CHAPTER 10

THE COMMON GOOD ON THE MOVE: THE PANDEMIC AS A CATALYST

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"One thing the coronavirus crisis has already proved is that there really is such a thing as society."[1] British Prime Minister Boris Johnson is stating the obvious: it only works if we work together; collective survival requires solidarity and the cooperation of everyone. Saying this at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, Johnson was, however, also setting something in motion that can be seen as an intellectual turning point whose outcome is open-ended.

Let's take a look back. In a 1987 interview, the then British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher came

out with the now notorious sentence, "There is no such thing as society." Taken out of the context of a much more nuanced interview, this sentence became the hallmark of her term of office and shorthand for a shift of emphasis towards more personal responsibility by the individual and away from state support. Depending on one's ideological orientation, this basic notion became a component of political programs and continues to have an impact today.

Thatcher would most certainly not agree with every way her words have been interpreted. However, one thing can be said of her: she was firmly convinced that the common good (she called it the "flourishing society") would be best served if everyone took responsibility for themselves and their immediate environment. The pandemic is now revealing the complexity of such a liberal perspective.

Already we can foresee that the effects of the pandemic will affect society as a whole and not just individual areas. New constellations of the common good will emerge which, in the best case scenario, are making society as a whole more resilient, more resistant, and more viable. In this essay, I would like to highlight the initiatives serving thinking about the common good that are already emerging from the pandemic and how they can be used productively.

WHAT THE PANDEMIC SHOWS

The first year of the COVID-19 crisis clearly shows us (once again) how dependent we all are on a functioning community. The idea of the autonomous individual who pursues their goals and takes responsibility for themselves and others turns out to be unsustainable if the necessary conditions for mutual dependency are not observed. This indeed is the legitimate reproach laid against the kind of individualism that insists on civil liberties above all without recognizing and appreciating the social forms of association ("sociality") on which they are based.

Infections reveal the quality of relationships ("forms of association") in the family, at work, or in public life, experienced as positive and negative dependencies, in a way that is as banal as it is brutal, simply through the danger posed by the air we share. We are existentially dependent on clean air to breathe and thus on minimizing the likelihood of airborne virus transmission. Nobody has "sovereignty over the air"—we are all connected to one another on a biological level via the air we breathe, even before we have exchanged a single word. The air we breathe is always social air. It feels like a drastic change in all areas of life when we have to reduce the amount of shared air that we

usually breathe. Greater physical distances lead to greater social distances, which sometimes require a great deal of adaptation and have a powerful impact on our social life together.

No matter how we interpret our changed, distanced relationships, no one can deny the realization, which has been highlighted once again due to the new conditions affecting our air, of how complex our modern way of life is and how much we depend on others. Without a reliable framework, to which we ourselves contribute through our own actions (even if it is "only" the clearly understood self-interest of physical distancing), it is inconceivable that we might exercise our individual aspirations to freedom.

Becoming aware of our own vulnerability is an essential moment in our totally subjective experience of why our own wellbeing depends on and in turn influences the wellbeing of others. None of us can survive in an airless space, literally or figuratively, and everyone contributes to filling the "vacuum." This systemic dependence on one another, which lies beyond our personal desires, often surpasses our faculties of perception. Therefore, many people find it hard to acknowledge the functional importance of social forms of association (including their biological preconditions) as a premise of individual freedoms. For

such people, it only becomes apparent during a crisis how any form of self-realization through the experience of autonomy, self-control, and self-efficacy turns out to be the fragile result of a thoroughly collective effort: without the common good there is no freedom, without "we" there is no "I"—we "are" only through and with other people. I think this eye-opening experience of the primacy of the social element is the main message behind Boris Johnson's comment, and less a question of the role of the state and the responsibility of the individual.

THE RENAISSANCE OF THINKING ABOUT THE COMMON GOOD

Thinking about the common good is undergoing a resurgence, and not just since the onset of the current pandemic. Since the financial crisis of 2008/09 and with the emergence of increasingly significant climate scenarios, individualistic ways of thinking have taken a knock-back. The COVID-19 crisis gives a much more powerful, perhaps even abrupt, twist to focusing on the common good.

This might even shake up the most recent answers to the question of the common good to the same extent

that the 1755 Lisbon earthquake spurred philosophers into new and different ways of thinking about the role of human beings in their forms of association with the world. In the 21st century it is no longer predominantly a question of how a benevolent God could allow a disaster to happen (the theodicy problem). Today the question is how should modern, open societies respond to crises that can only be surmounted by massively restricting personal freedom. In these circumstances, how can we conceive of the relationship between the common good and freedom?

