

Patrick Riordan. *A Grammar of the Common Good: Speaking of Globalization*. London: Continuum, 2008. vi + 195 pages. \$130 cloth.

As he surveyed the increasingly global and multidisciplinary retrieval of the theme of the common good, Riordan noticed two things: first, that many authors used “the term in a spontaneous, unselfconscious way,” and second, that those authors who attempted to explain the term frequently bemoaned the fact that “the term has no clear definition, that it is used in a variety of meanings in a manner which is confusing and indeed frustrating” (4). Is the common good a descriptive or prescriptive term? Is it something merely given or is it a construct? Is the common good invented or is it discovered? Should the theme be situated within an ontological or a merely practical framework? Is it unhelpful to press for a univocal use of the term? In other words, as the author queries, “Is it equivocation, or is there a possible explanation for the variation in the meaning so that the term can be predicated analogically? For instance, how can one speak of *the* common good, common goods, and a common good consistently and coherently?” (7).

This situation of confusion requires a more differentiated and effective use of the language or “grammar” of the common good, as the title of the book suggests. In this spirit, Riordan explicitly states that his aim is not to exhaust the topic in its varied historical, philosophical, practical, and multidisciplinary expressions. Rather, the work offers a “map to guide usage,” and provides the “intellectual housekeeping” needed for a more lucid and effective employment of the term (7, 12). The author’s interlocutors throughout the text include Aristotle, St. Thomas Aquinas, Rousseau, John Haldane, Charles Taylor, William Cavanaugh, John Rawls, John XXIII, Paul VI, John Paul II, and many others.

Chapters two and three lay out the most important claim of the book, namely, that the theme of the common good is most helpfully approached as a heuristic term, that is, it names “not a content already known in detail but that which is to be discovered in the exploration of what is the human good” (27). In chapter two, Riordan engages the influential position of Aristotle (which he clearly favors over the positions of Hobbes and Hume) and its multilayered use of the common good. He points out a tension illuminated in Aristotle between the many common goods sought in the various forms of cooperation that constitute family, social, and political life, on the one hand, and *the* common good, understood in the larger, more comprehensive sense, on the other hand. The key to appropriating Aristotle’s position is to recognize the analogical use of the term: his procession by analogy from

the common goods of local and small-scale cooperation to the singular common good. Riordan illuminates this tension concretely between the local, smaller forms of cooperation and the more comprehensively singular good by turning to the Enron/Andersen case, showing the different forms of cooperation operative: the conspiring executives; the executives in relation to the accounting firm, Arthur Andersen; the interests of the shareholders and employees; once public, the scrutiny of the accounting profession in general; and so on. Although different levels of cooperation can be distinguished by their respective common goods, “the dynamic of shifting from one level to another illustrates how at any level limits are set by unquestioned assumptions, or standardized formulae, which can be called into question as the analysis moves on to a further level” (40).

Chapters five and six discuss various Civic Republican and medieval uses of the common good, respectively. Riordan’s consideration of the many possible uses of the common good in Civic Republicanism shows the relevance of this discussion for practical philosophy and further complicates the discussion of the meaning of the common good. This account (and here the author is relying on the recent work of Iseult Honohan) “restricts the common good to the realm of human action,” revealing a notion of the good “shaped and chosen by citizens as they engage in self-rule” (61, 73). Whereas the Civic Republican strand restricts the common good to the practical, the author, in his discussion of medieval perspectives, raises the possibility of combining the ontological and the practical. This combination rests on the heuristic nature of the good, “since both nature and common good name realities which are as yet unknown, but are the intended objects of processes of discovery (ontology, nature) and construction (practical, common good)” (73). Drawing on the work of Kempshall, Finnis, and MacIntyre, the author identifies six different senses of the common good: God as common good; *ratio boni*; common good of the universe; happiness as human fulfillment; the good of order; and, the pursued objective. Here it is possible for scholars of Rousseau or St. Thomas Aquinas to be left disappointed, or at least to quibble with Riordan’s presentation. This is why it is important to note his caveat at the beginning of the book: “While my treatment will take up some of these sources and traditions, its main focus is not to provide an account of the history of the concept, nor to provide an exegesis of relevant source texts” (7).

