



## Common Advantage and Common Good

Michael A. Smith

---

Volume 51, numéro 1, février 1995

Société-Religion-Christianisme

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/400896ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/400896ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

---

Éditeur(s)

Faculté de philosophie, Université Laval

ISSN

0023-9054 (imprimé)

1703-8804 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

---

Citer cet article

Smith, M. A. (1995). Common Advantage and Common Good. *Laval théologique et philosophique*, 51(1), 111–125. <https://doi.org/10.7202/400896ar>

## COMMON ADVANTAGE AND COMMON GOOD

Michael A. SMITH

*RÉSUMÉ : Dans le cadre de la tradition aristotélico-thomiste, l'auteur pose la question du rapport entre le bien commun politique et d'autres biens, surtout le bien privé de l'individu. Il constate que chez Aristote et Thomas d'Aquin, la discussion met en lumière non une opposition du bien commun au bien de chaque citoyen, mais plutôt une opposition du bien commun aux intérêts privés des gouvernants.*

*SUMMARY : The author draws upon the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition to address the question of the relationship of the political common good to other goods, especially the private good of the individual. In both Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas, the discussion is framed, not as an opposition of the common good to that of individual citizens, but rather as an opposition of the common good to the private interests of rulers.*

---

### I

During the 1930's and 1940's, there was a great deal of debate, sometimes quite intense, on the nature and limits of the common good. Is the common good a final cause, the greatest good of a human person? Or, is it a means by which a person attains his or her private good? This debate took place in a particular historical context, that of the Fascist and Stalinist totalitarian regimes in Europe. The philosophers involved in this debate confronted the challenge of formulating a political philosophy which, all the while recognizing the value of the role of the State, emphasizes the dignity of the human person – without, however, reducing this dignity to the interests of the individual in the classical liberal sense.

The problem of the common good is still relevant today, at a time when political discourse often seems to oppose the good of the political community to that of each of its members. In this context, reference to the common good is often interpreted as opening the door to totalitarianism, as constituting an implicit if not explicit threat to the rights of the individual. By the same token, the good of a human person is

sometimes perceived in opposition to that of a people or a nation, with the latter being reduced to the role of a mere means.

In this article, I intend to trace the roots of this debate in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and his *Politics*. Then, I shall describe the way in which Thomas Aquinas takes up this discussion in his philosophical and theological writings. As this inquiry will show, Aristotle poses the question of the common advantage, not in opposition to the advantage of a particular citizen, but in opposition to the private interests of those in power. Aquinas poses the question in the same context. The development which Aquinas brings to this discussion consists of specifying that the political common good is situated in a hierarchy of common goods, and that it is not the only common good which must be considered.

## II

For Aristotle, politics is based on ethics. Legislation must foster the good life so that each citizen can live happily. In Book I, Chapter 2 of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1094b8-11), Aristotle writes that it is more "godlike" to obtain and preserve the good of the whole political community than that of one man alone, although the good is worth being pursued even for only one man. In this regard, Thomas Aquinas notes that the good is a final cause. Now, a cause is more powerful when it extends to several effects. The good of all citizens, therefore, takes precedence over that of one person. In commenting on the word "godlike" (*theioteron*) used by Aristotle, Aquinas explains that God is the ultimate cause of all goods, and that the political good is godlike (*divinum*) by similitude.<sup>1</sup> Thus, the common good is "divine" (like God, or – according to Aristotle – like the god) in the sense that the political good is the last final cause in a given order, that of human affairs.

The good is that which is desired for itself, as an end in itself and not as a means subordinate to an end. Referring to the political good, Aristotle speaks of the self-sufficiency of the good (1097a35-1097b22). Happiness, which Aristotle identifies with the ultimate good, is "sufficient" in itself; it alone makes life complete and lacking in nothing. Aristotle takes care to note that the sufficiency of happiness, and therefore of the good, is not conceivable in a strictly individual perspective. In order to be complete, happiness must extend to one's spouse, one's children, one's relatives and fellow citizens. As we shall see later, happiness is a common good, of which the personal possession is not to be found without a life in common, which is the sharing of happiness.

In his commentary, Aquinas notes that the self-sufficiency of the good implies the fact that happiness is the good in its complete state.<sup>2</sup> The endpoint of a natural movement, he writes, must be complete (*integrum*), since nature is not lacking in what is necessary. Thomas uses the example of the end of human generation: just

---

1. St. Thomas AQUINAS, *In decem libros Ethicorum Aristotelis ad Nicomachum expositio*, Raimundus M. SPIAZZI, O.P., ed., Taurini, Marietti, 1964, I, 2, 30.

2. *Ibid.*, I, 2, 107.

as this end is the generation of a complete human being and not of a human being lacking one of its members, so the ultimate end of life must be the complete and entire good. Happiness, being what suffices to make life complete, is precisely this complete good.

