



# **ABOUT THE COMMON GOOD**

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# ABOUT THE COMMON GOOD

by Antonin Pujos

## Introduction

The “Common Good” is one of those expressions that spring up from time to time in current discourse and immediately become fashionable even though their use until then had been infrequent. Why should a word or an expression meet with such success in contemporary language? Probably because synonyms or expressions conveying equivalent meanings have been over-used or too often misused.

Other similar phrases such as *social responsibility*, *sustainable development*, *ethics* and even *governance* have quickly become devalued, despite the fact that they are central to how we think about the world today. The same fate hangs over the Common Good. And since it is invoked to support points of view that are often vague and sometimes divergent, it might be a good idea to try to clarify its content and, more importantly, check regularly with our discussion partners that we are indeed talking about the same thing.

Whatever motivates its use, the term “Common Good” serves to remind us of the need for the harmonious and non-authoritarian coalescence of individual and collective interests, with the added proviso that neither one nor the other should be perverted, and above all without diluting the individual into the collective.

Adam Smith<sup>1</sup>, the pre-eminent representative of liberal economic thought, explained that the individual pursues his own interests with a purely utilitarian objective, in order to obtain maximum satisfaction with minimum effort. Being convinced that the world was a well-ordered place, Adam Smith added that the pursuit of individual interests furthers the general interest, since an *invisible hand* would guide individual passions towards the good of all.

Even before the recent economic crisis which, in stunning clarity, revealed the absurdity of such a hypothesis, the French philosopher Condorcet<sup>2</sup> noted the logical impossibility of striving to attain with certainty a general purpose through the sole addition of individual desires.

Subsequently the economist Kenneth Arrow<sup>3</sup> demonstrated that *no* system could exist which would establish a perfect coherence between individual interest and group interest... save of course a dictatorship!

Despite this theoretical impossibility, individuals and groups have to live together as harmoniously as possible.

This is precisely the objective of democracy. Still, even when democratic political regimes appear to achieve such a balance between individual and collective interest, this harmony is not perfect, since

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<sup>1</sup> Adam Smith, "*An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*" Book IV, ch. 2, 1776; from the new edition, éd. Flammarion, 1991

<sup>2</sup> Nicolas de Condorcet, "*Essai sur l'application de l'analyse à la probabilité des décisions rendues à la pluralité des voix*", 1785

<sup>3</sup> Kenneth J. Arrow, "*Social Choice and Individual Values*", 1951

most of the time it gives priority to the collective interest at the expense of the individual.

The rule of the majority, indisputable and unquestioned in such democracies, undeniably imposes on the minority the “dictatorship” of the majority, even if the word dictatorship might seem excessive in this context. Churchill used to say “Democracy is the worst form of government except all the others that have been tried so far”. In an example which became famous in France, a socialist representative acquired certain notoriety in the 1980s when he told his political opponents “You are legally wrong because politically you are in the minority”. This statement probably earned him his appointment as minister but showed undeniable contempt for the spirit of democracy, which aspires to the general interest and not to the interest of a faction, even if it is in the majority.

The problem therefore remains unresolved and democracy as it is practiced in modern states is not an entirely satisfactory solution because the individual interest is not always taken into consideration.

Moreover, the problem of the integration of interests is apparent at the level of the nation but also at all intermediate levels, since the concept of individual interest may cover the interest of groups themselves considered as individual entities. And here the problem is equally difficult to resolve, be it in relation to individuals, families, countries, groups of countries or even generations. The moment an individual or a group has to find a *modus vivendi* with other individuals or groups of a similar scale, the question arises, despite everything, of the necessary aggregation of individual interests in a collective interest.

## The individual: with or against the collective?

At the simplest level, i.e. that of the individual, physiological needs appear immediately after birth. However other, less directly physiological and more complex needs emerge over time. Maslow classified these into 4 categories and explained that it is impossible to worry about the needs of one category until those of the previous category have been fulfilled. These four categories are security, belonging, esteem and accomplishment<sup>4</sup>.

The methods whereby such needs are satisfied are infinitely variable according to people and circumstances. They are at the origin of behavior that reflects what we might term personal or individual interest.

Quite naturally, some consider individual interest as paramount and, as good individualists, consider this priority to be based on two principles; the first being the right of every individual to develop an autonomous view of his or her own condition, the second being the freedom of every person to concern themselves first and foremost with their own condition. The precursor of this individualist world view, Descartes, with his *cogito ergo sum*, places the individual center stage: I exist solely because I am a thinking being.

However, individuals born into a community must live in a community. They cannot live for very long in isolation and are soon threatened by death or insanity. Living in society, the question immediately arises as to the place of the individual in the collective. The individual must join its ranks and, reciprocally, the community must embrace the individual.

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<sup>4</sup> Abraham Maslow, "A Theory of Human Motivation", 1943

Recognizing the necessary coexistence of the individual and the community, two opposing theories have emerged at odds with Descartes' position.

The first is that of social naturalism, whereby the insertion of the individual into the community is dependent on natural and biological mechanisms. The individual is said to inherit everything from the community and therefore has only duties in its regard. The second is that of the social pact, whereby the individual's place in the community is governed by a social contract (Rousseau, Hobbes). In this so-called constructivist approach, all human relations, economic or otherwise, are based on a contractual logic and together lead to construction of the social body.

These two approaches seek to articulate the respective positions of living beings with their social environments but end up opposing the collective and the individual, largely to the detriment of the latter. In both cases, the individual must occupy a place in the wings and leave center stage to the collective. Even in a "contractualist" vision of society, the individual's negotiating power with the community is extremely limited, as is evident to one and all.

The question of defining the respective places of the collective and the individual with a view to eventually creating a harmonious social climate developing in a context of mutual respect therefore remains open.

## What the Common Good is not

When we think of the Common Good, the first ideas that spring to mind are often notions such as collective interest, general interest, public interest, reasons of State or social interest of the corporate enterprise (in French law), etc.

One must immediately stop and think in order to try understanding what the idea of the Common Good conveys and what the usual formulations referred to above fall short of expressing. To that end, probably the simplest solution is to review these different concepts and to try clarifying their content with reference to the initial question of integration of individual and collective interests:

**Collective interest** pertains to the benefits available to a specific community. The interest of the specific community is considered, independently of the individual interest of its members, which is usually sacrificed.

