

Common Good

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Overview

The common good (alternatively called “the public interest” or “public goods”) denotes those goods that serve all members of a given community and its institutions, and, as such, includes both goods that serve no identifiable particular group, as well as those that serve members of generations not yet born. It is a normative concept with a long and contested history. Philosophers, theologians, lawyers, politicians, and the public have arrived at distinct understandings about what the common good entails, how it should be balanced against individual goods, and if and by whom it should be enforced. Though there are many critics of the notion of the common good (as will be discussed below), it has survived as a meaningful concept for well over two millennia, and continues to serve as a very significant organizing principle of civic and political life.

The Common Good in History

Greek and Roman philosophy

The common good has deep roots in the history of philosophical and religious thought. For Plato (1968: 185) “the good” was objective, defined as that which “every soul pursues and for the sake of which it does everything.” Arriving at knowledge of the good within a community would create unity, which is “the greatest blessing for a state.” In this conception there is no tension between the private and public good, as individuals are thought to attain happiness (a private good) through the pursuit of justice (a public good). For Aristotle (1941: 1188–9) “a *polis* exists for the sake of a good life,” and human beings, as political animals, lead a good life by contributing to the

good of the community. He begins by asking what sort of people we want society to produce, moving then to the question of how we should structure society to achieve this end (1941: § 7, ch. 1). This question presupposes that a society has a shared end that both is separate from and actively shapes the good of the individual. Thus, Plato and Aristotle present a vision of the common good that cannot simply be reduced to the sum of all private interests, but whose promotion is nonetheless conducive to those interests – virtuous, fulfilled citizens and harmonious communities are both consequences of the pursuit of the good life.

The ancient Roman philosophers had a similarly robust and inherently political conception of the common good. Cicero (1928: bk. 1 ch. xxv), writing around 50 BCE defined a “people” or “republic” as “not any collection of human beings brought together in any sort of way, but an assemblage of people in large numbers associated in agreement with respect to justice and a partnership for the common good.”

Christian thought

Often drawing on Greek and Roman tradition, Christian theologians have also explored the common good (at least since the time of Augustine). In *City of God* Augustine takes up Cicero’s definition of a republic as a people joined by their pursuit of the common good and specifies the content of that good from a Christian perspective: the good is none other than God, and to pursue the common good is to render unto God the love and worship that is His due. Thomas Aquinas maintains a similar theological conception of the common good: “God’s own goodness ... is the good of the whole universe.” The Christian formulation of the common good also differs from its Greek predecessors in its acknowledgment of the tension that exists between the private and public good. Aquinas (1972: 107) wrote that

government qualifies as a tyranny when “it is not directed to the common good, but to the private good.” Moreover, private interest is often associated with selfishness and sin, the antithesis of righteous action done in the service of God and the common good.

Without breaking from these early conceptions, modern Christians have incorporated the language of individual rights into their definition of the common good. The Second Vatican Council (Vatican n.d.) defined the common good as “the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily.” And David Hollenbach (1989: 93), a Catholic scholar, concludes that “the historically achievable common good will demand that the pluriformity of human community be respected, and such respect should be institutionalized politically, legally and economically.” That is, even if the ultimate good has a single, absolute definition – God – pursuing that good need not entail imposing Christian belief and practice on all people.

In Social Science and Law

Economics

The place of the common good in modern (neoclassical) economics has its origins in the Enlightenment conception of society as existing “in order to further the goals of individuals, neither asking where the goals of individuals come from nor inquiring into the processes by which individuals are formed in society” (Yuengert 2009: 5). In neoclassical economics the common good is not an objective goal to be discerned and pursued but rather the *aggregation* of individual goods. This idea was first articulated by Adam Smith (2001: 288), who posited that man, in pursuing his own personal gain, unwittingly “promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it.” The so-called “invisible hand” of the market guides selfish interests to maximize the common good, which is defined as the efficient and maximal creation of wealth. The common

good is here conflated with the well-being of the individual.

Given the proper conditions (i.e., a free market economy) individuals reveal their self-interested preferences in the marketplace at which point supply and demand calibrate prices such that these private ends are efficiently met. That is, the common good – the summation of all private goods – arises naturally from the market and no state efforts are needed to promote it. Indeed, attempts to guide the preferences of individuals towards a common goal are seen as, at best, paternalism, and at worst, the first step on the road to totalitarianism, as was famously argued by Friedrich A. Hayek (1944) in *The Road to Serfdom*.

