

THE COMMON GOOD AND SOCIAL HOPE IN AFRICA

T. EBIJUWA

Ladoke Akintola University of Technology, Ogbomosho, Nigeria

Abstract

There is no doubt that every society tends to operate with what they considered the good life or the common good suitable to their social formation. But, the problem here is that people sometimes disagree as to what they considered good. What this implies for our conception of the common good in Africa is that the socio-political structure should be arranged in such a way that stakeholders in the society are guaranteed of fairness in the distribution of opportunities and benefits. For, it is only when stakeholders are duly recognized in the scheme of things, that we can expect their commitment to the common good. The common good is thus a kind of social relationship, which is somehow constituted by the coordination of the personal activities of members of the state. The common good then can thus be conceived as the platform of the existence of any social order. It is a good of all members of the society. On this showing, the common good is not a mere collection of individual interests, and it is not a surrogate for the sum of the different individual goods. This paper will investigate the conflict between individual interest and the common good in African political philosophy.

"Members of a community are expected to show concern for the well-being of one another, to do what they can to advance the common good, and generally to participate in the community life. They have intellectual and ideological as well as emotional attachments to their shared goals and values and, as long as they cherish them, they are ever ready to pursue and defend them" (Gyekye, 1997:42)

As germane as the notion of the common good might appear in Africa today, we find traces of individualist thinkers, insisting on the pursuit

of their personal autonomy and freedom as that which will increase their opportunity to choose their own good and life plans. This insistence is especially significant within the context of the identity discourse, the discourse of difference peculiar to some in the liberal societies who are denied due participation especially ethnic minorities, gays, disabled and in some cases especially in Africa, gender. It is also argued that the pursuit of common good will result in intolerance of other conceptions of the good and the manipulation of the instrument of power to realize the common good. In view of this, individualist argues for the promotion of the common good through the voluntary choices of individual members of the civil society. This appears to me to be wrong headed because the individualist conflates and thus reduce the common good to an artificial combination of individual interests or ideals.

But what exactly do we mean by the notion of common good? Before this, let us quickly see why the demand for common good is pertinent at this point of our historical life in Africa. Suffice it to say at this point that hitherto Africans enjoyed their communal form of life, which made available a variety of valuable options, where individuals derive their significance from social forms. All those suffered some form of dislocation, which incidentally is no fault of the ordinary citizens of Africa. Rather, the result of the disruption and /or dislocation of our cultural values are the incursion of negative alien values. These values driven by the negative forces of slavery, colonialism and most painfully the misrule of African political elites, which in concert, created a gap between the state and the citizens. This is to say that the inability of the state to meet the needs and provide the ground for realizing the aspirations of the people is responsible for the distrust of the collective spirit inherent in the hitherto communal form of life.

Indeed, our persistent set of problems in Africa is traceable to this gap between the state and the citizens; our inequalities of wealth and power, ethnic conflicts, economic instability, crime etc. are so obstinate today because of this alienation. What the whole of these represents is that because the state could no longer meet the needs of the people, it has lost the basis for the citizens' loyalty. The result of which is the complete lack of confidence in the state. As Ade- Ajayi clearly puts it in the case of the

elite:

The elite, like the colonial state, which they inherited, has grown apart from the society. Increasingly the state and the elite who control the state, have become predators of the society (1999: 16).

Here then is the reason for the insistence on individual interests in African societies. Since the society where individual social hope lies in hitherto communal forms life could no longer provide the lifeline for the survival of the collective spirits; it becomes increasingly difficult to rely on it. Consequently, the society becomes an arena of conflict, where social relationships can no longer generate important common goods, interests and values. These feelings of alienation can obviously not command the commitment of people to the common good, as individuals are likely to be concerned about what will promote their interests rather than what will frustrate them. The thinking then is that once everybody's interest is promoted in this regard, it will in the long run be in the interest of everybody in the society - and thus lead to the common good.

But since the pursuit of individual interest(s) can be read to be subjective, and hence prudential contemporary individuals like Will Kymlicka likens the common good to "the result of the process of combining preferences, all of which are counted equally (consistent with the principles of justice)" (1990: 206). In the same vein, Jeremy Bentham sees the common good as the "sum of the interests of the several members who compose it" (1948: 126). To adequately understand the individualist account one must take into consideration what Kwame Gyekye calls the normative or ideological impulse of the notion. (P.45). First, individualists consider themselves as prior to the society. Secondly, and as a consequence of the above, individualist sees the good arrived at independently of the society.

