To the faculty, students, and staff of Hekima College, 
who taught me much about the reality of solidarity 
and the need for the global common good.

Opus justitiae pax.
CHAPTER ONE

The eclipse of the public

Over two millennia ago, Aristotle set the challenge this book will address. Aristotle’s aim was to discern fitting goals for a good human life. At the beginning of the *Nicomachean Ethics* he argued that a human life can be judged good when it is shaped by a relatively consistent pursuit of ends that are themselves good. Thus much of Aristotle’s moral reflection was devoted to determining the nature of the good that people should seek. On this basis he wanted to specify what lifestyles can be called genuinely good patterns of living. His entire understanding of morality was built upon this conviction that a good life is one devoted to the pursuit of good purposes or ends.

One of Aristotle’s most significant conclusions was that a good life is oriented to goods shared with others – the common good of the larger society of which one is a part. The good life of a single person and the quality of the common life persons share with one another in society are linked. Thus the good of the individual and the common good are inseparable. In fact, the common good of the community should have primacy in setting direction for the lives of individuals, for it is a higher good than the particular goods of private persons. In Aristotle’s words,

Even if the good is the same for the individual and the city, the good of the city clearly is the greater and more perfect thing to attain and to safeguard. The attainment of the good for one person alone is, to be sure, a source of satisfaction; yet to secure it for a nation and for cities is nobler and more divine.¹

¹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1094b. This is an adaptation of Martin Ostwald’s translation (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1962). The Greek *polis* is translated “state” by Ostwald, but “city” has been used here to avoid the impression that Aristotle is speaking of the good of
Aristotle wrote these words in a context of the Greek city-state (the _polis_), a social and political form quite different from the modern nation-state. So it is not immediately evident what the interdependence of the good of the individual and the common good would mean in the contemporary context. It is clear nonetheless that Aristotle envisioned the larger good realized in social relationships as superior to the good that can be achieved in the life of a single person considered apart from the community.

Indeed Aristotle spoke of the common good realized in community not only as nobler but as “more divine” than the good of persons considered one at a time. This religious dimension of the common good has been echoed throughout much of the later history of Christian reflection on morality, politics, and what is called spirituality today. For example, Thomas Aquinas’s discussions of Christian morality often cited Aristotle on the primacy of the common good in the moral life. Aquinas’s _Summa Contra Gentiles_ reaffirmed Aristotle’s statement that the good of the community is more “godlike” or “divine” than the good of an individual human being. Aquinas went on to identify the good to be sought by all persons in common with the very reality of God. St. Thomas wrote that “the supreme good, namely God, is the common good, since the good of all things depends on God.” Thus the good of each person is linked with the good shared with others in community, and the highest good common to the life of all is God’s own self. For Thomas Aquinas, therefore, the pursuit of the common good carries out the Bible’s double commandment to love God with all one’s heart, mind, and soul, and to love one’s neighbor as oneself.

This centrality of the common good in Christian life was echoed by Ignatius Loyola at the dawn of modernity in the sixteenth century. Ignatius harked back both to Aristotle and to Aquinas when he set forth the spirit that should govern the Jesuit order he was founding. He wrote that all the decisions of his followers should seek the broader, common good, rather than goals that were less comprehensive in scope. In the document that lay out his founding vision of the Jesuit order, Ignatius stated that “the glory of God” is the goal that should energize all of his followers’ activities. But he immediately linked God’s glory with the terrestrial reality of the common good. Indeed the _Formula of the Institute_ of the Jesuit order came close to identifying the two ideas when it said that all of the order’s activities should be directed “according to what will seem expedient to the glory of God and the common good.” This single phrase sums up much that is central to Ignatius Loyola’s religious vision.

For the first Jesuits the pursuit of this vision of service to the common good included obviously religious ministries, such as the defense and propagation of Christian faith, preaching and other ministries of the Word of God, and the administration of the sacraments. But it also included tasks that might appear more secular, such as the education of youth and the illiterate, reconciling the estranged, and compassionate assistance to those in prisons or hospitals. Such pursuits were mentioned by Ignatius simply as examples of ways toward the common good that he identified with manifestations of God’s glory on earth. So for Ignatius the pursuit of this-worldly aspects of the common good was an eminent responsibility of Christians and closely linked with their vocation from God.

Ignatius Loyola’s vision of the common good was extraordinarily expansive in scope. Indeed he saw it as _universal_, extending well beyond the city-state envisioned by Aristotle, the medieval kingdoms of Aquinas’s understanding or the Renaissance republics closer to his own time. Ignatius saw the common good as the good of the

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3 This identification can be found in the apostolic letter of Pope Julius III, _Expositio actitum_ (July 21, 1550) that gave papal approval to the “formula of the Institute” of the Society of Jesus. It is contained in the contemporary normative documents of the Jesuit order, _The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus and Their Complimentary Norms, A Complete English Translation of the Official Latin Texts_ (Saint Louis Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1990), 1st Formulas of the Institute of the Society of Jesus, Julius III, no. 1, p. 4.

whole of humanity, extending to the ends of the earth. The phrase “the more universal good” appears repeatedly in the Constitutions of the Jesuit order as the criterion for decisions in the service of God and the church. This vision of the more universal common good made Ignatius’s first followers among the first Westerners to travel beyond the boundaries of the Europe familiar to most previous Christian thinkers. It led them to encounters with the cultures of India, China, and the Americas that had been inaccessible and even unknown. In these missions they sought to bring both the gospel and European knowledge to these cultures. In their encounters with these societies they predictably manifested the same prejudices as their European contemporaries. But in some notable instances they rose above these biases with appreciation for the high achievements of these cultures, seeking to learn as well as to teach. This was evident in their work of constructing the first grammars and dictionaries for Europeans of the newly encountered languages and in their often controversial adaptations of Christian doctrine and worship in light of indigenous religions. Thus echoing Aristotle but going well beyond him by stressing the scope of the common good, Ignatius wrote that “the more universal the good is, the more it is divine.” Therefore Ignatius’s followers were to choose ministries that gave preference “to persons and places which, once benefited themselves, are a cause of extending the good to many others.” At its best, this pursuit of the more universal common good was not simply envisioned as the one-directional transfer of the European vision of the good life to non-European societies. It was to be characterized by an exchange among understandings of what truly good lives could look like.

This brief historical sketch indicates that service to the common good was central to the normative vision of the good life through much of Western thought, from classical Greek moral philosophy, to medieval European Christian theology, to a form of early modern Christian spirituality in its initial encounter with the global realities that have become so central in contemporary consciousness. Oddly enough, however, one rarely finds a definition of the common good in these earlier sources, despite the fact that the concept was so central for them. We can, however, give a general description of what the term often meant to them by contrasting it with several terms that are currently in use.

The common good for these earlier authors was clearly different from the largely economic and utilitarian concept of the general welfare. The notion of general welfare, as ordinarily understood today, sums up the economic welfare of the individual members of the society into one aggregate sum. The gross national product, for example, is frequently taken as an indicator of the general welfare in this way. As has often been noted, however, this kind of utilitarian standard pays little or no attention to how this overall sum is distributed among the members of the society. Indeed the GNP could be growing at a rapid pace while some members of society grow poor or fall into destitution. This general welfare thus need not be common to all the members of society. This aggregative good can increase while the well-being of some or many of a society’s members declines.

The concept of the public interest is often used today as an alternative to this aggregative notion of general welfare. The idea of the public interest builds upon the modern commitment to the fundamental dignity and rights of all persons. Protection of these rights is thus seen as in everyone’s interest. Public institutions and policies that will secure these rights for all persons are thus seen as helping realize the interests of everyone. Understood this way, the public interest is a disaggregative concept. It breaks down the public good into the effects it has upon the well-being or rights of

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7 Constitutions of the Society of Jesus, no. 619.

the individuals who make up society. Thus, it too lacks the richer understanding of the common that is implicit in many of the authors who shaped the premodern tradition of the common good.

The recently revitalized idea of “public goods” is perhaps the closest contemporary analogue to the idea of the common good in more classical sources. A public good can be described as a good that is present for all members of a relevant community if it is there for any of them. More technically, it is “non-rivalrous in consumption.” This means that the enjoyment of this good by some people does not mean that it cannot be enjoyed by others. A beautiful sunset or a clean environment does not become unavailable to one person because it is being enjoyed by someone else. Second, a public good is “non-excludable.” Its benefits cannot easily be confined to just some people by excluding others from these benefits. The clean air of a healthy environment, for example, is not like bottled oxygen that may be available to some but not others. If it is there for all, it is there for everyone; if it is present for anyone, it is present for all.9

The concept of public goods, however, lacks an important element present in earlier conceptions of the common good. These public goods are largely seen as extrinsic or external to the relationships that exist among those who form the community or society in question. This is easiest to see when the community is an intimate one like a family. The goods shared in a family include the house they live in and the income they share. In a family that is functioning well, these goods are non-rivalrous in consumption and non-excludable. But there is more to a good family or friendship than the sharing in such extrinsic goods. The relationships of concern or affection among siblings and friends go deeper than the sharing of such goods. These positive relationships are, in fact, preconditions for such sharing. There are analogies to relationships of this sort in less intimate societies like cities or states, where the relationships are better characterized by the presence or absence of mutual respect. The quality of such relationships among a society’s members is itself part of the good that is, or is not,


achieved in it. One of the key elements in the common good of a community or society, therefore, is the good of being a community or society at all. This shared good is immanent within the relationships that bring this community or society into being. Aristotle, for example, understood the polis as an assembly of citizens engaged in debate about how they should live together. The relationships of reciprocal interaction among citizens brought this community into being and went beyond the general welfare achieved by their economic exchanges or the public good of the architecture of the forum where they conducted their debates. Similarly, for Thomas Aquinas the common good included the bonds of affection and even love that linked people together in communities. Throughout this book we will be seeking to clarify the relevance of the varied ideas of general welfare, public interest, public goods, and the common good immanent in mutual human relationships to some of the major issues we face in public life today.

