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Jacques Maritain's Perspective on the Individual Responsibility in Attaining the Common Good

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Abstract

Jacques Maritain on his perspective of the individual's responsibility in attaining the common good is a study that is set at exposing the responsibility of the individual person in attaining the common good which he sees as the good life of the entire community. To know what the common good and the individual responsibility is, it is important that we examine what the common good means to Maritain, and his own perspective about the individual person and the responsibility of the individual person towards the attainment of the common good. We adopt expository and analytical method by reviewing revenant works that pertains to this discussion and including Maritain's work. The purpose is to establish the individual responsibility, obligation towards attaining the common good. This study concludes that the individual should be engaged or participate in promoting the common good by making individual sacrifices, seeking to be virtuous and following after justice. This means that the individual is the unit that can orchestrate the status of any given society for it is the only thing that can determine the feasibility of the good life.

Keywords: Common Good, Individuality, Justice, Personality and Responsibility.

Introduction

The idea of the Common Good has been an underpinning socio-political and philosophical colloguy for centuries as various thinkers since from time immemorial tend to make contribution to its development. Ancient philosophers in the likes of Plato on his idea of a "Common Good in polities and society." On his own work titled "The Republic", Aristotle who also built his own ideas on Plato's ideas and formed the concept of "the Common Interest" in his work titled "Nicomachean Ethics" and "Politics". Socrates also being a character in Plato's Republic contended that the essence of society and politics is the same as the reason for flourishing human being – to be ruled by reason and some for the common good. Cicero, a Roman philosopher in his work an "On the Commonwealth" and "On Duties" also emphasizes on the concept of the common good in the context of societal well-being and civic responsibility. There are many other philosophers I believe that might not have directly used the term "Common Good" but indirectly contributed to it attainment and attaining it denotes responsibility that should be carried out. This pursuit in contemporary time remains a critical concern, precisely in the face global challenges such as social injustice, inequality and environmental degradation. Another philosopher, who is also our major point of interest that made significant contribution to this discussion of the common good is Jacques Maritain a Catholic fresh philosopher for his work on Thomistic Philosophy and its application on modern

Maritain's notion on the common good stresses the magnitude of individual responsibility in obtaining on achieving societal well-being. According to Maritain individuals are morally obliged to contribute to the common good, merely not only as a collective body of individual in a society but as a distributed individually unit of individual interest for human improvement or growth. This standpoint stirs up vital questions regarding the nature individual responsibility, civic engagements, and the relationship that exist between personal virtue and the common good. Most society basically associated the idea of common good with state responsibility, and in this context, when I say 'state' I mean government, situation where the attainment of the common good is embedded only in the shoulder of the government but his study is more than that as it clearly will show if through Maritain's thought.

Despite Maritain's relevance ideas to contemporary debates and contributions, a need for nuanced examination of his perspective on individual responsibility in attaining the common good is necessary. This study will be directed towards making this necessary examination of Maritain's philosophical framework and its implications for understanding the individual agent and collective well-being.

As we proceed to examining Maritain's though on this subject matter,. This inquiry resorts to contribute to ongoing discussions in fields such as ethics, civic engagement and political philosophy, giving insights into how the individual person is giving a role to work towards the common good and also for work collectively.

The concept of the common good in our modern societies is a matter of great recognition and is common almost in every society laying out grieves regarding the non-conducive nature of their society, a society that doesn't promote the common good so one is tempted to ask, what should be responsible in promoting the common good" is the individual also responsible for promoting the common good? Is this only the state (government) responsibility? There

remaining a disconnect between theoretical discussions of common good and the practical responsibilities of individuals in achieving of. Since Jacques Maritain's philosophical framework offers valuable insights into the relationship between the individual and the common good as could be found in one of his work "The Person and The common Good." What is the common good to Jacques Maritain? Is the common good something only materialistic or transcendental? What do we mean by the term "individual" to Maritain? In his work "The Person and the Common Good", he made a distinction between the "individual person" and the "individual", so what is the individual person and the "individual? Of what relevance is the common good in modern society or to the individual? And most importantly, what is the individual responsibility in achieving this common good? we are to introduce Maritain's philosophical framework as a valuable resource for explaining this issues.

