

# ARGUING FROM 'THE COMMON GOOD'

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THE NOTION of the common good floats around in our society and is often used in public argument, particularly by those people who regard social justice as something that is important to them. However there is a question of whether in our kind of society it is a legitimate principle on which to base our arguments. This essay will raise this question and then attempt to resolve it by examining the grounds on which the common good is based and by suggesting a way in which it can be used in our kind of world.<sup>1</sup>

## *'The Common Good' Seems not to be Legitimate*

At first sight it appears that in our society 'the common good' is not a legitimate principle to use in public discussion. We live in a liberal democracy, a form of social and political organisation first mooted in the Seventeenth Century that posits the radical equality of each of its members, who are understood to be individuals, and that proposes freedom and the opportunity to generate wealth as its primary goods. The structure of government is such that it excludes itself from significant areas of human life, notably religion and aspects of morality, unless activities in those areas generate conflict or are shown to cause harm to other members of the society. The moral language of such a society is the language of rights. These rights, initially called natural rights and opposed to natural law, but now known as human rights, are things that we claim. They assume that we will all act in our own self-interest and that the tussles we endure with one another will ensure both that we are able to do what we want and that the general outcome of

our activities will be the best available. Many of the rights claimed are specifically designed as protection against the intervention of governments or of other authorities in our lives.<sup>2</sup>

Strictly speaking, the notion of the common good has no place in discussions about life in such a social and political arrangement. If this sounds strange, let me note that the term did not appear in the 1967 eight volume *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.<sup>3</sup> Nor does it appear in the *Concise Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* published in 2000.<sup>4</sup> It does appear, however, in the *Lexicon* of American novelist and apologist for *laissez-faire* capitalism, Ayn Rand. There she begins, 'The tribal notion of 'the common good' has served as the moral justification of most social systems—and of all tyrannies—in history. The degree of a society's enslavement or freedom corresponded to the degree to which that tribal slogan was invoked or ignored.'<sup>5</sup> She goes on to say that there are no such things as the 'the tribe' or 'the public' but that there is only a number of individual men [and women]. Any larger good is simply the sum of the goods that accrue to each of these individuals.

## *Yet the Notion is Resilient*

Yet the notion of the common good keeps appearing in public discussion. It is often seen in religious and social justice literature. A fact sheet, 'What is the Common Good?', can be found on the CSIRO website, albeit meant for school children.<sup>6</sup> A large literature has formed in the countries of the European Union as they try to work out the implications of the adventure that they have begun together. Even the originators of the ideas underlying liberal de-

mocracy could barely hide it. Thomas Hobbes, in his *Leviathan* (1651), speaks of the construction of a commonwealth. 'Commonwealth' or a 'common weal' is not far from 'common good', though in all these cases the meanings of the term are not necessarily consistent, and they can be thick or thin. Where does the notion of 'common good' find its home?

I believe that in our time the notion of common good has been most strongly promulgated in the tradition of the Catholic social justice encyclicals from Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* in 1891 to Benedict XVI's *Caritas in Veritate* in 2009. This is not to diminish its use by other churches in their deliberations on social justice nor its use by political theorists. The encyclicals use the common good as a normative principle to argue for such things as just wages, friendly relations among members of society, participation in political activity, just distribution of wealth, access to public office, world peace. Consistently, there is insistence that the primary purpose of the state is the attainment of the common good<sup>7</sup> and that society is composed not just of individuals but of persons and communities of different kinds that must all be recognised and treated justly.<sup>8</sup> There is, however, little theoretical discussion of the principle, though John XXIII does assert in the longest discussion of the notion in any of the encyclicals that the common good 'embraces the sum total of those conditions of social living whereby men are enabled to achieve their own integral perfection more fully and more easily'.<sup>9</sup>

### *Sources and Grounds of 'the Common Good'*

The source of the principle for the popes is clearly the thought of Thomas Aquinas, and Leo XIII acknowledges this at the first use of the term in *Rerum Novarum*.<sup>10</sup> Thomas's principal sources are Aristotle's *Politics* and Augustine's *City of God*.<sup>11</sup> This brings to light a tradition different from that emanating from



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the Seventeenth Century, from which we receive our liberal democracy. In this older tradition, political communities are seen as developing out of pre-existing natural communities such as families, tribes and villages, rather than through agreement or contract by previously isolated individuals. It is natural for political communities to form but they are not formed by nature. They are achievements of human practical wisdom, which is required both for creating the shape that they take and for the act of bringing them about through human consent and through the development of friendship toward those who are not part of one's own family.<sup>12</sup>