THE HISTORICAL ROOTS OF THE ECLIPSE

Today, however, the idea of the common good is in trouble. John Rawls speaks for many observers in the West today when he says that the pluralism of the contemporary landscape makes it impossible to envision a social good on which all can agree. This is the intellectual and theoretical challenge to the common good today: diversity of visions of the good life makes it difficult or even impossible to attain a shared vision of the common good. Such a shared vision cannot survive as an intellectual goal if all ideas of the good are acknowledged to be partial, incomplete, and incompatible. This pluralism also makes it impossible to achieve a strong form of social unity in practice without repression or tyranny. This is the practical challenge: pursuit of a common good as envisioned by Aristotle, Aquinas, and Ignatius must be abandoned as a practical social objective incompatible with modern freedoms. Thus Rawls asserts that the Aristotelian, Thomistic, and Ignatian vision of the common good “is no longer a political possibility for those who accept the constraints of liberty and toleration of democratic institutions.”10

Such conclusions are the direct descendants of social and intellectual developments that led to the normative vision that has come to prevail in the West today. The reigning philosophy gives priority to protecting space for private, autonomous choice. It is called liberalism because of its insistence that showing equal respect for all persons means protecting the liberty of individuals to determine their own form of life when they disagree about what form of life is a good one. In Ronald Dworkin's formulation, it is based on the conviction that equal treatment of citizens demands that "political decisions must be, so far as possible, independent of any particular conception of the good life." Such a stand of neutrality toward ideas of the good life is a necessary element in treating people equally because different persons in fact hold divergent understandings of what counts as good. To favor one conception of the good over another is to favor some persons over others and to treat them unequally. Thus respect for the worth of individuals requires tolerance for the different visions of the good life they hold. In this way, affirming the equality of persons is linked with being non-judgmental about what ways of life are good, at least in public and political life. In public life, all encompassing understandings of the common good must be subordinated to the importance of tolerance. A live-and-let-live ethos thus leads to what John Dewey once called an "eclipse of the public." The good that can be achieved in the shared domain of public life is hidden from view as protection of individual, private well-being becomes the center of normative concern.

The sources of this eclipse of the common good by the reality of pluralism run deep in the modern social and intellectual history of the West. The conviction that pursuit of the common good must be subordinate to respect for equality rests in part on judgments that have been formed by major social and political currents in this history. These judgments are historical and contingent, not self-evident or necessary like the conclusions of mathematics and logic. So it will be useful to recall the historical basis for these judgments. This will set the stage for an inquiry into whether the conclusion that the common good remains in conflict with respect for equality remains valid under the social conditions prevailing today.

For Aristotle in ancient Greece, the common good was the goal of the whole of public life. He conceived of the human being as a social or political animal (zoon politikon) whose good is essentially bound up with the good of the polis. Indeed he maintained that "a polis exists for the sake of a good life, and not for life only." Individuals lead good lives when they make contributions to the good of the city-state. Aristotle, of course, developed his understanding of the shared good of the community in the context of the Greek polis, a political unit of quite limited size, and he knew that there were limits to the size of a city-state. Further, the Athenian life of Athens's time was not a homogeneous and egalitarian community. It included significant numbers of resident aliens (metics) and slaves who were not entitled to participate in public life as citizens. Women were excluded from public life. Such limits on extent and inclusiveness are prime reasons for the suspicion that the idea of the common good is irrelevant or dangerous in a large and diverse society that seeks to treat its members equally.

Nevertheless there are grounds for questioning whether this suspicion is the only lasting lesson egalitarians can draw from Greek thought today. Aristotle understood that the free males of Athens could be treated as equal citizens even when they held different understandings of the good life. The public domain of equal citizenship was the place where different understandings of the good life were to be debated and argued about. The public sphere was the forum where a working idea of the common good was to be forged. It was neither the venue where the more powerful imposed their understanding of the good life on those who were weaker, nor a domain of disengagement from those with different views. There was a third alternative to tyranny on the one hand and abandoning

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pursuit of the common good on the other. The active engagement of free citizens in public debate about how they would live together was the mark of their equality. Our modern commitment to the equal dignity of all persons rightly challenges Aristotle's exclusion of women, slaves, andmetics from the role of citizen. But it does not follow that, when citizens hold different understandings of the good life, treating them equally requires that the pursuit of the common good is potentially oppressive or illusory. Equal citizens can start from different understandings of the good but go on to participate actively in defining and pursuing the good they share in common.

In light of Aristotle's thought, the question we face today is whether Aristotle's understanding of free citizenship can be extended to all while also maintaining the pursuit of the common good as a realistic social objective. Today we are acutely aware that a nation as vast and diverse as the United States cannot hope to achieve the kind of social unity that might have been possible in the Athenian polis. The size and diversity of the United States, and even more of the world as a whole, make attaining common agreement on the human good today a much more formidable problem than Aristotle ever faced. Aristotle, however, also took disagreements about the best way to organize public life very seriously. In fact he began his investigation into the good of the polis by conducting a kind of survey of the different political systems that were in place in the known world of his time. Such an inductive approach to identifying the shape of the good society holds much promise, and the argument below will return to it. But Aristotle's goal was to identify a good form of public life for a very modest-sized city-state, not for a vast and pluralistic country like the United States or for an interdependent world-wide community. The change in historical context between Aristotle's Athens and the United States today is one of the chief sources of doubts about whether we can regard the common good as a realistic goal today. Historical context and historical experience, not eternally valid facts, are the source of these doubts.

In a somewhat similar way, Thomas Aquinas thought about the common good in the relatively homogeneous context of medieval

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17 Aristotle refers both to "what has been contributed by our predecessors" and to "our collection of constitutions" as the basis of his study of the good of political communities in Nicomachean Ethics, 1181b.

18 This is evident in the way Thomas Aquinas assumed that the religious practices of non-Christians should only be publicly tolerated within Christendom when intolerance would do greater harm than that caused by the public presence of the non-Christian rites themselves. See Summa Theologica 11-12, q. 10, art. 11. Citations of the Summa Theologica are from Summa Theologica, 5 vols., trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Allen, TX: Christian Classics, 1948). It should be noted that Aquinas did think that such toleration was often called for. His reasoning in support of such tolerance, however, is very different from the liberal defense of tolerance. It is also very different from the Catholic position officially adopted at the Second Vatican Council.
between Catholics and Protestants, and among different kinds of Protestants as well, led to sharply conflicting conceptions of what a good society should look like. In fact these conflicts led to overt religious war and persecution. The sixteenth- and seventeenth-century wars of religion were caused in significant measure by efforts to promote ideas of the social good narrowly based on particular religious understandings. These religious understandings of the common good were matters of a depth that would admit no compromise by those who held them faithfully. These sixteenth-century religious visions of the good society were the roots of "irreconcilable latent conflict."20 When these latent conflicts came to the surface, the consequences were very bloody indeed. For example, when the Peace of Westphalia finally ended the Thirty Years War in 1648, 15 to 20 percent of the population of the Holy Roman Empire had perished from war-related causes.21

This memory of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century strife has marked Western historical imagination with a deep suspicion toward all proposals to base social life on convictions about the good life. Visions of the full human good, especially religious visions, have come to appear as sources of division, not unity. Political theorists often appeal to the religious wars that followed the Reformation for historical, experience-based evidence of the dangers that lurk in any attempt to base public life on ideas of the common good.22 They fear that the outcome of pursuing strong ideas of the common good will be war between groups that hold competing ideas of the good life, oppression of those holding minority views of the good by those in the majority, or straightforward tyranny. In Rawls's words, "A public and workable agreement on a single and general comprehensive conception [of the good] could be maintained only by the oppressive use of state power."23 Thus a public regime based on a positive moral commitment to tolerance came to be seen as the only reasonable alternative to continued religious war. The memory of post-Reformation religious conflicts remains deep in the Western psyche today and it is reinforced by contemporary conflicts that have explicitly religious dimensions. Because of these historical experiences, the notion of the common good seems very dangerous to many political theorists in the West.

This suspicion is not limited to ideas of the common good that are based on Christian religious convictions. It extends to understandings of the common good found in the Western political tradition known as civic republicanism. This republican tradition is represented by thinkers as religiously different from Thomas Aquinas as were Cicero, Machiavelli, and Rousseau. These thinkers envisioned personal well-being and the well-being of the republic as inseparable. Being a good person required fulfilling one's responsibilities as a citizen for the public good. Indeed personal virtue and good citizenship were often identified in republican thought. This was an appropriation of Aristotle's understanding of the bonds between fellow citizens as the most honorable forms of friendship.24 And very recently Hannah Arendt sought to retrieve this high estimate of citizenship by identifying genuinely human action with

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19 It is worth noting that in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as today, conflicts with religious dimensions often have political and economic causes that are at least as important as the religious disagreements that become the rallying points for the participants. This can raise questions about whether religious tolerance will resolve such conflicts or whether other solutions to the economic and social causes must be found. If the latter is the case, such conflicts need to be viewed in a larger context than the liberal commitment to tolerance can provide on its own.

20 See Rawls, Political Liberalism, pp. xxv–xxvi.


22 For example, John Rawls states that "the historical origin of political liberalism, and liberalism more generally, is the Reformation and its aftermath, with the long controversies over religious tolerance in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries." Political Liberalism, p. xii.

23 Rawls, "The Idea of an Overlapping Consensus," Oxford Journal of Legal Studies 7 (1987), 1–25, at 4. See Rawls's more recent formulation of this idea in his Political Liberalism, pp. 36–38. Rawls acknowledges that basing the institutions of society upon a "conception of justice that can be understood as in some way advancing the common good" (usually the common good understood in religious terms) need not lead to religious war and persecution. As he understands the idea of the common good, however, such a society will not treat all its members as free and equal citizens but, at best, as entitled to have their good taken into account and to be consulted in the formation of policies. He sees such a society as based on a "reasonable consultation hierarchy" and distinguishes it from a democratic society as understood in liberal terms. This, however, is not the only way to conceive of the role of the common good in a free society, as I will try to indicate below. See Rawls, Political Liberalism, p. 109, and Rawls, The Law of Peoples (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), pp. 67–78.

