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### *The Common Good: A Welfarist Proposal*

*The purpose of the present paper is to defend a conception of the common good which remains faithful to a liberal tradition. Instead of identifying the common good with some sort of collective good that exists independently from the aims of individuals but nevertheless will impose on them constraints on the pursuit of their ends for the sake of the public well-being, it is argued here that the common good rather reflects the commitment of free and autonomous persons to societal cooperation. Thus, the common good should be understood as resulting from the aggregation of individual preferences which in turn reflect a concern for the public. Adam Smith's construction of the impartial spectator is invoked for the details on how a welfarist conception of the common good may be understood.*

The common good has become an issue of concern, and for plenty of reasons. Any attempt, however, to be more specific on what exactly it is about which we are concerned must quickly lead to the observation that the common good is above all a notion that is beset by paradox. First, it is paradoxical, in a more mundane sense, insofar as its idea is pushed to center stage at the very moment when the impression must prevail that it has already crumbled between the millstones of factional interests and partisan aims which jointly crowd out any public spirit. That it has become a matter of public concern around which political debates revolve clearly is a sign that whatever we identify as the common good is today under pressure and thus that we can no longer tacitly assume that, in particular in democratic societies with market-oriented, private-sector economies, it will be provided to a sufficient amount, whatever the sufficient amount and whatever the common good itself hereby are.

But discussions in the wider public aside, the notion of the common good is paradoxical also in a second, and maybe philosophically more intriguing sense because the common good seems to betray a very peculiar feature: the common good is characterized, or so I would like to suggest, by being in the interest of all while at the same time not being any agent's individual interest. But how can we share an interest that none of us has individually? A group of  $n$  persons can share some interest in the proper sense only if each of the  $n$  persons holds that interest individually. If the  $n$  persons' interests are in conflict or at least not unanimous with regard to certain issues then these persons still may come to a collective decision,

and under the assumption that the collective decision is done by a suitable rule of aggregation, say one to which the  $n$  persons have approved in advance and which they consider to be fair and impartial, we might even say that the outcome of the decision reflects their collective interest. However, we cannot properly say that the collective decision then reflects the interest of all (in the distributed sense of any of them), simply because the collective decision may well be against individual interests. It is presumably fair to say that it is in the interest of all to *have* a collective decision but, depending on the outcome, it must not be the case that it is the interest of all to have *that* decision specifically.

Assuming for the moment that this diagnosis is correct and also allows for a partial characterization of the common good, we then find ourselves exposed to a rather specific problem: the attempt to relate the common good to the interests of individual agents and possible aggregations of individual interests, an attempt as it is pursued in social choice theory<sup>1</sup>, leads immediately to frictions with the postulation of welfarism which is widely accepted in formulating rules for collective decision-making. Welfarism, loosely put, is a doctrine according to which the desirability of a collective choice for a group  $G$  depends exclusively on the desires and interests of the persons in  $G$ . If we substitute talk of desires and interest by the term “utilities” in its economic and somewhat technical sense then the doctrine may be put slightly differently by saying that the collective preferential ordering of options  $A_1, A_2, \dots, A_n$  shall depend exclusively on the individual utilities  $u_i(A_j)$  of the options for the individuals  $i$  in group  $G$ . The postulate of welfarism then rules out any non-utility information, i.e. anything not reflected in the individuals’ utilities, for the purposes of collective decision-making. If the common good, however, must be understood as being not any agent’s individual interest, thus not being equal to any alternative which maximizes any individual’s utilities, then it cannot be the result of a collective decision that respects welfarism, or so it would seem.

The welfarism postulate is, of course, not exempt from criticism and strong arguments were advanced to call welfarism into question. But these debates notwithstanding, welfarism should not be given up lightly, and our argument will indeed be that the notion of the common good itself supports welfarism, appropriately understood.

