CLARIFYING 'THE COMMON GOOD'[1]

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'The common good embraces the sum of those conditions of social life by which individuals, families, and groups can achieve their own fulfilment in a relatively thorough and ready way' (*Gaudium et spes,* 74).[2]

Introduction

The phrase 'common good', which goes back to Aristotle, has been widely used in Catholic social thought, and, partly as a result, is now regularly encountered in secular political contexts. If used with precision and care, it can increase the clarity of moral and political analysis, precisely because it identifies the shared nature of goods where that shared nature is a significant feature of those goods. For this reason, discussion of the common good within Catholic social thought has the potential to make an important contribution to wider debate. However, the phrase has been used in official documents of the Church with a wide variety of reference, and very often without explanation, analysis or definition. This risks depriving it of its explanatory and analytic power. For example, if it is unclear in what sense a good is common, then it will be unclear why it should be in any individual's interest to assist in promoting or protecting that good. Again, if it is unclear how the goods of different levels of community interrelate, then an appeal to the common good will be ambiguous, if not deceptive.[3]

My argument will be that the phrase is used to identify:

(A1) Goods that it is necessary or preferable to *enjoy* in common, because of what they are and the way that they are available to us. I shall divide this category of goods into *indivisible common goods*, *common resources*, *relational common goods* and *overflowing goods*.

(A2) Goods that it is necessary or preferable to *provide* in common.

When referring to these two categories 'common goods' is usually used in the plural, and identifies the shared nature of the goods in question.

(B) The well-being or *good of a community* thought of as a community. In this case, the phrase 'the common good' is usually used, and refers to the good state of a certain community rather than to the common nature of certain goods. Those who accept that a community as such can have a good in this sense might identify its good as the good of the whole seen as *the sum of*, as *organically related to*, or as *distinct from*, its parts. It is important to be clear which sense is intended. The total well-being of the whole community will be inclusive in two senses: it will include the well-being of all the members of the community, and it will include all aspects of the well-being of each.

The phrase ‘common good’ is also used in the context of a community thought of as composed of parts, or sub-groups, that have some conflicting interests. Here its function is to emphasise the ruler’s duty of impartiality. This points to the important fact that the ruler’s role gives him or her a distinctive duty to act for the common good. Although other individuals or groups within society may also have a duty to act (as well as an interest in acting) for the common good, any such duty will be of a different structure.

This analysis will not determine precisely the substantive content of the common good as a whole, or of any of its elements. However, it may assist us in identifying why we value shared institutions, cooperative projects and common life. Furthermore, it can clarify what is at stake in specific liberal or libertarian objections to certain defences of the common good. It might also provide a starting-point for interrelating the economists’ ‘public goods’ with the ‘common good’ of the ethical and theological tradition. I am not qualified to explore such connections in detail, but I shall sketch one or two examples of how such discussion might work.

Finally, I will suggest that there are several specific features of the Christian understanding of human beings and of creation that make it particularly suited to integrate the various elements of the common good into a single, coherent concept. Where other traditions, religious or secular, share these features, they too will be hospitable to the concept. In dialogue with traditions that do not share these elements, although it may be fruitful to make use of individual elements of the Catholic understanding, we should not expect the integrated concept to be readily intelligible.

The ‘common good’ in Catholic social teaching

Let me begin with some examples of usage from official Church documents. The nearest that the social encyclicals come to defining the common good is in the passage from *GS* quoted at the beginning of this paper (cf. *PT* 58). The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* treats this actually *as* a definition, and goes on to say that it ‘consists of’ (i) ‘respect for the person as such’, (ii) ‘the social well-being and development of the group itself’ and (iii) peace and security (1905-1912). Earlier, *QA* had equated ‘the requirements of the common good’ with ‘the norm of social justice’ (110). *PP* appears at one point to identify ‘the common good of humanity’ with ‘the human and spiritual development of all’ (76, cf. *SRS* 10). *MM* says that ‘governments should seek the economic good of all peoples’ (37).

Other passages suggest specific elements that should be included within the common good: just distribution of wealth (*QA* 57), the work of traders, labourers, farmers (*RN* 27, *MM* 147), full employment (*MM* 79), ‘public order, peace and tranquillity’ (*QA* 74), ‘acknowledgement of the moral order’ (*PT* 85), ‘ethnic characteristics’ (*PT* 55), ‘personal rights and duties’ (*PT* 60), roads, water supply, public health and recreational facilities (*PT* 64), ‘material goods’ (*MM* 20), ‘the natural and human environments’ (*CA* 40), effective aid to underdeveloped nations (*MM* 80).

Often the content of the common good is identified by contrasting it with its opposite: for example, misery and injustice (*PP* 76), ‘human passion and greed’ (*QA* 109) or the insufficiency of small groups (*GS* 74). One of the most persistent contrasts is that

between the common good and the interests of private individuals or sectors of society (e.g. *RN* 26).