At the very end of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, in Book X, Chapter 10, Aristotle develops the notion that the good life presupposes life in common, and he makes the transition from ethics to politics (1179b31-1180a13). On his view, legislation is necessary to train people in virtue. Few of us heed the force of argument, but most of us are prepared to accept necessity. Those who live for pleasure are sometimes motivated by the fear of pain. While few accept constraints imposed by another person, most are willing to accept a given state of affairs if the law obliges them to act in a certain way. It is the educative aspect of the law which Aristotle wishes to insist upon. The good life, far from being an asocial or pre-social condition, implies the existence of a set of laws which make citizens happy by fostering virtue, for happiness, on Aristotle's view, consists in virtuous action.

### III

In making the transition from ethics to politics, Aristotle moves from the ultimate good of human life to the common advantage of all members of the political community. In order to understand the way in which Aristotle situates the common advantage in his political theory, we must first consider the finality of the political community. As Aristotle states at the beginning of the *Politics*, the city is the most complete of all communities, and it encompasses all other communities. No community exists only for itself; each has an end to which it tends, and this end is a good (1252a1-6). And since the city is the highest of all communities, it follows that the good to which this community tends is also the greatest good, or at least the greatest good accessible in the sublunar sphere.

In his commentary on this passage, Aquinas notes that :

*[Aristotle] is showing that the good to which the city is ordered is the highest among human goods, for this reason. If all communities are ordered to a good, then the highest community must be the most apt to discern the good which is the highest among human goods. For the proportion of things which are means to an end must be according to the proportion of ends.*<sup>3</sup>

There are two aspects which should be pointed out here. First, Aquinas emphasizes the fact that the good in question is a *human* good. As we shall see later on, the political good, for Aristotle, is a good relative to the citizen. Now, since every political community is composed of human beings, and can be composed only of

3. St. Thomas AQUINAS, *In libros Politicorum Aristotelis expositio*, Raimundus M. SPIAZZI, O.P., ed., Taurini, Marietti, 1951, I, 1, 11. "*Ostendit quod illud bonum ad quod ordinatur civitas est principalissimum inter bona humana, tali ratione. Si omnis communitas ordinatur ad bonum, necesse est quod illa communitas quae est maxime principalis, maxime sit coniectatrix boni qui est inter omnia humana bona principalissimum. Oportet enim quod proportio eorum quae sunt ad finem, sit secundum proportionem finium*" [The emphasis is that of Aquinas].

human beings, the good to which the political community tends is a good relative to humans, and attainable by humans. Secondly, Aquinas makes explicit the analogy of proportionality between the hierarchy of human communities and the hierarchy of ends to which these communities are ordered. The common advantage is closely linked to the political community in that this community is identified with justice and friendship. The common advantage defines the political community and makes it an end: the end toward which the lower communities (families and villages) are ordered.

In fact, Aristotle points out that the development of the political community is a process of nature (1252b27-1253a1). The city has its origin in a group of villages which are populous enough to be more or less self-sufficient. Each of these villages is organized around the rudimentary needs of life; that is the good to which it tends as to an end. A group of villages develops naturally to become a political community. This time, however, the goal of political organization is not merely to provide what is basic for survival. Rather, the goal of the political community is the good life: the possibility of attaining happiness, of engaging in virtuous actions, of participating in the government of the city and, in general, of sharing the benefits which only life in common can provide. This common life is in harmony with nature in the sense that the nature of a being is the perfection of that being in its complete state or full development. Now, life in common finds its perfection in the formation of a self-sufficient and self-governing political community. The political community is thus the end of a natural process.

At this juncture, it may be useful to explain a point of terminology. Aristotle uses most often the expression '*sumpheron koinon*' (common advantage), and only rarely does he use the expression '*agathon koinon*' (common good). Aquinas, in commenting on Aristotle's works, most often uses '*utilitas communis*' (common advantage or utility), but he uses '*bonum commune*' (common good) as well. Is there a distinction between these two manners of speaking? It seems that '*utilitas communis*' and '*bonum commune*' are interchangeable in the writings of Aquinas. But are they really interchangeable? It seems to me that we must spell out the specific character of Aristotle's conception of the political good, in order to point out why Aristotle speaks of the common *advantage* right after stating that every community organizes itself in order to pursue a *good*. It is not the Platonic Good which is in question here – that Good which transcends all levels of the “divided line” of the *Republic* (509d-511e), and which transcends even philosophic wisdom itself. The Platonic Good is present, to be sure, at every level of knowledge, and it is true that, for Plato, even true opinion participates in this Good. Nonetheless, in order to accede to the eternal and unchangeable essence of the Good, one must look beyond the changeable world of appearances. For Aristotle, however, the good of a being, just as the form of that being, is to be found in that singular being. The good of a being is distinct from the Idea of the Good, or the Good in itself, which is at the summit of the hierarchy of Ideas. To put it another way, the good, for Aristotle, is the good of someone or something. The common good is the good of all members of a political community once these members have actualized their disposition to live in common.

