

On the Purpose of the State: Continuity and Change in Political Theories

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I. INTRODUCTION

What do contemporary political philosophers mean when they claim that the purpose of the state is the *good life*? Do they accept Aristotle's idea that the political community is able to bring about the happiness of its citizens? Or do they agree with Cicero's characterization of the state as a *res publica*? Many contemporary authors discuss the *common good* as the purpose of the state. Do they agree with Thomas Aquinas's interpretation of it? Liberal philosophers appeal to this concept as well, and communitarian philosophers also adopt a notion of the common good according to their views. Other authors opt for the idea of *general interest*.

In this paper two questions will be discussed. First, what has remained the same and what has changed in the interpretations offered by philosophers of the purpose of the state? In answering this question, I shall consider the ideas of Aristotle, Cicero, Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, and also of modern political philosophers. Second, how does Jacques Maritain's idea of the common good fit into the normative discourse on the purpose of the state?

II. ARISTOTLE'S IDEA OF THE GOOD LIFE

Let me start with Aristotle's well-known definition of the city-state:

The partnership finally composed of several villages is the city-state; it has at last attained the limit of virtually complete self-sufficiency, and thus, while it comes into existence for the sake of life, it exists for the good life. Hence every city-state exists by nature,

inasmuch as the first partnerships so exist; for the city-state is the end of the other partnerships (*Polit.*, 1252b27-32).¹

According to Aristotle, the *polis* was a natural institution (*physei*) because human beings and other partnerships, in accordance with their nature, realized themselves in it. Individuals, families and villages cannot maintain themselves. Therefore, he writes: '[T]he city-state is prior in nature to the household and to each of us individually (*Polit.*, 1253a17-18). He did not mean that the polis is ontologically and historically prior to the individual—on the contrary. However, the natural priority of the state is based on its self-sufficiency. Although the *polis* exists by nature, nature does not prescribe how it should be organized. Therefore, the state should also be organized. So, Aristotle extended his idea of the *polis* that exists by nature with the idea that it is a human invention (*nomooi*) as well.

I wish next to turn to the question: how is the purpose of the state, i.e., the good life of its citizens, to be understood. Aristotle writes:

Every state is as we see a sort of partnership, and every partnership is formed with a view to some good (since all the actions of all mankind are done with a view to what they think to be good). It is therefore evident that, while all partnerships aim at some good, the partnership that is the most supreme of all and includes all the others does so most of all, and aims at the most supreme of all goods; and this is the partnership entitled the state, the political association (*Polit.*, 1252a1-7).

Aristotle acknowledges that the purpose of the state is to achieve the supreme good for its citizens, that is, their true well-being.² This does not mean that the citizens have a subjective feeling that life pleases them, but that they have good reasons to consider and evaluate the state of their well-being. This state is one in which all actions which people consider to be good are done. Therefore, he argues: "For even though it be the case that the Good is the same for the individual and for the state, nevertheless, the good of the state is manifestly a greater and more perfect good, both to attain and to preserve" (*NE* 1094b7-8).³ The state seeks this supreme good in accordance with the practice of virtues, in particular the virtue of justice. Thus, the virtue of a legislator is to make just laws. The

¹ Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. H. Rackman in *Aristotle in Twenty-Three Volumes*, Vol. XXI, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1990).

² See E. Telfer, *Happiness* (London: Macmillan Press, 1980), pp. 37-39.

³ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. H. Rackham, Vol. XIX, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1990 edition).

virtue of a citizen is to practice justice: he should obey the laws of the *polis* and acquit himself of his civic duties that enable him to achieve his destination according to his nature: to live in the *polis*.

Concerning the leading virtue of the *polis*, Aristotle argues: "It is clear then that those constitutions that aim at the common advantage are in effect rightly framed in accordance with absolute justice, while those that aim at the rulers' own advantage only are faulty, and are all of them deviations from the right constitutions; for they have an element of despotism, whereas a city is a partnership of free men" (*Polit.*, 1279a17-21). Aristotle did not romanticize people's lives in the *polis*, "for appetite [for pleasure, wealth or honor] is in its nature unlimited, and the majority of mankind live for the satisfaction of appetite" (*Polit.*, 1267b4, also *NE* 1095a 20-25). Most people are only interested in their own pleasure, wealth and honor. They do not care for the common good unless they benefit by it.

