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SOMMARIO

IS THE COMMON GOOD AN ENSEMBLE OF CONDITIONS?

V. Bradley Lewis

Abstract

While appeals to the common good are a stock feature of political debate, the character of the common good in such discussions is often unclear. Since the 1960s the Roman Catholic magisterium has understood the common good according to a formulation of it as «the sum total of conditions of social life that allow social groups and their individual members relatively thorough and ready access to their own fulfillment». This formulation (which I call the Vatican II formulation) has been criticized on at least three grounds: first, it reduces the common good from a true final cause to something merely instrumentally good; second, its status as instrumental to the perfection of individual groups is still too demanding given the pluralism about perfection in modern societies; and third, the formulation represents a deviation from the sound understanding of the common good found in specifically Thomistic-Aristotelian political philosophy. After some clarifying remarks about the formulation itself and the history of the idea of the common good itself I discuss each of these criticisms and conclude that the Vatican II formulation can be understood as appropriate in view of specifically modern political institutions and practices against the background of the older conceptions associated with the Thomistic-Aristotelian tradition.

Keywords: common good, catholic social teaching, the modern state, aquinas, neo-thomism.

Appeals to the common good remain ubiquitous in political discussions. The notion has deep roots in Western political thought; however its content is often vague and this threatens to make it little more than a meaningless rhetorical trope. (Who, after all, is 'against' the common good?) One attempt to provide a more determinate notion of the common good is the formulation that has been regularly employed by the Roman Catholic magisterium in authoritative statements on social, political, and economic questions over the last half-century. The most widely cited version of the formulation is in the second chapter of the Second Vatican Council's 1965 Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et spes*: the common good is there characterized as «the sum of those conditions of social life that allow social groups and their individual members relatively thorough and ready access to their own fulfillment».[1] This passage has been cited or quoted in many subsequent statements right up to Pope Francis's 2015 encyclical, *Laudato si'*.[2]

[1] Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et spes* (7 December 1965), art. 26 (DS 4326): «seu summam eorum vitae socialis condicionum quae tum coetibus, tum singulis membris permittunt ut propriam perfectionem plenius atque expeditus consequantur». The formulation is repeated with only slight but important variation in art. 74, which I discuss below.

[2] See Paul VI, *Octogesima adveniens* («A Call to Action», 14 May 1971), no. 24, *A.A.S.* 63 (1971): 419; John Paul II, *Centesimus annus* («On the Hundredth Anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*», 1 May 1991), no. 47, *A.A.S.* 83 (1991): 852; Benedict XVI, *Caritas in veritate* («On Integral Human Development in Charity and Truth», 29 June 2009), no. 7, *A.A.S.* 101 (2009): 645; Francis, *Laudato Si'* («On Care for Our Common Home», 24 May 2015), no. 156.

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As established as what I will henceforth refer to as the Vatican II formulation now seems, it has not been wholly uncontroversial, and there are a number of important questions about it. My purpose in this paper is to consider this formulation as a philosophical matter,[1] although there are also some important historical aspects to its origin and exposition. Following some brief background comments about the idea of the common good (section I), I will note some details about the Vatican II formulation in its most authoritative version that are often overlooked (section II). Following that I will consider three important criticisms of it: first, that in so far as the formulation is an instrumental account of the common good it fails to identify a genuine good; second, in so far as it is instrumental to some conception of perfection it is inappropriate or impossible from the perspective of modern liberal pluralistic societies; and third, that the formulation is a deviation from the sound understanding of the common good to be found in the tradition of classical and Christian social thought exemplified in the work of Aristotle and Aquinas (section III). I will argue positively that the formulation is not accurately characterized as purely instrumental, but that it aims to describe aspects of specifically modern social and political institutions and practices against the backdrop of the classical conception of the common good and to do this in a way that is explicitly practical as distinct from speculative.

I.

