

Evangelisation and Ideology

The Common Good Response to Identity Politics

Matthew Petrussek

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Thank you all for joining us at home or wherever you're watching from.

So, I'd like to make three primary arguments tonight that lead to three conclusions that I hope are persuasive, or at least plausible.

- The first conclusion is that Identity Politics is hopelessly at odds with the basic tenets of human dignity and natural law justice.
- The second conclusion is that the Common Good tradition provides a unique, and I would say the only, solution to the problem of Identity Politics. And it does so while including whatever may be good about Identity Politics, or putatively good about Identity Politics. So it includes what's good and discards what's not.
- The third conclusion is that the Common Good tradition, solving the problem of Identity Politics, is highly relevant to the task of evangelization, in the sense that it can engender what we could call a dispositional conversion, or an attitudinal conversion. So it's not necessarily opening the door to a full acceptance of Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour, but it's at least opening the possibility of taking that seriously by opening up the reality between mortality and God.

So let me start with some definitions.

WHAT IS AN IDEOLOGY?

So what is an ideology? And is the Common Good just one ideology, among others? No, it's not. Oftentimes, the perception is that when we look at different political alternatives, different political theories, we sort of line them up on a table, and each one of them is making different claims about the nature of the good and the nature of how that good is achieved. But basically, they're all understood as ideological options. And so what we'd be doing with the Common Good ideology is just adding one more alternative to the panoply of alternatives that are already there. However, I want to argue that the Common Good is categorically and qualitatively different from its worldview competitors.

The reason is because an ideology, at least as I'm defending it in this presentation, is a comprehensive worldview that seeks to describe the totality of reality, and prescribe a systematic moral and political response to reality, in one of two ways:

- option A is that it does so by severing morality, and therefore politics, from any reference to the transcendent. And those would be secular ideologies, of which there are many, that'd be the general category, or
- option B, they conflate the transcendent with morality, and politics. And we could call those religious or theological ideologies.

In this presentation, as we are focusing on Identity Politics, we will primarily be looking at the category of secular ideology this evening. But it's important to note that there are religious ideologies as well.

So in sum, an ideology is a totality without transcendence. Identity Politics is an ideology. However, it's not the only one. Utilitarianism, classical liberalism, libertarianism, and some forms of political conservatism are just as ideological as well; theocracies would also qualify as an ideology.

The Common Good, however, is not an ideology. It neither severs morality and politics from the transcendent, nor does it conflate morality and politics with the transcendent. And so in this case, it's in a unique category.

WHAT IS IDENTITY POLITICS?

So if that gives us a basic sense of what an ideology is, what then is Identity Politics? Identity politics is oftentimes used synonymously with political progressivism, or what's now being referred to as wokeism. There may be some nuanced distinctions between political progressivism and wokeism, and Identity Politics. However, for this presentation, we could use all three synonymously.

The genealogy of Identity Politics

The intellectual genealogy of Identity Politics or progressivism or wokeism is immensely complex.

- It includes influences from post modernism - basically the idea that truth is socially constructed, that there is no such thing as objective truth. This started as a literary movement, but it has escaped the walls of academia and run through our society.
- It also has roots in post colonialism, especially the thought of thinkers like Franz Fanon, and the idea that the world can be divided into two categories, of oppressor and oppressed, and within those two categories, it's only the oppressed who have access to the true nature of what's really going on and the oppressors, sort of by definition, are epistemically limited in their ability to understand what's truly good. We'll see how important epistemology (how we understand what we know to be true) is to Identity Politics, and to the debate surrounding Identity Politics.
- It also includes strands of Marxism.
- It includes strands of Critical Race Theory.

- It includes (surprisingly perhaps) strands of Classical Liberalism, and even Libertarianism. Libertarianism and Identity Politics are, in a sense, rightly seen as completely at odds with each other, and we see that playing out in contemporary debates. However, what may look like ideological enemies on the surface actually share a kind of basic premise: that truth - or truth beyond what the individual thinks is true - is completely outside the bounds of a common rationality. So in that sense, they're deeply united, even if they end up being enemies on the surface.
- And it also includes influences of utilitarianism, or the greatest good for the greatest number (this is not the Common Good: the Common Good is the true authentic good for all, not the greatest good for the greatest number).

So because of this complex genealogy, I think the most effective way to define Identity Politics is to look at some of its dominant features. I'll be focusing on six features.