The purpose of this study is to analyze and examine Jacques Maritain's philosophical perspective on the individual responsibility in achieving the common good. Other than this, we are to also explore his concept of the common good and its relevance to the individual. We are to investigate his idea of the infidel and the individual person and also see how relevant the idea of the common good can affect the individual and the individual person. We are to also examine Maritain's view on the moral and philosophical base of individual's responsibility in attaining the common good. By exploring his thought on this subject matter, this article seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the relationship between the individual and the common good, and to shed light on ways in which the individuals can work in togetherness towards the common good.

This study will make use of expository, textual and analytical approach to explore Jacques Maritain's understanding on the individual responsibility in attaining the common good. A close reading and analysis of Maritain's works, including other relevant works, articles and essays to obtain a comprehensive understanding of his philosophical though on this matter.

We are to employ the analytical method to critically evaluate Maritain's idea, examining the strength and weakness of his argument. This analysis will also involve the contrasting and company of Maritain's thought with other relevant works in other to situate his ideas within a broader intellectual context.

This study cannot be overemphasized as the study is built on individual responsibility and the common good. This study gives a lot of insight on civic engagements, where the individual is ethical and politically employ to contribute individual or carry out his or her own moral obligations for the attainment of the common good. Our modern society today has undergably places too much emphasis on the government responsibility for attaining the common good which the lay man simply tag as good living among individual and have, forgotten that there is an individual responsibility, an individual role or obligation that is to be carried out to attain this good living.

The same way people see having good children with good behaviors as the only evident for good parenting, forgetting that good presenting alone doesn't guarantee one with good and well behaved children but rather children also doing and knowing individually to doing what is right. This study will bring to light the responsibility of individual in attaining the common good, it will expose to our individual sense of responsibility and redirect our mindset as individuals, policy marking and community leaders seeking to promote civic engagement and

collective flourishing.

Maritain's thought on the common good remains relevant today offering a philosophical framework for addressing pressing issues such as social inequality, environmental degradation and community fragmentation.

This study will also contribute to ongoing discussions in ethics, civic engagement and political philosophy, bringing into light the complex relationship between individual agency and common good.

Jacques Maritain's Perspective on the Common Good What is the Common Good?

When we use the phrase 'Common Good', what do we understand by it? Before we talk about Maritain's own perspective on the phrase 'Common', it uphold very significant to have a common view by what the phrase 'Common Good' is.

When we say something is common; according to Merriam Webster Dictionary, it means: "relating to community at large", "known to the community", "a belonging to or shared by two or more individuals or things or by all members of the a group." The simple sense about this definition is that for something to be a thing that is shared among individuals of a group.

The term 'Good' also according to the Merriam Webster Dictionary which is defined contextually is something that is "virtuous", "right", "something that is beneficial". As one can tend to not be ambiguous and also not to be relative because the idea of the term good is a huge theme that could be conceived relatively by different minds but on the context of this study, we will be objective by accepting that 'good' simply means something that is positive, moral, beneficial, something that promote well-being, foster community, and support justice. Therefore, if we being the term 'common' and 'good' to have the phrase 'Common Good' we may say that common good is a well-being, moral, beneficial thing that is shared among individuals.

As Aristotle himself in the *Nicomachean Ethics* says that "good is a man's own possession which cannot easily be taken away from him." Which means Aristotle believes that the good of man is something that belongs to the nature of man. This nature of man for Aristotle is something that is tending towards, the final perfection. The good therefor for Aristotle has a teleological character.