Thus, Hart summarized the individualist conception of the common good as "a maximizing and collective account that require the society to maximize the total net sum or balance of happiness of its subjects" (P.182). In the opening paragraph of *The Politics* Aristotle avers:

Our own observation tells us that every society is an association of

persons formed with a view to some good purpose. I say 'good' because in their actions all men aim at what they think good. Clearly, then, as all associations aim at some good, that one which is supreme and embraces all others will have also as its aim the supreme good (P.25).

There are two goals involved here: the goal of the individual and that of the state. The point one can deduce from this distinction is that the common good, which Aristotle calls the supreme good is higher than any good pursued by an individual or a collection of individuals. In affirming this view, Plato agrees with Aristotle that the purpose for which a state exists goes beyond that of satisfying the interest of individual. For Plato:

Our aim in founding the commonwealth was not to make any one class specially happy, but to secure the greatest possible happiness for the community as a whole (P: 110).

Clearly then Aristotle and Plato base their views that the state is not designed to protect the interests of individuals, or what they considered the "imperfect" or incomplete nature of man. For them, it is only within the confines of the state that an individual can find social and/or self-fulfillment. A state comes into existence because no single "individual is self-sufficing". He states further that since our needs are numerous and that it is because individuals cannot meet their needs themselves that the state evolved. The existence of this is to enrich the lives of everybody.

Now, what is beginning to appear is how a state is formed in the direction of order. Since man cannot live alone and needs the services of others to make his own life meaningful and fulfilled, everybody is expected to contribute to the overall mix i.e. the whole (here referred to as the state) by the parts (considered as individuals). But since a meaningful life cannot be attained without the union and assistance of others, it is difficult to describe "the part as prior to the whole". In other words, the common good from the above sense should be seen as a goal to which all things flow, the benefit of which returns to each individual. Put differently, no human society is considered orderly if what binds them together or what they seek communally is undermined. As Thornhill (1967) avers:

To say that man is by nature social --- is to say that what man achieves, he achieves together with other men, that the goals which he sets himself

are goals he pursues in common with other men; that any benefit which he seeks, he seeks as a benefit held in common, a common good. (P.45)

The common good is thus a kind of social relationship, which is somehow constituted by the coordination of the personal activities of members of the state. This coordination in the words of Eneh and Okolo (1998: 51) is itself regulated by the purpose of the common good, which motivates and binds the group together. The common good then can thus be conceived as the platform of the existence of any social order. It is a good of all members of the society. On this showing, the common good is not a mere collection of individual interests, and it is not a surrogate for the sum of the different individual goods. If the contrary, then it may just be contingently common and might, on this basis, may partially be achieved, if even it will be at all. In fact, as Kwame Gyekye says, the notion of the common good is a notion of that set of goods that is essentially good for human beings (op.cit: 46). For Maritain (1966): the common good, is the "*good human life of the multitude, of a multitude of persons; it is their communion in good living. It is therefore common to both the whole and the parts into which it flows back and which, in turn, must benefit from it*". (P: 51). Let me put this metaphorically in the words of Raj Mansukhani (2002); the common good as he puts it:

--- can be described as a vast net, and at each junction where the meshes meet sits a Jewel. Each Jewel reflects the light of all the Jewel round it, and all of those jewels reflect others around them. In this way, the whole universe of jewels is ultimately reflected in every single jewel. (P: 191).

This analogy of interdependence or interconnectedness clearly represents the commonality of the good that Kwame Gyekye says can be "universally shared by all human individuals, a good the possession of which is essential for the ordinary or basic functioning of the individual in a human society" (op.cit: 44). This, as said earlier can be said to be linked to the concept of common humanity, and hence cannot be derived from the goods or preferences of particular individuals. No wonder, Velasquez et al. say that the catholic religious tradition that has a long history of trying to define and promote the common good, sees the common good as "the

sum of those conditions of social life which allow social groups and their individual members relatively thorough and ready access to their own fulfillment".