The dominant features of Identity Politics

1. **Experientially based epistemology:** Identity Politics ideology exclusively tends to have what's called an experientially based epistemology. What do I mean by that? Well, epistemology comes from *episteme* and *logos* - epistemic is understood as a systematic understanding of how we know what we know. So an epistemology gives us the basic framework for being able to identify the methodology that leads to any potential conclusions of how we identify anything as true, as false, and then put into the moral realm as truly good, or truly bad.

So by saying that Identity Politics is based on experientially based epistemology, what I'm saying is that Identity Politics and Identity Politics ideology, derives its beliefs, from the self-reported "lived experiences", of the individuals that it deems to be representative of a politically favoured group. And that's an important caveat: it's not the lived experiences of all individuals of a particular category, but rather those deemed to be representative of that category and who can speak on behalf of the other members of the group. So knowledge is generated by sort of a upper caste of individuals within a group who appeal to their own experiences in order to say what is true and false and good and bad.

Identity politics ideology also and consequently sees rational objectivity and epistemic universality (that as rational beings it is theoretically possible for all of us to come to the same conclusion), as social constructs, specifically generated to oppress marginalised groups. So even the claim that human beings are universally rational (and because of that, that we have the capacity to come to a shared consensus, based on a rational agreement), that claim, in and of itself, is rejected as true and also tagged with a bad motivation. So the Identity Politics position would say that "the only reason you say that we share rationality is because you're participating in an oppressive structure of knowledge and ultimately, of politics."

Crucially, it dissects members of an identity group, for example, those who disagree with the lived experience epistemology. So when members of an identity group say "I actually don't think lived experience is sufficient to come to a conclusion, moral or otherwise", they are often deemed to be traitors, or dupes, who have adopted the oppressors' point of view.

This has been an issue with within my own family. My wife of 20 years is from Argentina. She moved to United States after we got married in our early 20s. And one of the things she quickly discovered, when she entered into the university system, was that she was now a *Latina* - and that Latina represented not only being from a particular geographic region of the world and being Spanish speaking, but it also necessarily represented inhabiting a particular worldview, specifically an Identity Politics worldview. And so in her classes time and time again, she would raise her voice against what the professor assumed was a consensus within the class about some political issue. And she would say, "well, I don't see it that way." And time and time again, she would be told "that's only because you have a white husband."

So, think about what that necessarily implies. To say you are a representative of a group means you must think a particular kind of way, and if you don't think that way, it's only because you're either naive or stupid. In a sane world that would be called bigoted and racist, but in the world of Identity Politics, it's considered to be enlightened. So conformity of thought is necessitated within this particular ideology.

It's also crucial to know upfront that learned experience cannot be falsified. Someone claiming that they see things a particular kind of way, or feel things in a particular kind of way - saying for example, that they feel "unsafe" - there's no way to test that, whether empirically, rationally or metaphysically. It's an expression of a subjective experience. And so if you've based your whole ideology on lived experience (and by definition, lived experience cannot be falsified) what you've done is you've generated a system of thought that by definition can not be challenged. From the outset, it makes itself immune, by design, to critique. And then, as we'll see in just a moment, it identifies any critique as "dangerous."

2. **Group control of language and logic:** the creation of in-group language, created for out-group consumption. As a consequence of rejecting rational objectivity, and by extension, a commitment to universally intelligible language, Identity Politics ideology seeks to advance its goals by imbuing words and statements with whatever meaning an identity group ascertains will best advance its political interests.

Now what this results in, precisely because it grants itself the power not only over language, but of logic as well, is the expression of overtly contradictory statements. For example, "colourblindness" is racist, "All Lives Matter" is bigotry, property destruction, or even physical violence, is "peaceful resistance". "Words" are violence, allowing people to vote is "anti democratic", or using the word "her" to refer to male genitalia.

A paradigmatic example of this form of thought (or anti thought) and action, can be seen in the work of theorist Ibram X. Kendi, who's done a lot of proclamations on behalf of what he's identified as anti-racism. This is a quote from his work in early work: "The only remedy to racist discrimination is anti-racist discrimination." The substance of this claim is that racial discrimination is both unjust and just at the same time. It violates the basic laws of logic.

3. **Tendency to generate imperious neologisms:** The ideology invents new words, but also imbues them with imperious power: the power to command, the power to compel, the power to force compliance. It generates words and slogans whose meaning, (a) is dependent on the identity group (the identity group grants itself the power to give the word the content it wants to assign to it), and yet at the same time, (b) claims moral authority over those in the "out-group" as well. Those who adhere to this ideology in effect take a word, cut it from the bottom, gut it and stuff it with new meaning and give it an authority generated by the identity group will.

