

THE COMMON GOOD

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Abstract

The concept of common good occupied a relevant place in the classical social, political and economic philosophy, then lost ground in the modern age, and has recently reappeared, although with different and sometimes confusing meanings. This paper is the draft of a chapter of a handbook; it explains the meaning of common good in the Aristotelian-Thomistic philosophy and in the Social Doctrine of the Catholic Church, why is it relevant and how is it different of the other uses of the term in the liberal and liberal-welfarist, communitarian and totalitarian social philosophies, and in the capabilities approach.

Keywords: Aristotle, Capabilities, Common Good, Liberalism, Sen, Society, Thomas Aquinas.

Note: For the Handbook on the Economics of Philanthropy, Reciprocity and Social Enterprise. Second draft, July 2011.

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Introduction

In current ethical and political discourse, the common good is often a rhetorical concept, defined in very diverse ways. It had a prominent place in the political and social philosophy of Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas, then lost ground when Western philosophy took an individualistic turn, and with the predominance of multiculturalism, which excludes any unitary conception of the good, but continued to be one of the main pillars of Catholic social teaching (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2004, no. 160). It returned to relevance in view of the modern manifestations of totalitarianism and other developments in recent decades, as a response to questions such as, is it possible to have a politics founded on a universal morality? Can there be a univocal notion of good in a multicultural world? Is a welfare state that combines economic prosperity with equality viable?

In Catholic social teaching the common good is defined as “the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily” (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2004, no. 164). This is a widely accepted definition that we can take as a starting point.

In this article we shall focus on the doctrine of the common good in the personalist tradition (Maritain, 1966), which starts with Plato and Aristotle and continues with Thomas Aquinas and Catholic social teaching. Following a brief review of the historical background, we shall discuss the relationship between the common good and human sociability, and between private goods and the common good, to then explain how the common good is built in a society. After that, we shall describe other conceptions of the common good, ending with the conclusions.

The Common Good in the History of Thought

In the classical or Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition, the notion of the common good relates the good of people insofar as they are part of a community to the good of the community insofar as it is oriented toward the people that are its members. For Aristotle, the formation of any community requires a common good, because “the end of the city is living well... It is to be assumed, therefore, that the object of the political community is good actions, not only life in

common” (1984a, III, 9, 1280b-1281a). For that reason the common good is constituted first of all by virtue, that is, by that which in a positive and stable way develops human beings in accordance with their nature.

Thomas Aquinas (1981, 1997) revived Aristotelian theory. The common good acquires its meaning in governance: “to govern is to lead what is governed to its appropriate end” (1997, Book II, c. 3). The purpose of man is to contemplate and enjoy the highest of goods, God. The common good therefore has both a supernatural dimension and a temporal dimension, which coincides with what society needs in order to live in a good way.

In modern times, the concept of the common good was cut off from that tradition, and so there appeared a range of positions, from individualistic liberalism (the good of society yields to that of the individual) to collectivism (society is an entity in its own right, with a collective good that is different from and higher than the good of its members).

In the 20th century, the flourishing of Thomism gave new prominence to the concept of the common good. Maritain (1966) contrasts his “personalist” conception with “bourgeois individualism”, “communist anti-individualism”, and “totalitarian or dictatorial anti-communist anti-individualism”. The human person is part of a community and, in that sense, is subordinate to the community, but the person is much more than a member of the community, because he has a transcendent dimension, so that society must have the person as its end.

In the second half of the 20th century, the Second Vatican Council (1965, no. 26) stated clearly that the person is the subject, the root, the beginning and the end of all social life and all social institutions. Within the personalist tradition, Karol Wojtyła (John Paul II) developed the thesis that the person is naturally social, not only by necessity but on account of his ontological plenitude. In *Sollicitudo rei socialis* (John Paul II, 1987), he proposed the articulation between solidarity and the common good, describing solidarity as “the firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say, to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all” (no. 38).

The Encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* (Benedict XVI, 2009) has prompted renewed consideration of the common good as an ordering principle of economic life. “The exclusively binary model of market-plus-State is corrosive of society” (no. 39); what is needed is “increasing openness, in a world context, to forms of economic activity marked by quotas of gratuitousness and communion” (no. 39). The introduction of the “logic of gift”, not only in civil society but also in the market and the State, thus opens new horizons for the role of the common good. “This is not merely a matter of a “third sector”, but of a broad new composite reality embracing the private and public spheres, one which does not exclude profit, but instead considers it a means for achieving human and social ends” (no. 46). And this promotes consideration of the common good in the “category of relation” (no. 53), because “relationality is an essential element” of the “humanum” (no. 55).

Sociability and the Common Good

Human beings always seek the good (Aristotle, 1984b, I.1) – goods of all kinds, material or otherwise – and that seeking takes place in society. They need society not only to satisfy their needs but, above all, to develop as persons. Sociability is not a whim, an instinct or a constraint, but a property that flows from the nature of the person.

