

## THE COMMON GOOD: WHY IS IT GOOD? WHY IS IT COMMON?

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A society of human beings . . . is one whose parts have an action independent of the whole, for here the part governs itself. Such a whole has merely unity of action; for this union is brought about by the collaboration of parts that are self-governing. Therefore, if these parts are ordered to the common good as to their chief good, this direction is not accomplished except by self-government. In Aristotle's doctrine, the action of the ruling element in the political community is in no sense divorced from the participation of the citizen. — Charles N. R. McCoy<sup>1</sup>

The principal part of the common good is contained within our souls. — Yves Simon<sup>2</sup>

For the good of the species is a greater good for the singular than its singular good. This is not therefore a species prescinded from individuals; it is the singular itself, which, by nature, desires more the good of the species than its particular good. The desire for the common good is in the singular itself. —Charles De Koninck<sup>3</sup>

### I

The terms “common good,” “commonweal,” “general welfare,” or “greatest good” are themselves frequently heard in politics, ethics, literature, the press, theology, and philosophy. They may or may not be exactly interchangeable. Words need content and context. These terms continue to bear a note of high mindedness, of something more excellent – even “divine,” as Aristotle said. St. Thomas's famous

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<sup>1</sup> Charles N. R. McCoy, *The Structure of Political Thought* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1963), p. 53.

<sup>2</sup> Yves Simon, *A General Theory of Authority* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1980), p. 126.

<sup>3</sup> Charles De Koninck, “On the Primacy of the Common Good,” *The Aquinas Review*, 4, 1, (1997), p. 18. This edition of *The Aquinas Review* reprints De Koninck's original essay, together with I. Th. Eschmann's critique of it, “In Defense of Maritain,” and De Koninck's reply, “In Defense of Saint Thomas.”

definition of law was precisely, "an ordination of reason, by the proper authority, *for the common good*, and promulgated" (I-II, 90, 1). The common good is an end to be chosen and brought into reality. It contains a reason or order worth putting into effect, if not already in place. Once in effect, it is a dynamic, not static, concept. A common good must be an on-going accomplishment. This is part of its excitement and nobility.

All actual human common goods, as prudentially reasonable configurations, can degenerate or increase. In either case, a "common" good will still be actively needed to achieve what is possible in the circumstances for those who participate in it. The particular good would be less itself, less good, if it were not also involved in a common good because the common good is composed of particular goods. A less than perfect good is still a good. Even a lesser evil has something to be said for it.

Idealists often become tyrannical because they seek to impose their systems apart from the nature, reason, and will of those of whose common good they are. The "common good" in general parlance is not wholly exempt from this danger, almost as if we could conceive it apart from those who might compose it. The principles of the "lesser evil" and the "greater good," moreover, are themselves elements of the common good in actual historic circumstances. The common good does not cease to function if some or most are not good.

The common good is sometimes said to be "opposed" to the private or particular good, but not in a way that denies that some goods are really private. Common good includes private goods as private. The common good is designed to keep genuine private goods precisely private and this for the common good itself. Private goods, as such, are good to have. The common good does not absorb private goods without itself at some point ceasing to be itself any longer a good. Private goods are good like all good. Good, divine and human, while remaining what it is, causes or incites whatever is good to be more good. What makes it possible to have private goods is itself a good, a common good.

Private goods themselves exist as goods, as realities. The order of things in which particular goods fall enables them to contribute to a greater good. Foundations of houses really do hold them up, and they really are not doors or second stories of the same house. "Privacy" or closed goods, however, those that proclaim their good over against

their being, against what they are, turn in on themselves. They produce a loneliness or isolation about them. They cannot stand the test of common being and its order from which and into which good flows or ought to flow.

Thus, it may be a common good, say, to have a free market system in which good quality apples can be grown by anybody and sold at a fair price to any purchasers who want them. But the apple, on eating it, is my particular good or perhaps my particular ill if it is too green so that a stomach ache ensues. The eaten apple is not a "common good," yet there is something common about all private goods. It is good that I am healthy, to which good the apple contributes a real, if tiny, element. "An apple a day keeps the doctors away." But it is also good that there are doctors in case I am not, after eating the apple, healthy. It is even good that there are lawyers and police in case someone, unbeknownst to me, deliberately poisons my good apple or, like Augustine, steals the produce of my fruit trees. Perhaps this symbolism is why the Fall is famously pictured as involving the willful eating of an apple!

