

THE COMMON GOOD

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It [the common good] is a good that is common to the members [of society] and a good arising from association and hence from the nature of man. It is a perfection of persons. Hence it can never be in opposition to the private good. ... it comprises a sufficiency of material necessities, comforts and conveniences of life and an increased efficacy of man's powers, but also a more efficient defence of man's rights, all aimed at a wider, fuller and nobler life and at an easier fulfilment and greater knowledge of man's duties. All is subordinated to the vocation of the person to citizenship in a still higher city.

The social good is no mere abundance of material goods, nor mere facility in producing them – though it does include all this. The social good is not merely the security of natural rights – though it includes this. For these things are not all that man wants from association. And all these things are clearly instrumental to the good of the person.

So any obstacle to the mission of the person is an evil and no society is fully civilised if it directly prejudices the personal mission of any of its members. If individual men lack facility in performing their mission in life, above all if society (or the State) places impediments in their path, then to that extent society is sick. Such individuals who are not profiting from association are slaves, unable to communicate their personal riches to society. They belong to society materially but not formally. So we have an anti-social vicious circle. The slave is not in a position to develop his personal activities but he has also an anti-social urge to give as little as possible to a society from which he can expect little return. Then healthy consciousness of social duties will be replaced by an unhealthy sense of social frustration, destructive to the natural communicativeness of the person, and promotive of an anti-social selfishness which can divide society politically into organised “political” parties which can easily drag a society into civil war. The Creator's gifts, the bounty of association, cannot be misappropriated with impunity. This is the lesson of the centuries and a conclusion of social philosophy.

The principle of individuation in man is matter. Matter is

appropriative, greedy of forms (as it were). The principle of personality in man is spirit, which is diffusive. Every thing acts for a good, to be acquired, or to be possessed or to be diffused. Hence comes the social absurdity of anything savouring of slavery and the social importance of freedom, i.e. the right of the person to be unhindered in the fulfilment of his duties, which right man has not from the State, and which right to freedom gives every man the natural obligation to defend that freedom. It is by nature an obligatory freedom.

Remember that civil society is for the good of the person. It produces a common good, out of the individual pursuit of private good. This is a natural end within all private ends, when society is harmoniously functioning. It is a good within all the goods, a weal within weals. So all pursuit of private goods is naturally co-ordinated, i.e. it is ordered in the common good, just as the whole universe is ordered “in Deum”. Hence the good of society is more divine than the good of any of its parts. These are truths that deserve much more attention than can be given to them here ... But they go right to the heart of social philosophy...

Society produces the common good. Do not think that the State (body politic) produces it. The State is a natural organ of the body social, having its proper office, and is itself ordered towards the common good of society – above all to the security of the person's freedom. here again, the State does not confer this right on the person. On the contrary, the State is the natural means almost instinctively hit upon by men for safeguarding this right which they know they already possess, and which they value as much as they are naturally inclined to defend it.

The office of the State and the authority of the State and the laws of the State are properties of the body social. in accordance with its high duties it has a right to a sufficiency of goods for the effective performance of these duties. These goods are called public goods (though this term is sometimes used as designating the common good). The office of the State is to have care of the community, of the common good. Hence, as St. Thomas says, human government should imitate the divine government which governs all things in accordance with their natures. It is blasphemous to say that God deprives things of their natural operations. Everything is for itself operating So government is not performing its office if it deprives the governed of their natural activities. This is the principle of subsidiarity which is so important in social life. Government promotes the common good but it does

not produce it. The perfection of the State is its end, which is the preservation and promotion of the common good.

The public good therefore comprises all those goods which the body politic possesses as necessary means towards its perfection, and it possesses them as trustee for the whole society. So the ultimate owners are the persons who make up society – but the persons taken collectively, not individually (or distributively as the logician phrases it). So public good is a good had by the whole society (and entrusted to the government) to be used for the sake of the whole society, i.e. for the common good of all. In short, public good is good had by the whole for the sake of the whole. Thus are constitution, laws, courts for interpreting and enforcing laws, police, army, departments for administering laws, for gathering information, as well as such things as public roads, railways, art galleries, museums etc. are public goods which no individual owns but which are the property of the government (federal, state or local) as trustee for the citizens, taken collectively.

Private good is good that is owned by individuals for the sake of individuals.

Common good is not owned either by individuals or by the State. It is not property. Property is the opposite of community. Hence common property (in this sense of the word “common”) is a contradiction in terms. Community is something in which we all participate but which we do not own, whether individually or collectively. It transcends both private good and public good, both of which are naturally ordered to the common good.

The body politic, instituted for the defence and promotion of the common good, acts against its nature if it proposes to secure the good of some and not that of all. It then tends to become the promoter of a huge bargain -sale of common good to fortune-hunters. And still more does it act against its nature if it plans to injure a single one of the members even in order to benefit all the others. Any law which impoverishes some for the benefit of others, any law benefiting some at the expense of others, is anti-social, even though it may appear to do some good. Society cannot thrive on the ethics of barbarism.

The end of society is the common good and the end of the State is the government of society, i.e. the care of the common good.