Paradoxically, the idea of the common good is in our time both criticized as vague, even empty of content, and invoked against political programs and policies that are seen as destructively individualistic. Catholic political thinkers, in particular, often deploy the idea as a trump against policies and programs described (often inaccurately) as «libertarian». The implication is that classical liberalism simply rejects the idea of the common good. In this context one often hears quoted Ronald Reagan's statement that «[g]overnment is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem», or Margaret Thatcher's statement that «[t]here is no such thing as society».[2] But neither of these statements necessarily entails skepticism about the existence of a common good. Reagan's statement can be taken simply as a negative judgment on the efficacy of centralized economic planning (at a particular historical moment) as measured by its consequences *for* the common good. Similarly, Thatcher's statement can be taken as a denial that «society» constitutes a substantial whole or natural kind (she actually contrasted «society» to «individuals and families»). One can disagree with both without insisting that either constitutes a rejection of the idea of the common good: they are arguments *about* the common good as were the alternative views of their opponents. And this is my first point: the character of the common good is often precisely what is at issue in political debates. In this respect the common good seems to be what is

[1] One might question this procedure since the formulation occurs in a magisterial document more suited generally to explicitly theological analysis. There is, however, nothing theological in a technical sense (that is, it makes no appeal to revelation) about the formulation of the common good in this document.

[2] The Reagan quotation is from his 1981 First Inaugural Address: See Steven F. Hayward, *The Age of Reagan: The Conservative Counterrevolution 1980-1989*, New York, Crown Forum, 2009, 51-54. The Thatcher quotation is from the interview with her conducted by Douglas Keay in «Woman's Own» magazine (31 October 1987): see Charles Moore, *Margaret Thatcher: From Grantham to the Falklands*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 2013, 349.

sometimes understood as an essentially contested concept.[1] It therefore seems unhelpful to argue that what is needed is concern for the common good. Political debates are debates about the character and content of the common good of the community in question.

The earliest philosophical discussions of the common good seemed both to understand this aspect of the common good, but also to insist on its saliency. Both Plato and Aristotle invoke it as an essential part of political discussion.[2] It functioned for them as an analytical tool with which to distinguish true political regimes from deviant ones.[3] Political community is conceived by both as, in its focal sense, a community of reciprocity, one ordered by a kind of friendship and thus one in which true members of the community could not simply be the means to the satisfaction of others. This seems too obvious to need saying, but in the fourth century B.C. it was not: tyranny was a not uncommon phenomenon, nor was oligarchy. Moreover, democracy was taken by many to mean an arrangement in which the poor simply expropriated and redistributed the property of the wealthy.[4] None of this was necessarily dressed up in the language of the common good as is the case now when the phrase is used by even the most rapacious kleptocrats (the identification of whom is usually not difficult). At this most general level the common good simply is a way of distinguishing the most basic orientations of a political system. At the same time, Aristotle, in particular, understood that beyond this most general meaning there was a more determinate conception of the common good associated with the various political regimes. So the concrete meaning of the common good was disputed by even monarchists, aristocrats, and the advocates of the generic or mixed political regime that Aristotle seemed to think the best model available to most communities, to say nothing of the oligarchs and democrats, both of whose claims Aristotle rejected as self-destructively partial.[5]

When the idea of the common good is taken up by the Christian theologians of the Middle Ages, starting with Albert the Great and reaching a culmination in the thought of Thomas Aquinas, much of the concrete sense in the various political regimes and their rival claims was lost as the *polis* had long ago given way to larger and therefore more abstract polities that involved little in the way of participation by citizens. Moreover, the sense – still very much alive in Aristotle – that the claims of the political regimes were also claims not only about justice but about the best way of life had given way to the universal Christian answer to that question. The stakes, one might say, of the political were massively reduced. The idea of the common good, therefore divided between, on the one hand, a topic of speculative theology constructed out of both Aristotelian and neo-Platonic elements in which the good of the political community was seen as analogically related to both the order of the universe and its extrinsic end in God, and, on the other hand, a piece of casuistical moral theology in which it served to explain why, for example, public authorities could intend to kill criminals, but private persons could not intend to kill an assailant in an act of self-defense.[6] The

[1] The classic discussion of this notion is W.B. Gallie, *Essentially Contested Concepts*, in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* (n.s.) 56, 1955-56, 167-98.

[2] See, e.g., Thucydides, 4.87.4, 5.90; Plato, *Gorgias* 506a, *Laws* 712d-715b; Aristotle, *Politics* 1279a17-22.