Examples (a sort of greatest hits rendition) of these kinds of imperious neologisms include: Hate. Love is love. Non binary. Mansplaining. Misgendering. Dead naming. Cultural appropriation. Believe all women. White male privilege. Patriarchy. Feminism. Heteronormativity. Cisnormativity. Silence is violence. Microaggression. LatinX. Equity. Birthing person. Allyship. Queerbaiting. Pansexual. Toxic masculinity. Reproductive healthcare. Gender affirming care - among many others.

Anyone who sincerely questions the meaning, the coherence or the selective applicability of the terms - those who ask those kinds of questions - are deemed as being motivated by "hate" or suffering from a "phobia".

And I want to pause here on the tagging of dissent as phobia. Literally, a phobia is a form of mental illness: to have a phobia means that you have some kind of paralysing fear of something that is not objectively fearful. So if you have a phobia of cats, or a phobia of spiders, the basic idea is that it has a claim on you that prevents you from thinking clearly, precisely because the fear has overcome your rational capacities. So when individuals who disagree with an ideology are described as being "homophobic" or "transphobic", or with some other kind of phobia, the idea is that they're being described as mentally ill. And so what do we do with people who are mentally ill? Do we argue with them? Do we have a debate with them? At best, we medicate them. At worst, we lock them up and get them out of society because they're a danger to themselves and others. So this use of phobia is not just a mere rhetorical device: there's a deep tyrannical impulse underneath it.

4. **Conflates opposing viewpoints with harm or danger:** Because Identity Politics ideology rejects rational standards of truth - including empirical truth, falsity or coherence - as valid forms of engagement, the only tool to resist and attack contrary viewpoints is to call them unsafe or harmful. It's crucial to note here that given the other premises of this ideology, "safety" and "harm", like every other word, have no fixed objective meaning. Meaning is entirely dependent on the identity group's wills and aims.

So because Identity Politics ideology reframes dissent as a form of violence, it therefore consequently authorises identity groups to be protected from speech. Because they identify dissenting speech as violent, this generates a moral imperative for all those who are dissenting to be silent. Because dissent is now defined as violence, the state, the authorities, have an obligation to protect the use of violence among the population.

So by a kind of magical syllogism here, the state now has the moral authority and imperative to silence particular forms of speech. And violence can justifiably be used to quell violence. So violence can potentially also be used to quell speech. So you see, these are these are not just harmless ideas that may be laughably absurd. When we examine them, they lead to real restructuring of society, and they go in one direction, and that's towards totalitarianism.

5. **Focuses on attaining and maintaining power:** Identity politics ideology is focused exclusively on attaining and maintaining power. It tends to have a mercantilist view of power: that there is a fixed supply of power in the world, in the community, and if one group has it, that necessarily means it has been taken by another group. Thus, politics is not about pursuing justice, *per se*, or some objective conception of a shared good, but rather about advancing one group's interests at the expense of other groups.

I want to pause for a moment to consider the conception of "intersectionality." Perhaps you've heard that term before. Isn't that a way in which Identity Politics is seeking to find unity among different groups, for some kind of pursuit of the Common Good?

Now to answer that question, we have to remember the other premises of Identity Politics, specifically the premises about the generation of knowledge and where truth claims come from - that is, that truth claims are subjective, that they depend on the will of the identity group. So in a sense, we can already see that substantive agreement, or rational consensus, is not a possibility - that's already been taken off the table. So what then could possibly unite identity groups, given that we can't come to any kind of shared conclusion? All we can have is what? A shared enemy.

And so the premises leading up to this feature of Identity Politics, that it's focused on power, is that some kind of binding agent is needed among identity groups who disagree with themselves internally. Necessarily so, because each group has the authority to define reality however it chooses, so there necessarily will be conflict. The only hope of these groups not warring with each other is to have some common enemy.

We see this paradigmatically in the expression of "diversity, equity and inclusion" that identifies typically it's white heterosexual, English speaking men as the common enemy that unites all the other intersectional groups. So intersectionality may sound like some conception of looking for a Common Good (and allyship is another relevant word here), but it's all premised on having a common enemy. Of course, if that common enemy were to fall, you need the generation of a new common enemy in order to make this system work.

Within the same category, any empirical inequality among groups is *ipso facto* evidence of oppression. And questioning the causal relationship between inequality and oppression generates the charge that you are on the side of the oppressor.

So for example, if we look at a sociological analysis of a particular segment of society, we might say, "this group has this amount of resources, and this group has this amount of resources, there's an inequality here." Identity politics ideology would say that the only possible explanation for that inequality is oppression. Even suggesting or asking the question whether there might be other variables is itself used as evidence to say that the system is oppressive.

