

Reestablishing the Commons for the Common Good

Howard Gardner

Abstract: For individuals living in a small community, the notion of “common good” seems almost natural; it can be thought of simply as neighborly morality. However, in a complex modern society, it is far more challenging for individuals to define and agree upon what is the common good. Nonetheless, two contemporary roles would benefit from embracing a broader sense of the good: 1) membership in a profession; and 2) membership in a polity. Drawing on findings from the GoodWork Project, I describe how the common good can become a guiding value in the professional and civic realms; discuss threats to such guiding values; and suggest some ways to promote the common good in contemporary American society.

As high-end primates, human beings in earlier eras presumably had some notion of “common good.” Parents made sacrifices for their children, and later in life, the favor was often returned. Siblings and more distant relatives cared for one another and, perhaps, for a broader group of persons.

Precisely when such solidarity transcended blood relationships will likely never be known. The work of anthropologist Robin Dunbar hints at the scope of early conceptions of the common good.¹ Dunbar argues that individuals can comfortably maintain relationships with up to 150 people: the maximum number of individuals in a clan or small tribe who see each other regularly, and whose behavior – friendly and helpful, or hostile and injurious – can be remembered for purposes of cooperation or retaliation.

I have coined the phrase *neighborly morality* to denote this conception of the common good.² Here, individuals handle a manageable cognitive load, with some capacity to solve existing problems and to anticipate new ones. It is logical for such individuals to help one another from time to time, to work together toward goals that would be difficult or impossible to achieve independently.

HOWARD GARDNER, a Fellow of the American Academy since 1995, is the John H. and Elisabeth A. Hobbs Professor of Cognition and Education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, where he is also the Senior Director of Harvard Project Zero. His many publications include *Truth, Beauty, and Goodness Reframed: Educating for the Virtues in the Age of Truthiness and Twitter* (2012), *Leading Minds* (1995), and *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* (1983).

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Indeed, this is what happens in small settlements.

Consider the Ten Commandments and the Golden Rule. Traditional injunctions make sense when dealing with a manageable number of acquaintances. Honor your parents and desist from lying, stealing from, and disrespecting your neighbors. Moreover, sanctions that follow the breaking of these codes – whether imposed by the community or by God – reinforce the desirability of the neighborly form of the common good.

We lack thorough histories of such small human groups. Communities large and literate enough to leave written records have dwarfed the type of neighborhood that Dunbar describes. Yet the need to recognize and address the common good scarcely disappears with the emergence of larger settlements, villages, cities, and states.

Is there evidence of voluntarism in working for the common good in these larger communities? The slaves of Egypt built pyramids, burial tombs, and massive granaries that served others, but we have no reason to believe that their actions were voluntary. So, too, serfs and peasants in ancient and medieval times mined for precious metals and harvested crops. Indeed, much of the political theory developed in Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was an attempt to determine whether such apparently selfless actions were compulsory; or whether people joined together voluntarily to serve what they believed was a broader good than that extended to kith and kin.

With the growth of states and the emergence of nations, centralized powers came to the fore. Inhabitants of the great empires – Chinese, Indian, Ottoman, Holy Roman – did not merely elect to pay taxes and tribute or to bear arms in a military expedition. At minimum they were

compelled to do so; but some citizens also understood why it might be in their interest to cooperate in such large-scale ventures. Whether literally religious, like Christianity or Islam, or better described as spiritual, like Confucianism or Shinto, the belief systems of these civilizations provided rationales for pro-social behavior, which motivated some inhabitants. Both formal and informal educational systems also represented efforts to instill such cooperative behaviors in the next generation.

My concern is not with authoritarian or totalitarian societies – the pharaohs of Egypt, the Qin emperors in China – or the fascist and communist dictators of the twentieth century. Rather, the challenge is to understand the specific conditions under which a voluntary conscientiousness emerges in nonauthoritarian societies. In such cases, individuals who have the freedom to behave selfishly instead elect to devote significant effort to benefit the larger polity. In contrast to neighborly morality, I term this variety of service *the ethics of roles*. The two principal roles with regard to serving the common good are those of the worker and of the citizen.

