

# How does the Common Good Apply in Australia Today?

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I have been asked to speak about the common good and specifically to reply to the question, how does the common good apply in Australia today? I will do so primarily as a philosopher, but also as a philosopher who is Christian and who respects some long traditions that are part of our heritage.

## 'The Common Good' Seems not to Apply

My first response is that it would appear that it does not apply at all. We live in a liberal democracy, a form of social and political organisation first mooted in the Seventeenth Century that posits the radical equality of each its members, who are understood to be individuals, and that proposes freedom and the opportunity to generate wealth as its primary goods. The structure of government is such that it excludes itself from significant areas of human life, notably religion and aspects of morality, unless activities in those areas generate conflict or are shown to cause harm to other members of the society. The moral language of such a society is the language of rights. These rights, first called natural rights and opposed to natural law, but now known as human rights, are things that we claim. They assume that we will all act in our own self-interest and that the tussles we endure with one another will ensure both that we are able to do what we want and that the general outcome of our activities will be the best available. Many of the rights claimed are specifically designed as protection against the intervention of governments or of other authorities in our lives.<sup>1</sup>

Strictly speaking, the notion of the common good has no place in discussions about life in such a social and political arrangement. If this sounds strange, let me note that the term did not appear in the 1967 eight volume *Encyclopedia of*

*Philosophy*.<sup>2</sup> Nor does it appear in the *Concise Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* published in 2000.<sup>3</sup> It does appear, however, in the *Lexicon* of American novelist and apologist for *laissez-faire* capitalism, Ayn Rand. There she begins, 'The tribal notion of "the common good" has served as the moral justification of most social systems – and of all tyrannies – in history. The degree of a society's enslavement or freedom corresponded to the degree to which that tribal slogan was invoked or ignored.'<sup>4</sup> She goes on to say that there are no such things as the 'the tribe' or 'the public' but that there is only a number of individual men [and women]. Any larger good is simply the sum of the goods that accrue to each of these individuals.

## Yet the Notion is Resilient

Yet the notion of the common good keeps appearing in public discussion. We are here to discuss it today. A fact sheet, 'What is the Common Good?', can be found on the CSIRO website, albeit meant for school children.<sup>5</sup> A large literature has formed in the countries of the European Union as they try to work the implications of the adventure that they have begun together. Even the originators of the ideas underlying liberal democracy could barely hide it. Thomas Hobbes, in his *Leviathan* (1651), speaks of the construction of a commonwealth. 'Commonwealth' or a 'common weal' is not far from 'common good', though in all these cases the meanings of the term are not necessarily consistent and they can be thick or thin. Where does the notion of 'common good' find its home?

I believe that in our time the notion of common good has been most strongly promulgated in the tradition of the Catholic social justice encyclicals from Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* in 1891 to

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<sup>1</sup> For a sharp discussion of how the moral language of human rights is incompatible with the moral language of common good and virtue see Ernest L. Fortin, 'Human Rights and the Common Good' in *Human Rights, Virtue, and the Common Good: Untimely Meditation of Religion and Politics*, by Ernest L. Fortin, edited by Brian Benestad (Lanham MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1996), pp. 19 – 28.

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<sup>2</sup> *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co, 1967).

<sup>3</sup> *Concise Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2000).

<sup>4</sup> Ayn Rand *Lexicon*, s.v. "Common Good", [http://aynrandlexicon.com/lexicon/common\\_good.html](http://aynrandlexicon.com/lexicon/common_good.html).

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[www.cazr.csiro.au/scienceweek2003/resources/F29\\_day11.pdf](http://www.cazr.csiro.au/scienceweek2003/resources/F29_day11.pdf)

Benedict XVI's *Caritas in Veritate* in 2009. (This, I might say, is not to diminish its use by other churches in their deliberations on social justice nor its use by political theorists.) The encyclicals use the common good as a normative principle to argue for such things as just wages, friendly relations among members of society, participation in political activity, just distribution of wealth, access to public office, world peace. Consistently, there is insistence that the primary purpose of the state is the attainment of the common good<sup>6</sup> and that society is composed not just of individuals but of persons and communities of different kinds that must all be recognised and treated justly.<sup>7</sup> There is, however, little theoretical discussion of the principle, though John XXIII does assert in the longest discussion of the notion in any of the encyclicals that the common good 'embraces the sum total of those conditions of social living whereby men are enabled to achieve their own integral perfection more fully and more easily'.<sup>8</sup>

### Sources & Grounds of 'the Common Good'

The source of the principle for the popes is clearly the thought of Thomas Aquinas, and Leo XIII acknowledges this at the first use of the term in *Rerum Novarum*.<sup>9</sup> Thomas's principle sources

<sup>6</sup> See, for instance, John XXIII, *Mater et Magister* 87; *Pacem in Terris*, 53 – 56.

<sup>7</sup> See, for instance, John XXIII, *Mater et Magister* 37; Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate* 7. The exception is John Paul II, who appears not to have made much use of the common good in his social encyclicals. He rather attempted to transform the language or rights to include the reciprocal notion of duties, absent from the 17<sup>th</sup> Century accounts of rights. See, for instance, *Laborem Exercens* 16 – 23.