So the conclusion is already set, it's just a matter of imposing it. Remember, empirical analysis has no place within Identity Politics, it's just another tool for power.

6. **Offers a Catch 22 to outsiders:** Identity Politics offers those outside favoured identity groups a catch 22 solution, a kind of damned if you do, damned if you don't offer. So if you're outside a favoured Identity Politics group that has been granted the authority by society culturally and or politically, those groups oftentimes will say you have two options: option (a) submit to our demands, and thereby admit that you are in fact an oppressor, so confess! You're guilty; or option (b) refuse or even question our demands, and thereby prove that you are in fact an oppressor, because you know, only oppressors deny that they are oppressors.

This is all redolent of the late mediaeval practice of witch testing, in which a woman accused of being a witch was cast into the water by a mob. If she sank, and died, that proved that she was not a witch, and therefore she was not a threat to the community. But she was also dead. If she fought, and floated, did everything possible to survive, that proved she is a witch, and needs to be put to death.

WHY IS IT A PROBLEM?

Now, I want to talk about why this is a problem in a bit more depth. I hope just the description of it is already giving some indication of why this may be problematic and why we need to find a better way to do politics. But before I do, we have to ask the question: how is this an ideology?

How does Identity Politics fit within the categories of ideology that we identified at the beginning? Remember, an ideology is a comprehensive worldview that seeks to describe the totality of reality, and to prescribe a systematic moral and political response to reality so prescribed in one of two ways.

How is it an ideology?

Again, the first way which qualifies as a secular ideology is by severing morality and politics from any reference to the transcendent. Identity politics fits squarely within this first category of an ideology. Why? Again, it's at the epistemic level. By claiming that groups have total authority to generate truth claims by simply doing a circular appeal to their own experience, and then to amplify that and apply that outside of the group, what we've just done is grant the group the power to generate reality.

It cuts off the possibility of the system of thought having any grounding in objective reality, objective truth, or being oriented to any objective reality, transcendent truth, or having any kind of objectivity, or logos, or reason course through it. So because it hermetically seals itself off from any conception of objective reality, it is a secular ideology, par excellence.

Reasons why it's a problem

Well, for many reasons, but let me focus on four, and then we'll look at the Common Good as an alternative.

1. **Moral relativism:** the first problem with Identity Politics is it embraces, in fact it celebrates, moral relativism. Now moral relativism can really take two basic kinds of form: one is cultural relativism, the idea that groups of one kind or another generate their own conceptions of

what's good and bad and right and wrong, and then it's particular to any specific group; or subjectivism, which is to say that individuals generate their own individual conceptions of good and bad and right and wrong. Identity Politics would fall more into the cultural relativism category. But at the end of the day, that doesn't really matter, they're two different kinds of the same poison.

And the idea is that there is no final answer to the question, "is this view of reality, true or false? Good or bad, right or wrong?" The answer to that question is, "there is no true good and bad, right?" Wrong. Now that view is oftentimes taken as a liberation. Human beings have been "freed" from the constraints of these heteronomous forms of thought: heteronomous meaning these laws that are imposed from without, from some conception of God, or some conception of reality or natural law: "we've liberated ourselves from that, and that's a good thing because it allows us to determine what's good."

But as Pope Benedict XVI very wisely identified it, relativism is a dictatorship. Why? Because it removes all limiting principles to human action. There's no standard that can possibly universally appeal to say "you can do this, but you can't do that." So the inevitable outcome is those who have the most power will get to do what they want, when they want, how they want. And there will be - think about this - no possibility of rational contestation. You can say "I don't like it"; you can say "stop it". But you can't say "that's not fair", "that's not right", "that's not just"; those words within the framework of cultural relativism have zero content. They don't even have formal content, so we have to take them off the table.

2. **Authorises totalitarianism:** so this leads to the second problem with Identity Politics - it explicitly authorises totalitarianism. It has no internal rational limiting principle, there's nothing internal to the system that says "up to here and then you stop; within this realm you're free, outside of this realm, you're not free." The only limiting principle that could possibly exist is the force of other groups pushing back. So it really does become a war of all against all - unless (a) you can have a common enemy, or (b), you can have a common unfixable fear, a fear defined in a way that can both captivate the population, and yet also has no solution to it. So we might think of some potential fears that have been framed in that way for our time.
3. **Destroys any conception of inherent and equal individual dignity:** in this ideology, people are not individuals, they're representations of groups, groups that are not just sociological in nature, but moral in nature, meaning that some groups are morally superior *qua* group over another group. Individual worth is determined by group membership. So if you are in a politically favoured group, you are worth more than those who are not in politically favoured groups.