Finally, we might note that while earlier documents such as *RN* seem to assume that the community which shares the common good is the nation-state, later documents, in particular *PT* and its successors, are clearly concerned with an international and even global common good. In short, any analysis of the use of the phrase within Catholic social teaching will have to interrelate and integrate a very varied set of elements.

Common to whom?

For a good to be common, it must be shared by some sort of community. This might in principle range from a pair of friends to all sentient beings living and dead. In fact, the division between 'private' and 'common' is not a fixed one, but depends upon context.[4] For some purposes, it makes sense to talk of the common good of a family or company; in other contexts, these may be treated precisely as private goods by contrast with public goods. Papal encyclicals tend to use the phrase common good in the context of either the nation-state or the global political community of all human beings. However, it is important not to forget that we both provide and enjoy shared goods through many different levels and varieties of community. Indeed, the principle of subsidiarity requires that we attend to this fact. To take a concrete example, *Familiaris Consortio* argues that the family, rather than the state, is the appropriate community to decide on how to provide for the good of educating children (36, 40), although that good, as the same document makes clear (43-44), is a good also for wider society.

Although Catholic social teaching endorses the principle of subsidiarity, it is arguable that it has tended to neglect its specific practical implications. More thinking is needed about the legal, political and economic relationships between local and national communities, and between families and the wider society. Moreover, most people think of themselves also as part of associations or networks that cut across geographical and political boundaries, which share common projects or cultural interests or linguistic or religious identity. Such communities too have their own common goods and sense of communal identity.

Because of the complex nature of our communal relations, it is a mistake to move directly from the premise that we are socially constituted beings with common interests to the conclusion that our common interests are best provided and protected by the nation-state.[5] It seems important rather always to ask the question, 'Are we trying to defend or promote this good at the right level?' To take a few examples: should the good of virtue be promoted nationally or by the small communities of family, school and workplace? Should the good of healthcare be provided or financed or regulated (three separate questions) nationally or locally? How do we cooperate to prevent the pollution and depletion of the oceans? Should the good of shared prayer be limited to the living?

Indeed, one might argue that many of the debates that appear to be between the political left and the political right would be better recast as discussions about the appropriate level at which to make decisions. To decide such debates wisely, we need to understand the variety of ways in which and levels at which we function as social beings, and there is

reason to believe that wise judges will come to quite different conclusions for different questions, since we are interrelated in such a variety of ways.

The commonness of goods

If we talk of ‘common goods’ rather than ‘the common good’, we are identifying a particular good and describing it as something that is shared by a community. Goods seem to be described in this way as common for two quite different reasons, either because they are somehow *enjoyed* in common (A1), or because they are *secured* in common (A2).

Certain goods are such that it is either necessary, or seems preferable, to enjoy them in common. Here the goods may either be independent of (A1a) or dependent upon (A1b) the relationship between the members of the community.

(A1ai) Here the good enjoyed by individuals is one and the same good, and this good can be enjoyed fully by each person without affecting the degree to which it can be enjoyed by others. The good exists independently of those who enjoy it, but the latter are not in competition for access to it. Examples include the presence of God, the enjoyment of a musical performance, or the understanding of a scientific explanation. These goods seem to be spiritual, moral or intellectual. In some cases, such as a fine painting, they may be material goods that are enjoyed by the mind, and therefore not consumable. We might term these *indivisible common goods*.

In theory, and in some cases in practice, such goods might be enjoyed by an individual alone: a mathematical genius could be unable to explain his discovery to others, or a pianist may play for the pleasure of a single friend. Interestingly, however, we often want to share such goods, both because we lose nothing of them by sharing them and want others also to experience enjoyment, and (a distinct point) because we take pleasure precisely in the comradeship of shared enjoyment. The mathematical genius will want to find someone who can understanding his discovery; the concert-goer enjoys being part of an appreciative audience. Often these goods are not only non-competitive, but even fruitful: for example, one person’s courageous act is likely to inspire courage in others; a teacher’s clear grasp of her subject will foster better understanding in her pupils.

(A1aii) Here the good enjoyed by individuals is part of a whole such that the parts can be available (or in good condition) for the individuals to enjoy only if the whole is available (or in good condition). This will be so if the good consists of some sort of system, such as the waterways, so that damage to one part affects the whole, or where enjoyment of the good involves enjoyment of all of it, such as a country walk. Both nature and convention contribute to the commonness of such goods. For example, it is impossible to pollute the source of a river without polluting the whole of it, and it is impossible to block one road without affecting traffic elsewhere. At the same time, it is up to the relevant community to agree whether or not individuals should be allowed to claim private access to part of a river bank, or whether the use of roads can be controlled by tolls. Where such private control is not permitted, the good in question remains common. Such goods need to be sufficiently abundant or capacious to cope with the numbers that wish to enjoy them, and need to be replenishable or maintainable, in order to remain in good condition.