The common good does not contradict the freedom of us all, both individually and collectively, but constitutes its premise—in the spirit of the Second Vatican Council, where the common good was understood as "the sum of those conditions of the social life whereby men, families and associations more adequately and readily may attain their own perfection."[2]

In addition to this systemic perspective, there is the quotidian view, according to which the experience of the common good is to be understood as

> …general social experience in the form of intuitive knowledge about social conditions […]. The common good is important for each of us because we cannot simply invent a world, but already live under conditions which are in many ways important to us all. The

> common good also lies, so to speak, in the framework that is created collectively. These are conditions in a realm of relationships that lend direction and structure to our identity and personal narratives.[3]

However, this basic and fundamental liberal tradition of thought has not had an easy time over the last few decades, when skepticism about the common good was on the rise. As a result of lessons learned from the experience of the Third Reich, the baby was often thrown out with the bathwater and what was originally well-considered caution was unabashedly freighted with accusations of authoritarianism (primarily citing Carl Schmitt's dictum: "Anyone who speaks of the *bonum commune* is intent on deception"[4]). In tandem with the advance of functional differentiation, the core of thinking about the common good is being hollowed out more and more, apparently evaporating into individual lifestyles ("singularities").[5]

Whether in today's wave of privatizing public services, in attempts at administrative reform, or in the business world, people everywhere thought that the common good was most likely to be served when economic and, in particular, competitive factors took effect. If everyone thinks of themselves, everyone is taken care of—this was the mantra in the tradition of Adam Smith, the Scottish moral philosopher whose

view was quite unjustly abbreviated to the phrase the "invisible hand" of market forces. Those who rejected the common good no longer saw any unifying systemically relevant qualities in modern society and even wanted to philosophize any obligation to the common good out of the economy. This is likely to prove short-sighted.

The *Public Value Atlas,* a representative survey of public value issues, regularly illustrates the role played by questions of the common good among the population. For example, in 2019, 81 percent of respondents in Germany were concerned that the common good was not receiving enough attention in the country.[6] The need to take a closer look once again at what connects society is by no means a purely academic debate.

BEYOND THE PRIORITIES OF DIFFERENTIATION THEORY: REVERSING THE POINT OF DEPARTURE

Are doubts now setting in? We must look for answers in the way we live together, leading us straight away to the question of the common good that must be answered not in heaven but here on earth. What is at issue is nothing less than a reversal of the point of departure, which says that it is not functional differentiation

but rather social forms of association that create the basis of the modern community. It is the quality of the forms of association between people on which every social order is built and from which it draws its legitimizing power. This is where the necessary support comes from that makes a social order viable in the first place. We are now seeing how much, for example, our economic system depends on these forms of association and cannot function without them.

Mutual social affirmation, the primacy of the social element, is itself based on psychological and, as we are now realizing, even biological forms of association, which make us dependent on one another to a much greater extent than we might like. The social element creates the framework in which forms of individuality can develop in the first place.

We can therefore assume that COVID-19 is accelerating the moment when differentiation theories will come to an end and integration theories will enjoy a renaissance. In the latter, societies are described less on the basis of differentiations, singularities, or intrinsic logics, but rather, and more powerfully, on the basis of the forms of association that shape them. We can now clearly see something of which we had not been reminded for a long time: we must be able to afford types of differentiation. When they become too

dominant and undermine what unites us, the common good suffers.

In reversing the point of departure, another notion comes into play: dedifferentiation means going back to more general questions of association and thereby a reduction in complexity. According to the developmental psychology of Jean Piaget, this interplay of differentiation and dedifferentiation requires a dynamic balance between the classification of new experiences in existing worldviews (assimilation) and changes to this worldview itself brought about by new experiences (accommodation).[7] The "impositions" of diverse perspectives in the modern age[8] require completely new forms of accommodation to process complexity and simplification. Previous differentiations are integrated at a new level into the resulting new condition. What seemed difficult and complicated before suddenly becomes understandable in a new light and reveals an internal order, for example a pattern, a rule, or a system. This basic mechanism, described by Piaget in terms of developmental psychology, is necessary in order to bring the abundance of different perspectives into a coherent context, without which purposive action is impossible. Dedifferentiation offers the opportunity of striking out on new paths

where egregious paradoxes and dilemmas seem to offer no way out.

Fraught with impositions, these differentiation tendencies will otherwise quickly overwhelm the human ability to deal with a diversity of perspectives, and prove to be confusing. Even more important for thinking about the common good, however, is the concealment of fundamental mutual dependencies linked to the differentiation discourse, as the pandemic has reminded us. This is not a plea to abandon the differentiation debate because of an existential threat that is teaching us to focus on "the essentials." Rather it is about promoting a form of accommodation so that all actors can take part in the common good on an equal footing.