**General interest** is defined at the scale of a community and relates to the benefits which all members of the community may enjoy. However, two concepts of general interest oppose one another:

- An Anglo-Saxon concept according to which the general interest results from the addition of all individual interests.
- A French concept with a centralizing inclination which defines the general interest as the expression of a collective will, to be represented and performed by the State.

The general interest can be invoked in relation to a national community but also in relation to any other community, whatever its size and boundaries.

**Public interest** is primarily a legal concept because it is sustained by the principles of a country's public law. Public interest directly echoes the general interest but at the scale of a national collectivity, since public law is generally defined with reference to a country's institutions.

**Reasons of State** is invoked by a State to justify the actions it takes in pursuit of the national interest as it defines it, regardless on occasion of moral imperatives, the law or any other considerations. These are exorbitant rights which the State confers on itself in the name of real or supposed higher interests, and which at all events allow the State purely and simply to override individual interests or those of intermediate collectivities forming the national community.

**Corporate interest (*intérêt social*) of the enterprise** is a central notion in French corporate law. Corporate interest is understood as the interest of the corporation as a moral person endowed with legal autonomy, pursuing its own objectives for the joint benefit of shareholders, employees, creditors, debtors and any other stakeholders in order to ensure its prosperity and sustainability. Corporate interest takes precedence over the interest of shareholders alone and over the aggregate interests of all stakeholders. It is therefore greater than the sum of its parts.

Original in terms of its content and its reach, the notion of corporate interest is unfortunately not clearly defined even in French law. In most cases it is invoked by stakeholders in a court of law, challenging management decisions which, they claim, contradict the social interest of the company. It is for this reason that its content can

only be analyzed with reference to specific test cases issued by the Commercial Chamber of the French High Court. As a legal concept, it lacks precision and is culturally too circumscribed to the French context. It is therefore difficult to extend its use beyond French corporate law.

Having thus reviewed the main notions associated with the Common Good, it is imperative not to forget that the interest of the group, however defined the latter may be, differs naturally from the interest of each individual comprising it. Thomas Aquinas declared that “There is no similarity between what is proper to each individual and what is common to all. The singular divides what the universal unites. Diverse principles are suitable to diverse realities. In addition to what pushes each one to its own good, something will be needed to ensure the good of all”<sup>5</sup>.

Affirmation of the individual and of his or her interest may be viewed as a useful way to promote individual talent in order to build a more efficient collective organization. Such a view is particularly deep-rooted in the economic world, the world of individualism par excellence. For all that, we still need to understand how best to reconcile individual and group interests, including those in the economic world.

For any human group composed of individuals, convergence towards an interest which might be termed common, collective, general or public is far from natural. The situation becomes even more complicated due to the fact that individuals belong simultaneously to different groups whose interests may be contradictory.

A classic example is that of the citizen of a country who is at the same time a family member, an employee of a company or of an administration, a resident of a village or a region, the owner or tenant of a house, a consumer, saver, shareholder and tax payer, perhaps on

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<sup>5</sup> St Thomas Aquinas, "*Commentary on Aristotle's Metaphysics*"

the verge of retirement, etc. To oppose the individual interest and the collective interest can therefore appear illogical, since any individual represents collective interests and individual interests in equal measure.

Caught in a network of different interests, the individual oscillates permanently from one facet to another of his own existence. Unless he introduces some order of priority in his values and hence his different interests, he will find himself adrift and unable to choose which one of his interests should take precedence.

Current discourse, or what is termed in France the *“langue de bois”*, conveyed by the mass media and imparting the “new political orthodoxy”, perfectly illustrates this aimlessness. It manifests itself principally through the attribution of a strictly equal value to all interests, be they individual or collective, regardless of their content or social impact. Considering the law to be strictly equivalent in both fields of collective and individual interests sows much confusion in minds.

More worrying still, the legislator, caught in this general confusion, responds to individual situations or personal dilemmas by taking legislative measures that affect everyone, exactly as if the role of the law was to uphold individual interests only, with no need to develop a vision of what the general interest might be.

The search for a solution to the necessary articulation of individual and collective interests, while avoiding any autocratic process, has been fruitless, be it in the practice of democracy, the logic of individualism, current evolution of the law or current discourse. The individual unfortunately seems bound to live in a social system in which his own interest is constantly under threat from the collective interest, or in which – and this is a recent tendency – the collective interest is not well identified as it is dissolved into multiple individual interests.

## Personal interest, an obstacle on the path towards the Common Good

Sooner or later the following paradox must be faced: any attempt to unify a society, a group or a corporation around the notion of interest serves in fact only to emphasize the very otherness that distinguishes one member from another. The specificity of the interest of a person, a society, a group or a corporation is, so to speak, what ensures its identity. And asking them to merge their own interests with the interests of other parties, in order to create a common interest, is the equivalent of asking them to renounce a part of their own identity. Interest defines identity through difference, in an exclusive way, excluding those who do not belong to the group or who are simply different.

Interest seems more inclined to separate individuals or groups than to unite them. That is why, when it comes to placing individual interests on a convergent path, it is hardly surprising that such a convergence does not occur spontaneously. It encounters major obstacles according to the scale on which the exercise is carried out, the size of the groups whose interests are required to converge and the place – central or peripheral – of those groups in the society in question.

The immensity of the task, for example, of creating a world governing body through the convergence in every domain of the interests of many countries on all five continents becomes immediately apparent; a task seemingly beyond human endeavor.

The different ideas examined above in the light of attempts to aggregate individual interests into a collective interest (public interest, reasons of State, general interest, etc) are static concepts, offering no specific perspective, suggesting no direction for the future.

As we shall see, this is contrary to the Common Good, which is a dynamic concept and one that offers potential for future action.

The expression “Common Good” does not refer directly to the notion of interest, whether collective or individual. The question of interest has been brought into the debate only through the association of ideas.

To escape the impasse reached through the logic of exclusion, which is inseparable from the notion of interest, the solution may have to be looked for “outside the box” and be examined with no reference at all to the notion of interest. For as we have seen, on all sides we encounter the difficulty of merging individual interests into a collective will.