In this context, the grounds for the claim that there is such a thing as the common good can be made clear. Two of these come from Aristotle. Firstly, he attributes to human beings a natural sociability. Even if they do not need one another for a specifically useful purpose, they like to be together and to associate with one another. The evidence for this is speech through which people are able to share things other than the simple material necessities of life. Speech gives rise to friendship, and, for Aristotle, it is affection that binds the city.<sup>13</sup> Secondly, in so far as the formation of a political community is a human action, it must be done for some good purpose, for every action aims at a good. The principal good of a political community, says Aristotle, is justice, though many other goods follow it—goods of the soul, goods of the body and external goods.<sup>14</sup> What Augustine and Thomas add to this is an understanding of natural law that is

embedded in eternal law, as Augustine says, ‘What shall I say of the common good whose common pursuit knits men together into a ‘people’, as our definition teaches? Careful scrutiny will show that there is no such good for those who live irreligiously, as all do who serve not God but demons.’<sup>15</sup>

### *An Argument for the Common Good*

How then might we argue that the notion of the common good is valid in public debate in this liberal democracy, which we call Australia? We could argue from within the principles of liberal democracy itself as, for instance, John Rawls has done admirably in his monumental work, *A Theory of Justice*.<sup>16</sup> The advantage of this approach is that we are speaking the language of the day. Its disadvantage is that I doubt that such arguments have succeeded or that they are able to succeed on the basis of their presuppositions. We could, alternatively, argue from within the natural law tradition of Thomas Aquinas, as many Christian people do. The advantage of this approach is that it has high normative force, for, indeed, its sense of natural law is founded on God’s creative act and the notion of eternal law.<sup>17</sup> Its disadvantage is that many of those whom we want to persuade will simply reject the theological and metaphysical dimensions of the argument.

Instead, I propose an Aristotelian argument that is properly political and which, I believe, avoids the disadvantages of both these approaches. To do this, we need to consider liberal democracy as a political form stripped of its supporting ideology. By ideology I mean a quasi-religious system of political beliefs that usually includes some positions that are manifestly false. An example of falsity is the belief that there are only individuals and the State and that pre-political and intermediary communities do not exist.<sup>18</sup> If we do this, we can analyse liberal democracy in terms of its constitutionality, that is, who participates in political office and how, and of the specific goods

that it pursues and for which it was formed. If the question of good seems alien, we can quote Thomas Hobbes who wrote, ‘the passions that incline men to peace, are fear of death; desire of such things as are necessary to commodious living; and hope by their industry to obtain them.’<sup>19</sup> It is this sense of the good that has generated the remarkable economic machine that is the modern state.

### *Aristotelian Political Analysis*

Aristotle’s formal division of constitutional possibilities is well known to us. There are good constitutions in which the good of the whole is sought and there are deviant constitutions in which a particular person or group exercises power in its own interests. Rule can be by one, by the few or by the many. And so we find three good constitutions—monarchy, aristocracy and republicanism—and three deviant constitutions—democracy, oligarchy and tyranny.<sup>20</sup> We should note that Aristotle’s notion of constitution is much broader than our own modern constitutions and includes much of the community’s law, policy and custom. It is the form or shape of the community. The issue of the good enters, firstly, through the specific goals of these particular arrangements and, secondly, through the political question of what is the best constitution, which we will take up now. Aristotle proposes four senses of the best constitution—the best possible, the best practicable, the best that circumstances will allow and the best that a particular people can achieve in the light of what they currently do.<sup>21</sup> It is the first and last of these that will concern us here: the best possible constitution and the best that a particular people can do given the arrangements they currently have.

Under Aristotle’s best possible constitution and assuming adequate material conditions, the good sought both by persons and by the community as a whole is the fullness of virtue, moral and intellectual. Bodily health and fitness are assumed as is a sufficient supply of material goods, which are to be used moder-

ately and liberally, that is with temperance and generosity towards others. The community is a kind of broad aristocracy, or rule by the virtuous. Aristotle does not think that we will normally achieve this, but it is a statement of what we 'would pray for'.<sup>22</sup> Other constitutions will generally be limited in their goals, so that, for instance, in an oligarchy wealth is usually taken to be the primary good, and in a democracy it is freedom that is most highly prized. Such constitutions he sees as partial, that is as limited by the presupposition on which they are constructed. They are partial both in their achievement of political justice (participation) and in the limited nature of the specific kinds of good that they seek.

