

The Concept of the Common Good

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This paper provides historical and theoretical background for a British Academy project, “Negotiating Inclusion in Times of Transition”, with a particular emphasis on peace processes in post-conflict societies. Formalised peacebuilding efforts in the post-cold war era have commonly involved a negotiated settlement between political elites, which focused on bringing those elites into some common framework for power. In order to make these settlements more inclusive, international and local actors have invoked ideas of justice, human rights, and equality. However, most peacebuilding efforts have failed to transform post-conflict societies, a failure that is often attributed to impositions of rights and equality norms. Against this background, scholars have focused increasingly on the ways in which international norms are negotiated and adapted at the local level. One way to put this matter is to say that, in deeply divided societies, there is a need to construct a shared notion of the “common good” as part of the political transition from war to peace.

The common good has been an important concern of moral and political philosophy since ancient times, and a politics of the common good was often contrasted with corrupt government and the pursuit of narrow self-interest. Pre-modern thinkers associated the common good with higher purposes and a virtuous life, which can only be realised in an ideal political community. By contrast, modern theorists put greater emphasis on the political conditions under which individuals could pursue their personal ends. Different thinkers conceived of the common good in terms of justice, material welfare, or utility maximisation. Collectivist visions of society, which also developed in the modern era, demanded extreme sacrifices from individuals in the name of the common good. While this led to scepticism about the concept, there has been a revival of interest in recent times.

In political theory, competing conceptions of the common good have been highlighted in the wake of the so-called liberal-communitarian debate in the 1980s. Following the publication of John Rawls’ *A Theory of Justice* (1971), “communitarian” critics such as Michael Sandel (1982), Charles Taylor (1985), and Michael Walzer (1983) questioned various aspects of liberal political theory. The common good has also been addressed by theorists of deliberative democracy such as Joshua Cohen (1989), civic

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republicans such as Philip Pettit (2004), and virtue ethicists such as Alasdair MacIntyre (1998). Catholic natural law theorists, such as John Finnis (2011), also attribute great importance to the concept, and theologians have long drawn on Christian notions of the common good. Writers such as David Hollenbach (2002) have called for renewed attention to these ideas as an intellectual resource for addressing contemporary problems.

In political practice, talk of the common good became more prominent again in Western societies as a reaction to what many perceived as the excessive individualism of the Reagan and Thatcher era. An example of this trend within Britain is the political rhetoric of New Labour, and the British Conservatives later advanced similar ideas under the banner of the “Big Society”.¹ These examples indicate that the language of the common good is not politically neutral, but has certain ideological connotations within contemporary discourse. Calls for a politics of the common good may denote opposition to various aspects of contemporary politics, such as the liberal concern with justice and human rights, a secular political order, or the materialism and individualism of modern societies. Scholars who pay closer attention to the concept of the common good frequently note that it is vague, imprecise, and open to political manipulation. The notion may refer to various aspects of political life, and invoke competing conceptions that developed in the history of political thought. Hence, it has been suggested that the meaning of the concept is “essentially contested” (Mansbridge 2013, p. 922).

This paper provides an overview of different conceptions of the common good that developed in the history of Western political thought, considers similar notions such as “public interest”, and explores related ideas in non-Western thought. In addition, the paper surveys contemporary theoretical debates on this subject, and points to different views on the relationship between the common good on the one hand and human rights and equality on the other.

Historical origins and meanings

The concept of the common good has played a prominent role throughout the history of Western political thought and can be traced back to ancient Greek philosophy. Aristotle (384–322 BC) in particular is widely regarded as a foundational thinker on this subject. While Plato (427–347 BC) also had a notion of the common good, Aristotle was the first to make the common good a central concept of his political theory (Morrison 2012).

