Common Good or Common Goods

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For much of his life the historian and political philosopher, Michael Oakeshott, investigated the conditions underlying political life in Europe or, as we would say, in the West. One focus of his research was the effect that moral beliefs and opinions have on the way in which we constitute ourselves and on the way in which we allow regimes to govern. His analysis of the development of Western moral belief is interesting in itself and will be the focus of this discussion. What he has to say will be illustrated by difficulties surrounding the use of the term “common good”. Fortunately, his thought is drawn together in his Harvard Lectures, “Morality and Politics in Modern Europe”, published by Yale University Press in 1993.

Oakeshott identifies three dominant moralities that can be found in Europe during the last five hundred years. He calls them:

the morality of communal ties,
the morality of individuality and
the morality of collectivism.

These are not to be identified simply with particular moral prescripts but are broad moral dispositions that underlie and make intelligible what people say about politics and government. They are not the cause of thoughts about government and politics but rather the context in which these thoughts arise. Each will be examined in turn.

The morality of communal ties is a relic of the medieval past, though it maintains some of its authority and of its power to attract and is still found in some non-European countries. It belongs to a society in which membership of the community is not a matter of choice but is regarded as in some way natural. Rights and duties are determined by custom, and one’s loyalties are directed not to moral principles but to persons.

An example of such a community is an extended family in which property is thought to belong not to any individuals but to the family as such. Primary loyalties remain within the family.

Medieval villages and other communities operated in this way. People thought of themselves not as individuals but as members of the group, and that membership determined the course of their lives.

The morality of individualism accompanied the rise of social conditions in which people thought of themselves primarily as individuals rather than as members of a community and for whom personal choice was a primary value. Individuals began to appear in Europe during the thirteenth century and became obvious during the sixteenth century and were responsible for some of the achievements of the Renaissance.

According to this morality one seeks “to make choices for oneself to the maximum possible extent, choices concerning activities, occupations, beliefs, opinions, duties and responsibilities.” Further, such a disposition is regarded as good and as good for all, so that to be deprived of choice is regarded as morally regressive.

Under such conditions property is private, as economic independence is essential to individuality. Human societies cease to be communities in the strict sense and become associations of individuals.

The morality of collectivism grew not only out of the collapse of medieval communities but also in reaction to the development of the morality of individualism. Though the opportunity to act from choice was exciting for some, others through circumstances or temperament found it a burden. Unable to survive amidst the uncertainties of this new world, the anti-individual emerged not as a relic of the past but as a truly modern character - the displaced labourer or the dispossessed believer.

Pressed to makes choices these anti-individuals looked to “leaders”, often regimes or rulers, who would make choices for them and impose those choices by way of protection.

The morality of collectivism relieved such anti-individuals of feelings of guilt at not being able to embrace individuality. The collective was praised, and self-love was despised. Solidarity and equality were valued in place of liberty and self-determinism. Property was [p. 23] best held in public hands so as to be put at the service of the established public good.
Each of these moral dispositions called for the political structures and practices that best supported it. Under the morality of communal ties, government tended to be a very local affair and was conducted in courts, which determined matters of justice according to custom. Rulers had little to do with enterprise.

This way of living no longer affects us in any significant way, but the politics of individualism and the politics of collectivism are very significant for life in the West today.

Under the **politics of individualism**, the office of government is to set rules that will allow society to function effectively. Where society is composed of a large number of individuals, each following its own choices, collisions are bound to happen. The role of government in such a society is to administer the rules so as to prevent collisions or, when they do occur, to resolve conflicts. In no way is this government thought to be allowed to impose beliefs or activities on citizens.

This kind of political life can be characterised as a system of rights administered and enforced by a strong central government. Theorists of this kind of government include Spinoza, Hobbes, Locke, Kant, Smith, Burke, Bentham, Mill.

Under the **politics of collectivism**, the office of government is the imposition of a single pattern of conduct and consequently the organisation and administration of much of the life of the collective. Here we are not talking about a society of individuals but rather about a society in which all move to a dominant tune, which is played by the powers of the day. 

Oakeshott identifies three main forms of collectivism. Religious collectivism as experienced in Calvin’s Geneva made righteousness the guiding principle of civil life. Productivist collectivism, as seen in Francis Bacon’s utopian vision or in Marxist theory, made prosperity and wealth through the exploitation of resources the fundamental goal of the state. More recently a distributionist collectivism has proposed security and welfare as the dominant concern of public activity.

The existence of these differing moralities and of their political counterparts within the life of the modern West is a source of great tension. At the level of the state, the imposition of a welfare state on a liberal democracy, though perhaps desirable, is a contradiction. As a pure liberal or individual, Margaret Thatcher was right when she said that there is no such thing as society and that there are only individuals. Yet, she was wrong, if, as she was, she was speaking of contemporary Britain, in which the inability of many to survive in such a world had generated the idea and institution of the welfare state. This kind of tension is found in varying degrees in most Western states.

A further tension, suggested though not developed by Oakeshott, is that each of these three moralities uses the same words to express itself but, of course, with radically different meanings. A particular term that has suffered this fate is “common good”.

Though now little used among political philosophers, it is still common in church teaching about political matters. Within a morality of communal ties, the common good is a mix of many goods that support the life of the community as such, and these may change.

Within a **morality of individuality**, the common good is the maintenance of a rule or order under which freedom is maintained and individuals can prosper in whatever particular ways are important to them. It is at times, for instance by Bentham, associated with specific goods such as wealth of individuals or its sum, but it is more properly the management of conditions under which individuals can flourish.

Within a **morality of collectivism**, the common good is a single dominant perfection, although what it is varies from regime to regime. As has already been stated, “welfare” is one such perfection.

Other complications affect interpretation of the term “common good”. A classical understanding will bring in the notion of the virtue of the citizens and the good of the *polis* both in terms of the totality of that good and in terms of how the laws encourage it. A theological understanding will bring God into the picture and more than likely move the focus of the good to the next world. It may also express the uniqueness of the human person in its relationship to God. Further, in whatever context the term is used, its implications are going to change according to social, historical, economic and technological conditions.

The upshot of all of this is that political discussion today is very difficult. The speaker may be confused about which dominant morality he or she may be using, and, indeed, it is not uncommon for one speaker to apply meanings from more than one the context. On the other hand, the listener may well interpret a term according to a context other than that in which it was uttered.

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