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## Public Policy and Social Good: Theory, Practice and Beyond

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### Abstract

In this paper I argue that the most fundamental goal of any public policy is to assist the realization of social good. I take it that the idea of social good has developed differently in different political and moral traditions, and focus my analysis on the interplay of liberalism, virtue ethics and the Capability Approach. I argue that the liberal conception of social good, as espoused by its leading exponents, is somewhat problematic, and that it fails to account for meaningful civic associations. Even though liberal thinkers often prioritize an individual's freedom and autonomy, they do not provide us with concrete principles that can facilitate the realization of these goals. I draw upon the practical functioning of leading liberal democracies, including the United States, Canada and India, emphasizing the role of normative political constraints in policy making. I conclude that the liberal conception of social good stands in an acute need of a fresh principle that can rectify the above anomalies and reinvigorate its moral force, and that such a principle can probably be constructed with the help of Amartya Sen's Capability Approach and Aristotle's Virtue Theory.

**Keywords:** social good, liberalism, economic policy, virtue ethics, capability approach

**JEL Classification:** I31, Z13, Z18

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## 1. Introductory remarks

At the outset, it can be said that public policy and social good<sup>1</sup> are closely connected: social good symbolizes the aims and objectives that inform a given society and are valued by its citizens, and public policy facilitates the realization of such aims and objectives. Moreover, the above intimacy of public policy and social good can be easily defended on empirical grounds.<sup>2</sup> In the functioning of various government organizations, we often see that a policy is adopted with an explicit purpose to attain beneficial social results, and is followed, extended, or even abandoned depending upon its output value.<sup>3</sup> So, it cannot be my task in this paper to dispute the closeness between public policy and social good; on the contrary, I wish to defend it. I shall argue that without a wholesome, systematic and effective concept of social good, our public policy – no matter how vigorously implemented – will hardly succeed in accomplishing its task. In what follows I will deploy theoretical as well as practical arguments to support my claim. On the one hand, I will argue that the concept of public good is ontologically prior to that of public policy and that it determines the nature, function, and content of such policy. This ontological priority of the public good over public policy, I shall contend, can be found (in varying degrees) in the works of some eminent political and moral philosophers, including Aristotle, Immanuel Kant, John Rawls and Amartya Sen. On the other hand, I will also show that the concept of social good that currently informs liberal<sup>4</sup> democracies is somewhat restrictive. To raise the shortcomings of the liberal conception of social good, I shall (1) work out the theoretical implications of a liberal view in the context of public policy and (2) identify the practical problems arising out of the functioning of leading liberal democracies such as the United States, Britain, Canada and India. The liberal conception of social good stands in an acute need of a fresh principle that can help it rectify the above anomalies and reinvigorate its moral force. I suggest that such a principle can be probably constructed with the

<sup>1</sup> In this paper, I shall use the term ‘social good’ and ‘public good’ synonymously, indicating common priorities and shared pursuits in a given context. I am aware that some thinkers have argued, Kenneth Arrow in particular, that it is impossible to construct a common conception of social good without compromising individuals’ preferences on some level. Without getting into the specifics of Arrow’s arguments, it can be said that he assumes a questionable type of methodological individualism and normativism, implying that ‘all goods were individualized, and there were no collective social goods distinct from the aggregation of individual goods, that individuals made rational decisions based on utility, that individuals’ preferences were unrestricted and inviolable, and that individuals’ preferences were incomparable’. S. Marginson, *The Dream is Over: The Crisis of Clark Kerr’s California Idea of Higher Education*, California University Press, San Francisco 2016, p. 126.

<sup>2</sup> M.A. Hajer, D. Laws, *Policy in Practice* [in:] *Oxford Handbook on Public Policy*, eds. R.E. Goodin, M. Moran, M. Rein, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2008, p. 411. Even though I am going to use some empirical cases to illustrate my arguments, my methodology in this paper shall largely remain philosophical and reflective, focusing on a conceptual (and theoretical) analysis of public policy and social good. More strongly, I shall rely on a ‘deductive method in which understanding is developed largely on the basis of applying general pre-suppositions, concepts, or principles to specific phenomena’. M. Howlett, M. Ramesh, A. Perl, *Studying Public Policy: Policy Cycles and Policy Subsystems*, Oxford University Press, Toronto 2009, p. 20.

<sup>3</sup> M. Bovens, P. Hart, S. Kuipers, *The Politics of Policy Evaluation* [in:] *Oxford Handbook on Public Policy*, eds. R.E. Goodin, M. Moran, M. Rein, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2008, pp. 322–323.

<sup>4</sup> I use the term liberal (and liberalism) in a Rawlsian sense, restricting its application to political and procedural issues rather than the substantive conceptions of a good life. Cf. J. Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, Columbia University Press, New York 2005, p. 77.

help of Aristotle's Virtue Theory and Amartya Sen's Capability Approach. Accordingly, I conclude that a meaningful solution to the current liberal predicaments resides in a successful situating of Sen's idea of human capabilities in Aristotle's theory of virtue.

