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COVID and the Common Good

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Abstract

This article examines the nature of individual goods, public goods, and the common good in the context of the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID). 'Common' in 'common good' is what applies to all persons without exception, and 'good' is what contributes to human flourishing. The common good is regarded as the communion of persons in good living. Addressing the relationship between the economy and society, it is proposed that the marketplace subsists within society. Acknowledging that we are deeply connected, the article employs the philosophies of MacIntyre, Maritain and Sandel to highlight the importance of reciprocity, relationships, and generosity as characteristics of the common good. Two narratives in the public discourse are observed in these COVID days – one characterised by fear and selfishness, the other by hope and generosity. The author recognises that this pandemic can be conceived as a 'wicked' problem in a 'volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous' world, and implications for leaders and citizens in managing COVID are suggested.

Keywords Common good · Community · COVID · Human flourishing · Goods

Introduction

The Master sat in rapt attention as the renowned economist explained the blueprint for development. 'Should growth be the only consideration in an economic theory?' he asked. 'Yes. All growth is good in itself.' 'Isn't that the thinking of the cancer cell?' replied the Master (de Mello 1987: 80).

This opening story highlights that growth for its own sake is not necessarily a good thing: after all, the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) – hereafter 'COVID' – is a virus that merely seeks to replicate itself and spread. This article begins by recognising that we are deeply connected, and addresses the relationship between the economy and society. In the context of COVID, the nature of the common good is then considered through the lenses of three

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philosophies, those of MacIntyre, Maritain and Sandel. The article concludes by offering some suggestions for leaders and citizens in managing this pandemic through the paradigm of the common good.

COVID Reminds us that we are Deeply Connected

COVID has reinforced that we are globally connected, both for ill and for good as a human species. According to the World Health Organization dashboard (WHO 2020a), this virus has already infected over 14 million people, with more than 600,000 deaths, and it has spread to every country except Antarctica. Just as COVID knows no borders and respects no boundaries, the human community is inexorably linked now in ways that were not possible during the so-called Spanish Flu (1918—1920) which killed an estimated 20—50 million victims, nor during the Black Death (1347—1352) which killed an estimated 25—30 million people (Cartwright 2020).

As the Irish proverb asserts, *Ar scáth a chéile a mhaireann na daoine,* 'in the shadow of each other, we live', meaning that we are shielded from the sun by others, the phrase evoking a sense of interdependence (Carswell 2015). The African concept of *ubuntu* goes even deeper — 'I am because we are' (Gade 2012), meaning that our human development depends upon the prior presence and support of the community (Obioha 2014a, b). Our very existence is contingent upon our membership of the human community: we both depend upon and are impacted by what happens elsewhere. COVID has entered a globalised world that is both interconnected and interdependent in trade, finance, communications, culture, and public health (Jones 2013; Makhlouf 2017).

While it is a truism that we are all part of the human community, various writers have nonetheless critiqued the common mantra that 'We are all in this together' as being an inaccurate commentary on the experience of those who are most affected by COVID (Guarnieri 2020; Hornery 2020). After all, the wealthy and those who are able to 'socially-distance' are being less impacted by the spread of the virus, while lower-income people are at greater risk. This was also evidently the case during the Spanish flu when the poor, and those who were living in close household and community proximity, suffered the most (Bowleg 2020; Pambuccian 2020).

The Context of COVID: The Economy and Society

According to the French philosopher, Jacques Maritain (1882—1973), the economy exists to meet the needs of the people rather than people existing to service the needs of the State (Maritain 1960, 1998). Society and the marketplace are not two mutually-exclusive entities — the marketplace subsists within society. Society does not exist to serve the State (Maritain 1960, 1998), rather, the State is part of the body politic (Bainton 1952), and its role is to ensure that society is the beneficiary of the contributions of its own citizens (McInerny 2007).

