

Common Good

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The Idea

The principle of a "common good" is inspiring, compelling, and elegant. Briefly, it puts the good of a community higher than the good of any individual or group in that community.¹

It first became a moral standard through the writings of Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero. Here's Aristotle:

Although though it is worthwhile to attain a good end merely for one person, it is finer and more godlike to attain it for a nation or for city-states.²

All major commentators on social and political philosophy cite this text as among the most influential sources in Western thought. It asserts that the "common good" is more than a desirable ideal. It is an objective reality, a public thing (*res publica*—hence *republic*), a wealth in the commonality as such (hence *commonwealth*, *commonweal*). It refers to the good of a system that benefits all members of a community. It requires an *interdependence* that supports common purposes by imposing certain restrictions on personal *independence*.³



The simplest instance of interdependence occurs when a particular *need* or *want* is pursued through any act of *cooperation*. This results in

¹ This overview is largely taken from David Hollenbach, *The Common Good and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 3-9

² Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics*, Bk 1, ch 2. By "more godlike" Aristotle was not promoting any monotheistic religion. He had in mind how we naturally seek to learn more, do better, and live our lives by love. These are above our nature; they are "super-natural;" they are "natural" only to "the gods."

³ The common good was also a key idea of John Adams, James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, John Jay, and Benjamin Franklin. Madison, Hamilton, and Jay incorporated the idea in their "Federalist Papers," which they wrote to convince the public of the importance of having a constitution that defined the rights, duties, and laws essential to preserve human freedom. However, the term is rarely mentioned by contemporary politicians. See <http://www.dailykos.com/story/2012/06/28/1104105/-Fouders-Established-The-Common-Good-Romney-s-Opposition-To-Taxes-For-Healthcare-Is-Unpatriotic>

some particular benefit or "good." This dimension is plain to everyone.⁴

Besides individual acts of cooperation that produce *individual* benefits, we also have *insights* into how to organize our efforts to keep the benefits coming regularly for *everyone*—benefits that could never be achieved by any single individual. So we develop industries of production, communications, advertising, finance, insurance, social security, and energy. We open schools, muster a military, develop agriculture, and lay out systems of transportation for roads, planes, trains, and buses. These organized social entities not only deliver benefits to everyone, they also profoundly shape the personal habits, skills, expectations, and careers of the individuals who contribute. These social setups often deliver less than what we hope, but no one doubts the validity of the *idea* of getting organized to maintain and improve a standard of living for all. Indeed, people get outraged as soon as these systems start falling apart. So we set up the cultural institutions of religion, education, arts, and a judiciary to oversee and promote the particular goods and the social entities that would ensure the true freedom and right living that are essential to living well.

The Reality

The reality is hardly so neat.

As of 2014, of the 162 countries in the world, 151 were currently involved in some form of conflict and only 11 were currently "at peace."⁵ Most of these conflicts fueled by hatred or retaliation.⁶ Also, the gap between the rich and poor remains unchanged or even widens in nearly every nation and international group.⁷ Why is the common good so difficult to achieve? Efforts to achieve it are undermined by (A) corruptive actions and (B) corruptive ideas.

⁴ These observations about particular goods, social setups, and critical observations about values reflect the questions charted under "Essentials of Being Human" in Lecture 1A in our course.

⁵ <http://www.express.co.uk/news/world/499884/Global-Peace-Index-reveals-only-11-countries-are-not-involved-in-conflict>

⁶ In the traditional Latin, the instinct to retaliate is named *lex talionis*—literally, *the Law of the Claw* (talon).

⁷ In "Plutocracy or Democracy?" David Carroll Cochran notes that from 2002 to the 2008 crash, the incomes of top 1 percent grew 10 percent, while the median family income declined. Also, "...CEO compensation ballooned from twenty-four times the average worker's wage to *three hundred* times that amount." *Commonweal*, February 10, 2012, p. 8.

A. Corruptive Actions

1. Free Riders

While everyone is expected to contribute to the common good, some enjoy its benefits but withhold contributions. Think of people who cheat on the taxes that pay for the roads, the military, the police, the government, and the public schools whose benefits they enjoy. Or draft dodgers: young adults with more opportunities in education and jobs find ways to exempt themselves from military draft which, reasonably, should exempt no one fit for service.