Now, this is so radical, it's not even Hobbesian. You may know the thought of political theorist Thomas Hobbes, who famously said that the state of nature is a war of all against all. He thought human dignity was a fanciful idea. He said, you know what really defines the worth of an individual? It is the value he or she has to society, meaning "are you useful?" So you kind of get a utilitarian conception of dignity. So if you're useful to society you have

value: the more useful you are, the more value you have; the less useful you are, the less value you have.

But Identity Politics isn't even Hobbesian, it is less than Hobbesian. Because it's saying whether or not you're useful to society, the only locus of value is in-group membership within a politically favoured category. And it's crucial to note here that given all the premises of this position, politically favoured categories shift over time and without notice, so there's no stability to this system. It really is like swarming birds that will line up for a period, then disperse and then line up for a period and then disperse. So you may be within a politically favoured category one day, but there's no guarantee you will be the next day.

4. **Destroys conceptions of commutative and distributive justice:** Identity Politics destroys basic conceptions of both commutative justice (that's justice between individuals) and distributive justice (that's justice between society and the individual). So this is a very significant simplification of the question of justice, but I stand by it and think it's accurate.

So the fundamental metrics of justice are what? Behaviour and action and need - need specifically in relationship to responsibility. So when we look at needs, we also ask the question: is this person acting in such a way that prevents them from being able to fulfil their own needs? and if not, then there's a justice category there in meeting that need. And behaviour, action and need should operate in accordance with a fixed, transparent and equally applied standard. So everybody knows the rules, everybody knows the criteria, both in terms of the definition of the standards of justice, and in terms of their applicability. This is how we create, in a formal basic sense, a just society.

However, in Identity Politics, these categories, these basic fundamental categories which make any conception of justice possible, are discarded completely. Some individuals are punished for their appearance, or whatever group they've been assigned to, independently of how they act. Some individuals are rewarded for their appearance or their identity, independently of how they act. Some individuals in need are either assisted or not assisted, based upon their appearance or their identity group. So in a literal sense it turns justice on its head. Any basic conception of justice, it turns it inside out and upside down.

How did it gain power?

So before we look at the Common Good alternative, it's an important question to ask, how did this become dominant so quickly? Some of the words that I gave before these, these imperious neologisms, even five years ago would have been laughably absurd. Maybe you would have heard them in some lecture hall, but apart from that, no serious person would even entertain taking them in any way as an important part of political or moral discourse. And now, they have overtaken really every major institution in the West. Entertainment, business, government, civic organisations, and everything in between. So how did that happen?

One non-cynical response is to say that this ideology makes a good show of caring about social justice and justice for the planet. And so it has a good heart, it's just misguided in its application.

That's a non cynical response. I used to be more sympathetic to that response, but the issue for me is that we've now got to see what this ideology looks like in practice. It's no longer just a sort of free floating set of ideas. We're now seeing it implemented, for example, in diversity, equity and inclusion training. We see it implemented in many different kinds of government policies. And we can see, and this is totally predictable by the way, we can empirically see that it doesn't work. If the basic premise of Identity Politics ideology, is to improve justice, and its purpose is to improve justice for those who are suffering most, the most marginalised, then we should at least be able to see some evidence that those who are most marginalised, those who are most vulnerable, that their lives are improving. The exact opposite has been happening - immeasurably, visibly so in our streets. It's undeniable from an empirical perspective that this doesn't work. So those who are using the excuse to say, "well, it's just social justice, and it may need some tinkering here and there", are willfully closing their eyes.

So a cynical response, and I think this is the accurate response, is that Identity Politics ideology permits easy access to money and power for those who don't have it but want it. It's a con man or con woman's paradise. It legitimises cheating. And I think this is especially the case with men who are now competing in women's sports. That's cheating. It used to be called cheating, and now it's been renamed as justice, it's been renamed as a positive good. So all that was necessary in order to go from say, being number 10,000 in the world to number one in the world, in any particular sport, is a re self-identification, and all of a sudden you get to be given money and medals.

It also permits those who are already in power to keep, expand and concentrate it under the guise of virtue. That is virtue signalling. So if I say the right mixture of words, if I have my employees go through diversity, equity and inclusion training, then I'm covered. I can, for example, pay slave wages to people halfway across the world. I'm one of the good guys, because I've said the right words. So in that sense, it's a classic case of diversion.

