

# Moral Voice – Towards Freedom or Constraint?

**Abstract:** *In this paper I will give a series of pro and against arguments concerning Amitai Etzioni's statement made in his famous work "The Monochrome Society" which says that the moral voice is much more compatible with freedom of choice rather than with coercion<sup>1</sup>. Throughout the debate I will analyze the moral voice envisaged by Etzioni in a larger context and I will try to find an answer to the following question: Is the moral voice different from the constraint as we know it (through sanctions, penalties and so on)?*

*The paper is structured in three parts. First part contains a theoretical approach concerning the communitarian thesis and how can we define the moral voice, the second part introduces the main arguments concerning the hypothesis whilst the third part shall conclude with my understanding of the use of the moral voice in a real world.*

## 1. Theoretical approach

Communitarianism is presented by Amitai Etzioni, one of the founders of this philosophy, as a political doctrine being at the crossroads between liberal and socio-conservative ideologies. Its main purpose is to build a "good society" through promoting the moral behavior of individuals of the community by consolidating a set of central virtues such as the care for the other, the concern for the under-privileged, protection of the environment, the crucial role of the family and so on. All these virtues are expected to construct the citizen, as envisaged by the communitarians, who only can escape from his vicious nature and develop

his individuality through the spirit of the community.<sup>2</sup> Combining self-respect, freedom of expression but also commitment to fulfilling the rights and responsibilities which are implied by the quality of being a member of the community, communitarianism presumes an

emphasis on the concept of "we" as opposed to "I" and, nonetheless, a balanced combination between the implications of both concepts.<sup>3</sup> According to the Responsive Communitarian Platform, this combination can be optimally obtained by an active involvement of the institutions of civil society in the shaping of citizens. Individuals, therefore, must learn how to respect themselves and the others, how to be responsible citizens, to self-govern as well as governing aside others, to learn how to live not just for their own good etc.<sup>4</sup>

The main instrument of the communitarian philosophy is "the moral voice" defined as the guidance of the community which determines the social behavior of individuals. From this perspective, com-

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### **Aila Veli**

Facultatea de Științe Politice, Studentă, An III,  
SNSPA

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munitarians argument in favor of two types of moral voices, the inner one connected to self-conscience and the exterior one defined as the expression of the community. In an ideal communitarian world, in order to form a good society which develops moral integrity, individuals shall subscribe voluntarily to the common values of the community as a result of the action of their personal moral voices. However, as Etzioni points out, this usually never happens, as large parts of the population do not take into consideration the values of the community, therefore their inner moral guidance is insufficient and vicious.<sup>5</sup> From here, the moral voice of the community based on communal experience and shared values must intervene. Its line of action is to be made through informal sanctions of immoral behavior by the members of the community, but also through positive actions such as the recognition and cheering of the honorable deeds. However, the moral voice is to be used moderately as to not violate the fundamental human rights.<sup>6</sup> To resume, according to the Communitarian Platform, the moral voice (understood from now on as the moral voice of the community)” must be seen as the one that “speaks to our capacity for reasoned judgment and virtuous action”.<sup>7</sup>

## **2. Arguments**

Amitai Etzioni is one of the advocates of the use of moral voice because, as he arguments, it functions mostly through suasion which is different from coercion, the latter employing force as its main instrument. In this way, to use the moral voice per se does not involve sanctions like prison or deportation. Moreover, the individual is still the last one who decides over his actions and in the end his choice to disobey the moral voice will only imply a social pressure from the community.<sup>8</sup>

Considering the above, I come up with the following question: Why couldn't be this social pressure considered a type of coercion? In the end, even Toqueville remarked that to disobey the masses is like you quit living anymore.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, this social pressure means a massive reduction of the alternatives that an individual has. Therefore, if an individual chooses to disobey the norms of the community, he ends up being isolated and, in some cases, also tagged as a deviant person. Etzioni itself strengthens this point by adding that a person “may not be invited over for coffee or be asked to sit at the head of the table during community celebrations and people may even refuse to chat over the back fence or at the store or bar”.<sup>10</sup> In my opinion, the coercion still exists because this moral voice violates the individual's right to develop as a social being by pressuring him to obey the norms against his will.

