

Working for the Common Good

Jonny Thakkar, Swarthmore College

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§ Introduction

Work has been the subject of considerable interest in recent political philosophy, with a focus on questions such as what makes work meaningful, how workplaces should be governed, whether there is a right to leisure, and how work should be distributed.¹ In this connection it seems natural to also raise a question inspired by the socialist tradition in political thought, namely whether citizens have a duty to work for the common good. Such a putative duty might be conceived in stronger or weaker forms, both in its own terms, as regards whether citizens must serve the common good optimally or simply make a genuine contribution, and in terms of its relation to other duties or legitimate interests that might bear on our decisions vis-à-vis work. But before considering such questions we would have to ask ourselves the following: What does it mean to work for the common good in the first place?

This paper aims to answer this question, but not definitively. The reason for that qualification lies in the relationship between political philosophy and ordinary language. The concepts we make use of in political philosophy are typically inherited rather than invented, and we must use them in ways that make sense to our interlocutors given the ways they use them. But observations regarding ordinary language are unlikely to settle anything significant in political philosophy, since where

¹ Literature on this

heavily freighted concepts such as authority, liberty, justice and the common good are at issue, a philosophical account will most often have to regiment usage so as to capture something important and specific about the normative landscape. In such cases any given philosophical account can only ever be partial relative to the cornucopia of ordinary usage; to fully account for the domain covered by usage, it would be necessary to develop various different concepts, each capturing something important and specific within the normative landscape.

To take an obvious example, a few decades of philosophical pressure have arguably revealed there to be not just one normatively useful concept of liberty, as ordinary speakers might assume, but various different ones, each uniquely capable of capturing something important and specific about the normative landscape while having enough of a relation to ordinary usage to deserve the title of liberty. Which concept we should make use of in a given context will depend on our purposes, pragmatic or philosophical. And since those purposes will differ, we should expect a plurality of normatively coherent and compelling concepts of liberty to be in play both in political life and in the more regimented domain of political philosophy.

Something similar is most likely true of the common good, which is clearly said in many ways. As Jane Mansbridge writes, “[t]he unsettled, contested nature of the concept is part of the unsettled, contested nature of politics.”² It is worth distinguishing in Rawlsian fashion between general *concepts*, which are abstract enough to be compatible with multiple normative outlooks, and particular *conceptions*, which entail fairly specific normative commitments. But although it is clear that natural-law conservatives will have a different conception of the common good from libertarians, Mansbridge’s point is that even the *concept* is likely to be unsettled and contested given its centrality to political struggle. For no matter how abstract a philosophical concept is, it will always be tailored

² Mansbridge

to particular purposes, and not everyone will share those purposes. In developing an account of the common good, then, our goal need not be to rule out other accounts altogether. The point is simply to articulate a way of understanding the term that seems to best serve a worthwhile purpose. In the present case, that means making sense of a putative duty for citizens to work for the common good. What must “working for the common good” mean for this to make sense as a possible duty?³

My claim will be that we can plausibly think of the common good as consisting in actions, policies and facilities that we have reason to endorse from the point of view of our roles as members of particular purposive associations. To work for the common good is therefore simply to act in ways that promote the actions, policies and facilities in question—or, to put it another way, to play one’s part in the joint activity of a purposive association. On this account work can come in many different shapes and sizes: there is no strong distinction between “work” and “leisure”; a conversation can count as work no less than a case of tangible production; and we can work for the common good on isolated occasions as well as across a whole career.

An account of this type has several virtues, I shall argue. It (i) corresponds to one way of using the term in ordinary language; it (ii) is specific enough to perform particular work in ethical life; and (iii) it is general enough that it does not commit us to a given substantive conception. These features ought to make the purposive-association account of the common good of widespread interest within political philosophy as a genuine alternative to other accounts, such those focusing on aggregate welfare, shared goods, community, corporate goods, and joint action in general. This is not to deny that those other accounts have much to be said for them, both as ways of regimenting ordinary discourse and as ways of capturing important parts of the normative landscape—as I have already

³ Pettit

stated, my goal is not to achieve a definitive account, but rather to isolate a particular concept of the common good that can plausibly serve an important function distinct from alternative concepts. That function is (iv) to make sense of a candidate duty to work for the common good. This becomes especially salient in the context of working out socialist ideals, but there is no reason to think it limited to that context.

The paper proceeds in four sections. In §1 I suggest that we can see the common good as bound up with a distinctive mode of practical reasoning. In §2 I work through four candidate accounts of what that mode of practical reasoning consists in, showing how none of them entirely succeeds relative to criteria (i)-(iv). In §3 I turn to the joint-action accounts suggested by Brian Barry, Philip Pettit, and Eric Beerbohm and Ryan Davis, finding in them useful materials for my own purposive-association account, which I present and defend in §4.

§1 A Distinctive Mode of Practical Reasoning

Our goal is to provide an account of the common good that helps make sense of a putative duty to work for the common good. Brian Barry provides a useful starting point for building such an account when he suggests that in ordinary language we tend to invoke the common good “in the context of an *appeal* to individual people to do something or other which is contrary to their net interests.”⁴ It is not hard to think of examples to support this claim. We might invoke the common good when asking a politician to compromise on vital legislation, a pharmaceutical executive to provide vaccines at cost price, a landlord to allow a coastal hiking path to pass through his property, or an academic colleague to teach a course that brings students into a major. In each case, Barry

⁴ Barry, 203.

would suggest, we are exhorting a particular individual to sacrifice their net self-interests in favour of interests that are common.

