

Video 6: The Common Good and Historical Variability and Structural Consistency

Achieving the common good involves working together, and “working together” means doing things like respecting everyone’s dignity, sharing a goal with everyone in the group, setting up and maintaining shared conditions for working together, and doing the individual duties we each have to make the whole thing work.

But how can this work when everyone and every group is so different? In today’s world, we are very aware of diversity and difference - families are diverse, regions of the country are diverse, nations are diverse - and of course, over history, we recognize the ways groups have changed a lot over time. Now all of this diversity may seem to obscure the common good - and indeed, many thinkers in today’s world are worried about too much “individualism”. Now, this isn’t because they prefer everyone to be exactly the same (that’s obviously silly), but because people and groups can become too focused on things that make them unique, that separate them from others, and the like, and so they can forget the common good.

In this video, I hope to help you see two things about diversity over cultures and across history: that the common good can accommodate a lot of diversity, and that while diversity can be good, it has its limits. So the first thing is that the idea of the common good can accommodate a lot of diversity across history and societies. It is a “formal” idea; that is, the basic form of the common good holds true, even when the content changes. Different sports require different sorts of plays, but all team sports involve the cooperative dynamics of seeking a common good. Let’s think about a tougher example. Family structure may change, and so the kinds of shared goods, and shared conditions they involve, may also change. It was for the common good of the family in past centuries for the children to work at very early ages on the farm, learning important skills which their parents could pass on to them, preparing them for a successful future life. In today’s world, we are likely to condemn, rather than commend, parents who make their children work - and in fact, we even have laws against this. We expect parents today to send children to school for the common good of the family - which includes, of course, the success of children in future adulthood. So if we ask, “Is it for the common good of the family to have children go to school instead of work?” the answer will be different over time, in different societies. But if we ask “Is it for the common good of the family to have parents do what is needed to prepare their children for adult success?”, we can see that that is true across many times and places, all times and places. To make the question a little more challenging, we might ask whether it is for the common good to prepare every child in our

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society to go to college? It is true that college is the important preparation for many forms of successful life. But many have also pointed out that a society needs really good, smart people from mechanics to electricians to skilled craftspeople to small restaurant owners, and that these positions - while they do require training - don't necessarily require traditional college. In this case, notice: the common good actually requires diversity. Yet we can still say something about the common good that applies to all: that parents and society should create the shared conditions that prepare children for a path to success.

The second thing is that diversity, while it can be good, has limits. Not every culture, or past time period should be affirmed. The most infamous example would be Hitler's Germany. Perhaps the key factor in Hitler's rise to power in a demoralized, collapsing, humiliated 1920s Germany was that he offered a grand vision of Germany's common good - and indeed, suggested that their common good was to use their superior talents and skills as a civilization to rule the world and remake it in their image. "Elites" in every society, in every time and place, will do this: they gain power by offering a vision of the common good that we now call "totalitarian" - superior people (whatever group or groups are deemed superior) get to impose, through education, law, and even violence, their "true vision" of the common good.

With all our talk today about diversity, we (rightly) reject neo-Nazi racists, because we rightly see that there are erroneous forms of the common good that are "totalitarian" - that obliterate individuals and destroy particular groups. What is important to see here is that diversity alone cannot support the common good - instead, we do have to have a vision of the good that is truly shared, a basic vision of inherent dignity for every person on which we agree, and objective shared conditions for human flourishing that we all agree on. This means that we have to become attentive to perceiving the common good and how it is always needed, even amidst historical and cultural diversity.