

THE CONCEPT OF THE PUBLIC GOOD: A VIEW FROM A FILIPINO PHILOSOPHER¹

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The author argues that the concept of the public good carries largely the politico-ethical sense which subsumes the politico-economic sense. The public good is public in the sense that the beneficiaries are the general public. The government or state pursues it with a service orientation while private corporations pursue it with a profit orientation. The author also discusses mixed public goods which are pursued by private organizations with a service motivation. Government corporations are basically motivated by service though having profit is not precluded. Finally, the author talks about public bads such as corruption, pollution, and crimes.

INTRODUCTION

I have always viewed philosophy as an activity consisting of two aspects: (1) clarifying the meaning of concepts and (2) using these concepts to construct or reconstruct an integrative view of a philosophical subject or a synthetic solution to a philosophical problem. Philosophy as an activity is not simply limited to the analytic clarification of notions, which in itself is empty unless the activity of clarification is put into more productive use by solving (or dissolving) a philosophical issue or by a synthetic integration of those concepts into a philosophical whole. In short, we undertake the first aspect because of its extrinsic good (application) and we undertake the second aspect because of the intrinsic good (clearness of meaning) of the first. Genuine philosophizing is therefore both analytic and synthetic, or in an Aristotelian fashion, both epistemic and phronetic—contrary to some views which consigns the epistemic aspect to the natural sciences and only the phronetic aspect to philosophy.²

This paper originally wants to pursue the two aspects of a philosophical activity. However, for lack of time, I will limit the present paper to the first aspect. I will attempt to make clear the concept of the public good. I will leave the second aspect to another paper in the future,

that is, which of the many public goods should be construed at present as *the* public good for a Third World country like the Philippines.

THE PUBLIC GOOD FROM THE POLITICO-ETHICAL SENSE

National People and the Public Good

Preliminarily, I will constrict the definition of the “public good” to *communal* or *national* public goods, or goods aspired to—or believed/assumed to be aspired to from the perspective of the state—by the communal or national public. This type of goods may probably become *global* public goods,³ but I wish to limit myself to communal or national public goods, which are to be understood in the politico-ethical sense. Hence, it becomes apparent that by *public good*, in this section of the discussion, I do not necessarily mean something to be understood from the politico-economic sense.

A *public good* is that which benefits by its use the communal or national public, that is to say, the greatest number of the local or national population. This can be perceived in two levels. The first level comes from the people themselves: they perceive the public good to be beneficial to most if not to all of them. This utilitarian consideration is important in that, on the one hand, it serves as the ethical standard by which the public—through a civil society⁴—unify themselves in consideration of their individual and social benefits. As individuals, they may of course think in terms of their own selfish benefits from a public good but there is also a recognition that unless they work together for their common welfare, then the public good aspired for may not materialize. And they as individuals may suffer as beneficiaries from its nonrealization. In this regard, the elements of unity (bonding together individual interests) and subsidiarity (working together for the *common good*) are significant aspects of a national *public good* from the communal or national people’s point of view. The second level comes from the local or national government, which believes or assumes with a utilitarian perspective that a particular project or service is desired by the populace as necessary for their *common welfare*. As such the local or national government views it as a public good. Examples of these assumed necessary public services or public goods are national defense, education, public health, public ports/airports and highways, social services, postal services, and the like.⁵

Communal People and the Public Good

I will presume that the communities, or the communal people, will likewise perceive a national public good as a communal public good. I think that in general this is the case. There are, however, difficulties sometimes in that—on occasions—a community or group of communities may believe that their communal public good does not jibe—in fact, may be in conflict with—the national public good.

A massive dam that will irrigate vast tracts of land and provide thousands of megawatts of electricity that would be connected to the national grid would undoubtedly be a national public good and the national people would aspire to have the government build it by expressly or tacitly supporting the project. However, the communal people of the place where the dam would be constructed may oppose it as it would mean the loss of their ancestral lands, the abandonment of their traditional means of livelihood, and the confrontation with relocation problems in a new environment as their communities would be submerged in water. Sometimes the construction of the dam is abandoned or not pursued despite its being a national public good because the cost of the rebellion or resistance of the communities would make it economically nonviable or politically unexpedient.

