

THE COMMON GOOD IN CLASSICAL POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

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The term “common good” names the end (or final cause) of political and social life in the tradition of moral thought that owes its main substance to Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas. It names a genuine good (*bonum honestum*) and not merely an instrumental or secondary good defeasible in the face of particular goods. However, at the same time, it does not override or subsume such goods. The good of individual persons and other groups is in an important way constitutive of the common good in this classical conception. To see this we need first to consider the way the classical view understands the good of individual persons and then turn back to the common good. After discussing several important aspects of the political common good I will then consider a common objection to the notion of the common good and suggest some unresolved problems.

I. The Good of Persons

Human beings are understood in the classical tradition to be rational animals and political animals. The most basic meaning of the first formulation is that human beings act for reasons: their deeds are intelligible by reference to their reasons. What makes human action ‘action’ as distinct from mere ‘behavior’ (snoring or stroking one’s beard while speaking) is the presence of some reason.¹ Reasons, on this view, are not merely justifications, but causes. Reasons are understood to be ‘goods.’ The basic meaning of good here is simply ‘desirable.’ The centrality of reasons understood as goods allows us to criticize action both internally (does it really achieve the goal set for it by the reason?) and externally (is the reason a good reason?). The external account and criticism of reason is possible because the proximate reasons/goods for any particular action can

usually be referred to some more distant and general reasons/goods and all of them to some ultimate framework of intelligibility: the good for human beings as such, the human good.²

Aristotle took it as unproblematic that the complete human good be named “happiness” or “flourishing” (*eudaimonia*), although the specific content of happiness he took to be quite controversial.³ Proceeding dialectically, Aristotle ruled out various candidates for the human good: pleasure, honor, money (Aquinas later ruled out more in a similar way, for example, power); and arrived at a formulation holding that happiness names not some one thing, but a *type of life*, one characterized by rational activity in accordance with the virtues in a complete life.⁴ That is, happiness is about living a life of actions carried out for the best reasons, reasons one apprehends and makes one’s own in large part as an effect of properly ordered desires and dispositions: the virtues. It is at this point that one confronts Aristotle’s other general formulation about human nature, that man is a *political* animal.

If the human good requires the virtues, the development of the virtues, one’s moral development, is the most important prerequisite for living the type of life that can be described as *eudaimōn*. Such development is impossible for one to pursue or achieve in isolation from other persons. This development requires the initial care provided by parents without which no human being can even begin his or her moral development, but continues with the aid not only of parents, but of teachers, co-workers, and friends. It also requires an environment that includes the structures practices and the institutions to support them in pursuit of which one develops the virtues. Such things include not only

schools, but athletic teams, chess clubs, and all the other human associations that provide the contexts for rational action through which persons aim at their good.

The actions and associations that make up the ordinary context of human life are manifold and interact with one another in countless and complicated ways. They require two types of coordination: first, the individual person must integrate the various goods and pursuits that make up his or her daily affairs into the overall good that is happiness or flourishing and that gives life its end; second, these various practices, institutions and actions must be coordinated by the larger human community. It is this second social dimension that suggests Aristotle's thesis that man is a political animal, since the political community (the "city" or *polis* in Aristotle's own idiom) is the highest type and coordinates the actions of persons and associations within it. This coordination of actions, practices and institutions is what we usually mean by the common good.

The classical notion of the common good then is rooted in an account of human nature that characterizes man as a rational and a political animal and these two predicates are closely related to one another. One's development into a human person fitted to pursue happiness, a life of rational actions in accord with the virtues, is made possible by a complex of relationships to other persons often structured as associations or communities for the pursuit of goods common to many persons. The political community is the paradigmatic such community, but not the only one.⁵

II. Aspects of the Common Good

The end of human association, then, is also a good, a good that makes that association intelligible. It is usually called the common good. The common good names the regulative principle of social and political life. Its most basic meaning is that the

community and its institutions should serve the good of all its citizens and not just the restricted good of a particular ruler or class.⁶

Two important aspects of the common good, which indicate its complexity deserve some initial treatment. First, the notion of the common good as an expression is equivocal in nature. Second, the classical notion of the common does not name a term opposed to the “individual,” good, but rather is correlated to *particular goods*. Let us take these features in order. The equivocity of the phrase common good (*bonum commune*) in the thought of Aquinas has been helpfully described by Gregory Froelich.⁷ Froelich distinguishes three senses to the phrase “common good(s)” in Aquinas. First there are goods that are common by predication, that is things that are potentially and in the abstract good for anyone, like food, money, exercise, or knowledge. These are *common* goods in the sense that certain characteristics are common to human beings and thus a part of human nature. But when discussed in this way they do not refer to any actual things, but are rather abstracted. That money is a common good for human beings says nothing about whether some amount of money is good for me at this moment. Moreover, once one is talking about some actual thing in the world rather than an abstraction, the commonality fades: the actual five dollar bill in my pocket is no longer common—it’s mine alone.

