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# Moral Dialogues *in public debates*

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By **Amitai Etzioni**

Communitarians argue that democratic societies require a core of shared values. To be legitimate, a democracy must be something more than a procedure that allows individuals with different values to work out shared policies. The question is, what is the most effective way for communities collectively to formulate shared values?<sup>1</sup>

Current thinking on the ways in which communities determine their courses is deeply influenced by the liberal way of thinking. Liberal thought maintains that, typically, the way people ought to proceed to work out policies is for them to assemble and dispassionately discuss the facts of the situation, explore their logical implications, and examine the alternative responses that might be undertaken. They then choose the one that is the most appropriate as determined on the basis of factual evidence and logical conclusions. This process is often referred to as one of *deliberation*, and it is commonly exemplified by the image of a New England town meeting, or the ancient Greek polis.



Deliberation and civility (and democracy) are often closely associated. A civil society is one that deals with its problems in a deliberative manner. According to James Kuklinski and his associates, “In a democratic society, reasonable decisions are preferable to unreasonable ones; considered thought leads to the former, emotions to the latter; therefore deliberation is

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preferable to visceral reaction as a basis for democratic decision making.”<sup>2</sup>

Deliberations have also been contrasted with an irrational and harmful, if not dangerous, way of attempting to chart a new course. As James Q. Wilson writes, “The belief in deliberation is implied not only by the argument for an extended republic but also by the contrast [James] Madison draws between opinions and passion, since opinion implies a belief amenable to reason whereas passion implies a disposition beyond reason’s reach.”<sup>3</sup>

Deliberations are often contrasted with culture wars, a term used to suggest that the people are profoundly divided in their commitments to basic values, and that segments of the public are confronting one another in an unproductive manner instead of dealing with the issues at hand.<sup>4</sup> In a culture war two or more groups of members of the same community or society confront each other in a highly charged way, demonizing one another and turning differences into total opposition.<sup>5</sup> Such culture wars tend to make reaching a shared course more difficult, and they often invite violence (from the bombing of abortion clinics to outright civil war). James Hunter writes that “Culture wars always precede shooting wars.... Indeed, the last time this country “debated” the issues of human life, personhood, liberty, and the rights of citizenship all together, the result was the bloodiest war ever to take place on this continent, the Civil War.”<sup>6</sup>

Given such a contrast between deliberations and culture wars, reason and passion, amicable resolutions versus emotional deadlock (or war), it stands to reason that many social scientists strongly favor the deliberative model. They argue that even though deliberations of a relatively pure kind are almost impossible to achieve, or even to approximate under most circumstances, they are still normatively superior to culture wars, and they provide a positive normative model to which we ought to aspire even if it is not attainable.

But is there a third model that is more realistic than deliberations *and* much more morally compelling than culture wars? An examination of the actual processes of sorting out values that take place in well-functioning societies shows that rather



different processes are, indeed, taking place which neither qualify as rational deliberations nor constitute culture wars,<sup>7</sup> and that, furthermore, these “other” processes, or “moral dialogues,” are fully legitimate. In moral dialogues, the participants combine working out normative differences among themselves, in a non-confrontational manner, with a limited but not insignificant use of facts and logic, of rational reasoning.

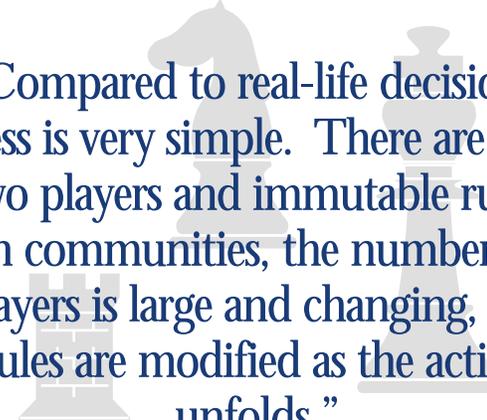
There are at least two powerful reasons the purely deliberative model needs to be replaced with one that includes moral dialogues. First, in charting a shared communal course, participants are not two-legged computers, stuffed with information and analytical software; they are members of the community who must earn a living, attend to their children, and so on. Unlike privileged males in ancient Athens, these citizens must study matters of public policy in their rather limited spare time. Even if each deliberant came equipped with a mind full of information and statistical techniques and a super computer, he or she still would not be able rationally to complete the analysis of the kind of issues typically faced—a problem widely recognized by the champions of artificial intelligence, not to mention of the human kind.