Aristotle stated in his *Politics* (1998, 1252a1–3, p. 1) that the city-state is a particular type of community, and that, like all communities, it is “established for the sake of some good”. He specified that the good of the city-state is the most authoritative good, which encompasses all other goods. Aristotle argued that the purpose of political communities is to secure not merely the conditions of living, but those of living well (1998, 1252b29, p. 2). Throughout *Politics*, he used different phrases to refer to the good of the city-state, including *koinon agathon* (“common good”) and *koinêi sumpheron* (“mutual advantage”). What Aristotle always seemed to have in mind was the citizens’ happiness or good life, which he understood to consist of “noble actions” (1998, 1280b39–1281a4, p. 81). That is to say, the pursuit of happiness requires participation in public life and

the cultivation of virtue, rather than, say, the maximisation of wealth. Happiness in this sense should be promoted for all full members of the political community. This, however, excluded many inhabitants of city-states, such as women and slaves, whom Aristotle deemed unfit for a life of moral and intellectual virtue (Morrison 2012, p. 190).

In Book III of his *Politics*, Aristotle used the concept of the common good to distinguish several good and corrupt constitutions, or forms of government. On his account, “whenever the one, the few, or the many rule for the common benefit, these constitutions must be correct” (1998, 1279a28–29, p. 76). By contrast, if one person, a few, or a multitude only aim for their private benefit, then they should be considered to be deviations from the previous types. Aristotle called good government by one person “kingship”, good government by several people “aristocracy”, and good government by the many “polity”. Corresponding to these three types are three corrupt forms of government, namely “tyranny”, “oligarchy”, and “democracy” (1998, 1279b32–1280a5, pp. 78–9). In this classificatory scheme, the concept of the common good served as a normative standard, which allowed Aristotle to evaluate different kinds of regimes.

Other ancient thinkers also developed influential ideas about the common good, particularly the Roman writer and statesman Cicero (106–43 BC). In *On the Laws* (1928a, 3.3.8, p. 467), he pointed out that the good of the people is the highest law of the state. Cicero referred to the common good as *salus populi*, which literally translates as “safety of the people” but is commonly understood to refer, more generally, to their “welfare” or “wellbeing” (Mansbridge 2013, p. 915). Cicero also reflected on this subject in *On the Republic* (1928b, 1.25.39, pp. 64–5), where he noted that *res publica* is a “thing of the people”. As he further specified, “a people” does not mean any kind of association, but is “an assemblage of people in large numbers in agreement with respect to justice and a partnership for the common good [*utilitatis communio*]”. Thus, Cicero invoked a particular conception of the common good to distinguish republics (or states more generally) from other kinds of human association. He argued that, in republics, individuals do not pursue only their mutual advantage, but are also united by their agreement on principles of justice that govern their mutual relations.

Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), who drew on both Aristotle’s and Cicero’s ideas, developed the most influential Christian account of the common good. Following Aristotle, Aquinas (1993, 2.2) argued that the pursuit of self-interest leads to a deviant form of rule: “[A] tyrannical government is not just, because it is directed, not to the common good [*bonum commune*], but to the private good [*bonum privatum*] of the ruler”. In addition, Aquinas highlighted the need for shared notions of justice and of what benefits the political community. Yet, Aquinas was not only concerned with the flourishing of particular political societies, but also conceived of humans as part of a universal moral order (see Keys and Godfrey 2010). In contrast with ancient Greek and Roman theorists, however, he identified the common good with God. Consequently, Aquinas (1993, 2.1, p. 19) held that knowledge of the common good is available to Christian believers through revelation. In his words, “the good of the whole universe is that which is apprehended by God, Who is the Maker and Governor of all things”.

It is generally agreed that, at some point in the history of political thought, conceptions of the common good shifted from concerns with moral virtue and an ideal

political community towards more pragmatic considerations of the material wellbeing of individuals. Some scholars, notably M. S. Kempshall (1999), argue that this development had already taken place in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. A more common view is that modern conceptions of the common good evolved in the seventeenth century. The English philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) is said to have “subjectified” the notion of the good, to the extent that it was defined as anything that a person might desire (Keys and Godfrey 2010, p. 242). As Hobbes stated in his 1651 publication *Leviathan* (1996), “whatsoever is the object of any man’s Appetite or Desire; that is it, which he for his part calleth Good” (emphasis in original). The role of the state then became to ensure that individuals can pursue their personal ends in accordance with their common peace and safety, as opposed to promoting a moral vision of the good life.