A second sense of common refers to common goods, that is, goods that are real and not abstract, but actually owned by everyone, although not enjoyed by anyone in particular unless distributed to them from the common stock, at which point they become private. The U.S. government once owned most of the land in the United States west of the Mississippi River. Under the provisions of the Homestead Act, signed into law by

Abraham Lincoln in 1862, any head of a household 21 years of age could apply for a grant of up to 160 acres of land for a filing fee of \$18. If after five years he could show that he was living on the land and had made efforts to improve it, it became his legal property. The land was a common good in the sense of being part of a common stock, but once distributed by the federal government it became private property. Neither of these first two senses describes what we ordinarily mean by the political common good.

The third sense of common good identified in Aquinas's writings by Froelich is the one we need. A thing can be common to real individual persons by causality. This is true of any cause "which while remaining numerically one extend to many effects."⁸ This is particularly true of causes that are also ends, goods that are sought, "final causes" in classical terminology. The common goal of an army is victory and while victory is one, it is also victory for each particular soldier. St. Thomas mentions in particular that the order of an army is also a common good, since it cannot do anything without it.⁹ The political common good is common in this sense. It is the complete internal order of a political community, which, like the order of the army is both one and is also good for each citizen. In the classical tradition the common good is also known as general justice, the relationship of order and reciprocity between fellow citizens that establishes the context in which each can pursue and enjoy his own perfection.¹⁰ The common good of any community, then, is an order of parts that explains and enables their coherence and activity without damaging their own internal integrity.¹¹ The specifically political common good does this most completely, although not exclusively.

A second feature of the common good concerns its relationship to particular goods. It is often thought that the common good is rightly contrasted to the individual

good. This is a mistake. As a number of philosophers have pointed out “individual” as a metaphysical category usually concerns matter. In ordinary language we can see this in the way the term is used: we refer to individuals as shorthand for individual human beings, but we can also refer to individual paper clips, bricks, doughnuts or atoms. Individual means ‘materially separate’ and that is all.¹² Slogans like the “rights” or “dignity” of the individual are thoroughly unhelpful since the category “individual” tells us nothing about what in virtue of which human beings should be accorded dignity or rights. For that we need something like the notion of the “person.” Personhood necessarily includes moral agency and rationality as well as individuality.¹³

The proper contrast to ‘common’ good is ‘particular’ good. Moreover, ‘particular’ means particular in relation to common and vice versa: the notions are correlative. There are many common goods and corresponding particular goods in human affairs, and they indicate the manifold and complex character of human affairs. The good of the individual human person is particular in relation to the common good of the family or the larger community. But the good of the family is also particular relative to that of the city, as is the good of the town, the province, the postal service, or ministry of defense. The good of the produce department can be particular relative to the common good of the grocery store, although—and this is something that will become more important later—the particular good of the produce department is also constitutive of the common good of the grocery store. This is also true of other particular goods. The particular is not the rival of the common, but its correlate. Moreover, these particular goods can be thought of, again, as the twentieth-century French philosopher, Yves Simon, noted, as two types: some refer to particular groups or parts within the whole, like

the village in relation to the province or the household in relation to the polity; others refer to particular functions, like trash collection, sewage maintenance, or financial service. In both cases coordination is required to order particular goods within the larger context of the common good, and this is particularly true of the second type.¹⁴

In looking more specifically at the common good, it is important to avoid two notions that are inconsistent with the classical understanding of it. The common good should not simply be identified with the state, nor should it be identified with what economists call “collective goods.” Let us consider the second of these first. Collective goods are goods that cannot be enjoyed by one without being enjoyed by many.¹⁵ The most common examples economists use to illustrate collective goods are things like roads, street lamps, clean air, and water. While many people use these, nevertheless they are enjoyed by persons individually, and this fact makes possible the main threat to the maintenance of collective goods: the so-called ‘free rider problem.’ The theory of practical reason and ethics that goes along with this view of collective goods is utilitarianism, where the goods of individuals (defined by something sufficiently abstract to elide controversy) are summed and weighed against one another to arrive at judgments about public policy.

