

## Markus Krienke

*What is the connection between common good and human dignity? The contribution of the Thomistic tradition to a reflection on common good*

*With its synthesis between the aspects of individuality and sociality of human nature, the Thomistic anthropology contains the elements to overcome the modern and late-modern antagonism between libertarianism and communitarism which both fail to determine validly the conceptions of human dignity and of common good. This failure consists in their identification and reduces or the first to the latter or the latter to the first. Rosmini, who applies the Thomistic anthropology to modern political thought, proposes a diverse relationship between human dignity and common good in which both correct each other critically. This generates new definitions either for human dignity and for common good beyond their monopolization by the political discourse and on their authentic ethical-anthropological basis.*

### 1. Introduction

The modern conception of *common good* rests between formal and substantialistic understandings, in other words, between “thin” and “thick” interpretations. The positions belonging to the liberal tradition substitute the concept of human dignity and the ethical dimension of fundamental rights for common good’s original significance. So, the common good is defined as the sum of all the institutional and juridical conditions for the realisation of the full potential of an individual. On the contrary, communitarian positions define common good through concrete values attributed by the social context and knowable by human intellect. In other words, they substitute the moral notion of common good for the idea of human dignity. For such theories, attaining these values constitutes a precondition to the possibility of worthiness and, therefore, individual choices are based on the moral and political dimensions of common good. In both positions the common good is intimately linked with human dignity.

One can simply affirm that both positions are quite abstract and that the truth must be found in a “middle position”. However, the challenging question is, what would be an adequate anthropology approaching a consistent middle position? Indeed, the Thomistic tradition offers a surprising answer to this challenge, which has not yet been developed because most Aquinas’ interpretations follow the Aristotelian paradigm, which favours the substantialistic interpretation of the common good. The aim of this paper is to suggest that Aquinas’ position is more complex than its usual handbook contraction, and that therefore it can contribute

an alternative reflection to the formalistic and substantialistic reduction of common good.

## 2. The modern *impasse* in the discussion on common good

The specific dimension of the modern reflection on the common good involves the development of the political and juridical theories of human dignity and human rights. This process was made possible by Thomas Hobbes, who categorised the common good with the State: the *Leviathan* is the moral and existential fundament of the human person, who affirms ontological status only through the State. Accordingly, in their natural state individuals are enemies, and could never create the common good allowing human fulfilment; therefore, the only legitimate private interests are those that can be justified by the good of the State<sup>1</sup>. Rousseau expresses this idea as the identification of the moral dimension of individual will with general will, i.e. that of the State. This radical reduction of the individual to the reasoning of the State or to the political reduction of the common good, provoked the liberal reaction of Locke and then of Kant. In contrast, they conceived the common good as a result of the affirmation of human liberty, dignity and fundamental rights<sup>2</sup>. Therefore, through Kant the common good is affirmed in its metapolitical and therefore moral dimension as the good of mankind<sup>3</sup>. For these two thinkers, there is no substantialistic dimension of State that could be opposed to the individual; on the contrary, the State is the necessary order through which human liberty and dignity is affirmed. Therefore, for Kant it is the *a priori* moral imperative and metaphysical necessity of human dignity for common good to be constituted in civic status, leaving natural status<sup>4</sup>. Common good now exists within the legal-constitutional framework as the *a priori* condition for the affirmation of liberty, and for self-determination as the fundamental moral faculty of the individual. Therefore, the political dimension of common good is identified with the formal conditions of the expression of human dignity as moral and juridical notions<sup>5</sup>.

Hegel criticised this idea of common good. He reaffirmed the Aristotelian intuition that the political common good cannot be reduced to the formal conditions for individual liberty, conceiving of public civic morals, which are the expression of a specific political community, and identifying the common good

1 «Governing to the profit of the subjects, is governing to the profit of the sovereign» (T. Hobbes, *The Elements of Law Natural and Politic*, in: Id., *Human Nature and De corpore politico*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1994, p. 172.

2 Cf. I. Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. M. Gregor, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1991, The Doctrine of Rights, § 49.

3 Cf. I. Kant, *To Perpetual Peace. A Philosophical Sketch*, trans. T. Humphrey, Hackett Publishing Co, Indianapolis-Cambridge 2003.