### *The Common Good in Liberal Democracy*

The liberal democracy in which we live can be examined using Aristotle's analysis of the best that a particular people can achieve given the arrangements they currently have. Existing constitutions cannot be changed easily because they are embedded in the culture of a people. Correction can, however, be made by edging them slowly towards something better, often by identifying shortcomings in the current arrangements and by proposing change. Liberal democracy is a flat democracy in which everyone is perceived as equal. The goods it primarily pursues are freedom and wealth. It proposes these both as particular goods and as common goods. By Aristotle's measure it is partial in its presuppositions. This does not mean that we want to give it up. I doubt that any of us want to lose the freedom to discuss things that in another time may have been regarded as subversive of the Commonwealth in which we live. Nevertheless, we can be critical and we can criticise the particular constitution under which we live both in terms of the achievements of its own ends and in terms of ends that might be imagined under the best possible constitution.

Under the rubric of the partial constitution that we have, we might ask whether it achieves

its own ends. Let us consider wealth. As a private good, this end might be said to be achieved if most people are content with how much they have. As a common good, two questions might be asked. Firstly, does the community as a whole have sufficient wealth for funding its institutions and services? Secondly, is the wealth held in private hands distributed sufficiently evenly to satisfy the fundamental presupposition of the equality of all? Alternatively, we can consider freedom. As a private good, are all individuals free, and does this freedom energise them to live worthwhile lives? As a common good, do multiple voices unite in such a way that the country institutes good policy, and does the country live in fruitful relationship with neighbouring countries?

Under the rubric of the best possible constitution, we might ask whether there are goods important to human living that we ignore. The goods that Aristotle proposes are justice, friendship and moral and intellectual virtue. These are already common goods, because they cannot be had alone. Let us take the second. Is the country as a whole bound by affection, or is it marked by division, competition and loneliness? Are our citizens able to form and sustain effective and flourishing communities?

### *Case Study: Agricultural Land*

In the final section of this essay, I will attempt to examine one concrete issue in Australia at the present moment that might be analysed in terms of the common good—the preservation of agricultural lands. The issue has been raised in relation to the mining of coal or coal seam gas under agricultural land, but it is broader than this and includes the encroachment of urban settlement on prime agricultural land and the degradation of marginal agricultural land by poor farming practices. Under the rubric of our liberal democracy, we act with the assumption that land is a private good, so that farmers have the right to sell it for other uses, if they are likely to be better off for doing so.

In so far as we acknowledge a common good, we assume that market forces will determine the best outcome. Thus, we have seen large swathes of rich agricultural land in the Southern Highlands and on the Far North Coast of New South Wales converted to urban use following the collapse of the dairy industry and before alternative agricultural industries could emerge.

Under the rubric of the best possible constitution, broader issues will be considered. Human beings are dependent on the soil for food, something that we are prone to forget in these days of supermarkets and supply chains. Prime agricultural land is the product of geological events that may have spanned millions of years and is finite in extent. Can it be a private good, or is it not rather a common good belonging to the whole community both now and into the future? If it is, then surely it ought to be preserved, even if it is not able to be fully utilised for economic gain at the present moment.

This should give us hope, because, although policy and practice in our country are strongly pushed by economic arguments, we can see that there are, in fact, laws that protect other goods. In this case, land zoning laws and different land titles—freehold and leasehold—exist and exert some control on how land is

used. Further laws can be enacted, and often are when voices in the community become strong enough. The partial constitution that we have can be amended to encompass broader senses of the good. This, in turn, offers a significant role to people and groups that already have a richer sense of the common good, which can be promoted in public discussion. This is a significant part of what the encyclicals in the Catholic Social Justice tradition have attempted and achieved.

### Conclusion

Our conclusion is, then, that ‘the common good’ is a legitimate principle from which to argue in public discussion in this liberal democracy of Australia. If, however, our argument is to be legitimate and we are to be successful we need to use it in an appropriate way. This essay has proposed an approach that is more Aristotelian than Thomistic. According to this approach we can look at our laws, policies and customs and measure them against the common good both in terms of the consistency of the political arrangements we have and in terms of the wider scope of human possibility. The change we can achieve will be piecemeal—step by step improvement in the conditions under which we live.

### NOTES

1 An earlier version of this essay was presented as a paper to the Wellspring Community, Willoughby Uniting Church, 29 July 2012.