Etzioni responds to these arguments with the possibility an individual has to change his community according to his convictions and be devoted to a different moral voice.<sup>11</sup> Elizabeth Frazer is, however, from a different opinion. According to Frazer, the ideal community based on shared values and resources “inevitably conduces to an emphasis on shared cultural identity and pronounced boundaries”.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, even though locality is not the same with community, as for what a life cycle concerns, a person spends a great deal of his life immobile – being a child and having to go to school, being an adult with stable responsibilities or being an elderly person – therefore the community he lives in holds a special place. On this line, even though individuals are members of different national or international, nearby or at distance communities, the most important communities remain the ones where they live in, work or they visit a lot.<sup>13</sup>

Having all these in mind, I continue by asking one more question: How can we determine the optimal combination between the implications of the “we” and “I” concepts in order to

avoid the transformation of the communitarian ideal into a catastrophic dictatorship? An example of this kind of deviation is to be found in the fascist Italian Charter of Labour which stated that “the Italian nation is an organic whole having life, purposes and means of action superior in power and duration to those of individuals ... of which it is composed.” (Charter of Labour, 21 April 1927)<sup>14</sup> Therefore, the line between suasion and coercion is really thin, Etzioni himself emphasizing the existent danger: “Sometimes suasion can turn into violence; we must oppose such violence with the full conviction of our moral voice, but without eliminating the essential moral expressions”.<sup>15</sup> Most of the time, this kind of violence appears when the moral voice is completed by laws, economic measures and so on.

Besides the extreme examples of the communities envisaged by the Nazis or Fascists, I want to analyze a conclusive example for my argument, namely the state of Singapore in which the communitarian ideas were used through coercion and not through the moral voice imagined by the communitarian theorists. According to Lee Kuan Yew, the founder of modern Singapore and Prime-Minister for three decades, the restrictions over democratic freedoms were a necessity for the development of the communal values of the society, less democracy being decisive for the implementation of communitarianism. On a first look over the Singaporean ethos, I observe communitarian elements such as the role of the family, the importance of the communal over the individual interests, the promotion of civic responsibilities and so on. However, the ideology is developed through the removal of the freedom to participate in public life and the non-existence of the opposition, all these being considered reactionary and a threat to the community.<sup>16</sup> To sum up, this example is illustrating that the equilibrium between the “we” and “I” concepts stated by Etzioni is rather a deviation to the “we” side, therefore the community can easily evolve in a form of soft authoritarianism.

### 3. Conclusions

To conclude, the moral voice defined as the fundamental instrument of a community builds, in my opinion, an ideal stateless community, where the moral voice is sufficient and efficient to promote the communal spirit, through which the individuals can develop. Moreover, according to Amitai Etzioni, the moral voice is “the best antidote for an oppressive state”.<sup>17</sup>

However, back in a real world, this kind of “good” society is an utopia, no matter how attractive could this ideas be. A stateless community cannot exist whereas a community governed by a state, as the case of Singapore shows that less democracy and coercion, as Lee Kuan Yew puts it, must be implemented. The moral voice, in this case, is reflected by the government, as a way to promote the communal interest, but compatible with coercion and not suasion.

In favour of Etzioni and other communitarian arguments remains the fact that the model of “good society” is based upon the American society where the absence of the concept “we” is dominant. For the cases of East Europe, China and Japan the situation could be exactly the reverse and a need for the emphasis of the “I” concept as opposed to “we” may be needed.<sup>18</sup>

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Amitai Etzioni, *Societatea monocromă*, trad. Mona Antohi, Polirom, Iași, 2002, p. 209.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., pp. 202-205.

<sup>3</sup> Etzioni, *The Spirit of Community. Rights, Responsibilities and the Communitarian Agenda*, Crown Publishers, Inc., New York, 1993, pp. 25-26.

<sup>4</sup> Responsive Communitarian Platform text, accesat 05.06.2014, disponibil la <http://www.gwu.edu/~ccps/platformtext.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Etzioni, *The Spirit of Community...*, pp. 30-31.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 37.

<sup>7</sup> Responsive Communitarian Platform text, accesat 05.06.2014, disponibil la <http://www.gwu.edu/~ccps/platformtext.html>.

<sup>8</sup> Etzioni, *The Spirit of Community...*, p. 38.

<sup>9</sup> Etzioni, *Societatea monocromă...*, p. 208.

<sup>10</sup> Etzioni, *The Spirit of Community...*, p. 38.

<sup>11</sup> Etzioni, *Societatea monocromă...*, p. 209.

<sup>12</sup> Elizabeth Frazer, *The Problems of Communitarian Politics. Unity and Conflict*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1999, p. 167.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, pp. 168-169.

<sup>14</sup> Andrew Vincent, *Modern Political Ideologies*, ediția a treia, Wiley-Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2010, p. 152.

<sup>15</sup> Etzioni, *The Spirit of Community...*, p. 39.

<sup>16</sup> Daniel A. Bell, "A Communitarian Critique of Authoritarianism: the case of Singapore", *Political Theory*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (Feb., 1997), Sage Publications, Inc., pp.11,17,20,24, accesat 05.06.2014, disponibil la <http://www.jstor.org/stable/192263>.

<sup>17</sup> Etzioni, *Societatea monocromă...*, p. 209.

<sup>18</sup> Etzioni, *The Spirit of Community...*, p. 25.

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