

The Common Good: A Buck-Passing Account*

ERIC BEERBOHM

Government, Harvard University

and

RYAN W. DAVIS

Political Science, Brigham Young University

THE “common good” is appealed to by philosophers, political scientists, and politicians alike. Although their purposes are diverse, most invocations of the common good share a unified orientation toward it. The common good is taken to be an ideal worthy of our political pursuit. The common good represents a way of rising above private or parochial interests, setting aside political posturing or gamesmanship, and working toward goals whose value none could deny.¹ Given its uniformly positive valence, it should not be surprising that the common good is often paired with the other guiding concept of political society: justice. We are frequently told that the appropriate aim of a deliberative democracy is toward “justice and the common good,” implicating both that the common good is something beyond justice itself, but also that the concepts play a similar function—as appropriate guides to political activity.²

What will interest us here is not how justice and the common good are treated similarly, but in a contrast between them. While justice—perhaps without much controversy—is the most examined concept in political philosophy, there has been relatively little systematic study of its complement. If we agree that justice is the “first virtue” of political society, it may well warrant greater scrutiny. Yet the comparison between justice and the common good sets in relief the deep disparity

*Earlier versions of this article were presented at the Nuffield Political Theory Workshop, the UCL Theory Workshop, and at Brigham Young University. For helpful comments and discussion, we are grateful to Jessica Flanigan, Johann Frick, Christopher Karpowitz, Meira Levinson, Jane Mansbridge, David Miller, Kelly Patterson, Jeremy Pope, T. M. Scanlon, and Dennis Thompson. We would also like to express thanks to the anonymous referees and Bob Goodin for their guidance in revising and rethinking significant parts of the paper.

¹See, recently, Dominique Leydet, “Partisan legislatures and democratic deliberation,” *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 22 (2014), 235–60; Eric McGhee, Seth Maskett, Boris Shor, Steven Rogers, and Nolan McCarty, “A primary cause of partisanship? Nomination systems and legislator ideology,” *American Journal of Political Science*, 58 (2013), 337–51.

²See, for example, Eric MacGilvray, “Democratic doubts: pragmatism and the epistemic defense of democracy,” *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 22 (2014), 105–23. Here MacGilvray is following Josh Cohen, “An epistemic conception of democracy,” *Ethics*, 97 (1986), 26–38.

in attention. If the common good, as well as justice, should guide our political reasoning and action, then this concept likewise merits theoretical attention.

Our aim is to provide the outlines of a theory of the common good. We will propose a partially revisionary account. On our view, to say a proposal is in the common good is to say that there are reasons to act together to bring it about. We take this account to offer what Carnap called an “explicative concept.”³ Our view preserves a fair amount of the meaning of the word in everyday use. At the same time, we refine the concept to meet a set of three relevant theoretical desiderata, to be described in section I. Section II will present our positive account. Sections III and IV will in turn illustrate how our account meets the desiderata, and respond to objections.

I. DESIDERATA FOR A THEORY OF THE COMMON GOOD

We should note that our primary aim will be toward theory-building, and so will be exploratory rather than critical. For example, we will not argue that alternative ways of specifying the concept of the common good will fail to meet our desiderata. Our aim is not to preclude other ways of theorizing the common good, but to suggest the need for theory in the first place. Conceptual choices should not be made unconsciously, and our aim is to make explicit some possible options. As with any conceptual choices, there are costs and benefits to our favored view. With this as background, we will suggest that a theory of the common good should meet three criteria. It should be distributively neutral, non-partisan, and extensionally adequate.

First, the concept of the common good should not privilege the interests or values of some members of a society over others. Any good-centered approach brings a certain hazard to political deliberation. It allows citizens to make arguments that paper over interpersonal trade-offs. In so doing, it creates the possibility that the concept itself could bias the distribution of goods or resources. Such a consequence, we believe, should count as a theoretical cost. Instead, a concept of the common good should be distributively neutral among the interests of relevant parties.

It may help to have a concrete example of how the concept of the common good can be invoked in a way that runs afoul of distributive neutrality. Robert Moses ensured that some of New York’s overpasses were so low that buses could not easily travel from the poorest boroughs.⁴ Here the distributive burden placed on the least well off was morally unacceptable on a range of egalitarian views. Moses defended his blueprint in abstractions. He was particularly fond of citing the common or public good as his ally. Of course, his actions were not actually

³Rudolf Carnap, *Meaning and Necessity: A Study in Semantics and Modal Logic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1947).

⁴Robert Caro, *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York* (New York: Vintage Books, 1975).

sanctioned by a good-oriented approach to political morality. But it raises the distributive worry about how the concept of the common good can be used. If public officials think of themselves as making decisions that are good-for-us, they may be tempted to gloss over disparities concealed behind this normative banner.

Although the case of Robert Moses is an extreme instance of deploying the “common good” as a guise for distributive bias, realizing distributive neutrality can be difficult. As another example, consider “objective list” theories of the common good. According to these accounts, the common good is given by a list of goods taken to be positively valuable to every member of a political community. Even seemingly uncontroversial items on such lists can be distributively consequential. Many objective lists of the “common good” will cite national security, for instance.⁵ While national security may be in the interest of every citizen, allocating resources in a way that marginally reduces the susceptibility of the political state to attack may mean little to citizens whose bodily security is vulnerable to violence by other members of their household, community, or even, possibly, local government authorities. Another frequent item on lists of the common good is equality in education.⁶ While certainly a worthy ideal, allocating resources to achieve equality in education may matter most to those who already receive an education that provides basic civic capacities. For those not yet in this group, equality in education may not be a meaningful ideal.⁷ In each of these cases, a seemingly uncontroversial item on an objective list of the common good may quietly import certain background assumptions about which distributive issues are most pressing.