[3] Aristotle, *Politics*, bk. 3, ch. 7, at 1279a22-b11. See also Plato *Laws* 712d-715b, 875a-d; Xenophon, *Hiero* 11.1; Cicero, *Republic* 1.25, 33, 3.31; Thomas Aquinas, *On Kingship*, 1.2-3; *Summa theologiae*, 1-2, 95.4c, 96.4c, 105.1c.

[4] Aristotle, *Politics* 1281a11-24, 1318a21-26.

[5] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1124b14-19.

[6] M. S. Kempshall, *The Common Good in Late Medieval Political Thought*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1999.

fact that Thomas never explicitly unified these speculative and practical aspects of the common good has been the cause of much subsequent controversy (and confusion) among Thomists.

These disagreements have extended to the practical applications of the idea of the common good to modern institutions and practices through the tradition of Catholic social teaching as developed since the pontificate of Leo XIII, the roots of which take one back to the neo-Thomist revival that began in Italy in the early nineteenth century. It was out of this project that the conception of the common good as an ensemble of conditions was developed[1] and to that conception I now turn.

II.

We should immediately notice five features of the Vatican II formulation: first, the common good is characterized as a sum of conditions. Much of the traditional discussion of the common good characterizes the common good as a kind of final cause, that is, a goal. It is certainly not impossible to see a set of conditions as a goal (think of a university fundraising campaign, which aims to raise a certain amount of money, not for its own sake, but for the sake of the goods for which the money is to be spent), but not as a final or ultimate goal: conditions would ordinarily assume some further end made possible by them. In this respect one could call the definition – and some have – an «instrumental» account of the common good. This is an issue to which we will return. In addition to this, one must note that the sum here is a sum of conditions, not a sum of personal goods or a sum of the satisfaction or happiness of persons.[2] Many kinds of goods could be described as «conditions» and some of these are presumably the sorts of goods that Charles Taylor has called «irreducibly social».[3] To call something a «condition» does not in itself settle what type of good it is.

The point is reinforced when we notice a second feature of the definition, which is given in terms of «fulfillment». The Latin word used here is *perfectio* in *Gaudium et spes*, as well as in *Mater et magistra*, *Pacem in teris*, *Dignitatis humanae*, and the *Catechism*. While an identification of the common good with conditions seems to thin it out in comparison to other possible conceptions, the notion that it aims at perfection seems to effect just the reverse, setting the bar rather high. This would seem particularly problematic in the context of modern pluralistic societies with no agreement on what might constitute human perfection. However, one must note that conditions are more capacious than a particular conception of perfection, so that the emphasis on conditions builds in a kind of flexibility that would not automatically be defeated by the empirical fact of pluralism.

A third feature of the definition complicates things even more, since it specifies the perfection as that of both groups and individuals.[4] Thus, while the possible reduction

[1] I have discussed this development in *The Neo-Thomist Theory of the Common Good and Catholic Social Teaching*, Paper presented at the 2014 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Washington, DC, 28-31 August 2014. Available at SSRN: http://ssrn.com/abstract=2454699.

[2] Indeed, John Paul II explicitly rejected this notion immediately before citing *Gaudium et spes*, 26. See *Centesimus annus*, no. 47, p. 852. There is a similar statement in the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, Vatican City, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2004, no. 164.

[3] Charles Taylor, *Irreducibly Social Goods*, in *Philosophical Arguments*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1995, 127-45.

[4] Groups are not mentioned in *Mater et Magistra* and *Pacem in Terris*, but are a modification of the formulation as found in *Gaudium et Spes*, which is the main source for subsequent discussions like the *Catechism*.

of the notion of the common good to conditions suggests thinning, it is not one that arises from a simple individualism. The social nature of human beings is built into the definition. But it is important that the social aspect here is itself already defined in a pluralistic way. To say that the common good establishes conditions for the perfection of groups indicates two further things: first the common good is not simply about political society; second, it assumes the existence of many sub-political human associations and relates them to human perfection, thereby precluding any attempt simply to identify the common good with the judgment of the state and its officials, even while underwriting and disciplining their authority.

