

The Common Good

Commenting on the many economic and social problems that American society now confronts, Newsweek columnist Robert J. Samuelson recently wrote: "We face a choice between a society where people accept modest sacrifices for a common good or a more contentious society where group selfishly protect their own benefits." Newsweek is not the only voice calling for a recognition of and commitment to the "common good." Daniel Callahan, an expert on bioethics, argues that solving the current crisis in our health care system--rapidly rising costs and dwindling access--requires replacing the current "ethic of individual rights" with an "ethic of the common good".

Appeals to the common good have also surfaced in discussions of business' social responsibilities, discussions of environmental pollution, discussions of our lack of investment in education, and discussions of the problems of crime and poverty. Everywhere, it seems, social commentators are claiming that our most fundamental social problems grow out of a widespread pursuit of individual interests.

What exactly is "the common good", and why has it come to have such a critical place in current discussions of problems in our society? The common good is a notion that originated over two thousand years ago in the writings of Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero. More recently, the contemporary ethicist, John Rawls, defined the common good as "certain general conditions that are...equally to everyone's advantage". The Catholic religious tradition, which has a long history of struggling to define and promote the common good, defines it as "the sum of those conditions of social life which allow social groups and their individual members relatively thorough and ready access to their own fulfillment." The common good, then, consists primarily of having the social systems, institutions, and environments on which we all depend work in a manner that benefits all people. Examples of particular common goods or parts of the common good include an accessible and affordable public health care system, and effective system of public safety and security, peace among the nations of the world, a just legal and political system, and unpolluted natural environment, and a flourishing economic system. Because such systems, institutions, and environments have such a powerful impact on the well-being of members of a society, it is no surprise that virtually every social problem in one way or another is linked to how well these systems and institutions are functioning.

As these examples suggest, the common good does not just happen. Establishing and maintaining the common good require the cooperative efforts of some, often of many, people. Just as keeping a park free of litter depends on

each user picking up after himself, so also maintaining the social conditions from which we all benefit requires the cooperative efforts of citizens. But these efforts pay off, for the common good is a good to which all members of society have access, and from whose enjoyment no one can be easily excluded. All persons, for example, enjoy the benefits of clean air or an unpolluted environment, or any of our society's other common goods. In fact, something counts as a common good only to the extent that it is a good to which all have access.

It might seem that since all citizens benefit from the common good, we would all willingly respond to urgings that we each cooperate to establish and maintain the common good. But numerous observers have identified a number of obstacles that hinder us, as a society, from successfully doing so.

First, according to some philosophers, the very idea of a common good is inconsistent with a pluralistic society like ours. Different people have different ideas about what is worthwhile or what constitutes "the good life for human beings", differences that have increased during the last few decades as the voices of more and more previously silenced groups, such as women and minorities, have been heard. Given these differences, some people urge, it will be impossible for us to agree on what particular kind of social systems, institutions, and environments we will all pitch in to support.

And even if we agreed upon what we all valued, we would certainly disagree about the relative values things have for us. While all may agree, for example, that an affordable health system, a healthy educational system, and a clean environment are all parts of the common good, some will say that more should be invested in health than in education, while others will favor directing resources to the environment over both health and education. Such disagreements are bound to undercut our ability to evoke a sustained and widespread commitment to the common good. In the face of such pluralism, efforts to bring about the common good can only lead to adopting or promoting the views of some, while excluding others, violating the principle of treating people equally. Moreover, such efforts would force everyone to support some specific notion of the common good, violating the freedom of those who do not share in that goal, and inevitably leading to paternalism (imposing one group's preference on others), tyranny, and oppression.

A second problem encountered by proponents of the common good is what is sometimes called the "free-rider problem". The benefits that a common good provides are, as we noted, available to everyone, including those who choose not to do their part to maintain the common good. Individuals can become "free riders" by taking the benefits the common good provides while refusing to do their part to support the common good. An adequate water supply, for

example, is a common good from which all people benefit. But to maintain an adequate supply of water during a drought, people must conserve water, which entails sacrifices. Some individuals may be reluctant to do their share, however, since they know that so long as enough other people conserve, they can enjoy the benefits without reducing their own consumption. If enough people become free riders in this way, the common good which depends on their support will be destroyed. Many observers believe that this is exactly what has happened to many of our common goods, such as the environment or education, where the reluctance of all person to support efforts to maintain the health of these systems has led to their virtual collapse.

The third problem encountered by attempts to promote the common good is that of individualism. Our historical traditions place a high value on individual freedom, on personal rights, and on allowing each person to "do her own thing". Our culture views society as comprised of separate independent individuals who are free to pursue their own individual goals and interests without interference from others. In this individualistic culture it is difficult, perhaps impossible, to convince people that they should sacrifice some of their freedom, some of their personal goals, and some of their self-interest, for the sake of the "common good". Our cultural traditions, in fact, reinforce the individual who thinks that she should not have to contribute to the community's common good, but should be left free to pursue her own personal ends.

Finally, appeals to the common good are confronted by the problem of an unequal sharing of burdens. Maintaining a common good often requires that particular individuals or particular groups bear costs that are much greater than those borne by others. Maintaining an unpolluted environment, for example, may require that particular firms that pollute install costly pollution control devices, undercutting profits. Making employment opportunities more equal may require that some groups, such as white males, sacrifice their own employment chances. Making the health system affordable and accessible to all may require that insurers accept lower premiums, that physicians accept lower salaries, or that those with particularly costly diseases or conditions forego the medical treatment on which their live depend. Forcing particular groups or individuals to carry such unequal burdens "for the sake of the common good", is, at least arguably, unjust. Moreover, the prospect of having to carry such heavy and unequal burdens leads such groups and individuals to resist any attempts to secure common goods.

All of these problems pose considerable obstacles to those who call for an ethic of the common good. Still, appeals to the common good ought not to be dismissed. For they urge us to reflect on broad questions concerning the kind

of society we want to become and how we are to achieve that society. They also challenge us to view ourselves as members of the same community and, while respecting and valuing the freedom of individuals to pursue their own goals, to recognize and further those goals we share in common.