Our second proposed desideratum for a concept of the common good is that it should be non-partisan. The concept of the common good should be specified in a way that allows for the full range of substantive debate about what should count as part of the common good. We have a strong methodological reason to foster agreement about core concepts, since that allows for the possibility of greater clarity in disagreements among conceptions. To see the force of this reason, we can again look to the concept of distributive justice. Members of a society—and their resident philosophers—can agree that they are interested in coming up with the right distribution of benefits and burdens in a cooperative social arrangement. The concept of justice, in this sense, helps set their collective problem. They will disagree about which particular theory offers a plausible answer to this predicament. But they have a platform on which to disagree, make concessions, and even search for overlapping principles.

⁵For example, Brian M. Barry, *Political Argument* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965), p. 195.

⁶This element has a Rawlsian pedigree. See also Samuel Freeman, “Deliberative democracy: a sympathetic comment,” *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 29 (2000), 371–418, at p. 412.

⁷For this point, see Elizabeth Anderson, “Fair equality in education: a democratic equality perspective,” *Ethics*, 117 (2007), 595–622. An important article in the history of sociology on class and education, which vividly portrays the varied ways in which status influences many aspects of education, is Jean Anyon, “Social class and school knowledge,” *Curriculum Inquiry*, 1 (1981), 3–42.

Partisan accounts of the common good will fail to provide this service. Instead, they will tend to favor some first-order view about morality or politics at the expense of others. It is tempting to talk about the common good in a way that casts a distinctive telic valence. The common good can easily be thought of as a value that is both specifiable in terms of an end state to be realized or promoted, and “common”—in the philosophically loaded sense of “agent neutral.” But to make this supposition would be to rule out many contending theories about political life. An especially prominent set of includes several forms of deontic egalitarianism. Relational egalitarianism, we want to suggest, is plainly incompatible with a good-centered view. It holds that what is morally central is relating to others on justifiable terms. Inequalities of goods—power or wealth—can reflect forms of mistreatment. It construes equality as a social and political—not fundamentally distributive—value. On this view, the value of equality lies not in abstract patterns or its impact on our well-being. It rests, instead, in the web of relationships that we hold as directly valuable. A good-oriented approach will misplace the significance of equality.

Third, and most obviously, an account of the common good should be extensionally adequate. It should be able to make sense of contemporary uses among theorists, as well as practitioners of politics. Extensional adequacy does not rule out the possibility of conceptual revision.⁸ Sometimes, existing practice may be partisan and or distributively biased, and so theoretical revision may offer the possibilities for providing a more useful concept. However, the concept should continue to answer to actual practice. A useful concept must be one that is intelligible from the point of view of those who, in fact, invoke it.

II. A BUCK-PASSING ACCOUNT

We are looking for a way of formulating the common good in a way that is distributively neutral, non-partisan among competing conceptions, and extensionally adequate in light of use. How should we proceed? Let us inspect the role that this notion plays in our first-personal plural reasoning. Suppose we are deliberating whether to invest more in our space program or performing arts. Arguments that one of these programs is “better-for-us” would come across as unusual. It would seem to be providing a reason of the wrong kind. To see the force of this, consider the experience of individual decision-making. In our personal choices, it is striking how rarely we are directly guided by the aim of our own good. The individual who has just climbed Mount Himalaya will not be glad to recast her accomplishment in terms of her well-being or interest. To her, accepting that the climb was good for her—on whatever metric you’d like—need not make the experience more valuable. It is in this sense that what is “good for

⁸Cf. Peter Godfrey-Smith, “Metaphysics and the philosophical imagination,” *Philosophical Studies*, 160 (2012), 97–113.

us” is, in Scanlon’s language, “evaluatively transparent.”⁹ So, if we opt for the policy of bolstering the space program, we do so for reasons that we see as choice-worthy in their own right. We are not making a good-for-us appeal—whatever aggregative procedure we are likely to use. This isn’t to say that the program’s impact on the good of particular individuals is null, or that it goes unregistered. But we recognize that our collective aim is valued primarily for non-welfarist reasons.

Here we follow T. M. Scanlon’s influential buck-passing account of the good. Scanlon writes:

[B]eing good, or valuable, is not a property that itself provides a reason to respond to a thing in certain ways. Rather, to be good or valuable is to have other properties that constitute such reasons. Since the claim that some property constitutes a reason is a normative claim, this account also takes goodness and value to be non-natural properties, namely the purely formal, higher-order properties of having some lower-order properties that provide reasons of the relevant kind.¹⁰

In Scanlon’s original version, predicates “good” or “valuable” refer (pass the buck) to other properties, which provide reasons for adopting various attitudes.¹¹ Modifying Scanlon’s idea, we propose,

The *Buck-Passing Account of the Common Good*: Being in the common good consists in the fact that there are reasons to act together to bring it about.

Our proposal modifies Scanlon’s in several ways. First, the paragraph from Scanlon cited above famously contains at least two theses: one negative and the other positive. The negative thesis claims that something’s being good does not, itself, provide reasons. The positive thesis claims that something’s being good indicates that there are always other reasons to respond to it in some appreciative way.¹² As has been pointed out in the meta-ethical literature, these theses are independent. We will be interested only in adapting the positive thesis. The truth of the positive thesis does not entail the negative thesis.¹³ Moreover, with a sufficiently capacious view of reasons, it is possible to think that the good might provide reasons even if it merely refers to other, reason-providing properties. In Schroeder’s case, Nate’s friend tells Nate that there is a reason to go into the living room, but does not tell him what the reason is (unbeknownst to Nate, a surprise party awaits him there). When Nate goes into the living room, he acts on

⁹Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), p. 93.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 97.

¹¹As a referee helpfully presses us to clarify, our proposal for the common good will not require adopting any specific view of the role of “the good” in collective deliberation.

¹²But not necessarily that there are only other reasons to respond in an appreciative way. Our thanks to a referee for pressing us to clarify this. If the positive thesis implied there were only other reasons, then it would entail the negative thesis.

¹³Cf. Mark Schroeder, “The buck-passers’ negative thesis,” *Philosophical Explorations*, 12 (2011), 341–7.

the consideration that “there is a reason for him to go into the living room.” By hypothesis, though, he also acts for a reason. But if this fact can, itself, count as a reason, then it seems that the negative buck-passing thesis is false.