The ethical citizen views the polity as an extension of himself and his interests. Not only does the ethical citizen identify with his city, region, or state; but concerned with the welfare of that entity, he is willing to contribute to it, whether or not he and his kin benefit directly.

Such powerful civic associations are illustrated by the Athenians' long-honored concern with the welfare of their city. In fifth century Athens, young adult males swore the following oath:

We will never bring disgrace on this our city through an act of dishonesty or cowardice.

We will fight for the ideals and Sacred Things of the city both alone and with many.

We will revere and obey the city's laws, and will do our best to incite a like reverence and respect in those above us who are prone to annul them or set them at naught.

We will strive increasingly to quicken the public's sense of civic duty.

Thus, in all these ways we will transmit this city, not only not less, but greater and more beautiful than it was transmitted to us.³

In Western civilization since the height of Athens, there have been both periods of active ethical citizenship and periods when the role of the ethical citizen was quiescent or even absent. Some periods of ethical citizenship coincided with religious agendas: for example, participation in the Crusades on behalf of Christendom seems to have been voluntary on the part of many. Other periods coincided with political revolution – be it the American Revolution, the French Revolution, the founding of the modern Chinese state, or the Russian Revolution of the early twentieth century. It is also possible to evaluate and rank polities in terms of civic concern for the common good. Contemporary Scandinavian and other Northern European countries, for example, stand out for embracing a voluntary form of the common good. East Asian countries also demonstrate a concern with the common good, though it may be somewhat less volitional on the part of their citizens.

The role of the ethical worker complements that of the ethical citizen, and its history is no less complex. Early instances of the ethical worker include the emergence of trades and guilds in the late Middle Ages. Certainly, trades and guilds exhibited selfish and secretive behaviors. But within the guilds there was also an awareness of which actions and which ideals served the good of the budding profession and, perhaps, of the broader society as well. The guild's concern for

the greater good can be discerned in the emergence of labor unions in Europe and the Americas.

The ethical worker emerged with the development of the professions, sometimes called the *learned professions*. Paralleling the oath of the Athenian citizen is the Hippocratic Oath, which is generally considered the first example of a professional oath and is still commonly taken today in one or another form. By taking the oath, the physician pledges to come to the aid of those who are sick, to do so without regard to the patient's ability to pay, to avoid any form of bribery, to pass on the trade to the next generation, and to respect the patient's privacy. While the oath may protect the special status of the profession, it also represents a pioneering effort to stipulate what it means to serve the larger community – the common good.

In the early 1960s *Dædalus* devoted an entire issue to the American professions. The professions were then at their heights: "Everywhere in American life, the professions are triumphant," remarked editor Kenneth Lynn.⁴ Professionals had prestige, status, and adequate compensation. They were viewed as individuals, and because they had mastered their material, were current in knowledge, and had been endorsed by the masters of their chosen guild, they were granted considerable autonomy. They were perceived as authorities, capable of rendering disinterested judgments in the face of complexity and uncertainty. Soon additional sectors of society, from business to journalism, emulated the "gold standards" of medicine, law, and the professoriate with regard to credentialing, service, and objectivity.

The concept of "disinterestedness" is crucial to the roles of both the professional and the citizen.⁵ Of course, the ethical worker and citizen does not ignore his or her own needs. Nevertheless, society benefits when those wielding power and

Howard
Gardner

influence – in professional offices, in the voting booth, in the public sphere – are able to transcend narrow self-interest. Professionals follow the precepts of the guild just as citizens follow their oath of citizenship. Thus, their understanding of personal gain is viewed within the context of the greater good over an extended period of time.

So why is a professor of cognition and education writing an essay on the ethical professional and the ethical citizen? I grew up in the 1950s and 1960s, when the professional in America was highly esteemed. Certainly, the professions were not without flaws: women and minorities were often barred from entering a profession, never mind ascending to the top ranks (a challenge that still remains in many sectors). Yet without romanticizing the era, I feel reasonably confident that American professionals in the mid-twentieth century cultivated a sense of the common good, and this framework guided them in their work. And flawed though they were, American citizens and public servants of the era viewed themselves as servants of this same common good, not servants of just their immediate needs, neighbors, or constituencies.