The same point about selfishness arises in his discussion of three true forms of government: kingship, aristocracy, and timocracy (a form of government in which power is widely and evenly spread between citizens who satisfy a property qualification), and three corresponding perversions, tyranny, oligarchy, and democracy or demagoguery (*Polit.*, 1289a26-29).⁴ These are perversions because in each case either a king, or powerful people, or another social class, wants to enrich themselves at the cost of others. And his conclusion is: "[N]one of these forms governs with regard to the profit of the community" (*Polit.*, 1279b9-10).

Aristotle acknowledged that one form of government is more suitable for a particular state than for another. However, whatever form of government exists, he insists on one criterion: "[Where the laws do not govern there is no constitution, as the law ought to govern all things while the magistrates control particulars, and we ought to judge this to be constitutional government" (*Polit.*, a-34). Therefore, in Aristotle's discussion of the state, there is no talk of any despotism of the government. However, he also states that the law of the state prescribes certain forms of conduct: "[T]he conduct of a brave man, for example not to desert one's post, not to run away, not to throw down one's arms; that of a temperate man, for example not to commit adultery or outrage; that of a gentle man, not to speak evil; and so with actions exemplifying the rest of the virtues and vices, commanding these and forbidding these—rightly if the law has been rightly enacted, not so well if it has been made at random" (*NE* b-25).

Many critics of Aristotle agree that this text indicates a far-reaching competence of the law: it covers all public and private aspects of human life. However, D.J. Allen objects to this totalitarian interpretation of the law, and

⁴ See J. O. Urmson, *Aristotle's Ethics* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), p. 111.

rightly so, because Aristotle never had in mind a totalitarian polis.⁵ Moreover, the law creates a framework within which virtues can be practiced, as well as a framework for dealing with misconduct. The law does not require behavior according to virtues, but its intent is to promote an outwardly honest life in the citizens without taking into consideration the moral motive. Allen concludes that in Aristotle's view the law contains minimum claims, and that it is limited to outward behavior concerning the good life.⁶

So, Aristotle did not support any kind of despotic government. He did not sacrifice individual citizens to the state. According to Allen, he defended civic freedom. For this reason some scholars have argued that the Aristotelian ideas of civic freedom, and the function of the state to promote the good life, are consistent with Locke's liberal ideas of freedom and the state,⁷ to which I now turn.

III. LOCKE'S IDEA OF THE COMMON GOOD

John Locke argued that human beings are originally equal and independent. Originally, in the state of nature, the law of reason teaches mankind that human beings have the unassailable rights of life, liberty, and property (§ 6).⁸ However, in the state of nature there are not only people who want to obey the law of reason but also others who offend against this law. These people endanger peace and safety in society. According to Locke, only the state could offer a just remedy against this harmful side of the state of nature. The precondition of this remedy, however, is that the state must uphold certain restrictions which make it more preferable for human beings to live within the state than in the state of nature. This means that the state should regulate through laws the unassailable rights of human beings (§§ 13, 87, 129-130).

Locke argued that there is only one basis on which human being can surrender these rights, and accept the state: to make strict agreements with others so that all who enjoy their life, freedom and possessions, do not become victims of arbitrariness, and can live together in peace (§ 95). He had in mind that these agreements should be laid down in a social contract that would be the basis of

⁵ See D. J. Allen, "Individual and State in the *Ethics und Politics*", in R. Stark, *et al* (eds.), *Entretiens sur l'antiquité classique*, Vol. XI: *La 'Politique' d'Aristotele*, (Geneva: Foundation Hardt, 1965), pp. 63-64.

⁶ See *ibid.*, p. 69.

⁷ See D. B. Rasmussen and D. J. Den Uyl, *Liberty and Nature: An Aristotelian Defense of Liberal Order* (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1991), pp. 131-132.