I believe such a communal resistance is rare, and where the communal public good and the national public good are coincident, then the project would be pushed through. It would seem in the example above that the national public would have to wait for the tribal communities to be touched by modernization to such an extent that they would be amenable to sacrifice their tribal traditions and values for the greatest good of the greatest number. Or, alternatively, the local or national government will have to find—if at all possible—other sources of energy and of irrigating lands. I believe this is still an unresolved philosophical issue and philosophers may offer a satisfactory solution as to which is of national significance: to preserve a communal heritage as part of the national heritage or to sacrifice it for the general good in the pursuit of modernization and globalization.

Government and the Public Good

We must clearly distinguish between the national public good as pursued by the national public on their own initiative, with little or without the help of the local or national government, and the national public good as pursued by the local or national government with the support of the national public. Both are desired generally by all in the sense that its realization will redound to the general public's common good in terms of national pride, aesthetic appreciation, national well-being, national moral uplift, economic uplift, or all of the above. The first, however, is pursued by civil societies with minimal support or without the support of local and national governments while the second is pursued by the local and/or national government because its cost of implementation is so great civil societies cannot afford to pursue it on their own.

The alleviation of poverty or eradication of slums in a country is a public good in that it satisfies one or more of the general considerations we set above: namely, that it at least satisfies national well-being, national moral uplift, economic uplift, and national pride. The fight against poverty is a pillar in the political platform of many national governments and funds are generally channeled through the governments' social welfare ministries or departments. But usually the funds are not enough. A civil society may

come in and work out its own slum eradication program through voluntary contributions and massive mobilization of the society-at-large in terms of the voluntary participation of students, workers, professionals, the wealthy, and the schools (colleges and universities), among others.⁶

THE PUBLIC GOOD FROM THE POLITICO-ECONOMIC SENSE

Microeconomy

Political economy, or economics in short, deals with both the microeconomy of industrial and commercial firms and with the macroeconomy of the nation. The economic concept of the public good pertains to the benefit (profit) that may accrue an individual or a firm in pursuing a project that will offset possible losses or adverse effects and that will likewise benefit the general public, including possible external or free public riders. The basic assumption is that the *Homo economicus* is a selfish individual who would pursue an economic project either individually or in group if he/she or they will benefit from it. A lamppost may be costly but if the light it provides will make one's store very visible to the passersby and the customers, and in the process raises one's profits and offsets the cost of electricity, then the lamppost will be built. But at the same time, the noncustomers who would be passing by and the neighbors (or, in general, the free public riders) will benefit from the light, and in that sense the lamppost (or streetlight) is a public good. Notice that the noncustomers or free riders directly use—in a sense—the streetlight.

There are two criteria for considering something as a public good, economically speaking: nonrivalry and nonexcludability. A potable stream is a public good in that if one drinks from it, the stream will not be diminished or exhausted (nonrival) while at the same time no one is excluded from drinking from it. One who fills his/her container with water from the stream and brings that container to his/her house will consider that container of water as a private good. If he/she drinks from it, its content will diminish and he/she can exclude others from drinking from it.

There are a lot of arguments now which say that the economic idea of the public good is ideal in that in practical reality there are no such things in view of the development of technology, the passage of laws or exclusionary regulations that would tend to convert what appears to be a public good to a private good, and other considerations (see, e.g., Samuelson 1955 and Vaknin 2004).

For example, the potable stream we talked about above might in due time be apportioned to certain owners of titled private lands and the whole stream may now be owned by many landowners. As a result, not everyone is free to drink from any portion of the stream without permission from the owner of that portion. The free use of clean air can, in practice, be limited by pollution (carbon dioxide, carbon monoxide, etc.) or by the special use of oxygen (an element of air) in, for example, hospitals. Hence, some

economists argue only for *ideal* or *pure public goods* to which external reality approximates.