A trade-off between health policy and economic goals has become evident during COVID: the USA under President Trump has been more concerned with encouraging and supporting Americans back to work rather than dealing directly with the serious negative effects of this pandemic; other nations such as New Zealand and Australia have been more cautious about opening State and Territory borders to 're-boot' the economy. Public health and the economy are being regarded as competing imperatives by political leaders. Friedman (2020) refers to this significant dilemma as the 'hellish trade-off between medical health and economic health'.

Various commentators in recent times (Anthony 2020; Hague 2019; Sandel 2018) have highlighted the legacy of a globalised world in a highly-privatised and individualised society such as in the USA where the poor are significantly disadvantaged in access to health care and paid sick leave, and in dealing with the disastrous effects of the coronavirus. It has also been postulated that Western free-market capitalism has lost sight of the common good in favour of 'market triumphalism' where there is no equality and little social justice (Glunt 2020).

Instead, and in light of COVID, representatives of some 17 countries are already proposing new ways to foster a prosperous global economy by recognising economic equality, and by putting people's needs and democratic values first: from a 'Common Good Product', which could sit above the 'Gross Domestic Product', to investments in sustainable food production and health; from 'Ethical World Trade' to a financial transaction tax to 'Common Good Balance Sheets' for businesses. This movement, calling itself the *Economy for the Common Good*, regards the current COVID crisis as the opportunity to master the transition from the prevailing economic model – which contributes to climate change, loss of biodiversity and inequality – towards a better future (ECG 2020).

A tension is currently evident across the world between the pursuit of individual liberty and respecting the common good. For example, in the USA, President Trump is insistent that wearing masks during COVID is a matter of personal choice and individual freedom, while others – especially health officials and COVID response coordinators – are mandating the wearing of masks to protect the community as a matter of public policy (Cathey 2020). It is evident in the USA that advocating and wearing masks has also become politicised as a symbol of support for Democratic policies since the Presidential candidate, Joe Biden, typically wears one. This tension between liberty and the common good is also evident between those who decide to participate in the *Black Lives Matter* protests to express their personal views against racism, and those who decide to refrain from protesting during the pandemic – even if they agree with the motivation to participate – in order to protect the community from transmission of the virus.

Indeed, there has long been a social and political struggle, especially in America, between protecting personal liberty and nurturing a civil society (Woodard 2016), a struggle between 'me and we' (Anthony 2020). This represents a choice between two competing 'goods'. The nature of various goods will now be considered.

The Nature of 'Goods' and the Common Good

Individual Goods

The Scottish philosopher, Alasdair MacIntyre (2016) points out that the common good is not to be confused with the idea, often encountered in economics, of public goods. These are also to be contrasted with an 'individual good' which is what one can both achieve and enjoy as an individual, such as a glass of whisky or a plate of fish and chips. One could add cars and parking spaces as examples of individual or private goods.

Public Goods

'Public goods' are those which can be enjoyed as an individual, but only through mutual cooperation, such as being a member of a choir (see Stevenson 2020). MacIntyre (2016)

observes that public goods include roads, banks, and schools and are enjoyed as members of a community (MacIntyre 2016: 168—169). Other public goods which might also be identified include lighthouses, freeways, sewerage systems, and street lighting.

Economists further distinguish between private goods, common goods, club goods and public goods against two criteria, excludability and rivalry. The first criterion, excludability, refers to whether other people can be prevented from using the good. Rivalry refers to whether a good has a rival in consumption: that is, whether one person's use of the good necessarily reduces another person's capacity to use it. Private goods are excludable and rival. Examples of private goods include food and clothes. Common goods are non-excludable and rival. A classic example of a common good is fish-stocks within international waters. Club goods are excludable but non-rival. Cable television and cinemas are examples of club goods. Public goods are non-excludable and non-rival. Public goods include public parks, national defence, and the air which we breathe (see Cornes and Sandler 1996; Hess and Ostrom 2007; Weimer and Vining 2017).

