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Desire for the Common Good: A Defense of Eudaimonism¹

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The language of the common good has become familiar most centrally through the papal encyclicals and other official documents, starting with the social encyclicals of Pope Leo XIII at the end of the 19th century, that together comprise Catholic Social Teaching.² Today, however, the common good is invoked from a variety of theological and atheological locations.³ Generally speaking, a commitment to the common good implies a commitment to organizing the structures and institutions of social existence in a way that is beneficial for all members of that society. To accept the common good as a norm for social ethics is to orient social activity teleologically, toward human flourishing, rather than merely to emphasize adherence to norms of fair or equal distribution. It is to assume that it is possible to identify conditions for human flourishing that can be influenced by human agency. And it implies a critique of any social arrangements that redound to the benefit of only some members of society. It does not, though, itself tell us

¹ I am grateful to my fellow participants in the Center for Faith and Culture's Consultation on Desire and the Common Good for their probing and perceptive comments, which pressed me to think further about various aspects of this paper, and to the organizers and sponsors of the event.

² See Dennis P. McCann, "The Common Good in Catholic Social Teaching: A Case Study in Marginalization," in *In Search of the Common Good*, 121-123.

³ One might mention such diverse recent works as Herman Daly and John Cobb, Jr., *For the Common Good: Redirecting the Economy toward Community, Environment, and a Sustainable Future* (Beacon Press, 1994); Timothy Backous and William C. Graham, eds., *Common Good, Uncommon Questions: A Primer in Moral Theology* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1997); Noam Chomsky, *The Common Good* (Monroe, ME: Odonian Press, 1998); Amitai Etzioni, *The Common Good* (Cambridge: Polity, 2004); Walter Brueggeman, *Journey to the Common Good* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2010). Oliver O'Donovan, steeped both in Augustine and in medieval political thought, has played an influential role in making the common good salient for Protestant political theology. See, e.g., *Desire of the Nations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 282-283.

what constitutes human flourishing, or how goods and services can be distributed in a way that is in fact beneficial for all. “Appeals to the common good,” comments moral theologian Jean Porter, “offer useful reminders of the moral priority of equality and sufficiency, but they do not do a great deal of independent theoretical work.”⁴

While it is specifically *modern* Catholic social thought that has foregrounded the common good, the term has deep historical roots in the Western theological and philosophical tradition. It plays an important role in the thought of Thomas Aquinas, who speaks both of the common good as the proper end of political rule and of God as common good of all creation.⁵ And it is at work in Augustine’s reflections on the contrast between the earthly and heavenly cities and the different senses in which various communities meet—or fail to meet—Cicero’s insistence that a republic exists only where there is agreement “with respect to justice and partnership for the common good.” Aristotle regarded the good of the individual and that of the city as inseparably linked, indeed as in some sense the same (NE 1094b). The language of the common good, then, grows out of the long tradition of Western eudaimonism as this has been further specified within Christian eudaemonist reflection. Attention to these historical sources helps to further specify the meaning of the common good, and to resolve some potential objections to the appropriateness of the common good as social and political goal. It also, though, raises its own problems, problems associated with eudaimonism more generally. Reflecting on the links between desire and the common good turns out to be critical for resolving these. My focus here will thus not be on the critical question of how

⁴ Jean Porter, “The Common Good in Thomas Aquinas,” in *In Search of the Common Good*, 94-120; here 95.

⁵ Jacques Maritain’s personalist thought played an important role in mediating Thomas’s understanding of the common good to modern Catholic social thought; see especially *The Person and the Common Good*, trans. John Fitzgerald (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1966; orig. pub. 1947).

we are to go about cultivating desire for the common good, or on the precise shape of the common good, but rather on prior conceptual questions: in what sense can our desire for the common good transcend self-interest, indeed self-reference? And in what sense should it do so? Having defended a eudaemonist construal of the common good and of desire for the common good, we will be in a position to appreciate the significance of the phenomenon of contemporary naturalists who root notions of ordinary earthly human flourishing in something that transcends pure immanentism. Despite their resistance to notions of external transcendence, such thinkers find themselves groping after some notion of transcendence in order to do justice to the way the common good imposes itself on us, summoning us on an ascetic ascent of desire. And Christians are likely to name this as a groping after God as our ultimate common good.

Desire and Fulfillment

The 1965 *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Gaudiam et Spes)* is often regarded as having provided the classic definition of the common good as “the sum of those conditions of social life which allow social groups and their individual members relatively thorough and ready access to their own fulfillment.”⁶ In our contemporary cultural context, the language of fulfillment is most often used in the context of subjective preferences or desires; to seek one’s fulfillment is to seek the satisfaction of one’s desires. Thus understood, we might take the social task to be the creation of social conditions that allow for the maximal satisfaction of desires. Such an interpretation gravitates toward utilitarianism. Among its appealing features is the fact

⁶ *Gaudiam et spes*, para. 26, in *The Gospel of Peace and Justice: Catholic Social Teaching since Pope John*, 243-335, ed. Joseph Gremillion (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1976), 263.

that it seems to avoid paternalism and coercion. It refrains from imposing my comprehensive conception of the good life, of human perfection or flourishing, on others. Allowing each to be the authority on what is in her or his own interest, on what counts as a benefit to her- or himself, seems to show maximal respect to the autonomous agency of each member of a society. Beneficial *for all*, then, is understood in terms of maximizing the satisfaction of individual preferences. And desire, understood in terms of subjective preference, is key to delineating the beneficial.

One problem that we confront in focusing our efforts on human fulfillment as the maximal satisfaction of desire is the elasticity and indeterminacy of desire. We live in a society that exploits these features: at least as much time and energy is devoted to the creation as to the satisfaction of desires. As has often been observed, the market is a powerful force generating new desires and new ways of satisfying these desires through the money economy. Even where a desire is such that it cannot be satisfied through consumption, media forces work to create the appearance that they can be: mouthwash will buy you love, beer will buy you friendship, the right tie will buy you power and influence. The economy flourishes as desires proliferate. In times of recession, consumers are encouraged to spend in order to stimulate the economy, made to feel that they have a duty to spend or at least that it is virtuous to spend; the satisfaction of private desires, it seems, will automatically offer a common benefit. On the other hand, we are well aware that the invisible hand that regulates the market does not do so with an eye to justice or equity. Only those who have resources are in a position to spend in order to satisfy their desires; desires are effectively generated in all, but only to be frustrated in many.