Although it may be true that the sacrifice of an individual's net interests is *typically* what is at issue when the common good is invoked, it is important to register (as Barry himself does) that this is not *necessarily* the case.⁵ To begin with, we can properly speak of the common good as the appropriate object of governmental, rather than individual, action.⁶ Beyond that, even the individual case is more complicated than Barry's initial analysis allows. Sometimes we invoke the common good in the context of an appeal to individuals to do something that is contrary not to their own net interests, but rather to the net interests of a loved one such as a child. Even leaving that aside, there are surely cases where the best way for an individual to advance their own good is to advance the common good. Plato suggests that working for the common good always brings its own intrinsic rewards in creating and maintaining psychic health, and that psychic health is the condition of possibility of other goods being valuable to us in the first place.⁷ Even if we reject that thought, it might still be the case that the benefits to an individual of acting for the common good, whether intrinsic or instrumental, can sometimes outweigh the costs of doing so. If the spread of a lethal disease can be stopped by the provision of vaccines at cost price, for example, this will most likely benefit pharmaceutical executives themselves in various ways, and it is possible that these benefits will outweigh the costs to their bank balances. It follows that acting for the common good does not *necessarily* involve acting contrary to one's own net interests.

⁵ Barry, 204.

⁶ Barry (143) himself prefers to refer to the public interest in that context, but this is hardly necessary and indeed the Aristotelian tradition in political philosophy uses orientation towards the common good as a criterion for legitimate government.

⁷ Apology, Republic TK; T. H. Green TK

As noted in the introduction, the general lesson here is that observations regarding typical usage or paradigm cases should not determine the final shape of a philosophical account of the common good, even if they can serve as a starting point. The account must explain typical usage and paradigm cases, of course, but it will do so by placing them in a broader framework that has its own logic. In this particular instance, what seems to unite the examples listed above is not the demand for individuals to sacrifice their net interests, as ordinary usage might suggest, but rather the demand that they structure their practical reasoning so as to evaluate potential courses of action in terms of whether they advance the common good, as opposed to whether they advance some individual good. Whether these different modes of reasoning produce different conclusions in terms of the actions they recommend or mandate will depend on the case, but it seems obvious that they can and often will. This is the kernel of truth underpinning ordinary usage as described by Barry. But the philosophical takeaway is that one way in which the concept of the common good comes up naturally is in connection with a distinctive mode of practical reasoning. There may be other contexts in which the concept of the common good naturally comes up—such as religious contexts where all humans are thought to share the same good—but an account that focuses on understanding what it is to reason in terms of the common good as opposed to some individual good will have some plausible relation to ordinary usage and is likely to capture something important and specific about the normative landscape.⁸

Viewing the concept of the common good as essentially belonging to a distinctive mode of practical reasoning, a way of evaluating potential courses of action, allows us to demystify the notion of “work” that is at issue in the demand to work for the common good. To work for the common good in the relevant sense is simply to act so as to bring about, or realize, the common good. There

⁸ For the Christian context, see Maritain and TK.

is therefore no need to posit a strict distinction between the realms of work and leisure, or to reify the notion of a career, or to treat material production as a paradigm instance of work. We can work for the common good in moments or over time, in formal or informal contexts, for pay or for free, and through various types of action. Having said that, there are at least two reasons for characterizing the putative duty as a duty to *work* for the common good, rather than simply to promote it. For one thing, to conduct one's practical reasoning with reference to the common good as opposed to some individual good typically demands considerable effort on our part. For another, the most obvious location for such practical reasoning remains, in present social circumstances, our work lives in the narrow sense: the decisions we make on a daily basis within a particular career, but also the decisions we make with respect to career path more generally.

§2 Four Criteria and Four Candidate Accounts

In the last section we said that our account of the common good should delimit a distinctive mode of practical reasoning, one that might help to explain the putative duty for citizens to work for the common good. So what does it mean to reason in terms of the common good? In this section I consider four candidate accounts of the common good that are found in the extant philosophical literature: the aggregate welfare account; the shared goods account; the community account; and the corporate good account.

As we will see, each of these accounts seems to capture a slice of ordinary usage and each seems to serve important philosophical and political purposes. It can therefore be hard to know how to pick between them. To resolve this problem, I propose that a satisfactory account of the common good ought to satisfy four criteria:

- i. It must have some plausible relation to ordinary usage, even if there are usages it does not capture;
- ii. It must capture something important and specific about the normative landscape, and therefore not be over-general;
- iii. It must permit robust disagreement at the level of conceptions, such that people of different normative outlooks can make use of it, and therefore not be over-specific;
- iv. It must help to make sense of a putative duty to work for the common good

These criteria are not completely uncontroversial, of course. Some may disagree that ordinary usage is at all philosophically relevant. Others may think the notion of the common good is an “empty signifier” that fulfils a psychological or rhetorical purpose but has no fixed referent, so that it is inherently vague and non-specific. Still others may think that a concept of the common good is necessarily part of a normatively specific “communitarian” ideal, or at any rate that socialism is bound up with such an ideal. And finally some may simply not see the interest in asking what might make sense of a putative duty to work for the common good. Rather than attempting to definitively rebut these objections, I will simply point out that an account that satisfies all four criteria would have important virtues. It would be specific enough to make sense of an important part of normative discourse while also being general enough to facilitate substantive debate, and it would enable us to reflect on whether there is a duty to work for the common good and what it would entail. For present purposes, these virtues are the crucial ones.

Suppose we assume the common good is *whatever advances aggregate welfare*. It seems plausible that (i) the term is sometimes used in this way, for example by representatives of the “effective altruism”

movement that has been spreading across college campuses. As that example goes to show, it also seems plausible that (iv) the aggregate welfare account could explain what a putative duty to work for the common good might mean, insofar as it is clearly supposed to guide reflection on jobs and careers.⁹ Where the account falls short, however, is relative to criteria (ii) and (iii).

If the common good simply means aggregate welfare then it is not clear that anything would be lost by dropping the term from our vocabulary altogether. To work for the common good is simply to allow one's practical reasoning to be determined by the demands of welfare consequentialism. This seems (ii) over-general, since it leaves the common good without a specific function in our normative vocabulary. But it also seems (iii) over-specific, since it builds in a controversial conception of what right action entails. After all, the literature on consequentialism has often noted the uncomfortable implications of aggregate welfare as a criterion for right action: in theory it might require us to kill off the terminally ill, the severely disabled and the chronically depressed, or to force a small minority to become slaves of the rest, or to increase the population up to the point where each added person's life is barely worth living.¹⁰ This might well track an "ideological" usage of the common good in political life, for example in some self-proclaimed socialist societies, whereby the term is used to persuade people to fall in line and accept an unfair distribution of burdens in the name of the greater good. But even if there were a form of welfare consequentialism that avoids these implications, the idea that we are working for the common good if and only if we are advancing aggregate welfare would remain over-specific for our purposes: it builds a controversial conception of the common good into the concept itself. So this account fails by criteria (ii) and (iii).