By 1995, my colleagues in psychology, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and William Damon, and I sensed that the era of the honored professional was already on the wane. We could see that law was becoming overwhelmingly corporate; that the practice of medicine was taking place in large, non-professionally-led health maintenance organizations, often for-profit; and that print and broadcast journalism had difficulty covering important news in a thorough and dispassionate way. (We were then unaware of the parallel pressures put on financial professionals – auditors, bankers, credit raters – but the events of the past decade have amply

documented the difficulty of maintaining professionalism in the financial sector in the face of rapid change and the opportunity to make enormous sums of money when willing to cut corners.)

To understand and address this movement away from the honored professional, we founded the GoodWork Project. Active today, the GoodWork Project is concerned with what it means to be a professional in the modern world. We explore the question of how professions can survive when conditions are changing rapidly, when our sense of time and space has been radically altered by technology, when markets are very powerful, and when few if any counterforces can mediate or moderate the forces of the market. To answer these questions, we interviewed more than 1,200 professionals drawn from nine different realms of work, and we launched a series of sibling and offspring research projects. Our findings are detailed in a dozen books and numerous articles, and described at our website www.thegoodproject.org.⁶

Why has the role of the professional in America been undermined in such a short period of time? Indeed, the perception of the American professional has so shifted that many young persons assume that a professional is simply a businessman who does not make as much money as a successful entrepreneur, trader, or consultant.

A multitude of factors has contributed to the diminution of the role of the professional, and more specifically, of its ethical core. Among the contributing factors is the opening of the profession to groups that were hitherto not welcome. Without question, this access has on balance been a healthy and needed trend, echoing George Bernard Shaw's renowned quip that "all professions are conspiracies against the laity." However, this democratization has also often entailed

an anti-elite, anti-expert sentiment. A heightened belief in the genius of the market, which is believed to be the optimal regulator of society and its institutions, has also lessened the value placed on professionals. In Ronald Reagan's United States and Margaret Thatcher's United Kingdom, there was little sympathy for professionals who sought protection of their status: "There is no such thing as society," Thatcher famously declared. And with cost-free access to copious technical information, the digital revolution has sometimes engendered unrealistic expectations of expertise on the part of professionals and placed unexpected pressures on those who, in earlier times, had been assumed to "know best."

Though it has largely been a hidden trend, the special status of the professional has been gradually worn down by the tide of market and value changes. One single event did not suddenly undermine the professional; rather, between 1970 and 2010, the once-esteemed professional came to be viewed with increased skepticism and distrust. And while diminution of status does not necessarily entail a diminution of ethical fiber, it is more difficult for the professional to serve the common good when society no longer elevates and empowers him.

The relatively positive milieu of the mid-twentieth century has been replaced by an atmosphere of fear and greed among many citizens and professionals: fear on the part of those who feel that they are losing their place in society; and greed on the part of those whose lives are driven by a desire for ever more possessions and ever-advancing status all too often yoked to the level of compensation, even in the not-for-profit sector. Concern for the common good cannot survive in the face of these two virulent forces. More worrisome, fear and greed combine to form a vicious cycle that is extremely

difficult to reverse on an individual or societal level. *Howard Gardner*

GoodWork Project researchers are often asked how we know that professionals are less ethical than they once were. Admittedly, we could not prove this claim to a skeptic, though much research with young people suggests an attenuation of the ethical muscle. But regardless of its standing in relation to the past, the ethical level of professions inarguably needs nurturing today.

And what of the role of the ethical citizen? The research of political scientist Robert Putnam documents the decline of civic communitarian groups, the weakening of civic trust in increasingly diverse societies, and the growing politicization of religion; not one of these developments favors the common good.⁷ Voting percentages may fluctuate, but public trust in governmental institutions and practices has dropped steadily, if not precipitously. Considerable evidence from the digital world documents both the ignorance of citizens about basic constitutional and historical concepts and the increased tendency of citizens to associate principally with those who share their political views. The hope that the Internet would usher in an era of cosmopolitanism, empathy, and/or generosity has not – or at least not yet – been realized.