A conception of fulfillment as desire-satisfaction has fit together well with the political culture of liberalism. The dominant political culture of Western liberal democracy valorizes liberty and equality. In the absence of general agreement on a conception of the good life, and given a commitment to equal protection under law and equal freedom to live as one deems fit, the state is expected to remain neutral with respect to various conceptions of the good. Meaning in life is seen as coming primarily from realizing one's own independently chosen life-plan, rather than from contributing to some project that transcends the self. The task of politics is to maximize the space for personal self-realization consistent with securing this space for all.

At the same time, political activity has come to be infected by market thinking. Many citizens take their political task to be simply that of lobbying for their own interests and preferences. The background assumption here is either that politics is merely a power-struggle or that it is a realm governed by its own invisible hand, such that if each votes his or her own interest, justice for all will be secured, or if not, that whatever injustices crop up are simply the unavoidable byproducts of a system good in itself.

Even as individualism is a salient feature of modern Western liberal democracies, at the same time it remains true that many individuals identify strongly with various corporate entities, whether this is their family, interest group, ethnic group, nation, or church. In doing so, they prove capable of subordinating narrow individual self-interest to the welfare of this corporate entity and of making personal sacrifices on its behalf. In fact, commitment to one or more such corporate entities often plays a central role in conceptions of the good life. At the same time, the tendency to think in terms of interest-group conflict is replicated at various social levels, up through the realist politics of

national self-interest. Even if one is no longer focused on one's individual self-interest, then, one is intent on securing the interests of some larger entity, which is seen as engaged in competition for resources with other such entities. We arrive at a sobering picture. The proliferation of desire and consumption is culturally endorsed and politics is reduced to the expression of personal preference and interest-group competition.

But this is not the whole story. The fact that everything I have said thus far has been widely noted and broadly deplored makes this also a hopeful historical moment. It is now increasingly conceded that the liberal state seeks to be neutral with respect to various comprehensive conceptions of the good life *just because of* its substantive commitments to the goods of liberty and equality.⁷ To say that these are substantive commitments of the state is of course simply to say that they are substantive commitments of individuals and communities within the broader political community. But recognition of this fact opens the door to reflection on other such goods, and indeed to recovering a more adequate understanding of the common good, even as it is also clear that these must be under constant discursive negotiation in a pluralistic society.

In order to move forward, however, and in order to think more globally, we do not just need better accounts of liberal democracy. We also need better accounts of desire and its fulfillment, accounts that explode the myth of the neutrality of economic utilitarianism and cost-benefit analysis. Where the intent in devising social policies is simply to maximize the satisfaction of subjective preferences, there is a tendency to introduce hefty assumptions about which desires are to be taken into account in devising

⁷ The recent literature on the "crisis" of liberal theory and the "myth" of liberal neutrality is vast. One might begin with George Sher, *Beyond Neutrality: Perfectionism and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). Many of the key figures in the debate are represented in *Perfectionism and Neutrality: Essays in Liberal Theory*, ed. Steven Wall and George Klosko (Rowman and Littlefield, 2003).

a scheme for aggregation and maximization of desire satisfaction. One effort to introduce some kind of discrimination among desires has been the social-scientific distinction between needs and wants, where needs are defined as necessary for an organism's survival and health, and wants are desires for something in excess of the necessary, the absence of which would result in no clearly negative outcome. Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs was an influential mid-century psychological theory of need.⁸ Maslow's hierarchy has been thoroughly criticized as individualistic, Western, and as wholly invented.⁹ Still, it continues to be employed in the health-care industry, and its ongoing popular authority is reflected in the fact that a simplified version of it was taught to my third-grader last year in public school, in an apparent effort to equip her to be a wiser and more restrained consumer.¹⁰ It is typical of the social sciences in its attempt to generate something like a normative distinction out of an objective description/observation, to find a criterion for the scope of social responsibility (fulfilling the *basic* needs of all) without needing to engage in ethical reflection or controversy. But in fact the notion of "health" employed here is a concealed normative standard.

Moreover, even if the distinction between needs and wants could be made to stick, it offers no help at all in assessing the various desires that fall into the *wants* category. Desire or preference here encompasses all kinds of longing, ranging from biological urges and appetites to a longing for world peace. This reflects the real

⁸ Abraham Maslow, *Motivation and Personality* (New York: Harper, 1954).

⁹ Mahmoud A. Wahba and Lawrence G. Bridwell. "Maslow Reconsidered: A Review of Research on the Need Hierarchy Theory." *Organizational Behavior & Human Performance* 15, no. 2 (1976): 212-240.

¹⁰ Robert J. Zalski and Richard Raspa, "Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs: A Framework for Achieving Human Potential in Hospice." *Journal of Palliative Medicine* 9, no. 5 (2006): 1120-1127. *Academic Search Premier*, EBSCOhost (accessed November 23, 2010); D.E. Best, E. Day, T. McCarthy, I. Darlington, and K. Pinchbeck. "The Hierarchy of Needs and care planning in addiction services: What Maslow can tell us about addressing competing priorities?" *Addiction Research & Theory* 16, no. 4 (2008): 305-307. *Academic Search Premier*, EBSCOhost (accessed November 23, 2010).

elasticity of human longing: Bob may live only for the sake of his next hamburger; Mary, on the other hand, may suffer continually from the fact that not enough attention is being paid to the plight of an endangered owl species. Is the satisfaction of Bob's desire and of Mary's desire equally beneficial to each? Bob's desire for his next hamburger and Mary's desire to save the spotted owl seem on this approach to be equally *unnecessary*, simply a matter of preference. *De gustibus non disputandum est*.