It might therefore be more productive to reflect on the Common Good by starting from the notion of Good rather than that of interest. And in discussing the meaning of Good, a philosophical detour will allow us to avoid reinventing certain basic concepts and help us to move the discussion forward. Such an approach may give rise to criticisms of being too intellectual and disconnected from reality. However if at the end of the day such deliberations allow us to draw practical conclusions, this reproach will no longer be valid.

## A philosophical detour: Aristotle and the Common Good<sup>6</sup>

Aristotle is probably the philosopher who first and best reflected on the question of Good, particularly in “Nicomachean Ethics”. He asked “What is the sovereign Good of our activity? On its name at least there is almost universal agreement: it is called happiness”<sup>7</sup>. Happiness would thus be the name of the ultimate and perfect Good the existence of which is a given, which is sought for itself alone and which guides the actions of each individual.

Such a Good is not universal. It is different for everyone. If it were universal, it would be the Good of one and all and therefore, when all is said and done, of no one.

Resisting the idea of a Good in general, of a Good “per se” and in order to remain realistic, Aristotle specifies such a Good as being practicable, as having a face. He establishes that the Good is always the Good of someone; that it is always sought after by a person. “Good is said in as many meanings as there are beings”<sup>8</sup>.

Might this not leave the door open to a degree of relativism, whereby everyone could find his or her Good in the mere satisfaction of wishes? Why then would ethics be needed? According to Aristotle, the particular and universal characteristics of the Good are not contradictory, but only different moments, each with its own truth and potentially reconciled in the same *end*.

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<sup>6</sup> Largely based on the intervention of Marthe Croissandeau during a meeting of the Paris Cercle Ecophilos.

<sup>7</sup> Aristotle “*Nicomachean Ethics*”, Book I

<sup>8</sup> -ibid-

The singular content of individual Good relates to what is good for the person but also qualifies the actions carried out by that particular person. Actions simply “actualize” the Good.

Actions – supposedly free – are always motivated by the search for happiness. They provide access to “intermediate goods” that are not sought in their own right but only as accessories to the Good ultimately being pursued “because it is through them that we believe ourselves happy”<sup>9</sup>.

Only these “intermediate goods”, which Aristotle calls “means”, can be the object of “deliberation”. Moreover it would be useless to deliberate over these “means”, these “intermediate goods” and therefore the actions that lead to them if the end – which is nothing but the Good – had not been chosen and clearly defined beforehand by the person in question.

Aristotle warns against the confusion which may exist between, on the one hand, knowledge of the Good, the designation of Good aimed at by each person, such designation being a prerequisite for “deliberating over” or choosing and then accessing the “means” or “intermediate goods”, and, on the other hand, the “love of Good” or the desire of Good, which is only an idealistic tension towards an ill-defined and non-practicable Good.

Means and intermediate goods are relative to the *end*. They are not necessary beyond the end. The most accessible and easiest means are those closest to the person but the most efficient means are those closest to the *end*.

Insofar as the *end* is particular to every person and everyone has his own definition of the ultimate Good it is appropriate to start from the person and from his or her unique situation.

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<sup>9</sup> -ibid-

Regarding actions that lead to “intermediate goods”, it is also necessary to start from the present, because at any point in time, one is only ever an actor of the present, never of the future. The future does not belong to us until it reaches the present. To project oneself into the future would therefore seem to be the wrong approach if one is in pursuit of the Good. *Hic et nunc*, here and now. This is the starting point for everyone in their quest for the Good.

In order to pass from the Good of an individual person to the Common Good, it is necessary to move from the level of ethics to the level of politics. The level of ethics is oriented by the Good and by the definition of happiness, individual to be sure but based on the unique situation of the person. The level of politics is oriented towards the Common Good. It is thus necessary to move from human action to human action in society, with the additional concern, shared by Aristotle, of remaining realistic.

There is therefore a similarity between, on the one hand, pursuit of the Good giving direction to individual action and, on the other hand, the search for the Common Good giving direction to political action. Both imply the definition of *ends*, individual in one case and collective in the other, as a guide to action. Both call for a realistic as opposed to an idealistic approach. Both belong to the field of *praxis* or “practical sciences”, as opposed to the field of *poiesis* or “poetical sciences”, the object of which is to produce an *opus* “outside the subject” and which serves as the fertile originating ground of ideologies.

## What the Common Good might be

The Common Good should be defined as the result or finality of a satisfactory resolution for all concerned, of the relationship between the individual and the collective, on the one hand, and the relationship between the collective and the universal, on the other, without ever losing sight of reality.

The Common Good refers firstly to the notion of material goods, “shared” goods, used collectively. In the Middle Ages, such *communal* goods, usually referred to as *commons*, were available to everyone in the community. They included items of equipment such as ovens where everyone could bake their bread, as well as immaterial rights such as the right to pasture cattle on common land or the right to gather dead-wood from the forest.

The first and most important example of these commons is certainly the language that is used by a community to communicate and which all of its members must master if they wish to be understood. Through this language and it alone, any member of a community can state their claim as an individual. Fabrice Hadjadj reminds us that “Thanks to words and languages, the individual is related to a community and acquires his or her freedom from the community”<sup>10</sup>.

Language, indeed, illustrates perfectly what these common goods are: shared freely by members of the community, like the air that everyone breathes or the rain that irrigates the land.

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<sup>10</sup> Cercle Ecophilos Paris- Fabrice Hadjadj, 8 October 2009

Margaret Atkins<sup>11</sup> suggests distinguishing five categories of “commons” the use of which is shared in the community. Among these, she mentions goods the consumption of which does not entail their destruction (spiritual or intellectual goods like the Internet), goods used collectively (means of transport, radio, television, water and electricity distribution networks, etc, accessible to the individual only when available to all), the common good of relationships (those formed with our friends or with members of groups to which we belong) and the goods of the community (accessible by the mere fact of belonging to that community).

The sharing and use of these common goods by members of a community have always implied the existence of rules imposed on and accepted by all, what might be termed a “grammar for living together”. These rules are designed to prevent conflicts or misunderstandings that may arise between the users of these goods or that may entail the suspension of free access to these goods.

It may seem easy, at first, to establish such rules within a single community where use of the same goods is shared. Paradoxically however, quarrels between neighbours are often the most dogged of all. They destroy the atmosphere within a community more quickly and more surely than hostility towards an outside group, which on the contrary often has the reverse effect of uniting members against the common foe. The rules of the “grammar for living together” are in fact dictated by the search for social harmony, the primary condition for the blossoming of each individual and development of the community as a whole. They are therefore ultimately justified by ... the Common Good.