<sup>8</sup> John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris*, 58, in *Catholic Social Thought: The Documentary Heritage*, edited by David J. O'Brien and Thomas A. Shannon (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2003), p. 140.

<sup>9</sup> *Rerum Novarum* 37, footnote 34 acknowledges Thomas's *Contra impugnantes Dei cultum et religionem*, Cap. II. Interestingly, Thomas does not appear to give any extended treatment of the nature and meaning of the common good in itself. Rather, he uses the principle to ground other discussions. His work does, however, establish *bonum commune* as a standard technical term, which can be called on in various contexts. His major discussions are found in his treatise on law, *Summa Theologiae* I-II qq. 90 -114, note especially qq. 98 - 105, and in his discussions of prudence and justice, *Summa Theologiae* II-II, qq. 47 – 122. It has to be noted that Thomas's interest was in ethics and that he had only minor interest in politics. His commentary on Aristotle's *Politics* peters out at Book III, Chapter 6, though there is some

are Aristotle's *Politics* and Augustine's *City of God*.<sup>10</sup> This brings to light a tradition different from that emanating from the Seventeenth Century, from which we receive our liberal democracy. In this older tradition, political communities are seen as developing out of pre-existing natural communities such as families, tribes and villages, rather than through agreement or contract by previously isolated individuals. It is natural for political communities to form but they are not formed by nature. They are achievements of human practical wisdom, which is required both for creating the shape that they take and for the act of bringing them about through human consent and through the development of friendship toward those who are not part of one's own family.<sup>11</sup>

In this context, the grounds for the claim that there is such a thing as the common good can be made clear. Two of these come from Aristotle. Firstly, he attributes to human beings a natural sociability. Even if they do not need one another for a specifically useful purpose, they like to be together and to associate with one another. The evidence for this is speech through which people are able to share things other than the simple material necessities of life. Speech gives rise to friendship, and, for Aristotle, it is affection that binds the city.<sup>12</sup> Secondly, in so far as the formation of a political community is a human action, it must be done for some good purpose, for every action aims at a good. The principle good of a political community, says Aristotle, is justice, though many other goods follow it – goods of the soul, goods of the body and external goods.<sup>13</sup> What Augustine and Thomas add to this is an understanding of natural law that is embedded in eternal law, as Augustine says, 'What shall I say of the common good whose common pursuit knits men together into a "people", as our definition teaches? Careful scrutiny will show that there is no

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confusion in the tradition, because commentary on the eight books was completed by Peter of Auvergne and since an edition in 1492 the whole has been presented as Thomas's work. This has been corrected by the Leonine edition. See Jean-Pierre Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas: The Person and his Work* translated by Robert Royal (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1996.) Volume 1, p. 233.

<sup>10</sup> See Mary M. Keys, *Aquinas, Aristotle, and the Promise of the Common Good* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

<sup>11</sup> See Aristotle, *Politics* I,2.

<sup>12</sup> Aristotle, *Politics* I, 2, especially 1253a1 – a17.

<sup>13</sup> Aristotle, *Politics* I, 2 (1252b30); III, 6 (1278b15-30); VII, 1 (1323a25).

such good for those who live irreligiously, as all do who serve not God but demons.<sup>14</sup>

### **An Argument for the Common Good**

How then might we argue that the notion of the common good is valid in public debate in this liberal democracy, which we call Australia? We could argue from within the principles of liberal democracy itself as, for instance, John Rawls has done admirably in his monumental work, *A Theory of Justice*.<sup>15</sup> The advantage of this approach is that we are speaking the language of the day. Its disadvantage is that I doubt that such arguments have succeeded or that they are able to succeed on the basis of their presuppositions. We could, alternatively, argue from within the natural law tradition of Thomas Aquinas, as many Christian people do. The advantage of this approach is that it has high normative force, for, indeed, its sense of natural law is founded on God's creative act and the notion of eternal law.<sup>16</sup> Its disadvantage is that many of those whom we want to persuade will simply reject the theological and metaphysical dimensions of the argument.

Instead, I propose an Aristotelian argument that is properly political and which, I believe, avoids the disadvantages of both these approaches. To do this, we need to consider liberal democracy as a political form stripped of its supporting ideology. By ideology I mean a quasi-religious system of political beliefs that usually includes some positions that are manifestly false. An example of falsity is the belief that there are only individuals and the State and that pre-political and intermediary communities do not exist.<sup>17</sup> If we do this, we can analyse liberal democracy in terms of its constitutionality (who participates in political office and how) and of the specific goods that it

pursues and for which it was formed. If the question of good seems alien, we can quote Thomas Hobbes who wrote, 'the passions that incline men to peace, are fear of death; desire of such things as are necessary to commodious living; and hope by their industry to obtain them.'<sup>18</sup> It is this sense of the good that has generated the remarkable economic machine that is the modern state.

### **Aristotelian Political Analysis**

Aristotle's formal division of constitutional possibilities is well known to us. There are good constitutions in which the good of the whole is sought and there are deviant constitutions in which a particular person or group exercises power in its own interests. Rule can be by one, by the few or by the many. And so we find three good constitutions – monarchy, aristocracy and republicanism – and three deviant constitutions – democracy, oligarchy and tyranny.<sup>19</sup> The issue of the good enters, firstly, through the specific goals of these particular arrangements and, secondly, through the political question of what is the best constitution, which we will take up now. Aristotle proposes four senses of the best constitution – the best possible, the best practicable, the best that circumstances will allow and the best that a particular people can achieve in the light of what they currently do.<sup>20</sup> It is the first and last of these that will concern us here: the best possible constitution and the best that a particular people can do given the arrangements they currently have.

