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Amitai Etzioni

Happiness is the Wrong Metric

A Liberal Communitarian Response
to Populism

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For the moral wrestlers

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Introduction

When I helped my son carry his belongings to the dorm on his first day of college, he ran into a classmate. The young man asked: “What are you going to major in?” When my son responded “applied math,” his classmate said, with considerable condescension, “I am going to do *pure* math!” When I taught sociology at Columbia University, my department prided itself on its strong theory and method classes. It was very reluctant to allow the teaching of applied subjects and steadfastly refused the introduction of a course in criminology. Indeed, those who wanted to teach such classes were relegated to the Teachers College and the School of Social Work and were not allowed to vote in department meetings.

The most prestigious ethics publication in the English language is *Ethics*. A typical issue, for instance, that of April 2017, covers topics such as deontological decision theory, distributive ethics, and understanding how risk factors into deontological theory. There is no similar journal for applied ethics. True, there are some very fine publications that deal with specific applied areas, e.g., the *Hastings Center Report* for bioethics and the *Journal of Business Ethics* for this field. However, no major journals provide a venue to share ideas or public deliberations of applied ethics as a field, a kind of publication most other fields have at least one of. This book attempts to provide some impetus for further development of applied ethics.

Ethics was a sterile and dull subject for decades, which rehashed questions of the kind “How many angels can stand on the head of a pin?” until it was applied to medicine. Here, ethics was able to help a great deal to patients in sorting out their choices, to guide health-care professionals as well as public policy. Moreover, this application is reported to have a salutary feedback effect on ethics.

I myself was first introduced to “basic” ethics when I spent a year studying with Martin Buber (Etzioni 2003). I wrote what at least I consider a learned essay and small book about his work (Etzioni 1998). And when I became involved in communitarianism, that provided more opportunities for reflection on what is the “good” and who and how one determines what it is (Etzioni 2011). However, I found it intellectually more stimulating and most assuredly more of service to struggle with applied ethical issues, as will soon become all too clear. I never bought the notion that academics should not venture outside the ivory tower and that engaging in

questions of values and public policy somehow corrupts their academic purity and virtue.

Moreover, like others, I found that applied work enlivened the basic one. Thus, when I tried to sort out when privacy should yield to the common good, for instance, to protect public health, I found it helped me think through more generally how one is to deal with clashes between two core values (Etzioni 1999). Most of what follows is applied.

To some, the term “ethics” evokes values such as veracity, loyalty, and truthfulness. However, the ethics domain is much vaster. It concerns itself with individual rights, social justice, peace, and much else. Cases in kind follow. They all deal with current challenges both in societies and on the global level.

Part I asks how we can determine what a good life is. Many measure it by how happy people are. Happiness in turn is assumed to be derived from high income that enables one to lead an affluent way of life, mainly viewed as being able to consume a lot of goods and services. However, evidence shows that by and large (there are always exceptions when one deals with social science data), once income rises above the level at which people’s basic needs can be met, it adds little to their happiness. Other social scientists studied whether what one does gives meaning to life. However, meaning can be gained by joining a gang or ISIS. At least from an ethicist’s viewpoint and, as I see it, from most people’s personal viewpoint, something is missing, something rather profound, namely, the sense of doing good. It is a sense that leads people to make sacrifices not for self-glorification, not to feel good about themselves, but to service others. I am not writing about saints, but about parents who take care of a severely disabled child, about spouses who take care of their partners with cancer or Alzheimer’s, and about volunteers who go into places that are unsafe to help those in danger (see Chap. 1).

The three Abrahamic religions have a clear perception of what human nature is; I call it one of a moral wrestler. Although they differ on the weight they accord—and the ways they depict—the forces that make us stray, they share the basic understanding of human nature. For Catholicism, the original sin plays a greater role than the *yetzer hara* (bad instinct) in Judaism; and neither embraces the Protestant notion of predestination. Islam emphasizes humans’ inherent goodness (*fitrah*), which must be upheld against base desires and sinful outside influences. However, all see life as a struggle between doing good and being tempted to violate our sense of what is right; all see room for some form of punishment as well as redemption. Social science by and large, with notable exceptions, has moved away from this view of human nature. This is not true merely for economics but, we shall see, also for psychology, sociology, and anthropology. If we could do more to incorporate the concept of the moral wrestlers into the social sciences, we might be able to learn more about what makes for better human beings and better societies (see Chap. 2).