They organize themselves in view of the good which political life can provide them ; they enjoy the advantages of life in common. And these advantages can vary from one period of time to another, and also from one place to another. Just as the good of a singular being is capable of finding concrete expression in different ways according to the contingencies of place and time, so the advantages of political life are not the same at all times and in every place. In using the expression 'common advantage', Aristotle is spelling out the character of the good specific to the city : it is the good of all citizens. Such a terminology would have been inconceivable for Plato.

Is it possible to name the good to which the political community tends ? In formulating the meaning of '*zôon politikon*' (political animal), Aristotle answers that question :

Now, that man is more of a political animal than bees or any other gregarious animals is evident. Nature, as we often say, makes nothing in vain, and man is the only animal whom she has endowed with the gift of speech. And whereas mere voice is but an indication of pleasure or pain, and is therefore found in other animals (for their nature attains to the perception of pleasure and pain and the intimation of them to one another, and no further), the power of speech is intended to set forth the expedient and the inexpedient, and therefore likewise the just and the unjust. And it is characteristic of man that he alone has any sense of good and evil, of just and unjust, and the like, and the association of living beings who have this sense makes a family and a state (1253a7-18).<sup>4</sup>

A privileged example of the common advantage is justice. Adhesion to this right rule consists in the use of language in order to promote and to defend the good of all citizens, and to cast aside what is harmful to them. It is interesting to note that in the context of political life, the role of language is not so much to express truth as to communicate concerning what is just and useful.<sup>5</sup> In order to promote justice in the political community, it is necessary, among other things, to assure justice in the distribution of wealth and responsibilities. So that these deliberations can be carried out, there has to be a common forum where a public debate is held. In other words, political life is deliberation and decision, hence the importance of language. Among animals other than man, even among gregarious animals, everything is done by instinct. The actions of other animals do not belong to the moral sphere. But human beings are free, political animals who consequently have a sense of the just and the unjust. All common human undertakings presuppose civil communication.

The essential point to be kept in mind here is that politics is a fundamentally practical or moral activity, and not a speculative or metaphysical enquiry. That is why, in emphasizing the importance of language in public affairs, Aristotle does not mention the True as such, but the True in the order of justice and utility. Inasmuch as it is a moral activity, politics has as its goal what is true in the practical order, what is truly for the good of the political community. And the common advantage is

---

4. All translations of Aristotle's works are taken from *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, Richard MCKEON, ed., New York, Random House, 1941.

5. My thanks to Prof. John R. Gallup who, in conversation, drew my attention to this point.

the good specific to the political realm. That does not mean that the True *as such* has no place in public life. For Aristotle, the contemplative life (*i.e.*, the life of rational activity) is the end or goal of the practical life. But the practical life comes before the contemplative life. The common advantage precedes the contemplative life and makes it possible, in that the common advantage consists in the practice of the virtues, especially justice. More than that: the common advantage extends to the contemplative life, which is the pinnacle of all the activities of the political community.

#### IV

In addition to being the end to which the political community tends, the common advantage also serves to distinguish a just political regime from a corruption thereof.

A sign which Aristotle gives to indicate that political leaders are administering the community for the common advantage is that they are ready to take turns governing (1279a7-21). Civil authority seems to consist in an exchange: citizen A cares for the interests of citizen B for a certain number of years, and then it is citizen B's turn to look after the interests of citizen A. Both citizens are on an equal footing in that each is willing to govern and to be governed. What is remarkable here is that Aristotle does not posit any conflict between the common advantage and the particular good of each citizen. If political leaders serve the common advantage, then the interests of particular citizens are well served at the same time. This harmony deteriorates, however, when a political leader governs not for the common advantage but for his own advantage: either the enjoyment of public revenues, or the pursuit of the prestige which accompanies an office or function. To illustrate this point, Aristotle uses the somewhat colorful image of a man who seems to need political power in order to remain in good health. Thomas Aquinas, in his commentary on this passage, makes explicit what is at stake in the comparison. He writes:

But afterward, men [...] want to be always governing, as though to govern were to be healthy, and as though not to govern were not to be healthy. For it is thus that men seem to desire governance like sick people desire health.<sup>6</sup>

Health is a private good, a good which belongs only to the person who possesses it, and which cannot be shared with others. In a similar way, a corrupt leader desires the advantages of governance as a private good which cannot be shared. And that is what distinguishes a true from a corrupt political regime.