Truly common goods by contrast are enjoyed not by individuals only but by persons in their relation to others. Moreover, the common good in the broadest sense can never simply be understood as an aggregation of separate useful goods material or spiritual. The whole is in this case necessarily more than the sum of its parts and the independent goodness of the whole is what seems to make intelligible the loyalty of citizens, even their sacrifices of closer particular goods.¹⁶ At the same time, if we

understand the common good to be constituted by some set of conditions supportive of and/or constitutive of genuine human flourishing, then we see immediate conflicts with utilitarianism. For one thing, calculations of the greatest good of the greatest number could not override those conditions considered constitutive of the flourishing of all persons in the community: protections of the dignity of persons usually denoted today by the term 'human rights,' are among these, but again, rights in this context need to be understood as constitutive of human flourishing of persons related to one another as members of a community aiming at the common good, not as individuals whose relationship is essentially one of competitive bargaining and competition.¹⁷ Goods considered in this sense remain private: collective goods are thus not common goods, but what Simon called "interdependent private goods." The model for human relationships of this type is the contract, and that has long been the controlling metaphor of political philosophers whose views are essentially individualistic and/or utilitarian.¹⁸

Simon helpfully suggested three marks or signs that suggest the presence of a genuine common good.¹⁹ The first is collective causality, i.e., that actions can be traced to the community and not simply to individual members or parts. The Redskins lost the game to the Giants, not simply a collection of individual players exercising independent causal force; the 101st Airborne Division defended Bastogne against the German Seventh Panzer Army, not just several thousand individual men incidentally wearing the same type of clothing. The second characteristic is that the actions of the community pursue a goal shared by the members. Simon adds that this implies "my knowing that the others know and desire the same object and want it to be effected by the action of our community." John Searle refers to this sort of phenomenon as collective intentionality

and asks how it is possible. It is possible, not by summing up the intentions of many individual persons or positing the existence of a super “organic” mind made up of individuals, but by the presence of what he calls “we-intentions,” that is, the individuals who make up the community all think that “we believe: or “we intend” some goal.²⁰ How much agreement is necessary for one to be able to recognize a genuine common good? How deep must the agreement be? These questions are too complex to go into here, but they are important. Suffice it to say that agreement can exist on a continuum of breadth and depth. More will be said about this below. The third sign is communication among the members that reinforce the goals and existence of the community, what Simon calls “communion causing communications,” and which include many symbols and practices, e.g., flags, songs, ceremonies, parades, etc. The presence of such things indicates, at a minimum, that the body in question wishes to be a community with a genuine common good and not merely a partnership instrumental to the partners.²¹

Such a community is and often has been in history the political community, but this is not always the case, and it is not always the case that the political community should be understood by reference to the modern national state. First, the state as we understand it and the doctrine of sovereignty that defines it is a modern phenomenon.²² In Aristotle’s account it is the city that is the essential context of social life, indeed the word “politics” is derived from the Greek word for “city” (*polis*). The crucial thing for Aristotle is that the city is a context in which citizens understand and mutually deliberate about the common good. Moreover this good is seen to include the character of the citizens. A city unconcerned with the character of the citizens is a city “in name only” according to Aristotle. A community that is defined by a concern for preventing

members harming one another and promoting mutually beneficial commercial transactions is said rather to be an “alliance” (*sumachē*).²³ The character of the city is related to its size. A smaller “face to face” community is fitted to take an effective interest in the character of its members. A large relatively anonymous society is less fitted to doing this and probably cannot do it without a regime of surveillance that most people would find oppressive.²⁴

As one might think from the account of signs of the common good presented above, however, common goods are promoted by sub-political groupings of various types related to one another in various ways. The family promotes a kind of common good relative to its members as do local communities and voluntary associations. Moreover the common good must be conceived relative to the level of association under consideration. The common good of the modern national state is, so to speak, thinner than it would be in a city. Indeed, in many modern cases the common good of a national state is so thin as to suggest that the state isn’t a city in Aristotle’s sense, but rather more like (but, still, more extensive and substantive than) what he would call an “alliance.”²⁵ There is nothing necessarily untoward about this; it is a development provoked by large scale changes in the character of political organizations in Europe beginning in the medieval period and carrying into early modernity.²⁶ It is simply important that one bear in mind the morally less extensive possibilities of the modern state and the transfer of those capacities to other types of associations better suited to their cultivation.²⁷ This entails many questions we cannot go into here.

