Amitai Etzioni: Communitarian Centrist and Principled Pluralist

Paul Schumaker, University of Kansas

During his 60 year career at Columbia and George Washington Universities, Amitai Etzioni has made many contributions to interdisciplinary understandings of social movements, become a respected public intellectual addressing many American and trans-national contemporary issues, and been a founder and leader of the Commununitarian Network.

Two core ideas define his communitarian perspective. First, Etzioni has maintained that humans are social beings who are and should be deeply embedded in community organizations and social structures. Second, he has claimed that the effectiveness and stability of community life depends on members having widely-shared emotions about what "ought to be," adhering to public virtues, and pursuing the common good. Communitarians have often positioned themselves as critics of "classical neoliberalism" – an alternative perspective that emphasizes self-interested individualism and the capacity of competition to generate widespread prosperity. However, Etzioni (1988) does not reject liberal thought in its entirely but rather sees communitarian ideas as important corrections when individuals and communities pursue liberal goals too extensively. His brand of communitarianism does not require homogeneous communities where citizens must hold all values in common or abandon the individual rights emphasized by liberals. As indicated in the case study that Etzioni examines toward the end of the following paper, good communities can and should accept individual rights such as that to

same-sex marriage, as long as there is widespread agreement in the community upholding such a right.

Given the diversity of values that might predominate in the cultures of various communities, the important question is how broad agreement about guiding norms is achieved and known. Traditional or "right" communitarians like Alastair MacIntyre (1980) thought that traditional authorities and institutions provided such norms, but more moderate or "centrist" communitarians like Etzioni believe that communities can abandon traditional values and emphasize new ones that better address emerging social problems and issues. In "Moral Dialogues," Etzioni provides a "matrix" or framework for studying the emergence of new norms and values. This framework suggests that the process of reforming community cultures does not demand majority, let alone unanimous, support for a new norm like the legitimacy of same-sex marriage; it only maintains that many "megalogues" (or local conversations within families, neighborhoods, workplaces, churches, etc.) result in extensive acceptance among the informed public of there being good reasons for emerging norms. He also claims that these justifications should be rooted in "core values," such as personal freedom and equal treatment.

In this example, freedom and equality are central to liberalism, but perhaps other widely accepted norms that are stressed by traditionalists – such as the sanctity of conventional families and the importance of raising children - are also relevant. Which competing values should and will prevail on an issue will be affected by how social structures distribute power among those who emphasize divergent values. Etzioni thus admits that his framework is incomplete because it treats social structures and power as exogenous, but he clearly sees the expansion of this framework to include such factors as necessary in future research on changes in morality.

As a public intellectual, Etzioni has drawn on the analytical framework provided here to discuss many social issues beyond same-sex marriage, including civil rights, environmental policy, and immigration policy. In these cases, his analyses normally result in recommendations that are "moderate," not because they compromise competing positions but because they seek to maximize the overall attainment of competing values. As an example, Etzioni suggests below that immigration policy should emphasize "diversity within unity," that immigrants should not be expected to renounce their identities to their country of origin but need only affirm primary loyalty to their new country, an orientation intended to reconcile the values of both those seeking to restrict immigration and those wanting to extend citizenship to undocumented residents.

In this and other cases, Etzioni doubts that market processes (with their emphasis on freedom) or states (with their capacity to impose regulations that uphold other particular values) will by themselves maximize competing values. Voluntary actions by individuals and civic groups within the community play important roles in maximizing values. The central finding of Etzioni's first major work, *Complex Organizations* (1961) - that the internalization of normative principles is more effective than the material inducements of market transactions or the coercive power of states for achieving compliance with actions that maximize values – has guided many of Etzioni's policy prescriptions and is again emphasized in "Moral Dialogues." When people are embedded in civil society, they will usually act in ways that further core values like respecting equal rights, welcoming strangers, and protecting the environment, even if market inducements and state power pull in opposite directions.

Etzioni's emphases on voluntary action, civil society, and reconciliation of competing values are of course compatible with pluralism, but Etzioni has not associated his work with pluralism or been widely recognized as a pluralist. When Etzioni was launching his career,

"orthodox pluralism" was approaching paradigmatic status, but was criticized for ignoring moral

values and overemphasizing the existence and benevolence of equilibrium among the interests

and power of various groups that competed under consensual "rules of the game" (Lowi, 1979).

Perhaps Etzioni failed to link his work to such a pluralism because it provided little room for

moral dialogues. But pluralism has evolved in ways that now stress the role and reconciliation of

competing moral principles. John Rawls (2005) emphasized the importance of an "overlapping

consensus" on values in a pluralist society characterized by conflicting "comprehensive moral

doctrines." Etzioni's "shared moral understandings" on overarching "core values" is analogous

to Rawls' overlapping consensus; both provide the justifications that can change moral

orientations and behavior on social issues and that yield social stability and political legitimacy.

Thus, Etzioni's contributions to the new principled pluralism, as well as to communitarianism,

are evident.[1] In an era when moral thinking and consensus are thought to be vanishing, greater

appreciation of both communitarian centrism and principled pluralism is needed and can be

furthered by academics giving greater attention to the analytical framework that Etzioni provides

below.

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[1] Readers interested in better understanding principled pluralism and the connections

between liberalism, communitarianism, and pluralism can consult Eisenberg (1995), and

Schumaker (2013 and 2016).

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