⁹ See the 80,000 Hours website TK.

¹⁰ Rawls, Scanlon, Parfit TK.

It might seem better to think of the common good as consisting in *shared goods*, things that would be good for everyone in a certain group. This would seem (i) to correspond to one strand in ordinary usage, which often opposes the common good to sectarian or factional goods—we will come back to this in §4, but for now let us just say that it has a plausible relation to ordinary usage. It (ii) avoids over-generality, since it allows for a distinction between a putative duty to work for the common good and the demands of morality more generally, with the former applying only within a given group. It also appears to be (iii) sufficiently abstract to count as a general concept rather than a specific conception of the common good, in that in itself it says nothing about what counts as a shared good. But can it (iv) make sense of a putative duty to work for the common good?

The difficulty is that it is hard to think of goods that actually benefit each and every member of a given group. The best candidates are probably common facilities that everybody in the community has the right to make use of: organizations like public libraries; institutions like contract law; and environmental conditions, whether natural or social, like peacefulness and cleanliness. These facilities at least potentially benefit each and every member of the group and therefore in a certain sense they also represent an actual benefit, insofar as they enlarge each individual's scope of action or option set. But once the costs of provision have been taken into account not all of these facilities will represent a net benefit to each individual; a national opera would be of no interest to some, for example. Even those that really do benefit everyone, like the enforcement of contracts, will clearly benefit some (in this case the rich) more than others (the poor). We should therefore divide the element of the good that is genuinely shared from the element that is really private. But then so few facilities will count as genuinely shared goods that it is hard to see how it could conceivably be an obligation on every single citizen to work for the common good, except perhaps via a system of rotation, as with military conscription. But then the putative duty would be for citizens to be

prepared to *occasionally* work for the common good, not that their work should generally be aimed at it. This cannot be ruled out, but it does not seem entirely natural as an interpretation of the socialist tradition, at least.

A third candidate account would be that the common good consists in goods that are communal not because they are common across a set of private individuals, as in the shared goods account, but rather because they supervene on the web of crisscrossing, mutually reinforcing interactions and relationships that constitute *community*.¹¹ On this view, the good of community just is the common good, so we serve the common good whenever we work to thicken the bonds of community, whether by strengthening relationships directly or by providing common facilities, such as public swimming pools, and common events, such as public festivals, that allow for relationships to be strengthened. It seems plausible that (i) the term is sometimes used this way and that (ii) such usage picks out an important and specific feature of our normative landscape. It also seems plausible that (iv) a concept of this kind could illuminate the practical implications of the putative duty to work for the common good insofar as it is derived from the socialist tradition, at least, given the importance of community to that tradition and the manifold opportunities we all have to strengthen community. Where the account falls short, though, is in being (iii) overly specific from a normative point of view.

For the view that whatever ties us to one another in shared life and culture is always to be respected and promoted is clearly not shared by everyone. This looks like a particular conception, rather than a general concept, of the common good. It is true that an account of the concept will never be normatively neutral, and it is also true that in this case the substantive position in question has a

¹¹ Sulmasy, Etzioni, etc.

natural resonance with the socialist tradition. But even from a socialist point of view there may be good reason to look for a more capacious account, since some might say that the true goal of socialism is to liberate the individual to follow their own path and it would be better if our characterization of the putative duty did not close off debate in this domain.¹²

Finally, we might say that the common good consists in *the good of a corporate agent* such as a state.¹³ To use the concept like this (i) accords with ordinary language insofar as we routinely speak of the state as a corporate agent and the leaders of corporate agents such as states, teams and universities will often invoke the common good when asking people to devote their energies to the corporate good.¹⁴ The good of corporate agents is plausibly (ii) an important and specific part of the normative landscape. It might also (iv) shed light on what the putative duty might mean from a practical perspective: working for the common good simply means devoting oneself to the good of a corporate agent such as a state. The problem concerns criterion (iii). In one sense the corporate good account would seem to admit of a wide range of conceptions, since it leaves open the question of what the good of a given corporate agent consists in. But at the same time it clearly requires endorsing a form of holism that is substantively controversial. The problem is not so much metaphysical holism, the view that corporate agents cannot be reduced to individual agents, as value holism, the view that the value of the proper functioning of corporate agents cannot be reduced to the value that such functioning offers to their members and other affected parties.¹⁵ This is clearly extremely controversial, both philosophically and politically, because it implies that individuals can

¹² See, e.g., Oscar Wilde, *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*.

¹³ Is the state a corporation article TK. Pettit and List on corporate agents.

¹⁴ Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Morrison, others. Even Barry recognizes the notion of a corporate good as referring to the survival, growth and improvement of an organization over and above the good of its members. TK

¹⁵ For the distinction between metaphysical and value holism, see, e.g., Donald Morrison TK.

be sacrificed for the corporate good. It follows that the corporate good account is too specific for the job at hand.

To sum up, none of these accounts—aggregate welfare, shared goods, community and corporate good—manage to satisfy all four of our criteria. The aggregate welfare account is both over-general and over-specific. The shared goods account arguably fails to fully illuminate the putative duty. The community account is over-specific, as is the corporate good account. That said, the fact that all four have something to be said for them in terms of their relation to ordinary usage is surely worth noting, and may even suggest a fifth criterion for our own account, namely that it (v) be able to explain such usages.

§3 The Shape of a Joint-Action Account

Before outlining my own proposal for an account of the common good that illuminates the putative duty for citizens to work towards it, in this section I will gather materials from three accounts that I take to be more promising than the four just canvassed. From Eric Beerbohm and Ryan Davis I will take the notion of “buckpassing” from goodness to reasons; from Brian Barry I will take the notion of role-based reasons; from Philip Pettit I will take the notion of an evolving fund of reasons within a group. None of these ideas takes us all the way to a fully satisfactory joint-action account, but together they show us the shape that such an account must take.