The common good is not some separate "vision" or "thing" conceived to be standing apart from or imposed on those for whose "good" it is said to be "common." Many a totalitarian mind has been inflamed by a dream of the "common good," by a way of "making" or "forcing" people to be good apart from their desire or ability to participate in the said scheme that will, presumably, eradicate all their problems. Indeed, I suspect that many a totalitarian is really a mystic gone wrong, intellectually wrong, because he wants to do so much good that he cannot trust or foster the participation of those whose good he so longs to implement. In this sense, we might argue that much of our difficulties do not arise from "evil" spreading its wings, but from "good" that has misunderstood its own condition.

"The common good touches the whole man, the needs both of his body and his soul," John XXIII writes in *Pacem in Terris*. He continues:

Hence it follows that the civil authorities must undertake to effect the common good by ways and means that are proper to them; that is, while respecting the hierarchy of values, they should produce simultaneously both the material and spiritual welfare of the citizens.... In our Encyclical, *Mater et Magistra*, we emphasized that the common good of all 'embraces the sum total of those conditions of social living whereby men are enabled to

achieve their own integral perfection more fully and more reasonably' (#57-58).

The common good is here pictured as something to be "effected," or brought about; that is, it does not just happen, but, while being something implicitly given in human nature as something to be accomplished, it remains the result of thought, decision, and action. It does not come into being by itself as if it were a superior being that had its own separate reason, will, and capacity to act. The common good is to be suffused within the minds and wills of those for whom it is common, both rulers and ruled.

Evidently, there are ways to attempt to bring about a common good that are "improper." This sobering reminder means that we must have some philosophical criterion to distinguish between what is and what is not a "proper" manner of bringing about this common good. The common good must really be a "good," something that is worthy of being desired. What is "not good" is recognizable, though still under the light of the good. Establishing the proper means, institutions, and purposes applicable to any political society is what natural law and political philosophy are about. Spiritual and material well-being are to be sought and brought into reality together. Thus, we do not seek one then the other. Even here, however, there is a priority of rank--"Seek ye first the Kingdom of God, and all these things will be added to you." "Man does not live by bread alone." "Remember, keep holy the Sabbath Day." "If you did this to the least of my brethren, you did it to Me."

The common good is more "divine" than the particular good. *What is is good. Good is good.* Making things better is "more good," or better, provided we know what "better" is. The good has the note of superabundance about it. The common good makes it possible for us to be more fully ourselves, as if we could not be really or fully ourselves without it. Goodness is both something of substance and something of acting. Denying being the possibility to be "fully good" is not good.

## II

The common good is said to embrace "the sum total of conditions of social living." Apparently, we could have all these "conditions" and still not have a real common good. Men still must "achieve" by themselves what is called an "integral perfection" and do so both reasonably and fully. It is almost as if we are warned not to bury the one talent instead

of using it to create more. What is "good" can evidently always be rejected, unless it is what is "goodness itself," which we never encounter as such in this life. Charles N. R. McCoy remarks that the common good cannot be achieved "divorced from the participation of the citizens." This participation itself, however, can be toward the less virtuous or less good, as well as toward a greater good. The subject matter of all ethics and politics must, as Aristotle said, include the objective judgment of the moral status of the act about to be effected. Is it good or bad?

Thus, "doing good" has its dangers if it means always doing something for others rather than allowing or encouraging them to do something for themselves. Charity begins at home. It ought not to take the place of home. "Doing good," in the sense of ourselves fulfilling ourselves by doing good for and in place of others, can be a very dangerous and selfish action. We may want others to be poor so that we can help them. It is better to teach a man how to fish than simply give him food, granted that sometimes this latter may be all we can do. This participation of others in causing the good, including their own good, is itself a major element in the common good. But it seems possible to have a good constitutional order in which citizens choose not to abide by its rules or conditions. This preference is how a private good can be opposed to a common good, precisely when it neglects its relation to the common good by its private acts. The common good includes the private good. The private good is only private within its relation to what is common. But the common good is not an "alternative" to the private good. We want what is good to be in fact good.

No "sum total of human conditions" can work automatically apart from human participation and choice. Otherwise, the pursuit of the good becomes the pursuit of being taken care of, not of ourselves acting. The choosing and the thinking that goes into choosing - Aristotle's deliberation and decision - themselves are elements of the "sum total," without which the common good cannot exist. That such a rejection or failure to effectuate what is good is possible seems to be a matter of human observation. We can only deny that it happens if, on some basis or other, we deny our experience.

