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## *The Road to the Good Society*

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AMITAI ETZIONI



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Love thy neighbor as thyself.

*Lev. 19:18*

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Do to others whatever you would wish them  
to do to you.

*Matt. 7:12*

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Act in such a way that you treat humanity,  
whether in your own person or in the person  
of another, always at the same time as an end  
and never simply as a means.

*Immanuel Kant,*

Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals

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# Introduction

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**THIS BOOK IS FOR THOSE OF MY FELLOW CITIZENS WHO** are tired of culture wars and hardened partisanship.<sup>1</sup> It is directed to those who do not believe that all truth or wisdom lies in one political camp and who do believe that we can work out a shared purpose and agenda. The book directly addresses the question of what must be done next—not merely by our national and local elected officials, but by our communities and, indeed, by ourselves.

A main thesis of this book is that center-based policies should involve much more than a compromise between Democrats and Republicans. We have learned over the last several decades that despite dominating so much of our public give-and-take and policy debates, the old opposition between statist liberalism and laissez-faire conservatism does not pay enough attention to a whole slew of issues. These all concern the body of society rather than either the state or the market; they concern our communities, culture, institutions, and values. These issues are often addressed (quite differently) by the religious right and by a new group of moderate thinkers (from which I hail) with the awkward title “communitarians.”<sup>2</sup> This term, which draws on the concept of community, is hardly a household word, but it captures a new way of thinking about our societal issues.

It is a way of thinking that is centered around people convincing one another to be better than they would be otherwise, on having faith in faith, on persuasion rather than coercion, on what might be called "soft morality." (Communitarian morality is soft not because its tenets are weak but because its enforcement is communal rather than state driven.) Whether one favors a soft, hard, or neutral position on our societal issues, it is difficult to think seriously about our future without addressing the social, moral, political, and spiritual challenges that are staring us in the face.

The book addresses seven core questions that have one theme in common: How can we move toward a good society? The book opens with a brief exploration of what kind of society we ought to seek; this vision frames all that follows. The discussion then turns to the general direction in which we ought next to be moving. It presumes that our condition calls for neither a sharp left turn nor a drastic right turn. Instead, this discussion focuses on a major course correction within the centrist direction in which the country has been moving for more than a decade.<sup>3</sup>

The seven questions addressed are:

1. Instead of relying on either the government or the market, what ought we to do for one another as members of families, communities, and voluntary associations?
2. How are we to sort out which moral values should guide us, both as individuals and as communities? Can we avoid both moral anarchy and moral determinism by centering our lives around a moderate, soft moral-



- ism—one that draws on persuasion rather than coercion?
3. What must be done to decriminalize and clean up politics, to shore up the rules of the game that we must follow to work out our differences? *What is to be done so that both major parties cease to put their own notions of misconduct above the voice of the electorate, thus becoming less inclined to drive from office future James Wrights, Newt Gingriches, and Bill Clintons?* Can campaign financing be thoroughly reformed, not by our current method of merely closing one floodgate as money gushes over and around the dam and everywhere else, but in a way that will stop the drift toward a plutocracy of one *dollar*, one vote?
  4. Is our national unity threatened by increased diversity and inequality? And to the extent that such fissures are visible, what can be done to bridge the differences, to sustain unity, while maintaining a strong measure of multiculturalism? How can we respect our different heritages but still advance as one nation?
  5. Does our vision for a good society at this stage require a further curtailing of government expenditures, regulations, and labor force, or has the time come for a more active state? Has the time come for a liberal course correction?
  6. Are there ways to continue to grow a strong economy without endangering the social and moral values we hold dear? How can we continue invigorating the market—as economic conservatives favor—without letting it

overwhelm all other considerations, pushing us toward a twenty-four/seven society?

7. Last but not least: Are we out to become ever more affluent, or ought we aim higher? Beyond affluence, what?



In the days when ships were powered by sails, the French philosopher Montesquieu wrote that no wind will do for a ship that has no designated port. This book opens with the vision of a port: a good society of the sort that humanity has been aspiring to since the days of the ancient Greeks and the Old and New Testaments.

Much has been made in recent years of the quest for a civil society. Building a civil society is fully commendable, but it is not good enough.<sup>4</sup> The civil society is a narrow concept. The notion of civil society as it has evolved from Alexis de Tocqueville to Robert Putnam has at its core the image of a society endowed with a rich fabric of voluntary associations that protect the citizens from the state. And it is a society in which people deal with one another in a civil manner. The vision that beckons us is much more encompassing. We see a society that lives up to our basic moral values, to our conceptions of right and wrong. Granted, it is a shining city on a high hill. We may never reach it, but its lights ought to guide our climb.

Our journey starts where the recent presidential campaign left off. During the campaign, much was said about numerous specific programs. These included plans to increase literacy,

protect us from OPEC, provide coverage for prescriptions for the elderly, institute smaller class sizes in our schools, and much else. This book goes beyond this laundry list, pointing to a set of principles with which to evaluate numerous current and future issues.

There is one particular sociological insight that underlies much of what follows. Namely, societies are like fully loaded barges that sit deep in the water and are difficult to steer. Often a course correction to one side will cause an oversteering in the opposite direction, requiring yet another change in course. We may be unable to advance in a straight line; changes in our natural and social environment, as well as new needs that arise internally, require frequent course adjustments. We can, though, stay the main course; the course corrections advocated herein aim to maintain the *general* direction we have been following for more than a decade.