In a recent article, Eric Beerbohm and Ryan Davis propose an account of the common good that explicitly aims to be “non-partisan” between first-order normative claims.¹⁶ If we build substantive

¹⁶ Eric Beerbohm and Ryan W. Davis, “The Common Good: A Buck-Passing Account”, 3.

views into the concept of the common good, they point out, we run the risk of prematurely closing off contestation over conceptions of the common good. In their view, this requires liberating the concept of the common good from the sense of goodness in which people debate the priority of the right and the good.¹⁷ It might seem obvious that claims about the common good concern the good and not the right. Beerbohm and Davis, though, follow T. M. Scanlon's suggestion that we think of "good" as a formal, higher-order property of having certain lower-order properties that provide us with reasons: "[B]eing good, or valuable, is not a property that itself provides a reason to respond to a thing in certain ways. Rather, to be good or valuable is to have other properties that constitute such reasons."¹⁸ Transferring this to the case of the common good, Beerbohm and Davis arrive at the claim that something's being in the common good "consists in the fact that there are reasons to act together to bring it about."¹⁹

The advantage of this "buckpassing" approach—the buck being passed from the property of "goodness" down to lower-order properties that constitute reasons for certain actions and responses—is that it allows us to see that the common good, and hence our common interests, need not be understood in terms of our own welfare. We can be acting for the common good, or in our common interest, when we promote the welfare of a set of people distinct from ourselves, as with foreign-aid programs, or indeed when we promote or honour values such as beauty that are not reducible to welfare at all, just so long as we have reasons to do so together. This liberates us from a form of over-specificity that might seem inherent in all talk of the common good, namely a bias

¹⁷ It is rather quaint, but nevertheless philosophically productive, that the primary form of partisanship that Beerbohm and Davis are concerned with does not involve the smuggling in of assumptions that benefit people from a given social position or belief system, but rather the smuggling in of assumptions that disadvantage deontological views as against their consequentialist rivals. They treat some of the former cases via a separate criterion of "distributive neutrality" among the interests of the relevant parties, but it is unclear to me how this criterion differs from that of non-partisanship.

¹⁸ T. M. Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*, 93.

¹⁹ Beerbohm and Davis, 5.

towards consequentialism, by allowing us to make sense of the thought that citizens have common interests that are not reducible to considerations of individual welfare.

In liberating us from over-specificity, however, this account seems to fall into over-generality. For Beerbohm and Davis, reasons to act together are always also reasons to act for the common good. If “we act together for reasons that (morally or otherwise) warrant our action”, they write, then “achieving our common aim becomes good for us collectively”.²⁰ But this appears over-inclusive. Imagine three strangers on a beach, each doing their own thing. A child cries out for help from between the waves. The strangers have reason to act together. They might rush forward to give strength in numbers. They might assign themselves to tasks, one rushing in, the other looking for a boat, a third looking for a lifeguard. If it all works out they will speak with pride of what they did together. But can we really say they were acting for the common good, as opposed to simply acting on moral reasons? It seems to me that we cannot.

To be clear, the force of this objection does not depend on rejecting the notion of buckpassing altogether. I agree with Beerbohm and Davis that people can be furthering their common interests even when they are acting for the welfare of others; I also want to pass the buck in that sense. (They would not speak of common interests in this connection, because they apply the buckpassing account only to “good” and not to “interests”, but I do not see why we cannot take that extra step.) What strikes me as odd about the strangers on the beach case is not that it involves benefiting others but rather that it is a case of acting together that does not involve a “we” that exists before or after the action in question. There is no common thing, no *koinōnia*, to use the Greek term, no partnership or association, to which the common good could refer. The members of a poverty-relief

²⁰ Beerbohm and Davis, 9-10.

organization, by contrast, would indeed be working for the common good on my account whenever they act together to alleviate poverty, irrespective of whether they are themselves poor. The difference is that in the latter case there is a common thing, the organization, to whose purposes the common good can refer. In other words it seems to me that an account of the common good needs to invoke some kind of association, whether loose or informal, which endures and evolves over time. For a given individual to reason in terms of the common good, in other words, their reasoning must refer to the ends of an association to which they belong. This is compatible with the idea of passing the buck from goodness to reasons—it simply implies that Beerbohm and Davis present the wrong buckpassing account of the common good. What we need is a group-based buckpassing account.

To flesh out the relation between membership in a group and reasons for action, we can turn to Brian Barry’s account of the public interest as consisting in “those interests which people have in common *qua* members of the public.”²¹ The public interest is not quite the same as the common good, to be clear: the former is typically invoked to defend an institution or action of the state—“*par excellence* it is an administrator’s concept”, as Barry says—whereas the latter is broader than that, having to do both with the state (*pace* Barry) and with individuals.²² But Barry’s approach to the public interest clearly bears on the notion of the common good.

It is crucial to distinguish, Barry points out, between the interests we have under certain descriptions or in certain capacities, for example our interests as motorists or as pedestrians, and our net interests once all our role-based interests have been aggregated. It is hard to find particular actions that are

²¹ Barry, 190.

²² Barry, 203.

better for absolutely everyone, all things considered, than salient alternatives, so there will not be many common net interests across a whole community as regards particular actions.²³ It is more likely that we can find common interests relative to enduring facilities as opposed to particular actions, since our wants and needs change over time and so it is in our interest to include potential benefits to our future selves when assessing our net interests, facilities representing a kind of insurance in the face of uncertainty.²⁴ But this may not change the calculus in any great way, since there is a limit to how much our circumstances are likely to change over our lifetimes: as we have already said, for many people the existence of a national opera company will not plausibly be seen as even a potential benefit. So we may have less of a common interest in either particular actions or facilities than we do in general policies: “For example, there may be no single road in a country to whose building cost it would be in everyone’s interest to contribute; but it may still be in everyone’s interest to contribute to the costs of a policy under which roads will be built all over the country wherever some criterion of ‘need’ is satisfied.”²⁵

There will still be limits to this mode of reasoning, however, insofar as some policies will never be very relevant to particular individuals given their circumstances: policies to mitigate poverty will surely always represent a net cost to the rich, even accounting for the slim possibility of their becoming poor. Barry offers a way of overcoming this problem when he distinguishes between “a man’s interests *as a ϕ* (that is, in some particular capacity) and his *net interest* in a policy (that is, how

²³ Barry claims that the notion of an interest is always comparative, such that “‘Being in someone’s interests’ is at least a triadic relation between a person and at least two policies” (192). If this is right then we cannot sensibly speak of the public interest, or common interests, in given actions or policies without specifying salient alternatives—but this seems to me another case where typical or paradigmatic usage is not a good guide to the phenomenon itself, since we can perfectly well understand and affirm claims that make no reference to alternatives. such as “we have a common interest in policies that improve national security”.