Under Aristotle's best possible constitution and assuming adequate material conditions, the good sought both by persons and by the community as a whole is the fullness of virtue, moral and intellectual. Bodily health and fitness are assumed as is a sufficient supply of material goods, which are to be used moderately and liberally, that is with temperance and generosity towards others. The community is a kind of broad aristocracy. Aristotle does not think that we will normally achieve this, but it is a statement of what we 'would pray for'.<sup>21</sup> Other constitutions will generally be limited in their goals, so that, for instance, in an oligarchy wealth is usually taken to be the primary good, and in a democracy it is freedom that is most highly prized. Such constitutions he sees as partial, that is as limited by the presupposition on which they are constructed. They are partial both in their achievement of political justice (participation) and

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<sup>14</sup> Augustine, *City of God* Book XIX, Chapter 21, Translated by Gerald G. Walsh *et al.* (New York: Image Books, 1953), p. 470.

<sup>15</sup> John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), see especially Part 3.

<sup>16</sup> See Stephen L Brock, 'The Primacy of the Common Good and the foundations of Natural law in St. Thomas' in Reinhard Hutter and Matthew Levering, *Resourcement Thomism: Sacred Doctrine, the Sacraments, and the Moral Life*, Essays in Honor of Romanus Cessario OP (Washington DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2010), pp. 234 – 255.

<sup>17</sup> This position is famously attributed to Margaret Thatcher, though she does acknowledge families albeit as only nuclear families, 'there is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families.' *Women's Own* 31 October 1987. Ayn Rand quoted above would seem to be a strong advocate of the position.

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<sup>18</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* edited by J. C. A. Gaskin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), n. 14, p. 86.

<sup>19</sup> Aristotle, *Politics* III, 7.

<sup>20</sup> Aristotle, *Politics* IV, 1 (1288b20 – 40).

<sup>21</sup> Aristotle, *Politics* VII, 1. Quotation: 1288b23.

in the limited nature of the specific kinds of good that they seek.

### **The Common Good in Liberal Democracy**

The liberal democracy in which we live can be examined using Aristotle's analysis of the best that a particular people can achieve given the arrangements they currently have. Existing constitutions cannot be changed easily because they are embedded in the culture of a people. Correction can, however, be made by edging them slowly towards something better, often by identifying shortcomings in the current arrangements and by proposing change. Liberal democracy is a flat democracy in which everyone is perceived as equal. The goods it primarily pursues are freedom and wealth. It proposes these both as particular goods and as common goods. By Aristotle's measure it is partial in its presuppositions. This does not mean that we want to give it up. I doubt that any of us here want to lose the freedom to gather in this place and to talk about things that are somewhat subversive of the Commonwealth in which we live. Nevertheless, we can be critical and we can criticise the particular constitution under which we live both in terms of the achievements of its own ends and in terms of ends that might be imagined under the best possible constitution.

Under the rubric of the partial constitution that we have, we might ask whether it achieves its own ends. Let us consider wealth. As a private good, this end might be said to be achieved if most people are content with how much they have. As a common good, two questions might be asked. Firstly, does the community as a whole have sufficient wealth for funding its institutions and services? Secondly, is the wealth held in private hands distributed sufficiently evenly to satisfy the fundamental presupposition of the equality of all? Alternatively, we can consider freedom. As a private good, are all individuals free, and does this freedom energise them to live worthwhile lives? As a common good, do multiple voices unite in such a way that the country institutes good policy, and does the country live in fruitful relationship with neighbouring countries?

Under the rubric of the best possible constitution, we might ask whether there are goods important to human living that we ignore. The goods that Aristotle proposes are justice, friendship and moral and intellectual virtue. These are already common goods, because they cannot be had alone. Let us take the second. Is the country as a whole bound by affection, or is it marked by division, competition and loneliness? Are our citizens able to form and sustain effective and flourishing communities?

### **Case Study: Agricultural Land**

In the final section of this paper, I will attempt to examine one concrete issue in Australia at the present moment that might be analysed in terms of the common good – the preservation of agricultural lands. The issue has been raised in relation to the mining of coal or coal seam gas under agricultural land, but it is broader than this and includes the encroachment of urban settlement on prime agricultural land and the degradation of marginal agricultural land by poor farming practices. Under the rubric of our liberal democracy, we act with the assumption that land is a private good, so that farmers have the right to sell it for other uses, if they are likely to be better off for doing so. In so far as we acknowledge a common good, we assume that market forces will determine the best outcome. Thus, we have seen large swathes of rich agricultural land in the Southern Highlands and on the Far North Coast converted to urban use following the collapse of the dairy industry and before alternative agricultural industries could emerge.