A more individualistic conception of the common good also played an important role in early modern debates about religious liberty and constitutional government, especially in England (Gunn 1969). John Locke (1632–1704), in his *Two Treatises of Government* (1988), contrasted arbitrary power with legitimate rule, which is “limited to the public good of the Society” (p. 357). For Locke, this meant above all that the government ought to respect and protect people’s inalienable rights to life, liberty, and private property. Other characteristically modern conceptions put less emphasis on individual rights and rather viewed the common good as the sum of all individual goods, that is, as the “greatest happiness of the greatest number”. This notion is most closely associated with the utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832). Bentham had originally meant that government ought to maximise the utility, or happiness, of all members of a political community. Later in his life, he also acknowledged the danger that the wellbeing of a minority might be sacrificed to increase the sum total of happiness (see Burns 2005).

The Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) provides an example of an early attempt to link local realisations of the common good with a theory of international peace and cooperation. In his 1795 essay *Toward Perpetual Peace* (1991), Kant argued for the need to establish lasting peace between sovereign states, which would otherwise pose a constant threat to one another. To this end, all political societies ought to adopt “republican” constitutions, which are based on the idea of an original contract among all citizens and, in Kant’s view, have a pacifying effect on international relations (pp. 98–102). In addition, states should constitute a *foedus pacificum*, that is, a federation of republics that subject their relations to law (pp. 102–105). Kant did not envision an immediate realisation of his plan for world peace, and was conscious of practical obstacles, such as cultural differences. He suggested, however, that progress is possible over time. In his view, peace and mutual understanding between peoples become feasible when “culture grows and men gradually move towards greater agreement over their principles” (p. 114).

Some modern political theorists also called attention to the roles of ideological understandings of the common good in politics and society. Karl Marx (1818–83) and Friedrich Engels (1820–95), for instance, considered this matter in 1845 in *The German Ideology* (2014). According to them, every ruling class would have to ensure “for its interests to be represented as the common interest of all the members of society, i.e. expressed ideally: to give to its ideas the form of universality, to present them as the only

rational, universally applicable ones” (p. 183). Thus, Marx and Engels maintained that appeals to the common interest are not meant genuinely to advance the good of all, or to reconcile competing interests of different social groupings. Rather, such rhetoric serves the purpose of preventing subordinate classes from realising their true interests, which conflict with those of the dominant class.

Totalitarian states in the twentieth century used ideologies of the common good to demand extreme sacrifices from their populations. For example, the maxim of “general good before personal welfare” was part of Nazi propaganda (see Keys 2006, p. 13). The experiences of totalitarianism (a form of government that subjects all aspects of people’s lives to state control) and atrocities committed in the name of collectivist visions of society have influenced subsequent debates. Even writers who are critical of liberal individualism acknowledge the need to strike the right balance between the good of society and the good of individual persons. Jacques Maritain (1882–1973), a French Thomist philosopher, provides an early example of this development (1946). In the aftermath of the second world war, he argued that the common good “is neither the mere collection of private goods, nor the proper good of a whole which, like the species with respect to its individuals or the hive with respect to its bees, relates the parts to itself alone and sacrifices them to itself” (p. 437). Maritain specifically referred to the then fresh experience of totalitarianism to highlight the danger of collectivist notions of the good.

To summarise, the common good has played an important role in Western political thought since its beginnings in ancient Greece. The concept was often associated with higher purposes, and many writers contrasted acting or governing on behalf of the common good with the pursuit of narrow self-interest. In modern political thought, the common good came to be conceived in terms of individual rights and justice, material welfare, or utility maximisation. What is more, modern thinkers paid increasing attention to the possibility that individual or minority interests could be sacrificed in the name of the common good. As will become apparent in the remainder of this paper, ideas that developed in the history of political thought still resonate within contemporary discourse. In particular, many critics of liberalism have been inspired by pre-modern conceptions of the common good, as developed by past thinkers such as Aristotle and Aquinas.