To further analyze the nature of the good of man, Aristotle argues that just as the goodness and the performance of a flute player, a sculptor, or any kind of expert, and generally of anyone who fulfils some function or performs some action, are thought to reside in his proper function, so the goodness and performance of man would seem to reside in whatever is his proper function. Since if seems natural that all things have their proper function. Aristotle raises the question as to whether it would be possible that while a carpenter and a shoemaker have their proper functions and spheres of actin, man as a man has none, but was left by nature "a good for nothing without function" (*Ethics* 1095), just as the eye, and hand, he foot, and in general each part of the body has its own proper function, it is only reasonable that men as a rational being has some function over and above the functions of his parts. What can this function possible be? Just living? Man shares that even with plants.

The life of growth and nutrition must be excluded since common with other living things. Next is the life of perceptions, but this too, man has in common with horses and ox, and every animal. The only thing according to Aristotle that seems to set man apart from all other living things is an active part of Rational Element. This rational element has two parts, one is rational because it obeys the rule of reason while the other part possesses and conceives rational rules.

Here Aristotle vividly shows that, that which distinguished man forms all other forms of animal is Rationality (Intellect and Will). The proper function of man therefore is the right exercise of rationality. This confirms his position when he said "the proper function of man, then, consists in an activity of the soul in conformity with a rational principle" (Ethics 1098). Just as the harpist sets high standards for himself and seeks to attain his goal of being a good and excellent harpist, so the function or the common goal of man is to achieve in his life as a man. In conclusion, Aristotle says that since "every art and every inquiry, and similarly, every action and pursuit is thought to aim at some good; for this reason the good has rightly been declared to be that of which all things" (Ethics).

For Plato, he identified the common good with the total virtue of the citizenry. His analysis was based on the primacy of the Polis (state or city), over the citizen. However there is one thing we must always keep in mind and that thing is the "Individual" which is fundamentally the essence of this article. Plato's primary concern and his idea of the common good is the virtue of the Polis, sop as one agree with him, it is important we put in mind that the polis (state or city) is made up of families which consist of individual and this is vital to comprehending Maritain's thought. Plato's argument is that it is the polis that has been divinely sanctioned by Herme's gift of justice and reverence. The individual person for Plato has worth and dignity only by he lives within a political community that is interracially just. The common good for Plato therefore is the virtuous life of the entire community. Whatever thing that encourages or promotes this virtuous life of the community, e.g. justice, laws, are considered as common goods – the goods of the community (Republic 464-465). Unlike Plato who made the man subordinate, Aristotle places primacy on man and the community or society is only at the service of man for the attainment of his end.

St. Augustine view of the common good is theological. He believes peace to be the common good of man. For him, the common good whose common pursuit incorporates men together into a people, is absolutely restricted to those who are subject to God and who live religiously. He insists that "the bon common nature3 makes all human beings one" (*The City of God* Ch. 2). His concerns for the world community made him to desire peace as the common good of human society. Notwithstanding, since the passions prevalent to human beings have resulted to many chaos, he therefore called on the political community to seek peace by believing in God and living according to his commands. Thus, for Augustine, God is primarily the common good, that is to be sought by all and form him peace and all other goods will be derived.

Thomas Aquinas in the *Summa Theologica*, "everything is called good form the divine goodness, as form the first exemplary effective and final principle of all goodness". For Aquinas, "nothing is good unless it is a likeness to and a participation in the highest good" whom he believe is God. Aquinas believes that the characteristic of a good ruler is one that is primarily concern to establish a virtuous life in the multitude, subject to him. The reason for this is that, by nature "men from a group for the purpose of living well together" (*Summa Theologica*)

90). Undoubtedly we can say that both Aquinas and Augustine share the same notion of God as the highest Common Good form whom human beings are to draw their goodness. Like Aristotle and Aquinas, the virtuous life of an individual citizen is a necessary condition for the necessity of the common good for the individual and the human society.

From the perspective of these mentioned philosophers, it can clearly say that we at least have an idea of what the common good is. One thing we should note as we proceed is that "the Common Good", is different from "Common Good." In other words, the phrase "Common Good" doesn't mean something as the phrase "the Common Good". When we look back at Plato's perspective regarding the common good, he said that whatever enhances or promote the virtuous life of the community e.g. justice, laws etc. are considered as common goods. Plato as earlier mentioned believes that the common good is the virtuous life of the entire community. In these sense common good is not the common good but that which promotes or helps towards "The Common Good" attainment. At this point it will be just enough for us to move unto Jacques Maritain's perspective of the Common Good.