Fourth, in the second and somewhat fuller treatment of the common good in *Gaudium et spes* the common good is said to «embrace or encompass» (*complector*) the sum total of conditions.[1] Such conditions are included in, *but not exhaustive* of the common good. In the Catechism, where the basic formulation is repeated and fleshed out in terms of more specific elements, it is also said that «each human community possesses a common good which permits it to be recognized as such». It goes on to say that it is in the «political community that its most complete realization is found» and that it is «the role of the state to defend and promote the common good of civil society, its citizens, and intermediate bodies».[2] The passage thus distinguishes the state, the political community, and the persons and intermediate bodies that make up civil society. This recalls Pius XI's characterization of the political society (*civitas*) as «a kind of instrument» (discussed below) at the service of the persons and groups that make up the society. These two are related to the common good, that is, have or participate in common goods that cannot be understood as sums of conditions.

Finally, the definition of the common good must not be taken in isolation from its context. In *Gaudium et spes* that context is the document's second chapter, *On the Human Community*. The chapter begins by noting the phenomenon of growing human interdependence and the contribution of Christian revelation in understanding more deeply «the laws of social life which the Creator has written into man's spiritual and moral nature».[3] This is certainly a reference to the natural moral law. The document then discusses «the communitarian character of the human vocation», affirming the brotherhood of all people and their common goal, «God himself».[4] The next article states that the progress of the human person and of society are interrelated since «the subject and the goal of all social institutions is and must be the human person, which for its part and by its very nature stands completely in need of social life».[5] Human social relations are divided into two classes: those most immediately related to man's nature are the family and the political community; others are a result of free decision. These relationships multiply and interrelate in a process called «socialization». The test of such relations is their contribution to the human person's direction towards her destiny. The relationship between the dignity of the person and the social nature of the person is the paramount theme of the chapter. In the immediate sequel to the definition the council fathers emphasize the person's «universal and inviolable rights

[1] *Gaudium et spes*, art. 74.
[2] Catechism, no. 1910.
[3] *Gaudium et Spes*, art. 23.
[4] *Ibid*., art. 24. The first quote is the title of art. 24.
[5] *Ibid*., 25: «subiectum et finis omnium institutorum socialium est et esse debet humana persona, quippe quae, suapte natura, vita sociali omnino indigeat». This sentence concludes with a note citing Aquinas's commentary on Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, bk. 1, lect. 1.

and duties», and then discuss particular threats to human dignity.[1] The last sections of the chapter all explicitly reject individualism and re-emphasize the social virtue of solidarity.[2]

The Catechism gives its own summary of the Council's account. After quoting the formulation, it says that the common good consists of «three essential elements»: first, respect for persons, which entails respect for «the fundamental and inalienable rights of the human person», privileging in particular freedom of conscience and religion; second, «social *well-being* and *development* of the group itself»; and third, peace, understood as «stability and security of a just social order».[3] The substance of this is that political communities should provide for their members a social context that truly supports their flourishing primarily through the protection of their fundamental rights, facilitation of their integral development, and the maintenance of internal and external peace and security. These are the characteristic tasks of modern political communities and there is a vast range of specific ways in which such communities can and do promote the common good. Nevertheless, the focus on human rights and development in particular, as well as the whole notion that the common good is about establishing and maintaining a set of conditions has suggested to some that the Council's idea of the common good represents a change from the premodern, particularly Thomistic, understanding that in some sense inspired it. This is among the questions disputed by contemporary philosophers and theologians, which I now take up.

III.

The Vatican II formulation has been criticized from, as it were, both directions, that is, as either too low an account of the common good or one that is too high to be achieved. In the first case, some have criticized the Vatican II formulation (and this criticism has been pressed also against John Finnis's account of the common good, which is quite similar)[4] as defective in so far as it is merely instrumental. This seems to put it at odds with the sense in which the common good is a true final cause. For Aristotelians and Thomists who accept the traditional division of goods between those that are pleasant, useful, and «noble» or «honest», it seems wrong to treat the common good as merely useful – how can a true final cause simply be useful? How can men be expected to sacrifice their very lives in the service of a mere means? Moreover many of the conditions that make up the common good in the Vatican II formulation would seem to be goods that are common, to use the technical scholastic terminology, by predication as distinct from goods that are causally common.[5]