²⁴ Barry does not himself distinguish facilities from policies, but I believe he ought to have. On the idea of shared facilities that insulate us against risk, see Joseph Heath TK.

²⁵ Barry, 197.

he is affected overall, striking a balance between the pluses and minuses incurred in his various capacities).”²⁶ If we consider ourselves under a certain description, such as “theatre-goers” or “citizens”, rather than as fully fledged individuals, then we necessarily exclude from consideration many aspects of our actual net interests. We can then reason from the point of view of “non-assignable” members of the relevant category, so that the question becomes, for example, whether citizens as such have an interest in policies that insure against poverty, or whether citizens as such have an interest in certain higher-order policies, regarding the kinds of policies to adopt or the procedures for adopting them. In sum, then, the way to find common interests, on Barry’s view, is to ask the question relative to certain roles and in light of our membership of particular groups.

Barry himself thinks of interests as grounded in wants, although not identical to them: to say that a policy or action is in someone’s interests, he writes, is to say that “it puts him in a better position to satisfy his wants” than some alternative policy or action.²⁷ But his claim that the public interest is to be understood in terms of our role-based interests qua members of the public is in principle compatible with a buckpassing approach that understands goodness, and so interests, in terms of the various reasons we have. Our wants give us reasons, but so too do our commitments, and it seems plausible to view the latter as generating interests as well: we might say, for example, that a pacifist has an interest in peace different from that of a coward. If we transpose Barry’s account of the public interest accordingly, the claim would be that it consists in the things we have reason to pursue in common qua members of the public.

²⁶ Barry, 196.

²⁷ Barry, 183.

To see what Barry's view of the public interest implies practically speaking, we would need to know how to determine what reasons apply to unassignable citizens as such in relation to a given policy, a question that Philip Pettit takes up in a festschrift for Barry.²⁸ The notion of revealed preference has no purchase here, Pettit observes, since there is no context of choice in which someone's interests as an unassignable citizen are bound to be revealed. The interests of unassignable citizens vis-à-vis a given policy can only be a matter of judgement. Pettit thinks such judgements are best arrived at via a process of collective deliberation and debate; we might say that this allows the citizenry to come together as a group agent rather remaining a group in the sense of a mere set. But in Pettit's view the public interest cannot be *whatever* citizens collectively say it is, or else there would be nothing to debate about; there must be some possibility of their getting it wrong. His solution is to say that the public interest is determined by what citizens *would* judge it to be, were they in an epistemically favourable (but not fully idealized) position, where an epistemically favourable position is one that enables them to overcome the various challenges of group reasoning.²⁹

What is crucial for our purposes are the next steps of Pettit's argument. For a consideration to be accepted as a genuine reason for a group, and so for members of the group as such, he says, it would have to fulfil one of two criteria. Either it must directly speak to previously agreed common ends or it must aim at indirectly promoting such reasoning, for example by combating special pleading. Over time, Pettit suggests, a group that reasons together respecting these constraints will develop a repertoire of considerations that are recognized as relevant to group decision-making, an ever-evolving "fund of reasons". A policy or action will then be considered to be in the common interest,

²⁸ Pettit, TK.

²⁹ Pettit, TK. It is important for Pettit that the favourability of an epistemic position is judged by a formal criterion, having to do with the process of group reasoning, rather than a substantive one, such as whether it leads to respecting rights or maximizing utility. Otherwise we could short-circuit the process of collective deliberation altogether.

or for the common good, insofar as it is better supported by this evolving fund of publicly admissible considerations than any feasible alternative.³⁰ So on Pettit's view the public interest has a determinate meaning from a practical point of view only when citizens form a group agent that is able to reason and learn in a certain way.

As with Barry, then, Pettit offers an account that highlights the reasons that apply to individuals in certain capacities, namely as members of certain groups. But unlike Barry, Pettit frames this as an account of the common good in general rather than of the public interest narrowly conceived, the thought presumably being that the public interest is simply a special case of the common good, perhaps distinguished by its having to do with state action.³¹ It seems plausible, meanwhile, that Pettit would agree with Beerbohm and Davis that something's being in the common good "consists in the fact that there are reasons to act together to bring it about," where those reasons do not have to be consequentialist or welfare-based. The difference is that for Pettit the reasons in question must be tied to the existence and developing history of a group agent characterized by decision procedures that aim at achieving a certain kind of rationality over time. This allows him to avoid collapsing the common good into the more general category of substantive rationality, understood as the ability to respond appropriately to reasons.

³⁰ TK.

³¹ Matters may be a little more complex than this. Barry himself draws a threefold distinction between the *public interest*, which he thinks is "par excellence an administrator's concept" having essentially to do with the state (TK); the *common interest*, which he thinks is generally used to discuss the interests of a group vis-à-vis other groups, for example when speaking of conflicts between employers and employees; and the *common good*, which he thinks is used for talking about the interests of a group per se (TK). I am inclined to think the common interest and the common good can be used interchangeably, and in any case on Barry's own schema the common interest seems to be nothing more than an aspect of the common good. Some have claimed that "common interest" implies a more acquisitive stance than "common good", but this is doubtful: see Mansbridge, TK. The relation of the public interest to the common good is more difficult to state. Accepting Barry's observation that the public interest is essentially an administrator's concept, we might say it denotes the idea that the shared goal of public officials qua public officials is to use legitimate state power to promote the common good of citizens, "those interests which people have in common *qua* members of the public." Ordinary citizens could never aim at advancing the public interest simply because they do not have the relevant kind of agency.