It is also every unscrupulous politician's or CEO's, dream, or anyone else's, who has a significant amount of power, because it grants you the power literally to redefine everything. If a man can be a woman, well then censorship can be free speech. Abortion can be healthcare, which is the same as saying death can be life. Inclusion can mean exclusion. Debt can mean prosperity. Centralised control can be liberty, oligarchy and aristocracy, just another form of democracy. Surveillance is for your privacy. War is peace. Freedom is slavery. Ignorance is strength...

So it has some problems.

Other ideologies are not the solution

What's not the solution? What's not the solution is turning to another ideology. Identity Politics is a particularly virulent and destructive ideology, but all ideologies by nature will fail precisely because they are ideologies.

- **Utilitarianism:** utilitarianism is a very attractive alternative - it says, well, we'll just see what most people want and what is going to make most people happy according to some empirical standard. Say, some psychological expression of happiness, and whoever has to pay for that, has to pay for that. Well, that's not going to solve the problem of Identity Politics, it is actually going to leave the exact same problems.

- **Positivism:** Positivism is just a form of chauvinism, that says we don't accept the premises of Identity Politics, but we have the laws of our nation. Those are our laws and so we're going to appeal to our laws. But the question of course, is, are those laws just? Are those laws good laws as opposed to bad laws? Or is this just another expression of arbitrary, cultural chauvinism? So positivism doesn't solve the problems, it leads to the same problems.
- **Pragmatism:** says look, all these ideological debates I find quite tiresome - let's just get done what we need to get done, people. Let's just find the most useful solution to the pressing problems, and we can have these debates after work in a pub. Well, that sidesteps the fundamental issue, it's a classic case of begging the question. The question isn't "what's most useful?" the question is "what is most useful for what ultimate good, for what final goal?" And so if we can't answer the question of what goal we're actually seeking to increase efficiency towards attaining, then we're just in another case of positivism.
- **Classical liberalism and libertarianism:** are very siren song-y alternatives. They say well, look, I am very put off by Identity Politics, it frightens me. You know what will work? Individual rights defined along the lines of consent: you do you, I'll do me; we will engage in contractual relationships with each other, and otherwise we will stay out of each other's way. And given where we are now, that sounds like paradise. (I'm collapsing classical liberalism or libertarianism here - there are some differences, especially on the conception of distributive justice. But both of them see autonomy as the fundamental, and really foundational, the only, principle of justice - understood as being a law unto oneself).

The problem with classical liberalism however, and libertarianism, as I suggested at the beginning of the lecture, is that it claims, by its very own internal logic, that the question of what's good is entirely preferential, it's entirely self-defined. So you define good one way, I define good the other way - any other way. And so government, law, politics, become just procedural and contractual. The issue however, is that that just allows absolute relativism outside of specific contractual agreements.

Here's an example, something I find very puzzling: libertarians who advocate for patriotism. Patriotism is a positive good, it's a goal. It's that we should live our lives according to the standard of advancing the good of the country, properly defined. So if you're patriotic, and also a libertarian - what you're saying, if you say both of these things at the same time, is that as a libertarian, I believe in absolute autonomy, and I have a totally preferential expression that the good of the country is something we should pursue. But you know what? There's no such thing; there's no definition of the good. So within a libertarian framework, the person who's patriotic, and the person who is anti-patriotic, who despises the country, cannot have a debate. They've already taken the question of the good off the table.

So all it becomes is another power match. This again, is where progressivism and libertarianism end up. They're enemies up here, but they're ideologically shackled down here. It's just "may the strongest man/woman/group win." So that does not solve the problem. Also, crucially, it's based on autonomy, which is a capacity. And if you push the logic hard enough, you would lose your rights when you're asleep. Even when you're dozing, you temporarily fall out of value until you're awake again. So insofar as an individual's rights are based on a capacity, we recognise that

capacities are sometimes either there or not there, sometimes you have value sometimes you don't. So within the arc of any individual's life, you start off with zero value, including when you're a toddler. So toddlers, the question of abortion, and the question of infanticide, all of a sudden they become the exact same thing, because neither one is autonomous. And then you start to get value and then what happens with the arc? You fall off, eventually having no value again. So it's profoundly anti-human. It's not a solution.

- **Non-theistic conservatism:** I would also add that forms of non-theistic conservatism are not the solution either. By non-theistic, I mean people who follow forms of conservatism who may believe in God, maybe they're avid churchgoers, but they say the question of God really has nothing to do with politics, and especially politics understood as having some kind of common conception of the good that we all can rationally apprehend and pursue.