24 Aristotle writes that "friendship seems to hold states together" and that "concord is friendship among fellow citizens" in Nicomachean Ethics, 1155a and 1156b. "State" is Oswald's translation of polis. Aristotle himself, of course, raised the question of how large a polis could be before this kind of unity becomes impossible. See Nicomachean Ethics, 1170b–1171a.
the kind of communication and argument about public affairs that takes place among fellow citizens.\textsuperscript{25}

This civic republican tradition, however, carries dangers that bring it under the same kind of suspicion as is directed at religious conceptions of the common good today. For Rawls, any comprehensive conception of the good life, whether religious, philosophical, or moral, carries the same dangers as became evident in the wars of religion. So we must abandon the notion that political life can achieve the kind of strong community for which the republican tradition hopes.\textsuperscript{26} Pursuit of such communal bonds in political life carries a high danger of conflict. It may also require repression or oppression. This is the "dark underside" of republicanism pointed out by Jean Bethke Elshtain, despite her sympathies for the nobility of its understanding of citizenship. The civic virtue that has often moved people and nations to great actions together has had one glaring problem historically: it has frequently been "armed."\textsuperscript{27} From republican Sparta, to Plato's ideal republic at Athens, to Machiavelli's exhortations to Lorenzo de'Medici on the usefulness of fear in governing Florence, to Rousseau's elevation of the general will over that of the individual, there has been a notable tendency to identify the common good with political control and military victory. Civic virtù becomes a close relative of military valor. So the same fear that rises from the memory of religious wars is brought to the surface by talk of republican virtue. The same apprehension arises about the high place it grants to the idea of the common good. These fears lead to suspicion that any notion of the common good, whether based on religious or secular-philosophical grounds, will lead to trampling upon the freedom and dignity of those who do not share it. Within this historically formed imaginative framework, respect for equal dignity appears possible only by standing on guard against the imposition of values we do not already hold. A certain wariness sets the agenda for how we deal with diversity and pluralism. This wariness is a deep bias imprinted on the contemporary social imagination by some of the major currents in the modern social and political history of Europe. The question this leaves open, however, is whether this imaginative predisposition fits the contours of the history that is unfolding today. We will argue below that it does not.

PLURALISM AND THE COMMON GOOD TODAY

The relevance of these historical considerations is not confined to the role they have played in calling the idea of the common good into question in academic philosophy and political theory. Skepticism about the compatibility of a shared vision of the good life with respect for freedom is widespread in contemporary popular consciousness in the West today, especially in the United States. People today are increasingly aware that they have many different kinds of neighbors, both nearby and far away. And these neighbors have many ideas about what a good life is. The reality of pluralism impinges on people daily as they rub shoulders at their workplace with those who have different religious beliefs and cultural traditions, and whose race or ethnicity is different from their own. They hear languages other than English as they commute to work and do the shopping. This diversity can, of course, be seen as a source of variety that enriches human life both for individuals and in society. But the experience of diversity is also accompanied by regular reports in the media of ethnic and religious conflict.\textsuperscript{28} Television also

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\textsuperscript{25} Hannah Arendt, \textit{The Human Condition: A Study of the Central Dilemmas Facing Modern Man} (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor, 1959), esp. pp. 155-185. Arendt writes that the \textit{polis} as the sphere of human action "properly speaking, is not the city-state in its physical location; it is the organization of the people as it arises out of acting and speaking together, and its true space lies between people living together for this purpose, no matter where they happen to be." (177). Thus the question of whether the Greek idea of the \textit{polis} is viable today is a question of the possibility of genuine communication and argument about the public affairs of a nation or a world as large, diverse, and complex as ours.

\textsuperscript{26} See Rawls, \textit{Political Liberalism}, p. 146.


\textsuperscript{28} Diana Eck writes that "pluralism is not just another word for diversity. It goes beyond mere plurality or diversity to active engagement with that plurality...to the active attempt to understand the other..." It will become clear in my discussion of intellectual solidarity in chapter 6 that I fully endorse this goal. Eck also writes, however, this engagement and effort to understand "is not a given but must be created." Whether this is possible is the issue being raised here. See Diana Eck, \textit{A New Religious America: How a "Christian Country" Has Become the World's Most宗教ously Diverse Nation} (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), p. 70.
brings images of urban gang conflict, drive-by shootings, and drug-use into middle-class homes. Under the influence of such reports and images, diversity can seem more a threat than an enrichment. If people who are different from oneself seem at least potentially dangerous, it becomes difficult to see them as neighbors. It becomes hard to imagine that a life that is shared with them in significant ways could also be a good life.

Some years ago the political theorist Michael Sandel stated that “we can know a good in common that we cannot know alone.”\(^\text{99}\) Sandel was suggesting that a shared social life makes knowledge of the common good possible. His argument also implies that a shared life together makes practical pursuit of this common good a social necessity. This book will argue that Sandel’s statement is true. But it is difficult to make a realistic case for this position when society is as aware of its diversity as we have become today. This awareness of diversity is deeply tinged by historical memories of religious wars and by images of ethnic and religious conflict from the contemporary scene. Sandel’s statement depends upon a sizeable number of people being able to appreciate and value existing bonds of social connection with each other. This positive experience of social interdependence enables persons to learn from one another, thus giving rise to understandings of the good life that could not be envisioned apart from their connections. But if large numbers of those with whom one rubs shoulders are seen as strangers, positive experiences of social unity are unlikely to arise. It is even less likely when divergences of culture, tradition, and ways of life make them look like threats to each other. When fear of these threats sets the tone, interaction with people who are different is perceived as a danger to be avoided. Serious interaction and mutual vulnerability can seem more like a “common bad” than a good to be shared in common. Defense of one’s turf becomes the first requirement of the good life. The common good becomes a will-o’-the-wisp in such an environment. So a positive experience of life together, common knowledge of what a good life is, and the philosophical idea of the common good itself all seem to evanescce together.


This is a relatively new situation for the West in general and for the United States in particular. Pluralism and group conflict, of course, have been around for a long time. The novelty today is that consciousness of pluralism has become routine. Cultural and religious differences are taken for granted as a part of the way things are and will remain in the future. In post-Reformation Europe, knowledge of religious differences between Protestants and Catholics was real, but such disagreements were not simply accepted as here to stay. Believers hoped for conversion or victory over their religious adversaries at an unspecified future date. Similarly, in the days of the Cold War before the tumultuous events of 1989, Westerners could map the globe into the free world, the Communist world, and those regions over which the other two blocs contended for influence. Within this framework one could envision the common good as the expansion of Western values throughout the world. Such a shared vision of the good society of the future followed from the principle that freedom is better than tyranny. Alternatively, Marxists in the Eastern bloc could project the common good as the international victory of socialism. The end of the Cold War has destroyed these simplifications and made the picture much more complex.

Several years ago Francis Fukuyama predicted that the end of the ideological conflict of the Cold War would lead to the “end of history,” with Western liberal democracy spreading across the globe and making future politics peaceful but boring.\(^\text{10}\) This now seems naïve to say the least. The rise of ethnic and religious conflict on the international stage has uncovered latent differences among peoples that seem to go at least as deep as the formerly contending Western and Marxist ideologies. For example, awareness of the presence of Islam as a major political force in the world has grown rapidly in the West, thanks to the visibility of the Ayatollah Khomeini, Muammar Khaddafi, Saddam Hussein, and most especially in light of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York that led the United States and its allies into full-scale war in Afghanistan. In the face of this Islamic resurgence, the France

that gave the West the revolutionary principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity has been unsure whether Muslim girls should be permitted to wear religiously prescribed head-coverings in French schools. Agonizing conflicts in Northern Ireland, the former Yugoslavia, and Central Africa have also raised new questions about the possibility of harmony among people with different traditions about the meaning of the good life.

One does not have to look very far to find similar divisions among communities within the United States. The country faces divisive questions about the meaning of religious freedom today. Do First Amendment protections of religious freedom extend to permitting Native Americans to use peyote in their religious rites, to Caribbean immigrants practicing Santeria rituals involving animal sacrifice, and to those citizens who want to send their children to religiously affiliated schools with the financial support that vouchers would provide? Court rulings on such cases have stimulated efforts to pass a “Religious Freedom Restoration Act,” implying that the first American freedom has been undermined and needs to be restored. The emergence of new religious movements, “cults” and even militias in the United States show that at least some Americans believe that the traditional religious and social institutions of the country cannot be relied on to help them live good lives. On the basis of memories of slavery, lynchings, ethnic exclusion, and newly awakened awareness of historical patterns of abuse and discrimination, advocacy groups argue forcefully against trusting the traditional ways of doing things. These traditional ways and institutions do not protect their well-being or give them a fair chance to live good lives. Others see these advocates as threats to the republic and respond in kind. Thus debates about remedies for the effects of racial discrimination, for example, have been deeply divided on whether equal protection of fundamental rights should be colorblind and opposed to affirmative action, or color-conscious and supportive of affirmative action.31 In Martin Marty’s words

During the final quarter of the twentieth century many groups of citizens have come to accuse others of having wounded them by attempting to

impose a single national identity and culture on all. [An] other set, in turn, has accused its newly militant adversaries of tearing the republic apart. They do this, it is said, by insisting on their separate identities and by promoting their own mutually exclusive subcultures at the expense of the common weal. Taken together, these contrasting motions produce a shock to the civil body, a trauma in the cultural system, and a paralysis in the neural web of social interactions.32

In this way, the injustices of the past haunt the present in the United States today and threaten new conflicts.

Awareness of diversity is thus a prominent fact in daily experience today. When difference generates conflict, fear grows. And such fear makes further conflict more likely. This raises the spectre that we have fallen into a downward spiral in which awareness of differences leads to conflict, which in turn leads to fear, more conflict, more defensive boundaries, and onward to deepened perceptions of difference. At least this much can be said: in the face of these tensions we cannot simply presume that there is a good shared in common by people who are more or less the same, nor is it obvious that this shared good can be readily identified. Indeed quite a few social commentators think the hope that we can identify and pursue the common good is utopian today. Perhaps it is a nostalgic hangover from time past, when people lived side-by-side in close-knit neighborhoods and in countries where those who were significantly different could be kept at a safe distance. We may be inclined to say: “Once upon a time there was a common life where what was good for one was good for all. In those days we could hold town meetings and elect representatives to decide how to achieve the shared good that benefits all of us. But today, the best we can hope for is tolerance toward all that makes us different from one another, and at worst we have to be ready to fight.” Thus when people disagree about the good life and take it for granted that this disagreement is here to stay, the hope that they can “know a good in common that they cannot know alone” seems a rather thin one.