We might even say it is a new look at what Friedrich Hölderlin called the only "dispute in the world": "namely what has priority, the whole or the individual." How thinking about the common good will actually refocus itself remains to be seen. The desire to use the crisis to press one's own convictions as to what constitutes the common good (for example, climate change or globalization) is certainly legitimate. This is easier to do in one's individual life than in a complex society. For example, not taking a cruise is easier than

implementing new kinds of ship propulsion systems in the entire industry.

One lesson can already be drawn, however: one reason why thinking about the common good has become important again lies in the new sensitivity towards vulnerability in general. This does not mean hypersensitivity to attacks on identity as a result of otherness or experiences of foreignness, but rather a new awareness of the fundamental precariousness of life.[9] By becoming aware of their own vulnerability, the individual has the opportunity of recognizing their fundamental dependence on others. This ethic of vulnerability is at the same time an ethic of the common good, as reflected in the debate about society's "vulnerable groups," who require special protection against the virus.

Focusing on vulnerability as a universal condition of existence and thus a principle of the common good contains a great opportunity beyond identity politics and towards a new kind of solidarity, a modern form of compassion and thus towards a new kind of liberalism, in which people's potential for development is regarded primarily independent of origin and ethnicity. This return to "being human" itself would in this case bring unexpected progress in terms of the common good, which in turn allows new differentiations and

perspectives. In this way, modern society, with its high level of functional differentiation, is once again becoming aware of its basis in the common good, something it seemed to be losing sight of.

AGGREGATE STATES OF THE COMMON GOOD

During the COVID-19 pandemic, when the air quality became significant in a new and literally existential way, describing the common good as shared air that does not belong to any one person, to which everyone contributes, which everyone can pollute or keep clean, turns out to be just as useful as a general way of describing the social and dynamic nature of the common good. There is a good reason why we use metaphorical formulations in everyday language such as "up in the air," "clearing the air," or "disappearing into thin air."

To distinguish between what is just "hot air" in the coming debates and where something is really on the move, it is worthwhile returning to the notion of the aggregate states of various types of public opinion as described by Ferdinand Tönnies,[10] one of the founding fathers of sociology. This can be linked to the useful

idea of conceiving the rise and fall of belief in the common good as a process.

Applying Tönnies' notion to the common good, we can distinguish three types that differ in terms of how binding they are: solid common good (for example, the principle of democracy), fluid common good (for example, debates about new kinds of citizen participation), and gaseous common good (for example, the influence of social media on collective decision-making). This refers to more or less binding values, rules and norms, depending on the aggregate state. In a liberal, open society, the common good must keep moving and allow phase transitions in all directions, as long as these can be justified within the constitutional system or lead to an amendment of the system.

While in normal times we can concern ourselves more with air-like and fluid forms of the common good and can cultivate (subtle) differences, in times of crisis the common good's more solid components come to the fore all the more significantly. Are they sustainable or are they built on sand? Does the suspension of legally inscribed beliefs in the common good, even if temporary, destroy their inner affirmation? What happens if what has thus far been taken for granted in terms of individual freedom turns out to be counterproductive for collective survival?

When survival is at stake, broadly accepted and stable foundations of the common good, without which we cannot afford to make superficial differentiations (singularities, filter bubbles, echo chambers), are important. Conversely, the exaggeration of individual values that are seemingly set in stone harbors the very risk of their destruction. The end has never sanctified the means. Now it becomes clear what is really happening with the common good, whether the fractured routines of everyday life in partnerships, families, businesses, and offices will once again ultimately reassert themselves in all areas of coexistence, or whether irreversible changes will occur, creating completely different forms of association and, as a result, constellations of the common good.

It is thus unclear whether the new technological forms of interaction resulting from necessity will solidify or are merely a temporary liquefaction of previously loose obligations. By far the greatest endurance test for the common good, however, is likely to be the question of whether the discrepancies between the socially, culturally, and economically privileged and everyone else, which may have worsened as a result of the crisis, will lead to dissatisfaction, social conflict, and alienation, which will in turn set things in motion and shake up the situation.

The above example of changes in collective decision-making (the principle of democracy, new kinds of citizen participation, influence of social media on collective decision-making) is a question that concerns altered constellations of the common good: that is, the potential to mediate between the satisfaction of individual needs and a functioning community with regard to participation and involvement in social processes.

Questioning constellations of the common good in terms of their aggregate state has a very practical value: readers of this essay might read a comment about political, economic, cultural, or social issues in a daily newspaper and can try to identify the common good in its solid, fluid, and gaseous components. In many cases this process will prove an illuminating way of identifying possible developments in the common good.