We see free riders everywhere in the insurance business. The idea of insurance is firmly based on the notion of a common good: No one will suffer catastrophic expenses if everyone contributes to the pool. But in the United States, for-profit health insurers have made money precisely by avoiding risk.⁸ Prior to the passage of the Affordable Care Act (2010), they could freely avoid costly benefit payouts by the practice of "adverse selection"—charging higher premiums to the sickly or excluding them altogether.

Individuals typically justify cheating on taxes and insurance claims by pointing to unacceptable inefficiencies in the system and excessively high taxes/premiums.⁹ But in reality much of these inefficiencies and costs are direct result of free riders like themselves. Whom do they think they're kidding?

2. Drainers

A second corruption is the practice of individuals who drain a society's resources to be found in both the natural environment and in human talent.

During a drought, some homeowners scoff at regulations restricting the watering of lawns. When an electrical energy shortage threatens a district during the summer, some people won't notch up their thermostats.

Private companies drain our natural resources when they fail to replenish the resources they used up. Lumber companies cut down forests without replanting, which not only depletes our natural stocks of trees but also

⁸ Important exceptions in the US are ten non-profit Blue Cross / Blue Shield plans that have always accepted both the healthy and the unhealthy without any difference in premiums. Their respective states regulate their nonprofit status in exchange for this non-discriminatory member policy.

⁹ It would probably surprise many American taxpayers to learn that in 2008, among the 30 nations with the highest GNP, citizens in 27 countries pay more taxes than the US. See "The Numbers: How do U.S. taxes compare internationally?" at <http://www.taxpolicycenter.org/briefing-book/background/numbers/international.cfm> .

removes significant sources of oxygen to the atmosphere. Fisheries harvest lobster and cod in international waters without allocating any profits to hatcheries to stock them afresh.

Daniel McFadden points out that this "failure of private incentives to provide adequate maintenance of public resources is known to economists as *The Tragedy of the Commons*." The was coined by Garret Hardin, whose 1968 article by that name describes how a village commons on which cattle from ranches all around could feely graze will eventually and tragically disappear because of a seemingly logical deduction by ranchers:

"If I add one steer to my herd, I gain significant income. This is a good idea because any loss of income to any other individual rancher resulting from the addition of my one steer's grazing is far, far less than my gain."¹⁰

Hardin points out that when everyone follows this reasoning, overgrazing and precipitous depletion of nutrients in the commons quickly follows. The value of the commons has been drained away.

In addition to the replenishment of our *natural* resources, there is the replenishment of our *human* resources which we provide by education. Subcultures of vandals and mischievous hackers lack awareness of a common good. So do many law-abiding citizens: many citizens vote down a referendum to pass a millage increase for education, with little thought about maintaining a high level of education for the next generation of citizens, which includes their children.

3. Polluters

Besides drainage, there is pollution. The unregulated use of antibiotics in feeding plants and animals passes into the human food chain, lowering people's resistance to disease. When carbon dioxide raises ozone to dangerous levels, some mow their lawns anyway. Pollution controls cannot be left to the social consciousness of individual company owners: To cover the additional cost of pollution controls, they would have to raise prices above their competitors and thereby kill their business. Here the common good practically requires strictly enforced common laws.

¹⁰ Daniel McFadden, "Tragedy of the Commons," *Forbes.com* at www.forbes.com/asap/2001/0910/061.html. The term was coined by Garret Hardin in "The Tragedy of the Commons," *Science*, 162(1968):1243-1248. Retrieved on June 14, 2006 from <http://dieoff.org/page95.htm>. His selection of *tragedy* can suggest some *inevitable* outcome, as in the tragedies of ancient Greece and Shakespeare. But what he proposes is that intelligent and conscientious foresight evades what may seem like an inevitable tragedy.

