

## A Classic Text

### The Common Good: Collective and Universal Good

The term common good is ambiguous, sometimes standing for goodness in general, sometimes for the total of all goods in a system, sometimes for the infinite good that transcends all categories. In the first sense *bonum in communi* is an abstraction, the form which is the meaning and end of every desire. This usage should be noted, as a source of confusion similar to that between *ens commune* and *esse subsistens*; we are concerned at present with the concrete common good.

This is taken to signify either the collectivity of all particular goods or the first cause from which they derive and in the end return. In the first, and perhaps easiest sense, the common good is the good of the whole group; it affects the sum total of the particular parts, and also the good proper to the system they constitute, which is displayed *in modo, specie, et ordine*. Enormous as this may be, it is less than the universal and infinite good: the whole cosmos is no nearer true infinity than is a grain of sand. But St Thomas read into Aristotle his own metaphysics of creation: the universe is not a self-sufficient system, but is wholly produced and sustained in each and every part of its reality and activity by a being who is outside the scheme. The first cause, who is not included in the series of causes, is also the purpose and of every desire, so much so that St

Thomas does not hesitate to say that every love is the love of God. Thus the motions of the universe are turned, not only on the working of the whole, but also to a supreme and extrinsic good, which is intimately present in the universe, not however as a form – he speaks with unwonted vigour against the pantheism of believing that God is the soul of the world – but as a cause. In this good, which we must imagine as separate and lifted above the world, *bonum separatum* are comprehended, unitedly and essentially, all the goods which are scattered dividedly and on loan throughout the world; indeed, its transcending simplicity is the cause of distinction and plurality.

The collectivity is said to be godlike because the universal good beyond the universe is better mirrored in the whole of creation than in any single particular. But the universal good is an infinite being apart from creatures, a being who is present to all things as their cause, but in an especial manner to rational creatures, as the object of their knowledge and love. As such, God is not just a meaning offered for philosophical contemplation and disinterested appreciation, but a person, or rather a trinity of person, in whose companionship men will be ultimately at peace. Already they enter into it, though the vision is delayed; already they embrace divine purposes, and so find the world is God's, and therefore theirs.

Thomas Gilby,  
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