Given the dystopic trends in contemporary American society, it is necessary to search broadly for encouraging models. It is poignant that many formerly totalitarian states – in Eastern Europe and East Asia, for example – look to the United States for models of how to develop an independent legal system, a political process, a faculty governance, or a journalistic ethos, at a time when the ethics of the professions in the United States are being intensely challenged. Revealingly, a preliminary finding from

one of our studies suggests that immigrant youth are no more trusting of institutions and public figures than are American-born youth; however, the immigrant youth at least trust the *processes* in areas such as law or investigative reporting.

Scandinavia (particularly Sweden and Denmark) and certain other pockets of Western Europe are probably the strongest bastions of ethical citizens and ethical professionals today. For many years, I have visited Reggio Emilia, a small city in northeastern Italy, celebrated for its remarkable preschool educational institutions. Not coincidentally, Reggio Emilia is in the region of Italy that, according to Robert Putnam, founded institutions of civic democracy as early as the twelfth century!⁸ Not only have I observed an exemplary concern for the common good in Reggio Emilia, but this Italian community represents a model learning organization, with leaders working tirelessly to learn from other sites as well as from their own experiments and mistakes.⁹

However, it is not clear either in Scandinavia or in other parts of Europe that the ethics of roles can endure in the face of these three factors: 1) pressures of the market and of globalization; 2) ready access of the general population to knowledge and expertise, both genuine and feigned, ushered in by the digital revolution; and 3) the large-scale movement of immigrants into once homogeneous societies. From what I have observed, countries like Sweden and the Netherlands make great efforts to integrate immigrants. Yet, particularly at times of financial pressure, it is easy to scapegoat immigrants and thereby narrow the scope of what is “common.”

Specifically, in Scandinavia and parts of Northern and Western Europe, the common good is seen as the good of the whole nation. But if a significant part of the population is not integrated, and

therefore is not accepted as part of the nation, then notions of the common good become truncated. The same issues arise in East Asia, where minorities in China or Japan have not been easily integrated into the majority culture. Countries with greater diversity and established histories of integrating ethnic minorities may have an easier time embracing an ecumenical notion of the common good. Recent social and political movements in the United States, Brazil, and India, however, demonstrate the constant pressures placed on ethnically diverse societies to limit the scope of what constitutes “we.”

In addition to documenting threats to the common good, the GoodWork Project research group has sought to identify features that are most likely to engender a broader sense of community among professionals and citizens. Many of the professionals with whom we spoke cited early religious education or experiences as a principal contributor to their ethical sense. Though many participants identified their religious upbringing as a major influence on their adult understanding of ethics, most no longer actively practiced their birth religion, nor did God or their religion otherwise come up in our lengthy interviews. In fact, for only one interview group did religion continue to loom large: namely, subjects who had been nominated as “good businessmen or businesswomen.” Note, however, that our interviews took place largely on the two coasts of the United States; if our sample had been more heavily skewed toward the South or the Midwest, religion might have been discussed more frequently.

Beyond the familial and religious milieus of early life, three factors prove influential in developing an ethical sense:

Vertical Support. Mentorship and other forms of institutional support are crucial

to the individual's development of an ethical stance. An admired mentor possessing a strong ethical compass may be a hugely influential model to a developing citizen. The same holds true of the workplace milieu: do leaders and supervisors value a high ethical standard, and not just as a talking point?

Less predictably, our research subjects frequently mentioned individuals who served as negative role models – we called these *anti-mentors* or *tor-mentors*. Our subjects often explained: “He (or she) epitomized what I did NOT want to be.” Of course, many ethically compromised workers lacked mentors, or had mentors who were themselves ethically deficient. Distance from a mentor with a negative influence may be required for a professional to realize that his or her mentor is not worthy of emulation.

Horizontal Support. In the contemporary United States, particularly with the rise of social media, the role of peer groups has taken on greater importance. With mentors scarce and senior individuals often moving from one institution to another, the influence of age-mates can be enormous. And as the GoodWork Project has documented, many young professionals perceive their peers to be extremely ambitious, often willing to cut corners to gain advancement. (We were not in a position to determine whether these perceptions were accurate.) Our subjects explained to us that they were not willing to hurt their odds of professional success by being more ethical than their peers. A low or inconsistent set of standards among peers – whether genuine or perceived – can confound one's ethical orientation.