4. Skimmers

Here is a moral lesson we can draw from the thinking of the free riders, drainers and polluters of the common good: *Individuals will justify large personal gains or savings if individual losses to others are minimal.* Individuals imagine this as gaining a lot by skimming just a little from many. These justifications are more instinctive than reasoned. Here's a familiar example:

You're driving in the left lane of a highway, and a sign indicates that the lane closes in 500 feet. What do you do? You can immediately merge into the lane to your right, or you can keep on going until the last 50 feet or so, hoping to slip into a gap. Let's say you keep going and pass 20 cars. You're ahead by 20 car lengths, while each driver you pass is behind by only one car length. Instinctively, you think, "This doesn't hurt anybody very much."¹¹

This same reasoning applies to cheating on income tax and fudging insurance claims. Your cheating saves you hundreds, while others each lose only pennies. "What I gained doesn't hurt anybody much at all."

B. Corruptive Ideas

1. Second-rate Citizens

Besides these corruptive actions, there are corruptive ideas. One such idea is that certain groups identified by race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation or age simply lack the intelligence and wisdom to lead. This is usually considered "unjust", but from the point of view of the common good, it represents a deliberate and legalized suppression of rich human resources, which is plain stupid.

Amazingly, the most outrageously unintelligent social policies can be invisible.

It is only in the last 200 years that any society recognized the injustice of slavery. Even then, attention was drawn to the dignity of individual humans and not to the foolishness of blocking the contributions of intelligent and caring people to the common good.

¹¹ Recently, traffic analysis proposed that random merging from the leftmost lane results in stop-and-go driving, which is both infuriating and somewhat polluting. They propose that if cars in the two leftmost lanes merged zipper-like fashion — with every other car in the leftmost merging between every other car in the next lane—congestion would be avoided. This reinforces the point: Things work better when people yield personal advantage to the common good.

An example closer to home is the long-standing and systematic exclusion of 50 percent of human resources from leadership positions in the Roman Catholic Church. Charles Curren, a leading Catholic expert in ethics, calls the exclusion of women from priesthood and ecclesiastical office "probably the most heinous and difficult structural problem that we face as a Church."¹²

2. Independence as Ideal

Another corruptive idea is the ideal of being independent. We're all quite ready to say, "I'm OK with whatever you want, as long as you don't interfere with what I want."¹³ Young, healthy people balk at paying the same health insurance premiums as their elders who generally need more medical care. People who own property resent having to keep on paying taxes on it, especially when they see little return in road maintenance, zoning protection, environmental regulations, and policing. In a society obsessed with fostering individual rights with little regard for the common good, few politicians run on a promise to increase taxes for social benefits like education, safety, cultural activities, and parks.

In Western societies these issues are described as examples of excessive individualism, to which the alternative seems to be some form of socialism. But the alternatives are not between the individual and various socialized institutions but rather between a culture of independence and a culture of *interdependence*. In "The Catholic University and the Common Good,"¹⁴ David Hollenbach discusses "an array of issues that make the need to address the interdependence of persons on one another increasingly evident." He covers dysfunctional family life, an irrational healthcare system, pollution of the environment, wars of hatred, and global economic inequality. He traces how each of these issues points to the damage done by the exclusive concern for personal independence and the corresponding need for cultures of interdependence at every level,

¹² Taken verbatim from "Faithful Dissent," an address given under the sponsorship of "Elephants in the Living Room, Central United Methodist Church, Detroit, September 11, 2012.

¹³ One exception is an explicit commitment to the principle of the common good that appears in the founding documents of the American Association of University Professors. See the "Redbook" excerpt at www.aaup.org/AAUP/pubsres/policydocs/contents/1940statement.htm

¹⁴ David Hollenbach, "The Catholic University and the Common Good," originally published as "Is Tolerance Enough? The Catholic University and the Common Good" in *Vision and Values: Ethical Viewpoints in the Catholic Tradition*, ed. Judith A. Dwyer (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press 1999, 179-195.). Reprinted from *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education* 13 (Spring, 1998): 5-15. Used with permission of *Conversations*. All rights reserved. Retrieved on June 15, 2006 from http://www.bc.edu/offices/mission/exploring/cathuniv/hollenbach_common_good

from neighborhoods to the globe.

3. Group Good

A third corruptive idea is the notion of *our* common good when it excludes or ignores any commitment to the good of another group. Of course, groupings are essential elements of any true community. But the damage to the common good inflicted by a self-serving group is far worse than the damage inflicted by a self-serving individual. This is evident from the history of wars and the current economic inequities between developed and underdeveloped countries.