The points I made in the second part of my paper were directed to the idea that the Vatican II formulation conceives of the common good as «merely instrumental». That it is not is suggested by the often unnoticed qualification of the ensemble of conditions as a part of the common good in a more general sense. Clearly that formulation is meant to emphasize an aspect of the common good and not necessarily to exhaust its content. But this raises additional issues, mainly, why so much prominence is given to

[1] *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 26, 27. It bears noting that the document mentions both rights and duties.
[2] *Ibid*., nos. 30, 31, 32.
[3] *Catechism*, nos. 1906-1909 (emphasis in the original). The first two aspects are based on the text of *Gaudium et spes* itself, while the third is not.
[4] See John Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights*, 2d ed., Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1011, ch. 6.
[5] See, e.g., *Summa theologiae*, 1a, 39.4 ad3, and 2a2ae, 90.2 ad2.

a partial account of the common good that seems to be (at least largely) instrumental. Why not stress the end to which the instrument is directed, the perfection of the members of the community in question? This is, of course, a two edged sword: Mark Murphy has pressed this criticism (mainly against Finnis), and argued for an aggregative account of the common good as the full flourishing of every member of the community.[1] By contrast, Jean Porter has argued that the direction of the conditions towards perfection simply pushes matters into a category that is inherently controversial in modern pluralistic societies.[2] This controversy would presumably feed back into one's conception of the ensemble of conditions itself, rendering their character similarly unsettled.

To this latter criticism the answer seems clear enough: one set of conditions can be apt for more than one sort of end. To take Aquinas's favorite aspects of the common good, justice and peace, or those specified in the Catechism as basic human rights, social development, and security, one can imagine them as establishing perfectly serviceable contexts for the perfection of persons as conceived of as Aristotelian *eudaimonia*, Thomistic *beatitudo* (at least *imperfect*), classically utilitarian happiness, or the Kantian *höchstes Gut* comprising both goodness and happiness. To say this is not to make the unrealistic claim that there would not be tensions and disagreements in practice, but only that, to use Aristotle's universally apt qualification for all generalizations about human affairs, the conditions would be acceptable to most people «characteristically and for the most part», as I think they in practice are in most modern developed societies.[3] Porter's alternative to this formulation is that the common good is a set of cultural ideals that mediate the participation of members of the community in basic human goods. This is preferable, she holds, because it is sensitive to the variation of human practices grounded in the stable but practically underdetermined structures of human nature.[4] I think this misses the point of the Vatican II formulation as a standard for practice. Whether some tolerable approximation of the common good understood as an ensemble of conditions is present and operative is a question that can be assessed and a goal that can be advanced. The existence of cultural ideals, however, is largely the result of many spontaneous, unplanned, human choices over a long period of time. There is, I think, an analogy here with the important differences between «state-building» and «nation-building», a difference that policy makers in the United States have learned at considerable cost.[5]

Mention of the «state» brings me back to Murphy's criticism of John Finnis and implicitly the Vatican II formulation as inferior to an aggregative conception that favors something more like a true final cause, the flourishing of every member of the

[1] Mark C. Murphy, *Natural Law in Jurisprudence and Politics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006, ch. 3.

[2] Jean Porter, *Ministers of the Law: A Natural Law Theory of Political Authority*, Grand Rapids, MI, Eerdmans, 2010, 147-48.

[3] Among the «conditions» that could be (and often are) controversial are, e.g., just what aspects of human life fall under justice, what rights are considered basic and necessary to guarantee and the controversies are obviously rooted in differences about ends. I don't mean to overstate agreement about those things, just that a rough consensus about conditions is easier to achieve than one about ends themselves.

[4] Porter, *Ministers of the Law*, 150-66.