The cost of Pettit's move, however, is that it ties the very concept of the common good to the existence of a specific kind of group, namely those which are able to adopt the relevant constraints on reasoning and hence those that have formal decision procedures and previously agreed common ends. Such groups certainly exist and no doubt they are important, but an account of the common good ought to be able to illuminate groups of other kinds as well. This is especially true insofar as we aim to provide an account that can illuminate the notion of *working* for the common good, since constraints of time and information mean that even in groups of the kind that satisfy Pettit's criteria, group-wide discussion of the different tasks that people should carry out, and how they should undertake them, will only be feasible in rare cases. What we need, then, is an account that retains the general thrust of Pettit's approach while widening the range of situations and groups to which it applies.

§4 The Purposive Association Account

My proposal, building on the materials gathered in §3, is that something's being for the common good consists in its being a feasible action, facility or policy that we have reason to endorse from the point of view of our roles as members of, or participants in, a purposive association. The notion of an association here is deliberately broad, so as to allow for everything from the kind of formally structured organization that Pettit has in mind to informal groupings such as book clubs and sports teams, but it is constrained by the idea of purposiveness, where that suggests that the associations in question will be held together by some kind of constitutive activity. This allows us to say that to reason in terms of the common good is to engage in a type of "we-thinking" in which one reasons from the point of view of an unassignable participant in the joint activity that constitutes the

group.³² The common good therefore consists in whatever furthers common interests, where a common interest is specified in terms of the reasons that flow from the constitutive activities of a given group, and is therefore something for the sake of which the members of that group, just in virtue of their membership, have reason to act together.

This account seems to answer to the criteria listed above. It suggests that when we appeal to someone to reason in terms of the common good, we are asking them to attend only to the reasons that they have qua members of a given purposive association, as opposed to any other reasons that might bear on their decision-making. That seems (i) to capture a range of ordinary usage, covering the examples mentioned in §1: in asking a politician to compromise on vital legislation, a pharmaceutical executive to provide vaccines at cost price, a landlord to allow a coastal hiking path to pass through his property, or an academic colleague to teach a course that brings students into a major, we are asking them to engage in we-thinking and to determine their actions on its basis. The account seems to avoid (ii) the kind of over-generalality that means the concept serves no distinct function, because in making essential reference to purposive associations it prevents the common good collapsing in to the good (or substantive rationality) more generally. In passing the buck from goodness to reasons, meanwhile, it also remains highly abstract and avoids (iii) the kind of over-specificity that builds a particular substantive conception into the concept itself and so prematurely closes off debate about how exactly to conceive of the common good. This account also promises (iv) to give a clear sense to the duty to work for the common good, which becomes a duty to further the constitutive ends of a given purposive association. Finally, the account offers (v) an explanation for the appeal of the inadequate accounts canvassed in §2, since aggregate welfare, shared goods,

³² We-thinking TK.

community and the corporate good can either be, or be instrumental to, the constitutive ends of certain associations.

This is all very compressed, of course, but it will become clearer in the process of addressing three important objections. The first is that the account allows for too many groups to count as having a common good relative to ordinary usage. The second is that the account makes it conceivable that the common good of a given group will not be good at all. The third is that the notion of constitutive ends is too vague and open to interpretation to be of much practical use.

§4.1 Ordinary Usage

The purposive association account implies that there will be a common good relative to every purposive association, so that one might work for the common good of a family or a university community or a sports team or a seminar. There is no common good simpliciter, on this account, except as a short hand. Whenever we say we are working for the common good, we ought really to specify which association we are referring to. But this seems to cut against ordinary usage. On the one hand, it sounds odd to say that one is trying to work for the *common good* of one's university, for instance; typically we would refer only to its *good*. On the other hand, it sounds perfectly normal to say one is trying to work for the common good simpliciter. So the objection is that the purposive-association account does not in fact have a plausible relation to ordinary usage: it is both overly inclusive, in allowing for cases that sound odd in ordinary language, and overly restrictive, in denying cases that sound normal.

Let us begin with the latter charge. The question is what we are referring to when speaking of the common good simpliciter. If we assume that it has a determinate referent, rather than being an empty signifier, the common good simpliciter must surely mean something different from the good simpliciter and the difference must derive from the notion of commonality. But the notion of commonality clearly entails the notion of some group across which a good can be common. So it does seem that the common good simpliciter is always shorthand for the common good relative to some group. The problem lies with ordinary usage: we are typically not clear, either to others or to ourselves, regarding which group we are referring to when we speak of the common good. The purposive-association account has the merit of focusing attention on this question and thereby avoiding confusion.

As for the account's being overly inclusive, it may indeed sound odd to speak of the common good of a university or a sports team or a seminar as opposed to their good simpliciter. But such cases seem relatively easy to resolve, since they involve the confusion of a group with a corporate body. A corporate body such as a university will indeed have a good rather than a common good, but things will be different with respect to the university *community*.

In the background of both charges, it seems to me, is the fact that the focal case for talk of the common good is and always has been the polity. That makes it possible to use the common good simplicity as shorthand for the common good of the political community, and it also makes it seem odd to use the phrase with respect to other forms of community. But the polity has itself typically been understood as simply one kind of association, and hence as a species of a genus whose members share certain features. Aristotle, for example, only mentions the common good (*to koinon sumpheron*) in reference to the polity, but at the same time he also treats the polis as a species of the

genus *koinōnia*, by which he means associations bound together by the quest for some good. It follows that there ought to be a common good for each *koinōnia*, even if that of the polis is the most authoritative and architectonic, and hence the one most worth paying attention to. The general point is that although ordinary language regarding the common good will naturally have evolved around the focal case of the polity, a philosophical account must look for the structures in virtue of which the polity counts as a case at all.