Arising from the above is the claim that the common good does not 'come out of the blue'. It involves the cooperative effort of everyone. As a result, the common good is a good to which all members of the society must have access, and from which no one can be excluded. It should be understood that to say that "the common good is a good all members of the society must have access", one is referring only to what can be regarded as the basic or essential goods as such, to which everybody must have access. There is no human being that is not desirous of peace, security, respect, freedom etc in any human society. It is such notions embracive of the essential goods that human beings desire, that we can call common good.

From the above, it could be argued that since all human beings benefit from the common good, we would be willing to urge that all should cooperate to establish and promote the common good. But this, as some would argue, rests on a mistake, as some people are likely to identify a number of hurdles that would hinder us, from successfully doing so.

Suppose the argument starts from the notion that the very idea of the common good is inconsistent with a pluralistic society like ours in Africa, or suppose, as many postmodernists would argue that the establishment of common good is another form of meta-narrative, which is oppressive in character. From this perspective, we would be pursuing the interests of the many at the expense of the interests of minority groups. This is how this objection is clearly stated by Velasquez et al:

And even if we agreed upon what we all valued, we would certainly disagree about the relative values things have for us. While all may agree, for example, that an affordable health system, a healthy educational system, and a clean environment are all parts of the common good, some will say that more should be invested in health than in education, while others will favour directing resources to the environment over both health and education.

Now, such disagreement abounds in many areas of our national lives and "are bound to undercut our ability to evoke a sustained and

widespread commitment to the common good" in the words of Valasquez et al. In the face of such diversity, efforts to get the commitment of people to support the common good will be herculean.

There is another challenge of the common good similar to the above. It is easy to see that whatever the benefits a common good provides will be available to everyone in the society; an exercise that is not restricted to only those who contributed to the pool of the common good. This is what many have referred to as the "free-rider problem". Individuals can become free-riders to the extent that they benefit from the common good while refusing to contribute their support to it. Now, it is because so many people, especially the elites in many parts of Africa, are guilty of this free-rider problem that we encounter all manners of crises in Africa-be it economic, social, political or what have you. Very many elites in Africa find it very easy to evade tax. We all know what taxes are used for. Very many elites in Nigeria, to be specific, find it convenient not to pay their electricity bills. Yet, we know that they consume more energy than the poor. The implication of all these for the common good is not far fetched.

I want to say here that there is a cacophony of opinions arising from cultural diversity, language, tribe, and religion or even on the mere insistence of one's individualism, depending on the perspective by which we conceive the common good. The idea of the common good is embracive. It does not as the foregoing discussion states, eliminate any stakeholder. The thinking of individualism which many feel will undermine the common good, is a fallout of the general social instability in many facets of our lives necessitated by our colonial experiences and driven by the negative forces of African political elites. Or else, how do you explain the quest for individualism, when hitherto the society maintains a social form of life characterized by communalism which made available a variety of valuable options, where individuals derive their significance from social forms. The quest for the promotion of private life or individualism is a creation of the dislocation of the communal form of life in Africa that was hitherto highly prized. Where then is the hope of Africa? How do we bridge the past with the present in an attempt to create a robust path for the future? Or simply put, how do we evolve an arena where social relationships can generate important common goals, interests and values?

The above questions, either singly or wholly, assume that there is

a gap in the social relationship in Africa, and that this gap needs to be investigated. For, to assume that this is impossible is to deny that there is hope for Africa's development. But hope is still possible. How? First, we must develop a system that would overcome the weaknesses of our present value system.

There is no doubt that every society tends to operate with what they considered the good life or the common good suitable to their social formation. But, the problem here is that people sometimes disagree as to what they considered good. What this implies for our conception of the common good in Africa is that the socio-political structure should be arranged in such a way that stakeholders in the society are guarantee of fairness in the distribution of opportunities and benefits. For, it is only when stakeholders are duly recognized in the scheme of things that we can command their commitment to the common good. For example, how do you command the commitment of women in Nigeria, when to a large extent they are displaced in the distribution of opportunities and benefits in the state. They are even marginally represented in the national assembly where decisions that concern daily experiences are formulated and managed. Here, decisions sometimes are based on voting. Even when some have argued that agreed points on any subject matter can be based on the "force of the better argument" as Jürgen Habermas points out, evidence has shown that most women in Africa do not possess the quality or the character to withstand the "force of better argument" in a dialogic sphere dominated by men. This is so because the cultural constraints of the society has brought to bear on the social structure.