Just as the distinction between needs and wants is hardly purely empirical, if we analyze the Pareto optimization common among social welfare theorists (according to which a change in allocation of goods is considered an improvement if it makes at least one individual better off without making any individual worse off), it becomes apparent that by creating a formula to translate individual preferences into social welfare, the approach effectively inscribes the aggregation of such preferences as the proper understanding of social welfare, thus proscribing any other understanding of welfare and indeed any attempt to reflect on social ends.¹¹ Far from being neutral, such approaches enshrine an atomistic conception of social flourishing.

Desire in Eudaimonist Perspective: Some Concerns

Better, then, to admit up front that conceptions of health and flourishing are normative, not technical scientific or barely empirical matters. The door is then open to more adequate accounts both of desire and of fulfillment or flourishing. And just this is the promise held out by the common good. *Gaudiam et Spes*, in defining the common good in terms of fulfillment, seems to speak the modern language of desire-satisfaction.

¹¹ Hockett, Robert C., "Pareto versus Welfare" (2008). *Cornell Law Faculty Publications*. Paper 115. http://scholarship.law.cornell.edu/lsrcp_papers/115. Accessed 11/20/2010.

In fact, however, reflection on the common good, rooted as it is in eudaemonist thought, understand desire and fulfillment, and so also what it means to promote common fulfillment, in a dramatically different way. According to this understanding, as classically expressed by Thomas Aquinas, we have been created for an end that is perfective both of ourselves as individuals and of all of God's creation. Desire is the primary mode of our responsiveness to the good intended for us by God; it represents the fact that God's will does not simply confront us from without as something that binds our wills, but rather as something that completes and perfects us. We can properly flourish only in realizing this true end, and our desires will only find final fulfillment in its realization; in it we find happiness. Aquinas tells us that "each part naturally loves the common good of the whole more than its own particular good."¹² This is true, he tells us, of all creatures, including stones following their inclination to fall toward the center of the earth; "the principal inclination of each part is toward common action conducive to the good of the whole" (II-II.26.3). Inanimate creatures can be said to be moved by a natural love; animate creatures by an animal love, and rational creatures by an intellectual love. Whereas other creatures pursue the common good without having knowledge of that good, rational creatures are capable of knowingly pursuing the common good and of knowing that common good to be God. Part of the attraction of this picture is that it speaks in the positive language of fulfillment rather than the negative language of self-sacrifice. Over against a picture of society as composed of self-interested monads or

¹² *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominical Province (Allen, TX: Christian Classics, 1948), II-II.26.3. Further references are given parenthetically in the text.

competing interest groups, clamoring for the recognition of their respective claims, this offers us a picture of mutual fulfillment via cooperation.¹³

Now, on the one hand we might simply find this highly counterintuitive as a description. It seems wildly optimistic about the harmony between private and common good, too sanguine that our deepest desires will be satisfied rather than stymied by the common good. Creatures in general, and human beings in particular, seem rather to seek their own self-preservation, to have a special orientation toward their private good. On the other hand, we might find it inadequate as an account of our moral tasks and obligations. For it seems to suggest that there is nothing truly demanding about the common good as an end, nothing that fundamentally de-centers us from our self-referential preoccupations. Are there not times, though, when one should simply not ask whether a certain action will contribute to my own life being well lived? If you have a right to have me treat you a certain way, “whether or not performing that action would make for greater happiness on my part is simply irrelevant to what I should do.”¹⁴ But if happiness is our last end, that for which we seek all else, then it would seem that we seek the common good (assuming we do) for the sake of our own happiness. A recent book by Eric Silverman illustrates this in a particularly blunt way. In *The Prudence of Love: How Possessing the Virtue of Love Benefits the Lover*, Silverman develops what he regards as a Thomistic account of the virtue of love. He promotes this virtue as a reliable strategy for increasing the lover’s overall level of happiness.¹⁵

¹³ The fact that *Gaudiam et Spes* speaks of the fulfillment not just of individuals but also of social groups is itself an indication of the fact that fulfillment is understood here as perfection and not as mere preference-satisfaction.

¹⁴ Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Justice: Rights and Wrongs* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 177.

¹⁵ Lexington Books, 2010.

The Christian eudaemonist can begin to respond to this concern by noting that our desires must be transformed, sometimes radically, in order to be in harmony with the end of perfection or fulfillment for which we were created. If by natural desires we mean the desires that characterize us not as created, but as fallen, then the fulfillment of “natural” desires will not bring us either to perfection or into harmony with one another. But our desires are not simply beside the point, either. For it is only when our desires are transformed in conformity with our proper end that we are capable of finding genuine, lasting fulfillment, the fulfillment of desire. And this transformation of desire reveals the harmony and interdependence of our good and the good of others. But this response, even if it clarifies that we are not dealing here with merely given preferences, still leaves agents acting for the sake of their own perfection.

We can develop these concerns about eudaimonism a bit more fully in relation to contemporary proposals regarding the common good. Even if it employs the language of happiness, benefit, and fulfillment, the common good cannot be assimilated to the utilitarian concept of the general welfare; it is not a mere aggregate of the preference-satisfactions of individual members of society. Nor does it simply employ some sort of maximin strategy or Pareto optimization in order to address the problem of the unequal distribution of utilities.¹⁶ For such an approach still lacks any notion of a truly shared or common welfare.

¹⁶ Admittedly, the term common good is sometimes invoked to characterize what is at heart a maximin strategy. Jeffrey Stout, for instance, speaks of the common good as “a way of relating to one another from which everyone who wishes to avoid domination would benefit,” ch. 3, *Blessed are the Organized*. But he speaks of this, following Ian Shapiro, as a “stripped-down conception,” and adds that “A stripped-down conception provides a starting point for a discussion that should eventually lead to something much more substantial,” fn.22. See Ian Shapiro, *The State of Democratic Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 35.

