

## Comments on Amitai Etzioni, *The Common good and rights*. 14-5-2009

Margo Trappenburg

Professor Etzioni, ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you very much for inviting me to be a discussant here today. I consider myself a friend of the communitarian cause, although sometimes a critical friend. So it is an honour for me to discuss a public lecture, delivered by the founding father of the communitarian movement.

In his lecture professor Etzioni argues that there should be two sources of normativity: individual rights on the one hand and the common good on the other. A lot of political philosophy is about individual rights: a right to free speech, a right to privacy, a right to choose or reject a religion, a right to be able to use one's native language, a right to choose a marriage partner, a right to welfare, a right to education etcetera.

Professor Etzioni rightly points out that much less attention has been paid to the notion of 'the common good' and his lecture (as well many of his publications) are an attempt to rectify that. In my reaction I would like to ask a couple of questions about the nature of the common good, that might help us a bit further in exploring that other source of normativity.

Professor Etzioni discusses some examples of the common good: basic research, national security, public health and environmental protection. It seems to me that the liberal-individualist bias in philosophy has made communitarians choose examples in which the common good is put opposite to individual rights.

- You can live your own life and do as you please, or you can be a volunteer in medical scientific research, and dedicate part of your time and energy to scientific progress, and the health of future generations.
- You can spend your life in libraries and universities, as any ordinary academic, but you also join the army and defend your country against enemies and terrorists.

- You can fly to a sunny holiday spot, or you can go camping in Drenthe and remember that you live in a below sea level country that could disappear as a result of global warming.
- You can cherish your right to raise your child as you please and not have him vaccinated because of the minor risks involved, or you can worry about the epidemics that threaten our public health.

Although these examples are a good choice if we want to convince sceptical liberals that there is such a thing as the common good, I think communitarians should also try to think about the common good, or common goods as such, that is, not in opposition to individual rights.

So let me raise some intra-communitarian questions. Jean Jacques Rousseau maintained that the common good, or the *volonté générale*, would somehow appear to us, if we would think as citizens of our political community, rather than as private individuals. Even in Rousseau's days many political communities were too complex to make this an easy truth. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century this is even more so. Whose common good and what community are we talking about? Basic scientific research seems to be an international enterprise that may in the long run benefit the whole world. Dutch soldiers are presently trying to defend a tiny piece of Uruzgan against the Taliban in Afghanistan. It seems highly unlikely that they are defending our national security over there. May be they risk their life as a contribution to world peace; may be in the end, all they accomplish is a good reputation for the Netherlands in international affairs. Whose common good? What community? Environmental protection also seems to be a global interest.

There may be cases in which the global common good and the national common good are the same, but there may also be cases in which they differ. For citizens in the third world environmental protection is often assumed to be in conflict with their country's economic development, which may also be taken as a common good. What community should we foster and whose common good are we talking about?

The European Union as a political community would fare a lot better if we would all decide to speak English rather than Swedish, Polish, Italian and Dutch. So, is this our common good? Or are we allowed to stick to our common good at the national level? I live in a nice socially mixed neighbourhood in Leiden. There are some large houses in adjacent streets, there are some streets with social housing apartments where lots of immigrants live, and there are houses and families in-between, such as my own. There is a park nearby where old people can walk around and children can play. There is not much traffic. The children in my neighbourhood can play outside without having to be extremely cautious about cars and buses. A few weeks ago my city council decided that our neighbourhood should be filled up with several 15 storey buildings. This will be the end of communal life as we know it in Houtwijk. There will be an endless number of cars. No more playing outside for the children, at least not without frantic parents watching their every move. No more peace and quiet in the nearby park. For the common good of my little neighbourhood this is disastrous. But then, my political representatives seem to think that this is for the greater good of Leiden citizens. Are they right? In my opinion this is a conflict between two communities and two types of common good. How should we weigh them? Does communitarianism offer us some help in thinking about that sort of questions? Should larger communities take precedence over smaller ones or lower levels, or vice versa?

My second question is related to the first one. It is about what you might call the level of group punishment. We all remember our high school days. Some teachers were into group punishment. Whenever four or five students in a class played a trick on them, or refused to pay attention, they punished the whole class: everybody had to do extra homework, everybody was detained or something like that. Somehow it never occurred to the teacher to punish half of the class. If it was obvious that the boys had screwed up, teachers never suggested letting the girls go home in peace. Apparently the message should be that the wrongdoers had spoilt everything for all of us, not just for their particular gender, racial, ethnic or religious subgroup. Similar things happen in public policy. In a liberal Western society we are allowed to choose our marriage partner. If we happen to fall in love with the girl or boy next

door, that's fine. And if we happen to meet our significant other in Germany, Spain or Argentina, as our royal family usually does, that's fine too. But this right assumes that not all of us fall in love abroad, because the country cannot survive a large influx of immigrant partners. As it is a large percentage of members of ethnic minority groups (about two thirds a couple of years ago) in the Netherlands tend to find their spouse in their parents' native country. Sometimes because they fall in love there, during the summer holidays, sometimes because their parents want them to marry a niece or nephew over there, because this way that family member would have a ticket to Europe.

The government decided that this could not last, so the rules have been changed. It has become much more difficult to import a bride or bridegroom from abroad. Not just for ethnic minority groups but also for native Dutch citizens who meet the love of their life in Malawi or Uzbekistan. From a communitarian perspective, was this the right thing to do? Is this the right kind of group punishment? Is it right that the community as a whole should suffer because of the expensive preferences of one particular group? Or would it be better to punish the group, rather than the whole community?

A third intra communitarian question that puzzles me has to do with the kind of obligations and moral duties that I have toward my community. In the Netherlands we pay a lot of taxes. Tax money is used to pay for the incarceration and re-education of criminals, to pay special tuition for handicapped children, to pay for institutions for the mentally disabled, to pay social workers who can take care of drug abusing youngsters and so on. Is that enough? I am sure left wing politicians would probably say that we need more tax money, and that would be fine with me. If the current tax level cannot deliver the goods, just raise the level. But communitarians might perhaps argue that communities need more than just money. They need commitment, they may need my time, my energy, and they require active solidarity. Or don't they? Do I have to visit the mentally disabled, talk to drug abusing youngsters and employ a released criminal as cleaning woman in my house or can I just pay off my duty to the common good and be done with it?

Perhaps professor Etzioni could take up some of these questions in his response.