We may describe this problem generally as the struggle between *group goods* and the common good. For Aristotle and Aquinas the common good was a universal principle that proved effective in securing the well-being of small, self-sufficient nations and cities such as Athens and Sparta. But humanity today is heading steadily toward a global interdependence of nations and cities. And we have little assurance that a common good will ever be secured for the entire community of nations. There are enormous differences in living standards across the globe. Nations identify the "common" with "national self-interest." Developed nations suck out from underdeveloped nations the very natural, human, and financial resources by which they might become developed. The "common" is not thought of as common to humans, but only to an "us." We see this bias in people who use the narrow-minded expression, "the common good of Americans." The meaning of the common good intended by classical philosophers has not yet been realized. Nor will it ever be realized as long as animosities between nations, ethnic groups, and religions are regarded not as wrong but as realities that cannot change.

4. Dividends as Individual

A fourth corruptive idea regards a mistaken assumption about the economy. Might our persistent economic inequalities be just a fact of economic life? After all, individual interests will often override concerns for the common good. Economists and religious prophets recognize that there will always be greed. But also, there will always be narrow understandings of the common good. Millions of people are lovingly dedicated to the well-being of their families and countries, but lack all concern for other families and countries. Their well-meant financial decisions inadvertently contribute to these global inequalities. The main obstacle here is not greed but ignorance. Specifically, it is the ignorance of how an economy that serves the good common to all humans would actually work.

We can see the difference if we consider two opposite meanings of the familiar term *net profits*.¹⁵

An economic system is not primarily about money. Like any other social system, an economy is a way of arranging the movements of goods and services in ways that benefit society. Money serves as a medium for efficient exchanges of goods and services. But the movements of money do serve as indicators of how well an economic system serves all members of society. In the perspective a system that achieves this, *net profits*—the discretionary amounts available after expenditures for wages, maintenance, advertising, and so on—would be allocated in accord with the inner dynamics of production and consumption across the globe. Net profits would sometimes favor *investing* in certain areas of research and development; sometimes *consumption* of certain goods and services; sometimes higher *taxes*; and sometimes higher contributions to *charity*. In the ever-moving global economy, the criteria



for which to favor at any moment, in any sector of production, in any country, are established by economic theory, just as the criteria for exploring space, or developing drugs, or treating disease are found in the theories of physics or chemistry or biology. In an economic theory that recognizes common good, *net profits* are considered not essentially as personal benefits but as social dividends.

However, the fact is that we have no commonly accepted theory of economics. So money moves haphazardly among investing, consuming, taxes, and charity. At the nerve center of an economy, *net profits* are regarded not as social dividends to be allocated according to an economic theory for the benefit of society but as personal dividends for the benefit of individuals. Ignorant of objective criteria regarding where the common good is best served, individuals naturally resort to at-hand and obvious needs for safety and security, with the result that *net profits* are understood as the property of individuals.

In the US today, the wealth of the top one percent is 43 percent of the wealth of the entire nation. The wealth of the top five percent is 71 percent.¹⁶ We complain about wealth inequality. But few people can

¹⁵ This analysis follows the work of Bernard Lonergan. See his *Macroeconomic Dynamics: An Essay in Circulation Analysis*, Collected Works v. 15 (University of Toronto Press, 1999), and *For a New Political Economy*. Collected Works v. 21 (University of Toronto Press, 1998).

¹⁶ Source: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/moneywisewomen/2012/03/21/average-america-vs-the-one-percent/#39d5f4832395>

explain why wealth inequality is a bad thing. It's bad because few people know what best to do with their wealth in any given state of the economy. Invest? Spend? Support tax increases? Give to charity? What is needed are criteria for making good choices—criteria based on an economic theory that clarifies how production and consumption can be managed in light of current economic conditions to ensure the well-being of all members of any society, and not just the wealth of the wealthy, nor the well-being of *our* society.

I realize this is a sketchy analysis, but it does illustrate this underlying principle of the common good as it affects the economy: When *net profits* are considered *social dividends* and the natural dynamics of bringing new goods/services to market are understood and observed, the global common good is served. But when net profits are considered strictly as opportunities for *individual dividends*, decisions about spending and investing are based on mere preference and not on understanding how the economy works. These decisions may benefit the few but at the cost of the many. Opportunities for improving the common good for all are lost.