Goods of this sort are material, and might be termed *common resources*.[6] As with the first category, they might in theory, and in some cases in practice, be enjoyed by an individual alone. Once again, because of our sociability, we will often prefer to enjoy them in common with others: the pleasures of strolling in a public park include watching others enjoy themselves. However, for both physical and emotional reasons, such goods may become congested, and different people will be sensitive to such congestion to different degrees.

(A1bi) Here the members of the community are seen as parts of a whole, and there are goods that belong to them by virtue of their being its parts. In other words, the good is constituted by the relationship among the members. Examples include friendship, being part of a football crowd, being a member of a worthwhile institution, being subject to a just legal system. These goods are essentially social, and might be termed *relational common goods*. They cannot by their nature be enjoyed by an individual alone: if they are to exist for one member of the relevant community, they must exist equally for them all.

(A1bii) Here the members of a community share in the benefit of another individual's having acquired a good. Examples include parents' enjoyment of their son's graduation, pride in the success of a local sports team, pleasure at the recovery from illness of a colleague at work, the protection from disease enjoyed by those who have healthy neighbours. These might be termed *overflowing* goods. They are not constituted by the relationship between members of a community, but they depend upon it. Again, they cannot by their nature be enjoyed by an individual alone: every member of the community may enjoy the good if it is available for any one member.

(A2) Some goods are such that it is necessary, or seems preferable, for the community to *provide* them cooperatively, whether we produce, channel, or adapt them for our use. If we want such goods, it is in our shared interests to cooperate in providing them. Thus free school milk or an art gallery might be described as a common good where the local council or the national government are responsible for providing this. Such common provision is clearly distinct from the common enjoyment of goods: for example, where free milk is available to poor schoolchildren there is common provision of goods that are individually enjoyed; conversely, where a millionaire opens his art collection freely to the general public, there is private provision of a good enjoyed in common.

Relational goods necessarily involve a kind of common provision in that they are created by the members of a community acting as part of a whole. They normally often also involve collective provision to make such coordinated action possible: the organisers of the football club, for example, make it possible for the crowd to gather. Indivisible or overflowing goods include goods that are better provided individually or privately, goods that are better provided collectively, goods that may be provided in either way (e.g. musical performances), and goods that do not need actively to be provided (e.g. the presence of God). Because of their scale and importance, common resources are often commonly provided or maintained. Where a private organisation, such as a railway company, is responsible for providing them, the community is still likely to oversee the provision.

Finally, we might note that political communities provide common *protection* for both common and private goods, but for different reasons in each case. Common goods are protected for the direct reason that they belong to the community. Private goods are

protected for the indirect reason that it is good for the community that its members are free to own and use private property safely and securely. The vandal who damages a park bench is seen as directly offending the community; the vandal who damages a family's garden furniture is seen as directly offending against the family and indirectly against the community.

The goodness of communities

'The reason for the existence of public authority is to promote the common good' (*PT* 104).[7] 'The common good' used in this way refers not to *goods* which are enjoyed in common way, but to a *community* which is in a good condition. The good of the whole can be understood in at least the three following ways:

(B1) As nothing but the *sum of the goods* of its individual members. This, broadly speaking, has been the understanding of the liberal political tradition, which has then debated within itself how to add up the goods - for example, whether a minimum level of good is to be secured for each and every citizen.

(B2) As the good of a whole that is *organically related* to its parts. In other words, the good of the community consists not only in the distinct goods of its individual members, but in the relationships among the members. Conversely, being part of a flourishing community is seen as a part of the good of the individual members themselves. On this understanding, common interests are a distinct motivation from either self-interest or altruism: to act in the common interest is to act for oneself and for others inseparably.[8] It is important, however, that such a view does not commit one to saying that sub-groups or individuals within society have no interests distinct from that of the community as a whole: they have both private and common interests.

(B3) As the good of a whole thought of as something *distinct from*, and usually superior to, the sum of its parts.

The differences among B1, B2 and B3 may be explained by contrasting three different reasons for being willing to die for one's country. Tom reckons that he and his fellow-soldiers can by giving their lives help to save a far greater number of their fellow-citizens (cf. B1). Fred, who thinks that he would be better off dead than living under unjust rule, might be willing to risk his life for the sake of just government. For he and his family, as a part of the whole, cannot themselves flourish if the whole is seriously harmed by injustice (cf. B2). Joe may simply count the good of his country as a higher good than that of himself, or other of its members, and be willing to die for it even if only a tiny minority of the nation were to survive the war (cf. B3).

These three senses have not always been carefully distinguished, and in practical contexts, it may not always matter to distinguish between them. However, the implications of each are very different, and both B1 and B3, for opposite reasons, sit uneasily with central elements of Catholic philosophy and theology. B1 treats human beings as essentially individuals, and relationships with others as merely instrumental. Christianity, by contrast, teaches that we are made to flourish in relationships, so that the mutual service of one another is in our mutual interest.[9] B3, on the other hand, treats an abstract idea of the community, or nation, as valuable independently of the human beings

that make it up. Christianity teaches that communities are valuable precisely because they consist of human beings (or other living creatures); moreover, as a universal creed, it recognises the dangers of competitive nationalism.