MacIntyre illustrates his conception of public goods by discussing the form they take when sought cooperatively in families, schools, and workplaces. These are social organisations that flourish by fostering the development of children, students, and workers. Teachers, for example, 'achieve their good *qua* teachers and contribute to [the] common good by making the good of their students their overriding good' (MacIntyre 2016: 172—173). The good of students, he adds, does not consist only or mainly in the mastery of economically valuable skills but in having 'a sense of the ends that should be theirs as contrasted with the ends that others for their own purposes impose on them' (MacIntyre 2016: 173). Similarly, he proposes that workplaces ought to be organised around the provision of excellent products and services, achieved through shared deliberation among workers. Market forces and governments subservient to capital are, MacIntyre highlights, powerful impediments to the existence of schools and workplaces in which individuals flourish.

It is worth observing with Kraut (2018) that MacIntyre's notion of communal flourishing is not an additional goal beyond the flourishing of the individuals who belong to a community. Families, for example, should desire the flourishing of each of their members; *what it is* for a family fully to flourish is simply for each of its members to achieve the goods that are specific to family life. Joint activities in families, schools, and workplaces, in which no one can engage as a solitary individual, still enable *individuals* to flourish within them.

The Common Good

'Common' in 'common good' is what applies to all persons without exception, and 'good' is what contributes to human flourishing (Mea and Sims 2018). Maritain simply refers to the common good as 'the communion of persons in good living' (Maritain 1966: 51). The common good for Maritain is an aspect of integral humanism, which is a social philosophy respecting human dignity and is oriented towards the ideal of a fraternal community. It is directed towards a better life for the brotherhood of man [sic] and the concrete good of the community (after Maritain 1996: 155). This moral philosophy of human freedom underpinned the *UN Declaration of Human Rights* (United Nations 1948) which Maritain was involved in promoting, and indirectly, in drafting (Sweet 2019).

The common good is to be distinguished from 'common good_s', the former concept referring, not to objects such as fish-stocks, but to a condition. The common good also embodies the notion and the principle of 'the highest good' – *summum bonum* – one which is shared and beneficial for

all (or most) members of a given community (Rashdall 2005), and which, in Kantianism, was used to describe the ultimate importance, the singular and overriding purpose which human beings ought to pursue (Federica 2016; Rohlf 2020).

The common good has been defined as 'a set of conditions which enables the members of a community to attain for themselves reasonable objectives, or to realise for themselves the value(s) for the sake of which they have reason to collaborate with each other (positively and/or negatively) in a community' (Finnis 1999: 155). O'Brien (2008) further elaborates that the common good is both a condition for, and the result of, the happiness which those persons who participate in the common good attain by living virtuously, that is in the promotion of virtuousness. For Maritain, the common good is 'the end of the social whole' (Maritain 1966: 49) and 'the true ends of human persons' (Maritain 1966: 48).

According to Mea and Sims (2018) and Melé (2016), a strength of Maritain's view of the common good is that it can be recognised as a core principle in dignity-centred ethics, a principle promoting conditions which enhance the opportunity for the human flourishing of all people within a community.

Maritain's view of society is one characterised by a liberty of expansion, that is, 'freedom in terms of virtue' (Hittinger 2002: 82) where the fruits of citizens' efforts 'flow back' to them as persons in a fraternal community (Maritain 1966: 55). Those who do the work of organisations, and who contribute to economic prosperity, are citizens first of all, and Maritain would advocate that citizens' efforts should benefit them and should flow back to them since '[t]he common good of the city is neither the mere collection of private goods nor the proper good of a whole—like the hive' (Maritain 1966: 50–51). Reciprocity and mutuality are therefore key aspects of the common good: each citizen contributes to the common good and the common good benefits citizens in return. The common good transcends both private (individual) goods as well as public (collective) goods.

While approaches to justice have included maximising utility as advocated in the eighteenth century by Jeremy Bentham (2007) and respecting freedom of choice as advocated in the twentieth century by John Rawls (1999), it has been argued in the twenty-first century by the American philosopher, Michael Sandel that there are limits to both such alternatives –

> A just society cannot be achieved simply by maximising utility or securing freedom of choice. To achieve a just society we have to reason together about the meaning of the good life, and to create a public culture hospitable to the disagreements that will inevitably arise (Sandel 2009: 261).