The aim of this paper is, however, less technical than these opening remarks might indicate. Rather, our purpose here is to suggest an understanding of the common good that is firmly based in a liberal tradition, in contrast to arguably more popular communitarian readings of the common good. The main idea defended here is that the notion of the common good makes sense only under the assumption of free, autonomous persons whose individual choices are initially independent from societal claims and demands. The idea of the common good could come into existence at the very moment when individual agents were freed from any commitments to a collective good that could claim precedence over individual

1 Social choice theory has started with the seminal work of K.J. Arrow, *Social Choice and Individual Values*, Yale University Press, New Haven/London, 2nd ed., 1963.

aims and interests. With the demise of a *summum bonum* an ethical lacuna opened up, for it could then no longer be taken as settled in advance for individual agents how to balance their own wishes and desires with societal demands. In this sense, the common good acts as a mediating device to integrate individual, thus potentially conflicting interests with collective needs. As the pursuit of individual aims depends in many cases ultimately on the ability to successfully cooperate with others for “the mutual advantage” (J. Rawls), suitable constraints must be imposed on individual behavior in order to ensure that successful cooperation is a sustainable option on which individuals may rely. The common good, in other words, is the sum of arrangements in a society which make societal cooperation and thus society itself “stable over time” (J. Rawls) by bringing the individuals’ aims in a mediated balance from which everyone eventually is to benefit. The suggested interpretation of the common good should be distinguished from any reading according to which the common good is a form of higher good over and above the individuals’ interests which is made prescriptive for individual agents. The insistence on the priority of individual interests explains the concern with welfarism.

The paper is organized as follows: section 1 discusses in slightly more detail the above-mentioned friction between (a straightforward reading of) the common good and the welfarism postulate. The background assumption is that the common good is such an elusive idea because it stands in an unclear and vexing relationship to the ends and aims of the individuals who constitute the society whose common good is to be maintained. It will be argued that welfarism is not without some ambiguity and thus can be rendered, if suitably specified, compatible with the idea of a common good rooted exclusively in individual interests. However, it also will be shown that if the idea of a common good as a counterweight to their partisan ends is to be attractive for “rational agents” then the individual interests themselves must be construed in a way that gives room to collective concerns and even to some sensitivity for public well-being. In section 2 I will try to demonstrate that fruitful proposals in that direction can be found in the Scottish enlightenment, and in particular in Adam Smith’s construction of a benevolent, impartial spectator as expounded in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Concluding paragraphs will then try to defend this as a welfarist proposal by reference to John Harsanyi’s idea of “ethical preferences” which Harsanyi introduced in connection with his formulation of a utilitarian aggregation rule<sup>2</sup>.

1) When corporations seek their profits at the public’s expense, for example by lobbying against stricter regulations for product safety or environmental protection, we clearly sense that the common good or public weal gets unduly

2 J. Harsanyi, “Cardinal Welfare, Individualistic Ethics, and Interpersonal Comparisons of Utility”, in: «Journal of Political Economy», Vol. 63 (1955), pp. 309–321. A detailed discussion of Harsanyi’s aggregation theorem and its surrounding ideas can be found in J. Weymark, A reconsideration of the Harsanyi-Sen debate on utilitarianism, in: J. Elster/L.E. Roemer (eds.), *Interpersonal Comparisons of Well-Being*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1991, pp. 255–320.

neglected. When government officials, even when they come to power through democratic elections, start to cater for their own interests by blocking laws which might hamper their private businesses which they had set up before they were elected, then likewise we feel that the common good is likely to be ignored, and much to the public's disadvantage. But our misgivings in these and similar cases do not stem so much from a general suspicion that a specific mode of conduct is unfair or unjust, although our sense for the common good is arguably closely connected to intuitions about what constitutes a just society. Rather, our irritation is due to the fact that in those or similar cases someone is free-riding on the trust in public institutions to promote their own individual ends thereby undermining the public's capacities to sustain these institutions and their ability to protect public affairs. In this sense, the common good is intimately tied to a society's ability to see itself, as John Rawls has expressed it, as a cooperative endeavor that must be stable over time. The need for a lasting ability to cooperate, irrespective of any differences in individual ends and aspirations, brings with it an injunction to heed some restrictions in the pursuit of one's own individual ends. If we accept, if only for the sake of the argument, that trust in public institutions is a public good and thus a commodity that cannot be had for free then we may say that respect for the common good, in the sense that citizens actively contribute to a society's capabilities to cooperate or at least refrain from deliberately undermining these capabilities, is a necessary requirement and the price to be paid for the stability of a society as a joint endeavor for cooperation.