B2, which insists that we have common as well as private interests, emphasises the implications of our nature as social and relational beings. In doing so, it fits comfortably within the Christian ethical tradition. Indeed, from the Christian point of view there are in one sense no merely private interests: my own true good is inseparable from that of those others who are actually or potentially related to me, while my service of others, and their service of me, benefits us all. Once again, however, we should note that the smaller or closer the community, the more likely its members are both to have many common interests and to care more deeply about these. Not only will I share with other other members of my town a direct interest in the local facilities, but I am also likely to be connected to them by networks of friendship. For this reason, appeals to the common good as a whole (rather than specific common goods) are likely to be more powerful the smaller (or more unified) the community in question.

We might also note here the connection between A2-type common goods and the common good. A relational good such as justice is common because shared by all members of the community; conversely, the community in question is good in part by virtue of that justice: this type of common good is an aspect of the goodness of the community.

Within any one given group, the more we identify with one another, the more we will think of ourselves as having common interests. Insofar as we and our world are fallen, however, we see our interests as private and competitive. One consequence of this is that rulers have been faced with competing demands from different sections of the community; an important further use of phrase ‘common good’ has been to remind them of their duty to serve all sections alike. As Aristotle wrote, ‘Wherever the one or the few or the many rule for the purpose of the common benefit, such constitutions must be correct, but those where they seek benefit for themselves, whether of the one or of the few or of the many, are distorted’.[10] It is worth noting that a duty to be impartial is distinct from a duty to serve the well-being of the community thought of as an interrelated whole; in practice, the two will often, but not always, overlap.

Aristotle suggests that a ruler is likely to be tempted to favour precisely himself or his own group. More generally, a government will always be under pressure to favour the powerful and influential, however power is distributed within a particular society. There are two reasons, therefore, why a just government ought to favour the weak: firstly as a counterbalance to the powerful, and secondly because the weak usually need particular assistance or protection that others do not need. It is because within stable societies the poor are usually *also* the weak that a government’s ‘option for the poor’ might be seen as a properly impartial. To quote Leo XIII: ‘Here, then, it is in the power of a ruler to benefit every order of the State, and amongst the rest to promote in the highest degree the interests of the poor; and this by virtue of his office and without being exposed to any suspicion of undue interference - for it is the province of the commonwealth to consult for the common good’.[11]

A final point: the complete well-being of the community will be complete in two senses, comprising the *whole* good of *all* of its members. Aristotle linked these two when he

defined the task of politics as both governing other types of practical knowledge in order to achieve the full human good, and as doing so for the good of all rather than of one.[12] It is, of course, more controversial in the contemporary world (by contrast with Aristotle's) to argue that the state should aim at the whole good of its members than to argue that it should aim at the good of all its members.

Public and private responsibilities for the common good

The role of the ruling authorities is to serve the common good; that has been a basic theme within the broad tradition since Aristotle. Recent Catholic social teaching has a tendency to add that all private individuals are also responsible in some way for the common good: 'The common good therefore involves all members of society, no one is exempt from cooperating, according to each one's possibilities, in attaining it and developing it' (*CSDC*[13] 167). There is a crucial distinction to be made here between the way in which political authorities and private groups or individuals are responsible for the common good. A ruler is responsible for the well-being of the community as a whole, which includes the well-being of all its members: his or her responsibility is direct, determinate and impartial. I suggest that it is a mistake to think of the responsibility of private individuals in the same way.[14]

Private individuals serve the common good instead in the following ways: first, through cooperating with the political authorities in their task of serving the common good; secondly, through caring for their families and other dependants, if they have them, and educating children to serve the wider society; thirdly, through doing worthwhile work well; fourthly, through involving themselves in other activities that enrich the communities (at whatever level) and networks to which they belong; fifthly, by assisting those in need, for example by reponding to emergencies, providing hospitality, or giving to the poor. The point is that the ways in which private individuals serve the common good are and ought to be varied, indefinite and largely dependent upon roles that are to some extent freely chosen. Furthermore, those individuals whose lives they might enrich are an indefinite sub-section of wider society: the customers in the shop that they own, or the children who turn up at the tennis club, or the stranger who happens to fall over in the street when they are passing. This point is important, for it is the very indefiniteness of such responsibility that makes its exercise concrete: since it is impossible for me, as a private citizen, to be responsible for serving all members of my society impartially, if I confuse my role with that of the political authorities, I will in fact achieve nothing.[15]

Catholic social teaching has, of course, paid some attention to the relation between nation-states and the rest of the world. *PT*, for example, both argues that a global authority is needed to safeguard security and rights and insists that such an authority should not 'limit the sphere of action of the public authority of the individual political community, much less take its place'.[16] We are still far from the creation of a single, global political authority with responsibility for the global common good, and the capacity to pursue it effectively. It is also far from clear how the governments of the world could establish such an authority in a way that gave it enough power to do its job, while securing effective safeguards against its abuse (which would, of course, be more dangerous the more powerful such an authority were).