Part II is dedicated to an examination of human nature. Are we out to maximize ourselves and does society work well when each person focuses on what *they* consider good? On a basic level, this issue has been debated as the difference between *homo economicus* and *homo sapiens*. Those who adhere to the rationalistic paradigm, the one that treats people as *homo economicus*, assume that humans have

only one kind of motivation: the quest for pleasure. Even when they do good, this is interpreted as seeking esteem or prestige or some other form of “psychic income.” As Robert Goodin put it, advocates of *homo economicus* proceed largely in one of two ways: “One reduces morality to enlightened self-interest, denying that morality has any special place in the decision calculus. Another, while acknowledging that people do internalize moral principles *per se*, enters them into utility functions as just another consumption good” (Goodin 1980).

In contrast, many other scholars see people as *homo sapiens*, as human beings subject to continuous conflict between the pursuit of pleasure and their moral commitments. The simple line, “I would like to go to a movie, but I ought to visit my friend in the hospital,” captures this tension.

Economists tend to assume that one’s preferences are given and stable. This allows them to explain changes in behavior largely in terms of variables, such as changes in income and relative prices, and more generally in terms of incentives and disincentives. However, sociologists and psychologists have shown that preferences are formed during socialization and continue to be reformulated during adulthood through factors such as persuasion, leadership, and advertising. Hence, when comparing behavior at two points in time, one must take into account changes in preferences that may well have occurred during the given period. The challenge is that there is no consolidated theory of what factors drive preferences (see Chap. 3).

How do we decide, as members of small communities as well as large ones, as nations, and sometimes even across borders, which moral values to uphold? The processes involved, which I call moral dialogues, are much more common—and effective!—than is often assumed. The details of how moral dialogues take off, evolve, and mature are spelled out in Chap. 4. Suffice here to note that they not only often lead to significant changes in what we consider moral but also affect behavior. For instance, Gallup polling found that in only 18 years, from 1996 to 2014, support for gay marriage more than doubled from 27 to 55%. Once people change their mind as to what is right, they also change their conduct; without that, the police stand over their heads. As far as one can determine, there were no significant shared moral commitments to the environment in 1950. By 2016, “74% of U.S. adults said the ‘country should do whatever it takes to protect the environment’” (Anderson 2016). Furthermore, “Seventy-three percent of Americans say they prefer emphasizing alternative energy, rather than gas and oil production, as the solution to the nation’s energy problems” (Auter 2016). Ample evidence appears in Chap. 4.

Social science theories have moral effects. If we teach each year many hundreds of thousands of students who take courses in economics and keep telling them publicly that everyone is basically out to enrich themselves, to “maximize” their self-interests, people will become somewhat more selfish than they would be otherwise. Social science theories become popular narratives and these have effects. They can either debase moral behavior to some extent or ennoble it to some. There is reason for concern when one finds that many business schools dedicate very little time—or none at all—to teaching ethics (see Chap. 5).

Part III deals with two major current ethical challenges, both affected by new technological developments. One concerns the massive loss of jobs due to

automation, accelerated by applications of artificial intelligence. The other is the rise of right-wing populism, which is driven in part by job loss, globalization, and accelerated societal changes.

Many discussions on the rise of AI-equipped, “smart” machines draw on driverless cars as their lead example. When ethicists first tackled the ethical issues raised by this new technological development, they drew on a “basic” ethical analysis that preceded any applied issue, often referred to as the trolley problems. They concern questions such as imagine a train is rushing down a track; if you do not act, five people are surely to be killed. If you pull a lever, the train will change course and kill only one person. Should you pull the lever (Thomson 1985)? Ethics was the subject of this narrative’s many variations, including one that puts you on a bridge above the track, standing next to a fat man. If you throw him overboard, his body will stop the train and so on and so on.

To deal with the issues raised by driverless cars, ethicists applied these narratives to a large variety of imagined situations. For instance, assume a child jumps in front of the car; should the car swerve into the adjacent lane even though it will kill several people there? Hit the brakes and kill the passenger but save the child and so on and so on (Bonneton et al. 2016).

These narratives provide fine material for academic seminars; for instance, they allow one to explore the difference between sins of commission and those of omission. And to be frank, they make for great topics in Woody Allen-like dinner conversations. However, we shall see when we turn to examine the ethical issues raised by artificial intelligence that they provide a rather misleading way to examine real ethical issues, the kind people and policymakers face (see Part VI). And they do not seem very helpful in exploring a burning issue raised by automation, especially driven by AI: the major forthcoming net job loss. Some refer to it as a job collapse or even job Armageddon.