What should be emphasized here is that there is a large and manifold web of associations organic and factitious in modern social life. Many of them support the

maintenance of common goods to their constituents of varying thickness and specificity. Just as many such associations are below the level of the state, some transcend the state, e.g., the Church, but also the international community which can be seen to have associated with it common goods of a certain albeit limited kind.²⁸

III. The Common Good, Government, and Subsidiarity

Both the good for individual human persons and the common good are thus highly complex. The individual human good is a variegated arrangement of particular goods that are constitutive of that person's overall good. The common good is even more complex since it includes the goods of persons arranged in various and iterated ways. Most importantly, we can say that the common good is constituted by particular goods. Moreover, the common good requires that particular goods be cared for by particular persons. To see this we must examine the relationship between human action and the common good a bit more carefully.

Human acts are classically understood in terms of their objects, intentions and circumstances. The *object* specifies the kind of act one is considering, for example, driving my car, drinking a beer, or writing a paper. In order to drive my car I must act in a certain way, that is, I must act so to achieve that object. I must get in the car, turn the ignition, depress the accelerator, pay attention when moving, etc. The *circumstances* describe aspects of my action that are a bit more remote. Driving my car is in itself a perfectly reasonable activity. However, certain additional conditions may make it less reasonable, e.g., driving recklessly, without a license, or in a severe snowstorm. Circumstances do not change the nature of an action, but they do condition actions in ways that can make them more or less reasonable. Finally, *intention* describes the larger

purpose or end of my action. I am driving my car for some reason: to relax, to get to work, or, if I happen to be a cabbie, I drive because it is my work.²⁹

Now let us apply this analysis to some issues connected to the common good. Specifically, we need to ask who is responsible for the common good, in what circumstances, and by what kinds of actions. As Simon remarks, all good citizens are expected to will the common good.³⁰ This is what it means to be a good citizen: one wishes the best for the community and supports it as a member of the community. However, not all citizens do or must will the common good in the same way. To will the common good as all good citizens do is to will it as a kind of intention in the sense described above. Another way to put this is to say that one can will the common good *formally*.

Some persons, however, must will the common good not just formally, but also *materially*. This means that they must will it not just as end, but as object. Their specific actions are actions that materially advance and maintain the common good. The most characteristic example here is, of course, the persons who make up the government or management of any community. It is the special responsibility of government to promote and maintain the common good of the society in a material way. Collecting taxes, paving streets, enforcing the law, and defending the country from external threats are all material aspects of the political common good that are typically the concern of government.

The vast majority of persons who will the common good formally, but not materially do, however, will other things materially: particular goods. Persons will their own good formally and materially and pursue it in a variety of ways. Moreover, particular persons will the goods of their families, churches, civic associations, and

workplaces. They do not will these things against the common good, and those responsible for the common good materially considered do not will the common good against the many particular goods. Indeed, that particular goods are maintained by particular persons is itself constitutive of the common good.

This is because of the great complexity of human society. The paradigm case of the common good is that of the whole society, the political community, which necessarily encompasses the manifold sub-political associations. These associations promote goods that are both particular goods and goods for society as a whole. This is especially clear with the family, which best assures the care and education of children and provides for the basic sustenance and care of all the family members. Thus, while the government does not perform these functions directly, it has a great interest in their being performed and the family is recognized as the naturally best means of doing this. The work of the family contributes to the common good as do the works of many other human associations.