It is often pointed out that it is impossible to decide in a chess game what the optimal (most rational) move is because the choices are too numerous. But compared to real-life decisions, chess is very simple. In chess, there are only two players and immutable rules. All the necessary information is right in front of the actors, power relations among the pieces are fixed, and the rules of engagement are fully established. In communities and societies, the number of players is large and changing, and rules are modified as the action unfolds. Information is always much more meager than what is needed, and the relative power of those involved and those affected changes frequently. As a result, participation in all decision-making must rely on much humbler processes than the rational decision-making school, at the heart of deliberation model, assumes.<sup>8</sup>

Second, and more important, the issues subject to discussion have more to do with people’s values than with matters of logic or fact. Yet the deliberation model rests on assumptions akin to those of the scientific approach. Even consideration of issues that seem technical is often deeply influenced by normative factors. For instance, the question of whether or not to put fluoride into a town’s water main brings into play values of those who oppose government “paternalism.”<sup>9</sup> The importation of tomatoes from Mexico evokes values associated with questions such as the extent to which we should absorb real or imaginary health risks for the sake of free trade and better neighbor relations. Questions concerning the best way to teach English to immigrant children raises value

questions concerning the commitment to one’s heritage versus that to one’s new nation. There seem to be few if any value-free decisions of any significance. And so most, if not all, communal conclusions require processes through which shared normative foundations can be found or at least normative differences can be narrowed.

This is not to say that when public policies are examined by communities and societies, information and reason play no role. Rather, I am pointing out that they play a much smaller role than the deliberation model assumes, and that other factors play a much larger role.



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**M**oral dialogues occur when a group of people engages in a process of sorting the values that will guide their lives. For example, in the United States, an intense dialogue is underway over the question of whether employment and college admission policies should be guided by the virtues of a color-blind (non-discriminating) society or of an affirmative action policy (to correct for past and current injustices). And there is a moral dialogue taking place over to what extent we should curtail public expenditures so as not to burden future generations with the debt we have been accumulating.

Such dialogues take place constantly in well-formed societies, and they frequently result in the formulation of a new direction for the respective societies (though sometimes only after prolonged and messy discourse). For instance, moral dialogues led in the 1960s to a shared normative understanding that legal segregation had to be abolished, and in the 1970s to the realization that, as a society, we must be much more responsible in our conduct toward the environment than we used to be.

**S**ociety-wide moral dialogues come in two basic forms. One is the piecing together of a myriad of local dialogues through organizations that have local chapters, includ-

ing numerous ethnic, religious and political associations. The other is through national media such as call-in shows, televised town meetings, and panel discussions.

Moral dialogues have their own procedures, which are distinct from those of the deliberative model. One often-used procedure in moral dialogues is to appeal to an overarching value shared by the various parties to the sorting-out process. Sociologist Robert Goodin is, in effect, using this rule when he seeks to pave the way for a community that must sort out a course between the rights of non-smokers and those of smokers.<sup>10</sup> At first, this may seem like a typical clash between two values: the rights of one group versus those of another. However, Goodin points out the *both* groups are committed to the value that one's liberty does not allow that person to violate the "space" of the other. In popular terms, my right to extend my arm stops when my fist reaches your nose. (Actually, quite a bit before that.) Goodin argues that because non-smokers, in their non-smoking, do not penetrate the smokers' space, while smokers do violate non-smokers' space in public situations, non-smoker rights should take priority. Using such arguments, American communities reached the normatively compelling shared understanding that lies at the foundation of new restrictions on smoking in numerous public spaces. (The fact that these new regulations met very little opposition shows that they were based on a thoroughly shared moral understanding, unlike Prohibition, which was largely based on the conviction of a minority that it was sinful or immoral to drink.)

While the particular way Goodin developed his argument may not be employed much, it is more often used in another form. Members of communities frequently argue that this or that measure under consideration is not compatible with a free society, a self-respecting society, or a caring people. These, as a rule, are not fact-based arguments. For instance, there is no hard evidence that if a community engages in a given measure, liberty will be seriously endangered. What the argument is really saying is that proceeding in a given manner would be incompatible with an important value the community seeks to uphold.

Another procedure is to bring a third value into play when two values diverge or clash. For instance, those who recently tried to restore the black-Jewish coalition of the 1960s in the United States argued that both groups share a commitment to liberal causes. And attempts to create an interfaith coalition relied upon a shared commitment to fight poverty, as the participants struggled to work out a joint statement.<sup>11</sup>

In effect, most of the considerations ethics bring to bear are discussions of the relative merit of various values rather than conflicts between the good and its corresponding evil. Values-talk is not composed of various people coming and declaring

their values the way some individuals state that they do not like broccoli without the need or inclination to explain their taste. Values require an accounting. And those accounts can be examined and challenged, for instance, by arguments that they are inconsistent with other values the party holds or lead to normative conclusions the party could not possibly seek, and so on. Using such arguments, members of communities convince one another, when moral dialogues are successfully advanced, to reach new shared normative understandings.

**“Using less the language of rights and more that of needs, wants, and even interests helps make dialogues more conducive to truly shared resolutions.”**

**T**o prevent values-talk from deteriorating into culture wars, rules of engagement must be applied. They basically reflect a tenet that one should act on the recognition that the conflicting parties are members of one and the same community, and so they should fight with one hand tied behind their backs rather than go at it whole-hog. This issue has been much discussed in recent years around the notion of what makes for a civil dialogue.

