. However, most people are not (nor do they seek to become) policy wonks or technocrats. Most yearn for an overarching picture of what we are trying to achieve, one that provides a framework for placing specific ideas, assessing specific past accomplishments, and planning for the future. We seek vision that inspires, compels, and gives meaning to our endeavors and sacrifices, to life.

Communitarians, who stress the importance of community, often face the charge that community is a vague and elusive concept. (Note that other widely used concepts, such as class, elites, and even rationality, also resist precise definition.) Communities are based on two foundations. First, communities provide affective bonds that turn groups of people into social groups resembling extended families. Second, they transmit a shared moral culture from generation to generation, as well as constantly reformulating this moral framework over time. In effect, the presence of groupwide affective bonds and a shared moral culture is what defines and
differentiates communities.

For those who see only two sectors, it is natural to assume or argue that if the government does something poorly, the private sector will do it well; if there are "market failures," the government can fix them. The fact is that there are hundreds of thousands of not-for-profits, voluntary associations, and other community-based organizations that often provide the best social services and cultural centers. Many of our best universities, hospitals, museums, orchestras, and social work agencies are neither public (governmental) nor private (profit making) but community-based.

Communitarians have been challenged for viewing communities as a major partner of the good society; communities, critics point out, can turn oppressive and nasty. But so, most assuredly, can states and markets. The implicit methodology of the critics is to compare real social entities to unrealistically envisioned images of faultless places. Communities should be compared to states and to markets, all as they exist today. Such a comparison will lead to the conclusion that underlies this endeavor: each of the three partners has its own strengths and weaknesses. Each is best suited for some societal roles and not others. And — if society's work is properly divided among them — they can complement one another. Prodded by a free and vigilant press and an informed and active public, all three can be improved but hardly perfected.

Many communities can discharge many social missions very effectively. Their actions cost the public little, and they can closely tailor their services to recipients because they know their members personally. Communities can play a major role in providing preventive and acute health care, reducing the need for publicly funded social services as divergent as child care, grief counseling, professional drug- and alcohol-abuse treatment, and law enforcement. For all these reasons, cultivating communities where they exist, and helping them form where they have been lost, is essential for the future provision of much social good and should be a major priority of future progress.

Although all members of every community ought to be expected to contribute to the common good above and beyond that of their immediate communities, they should be allowed, indeed encouraged, to provide "extras" for their own communities. Communities should also be free to levy fees, dues, or taxes above and beyond those levied by the state. Parents should...
be welcomed when they contribute services, money, and assets to their children's schools rather than being expected to place all contributions into an anonymous pot to benefit all schools in a city or state. Ethically, it is asking too much heroism to expect people to be willing to do for one and all as much as they are willing to do for those close to them. And limiting contributions to "universal" ones, to those provided to all, is incompatible with a society that views communities as essential and constitutive social entities. The fact that members of the community will have to work out their priorities, in what might sometimes be a difficult process of give-and-take, is not a defect but a merit of this approach.

In the 1950s, American society had a strong and clear set of social values, but these were somewhat authoritarian, unfair to women, and discriminatory toward minorities. These values were roundly attacked by the civil rights movement, the counterculture, and the women's rights movement, among others. Although these movements opened America's eyes to the negative practices of its own society, these attacks caused a moral vacuum, typified by unbounded relativism, situational ethics, and excessive individualism. Liberals were reluctant to step in to fill the void and to help evolve a new moral culture. Social conservatives, especially the religious right, have viewed a return to traditional morality as the key to national salvation. They seek to rely on the state to enforce good behavior. Thus they desire to ban divorce, mandate prayer in public schools, roll back the gains of gays and women, outlaw abortion, and require the teaching of creationism.

The great and growing American center has become increasingly uncomfortable with these ultraconservative, theocratic positions. During the 1990s, the religious right had lost a great deal of its political clout. But the moral vacuum it sought to fill has continued to gnaw at us. In response, a group of new communitarian thinkers (for whom I sometimes speak) seeks to provide a different approach to moral issues by drawing new, shared moral understandings, drawn from moral dialogues, rather than by relying on hierarchical dictates. The approach emphasizes convincing people to change their ways rather than enacting coercive laws to force them to do so. To put it more bluntly: We can no longer shy away from addressing the issues the right wing and the social conservatives have raised, but we ought to address them in a rather different manner than they advocate.

When we consider the current and prospective importance of communities, we are often inclined to focus more on the interpersonal bonding and mutuality they provide than on their role in formulating
and fostering moral culture. However, both elements of community have an important role fulfilling important social missions. True, community bonding is a major source for satisfying a profound human need for affective relationships with others. But in addition, the community's moral culture maintains social order, without which a good society is inconceivable, and it does so with minimal state intervention in social behavior.