Economists have introduced exceptions to this rule for situations in which the invisible hand is unable to provide “public goods” that benefit society at large. The market’s inability to produce such goods reflect what economists call a “market failure” (an instance where the market is unable to achieve an efficient allocation of resources) and thus government intervention in the production of these goods is tolerated. Examples of public goods include defense, basic research, and public health (e.g., fluoridation and vaccinations). Thus, Kenneth J. Arrow (1962: 619) wrote that “we expect a free enterprise economy to underinvest in invention and research (as compared with an ideal) because it is risky, because the product can be appropriated only to a limited extent, and because of increasing returns in use. This underinvestment will be greater for more basic research.”

In law

In public policy debates in the west, and in particular in the USA, concern for the common good tends to be overshadowed by a legal paradigm that grants primacy to individual rights and liberties. Subscribers to this school of thought include both economic conservatives seeking legal protection from government regulation and “legal liberals” who – motivated in part by a desire to curb state-sanctioned violence (e.g., war, police brutality, the death penalty) – embrace legally codified rights and

broad constraints on state power as the best means to that end. Thus, in the USA there has been vocal opposition to the various security measures that have been introduced following the 2001 attacks on the American homeland on the grounds that such measures violate individual rights. Similarly, many object to the fact that individual privacy is often violated both by the government and by corporations and hold that the purpose of the law is to restrict such abuses.

The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), which defines itself as an institution dedicated to defending individual rights and liberties (while making little mention of the common good), champions this line of legal thought. The ACLU has a history of mounting legal challenges against what it considers to be incursions into individual liberty, including sobriety checkpoints, Transport Security Administration screening, drug testing for people charged with maintaining public safety, pilots, train engineers, and HIV testing for pregnant women.

The prioritization of individual rights over the common good is codified to some extent in US law, most visibly in the Bill of Rights, where protections of individuals are often enshrined in exceptionless language: “Congress shall make *no* law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances” (emphasis mine). However, US law also includes many toeholds for those who would use it to promote the common good. The Fourth Amendment, for example, uses less absolute rights language. By banning only *unreasonable* searches and seizures it recognizes that there are reasonable ones – those in the public interest.

Furthermore, US courts have historically recognized the importance of balancing individual rights with the common good. Court interpretations of the law often limit individual liberties to safeguard the public interest. For example, searches lacking

individualized suspicion have repeatedly been upheld by the courts if there are good reasons for them, whether these reasons are said to fall under a “special needs exception” or a “public safety exception” to the Fourth Amendment. Sobriety checkpoints that stop all or randomly chosen drivers, rather than only those whose driving shows signs of being intoxicated, are legally permissible, as is the use of metal detectors in airports and public buildings to search the belongings and persons of millions of people each day. Even the First Amendment has been judged by the Supreme Court to allow for a number of restrictions on speech for the sake of the common good, including the barring of incitement, obscenity, threats, slander, and child pornography.

Although the US courts have done much to recognize the value of the common good, striking the right balance between the public interest and individual rights can prove difficult. Communitarians have weighed in on this question by providing a set of balancing criteria to determine whether or not a given right can be overridden in order to promote the common good. To illustrate, in the study of privacy four criteria are provided for determining whether privacy or the common good should yield. First, a free society will limit privacy only if it faces a well-documented and macroscopic threat to the common good (such as public safety or public health), not merely a hypothetical danger. Tampering with ethical, social, and legal traditions – and with the public philosophies that underlie them – endangers those traditions’ legitimacy. Once tradition is breached it is difficult to prevent it from unraveling, the problem of the so-called slippery slope. Changes, therefore, should not be undertaken unless there is strong evidence that either the common good or privacy has been significantly ignored.

Second, after determining that the common good needs shoring up, one should examine whether that goal can be achieved without recalibrating privacy. For instance, when medical records are needed by researchers, personally identifying information (such as

names, addresses and social security numbers), should first be removed. Third, to the extent that privacy-curbing measures must be introduced, a free society makes them as minimally intrusive as possible. For example, many agree that drug tests should be conducted on those directly responsible for the lives of others, such as school bus drivers. Many employers, however, resort to highly intrusive visual surveillance to ensure that the sample is taken from the person who delivers it when in fact the less intrusive procedure of measuring the temperature of the sample immediately after delivery would suffice. Last, measures that treat undesirable side-effects of necessary privacy-diminishing measures are to be preferred over those that ignore these effects. These measures are required both to protect people from unnecessary injury and to sustain public support for the needed policies. Thus, if more widespread HIV testing and contact tracing are deemed necessary to protect public health, efforts must be made to enhance the confidentiality of the records of those tested.