Even though Aristotle discusses at length the relative merits of government by one person alone, by a small number, and by the multitude, he emphasizes that the distinction among governments according to the number of rulers is not the primary distinction in his analysis. The true forms of government are those by which the leaders carry out their function in view of the common advantage, whatever the

---

6. St. Thomas AQUINAS, *In III Polit.*, 5, 389. "Sed postea homines [...] volunt semper principari, ac si principari esset sanum esse, et non principari, esset infirmum esse. Sic enim videntur homines appetere principatum, sicut infirmi appetunt sanitatem."

number of rulers.<sup>7</sup> The principle at stake here is that citizenship implies participation in the advantages of life in common (1279a28-33). We can see in this principle the centrality of citizenship in the Aristotelian schema of justice. The reason for which Aristotle does not envisage the participation of slaves in public life is that a slave, by definition, is not a citizen. When we try to account for the difference, in this regard, between the city-state as described by Aristotle on the one hand, and modern States on the other hand, we see that the difference consists primarily in a new conception of citizenship: throughout the centuries, the progressive widening of admissibility to citizenship necessitated a parallel widening of the recognition of rights. In the 19th century, the calling into question of slavery in the United States was provoked, among other things, by the fact that slaves had already been recognized as citizens several decades earlier. It was then a matter of recognizing the rights which flow from citizenship, so that these individuals could be citizens in fact and not only on paper. And to be a citizen in fact, one must have the possibility of participating in the advantages of public life, of governing as well as being governed – a task which, at least in the treatment of minority groups, is still not complete in most countries, and has not even begun in others. The common advantage is the advantage of *citizens*: the capacity to participate in the advantages of public affairs presupposes citizenship.

In order not to give a mere caricature of Aristotle's relatively narrow conception of citizenship, we must bear in mind that, for Aristotle, citizenship, though quite restrictive, is not a function of wealth (1281b33). Following Solon and some other legislators on this point, Aristotle gives the poor the right to vote as well as the right to nominate magistrates. He believes that the dominant classes would have a better judgment if they acted in conjunction with the poor. Aristotle does not, however, admit the possibility of the the poor governing alone.

Whereas in Book I Aristotle analyzes the common advantage in terms of the hierarchy of communities (the highest being the political community), in Book III he sees the common advantage from the point of view of the hierarchy of sciences. Just as each community is organized in view of a certain good, each science, also,

---

7. Aquinas comments: "*From what has just been said, [Aristotle] concludes the distinction between upright and unjust political communities.* For, since it is thus that the governance of free people is ordered to the advantage of the subjects, it is obvious that in each political community where the political leaders oversee the common advantage, these are upright political communities according to justice taken by itself. But in each constitutional government where only the leaders' advantage is cared for, those communities are perverse, a kind of corruption of an upright political community. For what is just is not to be found there simply, but in a restricted sense [...] For [the political leaders] govern an authoritarian political community using the citizens as slaves; that is, for their own use. And that is against justice, because a political community is a community of free people. A slave is not a citizen, as has already been said" (*In III Polit.*, 5, 390).

(*"Concludit ex dictis distinctionem rectorum politiarum ab iniustis.* Cum enim ita sit quod principatus liberorum sit ordinatus ad utilitatem subditorum, manifestum est quod in quibuscumque politis principes intendunt communem utilitatem, illae sunt rectae politicae secundum iustitiam absolutam: in quibuscumque vero politis intenditur sola utilitas principantium, illae sunt vitiatæ et corruptiones quaedam rectorum politiarum: non enim in eis est iustum simpliciter, sed iustum secundum quid [...] Principantur enim dominativæ civitati utentes civibus sicut servis, scilicet ad suam utilitatem: et hoc est contra iustitiam, quia civitas est communitas liberorum: servus enim non est civis, ut supra dictum est") [The emphasis is that of Aquinas].



is carried out for the sake of a good. Now, political science is the highest of practical sciences, and the good which it envisages is justice. Here, Aristotle identifies justice with the common advantage (1282b15-19),<sup>8</sup> As he continues, he notes the consensus of his contemporaries to the effect that justice implies a sort of equality. Specifically, he states that proportional equality takes the form of a distribution of responsibilities according to the excellence of the candidates; that is, inasmuch as they possess the qualities required for a particular function. He considers excellence in other domains as less important than the capacity to exercise the office for which a person is elected or chosen. And if the best candidate occupies a lower social status than the other candidates, this fact does not disqualify that candidate. It is to the common advantage that the political community be governed by the best people, and precisely by people who are excellent in governing.

Aristotle makes another mention of the common advantage, this time in Book IV (1296a32-36), where he explains the reason for which, on his view, constitutional governments were rare in Greece. The reason is that the rich and poor were concerned only for the interests of their preferred form of government (oligarchy and democracy respectively), without being concerned for the good of the entire political community. For Aristotle, the best form of government, in most cases, is a constitutional government established and governed by the middle class. He considers this form as a just mean between governments of the rich and those of the poor because, in both of the other cases, social relationships are characterized by domination and servitude. By favoring the middle class, Aristotle hopes to promote a situation in which social relationships have some measure of equality, where some people govern and others are governed in view of the advantage of all. Such governments were rare in antiquity, and it is realistic to expect them to be no less rare in our own day.