[5] I do not mean to suggest that cultural questions are simply beyond the scope of public policy. The preservation of aspects of a community's culture may well justify certain government policies, but this is generally best done in an indirect way, and the creation of culture does seem beyond the reach of political action.

community. I think this view is problematic for at least two reasons. First, it takes the commonness of the common good in the wrong sense: what makes a good common is its character as a good that is sharable not that it is an aggregation. Murphy works hard (and largely successfully to my mind) to head off any worry that his aggregative view is subject to the same sorts of worries that beset utilitarian conceptions of the common good. But that is a separate issue. My point goes more to the metaphysics of common goods. But, second, there remains a more serious practical problem. In criticizing what he calls the instrumental view Murphy argues that its attractions are parasitic on his preferred aggregative conception and asks why, given that this is the case, one would continue to prefer it to the background conception that is doing the real explanatory work. He takes Finnis's answer to be that the instrumental view is better at supporting the ideal of limited government, which is operationalized mainly in the principles of antipaternalism and subsidiarity, both of which seem better protected by the instrumental view. Murphy, however, argues that both of these principles can be built up from one's conception of flourishing as participating in basic human goods and that this is a much better strategy for establishing the principles than paring back one's conception of the common good itself.[1] I think Murphy is correct about this, but I do not see why it is a serious problem for the Vatican II formulation. But this requires that I say something more about the state, which I think is absolutely crucial in understanding the Vatican II formulation.

Human beings have organized themselves in many different ways throughout history; the modern state is thus a particular form, one that emerged in Western Europe gradually, beginning in the medieval period, and reached something like its basic form in the sixteenth century, although many features of it that we now take to be characteristic did not emerge until the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It is a form of political community that is typically large both geographically and in terms of its population (at least compared to many other forms) and is largely held together by a bureaucratic agency that, to take Weber's classic formulation (as descriptive, not normative), claims a monopoly on the legitimate use of coercive force within fixed territorial boundaries.[2] Its emergence both aided and was aided by the simultaneous rise of modern science and technology, which suggest a relationship between the «mastery and possession of nature» and the mastery and possession of persons. The early theorists of the modern state fixed on the notion of sovereignty as its animating characteristic and its rise often entailed the subjugation of rivals like the Church, but also the various premodern internal rivals to sovereignty in the feudal system. Although one can point to premodern intimations of some of these characteristics, for example in ancient empires, the modern state is distinguished by a vastly greater control over the many sinews of social life, assisted by technological means undreamt of by the most hubristic premodern tyrant. Aristotle held that a political community could not extend beyond a certain size since it would require the power of a god to control it.[3] It is unsurprising that ancient empires were ruled over by men who claimed to be divine, but they would regard our rulers as wielding genuinely god-like power.

The Vatican II formulation was, I am confident, developed by theologians and adopted by popes with the specific features of the modern state in mind. The state's highly

[1] Murphy, *Natural Law in Jurisprudence and Politics*, 71-72.

[2] Max Weber, *On Law in Economy and Society*, trans. Edward Shils and Max Rhenstein, ed. Max Rheinstein, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1954, 338-42.

[3] Aristotle, *Politics* 1326a29-33.

developed technical means, effectively unified and centralized in similarly refined administrative structures, make it uniquely suited to the control of large territories and populations. It also makes it a unique instrument for violence and oppression. Moreover, its size and internal complexity make its government frequently opaque and resistant to the sort of accountability to and input from practical reasoning in the form of meaningful communal deliberation. The politics of such states are generally a function of bargaining among elites and organized interests that cannot be intelligibly related to any really common good. This aspect of the state has led some philosophers and theologians to deny that the classical ideal of the common good can find expression in the practices of the modern state. Alasdair MacIntyre has forcefully made this argument. While I cannot here go into the matter in great detail, I think MacIntyre's conclusions, while not without merit, are too pessimistic.[1] The analogical aspect of the common good means that one can see it as encompassing wider or more narrow contexts, and so it seems to me that this allows one to apply it to the political environment of the modern state, albeit in a somewhat thinner and more formal sense than one might apply it in the context of other sorts of communities, both political and non-political. It is in just this context that seeing it as an ensemble of conditions makes, I think, good sense. The pluralism of modern societies and the problems that attend allowing for increasingly intrusive penetration of human relationships by the agency of the modern state tell against Murphy's aggregative view. Not only can the state not actually effect anyone's flourishing (a point he concedes, while maintaining his formulation as that of an ideal for policy), but we risk a great deal in the way of other human goods by letting it try.