There are some forms of behavior that a good society considers anathema and must seek to curb (e.g., damaging the environment, domestic violence, child abuse and neglect). It is a community's moral culture that helps to curb such behaviors. The community's ability to draw on subtle and informal social regulating processes, such as approbation and censure, is much more compatible with ends-based relations than is relying on the coercive powers of the state.

There are scores upon scores of studies with findings of the following kind. They highlight the effects of communal bonds and their merit in curbing antisocial behavior:

- Volunteer patrols called Orange Hats chased drug dealers out of their neighborhood in Washington, D.C. In the process, members of the community also became closer to one another. And when these drug dealers moved to other communities, they faced a similar fate, which disrupted their markets.
- In the county of Tillamook, Oregon, community efforts resulting from the collaboration of different groups, including religious and liberal organizations, led to a decrease in teen pregnancy rates from twenty-four pregnancies per thousand girls age ten to seventeen in 1990 to seven per thousand in 1994.

- Crime of every kind, violent and nonviolent, is much higher in urban America than in small towns and villages. For instance, violent crime (which includes murder, rape, robbery, and aggravated assault) takes place at a rate of 1,287 annual offenses per 100,000 inhabitants in cities of 1 million and over, while in cities of 10,000 and under, the violent crime rate is 397. Even rape—a crime with one of the smallest differentials—still takes place at a rate of 28 per 100,000 inhabitants in towns of less than 10,000, as compared to 37 for cities with a million or more.

Centrist governments do best when they resist the rush to legislate good behavior. When there is a valid need to modify behavior (say, to encourage saving water during a drought), the state should realize that relying on informal, community-based processes (members chiding each other and appreciating certain forms of conduct) is preferable to relying on the law. Legislation numbs the moral conscience.
moral conscience. When legislation is introduced in places where a moral culture does exist, the result is often to diminish the moral voices of the community.

We have also learned from government attempts to suppress divorce and alcohol consumption that such policies tend to fail. One should have faith in faith. The shortest line leading to "good" conduct, whatever one considers such conduct to be, is

convincing people of the merits of the moral claims we lay on them. To provide but one example of where the suggested communitarian principle should be applied: some of the 20 states that are trying to shore up marriages by making divorce more difficult should instead consider relying on moral dialogues, which would lead the community to form a culture and conditions supportive to families. Law enforcement should be the last resort and not the first line of defense.

Even though the moral cultures of communities make significant contributions to good societies, community-based morality does need to be judged. We cannot assume that the values around which communities form will necessarily meet whatever moral criteria we might bring to bear when assessing the moral standing of these values. At first blush, values may seem good per se, and some do use the term this way. However, there are errant values — for instance, the beliefs held by anarchists — as well as values that we judge to meet our criteria for goodness, for virtue. Where can one find such criteria?

One way to proceed is to assess the community's moral culture drawing on shared societal values that are ensconced in the basic laws or in the Constitution. This is especially true when it comes to individual rights that no community should be free to violate. That is, communities, just like each of the other elements that contribute to a good society, must be contained. Because communities have oppressed individuals and minorities, particularly in earlier ages, it is the role of the state to protect the individual rights of all community members, as well as those of outsiders present within the communities' confines. Thus, no community should be allowed to violate anyone's right to free speech, right to assembly, or any other constitutional right. Any notion that communities can be relied on as the sole or final arbitrator of morality need only look at those twentieth-century southern communities that reached a consensus on lynching people on the basis of race.

Although the question of where to draw
specific community restrictions is open to
discussion, in principle, no community can
be relied on fully to determine right and
Moral dialogue makes it difficult to govern.

wrong. Should immigrant communities
with traditions of arranged marriages be
allowed to continue this practice in cases
in which consent is dubious? Should fe-
male circumcision or child labor be toler-
ated? These are examples of the kind of
questions over which communities should
not have the final say, as they concern
basic rights. In a good society, the rules
that contain communities may be further
extended, but the basic principle is the
same: unfettered communities are no bet-
ter than unfettered markets or states. To
reiterate: at the core of a good society is a
balance achieved by mutual containment,
and the community is not exempted.

A good society combines respect for in-
dividual rights with the expectation that
members will live up to their own respon-
sibilities to those near and dear to them as
well as to the community at large. One of
the greatest achievements of the communitarian has been curbing the lan-
guage of rights, some of which had turned
every want and interest into a legal en-
titlement and fostered unnecessary liti-
giousness. “Rights talk,” which led to a
disregard of social responsibility, was
dominant in the 1980s, the days of ram-
pant individualism. By now it has been
largely replaced by a wide recognition that
both individual rights and social responsi-
bilities must be respected.