What we have instead at present is a variety of international institutions and alliances, dealing with different specific goods, such as trade or the cleanliness of the atmosphere. In this context, we might ask how a national government or group of government ought to concern itself with the common good as a whole, that is, the well-being of the worldwide community.[17] One way to answer this might to draw an analogy between the relation of individual citizens to the common good of their societies and that of individual governments to the good of the whole world. The responsibility of, say, the different governments of Europe to the global common good might be seen as varied and indefinite, yet resulting in concrete contributions to the whole, in a way similar to that in which individuals or sub-groups serve their national society. Thus, one nation might wish to provide pasta and peace-keeping troops, while another might prefer to offer computers and emergency famine relief. In practice, of course, much international cooperation and assistance is of this sort.

Objections to the common good

A clearer analysis of the idea of the common good can assist in responding to a range of standard objections to it, which correspond to a range of broadly liberal positions. The first group of these, which might be labelled *individualist* objections, deny that there are common goods on the grounds that we ought to think of ourselves primarily as individuals rather than social beings. The most extreme objection of this sort would hold that there are no resources that cannot, and therefore should not, be privatised: A1aii-type goods need not exist. Although this claim is unlikely to persuade many, for practical reasons (how would we go about privatising the air that we breathe?), more would be persuaded by the argument that we should hold resources in common *only* where this is absolutely necessary; all resources that can be privatised should be. The debate with this group needs to focus on the question of human nature (why should we see ourselves primarily as isolated individuals?) and on the intrinsically social nature of the institution of private property (why should this good and only this good be collectively protected?).

Other individualists might wish to reject the idea that we have (or should have) relational goods; however, a state that protects order and private property already recognises a minimum of these. Why should others also not be worth sustaining?[18] Here, the argument might proceed in a piecemeal way, examining whether each candidate for the status a relational good actually contributes to the interests of all.

The category of overflowing goods (A2aii) might be particularly useful in furthering debate with individualists. For if one can come to recognise that another’s well-being can contribute to one’s own, then one has begun to move from seeing oneself as an isolated individual to seeing oneself as partly social by nature. A parallel point can be made at a higher level: a community which comes to recognise that the good of a different community can contribute to its own good has begun to move from an isolationist to a cooperative view of international relations.

Debate about overflowing goods will be furthered by exploring the ways in which the well-being of other members of our community can in fact benefit us. These will include range from the pragmatic to the humane. Take, for example, the question of whether or not the rich should be taxed to ensure that the very poor have access to health-care. One might appeal to the concern of the rich for their own health, pointing out that if a

substantial minority of citizens are vulnerable to infectious diseases, the whole population becomes more vulnerable; one might appeal to their patriotism, asking the rich whether they could be proud of a country in which the poor were not well cared for; or else one might appeal, more straightforwardly to their sympathy, emphasising their relationship with their fellow-countrymen.

Such an argument will be easier to sustain the more local the community in question. In general, but particularly if used in the global context, it will require a serious commitment to the belief that we, the privileged, are not always better off when we are wealthier.[19] In that case, a debate about what interests we have in common will be inextricably linked to a debate about what our genuine interests are.

The second group of objections might be termed *sceptical*. These would focus on our difficulty in agreeing upon interests that are genuinely common. Some versions would accept common material interests, but hesitate to recognise non-material interests, such as virtue, on the grounds that these are irresolvably disputed. Here again a response might point to those relational goods that are necessary to sustain even a minimal state. To debate these objections further would require discussion of how far there we have a shared human nature (and at a more local level a shared culture), with similar material, social, intellectual and spiritual needs and desires.

The third group of objections might be termed *libertarian*. The more extreme versions of these will argue that whether or not there are common goods, it is simply not the state's business to impose systems that provide, foster or protect them. A consistent proponent of such a view will tend towards anarchism. A more moderate version might argue that though it is the state's business to protect some common goods, it has no right to interfere in the provision of others. For historical reasons, this version has tended to argue that the state should provide the systems that protect life and property, but not those that foster religious or moral well-being. Debate here needs to focus on the true nature of freedom, and on whether there are theoretical, rather than just practical, reasons for classing some common goods as the state's business and others not. Catholic social teaching does not, it seems to me, determine in advance the detailed conclusions of such a debate.

A fourth group of objections might be termed *anti-totalitarian*. These are also concerned with freedom, and are acutely aware (for excellent historical reasons) of the dangers of treating the individual as merely part of, or as expendable for the sake of, the whole. They are likely to reject the B3-type common good outright as both dangerous and fanciful (what can it mean to think of the state as existing independently of its members?). They would resist any version of the B2-type common good that did not include individual goods, and the protection of individual rights, within it. They would rightly warn that the comparison of the political community with a body (cf. e.g. *RN* 27) must be used only with great care. They ought, however, to willing to recognise that some aspects of the whole human good cannot be specified, or fostered, independently of an individual's relation to the community. Concerns of this type are not only thoroughly compatible with the tradition of Catholic social teaching, but integral to it. That is why the protection of individual rights must be an element in any healthy understanding of the common good.