Under the rubric of the best possible constitution, broader issues will be considered. Human beings are dependent on the soil for food, something that we are prone to forget in these days of supermarkets and supply chains. Prime agricultural land is the product of geological events that may have spanned millions of years and is finite in extent. Can it be a private good, or is it not rather a common good belonging to the whole community both now and into the future? If it is, then surely it ought to be preserved, even if it is not able to be fully utilised for economic gain at the present moment.

# Common Good – *George Browning*

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When I grew up as a lad in Sussex my happiest memories are not of anything that I owned or achieved, but of experiences I shared in common, either with members of my fairly large family, or with the wider community. In the centre of our village was a ‘common’, the focus of much community activity from the annual fair to agricultural shows and various activities for children. It is not too much of an exaggeration to say that I am shaped by what I shared in common with family and extended community during the formative years of my life.

Margaret and I have just come home from several happy weeks in the UK and especially from exploring some more of the canals that crisscross the country and the experience of walking some of our favourite paths that at times cut straight through private property and in some cases across the middle of fields.

The idea of the ‘commons’ has been part of the culture of most previous generations. It has only been in relatively recent times that capitalism has extended its reach into the privatising of almost everything, presumably on the assumption that assets, privately managed, are better preserved. Perhaps this seemingly unstoppable movement has also been encouraged in what I will argue is the mistaken belief, that human happiness and well being is best secured through private control.

The idea that existence can be compartmentalised (a necessary pre-requisite of privatisation), has developed in western culture since the Enlightenment. It has been supported by scientific research through which the interests and claims of one discipline have frequently been examined and valued without any necessary reference to other disciplines. This trend has tragically engulfed the debate on climate change where economic activity, especially the assumption that profits are in all circumstances good, has given comfort to political decision making in which science is excluded, or derided, if it seems that short term profit making might be put under extra stress.

However, in even more recent times, this understanding is being seriously challenged. The assumption or understanding that a relationship exists between all things is becoming an accepted norm in a range of sciences, as well as being confirmed through religious belief. Jürgen Moltmann puts it well.

According to modern mechanistic theory, things are primary, and their relationship to one another secondary and determined by natural laws. But ... relationships are as original as things.<sup>1</sup>

The British scientist, James Lovelock, has coined the term *Gaia* to describe the totality of creation as a single living organism. In his book, *The Vanishing Face of Gaia, the Final Warning*<sup>2</sup> he draws our attention to the looming disaster, he asserts, is awaiting humanity if we refuse to recognise the consequences of human action upon all living things. The same dire warning is presented in many

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<sup>1</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *Creating a just Future* (London: SCM 1989) 59

<sup>2</sup> James Lovelock, *The vanishing face of Gaia: a final warning*, (London Allen Lane 2009)

books and writings, most poignantly in *Storms of My Grandchildren: the truth about the coming climate catastrophe and our last chance to save humanity*<sup>3</sup> by one of the world's leading scientists, Dr James Hansen.

Francis Fukuyama, the author of *The End of History* and *The Origins of Political Order*<sup>4</sup> argues that we human beings naturally cooperate with one another at the level of family or tribe, but have enormous difficulty cooperating with one another beyond these naturally binding relationships, relationships that have evolved out of the necessity of survival. The manifestation of current global human behaviour seems to confirm Fukuyama's hypothesis. We are very good at competing with one another for advantage in international trade, but we seem to have absolutely no inclination to partner with one another in solving challenges that have been created by the global community. In other words we have created a world which for all intents and purposes transcends the tribal, and yet our tribal instincts remain so strong that we seem incapable of rising above them, even when our intellect confirms the necessity of doing so.

*Commons* have historically been understood as a means of securing equity and strengthening community at a regional, or local level. The need for *commons* has now stretched beyond local or regional requirements to a global necessity, for it is now manifestly clear that a region or a locality, on its own, can no longer secure the health, wellbeing and security of its own people. The availability of fresh water, clean air, stable climate and food security are affected by others who may live a continent away. It is this provision that so far we have miserably failed to secure, but we must learn how to do so within this generation, or it will be too late. In other words, so far we have no obvious commitment to safeguarding the global *commons* upon which we all depend for our health and wellbeing. Recent global meetings called to address the perils of climate change in Copenhagen,<sup>5</sup> Durban<sup>6</sup> and Rio<sup>7</sup> have been disappointing- to say the very least. There appears to be no political motivation to address these issues. Perhaps we should not be surprised. Those who represent us at a political level represent our tribal, and at best, our national interests. These interests are seen by national politicians to be in competition with other tribes or nations. Therefore when political leaders meet together their overriding consideration is the safeguarding of what they believe to be the self interest of their very small corner of the world. What is not politically understood is that global best interest is now self interest. Preserving the *global commons* – clean air, fresh water, river systems, fish stocks, diversity of species and a stable mean global temperature are in the interest of us all, and should be invested in by us all.

What does our faith have to say on this matter and has our faith been unwittingly subverted by the consumerist culture which dominates all our lives?

Over the last two years my own area of research has been the Sabbath principle. You will all know that the Sabbath requirement is the fourth of the Ten Commandments. In the Exodus 20 account the rationale given for the Sabbath is Creation. In the Deuteronomy 5 account the rationale is the Exodus. In other words Sabbath is somehow to be understood as the principle that undergirds both

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<sup>3</sup> James Hansen, *Storms of my Grandchildren: The truth about the coming climate catastrophe and our last chance to save humanity*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2009)

<sup>4</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *The Origins of Political Order*, (London: Profile Books 2011).