It is interesting to note that goods can be rivalrous and excludable (private goods), rivalrous and nonexcludable (common pool resources), nonrivalrous and excludable (club goods), and nonrivalrous and nonexcludable (public goods). Examples of the first are houses, cars, clothes, and the like. Examples of the second are hunting games and fishing grounds, among others. Deep-sea fishing is difficult to police such that the world's fish stocks while viewed as "finite and diminishing," appears as a nonexcludable resource. An example of the third is cable television in that it is a public good delivered as a private good. It is excludable because its use is limited to a household but nonrivalrous because no matter how many households will own a cable television, it is not diminished. Finally, among the common examples of public goods are defense and law enforcement, public works, clean air, information goods, and suchlike ("Public good," *Wikipedia*, 2006).

Between rivalry and nonexcludability, it is the latter that is usually affected by technological progress and the status of traditional public goods are modified to club goods, private goods, or common resource goods. For example, in cable television certain programs (boxing or movies) can be seen on a pay-per-view basis. Thus, "encryption allows broadcasters to sell individual access to their programming." The other side of technological progress is that it "can create new public goods." Streetlights, for instance—a relatively recent good—is both nonrivalrous and nonexcludable (see "Public good," *Wikipedia*, 2006).⁷

Macroeconomy

We usually make a distinction between service and profit orientations. Generally, industrial and business firms are profit-oriented while governmental agencies are service-oriented. Government-owned or -controlled corporations are basically service-oriented although they are encouraged to be self-liquidating and even accrue profits. In many instances, especially in Third World countries, when a government makes an accounting of all its corporations (owned or controlled), the total is in the red, that is, there are more losses than gains. And so the government puts in more subsidies. In some instances, when the subsidies increase rather than decrease, the losing corporation is privatized. The government may substantially lose here, but it is only once, and it is generally perceived to be in the interest of the public (i.e., a public good in both politico-ethical and economic senses). The yearly subsidies on that corporation can be channeled to more productive projects while the same service can be provided by the newly privatized corporation.

It might puzzle us why a newly privatized corporation can generally make a losing government corporation profitable. There are many reasons for this, and at least two can be forwarded outright: one, the government corporation has a bloated bureaucracy while the private one trims it down to

a manageable size to cut on overhead costs and, two, government contracts for subprojects within the corporation are laden with corruption and the costs are high while the private one gets the lowest price for a subproject to maximize its profits. In one discussion at the Catholic University of America on corruption, for example, a bank representative said that in Latin America the corruption cap on a government project is at least 20 percent which goes to certain government individuals.⁸ Certainly, corruption—which is one of the public bads⁹—should be eradicated in government.

It is this service orientation that prods the government to provide services through an unprofitable enterprise because such an enterprise is considered by government as a public good. It is generally demanded by the people, especially in the provinces or suburbs. A postal service, for example, is important in far-flung areas where private mailing services cannot reach. Moreover, government postal services are cheaper and affordable to everyone, especially the poor, while private mail services are not, and are usually patronized by the rich and the middle class.

It seems that, in general, what is considered as a public good by the national public, and recognized as such by the government (local and national), is the one in the politico-ethical sense. It is basically service orientation. Profits, although encouraged, is a secondary consideration. There is no question that some government-owned or -controlled corporations are profitable. For as long as the corporation is substantially profitable, the government will continue to hold on to it. It will be to the public good—in at least the politico-ethical sense—to add to the coffers of the national government whatever benefits (profit remittance or contributions or prestige) there can be. Where a government corporation is a liability and, if there are private takers, then the government usually privatizes it, for it considers it a public good to channel the subsidies on that losing corporation to more productive government projects.

In contrast, it appears that generally what is considered a public good in the economic sense is mostly the concern of the private sector of the economy. Some of the private public goods are taken cared of by microeconomic firms, which can be of limited circulation (within the village, city, or province) or can be of national circulation. The private sector can actively contribute to the realization of these public goods not only in their own interests but also, externally, in the interests of the public sector.

Where the private sector is not ready to shoulder the cost of making a public good readily available, and where the government considers it necessary for the general public, then the government allocates funds for realizing that public good either immediately or in the near future even if it would be a losing proposition.