We cannot emphasize enough the core
tenet of the good society: that people must
assume responsibility for others. No one is
exempt from this expectation although, of
course, individuals vary greatly in the con-
tributions they can make. In considering
this matter, a mental experiment may help.
Consider a paraplegic who has lost the use
of his limbs and is permanently institutional-
ized. He uses a small stick in his mouth
to turn the pages of a book. Should we
provide him with a nurse’s aide to turn the
pages, or should we expect him to take
that much responsibility for his own well-
being? In order both to respect the person’s
dignity and to remain in line with the ex-
pectation that everyone should do as much
for the common good as he or she can, we
would expect the paraplegic to turn the
pages himself (assuming he can do so with-
out undue effort). If assuming responsibil-
ity to the best of one’s abilities applies un-
der these circumstances, surely no one is
exempt from contributing to the common
good in line with his or her ability.

Accordingly, high school students should
be encouraged to do community service as
which both partners have the same rights and responsibilities, without condemning other forms of family. The point is not that peer marriages are necessarily the best family structure but that there are social and moral options between rigidly sticking to tradition (as parts of the religious right demand) and asserting that anything goes (as some hold).

Although the moral culture of a given community or community of communities is in part handed down from generation to generation, it is by no means fixed or "traditional." On the contrary, community morality is continually recast in line with new social needs, demands, insights, and above all, moral claims. This recasting occurs through a process of special importance to the good society: moral dialogues. Moral dialogues are composed of a large number of hours spent over meals, at bars, in car pools, at work, and in the media (e.g., call-in shows) on one "hot" moral issue. Local communities, whole national societies, and sometimes even people in many nations are engaged in extensive dialogues about one or more acute specific moral issues. These include such rather general subjects as our moral duty toward the environment, women's rights and sexual discrimination, and relatively more specific issues such as gay marriage, putting a child on trial as an adult, or DNA testing of a whole village to find a suspect (as was done in Britain): Usually only one or two topics are

People must assume responsibility for others.
the subject of intensive moral dialogue at any time. Anyone can try to initiate a moral dialogue, from the President to a local poet, from a media personality to a group of protesters. However, it is the public at large that decides which few of the many thousands of attempts to initiate a moral dialogue win an audience.

Despite claims to the contrary, the media— which serve as important venues for moral dialogues —control neither the agenda nor the outcome, although they of course influence both. This is in part because the media themselves are not of one mind and, in part because the public is much less susceptible to brainwashing than has often been assumed. To test this observation, analyze any moral dialogue —for instance, about the death penalty. By and large, the major media are much more opposed to the death penalty than the majority of the public, but the public is not swayed.

Moral dialogues are largely not about facts; rather, they are about values. These are dialogues among citizens rather than among experts. This does not mean that there is no room for factual arguments or that these have no effect. The arguments, though, are for the most part not empirical but ethical in nature. Review, for instance, the arguments about whether or not we should have bombed Serbia during the Kosovo war, or whether we should allow gay marriage. The subject of moral dialogues is moral cultures, and it is these that such dialogues seek to reformulate.

When a community is engaged in a dialogue on what is right, the discussion often seems disorderly, meandering, and endless. However, it often does lead to a recasting of that community's moral culture —of what the community appreciates or censures —and to new shared moral understandings.

Most important, people often modify their conduct in the process, without changes in public policy, law, or policing. Indeed, there may be no other way to change the behavior of a large number of people without using a large amount of force or incurring huge economic costs. For example, in the 1950s most communities had no sense of a moral obligation toward the environment. A profound moral dialogue that developed in the 1960s led not merely to a new shared moral sense of our duty to Mother Earth (although communities continue to differ on what exactly that entails) but also to a fair amount of changed behavior, such as voluntary recycling and conservation of energy. In short, if a community needs to change its social policies in a significant way, such changes are best preceded (as far as public policies are
concerned) and largely generated (as far as changes in personal and social conduct are conceived) by moral dialogues.

One should grant that involving the public in a moral dialogue about a major change in public policy, especially those that concern moral and social issues, makes it more difficult to govern. These dialogues consume time and do not necessarily end up where government may wish to go. But at the same time, there is no question that without such dialogues it is not possible to achieve profound encompassing changes in the way a society conducts itself in moral and social matters. In short, moral dialogues are the most important engine of significant change in a society aspiring to be good.

Although the state can and should be slimmed down, there are a number of tasks that must remain within its domain. During the administrations of Ronald Reagan, George Bush, and Bill Clinton, the market was given evermore rein and public controls were scaled back; now there are some signs that the market has overreached itself and to some extent needs to be curbed. However, to help sustain the three-way partnership, the government needs to do more to foster communities where they exist and to prime their development where they have failed. And it should take greater pains to ensure that it does not contribute to the ossification of communities by preempting their role. It has been fashionable to urge government agencies to treat citizens as consumers, as if the agencies were market oriented. But treating citizens as citizens—as people who care about the work of the agencies whether or not they personally benefit—is more compatible with the communitarian approach than viewing them merely as clients.

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