<sup>5</sup> Copenhagen Climate Change Conference December 2009

<sup>6</sup> UN Climate change conference Durban 2011

<sup>7</sup> Rio+20 climate change and sustainable conference June 2012

creation and redemption. Sabbath gains its name from the Hebrew, *sabat*, which is usually translated *rest*. However, contemporary understanding that rest is the opposite of work; indeed is cessation from work, is to misunderstand this principle. Essentially, *rest* captures the idea of relationship. *Sabat*, resting, reflects the presence of God to creation and similarly the presence of God to his people in the Exodus, the great act of redemption. *Sabat* is at the centre of the divine ordering of creation; because God is present, all of life is hallowed and blessed. Each individual can only be blessed out of its (his/her) relationship with the whole. Individual parts of creation are described as good, but the whole is described as very good.

In recent weeks I have been giving thought to the idea that commons, or common good, can be described as part of natural law. *Commons* are an outcome of the sabbath principle, the preservation of equity within the whole community, which I believe is part of the natural law. Thomas Aquinas described natural law as rational creatures' participation in the eternal law.<sup>8</sup> If Sabbath is as Karl Barth asserts,<sup>9</sup> the goal of creation, the celebration of relational life, then sabbath is part of the natural law, applicable to all human beings, believing or unbelieving. Sabbath belief implies that human beings must accept limits in their relationship with and exploitation of creation. We human beings are not owners of creation; we live in relationship with creation and with one another. It is through the acceptance of limits that we human beings allow for the possibility of *commons* and the *common good*. It is through the acceptance of limits that we enable a shared existence that exceeds private ownership or personal accomplishment. Unfortunately, a culture of 24/7, life without limits, assumes that we are *apart from* creation not *part of* it. This arrogant assumption runs directly across the idea of limits; thus making the possibility of renewing, or extending *common good* very difficult.

A short reflection on Ahab and Naboth will help illustrate the point (1 Kings 21:1-16). Ahab was influenced by the religion of Ba'al which means *owner*. Neighbouring his already substantial holdings was the small garden property of Naboth. Ahab made what he considered to be a reasonable offer for Naboth's land. What he failed to understand was Naboth's, or the Yahwist's understanding of land. To Naboth he was not the owner of his land and was therefore not in a position to sell it. His land was his heritage to steward during his life time and to pass on to his children in his death. The sabbath principle expressed through jubilee was that if such land were lost through negligence, ill fortune, or theft from the more powerful, it was to be returned in the year of jubilee, for no one, or no family could remain disinherited in the presence of the God who provides for all. This was a concept which Ahab was incapable of understanding. Unfortunately it seems a concept which the modern market is also incapable of understanding. If there is a patron of the modern market it is Ba'al not Yahweh. To the Yahwist individual human behaviour and action was always to be limited or curtailed if it was in conflict with the common good. We live in a world in which the opposite appears to prevail; common good is to be sacrificed if it is deemed to be in the way of private ownership, or the assumed rights of the individual. The following statement from the Church of England in 2005 is illustrative:

Humankind is easily ensnared in the culture of ownership. Even if it is understood intellectually that the world is God's, and the human role of stewardship means only to have

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<sup>8</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1-11qq. 90 - 106

<sup>9</sup> Karl Barth, *Systematic Theology* 111.4 (London T&T Clark, 2009) 34ff

stewardship under him, people can still be caught by the desire for possessions, which is by its nature voracious ... In the midst of this the Christian is called to stop: completely, properly for a period of time. Not just to pause for a breath before carrying on consuming, but to take a deep dive into God's peace.<sup>10</sup>

A tragic example of the inability to stop has been the recent abortive attempt to place regulations on the gambling industry, more particularly the poker machine industry. Certain facts are beyond dispute

- Australian adults lose on average approximately twice as much in gambling (at \$1000 annually) as the next nearest country in the OECD.
- The greatest single contributor to this gambling loss is poker machines
- Those who lose most are not the so called high rollers, or people on professional wages, but those who represent the less prosperous segment of society.
- The tragic consequences of these losses flow well beyond the individual to the families and dependents of those who gamble in this way
- The social cost to our society or to the 'common good' is very substantial.

Despite all of this, a successful campaign was launched by those who have a vested interest in the industry, including political interest, to convince the general public that what is manifestly in the interest of *common good* is in fact not in the interest of the common good at all!

I would like to turn for a moment to the central tenet of the Christian faith, the death and resurrection of Jesus, God's redeeming activity. I have earlier pointed out that in the Deuteronomic Decalogue, the *raison d'être* for the sabbath is said to be God's action in redemption, redemption that has little to do with the individual, but is about the whole people of God, or more properly the whole created order. Individual redemption comes into focus not for any reason, merit, or right of the individual, but through the individual's belonging to the whole creation people that God loves.