I write “net” because in previous technological revolutions, jobs were lost but many new and often better jobs were created. (Economists like to scoff at people who, they say, are akin to those who sought to protect the horse and buggy industry when it suffered as a result of the first cars running off the assembly line.) However, we shall see that there is strong evidence to suggest that this pattern—based on very few data points—will not repeat itself. Hence, a major ethical challenge society faces is how to respond to massive net loss of jobs. This is the subject of Chap. 6.

Job loss is but one of the factors that drives the populism that elected Donald Trump president and challenges, to one extent or another, most liberal democratic governments. What propels populism? How can democracies be protected from the onslaught? The answer to these questions, I show below, requires understanding the moral claims made by globalists and by nationalists. Globalists argue for moral positions that hold for all people—human rights; freedom of movement, including across borders (immigration); and free movement of goods across borders (free trade). Nationalists object to all three in the name of the particular values and needs of what they consider their folks, their nation. A close examination of both claims

finds that there is a third way that takes us away from a culture war between the two camps to public policies that are morally defensible and mitigate the ill effects of populism. See Chap. 7.

Part IV deals with moral issues raised by individual rights. Rights are not merely a matter of law but are also, in effect, moral claims. They call for respecting individual dignity and liberty and extol the value of protecting citizens from potentially overpowering governments. However, the moral language of individual rights is incomplete. We already see (in Chap. 7 on populism) the importance of bonding and shared moral cultures. These often define what people owe each other, their family members, their community, the nation, and various common goods such as the environment and public health (and to some extent, the global “community”). That we have rights but also responsibilities is a core liberal communitarian idea (Etzioni 1993). Ethical dilemmas arise when our rights and responsibilities come into conflict.

A key case in point is the increasing challenges to free speech in the name of the harm that it imposes on some who are subjected to it, especially on minorities. Recently, there has been a call for safe zones on campuses, safe from ideas that some students find distressing, or warning labels on books for the same reason. Many democracies use the force of the law to limit speech they consider hateful. As I see it, there is a better way, one that involves relying on the moral voice of the community to keep free speech from causing undue harm (see Chap. 8).

We constantly face the minting of new rights. Indeed, much of US history can be told in terms of expiation through rights. Gradually, people without property gained the right to run for office; women gained the right to vote; African Americans’ voting rights were much better guaranteed; the rights of disabled people were established; and more recently—there are more rights for those of the same gender to marry. Does this mean that all new rights have the same standing? Have we reached a stage where the minting of more rights undermines their moral standing? One such recent right is the right to be forgotten. In Chap. 9, I suggest that it causes more harm than justice.

The suggestion that people who committed non-violent crimes, especially first offenders, should be shamed instead of jailed raises hackles. “Back to the pillories?” we are asked. Chapter 10 makes the case that shaming is fully morally justified. One should not ignore that people who are “merely” jailed are also shamed. And shaming makes it easier to reintegrate offenders back into the community, while jailing very often has the opposite effect. (True, this holds only for those who share the values of the society at large. For those who view violating the law or norms as a badge of honor, shaming will have little effect) (see Chap. 10).

We have a moral voice, both as individuals and as communities. That is, when we celebrate people for doing good—say Doctors Without Borders for risking their lives to treat patients with Ebola—they feel appreciated. Moreover, such kudos lead others to feel they should consider doing more good themselves, maybe one not as demanding but nevertheless of virtue. And when people violate what we personally, or as

members of one community or another, consider good behavior and we gently chastise them, it helps curbing such behavior. The same holds even on the international level. Nations hate to be criticized about the ways they deal with their citizens or with those of other nations, although there are sharp limits to how far they are willing to change their policies in order for these policies to be regarded as morally appropriate. Given the limited leverage moral voices have on the international level, I argue that we have to carefully select the targets of our moral voice. Chastising one regime after the other, for great and not so great violations of what we consider right, squanders whatever effect our moral voice can have. We need moral triage (see Chap. 11).

Part V examines a few key ethical issues raised on the international level. The first centers on the American response to extremism in the Muslim world and asks how policymakers might better craft their messaging. Thus far, voices emanating from the USA have emphasized liberal values, like individual rights, democracy, and free markets, to counter religious extremist rhetoric. I argue that in doing so, we fail to recognize that while most of the Muslim world is not violent, the majority is also not liberal. They are believers who want to see religion play a greater role in public life—I call them “illiberal moderates”—and since they pose as central figures in the fight against violent extremism, we need to speak to them, I claim, on their terms (see Chap. 12).

