

# **The common good: a false dilemma?**

## **Bien común o bien individual: ¿falso dilema?**

***María Elizabeth de los Ríos Uriarte\****

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### **Abstract**

The article addresses the problem of thinking of the common good as something alien to the individual good and provides reflections that overcome this dichotomy through Maritain's thinking by betting on a harmony between the first and the second so that individuals and society can complement each other and seek their own development and improvement. Similarly, the reflection on the common good is complemented by reading from the principles of the Christian Social Doctrine to complement it.

*Keywords:* common good, individual good, individual, society, justice.

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\* Professor of the Faculty of Bioethics of the Universidad Anáhuac México, México.  
Email: marieli829@hotmail.com  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9600-445X>  
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The origin of the debate between individual and society can be traced back to the time of the advent of modern rationality, where the human being knows himself free and independent of his environment and chooses, as Kant would mention «his coming of age.» Thus, he is skeptical about the great paradigms of thought that had permeated until then, and functioned as regulators of individual and collective behaviors, thus, among them, the idea of society vanishes before the dazzle of unlimited freedom itself and emerges then the desire to position oneself above society and exalt their individuality.

Imbedded then in the ideals of modernity, namely, progress and reason, human nature is separated and untied from its environment and its community.

Countless are the consequences that can be named for this individualistic rationality, from the atrocities of Auschwitz to the catastrophic effects of climate change, hinting at the dilemma that arises when personal desire overcomes the collective good, leaving aside the essential characteristic of human sociability. .

In this way the contemporary debate between individual good and common good, can also be translated as the dilemma between happiness and duty; between what is wanted and desired on a personal and private level; and, what is owed towards society. It is usually considered as one or the other, that is, as if the individual good excludes the common wellness or vice versa, as they are perfectly reconcilable. The individual good can be reconciled with the common good and the latter must strive for it so that both constitute a harmony that allows both full individual human development and optimal common human development.

Thus, this article will address, at first, some of the historical conceptions around the common good that have led to problematize it as a false dilemma, secondly, we will analyze Maritain's proposal regarding the common good that overcomes dichotomous

Historical visions, in the third moment, the characteristics and elements of the common good will be analyzed to, in a moment,

relate it to other principles that strengthen it and make it more practical such as the principle of the universal destiny of goods.

## **I. Individual or common good: the false dilemma**

To propose that opting for the individual good, that is, for one's own hopes, wishes and desires, is incompatible with the good of society that moves more in the order of duty than in the order of preference is a false dilemma. Let us look at some historical positions:

Already Aristotle who proposed that the good life consisted of the pursuit of happiness. However, this had to go necessarily through the practice of the virtues of *phronesis* and justice, that is, through the application and implementation of practical wisdom and of justice as virtues that harmonized the place of the individual in society seeking both the satisfaction of the needs of the former and the harmony of the body of the latter (1).

For St. Thomas, the question of the common good is necessarily linked to the natural law while it is directed to it in such a way that if the natural law in man leads him to pursue the good of happiness, it will also apply as for the community life of the human being. That is, if man seeks his happiness being necessarily social, he must also seek happiness coming from the society or community where he is inserted and thus, the natural law not only will dictate him the precepts for his good if not for the common good (2).

On the other hand, the response to this dilemma in Kant from the autonomous ethics (3) makes the dilemma disappear by betting on the fulfillment of the ethical imperative in each individual. That is to say, it is enough to fulfill the internal duty of treating the human being always as an end, and never as a means, to harmonize individual and common good. However, it is not believed that Kant bet to meet with the other or the recognition of his dignity as a starting point; rather, his was an individualistic proposal

where people acted more for a duty imposed than by an agreed reflection.

Nietzsche and his joy for living (4) and the excess in the actions of each individual leans the balance more towards the pursuit of one's own happiness over the duties they have towards society. Only the individual can be the «superman». In fact, it seems that even for him, society is a crushing weight that prevents him from advancing on his path for it binds him in the figure of the camel that carries moralistic faults.

Lévinas (5), unlike Kant and Nietzsche, bets more on the ethics of compassion, on the encounter with the other and their consequent internal demand to respect him as another self; his is a more communal and less individualistic position.