In theory, and perhaps indirectly, we deal here with the problem of evil, which is itself never another good "being," but somehow is always a lack of being in what is good, particularly in the case of a moral good.

Why the complete good is impossible or unlikely in this world has, in part, to do with free will and the Fall, which in turn has to do with the question of whether we are only political beings, that is, with the question of whether a practical happiness in this world is the only happiness there is. The mislocation of the highest good constitutes one of the objects of study of political philosophy. Indeed, it is one of the criteria that define good and bad regimes. But man is something more than a political animal. The good to which he is finally oriented is itself the cause of the other goods that he chooses. The lesser or finite goods often appear as alternatives to his highest good. It is the thesis of the common good that this is not necessarily the case, or better, that it is not necessary that what is good must be used badly, even though it can be so used. The fact that it can be used badly is the drama of our existence, as it also implies, again, that it need not be used badly.

### III

Behind the notion of a common good, in the political sense, is the question of the ontological nature of the city in contrast to the ontological being of the individuals that compose the city by their prudence, actions, and passions. The city is not a substance, a "being," though it is "of being," that is, it has a distinct reality. Usually society is put in the ontological categories of action, passion, and primarily relation – *ad aliud*, according to how its members stand to one another. It deals with how human beings relate to one another reciprocally as others in a chosen, legal order. There is a certain tendency in the Hegelian tradition of viewing the state itself as a substance, as a separate being that transcends its parts: the Spirit marching through the world. The state, however, is not a substance. It is a unity of actions. Indeed, its parts are related to the whole as precisely parts.

The whole can only be the whole if the parts are parts. It is in the interest of, that is, to the good of the whole, that parts be what they are. Parts derive their whole justification from the prior nature of the whole and its good. We do not first conceive the hand, and then construct the human being to go with it. The whole human being, which has a hand as an integral part of *what it is*, comes first. Conceived this way, the parts may be expendable, for "the good of the whole." In medicine, this is the principle that we use to justify the amputation of defective limbs. Even though they perform some specific act that no other part could perform, the parts only exist because of and for the

sake of the whole. The whole itself, however, may have an action that transcends the actions of each part, while including them. This principle, however, does not deny that once a part is gone, say a limb is amputated, the whole must from then on limp. It is really missing some good due to it.

Thus, in the case of the common good of a human society, the "parts" of which it is composed are not just parts. Maritain calls them "wholes." Society is made up of parts, each of which is a substantial whole.<sup>4</sup> Though they are said to be by nature social and political beings, human beings are also said to transcend the whole political order, as if each human being, by being himself, is implicitly ordained to this higher purpose by his own proper activities, activities that are not that of the polis as such. The fact that lesser goods must be achieved first or more gradually is no argument against this priority. This higher ordination, in fact, is what limits the state to be itself, a unity of order, a relation, not a being. That is, the state does not exhaust human purpose or the destiny of its members. By being itself, it is ordered to a higher end.

This view was traditionally expressed in terms of the primacy of the contemplative life. Human beings, as persons, are said to have an end that is higher than the state and for which the state also exists. The common good, thus, wants lesser goods to be achieved as goods. It is, if you will, a theory of abundance, not a theory of parsimony. The common good that is the political common good is itself a "lesser good" in comparison to the end of the "wholes" that make it up. The immortality of the *polis* - it lives on as its members are replaced via

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<sup>4</sup> Jacques Maritain, "The Person and the Common Good," *The Social and Political Philosophy of Jacques Maritain*, edited by Joseph W. Evans and Leo R. Ward (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1976), pp.82-88. "The human person's vocation to goods which transcend the political common good is embodied in the essence of the political common good. . . . The direct ordination of the human person to God transcends every created common good - both the common good of the political society and the intrinsic common good of the universe" *Man and the State* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), p. 149.

birth and death – is itself subordinated to the immortality of the soul. Through the immortality of the soul, and more particularly through the resurrection of the body, the personal destiny is achieved that constitutes the real good to which human beings, from their beginning, are ordered.

#### IV

The term “person,” however, is not without its own problems. It is a term that arises originally from Greek drama. The “persona” was the mask worn by an actor to hide his own personality and to imply or to indicate that of the character he was portraying. Later, “person” was defined by Boethius as a subsistent being of a rational nature. The mask became the being it represented, as it were. The rational subsistent being, by being itself, could, through its reason, “be” other things not itself, all other things. The person meant both itself and what was not itself. It indicated an autonomy, that this thing had its own life, source of action, and grounding in being. It was that for which other things existed. Person was the highest sort of being.