4 Cf. Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, The Doctrine of Rights, § 15, 44.

5 Cf. I. Kant, *On the Common Saying: "This May Be True in Theory, But It Does Not Apply In Practice"*, in: Id., *Political Writings*, trans. H.B. Nisbert, ed. H. Reiss, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1991, pp.61-92.

with the well-being of a particular State<sup>6</sup>. But at the same time this is argued with a very specific difference from the Aristotelian notion of substantialistic moral values, resulting from a metaphysical consideration of human nature. Aristotelian view attributes to the State paternalistic power over individuals. This suggests that potentially, it has the ability to know what is best for its citizens because of its metaphysical knowledge of human nature. Hegel overcomes this substantialistic dimension by transforming it into his metaphysical consideration of liberty and introducing the subsidiary structure of institutions<sup>7</sup>. Human liberty is not affirmed through its subjection to a heteronym definition of moral good, but within the institutions of ethical life: only through the family, the civil society and the State, the human person acquires her full dignity because it is affirmed by the autonomous structures of the common good. With this reaffirmation of the ethical dimension of common good, *after* the Lockean-Kantian challenge, Hegel has created the presuppositions of the “communitaristic turn” that means the possibility to affirm the common good is the necessary precondition to the realisation of individual liberty. To Hegel, in other words, the common good is the context of the dynamic realisation of the dignity of human person.

According to the logic of the *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, only ethical institutions can transform this individual liberty into social dimensions and realise the common good as a finalistic category of individuality. Therefore, human dignity is not complete in its individual dimension, but only in its social and ethical integration. The common good is this final goal of human dignity, realised through the civic and public formation of the modern State. Therefore, in Hegel we deal with the modern transformation of the substantialistic concept of Aristotelian common good<sup>8</sup> – according to his dialectical logic, he overcomes and conserves it at the same time –, because the person is included completely, in its finalistic structure, in the political context of State.

The liberal alternative expressed by Kant argues that the person is always the “end” of every moral notion, but this paper argues that this reduces the signification of common good to the mere formal structures guaranteeing negative liberty. Therefore, the values of human dignity are reduced to the self-determination of the subject consisting in the individualistic choice of his moral goals. In the views of Kant and Hegel, the common good is in the impasse between being the sum of formalistic institutions (as the procedural democracy in Habermas), or being identified with a “thick” notion of State (as in the moral conceptions of MacIntyre and Nussbaum based on Aristotle).

### 3. The concept of common good in Thomas Aquinas

6 Cf. G.W.F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. H.B. Nisbet, ed. A.W. Wood, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2011<sup>15</sup>, § 337.

7 Cf. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, § 235, 258.

8 Cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. R. Crisp, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2011<sup>15</sup>, 1094b7-10; 1179b34-1180a6.

The impasse of the modern discussion on common good lies in Kantian-Hegelian heritage or, better, in Hobbesian: that of being thought as a political concept. In contemporary discussions, a radicalisation is noticed, and not an overcoming of this situation. Here, the classical notions of political thinking fail not because they would be substituted by ethical reflection or better ideas, but because they became empty, fragile and weak, leading to self-contradiction and confusion. The most alarming example is the confusion about the interpretation of human rights: if they are interpreted only in an individualistic way, their ethical fundament is lost. Even if these rights are extended to claiming human duties, collective, environmental or cultural rights or to animal rights, they will lose their political function, which is the defence of the dignity of each human person in her individual autonomy. The necessary relationship of individuality to the dimensions of duty, community or environment cannot be expected to grow from the notion of rights, but from the common good, which has to be rediscovered not in its modern political dimension, but in its moral implications. The modern story of common good shows, especially in Hobbes, Kant and Hegel, that rendering it a political concept leads to systematic impasses in its relationship to human dignity and human rights. But just for the necessity to recuperate its moral dimensions, the Thomistic tradition contains some interesting reflections that have not been considered in modern political thinking.

The State is not the main reference of Thomas Aquinas' political thinking – not even in its pre-modern significance as *polis* or *imperium*. His thought is rather centred on the supernatural fulfilment of a person. This is his very innovation relatively to the Aristotelian conception of the common good. First of all, it is important to consider that the dimension of the *polis* is not the political context resulting today after the differentiation between the social, economic and religious spheres, but it means a still undifferentiated unity of social life. Principally, this consideration counts also for Thomas Aquinas where, however, we can identify the first processes of differentiation in the transcendent finalisation of human beings, generated by the separation of the political sphere from the religious<sup>9</sup>, collocating the “essence” of human beings rather in the latter and interpreting the former in a subsidiary relationship to the latter. In this perspective, Aquinas disconnects the individual from its political status: the *telos* of the person is no longer the *polis*, assigning political dignity in its substantialistic context of common good, but his supernatural fulfilment. The latter is not individualistic, it is rather constitutively social and allows human beings to participate in this life because the «human likeness to God is their capacity for relationships of love, mutual communion, and solidarity with each other»<sup>10</sup>. In the end, God is divine substance and common

