
Ultimate End and Common Good In *Summa Theologiae*, Secunda Pars

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In human action what is last in execution is first in intention. For just this reason Thomas Aquinas begins the *secunda pars* of the *Summa Theologiae* with a consideration of man's ultimate end. It is the end and the end alone that renders intelligible all those choices and activities that human life comprises. "Finis enim dat speciem in moralibus" (ST 2-243.3; cf. 1-2 1.3, 18.6). Both the intellect in its practical activity and the will in its inclination share the same starting point. "The point of departure," Thomas says, "in the activity of rational appetite is the ultimate end" (ST 1-2 1.5). And: "The first principle in human deeds—the subject matter of practical reason—is the ultimate end" (ST 1-2 90.2); accordingly, "what first falls into the apprehension of practical reason is the good" (ST 1-2 94.2). Clarity on this point therefore must be had at the outset of moral discourse (whether philosophical or theological) to ensure success; confusion spells disaster. Hence Thomas devotes the first questions of the *secunda pars* to a consideration of the ultimate end. He had, as it were, no choice. Only then does he proceed to consider human actions in themselves and their intrinsic and extrinsic principles. In my brief comments I wish to call your attention to a feature of Thomas's discussion concerning that extrinsic principle he calls law. For there beginning with question 90 of the *prima secundae* an explicit consideration of the ultimate end arises once again but with a precision which is, I think, sometimes misunderstood within the Thomistic tradition.

It is obvious that Thomas's discussion in ST 1-2, leading up to the definition of law (q. 90), takes its cue from the familiar sense of the term, that is, human positive law. This is perhaps no more obvious than in the second article where Thomas argues that all law (eternal, divine, natural, and human) is ordered to the common good. As the rational rule and measure of all human action, so the argument goes, law must first take into consideration the ultimate end; but since human perfection at every level is achieved only in society (human and divine), the ultimate end is in fact nothing other than the common good. In a way to confirm this Thomas refers to the fifth book of the *Nicomachean Ethics* where Aristotle speaks of legal justice as procuring and preserving the happiness of

political community. He then reminds us that in the *Politics* Aristotle calls the perfect community “the city” (*civitas*). Strange references for a theologian, unless we realize that Thomas is not restricting his discussion here to divine law only and in fact is focusing on its better known yet secular counterpart in order to shed light on it and the other forms of law. When Thomas identifies the ultimate end with the common good, therefore, he has chiefly in mind the human ultimate end attainable in this life and the political common good, that is, political community.

This identification is precisely what a Thomist such as Henry Veatch denies.¹ As he sees it, the common good or political community is considered good just so far as it is an expedient means to the welfare and happiness of each and every individual citizen. It is not a good worth choosing for its own sake, let alone an ultimate end. Veatch’s own description of the common good resembles the *bona communia* that Thomas refers to in his discussion of distributive justice (*ST* 2-2 61.1), namely such goods as money, honors, water, land (natural resources in general), and “anything else in the class of exterior goods” (*ibid.*). The sum of these, together with the roles, offices, responsibilities, and “institutional arrangements” that ensure their maintenance and usefulness, is Veatch’s common good.²

For Thomas this is indeed a common and indispensable good, but nevertheless a common good on the level of utility and not choiceworthy in itself. For it falls within an order toward an even more indispensable common good—a good that is, as Jacques Maritain argued repeatedly,³ in the class of *bonum honestum*, noble, choiceworthy for its own sake, and perfective of the human agent. Thomas identifies this common good as the life of political community itself, for as a part of this communion of persons, just as within a friendship, the individual finds an essential element of his or her flourishing. In other words, for Thomas (and Aristotle), political community is a basic human good (cf. *ST* 1-2 94.2); in fact, so far as it is perfect the life of the community contains even all other natural human goods and for this reason can be considered an ultimate end (though of course not the absolute ultimate end).

Interestingly enough, while Veatch denies that the political common good could possibly have the character of an ultimate end, he nonetheless argues that “the love and association of others” is an

1. *Human Rights: Fact or Fancy?* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana: LSU Press, 1985), pp. 124-34.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 122.