The Catholic tradition is willing to use the language of the common good “analogically, that is, with shifting reference.” “It is not consistent with that Catholic tradition,” he argues, “to deny that the state

or the market can contribute to securing the common good” (116). Chapters seven through ten consider contemporary uses of the common good in political and economic discourse in relation to Catholic social thought. Limiting my review to the discussion of the political, the author considers, in an interesting manner, the later work of John Rawls, who recognized possible contributions from the Catholic intellectual tradition and Catholic social thought, including the themes of natural law, the common good, and solidarity. Riordan explores the ambiguity to be discovered in the Catholic Church’s view of the common good. He helpfully identifies both “dialogical” and “dialectical” strands of engagement with culture. The dialogical strand is exemplified in *Gaudium et spes*, with its insistence that all people of good will can have a reasoned discourse about the nature of human fulfillment and can even “work together in creating, operating and maintaining the conditions for human fulfillment...” (106). He also identifies the dialogical strand in John Paul II’s *Fides et Ratio*. However, contemporary Catholic social teaching emphasizes as well the need to critique and evangelize elements in the cultural and political fabric that are inimical to human liberation. This dialectical attitude presents itself clearly, according to the author, in Paul VI’s *Evangelii nuntiandi* and John Paul II’s *Veritatis splendor*, among other documents. Both strands reveal the author’s argument for a heuristic understanding of the common good and its ability to enable a commitment to both the ontological and the practical.

The final two chapters acknowledge the growing concern for the social and communal dimensions of life in the context of local, national, and even global forms of civil society. This growing concern is evident in various academic disciplines: “social capital” in economic and political thought; communitarianism in political philosophy; the feminist ethic of care; public and academic debates over the promises and perils of globalization; etc. Riordan’s aim is not to review these conversations in depth, nor is it to advance them in any substantive way, but simply “to illustrate how the concern about common goods and the common good arises in different ways, even if not in the traditional terminology of the common good” (163–4). In fact, this illustration is a first step. What the author envisions is a further task, a task not possible in this present work, namely, to draw “more explicit attention to the meaning and use of the concept” as a way of facilitating “greater success in analysis and persuasion” among the disciplines and debates (14).

This is an important book. The author’s irenic and engaging style transcends the often-divisive tenor of debates over the contributions of Catholic Social Thought to political, economic, and social discourse. The Thomistic axiom “Seldom affirm, never deny,

always distinguish” came to mind often throughout my reading of the text. This style is evident, for instance, in his sympathetic and critical engagement with the theologian, William T. Cavanaugh, who is increasingly recognized as important (Cf. 110-116). For a few examples of Riordan’s ability to distinguish, notice his discussion of John Haldane’s and Charles Taylor’s complementary accounts of various forms of goods (9-12), the account of complex usage of the common good in the Civic Republican (58 ff.) and medieval (74-77) contexts, and the Second Vatican Council’s complex treatment of this theme (104-107). One book cannot do everything. As is evident from this review, the topics treated here are varied and complex – important historical thinkers (Aristotle, St. Thomas Aquinas, Rousseau), current conversations in politics, economics, sociology, and feminist thought, the complexity of Catholic social teaching, the dizzying debates over globalization, and so on. If readers expect this book to treat any of these themes in depth, they will be left wanting. The way to make the best out of this book, in my estimation, is to take seriously the author’s descriptive metaphor of a road map. The author offers clues and suggestions to be explored, in the context of this journal, by Catholic thinkers across the disciplines. Our university, for example, is exploring the possibility of using the theme of the common good as a constitutive dimension of its revised general education program. For this task and for any project serious about employing common good terminology, Riordan’s helpful work is indispensable. Finally, the central theme of the book highlighted throughout the review—the heuristic nature of the common good and its consequent ability to combine the ontological and the practical—deserves serious attention. In my estimation, this is one of the most promising avenues of clarification for a Catholic understanding of the common good yet to be proposed. The validity of this hunch awaits further engagement from Catholic intellectuals and practitioners of Catholic social thought.

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