Within the most current positions, Fernando Savater (6) takes up Nietzschean vitalism and affirms that self-respect or self-esteem, is the source from which all activity emanates, including ethical activity, thus, the passage from being to duty or must be, is given by wanting to be or wanting to become.

Victoria Camps (7) takes up a rather more intermediate position and points to the notion of citizenship as belonging to a collective but through an act of autonomy, that is to say, it recognizes the importance of the social body but only as a recognition process, rather than as an adhesion to the same.

In this way, different positions have been built around the dilemma that, without the purpose of covering them all and in their entirety, I will limit myself to describe below:

1) Communitarianism: affirms that assets are discovered in society and that the state must intervene to guarantee equal opportunities in access to those assets; therefore, it also states that it is possible to discover and establish bonds of commitment to the community to define «communal aims» that benefit all members of a community.

Among the most prominent representatives of this position is Charles Taylor (8) for whom the principle of authenticity is the

axis that will harmonize the role of each individual in society since it is defined in the dialogue with the other and with the others of such Luckily, that the definition of oneself, includes the definition of the others.

Another representative is Alasdair McIntyre (9), a neo-Aristotelian philosopher who proposes to bet on communities that share a vision of good, for this, internal goods and external goods are differentiated. Each person can acquire these ones with the fruit of their work and of their savings. They must satisfy personal own needs. However the internal goods are those that, choosing them, not only cover individual or personal own needs, but also those of the others are also covered; that is, it is the internal goods that give sense of belonging to a group or a community and, therefore, they are the ones that should be chosen in the first place.

A third representative is Michael Walzer (10) for whom the assets in a community must be distributed through objective and clear criteria that allow justice standards. For this, each good must have its own distribution criteria based on its essence and purpose and no criteria must be overlapped to distribute a different good than the one for which it was designed. In this way, individual assets are achieved by commonly agreed standards.

2) On the other hand, there are the liberalist positions that propose individual rights and the individual good over the common good. Among its main representatives are Robert Nozick (11) for whom the state must intervene minimally in the lives of citizens since the right to private property, that is, the right of ownership, must prevail over any duty. That is to say, the satisfaction of individuals' goods or assets have to be disconnected from the common vision.

Another representative of liberalism is John Rawls; however, since his position is a position that contemplates the right to equality within the right to individual freedom, his position is considered an egalitarian liberalism. For Rawls, everyone must seek their own happiness and the state must distribute the means equitably

so that the former is achieved. Now, within his theory, he proposes two principles that must be fulfilled so that there can be harmony and justice, namely:

1) Each person must have a right equal to the most extensive total system of basic freedoms compatible with a similar system of freedom for all (12).

2) The economic and social inequalities must be structured in such a way that they are for: a) a greater benefit of those less advantageous, in accordance with a principle of fair savings and b) linked to the positions and functions available to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunities (12).

In this order of ideas, Rawls proposes that the first principle takes precedence over the second and the second part of the second over the first. This first part of the second principle is also known as the principle of difference, as it attempts to cover the differences between the most advantageous and those that are less fortunate.

Based on this principle, the adjective of egalitarianism has been attributed to its current as it promotes a social sense that requires compensation prior to the choice of individual goods, thereby showing a deep concern to reduce economic and social inequalities.

As can be seen, in many and varied occasions the dilemma between the individual good and the common good has come to light in ethical, political and social discussions. Given this, it would be worth clarifying an issue before continuing:

It must be stated and specified, first, that the common good should not be understood, as the sum of individual goods, for this is a widespread belief that does not reflect the real and complete meaning of the concept. When speaking of the common good, it must be understood as an intrinsic purpose to our social being. It is known that, when fulfilling it, individual goods will be equally fulfilled. That is, it is a greater good in that it constitutes the full realization of the human being within of his/her society; hence, a common good assumption that does not encourage the personal

development of each of the members that conform the group, will not be such.