The common good and public goods

I hope that this sort of analysis will also assist those with more expertise than my own in making connections between the idea of the common good and the economists' 'public goods'. The latter have also been defined in a variety of ways; I use a couple of examples to sketch the sort of connections I have in mind.

One standard definition of a public good is negative: 'one that free market exchanges will not generate on their own.'[20] Immediately we can note that this definition picks out the provision rather than the enjoyment of such goods. It may, therefore, need to be supplemented where collectively provided goods do not include all those that are collectively enjoyed. Secondly, many shared goods, in particular environmental goods, are already naturally available to us. We do not need to generate them, but to oversee their maintenance (and in some cases access to them). Thirdly, we might reflect that economists have normally, for obvious reasons, concentrated on goods that are measurable and therefore material.[21] Public goods that are also commonly enjoyed will, therefore, come under category A1a rather than A1b, although relational goods such as institutions may be needed to secure them.

Finally, the negative formulation of this understanding of public goods is interesting in its own right: it assumes the primacy of private exchanges over common projects, and therefore privileges commerce over other forms of social cooperation. Yet it is not necessary to start exploring this issue by asking, 'Is it impossible for this good to be provided by free market exchanges?' We might begin rather with the opposite question, 'Is it impossible for this good to be provided by the community as a whole?' Or else, we could ask, less ideologically, 'Would it be better, all things considered, for this good to be provided through free market exchange or by the community (and if the latter, by which community) or by some other means?' In that case, our answer could take into account the potential good of cooperative activity itself.

In the introductory essay to their volume, Kaul, Grunberg and Stern offer a different characterisation of public goods.[22] They begin by contrasting them with private goods, which, they argue, exclude others than their owners from owning or using them; they also tend to be consumed when used, so that if one person uses them they are not available for others to use (their example is a cake). We might want to make this analysis a little more precise. First, we might note that private goods exclude others from ownership by *definition*, whereas they exclude others from use by *convention or agreement*. Secondly, people may compete for goods either because their user consumes them or because he or she monopolises them while using them. A car is not used up by being used, but is rendered unavailable for other journeys at the same time. Both these points emphasise that convention as much as nature dictates whether specific types of good are normally thought of as private or public. This is important, because it means that in most cases whether or not a community allows its members to exclude others from access to a good[23] is a moral or political choice that is not dictated simply by the market or by nature.

Kaul, Grunberg and Stern go on to characterise pure public goods as 'nonrivalrous' and 'nonexcludable', that is to say, those goods that are not consumed by use, and to which everyone has access, are public goods. The criterion of 'nonexcludability' simply identifies the community which shares a good; hence this can be immediately related to the analysis of common goods. (A community smaller than the global community often may, though need not, exclude non-members from the good in question.) The criterion of

‘nonrivalry’ refers to the way in which goods are enjoyed; my A-type goods are ‘nonrivalrous’ in the sense that one person’s enjoyment of them does not detract from their enjoyment by other members of the community. Once again, we might note that the category of common goods can straightforwardly include those non-material and non-measurable goods, in particular those of relationship and shared activity; because these may be difficult for economists to handle, they are unlikely to be included under public goods. We should note, however, that the good of a community (a B-type good) could in fact be characterised as both ‘nonrivalrous’ and ‘nonexcludable’, whether or not Kaul, Grunberg and Stein’s formulation was intended to include it within their formulation.

The concept of the common good as a whole might, then, both enrich and put into context the various understandings of public goods used by economists. Conversely, the details of economists’ analyses can give greater precision to the idea of the common good. For example, economists have identified the ways in which public goods can be more or less pure, i.e. access to them can be limited or threatened by congestion or overuse; they have explored the idea of ‘club goods’, i.e. those goods that are shared exclusively by members of a group which they voluntarily join for that purpose;[24] and they have begun to refine the assumption that if x is a good, then more of x is necessarily better.[25] Such analyses can easily be integrated into an understanding of material, and in some cases of relational, common goods, and can assist in refining our understanding of them.

Underpinning the common good

The more that we see ourselves as competing with other members of our society, the thinner our understanding of the common good will be; the more that we see ourselves as sharing important interests, the richer it will be. I shall conclude by identifying four features of Christian anthropology and theology that encourage a rich notion of the common good within Christian moral and political thought. In dialogue with other traditions that share these features, Christians will be able to use this rich notion. In dialogue with traditions that do not share these features, they will be able to use at best elements of the total common good; for example, they might identify something that both parties can agree to be a common resource, but without assuming that this fits into a larger pattern of shared interests.