⁸ See John Locke, *The Second Treatise of Government*, ed. P. Laslett, *Two Treatises of Government* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988). All paragraph references are to this work.

each government (§§ 99, 106). Moreover, the law of reason underlies this contract and the laws of the state, and of these laws he writes:

For *Law*, in its true Notion, is not so much the Limitation as *the direction of a free and intelligent Agent* to his proper Interest, and prescribes no farther than is for the general Good of those under that Law . . . [T]he end of the Law is . . . *to preserve and to enlarge Freedom* (§ 57).

So, Locke seems to identify freedom and other unassailable rights of citizens as the common good or the ultimate purpose of the law. However, he also mentions the safety of society: to live in peace together. "For all the power the Government has, being only for the good of the Society . . . it ought to be exercised by *established and promulgated Laws*" (§ 137). So, Locke seems to discuss also the collective good as the ultimate purpose of the law (§ 165).

There is something confusing in Locke's argument. On the one hand, he focuses on the unassailable rights of citizens as the ultimate purpose of the state that he calls the common good. On the other hand, he focuses on the overall good of the people as the ultimate purpose of the state that he also calls the common good. Consequently, unassailable rights should be restricted by laws for the sake of the peace and safety of society. On the other hand, this good of society should be restricted for the sake of those rights. In my opinion, it is too easy to conclude that "the common good of the political community is a set of legal conditions which are determined by the individual's natural rights and thus governs the procedures that individuals use in fashioning a worthwhile existence for themselves."⁹ I conclude that there is an antinomy in Locke's political theory.

This antinomy was not inherent in Aristotle's political philosophy. He acknowledged civic freedom within the bounds of the laws of the state. He rejected a despotic or totalitarian state. Yet, he upheld an absolutist idea of the state, i.e., the *polis* was the most supreme community in which human beings could achieve happiness and perfection, and the ultimate destination of their lives. So a human being is in last resort no more than a part of the *polis*. Citizens are striving to obtain that which they think good but the state embraces all these strivings, and it determines the good life for its citizens.

Locke rejected the idea that the state would be the most supreme community by, and within which, the good life could be achieved. He suspected that the state could easily enlarge its power over citizens, i.e., the danger that the government would claim to promote the common good of the state at the cost

⁹ D. B. Rasmussen and D. J. Den Uyl, *Liberty and Nature*, p. 141.

of the freedom of individual citizens. For the sake of elaborating on this fear, we must turn now to Cicero's view of the good life.

IV. CICERO'S IDEA OF *RES PUBLICA*

Unlike Aristotle, Cicero held that the state did not primarily arise because human beings are not self-sufficient, but rather because they have a social nature by virtue of reason (*Off.*, I, 12).¹⁰ Due to their social nature human beings live in communities to achieve their true human existence and to share their happiness. Therefore, the state or another community has its own inherent value. As in friendship, love is the inherent value, so in the state the law (*iuris consensus*) is the inherent value. In this connection law does not mean the text of a law but justice (*Rep.* III, 27). He gives the following definition of the state (*Rep.*, I, 25):

[A] commonwealth is the property of a people. But a people is not any collection of human beings brought together in any sort of way, but an assemblage of people in large numbers associated in an agreement with respect to justice and a partnership for the common good.¹¹

In this definition Cicero does not speak only of justice as the purpose of the state, but also of the common good. The primary task of governors should be characterized by a supreme insight of justice in order to achieve the common good (*Rep.*, I, 26, 34).

Cicero connected this task of governors with another characteristic of the state, namely that the *res publica* is a *res populi* (i.e., the affairs and interests of the *populus*), and that all citizens should share in the administration (*Rep.*, I, 27). This does not mean that the mob should take control (*Rep.* III, 45).¹² According to him, this participation requires the authority of the government to be delegated to the most capable citizens. Moreover, in accordance with human nature, less capable people should trust their governors. Both the governors' achievement of the common good, and the natural trust of the people, were a necessary constituent of the state (*Rep.*, I, 41-43).¹³ Thus, Cicero defended a mixed form of government: a mixture of aristocracy and democracy.