To confirm the above, it is convenient to move into the notion that Maritain proposes for a common good, the following will be presented below:

## **II. Common good from the communitarian personalism of Maritain, its characteristics and constituent elements**

For Jaques Maritain (13), the human being belongs to a whole greater than he who is the community. Therefore, his own good must contribute to the common good but this cannot, for his part, disregard the former, in such a way that it will be ensured that individual good and common good advance harmoniously both for the full benefit of each individual and for that of the whole community.

It should be emphasized that in this scheme the person cannot conceive of himself as isolated from his society or that he lacks that, that is, the person is to society what society is to the person.

It is worth mentioning that in Maritain the reductionism presented in Saint Thomas is resolved where it is affirmed that the person is a part of a whole greater than him. This problem, thus stated, presented an aporia, while, when affirming that the person, being a part, must be subject to the whole, that is, to the community, implies denying that this is a substance in itself and downplay its ontological essence and, to its dignity. To solve this problem, Maritain identifies two levels in a person: that of his individuality and that of his personality.

The person considered in his individuality is ordered in the plane of his materiality (13, p. 37), that is, in function of it, the human being has vital needs such as feeding, protecting from the weather, acquiring health services, etc. The foregone means that

this level recognizes what of material there is in the person and considered in this regard, it is he, the individual who is subject to his society as long as he must provide these material conditions for his subsistence.

Regarding the second level, that of his personality, Maritain states that the person is not only matter but also that he has spiritual aspirations (13, p. 42). It is in this level where he communicates them to the others who form the social body. This level is then, that of their values, their beliefs, their ideals and, therefore, it will now be the society, the one who must remain subjected to the person, as long as it determines and defines the other one based on its free and spiritual activity.

Once these two levels are established, Maritain solves the false dilemma posed between the part and the whole. Thus, both notions, the person and the community are, in themselves, a whole but in their relationship both meet a reciprocity of one towards the other, where you must ensure both the individuality and the social character that supports it (13, p. 56).

For this reason, Maritain defines the common good as «the convenient human life of the multitude» (13, p. 57) since it affirms that it is about each one being able to live fully as the community does. This affirms both the person and his community without excluding or privileging anyone.

A remark to the previous idea is that Maritain distinguishes objective goods from subjective goods to achieve harmony between person and society. Objective assets are all those structures, institutions and legal systems that allow for an organized society and a fair distribution of resources and assets. While subjective assets are the scope of the ethical and moral values of people of such a kind that, for there to be harmony, it is required that objective goods align with subjective goods and vice versa; otherwise, they will enter into an individual and society conflict and the common good will not be achieved.



A final warning results from conceiving that the common good is not the ultimate goal of the person, although this should always be sought as a means –not as an end– to reach the ultimate goal of the man who is the union and full experience of God and his love in the world.

So far, Maritain's thinking. Now, if we analyze the proposal of the two levels of the human being, that of his materiality and that of his personality, effectively promote a harmony between individual and society. However, it seems that certain problems are not resolved as the fact that our rational apparatuses and spiritual structures sometimes are limited precisely according to the social conditions in which we are inserted. This limit can represent a problem, for the search of the common good insofar as it could lead to a process of privileging some over others or, even more so, of marginalizing those with whom we do not share, for example, the same aspirations. Because of the above, I consider that Maritain's proposed theory lacks the *a priori* of justice understood as equality of opportunities as Sen and currently Nussbaum understood it.

In spite of affirming that the internal structures can be organized in such a way that they promote and defend a fair distribution of resources, the idea in itself that, in fact they do it, is utopian and to think that only by the fact that it is so, the common good would be achieved is even more so.

It is undeniable that two of the conditions for the promotion of the common good are justice and peace. Without a correct distribution of opportunities and goods and without efforts to achieve a harmonious coexistence where dialogue takes precedence over marginalization and violence, the common good becomes an unattainable chimera. For this reason, it requires constant action by each one of us and by the community as a whole to promote living conditions that make it possible to achieve standards that are more egalitarian for all human beings.

As long as the element that allows each individual to project his or her aspirations into society and the latter allows them to operate

within their own organization, opening the way to plurality, not achieve the common good will. What allows, then, that level to be projected is, then, that it has covered, at least, its most elementary needs that are, as Maritain affirmed, the material conditions of their existence.