Comprehending the ideas of Maritain on the notion of the common good is secondary so to understand his ideas of the common good, it is primary that we understand his views of the individual person because he tied the common good to the idea of the individual person. We are going to gradually move from his conception of the individual person to the common good and then finally, the responsibility of the individual person towards the common good. In other words, knowing the Maritain's perspective of what he conceives as the individual person is a prerequisite to grasping his views on the notion of the common good.

Individuality and Personality

When we look at the work of Maritain's *The Person and The Common Good,* he asked the question, "is not the person the self?" "is not my person myself?" (31) and this leaves us with a contradiction to which this term and notion of self-give rise.

Pascal believes that "the self is detestable" (Pascal 49) which means that the self can self-centered, imperious and vile, like some could say "I don't like others". In this sense, we might construe personality to consist in self-realization achieved at the expense of others. This personality implies a definite form of selfishness. In contrast to Pascal that, "the self is detestable." The words of St. Thomas comes to mind; "The person is that which is most noble and most perfect in all of nature" (Pascal, 49)

Whereas Pascal teaches that "the self is detestable", St. Thomas teaches that whomsoever loves God must love himself for the sake of God, must love his own soul and body with a love of charity (selflessness). These two asserserous leaves us with a contradiction, so what does this contradiction mean? According to Maritain, it means that "the human being is caught between two poles", a material pole, which in reality does not concern the true personality but rather the shadow of personality or what in the strict sense is called individuality, and a spiritual pole, which does concern true personality. This means that what Pascal refers to as "the self is detestable" is the individual, the material pole. St. Thomas expression on the contrary refers to the spiritual pole, the person, source of liberty and bountifulness. Thus we are confronted with the dissociation between individuality and personality.

Individuality according to Maritain refers to the material, egoistic and biological aspect of the human nature. It is defined by desires, needs and the individuals own interest. While personality places signifies interiority to self. And because it is the spirit in man which takes him, in contrast to the plant and animal, beyond the threshold of indeed of interiority to oneself. It requires the communication of knowledge and love. By the very fact that each of us is a person and expresses himself to himself, each of us requires communication with other and the others in the order of knowledge and love. Personality, of its essence requires a dialogue in which souls really communicate. Personality as the spiritual, rational mind moral aspect of human nature is directly related to the absolute, for only in the absolute is he able to enjoy its full sufficiency. Its spiritual homeland is the whole universe of the absolute and of those indefectible goods which are as the pathways to the absolute whole which transcends the world.

This means that in our description there are two metaphysical aspects of the human being, individuality and personality, together with their proper ontological features. To avoid misunderstanding Maritain's view, we must note or emphasize that they are not two separate things. There is not in me one reality, called my individual, and in another sense, a person. Our whole being is an individual by reason of that in us which derives from matter and a person by reason of that in us which derives from spirit.

Having known the Maritain's notion of personality and individuality, we will now move to what he perceives as the common and also the responsibility of the individual person in attaining it.

One thing that is necessary to note is that we cannot separate the idea of the common good form the individual person and society since nothing will be conceived as Common Good without individuals or society. So therefore, form Jacques Maritain's idea, we are going to proceed gradually form how and why the individual tends to find himself in a society, the common good and what the individual person is meant to do in the process of attaining the common good. This now brings us to the question of why is it that the person, as person, seeks to live in society? For Maritain, "it does so, first, because of its very perfections, as person, and its inner urge to the communications of knowledge and love which require relationship with other person. In its radical generosity, the human person funds to every law into social communications in response to the law of super abundance inscribed in the death of being, life, intelligence and love" (Maritain 47). It does so secondly because "of its needs or deficiencies, which derive from its material individuality" (Maritain 48). In this respect, unless it is integrated in a body of social communications, it cannot attain the fullness of its life and accomplishment. Society therefore in this sense appears to provide the human person with just those conditions of existence and development which it needs. The individual person by itself alone cannot reach its plentitude but by receiving essential goods form society.

