

# Studying the Moral Voice

by Amitai Etzioni

I must confess, I have little training and experience in developing questionnaires. However, I offer these items in the hope that some of my colleagues will find a series of these kinds of questions of interest and develop them into instruments that will allow us to measure the "moral voice." The article below spells out the importance of the concept, and makes some comments about the issues raised in trying to develop an instrument to empirically study an individual's moral voice.

## A Draft Instrument

1. A blind man is confused and walks into traffic; a teenager jumps in and helps him cross safely to your side of the street. The blind man walks off, much relieved. The teenager passes by you.

**Should you say anything? If yes or no, why? If you choose to speak, what would you say? (Same questions to follow all items.)**

2. You are walking down a trail among some very old trees. A young couple is carving their initials into the bark of one of the trees.

3. You are riding home on a bus. Next to you is a person who has not washed in a very long time and his clothing emits a very foul smell. The bus is crowded; finding another seat is out of the question.

4. Walking home from the bus station you see a child whose

parents you vaguely know from the neighborhood. The child is throwing stones at a cat that is stretching itself next to the sidewalk.

5. You are shopping and see a woman you know to be in good health parking in a space reserved for the handicapped.

6. Two teenagers are hurling abuses at each other and are making threatening motions. A third teenager urges them to cool off and settle their differences in a mature, civil manner. Everyone calms down. You run into the third teenager later.

7. You see a woman leaving her dog in her car, windows rolled up all the way. The day is very hot.

8. You see two nine-year-olds, a boy and a girl, using a spray can to mark a swastika on a mail box.

9. You see a mother slap her two-year-old hard in the face just down the aisle from you in the supermarket. All the other shoppers pretend not to notice.

10. You are seated in the non-smoking area of a restaurant. The couple next to you lights up. The servers ignore the situation.

11. You give a ride to a friend who sits next to you in the front. He does not put on his seat belt. You know the friend; he does not take kindly to suggestions and tends to view them as personal affronts.

12. You run into your neighbor in the supermarket. He has a small Band Aid on his arm. "Are you all right?" you inquire, pointing to the Band Aid. He responds that he just donated blood to the community hospital.

## The Basic Concept

The single most important difference between individualists<sup>1</sup> and communitarians is their view of the acting agent. For individualists, it is a free standing person who in turn engages in forming social arrangements based on his or her preferences, needs, and interests, or on other mechanisms or arrangements of individual choice (voting, for instance). Communitarians view the main agents as groups of people (often communities, although not necessarily residential ones) and individuals that are "encumbered" by their social context. Their choices are assumed to reflect the culture or values of their community. People's choices are assumed to be deeply influenced by social forces, often in ways of which they are unaware. The last point is crucial. An individualist can readily concede that a free agent may choose to abide by norms out of self interest and rational considerations. But this assumes an awareness of external forces and a capacity to deal with them in line with one's own independent choices.

Communitarians stress that the social context runs much deeper; it influences, unbeknownst to the acting agent, what the person considers to be morally appropriate, and what he or she values.<sup>2</sup>

As a result, the social order can rely, to a significant extent, not on compensating the actors for their social efforts, or on policing them, but on "socializing" them to believe in the values the community seeks to uphold. To maintain a social order requires continued reinforcement of internalized values. Communitarians argue that it is here that the moral voice of others plays a crucial role.<sup>3</sup>

To test these concepts, the following must be considered:

1) the importance and depth of the community's culture and the influence of its members on one another; 2) the extent to which a social order can rely on the moral voice; and, 3) the effects of conflicting moral voices.



## Civility—or Incivility—in America

### Interpreting Results

In preliminary explorations of the subject, we concluded that many respondents might fear that if they spoke up they would be harmed, or might use such a fear as a reason to explain why they would not speak up when other motives are at work. The draft questions above deal with this consideration by suggesting non-threatening situations. It might be necessary, if interviews are conducted, to urge the respondents to assume that there is no danger for those who speak up.

There is reason to believe that there are systematic cultural and historical differences that affect the extent to which people are willing to raise their moral voice, for what kinds of issues, and whether they prefer to praise or criticize. Also, an important distinction exists between a firm moral voice and moralism. The latter implies that every item of behavior is scrutinized, which in turn may raise social and moral problems of its own. Quite possibly a middle range is best, that is, communities in which a significant portion of the members are willing to raise their voices on a fair number of issues, though not constantly or stridently. Note, though, that there are important cultural differences concerning the optimal level and scope of the moral voice. For instance, level and scope seem to be higher in Japan than in the United States, and lower in the US in the 1980s than in the 1890s.

A major issue that comes to mind is personal versus societal responsibility for an individual's condition in life. One would be much more likely to raise one's moral voice and chide the person if one assumes that the person chose that condition out of whim or personal indulgence. One would be much less likely to speak up, or address a rather different target, if one assumed that the cause for the person's condition was the socio-economic system, the person's upbringing, etc. Empirically, one can

investigate this issue by asking respondents about their assumptions regarding social causality and responsibility. One must, though, note that rather major issues are involved here on which social scientists themselves are divided. For example, can or should one assume that communities have *one* moral voice, or that the voice is typically divided between those who reflect the dominant culture and those who reject it.

In addition, the question of the legitimacy of the values for which the moral voice (or voices) speaks needs to be addressed. This is a surprisingly tricky wicket. Are these values morally sound if a whole community supports them? Cannot whole communities embrace values we hardly consider moral, say a Nazi community? If we grant the possibility that the values of a whole community may be amoral or worse, how do we account for the criteria that we apply in making such judgments? And are they specific to one's culture, as when we express our dismay when China jails dissidents, and when China expresses dismay at our treatment of senior Americans?<sup>4</sup>

The issues which one (or a community) is willing to address versus those one would rather avoid indicate the substance of the values of the community and their relative standing. We found, for instance, that middle class, secular individuals are relatively willing to speak up to protect the environment but are not as willing to interfere in social situations. This is, of course, going to vary a great deal from one culture to another.

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Finally, for numerous reasons, Americans seem much more inclined to praise and support than to be critical.<sup>5</sup> The results of the test will hence be deeply affected by the number of opportunities for positive response (praising someone who helps the blind or gives blood) versus the number of opportunities for negative response (most of the items listed above).

Many other issues arise, as in all such instruments. My purpose here is merely to help stimulate research along these lines. My colleagues and I would appreciate suggestions on improving the draft questionnaire as well as information about the results of similar surveys and their interpretation.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Individualists include “liberals,” laissez-faire conservatives, civil libertarians, most neo-classical economists, rational choice social scientists, champions of law and economics, among others.

<sup>2</sup>Amitai Etzioni, *The New Golden Rule: Community and Morality in a Democratic Society* (NY: Basic Books, 1997).

<sup>3</sup>See Dennis H. Wrong, *The Problem of Order: What Divides and Unites Society* (NY: The Free Press, 1994); Amitai Etzioni, *The Moral Dimension: Toward a New Economics* (NY: The Free Press, 1988).

<sup>4</sup>For additional discussion, see Chapter 8 of *The New Golden Rule*.

<sup>5</sup>See M. P. Baumgartner, *The Moral Order of a Suburb* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1988).



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