The absence or impossibility of achieving these conditions, do not allow the subjective values to be aligned with the objectives or vice versa. Hence, the urgent need to bring justice into the discussion.

Because of the space required, I will not address all the conceptions of justice that have historically been erected. I will only briefly mention that justice requires, first, to return people to the original state of well-being before they suffered harm, that is, to the level that allows them to overcome the state of war with each other and focus on the observance of ethical, aesthetic and spiritual values and principles. This justice has traditionally been called restitutive (14), which focuses on the victim and not on the punishment that the victimizer deserves; it is therefore a matter of recovering the original conditions.

Note that we speak of a victim in the broad sense of the word because people who cannot have their most basic needs covered are also considered victims; that is, a direct act of harm is not necessary for it to exist, in fact.<sup>2</sup>

Neither should the fair distribution of resources be understood as equality at the material level, but rather as the assurance of conditions that allow everyone to have access to the goods that are considered necessary and adequate for their full development. Moreover, at present and exceeding the level of opportunities proposed by Sen, Martha Nussbaum (15) speaks of the assurance of the level of development of capacities that allow, for their part, to take possession of the opportunities to have better standards of living.

For this reason, in order to achieve the harmonization of the individual good and the common good, in Maritain's proposal, the previous step of justice is required.

Another difficulty found in Maritain's thought and which I will only outline here is the fact that there are many emotions and behaviors in human beings that can bring him back to the desire to collaborate in the search for the common good. Envy, dissatisfaction, jealousy, revenge, honor, fame, reputation, are elements that do not bring the common good closer but, on the contrary, distance it from it. Thus, ideally our values and aspirations are poured into a society that gladly accepts them and assimilates them to the extent of even helping to realize them but, in practice, the simple harmonization of levels or objectives is not enough, prior actions are required.

With the above, it is affirmed that the common good is not an action carried out at a given moment but, like peace, are constructions that demand notable efforts daily, a willingness always to build community and to seek interests that are common with a society. Thus, the common good is understood more as a dynamic principle that requires constant reconfiguration than as a goal to be achieved through a concrete plan of action.

It would be interesting to bet on investigating the deep causes that lead human beings to put individual interests above the common ones, since it is not the simple ignorance of the social component of our essence, but rather, also the human psyche that combines rational and emotional elements. Therefore, it is convenient that the common good be a notion in which the individual-society conflict is further investigated.

A possible route of such reflection perhaps, as a preliminary reflection, could be given in the current theory of recognition postulated by Honneth (16). In it, the human need to be seen and named by others stands out, so that, if this does not happen, the individual will always continue to impose himself before society in an act of violent affirmation of himself before others.

Once again, there are many other causes that make the common good so difficult to achieve and that, like peace-building, are

so dynamic and procedural that progress is made in almost imperceptible and very slow steps.

The sole material dimension of satisfaction of needs and the sole spiritual plane of projection of ideas and beliefs do not place us on the threshold of the possibility of harmonizing them because, even if this were possible, their harmonization could remain on the plane of tolerance and not of the construction of the common good. Other elements must therefore come into play: Honneth points to recognition, Ricoeur to the recovery of the word (17), Galtung (18) to the establishment of the culture of peace that permeates human structures and modifies individual action, etcetera.

Thus, once again, the prelude of the common good is, on the one hand, justice and, on the other, the construction of peace. If we do not create these two preconditions, the common good will never be possible or feasible.

Finally, it must be stated that the common good has certain characteristics that distinguish it from its sometimes-erroneous meanings.

### **III. Characteristics of the common good**

In the first place, this is objective, that is, it does not correspond to ideologies that seek to generate illusions of equality and justice, but that its parameters directly affect the improvement of the lives of individuals and the community in general.

Secondly, the common good derives, as Saint Thomas already affirmed, from the natural law, therefore, it is inscribed within the order of human nature and is separated from political positions or confessional positions. The common good is sought because, in the first instance, the good of the human being is sought and, since it is intrinsically social, the good of the society is sought in the second place, so it is natural to seek the social good in the search for individual good.

