PART I

# *Situations*

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."[2] 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

the modern nation-state. Identification of the common good with the good of the modern nation-state can have totalitarian implications that any use of Aristotle today must avoid. Also "person" is used where Ostwald uses "man." Both of these departures from Ostwald's translation point to the difficult problems that must be addressed in making a normative argument for the viability of the notion of the common good today. These problems will be addressed throughout this book.

[2] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles*, III, 17. Again, the translation has been adapted, using "God" rather than "Him," from that contained in *Basic Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, ed. Anton C. Pegis, 2 vols. (New York: Random House, 1945), vol. II, p. 27. Adaptations in the interest of gender inclusiveness will be made as appropriate in citations throughout this book.

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 lays 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."[3] 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.[4] 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

[3] This identification can be found in the apostolic letter of Pope Julius III, *Exposcit debitum* (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 Complementary Norms, A Complete English Translation of the Official Latin Texts* (Saint Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1996), 1. Formulas of the Institute of the Society of Jesus, Julius III, no. 1, p. 4.

[4] See John W. O'Malley, *The First Jesuits* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), pp. 5, 163–192.

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.[5] 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.[6] 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."[7] 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

[5] For example, in *Constitutions of the Society of Jesus*, nos. 618 and 623. See John W. O'Malley, "To Travel to any Part of the World: Jerónimo Nadal and the Jesuit Vocation," *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* 16, no. 2 (1984).

[6] On the exchanges between the early Jesuits and non-European cultures, see Jonathan D. Spence, *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci* (New York: Viking, 1984); Andrew C. Ross, *A Vision Betrayed: The Jesuits in Japan and China, 1542–1742* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994); John W. O'Malley, Gauvin A. Bailey, Steven Harris, T. Frank Kennedy, eds., *The Jesuits, Cultures, Sciences, and the Arts, 1540–1773* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999).

[7] *Constitutions of the Society of Jesus*, no. 622.

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.[8]

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

[8] I here rely in part on the helpful discussions of the meaning of the common good in Patrick Riordan, *A Politics of the Common Good* (Dublin: Institute of Public Administration, 1996), esp. chap. 10. See also Drew Christiansen, "The Common Good and the Politics of Self-Interest: A Catholic Contribution to the Practice of Citizenship," in Donald Gelpi, ed., *Beyond Individualism: Toward a Retrieval of Moral Discourse in America* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), pp. 54–86.

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-excludible." 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-excludible. 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,

[9] For a concise discussion of public goods, see Inge Kaul, Isabelle Grunberg, and Marc A. Stern, "Defining Global Public Goods," in Kaul, Grunberg, and Stern, eds., *Global Public Goods: International Cooperation in the 21st Century* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 2–19.

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]

[10] John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 201.

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."[11] 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.[12] A live-and-let-live ethos thus leads to what John Dewey once called an "eclipse of the public."[13] 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

[11] Ronald Dworkin, *A Matter of Principle* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 191.

[12] See Michael J. Sandel, *Democracy's Discontent: America in Search of a Public Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), p. 4, and Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, p. 157.

[13] John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (Athens, OH: Swallow Press/Ohio University Press, 1994; orig: Henry Holt, 1927), chap. 4, "The Eclipse of the Public."

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*.[14] Indeed he maintained that "a *polis* exists for the sake of a good life, and not for life only."[15] 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.[16] Further, the Athens of Aristotle'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 too 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

[14] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1169b.
[15] Aristotle, *Politics* 1280b, 6–7, 1281a, 3–4, trans. Benjamin Jowett, in Richard McKeon, ed., *The Basic Works of Aristotle* (New York: Random House, 1941), pp. 1188–89.
[16] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1170a.