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## II

# IRREDUCIBLY SOCIAL GOODS

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### 1. Two Foundations of Methodological Individualism

Are there any irreducibly social goods? For some political strands of thinking in our culture, it is obvious that there are. For an influential tradition of academic thought, it is obvious that there are not. Common sense is divided on the issue, and confused.

The line of thought which takes the negative side is dominant in economics, among other places. It is often taken as a self-evident truth in that congeries of thought, calculation and reflection called 'welfare economics'. And it is the bedrock of an influential strand of philosophical thought which has been taking up a lot of the intellectual space in our civilisation over the last three centuries, which we can roughly call 'utilitarian'.

Amartya Sen in his celebrated article 'Utilitarianism and Welfarism' (1979a), offers a definition of this second term:

Welfarism: the judgement of the relative goodness of alternative states of affairs must be based exclusively on, and taken as an increasing function of, the respective collections of individual utilities in these states. (p. 468)

There are three crucial philosophical assumptions built into this definition. The first is consequentialism. This is the idea that our value judgments ought to weigh outcomes, states of affairs. They should not concern themselves, as some other modes of ethical thinking do, with the intrinsic moral qualities of acts. On a traditional theory which makes the notion of virtue central, such as Aristotle's for example, a crucial consideration can be whether an action is one of, say, courage or cowardice, loyalty or treachery. But for the consequentialist what counts is the outcome, what results. Hence judgments of value can be made by weighing states of affairs. This is the rational way to evaluate.

The second assumption is utilitarian. The philosophy of utility can be seen as a species of consequentialism. It specifies one step further what a rational evaluation procedure ought to be like. The states of affairs

are to be assessed for their utility — that is, the happiness or satisfaction that they give to agents. This 'happiness' is to be understood in its raw form. That is, there must be no metaphysical winnowing, whereby some kinds or sources of satisfaction are considered depraved or lower and hence not sources of 'real' or 'true' happiness. Whatever people find satisfying is satisfying. What they rank as more satisfying must be judged as quantitatively superior, and so on. There is to be no second guessing of the agent in terms of a doctrine of human nature or the good life. Here, again, there is a sharp contrast with much traditional ethical theory — including Aristotle for whom 'happiness' was closely tied to a conception of the good life.

The utilitarian theory is, of course, not committed to the view that all persons will always understand their own interests best. An agent may be mistaken about what will bring about states which he finds satisfying. He may be ignorant enough to think that drinking methyl alcohol has precisely the same consequences as drinking wine, and he knows that the state induced by the latter was highly satisfying. He may therefore have to be protected from the results of his own ignorance. But it is absolutely clear that the warrant for saying that he needs protection, viz., the negative consequences of drinking the spirits, come from his own tastes and reactions. He himself would not find blindness satisfying.

The third assumption comes almost as an anti-climax. It is the atomist one: the utilities to be weighed in the states of affairs are those of individuals. This is anti-climactic, and seemingly truistic, because the modern philosophy of utilitarianism is from its very foundations committed to atomism. Within this philosophy it just seems self-evident that all goods are in the last analysis the goods of individuals. By the time you get this far along within the outlook of 'welfarism', the third assumption almost disappears from sight as an assumption. It looks like the most banal common sense.

Sen deals a solid blow to welfarism by showing the fragility of its second assumption. I want to tackle the third. But just because this is so well embedded in the philosophical underpinnings of the other two, I have to dig somewhat deeper to get at it.

As my spade cuts deeper into the marshy soil under the welfarist construction, I come across two further struts which I want to lay bare. They both contribute to making it seem just obvious that goods must be in the last resort individual.

Of course, the expression 'in the last resort' involves an important qualification. Naturally, every school of thought recognises public goods. There clearly are measures, or institutions, or states of affairs which offer satisfactions to more than one individual. And in some cases these cannot in the nature of things be brought about in such a way as to benefit a single individual exclusively: they must benefit many or none. National

defence is often cited as an example. Or one might think of a dam on a stream designed to stop flooding in springtime. The dam saves my cottage, but cannot be so designed as to save mine without also saving yours. Again, Bentham offered the concept of a good which would be public not in the sense of benefitting all members of a collectivity, but of conducing to the good of a number of individuals who cannot be identified beforehand. If the municipality builds a handrail on steps that are likely to be covered with ice in winter, this will help whoever happens to be using those stairs after a bout of freezing rain. Similarly, erecting a street light will make passage easier and safer for whoever happens to be passing along at night.

But in all these cases, it can be argued, the good is a good only because it benefits individuals. In some cases, there may be many such: indeed, the benefits may encompass all the individuals of a given collectivity (e.g., all citizens who are defended from the enemy, or all dwellers beside this stream which is dammed). In some cases, it may not be possible to predict exactly who the benefitted individuals will be. But in the end, the state of affairs is good only because it 'delivers' satisfaction to individuals.

This last sentence catches the crucial thesis, that public and social goods are necessarily 'decomposable'. It seems evident because of the two underpinnings which I mentioned above, and which I now want to lay bare. The first is a philosophical atomism which is very deep in the modern tradition of social science. It draws on the atomism which was foundational to the modern revolution in natural science. Its originating figure is perhaps Hobbes. All wholes have to be understood in terms of the parts that compose them. Societies are made up of individuals, so the events and states which are the subject of study in society are ultimately made up of events and states of the component individuals. In the end, only individuals choose and act. To think that society consists of something else, over and above these individual choices and actions, is to invoke some strange, mystical entity, a ghostly spirit of the collectivity, which no sober or respectable science can have any truck with. It is to wander into the Hegelian mists where all travellers must end up lost forever to reason and science.

This atomism comes to the fore frequently in the plea for what is called 'methodological individualism', which enjoins us to treat all collectivities as composed of individuals. To those whose sentiments are expressed by the above paragraph, this just seems elementary common sense, advice one ignores at one's peril. But then the thesis that social goods are necessarily decomposable just falls out as an obvious application of a much more general principle, and one that seems unchallengeable. This is one supporting strut that my spade has laid bare, and that I will soon have to try to saw through.

But before lifting the saw (or as aggression mounts, the axe), I want to expose the second strut. Let this be called 'subjectivism'. This is implicit in the utilitarian conception of happiness, which as we saw is deliberately non-critical. Happiness, and thus the good, are measured in terms of what makes people feel happy. We are ultimately referred to subjective feelings, or satisfactions; or in terms of a more up-to-date version of utilitarianism, to preferences. The good, or the objects of value, are ultimately determined by what goes on in people's minds or feelings. But then the atomist understanding seems all the more appropriate, since no-one supposes that there is a locus of thought or feeling other than the minds of individuals. Unless one takes refuge in a group mind of some strange sort, it just appears evident that the good so understood must be ultimately decomposable into states of individuals. Subjectivism adds force to atomism in contributing to the unshakeable force of the thesis of necessarily decomposable social goods.

## 2. The Attack on Atomism

I want now to go to work on the first strut, on atomism. What is it that makes methodological individualism seem so self-evident to so many people? Plainly the consideration that in some obvious sense societies consist of nothing other than human beings. Of course, once you are living in a society, or even studying how it works, you have to take account of all sorts of things which are not simply people or concentrations of people: roles, offices, statuses, rules, laws, customs, and so on. These can easily bemuse you. But if you stand back and reflect for a minute, you have to realise that all there actually is here is a bunch of human organisms interacting. Take them away and you have nothing left. Their interaction may involve their having certain thoughts, and the content of these involve roles, offices, etc. But these are ultimately the predicates of the component individuals.

Some reflections of this kind underlie methodological individualism. We can recognise the influence of a no-nonsense brand of naturalism in our scientific culture. But plausible as this reasoning is, it is dead wrong. It is, of course, true in some sense that there being things like roles, offices, laws, statuses and the like is dependent on humans being capable of thought; in the sense that, for beings incapable of thinking we could never attribute any of these features, which are so essential to understanding our social life. It is even very dubious whether it makes sense to speak as we tend to do of 'hierarchy' among a group of baboons. Certainly one strong male may keep the others at bay and cowed while he controls the females. But if we reflect on the conditions of using a term like 'rank', it will appear evident that applying it involves reading something into baboon life which we have no reason to think is there.

Someone of a certain rank is *owed* acknowledgement; some infraction is committed when this is withheld or denied. Using this term implies that the subjects it is applied to make distinctions on the basis of rank: they have thoughts of the kind — 'that's unconscionable'; 'that's an insult'; 'at last he's behaving properly'.

So roles, offices and the like require thoughts. And thoughts occur as events in the minds of individuals. So much is true. But it still does not add up to a justification of atomism. It does not because of the peculiar nature of thoughts (and hence of all the things that require thought to be). Thoughts exist, as it were, in the dimension of meaning and require a background of available meanings in order to be the thoughts that they are.

Bad historical novels remind us of this all the time. If a character in a novel set in the middle ages rejects a course of action because it is not 'fulfilling'; or one who figures in a story about a neolithic village thinks of his lover as 'sophisticated', our sensibility is jarred by the incongruity. It is similar to, but also importantly different from, the incongruity of their using twentieth century technology. In both cases we know that they 'couldn't' be saying/thinking/doing what is described. But in the case of the incongruous thought or speech, it is not just the absence of certain artefacts in their environment. It is not something which could be remedied by some time-warp which allowed certain devices to be delivered to them. The impossibility rather consists in that this whole gamut of meanings did not exist for them; the whole way of classifying things as 'fulfilling' or 'sophisticated', and their various opposites and alternatives, was not part of the background of possible descriptions for them. Their language lacked these resources.

This illustrates what is in some respects a truism of human existence — the way in which thoughts presuppose and require a background of meanings to be the particular kind of thoughts they are. But the terms 'presuppose' and 'require' in the previous sentence point to a peculiarly strong relation. It is not a kind that we invoke, say, when we say that neolithic villagers could not have built pyramids, because this requires and presupposes a larger labour force. We can always imagine here a constellation of circumstances — perhaps extremely far from the actual course of things, but nevertheless not absurd as a supposition — in which this requirement might be circumvented. It might be, for example, that a race of people with much greater physical strength inhabited these villages. But in the case of the thoughts and words, a supposition of this kind would make no sense. Nothing that these people could say could ever *count as* describing something as 'fulfilling' or 'sophisticated', as long as they had the linguistic background they had.

The impossibility is stronger here, because we are in the domain of meaning, the domain in which 'counting as' and 'validity' play an

essential role. To have the descriptive thought: 'that's a fulfilling life', or 'there's a sophisticated girl' is to be making a claim about these objects. The general form of the claim in this kind of case can be summed up as the claim that these are the right terms to be applied here. In this respect, there are analogies between thinking and making a move in some rule-governed human activity in which questions of validity and invalidity arise — a game, for instance. This was, of course, the basis for Wittgenstein's celebrated use of the game image in his discussions of language and thinking. Whatever the weaknesses which may arise when this image is over-applied, it has this kernel of justification: we are in the domain of validity.

But then we can readily see why in a strong sense certain thoughts are impossible in certain circumstances. Nothing could count as making the claim 'she's sophisticated' among neolithic farmers in Upper Syria (if our surmises are right about their culture) in somewhat the same way as nothing could count as using the Queen's gambit in a checkers game. The move presupposes a background of rules, or in the case of language, conditions of possible validity; and in both these cases, the background is missing.

I invoked the name of Wittgenstein, and he is undoubtedly the most celebrated among those who have forced on contemporary philosophy this crucial feature of thought and language. A given linguistic item only has the meaning it has against the background of a whole language. The use of a single term, separated from that background, is unthinkable. The supposition that one might think through the invention of learning of such a single term makes no sense. Wittgenstein uses this point to great effect in arguing against the possibility of a private language, (for example, in *Philosophical Investigations*, I. 258 and following), where he asks us to imagine the case of someone who wanted to give a name to an inner sensation without reference to the rest of language. In order to know what one is saying oneself, one would have to place this entity somewhere. One would have to say, at least, what I am naming is a *sensation* (para 261). Wittgenstein relies on the same point to show up the limitations of ostensive definition. In order for someone to understand what I mean when I explain the meaning of a word by pointing to something, he has to grasp what kind of thing is being alluded to. I point to this object and say 'brown'. But do I mean the kind of object, the distance from me, the shape, or the colour? Only if he knows it is the latter does he get me right.

Once one has taken Wittgenstein's point, one looks back in amazement at the unsophisticated (*we can use this term*) theories of meaning which dominated early modern philosophy, in particular those of Hobbes (chapters 4 and 5 of *Leviathan*), Locke (book III of the *Essay concerning Human Understanding*), Condillac (the *Essai sur l'origine des connois-*

*sances humaines*). The latter (in part II, section I, chapter 1 of the *Essai*) gives an account of the origin of language in which he sees his originators learning to use first one word, then two, then three, then more. The underlying implication was that there could be such a thing as a one-word lexicon, something which does not seem to have been challenged in the classical period, but whose full absurdity Wittgenstein exposes.<sup>1</sup>

What underlay this naive view? That thought and the use of language were assimilated to ordinary kinds of events, which do not require this background of meaning. What emerged from the discussion above about the two kinds of impossibility, instanced respectively in the neolithic village by the inability to think 'sophisticated' and the inability to build a pyramid, was a distinction between two kinds of events: those which do, and those which do not, presuppose a background of meaning which lays down validity conditions. Let us call these, for short, 'plain events' and 'meaning events'. The early modern theories of language took thinking a thought, or introducing a word, as plain events. There was an idea in the mind, and a sound in the vicinity, and the individual thinker just set up a connection between these two. Language is born. These theories just ignored altogether the existence of meaning events, and imagined they could deal with everything as a plain event. Now exactly this error, I want to claim, is what underlies modern atomism, and its offshoot methodological individualism.

Once the point is made that all thoughts occur in individual minds, we might think that the case for methodological individualism is sufficiently made. But this only suffices if we are treating them as plain events. In an exactly parallel way, Locke argues (*Essay* III.ii.8) that the connection between idea and word has to be set up in someone's minds, so that lexica are always of individuals. Once you see that we are dealing here with meaning events, the story becomes more complicated. We cannot just focus on the event which occurs; we have also to take account of the background which gives it its meaning. But this background is not an event, nor can it be located in individuals. It is a language, and locating it is not a simple matter. From one standpoint, it cannot be located at all; it can be seen as an ideal entity, like Pythagoras' theorem, or the rule of *modus ponens*. But if we want to see how it is embedded in human life, then we have to say something like this: a language is created and

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<sup>1</sup> Of course, Wittgenstein was not the first to make this point. It was central to the theories of language of the Romantic age. Herder already attacked Condillac in his *Treatise on the Origin of Language*. Cf. Herder *Sprachphilosophie*, Hamburg, 1960, pp. 12-13. I have discussed the growth of this alternative view, and also its affinities to Wittgenstein's later philosophy, in my 'Language and Human Nature', in Taylor, *Human Nature and Language*, Cambridge (1985, pp. 215-47).

sustained in the continuing interchanges that takes place in a certain linguistic community. This linguistic community is its locus; and *that* is what ultimately rules out methodological individualism.

Meaning events exist in a kind of two-dimensional space. They are particular events, but they are these only in relation to a background of meaning. This is the basis of the famous Saussurian distinction (1978, ch. IV) between 'langue' and 'parole'. Language cannot be understood, Saussure claimed, unless we make this distinction. There is a code (langue), and this code is drawn on in each particular act of speech (parole). These are in a characteristic circular relation. The acts of parole all presuppose the existence of the langue. But this latter is constantly recreated in the acts of parole. At any one moment, synchronically, language can be considered as an ideal system, but over time or diachronically it changes and evolves, and it does so under the impact of parole, as people mispeak or deliberately innovate and deviant usage gradually becomes standard.

Now, let us say that each act of parole can be attributed to an individual or (decomposably) to individuals (I am not sure I want to concede this at the end of the day, but it certainly seems a commonsense assumption). It still does not follow that we can give an atomist account of language. To do so is to collapse the other dimension, that of langue, which is not an individual matter but the normative practice of a community. Nor does it help to point to the fact that over time the langue is given the shape it has through acts of parole. This still does not make it decomposable, because the acts which so shape it are only such acts against the background of the langue of their day. The two dimensions cannot be collapsed into one.

But methodological individualism involves attempting such a collapse. It is based on the belief that the background can either be ignored (treating the acts of parole as plain events), or can somehow be reduced and decomposed into these acts. On either variant, it is a fundamental mistake.

What emerges from this argument is the very deep intrication in our intellectual and cultural history of two issues: atomism versus the social perspective on one hand; and denying versus acknowledging the dimension of meaning on the other. Once you collapse the dimension of meaning, ignore the independent role of langue, once there are no more meaning events, but all are plain, then it just seems unproblematic on generally agreed naturalist grounds to conclude to atomism in politics as was once the norm in physics. In your theory of language, since everything is now accounted for in terms of parole, and all acts of parole are those of individuals, it seems that language too must be ultimately an individual affair, that the hook-up between sound and idea must occur in individuals, just as the classical theory thought. What upsets this line of

thought is not some mysterious collective consciousness but the nature of meaning events. Acknowledging the independent place of the dimension of langue means accepting something into one's social ontology which cannot be decomposed into individual occurrences. This is the crucial step out of atomism.<sup>2</sup>

In the last paragraphs I have been speaking about language. But the discussion started with such crucial features of social life as roles, laws, offices, and statuses. We got on to language because these are plainly connected with our having certain thoughts, and our thoughts are conditioned by our language. But it should be plain now, that in virtue of these connections, these features partake of the two-dimensional nature I described in Saussurian terms. I am now filling a certain role, say that of father or teacher. But this is evidently not a plain state, but a meaning state.<sup>3</sup> I can only fill these roles because there are conditions of validity which are defined in the set of practices and institutions which shape the life of my society. The way in which I and others fill these roles, or fall short of doing so, may bring about diachronic change in this background set of conditions; because finally the practices and institutions are only sustained in the particular form they have here through the ongoing interchanges of our social life. Each individual filling of a role is an act of parole which presupposes a background langue; and this in turn is sustained through constantly renewed such acts. The Saussurian circle

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<sup>2</sup> And that is why it is, of course, no accident that the later Wittgenstein's thesis about language as the background of the meaning of individual terms serves as part of a proof of the impossibility of a private language. Where for the classical theories the public language was only a convergence of private lexica, Wittgenstein shows the parasitic status of privately invented meanings on public language.

<sup>3</sup> On one reading, of course, being a father is simply a biological fact. But I am not talking here about the biological relation but the social role, recognised in different societies with different meanings and obligations attached to it, and a varying emotional significance. In our society it is embedded in a certain understanding of the nuclear family. This is in fact an excellent example of the way in which a langue changes over time through acts of parole. Our understanding of what a family is and how it should function is being stretched and changed by the variety of 'irregular' unions which people now live in. But all these original syntagms draw on our existing 'vocabulary' of family love and responsibility, sometimes in a bewildering way. Recently in Vancouver one member of a lesbian menage sued the other for child support, having had a child (by artificial insemination naturally) while living with her partner who had now abandoned her for another woman. The bemused judge threw out the case. But those who see the West Coast as the wave of the future may be right.

applies here too, and we cannot reduce it without rendering ourselves incapable of understanding how societies work.

Methodological individualist accounts of social processes have to break down because they can not cope with this fact. In one sense, perhaps, all acts and choices are individual. They are, however, only the acts and choices they are against the background of practices and understandings. But this background cannot be reduced to a set of acts, choices, or, indeed, other predicates of individuals. Its locus is a society. This is the undecomposable kernel against which atomism must break its teeth.

### 3. Identifying Irreducibly Social Goods

I have been sawing and hacking away at that support of the thesis that goods are decomposable which I have called atomism. I hope that everyone will agree that it is now cut through and collapsing. It is time to connect this back to the main issues. Besides taking away one of the strong motives to believe that all goods must be individual, does this understanding of society in terms of the Saussurian circle tell us anything directly about social goods? Perhaps I have removed one of the main reasons for believing *a priori* that social goods must be decomposable. But have I cast any direct light on what an undecomposable social good might look like?

I think it has. I want in fact to suggest that there are two ways in which one can identify a good as irreducibly social, and that an understanding of the langue-parole bi-dimensionality of social action helps to clarify these.

The first way emerges directly out of the above discussion. If we refer to the background of practices, institutions and understandings which form the langue-analogue for our action in a given society as our 'culture' (in one possible use of this rather overworked term), then it is clear that the culture can be the locus of goods.

One obvious way in which it might convincingly appear as such to us is this: as individuals we value certain things; we find certain fulfillments goods, certain experiences satisfying, certain outcomes positive. But these things can only be good in this way, or satisfying or positive after their particular fashion, because of the background understanding which has developed in our culture. Thus I may value the fulfillment which comes from a certain kind of authentic self-expression; or the experience which arises from certain works of art, or outcomes in which people stand with each other on a footing of frankness and equality. But these things are only possible against the background of a certain culture. Not every human culture has a place for authentic self-expression. Indeed, like 'fulfilling' and 'sophisticated', the very language of self-expression, including a term like 'authenticity', was not comprehensible to an earlier

age. The works of art which give rise to the experience I value may be those of a given age, and hence once again presuppose a certain culture; while the relations of frankness and equality I value will seem incomprehensible or obviously reprehensible to people of a very different society — in hierarchical societies, for example, like mediaeval Japan. Where there are some analogues in that society, they would only hold of relations within very restricted groups, say of between close friends, not of the generally accepted public relations of all citizens at large.

If these things are goods, then, other things being equal, so must the culture be which makes them possible. If I want to maximise these goods, then I must want to preserve and strengthen this culture. But the culture as a good, or more cautiously, as the locus of some goods (for there might be much that is reprehensible in it as well) is not an *individual* good. Very well, one might say, it is a public good in the recognised category, like national defence, or the dam we built upstream to protect our houses. Like them it is 'public' in that it cannot be procured for one person without being secured for a whole group. But the goods it produces are surely those of individuals: X's fulfillment, Y's experience, the relations of the individuals in this group.

But here is where the analogy becomes strained. Even leaving aside the case of frank and equal relations, to which I return below, there is something very different here. The dam, and the army, stand in a causal relation to the goods they produce. These goods could come about by some other means, even though this may be empirically unlikely. But a culture is related to the acts and experiences it makes intelligible in no such external way. The idea that the culture is only valuable instrumentally in this kind of case rests on a confusion. But this is essential to the ordinary understanding within welfarism of how public goods are decomposable. There is an objection one might make to this thesis. The objection is to the effect that, after all, the dam is a single entity, and it helps many people, and therefore it is a social good. But the answer to this is very clear. The dam is a single entity, but the goods are all individual: X's house being preserved from flood, Y's house being preserved, and so on. The dam itself is not good, only its effects are. It is merely instrumentally valuable.

*This* kind of reply is not possible in regard to the culture. It is not a mere instrument of the individual goods. It cannot be distinguished from these as they are merely contingent conditions, something they could in principle exist without. That makes no sense. It is essentially linked to what we have identified as good. Consequently, it is hard to see how we could deny it the title of good, not just in some weakened, instrumental sense like the dam, but as intrinsically good. To say, for example, that a certain kind of self-giving heroism or a certain quality of aesthetic experience is good necessarily involves the judgment that the cultures in

which this kind of heroism and that kind of experience are conceivable options are good cultures. If virtue and experience are worth cultivating, then the cultures have to be worth fostering, not as contingent instruments, but for themselves.

But now secondly, the valuable culture, unlike the dam, is an irreducible feature of the society as a whole. The dam, just as an instrument, its not a feature of society at all. This opens up another crucial disanalogy. A good is public in a common sense of welfarist theory, we saw, when its provision to one require its being supplied for all. But this too, in the ordinary case, is a contingent restriction. In fact, with available technology and taking account of cost factors, the only solution to my flooding problem is a dam which also will protect all of you. But with a different gamut of possible technologies, or if I had much larger resources, there might be another solution: I encase my property in some force field which only operates against water pressing from the outside; and then I watch all of you with smug satisfaction, as you rush to evacuate in your boats. But this possibility makes no sense in the cultural case. This good is inherently social.

This is one way in which we can identify irreducibly social goods. But there is another, which picks out a partially overlapping class of such goods. To identify this class we again start from the ordinary welfarist understanding of a public good. Such a good was judged decomposable, as we saw, because we can identify its being good with its being good for A, for B, for C, and so on, severally.

But now let us look more closely at the third example of culturally-conditioned goods above, the case of frank and equal relations. I entered a caveat above at treating this as a good of individuals only. And now I want to explain why. The crucial point is that our relations being of this kind is itself an irreducibly social fact. That our relations are of a certain kind is not just the combination of a fact about me, say my dispositions, and a fact about you. What this decomposition leaves out is the crucial factor: that we are not only well (or ill) disposed to each other, but that we have some common understanding about this. And it is futile and wrong-headed to try to define common or mutual understanding as a compound of individual states. Our having a common understanding about something is distinct from my understanding it, plus your understanding it, plus perhaps my knowing that you understand, and your knowing that I understand. Nor does it help to add further levels — for example, that I know that you know that I understand. This kind of convoluted situation sometimes exists in the more delicate or strained human relations, or on the diplomatic level between states, but it is recognisably distinct from the case where we have something out between us and come to a common understanding.

There is another crucial distinction here, alongside that between meaning events and plain events, which has been totally ignored by the empiricist-utilitarian tradition, but which is of the greatest human importance. It is that between what is convergent and what is genuinely common. A 'convergent' matter is one that has the same meaning for many people, but where this is not acknowledged between them, or in public space. Something is common when it exists not just for me and for you, but for *us*, acknowledged as such. Much of human life is quite unintelligible if one ignores this distinction. To start with, one can never understand why people strive to maintain the convoluted type of relations mentioned above. Nor can one grasp what friendship or love consist in, because it is essential to such relationships that they repose to some large degree on common understandings.<sup>4</sup> It is essential to their being what they are that they be not just for me and for you, but for us. That we have a common understanding presupposes that we have formed a unit, and 'we' who understand together, which is by definition analytically undecomposable. If it were, the understanding would not be genuinely common.

But friendship is usually judged a good. And where an undecomposable relation is a good, then some stronger condition generally holds: viz., it is essential to its being a good relation that the common understanding englobe its goodness. Friendship presupposes not just mutual understanding, but understanding around this, that our friendship is valuable. The mutual recognition in love always includes some common sense of what this means to us. When this comes in doubt, when it looks as though we do not any longer value it in the same way, the love is under threat.

Here is another way, then, that a good can be social in an irreducible fashion: where it is essential to its being a good that its goodness be the object of a common understanding. We find such goods more widely than in areas of intimate life. My social example above, of frank and equal relations, is also of this type. We do not in fact stand on such a footing with each other unless there is some common understanding of this. And we cannot maintain this footing unless the common understanding englobes the rightness of this footing. The footing does not exist unless there is some common sense that we *are* equal, that we command equal treatment, that this is the appropriate way to deal with each other. Essential to this set of relations as a good is something which is undecomposable.

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<sup>4</sup> I have discussed this distinction extensively in my 'Theories of Meaning', in Taylor, 1985a, pp. 248-92.

So we see two ways of defining irreducibly common goods: (1) the goods of a *culture* which makes actions, feelings, ways of life which are of value conceptually feasible; and (2) goods which essentially incorporate common understandings of their value. There is obviously a substantial overlap between these two, in that a cultural good may also be such that it can only exist to the extent that it is commonly prized. And, indeed, our last example seems to have a foot in both categories: that our culture offers the possibility of public relations of frankness and equality shades over into our actually standing in such relations. Neither can perhaps long survive the demise of the other.

#### 4. Social and Political Implications

So what? Perhaps I am right here, as a matter of philosophical analysis. But we may want to ask, what follows for our social and political life? Is this just an academic dispute?

The answer ought to be showing through already. It can be gleaned from the examples I used that the conception of irreducibly social goods is bound up with some important strands of modern politics. This means that in articulating this kind of good I am spelling out the philosophical presuppositions of some political positions which are widely held.

Almost the first example which springs to mind is modern linguistic or cultural nationalism. Perhaps this springs first to my mind because I live in Montreal, and have been trying to make sense of what has been going on there for the last half-century. And it is clear that all stripes of nationalist sentiment in the province concur in seeing the culture of Quebec, and that means in practice the French language, as a common good at least in the sense of a presupposition of the life that they value (sense 1); and sometimes as a good in sense 2 as well. What has emerged out of this is a politics of defence of the language as a common good, considered an important enough goal to take priority in some cases over individual goals which would otherwise have been considered beyond legitimate constraint. Thus there have been restrictions on where parents could send their children to state-supported schools (totally private schools are unregulated) and, specifically, on the language of schooling they could choose for their children. In response to pleas for freedom of parents' choice as a right, nationalist theorists have developed theories of 'collective' rights, which are alleged to take precedence in certain cases over individual rights.

I am not making a judgment here. I merely report a bit of contemporary politics which has turned on concepts which would have to be philosophically explicated in something like the manner I have outlined in the previous pages. But let me turn to another, perhaps (to some of you) less morally dubious example

One of the central strands of modern democratic culture is the notion that participatory self-rule is a good in itself. It is not simply something instrumental to other goals, like justice, or peace or stability, but is something valued for its own sake. This view has a long history in our culture. It connects to the tradition of a long history in our culture. It connects to the tradition of thought in the modern West which has been called 'civic humanist', and which took the ancient polis or republic for its model. Its major thinkers include Machiavelli — an idiosyncratic case, but one who built on an influential strand in the Renaissance; Montesquieu, Rousseau, Tocqueville, and in our day, Hannah Arendt. Its moments of decisive political impact, after the Italian Renaissance, were: the Civil War period in England; the American Revolution and constitution-building; and the French Revolution; after which it has become a major strand in the self-understanding of western liberal democracy.

This tradition takes the life of the 'citizen' understood as a person who is not simply subjected to power but participates in his/her own rule, as an essential component of human dignity. It contrasts the life in which citizens direct themselves towards issues in which the fate of peoples and cultures hangs in the balance, with the narrow confines of a life which is focussed only on self-enrichment, or private pleasures. To describe this political condition it coins a special sense of the term 'freedom' (or borrows it from the ancients), distinct from the common sense of 'negative' freedom. Tocqueville described eloquently the attractions of this kind of freedom:

*Ce qui, dans tous les temps lui a attaché si fortement le coeur de certains hommes, ce sont ses attraits mêmes, son charme propre, indépendant de ses bienfaits; c'est le plaisir de pouvoir parler, agir, respirer sans contrainte, sous le seul gouvernement de Dieu et des lois. Qui cherche dans la liberté autre chose qu'elle-même est fait pour servir.*

And Tocqueville finishes the passage grandly by saying that you either understand this taste for liberty or you do not. '*On doit renoncer à le faire comprendre aux âmes médiocres qui ne l'ont jamais ressenti*' (Tocqueville, 1967, pp. 267-8).

But shorn of Tocqueville's aristocratic sensibility, we recognise a widespread aspiration and political value of our time. These days a régime in which people govern themselves as equal citizens is a common good in sense 2 above. It cannot exist without some common understanding that that is the basis on which we stand with each other, and this common understanding must englobe the rightness of this basis. Of course, this insight goes way back into the civic humanist tradition of thought about republican rule, right back to the ancients. This kind of

*to breathe without constraint, under the govt. of so*

régime absolutely requires that we share a love for the 'laws', what Montesquieu defined as '*vertu*'.

But the outlook I am describing here as 'welfarist', following Sen, can assimilate this kind of good; it cannot allow for an undistorted description of it. The politics of nationalism, or republican rule, emerge in its language as the cherishing of some instrumental public good. Or else their status as goods is understood in a purely subjectivist fashion: they are goods to the extent that people desire them. Such and such a proportion of Québécois have a 'taste' for the preservation of the French language, and thus this is a good, just like chocolate chip ice cream and transistorised walkmans.

But both of these grievously distort the nature of the good sought; particularly the last. The advocates of nationalism, or republican rule, do not see its value as contingent on its popularity. They think that these are goods whether we recognise them or not, goods we *ought* to recognise. This stance goes sometimes unrecognised because it is thought to be somehow morally reprehensible: what right do these people have to tell us that we ought to give our national culture a higher priority in our lives, that we ought to participate in our own rule? Are they going to force us to be free? There seems to be something undemocratic in this attitude.

But this is a confusion. Democracy concerns our collective decision procedures. A proponent of nationalism or citizen rule can be a democrat as well as anyone else, in fact, in the sense of respecting these procedures. (There is, in fact, a great paradox in a proponent of republican rule failing to respect them, as has been tragically enough illustrated over and over again in modern history.) But he does not have to tailor his opinions about the good to the tastes of the majority. What he *advocates* must surely be independent of majority taste. The temptation to think otherwise comes from the rampant subjectivism of much of modern philosophy.

Now for the purposes of this discussion I am not taking a stand in favour of nationalism and citizen rule. Indeed, I could hardly do so, because there are many strands of modern nationalism, and some of them are visibly evil. As a matter of fact, I have spent much of my political life combatting some of these strands though I do confess to being a strong partisan of citizen self-rule. But all this is meant to be beside the point. What I want to bring out here is the way in which an important set of issues which figure in modern politics shows up distortively in the perspective of welfarism. Some alternatives cannot be undistortively formulated in this perspective. If these were really intellectually incoherent, then it would be entirely to the credit of welfarism to have shown them up as such. But since I have argued that this kind of common good is perfectly coherent, I draw the opposite conclusion. The view that all

social goods are decomposable is a view we have to scrap; and not just for the reason that it is wrong, but also because it prevents our adequately understanding important aspects of modern social and political life.

I have not yet finished my attack. The welfarist outlook does not only distort the political aspirations to common goods; it occludes to some extent the opposition to these aspirations. That is, philosophy is not neutral: the utilitarian view is aligned to one of the contestants in the modern struggle to define liberal democracy.

In fact, there are several strands of thought and political aspiration which have gone into making our contemporary western societies. The civic humanist strand is just one, and perhaps not the most powerful. Also of great importance have been: the understanding of society as an association of bearers of rights; and the picture of society as an association of bearers of interests, either groups or individuals. The rights perspective goes back at least to the great seventeenth century natural rights theories — and even beyond if we trace it out properly.<sup>5</sup> The picture of society as set up to serve the interests of its members also goes back to foundation writers in the seventeenth century. Locke is an important figure for both of these strands. But the full development of the interest strand comes only in the eighteenth century, with the Utilitarian Enlightenment. Today this picture of society as a common instrument for diverse group interests is visible in both the theories of interest group pluralism (for example, Truman, 1951; and Easton, 1965), and in the 'economic' and elite theories of democracy (say Schumpeter, 1950; and Dahl, 1961).

This interest strand has been in tension with the republican strand almost since the beginning of the modern representative liberal state. Pocock (1975, Part III) has traced the intellectual conflict in eighteenth century England. The tension can be seen in the work of the founders of the American Constitution. And it is evident today.

In our day it turns around our attitude to the growth of centralisation and bureaucracy. From one perspective, these can be positively valued, because they seem to be the conditions of more effective production of the goods which people (individually) want. Moreover, greater production can be thought to be the condition of fairer distribution, since it is easier to give to those who have less if you do not have to take away from those who have. Rapid growth can make social redistribution less of a zero-sum game. And fairness in distribution has always been a central concern of the interest perspective.

On the other side, concentration and bureaucratic organisation are seen as the greatest adversaries of self-rule, gradually stifling it or render-

<sup>5</sup> See the interesting works by Richard Tuck (1979) and James Tully (1980).

ing it irrelevant, and producing despair and cynicism about it in an age of giant, irresponsible agglomerations of power.

Now one of these strands of thought wants to think in terms of individual goods; it wants to see society merely in instrumental terms. It wants to be clear about who is getting what good. Because it is concerned about 'delivering the goods' maximally and (usually also) equally. The welfarist perspective is a good one to adopt in order to deliberate about alternatives, *granted the goods in which it is interested*. Welfarism is as congenial to this strand of thinking as it is inhospitable to the republican one.

Now if challenged to defend itself as a moral position, this strand would have something to say, because it comes from a moral tradition of some depth. There is an important line of modern moral thinking which I have called elsewhere (1985) the 'affirmation of ordinary life', which starts with the Reformation, and is secularised in the Enlightenment. By 'ordinary life' here, I mean the life of production and reproduction, of work and the family. The central idea of this outlook is that the good life for human beings is not to be found in some supposed 'higher' activity, beyond ordinary life — be it contemplation, or religious askesis, or even citizen rule. It is to be found in the very centre of everyday existence, in the acquisition through labour of the means to life, and the reproduction of life in the family. This idea perhaps starts with the puritan stress on the 'calling', and then it mutates into the Enlightenment conception of human happiness in a life according to nature. Rousseau too made it central, trying to combine it, paradoxically and perhaps ultimately impossibly, with an ethic of citizen rule. And it is visible in the exaltation of man the producer in the work of Marx.

Polemically, thinkers in this strand have directed their attacks on what they saw as the false prestige of the supposed 'higher' goods, which often served as a cover to justify the privileged status of a 'higher' class who were properly dedicated to these goods — be it those with leisure to contemplate; or those who have dedicated themselves to religious askesis; or those who seek honour and fame in public life. And in this context it is worth while remembering that the ethic of republican rule was in a very real sense an aristocratic one for most of human history. Even ancient democracies were far from all-comprehensive, and they existed on the backs of an underclass of slaves, not to mention the exclusion of metics and the lower status of women. The ethic of ordinary life has thus always been hostile to that of honour and fame.

So the proponents of welfarism, of a politics of instrumental reason aimed at the production of individual happiness, have something to answer the haughty claim of Tocqueville. They can plead that they are not interested in the illusion of supposedly 'higher' concerns; that too much has already been sacrificed of concrete human happiness on such

altars; that what they are out after is concrete, tangible human welfare, and that theirs is the politics of real philanthropy, of altruism and concern for the human good.

A full-scale moral argument is about to break out here, one of some depth and passion, one that could illuminate our current predicament if we carried it forward. And that is what is wrong with welfarism. It prevents this argument from happening. For it not only distorts its opponent's position, but occludes its own. As long as you think that all goods must be individual, that any other construal is incoherent, you cannot see that there is a *moral* argument here at all. The burden of advocacy of the welfarist stance to policy seems entirely borne by *logical* arguments. The issue seems one of thinking straight, rather than one of acting well. Welfarism, as a doctrine about the nature of the good, has to be dispelled before the really interesting argument, between welfarism as a theory of *what things are good* and its opponents, can swim into focus.

As a philosophical doctrine, welfarism is acting as a screen, which prevents us from seeing our actual moral predicament, and from identifying the real alternatives. It pretends to a neutrality it does not really enjoy. The result is that it distorts its opponent, and perhaps even more fatefully, hides from itself the rich moral outlook which motivates it. To set it aside is more than a demand of intellectual rigour. It is also a requirement of political and moral lucidity.

And that is why it is worth showing to all sides in the debate that there are irreducibly social goods.