So what's the solution?

THE COMMON GOOD

So here's one definition of the Common Good, and this comes from the Catechism of the Catholic Church, but it's a basic expression that applies, I think, to all Christian traditions:

"the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily. The Common Good concerns the life of all. It calls for prudence from each, and even more from those who exercise the office of authority."

It consists of three essential elements:

1. Respect for the person - that's the respect for individual dignity - now notice, this is not based on autonomy, this is based upon humanity.
2. The social wellbeing and development of the group.
3. Peace, understood as security, the absence of conflict.

The basic concept here is that the individual good and the social good within the Common Good framework are complementary. They're not in conflict, there are no zero sum games in the Common Good tradition. There is no one group or one individual who benefits at the expense of another.

Now, this is all theoretical, right? We'd have to build into the system both finitude and sin, but at the definitional level, there's no reason for any kind of conflict between the different components of society. This is not a pragmatic or idealistic conclusion, like "wouldn't it be great if..?" It's actually, first and foremost, a metaphysical, and an anthropological, conclusion.

The Common Good is based in a conception of reality. And out of that conception of reality, it is based on a conception of what the human being truly is. It goes something like this. There is a natural moral order. It exists, it's real. Human beings are created in the image and likeness of God, and within that order, with a common orientation to an objective, and final, good. This grounds human dignity.

The Common Good conception of human dignity

Human dignity has two basic components:

1. one is a fixed component. To say that human beings have dignity is to say that all of us, by virtue of existing - not by virtue of any capacity that we have, not by virtue of any accidental characteristic that we have, including how we look, including what the nature of our internal desires are, whether they're ordered or disordered (and we all have disordered desires); independent of all that - by virtue of being human, we have worth.

This is the image and likeness of God conception of human dignity. It's grounded in an immaterial, but real, individuated, but absolutely universal, reality. And that's something like we could call the soul. So what does that justify? Absolute equal respect. All human beings are worth the same, no matter what. And we have to act that way in all that we do. So that stays fixed.

At the same time, adding to that fixed component, not replacing it, not diminishing it,

2. dignity also has a dynamic component to it. Dignity is something that's also realised or attained. How? Well, by virtue of the fact that we are rational beings, and we are free beings, we are free to act in accordance with the good that we identify rationally as good, or we can choose not to.

And the realisation of dignity, then, is based upon the recognition that the good is vulnerable: we can either attain it or not attain it. And we can either attain or not attain it for two basic reasons: (1) by our own action and our own responsibility, or (2) by the actions of others, by the nature of society.

So, external factors play into this internal decision that we make freely. They can mitigate or expand our freedom to act in accordance with the good. So that means that the realisation of dignity is both irreducibly individual - it can't be taken away from any individual - but it's also social, at the same time.

So this metaphysical and anthropological setup establishes the contours of both morality and politics from a Common Good perspective.

The Common Good perspective on morality and politics

These are the "thou shalls" and the "thou shall nots."

What are the "thou shall nots"? What is always prohibited from a Common Good perspective?

- Harming or killing innocent human beings, born or unborn
- Discriminating among human beings for any reason other than need capacity, or merit
- Rewarding or punishing individuals for any other reason other than their actions and behaviours
- Violating of the individual's free conscience
- Treating any individual as a tool, or as a means to some putative, greater good, so instrumentalizing the human being to use him or her for some other purpose.

What are "thou shalls"? What is always required from this framework?:

- Pursuing the objective good of both yourself and others, in concentric circles: so you start with the individual and then the family - community - region - nation - world.
- Responding to the objective needs of others, to the extent that you are able. Crucially within this framework, your realisation of your dignity, your attainment, your full flourishing as a human individual, calls for you to act on behalf of the justice of society, pursuing the good of others, and rectifying injustices, to the extent that's within your power to do so. Not doing so is to diminish your own dignity, to make you less than you otherwise could be. So the social good and the individual good, they're married. They're distinguishable but they're absolutely linked together.
- Responding to the objective, not merely perceived, injustice.

There's much more to say. But these basic foundations of the Common Good approach provide a necessary alternative to the pitfalls of Identity Politics and other ideologies.

The basic foundations of the Common Good approach:

1. **It is not an ideology:** first and foremost, the Common Good is not an ideology. The Common Good is a totality located within a transcendence. It's not a totality without transcendence, it's a totality within transcendence. Where is that transcendence?

That transcendence is first at the bottom, below, spatially, we could say. We're not the creators of value, we're not the creators of reality, we're the responders to it. So the good transcends us before.