Comparative or similar concepts

Synonyms for “common good” include “common profit”, “common utility”, and “common weal” (see OED Online 2017). Moreover, “common good” is close in meaning to “public good” and “public interest”, and all of these phrases are often used in the singular. Economists also refer to “public goods” in the plural. These are goods that are non-excludable, in the sense that others cannot be prevented from enjoying them, and non-rivalrous, meaning that one person’s consumption does not reduce their benefit for somebody else. Street lighting is often mentioned as an example of such a public good. Yet, in contrast to “common good”, the concept of public goods does not convey a sense of commonality among a group of individuals (Deneulin and Townsend 2007, p. 32).

Jane Mansbridge notes that, historically, the notions of “common good”, “public good”, and “public interest” were often used interchangeably with little or no difference

in meaning (2013, p. 914). The phrase “common good”, however, may have particular connotations. “Common” implies commonality among all individuals that belong to a certain group, whereas the word “public” usually refers to matters that are subject to collective action. In contrast to the term “good”, which often signifies moral ends that people ought to pursue, “interest” is frequently associated with material benefits (p. 914). The notion of the common good may also imply the existence of a “community” with shared moral values, as opposed to a pluralistic “society”. David Hollenbach asks rhetorically: “Where there is no shared vision of the good life does it make sense to speak of a community at all?” (2002, p. 22).

Some scholars draw a clear distinction between “common good” and “public interest”. Bruce Douglass (1980), for instance, emphasises that the concept of the common good, as it evolved in the Aristotelian and Thomistic traditions, was understood to refer to a good that is objectively valuable in a moral sense. Specifically, the phrase signified the conditions for developing and perfecting distinctively human virtues, rather than merely promoting material wellbeing. By contrast, “interest” may imply that something is valuable in a more subjective sense, even if particular interests of individuals or groups may also be justified in objective terms. In view of this distinction, Douglass suggests that appeals to the “common good”, as opposed to the “public interest”, are generally motivated by dissatisfaction with the latter phrase’s liberal and utilitarian connotations (1980, p. 114). Other writers take issue with the assumption of commonality, which informs the language of the common good. For example, Craig Calhoun (1998) argues for the need to distinguish between the binding interpersonal commitments that make up a “community” and the politically constituted “publics” of large contemporary societies (pp. 23–4).

The phrase “common good” is usually understood to mean more than the “good of all”, but there are different ways to conceive the relationship between the common benefit and the good of individuals. Mansbridge proposes a distinction between aggregative, procedural, and unitary conceptions (2013, pp. 918–21). Aggregative theories hold that the common good consists of conditions that benefit literally all members of society, such as certain principles of justice that everyone could agree to regardless of their social circumstances. Alternatively, the common good may be conceived in utilitarian terms as the greatest happiness of the greatest number, which is also an aggregative understanding. Procedural conceptions identify the common good with the outcome of a particular process, such as public deliberation under ideal conditions. Unitary theories define the common good in relation to a supposedly higher purpose, such as God or the nation.

To conclude, “common good” is often used interchangeably with “public good” and “public interest”. However, the terms “common”, “public”, “good”, and “interest” all have particular connotations, and some scholars are critical of the very language of the common good. Regardless of terminological issues, it is possible to distinguish between various conceptions of what the common good or public interest consists of. There are a variety of views on the way in which the good of individuals relates to that of a larger whole.

Similar concepts from other traditions

Most discussions of the common good in the English-language literature engage with ideas derived from the Western tradition, which originated with the philosophers of ancient Greece, and was later influenced by Christian theology. It then evolved in Europe during the eras of the Reformation and the Enlightenment, and subsequently had a global influence. The European origin of conceptions of the common good may cast some doubt on their usage to facilitate a new common ground across different cultures.

Scholars who explicitly draw on notions of the common good that were developed by Christian thinkers, such as Aquinas, have paid particular attention to the apparent parochialism of these ideas. While secular notions of the common good also originated in Western thought, Christian ideas may appear to be even more limited in their reach. It is often claimed, however, that their Christian origin does not restrict the applicability to Christian believers (see, for instance, Keys 2006, p. 3). Theologians also suggest that a Christian conception of the common good can be realised in a pluralistic society. Hollenbach, for instance, argues that “Christians can enter into intellectual solidarity with non-Christians in pursuit of the social and political good, even though they have divergent beliefs about ultimate questions of human destiny and salvation” (2002, p. 150).