PRIVATE PUBLIC GOODS AND PUBLIC PUBLIC GOODS

Earlier, we made a distinction between a private good and a public good from the politico-economic sense. To refresh our memory, a public

good ideally is nonrival and nonexcludable while a private good is rival and excludable. We also made a distinction from the politico-ethical sense between a public good desired by the national public and a public good recognized or assumed as such by the government. Theoretically, at least, we raise these questions: (1) Are *public* public goods nonrival and nonexcludable? (2) Are *private* public goods in the interest of the national public and recognized by the government as such?

Public Public Goods

I can only adumbrate my arguments in this subtopic which should require a very extensive treatment. Some *public* public goods are considered by the government as basic or essential and necessary: national security and defense, education, postal service, health service, trade and industry, and the like and certain ministries or departments are created to address and manage these public goods. The general public recognizes these as public goods as well in that they as riders benefit from them. Of course, they are not entirely independent free riders, for they somehow help pay for these governmental public goods through paying their taxes directly or indirectly. So are also the members of the private economic sector: they recognize these as public goods, and in many cases they supplement these *public* public goods with their *private* public goods as in establishing private schools, private hospitals, private security services, and so on.

From the above consideration, it would seem that *theoretically* public public goods are nonrival and nonexcludable in that the participation of one does not in principle diminish—for example, education as a public good—or exclude others from participating in it. At the same time, these public goods are in the interest not only of the individual public but the nation as a whole as well.

There are public public goods, which the private sector does not generally want to participate because it is too costly and it would rather be a free rider itself as in the construction of national highways and bridges (although recently in the Philippines private toll highways or skyways are beginning to exist).

We have already mentioned the nonrealization of a public public good, which both the national public and the government recognize as such because of the resistance of the communities (communal publics) adversely affected by it (such as the construction of a dam).

Private Public Goods

Private public goods are goods which the private sector sets up either by itself or in participation with the government (local or national) since the private sector sees their realization as profitable, and the general public benefits from them as well either as customers or as free riders.

In practice, what seems to be *theoretically* a public good (in the sense of nonrival and nonexcludable) becomes in many cases—as we have

already said above—ephemeral. It is even argued that a public good is practically nonexistent one way or the other. A private good can be enjoyed by others whereas a public good can be restricted. Moreover, any participation of one private company in a line of business necessarily diminishes the chances of profitability of others in that same line. When viewed as overcrowded, the local or national government issues a regulation limiting the number of companies that can engage in such a business, which is a form of exclusion.

Here is a quote from Hoppe (1989, 28-29):

While at least at first glance it seems that some of the state-provided goods and services might indeed qualify as public goods, it certainly is not obvious how many of the goods and services that are actually produced by states could come under the heading of public goods. Railroads, postal services, telephone, streets, and the like seem to be goods whose usage can be restricted to the persons who actually finance them, and hence appear to be private goods. . . . Just as a lot of state-provided goods appear to be private goods, so many privately produced goods seem to fit in the category of a public good. Clearly my neighbors will profit from my well-kept rose garden—they could enjoy the sight of it without even helping me garden. The same is true of all kinds of improvements that I could make on my property as well. Even those people who do not throw money in his hat can profit from a street musician's performance. Those fellow passengers on the bus who did not help me buy it profit from my deodorant. And everyone who ever meets me would profit from my efforts, undertaken without their financial support, to turn myself into a lovable person.

Without going deeper into an analysis of this quotation, which shows how the economic criteria of nonrivalry and nonexcludability can put us into an intellectual quagmire, perhaps—for the purposes of this paper—we keep the essential distinction between service orientation and profit orientation as the distinctive marks between the goods or services provided by the state (government) and by the private sector.

Mixed Public Goods

Mixed public goods are undertaken by some private organizations or civil societies for the common good of the communal or national public. These are basically service-oriented. The public goods pursued are mixed in the sense that the undertakers are private groups and yet they seek not profits (unlike private firms) but service (like the government). Once these private groups make profit the primary consideration, then they become private corporations or cooperatives.