¹⁰ Cicero, *De Officiis*, trans. W. Miller in *Cicero in Twenty-Eight Volumes*. Vol. XXI, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1990 edition).

¹¹ Cicero, *De Re Publica*, trans. C. W. Keynes, in *Cicero in Twenty-Eight Volumes* Vol. XVI, 1988 edition.

¹² See M. Schofield, "Cicero's Definition of Res Publica," ed. J. G. F. Powell, *Cicero the Philosopher: Twelve Papers* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), pp. 72-75.

¹³ See *ibid.*, pp. 77-81.

According to Cicero, through the state and within it human beings may achieve the meaning and perfection of their lives. People who offend against the laws of the state should be punished by the government, but, what is even worse, they punish themselves because they diminish their own happiness. Moreover, although Cicero certainly was opposed to tyranny, there is in his political theory in the last resort no constitutional limitation of the power of the governor, i.e., it is not obvious just what the people are entitled to do against his abuse of power, or how bad the abuse must be before the resistance of the people is justified, or who is to act in their behalf in doing it. The unity and power of the *res publica*, as taught by natural law, prescribes governors and citizens to do their duties. However, it was personified by the supreme governor who had authority to dispose over the life and death of his subjects, and to determine their happiness.

In this connection there is a striking parallel between the main line of Cicero's argument and the main lines of Rousseau's and Marx's political theory. Like Cicero, both Rousseau and Marx took their starting-point from the idea of the state as constituted by citizens, but they came to opposite conclusions.

V. ROUSSEAU'S IDEA OF GENERAL INTEREST

Jean-Jacques Rousseau begins his essay *On the Social Contract* with the normative idea that human beings are born free, and, he continues, everywhere in the actual political society they are in chains (I, 1).¹⁴ He argues that this bondage is against the proper nature of human beings. The aim of his essay is (I, 6) to:

[f]ind a form of association that defends and protects the person and goods of each associate with all the common force, and by means of which each one, uniting with all, nevertheless obeys only himself and remains as free as before.

Rousseau characterized this association as a social contract. He continued by saying that, if properly understood, all clauses of this contract come down to a single one: the total alienation of each associate, with all his rights, to the whole community. "Each of us puts his person and all his power in common under the supreme direction of the general will, and in a body we receive each member as an indivisible part of the whole" (I, 6). According to Rousseau, this act of association produces a moral body that he characterized as the "common *self*," and that he called the state. Since citizens constitute this moral unity of the

¹⁴ See Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *On the Social Contract* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1978).

state, it should be impossible that a citizen would have other interests than this body of which he is a part and which determines his identity as a citizen.

However, since in the state individuals may have private interests differing from, or contrary to, the general will and the general interest, the social contract includes the following engagement: “[W]hoever refuses to obey the general will shall be constrained to do so by the entire body; which means only that he will be forced to be free” (I, 7).

The most important consequence of the social contract is that the general will of the moral body of the state is determined by its end, that which Rousseau called the general interest or common good (I, 7; II, 1). Therefore, the laws of the state ought to be in accordance with the general will. These laws are always general, that is, they deal with subjects as a body, and never as individuals with their private interests. Elaborating his ideas on the state, he makes clear that for the sake of achieving the general interest or the common good the social contract “gives the body politic absolute power over all his members” (II, 4). In consequence, Rousseau’s ideas of the state and the general interest are, like Cicero’s, totalitarian.

VI. MARX’S IDEA OF THE COMMON ESSENCE

According to Karl Marx, the state was the culprit of a society based on selfishness, because as an institution of power, it favored the private interests of economically and politically powerful people. As such, the state sanctioned class contrasts and promoted class-struggle. Contrariwise, the society should be organized on a constitutional basis and as a true community, or as the “common essence” serving the general interest.¹⁵ This normative view of the state could be achieved only by eliminating the contrast between civil society and the state or between private and general interests. Because of these contrasts citizens were living in two separate worlds. On the one hand, they were citizens of the state and as such they should be concentrating on the general and just interest. On the other hand, they were citizens of the civil society in which everyone was striving only after his private interests. Marx wanted to unmask this civil society as an unjust reality, because it represented a denial of true human dignity. Although the liberal states of his time had achieved political emancipation of many citizens they had not achieved at all the true and complete human emancipation, according to Marx.¹⁶

¹⁵ See Karl Marx, “On the Jewish Question,” ed. D. McLellan, *Karl Marx: Selected Writings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 47.