2 For a sharp discussion of how the moral language of human rights is incompatible with the moral language of common good and virtue see Ernest L Fortin, ‘Human Rights and the Common Good’ in *Human Rights, Virtue, and the Common Good: Untimely Meditation of Religion and Politics*, by Ernest L. Fortin, edited by Brian Benestad (Lanham MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1996), pp. 19–28.

3 *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co, 1967).

4 *Concise Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2000).

5 *Ayn Rand Lexicon*, s.v. ‘Common Good’, [http://aynrandlexicon.com/lexicon/common\\_good.html](http://aynrandlexicon.com/lexicon/common_good.html).  
6 [www.cazr.csiro.au/scienceweek2003/resources/F29\\_day11.pdf](http://www.cazr.csiro.au/scienceweek2003/resources/F29_day11.pdf)

7 See, for instance, John XXIII, *Mater et Magister* 87; *Pacem in Terris*, 53 – 56.

8 See, for instance, John XXIII, *Mater et Magister* 37; Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate* 7. The exception is John Paul II, who appears not to have made much use of the common good in his social encyclicals. He rather attempted to transform the language of rights to include the reciprocal notion of duties, absent from the 17th Century accounts of rights. See, for instance, *Laborem Exercens*, 16 – 23.

9 John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris*, 58, in *Catholic*

*Social Thought: The Documentary Heritage*, edited by David J. O’Brien and Thomas A. Shannon (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2003), p. 140.

10 *Rerum Novarum* 37, footnote 34 acknowledges Thomas’s *Contra impugnantes Dei cultum et religionem*, Cap. II. Interestingly, Thomas does not appear to give any extended treatment of the nature and meaning of the common good in itself. Rather, he uses the principle to ground other discussions. His work does, however, establish *bonum commune* as a standard technical term, which can be called on in various contexts. His major discussions are found in his treatise on law, *Summa Theologiae* I-II qq. 90–114, note especially qq. 98–105, and in his discussions of prudence and justice, *Summa Theologiae* II-II, qq. 47–122. It has to be noted that Thomas’s interest was in ethics and that he had only minor interest in politics. His commentary on Aristotle’s *Politics* peters out at Book III, Chapter 6, though there is some confusion in the tradition, because commentary on the eight books was completed by Peter of Auvergne and since an edition in 1492 the whole has been presented as Thomas’s work. This has been corrected by the Leonine edition. See Jean-Pierre Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas: The Person and his Work* translated by Robert Royal (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1996), Volume 1, p. 233.

11 See Mary M. Keys, *Aquinas, Aristotle, and the Promise of the Common Good* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

12 See Aristotle, *Politics* I,2.

13 Aristotle, *Politics* I, 2, especially 1253a1–a17.

14 Aristotle, *Politics* I, 2 (1252b30); III, 6 (1278b15–30); VII, 1 (1323a25).

15 Augustine, *City of God* Book XIX, Chapter 21, Translated by Gerald G. Walsh *et al.* (New York: Image Books, 1953), p. 470.

16 John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), see especially Part 3.

17 See Stephen L Brock, ‘The Primacy of the Common Good and the Foundations of Natural Law in St. Thomas’ in Reinhard Hutter and Matthew Levering, *Resourcement Thomism: Sacred Doctrine, the Sacraments, and the Moral Life*, Essays in Honor of Romanus Cessario OP (Washington DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2010), pp. 234–255.

18 This position is famously attributed to Margaret Thatcher, though she does acknowledge families albeit as only nuclear families, ‘there is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families.’ *Women’s Own* 31 October 1987. Ayn Rand quoted above would seem to be a strong advocate of this position.

19 Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* edited by J. C. A. Gaskin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), n. 14, p. 86.

20 Aristotle, *Politics* III, 7.

21 Aristotle, *Politics* IV, 1 (1288b20–40).

22 Aristotle, *Politics* VII, 1. Quotation: IV, 1 (1288b23).

Other photos

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*We must recognize the privileged place of the poor in our communities, a place that does not exclude anyone, but wants to reflect how Jesus bound himself to them. The presence of the poor in our communities is mysteriously powerful: it changes persons more than a discourse does, it teaches fidelity, it makes us understand the fragility of life, it asks for prayer: in short, it brings us to Christ.*

*The gesture of charity, on the other hand, must also be accompanied by commitment to justice, with an appeal that concerns all, poor and rich. Hence, the social doctrine of the Church is integral to the pathways of the new evangelization, as well as the formation of Christians to dedicate themselves to serve the human community in social and political life.*

—Message from the Synod of Bishops on the New Evangelisation, par. 12.