Analogous cases are even easier to find at the collective level. In a world of complex decision-making, policy makers are often forced to rely—to some extent, anyway—on experts.¹⁴ Suppose an advisor tells a representative that there is reason to vote for an economic stimulus package. It may well be that the representative has neither the expertise to understand what the reason is nor the time to come to understand the reason. Nevertheless, it may be rational for the representative to vote for the package. The representative still votes for a reason—namely, “that there is a reason to vote for the stimulus package.” However, the negative thesis would require that the representative act for no reason at all, since, by hypothesis, she has no other, first-order reasons for voting for the package. Thus, there is an analogous disconfirming case for the negative thesis. Because the negative buck-passing thesis might thereby encounter problems, we will now set it aside. (Equally, nothing we say will require that the negative thesis be false.)

Second, our buck-passing account of the common good is focused on reasons for action, rather than reasons for some other attitude or set of attitudes. One might worry that this feature will raise a partisanship objection against our own account, privileging deontological rather than consequentialist first-order political views. However, consequentialists also have theories of right action, and there is no obstacle to thinking that right actions are just those that promote desirable states of affairs. Our proposal is even compatible with versions of consequentialism according to which all values are agent-neutral.¹⁵ More centrally, the reasons that we have to act will depend on the reasons we have for intending, which will in turn depend on our reasons for desiring.¹⁶ So it will matter little, from the standpoint of first-order normative theory, whether we describe our account in terms of desires, intentions, or actions.

On our proposal, it is most natural to focus on reasons for acting, since acting is something that we can do together. Our account thereby connects action to the “common” aspect of the common good. We need not take any particular stand on how acting together works: whether, for example, it involves non-reductive collective agents, some agents acting on intentions formed by other agents, or

¹⁴Cf. Philip Pettit, “Depoliticizing democracy,” *Ratio Juris*, 17 (2004), 52–65.

¹⁵Such consequentialists may simply expand the set of reasons that apply to all-of-us together, since all values would, in principle, warrant promotion by any agent, no matter their position. On the other hand, some collections of agents will likely be contingently in a better place to promote some values than others, which may restrict what is in the common good for particular groups. In general, the only consequentialists that might be concerned with our view would be those who favor eliminating deontic terms altogether. Even in that case, however, such theorists might retain the concept of “reasons for action,” even while discharging concepts like “rightness” and “wrongness.”

¹⁶For discussion, see John Skorupski’s “bridge principle,” in *The Domain of Reasons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 265. A similar point is forwarded by Howard Nye, David Plunkett, and John Ku, “Non-consequentialism demystified,” *Philosophers Imprint*, 15 (2015), 1–28.

the like.¹⁷ We consider it a virtue of our account that it is action-theoretically lightweight. Further, we need not articulate now exactly how robust our shared agency must be. In some cases of acting together, our individual actions may be tightly coordinated. (Think, for example, of relief workers acting as part of a single, unified plan of action). On other occasions, our involvement in acting with fellow citizens may be limited to deliberation or voting that aims to link up with the actions of others to modify policy downstream.¹⁸ In still other cases, it may involve incorporation, if the relevant reasons favor forming a collective body or institution where none existed previously.¹⁹ Another related point: taking the common good to direct us to reasons to act together does not deny that individuals sometimes have reason to act alone for the common good. It merely entails that individuals do have reason to act with others for the common good. So the proposal can be neutral on, for instance, debates between Rawls and G. A. Cohen.²⁰ That is, agents might pursue the common good together through institutions (like those comprising Rawls's "basic structure") or through the actions of individual persons.

The buck-passing account thus connects the common good with acting together. This feature supports the idea that the reasons to act for the common good will also be reasons for us, together. In other words, the reasons to adopt certain actions or attitudes may be understood as agent-relative. Because buck-passing accounts of the good do not suggest states of affairs as the fundamental bearers of value independent of the normative deliberation of agents, they fit more easily with the phenomenon of agent-relativity.²¹ Buck-passing accounts can make sense of the idea of indexed values that provide reasons to particular agents. My keeping my promise may be good_{me} but not good_{you} . My avoiding terrible suffering, on the other hand, may be good_{me} and good_{you} . In general:

$\forall X$ (X has reason to do what is good_X)

¹⁷See: Margaret Gilbert, *Joint Commitment: How We Make the Social World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Michael Bratman, *Shared Agency: A Planning Theory of Acting Together* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); David Velleman, "How to share an intention?" *Self to Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Abraham Roth, "Shared agency and contralateral commitments," *Philosophical Review*, 113 (2004), 359–410.

¹⁸For an account of how our wills can become involved in common endeavors, but in a way that also does not require sui generis collective agents, see Eric Beerbohm, *In Our Name: The Ethics of Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

¹⁹On incorporation to achieve shared goods, see Philip Pettit, "Responsibility incorporated," *Ethics*, 117 (2007), 171–201.

²⁰See G. A. Cohen, "Where the action is: on the site of distributive justice," *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 26 (1997), 3–30.

²¹Cf. Wallace's description of teleological accounts as "inhospitable" to the phenomenon of agent-relativity; R. Jay Wallace, "Reasons, values and agent-relativity," *Dialectica*, 64 (2010), 503–28, at p. 519.

When I act alone, I ought to act on considerations of what is good relative to me.²² When we act together, we might then expect that we should act on what is good relative to us. We should act on reasons “attributable to us, collectively, as their joint subject”—or “reasons-for-us.”²³ These ideas might make it tempting to think that for some group of agents, the common good is given by some function of the agent-relative goods of the agents comprising the group. Such as:

$\forall X\forall Y$ (X and Y have reason to do together what is both good_X and good_Y)

In which case, the common good_(X and Y) would be given as a function of good_X and good_Y . That is, the common good_(X and Y) could be reduced to the agent-relative goods of X and Y . There might be some challenge in specifying how this reduction would work, since in some cases what is good_X might also be bad_Y . Such cases (and perhaps others) would have to be ruled out. But in principle, we might think that the agent-relative good of a group can be “factored” into the agent-relative goods of its members.