Part V then turns to the issues of mass atrocities and genocide. I followed these closely ever since a mutual friend introduced me to Samantha Power (who later became US ambassador to the UN during much of the Obama administration), as she was jogging on the banks of the Charles River. When she learned my name, she said with a broad smile, “I hate you!” It turned out that she was a journalist covering the brutal ethnic cleansing in Bosnia, calling in her story under fire to *The Economist*. She was told that her story had to be cut short to make room for a three-page story about communitarian ideas I was championing and which were, at the time, popular with Tony Blair and Bill Clinton. I soon read her Pulitzer Prize-winning volume *A Problem from Hell* in which she documents the history of America’s failure to respond to genocide and crimes against humanity. Bill Clinton, who did stop ethnic cleansing in Kosovo, stated that his biggest regret is that he did not in Rwanda (Hughes 2014). Indeed, more and more nations agreed that it was legitimate for foreign powers to interfere in the international affairs of nations if genocide took place. Part V examines how this moral consensus was abused and why the USA did so little—despite Power’s urging—to stop the civil war in Syria, the genocide in South Sudan, and the civil war in Libya. It is one of the great ethical questions of the age—as these atrocities continue (see Chap. 13).

Senator John McCain made a compelling case for keeping the promotion of human rights as a core element of US foreign policy, but does not address the fact that while this goal is noble, the means may be foul. There is a vast moral and prudential difference between promoting human rights with nonlethal means (such as public diplomacy, leadership training, cultural exchanges, and even smart sanc-

tions) and coercive regime change. Such changes often lead to very high human and economic costs. These could be considered as a price one must pay for liberty, but they often result in new, very unsavory governments.

Whatever reasons the USA had for invading Iraq, it stayed to make Iraq into a liberal democracy. The human costs for the Iraqis have been horrendous. At least 25,000 people lost their lives and millions lost their homes. The Shia government supported militias acting as death squads against Sunnis, which has driven them to support ISIS. The military is so corrupt that often not enough funds are left for ammunition and food for the troops. In Libya, the humanitarian intervention morphed into a coercive regime change, leading to bloody civil war. The USA ignored that the rebels it considered prodemocratic forces committed many of the same atrocities that Qaddafi's forces did, including ethnic cleansing. Afghanistan, after 16 years of democracy-building, is one of the most corrupt nations in the world; it is a major source of heroin that floods Central Asia and streams into Europe. Terrorism is rampant. The USA has even been unable to stop the institutionalized pedophilia (called *bacha bazi*) of the governing Pashtun elites. One of the many reasons the tragic war in Syria is continuing is that for years, the USA insisted that Assad's departure be a precondition for negotiation.

Coercive regime change also stands in the way of dealing with North Korea, China, and Russia. Recent statements that the USA is out to change the regime in North Korea are sure to make the regime work even harder, if this is possible, to develop its nuclear arms and resist any negotiations. China and Russia feel that their allies are threatened as well as their own regimes.

In short, a strong case for the promotion of human rights needs to be coupled with a discussion on how it will be achieved. Avoiding coercive regime change and relying on nonlethal means seem a morally sound and wise foreign policy (see Chap. 14).

Part VI focuses on the ethical issues raised by artificial intelligence. One may well wonder what qualifies me, a sociologist, to deal with artificial intelligence. The short and long answers are the same. My son Oren (who coauthored the articles in this part) is a leading AI scholar. A father is allowed to gloat, but Google his name or search *The New York Times*, and you will see that he truly is a superstar. Our extended family gets together at least twice a year for a week each time. Long walks and talks during these weeks allow us to understand where the other is coming from, which is essential for work that bridges a highly technical field and ethics.

The ethical issues we addressed in this part concern the fact that AI is making many different kinds of machines—from cars to bombers—increasingly autonomous. That is, they are able to act on their own, way beyond how humans programmed and instructed them. Thus, a driverless car may be programmed to abide by speed limits set by law but note that other cars are speeding and “learn” to speed itself. These recent achievements are the third stage of AI. Like many other technological developments, AI's accomplishments and potential were first overhyped, and then considerable disappointment set in. Now, however, it is reaching a stage in which it changes most everything we do—from surgery to child and elder care.