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<sup>11</sup> *In search of “common good” in a time of globalization* - Discussion of the Papers by Margaret Atkins and Patrick Riordan S.J.

Given that a system such as this subsisted for centuries in Europe, it carries some wisdom, probably applicable in communities of limited size, involving individuals sharing the same environment and the same preoccupations. This system may well contain part of the answer to questions raised by the need to involve the individual with the collective with respect to goods regarded today as common goods of humanity, which could be termed “global goods”, such as climate, water, the atmosphere, etc.

The practical nature of this system of common goods is undeniably attractive; attractive but insufficient, given the failure of the recent Copenhagen Summit. The latter illustrates perfectly how difficult it is to define rules of behavior acceptable to everyone. Many countries simply refused the sacrifices implied by recognition of the earth’s fragility, albeit so evident today. In such conditions, how can we begin to develop a new “grammar for the environment” to which all countries could / would adhere?

Agreement on common rules would require everyone to have the same reference values, which would then be none other than the expression of a higher objective akin to the Common Good. A discussion of common goods, in the plural, or the Common Good in the singular and in capital letters, therefore in practice boils down to the same thing, since recognition of the existence of the former simply confirms the need to move forward with the latter.

The other meaning of the expression “Common Good”, used this time in the singular and with capital letters, relates to a principle which is by nature more moral and political, or philosophical.

The distinction between both meanings can be found again in what separates language, the tool of communication, from communication itself. Language is one of those “intermediate goods” referred to by Aristotle. Language is not an end in itself but seeks rather to satisfy a

need for communication and for an exchange of words and ideas with other members of a community. A vector of communication, language is not communication per se. At the same time, communication is impossible without the intervention of language and, furthermore, without the grammatical rules that govern language and which, far from making communication more rigid and therefore more difficult, make it clearer and more effective because they apply to everyone.

Thus, as Nicolas Michel explains, “the Common Good is ultimately the social and community dimension of the moral good”<sup>12</sup>. In a world where the merest mention of moral principles is regarded as an attempt at intimidation, strangely enough it is precisely in this sense that the expression “Common Good” today meets with genuine success. Anyhow, it is in this sense that the term is used frequently in the media, even though the latter are unsuspecting of its moral content and do more to obfuscate than clarify its meaning.

## A metaphor?

In order to illustrate the place of the individual in the community and his responsibility in pursuit of the Common Good, and the need to start with an idea of the finality before deliberating over “intermediate goods”, it would be easier to picture through use of a metaphor, that of a ship manned by individuals.

If the pilot or the captain is steering towards a point on the horizon, this, until it is reached, may serve as a direction for the ship. Once it is reached however a new point on the horizon has to be chosen. From one point on the horizon to another the ship can advance on its course, since the horizon forever recedes. However once a point on

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<sup>12</sup> Cercle Ecophilos Paris- Nicolas Michel, 18 November 2009

the horizon has been reached, if the captain or his crew have not chosen beforehand a point beyond the visible horizon – a destination point, a finality, a Common Good – how can they choose the next point on the horizon?

It is therefore necessary to choose as a final destination, as a goal for the voyage, a point located beyond the horizon in order to determine the ship's course. This point, like the Common Good, puts everyone during the journey in the position of imagining the time when the ultimate destination of the journey will be reached. And if this is achieved, is this not the time to be happy? Let us imagine for a moment the atmosphere on board upon arrival time of large clippers in Valparaiso (Va al Paradiso!) after having crossed the Atlantic and rounded Cape Horn.

The passengers are invited, even before departure, to accept the choice of port of destination, even though this port is still invisible. Unless they refuse to embark or decide to jump overboard after departure, all are “in the same boat”, including the captain.

The choice of ultimate destination, announced and shared by everyone, has the great advantage of giving meaning to both collective and individual action. Everyone knows where the ship is bound and everyone is invited to contribute, in their place and as far as their talents and skills allow, to efforts made by the group to reach the port of destination.

Each one is in a position to understand the reasons why decisions are made at all levels by those in charge, from the captain to the lowest seaman. Maneuvers executed by the crew are immediately understandable by all. This clarifies the activity and role of every individual and gives meaning to their presence on the ship as well as to their active participation in the different maneuvers.

Of course, the Ancients followed the direction of the stars and the compass. These navigational instruments provide information as to whether the ship is on the right course. They give an indication as to the ship's direction, but neither one nor the other can provide an answer to the main question, namely the choice of final destination.

Unless he has chosen his final destination and proposed it openly to his crew, the captain cannot steer the ship forward reliably from point to point on the horizon, from "intermediate good" to "intermediate good". He therefore finds himself sailing aimlessly. Nor can he choose the right winds or currents to maximize his ship's potential. He is also prey to inefficiency.

For this reason, in any long-haul crossing, the choice of final destination must be made very early, if possible before departing. If this is not the case it is never too late, but no one can get back on course without having made this choice. Is it not just common sense?

If this final destination is literally visible on the coast line, defining the goal is no great challenge for the intelligence and the imagination and it is relatively easy to agree on the means to deploy in order to reach it.

On the contrary, if the destination is not visible because it is beyond the horizon or, interestingly, is defined simply as a point to be reached in the future, beyond the present, the challenge is much greater and adherence to this goal requires an effort of the imagination in order to visualize it and an effort of will in order to integrate it as our own ultimate goal.

This dual effort is required from everyone because the geographical horizon, like the historical horizon, has the principal characteristic of constantly receding. Our eyes can focus on the geographical horizon but it is impossible at the same time not to convince oneself that this point has already moved backwards. The moment we focus our attention on the future, a part of that future has already become the

present and, immediately thereafter, the past. The future constantly moves backwards in time and remains out of reach. The future does not belong to us, as Aristotle long ago observed.

The part of the journey at sea which lies beyond the horizon, whether geographical or historical, consists of the unknown (*mare incognitum*). That part of the unknown is one of the essential components of the Common Good because it implies that it is impossible to say in advance which means will have to be deployed in order to reach the ultimate goal. It will be necessary, when the time comes, to make decisions and to let ourselves be guided once more by a Common Good that remains beyond the horizon and/or in the future.