Society does not arise from a contract by which individuals surrender part of their freedom to the group in order to guarantee their protection and avoid conflict. It is not a mere aggregate of persons, yet it has no nature of its own independent of that of its members. Society's members are like the parts of a whole, but not in the way the arm is part of the body, as the arm cannot survive if separated from the body, whereas man retains his personality intact when separated from society.

If society is not a mere aggregate of subjects, it must have an end –its common good– which cannot be reduced to the particular good of its members. The centrality of the person demands that the end of society include the good of individuals, each and every one. There is, therefore, a good of the person and a good of society, which do not coincide but are related to one another. A person seeks his personal good because he cannot desire anything that he does not see as a good for himself; but he also seeks it in society. It would be a contradiction if he were able to achieve his own good at the expense of, or even outside of, the common good. Society, in turn, has its own good, which is common to all its members but is not the sum of their personal good. Being common, it cannot be the good of some, nor even the majority; rather, it is the good of all and of each one, at the same time and for the same reason.

It is very unlikely, however, that the members of a diversified community will all have the same conception of what their common good is. Does this mean that the common good cannot be realized? Not if the members of that community are aware that they can achieve their particular good only within the community; that serving the good of the community is a precondition for achieving their personal good; and that, therefore, they must contribute to the good of the other members of society – not to the particular good of each one but to the good that the community provides to them. The cooperation and participation of each person in the common good closes the gap between the pursuit of the good of each individual and the pursuit of the common good.

The common good is thus “the aim of the “good life” with and for others in just institutions” (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 202). The idea of the common good is close to that of the “structures of living together” that provide the conditions in which individual lives can flourish. “The common good is... the good of the relations themselves between people, bearing in mind that such relations are understood as a good for all those who participate in them” (Zamagni, 2007, p. 23).

The common good is indivisible because the good that benefits each person cannot be separated from the good of others. It cannot be appropriated by any one of society's members; all have access to it. The goods that make up the common good are present as the foundation of all the actions of society's members; but they transcend the immediate ends of each action. Society's members seek those goods, probably unconsciously, in all their actions, but the goods themselves are not the result of specific actions.

Earlier we defined the common good as “the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily” (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2004, no. 164). This is a widely cited definition, yet it is not entirely correct, as it presents the common good not as an end in itself but as an instrument for the good of individuals or groups. It does not reflect the fact that the common good is not only the good that is common to the people who live in a community but also the good of the community itself.

Private Goods and the Common Good

Economists distinguish among three types of goods: private goods (they are excludable: one can prevent its use by another person, and rival: the use by one person can reduce or prevent the use by another; for example, an ice-cream), public goods (non-excludable: they are available to several people, and non-rival: the use by one person does not reduce the use by another; the national defense, for example), and common resources (non-excludable but rival: the fish in a lake). What we call here the common good is not another category of economic goods, although it is related to them.

The relationship between the common good and private goods is often presented in terms of confrontation, as if the pursuit of the second were incompatible with the pursuit of the first, or as if the good of society were a burden to individuals. But that is not the case. The key to understanding their relationship is that “the beginning, the subject and the goal of all social institutions is and must be the human person” (Second Vatican Council, 1965, no. 25). The goal of the political community is the good of the person, insofar as the person is a part of the community. Yet the good of the person is not opposed to the good of society but is part of it.

The common good therefore takes precedence over the particular good, where the goods are of the same or a higher kind (Aquinas, 1981, II-II, q. 152, a. 4 ad 2). This is not for any quantitative reason (e.g., because the common good is the good of more people), but because the common good is the good of the whole of which the individual is part. It is not opposed to the pursuit of private interests as such but to the pursuit of private interests at the expense of the common good, turning the common good into an instrument for the particular good. In short, the tension between personal good and common good is resolved dynamically: a person has a duty to achieve the good for himself, but he can only achieve his own good if he also achieves the good of society, which is oriented to the person. Moreover, this is not the good of “others” – a good that a person must seek because of some altruistic imperative – nor, clearly, the good of the State.

Just as society is not given but is somehow “constructed” by all its members, the common good also is built by the members of society. It arises from the common activity of all and is enjoyed by all. It is a shared good, not only because everybody shares in it but above all because it “overflows” from each person to the rest.

How the Common Good Is Built

The concept of the common good, as stated here, seems of little use if the aim is to specify the conditions of life that individuals and communities consider most appropriate to achieve their goal. And as the abstract good does not move people to act, it is important that we more clearly specify its content. Maritain (1966, pp. 52-53) states the issue as follows:

- 1) “(t)hat which constitutes the common good of a political society is not only: the collection of public commodities and services – the roads, ports, schools, etc. – which the organization of common life presupposes; a sound fiscal condition of the state and its military power; the body of just laws, good customs and wise institutions, which provide the nation with its structure; the heritage of its great historical remembrances, its symbols and its glories; its living traditions and

cultural treasures.” Here, Maritain identifies the sum of social conditions that make it possible for the members of society to realize their goals.