Yet there are a variety of cases where we have reasons-for-us that may not be reducible in this way. As Westlund points out, if a married couple is planning a vacation, it may be important to each person that the other has reasons from their own point of view for accepting the proposed destination, even if the other is willing to “leave it up” to their partner.²⁴ In such a case, to say that a destination is good relative to me and good relative to you (since, by hypothesis, my having a happy vacation is good_{you}), it doesn’t follow that we have reasons-for-us to go there. On the other hand, I may sometimes be persuaded that even if some plan is bad_{me} , there still might be reasons-for-us to do it. That is, although I have an *ex ante* agent-relative reason against some plan, I might find in deliberation with you that your agent-relative reasons favoring the plan are reasons I can, in a sense, share by deciding to adopt your ends as my own.²⁵ As Westlund puts it, “co-deliberators behave reasonably when they are dialogically sensitive to the interdependence of their individual reasons for accepting R as a reason-for-them.”²⁶

²²A helpful exposition of agent-relative value is given by Michael Smith, “Neutral and relative value after Moore,” *Ethics*, 113 (2003), 576–98.

²³Andrea Westlund, “Deciding together,” *Philosophers Imprint*, 9 (2009), 1–17, at p. 2. For a related discussion of how groups level reasons of self-interest, see Alexander Dietz, “What we together ought to do,” *Ethics*, 126 (2016), 955–82, at pp. 966–7.

²⁴*Ibid.*, p. 7. Kaspar Lippert-Rasmussen points out that agent-relativity intuitively involves assigning “different aims to different agents” in *Deontology, Responsibility, and Equality* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2005), p. 16. If agent-relativity in general invokes the perspectives of separate agents, then the common good intuitively assigns a single perspective to agents acting together.

²⁵Compare: Kyla Ebels-Duggan, “Against beneficence: a normative account of love,” *Ethics*, 119 (2008), 142–70; Christine Korsgaard, “The reasons we can share,” *Creating the Kingdom of Ends* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). Compare also with John Finnis, “Public good: the specifically common good in Aquinas,” *Natural Law and Moral Inquiry*, ed. R. P. George (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1998), pp. 174–209.

²⁶Westlund, “Deciding together,” p. 10. For a discussion of how act- and agent-relative collective reasons for action can affect an individual’s reasons for action, see Dietz, “What we together ought to do,” pp. 980–2.

Resolving such matters extends beyond our present scope, but we suggest three implications. First, the difficulty of factoring the common good into its constituent goods is probative for the view that the common good must be reached through some deliberative process (we will return to this later). Second, it may be an open question whether some group of agents has a common good at all—this, itself, may be an appropriate subject for political theorizing. Third, the irreducibility of the common good counts in favor of its theoretical usefulness. It offers a reason to think that we should not eliminate the concept altogether in favor of simpler, less contested notions.²⁷ Instead, we might see the common good as irreducibly agent-relative to a group, as in:

$\forall X\forall Y$ (If X and Y have a common good, then X and Y have reason to do together what is in the common good_(X and Y))

This proposal clearly does not require that for any set of agents, there must be a common good. Whether there is a common good in the first place—for a group somehow delimited—may be a controversial matter. There is also no suggestion that the common good can be factored into the goods of specific members—although it also does not deny this possibility. For groups that do have a common good, the proposal analyzes that good in terms of reasons that members of the group have to act together to bring it about.

III. VIRTUES OF THE BUCK-PASSING ACCOUNT

With the proposal now more clearly in view, we can consider how our buck-passing account manages the distributive and partisanship objections. The buck-passing account need not reduce the common good to the goods picked out by the welfare function of any person, set of persons, or group. We may have reasons to act together to promote or honor impersonal values. We may also have reasons to act together to promote or honor goods connected to persons not included among those acting. In principle, such actions are just as much part of our “common good” as the mountain climber’s quest is a part of her individual good. Recall that in the mountain climber’s case, we do not judge that she has some *ex ante* interest satisfied in being at the top of a mountain.²⁸ Rather, she adopts the aim of climbing the mountain for reasons that make this a worthy project, and it is then good for her welfare to achieve her aim. In the case of our common good, we may act together for reasons that (morally or otherwise) warrant our action, and

²⁷Non-eliminative strategies are, of course, also supported by the continued usefulness of the distinction between self-interest and a more general civic interest. This sort of distinction is deployed, for example, in Kaspar Lippert-Rasmussen, “Vote buying and election promises: should democrats care about the difference?” *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 19 (2011), 125–44, esp. n. 13.

²⁸Wallace is also good on this point, in “The rightness of acts and the goodness of lives,” *Reason and Value*, ed. M. Smith, P. Pettit, S. Scheffler and R. J. Wallace (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 385–411.

achieving our common aim becomes good for us collectively.²⁹ Thus, our account can remain neutral with respect to distributive questions.

The buck-passing account of the common good is also non-partisan. Because it takes no axiological stand, it allows for debates between competing political theories to be decided on their substantive merits, rather than conceptual fiat. Liberal egalitarian, communitarian, natural law, and republican theories can all be formulated in terms of reasons to act together. Libertarians—sometimes wary of the very notion of joint action—might worry that their views will not be expressible through the buck-passing account. For that matter, libertarians might contend that the very idea of the common good is a partisan one, smuggling in collectivist values.³⁰ However, even strict libertarians allow that there are sometimes reasons to act together through politics.³¹

Nor does the buck-passing account smuggle in an implicit consequentialism. We may have reasons to act together that follow from the relationships we currently share, or might realize through shared action. These reasons might not be grounded fundamentally in our welfare (although they may, as noted, derivatively connect to welfare), and they may also not be about promoting any state of affairs. This point bears emphasizing, as it might seem that the difference here is merely verbal.³² For example, a critic might argue that the consequentialist version of the common good could also capture relational reasons (for example, we ought to promote the state of affairs in which we stand