The common good is served then by particular goods being maintained by particular persons and by the common good as a whole being a separate and distinct material concern. This is a division of labor and responsibility that serves the overall common good in various ways. Plato famously considered the possibility of a political community maximally unified and controlled by a ruling class for whom private property and the family were abolished. This arrangement, foreshadowing in some respects the totalitarian systems of the twentieth century, was explicitly rejected by Aristotle. Aristotle held first, that a genuine city was not to be understood by analogy with a single human being, as Plato had suggested, but as a complex unity of differentiated parts all

contributing something different to the whole. Aristotle argued that the unity of the city should not be seen in centralized ownership of property or control of life, but rather in a common ethos or understanding of the city's good on the part of citizens, something to be cultivated by civic education, not communism. Similarly, Aristotle maintained that common ownership of property was less likely to promote the common good than private ownership. Common ownership would lead to what economists sometimes call a "tragedy of the commons" in which no one exercises adequate care for common resources (what belongs to everyone belongs to no one). Private ownership, together with a sense of the common good, would more adequately guarantee that the particular goods of the family and economy were properly cared for.³¹

This is related to the principle usually known as "subsidiarity." Subsidiarity holds that social functions that can be performed at a lower level should not be performed at a higher level.³² This principle itself is grounded in the diversity of functions and goods that make up society and the good of autonomy itself for persons and groups. Persons more fully pursue and maintain particular goods when they can do so freely and according to their own practical reason.³³ A free society allows for the cultivation of more goods and allows for their cultivation more fully than one that is centrally directed and in which all parts are considered mere instruments for the transmission of central authority.³⁴

The complex functional differentiation of modern society is reflected in the complexity and functional differentiation of government itself. Government, especially at the national level, contains a multitude of divisions reflecting lower levels of administration, but also specific functions. Beneath the national government are state,

county, and municipal governments. Within each of these there are separate departments, and this is true at the federal level as well. Each of these departments has a certain set of mandates, both legal and policy-based, but the divisions are generally given autonomy to carry out their responsibilities in a way that best accomplishes their missions. The correlate distinction between common and particular then exists within the main agency concerned materially with the common good. The functions of finance, law enforcement, defense, etc., are themselves particular with respect to the overall direction of government policy exercised at the highest levels of (in the American case) the three coordinate branches of the United States government and residing ultimately in the people.

In speaking of the common good, I have mostly referred to government. The reason for this is that the political common good is the central case here to which others are related by analogy. The political common good is the central case because it is most encompassing, that is, its sphere can take in and direct all the others. It is for this reason that some thinkers in the classical tradition referred to the political community as a “perfect” community. “Perfect” here means complete, lacking nothing. One of Aristotle’s definitions of the city was a community of people that is self-sufficient because it included everything necessary for a good life.³⁵ Throughout I have assumed that common and particular goods are analogical in character and exist at various levels and with respect to various functions in society. The political common good remains distinct in its comprehensive character. It is true, nevertheless, that in modern life non-governmental organizations, including those associated with the professions, cross political boundaries and exercise considerably more influence than in earlier ages.

IV. Criticisms of the Common Good

I now want to consider a common criticism of the notion of the common good and respond to it by noting two important characteristics of the common good. It is often said that the common good is far too vague a notion to be very useful in political philosophy. This criticism is due, I think, in no small part to the somewhat exaggerated claims for it sometimes made by its defenders—as if the phrase “common good” named a genre of political theory or some complete account of politics available to answer all questions and solve all problems. The common good stated in such an abstract way *is* a vague and unhelpful notion. Looking at why this is in a bit more detail, however, answers the objection.

I want to suggest two restrictions or conditions on any real working out of what the common good means. First, the common good is always worked out *practically*. Second, it is always worked out in particular and local circumstances. As suggested above the common good is the good of a community and the good is an end pursued by that community. The principle of human actions according to both Aristotle and Aquinas is to be found in their ends. Human beings act on the basis of reason—they apply their reasoning to action as the pursuit of goods. When people act for ends as a community the good they pursue is a common one. Therefore, the pursuit of the common good has the same characteristics *qua* action as the pursuit of the good by individual persons. The pursuit of the common good is the work of practical reason. Human affairs, however, are so various and complex as to admit of a great range of possibilities. Practical reason contends with many variables and so cannot be precise in an abstract sense in the same way that theoretical reasoning is when constructing demonstrative arguments. The sorts

of rules and principles that guide human conduct in the abstract are always, as Aristotle notes, prefaced by the qualification “characteristically and for the most part.”³⁶ The complete specification and rectitude of practical judgments can only be seen in the concrete decision against the backdrop of all known variables. This is even more true for the common good, since there are even more variables present. To summarize: since the common good names a judgment of practical reason about the good of a particular community, it cannot be defined with much specificity in the abstract. If this were possible politics would be replaced by political philosophy. Philosophy concerns the vindication and criticism of basic principles, but the material pursuit of the common good is the business of the more practical arts.