5. Good as Preference

A fifth corruptive idea is the notion that what is good is identical to what people happen to prefer and that the market succeeds when companies align their outputs to match the shifting preferences of the public. So the social benefits of a common good can seem designed chiefly for the satisfaction of subjective interests.

This hardly squares with Aristotle's comment that the pursuit of a common good is "more godlike." What he had in mind is an objectivity about "good" that goes beyond the mere preferences of individuals. It goes beyond mere preference by relying on a judgment—specifically, a *judgment of objective value*, the values as seen by "the gods." And the basic question of value is about the liberty to live *rightly*, not just *comfortably*.

To live *rightly* involves an abiding concern with one's *moral orientation*. A moral orientation that sets what is objectively good over what is subjectively preferred will seek *camaraderie* of pursuing right living together. Even in the absence of the added material benefits coming from cooperation, we often experience a common good directly when we help one another and shoulder burdens together for no other reason than the fellow-feeling and sense of unselfish wellbeing that comes with friendships.

The Challenge

To overcome these corruptive actions and ideas is no picnic. The very idea of a common good seems inconsistent with the standards of pluralistic societies evident in democracies. Personally, over many decades following US elections, I never heard a candidate for office speak of a "common good." These are Bad Words. Warn the kids.

Not only do different people have different values, but different groups do as well. And these values will conflict. We see this is the recognition of the rights of women, of persons of color, of homosexual groups, and the long-standing claims of a dominant majority that have blocked the exercise of these rights. Organizers of the Markkula Center for Applied Ethics stated:

"And even if we agreed upon what we all valued, we would certainly disagree about the relative values things have for us. While all may agree, for example, that an affordable health system, a healthy educational system, and a clean environment are all parts of the common good, some will say that more should be invested in health than in education, while others will favor directing resources to the environment over both health and education. Such disagreements are bound to undercut our ability to evoke a sustained and widespread commitment to the common good. In the face of such pluralism, efforts to bring about the common good can only lead to adopting or promoting the views of some, while excluding others, violating the principle of treating people equally. Moreover, such efforts would force everyone to support some specific notion of the common good, violating the freedom of those who do not share in that goal, and inevitably leading to paternalism (imposing one group's preference on others), tyranny, and oppression."¹⁷

In colleges today, I believe we can incorporate an abiding sense of the common good across the curriculum. We can teach:

1. How stupid the reasoning of free riders is.
2. How disastrous for our children, let alone the entire next generation, to ignore the depletion and pollution of our natural and human resources.
3. How unintelligent are Roman Catholic authorities to exclude women and married men from the priesthood and positions of authority.

¹⁷ From Markkula Center for Applied Ethics, at Santa Clara University. Retrieved May 15, 2006 from <http://www.scu.edu/ethics/practicing/decision/commongood.html> The article represents the vision of the organizers of this academic center.

4. How self-defeating it is to allow the ideal of independence overshadow our need for interdependence.
5. How counterproductive for the common good is the assumption that net profits are always personal, not social dividends.
6. How isolating it is to lead our lives by personal preferences.
7. How enlightening it is to recognize how objective value judgments lead to life-enriching engagements with others.
8. How enriching it is to balance our love of family and friends with a heartfelt concern for all our neighbors on this planet.
9. How fully democratic it is to acknowledge our pluralism of values and engage in ongoing dialog and compromise that might honor the common good above both individual benefit and the group good.

Obviously, these are moral concerns. But in my experience, the moral standard of many college students has been reduced to the simple idea of *live and let live*, as if each person must live on a personal definition of right and wrong. I worry that this verges on being unintelligent, ungrateful and unloving.

Unintelligent because college students have the opportunity and encouragement to study complex issues.

Ungrateful because all material and human resources are not the result of our creativity; they are created by God and given to us to share in God's own desire for a global community based on interdependence.

Loveless because all humans are at their best when they open themselves to mutual commitments and to the ever-looming possibility that they are gifts to themselves from a loving God.

Perhaps this short list of obstacles to the common good will help us understand what needs to be done to foster the feelings and insights that savor the joys of pursuing the common good together.

-Tad Dunne