²⁹It may be intuitively odd to regard all action which we have reason to do together as part of the common good. For example, suppose that a soda company would give every American citizen a large sum of money if each person purchased one can of the soda. The company's generous publicity stunt would seem to give all Americans sufficient reason to coordinate their actions together in response to the same set of considerations. But it seems odd to think that in buying the soda, I am acting for the common good. (We thank Adam Kern for calling this point to our attention with this case.) The issue is that this case of the common good appears like a set of many individual private goods, rather than one public good. Here it may help to distinguish the common good from the related notion of the public good. The contrast between public and private goods is often connected to the idea of excludability or non-excludability. Because the soda case focuses attention on each individual receiving a correspondingly individuated good rather than sharing a single good, it has the feel of a value that is in-principle excludable. So it seems not to be within the public good. For a more detailed discussion of the concept of the public good and its history, see Jane Mansbridge, "On the contested nature of the public good," *Private Action and the Public Good*, ed. Walter W. Powell and Elisabeth S. Clemens (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), pp. 3–19. Mansbridge also notes the historical evolution of the concept of the common good. For another significant treatment of the public good, see Robert E. Goodin, "Institutionalizing the public interest: the defense of deadlock and beyond," *American Political Science Review*, 90 (1996), 331–43.

³⁰For this version of a partisan objection against the common good, see Geoffrey Brennan and Loren Lomasky, "Against reviving republicanism," *Politics, Philosophy & Economics*, 5 (2006), 221–52, esp. sec. II.

³¹For example, if there is universal consent to some decision procedure other than universal consent for some domain of collective decisions, then one might regard that decision procedure as one we have reason together to follow. Cf. James Buchanan, *The Calculus of Consent: Logical Foundations of Constitutional Democracy* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1965). A helpful introduction is provided in John Thrasher and Gerald Gaus, "On the calculus of consent" in *Oxford Handbook of Classics in Contemporary Political Theory*, ed. Jacob Levy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

³²Nozick, for example, allowed that difference might be verbal, but remained suspicious of consequentialist re-descriptions; *Anarchy State and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), p. 29.

with other citizens in relationships of equality). Importantly, this kind of re-description does not necessarily capture the same set of reasons. To say that the mountain climber has a reason to climb the mountain is not equivalent to saying that she has a reason to bring about the state of affairs in which she has climbed the mountain. An ambitious but self-effacing mountain climber might have reason to want to climb Everest (a great achievement!), but not have reason to want to bring about the state of affairs in which she had climbed Everest (too much attention!). As Nye, Plunkett, and Ku point out, the functional role of act-directed reasons can be quite different from state-directed reasons.³³

So too for reasons in the common good. We may have reason to act to bring about social equality, not just to bring it about that we achieved social equality. To see the difference, imagine social equality being achieved by the same group of people, but in one case through exclusively private actions, and in another case through the use of a shared state apparatus. Our present point is not that the action matters beyond the fact of realizing the state in which the action is performed, but merely that it *may* matter, and so our conceptual tools should not occlude this possibility. That should be left to the business of substantive political argument. It may matter that we have reason to apologize for historical injustice, not just that we bring about the state of affairs in which we apologized. It may matter that we provide humanitarian aid, not just that we bring about a state of affairs where aid is provided by us.

This last point leads to a final, central virtue of our account—namely, that it can help us understand how the concept of the common good is used by political theorists, and how it is connected to other concepts within political theory. First, we will consider the concept's use. While we do not want a concept of the common good that calls any claims made by actual theorists in or out of bounds (as if they could be disabused of their misguided view of the common good merely by attending more closely to the concept), we do want a concept that will explain features common to all uses.³⁴ As the first section indicated, the common theme to all uses of the common good is that it is normative.³⁵ The religious group, the political liberal, and the political ideologue have very different view of the common good, but they all agree that we should act for it or in its behalf. Moreover, the very sparseness of description given by some theorists cited above

³³This is the central point in Howard Nye, David Plunkett, and John Ku, "Non-consequentialism demystified," *Philosophers Imprint*, 15 (2015), 1–28. It is also anticipated by David Velleman's discussion of "acting for the sake of" in "Love as a moral emotion," *Self to Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

³⁴We might call these the common good's "conceptual platitudes." See Michael Smith, *The Moral Problem* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1994).

³⁵Our proposal is presaged by Henry Richardson's discussion of the "public good." Like Richardson, we are motivated by decoupling the concept of the common good from a welfarist account of value. Second, our proposal makes the common good a kind of normative success term, similar to Richardson, who defines "a conception of the public good," as "a view about how public action *should* be regulated" (emphases in original). See Richardson, *Democratic Autonomy: Public Reasoning about the Ends of Policy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 40.

suggests that they take for granted that the common good is normative for us. Like “justice,” the common good is a kind of normative success term. Our buck-passing proposal can explain *why* the common good has this feature. This is simply because the common good is understood in terms of reasons, and reasons are what express normativity.³⁶ If we understand the common good as conceptually connected to reasons, we can make sense of the one feature that clearly unites the ways in which the term is used.

Our account can also help illuminate how the common good is connected to other concepts within political theory. In particular, consider the idea of deliberation. As section II described, political theorists regularly insist that political deliberation should be somehow *aimed at* or *directed toward* the common good.³⁷ However as we described above, tying the concept of the common good too closely to aims of deliberation can risk tying the concept of the common good too closely to the theorist’s other substantive political commitments. That is, it raises the worry that the common good will become philosophically *partisan*. A virtue of the buck-passing account of the common good is that it can explain the close connection between the common good and deliberation without introducing any partisan political values. This is because it can explain how the common good is conceptually connected to a deliberative understanding of evaluative facts.

Here we follow an explanation of the buck-passing account of goodness developed by R. Jay Wallace.³⁸ Wallace observes that on Scanlon’s original view, the reason-giving properties to which the buck is passed are, themselves, evaluative properties. For example, the claim that some experience is good might be given by other properties—for example, that it would be pleasant. Such properties are not natural properties—“pleasantness” expresses an evaluative appraisal. Responding to this problem, Wallace elaborates two different ways of interpreting the buck-passing account. According to what he calls the “deliberation independent interpretation,” evaluative properties are metaphysically prior to and epistemically accessible without deliberation. The “deliberative interpretation” reverses the direction of fit. On the deliberative interpretation, “the only way to establish whether a candidate property is a genuine substantive value ... is through deliberative reflection about the normative significance of the property for agents.”³⁹ The deliberative interpretation maintains the priority of the normative to the appreciative way. The response to such facts in the form of deliberative

³⁶Schroeder points out this as a virtue of the buck-passing positive thesis. But it remains a novel point that uses of “common good” in the political literature so uniformly presuppose that the common good is normative in some way.