The first feature is that the world is benevolently ordered. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that, provided we live within the laws that govern creation, the world’s resources will be sufficient to supply our genuine collective needs. It is hard to be sure that the same conclusion could be reached on the basis of scientific evidence alone. Secondly, there is a connection between the belief that the world’s resources are sufficient, and the belief that our own material needs are limited; in other words, what is good for us is not more and more, but the right amount.[26] This second belief is a basic axiom of the Catholic tradition; for example it is fundamental to the teaching of the encyclicals on private property or just wages, which are both rooted firmly in ideas of Aquinas.[27]

It is no coincidence that these ideas are so counter-cultural in our world, driven as it is by advertising, the search for financial profit, and utilitarian assumptions about maximisation and the commensurability of goods. For the science of economics is built on the assumption that we live in a world of scare resources, while liberal political theory originated with the myth that we were isolated strangers in competition with one another.

The more we assume that resources are relatively abundant, that is to say, sufficient for all, the more scope there will be for identifying common resources (cf. A1aii).[28] Conversely, where unlimited demand threatens to create scarcity, such goods will either be damaged or exhausted, or else, where possible, privatised; often, in practice, they are likely to become the focus of conflict.

The second feature is that human beings share a nature which shapes, and in part determines, their basic needs. Even when cultural differences are taken seriously, we can still recognise that we share a set of centrally important, objectively identifiable, goods, which include material and other external goods, and moral, intellectual and spiritual goods. The similarity of our needs is a necessary condition of our having a rich set of shared interests.

The Christian tradition goes on to rank such goods: while goods of the body are necessary for life and well-being, those of the soul are of a higher value. The latter are not only indivisible common goods (cf. A1ai), in the sense that the overall quality of, say, courage, is not limited, but they are even fruitful: for when one person grows in virtue, he or she is likely to inspire that virtue in others. A teacher who is knowledgeable and perceptive will foster such qualities in a pupil; children learn to love through being loved by their families and friends; those who are at peace within themselves bring peace to others. In short, those common goods that are of the greatest worth are ones that need never be in short supply.

The third feature is that human beings are essentially sociable and flourish through their relationships (even though their flawed nature often puts strain on those relationships). Therefore cooperating to share goods is both possible and often enjoyable. Clearly, the larger the community, the more our natural sociability needs to be complemented by imagination and theory.[29] Christianity, like other monotheistic religions, further insists upon the fundamental unity of the human race: we are all children of God and owe one another charity, as fellow-creatures loved by the Creator. Therefore, the inhabited world can be seen as a single community, at least in potential and in aspiration. Here, increased scientific understanding of our biological nature and the combination of social phenomena known as 'globalisation' both provide assistance in the attempt to see the human world as an interrelated whole.

Finally, Christianity holds that our final, and shared, good is God, whose presence we now enjoy through the created order, and hope one day to be able to enjoy without mediation. Furthermore, the existence and activity of God undergirds the first three principles. He is the Creator responsible for the benevolent ordering of the world, including the correspondence between our true needs and its provision. It is through faith in God, or at least in transcendental order, that we rank virtues above material goods, and seek to develop them. We might also see it as part of the providential ordering of the world that the higher goods are fruitful rather than competitive in nature. Finally, it is because of our relation to God that we can believe that we are already in some sense, despite our deep divisions and conflicts, a single global community, and that we ought to live as if this were true.

Finally, then, we may ask whether the different uses of the phrase 'common good' merely pick out a list of different elements, described as common for different reasons, or whether they can be integrated within a unified understanding. I have suggested that

Christianity provides a framework which both makes sense of a rich understanding of common interests, and can interrelate these: for our common nature, our sociability and our need for cooperation, together with the resources that the world affords, are part of a whole that is ordered and unified for our, and for its, good. It is the ordering of creation that connects the Creator, as our common good, with other sorts of common good, and thereby integrates them with each other. Again, because our real interests are not in competition (although in our fallen condition we often see ourselves as part of competing groups), the ruler's duty to serve the community impartially can also be seen as a fundamental part of what is in the true common interest of all.

Without a metaphysics that is capable of such integration, the various senses of the phrase will be independent, and in that case, it would arguably be better to use separate terms. At the very least, it seems important to ask how far the wide variety of ways in which the phrase has been used within Catholic social teaching could refer to a single concept if they did not imply certain substantial anthropological and theological commitments. If, but only if, we are clear about this, the concept of common good can be a helpful tool in sharing the insights of Catholic social teaching with the wider world.[30]