We are not just taking about his material needs of cloths, bread, and shelter, for which man requires the help of his fellowmen, but also, and above all, of the help which he ought to be given to do the world of reason and virtue, which responds to the specific feature of his being. To reach a certain degree of elevation in knowledge as well as a certain degree of perfection in moral life man needs an education and the help of other men. He believes that reason requires development through character training, education and the cooperation of other men and thus, society is indispensable to the accomplishment of human dignity. This brings us to his idea of

the common good since every individual person requires a good form other fellow men for the development and flourishing.

For Maritain, "The common good is common because it is received in person, each one of whom is as a mirror of the whole" (Maritain 49). Maritain made a distinction of public good and a common good by using the Bee Hives for the continuous function of a hive is a public good and not a common good, that is, a good received and communicated. He therefore concluded that, the end of society, therefore is neither the individual good nor the collection of the individual goods, of each of the persons who constitute it for in conserving the end of society as the individual good or the common good would amount to either a frankly anarchistic conception, or the old disguised anarchistic of individualistic materialism. This aspect only supports the individual pole of his conception of the individuality and annihilates the spiritual part of man.

The end of society is the good of the community, of the social body but not a common good of human persons. The common good of the city is neither the mere collection of private goods, nor the proper good of a whole which like the species with respect to its individuals or the hive with respect to its bees in that just like, some bees life are being sacrificed for this function of the hive, same goes with societies whose government have made decisions that resulted to sacrificing individuals for the flourishing of the society. So the end of society cannot be the common good. The common good for Maritain is the "good human life" of the multitude of person; if their common in good living. It is thereof common to both the whole and the parts into which it flows back and which, it turn (Pascal 52).

Thus, that which constitutes the common good of political society is not only: the collection of public commodities and services – the roads, pots, schools, etc., which the organization of common life presupposes; a sound fiscal condition of the state and its military power; the body of just laws, good customs and wise institutions, which provide the nation with its structure; the heritage of its great historical remembrances, its symbols and its glories, its living traditions and cultural treasures. The common good includes all of these and something much more besides, something more profound, more concrete and more human. For it includes also, and above all, the whole sum itself of these3; a sum which is quite different from a simple collection of juxtaposed units. (Even in the mathematical order, as Aristotle points out, 6 is not the same as 3 + 3). It includes the sum or sociological integration of all the civic conscience, political virtues and sense of right and liberty, of all the activity, material prosperity and spiritual riches, of unconsciously operative hereditary wisdom, of moral rectitude, justice, friendship, happiness, virtue and heroism in the individual lives of its members. For these things all are, in a certain measure, *communicable* and so revert to each member, helping him to perfect his life and liberty of person. They all constitute the good human life of the multitude.

Let us note in passing that the common good is not only a system of advantages and utilities but also a rectitude of life, an end, good in itself or, as the Ancients expressed it, a *bonum honestum*. For, on the one hand, to assure the existence of the multitude is something morally good in itself; on the other hand, the existence, thus assure, must be the just and morally good existence of the community. Only on condition that it is according to justice and moral goodness is the common good what it is, namely, the good of a people and a city, rather than of a mob of gangsters and murderers. For this reason, perfidy, the scorn of treaties and the sworn oath,

political assassination and unjust war, even though they be useful to a government and procure some fleeting advantages for the peoples who make use of them, tend by their nature as political acts, acts involving in some degree the common action, to the destruction of the common good.

The common good is something ethically good. Included in it, as an essential element, is the maximum possible development, here and now, of the persons making up the united multitude to the end of forming a people, organized not by force alone but by justice. Then and finally, the individual responsibility in attaining their common good.