³⁷Gutmann and Thompson use the “aimed at” language connecting the two concepts. See their *Why Deliberative Democracy?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 28. Joshua Cohen says that deliberation should be “focused” on the common good; “Deliberation and democratic legitimacy,” *The Good Polity*, ed. Alan Hamlin and Philip Pettit (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), pp. 17–34.

³⁸Wallace, “Reasons, values, and agent-relativity.”

³⁹*Ibid.*, p. 513.

attention plays a crucial conceptual role. Buck-passing ties the good to an agent's deliberative response.

Given that the buck-passing account of the good requires a disposition of agents to respond deliberatively to a set of considerations, it should be unsurprising that the "common good" also requires the collective deliberative attention of some larger group of agents. A buck-passing account of the common good can explain why this connection holds so generally. To say that something is in the common good is to give metaphysical and epistemological priority to the deliberative attention of a group of persons on a set of considerations, and their disposition to respond to those considerations in an appreciative way. Without taking sides about how idealized deliberation should proceed or which values it should favor, we can vindicate the conceptual intuition behind deliberativist accounts of the common good. This intuition, stretching back to Rousseau, sees the common good as both a matter of will, and as identifying a common interest.⁴⁰

We will now set to one side the buck-passing account's conceptual virtues. To test this account, let us consider its explanatory value in imagined and actual cases. Start with a case where our approach can explain something that is likely to puzzle the simplest good-for-us accounts. Brian Barry puts his finger on a paradigmatic use of the concept of the common good. He notices that we do not tend to make use of this idea when a candidate policy can credibly be said to be good-for-all. "The common good' is typically used in a very different way," he writes, "namely in the context of an *appeal* to individual people to do something or other which is contrary to their net interests."⁴¹ So a central case use for the common good is precisely when we are trying to convince a person or group of persons to support a decision that will disadvantage them personally. In such a setting, we might imagine addressing them second-personally, offering *reasons to act together*, rather than taking up the third-personal posture of a benefactor.

In the case of *Kelo v. City of New London*, the Supreme Court allowed the city of New London to transfer land from a private owner to a private redevelopment project. The *New York Times* celebrated the ruling as "a welcome vindication of a city's ability to act in the public interest."⁴² Once we understand the public interest as reflecting aims that provide us with reasons for collective action, we will not be searching for the most infinitesimal of ways that a policy can be seen as good for each member of a community. Our claim that eminent domain reflects or affronts the common good can now set the terms for a debate that is not primed towards aggregating individual goods. To say that a social decision is

⁴⁰Our thanks to a referee for this point. Of course, adding the deliberative component does make the account more meta-ethically partisan. If one favored a less committed view, this addition is a modular component of the view. However, for those independently attracted to an ideal of the common good that is tied to deliberation, the buck-passing account can help to explain the connection between the two.

⁴¹Barry, *Political Argument*, p. 203.

⁴²"The limits of property rights," *New York Times*, June 24, 2005.

in the common good is not to say that it is merely appealing. It is, on our view, a way of registering that there are shared reasons for acting together towards a particular end. This leaves open whether those reasons are morally decisive—that will depend on the substantive moral theory at hand. We shouldn't expect a concept to settle this case, only to ensure a fair debate among alternative conceptions.⁴³

On our theory, the buck that gets passed here is the idea of the good. While previous formulations relied upon particular accounts of the good, this approach avoids this philosophically fraught exercise in axiology. It thus creates room for disagreements among a more diverse set of moral conceptions. So, for example, the contractualist approach that we sketched earlier can develop this concept into a conception that treats human relationships as reason-giving. Nor need one accept that there is a pro tanto reason to promote the good to accept this reading of the concept. Those who deny this good-promoting view would see the “good-for-us” variations of the concept as identifying aims that are decidedly supererogatory. On our account, this problem does not carry over. The contractualist has as much evaluative room as the consequentialist to draw upon its distinctive moral vocabulary.

IV. OBJECTIONS AND RESPONSES

In this section we will consider what we take to be two of the most pressing objections to a buck-passing account of the common good. The first objection argues that our concept of the common good implicitly precludes theories that would limit state action to the pursuit of justice. Because plausible, well-defended theories take exactly this form, our concept of the common good rules out too much logical space. The second objection maintains that our account treats intuitively too many public political actions as pursuing the common good. The first accuses the account presented here of a kind of partisanship, while the second disputes the account's extensional adequacy. For the sake of having labels, we will refer to these as the partisan objection and the over-inclusion objection. The rest of this section will discuss them in detail.

⁴³We emphasize that our proposal is not intended as a putative conceptual analysis. Instead it is something closer to what Peter Godfrey-Smith in “Metaphysics and the philosophical imagination” refers to as conceptual “reform”—or specifying concepts with an eye to theoretical virtues and theory use, rather than to fit with current use in a given social or academic practice. Thus we can agree with Mansbridge that “in practical political life” it is “often not necessary to be analytically clearer than the ordinary language” about the public good or the common good. Still, as Mansbridge also observes, “we may want to choose only one from a set of competing meanings” when engaging in philosophy (“On the contested nature,” p. 12). We agree, and only want to add that for such purposes some meanings may be more useful and exportable to a diversity of philosophical contexts than others. In short, how to specify the concept may be something worth arguing about.

A. PARTISANSHIP

Consider a theory of legitimate state action according to which the only thing the state can permissibly do is bring about the conditions of justice. For example, some politically liberal theories of justice hold that all state coercion can only be legitimated by public justification.⁴⁴ By hypothesis, only requirements of justice could fulfill this justificatory role. Thus, the state is only permitted to satisfy the requirements of justice, but is not permitted to pursue other values.