Finally, I want to say something about the explicitly Thomistic concern about the Vatican II formulation as a description of the common good as something less than a true final cause. This is the matter of many disputes among Thomists, including the particularly acrimonious dispute between Charles De Koninck and the defenders of Jacques Maritain that took place in the midst of the Second World War, which some have seen as repeated in the arguments about John Finnis's views about the common good. I want to limit myself to one point about this, albeit one that seems to me of great importance, but also one that I cannot adequately develop or defend here.[2] I mentioned above the issue of the distinct contexts, speculative and practical, in which discussion of the common good took place by medieval theologians, especially Aquinas. The common good described first and foremost the most common good-as-end for human beings, God, and by analogy the order of the universe and then the order of political society. All of these were seen as ends for human action. But a means is not an end and if one gives an «instrumental» account of the common good it seems that this is at odds with the Thomistic account, which often seems to suggest that human beings are for the sake of the political community in some sense. This is particularly evident in the many passages in which Aquinas describes the relationship of the person to the community as like that of a part relative to the whole.[3] The distressingly totalitarian-sounding implications of this are mitigated by insisting, as one should, that

[1] I have discussed this in *The Common Good against the Modern State? On MacIntyre's Political Philosophy*, «Josephinum Journal of Theology», 16, 2009, 357-78.

[2] I have discussed this controversy in *Personalism and Common Good: Thomistic Political Philosophy and the Turn to Subjectivity*, in *Subjectivity Ancient and Modern*, ed. R. J. Snell and Steven McGuire, Lanham, MD, Lexington Books, 2016, 175-96.

[3] E.g., *Summa theologiae* 1a2ae, 90.2c.

communities are not substantial unities, but unities of order, whereby the integrity and causality of the parts are not reduced without remainder to those of the whole.[1] But there is still the notion that persons are, in some sense, for the sake of the community.

To some degree, the circle can, I think, be squared by appeal to the distinction between speculative and practical reasoning. One can intelligibly posit an order to creation that explains the analogical relationship of various common and proper goods relative to wholes and parts. But this is not a fully satisfactory resolution of the problem when one considers that there are situations in which the goods of wholes and parts seem to be at odds with one another. When a man is called upon to sacrifice himself on the battlefield or on the site of an ongoing natural or man-made disaster, this really is a sacrifice and we honor those who make it precisely because of what they are willing to risk. Most of the time the community – the whole – is providing something for the parts: it assists them in pursuing their perfection. But there are occasions when it calls for them to potentially surrender everything. Jacques Maritain famously attempted to explain this by reference to his distinction between person and individual. For him the latter was the principle of material individuation and the root of selfish egoism, and the former was a spiritual reality that led to generosity and transcendence. In so far as man was an individual he was for the sake of the whole; in so far as man was a person the whole was for the sake of him.[2] While Maritain claimed a Thomistic provenance for this distinction, a number of Thomists have rejected the claim and I am inclined to agree with them, not least because it seems to me that egoism is far more a spiritual than a material phenomenon.[3] Nevertheless, I think he was on to something important here.

Goods are ends just in so far as they serve to perfect. God is the final end and most common good just because unity with God is the perfection of human nature. There is no contradiction between self-love and love of God since man is made for unity with God. Man is also made for society and cannot achieve such natural perfection as human nature permits without it. But the sense in which society perfects man is not the same as the sense in which God perfects human nature. The analogy between God and society as common good has its limits. Even the most perfect political community cannot completely perfect and thus satisfy human nature. So the sense in which persons are for the sake of society is not the same as the sense in which persons are for the sake of God. When a man loses his life for the sake of God he actually gains it. When a man loses his life for the sake of his country, it is not simply the same thing because the community is for the sake of its members in a way that is different from the way in which God is for the sake of human beings. If no human beings existed God would still be God, but the political community would not exist at all. It cannot provide us what it exists to provide us if we do not see ourselves as, in some sense for it, but that sense is not complete in the way that it is when we think of ourselves as for God. Thus Pius XI's statement that «society is for man and not vice versa» and Maritain's statement that «the state is for man, man is not for the state».[4]

[1] See *Commentary on Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, bk. 1, lect. 1 [5]; *Summa theologiae* 1a2ae, 17.4c; and John Finnis, *Aquinas: Moral, Political and Legal Theory*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1998, 24-25

[2] See especially Jacques Maritain, *The Person and the Common Good*, trans. John J. Fitzgerald, Notre Dame, IN, University of Notre Dame Press, 1947, 33-45.