From *hic*-here to there or from *nunc*-now to then, in order to reach the goal and face the unpredictable events that will certainly occur, it will probably be necessary to change tack and adapt to changes in the winds and currents, but it will be necessary always to stay on course. To this end, prudence, courage, wisdom, tenacity, responsibility, etc, will have to be shown. The pursuit of the Common Good solicits many virtues and, through these, brings into focus the anthropological dimension which informs the actions of mankind.

Given the nature of the finality, locked for so long in the imagination, and the hypothetical character of arrival at the destination, the crew must in a way accept the objective of the Common Good while knowing that they can never reach it because this goal is by definition perfect and therefore unattainable. The crew must all the same continue to believe that it is possible to reach the Common Good, that state of happiness; either that, or a return to the aimlessness that results from lack of adherence to an ultimate goal.

At this point, among the medley of virtues called forth by this long journey, courage merits a special place. Knowing that the Common Good cannot be reached, it is easy to tell oneself that pursuit of the

Common Good is but a chimera, and to witness thereafter the rapid onset of discouragement and aimlessness. It is precisely the role of courage to keep the ship on course, against the wind and the tides, without being beaten down by adversity and difficulties that arise.

Finally the Common Good, contrary to the collective interest, is a dynamic notion, directed towards a goal and maintained by action. It keeps everyone's potential intact, never letting us believe that we have arrived at the destination. It is an invitation to everyone to strive constantly for greater personal fulfillment because there is always ground to be covered towards the Common Good, regardless of the distance already travelled.

## **The Common Good and personal happiness**

As we have seen, the finality of our actions is thus called Happiness (εὐδαιμονία) according to Aristotle. This happiness is called human happiness, insofar as it involves the blossoming of the human being in the life of the city, under the guidance of reason and virtue, as Aristotle would have said. Therefore the search for happiness consists in trying to identify the ultimate good towards which we would like all our actions to be directed.

Once this ultimate goal has been identified, it becomes apparent that working for the Common Good can indeed contribute to our personal happiness. To convince oneself of this, one has only to observe the major growth of charitable activities and non-profit NGOs, which primarily attract people who are motivated by the meaning given to their work and by the virtuous and life-enhancing nature of their actions.

In a quasi-reciprocal way, our personal happiness can help us to work for the Common Good. After attaining a degree of professional

maturity and growing more people conscious, many adults decide to become more involved in passing on knowledge or advice to underprivileged or fragile populations.

But the Common Good may also require the sacrifice of one's personal happiness. Pursuit of the Common Good of society or of the universal Common Good sometimes puts on hold the moment when happiness, as individually defined, is attained. To allow the Common Good to develop in a community, each individual may be asked to sacrifice – in part or momentarily – his or her personal happiness.

This sacrifice frees the community from the impasse that would result from a person's absolute refusal to give up part of his or her happiness, a refusal that would prevent the entire community from defining its Common Good. Paradoxically, for the Common Good I am invited to "freely consent to the alienation of my freedom"<sup>13</sup>.

This sacrifice is in fact only the counterpart of the fact that the community, for its part, renounces its power simply to impose its decisions, made in the name of the collective interest, and insists on taking into account the interest of every individual in their own pursuit of the Common Good. In an unstable equilibrium, each side – individual and community – gives up some of its legitimate demands and power, as circumstances dictate, for the purpose of reaching the Common Good.

Even though the Common good remains invisible and beyond the imaginary horizon, the simple fact that the goal to be reached has been defined allows everyone in the community to adhere to it and to work with a great sense of freedom. The goal elucidates and gives meaning both to collective and individual action. Everyone knows what they have to do. Everyone's actions blend naturally with the orchestrated actions of all members of the community.

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<sup>13</sup> Cercle Ecophilos Paris- Alain d'Iribarne, 25 November 2010

Because everyone takes part in the pursuit of the Common Good, everyone's role and place is clear. Furthermore, since each person has contributed directly or indirectly to the definition of the Common Good, their presence is recognized as indispensable. Everyone is considered equally worthy of participating in the effort and their contribution is equally valued, even though its extent depends naturally on their level of competency.

In addition, while this vision may be somewhat idealistic, the very fact that a community sets itself the goal of pursuing the Common Good radically changes relations among its members. Sharing a common goal makes it possible to develop an honest and fraternal cooperation between those who have jointly decided that this Common Good should be their ultimate goal.

Taking part in the pursuit of the Common Good allows everyone to feel close to those on the same path. And the more the Common Good to which they aspire is elevated in terms of its objectives and its scope, the more numerous are those invited to pursue it together, to the point where this Common Good, sought after in the fabric of the community, can touch something akin to a universal Common Good.

Lastly, the Common Good is not a disembodied concept. Its pursuit cannot be achieved through mere declarations of principles. It actualizes itself in everyone's actions. However, it is important to understand that the issue here is not to "do good" but to act in order for good to exist<sup>14</sup>. Good remains the ultimate end which cannot be attained and which can only be aimed at through the Common Good.

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<sup>14</sup> Parcours Zachée 1 La Boussole Ed, p.84

## The Common Good and politics

As previously mentioned, democracies do not seem to be able to satisfactorily resolve the issue of the relationship between the individual interest and the collective one. By construction, they give priority to the collective interest as supposedly expressed by the majority, and this frequently at the expense of the individual interest. Still, in democracies more than in any other regime, politics should be the field where the individual and the collective interests are properly regulated.

The lack of regulation which is frequently observed is partly due to the fact that democracies are constantly navigating between two major obstacles which are threatening their normal operating efficiency.

The first one is individualism. When priority is systematically granted to the anecdotic, if not the exceptional, when emotion always supersedes reason and thought is mainly centered around image and imaginary, when culture is progressively losing its depth, this leads to the promotion of individual rights and to the related disappearance of common rules which is as apparent today in the media as it is in politics and law. The individual overstepping the collective, the question of the Good becomes a strictly private issue. The Good of the person is mistaken for his comfort and the pursuit of his Good with the search for his well-being.

This is especially true in economic life which focuses on consumption to the point where being is dissolved into having. "Goods are multiplied because we no longer know how to use goods"<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup> Cercle Ecophilos Paris- Fabrice Hadjadj, 8 October 2009

This fervor for zealous consumption corresponds to the search for distraction when faced with the fear of emptiness and death, as already noted long ago by Pascal<sup>16</sup>. Everyone is only concerned with his own interest. Common Good is then concealed behind the quest of material goods and politics no longer play their regulating role and no longer carry collective values. The State, in the name of a supposedly higher interest, from time to time shows its strength and brutally imposes itself on the individual person. Here, we find ourselves very far from the concept of Common Good.