Peer influence need not be destructive. It is certainly possible for peers to band together, to attempt to better the ethical milieu of their organization, or even to start a new institution that embodies

high ethical standards. The remarkable young entrepreneurs who have recently founded organizations in education, citizenship, justice, and the environment have much to teach us about the pursuit of the common good. Alas, as John Gardner – the embodiment of the good citizen in an earlier era – has pointed out, their efforts can pale in the event that necessary and far-reaching legislation is not enacted.

Periodic Wake-up Calls. Even when attempting to serve the common good, workers and citizens can regress, acting either foolishly or selfishly. At such times, an unexpected event can be salutary. The event is often a negative one – malpractice on the part of an individual or group that threatens the viability of the overall enterprise. Such a wake-up call occurred at *The New York Times* early in the twenty-first century. Within a short time frame, two key events unfolded: 1) the *Times* discovered that staff reporter Jayson Blair had plagiarized and fabricated news stories; and 2) the national news division published the unsubstantiated claim that Saddam Hussein was hiding weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. Such wake-up calls may compel individuals to revisit the core values of their profession and redetermine how best to embody them. The wake-up call is therefore ultimately a positive event that can help workers entrenched in a profession appreciate how their role can serve the broader good. That was the case in 1971, when *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* risked judicial proceedings and financial ruin by publishing the Pentagon Papers.

These forces are not limited to the professional realm, but operate in civic life as well. Young people are heavily influenced by the models of parents and teachers; indeed, the best predictor of interest in civics is growing up in a home where members of the family regularly discuss

Howard
Gardner

and debate the news. Peers exert potent influence as well: it matters whether a child's peers discuss participants and events in the political and economic worlds, or if they restrict their discourse to gossip about celebrities. And once again, the occurrence of a major event – carnage at an elementary or secondary school, the bombing of the Twin Towers – can serve as a civic wake-up call.

We began the GoodWork Project with the aim of understanding current stances toward the common good: what is happening with respect to various professions and, more generally, to the world of work; and what is happening with respect to citizenship, among youth in particular. As the data accumulated, and as we reflected on their implications, we elected to devote our efforts toward the promotion of good work and good citizenship.

Under the leadership of William Damon, and with the collaboration of the Committee of Concerned Journalists, the GoodWork Project designed a traveling curriculum for journalists. It is based on a series of off-site workshops where members of a journalistic organization can meet to discuss vexed ethical issues, such as how to minimize bias, how to verify sources while competing with blogs in a 24/7 news cycle, and how to undertake investigative journalism at a time of intense market pressures and diminished resources. Carried out in almost two hundred newsrooms and involving approximately three thousand journalists, the traveling curriculum has been well received, and a follow-up study has indicated that the workshops have had lasting value.

With the leadership of Lynn Barendsen and Wendy Fischman, we have designed the GoodWork Toolkit, which consists of dilemmas that have been reported by subjects in our GoodWork study. Orga-

nized around a series of lessons, the participants tackle questions such as: What work is admired, and why? Can work be both engaging and ethical? Is it appropriate to cut corners when your colleagues engage in such compromises? The Toolkit can be used in any educational setting, but is most effective when, like the traveling curriculum in journalism, all the stakeholders participate actively.

Several of us have taught courses centered on the GoodWork themes. We have also designed “reflection sessions” for undergraduates. In these voluntary sessions, students reflect on their goals and values; their current use of time and how consistent this is with their large-scale concerns; and the manner in which they deal with ethical issues that have arisen in their own lives, or ones that have been reported in the media.