One benefit of this approach is that it illuminates a class of demands we make on one another as participants in associations: it is certainly not only in the political sphere that we exhort people to reason in terms of common ends, rather than net individual interests. Another benefit is that it allows us to avoid assuming that the common good of polities must always have roughly the same character. It is common for communitarians such as Alasdair MacIntyre to allege that deliberation over the common good has no place in the modern liberal state, on the basis of an Aristotelian understanding of what the common good of a polity would be. On the approach that I have been proposing, by contrast, we can see that the common good always refers to a given association, and its nature will depend on the nature of that association. To the degree that modern pluralistic societies are different kinds of association from the poleis that Aristotle had in mind, we should expect the common good to signify something different as well. Liberal political theory might then be understood as proposing an answer to the question of what the common good might mean in such societies.

It must be noted that on the purposive-association account not every group can have a common good. A more refined version of the first objection would therefore be that there are some groups with respect to which the purposive-association account comes apart from ordinary language. For

people may sometimes use the common good to refer to the good of all sentient beings or the good of humanity at large. But the set of sentient beings does not and could not form an association that undertakes any kind of joint action, and so on the purposive-association account it cannot have a common good. The case of humanity at large is more complicated, since it is at least potentially an association engaged in joint action, such that we can think of it as potentially having a common good. But this is different from humanity's actually having a common good, as many would assume it does. Here I believe we must simply bite the bullet: no account of the common good will capture all of ordinary usage, so at some point the question is just whether a given account points to something interesting and important. In response to those who speak of the common good of sentient beings, or humanity at large, we can simply say that they are using the term in a different sense (most likely that of aggregate welfare).

§4.2 Bad Groups

The second objection is that the purposive-association account makes it conceivable that the common good of a given group will not be good at all. This objection is more difficult to resolve than the first because it raises intractable questions of philosophical method. The purposive-association account says that the common good consists in whatever furthers common interests, where a common interest is something for the sake of which the members of a given group have reason to act together, given the group's constitutive activity. But what if this activity is bad? What if the group is a hit squad, for example? The account implies that a member who reasons in terms of advancing the squad's constitutive goals as opposed to their own net interests—for example by buying weapons, stalking victims, shooting people, even when the risks seem to outweigh the rewards—is thereby working for the common good, relative to the group in question. We might be

tempted to assimilate this objection to the previous one, since there is certainly something odd about speaking of the common good relative to a given group, rather than the common good simpliciter. But the problem would recur even if we changed the example to that of a polity organized around the end of military conquest or white supremacy. If this constitutive activity is bad, it would follow that it is bad to work for the common good. Is that not a contradiction in terms? Mustn't the common good be good?

An obvious response would be to moralize the account by adding a rider to the effect that in order for something to count as a common interest, it must be something for the sake of which the members of a group have reason to act together, not only in virtue of their membership of the group, given its constitutive activity, but also independently of their membership, given the independent value of that activity. This allows us to avoid the uncomfortable implication that we can speak of working for the common good relative to a hit squad or an imperialist nation, but only at the cost of violating criterion (ii) by collapsing the common good into morality or substantive rationality more generally. The only question of interest becomes, what is the right thing to do in a given situation?

The unmoralized version, by contrast, allows us to locate a distinctive kind of normative demand and hence to better understand and evaluate the ethical conflicts that characterize human life. On this view, the question isn't whether, say, a soldier is working for the common good where the polity is concerned, but how the soldier's role obligations and role interests vis-à-vis the polity relate to their net, all-things-considered obligations and interests. Something similar will be true of the hit-squad case. One member may plausibly appeal to another to put aside their selfish interests and reason in terms of furthering the group's activity, and analytically speaking we have reason to

develop a concept capable of capturing the character of such appeals even if in the final analysis we believe that any reasons issuing from the common good in this sense will be outweighed or more likely silenced by other reasons.

These are not definitive arguments, of course, but then again our goal was not to come up with a definitive account of the common good, only to come up with an account that might render intelligible the claim, made by socialists and others, that citizens ought to work for the common good.

§4.3 Vagueness

The third objection is that the notion of constitutive ends is too vague and open to interpretation to be of much practical use. Suppose somebody wants to work for the common good of a given group. The purposive-association account says that doing so requires acting on the reasons that the group has for acting, given its constitutive activity. But it is not always clear what the constitutive activity of a group is, let alone what reasons it issues in. It is not clear, for example, what the constitutive activity of the American polity is supposed to be, or how it would yield reasons for action. In sum, the objection is that the constitutive activity account is too vague to serve as the basis for determinate practical reasoning and hence (iv) make sense of a putative duty to work for the common good. To answer this objection, we need to distinguish between associations along two different axes, according to the clarity of their goals and the clarity of their structure more generally.

We can envisage a spectrum between associations that are organized around mission statements that clearly specify their constitutive ends and associations whose ends remain vague or confused. In the middle might be groups with vague or confused mission statements and groups whose ends are tacitly understood on the basis of historical precedent and present practice without being codified. From the point of view of practical reasoning, the differences between associations along these axes will be crucial. At the clearer end of the spectrum, it might not be too difficult to see the practical implications of reasoning in terms of the group's constitutive ends. The founding statute of the oil cartel OPEC gives it a clear mission, for example: "The principal aim of the Organization shall be the unification of petroleum policies for the Member Countries and the determination of the best means for safeguarding the interests of Member Countries, individually and collectively."³³ To act on the reasons that flow from one's membership of OPEC is to decide between actions and policies solely on the basis of whether they lead to a united front that safeguards the interests of member countries. This criterion is compatible with many different decisions, but it surely rules out many actions or policies. That said, the fact that there remains some indeterminacy even in the case of an organization like OPEC goes to show that interpretation of constitutive ends is inescapable. So the difference between the two ends of the spectrum is not that in the one case there are no questions regarding constitutive ends, while at the other there are no answers. Rather it is that at one end the grounds for assessing different interpretations are clearer than at the other end. But in all cases it will be possible to offer reasons to support one interpretation as against another, so that even if there is no single right answer, there will nevertheless be better or worse answers.