From what has just been said, it is not difficult to conclude that there are many cases in which the common advantage does not exist at all. In Book V, Chapter IX, Aristotle provides a portrait of such a scenario :

---

8. Peter of AUVERGNE, who completed the commentary of Thomas Aquinas on the *Politics* after Aquinas' death, explains the hierarchy of sciences in the following way: "In the first point, [Aristotle] says that in all arts and in all sciences (*i.e.*, practical arts and sciences), the end is a certain good, because all teaching and all art (but similarly, action and operation) seem to desire a certain good, as is said in the first book of the *Ethics*. But if the end of any art and any science is a certain good, then the end of the best and highest art and science is the best and highest good, because among things taken by themselves, just as what is simply is to what is simply, so the more is to the more, and the most is to the most. But political science is the highest among all practical, active sciences, as has been shown in the first book of this work; for the end of political science should be what is highest and best. But the good aimed at in politics is what is just simply; *i.e.*, in the order of that to which the just tends simply. And this is the good which is conferred in common. Thus, the good conferred in common is the end in politics" (*In III Polit.* 10, 441).

("In primo dicit quod in omnibus artibus et scientiis, scilicet operativis, finis est aliquod bonum, quia omnis doctrina et ars, similiter autem actus et operatio bonum quoddam appetere videtur, sicut primo *Ethicorum* dicitur. Si autem cuiuslibet artis et scientiae finis est aliquod bonum, principalissimae est finis optimum et principalissimum; quia in his qui sunt per se, sicut simpliciter ad simpliciter, ita magis ad magis, et maxime ad maxime. Sed inter omnes scientias practicas activas politica et [sic] principalissima, ut ostensum est in primo huius: quare finis eius debet esse principalissimum quid et optimum. Sed bonum intentum in politica est illud quod iustum est simpliciter, idest in ordine ad quod attenditur iustum simpliciter, et tale est bonum conferens communiter: ergo bonum communiter conferens est finis in politica.")

Neither should we forget the mean, which at the present day is lost sight of in perverted forms of government ; for many practices which appear to be democratical are the ruin of democracies, and many which appear to be oligarchical are the ruin of oligarchies. Those who think that all virtue is to be found in their own party principles push matters to extremes ; they do not consider that disproportion destroys a state. A nose which varies from the ideal of straightness to a hook or snub may still be of good shape and agreeable to the eye ; but if the excess be very great, all symmetry is lost, and the nose at last ceases to be a nose at all on account of some excess in one direction or defect in the other ; and this is true of every other part of the human body. The same law of proportion equally holds in states. Oligarchy or democracy, although a departure from the most perfect form, may yet be a good enough government, but if anyone attempts to push the principles of either to an extreme, he will begin by spoiling the government and end by having none at all (1309b17-34).<sup>9</sup>

In either form of government, there are policies and measures which save or destroy that form of government. In order to save a constitution, Aristotle insists that the rich and poor be included in the governance of the city. Where there is government by the few (and it could well be argued that some modern democracies are in fact governed by the few), the ruin of such states consists in contempt for the poor. And where there is government by the multitude, its ruin consists in contempt for the rich. So that the common advantage can exist in a political community, the government must be as inclusive and as participatory as possible ; in other words, all groups which form the political community must be able to participate in its governance.

## V

The conception of the common advantage underwent several developments following its formulation by Aristotle. The writings of Thomas Aquinas provide a notable example of the fact that in order to “christianize” Aristotle, it was necessary also to christianize the notion of the common advantage (now “common good”). The most remarkable difference between the teaching of Aristotle and that of Aquinas is that, for the latter, the political community is not the highest form of community. So that the Aristotelian notion of the common advantage could be harmonized with Christian faith, it was necessary to harmonize this teaching with that concerning the Communion of Saints, because eternal life is lived in common, and because there is a close link between the earthly city and the heavenly city. Thus, when a Christian philosopher speaks of the common good, one must immediately ask the question, “Which one?”. The answer is not always apparent. Sometimes it is the good of a nation or of a people, at other times the good of the entire political community, and at other times the good of the entire community of human beings, in this world and in the next. In an article published in *The New Scholasticism* in 1989, Gregory Froelich analyzes the ambiguities involved in any discussion of the common good, and he

9. Jules Tricot's French translation of this text has “*constitution*” where the above translation has “government” and “party principles”. Cf. ARISTOTLE, *La Politique* (tr. J. Tricot), Paris, Vrin, 1970.

goes so far as to say that the expression ‘common good’ is equivocal.<sup>10</sup> In analyzing Froelich’s thesis on the different meanings of the expression ‘common good’, I intend to provide the reader with a kind of road map which will help to identify the principal issues in the debate and to avoid confusion concerning the different kinds of common good.