32 Martin E. Marty, The One and the Many: America’s Struggle for the Common Good (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 3. Marty uses the term “trauma” to characterize this set of conflicts over the past several decades throughout this book. See the book’s index under “trauma.”
Pluralism, by definition, means disagreement about what is finally true and good. A pluralist society is one where people do not share an understanding of the full breadth and depth of the good life. Thus almost by definition pluralism seems to make conceiving of a common good an impossible task. More strongly, it suggests that we should abandon efforts to encourage people to live in a way that realizes a common vision lest these efforts perpetuate past injustices, deepen conflicts, or even precipitate war. Where there is no shared vision of the good life does it make sense to speak of a community at all? When people who hold different understandings of what makes for a good life regard each other warily and with suspicion, it would be more accurate to speak of a tense juxtaposition of human beings than of a community. Perhaps that is the best we can hope for. Perhaps the pursuit of a vision of the good life to be lived in common by all is a dangerous prelude to oppression and even tyranny.

PUBLIC OPINION: THOU SHALT NOT JUDGE

Some recent social-scientific investigations have concluded that failure to recognize this situation is precipitating a deep cultural rift in the United States today. This *Kulturkampf* is punitively not restricted to disagreements on single issues such as abortion or affirmative action, though such disagreements certainly exist. Rather, authors such as James Davison Hunter, Christopher Lasch, and Gertrude Himmelfarb have suggested that a fundamental conflict of world-views has developed that is splitting American citizens into opposed camps. In Hunter's analysis these splits are pitting orthodox or traditional wings of the middle class against those who regard themselves as progressive. In Lasch's reading, it sets the middle-class working people against upper-middle-class managerial elites. In both cases the battle lines of this supposed culture war are located within the middle class itself. In Himmelfarb's view, the division cuts through class lines and through lines of religion, race, ethnicity, and gender as well. It is an "ethics gap," with "moral disarray on the one hand and religious-cum-moral revival on the other."34

If this picture of culture war is true, the consequences for the United States as a whole could be ominous. Aristotle and many after him have long argued that societies with a large middle class are less subject to internal conflict than those polarized between rich and poor. Middle economic status supposedly makes people politically moderate, strengthening the stability of society. In Aristotle's words, "it is manifest that the best political community is formed by citizens of the middle class, and that those states are likely to be well administered in which the middle class is large . . . Where the middle class is large, there are least likely to be factions and dissensions."35 Following this line of reasoning, a polarization of the middle class would threaten social and political stability. Weakening of middle-class consensus about what constitutes the good life would act as a solvent on the glue that holds the whole society together. Thus Alan Wolfe states that "if even a part of this story about middle-class decline and fracturing is true, the implications could not be greater. The issue is simple to state: an angry, inward-looking, and hopelessly divided middle class is not a middle class at all."36 Thus the hypothesis that there is a culture war underway in the United States raises "the prospect that the democratic stability that has kept the country together since the Civil War will no longer be attainable." One might add that middle-class instability and internal conflict in the United States would also have very great implications for the world as a whole.

For this reason the contention that the United States is not only pluralistic but culturally at war with itself over a broad range of moral values calls for careful scrutiny. Wolfe believes that the facts do not support the culture-war hypothesis and he is relieved to be able to say so. Nevertheless, the data that lead Wolfe to this conclusion are not reassuring from the point of view of concern for the common good. A number of empirical studies, including


Wolfe's own, suggest that conflict is being avoided precisely by abandoning the pursuit of the common good. This abandonment appears to many to be a key to a more humane society. Tolerance for difference rather than pursuit of a common good seems the safest path. It seems the path least likely to perpetuate past harms or provoke new violence, and the route most compatible with the freedom so highly valued in modern Western cultures. Or so, it seems, many Americans have concluded.

There are many indications in the United States today that tolerance of diversity occupies the place held by the common good in the thought of Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, and Ignatius Loyola. Tolerance of difference, not the common good, has become the highest social aspiration in American culture. And the range of matters to which tolerance is extended has been broadening. Historically the need for tolerance has been associated in the West with the fact of religious disagreement. Religious freedom became the "first freedom" in the minds of Americans and religious coercion the "first oppression." Today, however, the fear of conflict focuses not only on religious disagreement as a source of social strife but on many other types of disagreement about the good life as well. The wars of religion led many in the past to argue that religion must become a private matter if social peace is to be possible. Today it is argued that all fully articulated visions of the good life should similarly be viewed as private or "non-public." Again John Rawls is representative of this trend in political theory. He maintains that today there is a need to extend tolerance beyond the religious sphere to all comprehensive "conceptions of what is of value in human life, and ideals of personal character, as well as ideals of friendship and of familial and associational relationships, and much else that is to inform our conduct, and in the limit to our life as a whole." Thus Rawls asserts that avoiding conflicts like the religious wars of the past means we should today "simply apply the principle of toleration to philosophy itself," that is, to all fully developed understandings or visions of the good life.\(^{37}\)

This appeal for a broadening of the scope of tolerance is not an esoteric invention of political theory. It is clearly a strong force in the climate of American public opinion today. For example, the General Social Survey of American beliefs and attitudes reveals the high place given to tolerance by the American public. Table 1.1 indicates that most Americans think of morality, not just religion, as a personal matter rather than as a set of standards that should be enforced in society at large. 67 percent of Americans agreed, either "strongly" or "somewhat," that morality is "personal." One could interpret this as meaning that judgments about right and wrong are simply private matters having little or nothing to do with the well-being of the larger society. Such an interpretation would imply that many Americans think morality is not concerned with the common good of the larger community. If this is correct, the common good is a dead issue in the minds of most Americans. Before reaching this conclusion, however, we should note that this question in the General Social Survey is two-pronged, for its second clause raises the issue of whether morality should be enforced by unspecified coercive means. Agreement with the statement could be explained by the respondents' aversion to political coercion and the dangers of excessive state power, not by their conviction that morality does not extend to the public good.

Another question in the General Social Survey suggests that viewing morality as personal is related to many Americans' belief that morality, both public and private, is a domain of ambiguity.

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Table 1.2. "Right and wrong are not usually a simple matter of black and white; there are many shades of gray"

| Agree strongly | 589 |
| Agree somewhat | 624 |
| Disagree somewhat | 115 |
| Disagree strongly | 102 |
| Don't know | 43 |

Source: General Social Survey, question 374 B Codebook variable: BLKWHITE

Table 1.3. "We each make our own fate"

| Strongly agree | 200 |
| Agree | 510 |
| Neither agree nor disagree | 237 |
| Disagree | 149 |
| Strongly disagree | 79 |
| Can't choose | 44 |
| No answer | 65 |

Source: General Social Survey, question 673 G Codebook variable: OWNFATE; responses from the year 1998

Table 1.2 indicates that over 82 percent agreed either "strongly" or "somewhat" that the answers to moral questions are "gray" rather than "black and white." This grayness is a likely source of the desire to keep moral decisions within the zone of personal discretion. Few people want to surrender close-call moral decisions to anyone who might use coercive power to settle such matters for them. Suspicion of state coercion, of course, is compatible with the belief that we have moral obligations to promote the common good and that there is such a thing as a public morality. This reading of the responses would imply that the common good should be pursued by citizens through their voluntary, uncoerced activity. Such voluntary activity for the common good could even be regarded as morally required. Those who see morality in shades of gray may simply be saying they do not want bureaucrats or police making such judgments for them.

Other attitudes uncovered by the General Social Survey, however, imply that the conviction that morality is "personal" has a deeper root than fear of coercion. A third question suggests that when Americans say morality is "personal" they in fact mean it is "private." Table 1.3 shows that 57 percent either strongly agree or agree that "we make our own fate." These responses highlight the individualistic view of human existence that has long been evident in American culture. A clear majority of Americans believe they are in charge of their own destinies. The widespread presence of such belief is further confirmed by "The Way We Live Now Poll" conducted for the New York Times Magazine. In this poll, 85 percent of a random sample of Americans agreed with the statement "I believe it is possibly in America to pretty much be who you want to be," while only 14 percent disagreed. This positive response varied very little by income, with 82 percent of those earning less than $30,000 per year and 90 percent of those earning more than $75,000 agreeing with the statement. Such beliefs imply that living a good life is not dependent on the conditions of public life, whether these are economic, political, or cultural. If a good life is "self-made" there is little reason to be concerned about the quality of public life; morality becomes a matter of the private rather than the public good.

Taken at face value, the statement that we make our own fate implies that we are not ultimately vulnerable to contingencies of social and natural circumstances. Circumstances of birth, family relationships, economic conditions, sexual, racial or ethnic identity, environmental conditions, international war and peace, and a host of other factors can be ignored as unimportant to what one's life ultimately amounts to. Whatever others may do, people still have the freedom to shape their lives in accord with the values they

39 Alan Wolfe, in his most recent book, Moral Freedom: The Search for Virtue in a World of Choice (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), seems at times to suggest that Americans view "moral freedom" as not being coerced by others. At other times he seems to imply that "moral freedom" means there are no pre-existing moral standards. Whether coercively enforced or not. It is not entirely clear to me which meaning of moral freedom Wolfe finds present in American culture, though on p. 224 he states it is the former rather than the latter.

40 Results of "The Way We Live Now Poll" were published in The New York Times Magazine (May 7, 2000). The data for the question cited here can be found on p. 66 of this issue of the Magazine.
hold. This suggests that social and natural conditions are not very important in living a good life. It is not a big leap from this presupposition to the conclusion that the idea of the common good is irrelevant to living well. The good life, and morality with it, is seen as a private matter both in its source and its scope.