Arguably the most famous verse on the New Testament is John 3.16, *God so loved the world that...* Through the death and resurrection of Jesus a new redeemed community is formed in and through which there is no more division, no bond and free, no male and female, no Jew and Gentile. In this new community peace reigns not because enmity ceases between opposing factions, but because there are no opposing factions, there is only one community. Sadly the focus on God's redeeming activity for the sake of the whole creation has been somewhat overshadowed by a focus on the salvation of the individual. Since the reformation and especially since the influence of Enlightenment thinkers such as John Locke, Christianity, especially Protestant Christianity, has made much more of an emphasis upon the individual than is warranted in scripture and certainly far more than was understood in the early days of the Church. William Temple that great Archbishop of Canterbury captures it this way:

No object is sufficient for the love of God save the world itself. Christianity is not one more religion of individual salvation, differing from others only in that it offers a different road to

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<sup>10</sup> Church of England Mission and Public Affairs Council, *Sharing God's planet*, (Church House Publishing London 2005), 27



that goal. It is the one and only religion of world redemption. Of course it includes a way of individual salvation, but its scope is wider than that, as wide as God's love.<sup>11</sup>

Norman Wirzba makes the same point: "We need to move beyond the highly individualistic notion of salvation that many of us assume. It is important to understand that the Church early on worked precisely to combat this tendency".<sup>12</sup>

Emphasis on the individual has led many, most famously Lyn White junior<sup>13</sup> and Max Weber<sup>14</sup> to claim that Christianity has itself been responsible for tendencies that have worked towards a capitalism that is devoid of ethics and is largely antithetical to the common good.

My own view is that both White and Weber have important points to make, but over state their case. Moltmann asserts: "It was the Renaissance which first deprived nature of its rights and declared it to be 'property without an owner'".<sup>15</sup>

Post the Reformation, Christianity was influential in asserting that individuals should aspire to increased prosperity and well being and should not simply be pawns of an institution, be it the monarchy, the church, industry or politics. However, Christian influence assumed a moral undergirding, namely: individuals should prosper and have the right to improve their own lot, but only as a consequence of making a contribution to the well being of others. What has happened in the last three decades, at least, is that Christian values and Christian influence in public discourse has effectively ceased. Capitalism, separated from its moral underpinning, is not so much immoral but an ethics free zone. Profit can be made whether or not it contributes to others, or worse, even if has been made at the expense of others.

We now live in an economic environment where a lot of money, indeed a significant percentage of the total economic activity in countries like Australia and Britain is made without any connection to production, or the improvement of the lot of others. In the market, through processes like short selling and leverage, large amounts of money are made, or lost, simply by gambling that the market is going up or down. This activity, on a large scale, can become the reason why the market moves one way or the other. The market then ceases to be a true indicator of real value. Following the economic crisis of 2008/9 one would have thought that activities such as these and of course the practice of lending sub-prime mortgages would have been stopped through regulation and that banks would have been forced to serve their customers first and their share holders second – apparently not.

The Christian faith is essentially about the common good. This is because we believe in a relational God who has created a relational world. A world in which a few prosper while the aspirations of the

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<sup>11</sup> William Temple, *Reading is St John's Gospel* (London: Macmillan, 1959) 48

<sup>12</sup> Norman Wirzba, *Living the Sabbath: Discovering the Rhythms of Rest and Delight*, (Grand Rapids: Brazon Press, 2006)., 45.

<sup>13</sup> Lyn White, "The historical roots of our ecological crisis." *Science* 155 (10 March 1967): 1203-1207. <http://www.uvm.edu/~gflomenh/ENV-NGO-PA395/articles/Lynn-White.pdf> (accessed 13 November 2011).

<sup>14</sup> Max Weber. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, (London: Unwin University Books, 1930).

<sup>15</sup> Moltmann, *Creating a just Future* 68

majority are sacrificed on the altar of individual rights is not a world that receives biblical comfort. The biblical view is that because we are relational beings it is through and because of the common good that we will flourish as individuals.

An argument consistently put by those who champion a free market, a market unfettered by regulation is that wealth created will always trickle down to the advantage of all. It is true that throughout the world a large number of people have been pulled out of poverty. However, the last decade has, I believe, shown this argument to be false.

- The wealth gap between nations has increased
- The wealth gap between the highest wage earners and the lowest is at obscene and unprecedented levels.
- Growth in most of the industrialised world in the past decade has been an illusion; it has in fact only been achieved through debt, a burden which some countries are finding impossible to address.
- Growth, even in Australia, is only possible through an increase in the population, a strategy which clearly cannot continue indefinitely, even assuming it is wise in the short term, which is highly debateable. (Increasing the population to cope with a burgeoning quantum of aged people is only to inject another generation into the cycle. This increased population will itself age and need a further injection to cover it – ad nauseam.

I would like to conclude by suggesting some areas in which Christian influence could and should be more assertive as we seek to protect the interest of ‘common good’.