¹⁶ See also Karl Marx, “Toward a Critique of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*: Introduction,” in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, p. 73.

Marx had the opinion that human beings as social and moral beings ought to achieve their identity within the state as their "common essence." On the other hand, after the revolution of the proletariat, and by its dictatorship, the state would be reorganized as a true community so that it could achieve its purpose of the "common essence" of all citizens, that is, their common well-being. Just like Cicero and Rousseau, Marx had in mind an ideal state, and he acknowledged also that it could be achieved only by a totalitarian government.

VII. AUGUSTINE'S IDEA OF *RES PUBLICA*

One of the most important critics of Cicero's definition of the state and of the political situation of the Roman empire was St. Augustine.¹⁷ He held that if, according to Cicero's definition, the state (*res publica*) was a matter of the people (*res populi*) then the Roman republic never existed. According to Augustine, the Roman state had never been a matter of the people. Moreover, Augustine had the opinion that a true political society could not exist without true justice and a true understanding of the meaning of human life.

In the Roman tradition justice and the meaning of human life could be achieved only through and within the state, and as such they were determined by the unrestricted power of the state. Augustine, however, related justice and the meaning of life to Christian love that opens insight into the law of God (*lex aeterna*): the divine and dynamic force that is present in all things, actions and motions. This means that everything should be understood in relation to its divine origin and to its true destination. This law of God should be the source of inspiration for the legislator.¹⁸ However, in his view the state did not express the highest purpose of life, but was rather a means to serve human life. Otherwise the state would degenerate.¹⁹

Although Augustine characterized the Roman government as a band of criminals, nevertheless he acknowledged the Roman state as a state, because it was a multitude of reasonable human beings—not of irresponsible cattle—who were associated in the pursuit of common interests. Therefore, he corrected Cicero's definition of the people as follows: "[A] people is . . . a multitude of reasonable beings *voluntarily* associated in the pursuit of common interests."²⁰ By virtue of this definition he also acknowledged other states. However, a state

¹⁷ See St. Augustine, *The City of God*, 3 vols, (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1950), Book II, Chapter 21; Book XIX, Chapter 21.

¹⁸ See R.A. Markus, *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of St. Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), pp. 89-90.

¹⁹ St. Augustine, *op. cit.*, IV, 4.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, XIX, 24 (emphasis mine).

could be better or worse in relation to the good or inferior interests which brought the people together. Thus, a state would be better if the common interests were determined by an analysis of notion of the citizens' well-being.²¹

VIII. THOMAS AQUINAS'S IDEA OF THE *BONUM COMMUNE*

In accordance with St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas held that the *lex aeterna* is the divine force by which everything should be understood as concentrated on its Origin or the "supreme good" (*summum bonum*).²² Human beings cannot know the eternal law immediately or completely, but they can acknowledge the working of this law in nature and in human life. In that way they can learn to know this law. Since human reason can understand the eternal law only partially, human beings have no other choice than to work with knowledge of general principles. They should practice these principles in concrete situations by virtue of practical wisdom.²³ Therefore, Thomas discussed the natural law (*lex naturalis*), that is, what human beings in this process of learning can understand rationally of the working of the eternal law in the laws of the state, in particular in what serves their welfare or common good.

The common good includes more than what Aristotle indicated as the good life. Thomas interpreted the common good (*bonum commune*) as the all-embracing good of the creation in its totality, and in the diversity of human beings, families, cities and states: everything is concentrated on the "supreme good." For the state, this implies that its laws should be enacted for the "universal happiness" or the common good of all citizens.²⁴

Regarding the place of human beings in the world, Thomas held that they are by nature social beings who should live in solidarity.²⁵ Like Aristotle, he had the opinion that the state was not only a product of human nature, but also a result of human reason and will. Unlike Aristotle, Thomas had the opinion that a human being could not achieve his perfection and ultimate destination within the state. Indeed, a human being is a social being, and as a citizen he is a part of the state, but as regards his concentration on the "supreme good" he simultaneously transcends the state.²⁶

²¹ *Ibid.*, II, 19.