Sometime around 1990 the Democrats discovered that if they wished to lead the country, they would have to move toward the center and ditch hard-core left-liberal positions, most notably those that clashed with core societal values of responsibility and opportunity.<sup>5</sup> During the Clinton administration, which was hardly cut entirely from one cloth, there were several grand showdowns between liberals and centrists, most of which the centrists won.

Republicans, too, changed course. They discovered in the mid-1990s that the country did not favor a conservative revolution. Most of the measures favored by the right were not enacted. And congressional Republicans increasingly worked out centrist policies with Clinton both before and after the 1998 impeachment hearings. During the 2000 election campaign,

George W. Bush moved the GOP further toward the political and philosophical center. At the end of the 1980s, demands for rights were very prominent. However, in the 1990s we learned to stress that individual rights go with social responsibilities. The slogan “Strong rights presume strong responsibilities” has gone from being a communitarian battle cry to almost a cliché, so widely has it been accepted.

I am not suggesting that because both parties are now basically centrist, no significant differences remain between them. One party rests on the liberal side of the center, the other on the conservative side. And one should realize that after the 2000 elections, both sides will move a bit away from dead center, back toward their respective corners. Still, the centrist positions of Bush and Gore highlight an undeniable fact—their national agendas are much closer to one another than to their respective left and right wings.<sup>6</sup> On numerous—albeit not all—issues, Gore’s positions are much closer to those of Bush than to those of Ralph Nader, Louis Farrakhan, or Camille Paglia. And by and large, Bush’s positions are closer to Gore’s than to those of Pat Robertson or Pat Buchanan, not to mention David Duke.

The new centrist direction to which I have referred so far is sometimes labeled the “third way” because it avoids both the first way (the free market) and the second way (command-and-control economy, planned economy, or socialism).<sup>7</sup> Steve Goldsmith, the former mayor of Indianapolis, a moderate Republican, has referred to Bush’s “compassionate conservatism” as the “fourth way.”<sup>8</sup> (In a moment of levity I considered calling the centrist paradigm—which encompasses both Gore’s and Bush’s approaches—the seventh way.) But something is profoundly underplayed in most discussions of these third and

fourth ways, and that is the role of community as it is broadly understood.

Public intellectuals, among whom I count myself, tend to write two kinds of books. One kind, scholarly ones, are aimed strictly at our colleagues. These tomes include technical terms (“jargon”), numerous footnotes, statistical and quantitative data, and other features of the academic apparatus.

The other kind of books we write are addressed to our fellow citizens. Here, we do draw on our and others’ previous academic works and studies, but we try to write in English as unencumbered as a scholar can muster. We provide illustrative examples rather than detailed displays of data and technical analyses. Jargon is taboo. Open appeals to moral sense and good judgment are welcome. This book falls into the latter category.

# *Contents*

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*Introduction* • ix

1

The Good Society: First Principles • 1

2

Giving Community Its Due • 5

3

For a Soft Moral Culture • 21

4

A Lean but Active Government • 47

5

The Economy: Strong but  
Not Unfettered • 63

6

Saving the Rules of the Game • 79

7

From Many–One? • 97

8

The Next Grand Dialogue: A New  
Counterculture? A Religious Revival? • 109

*Notes* • 113

*Acknowledgements* • 127

*Index* • 129

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# **The Good Society: First Principles**

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## **The Vision**

**WE NEED A CLEARER VISION OF WHERE THE CENTRIST** way leads or in which direction we ought to pave it. Specific policies are welcome; technical details can be fascinating; there is room for debate about specific modifications required by this or that public program or legal structure. However, most people are not (nor do they seek to become) policy wonks or technocrats. Most yearn for an overarching picture of what we are trying to achieve, one that provides a framework for placing specific ideas, assessing specific past accomplishments, and planning for the future. We seek vision that inspires, compels, and gives meaning to our endeavors and sacrifices, to life.

Americans aspire to a society that is not merely civil but also good. A good society is one in which people treat one another as ends in



themselves and not merely as instruments, a society in which each person is shown full respect and dignity rather than being used and manipulated. It is a social world in which people treat one another as members of a community—a much extended family—rather than only as employees, traders, consumers, or even fellow citizens. In the philosopher Martin Buber's terms, a good society nourishes authentic, bonding I-Thou relations, although it recognizes the inevitability and significant role of instrumental I-It relations.<sup>1</sup>

Several core values that characterize a good society can be directly derived from its definition. On the face of it, child abuse, spousal abuse, violent crime in general, and, of course, civil and international war offend the first principle of treating people as ends. (Hence our love of peace.) For the same reason, violating individual autonomy, unless there are compelling public reasons, is incompatible with treating people as ends. This is the ultimate foundation of our commitment to liberty.

The ethical tenet that we should treat people as ends rather than only as means is far from novel, but this hardly makes it less compelling. Less widely accepted is the very significant sociological observation that it is in communities, not in the realm of the state nor the market, that this tenet is best realized. Hence, policies that undermine community distance the good society.

Single-minded ideologies seek to adhere to one overarching principle, such as according the needs of the nation priority over all else. In contrast, the centrist, communitarian approach often synthesizes principles that are in part incompatible by judiciously balancing two or more approaches.

The good society balances the state, the market, and the community. Much has already been made of the fact that the best way to proceed is to view government as neither the problem nor the solution but as one partner of the good society. Similarly, the good soci-