However, even if this were plausible it still would be a rather incomplete characterization of the common good, and one that seems to proceed in a negative way by paying specifically attention to the potential effects of a neglect of the common good. 'Negative' here is meant in roughly the sense which Amartya Sen recently has maintained for our understanding of justice. While a satisfying and uncontested conception of justice proves to be elusive, the ability to spot acts or social states as unjust seems to work fairly reliably<sup>3</sup>. But a reliable perception for injustice is at least a negative way to approach the concept of justice. Likewise, the ability to recognize the corruption or the defiance of the common good in social arrangements can be seen as a negative and at best partial way to approximate an understanding of the notion of common good. What is still missing then is any characterization of the common good in positive terms that eventually would allow conclusions on how the common good can be promoted or sustained for a society's well-being and prosperity.

One might try to improve this situation by reference to the notion of civic virtues. For clearly, in those cases where the common good is trampled on by individual behavior a lack of civic sense is exhibited. Roughly speaking, the civic sense seems to consist in a certain commitment to the public's interests and a sensitivity to public concerns in the sense of a *res publica*. However, the republican

3 A. Sen, *The Idea of Justice*, Penguin Books, London 2009. Sen argues that the keen sense for injustice should be exploited to make societies more just.

ideal underlying this conviction is not unequivocal and has seen considerable transformations in the course of time. Without belaboring the obvious it may be noted that M. Tullius Cicero and David Hume both spoke of civic virtues but their understanding of these virtues was hardly the same.

J.B. Schneewind has pointed out that despite a contemporary enthusiasm for virtue ethics the “misfortunes of virtue” in modern philosophy came about for fully comprehensible reasons<sup>4</sup>. The natural law tradition, originating from Hugo Grotius and Samuel Pufendorf, established, by way of its distinction between perfect and imperfect duties, important ethical discriminations, discriminations which largely had been inaccessible for traditional virtue ethics. Even the supplementary discussion of virtues in terms of perfect and imperfect duties, in particular in the writings of David Hume and Adam Smith, still worked to the detriment of virtues – hence became one of its “misfortunes” – because it could do nothing not obstruct the tendency to act-centered theories of morality, theories which are more focused on reproducible rules and principles guiding actions instead of judgments of personal character on which virtue-centered views traditionally concentrated<sup>5</sup>. But the lot of virtues notwithstanding, it should be clear that the resort to civic virtues brings with it more questions than answers. In particular, a substantial concept of civic virtues which is committed to a traditional republican understanding of the common good runs the risk of charging it with Platonic aspirations which would move the common good beyond the access of individual persons. In this vein, individuals become the hand-maids for promoting the common good which is defined by reference to an ideal commonwealth that as such is largely independent from the ends and desires of actually existing individuals. But any idea of a *summum bonum* being dismissed in post-Hobbesian political philosophy, it should be clear that a modern reading of the common good must preserve a connection with the aims of individual agents. More specifically, the common good, whatever it ultimately turns out to be, should not claim any precedence over the individuals’ ends.

The upshot of the discussion of civic virtues as an attempt to elucidate the nature of the common good is that any interpretation of the common good which is to be in line with modern political philosophy will require a certain sensitivity or responsiveness of the common good to individual aims and ends. Therefore, it should rather be the common good which explains the content of possible civic virtues than alleged civic virtues explaining the notion of the common good. This demand may be seen as an expression of a liberal creed, broadly conceived, according to which society as a scheme for cooperation, stable over time, is instrumental to promoting the plans of its members. The individuals’ aims thereby do not only claim priority over society’s ends, society does not even have any ends over and above those of its members.