- 2) “The common good [...] includes also [...] the sum or sociological integration of all the civic conscience, political virtues, and sense of right and liberty, of all the activity, material prosperity and spiritual riches, of unconsciously operative hereditary wisdom, of moral rectitude, justice, friendship, happiness, virtue and heroism in the individual life of its members. For these things all are, in a certain measure, communicable and so revert to each member, helping him to perfect his life of liberty and person. They all constitute the good human life of the multitude.” These sentences point to the sum of the aids that society provides to its members.
- 3) To the previous two sets of elements we must add the harmonious integration of all these elements into a whole (Maritain, 1951, p. 10).

The common good therefore obviously cannot be defined statistically, in terms of a country’s wealth, consumption or another economic variable. Material goods are part of the common good insofar as they make the common good possible, as well as other goods like truth, beauty, peace, art, culture, freedom, tradition and so on. All these can be “common goods” that define in some way the abstract and transcendent concept of the common good.

As Maritain suggests, the common good is not a single good but is made up of an interwoven set of goods of varying scope and on different levels. It is not a precise institutional project, nor is it the result of a predetermined objective assessment of what is good for human nature. Nor is the common good a subsidy that society offers to its members (like the welfare state), much less a burden that is imposed on them.

It is the task of the State to enable and promote the common good, but not to define it nor, therefore, to impose specific content that might realize it. Nor is it the task of the market, through the impersonal forces of the “invisible hand”.

What we have said here regarding the common good of the *polis* applies equally to the different types of communities, as “no expression of social life – from the family to intermediate social groups, associations, enterprises of an economic nature, cities, regions, States, up to the community of peoples and nations – can escape the issue of its own common good, in that this is a constitutive element of its significance and the authentic reason for its very existence” (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2004, no. 165). Every community at every moment in history must find its common good. But this is not to say that there is no universal common good, because all individuals and all smaller communities are part of larger communities, up to the whole of humanity in time and space.

Other Conceptions of the Common Good

As we said earlier, the concept of the common good has been addressed from different philosophical positions. Here we shall discuss 1) philosophical and political liberalism, 2) welfare liberalism, 3) communitarianism, 4) totalitarianism, and 5) the capability approach.

- 1) With the advent of modernity, the individual became the center of attention of social and political ethics. The main characteristic of the self-sufficient individual is the ability to choose the means to achieve ends that are not an integral part of his “self”.

Here, society is a rational project – a social contract between subjects who have their own conceptions of what is good. Morality is a product of individual choices, which cannot be judged by external criteria. The organization of society therefore does not depend on the concept of good, which is replaced by the concept of rights. People's moral or religious points of view play no relevant role in this society.

Classical political liberalism relies on the free market – ruled by self-interest – and a minimal State to achieve social goals. For its conservative and libertarian branches (Nozick, 1988), the common good or general interest is determined in a consensual way as the sum of the private goods chosen by the citizens according to their utility functions; in a utilitarian spirit, it is the greatest good for the greatest number. And the role of the State is to promote the well-being of citizens and protect their freedom.

- 2) Welfare liberals today form the dominant currents in Western political thought. They start from the individualistic assumptions of liberalism but note that the agents, in trying to put their life plan into effect in the context of the free market, have very different starting positions. It is the task of the ethically neutral State to guarantee and distribute equitably the freedoms and resources that individuals need in order to lead the lives they have freely chosen. Hence the centrality of the concept of justice (Rawls, 1971).

Besides the realization of the personal good of the agents, the concept of the common good also includes certain social outcomes, in terms of equality, leveling of starting conditions, and provision of a universal welfare state. The market is the sphere of efficiency and wealth creation, whereas the State is the sphere of solidarity and redistribution; as the two spheres are ultimately incompatible, there will always be clashes between the two.

- 3) In political debate, communitarians are above all critical of liberalism. The person is not a self-sufficient being, separated from the community, concerned only for his particular interest and endowed with certain basic rights and freedoms that are prior even to the definition of the social order; rather, his “self” is made up of communal ties, which he cannot do without. The community is much more than an aggregate of individuals; it becomes a moral space in which things have value insofar as the prevailing culture gives them meaning.

The common good is no longer the sum of particular goods: the community is a common good in itself and a source of common goods for individuals. There is no universal common good; rather, each community has its own conception of the common good, which takes precedence over the good of citizens, because citizens owe it loyalty and commitment. It is the good of the community, not the good of individuals as members of the community. The State cannot be neutral. Its mission goes beyond guaranteeing the rights and freedoms of individuals to having its own conception of what is good in accordance with the values it recognizes in the community.