Ideologies form the other obstacle encountered by democracies. This is an important obstacle as their success – at least initially - is often the result of perfectly democratic processes. Their promoters are frequently brought to power by majority votes cast by populations seduced by their rhetoric and by their imaginary vision of the world and of society. Before causing millions of deaths – as was often the case during the XX<sup>th</sup> century –, ideologies claim to understand the human question and seek to apply the magic formula to each individual that will lead him to happiness, but towards a happiness the achievement of which is presented as certain despite the fact that its content is largely idealized when not altogether unrealistic.

Interestingly enough, democracy itself may, in certain respect, be considered as carrying an ideological content, especially when presented as a universal formula. Thus, in the name of some imperative for modernity, societies organized around tribal, communitarian, religious or ethnical references since the beginning of times are vigorously invited to apply principles and methods of modern democracies without delay. These demands immediately and irreversibly destabilize these societies and constitute a complete denial of reality.

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<sup>16</sup> " *Distraction amuses us and leads us insensitively to death* " Pascal, "Pensées" N°128

In contrast to what Aristotle regarded as an overriding requirement, namely coherence with hard reality, the current political discourse – despite frequent denials and reference to anecdotic if not purely emotional reality - has no practical foundation. Quasi incantatory positions are adopted by its advocates, relying on impoverished thought and cultural emptiness. The aim of this *newspeak* as recounted by George Orwell was precisely to restrict the scope of thought and disconnect it from reality. In this sense, the simplification of language which characterizes current discourse in no way signals clarity of thought, but rather the rarefaction of thought. By prohibiting the development of complex and complete communication and not taking into account every facet of the individual, it is the preferred form of expression of ideologies and violence. It negatively affects the credibility of politics and does nothing to further the emergence of the Common Good.

Taking into account reality and its complexity is not only a condition for political discourse to recover its credibility. It is also a condition for it to recover its efficiency. Indeed, how would it be possible to manage a country or a community towards the Common Good if reality is simply not accounted for or if it is too deformed by an ideological prism?

Would the solution not be in the development of intermediate communities which would allow the regrouping of individual interests in order to rebalance the weight of the all-powerful democratic State?

Fabrice Hadjadj noted in passing that the relationship between the State and intermediate groups is at the heart of the political question. He mentioned the French revolutionary law, *Le Chapelier* which, at the time, brought all intermediate groups to an end since it prohibited all forms of association<sup>17</sup>. It expressed the deep distrust of French revolutionaries towards all intermediate bodies and, in the name of

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<sup>17</sup> Cercle Ecophilos Paris- Fabrice Hadjadj, 8 October 2009

democracy, forced the individual to have direct ties with the State. Thus, it made him disappear as a person to the exclusive benefit of the collective and, forbidding the creation of any intermediary community, it cut him off from the universal, paving the way for modern totalitarianism. Deceiving the individual in terms of his personal interests by claiming to promote them ("*Freedom, Equality*") the Revolution, despite declarations made at the time, in reality placed individual freedom at the mercy of "the will of the people", another name for the collective interest, and prevented any reflection on the possible emergence of a Common Good for many years to come.

For a long time, most democracies have well understood the role to be played by intermediate groups and have accepted the freedom of association as fundamental rights. This would confirm the intuition according to which the most complete form of the Common Good in the political universe is probably to be found in political action on an intermediate group scale.

If everyone is invited to define what they consider to be their Good, their own happiness, and to be responsible for their part in the Common Good, so each group and each intermediate community must pursue its own Common Good. However such Common Good of a group or a society is not an end in itself because any such group or society striving towards the Common Good, could not do so before having fulfilled two basic conditions: first, to know its own Good well, its values and final ends, in order to be certain of its own identity and, secondly, to make sure that its quest for the Common Good be part of the search for the universal Common Good.

Failing to participate in the quest for the universal Common Good, the group closes up on itself and its own purpose. It ends up seeing anything outside the group as a threat. It adopts a communitarian posture, cutting itself off from the rest of the world, preventing itself from developing harmonious relationships with homolog communities

and from creating a peaceful and serene climate, both inside the group as well as outside.

As mentioned earlier, the Common Good differs from the general interest insofar as it does not contradict the individual good of the person. The moment the good of a single person or – as a matter of fact - of a group is not taken into account in the definition of the Common Good, we can no longer talk of the Common Good. This complicates somewhat the tasks of political leaders and of the State as they are thereby requested to make sure that no one feels injured by a decision made by the State in the name of the Common Good.

However, politics is not the sole prerogative of the State and of the role that it plays, but it acts through all individuals and all intermediate communities, in a reciprocal respect which can only be shown when referring to common principles transcending both the collective and the individual, namely the Common Good. Realization of the Common Good “is not the business of politicians alone”<sup>18</sup> repeats Nicolas Michel.

	Indifference to the person	Good of the person
Indifference to society	Cynicism	Individualism
Good of society	General interest Totalitarianism	<b>COMMON GOOD</b>

Source: Parcours Zachée 1 La Boussole Ed p.84

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<sup>18</sup> Cercle Ecophilos Paris- Nicolas Michel, 19 November 2009

Referring directly to the Social Doctrine of the Church, Nicolas Michel explains that the Common Good is “the set of social conditions that allows human beings, families and associations to find fulfillment more completely and more easily”<sup>19</sup> or, in other words “the set of social conditions that allows groups and their members to attain their perfection in a fuller and easier way”<sup>20</sup>. Thus defined, the Common Good is based on three main components:

- (1) Respect for the human person per se.
- (2) Concern for social wellbeing and development of the community
- (3) Peace in a twofold sense, that of security and sustainability

“The Common Good is very difficult to attain because it involves trying to do the good of others as if it were our own” warns Nicolas Michel<sup>21</sup>.