It is sometimes noted that similar ideas on the common good also developed in non-Western thought. Mansbridge mentions parallel debates on the relationship between public and private interests, but does not refer to any particular terms as being equivalent to “common good” (2013, p. 924). Identifying notions that correspond with Western concepts is often difficult. The editors of a recent volume on Chinese and American perspectives on the common good point out that there is no direct equivalent to “common good” in the Chinese language, even if similar ideas can be found in the history of Confucian thought (Lo and Solomon 2014, p. 7). One candidate is the ancient concept of *datong*, which denotes a state of affairs in which individuals devote themselves to serving the greater good of society, rather than only seeking their personal benefit (Chen 2014). Various strands of Confucianism also considered ideals of political leadership and the exercise of moral virtue on behalf of the common good (de Bary 2004).

In the history of Islamic political thought, there are different notions that may correspond with the phrases “common good” or “public interest”. The concept of *maslaha*, which literally means “wellbeing” or “welfare”, was invoked in the first centuries of Islam to refer to policies that served society as a whole (see Opwis 2000, p. 2). From the eleventh century onwards, Islamic legal scholars argued that divinely revealed law (*shari’a*) ought to bind political decisions, and began to define *maslaha* in religious terms. After the fourteenth century, Islamic writings on the public good were dominated by the concept of *siyasa shar’iyya*, which denotes the binding nature of religious law for all political life. Such religious conceptions of the public interest have lost influence in the modern period. That said, both *maslaha* and *siyasa shar’iyya* continue to be invoked to justify or critique various political agendas (Opwis 2013). Contemporary scholars of Islamic law seek to establish an objective common good, rather than one that is constructed through public contestation, but there is debate among them as to what that good consists of (Zaman 2004).

In summary, discussions of the common good or public interest can also be found in non-Western political, legal and religious thought. A cursory overview of comparative ideas suggests that there is also considerable disagreement on the nature of the common good within other major traditions. Furthermore, there may be tensions between traditional non-Western ideas and modern conceptions that are influenced by Western thought.

Contemporary theoretical debates

In contemporary political philosophy, issues pertinent to the common good have been brought up during and in the wake of the so-called liberal–communitarian debate in the 1980s. These concerns include the moral universalism of liberal theories, the social embeddedness of individuals, and the need for a sense of community. There have also been debates on democracy and public deliberation, the conflictual nature of politics, and the limits of normative political theorising.

“Communitarian” political theorists took issue with several aspects of Anglophone liberal political philosophy, and particularly with John Rawls’ highly influential *A Theory of Justice*. In this work, Rawls set out to develop a non-utilitarian liberal political theory that establishes principles of justice, which should govern the basic structure of society. To achieve this end, he invoked the idea of an “original position”, in which individuals are not aware of their current wealth and social status (1971, pp. 17–21). According to Rawls, people in such a condition would agree on certain principles of justice, in the sense of fairness, to guarantee equal life chances for everyone. This requires equal basic liberties and limits to social and economic inequalities (pp. 60–5). One of Rawls’ central claims is that his liberal theory of justice as fairness does not promote a single vision of the good life, but enables individuals to pursue their own conceptions of the good. Thus, he pointed out that the purpose of government consists of “maintaining conditions and achieving objectives that are similarly to everyone’s advantage” (p. 233). That is to say, he conceived of the common good in terms of individuals’ “basic equal liberties” (p. 243).