Application of the four balancing criteria helps to ensure that correctives to a society's course are both truly needed and not excessive (Etzioni 1999). Granted, even when these criteria are applied, one cannot pinpoint with complete precision the proper or optimal course to follow. Societies have rather crude guidance mechanisms, and may need constantly to adjust their course as they oversteer first in one direction and then in the other. However, the criteria do provide a basic measure of the imbalance between individual rights and the common good, and the direction and nature of the necessary corrections.

The public interest

The pluralist tradition of political science, which largely adopts the assumptions of neo-classical economics, has little room for a robust notion of the public interest, and in some cases criticizes such a notion as implicitly antidemocratic. Pluralist thinkers, drawing upon their theory's economic underpinnings, argue that in a free and robust democracy competition

among interest groups – which reveal and are guided by the preferences of individuals (i.e., private goods) – gives rise to a public policy that maximizes general welfare. The representative function of such a political system is preserved both because all individuals are free to associate with any number of these groups and because each group can only exercise pressure equivalent to its popular support. Political scientists in the pluralist tradition readily criticize top-down notions of the public interest and the common good as inviting authoritarianism at the expense of procedural democracy. Thus Frank Sorauf (1962) and others have argued that the tug of war between private interest groups produces public policy superior to anything that would be reached by the state enforcing its own formulation of the public interest.

The pluralist approach amounts to an

understanding of politics in terms of autonomous and isolated individuals and their interests. It is the vision of politics as an arena ... [which] makes impossible within contemporary political science any credible notion of a public interest or a common good ... because there is no public or community other than the aggregation of individuals and special interest groups which they form. (Cochran 1974: 328)

Critics argue that discrepancies in wealth, power, and position give groups varying degrees of leverage over the government, and as a result public policy does not maximize social welfare (i.e., that aggregation of individual goods), much less reflect a robustly defined common good, but rather preserves the interests of the politically and economically powerful. These opponents hold that select aims and values constraining the democratic process are necessary for there to be meaningful competition (rather than a rout), and also for ensuring that causes that are marginalized or underrepresented – but intrinsically worthy – find expression in public policy.

However, such criticism still neglects the larger point that interest group pluralists fail to properly incorporate notions of the public

good into their normative framework. One might very well concede that a constrained democratic pluralistic process is better than a laissez-faire one while denying that there is any such notion as the common good. Rather, one might simply hold that a constrained pluralism is the best means for advancing individual self-interest. Thus, it is worth turning now to a more communitarian understanding of politics that places the common good at the front and center of normative analysis.

Communitarian versus Liberal Conception of the Common Good

In less individualistic societies – many of them nonwestern – the value of the common good is rarely questioned. However, the normative status of the common good – unlike that of rights – is far from self-evident to many in the west. The use of the term “the common good” is contested on a number of fronts. First, there are those who argue that it does not exist at all. Philosopher Ayn Rand (Rand & Branden 1986: 20) wrote in *Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal* that

there is no such entity as “the tribe” or “the public”; the tribe (or the public or society) is only a number of individual men. Nothing can be good for the tribe as such; “good” and “value” pertain only to a living organism – to an individual living organism – not to a disembodied aggregate of relationships.

Communitarians counter that the common good does not merely amount to an aggregation of all private or personal goods in a society. Contributions to the common good often offer no immediate payout or benefit. It is frequently impossible to predict who the beneficiaries will be in the long run. Still, members of communities that support the common good invest in it not because it will necessarily or even likely benefit them personally, or even their children, but because they consider it a good that ought to be nurtured. They consider it the right thing to do – by itself, for itself. This explanation surprises only those who claim that, even when we act in clearly altruistic ways, we always have an

ulterior, self-serving motive. For everyone else, examples of such common goods are readily apparent: in addition to national defense and basic research, discussed above, public health and environmental preservation are widely accepted examples of common goods. The nonself-interested nature of these measures stands out especially when serving the common good entails not merely some costs to the individual (e.g., taxes) but as the existential risks of certain forms of service such as fighting for one’s country.

Protecting the environment, preventing climate change, and developing sustainable energy sources are all costly projects that will only pay off over the longer run, and then only to unknown, unpredictable beneficiaries. The millions of people who are working towards these goals today cannot be sure that they will be alive to see the full impact of their work. Self-interest-maximizing individuals would gain a much better rate of return on their money if they invested in readily available financial instruments such as stocks and bonds, and then used the dividends to purchase air conditioners and sunscreen.