The challenge is to validate changes in the aggregate states of the common good as contributions to a functioning, living community. When it comes to the issue of the common good, decision-makers are responsible for carefully weighing up where they want to make cuts or where to consolidate. The great achievement in interpretation and, consequently, in leadership consists in the ability to seek the common good in the concrete, but not to confuse the two. As a "necessary fiction," the experience of the common

good inevitably transcends the facts at hand; it cannot be derived directly from them.[11] The "facts" must first be scrutinized notionally in terms of their possible experience as a form of the common good. This consists in an inner affirmation or rejection of social facts. Ascribing a value to the common good is in no way a random or even arbitrary process, if we take the idea of the primacy of the social element seriously and see subjective evaluations themselves as expressions of social processes through which the individual has internalized social values and norms.

This paradox of the so-called immanent transcendence of the common good can be summed up thus: "To understand the common good as a category of experience of the social element inevitably means relying on the individual's skills in perception, indeed ultimately being obliged to rely on them. This does not mean just sensory impressions, but rather the ability to translate one's own experiences in the social world into a subjective context of needs and to classify them emotionally."[12]

In the acute COVID-19 crisis, as we have already mentioned, our own vulnerability and the connection between individual and collective survival are the key to the relevance of the common good. After the crisis, other views about its relevance will return

to prominence, as the historical analysis of past pandemics suggests.[13]

THE COMMON GOOD IN A POST-PANDEMIC WORLD

Data collected in summer 2020—the first year of the pandemic—shows that the COVID-19 crisis is changing the public's awareness of the common good. For example, 60 percent of those surveyed state that the common good has become more important to them.[14] It remains to be seen whether this effect will last.

In many instances, commentators are already seeing the pandemic acting as a catalyst, enabling new developments or accelerating those that are already emerging and steering them in a certain direction. Is humanity once again facing a fundamental change—a *metanoia*—that will lead to a good life in community and society?

For decision-makers in business, politics, and society, an injection of dynamism into the common good is both an opportunity and a risk. Arguments about public tolerance, public benefit, or innovation for the common good, as well as harm and damage to the common good, lend themselves well

to legitimizing or delegitimizing complex decisions. There is no doubt that these ways of facilitating or even burdening this reasoning will determine important debates in the public realm over the next few years. The deeper reason for this lies in the integrative power of thinking about the common good in order to overcome emerging contradictions and paradoxes by shifting to another level of reference. The recipe for success is not yet more reflection, but an attractive combination of thoughtful reflection and emotional appeal. The common good can never be true or false; it is always about the enactment of certain values that prove themselves subjectively and receive collective affirmation.

In times of crisis, despite all the mobility inherent in the common good, enlightened Europe always stands at a crossroads where there can be only one compass, namely the inviolability of the dignity of the individual. In this respect, the moment has now come for liberal philosophers of the common good—those who can turn the conditions for the free development of each individual and therefore everyone into an intellectual principle. The question of the common good is becoming the ultimate liberal issue.

Notes

1. Boris Johnson, video message, https://t.co/kxdqItMYSE, Twitter, March 29, 2020 (accessed February 8, 2021).
2. Second Vatican Council: *Gaudium et spes,* Chapter IV: The Life of the Political Community, para. 74, 1966. http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_cons_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html (accessed January 13, 2021).
3. Timo Meynhardt, "Ohne Gemeinwohl keine Freiheit: Zur Psychologie des Gemeinwohls" in Hans-Jürgen Papier and Timo Meynhardt (eds.) *Freiheit und Gemeinwohl: Ewige Gegensätze oder zwei Seiten einer Medaille* (Berlin: Tempus Corporate, 2016), p. 188.
4. Quoted in Josef Isensee, *Gemeinwohl und öffentliches Amt. Vordemokratische Fundamente des Verfassungsstaates* (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2013), p. 39.
5. Andreas Reckwitz, *Die Gesellschaft der Singularitäten: Zum Strukturwandel der Moderne* (Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2018).
6. www.gemeinwohlatlas.de/en (accessed February 8, 2021).
7. Jean Piaget, *The Origin of Intelligence in the Child* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2013).
8. Peter Strohschneider, *Zumutungen: Wissenschaft in Zeiten von Populismus, Moralisierung und Szientokratie* (Hamburg: kursbuch.edition, 2020).
9. Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London/New York: Verso, 2004).
10. *Ferdinand Tönnies on Public Opinion: Selections and Analyses,* edited, introduced and translated by Hanno Hardt and Slavko Splichel (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000).

11. Timo Meynhardt, "Public Value Inside: What is Public Value Creation?" in *International Journal of Public Administration*, vol. 32, issues 3–4 (2009), pp. 192–219.
12. Timo Meynhardt, "Ohne Gemeinwohl keine Freiheit: Zur Psychologie des Gemeinwohls," p. 180.
13. Laura Spinney, *Pale Rider: The Spanish Flu of 1918 and How it Changed the World* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2017).
14. www.gemeinwohlatlas.de/en (accessed February 8, 2021).