Reflection on the common good attends to so-called “public goods,” goods like clean air and the beauty of a sunrise, that are available to all members of a community insofar as they are available to any. They are described as “non-rivalrous,” insofar as the enjoyment of them by one person or group of persons does not deny access to them by others. They are also “non-excludible,” in that it is difficult to exclude anyone from them or confine them to merely some members of the community.¹⁷

But even attention to public goods does not yet fully capture the sense in which the common good is properly common. For public goods are not irreducibly social, like the good of being a member of a family or a partner in a friendship. These are not simply goods the enjoyment of which is non-competitive, but genuinely participatory goods; the good itself comes to be through, and can only be enjoyed in the context of, social relationships.¹⁸ In fact, we can go further than this. It is not enough to say that individual enjoyment of such goods is only possible given the existence of the social relationships that give rise to these goods. We must also recognize that the enjoyment of these goods is itself communal; they can only be enjoyed together. Part of what we enjoy in a friendship is our common understanding of our relationship as itself good: “That we have a common understanding presupposes that we have formed a unit, a ‘we’ who understand together, which is by definition analytically decomposable . . . And where an undecomposable relation is a good, then some stronger condition generally holds: it is

¹⁷ David Hollenbach, *The Common Good and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 7-8.

¹⁸ Charles Taylor, “Irreducibly Social Goods,” in Taylor, *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 127-145. Jeremy Waldron develops this idea in terms of “communal goods” in “Can Communal Goods be Human Rights?” in Waldron, *Liberal Rights: Collected Papers 1981-1991* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 339-369, and Denise Reaume in terms of participatory goods, in “Individuals, Groups, and Rights to Public Goods,” *University of Toronto Law Journal* 38/1 (1988): 1-27. I am indebted to the discussion in James Helmer, “The Rights of Peoples? A Theological Analysis of Cultural Rights,” Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Notre Dame, 2010, esp. 135-136.

essential to its being a good relation that the common understanding englobe its goodness.”¹⁹ Recognizing the existence of both public goods and irreducibly social goods helps make more plausible the notion of a common good that does not compete with our several private goods. It encourages us to think of the social contributions we make in terms of building up a good in which we share, rather than depriving ourselves of goods for the sake of others. The bachelor whose taxes go to support the public-school system need not think of this merely in terms of a loss to himself, but as a contribution that builds up the health of the community of which he is an integral member. We are moved away from competitive, zero-sum thinking.

It is important that we recognize communal goods in order to correct the atomistic tendencies of contemporary culture. As David Hollenbach has persuasively argued, a culture that valorizes autonomous individuality is ill-equipped to respond to the biggest challenges that face the world today—poverty and despair in the inner cities, the overweening power of multinational corporations, the gap between wealthy and poor nations, global migration, global environmental and energy crises, and terrorism. The assumption that persons are best equipped to live well when they are protected from one another, their autonomy and independence maximally defended, fails to equip us to recognize our interdependence and the fact that many goods are realizable only in community. Hollenbach notes: “such an ethos systematically avoids attending to the impact of human interconnections on the quality of life by focusing on the freedom and choices of individuals one at a time.”²⁰

¹⁹ Taylor, “Irreducibly Social Goods,” 139.

²⁰ David Hollenbach, *The Common Good and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 42.

Emphasizing the interrelatedness of private good and communal goods in this way might also, though, reinforce our expectation that we should always be able to identify the way in which we ourselves benefit from the advancement of the common good. It might encourage us, that is, to think about the common good in a fundamentally self-referential way. So, for example, in reflecting on the cycle of poverty and violence in the inner cities, we might become more aware of the social and economic isolation of those living in the inner cities: of the lack of jobs in those areas, together with the lack of transportation from neighborhoods to jobs. We might come to think that any lasting resolution to the problems haunting the inner cities will require forging stronger urban-suburban links. “Such bridging,” writes Hollenbach,

. . . calls for a sense of mutual interdependence and an awareness that the good life of those in the suburbs is linked with a better life for those in the inner city. It requires a greater recognition that all citizens of a metropolitan area share each other’s fate . . . In other words, a deeper awareness that the well-being of cities and suburbs are interdependent is needed if the poverty of core cities is to be addressed effectively. A revitalized vision that cities and suburbs share a common good, or a common bad, is a motivational precondition for dismantling the walls that isolate those in the inner city from the economic and cultural achievements of the middle class.²¹

Those in the suburbs, in particular, must arrive at a chastened sense of their own achievements and an appreciation for how they too suffer from living in a society in which the inner cities are festering wounds. “No one can finally act solo,” insists Hollenbach, “and no one can attain a good life alone.”²² This is, I believe, undeniably true. But emphasizing interdependence as a motivational condition for pursuing the common good does not simply expand our range of concern in ways that more fully

²¹ Hollenbach, *Common Good*, 179. Hollenbach himself clearly insists that the common good is not merely a shared good but an intrinsic good, 81. The phrase omitted in the ellipses in the passage just quoted gestures in the same direction; “all citizens of a metropolitan area share each other’s fate both in fact and from a moral point of view.” I omit it only in order to carve out the problems with an approach that fails to articulate our capacity to act for intrinsic goods, on which more below.

²² Hollenbach, *Common Good*, 188.

encompass others; it also reinforces the tendency to refer all of our actions to our own good. This is the same dual suspicion that we voiced earlier; that an approach rooted in eudaimonism offers a falsely harmonized depiction of the relation between private desire and common good, and that it feeds and sanctions a preoccupation with our own happiness.

There is a real danger here—that the eudaemonist roots of reflection on the common good will play right back into dominant cultural assumptions concerning the self-interested character of human agency and succeed only in raising expectations that we can locate self-interested reasons for caring about social justice. But I also think that the eudaemonist stance can be clarified in such a way as to render it defensible. Rightly understood, eudaimonism allows us to articulate and illuminate the capacity of human beings to act for the sake of the good as such, not solely as that which is good for themselves. If we fail to insist on this, we not only fail to represent the demanding character of the moral life, we also contribute to a fundamental debasing of human moral agency. It is true that we can retrospectively affirm that moral agents are perfected and fulfilled by their pursuit of the good for its own sake. But one's own happiness plays neither a motivational nor a justificatory role for the fully virtuous agent. In order to unpack this I turn first to Aristotle, one of the most important and influential sources for the eudaemonist tradition, and then to the Christian eudaimonism of Thomas Aquinas.