We have emphasized the sociability of the person and the properly human nature of the common good. We have seen that it is a good according to the requirements of justice; that it must flow back upon person and not merely the society, and that it includes, as its principle where, the access of persons to their liberty of expansion. What then can the individual do to achieve this? According to Jacques Maritain, we cannot remove the idea of the common good from the individual person because the common good implies that the whole man is engaged in it. To him, for the common good to be achievable then individual to commit their lives, properties and honour (Maritain 54)

Individuals must commit their lives, properties and honour. He believes the society of person is not like any comparative where some persons shift responsibility to others of the cooperative or association. For him, every man must commit his lives, property and honour. This means that everything that is term as good must be practiced by each individuals where we use the term 'good', according to Maritain is that it must be ethical, it must be moral.

This means that individual should channel their energy and work towards enhancing the good life of the multitude, and not just their individual good except such individual good is communicable between the individual and the community. It can involve making sacrifices for the community but only when it is necessary for the promotion of the good life of the community and these sacrifices can only be done freely without any form of coercion.

Prioritizing justice is another way in which any individual can contribute to the attainment of the common good which is the good life of the community. The good life of the community is not achievable by force but by justice. Creating a just society where the needs of all members are considered. We cannot necessarily say a society is just without having just individuals in that society so the idea of having a just society without individuals who have taken it upon themselves to live virtuous and just life is like trying to fill a basket with water.

Individuals must seek after rightness that is shaped by morality. Aside ethics: Maritain highlighted the significance of virtue and moral character in achieving the common good. To him, individuals must cultivate virtues such as justice, temperance and prudence to make decisions that promotes the common good.

To make this more clearer, let's take Niger Delta University to be a community, a community that comprises of lecturers, administrative bodies and students. And let's take the Moto of this university to be the "The Common Good" of the community. The Moto is "Creativity, Excellence, and Services" and the common good to be producing creative and excellent student that are willing to serve or willing to be of service to humanity. The question is; how will this community produce creative and excellent student? Someone can say; to produce excellent and creative student, the community being the university must have creative and excellent

Lecturers which is right. Someone else can say that the administrative bodies in this community must also prove themselves to be excellent at their jobs and this is also right by making sure that they provide all that the community needs e.g. books, skill etc. and anything that promote learning. Now the question is, does having creative and excellent lecturers, administrative bodies and all the required facilities need to promote learning guarantees the community of having creative and excellent student? The answer is NO! Why? Because there also has to be a student who is individually willing to learn and attain this goal. We cannot deny the fact that having all that it takes can play a good role in achieving the common goal of the community but everything rests on the individual student. There can be good excellent lecturers and the student can choose not to learn, not to read or partake in anything that will enhance this goal. This clearly can help us understand what the individual responsibility is all about in attaining the common good (good life of the community).

Conclusion

In a nutshell, our study was focused on Jacques Maritain perspective on the responsibility of the individual in attaining the common good. Which we started by first giving a view of what the common good is. For Aristotle, reason is the common good at as it is the only thing that differentiate us from other living beings. For Plato, the common good is the virtuous life of the entire community. For Augustine sees the common good of society as peace but however due to the resultant war among men as a result of the passions of human beings, he went further to say that God is primarily the common good that is to be sought by all men from and peace and all other good things will be derived and Thomas Aquinas also shared same view. Moving to Maritain, he believes that the common good is the good life of the entire community and to achieve this, every individual must participate in promoting the common good.

As the study was centered on trying to know the individual responsibility in attaining the common good, I come to realize on the importance of the individual person in nay giving society. The relevance and role an individual play at any point in time in a society is non-negotiable.

Most times in our modern society, where the common good is mere conceived to be the end of society or anything we can think about, we place more emphasis on the State as being the only thing that can bring the realization of the common good into reality and thereby forgetting our own individual role.

The study made me to realize that society is not society without individual units that made it up. So if we find ourselves in a society where common goods are not being achieved or the common good is becoming a thing of illusion then the only question that is expected to be asked is; are the individuals seeking towards it? Maritain believes that the individual must seek after virtue and justice so therefore the individuals and the rightness is a prerequisite to the attainment of good governance or good life and happiness in any society.

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