This line of argument poses a problem for our account. It seems to sit in tension with our supposition that the common good provides reasons to act politically that are somehow “beyond justice.” The problem may be formulated as a dilemma. On one horn, our account allows the politically liberal theory above as a viable candidate theory of justice. However, if this theory is correct, then the value of justice is necessary and sufficient to guide all political activity. But if that is true, then the common good plays no additional informative role about which political actions should be taken. It is either silent, or it idly affirms the antecedent pronouncements of justice. On a second horn, our account could deny that theories like that of the political liberal above are correct. But in that case, it seems that we have violated the partisanship requirement from section I. Simply by specifying the concept, we would have ruled out a logical available conception that actually is defended from multiple different theoretical perspectives.

We will take the first horn of the dilemma. Such an account can be allowed without rendering the common good either silent or idle. To see why, it will help to frame, more precisely, the basic politically liberal insight:⁴⁵

(P₁) All coercive state actions must be justified by sufficient public reasons.

(P₂) Only justice can provide sufficient public reasons.

(C₁) So, coercive state action can only be permissibly directed at satisfying justice.

(P₃) If justice is the only legitimate end of coercive state action, then other values are either idle or silent.

(C₂) So, the common good is either idle or silent.

Stated this way, it is clearer that premise (P₃) is vulnerable. Premises (P₁) and (P₂) simply give the substantive claims of the theory, so it would be objectionably partisan (for present purposes) to deny either. But the politically liberal theory is

⁴⁴A referee helpfully gives Jonathan Quong as an example. See Quong, *Liberalism without Perfection* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), esp. chs. 2–3. Another example might be Gerald Gaus, *The Order of Public Reason: A Theory of Freedom and Morality in a Diverse and Bounded World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

⁴⁵Of course, political liberalism is a broad tent, and many of its members would not accept that the state can only legitimately pursue justice. We are not considering the truth of this claim as a thesis about the nature of legitimate state action.

not disputed by denying (P₃). And in fact, we believe that this premise is incorrect. (P₃) is only true if the only actions that can be collectively taken through state institutions are coercive actions. However, this seems likely to be false. Consider the following cases:

Expression. A liberal, democratic state tolerates the presence of religious or educational institutions that discriminate on the basis of race. However, members of the political community want to officially repudiate the idea that racist discrimination is acceptable. As such, they decide through deliberative, democratic institutions to revoke the tax exempt status of institutions that discriminate.

Expertise. Members of the Federal Reserve board deliberate about whether to raise interest rates by a 1/4 point. Suppose—ex hypothesi—that no one has a claim of justice either that rates be raised, or that rates not be raised. Still, members of the Federal Reserve board ought to make their decision based on reasons, rather than arbitrarily.⁴⁶

Refusal. State institutions generally enforce contracts. However, the state may decide that it has moral reason to decline to enforce certain contracts. Members of the political community decide, for various reasons, that certain contracts should be legally unconscionable.⁴⁷

We propose that in each of these cases, the common good can facilitate deliberation about how the state should act. This remains true even if one accepts the politically liberal stricture against coercion for non-justice based reasons. This is because the state can do things other than act coercively.⁴⁸ If this theory were correct, the common good could continue to play a meaningful role in what moral messages the state should non-coercively express, or in how to set policies that affect members of the state but do not alter the extent to which the state engages in coercion. The Federal Reserve example illustrates one such case. Imagine if the Federal Reserve simply selected an interest rate that was best for Fortune 500 executives. Even though their decision might not affect the amount of coercion in the political community, it would still seem to be faulty. The Fed should decide in a way that was supported by reasons of the common good. Finally, the state could use the common good to guide it in deciding where to withhold coercive activity, even if that activity might not be unjust (as in Refusal).

Finally, consider a weaker version of (P₃), according to which: If justice is the only legitimate end of coercive state action, then other values are either idle or

⁴⁶This case is adapted from Pettit, “Depoliticizing democracy.”

⁴⁷This case is inspired by Seanna Shiffrin, “Paternalism, unconscionability doctrine, and accommodation,” *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 29 (2000), 205–50.

⁴⁸The case of Expression is modeled on similar examples given by Corey Brettschneider, who defends such examples as non-coercive. See Brettschneider, *When the State Speaks, What Should It Say? How Democracies Can Protect Expression and Promote Equality* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012).

silent *with respect to coercive state actions*. This premise allows that the common good could still be relevant in cases of state action that are non-coercive, but denies it could be relevant to any coercive action. We believe that even this weaker premise is false. Sometimes, justice might provide sufficient public reason in support of some disjunction of coercive actions, but remain silent about which disjunct is preferable. For example, suppose that justice requires that each child be provided with a sufficient opportunity to enter the political elite.⁴⁹ For the sake of specificity, suppose this requires that a public high school offer an activity that models deliberation—say—Model UN, Debate, or Ethics Bowl. Reasons of justice might provide the weighty considerations supporting coercive actions necessary to realize the relevant standard of public education. But these reasons might leave open which option is best. However, we might still think that the choice should be made deliberatively—on the basis of reasons. On our view, these should be reasons to act together, or reasons of the common good.

B. OVER-INCLUSION

The second objection we will consider holds that our concept is too capacious—counting considerations as part of the common good that intuitively issue from some quite separate normative concern. Recall, for example, the question from section II over whether to fund a space program or the performing arts. According to the present objection, it might seem intuitively odd to regard both of these as candidate instances of the common good. While the performing arts might be thought of as a common good (though, as the previous section described, not required by justice), one might think that the reasons to support a space program have a source that is quite different from the common good of any group. After all, space exploration might not result in improving any particular person's welfare. If it is not supported by any person's particular good, then how could it be part of the common good? Instead, one might think that the reasons to support the space program might be thought somehow more transcendent.⁵⁰ Perhaps, for instance, the intrinsic value of truth or discovery might provide reasons for the space program.

In short, the over-inclusion objection holds:

There are reasons that we have together to politically pursue a space program (for example).

If the buck-passing account of the common good is correct, then acting together to politically pursue a space program is part of the common good.

