
The Common Good, Moral Education and Criminality

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Abstract

In this article we support the view that putting the common Good above the right and the private is the necessary element of proper political philosophy that moves within the framework of liberal, open and democratic societies. Common Good does not only concern the society, but the wider political community as well. This common Good needs to be considered according to the prescriptions of Greek political philosophy (Plato and Aristotle) and not in the limited, narrow sense of contemporary communitarians. Thus, the most important common good for the state is education, which should be provided to all free of charge and based upon the ethical character of the Good, and not simply upon the putative social-political correctness. Such education, especially during the first years of one's life, unites the state and presents a strong preventive and averting weapon against every kind of criminality. However, such education cannot be provided by a morally neutral and allegedly impartial and non-committed state. That is why the principle of neutrality of the state in contemporary political philosophy seems like a medicine given to the patient only in order to preserve her/him in life and not to cure her/him. Of course, such political community is not capable of dealing with any kind of criminality as long as the main body of the state remains eroded by the private and by misconceived personal interest.

The fact that the present Conference is being organized and held here in Pretoria by the SASGPH (South African Society for Greek Philosophy and the Humanities), in an age overridden by violence, international terrorism and criminality, where people are searching for the grounds and the environment for living their life; this fact is of exceptional importance. It is also important that we are all here in a friendly country such as South Africa, where enlightened political leaders admirably succeeded in directing this big country on the path of free, democratic and open societies. Of course, the

responsibility is always on the majority and on those in power, and for that reason public commendations to the former president Mr. Nelson Mandela and the incumbent president of South Africa, Mr. Thabo Mbeki, are in order for the work they have accomplished and are still carrying out for all the citizens of this country. I remember that, at the official opening of the First Conference at the Pretoria Opera, President Mbeki was present together with his assistants. I wish to believe that since then the situation has changed for the better and that the SASGPH is giving its contribution to the establishment and consolidation of democracy, justice and the character of a state in which it is worth living.

By examining one of the major contemporary problems, our Conference reaches for the light and wisdom of Greek philosophy, for the views articulated then remain valid today as well, and because the time distance may enable us to see things more objectively.

What, then, do Greek classical philosophers have to tell us about common good and what is the importance and relevance of their views for the moral education of citizens in relation to criminality? I shall deal with these issues in the present paper.

Ladies and Gentlemen, dear Colleagues and Conference Participants.

The well-known debate between the liberals and the communitarians in contemporary political philosophy is articulated in the works of John Rawls, R. Dworkin, Robert Nozick, on the one hand, and those of A. McIntyre, Ch. Taylor, M. Walzer, M. Sandel, etc on the other.¹

Generally speaking, different representatives of liberal ideas endorse the following positions:

1. The individual as self has priority over the community.
2. Man, as an autonomous being, knows by himself what he ought to do.
3. Men are free and equal among themselves. Their freedom extends as far as it does not harm others (*negative freedom*).
4. The right is prior to the good. Putting one good before the other means that equality and freedom of others are in danger.
5. The state is neutral with respect to good (that is, it does not decide what is good or which good ought to be promoted).
6. Men as citizens adopt the principle of tolerance.
7. The decisions of men-citizens should be based on reason, understood either as a loose reasonableness or as a strict rationality or logicity.

To these positions of the liberals (libertarians or liberals of socialist provenance) are opposed the views of the communitarians, which are, again generally speaking, the following:

1. The *polis* (community) has priority over the individual.

2. Man as a soul, as self, is communally structured and therefore his/her autonomy has no priority.
3. Men are free and equal, but occasional intervention of the political community is necessary to secure this situation, so that the citizens have the resources and be able to act autonomously towards the good.
4. The Good is prior to the right.
5. The state ought not to be neutral and indifferent regarding the Good, but rather adopt positive attitude towards real goods.
6. Men as citizens should not simply adopt the principle of tolerance for others, but should get involved in a moral dialogue and deliberations as to which is the real good in every particular case and how it should be protected or fairly distributed to all.
7. Men as autonomous beings are able to decide on the basis of their preferences, which however ought not to be arbitrary nor, of course, to be considered as completely identifiable with the good. They are the result of a dialogue, intense deliberation and strong arguments with reference to the essential good and the just secured by the political order.

From this schematic opposition of the views of liberals and communitarians it is obvious that they promote conflicting conceptions of the meaning, structure and functioning of political community. In practice the differences may not be so intense, since things present such opposition only schematically and theoretically. In the social-political environment, every time for different reasons, a mixture of conditions instead of a clear distinction may prevail (as it sometimes happens).² On the other hand, R. Epstein,³ as the subtitle of his book shows (*Reconciling individual Liberty with the Common Good*), believes that compatibility between Liberalism and the principle of Common Good is not impossible. This is important and must be taken into account every time that the limits be drawn in relation to property, freedom and individual rights. Yet, theoretically small differences may have grave consequences for the development of certain political community in time. Still, these issues, however important they may be, are not the questions of the hour. To save time, we shall focus our attention here only on some of the views mentioned above, and will particularly refer to the priority (or to secondary importance) of the state against the individual, to the neutrality of the state regarding the good, and generally to the conception of common good in relation to moral education of the citizens and criminality.

In the first place, we should notice the great gap between the classical political philosophy of the Greeks and the modern and contemporary political theory and philosophy. Greek political philosophy regards politics as the highest art, as the architectonics, which aims at the regulation of the relationships and conditions of the political community; whereas, in straight opposition to that, until recently (1971) the liberal political theory and philosophy, influenced by positivism and particularly by the conception of the division between facts and values, denied its very existence and limited

its work simply to a meta-political and meta-ethical discussion about the meaning of terms used in ethical and political discourse. In addition, for mostly historical reasons (feudalism, totalitarianism, despotism, etc.), modern political theory sets the individual as the starting point of its reflections and not the community (or the state), to which it is indeed considered to be opposed. This situation had certainly been aggravated in the middle of the last century, since the division of the world into two opposed social-political camps (into the free states and the illiberal socialist political entities) had led to an incontestably strong preference for the principle of liberty and of individuality over the socialist position in the Western World.

Today, things have changed. They are more comfortable conditions and the philosophical dialogue can be productive and might have (as it does) better results. I would indeed say that this situation makes Greek political philosophy actual again, as it is an undoubtedly important intellectual capital and beacon in our troubled times.

In the political philosophy of the Greeks the first principle that becomes universally accepted as self-understandable, even though not widely discussed, is the principle of liberty. The whole political thought of the Greeks unfolds and *breathes* in the air of liberty, understood as political condition/situation and an unsurpassable belief. However, this principle may acquire specific content every time, either in the sense of elevation and greatness of the individual against the state (as, for example, happens with the individualism of the Sophists) or in the sense of importance and autonomy of the self against the body, as appears in Plato's *Phaedo*,⁴ where the ethical self-determination and self-rule of the agent is established, and where Socrates' dedication to the city of Athens is simultaneously emphasized.⁵ Freedom for the Greeks is not only *negative* but also essentially positive, whenever the completion of the deeds that promote education and the common good in the state is decided.

However, freedom itself is not enough to constitute a political community. Rather, one needs other principles to properly construct it and to enable the citizen to live his/her life in a dignifying way within this community. One such principle is *justice*, which ought to be understood as founded upon the Good, and not as provisional and occasional opinion and product accepted as *correct*, or as the so-called political correctness. Aristotle says that: "Justice ... is an element of the polis (state); for judicial procedure, which means the decision of what is just, is the regulation of the political partnership."⁶

As such, justice is established by the statesman according to the principle of Good or the common good of people, which is *well being* (*eudaimonia*). It is not simply a question of what people sense as just and

right at a given moment; that is, of what has been accepted *as ethos* or temporarily preferred. Rather, it is a question of something deeper that stems from the dialectical relationship between the right and the Good (or the kinds of good, the good and virtuous life), and of the conditions which Aristotle regards as the flourishing of human life, i.e. as happiness or prosperity. This condition essentially consists of living in accordance with virtue.

In order to clarify this point let us give a historical example:

It was correct (that is, an established and accepted criterion) and therefore customary just for the Athenian generals to take care of the dead in a battle and to bury them afterwards. Yet, Socrates does not agree to condemn the generals of the naval battle at Arginousai for not collecting and burying the dead because of the storm. This action of theirs was not an expression of disrespect, meanness or indifference, and generally did not constitute a breach of the principles of a virtuous life, because that which did not take place was imposed by the logic of things and did not mean a denial of good moral intentions on the side of the generals. The customary right does not prevail over Goodness. For Plato and Aristotle, therefore, justice as correctness has no axiological priority over the Good. The Good takes precedence and ought to be understood as the metaphysical principle that sustains justice and the state in general. Already the early Plato discerns between different kinds of goods, just as common sense partially accepts it. Such goods are hierarchically considered to be:

1. the goods of the soul (virtues): wisdom, justice, temperance, courage, piety
2. the goods of the body: health, strength, beauty
3. the social goods: wealth, reputation, positions and honors.⁷

Without such classification and evaluation human life becomes unstable and the unity of a political community may certainly be put in danger (especially in critical situations). But if it is easy to make such hierarchies still both Plato and Aristotle understand that the distinction of *relationships* and the confirmation of values regarding what is *Good per se* (not just the functional good) is quite difficult to accomplish and cannot be done by just anybody. That is why the philosophers guardians, the statesmen *per se*, the wise politicians have their place within the political community and in the state which distinguishes itself by the quality of life of the citizens, by the good and just order of things and by the prevalence of the good life over the unjust and erosive conditions.

Thus, what is every time superficially considered to be right by a particular social whole should not have priority over the good. Besides, Plato⁸ clearly distinguishes between the Idea of Justice (founded upon the Good) and the demotic virtue (or demotic justice) that definitely stands on a lower level (which does not mean that it is always opposed to the idea of

justice). Therefore, that which makes the powerful cohesive substance of a political community is the Good and the life in accordance with it. Life of a political community should not be a life of excess, of hedonism and pleasure, but the life of virtue and indeed of justice, which is thought by Plato not only as a legal and political principle, but as the condition that shows the moral integrity and completeness of man's being.

Therefore, Plato in the *Republic*⁹ gives strong arguments in support of the view that Goodness or the idea of Good cannot be identified with its occasional particular samples and much less with particular opinions about the good, but transcends them all as the guiding first principle. Aristotle as well, although he says that "the good is diversely called," still does not equally value all particular opinions on the goods, for according to him human good is ultimately well being (*eudaimonia*), that is "the Good of man is the active exercise of his soul's faculties in conformity with virtue, or if there be several human virtues, in conformity with the best and most perfect among them. Moreover, to be happy takes a complete lifetime."¹⁰

Apart from this, as is shown by Plato and Aristotle's great interest in the *kinds* and *ways* of lives within a political community, the preference and promotion of the Good does not lead to restriction, suppression and oppression of the *ways* of life that individuals within a political community may choose. (The principle of liberty is not refuted, except if it clashes with the principle of goodness.) So, there may exist a variety of ways of life of the citizens that are incorporated in a common framework of a dominant *form of life*, so to speak, as it generally happens today with many states which follow or accept values cognate with the European or western form of life.

Thus, the non-preference of the Good and the neutrality in the contemporary liberal political thought are not only opposite to the classical Greek political philosophy,¹¹ but definitely unfounded, because they are based on weak propositions:

First of all, it accepts the equal value of all beliefs held by citizens, it does not intervene and does not seek to discuss them critically nor to prefer some value against some other, arguing that such a thing could endanger the equality of citizens.

But this position means that it should also accept as equally valid the values and views that turn against freedom and tolerance for other valid beliefs. If it accepts this position, then it discredits itself. If, however, it excludes such a case, then it will have to provide ethical or metaphysical reasons for doing that and thus necessarily be allied to Greek philosophers.

Furthermore, it is not correct to say that, because we live in an axiologically plural political community (in which there are people who have personal differences regarding beliefs, values and conceptions of the good) and because in this situation (on account of pluralism) it is neither possible

nor easy to practically define something as common good, the state must really be neutral. The existence of many and opposite values within the society is certainly at times an empirical fact, but that alone does not mean that we necessarily have to accept pluralism as a value. This situation may show the multiple division of a community, but one needs arguments of a different kind in order to accept the pluralist position as a value in itself (and such arguments are related to the structure, the goal and the axiologically consistent life of the members of a political community, and that does not support the neutrality of the state).

In addition, for this reason some liberal thinkers have adopted the view that it is necessary to construct a theory about what constitutes human good in a free political community, and also to express consistently the relevant views. The fact that at times their views take similar Aristotelian positions and speculations as their point of departure is the sign of the time as well as of the vitality of the classical Greek political philosophy.¹²

Apart from that, the Stagirite philosopher authoritatively and categorically expressed the view (thus in a way recapitulating the earlier philosophical thought) that *polis* has priority. He says:

"Hence it is evident that the polis is the creation of nature and that man is by nature a political animal ... Further, the polis is by nature clearly prior to the family and to the individual."¹³

This means that human good, the well being (*eudaimonia*) of man, which consists of development of all his potentials, of the flourishing of his life and mainly of a virtuous life, can only be realized within the political community, which possesses regulations that aim at the Good.¹⁴

In this way, the priority of polis is teleologically founded, since human nature is taken into account. That is why the *human good* cannot remain indifferent or opposite to the goals of the state and the common good, nor of course can the state act against human good. Similarly, Plato emphasizes that the state does not aim at securing the good or the well being (*eudaimonia*) of just one portion of its citizenry, but of all of them. The Athenian philosopher says in relation to that the following:

"For we shall say that while it would not surprise us if these men thus living prove to be most happy, yet the object on which we fixed our eyes in the establishment of our state was not the exceptional happiness of any one class but the greatest possible happiness of the city as a whole. ... Our first task then, we take it, is to mold the model of a happy state – we are not isolating a small class in it and postulating their happiness, but that of the city as a whole."¹⁵

This means that, as he clearly states in the *Republic*, all the citizens ought to enjoy common education and upbringing and to regulate their life

according to the imperative of justice (in the soul) and to the Good. That is why the Athenian philosopher proceeds to criticize the values, beliefs and conceptions of his predecessors and emphasizes the importance of upbringing and moral education for the young people in the state.

This education aims at inculcating the proper axiological beliefs and conceptions about life, world and political community in the souls of the young; this education constitutes, so to speak, the well-woven tissue that unites and strengthens the political community.

This education is, among other things, the exercise and the acquisition of virtue and consists of providing knowledge and truth about things as well as of successful harmonization of the faculties of the soul of the young, that is, of the balance and harmony of the faculties of the soul under the guidance and domination of the intellect.¹⁶ Therefore, although the human self possesses metaphysical value, still its priority without the acquisition of content and form through education can simply remain an entity with potential abilities realized and expressed only by chance. That is why Plato constructs the state in analogy to the soul, and although he accepts the unity of the soul, he still distinguishes the existence of faculties or kinds (gene) within it that acquire their meaning from the structure and the content they take.

Thus, for the classical Greek philosophers, it is not the individual ego that has absolute priority and value, but rather as ego or the soul, since the latter is communally and axiologically educated and structured. Therefore, individualism or supremacy of the ego that does not include social content according to the principle of the Good, is equal to the nakedness and barrenness of the soul and is disconnected from the proper social-political reality. The ego or the soul necessarily takes the building material for its being from its social environment, and only later on, when man acquires his critical ability, may criticize and revise the beliefs, conceptions and values he has already accepted. The basic position of man, as Ludwig Wittgenstein¹⁷ noted, is that of *acceptance*. We accept many things as right and we can later investigate them critically and revise our views, always moving within the framework imposed by existing conditions.

For this reason, any liberal, strictly individualistic conception of man and his relation to the community is not well-founded and certainly is deviating.

And if indeed today the liberal, individualistic view seems to be powerful and further strengthened by the domination of competition and the market mechanisms, that still does not mean that this should be accepted. The notion of competition is founded already in Greek thought from the age of Homer and Hesiod. But competition itself does not present a solution to the problems of political society, as was realized by Heraclitus, Solon, Democritus, Plato and Aristotle, who all undoubtedly accept the principles of

freedom, of equality of speech (isegoria) and before the law (isonomia), of meritocracy, democracy, justice, dialogue, philosophy; and who, in opposition to certain Sophists, accept the priority of the state and the common good over the peculiarities of the individual.

Within these boundaries, the citizens may of course freely choose what they desire, which does not mean that their choices and preferences are always the right ones. Thus they choose their way of life and may even determine their path so as to turn to deviation and criminality. What dimensions such a phenomenon can acquire does not only depend on the biological heritage and the idiosyncrasy of every individual, but also on the education he/she will receive, especially during the first years of his/her life. That is why Plato and Aristotle attribute great importance to the moral education of youth. Nothing that, directly or indirectly, contradicts the advanced morality of people should be taught. (For this reason Plato, following the example of Xenophanes, subjects the whole educational and mythological material of the Greeks from Homer onto moral criticism and so to speak to purification.)

Having deep knowledge of the power of education, Plato states clearly in the *Republic* that, if it is guarded "in the great," that is in education and upbringing, the unity and prosperity of the state are secured.¹⁸

The young should be educated so that no disrespect, impiety, fear, cowardice and generally all the conditions that go against the moral and virtuous life reside in their soul. Rather, their being should be imbued with pure virtue, justice and goodness instead of superficial and unfounded demotic morality.

It is obvious that such a decision about proper education of the young can be taken only by mature citizens and authorities of the state, which means that the principle of neutrality of the state and the preference of the right over the good is meaningless.

Within such a framework of education of the citizens, the Socratic propositions that "we ought neither to requite wrong with wrong nor to do evil to anyone"¹⁹ and that the wrongdoer who remains unpunished is more miserable²⁰ than the one who is punished, acquire meaning and exceptional importance.

Criminality is thought as performance of actions for which one can be condemned for causing damage to others. Men and women that have been educated with proper values and principles do not even think of doing such deeds and naturally make the guardians par excellence of legal order and justice. That is why, in the long run, the unity of the state and the effacement of indigenous criminality can be accomplished only through education in a state that is free, democratic and accepts justice and the principle of virtuous life.

The neutrality of the state and the preference of the right over the

good, strengthened today by competition and market mechanisms, can eventually be equal to the protection of those in power, to the preservation of inequalities and the undermining of the quality of life in the state. The state that does not intervene where it is necessary for the prevalence of the just in accordance with the imperative of the Good for Greek classical philosophers has no reason to exist, or we would simply say that it leads to a degraded quality of life and does not rouse enthusiasm in its citizens.

And today here in the pluralistic and multi-dynamic South Africa one could argue that political differences and social practices are in need of protection and show great tolerance for differences. However, this does not mean that the principles of the Good life, common Good, social justice and moral education of the citizens should be left defenseless. Indeed, for particular reasons, criminality is on the increase. Its curbing in the long run, as we have said, depends on the work of moral education and on the degree to which a wise and enlightened politics will be adopted, a politics which will emphasize the value of the communal and *public* over the *private*, the priority of the common good, and which will not leave anything to chance nor to the defense by alleged market laws that are actually favouring the established and powerful interests that may damage the whole.

In a state that respects the man (which is interlaced with our Christian tradition as well as with the Greek and Kant's moral philosophy), that promotes common good against the private, that accepts justice as the major order of political community and provides proper education to all, the life of men acquires meaning and becomes alluring. Undoubtedly, sooner or later, criminality will be limited or will completely disappear, and the citizens will be able to live in safety and order, will be able to enjoy the fruits of their work and honest efforts, and have reasonable hopes for a better future. On this path classical Greek philosophers can be real allies and supporters in their laborious and long work.

Endnotes

1. The classification of opposing groups is, of course, completely schematic and eventually does not correspond to reality.
2. M. Sandel, for example, complains about being characterized by others as a "communitarian," whereas, as his work shows, he has no intention of defending the strict communitarian views. See M. Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, Greek translation: Athens 2003, pp. 67-70.
3. R. Epstein, *Principles for a Free Society. Reconciling individual Liberty with the Common Good*, Perseus Books, 1998, pp. 2-5.
4. In the *Phaedo*, Plato establishes the ethical autonomy of the subject (the soul, the self) in an unparalleled way and transcends every possible biologism or causality. (See *Phaedo* 98c2-99b6.)

5. Socrates says in relation to this: "I did ... think it was better and nobler to endure any penalty the city may inflict rather than escape and run away" (*Phaedo* 99a2-4).
6. Aristotle, *Politics* 1253a37-39.
7. See also G. Santas, *Goodness and Justice*, Blackwell, Oxford, 2001, pp. 21-22.
8. It is obvious that one such conception of the Good and its precedence is not cognate with any communitarian view in the contemporary sense.
9. See Plato, *Republic* 508e1-509b10.
10. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1098a15-16.
11. Which, of course, does not endorse the communitarian position.
12. Let us refer here to the views of W. Galston (*Liberal Purposes*, Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 174), M. Nussbaum, A. McIntyre and others.
13. Aristotle, *Politics* 1253d2-3 and 1253a18-19.
14. This is followed by the neo-Aristotelian thinkers, such as W. Galston, who defines the conditions that constitute human good (*ibid.*, pp. 173-177), M. Nussbaum (in Galston et al.) and others.
In relation to the latter, Laura Westra correctly notes that the views of M. Nussbaum may well be her own and just take Aristotle as a point of departure, but do not in any way present the correct interpretation of Aristotelian philosophy. According to Westra, M. Nussbaum misinterprets Aristotle's concept of well-being (*eudaimonia*), which is a single-meaning position and is not a sum of many factors (see Westra's paper at the 14th ICOGP). See also R. Kraut, *Aristotle on the Human Good*, Princeton University Press, 1989, p. 354.
15. Plato, *Republic* 420b1 and 420c.
16. *Republic* 443c9-444a1.
17. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, (see translation into Greek by K. Boudouris, Athenian Library of Philosophy, Athens 1989, paragraph 344.
18. *Republic* 428e1-4.
19. *Crito* 49b8-c3.
20. *Gorgias* 472e4-7: "in my opinion, Polus, the wrongdoer or the unjust is wretched anyhow; more wretched, however, if he does not pay the penalty and gets no punishment for his wrongdoing, but less wretched if he pays the penalty and meets with requital from gods and men."