²² St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 5 vols., (Westminster, Maryland: Christian Classics, 1981) I, Q103, A1; I-II, Q93, A1; I, Q6, A2. He distinguished the *lex aeterna* from the *lex Divina*, divine commands in the Gospel (ST I-II, Q91, A4).

²³ ST, I-II, Q91, A3.

²⁴ ST, I-II, Q90, A2; I-II, Q92, A1.

²⁵ ST, I-II, Q72, A4.

²⁶ ST, I-II, Q21, A4.

Thus, the state does not exist for itself, but it should serve the “common good,” that is the common welfare of all citizens.²⁷ Therefore he writes:

A law properly speaking, regards first and foremost the order to the common good. Now to order anything to the common good, belongs either to the whole people, or to someone who is the viceregent of the whole people. And therefore the making of a law belongs either to the whole people or to a public personage who has care of the whole people.²⁸

So, just like Augustine, Thomas acknowledged that the *res publica* should be a *res populi*. He acknowledged the rights of the people, however, without defending a liberal form of government.

IX. LIBERAL IDEAS OF THE COMMON GOOD

In the history of liberal political philosophy after Locke the rights of individual citizens were prior to the idea of the common good of the people. Adam Smith, for example, acknowledged that private interest was an important motive for human action, provided that the rules of law, in particular the rights of life and property, would be respected. Within the bounds of the law, society was a field of exploration, particularly economic exploration, provided that the government meddled as little as possible with it.²⁹ According to Smith, this striving for private interests could be judged as just because it was useful for society and served the general interest.³⁰ Therefore, he held that the general interest should not be promoted by the government. It would be a consequence of citizen’s strivings for their private interests.³¹

In our time, John Rawls is a well-known representative of a social liberalism that is intended to correct the disadvantages of individualistic liberalism. Therefore, he presupposes that all human beings, regardless of their private world views, have an intuition of justice. Primarily this means that they want to be treated as equals. Next he designs an imaginative procedure for decision

²⁷ *ST*, I-II, Q96, A3.

²⁸ *ST*, I-II, Q90, A3.

²⁹ See Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776), ed. by R. H. Cambell and A. S. Skinner (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), IV, IX, 51, p. 687.

³⁰ Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759, 1799, sixth edition), ed. D. D. Rapheal & A. L. Macfie (Glasgow Edition, Vol. I), (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), IV, I, 11, pp. 185-186.

³¹ See also John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 57, pp. 109-115.

making which takes into account the interests of all. For the sake of this procedure he construes a social contract that serves to formulate certain principles of political justice: equal rights of freedom and a more equal division of socio-economic goods—a division that will only be possible if all offices and positions are open to every individual, and if everyone has a fair chance of getting them, and if this division is to the advantage of lower class people.³²

Rawls agrees with the liberal view on the purpose of the state—one that does not contain an outline of the substance of the good life or the common good of the people. His intention is to present only a rational basis for a more just society in which human beings have space to arrange their private lives. Only they can decide within this rational basis (or political conception of justice) the good life for them, and how to achieve it.

X. COMMUNITARIAN IDEAS OF THE COMMON GOOD

Communitarians criticize individualistic liberalism, and also Rawls's concept of procedural justice. Rawls starts from a philosophical construction of human beings as individuals who make their choices independent of social relationships and related norms and moral values. Communitarians argue that the social identity of a person is always determined by norms and moral values which he acquires by participation in, and loyalty to, various groups: family, friends, occupational groups and other communities.

Like other communitarian philosophers, Philip Selznick discusses the subject of social communities which he regards as very important to the vitality of society. Therefore, he writes: "[T]he worth of community is measured by the contribution it makes to the flourishing of unique and responsible persons."³³ If human beings can achieve their moral responsibility, then the state can keep a low profile. If not, then the government should have a regulative function.³⁴ Selznick holds that the achievement of moral responsibility of citizens, institutions and the state is a matter of civilization.

According to Selznick, the most important characteristic of civilization is practicing the virtue of justice. In elaborating his idea of justice, he refers to Aristotle's idea of the good life. Selznick is very much aware of the fact that many contemporary philosophers oppose Aristotle's idea of the good life as a "natural good." They consider this idea incompatible with the theory that values

³² See John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), pp. 302-303.

³³ P. Selznick, *The Moral Commonwealth: Social Theory and the Promise of Community* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1992), p. 363.

³⁴ See *ibid.*, p. 369.

are the results of arbitrary choices. They fear that the idea of the natural good implies prescriptions of what ends are worth having and what lives are worth living. Selznick, on the contrary, holds that the government's striving for the good life does not say anything of the manners, ends and results of it. In a democratic and pluralist society people can discuss these things. They can make their choices and evaluate their ends and interests in search of the good life. This means no more than that there is a certain direction of a desirable social life for achieving individual and social well-being.³⁵

Selznick calls this individual and social well-being the common good. He argues that the common good is a normative idea that gives direction to a process of a just distribution of material and immaterial goods among all citizens and social groups. He acknowledges that it is in vain to talk of the good of a community without accepting the well-being of citizens as its ultimate criterion.

XI. CONCLUSIONS (1)

We can now address the question raised in the Introduction about the continuity and changes which have occurred in the interpretations of the purpose of the state. All philosophers who addressed the issue of the purpose of the state, i.e., the good life, common good, general interest or common essence, had some idea in mind that gives direction to a process of distribution of material and immaterial goods among all citizens. However, they employed different standards in their interpretations of this idea.

No author employed subjective standards: standards that are entirely a matter of the personal choice or taste of each citizen. Representatives of individualistic liberalism argued that the common good should be evaluated by the achievement of fundamental rights that all citizens have in common. Authors who held that the ultimate criterion of the common good of the people should be evaluated by the well-being of citizens argued that all citizens should share in the common good.

Neither did any author employ objective standards for evaluating the achievement of the purpose of the state because each one acknowledged that these standards do not exist. Also fundamental rights have objective standards because they are restricted by interests of the people.

All authors were engaged in a normative discourse on the common good of citizens within the state. They did not discuss the quality of the common good itself, but they did consider certain conditional standards that will have to be fulfilled to promote this quality.

³⁵ See *ibid.*, pp. 148-151.

Aristotle held that the state as the supreme community was a main condition to promote the good life of citizens. In his view the good life of the state and the good life of citizens were identical. Cicero held the same vision of the state but his vision implied a totalitarian state: the power of the state was unlimited for the sake of the common good of citizens. The theories of Rousseau and Marx implied the same consequence. Both Augustine and Thomas Aquinas argued that the purpose of the state as a *res populi* (a multitude of citizens voluntarily associated) and its laws, were the basic conditions to promote the common good or welfare of all citizens. Moreover, they held that the purpose of the state could not be to achieve the final destination and perfection of human life.

According to many liberal philosophers, the purpose of the state is primarily to guarantee the rights of freedom of individuals as a condition to facilitate their strivings after their private interests as common good. Communitarians held to the conditional standard that there are many communities which have their collective competencies and responsibilities, in which human beings perform their personal competencies and responsibilities, in which they share differentiated common goods, and by which the common good of the political community will be served, so that all people share the material and immaterial goods, that is, their well-being.

XII. MARITAIN'S IDEA OF THE COMMON GOOD

Like Thomas Aquinas, Jacques Maritain criticized Aristotle's and Cicero's ideas of the state as the supreme community through and within which human beings could achieve the ultimate destination and perfection of life. According to Maritain, "by reason of his relationship to the Absolute, and to the extent that he is called to a life and a destiny superior to time . . . the human person *transcends* all temporal societies and is superior to them."³⁶

Although Maritain was discussing the common good as the purpose of the state, he rejected the interpretations of Locke and Smith but also those of Rousseau and Marx. He argued that the common good was neither the sum of the goods of individuals, as liberals often argued, nor the interest of the community to which citizens were subordinated.³⁷

Like Thomas Aquinas, Maritain argued that the purpose of the state was the common good of the entire nation, in which everyone has the economic right to labor and property, and also possesses civic and political rights, and cultural

³⁶ Jacques Maritain, *Christianity and Democracy and The Rights of Man and Natural Law*, edited by D. A. Gallagher (San Francisco, California: Ignatius Press, 1986), p. 98.

³⁷ See Jacques Maritain, *The Rights of Man*, 95. See also Maritain's *Man and the State* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1951), pp. 43-49.

participatory rights.³⁸ As such the common good is the general goal or a normative characteristic of the political society: “[T]his good of the social body is a common good of *human persons*, as the social body itself is a whole made up of human persons.” So, the common good refers to what is “common to *the whole and the parts*.”³⁹ This general goal should not be confused with concrete goals of the government’s policy, for example, in the fields of education, social security or public health care. However, the effects of the government’s policy should be evaluated by that general goal.

In accordance with contemporary communitarians, Maritain argued that the political society is comprised of families and other social institutions, and that it should give the greatest possible autonomy to these institutions: every institution governs itself, and carries out duties according to its own competency and responsibility.⁴⁰

So, the task of the state is to promote the common good of the multitude, that is the betterment of the material conditions of human life, and the improvement of moral and spiritual capacities. In short, Maritain argues: “Maybe man will not become better. At least his state of life will become better. The structures of human life and humanity’s conscience will progress.”⁴¹

Rasmussen and Den Uyl criticize Maritain’s idea of the common good, because his theory would imply that a political authority “must dictate the courses of action that will be taken to achieve these goods and also set the standards for what will count as a realization of them.”⁴² In my judgement, this criticism is completely off the mark, because Maritain explicitly rejected the idea that the state would dictate what people have to do in order to achieve the common good. However, he did argue that the state is the only institution that is able to promote the common good in public life.

Moreover, the criticism of Rasmussen and Den Uyl that Maritain neglected the idea that “the individual must bear the final responsibility for the achievement of these goods,” is not correct. Maritain acknowledged individual responsibility for achieving common goods within and through social institutions, and for a democratic evaluation of the government’s policy to achieve the common good, but he did not accept personal responsibility as the final criterion for achieving the common good. Moreover, for the sake of the common good we need a state

³⁸ See Jacques Maritain, *Man and the State*, pp. 10, 20, 54.

³⁹ See Jacques Maritain, *The Rights of Man*, 94-96. See also Jacques Maritain, *The Person and the Common Good* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985 edition), pp. 29-30, 47-89.

⁴⁰ See Jacques Maritain, *Man and the State*, pp. 9-12.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 127.

⁴² D. B. Rasmussen and D. J. Den Uyl, *Liberty and Nature*, p. 139.

that is based upon the principle of what he calls "personal democracy" in which human dignity, freedom and responsibility are acknowledged as inalienable moral values. Therefore, he advocated the idea of the common good as that which is "common to the whole and its parts." This then is my answer to the second question of the Introduction.

XIII: CONCLUSIONS (2)

Summarizing Maritain's theory, I note that the most important characteristics of the state are: 1) the state is neither a political organization for the sake of individual freedom, nor a totalitarian power to control society; 2) there is a distinction between the common good as the general goal of the state, and concrete goals of the government's policy; 3) the idea of the common good comes down to what is "common to the whole and its parts"; 4) these parts are not only individuals but also social institutions with their own competencies and responsibilities to achieve their proper interests and goods; 5) since the purpose of the state is the common good, citizens should have the legal right to evaluate the policy of the government to promote their common well-being.

In their mutual connection these characteristics give a more adequate insight into the proper character and the purpose of the constitutional state than any other political theory discussed above. According to these characteristics the constitutional state can be defined as: the organization of the mutual relationships between government, citizens and social institutions on a certain territory of culture, to protect and to distribute material and immaterial goods, upon the basis of maintaining law and justice, and to achieve the normative idea of the common good by realizing concrete goals of the government's policy.