

Video 5: The Common Good and Individual Duties and Responsibilities

Pursuing the common good can sound really good! We all think everyone should work together, everyone should respect everyone else, everyone should support conditions that make it possible for all groups to work effectively. It's true that we don't always pay attention to all the things involved in making this all work - but most people will recognize that it's important for everyone to learn about and act for the common good if we want to do anything in life. So, if the common good sounds, well... so "good", why can it also seem so difficult? We need to turn to some of the more difficult aspects of the common good.

So it's always nice to say, "Everyone should work together." But what happens if someone doesn't contribute? If it's truly a shared good, you've got a problem. One bad player, and the whole orchestral piece sounds off. Now it's possible that this is the fault of the conductor of the orchestra, or maybe the whole seating arrangement of the players is messed up, and the bad player can't properly hear the other parts of the orchestra. However, these explanations can only go so far. It is still the case that each player in the orchestra has to do certain things for the whole group to work. They have to practice their pieces adequately on their own, they have to pay attention to direction, they even have to speak up when something is wrong. If the problem is the player can't hear properly, then they need to tell the conductor about it. So for the whole group to pursue the common good, there are certain things everyone must do individually.

The word we're looking for here is "duties," or sometimes we call them responsibilities. For the common good to be achieved, everyone has to do what they are assigned to do - do their "duty." A great manager or coach or politician or CEO simply can't make a team good if the people on the team don't play their part, don't perform as they are supposed to perform.

Now when we use the word "duty," we need to get past our tendency to associate the word with something burdensome, something we do when we don't really want to do it. For example, a key individual duty in a family or a classroom is to show respect for the parent or teacher. Everyone needs to do that individually in order for the common good of the group to be achieved. But of course, most of the time, showing respect to a parent or a teacher is something we do gladly - we actually love the parent or the teacher. We see that not showing respect would be hurtful to them and ultimately to us as a member of the classroom or of the family. So doing our duty, whether it's caring for our parents or picking up our dog's waste or a hundred other things, is a good thing, something we want to do.

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The burdensome part comes in because “duties” are also what an individual has to do, even at times when they don’t want to do them. If I only got up to teach my class when I felt like doing it, there just couldn’t be a class. Doing your duty is not dependent on how you feel at any particular moment - otherwise, we would never be able to act as groups. Part of growing up as a person is coming to be able to recognize when you “should” do tasks, even when you don’t want to - and that ultimately, it’s a good thing to do them, even if it “feels” burdensome at the time. Indeed, adults absolutely have to have this capacity for society to function. Teachers, police officers, store managers and clerks, delivery drivers, doctors and nurses, husbands and wives loving each other, parents taking care of their children - in all these cases, for their groups to work, all need to perform, day in and day out, regardless of how they feel. And at least everyone should “feel” good about themselves for doing that.

These examples should help us see that, even if we don’t use the word “duty” when we are contributing to the common good, we are all doing our duties much of the time, and we aren’t always or even mostly glum about it!

But a big challenge to achieve the common good in any team or society is how to handle things when some people won’t do their individual duties necessary to achieve the common good. What do we do in those cases? Think about the following example: Restaurant owner “A” wants to open her restaurant after Covid 19. She works hard to space her tables, keep a very clean kitchen, have her employees wear masks. She also decides that if any customer seems visibly sick, or refuses to wear a mask, she is going to ask them to leave. She doesn’t like to ask her diners to leave, but she thinks it’s the right thing to do. Restaurant owner “B” also wants to open her restaurant after Covid 19. She works hard to space her tables, keep a very clean kitchen, and have her employees wear masks. She decides that it’s too harsh to ask diners to leave if they are not following the rules about masking. Now, this isn’t the place to go into detailed debates about when masks protect people and how they work. Instead, we should recognize two things from this example. One, wearing a mask may protect the person wearing it, but a mask is more important to protect others from the inadvertent coughs, and sneezing, and vapor of the person wearing it. And two, a mask can also be a visible sign - in the midst of a pandemic - that you are taking the health of everyone seriously, and so makes everyone else in the grocery store, the restaurant, the church, or wherever feel more at ease in a difficult and scary time for all. Notice here the importance of the duty extends beyond the simple question of whether person A is going to infect person B. Rather, it is about everyone sharing a space with more security in a dangerous time. So too we might think about people who insist on

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texting and driving on our roads. Most of them will not cause accidents, although some will, but the activity makes people erratic and dangerous drivers for everyone else, and is also a sign that a person simply doesn't care that they are sharing the road with others.

Now the point here is not to definitively name what is a duty. Rather, we should see two general things about what we might call "difficult duties." One is that we have to look at the particular common goods - of a sports team or classroom, of the road or of indoor spaces in a pandemic - and then consider what is necessary for all to do in order that everyone can share in that good. The other lesson is that such "difficult duties" will require some kind of enforcement mechanisms, and these enforcement mechanisms will involve judgments about what we call "punishment" or "penalties" that seem to do "harm" to individuals (for example, throwing out the diner) for the sake of the common good. Getting duties and their enforcement right is a big challenge - for parents, for teachers, and for societies. But without all of us doing our duties and pitching in, even when we don't feel like it, the common good simply can't be achieved.