As Froelich rightly states, we find in the works of Aquinas an impressive array of examples of the common good,<sup>11</sup> but there is no one work by Aquinas dealing with the common good as such. Froelich postulates that the reason for the absence of such a work is that the many examples of the common good have no unity :

Certainly St. Thomas could not have in mind the same idea of “bonum commune” when he applies it to happiness (a quality of the human soul) and to the order of the universe (a relation) and to children (substances). Even the most general and flexible term “ens”, which is predicable of every category, is, as St. Thomas argues, an analogical and hence equivocal term. It seems to follow then that “bonum commune” is an equivocal expression. In fact, its equivocity rivals that of “ens”, since its two components are themselves highly equivocal.<sup>12</sup>

We must first spell out what is meant by the expression ‘equivocal’.<sup>13</sup> In Book I, Chapter 6 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle states that goods are called good by equivocation, but he specifies right away that it is not accidental equivocation or equivocation by chance (that in which the equivocal terms have nothing in common except the name), but rather equivocation pertaining to one good, or possibly an analogy of proportionality :

But what then do we mean by the good ? It is surely not like the things that only chance to have the same name. Are goods one, then, by being derived from one good or by all contributing to one good, or are they rather one by analogy ? Certainly as sight is in the body, so is reason in the soul, and so on in other cases (1096b26-30).

In his commentary on this passage, Aquinas distinguishes equivocations by chance (*a casu*) from equivocations the meanings of which are not completely diverse, but which converge in a certain way by their reference either to an efficient principle (military equipment is called military because it is used by military personnel), or to an end (a remedy is healthful because it restores health), or to a subject (a quality is a being because it is a disposition of a substance). Perhaps it is better to speak of a proportion between several subjects (sight is to the body as the intellect is to the

---

10. Gregory FROELICH, “The Equivocal Status of *Bonum Commune*”, *The New Scholasticism*, LXIII (Winter, 1989), p. 38-57.

11. The examples of the common good which Froelich cites are as follows (*cf.* note on p. 42 of Froelich’s text) : Money, honor : *In V Ethic.*, lect. 4, n. 927. Victory : *In XII Meta.*, lect. 2, n. 1303. Justice : *ST*, Ia IIae, q. 19, a. 10 ; *In IX Ethic.*, lect. 6, n. 1839. Peace : *ST*, Ia IIae, q. 96, a. 3 ad 1 ; *De regimine principum* c. 2. Happiness : *SCG*, III, 39 ; *ST*, Ia IIae, q. 3, a. 2 ad 2. Perpetuation of the species : *Quodl.* I, q. 4, a. 3 [8] ad 3 ; *Q. D. de malo*, q. 15, a. 2 ad 12. The order of the universe : *De subst. sep.*, c. 12, n. 113 ; *In XII Meta.*, lect. 12. The good convertible with being : *ST*, Ia, q. 17, a. 4 ad 2 ; *ST*, Ia IIae, q. 55, a. 4 ad 2. God : *ST*, Ia, q. 60, a. 1 ad 5 ; *ST*, Ia IIae, q. 100, a. 9 ; *ST*, Ia IIae, q. 26, a. 3. Children : *In VIII Ethic.*, lect. 12, n. 1724 ; *In IV Sent.*, d. 33, q. 2, a. 1.

12. FROELICH, *op. cit.*, p. 42f.

13. My thanks to Prof. Lionel Ponton for drawing this matter to my attention.

soul). We can now ask about the relationship among the meanings of the expression 'common good' in Aquinas' writings. As we shall see, we have here an analogy with reference to one good, of which the first analogue is the common good *in causando*. Some authors, however, prefer to speak of an analogy of proportionality.

Froelich mentions, first of all, the common good in predication (*bonum commune in praedicando*), or the common good of which the community is simply logical, such as that of a genus or species. The common good in question here is a predicate. In the *Summa theologiae*, Aquinas makes the distinction between the common good of which the community is comparable to that of a genus or species, and the common good according to final causality.<sup>14</sup> The question is formulated as follows: Is law always ordered to the common good? It is a matter of reconciling the common good which is the end of law, and the particular acts which law commands. Aquinas answers that particular acts which law commands are not parts contained in the common good understood as a logical whole, but these acts belong to the community of a final cause.<sup>15</sup>

In order to illustrate this distinction between the *bonum in praedicando* and the *bonum in causando*, Froelich makes use of the example of happiness.<sup>16</sup> On his view, if happiness is a common good, it is such only according to the community of predication, on a very general level. Happiness is an operation, an activity and consequently a purely personal good. People seek happiness in many different ways. Happiness, envisaged in its community, has thus no reality and resembles the Platonic Good. On this point, Froelich's view differs from that of Aquinas, for whom happiness (or felicity) is the *end* of the human species. Happiness is a common good, accessible to all human beings provided that there is nothing impeding their attaining it. In the minor work *On the Perfection of the Spiritual Life*, Aquinas points out that:

in this community by which all people agree on happiness as an end, each and every man is considered as a certain part: but the common good of the whole is God himself, in whom consists the happiness of all.<sup>17</sup>

Note the distinction between 'whole' and 'all'. God is the common good of the *whole* (the human species considered as one, as an ordered whole). At the same time, the happiness of *all* (*i.e.*, each and every part of the whole) is found in God. In God consists my happiness and yours because, as members of the human species, we desire God as our ultimate end. The concrete differences among the happiness of

14. *ST. Ia IIae*, 90, 2, ad 2.