Eudaimonism and the Intrinsically Good

Aristotle begins the *Nicomachean Ethics* with the search for some last end, that is, for “some end of the things we pursue in our actions which we wish for because of itself,

and because of which we wish for the other things” (NE 1094a18). This last end is equated with *eudaimonia*, where *eudaimonia* is flourishing, living and doing well, traditionally translated as happiness. The eudaemonist, then, is one who holds that the last end, the final and comprehensive goal of each of us, is a *eudaimon* life, a flourishing life.

But while it is not implausible that such flourishing would be something that all desire for its own sake, it seems problematic to go beyond this and claim that happiness is that for the sake of which everything else is done. This does not seem properly to capture the way in which, for Aristotle himself, the virtuous agent chooses virtuous action *for its own sake*. As Rosalind Hursthouse explains, the locution “for their own sake” is a way of gesturing not toward some common feature of virtuous actions nor a specific reason for acting common to such actions, but rather toward the *plurality* of concrete reasons for acting characteristic of the virtuous: “The virtuous agent chooses virtuous actions ‘for their own sake’ means ‘the virtuous agent chooses actions for at least one of a certain type or range of reasons, X’, where X reasons differ from virtue to virtue and where they are reasons that allow us to understand what made that action appropriate for a virtuous agent under these circumstances.”²³ Anthony Kenny has argued that differences between the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the later *Eudemian Ethics* suggest that Aristotle himself felt the need to clarify how happiness functions as final end. He puts the point perspicuously: “the way in which happiness functions as an end seems not to be that the happy man does things in order to be happy, but rather that he does, for the sake of their own nobility, the noble things which in fact constitute the happiness which makes life

²³ Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 127.

worthwhile.”²⁴ Kenny argues that a hermeneutic of charity requires that we take a minimalist interpretation of the claim that happiness is that for the sake of which everything else is done. Sarah Broadie has made a very similar claim.²⁵ Julia Annas, meanwhile, sees this as a structure characteristic of ancient eudaimonism generally speaking. On her account of this minimalism, eudaimonia is a very thin specification of the final end of human agency.²⁶ If a eudaimon life is by definition an objectively desirable life, the claim that all desire what they take to be a eudaimon life is rather formal. The common structure of eudaemonist argument is to use this thin claim as a commonsensical entry point, as a wedge that can allow reflection to press in toward conclusions that are dramatically different from that common sense starting point—as notably in the Stoic claim that the sage is happy even on the rack. The eudaemonist starting point creates a space within which one can ask, what constitutes *true* happiness, *true* flourishing, *truly* actualized human agency? If in the course of reflection, you come to recognize, for example, that virtue is a necessary constituent of an objectively desirable life, then since you want to live an objectively desirable life, you have at least a second-order desire to be virtuous. It is crucial to add, however, that *this* desire to be virtuous remains far from the structure of desire characteristic of the virtuous agent. For a key part of what is involved in coming to be virtuous is ceasing to do things *in order to* be or become happy (whether this is understood in terms of experiencing pleasure, satisfying preferences, or actualizing one’s agency). Instead, the virtuous agent does good things for their own sake, because they are the right or appropriate thing to do under the circumstances.

²⁴ Anthony Kenny, *Aristotle on the Perfect Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 21.

²⁵ Sarah Broadie, *Ethics with Aristotle* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 32.

²⁶ Julia Annas, *The Morality of Happiness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 32.

For the virtuous agent, then, her own eudaimonia no longer plays either a motivating or a justifying role in her action. It is not that the virtuous agent no longer desires to be happy, but that the virtuous agent no longer seeks directly to realize this desire. Rather, she acts in response to the host of intrinsic goods she encounters; the fact of a good's contributing to her own happiness is not needed in order to elicit her response or motivate her action. Eudaimonism does not amount to the claim that I am capable of doing x only because x makes me happy. Nor need eudaimonism appeal always to my happiness in justification of my course of action; it does not amount to saying that I ought to do x because x will make me happy.

If happiness no longer plays either a motivating or a justifying role for the virtuous agent, what does it mean to invoke happiness as last end? Its role is, I think, twofold. On the one hand, as Annas explains, reflection on happiness offers a starting point for common ethical reflection on the part of approaches that otherwise diverge quite sharply. Disagreeing about what would constitute a life that is lived well and has gone well, participants in the conversation nevertheless can agree that one who did not desire such a life would not be recognizably human to the rest of us. On the other hand, eudaimonism can invoke happiness retrospectively. What appears when we reflect back on virtuous agency is that it alone is the sort of agency that is consistent with genuine happiness, genuine flourishing. The commonsense starting point with which reflection begins is, though, radically different from the ending point. The virtuous agent is made capable of happiness (note that this does not require chiming in with the Stoic claim that happiness is *fully constitutive* of happiness), but her understanding of what happiness is has changed dramatically. More than this, she grasps that happiness is the sort of thing

that *supervenes* on virtuous agency, not the sort of thing that can be secured through its direct pursuit.

Let us see if we can unpack this transformation a bit more fully, in relation now to Thomas Aquinas's discussion of happiness as our ultimate good. It is common to all living beings to have an immanent tendency to their own perfection or self-actualization (S.T. I.5.1). This tendency obviously takes very different forms in inanimate objects (the stone that has a tendency to fall, on Aquinas's account, toward the center of the earth) than in living beings (the plant that tends to grow toward the light), in conscious living beings (the animal that desires food), and in rational moral agents. What is special to rational agency, over and above all these other kinds of tendencies toward perfection, is that rational agents are capable of acting for reasons not always derived from our preferences. That is, we assess (some of) our preferences; I think my life would be impoverished, for instance, if my preference for walks in the woods were to be displaced by a preference for professional accolades. Unlike non-rational agents, we are capable of asking whether our preferences give us adequate reason for acting.²⁷ We can be said to act for the sake of an ultimate good even if we never actually conceive of and are unable to give any account of such a good; the mere fact that we adjust our aims in light of one another, indicates that we seek the coherent coordination of our various ends, some comparative assessment of how bird watching and literacy education and saving for retirement are to come together in a good life. This coordinated system of ends can be described as a single ultimate end.²⁸

²⁷ I am drawing here on Terence Irwin's discussion in *The Development of Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), I, 499.