However, a space program is not part of the common good.

⁴⁹Cf. Anderson, "Fair equality in education."

⁵⁰We are grateful to a referee for helping us to think more clearly about this objection.

So, the buck-passing account must be wrong. Our response to this objection will be twofold. First, we will try to show how actions that don't appear to advance anyone's well-being could still be part of the common good. Second, we will suggest that if our account does include some revision to the folk concept of the common good, the associated theoretical cost is worth paying.

First, we think it is important to distinguish between two ways in which the space project might be pursued through a political institution. On the one hand, consider a case in which a small cadre of politically insulated elites is curious about scientific inquiry into far corners of the universe. To slake their curiosity, they adopt and politically authorize a plan to fund a space program. In the second case, a political community has a public debate—say, in an election year—about whether to prioritize funding a space program for the sake of the values of discovery and knowledge. Opinion elites as well as grass-roots organizations are involved. In the election, the side favoring the space program wins, and they take measures to politically authorize it.

While these space programs might equally realize the values of truth or knowledge, we suggest that the latter program has better credentials for realizing the common good. This is because only in the latter case is there evidence of reasons that members of the politically community share, on which to act together. To see this point, recall the simple two-person action theory case from section II. A married couple could decide to go on vacation either by having one party unilaterally pick the destination, or through a process of deliberation. But because each party's reasons depend in part on the other's reasons, the reasons they have for joint action can only emerge through "dialogical sensitivity" to each other. If that is right, then we might think that the public deliberative processes in the second version of the space program case allow access to reasons for members of the community to act together, and for that reason this version is intuitively an instance of a common good.

To put the point a different way, we do not think that there is anything in the nature of the folk use of "common good" that precludes the space program. On a variety of theories, the realization of goals or plans can count as at least a part of an individual's well-being.⁵¹ Even on purely subjective theories of well-being, what a person desires or values partly determines welfare.⁵² Only on a mental state theory of well-being would such possibilities be denied. But here, it seems that the difference between groups and individuals makes such theories less plausible in the case of the common good. While it is metaphysically innocuous to think that groups of persons share intentions, reasons, or goals, it is more controversial to attribute mental states to groups. So it seems that theories of an

⁵¹For a very nice recent discussion, see Simon Keller, "Welfare as success," *Nous*, 43 (2009), 656–83.

⁵²According to Dale Dorsey, this is because subjectivists must necessarily include idealizing elements. Well-being cannot simply be read off the actual mental states of an agent. See Dorsey, "Idealization and the heart of subjectivism," *Nous*, (2015), 1–22.

individual's good that would disallow goal-based projects (analogous to the space program) would be less plausible at the level of the common good, anyway.

Moreover, typical use of the common good seems less associated with goods that are connected directly to well-being, as much as to goods that are politically selected in the right way. Political scientists juxtapose the "common good" with mere "partisan interests," or with the "particular interests" of a subgroup of one's constituents.⁵³ To suggest that impersonal or other-regarding values could be part of the common good does no violence to these uses. Even when theorists argue that the common good must be shaped by the "subjective interests" of the members of a society, they tend to have in mind only that individuals have the "last word" on what counts as "good and bad for their community."⁵⁴

Finally, consider an even more extreme example. A political community decides that they have most reason together to provide aid to a group of distant needy persons, notwithstanding that members of this group will not be able to reciprocate. Could such self-sacrificing behavior really be part of the common good? Our account would suggest so. It is not obvious to us that this is at odds with use, given that the common good is frequently invoked only in a negative sense—not partisan, or parochial, or selfish, and so on. But suppose, not implausibly, that it is revisionist. It may still be important to maintain this conceptual space. Consider, for example, Peter Singer's argument that it is in our common good to provide aid to others, because doing so makes our lives meaningful. Were the world organized in a way that did not allow for such actions, our lives would not be meaningful.⁵⁵ Clearly Singer's view is a proposal about the common good, and his view holds that the common good is centrally realized by precisely the kind of action being considered. Singer has long been open about his desire for revision in our moral conceptual scheme. We do not take sides here about his proposal, but we do think it should not be ruled out as a conceptual matter. It would be partisan to claim that his proposal, contrary to his claims, couldn't be the common good. At some point, the lesson may simply be that trade-offs among our desiderata cannot be altogether avoided.

⁵³McGhee et al., "A primary cause for partisanship?" p. 337; Leydet, "Partisan legislatures," pp. 235–6.

⁵⁴Christian Blum and Christina Isabel Zuber, "Liquid democracy: potentials, problems, and perspectives," *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 24 (2016), 162–82. See also, Christopher Karpowitz and Jane Mansbridge, "Disagreement and consensus: the importance of dynamic updating in public deliberation," *The Deliberative Democracy Handbook*, ed. J. Gastil and P. Levine (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005), pp. 237–53.

⁵⁵Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), ch. 12, esp. p. 294.

V. CONCLUSION

Political philosophers have insisted that the common good is a “self-evident” concept.⁵⁶ This article suggests that that hope is unrealistic. We do need an evaluative term—or perhaps a plurality of terms—that address the territory that is underdetermined by a theory of distributive justice. We’ve suggested that a buck-passing account of the common good offers a helpful way of filling this role. It can do so without tacitly encouraging political practitioners to elide distributive implications of their choices. At the same time, it can avoid unnecessary philosophical contention. Given how easy it is to “slip into utilitarianism by sheer inattention,”⁵⁷ non-consequentialists should be especially wary about embracing concepts that carry with them consequentialist assumptions—or even valences—that rely upon a theory of value. Following Scanlon’s individual approach, we offered a buck-passing reading of the common good that was designed to avoid the master value assumption. The “common good” is a not dummy concept. It has the potential to play an important role in our collective decision-making, so long as its basic contours and content are worked out.

⁵⁶In the same sentence, Amitai Etzioni refers to it as the right thing to do, by itself, for itself and “goods that serve all of us and the institutions we share and cherish”; *The Common Good* (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2004), p. 1.

⁵⁷Richard Kraut, *What Is Good and Why: The Ethics of Well-Being* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 17.