³³ Article 2A. The statute goes on to specify the principal procedure for securing this aim, which is to "devise ways and means of ensuring the stabilization of prices in international oil markets with a view to eliminating harmful and unnecessary fluctuations", as well as a side constraint on such means, namely that they give "due regard" to the interests of investors and consuming nations as well as those of producing nations. See https://www.opec.org/opec_web/static_files_project/media/downloads/publications/OPEC_Statute.pdf

A related distinction, or spectrum, would be that between associations that have constitutions that establish procedures for settling interpretive questions and those that have little or no formal structure. These two spectrums are in principle independent of one another, although in practice it will often be the case that groups with clear decision-making procedures will also have clear constitutive ends, and vice versa, not least because a group can refine its mission statement over time.

The kind of groups that Pettit is thinking of in his treatment of the common good would fit into the first category. Once again, OPEC is a good example given the clarity of its statutes, which govern membership, obligations, and decision-making authority. There is a Conference, convened at least twice a year, which is “the supreme authority of the Organization,” formulating general policy and determining means of implementing it, deciding on applications for membership, approving or rejecting the work of auditors and governors, and deciding whether to amend the statutes themselves, with all non-procedural matters requiring unanimous agreement.³⁴ The Board of Governors, meanwhile, is a kind of inner council, meeting at least twice a year, whose role consists in directing the management of the organization and the implementation of its policies, while also preparing the agenda for, and making recommendations to, the Conference.³⁵ Finally there is a Secretariat, which executes the policy of the Conference under the direction of the Board of Governors.³⁶ Interpretation of the statutes, and so of the association’s constitutive ends, will take place at each of the three levels, with a clear hierarchy of authority. In this context, we can easily imagine an interpretative tradition developing over time in line with Pettit’s model of an evolving fund of reasons that clearly speak to the association’s constitutive ends. Given the relative clarity of

³⁴ Articles 10-16.

³⁵ Articles 17-20.

³⁶ Article 25.

the ends in question, presumably this procedure would yield a fairly determinate answer to the question of what it is to work for the common good of the group.

At the other end of the second spectrum would be groups that lack any formal structures for resolving interpreting questions concerning constitutive ends, such that the burden of reasoning is on individual members. Imagine a social movement, perhaps an idealized version of Occupy Wall Street, that disavows all forms of hierarchy. There is no general assembly, no inner council, and no executive, and it follows that there are no procedures for resolving debates over the movement's aims, which actions and policies are in line with those aims, and even who counts as belonging to the movement. This does not mean that there are no grounds for distinguishing between better or worse interpretations: it is not plausible that the movement aims at strengthening oligarchy, or that Gordon Gecko is a participant. Nor must individuals reason solipsistically: opinions can be formed in conversation with others, whether in person or via traditional and social media, and in light of the example given by others' actions. Nevertheless, in the final analysis it is up to individuals to decide how to understand the goals of the movement and how best to achieve them. What it means to work for the common good of such a group, to act on the basis of reasons flowing from one's membership in the group, is therefore up to the individual in important ways.

The practical implications of the purposive-association account with respect to our work lives will vary according to the kind of groups in which we take ourselves to participate. This is true both within a given career and in terms of career choice. Let us consider these cases in turn.

Within a given career, we may find ourselves working for an organization that has clear ends and a definite structure for resolving questions about what those ends are and what they imply regarding

the activities of each member. An individual worker might be accountable to a department manager or committee that is in turn accountable to some higher level of authority, and so on, so that for the individual to work for the common good is simply for them to execute their allotted role in a division of labour that has been determined by those with the authority to interpret the organization's ends. If the organization is run democratically, then the individual themselves may form part of the latter authority. At the opposite end of the spectrum, we may find ourselves working in situations where the burden is obviously on us, as individuals, to determine what it would be to tailor our activities in light of the constitutive ends of the associations to which we take ourselves to belong. In the middle will be the vast majority of work contexts in which either constitutive ends or decision-making authority remain to some extent unclear or imperfect, so that some burden remains on us to interpret what it means to work for the common good.

As for the jobs we undertake in the first place, at one end of the spectrum we can imagine an authoritarian polity in which some central body assigns each individual to a particular job in light of an assessment of their talents and the needs of the situation, as well as an interpretation of the constitutive ends of the polity itself. The central authority could be structured democratically, so that the individual has some voice in its decisions, or it could be an elite body in which (supposed) expertise reigns. At the other end of the spectrum, we can imagine a liberal polity in which it is up to each individual to apply for jobs according to their own priorities, which may or may not include a concern for the common good. Insofar as it does include such a concern, the burden would be on the individual to reflect on what the constitutive ends of the polity are, and how the individual might best contribute to their realization. Once again, such reasoning need not be solipsistic: it can be conducted in conversation with others, against the background of a broader cultural conversation, in light of salient examples, and with the intention of meshing with others' actions. At the limit, in

cases where it is unclear that the standard conditions on joint action, such as common knowledge and interlocking intentions, are being met, each person's actions might be viewed as a kind of offering in which we imagine ourselves as participants in joint action and accordingly perform what we consider to be our part, in the hope that others will recognize our actions as such and follow suit, with all parties being ready to create and support more formal structures if the opportunity were to arise. This may be the case with respect to the global economy, for instance, insofar as we can conceive of ourselves as working for the common good of humanity understood as one large association.

In a liberal society, then, it will be impossible for an individual to work for the common good without taking a position on what the constitutive goals of the polity amount to, what kind of joint action would be required to pursue them, and how one might best contribute to such a scheme. Such a position might be arrived at directly by means of individual reflection, or, more likely, it might result indirectly from the ethical formation that takes place in the context of social institutions such as the family, educational organizations, workplaces, and professional bodies such as trade unions. But since such formation can always be endorsed or rejected, the ultimate responsibility in each case lies with the individual. In fact, this is doubly the case in a liberal society, since the decision as to whether to even attempt to direct one's labours towards the common good, and how to weigh the competing reasons flowing from one's membership in different groups, is itself left up to individuals. This implies that the putative demand for citizens to work for the common good will be in some respects more difficult to successfully discharge in liberal societies than in authoritarian ones—it requires a host of virtues, including practical wisdom. Insofar as the demand is a socialist axiom, this implies that liberal forms of socialism, including anarchistic forms, must necessarily place a huge weight on individual virtue.