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1 The idea for this paper arose from a discussion with Helen Alford O.P. of her 'Equitable global wealth distribution: a global public good and a building block for the global common good,' in Helen Alford O.P., Charles Clark, S.A.Cortright and Michael Naughton (edd.) *Rediscovering Abundance: Interdisciplinary Essays on Wealth, Income and their Distribution in the Catholic Social Tradition* (University of Notre Dame Press, forthcoming).
2 Translations of encyclicals are taken from David J.O'Brien and Thomas A.Shannon (edd.) *Catholic Social Thought: the Documentary Heritage* (Orbis, 1992). I use the following abbreviations: *RN* (*Rerum Novarum*), *QA* (*Quadragesimo Anno*), *MM* (*Mater et Magistra*), *PT* (*Pacem in Terris*), *GS* (*Gaudium et Spes*), *PP* (*Populorum Progressio*), *OA* (*Octagesima Adveniens*), *SRS* (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*), *CA* (*Centesimus Annus*).
3 Scholastic theologians were well aware of the complexities of the term. For a thorough and subtle analysis see M.S. Kempshall *The Common Good in Late Medieval Political Thought* (Oxford University Press, 1999)
4 Cf. the argument of Raymond Geuss' *Public Goods, Private Goods* (Princeton University Press, 2001) that the distinction between public and private is made in a variety of ways.
5 Bill Jordan's *The Common Good* (Blackwell, 1989) makes a powerful case that our sociability implies that we have common interests; however, while his discussion of sociability focuses on local networks, he assumes throughout that the nation-state (or, in the final chapter, the global community) is the appropriate community to secure such interests. If that is correct, it at least needs to be argued. Peter Phillips Simpson *Vices, Virtues, and Consequences* (Catholic University of America Press, 2001), ch. 11, provides a strong, though rather schematised, argument that the state must be liberal, but the community must not. Whether or not one agrees with his conclusions, the question that he raises is of crucial importance.
6 The term 'common resources' may also be used of those resources that are naturally available in abundance (that is, in quantities greater than people wish to use them), and replenishable, such as wild blackberries in Britain. Here there is private enjoyment of a common usufruct.
7 Cf. e.g. *RN* 26, *QA* 109-110, *GS* 74, *CA* 11.
8 Jordan makes this point central to his analysis in *The Common Good* (see note 5).
9 Cf. *CA* 47.
10 *Politics* III.7, 1279a 28-31.
11 *RN* 26, cf. *QA* 25, *PT* 56.
12 *Ethics* I.2, 1094b, 4-11; cf. *CSDC* 165: 'the good of all people and of the whole person'.
13 *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2004).
14 Utilitarian thought, which urges each of us to imagine that we are equally responsible for all (or, to put it another way, that we have no special responsibilities) encourages the tendency to blur the differences between the responsibilities of rulers and those of private citizens.

15 Similarly, Aquinas argues (*Disputed Questions on the Virtues: on Charity*, article 8, reply) that we cannot love every single neighbour actually and in particular; therefore we are obliged to love in this way only those bound to us by particular ties or unusual circumstances (such as urgent need). We should, however, love all other people in the world in a general way (and, presumably, recognise them as *potentially* bound to us by particular circumstances).
16 141, cf. *CSDC* 440-443.
17 Cf. *SRS* 38.
18 Patrick Riordan S.J. *A Politics of the Common Good* (Institute of Public Administration, 1996) provides a sustained argument for a liberal public framework and forms of participation that would enable us to explore through reasoned public debate our genuine shared interests.
19 Cf. Geuss, *Public Goods* (see note 4), pp. 96-103, where he argues that although genuine common goods exist at a more local level, the idea of a global common good makes little sense because it would require privileged Westerners to cease to exist.
20 David Hollenbach S.J. *The Common Good and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), p.216, referring in particular to Inge Kaul, Isabelle Grunberg and Marc A.Stern (edd.) *Global Public Goods: International Cooperation in the 21st Century* (Oxford University Press, 1999). See also pp. 8-9 for a comparison between common and public goods.
21 Where in recent years economists have tried to find ways of 'measuring' such non-material goods as happiness, they have been able to do this only by assessing stated preferences: in other words, what people (say that they) think will make them happy rather than what actually does make them happy. The findings of such investigations may be helpful, but only if treated with great care; the inevitable crudity of such measurement needs to be kept firmly in mind.
22 'Defining global public goods' in *Global Public Goods* (see note 20), pp. 2-19.
23 The community chooses, because even in the minimalist state the right to property can be enforced only by law.
24 See e.g. R.Cornes and T.Sandler *The Theory of Externalities, Public Goods and Club Goods* (Cambridge University Press, 1996 (second edition)) .
25 For more details, see Andrew Yuengert's incisive contribution to this conference, 'More of *what* is better? Material goods in economic theory and Catholic social thought'.
26 See Yuengert (previous note).
27 See e.g. *Summa Theologiae* 2a2ae 32.6, reply.
28 A related point might be made for A2b-type goods where they are material in nature.
29 Hence the telling title of Benedict Anderson's book on nationalism, *Imagined Communities* (Verso, 1991), which argues convincingly that the geographical and cultural shape of nations as they actually exist have been constructed in part by the shaping of collective imagination.
30 This version of this paper represents a provisional attempt at sorting out a tangled issue. I would very much welcome any assistance from readers in improving it (email address: m_atkins@tasc.ac.uk; postal address: Trinity and All Saints, Brownberrie Lane, Horsforth, Leeds LS18 5HD, UK).