As MacIntyre (2016) similarly notes, our pursuit of the common good requires a willingness to listen to and account for differences of perspective. A more robust public engagement with such disagreements could well provide a stronger, not a weaker, basis for mutual respect, as Sandel further proposes (2009: 268). The common good requires that we see things the way our neighbours and opponents do, converse respectfully, and reason together toward finding common solutions to complex problems.

Accordingly, a community's agreeing to be vaccinated is an illustration of communal and cooperative behaviour which is based upon collective reasoning and a respectful openness to different views, thereby reflecting and reinforcing the common good. The many crowd-funding ventures established to support people in need, especially during natural disasters such as floods, droughts, and bushfires, and during human-initiated community emergencies such as COVID, also bear testimony to the benefits of cooperative behaviour by finding and funding solutions to complex problems.

The Public Interest

The principle of 'the public interest' reflects a communal ideal in civic life where 'burdens are shared and resources are pooled' (Hussain 2018). The meaning of the term, or the approach indicated by the use of the term especially in the public service, is to direct consideration and action away from private, personal, parochial, or partisan interests towards matters of broader, public concern (PSC 2020). Acting in the public interest typically has two separate components: firstly, objectives and outcomes – that the objectives and outcomes of the decision-making process are in the public interest, and secondly, process and procedure – that the process adopted and procedures followed by decision-makers in exercising their discretionary powers are in the public interest (Wheeler 2006). Dealing effectively with COVID has reinforced the importance of acting in the public interest where decisions have been taken to benefit global and local communities, not to preserve individual interests, or even individual freedoms. Enforcing border restrictions and mandating quarantine measures as part of a COVID suppression strategy are not merely legal impositions, but are expressions of actions taken in the public interest.

Recent reflections upon the principles of a democracy also highlight that the public interest of all the people should be at its heart, not a particular interest group, class, or faction. As Grayling observes (2020: 165), '[a] democratic government is neither majoritarian nor minoritarian, but inclusive in its aims, duties and purposes'. Further, those who serve in the parliament should also demonstrate selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness and honesty as their general principles of conduct (Grayling 2020: 206–207). In similar vein, MacIntyre endorses the need for a practical ethics which is grounded on virtuousness not viciousness, where a virtue is an acquired human quality which demonstrates excellence in human agency (MacIntyre 2007; see Hursthouse and Pettigrove 2018).

Such principles of right conduct in a parliamentary democracy, and the principle of the public interest, echo the views of Maritain who believed that the hallmark of a civilization itself was found in 'radical generosity' towards others (Maritain 1966: 48). For Maritain (1966), the individual is the lower self, the lower good of the human being while the person can be defined as an expression of the higher self, the higher good of the human being. Maritain contrasts individuality (the material component) with personality (the spiritual component) and highlights that the individual is but a narrow expression of the ego – 'to grasp for itself' – while personality is an expression of the self – 'giving itself' (Maritain (1966: 37, 39). Maritain believed that we were at our best when we were active citizens and contributing members of a community. To become fully a person is to be in relationship with others. To act in the public interest is to foster the pursuit of the common good.

Managing COVID as Managers and as Leaders

It is acknowledged that there are different ways in which management can be understood, such as risk management, anger management, and management of an organisation. Management can be broadly defined as the process of providing order and consistency to organisations (Kotter 1990) with four functions traditionally identified – planning, organising, staffing, and controlling (Fayol 2013). The domains of management typically include self-management, team management and organisational management, as addressed in the academic discipline of organisational behaviour.

