

# The New Golden Rule

by Amitai Etzioni

An Executive Book Summary by Robin Alison Mueller



Amitai Etzioni

*The New Golden Rule* (1996). New York: Basic Books.

## Contents:

- Purpose and Overview: p. 1
- What is a Good Society?: p. 2
- Order and Autonomy: p. 3
- Sharing Core Values and the Moral Voice: p. 4
- Values, Human Nature and the Moral Infrastructure: p. 5
- Practical Applications and Critical Reflections: p. 6

## *The New Golden Rule: Purpose*

Etzioni's writing in *The New Golden Rule* is guided by several related purposes. However, his primary focus lies in challenging the reader to critically assess the moral status of his or her own, and other, societies. In addition, Etzioni indirectly charges the reader with the task of taking steps to re-generate North America's moral voice, and America's status as a "good society".

In the process of addressing this purpose, Etzioni strives to answer the following questions:

- (1) How can a society balance its members' needs for both order and autonomy?
- (2) What exactly is a "good society", or a "good community"?
- (3) Where do the core values of a community come from, and how can these values be developed and maintained?
- (4) What is a "moral voice"? How does a community develop and maintain a distinctive moral voice?

Business Name

Primary Business Address  
Your Address Line 2  
Your Address Line 3  
Your Address Line 4

Phone: 855-555-5555  
Fax: 855-555-5555  
Email: info@microoff.com

## *The New Golden Rule: Overview*

*The New Golden Rule* is a challenging read in which Amitai Etzioni utilizes data from sociological, psychological, political, historical, and legal traditions in order to examine the following concepts: good societies, communitarian dynamics, and morality in society. Etzioni cites communitarianism as the most suitable social philosophy for building (or regenerating) a "good society". Current and past events are used to illustrate Etzioni's ideas about order, autonomy, core values, the "moral voice", human nature, and the development of societies in a communitarian context.

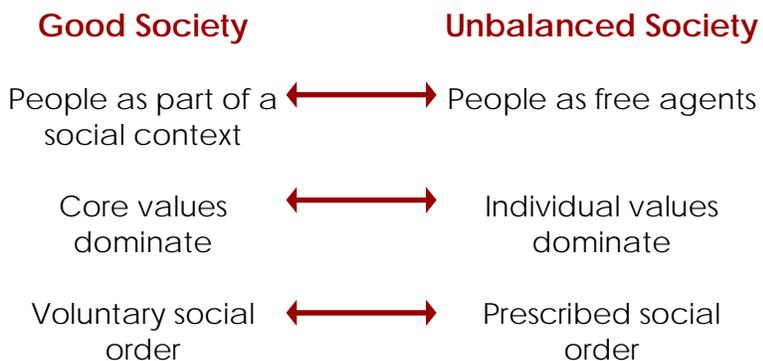
A good society can be described as “one that nourishes both social virtues and individual rights” (p. 4).



“The communitarian paradigm... recognizes the need to nourish social attachments as part of the effort to maintain social order while ensuring that such attachments will not suppress all autonomous expressions” (p. 27).

## *What is a Good Society?*

The debate regarding what constitutes a good society has been championed primarily by individualists (who treat individuality as the most important social good) and social conservatives (who treat social order as the most important social good). Etzioni suggests communitarianism (which strikes a balance between order and autonomy) as an alternative social philosophy that would better support the elements of a good society.



## *In a Good Society...*

- (1) A social order exists that is in line with the moral commitment of its members.
- (2) The maintenance of social order relies primarily on normative means such as education, leadership, moral dialogue, and moral voices.
- (3) The members of the society share a commitment to a set of core values, and abide by those values most of the time.
- (4) Individualism is not favored over the social good (and vice versa); these two social virtues are maintained in a careful equilibrium.

“For individualists the cornerstone of a good society is the freestanding person;



for social conservatives, it is a pervasive set of social virtues embodied in the society or state.



For communitarians, it suffices as a first approximation to argue that a good society requires a balance between autonomy and order” (p.28).



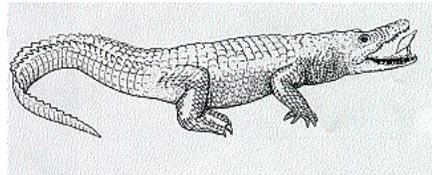
## Order and Autonomy

Order and autonomy may, at first, appear to be conflicting virtues.

**United States of America** — Autonomous Society

**Japan** — Ordered Society

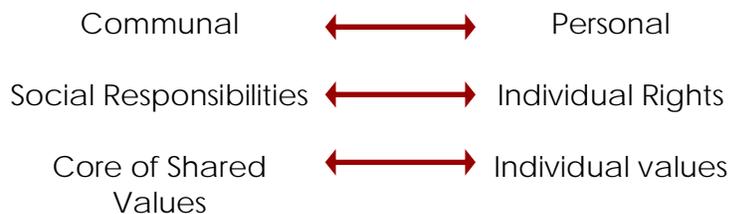
**“Good Society”** — Inverted Symbiosis: a stable balance between order and autonomy



Order and autonomy have a unique relationship. At certain levels, they can maintain a symbiotic relationship, where both values enrich one another. However, if “either element intensifies beyond a given level, it begins to diminish the other: the same two formations become antagonistic” (p. 36). Etzioni calls this relationship *inverted symbiosis*.



**Balance**



Communitarians “limit the virtues the society favors to a set of core values while legitimizing differences on other normative matters” (p. 17).