For quite similar reasons, the political common good must be worked out *particularly* and *locally*, that is, with respect to particular times and places. What constitutes the common good of a particular community at a particular time is not a matter of theory, but of practice, indeed of prudence. It cannot be spelled out in detail apart from all the manifold peculiarities of the local situation. And, again, those who can do this spelling out are persons with knowledge of the particular local situation, not philosophers.

V. Conclusion: The Common Good in Question

I want to conclude by noting some unresolved problems. First, even within the ambit of classical and Christian thought about the common good there is serious disagreement. Some contemporary thinkers would contest the account presented above as insufficiently attentive to disjunctions between the classical notion of the common good and modern political institutions. I have, of course, already suggested that there are

tensions and problems here (in section II). Alasdair MacIntyre, for example, has gone much further in suggesting that the institutions and practices of the modern state are incompatible with any classical notion of the common good and concluded that the common good can only be pursued at the politically local, that is sub-national, level by communities that in some sense reject the claims of the state to moral legitimacy.³⁷ I have already said that the common good in large and diverse modern societies is necessarily thinner in character than in an ancient city, but that does not seem to me from preventing it from being a common good at all. John Finnis, on the other hand, has argued that Aquinas's view of the political common good should be understood as limited and instrumental and thus rejects the more expansive view of it found in most of the classical tradition.³⁸ Here it seems to me that even the thinner common good appropriate to modern societies is nevertheless more than simply instrumental, but this question cannot be pursued here.

These issues are parts of ongoing debates within the community of thinkers who claim allegiance to the classical Thomistic-Aristotelian tradition, as is the account of the common good I have sketched out above—and sketching is all I can claim to have done. It is not the sort of account that would be given by a classical liberal or post-modernist. Moreover, it is not one that would gain immediate endorsement in the pluralistic moral and cultural environment of today. My defense in this matter can only be that the notion of the common good itself comes out of the classical and Christian tradition of political thought and anyone who finds it useful or even necessary for sound reflection on political things must inevitably confront other aspects of its context. Some defensible notion of the common good, however attenuated, would seem to be the only alternative to force or

some type of non-rational persuasion in attempts to justify the exercise of power in society. A vigorous discussion of both agreements and disagreements about how to conceive of the common good would seem a salutary starting point for a higher level of political and social debate.

¹ Aquinas famously distinguishes in this respect between “human acts” and “acts of man,” the former being properly rational actions in pursuit of intelligible goods, the latter being mere behavior. See *Summa theologiae*, 1a2ae, q. 1, a. 1.

² A very helpful recent account of these matters is Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (Chicago: Open Court, 1999).

³ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, book 1, ch. 5.

⁴ *Ibid.*, book 1, ch. 7, especially 1098a7-18.

⁵ While I have developed the notion of the common good above (and more below) largely on philosophical grounds, it seems fully consistent with the view of the common good defined in authoritative Church documents on social ethics. John XXIII, for example, famously defined the common good as “the sum total of those conditions of social living, whereby men are enabled more fully and more readily to achieve their own perfection” in his 1961 encyclical, *Mater et Magistra*, §65. This definition is authoritatively cited in the Second Vatican Council’s Pastoral Constitution, *Gaudium et Spes*, §26, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2d ed., §1906, and the recent *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, §164. This definition has sometimes been thought to shift emphasis from the common good as a genuine good to one that is secondary or instrumental to the good of the individual person. Such an interpretation, however, can only seem plausible if one ignores the repeated correlative statements about the social nature of man, e.g., John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris* §23; John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus* §47; *Catechism* §1879; *Compendium* §125. See also discussion in Mary M. Keys, “Personal Dignity and the Common Good: A Twentieth-Century Thomistic Dialogue,” in *Catholicism, Liberalism, and Communitarianism*, ed. Kenneth L. Grasso, Gerard V. Bradley, and Robert P. Hunt (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 1995), 187-91. John Paul II specifically acknowledged the Church’s intellectual debt to Aristotle in its social doctrine in one of his last works, *Memory and Identity: Conversations at the Dawn of a Millennium* (New York: Rizzoli, 2005), 41, cf. also 131.

⁶ Cf. Plato *Laws* 715a-d; Aristotle *Politics* 3.7; Thomas Aquinas, *On Kingship*, 1.2.