Inspiring individuals to focus on the common good is particularly challenging in a social climate of fear, greed, and uncertainty. Indeed, in one study that included a pre- and post-test, adolescents exposed to GoodWork issues actually became *more* resistant to working for the common good.¹⁰ It is unclear whether they became less generous as a means of resolving cognitive dissonance; or whether challenging the common good is, at least for some, a necessary step en route to a more capacious perspective. We are under no illusion that mere discussion of these issues is the same as working on them in our daily lives; many of us “talk” a better game than we “walk.” Yet the results of our various interventions have sufficiently encouraged us to continue their practice and development. As a result of these and other activities, I have become convinced of the power of a “common space” or a “commons.” Originally, of course, this phrase in English referred to public grounds to which herdsman brought their cattle and on which farmers planted

their crops. If the community did not show restraint, the commons was soon exhausted – hence the famous “tragedy of the commons.” Conversely, if individuals at the commons worked together to serve the long-term needs of the larger community, broader benefits resulted. The same principles extend beyond a physical commons to the institutions and polities that link professionals and citizens today.¹¹

Within my own institution I have felt the pronounced need for such an intellectual common space. At an institution as large, well known, and closely monitored as Harvard, ethical issues arise constantly. Some issues are large, some small, and most are gossiped about. Yet Harvard leadership is extremely reluctant to discuss these issues publicly, let alone reflect on them and promulgate lessons learned. Meanwhile, bloggers speak very frankly about “silenced” issues, but they do so anonymously, leaving no way of determining which claims have warrant and which do not. I hope that it may be possible to create a “commons” where members of the Harvard community can freely discuss consequential ethical issues, without fear of reprisal, and thereby perhaps discover new procedures that could contribute to the common good in other contexts.

I believe in voluntarism. I admire institutions and practices that begin modestly and yet prove so compelling that they “go viral” and take on a life of their own. The educational system in Reggio Emilia exemplifies this phenomenon. The educators are far from proselytizers; indeed, they do not seek out partners or search for multichanneled megaphones. And yet since the time of Maria Montessori a century ago, no educational effort with young persons has had as much positive influence throughout the world as that put forth by the schools of Reggio.

However, boutique examples are difficult to replicate, and in the meantime, valuable opportunities may be lost. Accordingly, I endorse the promulgation of regulations and the implementation of laws that counter selfishness and self-centeredness, and that “nudge” people and institutions toward the common good. Recent Anglo-American history reveals a sharp turn away from concern with the common good. It is high time to restore a better balance. I therefore support those processes and institutions that explicitly embrace the common good as their mandate, as well as measures that can indicate whether they have contributed to greater common good. Just as war is too important to be left to the generals, the common good is too precious to be left to the vagaries of human biology, historical trends, or the appearance of the occasional saint. Conscientious efforts by ethical workers and ethical citizens to serve the common good deserve all the support that society and government can muster.

*Howard
Gardner*

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Robin Dunbar, *How Many Friends Does One Person Need? Dunbar's Number and Other Evolutionary Quirks* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010).
- ² Howard Gardner, *Truth, Beauty, and Goodness Reframed: Educating for the Virtues in the Age of Truthiness and Twitter* (New York: Basic Books, 2012).
- ³ The Essentia Book of Knowledge, "The Athenian Oath," <http://www.essentia.com/book/history/athenian.htm>.
- ⁴ Kenneth Lynn, Introduction to "The Professions," a special issue of *Dædalus* 92 (4) (Fall 1963): 649.
- ⁵ Howard Gardner, "In Defense of Disinterestedness in the Digital Era," in *Transforming Citizens: Youth, New Media, and Political Participation*, ed. D. S. Allen and J. Light (in preparation).
- ⁶ See also Howard Gardner, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, and William Damon, *Good Work: When Excellence and Ethics Meet* (New York: Basic Books, 2001); Howard Gardner, ed., *Good Work: Theory and Practice*, <http://www.thegoodproject.org/the-goods/books/goodwork-theory-and-practice/>
- ⁷ See, for example, Robert Putnam, ed., *Democracy in Flux: The Evolution of Social Capital in Contemporary Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).
- ⁸ Robert Putnam, Robert Lenardi, and Raffaella Nanetti, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993).
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- ¹¹ Elinor Ostrom, "Beyond Markets and States: Polycentric Governance of Complex Economic Systems," Nobel Prize Lecture, December 8, 2009, http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/economics/laureates/2009/ostrom_lecture.pdf.