In response to this account of the common good, libertarians have developed elaborate arguments that explain why people invest in these common goods that do not necessarily benefit them, without giving up on their assumption that people are rational utility maximizers. For example, Anthony Downs, Gordon Tullock, and William Riker all wondered why a rational actor would bother to vote. These social scientists assume that “the voter calculates the expected utility from each candidate’s victory, and naturally votes for the candidate whose policies promise the highest utility” (Mueller 2003: 304). Yet the probability that any one voter’s ballot will affect the outcome of all but the closest elections is virtually zero. As voting always imposes at least some costs (such as time lost waiting in line to vote, the price of the gasoline needed to drive to the polling station, etc.), those costs almost always outweigh the expected benefit. Downs and others tried to argue that people do, in fact,

vote because they believe that the results will be close and hence their *one* vote could decide the election – a personal benefit that would offset the individual cost of their effort. However, it turns out that many millions vote even when elections are known not to be close.

Actually, the evidence shows that the most important factor that explains whether a person will vote is the extent to which the person considers voting his or her “citizen’s duty.” André Blais (2000: 137), a professor of political science, finds that “about half the electorate ... vote out of a strong sense of moral obligation, because they believe it would be wrong not to vote; they do not calculate benefits and costs.”

A second commonly voiced criticism of the common good comes from those on the left who hold that the concept – as manifested, for instance, in the call to serve the “fatherland” or “mother church” – serves to conceal class differences in economic interests and political power so as to keep those who are disadvantaged from making demands on the community. Indeed, these critics are correct in asserting that this concept can be abused, as when the fear of terrorism is drummed up to justify curtailing individual freedom. However, the fact that a concept is abused – a common fate for any compelling concept – does not mean that it is necessarily without merit. Otherwise we would have to do away with such concepts as science, rationality, and community, all of which can be misappropriated. That said, one would be well served by paying mind to whether these terms are used as originally defined or distorted and exploited for ideological purposes.

Finally, there are those who oppose the pursuit of the common good on the grounds that it is inherently threatening to individual and minority rights. Liberals and libertarians tend to shun robustly communal definitions of the good because they fear that if such formulations are embraced, even if initially only on normative grounds, government will be tempted to coerce people into involuntary service. This in turn would diminish individual liberty – the good that, for libertarians and many liberals, trumps all others. For individuals with such a

political temperament, calls to serve the common good hark back to the days of enforced conformity under authoritarian regimes, an overbearing church, and oppressive Salem-like communities (Gutmann 1985: 319). Many libertarians and some liberals hold, instead, that each person should decide for herself what constitutes the good and that society ought to then base its public policies on the aggregation of these individual choices.

Michael J. Sandel and Charles Taylor, among other academic communitarians, have criticized the philosophical underpinnings of this liberal/libertarian school of thought. They argue that contemporary liberalism and libertarianism presuppose an incoherent notion of the individual as existing outside of and apart from society rather than embedded within it. Because individual identity is partly constituted (or “constructed”) by culture and social relations, there is no coherent way of formulating individual rights or interests abstracted from their social context. In particular, these communitarians argue that there is no point in attempting to derive a theory of justice from the principles that individuals would choose in a hypothetical state of ignorance of their social, economic, and historical circumstances (i.e., from behind a Rawlsian “veil of ignorance”), because such individuals cannot exist.

Academic communitarians draw upon Aristotle and the German Idealist philosopher Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel to argue that any conception of the good must be formulated on the social level and that the community cannot be a normative-neutral realm. Unless there is a social formulation of the good, there can be no normative foundation for resolving conflicts of value between different individuals and groups. Such an overriding good (e.g., the national well-being) enables persons with different moral outlooks or ideological backgrounds to find principled (rather than merely prudential) common ground.

Communities are the most likely source of particular specifications of what is good for its members. Some have argued that the term “community” is so vague it cannot even be

defined. In contrast, communitarians hold that community can be clearly defined as a group of individuals that possesses two characteristics. The first is a web of affect-laden relationships which often crisscross and reinforce one another (rather than merely one-on-one or chain-like individual relationships). The second characteristic shared by the individuals of a community is some commitment to a core of shared values, norms, and meanings, as well as a collective history and identity – in short, a particularistic moral culture. Responsive communitarians hold that community is *basically* a major common good in itself as well as a major source of other common goods; “basically” because like all goods, community can take on dysfunctional forms, especially when its social bonds, culture, or political structure are oppressive. Hence the special import of balancing the community as a value with commitments to rights.

An important facet of communities is their ability to provide informal social controls that reinforce the moral commitments of their members, that is, they promote the common good. This helps to make for a largely voluntary social order. The most effective way to reinforce norms of behavior is to build on the fact that people have a strong need for continuous approval from others, especially from those with whom they have affective bonds of attachment, such as members of their community.

SEE ALSO: Aristotle (384–322 BCE); Civil Liberties; Communitarianism; Community; Ethics; Individualism; Interest Groups; Plato (429–347 BCE); Public Goods; Sandel, Michael J. (1953–); Taylor, Charles (1931–)

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