This privatized view of the good life depends on a very selective reading of the forces actually at work in shaping lives. It is so selective that it cannot be taken literally. Rather, agreement with the statements that “we make our own fate” and “you can pretty much be who you want to be” must be more an indication of what people think is most important than of their realistic description of how human lives actually unfold. It suggests that those aspects of life under the power of personal freedom are more important to most Americans than those determined by social contexts or historical contingencies. Thus affirming that fate is self-made is as much an indication of an individualistic value system as it is a description of fact. It puts the quality of public life low on the scale of goods and directs attention away from goods that can only be realized in the shared life of the larger society. Thus it devalues the common good and directs attention away from the common conditions of public life.44

It would be risky, of course, to base large generalizations about American culture on a few survey questions such as these. Indeed the interpretation just suggested is at best hypothetical. There is further evidence, however, of the fragility of the common good in American culture today. Ironically it is most evident in the work of a social scientist who has strongly rejected the culture-war hypothesis. Alan Wolfe’s study, One Nation After All, is based on empirical research that goes deeper than the inevitably hypothetical interpretations of correlations among responses uncovered by survey research. Wolfe interviewed approximately two hundred middle-class Americans in depth, pursuing open-ended, oral questioning on key issues of public morality. His goal was to discover, with more subtlety than is possible with survey instruments alone, what a

representative group of middle-class Americans really think on matters of public morality.42

Wolfe rejects the culture-war scenario and argues that the beliefs and values of the American middle class are still largely homogeneous. In fact he finds something close to consensus on what is valued most highly by the middle class in the United States today. This consensus on the summan bonum can be summed up in a single word: tolerance. The high value placed on tolerance is evident in the attitudes toward religious belief Wolfe found in the middle class. But tolerance is central not just in attitudes toward religion; it is also evident in middle-class attitudes on a large number of other questions with important consequences for the quality of public life. These include the structure of family life, gender roles, immigration, multiculturalism, and race. By actually talking to people in some depth and asking them what they really mean when they express their opinions, Wolfe concludes that America is not coming apart at the seams in a culture war. If there is a culture war going on in the United States it is largely being fought by intellectuals rather than ordinary middle-class people. Wolfe’s hopeful conclusion is that the tolerance of the American middle class is not reflected in high-visibility wars of words conducted in the academy and the mass media. In fact, the American middle class today is a restraining force on academic and political elites, as Aristotle would have predicted. Average Americans are too non-judgmental to get sucked into battles that might tear the country apart. From this Wolfe takes a certain modest comfort.43

For example, his interviews indicate that the United States is not about to enter a period of war between traditionalist religious believers and progressive secularists. Neither a war with guns nor a war of words based on religious disagreement seems imminent.

44 These interviews were selected for their geographical, racial, cultural, ethnic, and job-related representativeness of the suburban middle class. Within this representative framework, Wolfe tilted the sample somewhat toward the conservative end of the cultural spectrum, to assure that the “progressive,” “new-class,” and managerial “elites” held by other theorists to be the originators of the culture war did not dominate the interviews. Wolfe’s research method and sample make his conclusions more ominous for the viability of the idea of the common good than if they could be seen as biased toward the “liberal” end of the culture. See Wolfe, One Nation After All, pp. 19–33 for a description of the sample on which Wolfe’s study is based.

among the people. It is true that Americans are more likely to be religious believers than are citizens of any of the other advanced industrial nations of the North Atlantic. But the American religious style is a “quiet faith” that is strongly averse to religious conflict. Indeed Wolfe suggests that most middle-class Americans have added an eleventh commandment to the biblical decalogue: “Thou shalt not judge.” In light of the terrible bloodshed of past and present religious wars, this is encouraging. The faith of middle-class Americans has been tempered by their almost absolute aversion to strife and conflict about religious beliefs. In Wolfe’s words, “Religious tolerance in America bears a distinct resemblance to laissez-faire economics: you can do what you want so long as you let me do what I want.”

Wolfe also finds that this tolerance is not restricted to matters of religion. It extends to matters of race, ethnicity, family structure, and many other matters of public morality, with the notable exception of homosexuality. He calls this tolerant stance on a broad spectrum of issues “capacious individualism.” The ethic that informs it he calls “morality writ small.” This is an ethic that aspires to “modest virtues” and “ordinary duties,” such as kindness and honesty rather than larger goals of social justice and social equality. These modest virtues are surely important; their lively presence among ordinary Americans is surely preferable to the anger and resentment that the practitioners of group conflict promote. A culture war in the United States would be a very bad thing. The American Civil War has already shown this vividly, and the recent abominations in the former Yugoslavia and in Rwanda have confirmed it afresh. So Wolfe breathes a sigh of relief to find tolerance alive and well in the United States.

It remains an open question, however, whether generous and tolerant individualism is up to dealing with the problems we face today. Despite Wolfe’s relief that cultural war does not seem imminent in the United States, he has nagging doubts about whether non-judgmentalism can provide what we need as we face the future. Shortly after the appearance of One Nation After All, Wolfe confessed that his research left him “somewhat depressed.” The principal reason for this is that morality writ small lacks “a shared sense of national purpose.” The ethic of tolerance shows the right instincts, but it “lacks a vision of how to put them to constructive use.” Americans may value personal responsibility highly, but they also have a distinct lack of enthusiasm for meeting the responsibilities of national citizenship. “They seemed to want the benefits of being American without the obligations of paying taxes or paying attention.” They are also distinctly unenthusiastic about the international responsibilities that go along with being an American in the emerging global context. Wolfe conjectures that this narrowness of vision is a by-product of the prosperity of the middle class. In the comfortable world of the middle class, morality writ small translates into “couch-potato politics,” an unwillingness or inability to articulate common purposes and act to secure them.

In other words, middle-class Americans lack a vision of the common good, both in their approach to national life and in their understanding of the role of the United States internationally. This lack raises fundamental questions. Will a culture in which tolerance is the prime virtue generate a society good enough to sustain its citizens’ loyalty over the long haul? Does avoiding judgments lead to an attenuated vision of what is possible by telling us never to say anything in public that others do not already agree with? If tolerance becomes a card that trumps all strong proposals on how we should live together, will it stifle the imagination needed to address pressing public problems? The next chapter will suggest that creative response to some of the pressing social problems emerging today will require a considerably stronger commitment to the common good than we now have.


CHAPTER THREE

Recovering the commonweal

A long time ago, Cicero expressed concerns like those we have been outlining about the likely effect of the waning of a vision of the public good on the future of the prosperous Roman Empire of his day. Fifty years before the birth of Christ, Cicero had concluded that the citizens of Rome no longer possessed the common vision required if they were to be a people at all. They had lost the moral consciousness needed to sustain their common life together. Cicero used the Latin phrase res publica to describe this common life. Literally this means "the public thing." It can more aptly be translated as civil affairs, the commonweal, the common good, a commonwealth, or simply a republic. Cicero defined the commonweal this way:

Res publica, res populi, populus autem non omnis hominum coetus quoquo modo congregatus, sed coetus multitudinis iuris consensu et utilitatis communione sociatus.

A commonwealth is a thing of the people. But a people is not any collection [coetus] of human beings brought together [congregatus] in any sort of way, but an assemblage [coetus] of people in large numbers associated [sociatus] in agreement [consensu] with respect to justice [right, iuris] and a partnership for the common good [utilitatis communiones].

Cicero's use of the Latin words coetus, congregatus, consensus, and communione points directly to the social union he presupposes must exist in a republic. Persons are envisioned as bound together by strong connections. They have come together in a coetus — the Latin word

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The common good and Christian ethics

is cognate to animus, sexual union. Their good is shared in a communio or communion. The links among them are formed by their common consent, their consensus, about what is just, right, and good. Understood this way, a republic requires a notable degree of social unity, perhaps a considerably higher level than the experience of the past several centuries leads us to expect today.

In 1787, when Benjamin Franklin was asked what kind of government the American founders had provided for the new nation of the United States, he replied: "A republic if you can keep it." Have we "kept it," or has the social unity required to be a republic been lost? Before dismissing hope for such unity as romantic and even dangerous, we should remember that Cicero's definition of a republic was not formulated for a small, relatively homogeneous city-state. He was envisioning what was required in the "public affairs" of a Roman regime that extended well beyond the middle of the Italian peninsula to much of the world known to his readers. Cicero's context was in some ways more like that of the contemporary United States than like the Athens of Pericles or Aristotle. He knew that this close social unity had in fact evanesced in the Rome of his day. But he saw that as the source of Rome's problems, not as an inevitable consequence of its size. This lack of the bonds of common life was particularly problematic precisely because the demands of Rome's public life had grown in proportion to its extent. Cicero had concluded that, without a common vision and commitment among the citizens, no governmental structure would be "sufficient to found or to preserve ... a commonwealth whose dominion extends so far and wide." The lack of a shared sense of the good meant Rome was no longer prepared to address the problems of its complex social life. So it could no longer be called a republic in any meaningful sense: "It is through our own faults, not by any accident, that we retain only the form of the commonwealth, but have long since lost its substance." In Cicero's view, Rome was already well advanced in the process of its decline and fall.

This sort of Ciceronian diagnosis has been applied to the United States by some recent political and philosophical thinkers. For example, Alasdair MacIntyre has argued that Western societies, including the United States, possess but "simulacra of morality." We have "lost our comprehension, both theoretical and practical" of central aspects of morality, namely of the virtues needed to sustain the common good. In some of his writings, MacIntyre regretfully yields to the wistfulness that is often found among such critics. According to MacIntyre's diagnosis, we need a shared vision of the good but lack it. But he has nothing to say about how we might address the problem so defined. We also lack the resources needed to regain such a vision. So the prognosis is grim. Like Rome, we are already well down the path of decline.

This is not a helpful response. We have been tracing some of the reasons to worry that there is a lack of shared national purpose in America today and that this is having serious negative consequences. The questions that now need to be addressed concern what needs to be done to remedy this lack and what can be done. Fortunately there are both traditional and more recent resources that lead in more constructive directions than are contained in MacIntyre's lament. The stakes here are high, so we cannot afford simply to deplore the present circumstances. A generation ago, the distinguished theologian John Courtney Murray stated the alternatives this way: "whether we like it or not, we are living in a religiously pluralistic society at a time of spiritual crisis; and the alternatives are the discovery of social unity or destruction." Despite Murray's uncharacteristically apocalyptic tone, he was convinced that a stronger basis for social unity could be found than is provided by the philosophy of wariness. He was also convinced that the needed social unity can be combined with the great modern discovery of equal respect for the freedom of all.

