

A Comprehensive Analysis of "The Common Good"

We tend to believe that people are inherently good. Yet in an age as uncertain and divisive as this one, academic literature and popular media alike have pointed to humans as a selfish, greedy, and uncaring species, only doing what is good for themselves. The “altruism” of humanity is not solely speculation, however; there are reasons to believe that such a concept as the common good exists. This paper justifies the existence of the common good, first from a biological perspective, then as one of relational obligations, and finally in a political sense.

Throughout history, many have attempted to define the common good, from the early Greeks to modern philosophers. Aristotle noted that citizens do not live only for their own sakes, but rather take an interest in the well-being of other citizens, while knowing that other citizens take an interest in their well-being as well (Aristotle 1984). Locke, Smith, and Rousseau note that the common good serves a privileged class of common interests, among them the interest in bodily security and property (Locke 1698; Rousseau 1762) and the interest in living a responsible and industrious private life (Smith 1776). Amongst these varied definitions, one point of agreement is that the common good consists of institutions, values, and ideas that are generally beneficial to society. While disagreement remains about how exactly society should be defined, and about whether the benefits of the common good must accrue to everyone equally, the general defining theme of the common good is its universality.

A dive into the biological nature of the human species and its evolutionary history suggests that a common good exists. Philosophical literature is radically diverse, yet a significant portion of contemporary ethical theories agree that humans seek to maximize happiness and to minimize pain or suffering. While Bentham thought it was most moral to achieve the greatest

good for the largest number of people, and desire theorists would prioritize each person getting what they want, all these theories agree that pleasure is a good thing, and any rational individual would pursue it. As a species, humans experience both pain and pleasure from different stimuli, but some stimuli provoke common reactions from all humans because of their basis in our shared physiology. For example, getting hit by a hard stick physically hurts each human, so avoiding that is a common good. Similarly, positive actions are part of the common good as well. For example, everyone benefits from a good night's sleep, as it simply rejuvenates one's body and fills it with energy. Thus, having conditions that make an adequate amount of sleep possible is a common good. Additionally, humans also share non-physical tendencies, including social behaviors like affiliation (Young 2008), which means that avenues towards affiliation are part of the common good as well.

Next, let us consider two common objections to the existence of a biologically-based common good. People who oppose the existence of the common good might object in two ways. First, they may claim that what is stated to be the "common good" does not apply equally to each individual (Balfour 2022). For instance, one might object by saying that people with sleep-related illnesses do not desire to sleep. However, this is not a reflection of not wanting to sleep, but rather the inability to do so without experiencing pain. If we carefully define sleep as sleep without suffering, which is still an achievable good, even people who experience pain during sleep would desire this. A secondary objection is that the extent to which each person experiences pleasure through the common good is different, and as such the common good cannot exist. However, desire theory points out that fulfilling one's desire to any extent brings

net pleasure, and since pleasure is generally a good thing to any individual, the extent of fulfillment does not prevent the common good from existing.

History corroborates this: human civilization advanced because of collectivization as a result of the common good. The book *Sapiens* notes that language and improved communication was a large difference between modern humans and early homo sapiens (Harrari 2016). Language itself can be seen as a part of the common good—one sacrifices their time, “mouth fluids,” and brain power in order to convey a message that supposedly benefits others when received. Another reason humans have progressed in history is because of the ability to imagine things that are not there. Leaders with visions of structures or traditions that benefited their community were able to share their visions to others, who, embracing these visions out of respect for the common good, ended up creating early social structures and the systems that have defined human development for the past few thousand years. Oftentimes, these projects required personal sacrifice, and did not benefit each individual equally (a temple might appeal most to the ultra-religious and less to agnostics), yet people still embraced these ideas, a collectivization likely for the common good.