Public Bads

Public bads are negative goods which the general public scorns, and in many cases, are avoided or not tolerated by both the private and public sectors. Some of these are corruption, pollution, crimes, and the like. In the early stages of economic development, these public bads existed and were generally tolerated or taken for granted by the national public, the private sector, and the local/national government. However, when the national public begins to feel that its personal security or health is threatened, then it starts to clamor for laws and regulations curbing or eradicating these public bads.

The national situation regarding this matter is actually complicated. We recently read reports of companies closed because of pollution (of the atmosphere or river or sea), of governments prescribing regulations of newly-built factories to have a pollution control system, of laws restricting the use of certain machineries or gadgets that largely contribute to pollution, and so on. We also hear of cases where laws or ordinances are passed to curb criminality or to check on corruption practices of both the private and public sectors.

CONCLUSION

As regards the notion of the public good, I agree with the view that this notion is largely ideal or pure. It is a prescriptive standard by which we try to approximate in practice since we notice that in practice there is no public good that is purely nonrival and nonexcludable. It would seem reasonable to reclarify and redefine the concept of the public good, not in its ideal (economic) sense but in its practical (ethical) sense. However, I want to qualify immediately that the ethical sense I am referring to here is limited to activities of a rational private sector and a rational public sector (government or its agencies). On the one hand, the rationality of the private sector is determined by its *profit orientation*. It would be irrational for such a sector to pursue a losing project or build an enterprise in a business area that is overcrowded. On the other hand, the rationality of the public sector is determined by its *service orientation*. It seems that where the private and public sectors are irrational, no public good, but perhaps a public bad, is essentially served.

Now, let me go to the concluding observations.

First, the public good is “public” in the sense that the beneficiary is the general public, that is, the local or the national public either directly or indirectly (as a free rider).

Second, it is pursued by the private (economic) sector for the sake of profit and in view of its profit orientation. It assumes the individual person as a *Homo economicus*, that is, a selfish individual who desires to satisfy his or her personal needs or wants. And a private company or corporation is a *Homo economicus* writ large.

Third, the public good is pursued by the local or national government for the sake of the general public and in view of its social-service

orientation. It assumes the individual person as a *Homo politicus* (in the Aristotelian sense), that is, a socio-political individual who desires to satisfy not only his or her personal needs or wants but also those of others since he or she recognizes the need for the others in order to survive. And the government (or state) is a *Homo politicus* writ large.

Fourth, the private sector pursues a public good through its own initiative when it believes the public good is affordable and profitable even if there will be external riders to it. Otherwise, it will allow the government to pursue a public good and it will simply make itself a rider to it. In other cases, the private sector participates with the government in the pursuit of a public good for as long as its profit orientation is satisfied.

Fifth, the government pursues a public good through its own initiative when it believes that that public good can be had with financial reasonability for the welfare of the general public. By “financial reasonability,” I mean to say that the government can afford it outright or can obtain a loan which it can pay over a period of time without unduly jeopardizing the other basic services of the people, or it can let the people pay the tolls (as in highways) or pay a tax whenever a person makes use of the services (as in an airport tax). There is no doubt that some of these pursuits may be convertible politically into election votes, but this is a consequence rather than the goal of government. Where the government is irrational, the public good it pursues (for election purposes, e.g., rather than for the welfare of the public) is only apparent since its real cost to the general public in the long run will be such as to cause the general public to eventually suffer (usually in terms of curtailment of its other basic services since funds allotted or intended for these services are used for other purposes).

Sixth, private organizations or civil societies pursue a public good through their own initiative when they recognize that the government cannot do it for them, but they believe—by collective effort with little or even without the help of government—they can do the project for the sake of communal, organizational, or national welfare. It is also conceivable that a private business firm may pursue a public good in a purely nonprofit altruistic gesture, that is, a public service, as in constructing a bridge for an isolated communal village, without any direct or indirect financial returns. It is in this sense that the pursued public good is practically viewed as *mixed*.