9 Cf. E.-W. Böckenförde, *The Rise of the State as a Process of Secularization*, in: Id., *State, Society and Liberty. Studies in Political Theory and Constitutional Law*, translated by J.A. Underwood, Berg Publishers, New York-Oxford 1991, pp. 26-64.

10 B. Hollenbach, *The Common Good and Christian Ethics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2002, p. 130.

good<sup>11</sup>. The perspective of transcendent fulfilment, therefore, is not individualistic but solidaristic. At the same time, it relativizes the political discourse of common good and moves it into moral teleology, which not only interprets the human being but also human society as an image of God (because God is not only individual, but also the relationship of three divine persons)<sup>12</sup>. This human society finds, then, its fulfilment in the community of saints<sup>13</sup>. While in an Aristotelian context, the common good as the social dimension of human beings' perfection is collocated in the sphere of the *polis*; in Aquinas' perspective such excellence is independent from its political realisation. Referring to the political context, the human person has an uncompromisingly dignity, which is absolute in the sense that no political context can relativize it. This new dimension can be concretely realised in two specific reflections of Aquinas: a new consideration of the contemplative faculty of human beings, on the one hand, and on the social importance of human work, on the other.

First, in Aquinas contemplation is no longer the philosophical view of the ideas, and therefore it is not the theoretical insight of the good, but a spiritual category. Thus, the principle of knowledge of the common good is first a religious or ethical dimension, which then becomes a political criterion. In the Aristotelian context, this insight was possible only for an elite of few<sup>14</sup>, and only the collective of people – but not every individual – could found a common capacity of knowing the good<sup>15</sup>. Now, in the Christian world, this becomes the exercise of spiritual life and therefore a possibility for every person. Since spiritual contemplation is finally oriented to the divine essence, the concept of political truth is radically transcended and therefore relativized. At the same time, contemplation has become a duty for everyone, and involves a way of reaching the communion of saints, which is the final transcendent dimension of the common good for Thomas Aquinas.

Second, work is no longer the main characteristic that categorises the differences between free people, those with full social dignity, the underclass of slaves by natural law<sup>16</sup> and all the other forms of bound beings. While for Aristotle work is an impediment to political participation<sup>17</sup>, in the Christian context, work is a way of fulfilling human life through creativity, which is in its origin a divine activity. Therefore, the dimension of work realises the same process of transformation analysed for contemplation: from a category characterising the social class differences of free persons, which renders only a few fully able to realise themselves in the common good of the *polis*, to the democratic existence in a context of a common good, liberated from the context of *polis* and consisting in

11 Cf. Aquinas, *STh* I 60, 5 ad 3, ad 5; I/II 109, 3; II/II 25, 1 ad 2; I/II 26, 2-4.

12 Cf. J. Maritain, *The Person and the Common Good*, trans. J. Fitzgerald, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame 1966, 38, 59.

13 Cf. Aquinas, *STh* I/II 21, 4 ad 3;

14 Cf. Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. H. Rackham, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 2005, 1277b25-29, 1283b3-1284a2, 1290a37-b3, 1317a40-1318a10.

15 Cf. Aristotle, *Politics*, 1281a40-1282a40, 128 b34.

16 Cf. Aristotle, *Politics*, 1252b, 1259.

17 Cf. Aristotle, *Politics*, 1277b25-29.

the transcendent fulfilment of individual existence in the social relationship with God and the saints. Only in this divine dimension, individual fulfilment and the maximum social relationship coincide.

With Aquinas, the social-political dynamics of common good were transformed into the anthropological tension of personal fulfilment in the transcendent relationship to God through contemplation and work. Anthropologically, this allowed the synthesis between the individual and the social dimension in a coherent theory: contemplation and work are dimensions of personal fulfilment as much as they strengthen the social bond between human beings. While for the Greeks, they were extra-social dimensions of the human being and sanctioned the social gap, in the Christian dimension, they were transformed through the social dimension of the individual. The person's fulfilment in divine contemplation and terrene work, allowed the individual to communicate with others and reveal the social, not the substantial, worth of the common good.