²⁸ Irwin, *Development of Ethics*, 493.

Attentive as he is to the different forms the tendency toward perfection takes in various kinds of creatures, Aquinas emphasizes as well what they have in common. He does so in order to articulate the *exitus-reditus* structure of creation. God summons creation back to God's self via tendencies that are immanent to created beings. Aquinas interprets Aristotle's account of the last end, and eudaimonism more generally, through this Neoplatonist lens. In doing so, he is able to underscore the way in which created entities' tendency toward their own perfection contributes toward the realization of God's providential plan for creation. It is against this backdrop that we must interpret Aquinas' claim that each part naturally loves the common good of the whole more than its own particular good. Non-rational creatures are said to "love" the common good simply by virtue of following their immanent tendencies. In animals, this takes the form of seeking the satisfaction of desires. In doing so, animals contribute to the common good *by way of* seeking their private good, by way of engaging in the particular forms of activity that characterize their kind—birds, say, by singing to mark territory and attract a mate, by building nests, by brooding eggs, feeding young, and so forth. Most immediately, these activities can be described as aimed at the bird's own self-actualization, the bird's own private good, although of course it involves no conception of such a good on the part of the bird. But these activities can also be described as directed towards the common good of the whole. We might articulate this in terms of the place such activities play within an ecosystem; Aquinas does so in terms of the destiny of creation in God.

Rational creatures, though, are capable of an *intellectual* love of the good. Intellectual desire grasps its object as good *in itself*, not merely as the object of some prior inclination, i.e., as intrinsically good (S.T. I.82.5). We also have non-rational

desires, which like the desires of non-rational animals are directed simply toward the satisfaction of inclinations that we possess. Intellectual desire, though, is directed toward that which we understand as *deserving* of being desired.²⁹ This key distinction is present as well in Aristotle, who differentiates between two types of appetite (*orexis*): *epithumia*, or desire for pleasure, and *boulesis* or rational wish for the good. This draws attention to the fact that appetite or longing is not merely elastic, but takes substantially different forms. Animals and immature human beings are capable only of *epithumia*. Reason brings with it the capacity to conceive of and long for something specifically as good, as objectively worthy of being sought rather than simply as subjectively desired. *Boulesis* and *epithumia* are often in conflict; I may not take pleasure in doing or pursuing what I rationally wish for. In a person of good character, however, *epithumia* and *boulesis* come to coincide, such that one takes pleasure only in what is objectively good. In the good character, desire is not suppressed, but it is radically transformed. Bob may go from living only for the next hamburger to being capable of taking pleasure only in Veggieburgers. His understanding of how beef clogs arteries and how many resources go into producing a pound of beef as opposed to a pound of grain have transformed his desires; the whiff from the grill now evokes visions of heart attacks and strokes more than memories of carefree childhood BBQs.

To say of human beings that they naturally love the common good more than their own particular good is not, then, to say that an invisible hand brings it about that our pursuit of our own private good, our own self-realization, contributes to the common good. Rather, it is to say that we are capable of pursuing intrinsic goods, of conceiving of the common good as a greater intrinsic good than our own private good, and thus of

²⁹ Irwin, *Development of Ethics*, 500.

ordering our own activities in accord with that intrinsic goodness. More than this, it is “natural,” i.e., in accord with our created nature, that we should do so, even as freedom, sinfully exercised, has made it possible that we oftentimes do not. Our immediate desires are not just for real goods, those things that are actually perfective, but also often for merely apparent goods. Many of our desires, then, insofar as they are desires for merely apparent goods, should rightfully be frustrated rather than realized. The end for which God has intended us cannot, then be read off of our occurrent desires. At the same time, though, these desires are not merely beside the point of conformity to God’s will. Even now, Aquinas insists, fallen human nature is capable of sacrificing private good to common good as “in civic virtues whereby sometimes the citizens suffer damage even to their own property and persons for the sake of the common good” (II-II.26.3).

What light does this insistence that each part naturally loves the common good of the whole more than its own particular good shed on Aquinas’s identification of happiness as our final end? It helps to clarify, more fully than Aristotle succeeded in doing, that the perfected rational moral agent no longer acts *for the sake of* her own private happiness, if this means that her own self-realization or flourishing is that for which she desires all other things. Rather, such an agent finds happiness in her pursuit of the common good. Following the general eudaemonist structure of argument, which begins by securing agreement on happiness as final end and then unpacks this in counter-intuitive ways, Aquinas moves only gradually to unpack the inner logic of the pursuit of happiness. Some aspects are not fully laid out in the “Treatise on the Last End” at the outset of the *Prima Secundae*, but are reserved for the *Secunda Secundae*’s discussion of charity and the love of the common good, which we have just explored in the preceding

paragraphs. “As to whether man loves anything more than himself with the love of friendship,” he tells us, “there will be occasion to inquire when we treat of charity” (I-II.2.8). But the very character of intellectual love is to love the good in itself and not inasmuch as it fulfills our desires.

Is there, then, *any* special way in which the virtuous agent is oriented to her own perfection? There is, and it is due to the fact that each of us stands in a special relation to our own agency. My life is the only life I can lead, and I thus have a special responsibility for my own agency that I do not have for the agency of others. I can, for instance, control whether my actions respect your worth in a way in which I cannot control whether anyone else’s actions (including your own) respect your worth. This is not to say that I need not be concerned for how my actions influence the agency of others. On the contrary, this, too, is part of that for which I have special responsibility. But as a participant in God’s providential care for creation, I am not permitted to be indifferent to the quality of my agency. I am permitted and even required to assist the neighbor in many ways, sometimes even at the cost of my life. But I am not permitted to do evil that good may come, not permitted to sin even in order to free my neighbor from sin (II-II.26.4). To do so is to fail to participate in God’s Providence in the way that rational creatures were intended to do, as morally responsible agents. This does not mean that I care for my various ends only insofar as they contribute to my own flourishing, but it affirms that I do have a special responsibility for perfecting my own agency, and that this acts as a check on the ways in which I may pursue the good.