This global pandemic could well be regarded as a 'wicked problem' to be managed – 'wicked' referring to the fact that it is not 'tame', but complex, open-ended, and intractable (Head 2008). The term 'wicked' in this context is used, not in the sense of being evil, but rather as an issue highly resistant to resolution (Briggs 2007). Similarly, other scholars have addressed the challenge of managing in a VUCA world – that is, a world which is volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (Thurman 1991). In the face of this, it has been suggested that agile leaders need to be 'flexible, fast, and focussed' (Horney et al. 2010). Similarly, Bennett and Lemoine (2014) encourage leaders to build resource capacity, to build in 'slack', to experiment, and to invest and share information widely.

Modern social problems such as indigenous disadvantage, poverty, obesity, and climate change are seen as ill-defined, interlinked, and relying on political judgments rather than scientific certitudes. In this sense, most major public policy problems are not 'tame' but 'wicked' (Rittel and Webber 1973: 160) – they are inherently resistant to a clear statement of the problem, and resistant to a clear and agreed solution. It is to be hoped that, while a vaccine might be discovered to 'tame' COVID, managing its impact will still present a wicked problem for healthcare professionals and political leaders for some time. Effective solutions to such wicked problems in the context of internal security and welfare administration appear to be achieved by commitment, communication, and co-ordination (Lagreid and Rykkja 2015).

The lessons already being learned from the perspective of crisis management about COVID have employed the four 'levers' from the World Health Organization: readiness, preparedness, implementation, and minimisation of the impact post-COVID (WHO 2020b). It is evident that countries have varied in their readiness and response to this global pandemic, due to factors such as the prevalence of healthcare resources, and other factors based upon socio-cultural norms. Japan already exhibits a culture of wearing masks, and this has even become a fashion statement with ready compliance on wearing masks during COVID being evident among many Asian countries as soon as this pandemic was declared (see Aslam and Hussain 2020). Further, it is apparent for example, that the leaders of Brazil and Nicaragua adopted a 'hands-off' approach from the outset; Germany and New Zealand responded with science, and a 'hands-on' approach; while the USA's approach was both mixed and confusing (Blackburn and Ruyle 2020).

Dealing with previous public emergencies such as Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans in 2005 was traditionally by disaster and crisis management (John 2009; Tanguay-Renaud 2009; Zack 2009). It is now suggested that an alternate route of inquiry which could be undertaken towards COVID is through existentialist philosophy (Vandekerckhove 2020). As has been shown, this article has also taken a philosophical approach which has been focussed upon the notion of the common good by employing the philosophies of Maritain, MacIntyre and Sandel.

Scholars have long distinguished management from leadership (Bennis and Nanus 1985; Rost 1991; Zaleznik 1977) with leadership being defined as a process whereby an individual influences a group to achieve a common goal (after Northouse 2018). Certain leadership behaviours have been regarded as being more significant than others in fostering results among followers including authentic, servant, and transformational leadership styles (Latemore 2020b; Yukl and Gardner III 2020).

During COVID, crisis healthcare leadership employing effective and ethical communication which builds trust (Häyry 2020a, 2020b) has become vitally important. Leaders who are clear, honest, and compassionate are perceived to be authentic (Latemore 2020c), where authentic leadership is regarded as a positive psychological capacity possessing three characteristics – an intrapersonal perspective which focuses on the leader's self-awareness; an interpersonal

perspective characterised by genuine relationships with followers; and a development perspective where the leader develops over time, especially when such growth is triggered by life events (Northouse 2018). The contrast between some political leaders and the extent to which they are seen to be credible and authentic or not in managing COVID is being observed (Latemore 2020c), and others are considering whether the leader's gender and the accompanying behaviour impacts upon how successful leaders are in managing COVID (Henley and Aingel Roy 2020).

While the lessons for leaders during COVID are yet to be fully appreciated, scholars have already identified the importance of what is being termed 'identity leadership', that is, leaders need to represent us, and in a crisis, 'us' becomes more inclusive, that leaders need to craft and embed a sense of 'us', and that this creates a platform for citizenship (Haslam 2020; Letten et al. 2020). To that extent, it seems effective political leadership in the face of COVID has involved more than taking responsive action to the crisis but includes the ability to constitute meaning for their citizens during this crisis (Blok 2020).