3. *The Person and the Common Good* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1966), p. 53; *The Range of Reason* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1952), p. 142; *Man and the State* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), p. 149.

integral part of an individual's flourishing.⁴ But is not political community a form of love and association, of *philia*, *amicitia*, friendship? Doubtless Aristotle, Thomas, and Maritain thought so and for that reason considered the city to be an intrinsically choiceworthy good, in fact, an ultimate end. Not only does Veatch neglect this constant and evident teaching of the tradition he claims his own, he even (perhaps unwittingly) contradicts it. His confusion on this point, I suggest, stems both from his oversight of the distinction between objective beatitude (*finis cuius*) and formal beatitude (*finis quo*; cf. *ST* 1-2 1.8) and from his attempt to reconcile two fundamentally disparate political schools (those of Aristotle and of Locke).

John Finnis's discussion of the common good in *Natural Law and Natural Rights* surpasses Veatch's in clarity and fidelity to the tradition but is not completely immune from criticism. For his working definition of the common good seems strikingly similar to Veatch's: "A set of conditions which enables the members of a community to attain for themselves reasonable objectives, or to realize reasonably for themselves the value(s), for the sake of which they have reason to collaborate with each other (positively and/or negatively) in a community."⁶ I say "seems similar" because of other remarks Finnis makes in *Natural Law and Natural Rights* that in fact run counter to such an interpretation. For example, he also calls the common good a "value" and "objective," the "flourishing of all members of the community," and the "object of all justice." In this last sense, the common good "is not to be confused with the common stock, or the common enterprises, that are among the means of realizing the common good."⁸ Finnis in fact offers a threefold division of the common good: (1) the seven basic values (life, knowledge, play, aesthetic experience, friendship, religion, and freedom in practical reasonableness) taken together; (2) each basic value taken separately; and 3) a set of conditions . . . , which is the one "commonly [but by no means exclusively] intended throughout this book."⁹ He sees this third type as ordered to bringing about the first and second types of common good (cf. p. 156).

Thomas himself admits that "common good" is used in a variety of ways, but not exactly in the ways Finnis mentions.¹⁰ For among those

4. Henry Veatch, *Human Rights*, p. 129.

5. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), pp. 134-60.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 155.

7. *Ibid.*, pp. 154; 174, and cf. 303, 372; 168, 194.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 168.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 155.

10. See Gregory Froelich, "The Equivocal Status of *bonum commune*," *The New Scholasticism* (Winter 1989), pp. 38-57.

seven basic values or goods Thomas would point out only one that is truly common in the way a good is properly common, that is, as a common end or goal (“communitate causae finalis,” *ST* 1-2 90. 2ad2). That good is friendship. Life, knowledge, and the others, since realized (or instantiated) in the individual as such, are common only in definition (“communitate generis vel speciei,” *ibid.*). Although we both may be knowing the same truth, my act of knowing is not yours. Knowledge, properly speaking, is a purely personal good. Friendship, on the other hand, in its very particularity is as common to the friends as is the room they may be sharing. Indeed, as Thomas argues, the common life of friends is the most choiceworthy thing in friendship (*In IX Ethic*, lect. 14). Hence for Thomas it is precisely this kind of common good above all that law must respect. This finds vivid expression in Aristotle’s insistence that the principal intent of human law is to produce friendship among the people (*Nic. Ethics* 1155a25). Thomas adds that even divine law has friendship chiefly in view—the friendship of course between man and God (*ST* 1-2 99.2).

Yves R. Simon once warned that “an inquiry into the common good must involve constant awareness that its object may, at any time, be displaced by deadly counterfeit.”¹¹ For it is a highly equivocal term. But equivocity does not always preclude one of the many senses from ranking first. I have tried to indicate what kind of common good an authentic Thomistic moral theory would place foremost: the common good as ultimate end. In this view, an individual citizen chooses to participate in the common good of his community as an integral component of his flourishing, and not as a mere means. Fortunately, this is not a uniquely Thomistic view. The authors of *Habits of the Heart* (New York, 1985), for example, seem to accept it, and in fact have argued that everybody seems in one way or another to assent to it, even though the prevailing language at the moment is that of individualism. For even natural law, the set of first and immediate principles of practical reason present to everyone, has as its principal object the common good.

11. *A General Theory of Authority* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1962, 1980, 1991), p. 27.