Rawls’ theory was criticised by communitarian political theorists, who argued for the need to consider the role of social practices and understandings, and proposed modifications to liberal principles of justice and rights (cf. Kymlicka 2002, pp. 208–10). Some critics, such as Michael Walzer, objected to Rawls’ aim to establish universal requirements of justice, and consequent failure to observe how particular historical communities understand the value of certain goods. For Walzer, any given society is just “if its substantive life is lived in a certain way – that is, in a way faithful to the shared understandings of the members” (1983, p. 313). This argument amounts to a form of cultural relativism, which many political theorists consider to be problematic. Two main objections are that a community’s shared values may be difficult to identify because they are usually contested, and that cultural relativists misconstrue the nature of claims about justice. As Will Kymlicka (2002) puts it, the wrongness of certain practices, such as slavery, “is a reason for, not the product of, our shared understanding” (p. 211). In other words, a shared understanding develops because people come to agree that a practice

like slavery is (universally) wrong. Walzer (1994) himself later argued for “thin” universal moral standards.

A second line of communitarian critique was that the liberal concern with justice and rights does not adequately take into account how people participate in the good of their political community. Michael Sandel criticised Rawls for seeking to avoid promoting a substantive conception of the good by asserting the primacy of justice (Sandel 1982). On Sandel’s account, justice and equal rights alone cannot provide conditions for people to pursue a good life, because individual identities are socially constituted and a good life is only feasible if people understand themselves as members of a community. On these grounds he suggested that “when politics goes well, we can know a good that we cannot know alone” (1982, p. 183). In a later article, Sandel (2005) argued that the liberal “politics of rights” should be abandoned for a “politics of the common good” in order to revive communal life and public morality. See the next section for further discussion.

Other communitarians did not question the liberal concern with justice and rights as such, but argued that liberal political theorists like Rawls failed to pay sufficient attention to the social foundations of a well-ordered society. Charles Taylor claimed that citizens are only prepared to accept the legitimacy of a liberal political order and share the burdens of justice if they have a sense of community based on a shared conception of the common good. Therefore, it is necessary that “the common form of life is seen as a supremely important good, so that its continuance and flourishing matters to the citizens for its own sake and not just instrumentally to their several individual goods” (Taylor 1985, p. 213). While many political theorists agree that there is a need for a shared political identity, there is debate on the sources of such a sense of community. Some, including Taylor himself, highlight the role of a community’s shared way of life. Others, such as David Miller (1995), have argued for a liberal nationalism. Yet, the idea that a shared nationality is required to sustain political communities has been contested by other scholars (see, for instance, Mason 1999).

Since the 1990s, political theorists have also argued that democratic participation and active citizenship could provide members of society with a shared sense of belonging. Philip Pettit’s (1997) attempt to revive the tradition of civic republicanism provides an example of this development. In a later article, Pettit explicitly addressed the question of how a society’s common good should be understood. On his account, it is highly unlikely that any set of policies and practices would be in the net interest of all citizens as private individuals, because the concept of the common good could only refer to “the interests that people share in their role as citizens” (2004, p. 156). That is to say, citizens are united by the fact that they participate in the enterprise of democratic self-government. There is debate as to whether political participation should be seen as an intrinsic or an instrumental good. Some political theorists, including Pettit, argue that active citizenship is a value in itself. Others hold that democratic government and civic virtue are only means to sustain just political institutions and individual rights (cf. Kymlicka 2002, pp. 294–302).

There have also been debates on the nature of democratic decision-making, specifically on public deliberation as a way to determine the common good. Joshua Cohen (1989) has provided a seminal account of the ideal of deliberative democracy,

according to which collective decision-making should proceed through public argument and reasoning among equal citizens, rather than merely through democratic elections. Other political theorists, such as Chantal Mouffe (1999), have argued that the ideal of deliberative democracy cannot be realised, because it fails to account for the conflictual nature of politics. In Mouffe's view, the common good will always be contested and part of a political power struggle. Thus, she points out that "every consensus exists as a temporary result of provisional hegemony, as a stabilisation of power and... always entails some form of exclusion" (1999, p. 756). Consequently, Mouffe advocates an agonistic model of democracy that takes these features of "the political" as its point of departure.