- The mantra of exponential growth at any cost should be challenged. It should be challenged on moral grounds because of the inequity it produces and the unmeasured debt left to the environment. It should be challenged on economic and ecological grounds as being simply undeliverable. Resources that produce wealth are not infinite. There are now several economists who argue for what is being called a ‘steady state economy’.<sup>16</sup> A steady state economy challenges the presupposition that increased wealth is the appropriate goal. A steady state economy starts from a different proposition. It assumes that well being has more to do with relationships within community than increased private ownership. A steady state economy would use very different measures for GDP than the arbitrary measurements currently used. A steady state economy would certainly measure volunteerism, and the contribution made within families in the care of their elderly and disabled. It would measure educational and health improvements. It would also measure the losses experienced each year as a result of resources that have been mined and are therefore no longer available.
- Greater honesty should be insisted on from politicians, on all sides, in relation to the health challenges facing the community. The reality is that a combination of longer lives, the availability of expensive medical procedures, the prevalence of chronic conditions such as diabetes and obesity, and an increasingly anxious society is now making the gap between people’s expectation for health delivery and the budget available to fund it impossible to

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<sup>16</sup> Jeffrey Sachs, *Common wealth; economics for a crowded planet* (London Penguin 2008). Tim Jackson: *Prosperity without Growth: Economics for a crowded planet* (London: Earthscan 2009)

bridge and facing almost certain collapse within a decade or so. For the good of society greater effort must be given to the empowerment of people for their own health options and quality of life.

- The environmental debate desperately needs the voice of mainstream Christianity. The debate has reached a farcical situation which can best be described as tragic.
  - a. The campaign to deride peer reviewed and very careful science is unprecedented: instigated by vested interest in the mining industry, right wing shock jocks and sympathetic politicians, it has been very successful.
  - b. As each year goes by the consensus of science that we face a crisis not only grows, but the seriousness of the situation is making previous estimates sound conservative.
  - c. Extreme weather events all around the world are a sad confirmation of scientific predictions. These events are not likely to abate, on the contrary, their frequency and intensity is likely to increase and the expense involved in dealing with them far outweighs the cost that would have been needed to respond appropriately when the crisis was first understood.
  - d. Despite all the statements to the contrary, the fact is the average world temperature continues to increase, with eight of the ten hottest years ever recorded occurring since the year 2000.

Political resolve, on either side of politics, will not match the level of decision making required for the sake of future common good, unless there is a much clearer demand from the general population that this is what we all demand.

The common good is at the heart of Christian belief because we believe we are fulfilled and enriched through our relationship with God, one another and the whole created order. At this time, when western Christianity continues to be in decline both in terms of church attendance and in terms of influence in public discourse, the tendency has been to embrace a strategy focussed on individual salvation and individual membership. While such a strategy must always be a part of the Christian mission, it should occur within the context of God's sovereignty over and within all things and of the embrace of the Kingdom of God which delivers the common good. The Billy Graham Crusades of the late 1950's were successful because they occurred within the context of maximum Christian influence and notional membership. Sadly this is no longer the case. Bishop Lesslie Newbigen<sup>17</sup> noted that since the enlightenment two worlds have developed; the private world and the public world. He further noted that Christianity has not simply been pushed, but has retreated into the private world of gender, sexuality and personal morality. For the Church's sake, but more particularly for the world's sake and for the sake of the kingdom of God it is necessary to return to the place that God in Jesus has placed the divine agenda – nothing less than the public world, the place of Common Good.

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<sup>17</sup> Lesslie Newbigen, *Foolishness to the Greeks: the Gospel and Western Culture*. (London: SPCK 1986)



## THE COMMON GOOD – AND HEALTH

Stephen R. Leeder

Sunday July 27<sup>th</sup> 2012

I am pleased to acknowledge offer respect to the Cadigal people of the Eora Nation and their elders, past and present, once custodians of this land.

Thank you for the invitation to join you this afternoon in this important topic. It is a privilege to be with you. Jim Tulip has kept me informed about the development of Wellspring, a wonderful movement, and it is good to experience it working first-hand.

You are the salt of the earth! If the common good is to prosper, it will be because of you and people like you.

Salt remains the world's major preservative. It is ironic that salt also contributes to our current global epidemic of high blood pressure! Yet in the right dose, especially when supplemented with a little iodine, salt has led to major health gains in leached mountainous regions of China and the Himalayan nations, preventing hundreds of thousands of cases of mental sub-normality due to iodine deficiency among children. Australian physicians including Professor Cres Eastman and several others from Westmead Hospital have led the charge. In 120 countries iodised salt now accounts for 80% of all salt used and rates of mental retardation have fallen dramatically – so as you *are* the salt of the earth, to promote the common good make sure you are the right kind of salt – iodised salt – and don't overdo it!

This afternoon I would like to think with you about the common good in relation to two rather different aspects of health. The first of these is the *treatment of illness*. The second is *sustaining health*. The first concerns the small number of people who at any time are sick. The second concerns the vast majority who are well.

Now, in relation to these two aspects of health I want you further to consider what the common good means for them *locally* and then *globally*.

First, how does a concern for the common good play out when it comes to **treating illness and caring for patients in Australia?** We are fortunate that we have a universal insurance scheme that enables everyone access to basic care without financial barriers at the point of care. Medicare does not overcome the barriers of distance or race, but it is a great equaliser and of course compares favourably with the US, which is still struggling to provide cover for about 50 million Americans who lack insurance. So as social justice and equity feature in most definitions of common good, we can be pleased about that.