- 4) The concept of the common good has also been used by different types of totalitarianism (communism, Nazism, fascism), but in a radically different sense from that given it in the personalist tradition, because in totalitarianism the person is seen as merely a part of society, to which he is subordinate; and also because the totalitarian desire to impose a certain specific content of the common good on

citizens is opposed to the idea of a good that is both the good of the person and the good of society.

It is this desire that has led authors of various tendencies to oppose the concept of the common good on the grounds that it is incompatible with democracy and the freedom of people. And the risk of totalitarianism clearly exists where the State is assigned the task of defining and implementing the common good. That is why the personalist tradition affirms that the common good is not so much a duty of the State as a duty of all the members of society, and that the role of the State to promote it, but not to define or impose it.

- 5) In both the theory and the practice of economic development, growth has been synonymous with an increase in the material resources of a country. The results, however, have been frequently insufficient, even regrettable, prompting a search for alternative approaches. One of the most suggestive is that of Amartya Sen, for whom “development can be seen... as the process of expansion of the real freedoms that people enjoy” (1999, p. 3). Poverty is rooted not so much in a lack of material means as in the absence of certain freedoms, because of the denial of certain “abilities to do valuable acts or reach valuable states of being”.

Sen does not use the concept of the common good, but his focus on capabilities brings him close to it, albeit without coinciding. Sen understands capabilities as oriented to the freedom to choose, in line with liberal theories, so that the common good is not the good of the community as a whole and the good of its members, but only the good of the members.

Developing the theory of capabilities, Nussbaum (1992) identifies the good that is common to human life with the sum of human rights, or with a list of core human capabilities. In the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition, a list of human rights is not enough to define the common good, because those rights do not capture the full depth and wealth of the concept, although they are of course part of it.

Conclusions: What Role Does the Common Good Have Today?

The concept of the common good is far from being universally accepted, and those who use the concept have very different conceptions of it. When the common good is identified with a set of democratic freedoms or human rights, or with the generic object of social and redistributive policies, it is widely accepted. But when it is presented as a good that not only is shared by citizens but also exists in its own right, the level of acceptance declines considerably. In this order of things, Deneulin (2006) cites five objections that social philosophers and political scientists raise nowadays when discussing the Thomistic concept of the common good:

- 1) It simply amounts to recognition of the need to reach institutional agreements in order to promote the well-being of citizens. In other words, it is instrumental to the good of individuals. We already criticized this conception earlier.
- 2) If it is not instrumental, the common good becomes a tool of totalitarianism. However, if we accept that the common good is the good not only of society but also of individuals, that threat disappears.

- 3) In practice, the common good is simply another name for the public goods that we hear about from economists. But those public goods are exclusive: though in principle available to all, when allocated to a particular user, they become reserved for exclusively private use.
- 4) It is another way of talking about a good that is common to human life and so is reduced to a list of rights that are necessary for a good human life. However, if that life is only personal, it does not include the common good, which also encompasses life in common and the structural conditions that make it possible.
- 5) It is an unrealizable concept because it is impossible in a multicultural society to reach agreement on the goods of which it is composed. So either the concept of the common good is abandoned or it is reduced to a discussion of the partial common goods of a particular community. But if there is no good that is shared by all humans by the fact of being human, we will end up separating some communities from others. The fact that the common good described here cannot be reduced to a list of realizations for politicians is, rather, a strength of this concept, because it can never crystallize in a defined set of structures, which would be the same negation of the dynamism of human good in society.

The concept of the common good, as understood in the classical social and political philosophy and the Catholic social teaching, does not have wide acceptance in “secular” media. Nevertheless, we have already seen how the exclusive pursuit of self-interest, divorced from any consideration of the good of society, leads to bad results. This is perhaps why the common good is so much talked about today, albeit in a sense that is, to say the least, inadequate: as the sum of personal goods, as mere common interest, as the exercise of justice, as recognition of the need to account for the consequences of one’s own actions on others (what economists call the “externalities of action”), as an instrument of social negotiation between adversaries, and so on. Against all this, consideration of a rich, well-founded concept of the common good may help to redefine the role of politics.

But this does not mean that putting the common good in practice is an easy task in politics. It demands a broad vision of the problems and taking into account the effects of the policies on the people and the organizations – and not only on their private interests, but also on creating and preserving the conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily. It does not allow a concrete and detailed description of the common good to be imposed on the citizens. It is not monolithic: the common good is realized in every community as well as in the global society, in a historical, specific and plural way. It cannot be warranted by any political, economic or technical structure, unless it is based on the responsibility of the persons and the institutions. It is, therefore, a calling to all to take on their common responsibilities (Benedict XVI, 2009, n. 17).

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