“Person,” moreover, was the term that came to be used in theology to describe the three “subsistences” in the Trinity. The word must always be seen in the light of that background. The inner life of God was revealed to contain both an otherness and a unity. The term “person” described this diversity. It was said to be a “substantial relation,” meaning that one person of the Trinity was *not* the other, but that each, nonetheless, was in or of one nature, one God, not three gods. Moreover, the whole inner being of each person was seen to be related to or defined by his relation to the other persons. The Son was from the Father. No one knew the Father but the Son. The Christian understands that love and friendship, while agreeing with Aristotle on these topics, arose precisely out of this background. “Greater love than this no man has who lays down his life for his friend” (Jn. 15:13). The very irreducibility of each person of the Trinity combined a sense of otherness and identity that prevents anything from being isolated in itself, or contrariwise, from being totally absorbed so that it no longer remains itself.

Person came to describe the absolute uniqueness and irrepeatability of certain beings, rational beings. In a famous controversy between Charles De Koninck and I. Th. Eschmann, ostensibly over the proper



interpretation of the common good, the question was asked about the accurate understanding of person or "personalism." In what sense was the "person" considered to be independent or autonomous? The crux of this controversy remains of considerable, if not more, importance today. The term "person," with its philosophical adjuncts, namely, "rights," "dignity," and "values," has come to mean almost the opposite of what the term "person" meant in that philosophy that understood God as a common good. That is, God was known as that good to which all things are ordained, so that our good as persons is itself ordained to this common good that is God, in which all things are good.

What happened in the meantime is that the term "person" came to be conceived not as merely a subsistent being of a rational nature, but rather as a fully autonomous being whose reality was exempt from precisely anything but itself. To be a person meant to be dependent on nothing but oneself. The description of personal autonomy was posed or defined in the terminology of "rights," "values," and "dignity" in such a way that person had no relation either for its own given being or for its own good, to any order outside of itself. "Dignity" meant this self-declared autonomy. "Rights" meant whatever content we chose to put into the definition of person. Thus, it has happened that precisely the words that have been most used to establish the proper understanding of what it is to be a human being have been, largely, co-opted so that they mean almost the opposite of their original intent.

"But Christianity actually has a deep resistance to the concept of human rights," Robert Kraynak has written.

As shocking as this may sound today, there are numerous and profound reasons why this is so. In the first place, Christianity places duties to God and duties to one's neighbor before individual rights and cannot easily accept the proposition that people have the right to pursue happiness as they see fit, especially if that right leads to societies that are indifferent to God.... Today the term "person" refers to a human being with a duty to forge his or her own identity or moral personality by an assertion of the will.... In recent years... "person" has become a

moral (not metaphysical) term applied to human beings, meaning a rational and free agent who possesses inherent dignity and rights.<sup>5</sup>

Through this understanding of the term "rights," it becomes almost impossible actually to do anything for anyone, as whatever anyone needs or wants ought to be his by "right." So if he does not have what he wants, or thinks he wants, however he defines it, it is someone else's fault or someone else's duty to provide. Rights have no independent source or content than what the subject wills. The emphasis on "dignity" means that we are allowed or encouraged to do what we want. The definition of democracy has come to mean the protection of our "right" to do what we choose, wherein what we choose constitutes the dignity of our person. Nothing has a "claim" on our will except a negative understanding of the common good that deprives the word "common" of any meaning. There is, strictly speaking, nothing to be held in common as participated in by others.

## V

In his essay on the "Good," Jörg Splett maintains that failure to keep together the relation of good to both reason and will occasioned:

the real disappearance of the proper reality of the good in rationalism, which culminated in Spinoza's conception of the *amor intellectualis*. But it also gave rise to an irrational philosophy of values, which especially in its modern form separates *esse* and *bonum*, knowing and willing (or "feeling") in a dualistic way and never envisages the antecedent unity in being as well as in consciousness. The appeal to a merely irrational "feeling" is a simple rejection of a positivist denial of the objectivity of the good....<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Robert Kraynak, *Christian Faith and Modern Democracy* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), pp. 153-54.