FROM WARINESS TO SOLIDARITY IN FREEDOM

Reflection on how we might go about recovering the common good in a way that respects freedom can begin with some further considerations concerning tolerance. The high value placed on

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9 Cicero, De Re Publica, v, i, 1.
10 Ibid., v, i, 2.
tolerance today can be rethought as expressing an aspiration for a good society of a certain kind. The hope placed in tolerance can be seen as a desire for a social good, not simply for the private well-being of individuals considered one at a time. Considered from such a social point of view, tolerance is important because we do not want society to be riven by religious or cultural war. Both the past several centuries in the West and the painful experiences of the Yugoslavias and Rwandas of the world today show that such conflicts have very high costs. These costs are born by individuals to be sure. But a large part of the cost to individuals is a direct result of the painful social losses that occur when common life disintegrates into the chaos of warring factions. Preventing these social losses requires respect for diverse religious faiths or other comprehensive understandings of the good life. But respect for this diversity does not mean total abandonment of the pursuit of a good shared in common. Rather it is a challenge to develop an understanding of the common good of a pluralist society – an understanding of the goods that we can and must pursue together even though we do not agree about what is good in every aspect of life.

A democratic republic is a social good, not simply a summation of the goods of its individual citizens considered one at a time. From this social standpoint, tyrannies and authoritarian governments undermine the common good itself. It is obvious, of course, that tyranny harms the individuals who are oppressed by it. But Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas pointed out that a tyrant is a ruler who uses governmental power for the ruler’s own private good or for the good of some faction, rather than for the good of all the members of the community being governed. Tyranny, like war, makes it impossible for many to share in the life of society in a way that actualizes their potential both as persons and as contributing members of the community. A tyrannical regime treats those it oppresses as if they did not really belong to the society. The tyrant or tyrannical in-group claims the social good as its own fiefdom. An authoritarian regime may claim to be serving the good of the people, but dacias on the Black Sea and Swiss bank accounts rarely seem to be available to all when such regimes are in power. To be common, the common good must be the good of the people understood inclusively. In other words, an authoritarian regime is one whose understanding of who should share in the social good is too narrow. A tyranny’s vision of the good is not a vision of a commonweal or of a good that is genuinely common.

In light of this kind of social evil, an appeal for tolerance can be heard as a demand that the social good be accessible to all. It makes a claim that people should not be excluded from sharing in the life of the commonwealth because of their religion, their race, their ethnicity, their gender, or other characteristics judged irrelevant to their status as citizens. Such considerations highlight that tolerance aims to secure a kind of society where basic respect is forthcoming for all people no matter where they have been born or live on the social and cultural map. Thus one can reenvision the aspiration for tolerance as an aspiration for a social good – the good that is realized when all persons share in the political, social, and cultural life of the communities whose activities affect their well-being. Seen in this light, tolerance is an instrumental rather than an ultimate value; its purpose is to assure that the common good is truly common, i.e., shared in by all.

It can be asked, of course, whether this does not finally amount to protecting the well-being of individuals considered one at a time. Respect for the dignity and well-being of persons, to be sure, implies that persons are not mere parts of the social whole, like cogs in a large machine. The good of an individual person is not simply a part or a mathematical fraction of the good of the larger society. But neither is the social good simply the mathematical sum of individual goods. The relation between the good of persons and the common good is more complex than the mathematical operations of division or summation can represent. For this reason individualistic arguments that conceive of tolerance as leaving individuals alone miss the important social and public dimensions of respect for persons. People who live alone have no occasion to be either tolerant or intolerant; the concept simply does not apply to them.

Seeing tolerance as a call to leave each other alone would suggest that in a maximally tolerant society there would be a minimum of human interaction. Following this line of thinking, the best way

7 Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, 1156b; Politics, 1279b; Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica 1-2, q. 45, art. 2, ad 3.
to be fully tolerant of others would be never to speak and never
to do anything that actually affects other people. For all speech
that is not simply a repetition of what someone else has already
said must either add to or disagree with what the other has voiced.
Meaningful speech very often suggests that the person addressed
should develop or change what he or she presently thinks and has al-
ready expressed. Tolerance understood as leaving each other alone
would avoid making such suggestions; it would simply accept what
the other has said and leave the matter at that. No new ideas would
ever be proposed in public, for their very newness could be seen
as some sort of challenge to those who do not already agree with
them. In the same way, any form of genuine human action adds to
or tries to change the direction of what is happening. Simply drift-
ing along in the current of already unfolding events is not human
action at all. Innovative action does not simply tolerate the direc-
tion of events but seeks to reorient it—sometimes incrementally,
sometimes in fundamental ways. Tolerance, understood as never
challenging opinions that sustain the status quo, would therefore
reduce us to silence and inactivity. It would lock us into our own
solitude in a state of suspended animation.

There is something fundamentally wrong with formulating the
aspiration for mutual respect among persons in terms that lead to
such absurd consequences. It is obvious, of course, that a public
philosophy built around tolerance does not aim to get people to
stop talking and acting. But this reductio ad absurdum suggests
that something important is missing when we formulate the ideal of
respect by only focusing on its importance for individuals regarded
one at a time.

There is an alternative, however, that sees the commitment to
tolerance as expressing a desire that no one be excluded from those
goods they can only have together. This alternative comes into
view when we recognize that mutual respect is a social reality.
Respect for the worth of persons is embodied in the relationships
of social interaction and in the societal structures that make genuine
interaction possible. From such a perspective, mutual respect means
interacting in ways that enhance the good of all who are involved
in the social give-and-take. Mutual respect, therefore, is a shared
or common good. It is a good that is realized when the members
of society share in creating their life together. This good is truly
common only when all members of society jointly create a common
life together. It will be a common good only if all members also
benefit from the good that has been created. Looked at from this
perspective, the values sought in the name of tolerance are aspects
of a good that is fundamentally social. Such a common good-based
approach provides a theoretically more coherent way to understand
the values tolerance seeks to protect. It provides a more efficacious
way to secure these values in practice. It can also energize more
helpful ways of responding to the growing de facto interdependence
of the world today than can conceptions of tolerance that are part
of a hangover from the excesses of the seventeenth century.

Charles Taylor has developed a line of argument that shows the
plausibility and even the necessity of such a common good-based
conception of mutual respect. It harks back to ancient understand-
ings of the social nature of human existence while also showing
how these ancient ideas can be retrieved in ways that are supportive
of the freedoms valued so highly in our time. It will be useful to
consider his argument here.

First, Taylor maintains that the modern notion that all persons
have an equal claim to freedom is an idea that has been socially gen-
erated. It is the outcome of the social and cultural history of modern
Western society. It is evident that self-determination and freedom
to choose one’s own way of life have not been valued as highly in
all past cultures as they are in the West today. Very few societies,
including contemporary non-Western ones, rank these values as high
as we do. How do we explain this fact? Taylor argues that the idea
that all persons ought to be treated as free, self-determining agents
worthy of the respect called for by tolerance is a distinctively mod-
ern creation. The aspiration for universal self-determination had a
social matrix. Its emergence was dependent on the social crises of
the early modern West, and it is sustained today by social practices
and institutions that were developed in response to these past social
struggles. Contemporary Western men and women did not, all by
themselves, come to demand respect as self-determining agents.
They learned to value self-determination through interaction with
the larger society in its social, religious, and political history.

They also learned that fulfilling this aspiration can only take
place in social interaction with others. Self-determination is not iso-
lated self-sufficiency. If literal self-sufficiency were possible it would
be a kind of imprisonment in solitary confinement. Rather, placing a high value on self-determination goes together with a judgment about the inherent goodness of social practices and political institutions that sustain active participation by all in public life. The high value of self-determination is therefore linked with a judgment about a good that is shared in common. A society is a good society when it sustains freedom from tyranny, oppression, and war through the mutual respect its members show one another in their interactions and relationships. Further, sustaining this kind of society requires sustaining the social practices and public institutions that make it possible. The good of the individual as an equal, self-determining agent and the good of these practices and institutions are mutually implicating.

Taylor describes the internal connections between these social practices and our self-understanding as free persons worthy of equal respect this way:

"[T]he free individual with his own goals and aspirations . . . is himself only possible within a certain kind of civilization . . . it took a long development of certain institutions and practices, of the rule of law, of rules of equal respect, of habits of common deliberation, of common association, of cultural self-development, and so on, to produce the modern individual; and . . . without these the very sense of oneself as an individual would atrophy."

In other words, without the institutions and practices developed by modern democratic societies we could not sustain the value of mutual respect we affirm in the name of tolerance. The seemingly individualistic value of tolerance, therefore, is sustained by implicit judgments about a good that is necessarily social and public. This good cannot even be conceived unless we think about the quality of relationships that connect persons together.

Taylor concludes that "the free individual or autonomous agent can only achieve and maintain his identity in a certain type of culture." This kind of culture is one in which all persons have a voice in deliberation about public action. Its social practices and institutions provide the matrix out of which the freedom of modern self-determination is born. These practices protect the freedom of individuals to be sure, as the ethic of tolerance would insist. But the practices and institutions of democracy are not merely instrumental means for the protection of a freedom that already exists for individuals considered as separate from society. In a way that the ethic of tolerance fails to take into account, these practices also generate and sustain the sense of being an agent in society, of having the power to make a difference by speaking and acting in a life shared with others. They are therefore constitutive of the good of the self-determining personality. Being a self-determining person is internally linked with the social practices and institutions of a democratic polity — with the practices that make a republic possible in a pluralist society.