Thirdly, the common good is, as we have already said, redistributable, that is to say, it pays for the benefit of both the person and the society and if the benefit of either were missing, then there would be no real common good.

A fourth characteristic of the common good is that it is integral, that is, it encompasses both the material dimensions of the existence of the person and society as well as the spiritual ones. Therefore, from the conditions of human subsistence such as food, work, housing, clothing, to spiritual aspirations such as freedom of belief and thought, access to culture and education, time of creation and recreation, are matters of the common good and, if desired, both are desired as well as the other.

In the fifth place, it should be noted that while the pursuit of the common good obliges all human beings. It is the own and more specific task of the state or government to ensure the fulfillment of the interests of both the people and the community of people since the authority of the fair distribution of the goods and the correct distribution of the benefits obtained rests with it.

So far the position of the common good in Maritain, then we will address the principle of the common good from its strengthening in the Christian Social Doctrine in order to describe it as the maximum ethical of human behavior.

#### **IV. The principle of the common good in the Christian Social Doctrine**

It is important to understand that the principles of the Social Doctrine of the Church constitute a light to understand and live social life from reason and faith. In that sense they constitute a corpus that guides human action on the horizon of justice and equality of all human beings and that seeks to promote peace, justice and truth in all human spheres.

It is also worth mentioning that these principles cover both the human relationships of individuals and those in which political relations of an international nature intervene, which is, they are integrators and guides of human activity in general.

While it is true that all the principles of social doctrine are articulated and interconnected, in this section we will focus on the principle of the common good because it is the subject discussed and the principle of the universal destiny of goods because of its proximity to the first and its relevance to the subject.

With respect to the principle of the common good, it must be stated that it is based on the dignity and equality of all people and it follows that it is «the set of conditions of social life that make associations and each one possible of its members the fullest and easiest achievement of their own perfection» (14, p. 123).

Thus, as we stated earlier, the common good should not be understood as the sum of the individual goods, but rather as that good, that, being indivisible, is for all and every one without any preference or particular and individual domain prevailing over it. Thus, the dimension of moral good takes on a community dimension when talking about the common good that is to be promoted, protected, sought, increased and achieved by all.

This principle, therefore, highlights the natural sociality of the human being as a being that is put at the service of others but its promotion is given, also and at the same time, by that group of people we call community.

It should be emphasized, however, that the common good is changing different ways and forms as times and societies change, therefore, it responds dynamically to the achievement of the conditions that allow the human being, increasingly, higher quality and improvement.

These configurations «concern, above all, to the commitment for peace, the correct organization of the powers of the State, a strong legal system, the safeguarding of the environment, the provision of essential services for people. Some which are, at the

same time, human rights: food, housing, work, education and access to culture, transport, health, free circulation of information and protection of religious freedom» (14, p. 125).

Therefore, the common good is the duty of all and every one, in such a way that the good of the other is sought with the same zeal that their own is sought and with constant actions that affirm the responsibility and co-responsibility between people and their societies, between the whole and the part. In this sense, it is not only a duty but also a right, that is, as all are obliged to achieve it, the assets that result from it, must be enjoyed and indulged by all in the same way. That is why we stated earlier that it is remunerable for both the person and society.

For the Social Doctrine, this principle is the obligation of all but with special emphasis on the State since it is he, who must make accessible the goods to all people: «to ensure the common good, the government of each country has the specific duty of harmonize with justice the various sectoral interests» (14, p. 126).

It is important to clarify that the common good must be inscribed within the horizon of the transcendent dimension of the human being, that is, by itself; it is worthless and only acquires it when it is understood in relation to its ultimate goal that is the establishment of the Kingdom of God. In this way, the common good is not merely socio-economic well-being, but the means for more fully human fulfillment; this is the true end of the common good.

Together and deeply interconnected to the common good, there is the principle of the universal destiny of goods. This is because all goods created by God, are of common use for all people and that we all have the right to use and enjoy them: «God has designated the land and how much it contains for the use of all men and people. Consequently, the created goods must reach everyone equally under the aegis of justice and with the company of charity» (14, p. 127).