Managing COVID as Citizens

An old Cherokee chief was teaching his grandson about life. 'A fight is going on inside me,' he said to the boy. 'It is a terrible fight and it is between two wolves.One is evil - he is anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, self-doubt, and ego. The other is good - he is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith. This same fight is going on inside you and inside every other person too.' The grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked his grandfather, 'which wolf will win?' The old chief simply replied, 'the one you feed.' (Cherokee nd).

Similarly, two parallel narratives in the public discourse seem to be occurring during COVID days — one based upon fear and selfishness, the other based upon hope and generosity. The best and worst manifestations of human nature have been on show during this global health crisis, ranging from fear, scepticism, and individualism, to serenity, trust, and community awareness (Latemore 2020a).

On the one hand, we have witnessed acts of fear. For example, it has been reported that the sale of firearms and ammunition in the USA have increased by 85% in March 2020 and 71% in April 2020, the highest levels ever recorded in the USA (Morral and Travis 2020). On the other hand, we have seen acts of generosity, including a significant increase in donations during COVID (Bibby 2020), and the 'pandemic kindness movement' which has been created by Australian clinicians 'to provide health workers with easy access to curated resources' (PK 2020). Similarly, a web search on 'generosity during COVID-19' revealed 54,800,000 results, while a search on 'selfishness during COVID-19' produced 39,100,000 results, perhaps bearing testimony that generosity is outweighing selfishness during these COVID times.

Downloading the 'COVID safe' app, observing social distancing, practicing personal hygiene with regular sanitisation, undergoing COVID testing, and wearing of masks in public, are all expressions of a community consciousness in pursuit of the common good, and not just a reflection of personal desires to avoid becoming infected.

To foster the common good, generosity of spirit is essential which has been evident throughout the coronavirus pandemic, notwithstanding that selfish behaviour in panic-buying and hoarding of certain consumer items have also been witnessed. Research has shown that lack of control, intolerance of uncertainty, and distress intolerance are predictors of

hoarding behaviour. Where individuals also experience anxiety, they are more likely to start stockpiling (Notebaert 2020). Rather, community well-being is protected and fostered by observing public health measures and engaging in co-operative behaviour.

The enduring testimony of these times is the selflessness and dedication of whole communities, and especially from frontline healthcare workers who have earned the admiration of all citizens in helping us deal with COVID (Brooks and Morris 2020). Fatalism and despair have been balanced by generosity and hope for a better world. The community indeed benefits from such generosity and is itself nourished by it – as Maritain writes, a 'liberty of expansion' occurs when the common good is respected. Such liberation is expansive because it leads to a 'love of others' and 'the communication of generosity (Maritain 1966: 51). Maritain conceives of liberty of expansion as 'the flowering of moral and rational life' (Hittinger 2002: 82).

Conclusion

In the midst of widespread death and human misery, a different form of prosperity is being discovered during this pandemic. *Eudaimonia* – usually translated as 'human flourishing' (Arjoon et al. 2018) – is the outcome of recognising the public interest and working towards the common good. A renewed appreciation of the benefits of family life and community have been widely reported during these COVID times. This article presented the view that community well-being is central to society and that the economy serves the community — not vice versa. Various philosophies regarding the common good have been harnessed to address and support this argument. The common good might well be considered as the source and summit of human wellbeing, and is characterised and fostered by reciprocity, relationships, and generosity.

The loss of life, hardship, suffering, and unemployment throughout the world which is still occurring during COVID have been unprecedented and tragic in modern times. While it is anticipated that there will be more fear, selfishness, polarised politics, and international friction post–COVID (Wolf 2020), it is to be hoped that the generosity of community spirit, fostering the common good, which has also been evident during this pandemic might be sustained for our ongoing well–being. The implications for management and leadership in a post-COVID world will continue to be significant.

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