It transcends us at the top: we are not the creators of the final good, nor is it within our power to achieve that good, simply, by our own powers. Reason can think itself up to its own limits and respect those limits. The transcendence is also within. We recognise that we are finite, and - this would be a longer conversation - we recognise that we are sinful, as well. So that's the first advantage it has, it's not an ideology.

2. **It addresses social justice issues effectively:** it more effectively addresses the social justice issues that Identity Politics putatively cares about, while also fixing its four problems. I hope it's become clear even this very basic description, that the Common Good is intensely concerned with social justice properly defined. So much so, that it links the individual good to the social good, inextricably so. So what are the four problems that it fixes?
 - i. remember the first problem is that Identity Politics embraces and celebrates moral relativism. The Common Good, in contrast, affirms moral objectivity and universality. It says "no" to bullies' epistemology, "I feel it therefore you must do it". The Common Good says absolutely not.
 - ii. Identity Politics authorises totalitarianism. Remember, it has no internal rational, limiting principle. Whereas the Common Good, where there are limiting principles at the bottom. We didn't create the value at the top, we didn't create the final good and within, we're not God. So what does that mean? No need to rule by violence and fear, which is a necessary component of Identity Politics.

- iii. Identity politics destroys any conception of inherent and equal human dignity. The Common Good by contrast, as we just saw, holds that individuals are never mere representations of groups. Each person has irreducible value, no matter what his or her characteristics. But again, it's not individual dignity at the expense of the Common Good. It's not libertarianism, or classical liberalism.
- iv. Identity politics destroys the basic conceptions of both commutative justice and distributive justice, that is, justice between individuals and among between the individual and society. The Common Good actually upholds the criteria that are necessary for defining any kind of just system. That's acting according only in response to behaviour, action and need.

IDEOLOGY, THE COMMON GOOD AND EVANGELISATION

So what does any of this have to do with evangelization? It's in the title of the lecture. On the one hand, I hope that the lecture has at least opened the possibility to seeing that Identity Politics is not only wrongheaded, it's dangerous, and that the Common Good is not only a superior option, but *the* best option to respond to it.

But this conclusion, I believe, also has profound evangelical importance. Why? We live in an age in which politics has usurped the role of religion, both theoretically, in terms of how people conceive of the world, and also practically, in terms of how people act, including in their day to day lives. So the political has now become religious.

And so when we seek to evangelise, we have to always deal with reality as it is, in terms of empirical reality - where the culture is at any given time. And so if we're going to address people who have been possessed - and I use that word advisedly, but I think it's fair - who've been possessed by politics, who have really embraced the death cult of Identity Politics specifically, then we're going to have to talk to them about politics before we can really talk to them about religion.

And so the goal here is that if we can - to the extent anyone's willing to listen, to the extent that anyone's willing to engage in a conversation, and I recognise that's oftentimes not the case and so we have to have strategies for dealing with that; but to the extent that it is possible - if we can show through civil conversation, first that Identity Politics is wrongheaded and dangerous, and second, that the Common Good is a better way of doing things, well, then that opens the possibility for what?

That there may be a political alternative that we haven't really sufficiently considered that might be better - so it's politically motivated - but it opens the possibility of saying, well, what really holds up this whole tradition? What really makes it possible? What's the condition for the possibility of the Common Good really being there, and really being superior? So we'll open the question of what? Moral objectivity; human nature having a fixed reality in both men and women; there being a common, shared good; and ultimately opening up the question of God.

So to conclude, I think, and I've practised this - I spent ten years before I joined *Word On Fire* - in a Catholic university, with primarily secular students - I found this to be effective. Students even at theology class didn't want to talk about God at all because that issue had been settled - God is, you

know, like Sasquatch [Big Foot]. You know, we've looked for him and we can't find him so therefore he's not there. It's a category error. But they would talk about politics.

And so we can use this not only as advocates of the Common Good tradition, but also as advocates for the reclaiming of the cultural sphere, for both the good and for God.

***Professor Matthew Petrussek** is the Senior Director and Professor of Catholic Ethics at the Word on Fire Institute in the US, Bishop Robert Barron's evangelisation ministry. He lectures on philosophical and theological ethics, Christian theology, politics, social issues and the Catholic Intellectual Tradition. His work is dedicated to show the relevance and prophetic nature of Catholic thought to a wide audience in as much clarity as possible, and in the context of a society that has lost its way. He has published several books, the latest of which is [Evangelization and Ideology: How to Understand and Respond to the Political Culture](#).*