The Social Teaching of the Church is here an evident reference insofar as the concept of the Common Good has been part of the body of principles on which this doctrine has been based since its inception. Encyclicals and recent pastoral documents have formed and regularly updated<sup>22</sup> the Vatican’s position on the social question. Work carried out in this context for more than a century, since the *Rerum Novarum* in 1892, is considerable and never fails to mention the fervent need to promote the Common Good. The corresponding documents are very impressive both in terms of coherence and relevance to the trials the world is undergoing today.

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<sup>19</sup> Gaudium et Spes 74, 1966

<sup>20</sup> Compendium of the CST 164

<sup>21</sup> Cercle Ecophilos Paris- Nicolas Michel, 18 November 2009

<sup>22</sup> Laborem exercens (1981), Sollicitudo rei socialis (1987), Centesimus annus (1991), Caritas in Veritate (2009)

Again recently, in the Encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*, the mentioning of the central place – although very discreet – of gratuity and gift in economy is a stunning reminder of a truth too often forgotten by the actors of the markets.

Bearing in mind that no community can evade the issue of the Common Good, pursuit of the latter is binding on every member of the community and, a considerable further dimension, implies the responsibility of all of its members. “The Common Good is binding on every member of society: no one is exempt from contributing, according to their capabilities, in the realization and development of this Good”<sup>23</sup>.

This implies that every member of a community gets involved into political action while, at the same time, reflecting about his own purposes and about his own conception of the Common Good, participating in the elaboration of the Common Good at the scale of the community and ensuring that the Common Good of the community remains open to the universal Common Good.

Ultimately, beyond each person’s rights over the community and their duties towards the community, there is also each individual’s responsibility vis-à-vis the Common good. This responsibility reaches beyond the community alone, in space and time, and thus touches upon the universal. Through our fellow beings, and because they share with us the universal Common Good, it is possible for each of us to access the universal.

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<sup>23</sup> Compendium of CST 167

## The Common Good and the business enterprise

Without in any way criticizing what constitutes a business enterprise, the first thing to make clear is the fairly simple idea that no one – save in almost pathological cases – could consider a corporation to be their ultimate goal in life. The corporate enterprise in itself can represent no one's Common Good, not even that of its founder, who may have devoted to it an important part of his or her life.

“A real danger exists for those who identify their lives entirely with their work; even if they believe that their work is socially useful. However at the same time the ultimate goal of every individual can only be attained by their participation in the life of the organization”<sup>24</sup>.

The enterprise can only be a mean to achieve something else and this immediately contradicts what can be observed in the economic world.

In the first place, employees are often required to make the corporation their primary concern, ahead of their personal or family lives. For a long time the enterprise has sought the complete separation of its employees' working lives and their private lives, fearing no doubt that the latter might disturb the former. But today, in an inverse excess, thanks to new technologies (mobile phones, Internet, Blackberry, etc), the boundary between working life and private life tends to be blurred and the former tends to encroach on the latter.

One can also observe, particularly among managers, that the number of hours worked very often exceeds not only legal norms, if any, but also physiological norms.

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<sup>24</sup> M. Naughton, H. Alford, B. Brady, “*The Common Good and the Purpose of the Firm*”, University of St Thomas,

For example, the question of working on Sundays is tantamount to establishing the principle that in a strictly contractual relationship with its employees, the enterprise has no obligation to guarantee that they will be able to spend a minimum amount of time awake with their families and friends.

Despite this extreme dedication demanded by the enterprise, a relatively recent survey<sup>25</sup> shows that, in France, nearly 50% of the workforce had not the slightest idea of their company's strategy. In view of the management methods used and the type of internal communication practiced in most industrialized countries, this percentage is unlikely to be different outside France.

The corporation is focused on its own objectives of growth and winning market share, to the point that it is often a closed world and entirely self-centered. The corporation has grown accustomed to thinking that its responsibility stops at its gate and that its efforts go only as far as its own objectives.

This attitude is no longer tenable today because the responsibility of the enterprise extends well beyond its visible boundaries. The principles of corporate social responsibility have caused the boundaries of the corporation to explode and made it assume responsibility not only for aspects under its direct control (pollution, ethics, etc), which is quite normal, but also for other elements more difficult to control because they are more remote (suppliers, customers, etc).

From this standpoint, the corporation is a community like any other: it should not close itself off, as is too often the case, but should open itself up to other communities, to politics, culture, etc, and through these to the universal.

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<sup>25</sup> Cahier Entreprise et Progrès

Similarly, the human person cannot be reduced to an individual without a history. To serve the human person is to serve someone who is recognized as belonging to one or more communities. This is an idea that should also be taken into account within corporate enterprises.

In the corporation of today it is often no longer possible to answer the simplest questions, such as “Who am I working for?” or “What for am I working?”<sup>26</sup>.

The end purpose of the enterprise is still subject to much debate, both in the economic world and academia. Theoreticians defend opposing positions as to whether the goal of the enterprise is to produce a profit, to serve its shareholders or stakeholders, or if governance should be disciplinary, cognitive or behavioral. In these discussions, no one any longer has a clear idea of where the human person stands.

It is necessary to go back to basics, as Professor R.G. Kennedy<sup>27</sup> invites us to do when he states that “First, the success of a company can effectively be measured in different ways; second, the goal of a company is necessarily bound to its characteristics as a community; and third, the community puts itself voluntarily at the service of the society to which it belongs”.

Professor Alain d’Iribarne<sup>28</sup> reminds us that today, companies are encountering three major difficulties that have a compound effect which make it a place of numerous unresolved contradictions. These contradictions become apparent in the form of a marked inconsistency between discourse and practice:

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<sup>26</sup> Cercle Ecophilos Paris- Alain d’Iribarne, 25 November 2010

<sup>27</sup> “Corporations, common goods and human persons”, Robert G. Kennedy, PhD, University of St Thomas, 2006

<sup>28</sup> Cercle Ecophilos Paris- Alain d’Iribarne, 25 November 2010

- (1) The management model of the enterprise which relies on cooperation and the sharing of knowledge for the purpose of economic performance. The management of human relations is said to be based on competences whereas it relies in fact on competition between individuals, which might be termed the *logic of tournament*. This reveals an initial contradiction that cannot easily be resolved: people competing with one another must want to work together!
- (2) The promotion of a social model of individual affirmation. This implies the use of a logic whereby everyone has to try to be visible in order to exist. It is the *Facebook logic* which runs on self-promotion, carried by a strategy of *personal branding*. What we have here is the opposite of the team spirit so often proclaimed as an ideal by companies and very far removed from pursuit of the Common Good as we understand it.
- (3) An increasing social heterogeneity. One can observe in fact a multiplication of professional techniques, an increasing difficulty in integrating young people which creates opposition between generations, and an increasing number of women in the work place at a time when, paradoxically, the gender mix is again being called into question (e.g. floors reserved for women in luxury hotels, attempts to overcome underperformance in school by separating boys and girls, etc).

