# An Alternative Evaluation

# of the Common Good

## Introduction

In “The Social Contract,” Jean-Jacques Rousseau explains the common good as the people’s “general will.” He argues that the legitimacy of government can only be derived from the fulfillment of the common good. Wheeling on this definition and John Locke’s assertion that people are endowed with the natural rights to life, liberty, and property, John Rawls, in turn, argues that people’s basic liberties and equal economic opportunities are the most important benchmarks among their “general will” when deciding whether something could be qualified as the common good. This paper will analyze the extent to which a clear definition of this common good can be obtained, and thus, whether it exists.

**Defining the Common Good**

Rousseau's "general will" of the people, which constitutes the common good, is established upon the aggregate of total individual interest within a society. According to Adam Smith in "The Wealth of Nations," the "invisible hand" allows people to pursue their self-interests, and therefore "individual ambition serves the common good." Without individuals' self-interest, the public good is non-existent since the public is essentially composed of numerous individuals. How could we balance the individual interests and formulate a collective good? Plato, in his book "The Republic," argued that social cohesion is the common good since all individuals share goals and could thus share benefits deriving from a society's success.

However, it is inevitable for individuals to have clashing interests and place different priorities and values on different things. According to Rousseau, these different priorities are all legitimate because individuals are born selfish. Rousseau argues on grounds of the legitimacy of every individual's interest, and it is important to take this premise as an part of the common good's definition. Combining these theorists' criteria, it can posited that a common good is something that yields overall greater net benefit than net costs to one society as a whole, and the way to weigh this is to compare different actors' individual benefits and costs.

Some scholars argue that public interest equates to the interests of the majority only. However, according to Claude Lefort's "empty space" theory, the legitimacy of democracy is justified by representing the public as a negative space of contestation, such as public referendums, parliamentary voting and presidential elections, and not as "The People-as-One". The premise of this argument is that democracy's power is periodically

recycled and is checked and balanced by internal division. When power is redistributed in the next cycle of elections and a former leader accepts electoral defeat, no group of individuals fully embodies that power to tower over the public since the authority of leaders is created as a manifestation of the people's will.

Hence, the public cannot be narrowed down to being "the majority" because democracy limits one group from exclusively owning the authority and prevents other members from being turned into the same subject with a particular will. The public is therefore defined as "the negative" since it allows the contestation of power, which is the foundation of democracy. If the people cease to exist in the negative form, they would be homogenous and unified, leading to a usurping of the popular sovereign instead of the sovereign left intact in democracies. This is a fundamental distinction between democracies and totalitarian societies, demonstrating that the definition of the common good cannot be limited to overlapping interests between some dominant groups in society while ruling out other groups whose interests happen to not coincide with theirs. Thus, there is no such conflict between the public interest and the individual interest, but rather the conflict between one or multiple private interests against opposing private interests when deciding the net benefits and net costs involved in the qualification of a common good.

**The Common Good on a Micro-level**

It is also true that causing harm to anyone is not automatically against the common good since the degree and broadness of impact are the only two weighing metrics when comparing net costs and net benefits. For instance, a person's act of paying for dinner for her and her friends could be classified as the common good as long as it yields a greater net benefit than if everyone paid for their individual meals. Although this generates a greater net cost to that one individual and therefore harms her, it is still a common good since the net benefits here outweigh the net costs.

Conversely, if the net cost of this action outweighs the net benefit given that the harms toward the specific individual exceed the benefits enjoyed by all the other friends, the action thereby is not a common good by definition. Since the weighing of net benefit and net cost is subjective and the impact differs in each circumstance, evaluating whether an action qualifies as the common good is essentially the comparison of utility. To one person, time might matter more than a particular amount of money, but to someone else, that same amount of money might matter much more than time. Therefore, though it may seem like a strong argument to posit that net benefits and net costs can be weighed with quantitative units such as money, the amount of money matters to a different extent for different people and the meaning attached to values like freedom is immeasurable with quantitative units. Thus, as each person holds different standards for utility, the criteria for what constitutes the common good are subjective.