Let's look at one patient, let's call him Stanley, who was 74, small, frail and had severe emphysema. I visited him at home with two nurses several years ago. He welcomed us with a happy if breathless smile. He walked slowly and haltingly from room to room in his small home in Blacktown. He was dressed in pyjamas at 11 in the morning. He had a thin plastic hose that connected him to his oxygen bottle. He

is dead now. His wife, from whom he was separated, had come back to look after him and was his principal carer rather grudgingly and said she was there because ‘the children had threatened never to speak to me again if I didn’t!’ (It is easy for us to overlook just how much caring for people such as Stanley is given by family, friends and volunteers.)



Stanley’s life still had quality. Despite his struggle with breathing he built model boats from balsa and a few friends and his children visited. His medications, of which he had ten, were paid for from the public purse as were aspects of home care and home nursing but incidental costs like transport and his wife giving up half her paid work to care for him meant that he had to find money from his savings and live frugally.

Out-of-pocket expenses are high if you have chronic illness in our community despite Medicare and forms of social security. Our group has studied the fate and fortune of people with chronic illness and many end their days in poverty. There are gaps that need to be filled if our vision of universal illness care for all who are sick is to be fulfilled. To be consistent, these gaps should be filled from taxation – the same common good that pays for Medicare and public hospitals.

These costs are not trivial. Treating illness accounts for 9% of GDP in treating illness and at present one-third of that comes out of people's pockets rather than through taxation. For surgery for arthritic hips you have an advantage if you have private insurance (PHI). PHI also covers dental work which is not covered by Medicare. Taxpayers contribute \$3b a year to subsidise premiums. The richer you are the more likely you are to have private insurance. This arrangement is something we may wish to discuss later.

So the picture in relation to the common good and treating illness in Australia is like the proverbial school report: Doing well but could do a lot better.

The second of our four categories, **sustaining health in Australia**, is complex. Sustaining good health has to do with the environment in which we live. The social context defines our range of choices – our lifestyle choices – including what we eat and how much physical activity we have, as well as our mental well-being.

Just how important these environmental forces are was made clear by Australian Sir Michael Marmot and his colleagues on the WHO Commission on Social Determinants of Health. They wrote in 2008:

*Lack of health care is not the cause of the huge global burden of illness; water-borne diseases are not caused by lack of antibiotics but by dirty water, and by the political, social and economic forces that fail to make clean water available to all; heart disease is not caused by a lack of coronary care units but by the lives people lead, which are shaped by the environments in which they live; obesity is not caused by moral failure on the part of individuals but by the excess availability of high-fat and high-sugar foods. The main action on social determinants of health must therefore come from outside the health sector. [The World Health Organization Commission on Social Determinants of Health, *Closing the Gap in a Generation – Health Equity through Action on the Social Determinants of Health*, 2008, p. 35.]*

We have learned from the environmental movement how hard it is to bring about changes that sustain the planet. It is equally challenging in relation to sustaining health. The changes necessary to sustain our planet and our health are rather similar and will require concerted action from large groups of people.

If our interest is in assuring that a new urban development has sufficient fresh food outlets, is walkable, is well served by public transport and is safe, how do we win a contest with interests that are strongly committed to the highest profit possible?

As with the environmental movement and the human rights movement, sustaining health requires group action. To assure the common good we need collective action built on individual contributions from people such as you.

Those who believe in the common good and health can legitimately attend to city planning, the food supply, the walkability of our cities, public transport, education and more. There is room for all those concerned about the common good to act in sustaining health.

The third category of health and the social good takes us out of our locality and indeed out of Australia and challenges us to think **about the common good as something pertinent to the whole world**. It is the most heart-ending and has to do with treating illness in less affluent and less democratic nations than ours – ones less concerned or less able to be concerned about the common good.



To what extent is the continuing illness and disability of a patient who had polio years ago met in India, for example? Is this individual *our* concern? If so, what follows by way of practical action? If not, what moral compass are we following?

The fourth category is also challenging. Poverty is the pervasive force that undermines the chances of billions of people for good health and we have made much progress in its relief in recent years. But it remains pervasive, the numbers of people experiencing it stubbornly fixed at around the one billion mark although now it is more common as a feature of developing cities than as a purely rural problem.

As we witness the biggest migration in history, from rural to urban areas, poverty is making its presence felt in precisely the same cities that are lifting general prosperity in Africa and Asia.

Books by economists such as Jeffrey Sachs from New York and Australian ethicist Peter Singer provide insights into what might be done by us as individuals who wish to pursue the common good in relation to poverty.

Peter Singer offers us a challenge as individuals living in affluent society. He suggests that, while we may enjoy a meal out, we might consider making a similar contribution to the price of the meal to UNICEF or Save the Children or Freedom from Hunger. You may already be a generous supporter of groups such as these.

Allowing for graft and corruption and inefficient administration, the cost of saving the life of one child is around the \$250 mark. That is regularly within the reach of many of us.

But as with sustaining health in Australia, **sustaining global health** is an immense challenge, embodying elements of the environmental movement and the human rights crusade. In health, we need all the friends we can get and we need to learn from their successes in planning our own actions to promote the common good.

I hope that these remarks paint a picture for you of the location and type of challenge illness care and sustaining health pose to those of us concerned with the common good. I hope also they give you a sense of opportunity and I look forward to our discussion about these matters.



"It is from numberless diverse acts of courage and belief that human history is shaped.

"Each time a person stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against an injustice, he [or she] sends forward a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centres of energy and daring, those ripples build a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance."