

The Common Good and Good Governance in Nigeria: A Philosophical Reflection

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Abstract

There is no gainsaying that the end of government as an institution of the state is the good of the citizenry. Government is meaningful to the extent that it promotes the common good of the individuals that comprise the political state. This paper, therefore, examines the nexus between the common good and good governance in the Nigerian body — politic using the thought patterns of different social philosophers. It employs the method of textual analysis and exposition. Its epistemological value consists in its clarification of key themes in socio-political philosophy vis-à-vis contemporary government and politics in the Nigerian state. In conclusion, a case is made that the common good is indeed the basis of good governance. It recommends that the culture of distributive justice be encouraged in the Nigerian context as a way of promoting good governance through the instrumentality of the common good.

Keywords: Common Good, Good Governance, Nigeria, Philosophical Reflection

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Introduction

The main focus of this paper attempt a philosophical reflection on the interplay between the common good and good governance in Nigeria as a post-colonial state. It seeks to marry sense with the core values of the common good as a politic philosophical ideal, bringing it to bear on the quest for good governance in Nigeria as a fragile state. Thus, it pays particular attention to the emerging trends and evolving dynamics of Nigerian government and politics in relation to social justice and welfare programmes.

Political philosophy is the aspect of philosophy that deals with political society, its nature and its ends, which is the highest common good (Wallace 252). Political philosophy is a practical rather than a speculative mode of inquiry. Thus, its aim is to perfect man in accordance with his nature through the process of well-ordered government. It is an applied ethics given the fact that it attempts to develop political virtues especially prudence in the art of governance. The common good to which it is directed transcends that of the family by way of the highest virtues; its end is the common good of its members—both political and moral.

All the same, social philosophy studies man as an individual member of the society. In this way, it is concerned with ordering human acts to the common good (Agboola 47-48). It is a derivative of social ethics is basically normative in principle consequently, the basic supposition on which this philosophical inquiry anchors or hinges is that man is a social being; he depends on others at every stage of life — for his existence and for the fulfillment, of physical, emotional, intellectual, social, and even physiological needs (Ogwu 82). Importantly, peace and order in human society require the conformity of individual members to certain expectations in their interaction with each other, whether individually or collectively. Such conformity is essential if the common good is to be attained in all facts or spheres of human endeavours.

Why the Common Good?

The question of the necessity or rationale for enhancing and promoting the common good is a fundamental question in social inquiry. Recall that a society is a permanent union of human

beings who are united by modes of behavior that are demanded by some common end, value, or interest.

Since society itself is not possible unless based upon some common moral and legal understanding with social laws and controls to sustain it (Okafor 113). Thus, guided by experience, human nature therefore constitutes the *ontological basis* for society (Asiegbu 15-16). It manifests this through its biological, psychological, and theological tendencies. Biologically, man's nature is ordered to procreation and family life. Psychologically, the impulse to be appreciated as such is characteristically human. Teleologically, man seeks happiness and conformity with the natural law (Wallace 234). All these predisposed him to establish a social order; a civil society with the overall aim of promoting the common good. In consequence, this social network of an order of social life guarantee freedom, common utility and socio-economic justice which are all essential conditions or variables for the achievement of a well-ordered and well-organized socio-political entity.

More so, the function of society is to actualize its inherent end, the Common Good which is nothing but the condition that makes an ideal human existence possible for all its members (Nwosu 77-78). Because the individual depends on others to bring about the end of society — the principle of solidarity; the individual good is part of the common good. All the same, the individual as a member of the community has to achieve ends and realize values on his own responsibility based on the principle of social cohesion and solidarity to the extent that this is possible (Edet 124).

It is, however, important to note that the common good is a reality over and above the good that individuals can achieve separately. In effect in realizing the common good, society emerges as a reality of a special kind (Awofeso and Udokang 2 1-22). It cannot be defined simply in terms of the disjunction between substance and accident; society is a substance, neither is it a mere ontological accident.

It is also germane to stress that law and right reason are right reason are essential preconditions for achieving the common good. They are prerequisites to enhancing the social good. It is against this backdrop that William Wallace emphatically opines that:

Among the internal principles of human acts, virtue is the primary means of directing man to the good of human happiness; among the external principles, law enjoys a similar status in enabling him to lead the good life. As is evident from experience the common good is the end or purpose of all law, and without an understanding of what the common good properly is, the nature and function of law in directing human acts cannot be appreciated (166).

A common good is clearly distinct from a private good, the latter being the good of one person only, to the exclusion of its being possessed by any other. A common good is distinct also from a collective good, which, though possessed by all of a group, is not really participated in by the members of the group; as divided up, a *collective* good becomes respectively private goods of the members (Ukwuegbu 7778). To be sure, a true *common* good is universal, not singular or collective, and is distributive in characters, being communicable to many without becoming anyone's private good.

Moreover, each person participates in the whole common good, not merely in a part of it, nor can any one person possess it wholly. Thus, the distinctive common good to which human law is ordered is the civil, or political, good of peace and order.

Social Justice as a Common Good

Social justice is the virtue that ordains all human acts towards the common good. It is a special virtue, specified and distinguished from other virtues, but it is also a general virtue because, ordered to it under a certain aspect, are all acts of other virtues and not only the acts of justice in the particular sense of the term (Wallace 246).

Social justice is equivalent in meaning to general or legal justice; it is of the essence of social justice to demand from each individual all that is necessary for the common good. But just as in the living organism it is impossible to provide for the good of the whole unless each single part and each individual member is given what it needs for the exercise of its proper functions, so it is impossible to care for the social organism and the good of society as a unit unless each single part and each individual member is supplied with all that is necessary for the exercise of his social functions (Okafor 56-57).

Historical Antecedents to the Notion of Common Good

Different philosophers have attempted to deal with the issue of common good and good governance in different cultural contexts, social milieus or historical epochs. In other words, thinkers have sought to address the problem of enhancing good governance through the apparatus or instrumentality of the common good as a moral ideal right from the ancient through the contemporary periods in the history of philosophy. For instance, Plato's conception of the common good is couched in his idea of the good life as espoused his dialogues viz: *Republic*, *Laws*, *statesman*, etc. Whereas, Aristotle's notion of the common good finds expression in the place of happiness, as the highest good, in his politics and morality. Thus, Aristotle presents this absolute good in both his *Nicomachean Ethics and Politics*.

The utilitarianism of Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill also represents a paradigm or model of the common good. In the contemporary period, Jacques Maritain and Robert Nozick also present their different versions of the common good.

Meaning of Common Good

The notion of the Common Good is an essential attribute of good governance in a well-ordered society. It designates that which is beneficial to all and sundry. It is nothing but public good. Thus, the Common Good is a welfarist ideology that seeks to promote the well being or existential condition of all members of the civil society. In view of the foregoing, it can be variously referred to as public interest, public good, common interest, general welfare, social good, amongst others. Attempting to properly situate the notion of the Common Good in its right perspective, Iniobong Udoidem in his masterpiece entitled, *Authority and the Common Good in Social and political Philosophy brilliantly* writes that, "The common good therefore could be said to be that which all human beings whether as individuals or a group desire by nature" (96).

The import of the foregoing is that the Common Good represents that which can be commonly desired, either by individuals desiring the same thing, or desiring it as a group. In any case, it entails desiring the good and actualizing same satisfactorily. On his own part, Jacques Maritain sees the Common Good from the point of view of moral discipline and civilization. For him, the ethical dimension of the Common Good is that it entails "the maximum possible development of human persons" (qtd in Udoidem 100). Here is Maritain in full:

(The common Good) includes some sociological integration of all the civic conscience, political virtues and sense of right and liberty, of all the activity, material prosperity and spiritual riches, or moral rectitude, justice, friendship, happiness, virtue and heroism in the individual lives of its members. For these things 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 (Evans and Ward 31).

The Common Good is what is in the best interest of the generality. It is neither the interests of the majority nor the interests of the minority. In this discourse, the concept of the Common Good will be x-rayed from two perspectives namely: The General Will and Utilitarian Principle.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau attempts to articulate and chart a course for the Common Good and distributive justice based on the canons or core values of the General Will as a directive principle. This will, according to Rousseau, is always right and tends towards the public good. It is not a particular will or the will of a particular social class. It is not also the will of the majority. Rousseau's definition of the General Will is as follows:

There is often a great deal of difference between the will of all and the general will; the latter considers only the common interest, while the former takes private interest into account, and is no more than a sum of particular wills: but take away from these same wills the pluses and minuses that cancel one another, and the general will remains as the sum of the differences (Contract 3).

The import of the above conception of the General Will is that it is an aggregation and reconciliation of the particular will of a single individual and the collective will of all members of the society. It avoids the extremes of both particular and collective wills. It is the sum of the aggregation or harmonization of all conflicting interests or opposing paradigms in the civil order. Rousseau further adds that, "Each of us puts his person and all his power in common under the supreme direction of the general will, and, in our corporate capacity, we receive each member as an indivisible part of the whole" (Contract 20).

The General Will is the composite aggregate of the reconciliation between a particular will, on the one hand, and collective wills, on the other hand. It tends to maintain a balance between these two extremes or variables in terms of interest articulation and interest aggregation especially as it concerns matters of public importance.

Furthermore, Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill provide a theoretical foundation of morals and politics using the matrix of utilitarianism. Thus, utilitarianism is an ethical cum political theory which holds that action should be directed towards achieving the "greatest happiness for the greatest number of people". In his *An introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, Bentham writes thus, "Act always to promote the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people" (1.6). It translates to mean that government policies, programmes, and social legislation be based on the foundation of measurable human happiness with the overall objective of promoting the common good. Thus, the Common Good tailors towards the avoidance of pain and maximization of happiness. In *Utilitarianism*, Mill opines that:

The happiness which forms the utilitarian standard of what is right in conduct, is not the agent's own happiness, but that of all concerned. As between his own happiness and that of others, utilitarianism requires him to be as strictly impartial as a disinterested and benevolent spectator (2).

Here, Mill's conviction is that general happiness is the supreme good given the fact that each person's happiness is a good to that person, and the general happiness, therefore, becomes a good to the aggregate of all persons. All these are geared towards the advancement of the common good.

Meaning of Good Governance

Good governance ensures that political, social and economic priorities are based on broad consensus in society and that the voices of the poorest and the most vulnerable are heard in decision-making in the allocation of resources or policy formulation. Good governance are characterized by being consensus - oriented; accountable; transparent; responsible; participatory; effective and efficient equitable and inclusive etc.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have critically examined the relationship between common good and good governance in the Nigerian state using the ideas of different philosophers. In so doing, we have argued that the purpose of government is to promote the common good as a moral absolute through good governance.

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