The common good exists as it is seen in our personal interactions. For instance, imagine an student who masters all the content at school and is willing to help her friends

study. Since her mom picks her up at 6:00 P.M. each day and it's only 4:00 PM, she decides to help out one of her friends because she has nothing else to do. This student benefits from a closer relationship with her friend and the happiness derived from simply helping others. Her friends also benefit because they would not have studied as efficiently without her help. Since there is no net cost and a huge net benefit, the peer-together study mode counts as a common good. Even on a local level, the regional government could fulfill the common good in a situation where no net costs are derived. For instance, eminent domain can be counted as a common good if it provides a win-win situation for both the government and enclave residents—the government gets to use the land to construct public utilities like hospitals or energy pipelines while the enclave residents get reassigned to housing properties with, presumably, higher market values, communities with better security, and exponentially more job opportunities. In this case, the net benefit outweighs the net cost because no actor's interest would be harmed in the process.

**The Common Good on a Macro-level**

However, the greater the scale, the harder it is to measure the net benefits and net harms in deciding whether one could qualify as a common good. For instance, the allocation of healthcare funds is supposed to be the common good given that the government, the agency which carries the general will of the public, decides how to allocate the funds to maximize net benefit and prevent voter backlash. However, according to Northwestern University, the deadliest and most common types of cancer currently receive the least amount of research funding, which is partly due to a lack of media coverage. The research found that testicular cancer is underfunded because of its surrounding stigma while pancreatic and lung cancer are also poorly funded due to the lack of media coverage. In contrast, leukemia, lymphoma and breast cancer are much more well-funded although they are less common and less lethal. In this case, the common good is hard to measure. On the one hand, allocating funds toward the more common types of cancer leads to more scientific breakthroughs in these categories, thus saving more lives. On the other hand, children and women are more likely to get breast cancer, lymphoma and leukemia, and thus may deserve more funding as these groups have less economic power to pay for healthcare. Moreover, the Northwestern University study also found that there is a higher public willingness to prioritize medical treatments directed toward females and children given how popular media generate more sympathy for these two groups and facilitate mainstream public discourse on it, which further complicates the process of defining the common good.

On a macro scale, it also becomes more difficult to determine what a common good is since it involves countless individuals who hold different interests. Although it may be

intuitive to posit that the government fulfills the common good by standardizing education and therefore making sure that individuals share interests owing to the proximity of their world views, the government's standardization of education might not be a common good. For instance, governments could set heavy limitations on the things that people learn and cause harm to groups of people by erasing traces of their historic wrongs. Whether it is the case of China's continuing education of its population on its 20th century struggles through civil war and policies like the Great Leap Forward, American policies in the 19th century to not disclose its eradication of Native American populations or Japan's earlier rejections of its imperialist past, these actions hindered citizens' rights to access accurate information and wrongs.

Governments could ideologically manipulate their people through standardizing education, which is still being used in authoritarian regimes like China and North Korea. In these instances, citizens' autonomy is part of the net costs and is great enough to weigh down the net benefits of social cohesion. The premise of social cohesion is often to have a history of institutional trust and norms of generalized reciprocity. Therefore, without a system that allows for people to choose their government, a citizenry may not place that trust in its society's institutions and there will be no common good.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, the discourse surrounding the common good, as elucidated by thinkers such as Rousseau, Locke, and Rawls, offers a profound lens through which to analyze societal dynamics and governance. The interplay between individual interests and collective welfare forms the crux of this discussion, with various perspectives contributing to a nuanced understanding.

The notion of the common good emerges as a multifaceted concept, shaped by divergent interests, values, and power dynamics within society. While Rousseau posits the "general will" as the foundation of the common good, Locke emphasizes the protection of natural rights, and Rawls advocates for equal opportunities and liberties. These frameworks underscore the complexity inherent in defining and pursuing the common good.

Moreover, the discourse extends beyond mere theoretical abstraction, finding resonance in practical applications at both micro and macro levels. At the micro level, interpersonal interactions and community initiatives illustrate instances where the common good is pursued through mutual cooperation and benefit. Conversely, at the macro level, governance structures and policy decisions grapple with the complexities of balancing competing interests and maximizing societal welfare.

However, as evidenced by contemporary examples and scholarly critiques, the quest for the common good is fraught with challenges and contradictions. Issues of power asymmetry, ideological manipulation, and systemic inequalities complicate the realization of a truly inclusive and equitable common good. Moreover, the subjective nature of evaluating

net benefits and costs underscores the inherent complexity of the endeavor.

In essence, while the common good may elude a definitive and universally applicable definition, its pursuit serves as a moral imperative and a guiding principle for fostering solidarity, justice, and human flourishing in an increasingly interconnected world. As we navigate the complexities of contemporary challenges and opportunities, it is imperative that we engage in ongoing dialogue and collective action to advance the common good of the society.

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