In reflecting on the link between desire and the common good, then, we must insist that the common good is not simply an irreducibly social good but also an intrinsic

good, a good it is incumbent on us as moral agents to seek to bring about in our agency. Were we perfected as agents, our desires would be in harmony with the common good. Imperfect as we in fact are, we will often experience our commitment to realizing the common good as demanding self-sacrifice, as running counter to many of our desires. This line of thought might seem pessimistic about our actual prospects for cultivating desire for the common good. Our desires are in need of radical transformation, and a commitment to the common good offers no easy road to subjective fulfillment. However, I do not think that pessimism is in order. For the eudaemonist outlook I have been sketching has the virtue of making radical transformations of desire intelligible, of showing both how the desires of human beings are in continuity with those of non-rational creatures and how they are qualitatively different. Human beings are capable of responding to, and of being elevated by, the call to seek the common good for its own sake. While this eudaimonism is, when properly understood, as uncompromising in its ethical demands as any deontological perspective, it places these demands within a broader perspective of meaning and intelligibility. It will make sense that often our contribution to the common good will come by way of promoting our own good and the good of those near and dear to us, since our range of action is limited. We will have no reason to expect that our good in any particular instance need conflict or compete with our moral duties; morality is not a matter of placing other before self, but a matter of properly respecting the full range of intrinsic goods with which we engage as agents. Moreover, as Christians, we can be confident that our genuine happiness—our fulfillment, our perfection—lies in working for the common good.³⁰ That ought not to be

³⁰ In the course of the consultation, John Hare posed the question whether God, on this view, *must* make us happy. I don't think the view I am defending need insist on this. Rather, what it claims is simply that we

our reason for working for the common good, nor the source of our motivation for doing so. But in confessing this harmony we confess the creative and providential power of God, and the intrinsic beauty and goodness of this harmony can give us additional reasons for seeking the common good. Nor is this a heady conceptual task, for to participate in the sacramental life and other formative faith practices of living Christian communities, as well as in the mundane tasks of weaving civic life and discursive democracy, is to become involved in a process that can work concretely to transform our desires and form them for the pursuit of the common good.³¹

I have allowed the common good to remain quite indeterminate for the purposes of this essay. This is appropriate, insofar as the common good represents an ideal that might constrain and shape concrete policy proposals, rather than itself a concrete policy proposal. We may begin by noting, as I have, that this ideal is not simply a commitment to organizing social structures and institutions in a way that is beneficial for all members of society, but an approach that understands “beneficial” in thoroughly objective, relational, and perfectionist terms. However, there is much more work to do in order to render the common good a practically useful concept. There are internal constraints to the way in which this common good may be pursued; both the intrinsic good of free self-determination and that of relationality must be respected, for instance, and I have said nothing here either about how to identify these various constituent goods nor about how

have been created with the capacity to find our happiness in the pursuit and defense of what is intrinsically good, and that the realization of this capacity (even if it requires self-sacrifice) is partially constitutive of genuine happiness for a rational moral agent. Whether or not God is under an obligation to ensure that this capacity is realized for every such agent is a separate question, as is the question of whether there is some necessity for God to heal this capacity as it has been damaged by sin.

³¹ On the formative practices of the church, see the many writings of Stanley Hauerwas; on Christianity and civic virtue, see Eric Gregory, *Politics and the Order of Love* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), and Charles Mathewes, *A Theology of Public Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

to relate them to one another.³² I am content here simply to note the importance of carrying out that task in order to head off understandable worries about the paternalistic tendencies of perfectionist visions. I do, though, want to turn in closing to the relationship between the civic common good and our ultimate common good.

Transcendence and the Common Good

The common good, most fully articulated, is joyful fellowship with God and one another.³³ It is a good that can only be eschatologically realized, and it is not something that human beings can or should attempt to bring about through their own agency. Recognition of the gap between temporal common good and ultimate common good is deeply rooted in the theological tradition. Whereas Aquinas, as we have seen, insists that each part naturally loves the common good of the whole more than its own particular good, and identifies God as “the common good of all,” (II-II.26.3), he does not claim that human beings naturally love God as the common good. Rather, even apart from the distortions of sins, he notes that human knowledge “depends on sensible things”; we therefore need the assistance of grace both to know and to love God (II-II.24.2.ad2). In the absence of this knowledge of God as our final good, human beings are still capable of cultivating civic virtues that orient their action toward the common good of the human community (II-II.26.3). Augustine, meanwhile, though reluctant to recognize genuine civic virtue in the absence of genuine love of the true God, and while lacking Aquinas’s

³² Hollenbach’s discussion of “Christianity in a community of freedom,” is helpful on this score, *Common Good*, 113-136.

³³ But cf. Jean Porter, who cautions that Thomas Aquinas does not understand the beatific vision as inherently communal: “because the happiness of the beatific vision is a complete good, to which nothing can be added, it is not intrinsically increased by being shared with companions, even though this fellowship increases the well-being of happiness,” “Common Good in Aquinas,” 115.

conceptual category of proximate goods capable of being directed toward our final end, nevertheless also held that Christians and non-Christians share a responsibility to identify and promote shared goods of this secular, earthly existence.³⁴ The eschatological character of our ultimate common good, the fact that it can only be partially anticipated within history, chastens earthly politics. Hollenbach puts this point powerfully:

An exclusively religious politics is a form of false messianism. It makes the political sphere the bearer of counterfeit messianic hopes, often because of an inability to come to terms with the historical imperfection and imperfectability of public affairs. It easily leads to fanaticism and tyranny on the one hand or to failure to seek the lesser goods that are in fact achievable in politics on the other. Genuine Christian faith counteracts false political expectations by placing hope where it belongs, namely in God. In counteracting such false hopes, it can free believers to pursue the goods, including the common good, which can be achieved within terrestrial cities.³⁵

This is a vitally important point. But there is another point to be made from an opposite angle. It is not just that the transcendence of our ultimate final good chastens human agency and saves it from the temptations of false messianism. The way in which the earthly common good points beyond itself to transcendence serves not simply to curb but also to enliven and sustain human agency in pursuit of that good.