These three major difficulties largely explain the suffering which can be observed in the enterprise, the incomprehension which affects its image and loss of the meaning of work.

The Common Good could be of use in resolving these contradictions in the corporation. This would be possible however only if the enterprise abandoned production efficiency as the sole arbiter of its end purpose and, beyond and above such performance, agreed to pursue the Common Good.

On such basis, the work of every individual can become meaningful again since it is directed towards a goal which is not solely quantitative and which invites them, individually and collectively, to share a certain form of happiness.

The duty of the entrepreneur in this perspective is to ensure that his or her enterprise is actually a human community, that it is not founded solely on the exaltation of egotistic values and individual interest but rather on an ability to live together, to be together, to communicate and forge ties of friendship.

One recommendation which could be made – as suggested by Professor Alain d'Iribarne<sup>29</sup> - would be to try firstly to replace the war rhetoric – war being defined as competition with death – with the sport rhetoric – defined as competition without death. War rhetoric applied to the economic world and corporations is totally unacceptable but is very often employed. Is it not necessary to crush competitors, to beat them in the field, to use heavy armaments to win a customer, to protect our own territory, to mobilize teams? An infinite number of examples could be cited to illustrate the useless virility of corporate discourse.

Here, too, the corporation, asserting itself by standing in opposition to the rest of the world, gathering its resources against a common enemy to protect a hypothetical collective interest, is unable to find peace. It develops a paranoid vision of the world around it and is incapable of finding the way to the Common Good.

One must also mention the specific responsibility of the chief executive who, in the corporation, is the warrantor of the Common Good. The individuals occupying such place are often trapped in chains of thought and behavior acquired for the most part during their education or in the course of experience, while changes in the reality would require

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<sup>29</sup> Cercle Ecophilos Paris- Alain d'Iribarne, 25 November 2010

rather that they have the courage to keep imagining new solutions. But how can they innovate without questioning and looking to change their own lives?

For these individuals, pursuit of the Common Good could be an opportunity to examine afresh the objectives of the enterprise, their real objectives as business leaders, the conditions of their professional and personal development, their values, the place that work occupies in their lives, the goal of their lives, the degree of freedom they would like to enjoy, the real room for maneuver available to them, etc.

Failing such reflection, business leaders run the risk of being seen as inconsistent. Justifying their decisions by constraints imposed from outside which may not always be real and are often avoidable, leaders at times do not fully assume their responsibility. Some do not mind being seen as inconsistent and, as Professor Philippe de Woot puts it, would often “accept to be mistaken but never to be in doubt”.

Others might prefer to show more consistency in their approach and become more unified in their lives. They might fully assume their responsibilities as business leaders and refuse to hide behind reasons that are simply excuses to remain locked in a circle of automated behavior. Reflection on the Common Good and, more importantly, action guided by the Common Good, could certainly help them break free and begin to innovate.

Once they have identified their own motivations, their own weaknesses, their own fragilities, business leaders could invite the entire enterprise to reflect on the definition of what might be its Common Good and might help its employees to answer questions that are often left without an answer: “Who are we working for?” “What are we working for?”

They might also invite them to go further and ask questions which could guide the long-term actions of everyone in the corporation,

namely “How can we contribute to the society we are part of?”, “Do we have a role to play in the community to which the enterprise belongs?”

Thereafter, why not go even further and ask: “Where do we all want to go together? What kind of world do we want to help build together?”

## CONCLUSION

The Common Good is at once a wish and a direction. It is the wish of humanity capable of developing harmonious relations between people. As such, it brings a message of hope. It is also the direction which needs to be taken in order for this wish to become reality. As such, it is an invitation to act.

The Common Good shows the way forward, acting together with those who share our world, the world in the larger sense of the earth, or on a smaller scale, society, the corporation or the family. Once the direction has been chosen, every person, group and country must make the Common Good its own individual good. Everyone must try to act to maintain this course; the alternative is to accept aimless wandering.

If the course has to be abandoned temporarily for reasons of character or circumstances, it is still possible at any time to get back on track towards the Common Good.

Finally, the way to the Common Good can be found – or retrieved – by starting not from an idea of the ultimate goal to be aimed at which reveals how far we still have to go, but from our own reality, from our knowledge of ourselves and of where we are. This can guide our action towards the Common Good, which at all events remains beyond our visible or foreseeable horizon.

*This text is largely inspired from the works of the Paris Cercle Ecophilos during meetings held in 2009, 2010 and 2011 which have been hosted by Entreprise et Progrès.*

*Translation has been reviewed by Mrs. Jaqui Manini*

## PLAN

Introduction	3
The individual: with or against the collective?	6
What the Common Good is not	8
Interest, an obstacle to pursuit of the Common Good	12
A philosophical detour: Aristotle and the Common Good	14
What the Common Good might be	17
A metaphor?	20
The Common Good and the quest for personal happiness	24
The Common Good and politics	27
The Common Good and the business enterprise	34
Conclusion	40

### List of speakers 2009-2011 :

- Fabrice Hadjadj, Professor of philosophy
- Nicolas Michel, Professor of International Law, Geneva University de Geneva
- Philippe de Woot, Member of the French Institute, Former Professor of Ethics, University of Leuven, Belgium
- Laurent Mortreuil, Head of Finance Capital Markets, Société générale, Paris
- Marthe Croissandeau, Young professional, Communication, student in philosophy
- Thierry Wiedman-Goiran, Fund manager and professor of finance, Paris IAE
- Alain d'Iribarne, sociologist, Director of School for High Studies in Social Sciences (EHESS), Paris

### Liste des participants :

- Béatrice Bourges
- Alain Champigneux
- Marthe Croissandeau
- Guillaume Desanges
- Hervé Gourio
- Anne-Claire Humeau
- Carol Lambert
- Christine de Laheudrie
- Patrick Laubry
- Antonin Pujos
- Hughes Sabatier



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