<sup>6</sup> Jörg Splett, "Good," *Encyclopedia of Theology: The Concise Sacramentum Mundi*, edited by Karl Rahner (New York: Seabury, 1975), pp. 581-82.

Splett dubiously implies that this failure to “keep together” good and being was the fault of St. Thomas and Aristotle, even though they were very careful to explain the relation of will to reason and to *what is*.

Splett, however, seems to be right to link the notion of “value” to a “disappearance of the proper reality of the good in rationalism.” If good has no reality, if it disappears, then human choice has no proper object. Reason goes its own way and does not provide, as in Aquinas, something worthy of desire or will. The term “value,” which we usually associate with Max Weber’s sociology, is what connects “rights” to “person.” Value is what happens to will left to itself. Since there is no “good” either revealed in the ontological being of the subsistent human being or in the universe in which he acts, the person has the sublime need to create himself, to give himself content, substance. “Value” is a modern word. It provides ends unrelated to reason or to *what is*.

According to this view, no person has any content to his own being except that which he gives himself. Once he gives himself something, he has a “right” to it. His dignity is constituted by the fact that he is autonomous. He has no “intrinsic” dignity, as the “right” to abortion indicates. Neither truth nor good arise out of common being from whence the diversity of things first comes. Hence, the social enterprise is not in pursuing and willing a “common good” composed of wholes that reach to ordered being, but in defending a private good which is self-constituted, giving itself rights, autonomy, and value.

Charles De Koninck’s original essay on the common good, since it was an attack on personalism, was understood by some, notably by Father Eschmann, to be an attack on Maritain, something that De Koninck vigorously denied. But De Koninck did attack an understanding of dignity and person that was exactly the opposite of what such words had originally meant. He writes: “It must not be forgotten that the philosophers responsible for modern totalitarianism did not deny the dignity of the human person; on the contrary, they exalted this dignity more than ever before.”<sup>7</sup> De Koninck wished to show that this modern conception of man is based on a principle of

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<sup>7</sup> De Koninck, “On the Primacy of The Common Good,” p. 11.

autonomy quite opposed to a view of person whose good is seen to be linked to the good of others, to a common good.

To make his point in terms of the common good, De Koninck uses the example of the fallen angels. Of Satan, De Koninck writes, dignity consisted:

in the exaltation of his personal dignity and of the proper good of his nature; he preferred his proper good to the common good, to a beatitude which was participated and common to many; he refused this latter because it was participated and common. Even though he possessed his natural happiness and the excellence of his person by no special favor, but rather by a right founded on his creation itself – to God he owed his creation, but all else belonged properly to him; by this invitation to participate he felt injured in his proper dignity.<sup>8</sup>

To conceive dignity after the manner of Satan, then, is what De Koninck understands to be the “personalist” or “Pelagian” error, the error of an autonomy closed to a higher good. It prefers the sufficiency of the good one self-creates. It relates to nothing other than to one’s self.

“The dignity of created persons is not without ties, and the purpose of our liberty,” De Koninck affirms, “is not to overcome these ties, but to free us by strengthening them. These ties are the principal cause of our dignity.”<sup>9</sup> The fact that we are not totally complete in ourselves is not a defect in us. What we are is not a defect in reality precisely because of a common good in which we also participate. To love is to be bound. The only alternative to this being bound is not to be bound, which is a form of rejection of the good of others. “The sin of the angels was practically a personalist error: they preferred the dignity of their own person to the dignity which they would receive through their subordination to a good which was superior but common in its very superiority.”<sup>10</sup> The fallen angels thus appear as adversaries to the

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

common good precisely by preferring their own good as unrelated to any good other than themselves. This is the "personalist" error. Because of their angelic choice, the world is deprived of their good as diffusive among many, while they are deprived of any good that they might have received.

De Koninck thinks that the personalist error is the Pelagian claim of self-sufficiency for our destiny. In a subtle observation, he seeks to explain more exactly how the totalitarian notion of dignity opens the way to the denial of dignity. De Koninck observes that there is a speculative error involved here. He means that something more ominous is at work here than the sin of the angels, which was a purely practical error. The angels knew they were not God. In the case of man, the speculative error is such that, in practice, it results in our enslavement in the name of human "dignity." The devil refused to participate in any good but his own. "The denial of the higher dignity which man receives through the subordination of his purely personal good to the common good would ensure the denial of all human dignity."<sup>11</sup>

Thus, it is 1) a denial of human dignity to isolate human existence from the destiny or orientation to a common good that is not simply one's own creation. 2) It is a high good to receive a good beyond one's own good, as it were, to "be" more than we "are." 3) To close the finite human good from all other good ends up by undermining human dignity, which consists precisely in its capacity to will the good of others.