Therefore, through the Thomistic perspective, the common good cannot be reduced to the mere external social conditions for human existence. This would undervalue the constitutive dimension of common good for the teleology of each human. Nevertheless, it cannot be identified either through a social or political community, because this perspective fails to consider that the fulfilment of the person is always an individual fulfilment and not the perfection of a social structure or of the species. Only the transcendental dimension of common good seems to avoid specific theoretical reductions of individualism and socialism.

For this moral and religious dimension of common good, human dignity cannot be reduced to a political concept. Instead, for Aquinas the dimension of human dignity has acquired a very critical function towards the political reality: «no man ought to injure a person unjustly, in order to promote the common good»<sup>18</sup>. The political reality is integrated in the moral perspective, delineated by the common good. Therefore, it has a subsidiary educative, i.e. moral, function<sup>19</sup>. Nonetheless, this function is only subsidiary to the transcendent dimension of the common good. It affirms the worth of individual in relationship to the political context. Human individuality is fundamental, and therefore Aquinas asserts not only the importance of the social structure of common good, but also its individual dimension.

The Thomistic tradition presents an idea of common good proposing a new synthesis between the communitarian and the libertarian dimension of human nature; providing a definition of *human being* which can give important intuitions for overcoming now, at the beginning of the new century, this contraposition between liberalism and communitarianism which belongs to the old one. In this perspective, it proposes to rethink the concept of common good, which is not reduced to the idea of the precedence of moral or political communities, but rethinks the relationship of the political sphere to its anthropological *a priori*.

18 Aquinas, *STb* II/II 68, 3; cf. I/II 21, 4 ad 3; I/II 113, 9 2 ad 2.

19 Cf. Aquinas, *STb* I/II 95, 1.

Arising from this, the Second Vatican Council offered a new definition of the common good which considers these presuppositions: «the sum of those conditions of social life which allow social groups and their individual members relatively thorough and ready access to their own fulfilment»<sup>20</sup>. The political framework is oriented to the human person who is not an individual, but someone who realises herself only through social groups like the family, the religious associations, and the associations of civil society<sup>21</sup>.

#### 4. An actualisation of the fundamental characteristics of the Thomistic definition of common good

Thomas Aquinas wrote in a period in which the reflection on common good was not determined by the reality of the modern State. For this reason, his thought can give us very worthy anthropological considerations, but not direct arguments concerning the political dimension of common good in political ethics today. The context of his reflection is the tension between the natural and the supernatural dimension of human fulfilment in the synthesis of the individuality and social character of a person. But the real challenge for political ethics in the Thomistic tradition is facing the existence of the modern State.

The most convincing attempt at such an actualisation was articulated by Antonio Rosmini who, on the one hand, as a liberal catholic thinker of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, developed a fine sensibility for the diverse dimensions of the central concepts of Thomistic speculation, and on the other, mastered the necessary analysis of the modern times and the political challenges of it<sup>22</sup>. The first element of his Thomistic reflection is the prevalence of personal individuality. The contrary to individuality in the political context is “collectivism”, and not “sociality”, and therefore it can be compatible with the latter, but not with the former. The affirmation of individuality in the Thomistic tradition does not exclude the social nature of person. So the first dimension of a Thomistic anthropology would be the anti-collectivism of the individual rights, stressing human dignity as the ethical *a priori* to every political reflection. In this respect, Rosmini converges with the political *a priori* of Kant and Hegel.

Given this anthropological basis, Rosmini explicates the idea of common good. Similarly to Aquinas and contrary to Aristotle, Kant and Hegel, Rosmini depoliticises the concept of common good. However, while through Aristotle the political dimension had a different meaning as it has today – closer to the social dimension of the human person – Rosmini’s criticisms of Aristotle were not well-

20 *Gaudium et spes*, 26.

21 Cf. Hollenbach, *The Common Good*, 133.

22 Cf. M. Krienke, *L’etica sociale rosmينiana. Metafisica della persona, libertà morale, giustizia sociale*, <http://www.cattedrarosmini.org/site/view/view.php?cmd=view&id=110&menu1=m2&menu2=m6&menu3=m58> (2013/01/14).

defined. They need to be much sharper when confronting Kant and even more so Hegel, considering their idea of the modern State. In this context, it was very important to establish the common good on the anthropological basis of human nature and not on the level of political reflection. The human being is not just an individual, as argued by Kant, but relational (social) on a natural and supernatural level. And the first and only social structure grounded in the individual personhood is for Rosmini the family dimension of divided liberty: as in the family we do not speak about “individuals” but of “father/husband”, “mother/wife”, “son” and “daughter”, every person is constituted not only as individual but in social-familiar relationship<sup>23</sup>. So Rosmini, beyond the political common good, speaks first of two kinds of such relationships: the religious community of all those who are living in the social context of supernatural fulfilment, and the natural family of human nature<sup>24</sup>.