⁷ “The Equivocal Status of *Bonum Commune*,” *The New Scholasticism* 63 (1989): 38-57; and “Ultimate End and Common Good,” *Thomist* 57 (1993): 609-19.

⁸ Froelich, “Equivocal Status of the *Bonum Commune*,” 48.

⁹ *Summa theologiae*, 1a2ae, q. 9, a. 1, as discussed in Froelich, “Equivocal Status of *Bonum Commune*,” 49.

¹⁰ See, e.g., Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, book 5, chs. 1-2, 6; *Politics*, book 1, ch. 2, especially 1253a29-b1. A helpful recent discussion of this is Robert Sokolowski, “The Human Person and Political Life,” *Thomist* 65 (2001): 505-527.

¹¹ See *Summa theologiae*, 2a2ae, q. 58, a. 5, a. 7 ad3, a. 9 ad2, with discussion in Froelich, “Equivocal Status of *Bonum Commune*,” 52-53, and Michael Sherwin, O.P., “St. Thomas and the Common Good: The Theological Perspective: an Invitation to Dialogue,” *Angelicum* 70 (1993): 321-23. One should note here that in concentrating on the political common good or even the common good that is other than specifically political I am concerned with the *temporal* common good. Aquinas was, of course, a theologian and was concerned first and foremost with the ultimate common good, God (See Sherwin, pp. 308-14). The temporal common good is real for him, but is understood by analogy to the ultimate common good.

¹² For example, Jacques Maritain, *The Person and the Common Good* (New York: Scribner’s, 1947), 34-46; Yves R. Simon, *A General Theory of Authority* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1962), 67-72.

¹³ The notion of “person,” it should be noted, is not itself Aristotelian. It emerges out of Christian theology, although it can and is often discussed in purely philosophical terms. On personhood see especially Kenneth L. Schmitz, “The Geography of the Human Person,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 13 (1986):

27-48; W. Norris Clarke, "Person, Being, and St. Thomas," *Communio: International Catholic Review* 19 (1992): 601-18; David Braine, *The Human Person: Animal and Spirit* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992).

¹⁴ Simon refers to the coordination of particular functions as the "most essential" function of authority. *Philosophy of Democratic Government* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 59.

¹⁵ On collective goods see Mancur Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965), 14-15, 98-102.

¹⁶ Maritain, *The Person and the Common Good*, 52-53; Sherwin, "St. Thomas and the Common Good," 323, 327-28.

¹⁷ See John Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), 198-230.

¹⁸ Simon, *Philosophy of Democratic Government*, 48-50. Understanding political society as the result of a hypothetical contract is, of course, an important feature of modern political philosophy, e.g., in the thought of Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, and Kant. Others have rejected the notion of the contract as superfluous, mythological or destructive of genuine community loyalty, e.g., Hume, Bentham, and Burke. On the disintegration of the notion of the common good in modern political philosophy see Louis Dupré, "The Common Good and the Open Society," *Review of Politics* 55 (1993): 687-712.

¹⁹ *Philosophy of Democratic Government*, 63-67.

²⁰ John R. Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality* (New York: The Free Press, 1995), 23-26.

²¹ Of course, such "communion" as well as the previously mentioned "collective intentionality" can be phony or the product of coercion, either physical or psychological. Tyrannies live by such specious commonality. This only shows that the common good like many other good things can be faked and that tyrants seek the legitimacy suggested by the existence of the common good and thus seek to fake it where it doesn't exist.

²² Slade, Francis. "Rule as Sovereignty: The Universal Homogeneous State," in *The Truthful and the Good: Essays in Honor of Robert Sokolowski*, Ed. J.J. Drummond and J.G. Hart (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1996), 159-80.

²³ Aristotle *Politics*, book 3, ch. 9.

²⁴ *Politics*, book 7, ch. 4.

²⁵ See the suggestions made by Peter L. Phillips Simpson, "Making the Citizens Good: Aristotle's City and Its Contemporary Relevance," *Philosophical Forum* 22 (1990): 149-66.

²⁶ Gianfranco Poggi, *The Development of the Modern State* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1978).

²⁷ In suggesting this I assume that even the modern nation-state is not understood by most of its inhabitants on the model of a contract simply. Put another way, the modern state is somewhere between Aristotle's somewhat idealized model of the city (I take it that the idealism was self-conscious) and the politically minimalist "alliance." It seems to have qualities of both.