15. *Ibid.*

16. FROELICH, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

17. St. Thomas AQUINAS, *De perfectione vitae spiritualis*, c. 13, n. 634, in *Opuscula theologica* (Vol. II, Raimundus M. SPIAZZI, O.P., ed., Taurini, Marietti, 1954). "In praedicta autem communitate qua omnes homines in beatitudinis fine conveniunt, unusquisque homo ut pars quaedam consideratur: bonum autem commune totius est ipse Deus, in quo omnium beatitudo consistit."

In his commentary on the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aquinas writes that "what belongs to the end of a nature should be common to all those who have that nature." Thus it is important that happiness, which is the end of human nature, be common (at least potentially) to all those who possess this nature. The common good of the whole extends to each of its parts. *Cf. In I Ethic.*, XIV, 170.

individual human beings lie in the degree of apprehension<sup>18</sup> (if any) which accompanies this desire, and in the intermediate goods (real or apparent) which are chosen as means. Happiness is the good of the human species and of each of its parts, much as, *mutatis mutandis*, the political common good is the good of the community as a whole, and the good of each of its members. This good must become effective. By contrast, the good in general, the common good according to the community of predication, is not the good of the human species, but rather the private good of the individuals to whom it is being attributed. It consequently has no role in political life.

As an example of the common good according to causality, Froelich proposes one of the three goods of marriage: the procreation and education of children (the other two goods being fidelity and the sacrament). The transmission of life and the upbringing of children constitute, beyond a doubt, the common good of the spouses. Their union is ordered to this end, and it is an end common to both. Here, the distinction between the common good according to predication and the common good according to causality becomes clear. Children are the common good *of* the father and *of* the mother: the common good of both, and not a private good of either of them. A private good is exclusive. In this case, however, “mine” and “yours” are not separate from the “ours” of a common good understood as a final cause.

In order to situate the political common good in the analysis of the common good as a final cause, Froelich distinguishes between extrinsic and intrinsic common goods. The former exists separately from those who desire it (for example, the destination of a group of travelers), but the latter exists within those who desire it. The political common good falls under the second category:

[T]he common good is the good of the whole community. But since the political community is an ordered whole, not an organic whole or a disordered pile, its good consists in the preservation and tranquillity of order. Such a good is not taken in opposition to the good of a single man, for it is as a part of that order that man finds his highest natural perfection. As St. Thomas argues, only through the civil order is man put within the reach of the virtues, which once attained make him the best of animals. Outside of the civil order, without justice and law, man becomes the worst of animals, since being armed with reason he can turn even the virtues to the worst ends. The political order, then, is a good for each citizen belonging to it. It is an intrinsic common good.<sup>19</sup>

The political common good is a function of the internal order of the community, an order characterized by justice and law (as opposed to the will and, at times, the whim of political leaders). Even though individuals have the capacity to attain their natural perfection, they cannot realize this capacity except as members of the political community. For each has the disposition to live in common with his or her peers. This disposition, which is part of human nature, must be realized so that other dispositions, such as the disposition to virtue, can be realized as well.

---

18. ‘Apprehension’ is being used here in the technical sense of a sensory, emotive, or intellectual grasp; it is not being used in the popular sense of hesitation.

19. FROELICH, *op. cit.*, p. 52f.

The third kind of common good is related to distributive justice, which deals with what the community owes to each citizen. Aquinas calls these goods *bona communia*, common goods to be distributed among individuals according to their merits or their contribution to the good of the political community. For Froelich, the principle at work here is that the goods which are part of the transactions on the level of commutative justice can also be distributed by the structures of the political community. These goods are common because they are held in common until distributed to members of the community. After distribution, these goods become private goods. Froelich uses the example of the water in the municipal reservoir.<sup>20</sup> So long as this water remains in the reservoir, it is part of the common stock and does not belong to anyone in particular. Once this water passes through someone's tap, however, it becomes a private good. This example is not quite right. In the case of the water in the municipal reservoir, we are dealing with a public service rendered by the community, for which the community exacts a special tax or a payment at regular intervals. This service could conceivably be rendered just as easily by a private individual or group. Distributive justice, on the other hand, is the prerogative of the leaders of the political community, who distribute wealth and responsibilities on the basis of the quality of persons and their ability to promote the common good. If the *bona communia* in question are material goods, then they come from public property or from a new distribution or allotment of private property.

---

Table 3.0  
Schema of the Common Good

- I. Common : (*De Veritate* 7, 6, ad 7)
    1. "by predication ; when, that is, some one thing is found in many according to *one explanation*."
    2. "by mode of cause, just as a cause which, remaining one in number, extends to several effects."
  
  - II. The Good : (*In I Ethic.*, I, 2, 30)
    1. "the good of one person"
    2. common good :
      - "the good of the whole political community" ;
      - "the preservation of the family."
  