Some political theorists have called into question the very enterprise of normative political philosophy, which makes prescriptions for political practice. Such "realist" political theorists agree that the members of a society must have something in common, yet they deny that there could be a substantive consensus on principles of justice or the common good. All that can be hoped for is mutual accommodation or a *modus vivendi*, which "create[s] an arena of contestation over the terms of a common life that contains conflict short of war" (Galston 2010, p. 440). Theorists who adhere to this approach also emphasise that any *modus vivendi*, or political settlement, is a temporary and ongoing achievement (Horton 2010). In one variation of this theme, Hans Sluga has recently argued that politics is "an ongoing search in which various conceptions of the good will be proposed and dismissed" (2014, p. 4). He suggests that the common good, and the way in which it is negotiated politically, could be envisaged in various ways. Moreover, the search for the common good may take place at the local, national, and international levels. But in any case, we should not assign the task of determining this good to expert philosophers (p. 6). There is a risk, however, that such a rejection of normative political philosophy simply leads to an endorsement of the status quo (see, for instance, Finlayson 2015).

To conclude, issues related to the common good have received increasing attention in the wake of the liberal–communitarian debate in contemporary political philosophy. There is considerable disagreement as to what the common good consists of and how it should be realised. Different political theorists advance competing views on the roles and relative importance of universal principles of justice and human rights, communal ways of life, sources of collective identity, active citizenship, public deliberation, and the conflictual nature of politics. One theme that emerges from the above discussion is that, on the one hand, political theory cannot prescribe normative principles without taking into account the realities of social and political life. On the other hand, scholars who highlight the limits of normative theorising could end up endorsing problematic practices, which may be viewed as being part of the good of a given community.

Relationship to human rights and equality

From the discussion in the previous sections it seems that there is potentially a tension between appeals to the common good and the promotion of human rights and equality. Many contemporary scholars who seek to revive notions of the common good

acknowledge that this concept has been used in the past to justify social and political inequalities, and the suppression of parts of the population (Etzioni 2004, p. 3; Honohan 2002, pp. 150–1; Riordan 2008, p. 6; Taylor 1997, pp. 144–5). For instance, as mentioned above, Aristotle sought to promote the virtuous life of full members of a city-state, yet not of all inhabitants, in the name of the common good. Contemporary theoretical debates point to various ways in which the relationship between the common good and human rights and equality could be conceived.

Some scholars have criticised what they perceive as an excessive concern with civil and human rights, particularly in contemporary American politics. In an oft-cited book on this subject, Mary Ann Glendon (1991) argued that liberal “rights talk” has impoverished political life and eroded the social foundations of individual freedom. She also claimed that the language of individual rights “regularly promotes the short-run over the long-term, crisis intervention over preventive measures, and particular interests over the common good”. Communitarian critics of liberal political philosophy have expressed similar views. Sandel, as mentioned previously, suggested that the liberal “politics of rights” should be abandoned for a “politics of the common good” (2005, pp. 147–55). What he had in mind was a particular neo-Aristotelian theory of the common good, according to which individuals can only flourish by participating in the public life of their community. As Sandel correctly anticipated, however, his appeal to an Aristotelian conception of virtuous political life seemed “nostalgic at best and dangerous at worst” to many critics (2005, pp. 154).

Other communitarians do not reject outright the language of rights, but merely suggest that the concept of the common good could serve as a “counterbalance to rights talk” (Keys 2006, p. 9). For instance, Amitai Etzioni (2006) proposes to combine a concern for universal human rights with particularistic conceptions of the good, which may in some cases override individual rights. That is to say, the values of particular communities could trump universal human rights in certain areas of national and international public policy, yet not generally (pp. 73–7). For instance, while torture and ethnic cleansing are never justifiable, denial of free expression or the violation of women’s rights could be defended in accordance with the values of more traditional communities (p. 78). Elsewhere, Etzioni (2004) argues for restrictions to the right to privacy for the sake of the common good of national security (pp. 30–55).

Liberal political theorists take issue with appeals to a community’s traditional notion of the good life, which may risk glossing over historical injustices committed in the name of the common good and could further exclude marginalised groups (2002, p. 259). The very concept of “community” is politically contested, and some scholars argue that it has non-progressive implications when it is invoked in political practice (Frazer, 1999). In this context, liberal political theorists often emphasise that their concern with rights arises from the possibility that communal moral standards conflict with, and are invoked to justify, the suppression of minorities (Gutmann 1985, p. 319).