Taylor further develops this argument for the link between self-determination and the common good through an analogy with the way language works. The distinction drawn by Ferdinand de Saussure between a given language (langue) such as English or French, and a particular act of speaking (parole) is the basis of this analogy. A language such as English is a shared reality, a cultural system of communication that an individual learns from society. A child does not invent this language but is taught and receives it as a social given. After learning to speak the language one then uses it in all one's speaking. A particular act of speaking would be impossible without already having learned a given language like English. Every act of speaking, of course, communicates a specific message with a particular meaning. Cultures do not speak, people do. And

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He also puts it this way in another place:

"We live in a world in which there is such a thing as public debate about moral and political questions and other basic issues. We constantly forget how remarkable that is, how it did not have to be so, and may one day no longer be so. What would happen to our capacity to be free agents if this debate should die away, or if more specialized debate among intellectuals who attempt to define and clarify the alternatives facing us should also cease, or if the attempts to bring the culture of the past to life again as well as the drives to cultural innovation were to fall off? What would there be left to choose between? And if the atrophy went beyond a certain point, could we speak of choice at all? How long would we go on understanding what autonomous choice was? ("Atomism," in Philosophy and the Human Sciences, p. 205.)"
The common good and Christian ethics

when people speak, they do not communicate whole languages but specific meanings. But actually communicating any meaning at all would be impossible unless both the speaker and the hearer already shared knowledge of a common language. The communication of a specific meaning by the speaker depends both on shared knowledge of a common language (langue) and on the particular insights the speaker expresses in speech (parole). The social reality of the shared language, therefore, is in the speaker, just as the specific meaning of the speaker is communicated in the shared language. The shared good of a language is not merely an instrument that individuals use to communicate; it is constitutive of speech itself. If speech is to be meaningful at all, it cannot be “decomposed” into the actions of entirely separate individuals who use the language as an external tool. The social good of the language and the individual good of speaking are internally connected. They are aspects or dimensions of each other. What is common and what is individual are both required in any successful communication. The common and the individual mutually interpenetrate and mutually determine each other. This suggests, more generally, how the common good and the good of an individual person can be mutually determining in a similar way.

The same is true of the way learning and innovating are interconnected in speech communication. What a person says on a given occasion is often a commonplace that is already well known to many, perhaps even to the person being addressed. If so, the speaker is simply passing on or repeating something received from others in the culture. On the other hand, what is said can be innovative and boldly creative, communicating meaning that no one but the speaker has ever thought of before. Communicating such innovations, however, depends on already sharing a language with those to whom one speaks. Even the most innovative acts of communication, such as great poetry or major intellectual achievements in the sciences, cannot be totally innovative. Entirely innovative speech would be possible only in a language that nobody else knew, which is a self-contradictory idea. A language must be shared if it is to be a language at all. Unless some meaning is already shared no one could understand any of the speaker’s utterances. These utterances would not be meaningful speech but gibberish. If they were recorded and played back at a later time not even the original speaker could understand them. The ability of individual persons to communicate innovative or idiosyncratic ideas, therefore, is intrinsically connected with already sharing a language with others in society.

More generally, this suggests that one can be self-determining in an innovative way only by having received the capacity to innovate from a culture and by being part of a shared history that nurtures such self-determination. Being dependent on the community for these capacities and being a self-determining agent are reciprocally connected. You cannot have one without the other. You cannot have the good of “autonomy” without the kind of good society that makes it possible. This interpenetration of the good of personal freedom and the good of a certain kind of community suggests that our reigning public philosophy has been seriously misled by the way the term “autonomy” connotes a capacity present in the lives of individuals as long as no one else interferes with it or restricts it.

This linguistic analogy can therefore shed some light on more general interconnections between the good of individual persons and the common good. It suggests that individual freedom and the maintenance of the common good need not be opposed alternatives but can be complementary. Just as specific acts of speaking depend on sharing a language with others, the freedom of individual persons is actualized in a shared social context that makes choice possible. Self-determination is not a solo activity but has social preconditions. Moreover, these social preconditions are not external to the person who makes the free choices; they are internally constitutive of the capacity for freedom itself. For example, in a society that accepts slavery or tyranny as legitimate institutions, those who are enslaved or oppressed will very often simply accept the lack of

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freedom as their fate. The acceptance of such a fate undercuts the very freedom needed to alter existing social patterns of dominance. Conversely, a culture that holds that freedom and mutual respect are due to all persons will sustain people’s desire to be free from domination and will enable them to resist actively if necessary. A culture that values equal freedom for all supports individual efforts to live in freedom, while a culture that legitimates domination undercuts such efforts. Since cultures are shared, social realities, the good of a culture that supports freedom is a shared good. The freedom that results in such a culture is a shared good as well.

It is true, of course, that individual persons can and do challenge the prevailing practices and values of their culture, just as speakers of English can introduce changes in English vocabulary and usage. English speakers can also use their familiar language to communicate genuinely novel ideas and to write great poems that no one else could create. There is a parallel in the way individuals can both freely create their own lives and stimulate social change. For example, the experience of the seventeenth century brought the innovative practices and institutions of religious freedom to Western Europe. Some one person, of course, must have been the first European to say that the good life is one where religious freedom is respected. This was a new insight about both the personal and the social good. But this innovative idea arose in response to unfolding social conflicts. The idea that religious freedom is a good thing did not simply pop from nowhere into the head of the innovator; it was stimulated by the social context and was proposed as a revision of existing social practices and institutions. It also had historical roots. The personal and social good of religious freedom was not created \textit{ex nihilo}, but was a reworking of long-standing traditions and ideas about the good life in light of new historical circumstances.

So as Taylor puts it, the freedom to be self-determining is always “situated freedom.” It is the freedom of a situated self—of a self that lives, moves, and has its being in community, in a social setting of interaction with other persons. To possess this freedom is not simply to be left alone. Rather it comes into being when a person participates in interactive life with other persons, sometimes receiving from them quite passively, sometimes contributing gentle innovations in the interactive process, sometimes challenging them strongly or even rebelling against them. Whichever of these forms it takes, human freedom is never a solitary possession. Securing and sustaining this freedom demands more than keeping disconnected individuals from interfering with each other. To eliminate interaction entirely would not protect personality but dissolve it. Rather, self-determination is participation in communal give-and-take—sometimes giving, sometimes taking, but always responding to and interacting with others.

We have learned from experience that the practices and institutions of democratic society are essential to securing such participation for all persons. These practices are essential to making this participation possible not just for free males, or for Catholics, Lutherans, or Calvinists, or for Christians or theists, but for all. These practices are social goods. When these goods are realized at all, they are present in the interactions and relationships that connect people together in a community of mutual respect. When they are not realized, either some people end up dominating others or there is no interaction at all. In either of these alternatives, the good of some individuals is harmed and the common good of mutual relationship is diminished. In a society like ours today the many threads of social interdependence are becoming more tightly woven. Thus we face a choice between pursuing the good of social participation for all or accepting the evil that occurs when the strong dominate the weak or the privileged try to wall themselves off from the vulnerable. In an increasingly interdependent world there is nowhere to hide, nowhere simply to be left alone. In such a world, the internal connection between self-determination and democratic social practice means we face the choice of discovering how to achieve good lives together or accepting the fact that some people (likely very many) will not have good lives at all.

Without the kind of relationships that sustain social participation, individuals are unlikely to be able even to imagine that they have options among which to choose. Social relationships that enable and support active engagement with other persons, therefore, are constitutive of self-determination. A person is not free alone, but only in

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{13} Taylor presents his extended historical argument for the possibility of "situated freedom" and the reasons it is often occluded in our culture in \textit{Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity} (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989). See esp. pp. 513–515.}
privileged roles in bringing this web into being. But since speech and action rise from and are directed into the already existing web, there is no such thing as the speech or action of a solitary person but only of a person in inter-action with other people.\(^{15}\)

Any good of a person that is a real good, therefore, is embedded in the good of the community. Conversely, any common good that is a real good is simultaneously the good of persons. The good shared with others is constitutive of the good of persons regarded one at a time; the good of persons regarded one at a time cannot exist without some measure of sharing in the common good. The “good” of an isolated self, therefore, cannot be a bonum honestum, a genuine good. It is illusion or surrealistic fantasy, for the individual cannot be self-sufficient in any literal sense.\(^{16}\) There are, of course, certainly occasions when the fun of fantasy and the iconoclasm of Dada are needed to keep life genuinely alive. Play is an essential dimension of social creativity. The same is true of genuine solitude, contemplation, and mysticism. But none of these can occur without the sustaining relationships that make them possible and none of these activities ever leave the human community entirely behind. The community that makes these activities possible is not a mere means. It is constitutive of these activities and always present within them.

**HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS AS VALUABLE IN THEMSELVES**

Two thinkers from a generation ago help clarify how social relationships are good in themselves, not simply as means to the good of individuals. Jacques Maritain and Yves Simon both argued that relationships with others are intrinsically valuable.\(^{17}\) Such relationships

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\(^{15}\) Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, pp. 152–53.

\(^{16}\) As Iris Murdoch puts it:

One might start from the assertion that morality, goodness, is a form of realism. The idea of a really good man living in a private dream world seems unacceptable. Of course a good man may be infinitely eccentric, but he must know certain things about his surroundings, most obviously the existence of other people and their claims. The chief enemy of excellence in morality (and also in art) is personal fantasy: the tissue of self-aggrandizing andslicking wishes and dreams which prevents one from seeing what is outside one. *The Sovereignty of Good* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), p. 59.

\(^{17}\) The distinction between that which is enjoyed as good in itself and that which is useful as a means to another good is classically discussed by Aristotle in *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1096b–1097a. Aristotle applies this distinction in distinguishing friendships that are useful or others.
can, of course, be necessary means to the attainment of goods that are valued in themselves. Some human relationships, such as those in the workplace, can be means to the meeting of basic material needs. They are necessary means to human flourishing and even survival. But human relationships also have non-instrumental value. We seek such relationships for their own sake, not because, once obtained, they enable us to satisfy other desires in solitude. We want these human relationships not as means only but as ends in themselves.  

Maintain argued for this intrinsic value by observing that social relationships arise not only from the experience of need or deficiency but also from the "very perfections" of human beings. When a good that simply fulfills deficiency has been obtained, the desire for it ceases. For example, human beings need food like all other living things. They depend on nurturance from beyond themselves, and this nurturance is a means to their individual well-being. But communication with other persons is not simply a means like food, which is no longer needed once hunger has been satisfied. The good of a relationship with another person does not exist "inside" an individual in the way food fills an empty stomach. Rather the good of relationships with others is realized in the interactive activities of communication and love that are distinct capacities of persons. Human beings have a positive capacity for such relationships with each other, and realizing this capacity brings something new into being that continues to be valued for its own sake.  