Let me say here that even if the number of women is increased in the dialogic sphere, it will be only a mere recognition of representation, and not the recognition of the will of the representatives. The latter is paramount. Yet, this is culturally undermined. The implication of this for the common good is a sort of social dissension because a group excluded from a share in power is always a group excluded from a share in social and other benefits or advantages in society, the results of which are the well known indecencies of adversarial politics in many parts of Africa today. It is for this reason that we suggest a kind of consensualist perspective in social organizations. By this, I mean the recognition of the "voices" of stakeholders in the arrangement of benefits and opportunities in Africa.

This, for example, is part of the reasons for different ethnic clashes in Nigeria, Liberia, Côte d'Ivoire and many parts of Africa. It is equally the reason for the withdrawal of many from the state into their ethnic enclaves for social fulfillment. The reason for this withdrawal is not only because the state is not able to provide for the common good of all, but also because of the frustration of one suffering in the mist of plenty. Thus, it is only when all stakeholders are adequately recognized that we can command their commitment to the common good. Suffice it to say here that this is only when talks about social stability in Africa can be meaningful and common identity forged.

From the foregoing, we have said that the hitherto communal form of life enjoyed by Africans suffered severe dislocations arising from our colonial experiences and the negative influences thereof on our political elites. We argued that this led to the creation of a gap between the state and the citizens to whom the state owes responsibility. And this is part of the reasons why it is difficult to command the commitment of all stakeholders to the common good. Thus, when individualist defines the common good as the "surrogate for the sum of the different individual goods", it is because of the failure of the state to fulfill its obligation to the people. The common good, following Maritain, is the good human life of the multitude, of a multitude of persons, . . . their communion in good living" the recognition of which will provide stability, meaningful progress and social hope in Africa.

REFERENCES

- Ade-Ajayi, J.F. (1999) "*Development is about people*" *Viewpoint: A Critical Review of Culture and Society* Vol. Nos. 1 and 2.
- Aristotle (1952) *The Politics*. London: Penguin Books Ltd.
- Bentham, J. (1948) *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* 1823: Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Ebijuwa, T. (2000) "Ethnic Conflict, Social Dislocation and the Search for a New Order in Africa" *Indian Journal of Politics* vol. XXXIV, Nos. 3-4, July-Dec.
- Ebijuwa, T. (2002) "Postmodernism and the Conflict of Values: The Challenge of Universal Morality" *filosofia: International Journal of Philosophy*. Department of Philosophy De la Salle University Manila Philippines vol.

31 number 2 May.

- Eneh J.O. and Okolo C.B. (1998) "The Common Good and Political Stability" in M.Dukor (ed) *Philosophy and Politics: Discourse on Values and Power in Africa*. Lagos: Obaroh and Ogbinaka Publishers Ltd.
- Gyekye, K. (1997) *Tradition and Modernity: Philosophical Reflections on the African Experience*. New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Habermas, J. (1970) "Towards a Theory of Communicative Competence" *Inquiry* No. 13.
- Hart, H.L.A.(1985). *Essays in Jurisprudence and Philosophy*. Oxford, Clarendon Press.
- Kymlicka, W. (1990) *Contemporary Political Philosophy: An Introduction*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Mansukhani R. (2002) "Wisdom in a Postmodern age" *filosofia: International Journal of Philosophy*. Department of Philosophy, De la Salle University, Manila, Philippines vol. 31 No. 2.
- Maritain, J. (1960) *The Person and the Common Good* Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, Paperback.
- Plato (1973) *The Republic of Plato*, (Translated with Introduction and notes by Francis Macdonald Conford Oxford, London, New York, Oxford University Press.
- Thornhill, J.S.M. (1967) *The Person and the Group*. Milwaukee. The Bruce Publishing Company.
- Velasquez, M, et al "The Common Good" file://c:/Docume~1/TOSTNE/Locals~1\Temp/triMNFLO.htm.