De Koninck has concentrated on a version of personalism that has, in fact, become predominant in the culture, the personalism of the autonomous man who gives himself his own dignity and even his own consciousness. Values and rights are what this man wills, not what he has received by reason of his being *what he is*. Thus, he does not "have" rights or values by nature. He gives them to himself. In effect, the person is left with no inherent defenses against a totalitarian version of the "common good" that would seem to counteract the chaos that comes from universalizing rights and values that have no common

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., pp. 13-14.

basis in objective reality. Any order is better than the chaos of rights-practices that have no unity other than arbitrary will. This analysis seems to be why De Koninck holds that modern totalitarian theories consider themselves to be on the side of human "dignity" and human "personhood." They save personalist theories on their own grounds, on the grounds of a will predetermined to nothing but itself, but with the power to enforce its order. The "denial of all human dignity" resulted from the denial of any openness to the common good. Human dignity is based on something more than the will's own act of affirming only itself as the basis of this dignity.

## VI

To understand what is at issue here, one must see why the "common good" is not merely a collection of individual goods. Individual goods, to be themselves, have a relation to the common good that is, particularly in the case of rational beings, interior to them. The common good is not only unachievable apart from the wills and intellects of members of the community, but it is also achieved best when it is voluntarily and even happily participated in. Clifford Kossel states the principle well: "The immediate objective of civil law," he writes,

is to establish social unity and peace by establishing an order of justice in which all the citizens and lesser societies may have security in their goods and be enabled to share in the fruits of social cooperation according to their contribution. This very order is the first common good, but it is ordained to a further end, the virtuous life of the citizens. Law immediately takes care of the external order and the external acts required for that order. But by its directive and coercive power, it aims ultimately to lead the citizens to act from true interior virtue by habituation to these acts. Yet it cannot by itself effect this. Hence while the very establishment of law and order makes possible the liberty by which individuals and lesser communities can carry on their proper functions, it also stimulates and calls for their free cooperation in actually bringing about the virtuous life and communion in that life through the communication of their

goods with one another. This is civic friendship, the final aim of the legislator.<sup>12</sup>

It is important to sort out's position here. The "first common good," as he calls it, is the order of law and justice that provides a framework within which free people can act rationally to secure the greater goods made available by the multitude.

But this "first common good" is itself insufficient. There is, as it were, a "second" common good, to which the first common good points. We are not directly loved or made content by a "framework of law," however useful it may be. Citizens are ultimately to act not because of law or coercion but because of virtue, within the law. This position means that they act out of friendship and not merely out of justice. The law evidently, as Aquinas says, points to friendship but it cannot by itself produce it. A civil society is the context for many things of which it itself is not capable of either knowing or fostering. These are properly higher goods. Because of this, the civil society is a reflection of the nature of the good itself, in the goods that it makes possible. This possibility also implies that the good that is capable of being produced in the city is a reflection of the proper common good and an embodiment of it after its own manner. At the same time, it is not that highest good to which the wholes that are "persons" in the ontological sense are ordained, a good they do not themselves create or make.

Yves Simon in making this point in another way, observes that in one lifetime very few people can be excellent in more than one or two capacities, if that.<sup>13</sup> This is so because in order to acquire many, if not most perfections, we need a lifetime of training and practice, particularly in the higher things. This limitation is not a bad thing in itself, and it is a fact. Thus, if we are going to have available to us goods other than those we can perfect ourselves, we will have to allow or encourage others to effect them. This result has nothing to do with we

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<sup>12</sup> Clifford G. Kossel, "The Moral Views of Thomas Aquinas," *Encyclopedia of Morals*, edited by V. Ferm (New York: Philosophical Library, n. d.), p. 21.

<sup>13</sup> Yves Simon, *A General Theory of Authority* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1980), p. 28.

ourselves being well-rounded persons. The very condition of the individual human being is to be lacking many things that are either necessary or worthy to have. This is the point of Plato's observation about specialization and, to some degree, of Adam Smith's understanding of a market.