Seventh, any benefit that a private or public person may enjoy or experience—as a free rider—from a private, public, or mixed good is an externality.¹⁰ The riding public that enjoys the pleasant smell of one’s private use of a deodorant, for example, is an externality since it does not emanate from a direct use by the public of the deodorant. A passersby who walks on a lighted street directly use—in one sense—the streetlight which, in that respect, is a public good.¹¹

Finally, the politico-ethical dimension of the notion of the public good is preferable since it subsumes the politico-economic dimension in both the ideal and practical senses of the term. That is to say, the practical sense—in its contingent reality—subsumes the ideal sense as a prescriptive

standard. The whole direction of this paper is epistemic in nature as it tries to *know* the sense by which the notion of the public good can be consistently viewed and understood. The practical application of this sense (assumed to have already been made clear), or the phronetic aspect, will come later.

NOTES

1. Paper presented during the Eastern Division Conference of the American Philosophical Association, Washington, D.C., 28 December 2006. Read for Gripaldo by John Abbarno, president of the Conference of Philosophical Societies.

2. See, for example, Karl Jaspers (Copleston 1965) and Hans-Georg Gadamer (1996, 312-24).

3. Johnson (1994-2005) also calls the *public good* as the “collective good.” Samuelson (1954), the first to refer to this term calls it as the “collective consumption good.” “Global public goods” are those desired by most, if not all, people of the world (the world public) and generally recognized and desired likewise as such by world leaders. World peace, for instance, is one of these global goods. Knowledge or information is another example (“Public good,” *Wikipedia*, 2006; Yee, n.d.).

4. A “civil society” may be defined as a group of people forming an association to satisfy certain needs with or without the help of the government. It is basically characterized by unity (bonding together to achieve strength and oneness of purpose) and subsidiarity (working together for the common good). It is essentially a society that lies between the family and the state. See McLean (2001 and 2005, 89-107).

5. The terms “public good,” “common good,” and “general welfare” have different nuances but they share the common characteristic by which the general public would benefit from the *good* or *desired object* referred to.

6. In the Philippines, we have the *Gawad Kalinga* (literally, “helping those in need”) movement. It aims at eradicating Filipino slums by building 700,000 houses in 7,000 communities in 7 years (up to 2010), or the 777 Movement. So far, through voluntary contributions in terms of work and funds, it has built houses for more than 875 communities. Each *Gawad Kalinga* village consists of 50 to 100 families. It is hoped that the reconstruction of villages will accelerate in the last remaining 4 years (see *Gawad Kalinga* pictures below). Members of a GK village are immersed in value-formation trainings.

7. No doubt, there are many *grave* issues connected with the economic sense of the public good such as the free rider problem, the incentives problem, issues on the underprovision of the public good, the subsidy issue, etc. But this paper is not addressed to the purely economic aspect of the public good where profit is of utmost consideration.

8. This information came up during the discussion of Sandro de Francis on “Ethics and public administration” at Life Cycle Institute,

Catholic University of America, on 11 October 2006. The discussion was jointly sponsored by the Center for the Study of Culture and Values and the Department of Politics, Catholic University of America.

9. The concept of the *public bad*, which is also viewed in terms of nonrivalry and nonexcludability, is just as important as that of the *public good*.

10. Some writers connect positive externality to nonrivalrous consumption (see Cowen 2002; Vaknin, n.d.; Musgrave 1969; and Samuelson 1954, 1955). For comments on the 1954 Samuelson paper, see Pickhardt (2006).

11. We might make a distinction between a customer, a free-using rider, and a free-nonusing rider: (1) a customer is one who uses the private good or service and directly pays for it or indirectly pays through other means (e.g., one makes use of the streetlight built by the storeowner and indirectly pays its electricity by buying something from the store), (2) a free-using rider is one who uses the good/service but does not pay for it (one uses the streetlight as a passerby and does not buy from the store), and (3) a free-nonusing rider is one who benefits externally from a service/good, but does not directly use it or is not even aware of its existence (one may enjoy the pleasant effect of a deodorant but is not even aware that the adjacent fellow uses it, or he/she does not personally use it).

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GAWAD KALINGA PICTURES (Taken from the Internet)





THE WORK OF GAWAD KALINGA
WILL NOT STOP UNTIL THERE ARE
NO MORE SLUMS
NO MORE HUNGER
NO MORE VIOLENCE
NO MORE TERRORISM