Now Rosmini extends the tension of fulfilment in the transcendent common good which is anticipated by the religious communities and which was characterising the Thomistic dimension of common good, to the universal dimension of mankind. All humans are naturally constituted in an original relationship, and all are destined to supernatural fulfilment (even if they are not part of the Church). This is the theoretical and political translation of the anti-Hobbesian affirmation of Aquinas, that in their natural constitution human beings are “friends” among themselves<sup>25</sup>.

This means, first of all, that the reality of human dignity and fundamental human rights are never a mere individualistic reality. As a foundation of these rights, we find the dimension of the universal family of human mankind, and that means a universal solidaristic dimension. So we immediately see how for Rosmini the dimension of common good is the universal ethical integration of the idea of human rights: we cannot think human dignity and individual rights without thinking of a universal community of people as human beings. In this way, it is clear how the concrete reality of family is the first concrete incarnation of human relationship in the teleological perspective of supernatural perfection<sup>26</sup>. Therefore, Rosmini conceives humankind, the religious communities, and families as concrete ethical realizations of common good in the same anthropological perspective of Aquinas. Therefore they precede normatively every political understanding of common good.

Only in a subsidiary perspective, for Rosmini we can also speak about a political common good. This subsidiary dimension of the political dimension referring to the ethical ones is the most important consequence of the modern reflection on the Thomistic conception of common good. Common good means the goal of all the people together in a political context, and is distinguished from the “public

23 Cf. A. Rosmini, *The Philosophy of Right*, trans. D. Cleary and T. Watson, Rosmini House, Durham 1993-1996, II, 987.

24 Cf. Rosmini, *The Philosophy of Right*, II, 491, 636-638, 662, 668.

25 Cf. Aquinas, *Contra Gentiles*, IV, 55; A. Rosmini, *The Philosophy of Right*, II, 665-667.

26 Cf. Rosmini, *The Philosophy of Right*, II, 470, 1582.

good”, which is the good of the State as political institution<sup>27</sup>. This distinction is an important factor for political ethics, where common good is too often immediately identified with political decisionism, with the reason of State, but loses its personal and ethical dimensions.

As Aquinas created the synthesis between the individual and the social dimension of the person, Rosmini is responsible for the consequences of political ethics: only in the synthesis between human rights (human dignity)<sup>28</sup> and common good we find the balance to avoid the one-sidedness that both concepts face when they are fundamentally identified as happens in modern political thought. The perspective of human rights is extended to the whole humankind, while the dimension of common good underlines the necessity of qualified relationships.

## 5. Conclusion

Through Rosmini, the ethical idea that the *dignity of a person* is not only the end (Kant) as well as not only the principle (Hegel) of political ethics but at the same time the end and the principle can be conceived only by the recognition of the individual human dignity and of the structures of common good in humanity – the religious community and the family. In this way Rosmini realized the political expression of the Thomistic anthropology in the political discourse of modernity, presenting a characteristic synthesis between the conceptions of common good and human dignity. The consequence of this thinking is expressed in the definition that the Second Vatican Council gave on human dignity and which underlines the alternatively of the Thomistic tradition, interpreted by Rosmini, to the Kantian or Hegelian conception of human dignity: «the principle, the subject and the end of all social institutions is and must be the human person»<sup>29</sup>. This is a definition which implies the synthesis with the common good, and therefore Rosmini explains perfectly the mature Thomism which has influenced the equilibrated definitions of *common good* and of *dignity of a person* of the Second Vatican Council, being able to affirm the criterions for a necessary «pluralistic-analogical understanding of the meaning of the common good»<sup>30</sup>.

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27 Cf. Rosmini, *The Philosophy of Right*, II, 1644-1645, 1660.

28 Cf. Rosmini, *The Philosophy of Right*, I, 49, II, 1662-1663.

29 *Gaudium et spes*, 25 (my translation from the Latin original).

30 Hollenbach, *The Common Good*, 136.

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