It is widely agreed that contesting parties should not “demonize” one another, that they should refrain from depicting the other side's values as completely negative—as they do when they are characterized as “satanic” (as in Iran) or as a betrayal of a people (as in Israel). A case in point: after the GOP won the 1994 elections in a landslide, the ebullient new Speaker of the House, Newt Gingrich, said his side was supported by “God-fearing” Americans faced by the opposition of “God-less” people. This and other such exclamations were widely regarded as a violation of a civil values-talk, and not only by Democrats. They contributed to the high negative ratings of the Speaker in subsequent public opinion polls. “The more people see and hear Mr. Gingrich, the more some seem uncomfortable with him,” wrote Michael K. Frisby in the March 9, 1995 edition of *The Wall Street Journal*. “The share of Americans holding a negative impression of him is up to 41%, compared with 27% who report positive feelings.” Gingrich used such phrases less often in the following months, bowing to the norms of values-talk.

A more dire situation occurred in Israel, where it was widely believed that the comparison of Prime Minister Rabin to

Hitler and the characterization of him as a traitor by several religious groups egged on those who assassinated him. Such verbiage has also fed the culture war between extreme religious groups and secular ones. Civility is a crucial element of moral dialogues.

**A**nother rule of values-talk is not to affront the deepest moral commitments of the other groups. The assumption must be made that each group is committed to some particular values that are especially sacrosanct to that group, and that each group has some dark moments in its history upon which members would rather not dwell. Thus, to throw into the face of a German, whenever one discusses a specific normative difference, the horror of the Holocaust, or to tell Jews that it did not happen, hinders values-talk, while refraining from doing so enhances it.

Closely related is the line drawn between one's legal right to free speech, which allows one to say most things, however offensive, and the merit of not voicing whatever offensive thoughts come to mind.<sup>12</sup> Several leading hosts of radio call-in shows have been blamed for ignoring this distinction and undermining values discourse as a result.

More generally, communitarian and Harvard law professor Mary Ann Glendon makes a strong case that using less the language of rights and more that of needs, wants, and even interests helps make dialogues more conducive to truly shared resolutions. As Glendon puts it, "In its simplest American form, the language of rights is the language of no compromise. The winner takes all and the loser has to get out of town. The conversation is over." She adds:

The most distinctive features of our American rights dialect [are] its penchant for absolute, extravagant formulations, its near-aphasia concerning responsibilities, its excessive homage to individual independence and self-sufficiency, its habitual concentration on the individual and the state at the expense of the intermediate groups of civil society, and its unapologetic insularity... each of these traits make it difficult to give voice to common sense or moral political discourse...<sup>13</sup>

I do not attempt here to develop a full list of rules of engagement, but only to illustrate that just because values-talk does not proceed by the codes of deliberation (which are surprisingly close to those of science) does not mean that it does not have a code.

Understanding the ways values-talk takes place and can be enhanced is a subject of great importance to democratic societies because such dialogue sustains one of the key elements required for the social order. It is a subject that requires much more study and is likely to intensify once the notion of relying on deliberations is set aside and the importance of values-talk as distinct from culture wars is more widely recognized. ●

#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>In preparing this article, I have relied on my book: Amitai Etzioni, *The New Golden Rule: Community and Morality in a Democratic Society* (New York: Basic Books, 1997). I am indebted to Everett Ladd for the thoughts expressed in *The Ladd Report* (New York: The Free Press, 1999).

<sup>2</sup>James Kuklinski, et. al., "The Cognitive and Affective Bases of Political Tolerance Judgments," *American Journal of Political Science* 1991, Vol. 35, No. 1, p. 1.

<sup>3</sup>James Q. Wilson, "Interests and Deliberation in the American Republic, or Why James Madison Would Have Never Received the James Madison Award," *PS: Political Science and Politics*, December 1990, p. 559.

<sup>4</sup>James Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic Books, 1991).

<sup>5</sup>James Hunter, *Before the Shooting Begins: Searching for Democracy in America's Culture War* (New York: The Free Press, 1994), p. viii. See also Deborah Tannen, *The Argument Culture* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1999).

<sup>6</sup>Hunter, pp. 4-5.

<sup>7</sup>Jane J. Mansbridge, *Beyond Adversary Democracy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983). See Chapter 5, "The Town Meeting," pp. 47-58.

<sup>8</sup>For further discussion, see Amitai Etzioni, *The Moral Dimension* (New York: The Free Press), pp. 136-150; Charles Lindholm, *The Intelligence of Democracy* (New York: The Free Press, 1965); Kenneth E. Boulding, "Review of a Strategy of Decision: Policy Evaluation and as a Social Process," *American Sociological Review* 1962, Vol. 29, pp. 930-1.

<sup>9</sup>Bette Hileman, "Fluoridation of Water," *Chemical and Engineering News* 1988, Vol. 66, No. 31, pp. 26, 27, 42.

<sup>10</sup>Robert E. Goodin, *No Smoking: The Ethical Issues* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989).

<sup>11</sup>See Michael Lerner and Cornel West, *Jews and Blacks: Let the Healing Begin* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1995).

<sup>12</sup>See William Galston, "Rights Do Not Equal Rightness," *The Responsive Community* 1991, Vol. 1, No. 4, pp. 7-8. See also Amitai Etzioni, *Spirit of Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993), pp. 192-206, especially pp. 201-4.

<sup>13</sup>Mary Ann Glendon, *Rights Talk: The Impoverishment of Political Discourse* (New York: The Free Press, 1991), pp. 9, 14.