Beyond evolutionary perspectives, the common good also exists because of relational obligations in society. All people are born into social structures, whether explicitly defined or not. Countries, cities, and communities are all part of what we see as “society.” Even orphans born in the wild, as an extreme example, exist in a social structure, although they themselves fill every level. Upon entering the world, society gives certain benefits to each individual. Shelter and food are provided from parents or guardians, education from teachers, healthcare by doctors,

and entertainment from virtually anyone. For most, all of these things accrue naturally as a result of simply existing, while some experience only part of these benefits. However, even on the most basic level, all humans who live and breathe are provided this state by their respective societies. Thus, individuals who are a part of their society have an obligation to give back to their society. Crucially, this obligation is towards all members of the society, for the simple reason that the ability to receive benefits that may have come from one person is nevertheless dependent on the society functioning as a whole. The ability for a child to receive education from a teacher is dependent on the teacher's employer having money to pay them, which is dependent on the fact that the central bank still does print money, which is dependent on the fact that banks and central institutions exist in the first place, all part of an intricate social web. The obligation to give back, therefore, is an obligation to the social structure that benefits everyone, proving the existence of a common good. Importantly, this version of the common good exists even if the individual investing in the common good does not personally accrue happiness. Whether or not one appreciates the social structures that enable them to have a happy, healthy life, those structures are nevertheless good for them and are therefore good to contribute to. For example, someone contributing to charity is doing something good even if that person is sad that they now have less money.

An objector to this argument may question why reciprocity is important and good in the first place. If one does not ask society to benefit them, why are they nonetheless obligated to society? However, there are justifications for why reciprocity exists. Firstly, reciprocity is a reflection of the values of society. When a stranger holds a door open for us, we thank the stranger and feel morally indebted to them, not because thanking someone or being indebted is

inherently a good thing, but because it rewards the behaviour of holding a door that is a good one in society's values. Secondly, reciprocity can be self-sustaining, in the sense that everyone would be maximally fulfilled if complete reciprocity were to be achieved. This is an inherently good thing, and also the ideal state of the world. Finally, reciprocity occurs naturally, because being favoured induces liking, and liking can result from being liked, making reciprocity a part of the natural order of things (Kolm et al. 2006).

Finally, the common good exists in the politics of society. Politicians in most democracies campaign on the promise of building a better society that benefits everyone. Notably, politicians must appeal to all of their voters, who are representative of the society that is receiving benefits from the common good. Politics is all about power and its distribution. Individuals with the most power are able to affect society in the largest ways, bringing about change as they see fit. Leadership positions, then, represent a concentration of power, one big enough that it can represent the will of the people in how they envision their society to be in the future. Given that conceptually, the majority of politics is a reflection of change in society, it can practically define how the common good exists in society. Politicians who institute a policy that changes society in a way that is beneficial thus appeal to the common good itself, as the policy is likely to benefit the entire voter base. John Locke himself famously defined political power as “the right to make binding laws and the right to mobilize the community in defense of these laws, where both of these powers are to be directed to no other *end*, but the *Peace, Safety*, and *publick good* of the People” (Locke). Even if the common good did not presently exist in practical society, it would start to slowly show itself, since politics reflects the world around us,

and the politicians who campaign for change eventually realize that common good through policy.

One objection is that, in practice, politicians only appeal to the majority group. Notably, politicians respond to incentives (World Bank), and they are incentivized to appeal to more individuals than just the majority group to make their candidacy more secure. Even if this were not true, the objection only shows that politicians have not determined what exactly is the common good for all, and are trying to pursue what is closest to the common good. It does not prove that the common good is nonexistent. The continued participation of citizens in a political system indicates that governance as a whole is at least more beneficial than harmful for society as whole, suggesting that politics, as a whole, contributes to a common good. Additionally, opponents of the existence of the common good may point to the fact that political deadlocks often exist and that global democracies are currently sliding away from the common good. How can the common good exist, when the U.S. can't even settle on who won the presidency? The response here is that presumably, the common good is a happy and healthy society, and both candidates are trying to appeal to their voters by promising different combinations of policies and agendas, meaning that their disagreements are simply over the best path forward for the common good, rather than disagreements over whether or not a happy healthy society is a good thing.

From early on in history, human development has always been influenced by the common good. It is because we pursued these common interests that we were able to reach the societies of today, and it is the continual definition and pursuit of the common good that shapes

politics in the modern day. The common good is an inherent part of society, from the common biological characteristics of humans to the obligations we hold as part of society, and on to the different paths of realization of this higher human goal in politics. This essay justifies the existence of the common good in three forms: a common good as an outcome that brings all people pleasure, a common good as a collective that everyone benefits from and that everyone benefits from contributing to, and a common good as a political system that converges on what is good for all. Whether or not people end up choosing to pursue the common good, we can rest assured that its existence means that there is still hope for humanity in a divided time.

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