²⁸ While I do not endorse in any simple way the specific account he presents, Michael Walzer's well-known *Spheres of Justice* (New York: Basic Books, 1983) is quite suggestive here about the problems entailed in attempts to impose a unitary account of justice on the many and varied institutions and practices that make up modern life.

²⁹ The basic categories are set out by Aquinas in *Summa theologiae*, 1a2ae, q. 18.

³⁰ The next three paragraphs rely on Simon's analysis in *Philosophy of Democratic Government*, 39-48. Simon's discussion is itself an interpretation and extension of what Aquinas says in *Summa theologiae* 1a2ae, q. 19, a. 10.

³¹ See Aristotle *Politics*, 2.2-5. This distinction between ownership and use is, of course, a staple of Catholic social teaching. See *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, §§176-178.

³² The language of higher and lower levels here should not be construed to restrict the principle to parts of a single government or elements of civil society within one geographical community. It can refer to those things, but also to communities or groups that may be trans-national, but specialized so as to lack the comprehensive character of the political community. The nature of the political community as comprehensive is discussed below.

³³ Use of one's own practical reasoning as an element of flourishing is the proper meaning and value of autonomy. See discussion in Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights*, 88-89, 100-103.

³⁴ Simon writes: "The common good itself demands that not all interests, activities and capacities should be common but that diversity should be produced in the two orders symbolized by the function and the

homestead. The metaphysical law which demands such diversity demands also that no task which can be satisfactorily fulfilled by the smaller unity should ever be assumed by the larger unit. The principle of autonomy is implicitly asserted in the argument designed to establish the principle of authority. It is perfectly obvious that there is more life and, unqualifiedly, greater perfection in a community all parts of which are full of initiative than in a community whose parts act merely as instruments transmitting the initiative of the whole. Abundance of life in all parts of the community is such an important phase of the common good that direct management by the whole is preferable only when the difference with regard to fulfillment of a task is very great." *Philosophy of Democratic Government*, 129-30; cf. also pp. 207, 230, 249, 252, 306. The classic statement is that of Pius XI in his 1931 encyclical, *Quadragesimo anno*, quoted in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §1883: "a community of a higher order should not interfere in the internal life of a community of a lower order, depriving the latter of its functions, but rather should support it in case of need and help to co-ordinate its activity with the activities of the rest of society, always with a view to the common good." See also *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, §151. For a recent discussion of the principle of subsidiarity in the context of contemporary American government policy see Robert K. Vischer, "Subsidiarity as a Principle of Governance: Beyond Devolution," *Indiana Law Review* 35 (2001): 103-42; and with respect to contemporary international law, Paolo G. Carozza, "Subsidiarity as a Structural Principle of International Human Rights Law," *American Journal of International Law* 97 (2003): 38-79. The most extensive recent discussions of the principle of subsidiarity have concerned its relevance to constitutional questions in the evolving legal and political structure of the European Union. See, e.g., Phil Syrpis, "In Defense of Subsidiarity," *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies* 24 (2004): 323-34.

³⁵ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1.2.1094a26-b11; *Politics* 1.2.1252b27-1253a39, 3.9.1280b29-1281a2; St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 1a2ae, q. 90, a. 3 ad3.

³⁶ See *Nicomachean Ethics* bk. 1, ch. 3 generally as well as 1094a25, b20-21, 1098a20-23, 1104a2-11.

³⁷ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, 129-146; "Politics, Philosophy and the Common Good" in *The MacIntyre Reader*, edited by Kelvin Knight (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), 235-252. For a very illuminating critique of MacIntyre's view see Thomas S. Hibbs, "MacIntyre, Aquinas, and Politics," *Review of Politics* 66 (2004): 357-83.

³⁸ John Finnis, "Public Good: The Specifically Political Common Good in Aquinas," in *Natural Law and Moral Inquiry: Ethics, Metaphysics, and Politics in the Work of Germain Grisez*, edited by Robert P. George (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1998), 174-209. Against Finnis's view see Lawrence Dewan, O.P., "St. Thomas, John Finnis, and the Political Common Good," *The Thomist* 64 (2000): 337-74, and Michael Pakaluk, "Is the Common Good of Political Society Limited and Instrumental?" *Review of Metaphysics* 55 (2001): 57-94.