[3] Lewis, *Personalism and Common Good*, 184-86.

[4] Encyclical letter, *Divini redemptoris* («On Atheistic Communism», 19 March 1937), no. 29, *A.A.S.* 29 (1937): 79.

At the same time, Maritain insisted that the temporal common good was a *bonum honestum* and not a merely instrumental good. This is because he described it compendiously as «the good life of the multitude», comprised, among other things, of public services, laws, the protection of fundamental rights, customs, history, culture, and moral character.[1] This goes well beyond simply an ensemble of conditions, but includes them, as the Vatican II formulation does. I think that Maritain was largely correct in this, but I think there is a better way to describe its character as the common good than he provided in his distinction between individuality and personality. A better way to think about it is suggested by Aristotle, who in the third book of the *Politics* described political community is a kind of friendship. In this, I agree with John Finnis (and others) that friendship (which can also be called «society» or, as with Finnis by the Latin, *societas*) is a basic form of good and thus a reason for action, a starting point of practical reasoning because it is good for its own sake.[2] The central case of friendship is that of two persons each of whom take the good of the other to be an aspect of her own good. Therefore, one cannot herself enjoy the benefit of the good of friendship unless she really wishes for the good for the other, not only because there is no good without the other, but because the good is the mutual love. Having a friend is not reducible to the many discrete goods that come of having a friend (e.g., someone from whom you can borrow money, get a ride to the airport, or whose scotch you know you are welcome to drink) real though they are. Similarly, a real community cannot exist unless the members value it not just for the useful goods it provides, which include the characteristically public or political goods like public order, including not only the personal protection provided by a functioning legal system, but also access to the benefits of free commerce; they must value it also as an ongoing association characterized by a degree of reciprocity and shared sentiment that are associated with friendship, although at once more extensively and less intensively. Sometimes. Friends do sacrifice things for one another and sometimes do quite astonishing things in the name of friendship as they do in the name of patriotism. The real benefit of having a *patria* is of the same type as the real benefit of having a friend and cannot be enjoyed save by one who views the friend and the *patria* as in a way ends, starting points in their own practical reasoning.

IV.

It is important to notice that nothing in the Vatican II formulation of the common good is at odds with the view I have just sketched. Its focus on the conditions does not mean that the common good *simpliciter* is to be understood instrumentally, although some aspects of it are instrumental goods. It may even be correct to say, as both Pius XII, Maritain, and John Paul II did, that the *state*, in a quite restricted and technical sense, is an instrumental good.[3] The common good understood as an ensemble of conditions is thus not a complete formulation of the common good, but one that is appropriately tailored to the circumstances of modern political institutions and prac-

[1] Maritain, *The Person and the Common Good*, 51-53; *Man and the State*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1951, 11-12. [2] Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights*, 88, 141-44.

[3] Pius XII, Encyclical letter, *Summi pontificatus* («On the Unity of Human Society», 20 October 1939), no. 59, *A.A.S.* 31 (1939): 433; Maritain, *Man and the State*, 13; John Paul II, Encyclical Letter, *Centesimus annus*, no. 11, p. 806.

tices. It can and should serve as a measure of and a means of disciplining the pretentions of the modern state and the elites who are provided by it with a vehicle for their own ambitions (which are not fundamentally different than those already described by Plato and Aristotle). This conception requires neither that we reject the modern state nor simply acquiesce in its often extravagant and predatory claims. The former is simply impossible given the actually available alternatives: one thing that we know to be worse than the modern state is modern statelessness. The latter, however, would be catastrophic from the perspective of the fuller view of the common good afforded by the Thomistic-Aristotelian tradition of moral and political thought.[1]

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