“The term ‘moral voice’ is particularly appropriate because people ‘hear’ it. Thus, when a person who affirms a value is tempted to ignore it (for example, to renege on a commitment to a friend), he or she hears a voice that urges him or her to do what is right” (p. 120).

## Sharing Core Values

### Sources of Values

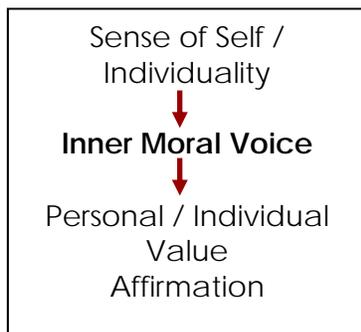
“In a communitarian society... values are handed down from generation to generation rather than invented or negotiated” (p. 93). The community’s shared values are what causes individuals to believe that they belong together in a community. A community provides individuals with an historical and cultural context.

The core values of a community defy boundaries between public and private life; behavior that violates core values is immoral whether it happens in public or in private. Individuals in a community may have conflicting moral claims, but these individuals are generally united by over-arching values.



## The Moral Voice

Although they are an integral part of a good society, values on their own are not enough. Individuals and the communities they belong to encourage each other to adhere to shared values through individual and community moral voices.





“Internalization refers to the process through which children incorporate values into their evolving inner self, until these values become their own...” (p. 167).

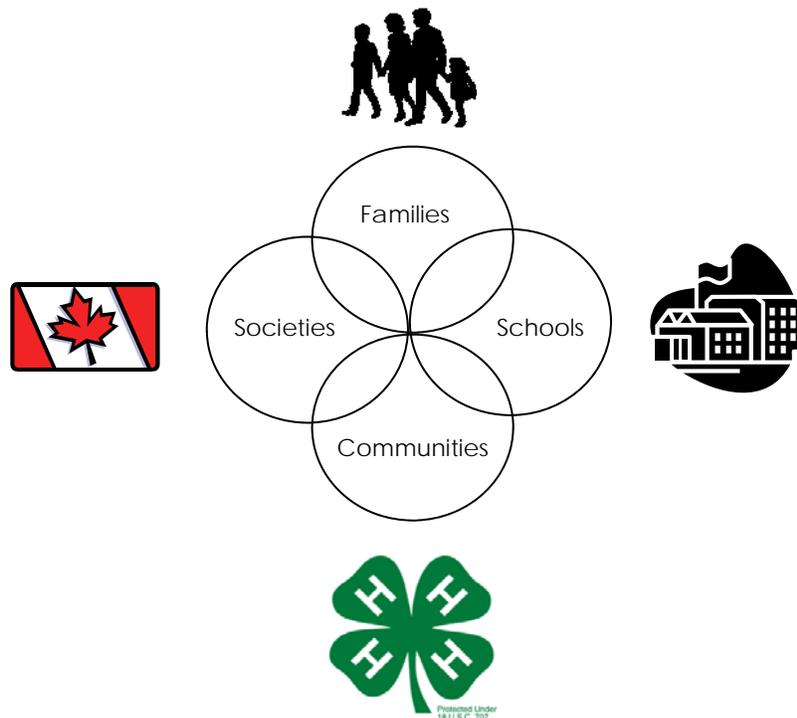
The moral infrastructure is a social formation that “is dedicated to fostering internalization and reinforcement via the moral voice” (p. 176).

## Values and Human Nature

The communitarian philosophy holds a dynamic or developmental view of human nature. According to this view, individuals are born without an innate value system (they are basically “savage”). The extent of a person’s virtue, then, relies on the following conditions:

- (1) **Internalization:** making values an integral part of the self;
- (2) **Social Formations:** the reinforcement of a moral infrastructure (see below);
- (3) **Reducing the Contradiction Between Order and Autonomy:** “making the main social formation more responsive to human nature” (p. 166).

## The Moral Infrastructure



“There is no way for a school to avoid affecting the moral values of its pupils. Much teaching material cannot be morally cleansed, made neutral, even if this were desired... There is no values-free education” (p. 184).



### Critical Questions:

How can **individuals** become empowered to participate in the regeneration of community morals and values?

How can educators become involved in the moral development of students in a way that is respectful of community values?

## Practical Applications

Etzioni offers many suggestions about how we can begin to regenerate the moral status of our communities. Many of these practical applications deal primarily with what can be done at a societal level. For example, Etzioni’s suggestions include: changes in government policy and law implementation; increases in government funding to civic groups; protection of public spaces; community policing; alternative community design; and providing parents and families with greater resources.

Some particularly useful applications are suggested in the context of education. Etzioni states that schools are (and should actively be) engaged in moral education, and provides the following suggestions for schools with respect to the moral development of students:

- School administrators and teachers can check periodically to ensure that the educational messages they send support self-discipline and empathy;
- Schools should focus on “values shared by the community rather than on those that divide it” (p. 186);
- Schools should provide “core curriculum” that focuses on shared values in addition to diversity.

## Critical Reflections

Etzioni presents a comprehensive overview of the moral disintegration that has occurred in North American society, and offers an impressive array of theoretical solutions to the problems that exist with regard to the regeneration of moral societies. Etzioni deals frankly with the obstacles that individuals and societies will face in the course of this endeavor. However, theory dominates this book, and occasionally the reader leaves wondering if practical application is really possible. Missing from this text are the “small steps”, or the small but significant ways we can begin to positively effect the moral status of society within the context of our own personal lives.