Some liberal political philosophers maintain that the common good actually consists of certain conditions of equal rights. John Rawls, as mentioned above, asserted the primacy of justice over alternative conceptions of the common good, which he conceived in terms of two principles. First, “each person is to have an equal right to

the most extensive basic liberty compatible with a similar liberty for others”. Second, “social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are both (a) reasonably expected to be to everyone’s advantage, and (b) attached to positions and offices open to all” (Rawls 1971, p. 60). From this perspective, liberal political theory is not opposed to a politics of the common good, but rather committed to the view that the good of a pluralistic society consists of justice and equal human rights.

Democratic theory provides a different perspective that focuses on rights and equality not as the content of the common good, but as conditions for politically determining that content. In the terminology introduced above, this would be a procedural, rather than aggregative, conception. In one seminal account, Joshua Cohen asks how it could be ensured that appeals to the common good, around which public deliberation should be organised, do not merely disguise personal or class advantages. He suggests that public deliberation itself, which aims to arrive at a rationally motivated consensus, will neutralise relations of power and subordination. Yet, this requires that political institutions facilitate the autonomy of citizens and material conditions conducive to deliberative democracy (Cohen 1989, pp. 24–6). For example, private resources must not dominate the agendas of political parties (p. 31). Conversely, this view would imply that inequalities in power and wealth reduce the prospect of realising the common good through public deliberation.

Some theorists such as Alasdair MacIntyre offer a pessimistic account of the prospects for a politics of the common good in contemporary societies. MacIntyre argues that political communities cannot survive or even flourish if politics is reduced to the role of providing conditions for individuals to pursue their personal ends. Rather, what is required is a shared understanding that connects the good of the community with the wellbeing of its members in a more substantive way. In particular, people must share a commitment to ordering their individual and collective goods through what MacIntyre calls “communal learning” (1998, pp. 241–2). He suggests that this ideal of a participatory politics of deliberation can only be realised in small-scale communities in which members are relatively equal in economic terms, and share an understanding of their common goods, virtues, and rules (pp. 247–50). These conditions may still be met in certain local communities, but in today’s large, pluralistic societies “no place is left any longer for a politics of the common good” (p. 239).

Other scholars also emphasise the importance of local sites of democracy, but adopt radically different views from those of MacIntyre. For instance, Ash Amin (2006) outlines a model of the good city, in which people of different classes, genders, and ethnicities can negotiate living together in spite of the fact that they do not form a single community. He points out that a good city should be “imagined as an ever-widening habit of solidarity built around different dimensions of the urban common weal” (p. 1012). While Amin aims to reclaim the city as public and democratic space, he also highlights the gap between liberal talk of universal rights and the practice of restricted rights, particularly in cities in the global south. In Amin’s words, “a new paradox of rights has arisen, involving constraints on the civil freedom of many urban-dwellers in the name of the individual rights of the so-called majority” (p. 1017). Amin is not opposed to the language of rights,

but merely criticises their insufficient realisation. In his view, rights are one important dimension around which the urban “common weal” should be organised.

In conclusion, how rights and equality relate to the common good depends on the way in which the latter concept is understood. If the common good is identified with a community’s values and conception of the good life, it may conflict with universal human rights. Historically, conceptions of the common good have been invoked to justify existing inequalities and discrimination against minorities. Some scholars appeal to the common good as a counterbalance to an overemphasis on rights, yet this may raise the question of which human rights may be compromised for the sake of the common good. Liberal political theorists maintain that a society’s common good actually consists of equal rights for all of its members, or that rights and equality are instrumental to politically realising the common good.

Endnotes

- 1 See Daniel Sage (2012). The most recent example is “Blue Labour”, a renewal movement within the Labour Party.

The views expressed in this paper are those of the author, and are not necessarily endorsed by the British Academy, but are commended as contributing to public debate.

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