  - III. Common Good : (*In I Ethic.*, I, 7, 95. Analogy with reference to an end.)
    1. "Prior : Preservation of the political community" (end).
    2. "Posterior : related to what is owing to the end" (*bona communia* : means).
  
  - IV. Common Good : (*In I Ethic.*, I, 7, 95. Analogy of proportionality : one proportion to diverse subjects.)
    1. "The good of the whole political community".
    2. "Preservation of the family".
- 

<sup>20</sup>. *Ibid.*, p. 54.

Among the diverse meanings of 'common good' which have just been mentioned, is there pure equivocation *a casu*, or is there a common reference despite the diversity of these meanings? 'Common good' designates first and foremost the common good as the final cause of a whole, as a common end. *Bona communia* belong undoubtedly to the common good of political society as means or instruments. There remains the common good according to predication: not the common good of a whole, but the good common to several people to whom it is attributed, and which designates their private good. The common good according to predication, which is the good common to several people, is opposed to the common good according to causality, which is the common good of a whole and of its parts, without ever being a private good. Aquinas always opposes the common good by way of a genus to the common good as a common end. There is frequent confusion between the two. But we cannot speak here of equivocation *a casu*. If there is an analogy, it is an analogy of proportionality: the good predicated of several subjects is, in each one of them, capable of being desired, just as the common good *in causando* is also, and in an eminent way, capable of being desired. But taken in the abstract, the common good *in praedicando* is not capable of being desired, and it is not a good.

In the *Disputed Questions on Truth*, Aquinas distinguishes two meanings of 'common' without relating them to each other:

For something is said to be common *in two ways*: *In the first way* by effect or predication; when, that is, some one thing is found in many according to one explanation: [...] *In another way* by the mode of a cause, just as a cause which, remaining one in number, extends to several effects.<sup>21</sup>

As far as legal justice is concerned, Aquinas uses the two notions of community by distinguishing them. Legal justice is a special virtue if it is considered from the point of view of its object: the common good. It is a general virtue to the extent that it is identified with the virtues of which it commands the acts.

## VI

In conclusion, the difference between Aristotle's analysis of the common advantage and Thomas Aquinas' analysis of the common good is based on two different world-views. For Aristotle, the communal aspect of human life does not transcend the temporal realm, nor does it transcend the citizens of a particular city. The common good is the perfect and self-sufficient good in its own order. Aristotle considers God as a Good, as that which is supremely lovable, the end of the cosmos and an extrinsic end. He does not, however, have any notion of God as the end of the supernatural order or as the common good of that order.

---

21. St. Thomas AQUINAS, *De Veritate*, 7, 6, ad 7, in *Quaestiones disputatae* (Vol. I, Raimundus M. SPIAZZI, O.P., ed., Taurini, Marietti, 1953). "Dicitur enim *dupliciter* aliquid commune. *Uno modo* per consecutionem vel praedicationem; quando, scilicet, aliquid unum invenitur in multis secundum unam rationem: [...] *Alio modo* per modum causae, sicut causa quae, una numero manens, ad plures effectus se extendit; [...]" [The emphasis is that of Aquinas].

In Aquinas' writings, we see a broadening of the hierarchy of communities, in that the communal aspect of human life is extended to include the communion of all people under God. If there were not this latter communion, Aquinas would not have called God the common good of all His creatures. It is in this perspective that we find the distinctions among the various kinds of common goods. The political common good in Aquinas' writings, which is the same thing as the common advantage in the writings of Aristotle, is to be found in the realm of intrinsic common goods *in causando*. This good is identical to the order of the political community, an order of justice and friendship. The order of the political community is a final cause, a whole of which each citizen can have a part; each member of the political community has his or her role to play so that this order can be realized.

For Aquinas as well as for Aristotle, the possibility of enjoying the advantages of life in common is based on citizenship. It is true that for these two authors a human being is not automatically a citizen. For Aquinas, however, the fact that every human being is a creature of God implies that he or she is a member of a community which transcends the political community. There is thus a distinction between human dignity and citizenship. The value of a human being does not derive solely from his or her involvement in the political community. But this view is limited by the fact that it does not link membership in a community which transcends the temporal city on the one hand, and temporal citizenship on the other hand. There is nothing in Aquinas' position which necessitates such a link, but there is nothing which excludes this possibility either.

In order to answer the question of the relationship between the common good and the good of each citizen, we must go much farther than Aquinas did, to the point of affirming that as a person, each individual must automatically be recognized as a citizen *de facto* of a political community, with all the rights which flow from this status. What is more, we cannot reconcile, in a given context, the political common good and the good of each citizen if the common good is purely abstract. A thing does not deserve to be called a common good unless it is also *my* good, and the good of each and every one of my fellow citizens. But the common good is not fixed once and for all. It involves different concrete goods in different places, and at different times in history. The only way of determining what is precisely the political common good in a given time and place, is to deliberate and decide upon it in open debate.