If we ask, "Why is the common good, good?" the answer seems to be that we want a world in which a variety of perfections can exist and be available in their respective ways to those who do not have them. This desire includes particularly the goods of the mind, of truth and of beauty. It is "good," in other words, that we have goods of all orders brought into being by others. It is not a failure on my part if I, even because I lack time, talent, or opportunity, cannot do what someone else can do. If we all did the same things, what would be available to us would be those same things that we all did by ourselves, a very narrow world. Kossel's point is rather that these particular things work themselves out in an atmosphere beyond justice if they are really to work or be present at all.

It is in this context Simon recalls that Aristotle points out that the common good is more "divine" than the particular good. Simon notes that "divine" for the Greeks meant that a thing is imperishable, a point made by Hannah Arendt in *The Human Condition*. We have a certain experience of imperishability in two ways - in the case of the persistency of the species and in the continuity of communities. Individuals enter into life and leave it constantly. The species, not as an idea but as a concrete reality, exists in actual individual beings within the species who are continually replaced. "The law of generation and corruption covers the whole universe of nature," Simon writes:

This law is transcended in a very proper sense by the incorruptibility of the species and the immortality of human association. The masterpiece of the natural world cannot be found in the transient individual. Nor can it be found in the species, which is not imperishable except in the state of universality; but in this state it is no longer unqualifiedly real. Human communities are the highest attainments of nature, for they are virtually unlimited with regard to diversity of perfections, and virtually immortal. Beyond the satisfaction of individual needs the association of men serves a good unique in



plenitude and duration, the common good of the human community.<sup>14</sup>

The “masterpiece of the natural world,” as Simon graphically calls it, is the real, active common good when it actually and through its “parts” provides goods.

Simon uses the term “imperishability” both to designate the living species in operation – that is, little fishes replace big fishes ad infinitum so that some fish actually exist at any given time– and to designate that aspect of a community that analogously carries on down the time so that we can say that a nation lasts longer than the lives of its individual members. To understand a species “in the state of universality,” that is, as an essence, means that it exists in this form only in the mind. This is what Simon means by saying that it is “not unqualifiedly real,” whereas real fish in a real pond are unqualifiedly real, though they are not the whole or abstract species whose form they bear to make them formally what they are.

## VII

If the common good is “good” precisely because it enables the abundance of being to come into effect through the actions of its parts, each of whom has his own internal principle of action, then why is the common good “common?” De Koninck has pointed out that the “desire” for the common good is in the singular itself. And Simon remarks that “the principal part of the common good is contained within our souls.” In *Genesis*, we read that it is not “good” for man to be alone. What does “not being alone mean?” After all, we do not want it to mean that we do not remain ourselves. We are the ones who want the good that comes from our not being alone. We may recall the title of a book of some years back, *The Lonely Crowd*, which implied that the mere presence of others did not prevent us from being lonely. There would have to be some way for us, while remaining ourselves, to become the other.

Basically this is what knowledge and will are about. “Thus God, a purely and simply universal good, is the proper good which all things

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 29.

naturally desire as their highest and greatest good, the good which gives all things their entire being.”<sup>15</sup> Nature is suffused with intellect. “It is thanks to this participation in intellect that every nature tends principally towards a universal good.”<sup>16</sup> This observation suggests that intellect itself is open to the order of things.

De Koninck writes, “[T]he common good is not a good other than the good of the particulars, a good which is merely the good of the collectivity looked upon as a kind of singular.”<sup>17</sup> We do not know or love a particular, and then, in addition, love something else called the “common good.” Such a common good would really belong to no one; whereas, the very point of the common good is that it is also ours. The common good is the good of the particulars, but the particulars know that this good is also the good of others. If their particular good does not include this awareness that others know this truth or will this good, then their isolation will be complete. Thus,

the common good is better for each of the particulars which participate in it, insofar as it is communicable to the other participants; communicability is the very reason for its perfection. The particular attains to the common good precisely as common good only insofar as it attains to it as to something communicable to others.<sup>18</sup>

Love of others includes a common good.

While it is true that we cannot, properly speaking, “do” anything for God, it does not follow that we cannot imitate the order of God. “It is the created common good, of any order, which imitates most properly the absolute common good.”<sup>19</sup> This is why the common good is good. “But God, Who is the most perfect good, tends toward the good of being as a whole. And thus not without reason is it said that good as such is diffusive; for the more a being is good, the more it spreads its goodness

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<sup>15</sup> De Koninck, “On the Primacy of the Common Good” p. 18.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., pp. 19-20.

to beings, which are further from itself."<sup>20</sup> And this is why the common good is common.

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.