AI is believed by some to be on its way to producing intelligent machines that will be far more capable than human beings. After reaching this point of “technological singularity,” computers will continue to advance and give birth to rapid technological progress that will result in dramatic and unpredictable changes for humanity. Some observers predict that the singularity could occur as soon as 2030.

As we see it, the fact that AI makes machines much smarter and more capable does not make them more fully autonomous. We are accustomed to thinking that if a person is granted more autonomy—inmates released from jails or teenagers left unsupervised—they may do wrong because they will follow their previously restrained desires. In contrast, machines equipped with AI, however smart they may become, have no goals or motivations of their own. It is hard to see, for instance, why driverless cars would unite to march on Washington. And even if an AI program came up with the most persuasive political slogan ever created, why would this program nominate an AI-equipped computer as the nominee for the next president? Science fiction writers might come up with ways intelligence can be turned into motivation, but for now, such notions probably should stay where they belong: in the movies.

Instead of slowing down the development of AI, out of fear for where it may lead us, Oren and I hold that humans can keep the ultimate control over ever-smarter machines. How this can be achieved is the subject of five chapters. One asks if and how one can ensure these machines will act ethically (Chap. 15). The discussion then turns to examine the dangers and merits of autonomous weapons (Chap. 16), whether robots should be used in child, elder, and patient care (Chap. 17), and finally issues in bioethics (Chap. 18 and 19).

Part VI begins with a review of the reasons scholars hold that driverless cars and many other AI-equipped machines must be able to make ethical decisions and the difficulties this approach faces. It then shows that cars have no moral agency and that the term “autonomous,” commonly applied to these machines, is misleading and leads to invalid conclusions about the ways these machines can be kept ethical. The article’s most important claim is that a significant part of the challenge posed by AI-equipped machines can be addressed by the kind of ethical choices made by human beings for millennia. Ergo, there is little need to teach machines ethics even if this could be done in the first place. Finally, the article points out that it is a grievous error to draw on extreme outlier scenarios—such as the trolley narratives—as a basis for conceptualizing the ethical issues at hand (Chap. 15).

As technology progresses and autonomous weapons increasingly become a reality rather than mere science fiction, an ethical debate has developed surrounding the use of such weapons, which operate with little or no human oversight. Some view the use of autonomous weapons as morally preferable (not to mention strategically advantageous), as they can be used in place of human combatants. Others oppose their use for moral and legal reasons. The article discusses challenges to limiting and defining autonomous weapons and proposes seeking international agreement to ban fully autonomous weapons—those which cannot be recalled—as a first step toward addressing the issues raised and, above all, how to keep these weapons from running amok (Chap. 16).

As artificial intelligence technology seems poised for a major takeoff and changing societal dynamics are creating a high demand for caregivers for elders, children, and those who are infirm, robotic caregivers may well be used much more often. This chapter examines the ethical concerns raised by the use of AI caregivers and concludes that many of these concerns are avoided when AI caregivers operate as partners rather than substitutes. Furthermore, most of the remaining concerns are minor and are faced by human caregivers as well. Nonetheless, because AI caregivers' systems are learning systems, an AI caregiver could stray from its initial guidelines. Therefore, subjecting AI caregivers to an AI-based oversight system is proposed to ensure that their actions remain both legal and ethical (Chap. 17).

A generation after I urged my son Oren to study artificial intelligence, I urged Margaret (who allows me to see myself as her grandfather, actually "saba" in Hebrew) to study biology. I hold that the next great technological revolution will take place as we learn how to recast our bodies the way we are recasting our environment and trying to recast our societies. In Chap. 18, I discuss the unfolding of this active orientation, our engineering ambitions, and the moral issues it raises. The following chapter examines this general issue for development in biology.

Bioethics (and medical ethics) has already addressed numerous moral issues. Should society allow medically assisted suicide? Can patients truly give informed consent? Should there be any limits on women's right to choose? Who gets what and how much of the resources society has set aside for health care? How can we better protect medical privacy in the age of big data? These issues have been subject to a great deal of deliberations and publications. In this book, I deal with one particular dimension of the ethical issues involved: the role of the community. The term "community" is often associated with small, traditional, residential communities, such as villages. However, in the modern era, communities are often nonresidential and based on ethnicity, race, religious background, or a shared sexual orientation. Moreover, people are commonly members of more than one community. Finally, it is often productive to consider communities as nesting within more encompassing communities, such as local ones within a national one. People are hence subject not merely to tension between their personal preferences and the values and norms promoted by their community but are also subject to conflicting normative indications from various communities. For more, see Chap. 19.