

## Video 4: The Common Good and Shared Conditions

In defining the common good, we've seen that some things can't be divided up; they have to be shared, like a team championship. Now we are going to dig more deeply into what we mean when we talk about the common good as shared, especially when it comes to thinking about the whole society, and not just particular groups in it.

Now we might wonder, does society as a whole even have a common good? A sports team or an orchestra have a very specific activity that everyone is focused on doing, and it's clear that they have to do that activity together, and that they share in the goal of achieving it. But is society as a whole really like that?

In some ways, it is not. What we mean by society is actually best understood as a "society of societies" - businesses, families, schools, sports teams, theater groups, churches, and many other "societies", all focused on their specific activity, their specific shared common good. But how does that work in the society of these societies?

Now this realm, the society of societies, is the realm that the ancient philosopher Aristotle called "politics" - he believed that "the polis", which is the Greek word for city (like Indianapolis or Minneapolis) was a special kind of necessary community. He called the polis the "complete" community, not because it replaced all the others, but because it included all of them that were necessary. You couldn't have a society that was only one big sports team, or one big army, or one big school - how would anyone eat? The polis was a society where you had all of the groups necessary for human life. When it worked well, the polis helped all of the different groups coordinate, resolved conflicts between them, and provided things that all of them needed. Aristotle thought that, for any human being to live out a good life individually, whether as a soldier, or a teacher, or a farmer, he or she needed to live in a good polis - a polis that looked out for the good of all groups, and was not overly partial to any one group.

So, when we turn to the "political" question of the common good of a whole society, we should first ask: what does every group in that society need in order to pursue its own common good? The easiest way to think about this is that they all need "shared conditions." Now you might stop here and brainstorm a bit: what conditions might every group - every team, every musical ensemble, every family and church and business - need in order to work well?

From your brainstorming, you might get pretty far. We all need safety, for example. We all need a functioning financial system on which we can rely. We need some kind of transportation to get us from place to place.

## TEACHING HUMAN DIGNITY

We need some kind of a system for settling disputes that doesn't descend into violence. But there are other conditions that we might not immediately identify. For example, we need a reliable education and certification system - first and foremost, so people can read and write and understand. This education is not just something for me; I need to rely on the fact that other people in other groups are also educated enough to do their tasks. Imagine if the people who created and prepared our food didn't know how to do it with the proper safety? Or if our doctors didn't really understand how bodies and diseases work? So we aren't just interested in our own education, but in good education for all groups, because we rely on others to be well educated, too. Other examples: we need a system of caring for sickness and illness, especially in old age; we need rules to protect and manage nature: the most fundamental and important conditions for every group are air to breathe, water to drink - the very things that we need to sustain life. And these resources, inevitably, are shared.

Now, a couple things to note here. The fact that all groups need something doesn't determine HOW the thing should be provided. For example, in some nations, health care is provided by the political structure, but in others, health care is simply regulated and a privately run network of providers and insurance is used, with a safety net for the poor. Some other places, it's another mix. Now a lot of arguments in politics are about these HOW questions - those are important, but more important is seeing the agreement on the underlying claim about a shared condition we all need, one way or the other. And even in situations where - like food or health care - these are provided by a private system, the political order still has to regulate this system. For example, one of the major contributors to increased life expectancy in the early 20th century was the implementation of food safety and purity laws - meatpacking regulations, ingredient label regulations, and the like. These regulations were all enacted and enforced by the government. Now the polis, the government, does not feed us. Farmers, and grocers, and restaurant workers do. But to get that system to work for the common good of all, the polis has to regulate it to create shared conditions where all producers and consumers can safely and fairly go about their business.

The other thing to note is that, because these are shared conditions, no one can opt out. Now as we mentioned previously, we all have to cooperate to keep the air and water clean. We can't set up our own private money system, either, and then expect everyone to honor our system. But of course, you may be thinking, well, can't some people opt out? Can't you just get bottled water delivered from some pure spring somewhere? But notice: you'll still need some kind of transportation network and functioning financial exchange system to do that. And, more importantly, you won't actually be able to drink your pure water in safety if all your neighbors have poisoned water - at least, not without fortress walls and security.

## TEACHING HUMAN DIGNITY

Now sadly, some “societies” end up looking like this: those who have “opted out” hoard resources for themselves, but constantly have to defend themselves against the dangers posed by all the people excluded from the system. It should be obvious that this is not sustainable. It is best for every group if all groups have common access to shared conditions for their flourishing.

In this video, we have identified a crucial and easily overlooked aspect of the common good that, in all larger societies, there are a set of shared conditions that form a background and foundation for the lives of individuals and their smaller groups. Everyone in the society needs these conditions to be maintained and everyone should be able to benefit from these conditions. Everyone should be able to be safe from violent crime and property theft, everyone should be able to receive the education necessary to contribute to the team of society through their smaller groups. These shared conditions are the primary responsibility of the political sphere.