We witness this groping towards transcendence even among contemporary naturalists insistent on keeping our eyes trained on the end of ordinary human flourishing, but also convinced that an adequate account of flourishing requires reference to intrinsic goods, goods that demand our recognition and so transcend desire. Jeffrey Stout, for instance, identifying himself as an exponent of naturalistic piety, expresses a concern that an aspiration to external transcendence, or the positing of a supernatural object of piety,

³⁴ Robert Markus, *Christianity and the Secular* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), 62-65.

³⁵ Hollenbach, *Common Good*, 125.

tends to undermine our grasp of the goods of natural existence. He recognizes that this is a debate that has more than one side:

Naturalists who are not militant atheists . . . might also be inclined to claim that “reference to a supernatural and other-worldly locus has obscured” the “real nature” of the “human abode” and weakened the force of “goods actually experienced in the concrete relations of family, neighborhood, citizenship, [and the] pursuit of art and science” (CF, 71). Supernaturalists, for their part, will see this stopping short as a failure to respond appropriately to the ultimate source of our existence and progress through life.³⁶

In his latest book, Stout refrains from pushing that controversy further. Instead, his concern in *Blessed are the Organized: In Search of Grassroots Democracy* is to articulate a substantial common ground that nevertheless exists between forms of natural and supernatural piety, to summon advocates of each to mutual generosity, and to make headway in the work of shoring up democratic culture. He employs the language of “sacred value” in order to articulate this common ground. “Some people” he notes, with a footnote to Peter Singer’s secularist utilitarianism, “explicitly reject the sacred.”³⁷ Utilitarians reject any absolute prohibitions, reject the thought that some things may not be appropriately placed in a cost-benefit calculation, that they possess an intrinsic value whose loss cannot be outweighed by some other gain, but whose loss represents a horror or outrage. They seek instead to homogenize all goods in a way that allows for the maximization of utility. They thus translate reverence for sacred value and horror at its violation into preferences and interests, which can be toted up against the competing preferences and interests of others. To do so is to introduce a fundamental commodification into political culture. To attribute sacred value to something, in contrast, “is to imply that its value can neither be measured exhaustively in quantitative

³⁶ Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 33, quoting from John Dewey’s *A Common Faith*.

³⁷ Jeffrey Stout, *Blessed are the Organized: In Search of Grassroots Democracy* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2010), 224.

terms, nor reduced to utility, nor subjected at someone's whim to trade-offs of the sorts that markets are designed to facilitate."³⁸ Politics should not be governed by an invisible hand; it should be a site where our deepest concerns become visible, even as conflict among them is adjudicated democratically rather than by means of force.

The insinuation of cost-benefit calculations into all arenas of policy-making and political life is also a central concern for Martha Nussbaum. Like Stout, Nussbaum resists appeals to external transcendence, appeals to something beyond the realm of the natural, but nevertheless finds herself invoking "internal" transcendence, characterizing this as "a certain sort of aspiration to transcend our ordinary humanity," a capacity to "soar above" the "dullness and obtuseness of the everyday."³⁹ Internal transcendence involves "delving more deeply into oneself and one's humanity."⁴⁰ It allows us to rage against human defects and push against human limitations, but only in a way that simultaneously acknowledges that these make us who we are. The key to Nussbaum's internal transcendence, then, is that it pushes against the limits of ordinary human life while at the same time affirming that this ordinary life really does matter, and is not itself the thing to be escaped from or be cured of.

Reading novels, Nussbaum argues, cultivates imaginative sympathy with the particularities of others' experience, helping us to understand them and care for them. It teaches us that "not everything in human life has a use," and makes us capable of "cherishing things for their own sake."⁴¹ It makes us resist reductions to aggregate

³⁸ Stout, *Blessed are the Organized*, 219.

³⁹ Martha Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 379.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Martha Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 42. Further references given parenthetically to PJ.

“utility” and cultivates in us a more complex, internally differentiated understanding of human flourishing (PJ 45). Nussbaum’s model is the evolving casuistry of the common law tradition, which attends in a fine-grained way to historical precedent and social context, rather than aspiring to deduce legal judgments from abstract principles (PJ 84). But the casuistical tradition cannot survive without something more; Nussbaum repeatedly invokes the language of “mystery,” “wonder,” and “awe” in order to capture that to which rational choice models are blind. “Human life,” she writes, “is something mysterious and extremely complicated . . . in the name of science, the wonder that illuminates and prompts the deepest science has been jettisoned” (PJ 27). In this context, she finds it quite appropriate to speak of having a “soul” (PJ 31). “All of human life,” she tells us, “is a going beyond the facts, an acceptance of generous fancies, a projection of our own sentiments and inner activities onto the forms we perceive about us” (PJ 38).

Stout and Nussbaum thus both move beyond what Charles Taylor has termed “pure immanentism,” “a purely self-sufficient humanism” that makes no appeal to anything that transcends human flourishing.⁴² Neither Stout’s sacred value nor Nussbaum’s awe and wonder at human life amounts to an affirmation that the common good is properly known as our destiny in God. But they do issue out of the conviction that we cannot properly articulate and defend the common good over against utilitarian reductions to individual preference satisfaction without the capacity to articulate the intrinsic goodness of x as something that confronts us and demands our recognition. And they find that they cannot do without the language of transcendence in attempting to express this point. Christians would go farther: it is the love of God that, far from robbing the political common good of meaning, can allow us most fully to perceive that

⁴² Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Harvard: The Belknap Press, 2007), 18.

which (in Stout's terms) has sacred value and to sustain our horror at its violation, to sustain our commitment to universal human solidarity and the global common good in the face of all the "myriad ways in which real, concrete, human beings fall short of, ignore, parody and betray this magnificent potential."⁴³ For it is this that allows us to love others as most profoundly "not something that can be characterized just by reference to this being alone," but as made in the image of God.⁴⁴ We grasp the earthly common good as pressing its demands on us in a way that powerfully reshapes our desires, and we do so by virtue of its reference beyond itself to God as the common good of those made in the divine image.

⁴³ Taylor, *Secular Age*, 697.

⁴⁴ Taylor, *Secular Age*, 701.