4 J.B. Schneewind, “The Misfortunes of Virtue”, in «Ethics», Vol. 101, No.1 (Oct. 1990), pp. 42-63.

5 J.B. Schneewind, *The Misfortunes of Virtue*, cit., pp. 43-44.

But this exactly the point where the rub lies. For, if we accept that society is just an instrument for the individuals' benefit by allowing them to rely on institutionalized arrangements for cooperation while otherwise the individuals as free and autonomous agents are neither committed to each other nor to anything abstract like society (or nation, for that matter), then the idea of the common good seems to have no ground to gain foothold. If it's all just individuals then nothing is common anymore, or so communitarians would seem to argue. Should one then conclude that modern philosophy's emphasis on individualism is to lead to the dissolution of any kind of public-mindedness?

Schneewind's claim, it should be emphasized, that the misfortunes of virtue were not sheer coincidence because virtue-centered positions have ignored morally relevant distinctions, brought to light, for example, by the distinction between perfect and imperfect duties, indicates not just a specific weakness in traditional conceptions of virtues but a more general short-coming in any pre-modern ethical or political discourse. With the natural law doctrine, at any rate, the political individual had the floor. If this is a development behind which we cannot step back, then how can an individualistic perspective be combined with a substantial concept of the common good?

The requirement mentioned above that the common good should be sensitive to the aims of individuals leaves room for interpretation. It is one thing to say that the collective well-being is positively connected with the well-being of the individuals, it is quite another thing to say that the degree of collective well-being is completely and exclusively determined by the degrees of well-being for the individual agents. The latter claim in effect is what the postulate of welfarism requires. But even here, details are crucial.

Initially, welfarism was closely connected to utilitarianism. If the collective choice among a certain range of options is to be determined uniquely, as utilitarianism commends, by comparing the respective sums of individual utilities for the alternatives under consideration then this requires not only that utilities are additive (which eventually follows from the fact that they are assumed to be cardinally measurable and interpersonally comparable for utilitarian purposes) but also that no further information than the individuals' utilities can be taken into account. But if the welfarist assumption is integral to utilitarianism then the discontent regarding the latter will readily spill over to the former. It would be wrong, however, to equate welfarism with a utilitarian approach to the evaluation of social states, for welfarism is primarily an expression of (strong) individualism in the sense that the evaluation of social states is based exclusively «on individual well-being (utility), and no additional information – about individual liberty, for example – is needed»<sup>6</sup>. A Rawlsian maximin aggregation rule which ties the assessment of social states to maximizing the welfare level of the worst-off person

6 C. Blackorby/D. Donaldson, "Adult-equivalence scales, interpersonal comparisons of well-being, and applied welfare economics", in J. Elster/J.E. Roemer (eds.), *Interpersonal Comparisons of Well-Being*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1991, p. 169.

is just as welfarist as the utilitarian rule which maximizes the sum of individual utilities. In formal presentations of social aggregation rules welfarism is often expressed by an axiom for strong neutrality:

*Axiom (Strong Neutrality)* Let  $S$  be any set of social states and let  $x_1, y_1, x_2, y_2$  be four elements in  $S$ . Let  $u, v$  be vectors of individual functions on  $S$  such that  $u = (u_1, u_2, \dots, u_n)$  and  $v = (v_1, v_2, \dots, v_n)$  respectively, so that for a social welfare function  $f$  mapping vectors of individual utility functions on collective preference ordering  $R$  we have that  $R = f(u)$  and  $R' = f(v)$ . If  $u_i(x_1) = v_i(x_2)$  and  $u_i(y_1) = v_i(y_2)$  for all individuals  $i$  then  $x_1 R y_1$  if and only if  $x_2 R' y_2$ .<sup>7</sup>

Thus, what the axiom in effect states is that any information which is not reflected in the individuals' utilities will be ignored for the purposes of the collective evaluation of social states. To represent the collective evaluation by the equation  $R = f(u)$  is therefore in itself a very general expression of welfarism<sup>8</sup>. Note, however, that the social states among which the individuals are to choose and whose individual evaluations will determine, given a welfarist aggregation rule  $f$ , a collective evaluation of these states are typically connected with a distributional scheme  $\Delta$  such that for any social state  $x: \Delta(x, i) = x_i$  is individual  $i$ 's share of goods and commodities, i.e.  $i$ 's "payoff", under  $x$ . A slightly more explicit formulation of social aggregation rules or social welfare functions will then refer to the individual payoffs by noting that person  $i$ 's well-being in  $x$ ,  $u_i(x)$ , depends on  $i$ 's evaluation of  $x_i$ , where it seems intuitively plausible to suppose that  $u_i(x) = u_i(x_i)$ <sup>9</sup>. However, equating the individual evaluations of social states with the evaluations of the individuals of their respective shares or payoffs in these states leads, when combined with welfarism, to collective evaluations of social states which look thoroughly egotistic: the relevant information for comparing social states from a collective point of view is reduced to the individuals' evaluations of their own shares in these states. This then precludes any possibility to distinguish between social states by reference to anything that is beyond individual benefits. The common good, on the interpretation suggested above, namely that it is in the interest of all while being not any individual's interest in particular, is then clearly an instance of something that cannot be accounted for in collective welfare judgments if these are based exclusively on the utilities of the individual payoffs. This reconstruction seems to meet, or so I would like to argue, our intuitive concerns about the common good

7 The formulation of this axiom is due to C. D'Aspremont and L. Gevers, "Equity and the Informational Basis of Collective Choice", in «The Review of Economic Studies», Vol. 44, No. 2 (June 1977), pp. 199-209; see also J.E. Roemer, *Theories of Distributive Justice*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (Mass.) 1996, p. 28.

8 A point that has been emphasized by Amartya Sen in A. Sen, *Choice, Welfare and Measurement*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford 1982, p. 19.

9 The assumption of distributional schemes as presented here is implicit for example in Steven Strasnick's derivation of Rawls' difference principle from certain assumptions on the original position, see S. Strasnick, "Social choice and the derivation of Rawls' difference principle", in «Journal of Philosophy», Vol. 73 (1976), pp. 85-99.

which call for an impartial, non-egotistic perspective that allows to abstract from a purely individualistic assessment of individual benefits under given social states.

However, the suggested formulation points also towards a possible solution for this embarrassment: we simply have to find a way to separate individual judgments  $u_i(x)$  on social states  $x$  from the individuals' utilities  $u_i(x_i)$  of their respective distributional shares under  $x$ . Note, that even under this separation and with a distinction between two kinds of individual evaluations of social states we still would satisfy welfarist demands: the collective evaluation of the feasible social states depends strictly on individual utilities. What is different is that the individuals' utilities are no longer confined to measurements of the individuals' respective shares only.

From a purely formal perspective this seems unproblematic. But to develop a coherent notion of the common good that will lend itself to a substantial interpretation of formal representation of individual welfare judgments is less straightforward. What will be needed is something like a 'reflective structure' whereby the result of the aggregation of the individual value judgments in turn influences these value judgments so that part of any individual's evaluation of a social state  $x$  is an evaluation of  $x$  as a collective result (what it means for all) in contrast to its evaluation in terms of the purely individual outcome under  $x$ . Before we turn in a concluding section to John Harsanyi's earlier distinction between different types of value judgments I will try to argue that a fruitful approach to our present problem can be found in the Scottish enlightenment, and in particular in Adam Smith's idea of an impartial spectator<sup>10</sup>.

2) It is a commonplace to say that modern ethics is predominantly individualistic. What is thereby meant is not only that ethics has to find moral standards and criteria for the conduct and the actions of individual persons, it means moreover that it must do so in the absence of any general or absolute idea of the good. Even the idea of a "good life" has become to a large extent an individualized concept ever since Thomas Hobbes most prominently decried the existence of a uniform *summum bonum* which might guide rational agents in their pursuit of their individual aims. No doubt, some would say that our modern problems with ethics are to a large extent due to our ignorance of the truly Good and the truly Right, as these are to be distinctions which cannot be left to the personal discretion of rational agents but instead must simply be accepted as the benchmark for what is morally right.

But quite apart from general reservations regarding such a stance I will for present purposes simply accept the individualistic perspective of modern ethics which as such starts with the conviction that ends and aims must not be imposed on individual persons who instead will need ethical guidelines on the appropriate and legitimate ways and methods to pursue their own well-considered interests. Granted, then, that one of the tendencies of modern ethics has been to leave more and more value judgments to the individual's discretion because any universal, non-individualistic prescription of the Good must be suspect, we must ask what constraints can reasonably be imposed on rational agents if they are on the one

10 A. Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2002.

side to be respected as free and autonomous persons while on the other side still be held accountable for their actions and in particular their actions' consequences for others who likewise are to be respected as free and autonomous.

The contention here is that on the basis of the notion of sympathy the Scottish enlightenment, in particular in the writings of David Hume and Adam Smith, found an illuminating way to combine an individualistic perspective with ethical demands which leads specifically to an instructive approach to conceptualize the common good<sup>11</sup>. The basic idea hereby is as follows: the expansion of individual liberties has increased the range of choices for rational agents who will pursue by their choices their individual ends and aims. Being rational they will understand, however, that insufficient coordination and a lack of cooperation will eventually be detrimental to the successful pursuit of their ends. But expanded freedom brings with it a lacuna in social commitment, and it is a lacuna wherein the common good is bound to disappear. A little moral psychology, however, will do the trick to the great advancement of the collective interest. Hume and in the sequel Smith did assume that human beings as social beings are characterized by an ability for 'sympathy' which ultimately amounts to a 'moral sense'. Sympathy enables a person<sup>12</sup> not only to understand the motivations and driving forces in others, to put oneself in their shoes, as one says, but also to anticipate their reactions and responses to our actions. As such this ability works reflectively, as the anticipated reaction will influence an agent's decision. A coordinating effect results from some sort of 'moral ascent' whereby agents abstract from any specific anticipation through a process of moral refinement leading to the hypothetical position of an impartial spectator. The judgments, however, which can be made from this perspective are narrow in scope. Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* has been called narrow in the sense that as an ethical theory it addresses primarily the nature of our moral judgments, while questions of a more substantial character, in particular regarding the nature of virtues, were to a large degree left open<sup>13</sup>. But it is also narrow in the sense that it concerns itself with rather specific moral demands, namely those that are required in social surroundings and which ultimately constitute a 'public morality'. Moral standards, according to Smith, are not without context: they are designed quite obviously for the civilized life in a civil society.

11 In addition to Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* see also D. Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, edited by L.A. Selby-Bigge, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1978 and D. Hume, *Selected Essays*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1996.

12 Possibly with the exception of psychopaths, but even this is largely excluded by Smith when he writes that even the «greatest ruffian, the most hardened violator of the laws of society, is not altogether without it [i.e. the sentiment to feel compassion; U.M.]» (A. Smith, op. cit., I.i.1.1, p. 11).

13 D.D. Raphael argues that Smith's account is narrow in scope in this sense; see D.D. Raphael, *The Impartial Spectator. Adam Smith's Moral Philosophy*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2007, p. 7. The fact that Smith himself then found his exposition wanting and tried to remedy the situation by developing an account of virtues, explains, as Raphael emphasizes, much of the differences between the sixth edition of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* and earlier editions.

«Were it possible that a human creature could grow up to manhood in some solitary place, without any communication with his own species, he could no more think of his own character, of the propriety or demerit of his own sentiments and conduct, of the beauty or deformity of his own mind, than of the beauty or deformity of his own face. [...] Bring him into society, and he is immediately provided with the mirror which he wanted»<sup>14</sup>.

Given such a mirroring context, agents will have reason to care whether their behavior conforms to the moral standards which guide the public. Agents learn about the propriety of their conduct through the reactions of others. As these reactions are sentiments or at least are based on sentiments, it is natural to ask in turn whether these sentiments as reactions are appropriate or inappropriate. If morality is to be grounded in 'sentiments' then the morally right kind of conduct will depend on the propriety of these sentiments either as reactions to circumstances or as reactions to the expressions of others. As social beings we cannot ignore the effects which our actions have on others.

«[...] our first moral criticisms are exercised upon the characters and conduct of other people; and we are all very forward to observe how each of these affects us. But we soon learn, that other people are equally frank with regard to our own. We become anxious to know how far we deserve their censure or applause, and whether to them we must necessarily appear those agreeable or disagreeable creatures which they represent us. We begin, upon this account, to examine our own passions and conduct, and to consider how these must appear to them, by considering how they would appear to us if in their situation. We suppose ourselves to be the spectators of our own behaviour, and endeavour to imagine what effect it would, in this light, produce upon us»<sup>15</sup>.

Smith clearly was trying to formulate a theory of moral judgments based on reciprocal assessments of (reactions to) actions. What is instructive for our purposes is Smith's construction of the impartial spectator and how, in particular, such a hypothetical spectator incorporates impartiality. A crucial step in this construction is a person's division, «as it were, into two persons.[...] The first is the spectator [...] The second is the agent. The first is the judge; the second the person judged of»<sup>16</sup>. Thus, persons may distance themselves from their immediate desires and motivations to check whether these could find the approval of an unbiased observer. Distancing oneself far enough, the observer must not even be supposed to be sympathetic. Gradually we then ascend to the perspective of the impartial spectator who finally is the internalization of the judicial capacities of the random external observer.

An impartial view, based on our reflective capacities, seems to be what is also required for the recognition of the common good. Smith's construction of the impartial spectator is often identified with the conscience as an entity of moral

14 A. Smith, op. cit., III.1.3., p. 129.

15 A. Smith, op. cit., III.1.5., p. 131.

16 A. Smith, op. cit., III.1.6., p. 131.

psychology. But it is important to realize that as a construction of conscience the impartial spectator's point of view is not simply reflecting a society's actually existing attitudes and opinions<sup>17</sup>. The impartial spectator is critical in a strong sense, calling upon us to revise or revoke societal opinions where these are based on prejudice, or error, or can otherwise be exposed as parochial from a truly neutral perspective. Impartiality, in Smith's sense, is not insensitive to human concerns; it is not independent from the needs and desires which motivate rational (and not so rational) agents. We therefore must not resort to something like Kant's realm of pure reason to find the impartiality that is required for the reciprocal adjustment of individual ends in order to preserve enough of a common ground. The model we find in Smith's construction is one of reflective adaptations in value judgments. By adopting hypothetically an external point of view, agents may overcome their sectional positions. But as the impartial spectator perspective is hypothetical and thus must be internalized, even the, let's call it, morally refined view is still subjective.

In much the same way, it now seems, will the notion of the common good become accessible for individuals who, by ascending to an impartial spectator perspective, will transcend their subjective evaluation of social states, where this is based exclusively on considerations of their individual share, in favor of a perspective that assesses the social state as the result of a process of aggregation in which the varying individual assessments must be combined. The construction of an impartial spectator perspective, as it can be extracted from Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, would allow to distinguish between the two utility values  $u_i(x_j)$  and  $u_i(x)$  in a way which does justice to the normative demands that will be required for the latter value. While introducing impartiality and thereby an element of fairness, as it seems necessary for the common good, it still would be welfarist in the sense mentioned above. But one question remains: for Smith, the ascent to the impartial spectator perspective was inevitable given our human nature as social beings who cannot ignore the judgment of others. Smith, therein a disciple of Hume, could take this as an empirical fact, and one which could not be denied. Our contemporary conception of the human nature, however, seems less sanguine. Even if we do not want to identify our fellow-humans with the economists' *homines economicos*, we are still prepared to account for much of their doings by strategic behavior. But what could motivate an ideally rational agent, motivated by pure self-interest, to broaden her perspective to impartiality in order to appreciate from that perspective the common good - if the common good still is not in her self-interest?

3) John Harsanyi, in arguing for a utilitarian formulation of a social welfare function as a tool to make normative judgments in welfare economics, has introduced the distinction between a person's "subjective preferences" and her "ethical

17 On this see D.D. Raphael, *The Impartial Spectator. Adam Smith's Moral Philosophy*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2007, pp. 34 - 37.

preferences”<sup>18</sup>. Harsanyi’s concern was not unlike the one that led to our reflections on the common good. Equipped with the formal instrument of Bergsonian social welfare functions, «defined as an arbitrary mathematical function of economic (and other social) variables, of a form freely chosen according to one’s personal ethical (or political) value judgments» (Harsanyi (1955), p. 309.) Harsanyi was aware of the problem that within this setting «social welfare is no longer regarded as an objective quantity, the same for all, by necessity» (Harsanyi (1955), p. 315.), because the individual social welfare functions can no longer be sharply distinguished from the individual utility functions proper. But as we want «to uphold the principle that a social welfare function ought to be based not on the utility function (subjective preferences) of *one* particular individual only (namely, the individual whose value judgments are expressed in this welfare function), but rather on the utility functions (subjective preferences) of *all* individuals, representing a kind of “fair compromise” among them» (Harsanyi (1955), p. 315), we are led to distinguish a person’s “subjective preferences” from his “ethical preferences” where the latter «express what he prefers in those possibly rare moments when he forces a special impartial and impersonal attitude upon himself» (Harsanyi (1955), p. 315).

Harsanyi’s main goal was, of course, to defend a formal version of utilitarianism as an appropriate approach for economic welfare judgments. With this aim in mind, he then continued to demonstrate that what he called the «‘impartial’ or ‘impersonal’ attitude» of the ethical preferences’ can be substituted by a choice mechanism including a thin veil of ignorance behind which persons will not know their precise social positions, thus being forced to make their evaluations impartially, i.e. based only on their “ethical preferences”. The details are irrelevant for our purposes here<sup>19</sup>. What is of interest is that Harsanyi explicitly acknowledges the possibility to distinguish between different types of evaluations of social states, although both types will be individualistic. To the extent that Harsanyi’s ethical preferences do indeed reflect impartiality, he seems to come close, implicitly, to a recognition of the common good. Still, Harsanyi does not offer any explanation where the ethical preferences might come from and how individuals might eventually gain the required perspective of impartiality that will be expressed by their ethical preferences. This, however, is not so much a question regarding their causal development in moral psychology but rather one on conceptual analysis.

A persuasive account of the common good must ultimately be a philosophical discussion. Formal considerations certainly will help to clarify our ideas and test them for coherence, but they will hardly offer much in substance. So far, the best account of how the common good should be conceived comes from the Scottish

18 J. Harsanyi, “Cardinal Welfare, Individualistic Ethics, and Interpersonal Comparisons of Utility”, cit., pp. 309 - 321; see in particular section IV.

19 What Harsanyi has exactly shown is discussed in some detail in J. Weymark, A reconsideration of the Harsanyi-Sen debate on utilitarianism, in: J. Elster/I.E. Roemer (eds.), *Interpersonal Comparisons of Well-Being*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1991, pp. 255-320. For a critical discussion of Harsanyi’s utilitarianism see also J. Roemer, *Theories of Distributive Justice*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (Mass.) 1996, chap. 4.

enlightenment. Their lasting contribution was the insight that the common good demands a diligently balanced combination of the benefits for free and autonomous agents with their commitment for public well-being as a source for stable cooperation and other types of social capital. Here, I have just attempted a first sketchy formulation of these lasting insights.

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