Human beings can form relationships with others for the sake of the relationships themselves. These relationships are valuable for their own pleasant from friendships that are valued for themselves in *Nicomachean Ethics*, 113b–1137b. It is also discussed by Augustine in *De Doctrina Christiana* (On Christian Doctrine), trans. D. W. Robertson (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1958), bk. 1, sec. 3–5, pp. 9–11. For Aristotle, political activity is good in itself; for Augustine political activity must be subordinated to a proper relation to God, though this subordination is not strictly that of means to end. The relation of the political to the religious in Augustine’s thought will be discussed in chapter 5 below.  

The parallel between this way of putting the importance of interpersonal relationships and Kant’s third formulation of the categorical imperative is evident. See *The Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Lewis White Beck (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1950), p. 47. It reinforces the link between personal self-determination and the common good argued for above.  


Friendship and love, then, are not simply means to personal fulfillment. If they are regarded only as means to the good of the individual, they cease to be friendship or love in any genuine sense. A friend, of course, may do many things that help meet the needs of the other partner in the friendship. True friendship, however, is not egotisme à deux — it is not a good that simply meets the private needs of the friends considered apart from each other. There can of course be partnerships of this kind, but they are not friendships in the full sense. The good of friendship must be a shared good that is valued for itself if it is to exist at all.

In the same way the common good of public life is a realization of the human capacity for intrinsically valuable relationships, not only a fulfillment of the needs and deficiencies of individuals. It is true, of course, that social life is necessary to meet a person’s needs for food, shelter, familial nurturance in childhood, basic education, the protection of public safety, etc. From one point of view, therefore, these dimensions of the common good are instrumental to the good of the individual. Human beings are vulnerable and needy. But it is also true that eating with others, sharing a home with others, and benefiting from education, intellectual exchange, and friendship are all aspects of a life of positive social interaction and communication with others. They are not merely extrinsic means to human flourishing but are aspects of flourishing itself. This shared life of communication and interaction with others, in all its aspects, is good in itself. This helps explain why the common good of social life cannot be disaggregated without remainder into the private goods of the people who are members of the society. For such disaggregation dissolves the bonds of relationship that constitute an important part of good lives. If we overlook these bonds of relationship, the goods of the relationships themselves will not be part of the picture of the common good. The good of community itself will be ignored. The common good, therefore, is not simply a means for attaining the private good of individuals; it is a value  

to be pursued for its own sake. This suggests that a key aspect of the common good can be described as the good of being a community at all—the good realized in the mutual relationships in and through which human beings achieve their well-being.

In a republic, this intrinsic good is realized in the shared speech and cooperative action of citizens determining how they will live together. Such communication and shared action happens in communities of different sorts and sizes, ranging from families to nation-states and, in our time, to the larger world community. It is also realized in the political sphere when people govern themselves together in freedom as fellow citizens. Of course, participation in this shared public life depends on antecedently meeting certain elemental needs of the individual. In this sense there is an instrumental dimension to the common good. For example, a person needs to learn a language from society if he or she is to participate in the public speech and argument of a self-governing community. In the same way, a person who lacks food, housing, or freedom from the constant fear of crime will be unable to share in the active self-governance of a democratic republic. The education through which one learns a language is in this sense an instrumental good. But these goods are also constitutive parts of intrinsically valuable interaction and communication with other persons. A shared language is not only a means that makes speaking with others possible; it is internal to and constitutive of the act of communication itself. Language is not merely a tool that allows individuals to mumble words in solitude.

Further, social communication in a democratic polity is itself a constitutive dimension of the shared public life of free, self-governing citizens. It is valuable in itself as well as an instrument to the private ends of individuals. In a similar way, food, housing, and public safety are intrinsic parts of a shared life together, not simply means to the well-being of individuals. By sharing in these goods, people share a common life that no hungry, homeless, or crime-threatened individual can know. Non-human animals can be hungry; only a person can feel the lack of social connectedness that is the most serious deprivation faced by the poor and homeless in our society. Non-human animals can be sick; only a human being can know the loss of being left out of the advanced health care system of the United States today. Non-human animals cannot speak; only a human being can know the humiliation of not being listened to. These human deprivations are so serious because they deprive people of the distinctively human capacity for lives lived in mutual relationship with others and of genuine participation in the good of social life itself.

In other words, the common good of a republic fulfills needs that individuals cannot fulfill on their own and simultaneously realizes non-instrumental values that can only be attained in our life together. These non-instrumental values include the relationships that come into existence in public speech, joint action, and shared self-governance. These are all dimensions of a kind of freedom that can exist only in a community linked together by bonds of reciprocal solidarity. They are goods that, by their very nature, cannot be enjoyed privately. They exist in the relationships between people talking and acting together, and they evanesce when people fall silent or disperse. The freedom they bring is the power that arises when men and women are free together. This is the power of a community of freedom, a community of people acting together in reciprocal respect for one another’s dignity. This kind of freedom cannot exist for isolated individuals no matter how autonomous they imagine themselves to be.

The power of this shared freedom is evident in the way tyrants seek the isolation of their subjects. Divide and conquer is the first principle of tyrannical, authoritarian, or colonial rule. When citizens are isolated from each other, through restrictions on their speech and association together, they are no longer citizens but are transformed into subjects of the power of another. With isolation comes powerlessness in the face of the material, economic, and political forces that inevitably shape people’s lives. If citizens refuse to accept this isolation and seek the shared freedom of common speech and action, a tyrant can repress them only by violence. Authoritarian rule offends against the common good of shared

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31 Arendt, The Human Condition, p. 179.
32 Ibid., p. 181. For a stimulating analysis of how the colonial strategies of European powers in Africa exemplified this principle and led to some of the deep problems of Africa today, see Mahmood Mamdani, Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), esp. Part I.
freedom most obviously when it resorts to force to prevent citizens from speaking and acting with each other openly. When this happens to real tyranny is the result. If citizens retreat into privacy on their own, whether because of fatigue or because they have lost a vision of the good of shared freedom, they make an apparently non-violent authoritarianism possible. Such "velvet tyranny" remains a form of domination nonetheless; all but the rulers have no say about the conditions that shape large parts of their lives and little effective voice about the tenor of their lives as a whole. Conversely, when citizens insist upon speaking freely about their lives together, and when they set out to act together in light of this speech, the good of democratic self-rule begins to come into existence. This is the power of shared freedom. It does not depend upon guns, on holding political office, or even on money. It is the shared freedom that made the velvet revolutions that brought down the Berlin Wall in the face of a nuclear-armed Communist apparatus. It is just as surely needed to keep power in the hands of a self-governing people in the West. For today in the West, the market and politics of the image driven by money and media threaten to reduce citizens to political consumers rather than self-governing agents. An ethic of tolerance whose highest value is protection of the right to be different in private abandons the hope that more than this can be expected. The common good of a commonweal, the shared freedom of a republic, and the good of persons (including the good of personal freedom) rise or fall together.

This intrinsic good of shared self-rule can, of course, be achieved to greater or lesser degrees in different societies. For this reason, some have argued that seeking the good of such a life in common is a form of "perfectionism" and that it is in any case unattainable in a complex and diverse society like ours. It is claimed that pursuing the common good understood in this way runs the danger of letting the best become the enemy of the good. The solidarity of shared self-rule, however, is not an all-or-nothing affair. We do not have to choose between a utopian republic, with total and constant participation by all, and an ethic based on wariness and the pursuit of privacy. It is possible to realize the solidarity of a commonweal to greater or lesser degrees. We can use the scale of solidarity in a self-governing community of freedom as a measure of a society's relative goodness. Using this scale to orient our choices can help us discern the route that leads to a better society. It can suggest ways of defining human rights in terms of the minimum levels of social participation required by mutual respect for human freedom and dignity (which will be discussed below in chapter 6). Such a scale will, therefore, enable us to think creatively about problems that tolerance cannot solve, like urban poverty and the challenges of global interdependence. The good of shared self-determination marks a course for addressing these challenges, rather than invoking "the fact of pluralism" to trump substantive proposals for political and cultural change.

The solidarity of shared freedom is an essentially dynamic standard. It sets us on a transformative path rather than leading to an all-or-nothing call for utopia. This is because it is a normative standard that takes history seriously; it preserves that the internal link between the good of persons and the common good is itself historical and dynamic. Invoking the norm of solidarity in shared freedom therefore means starting from where we are and seeking to move toward a common life in which more people are free and active participants. But it is also true that a decision to accept such a standard is already an act that will make a major difference in the lives of citizens. To adopt such a criterion for the direction we should be moving is itself the first step out of self-protective wariness toward the solidarity necessary for a morally interdependent community. This first step would be a kind of breakthrough, for it would set us on a path very different from that suggested by an ethic that seeks the good life primarily in the domain of privacy or in lifestyle enclaves. This first step can only be taken by citizens committed to the solidarity of shared speech and action. So to begin the recovery of the shared good of a commonweal is already to have moved well down the road that leads to its fuller achievement.

94 See Rawls, Political Liberalism, pp. 194-195.
We live, here and now, in an increasingly interdependent web of relationships with many other persons and with the natural environment. A public philosophy that acknowledges this de facto reality is both necessary and possible. It is required by what human beings have become at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The human good, including the good of freedom and self-determination, is a "public thing"—a res publica. Achieving this good calls for a common life in which freedom is more fully shared, for a society in which all people more fully participate in the common goods that can be achieved in their social, political, and economic activity together. Response to this de facto context calls for a public philosophy whose normative understandings of the good also take common life seriously. Human beings are indeed capable, perhaps especially in our own day, of shared speech and action. Such capacities are essential characteristics of human beings, and we have not ceased being human. The actualization of these capabilities is no doubt a daunting challenge in a world that is as culturally complex and politically confusing as ours is today. But to decline the challenge would be to abandon the quest for freedom that has been the mark of modernity. If we reframe freedom as a shared reality perhaps it will not seem a quest that is too much for us today. The normative standards of a public philosophy of freedom in community are both a reflection of what human beings are and a projection of what they can become when they live good lives in a commonwealth. The rest of this book will elaborate some of the implications of pursuing such a recovery of the commonweal. It will suggest what the lives we share together could look like if shared freedom became a guiding value in our public philosophy.