Under this view, everything created must be to meet everyone's needs without any being seen as privileged or excluded.

Once again, this principle emerges from the basis of basic human needs, but is not limited to that, but as long as these promote that, the person can reach the ultimate goal to which he aspires. Therefore, this principle even surpasses any legal system or social, political or economic model. However, this principle, in order to operate correctly, requires a delimitation of its objects and their modes, that is, it needs to rely, for its operation, on national and international standards and regulations.

Much has been debated if this principle is opposed to the right to private property. The Social Doctrine of the Church has made it very clear by stating that as long as private property is the source or the means for human promotion, in order to generate more just and solidary human conditions. This must be the result of honest work and livelihoods, which does not opposes the universal destiny of goods, but it, must be promoted as a means to complement it.

Thus: «private property is an essential element of a genuinely social and democratic economic policy and is a guarantee of a straight social order [...] private property is, in essence, only an instrument for respecting the principle of the universal destiny of goods, and therefore in the last analysis, a means and not an end» (14, p. 125).

What the Social Doctrine proposes is that they have equal conditions so that everyone can obtain private property that guarantees autonomy and personal and family development. However, they also warn of the temptations to absolutize the right to own property by leading, this idea, to increasing slavery by converting them into ends and not means.

A final note regarding this principle is its inclination towards the preferential option for the poor in the sense that it accentuates a special procurement of goods to those who do not have the mini-



mum conditions to reach their improvement. To the poor and marginalized, whose misery challenges and demands Justice.

In this way, one must be very sharp with considering an act of retribution towards a person in conditions of misery and poverty, not as an act of charity, but as one of justice.

So far the analysis of the Social Doctrine of the Church. As it can be seen, the principle of the common good is strengthened with that of the universal destiny of goods and, therefore, reaches shades much more concrete that facilitate its application.

## Conclusions

In these pages we have addressed the issue of the common good and tried to highlight its understanding and historical relevance.

In doing so, we have detected that there is a false dilemma in raising the issue of the common good in a dichotomous way, leading to the extreme of having to choose either individual interests or collective assets as if the person and society were polarized entities and in constant confrontation. Thus, considering that, they are not, but rather that they complement each other; we approached the position of Maritain that tries to solve this false dilemma by betting on the person and the community. Both as a whole but with a common objective that is the search for common good in such a way that one does not remain above the other but that both can display their maximum aspirations in a minimum of harmonious coexistence.

At the same time, some weaknesses were detected in Maritain's proposal, which were reflected on as the need to create preconditions that would allow both the individual and society to harmonize their interests and look after the common good. These conditions are justice and peace.

The principle of the Common Good was also approached from the Christian Social Doctrine, with the objective of complemen-

ting its understanding. It was analyzed how it cannot be separated from the principle of the universal destiny of goods as long as both are articulated to express the need for a correct and fair distribution of goods to achieve both the individual good as well as the community good.

With all this, we can conclude with three reflections. In the first place, the common good is a demand of human nature in the same way that the search for good is. This, depending on the fact that the person cannot be separated from society and it is not understood without the first.

Secondly, it must be said that the common good cannot be reduced to simplistic readings that fall into political or ideological positions. Rather it should be understood as an anthropological condition and ethical requirement.

Finally, the common good must always be understood as intrinsically linked to justice and peace as preconditions for their pursuit. Since what makes it possible, to harmonize interests is first to create a level playing field and to investigate the root causes of these inequalities and of their manifestation in acts of reaffirmation of one another, sometimes even in violence.

The relationship between the common good and peace as a precondition for its fulfilment is therefore open to reflection.

## **Bibliographic notes**

<sup>1</sup> It also calls «restorative justice» and does not always refer to the material conditions prior to the state of damage or impairment if not, for example, to the original account assuming that the lie has been established as a mechanism of violence.

<sup>2</sup> Johan Galtung mentions the type of damage generated from what he calls the «structural violence» that is the one exerted by institutions and organizations, including official ones that generate structures of inequality in individuals depriving them, even, of their vital needs.

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