## 2. Normative foundations of public good

In its most generic form, public good characterizes a variety of goods.<sup>5</sup> But for the sake of clarity we can divide them into two: material goods and normative goods.<sup>6</sup> Material goods are those goods that have some physicality to them. That is to say, we can see them, touch them, buy them or sell them. That is why these goods are also called tradable goods or even supermarket goods. Though these goods are necessary for the survival of human beings, they are not considered to be as prized as normative goods. As a matter of fact, we all require food, clothes and shelter but then we cherish liberty, equality, fraternity and justice. This is in no way to devalue the material goods but rather to put them in a proper context. Indeed, the distribution of these goods is central to any system of public policy and decision-making (and for very good reasons). And yet, it must not be forgotten that our concept of normative goods is crucial to the determination of our material pursuits. How do I determine the legitimate aims and extents of my material pursuits within a social context? Surely, I would not want to infringe upon the pursuits of others. In other words, the normative element which underlies my concept of freedom here has a significant impact upon the material element, the representation of my freedom in a social setting. Aristotle elucidates:

*Every state is a community of some kind, and every community is established with a view to some good; for mankind always act in order to obtain that which they think good. But, if all communities aim at some good, the state or political community, which is the highest of all, and which embraces all the rest, aims at good in a greater degree than any other, and at the highest good.<sup>7</sup>*

The above concept of the good seems to have two major social and public policy implications. In the first place, for Aristotle, a successful pursuit of the good requires a fine-tuning of an individual's material and moral pursuits. Simply put, an individual may obtain as much wealth, honor and success as she wants (note that these are important social commodities), but she must do so within the framework of reason and virtue.

<sup>5</sup> J. Wolff, *Ethics and Public Policy: A Philosophical Inquiry*, Routledge Publishing, New York 2011, pp. 16–17.

<sup>6</sup> By normative goods, I mean the goods and principles that are usually invoked to assess the ethical value of material goods but are not contingent upon them. In this philosophical sense, normative goods are to be understood as non-material and independent of permanent goods discussed in economic theory: "Permanent goods which can be produced – if there is such a thing, namely a good which is expected not only to last forever physically, but also to remain permanently useful – stand in this respect in a somewhat exceptional position". F.A. von Hayek, *The Mythology of Capital*, "The Quarterly Journal of Economic" 1936, Vol. 50, No 2, p. 224.

<sup>7</sup> Aristotle, *Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon, trans. C.D. Reeve, Penguin Random House, New York 2001, 1941b, 1252a 1–6.

For instance, generosity is a virtue but the practice of generosity requires wealth; so, wealth is a useful material good, and since a poor individual lacks it, she would be perennially deficient in that virtue. Amartya Sen explains: ‘The usefulness of wealth lies in the things that it allows us to do – the substantive freedoms it helps us to achieve.’<sup>8</sup> Yet the desire to possess wealth must not slide into an unbridled greed. There is a thin line between an individual’s desire to obtain wealth for noble or ignoble purposes, and only virtue can help us locate it. That is why both reason and prudence are extremely crucial to our social interactions.

In the second place, Aristotle truly believes that a successful pursuit of the good necessitates a harmony in an individual’s personal and social relations (and by implication, personal and social goods). He explicitly holds that social relations embody the same natural propensity that constitutes, and in turn, conditions, personal relations.<sup>9</sup> To comprehend Aristotle’s argument on the above subject, consider yourself as a parent, spouse, friend and citizen, and try to work out the separate moral obligations of all these roles. Aristotle believes that when a moral agent performs various roles in her life, she always exhibits virtue and character in all her roles. Conversely, she may also reflect a lack of such virtue and character. Thus, for Aristotle, an individual’s personal and civic relations form a continuum. They exist side by side. They capture two important aspects of human nature and being, bring them into harmony with each other, lead to multiple satisfactions, and finally facilitate the realization of the good life.

Furthermore, Aristotle also argues that for the realization of the above harmony of the moral and material elements, and personal and social aspects of an individual’s life, it is essential that the principles of justice are reflected in the functioning of an individual and society as well.<sup>10</sup> He understands justice normatively as a virtue and materially as a matter of proportion.<sup>11</sup> More explicitly, an individual must get his honest share in the distribution of goods and be satisfied with that, without desiring to usurp the legitimate share of others through illegitimate means. This capacity to not desire what does not belong to the individual is matter of a constant character development; and Aristotle identifies it with virtue. In this Aristotelian sense, justice is primarily a virtue and, as such, an individual must strive hard for its realization in her life.<sup>12</sup> Aristotle’s realization-focused notion of justice is in sharp contrast to the arrangement-focused conceptions of justice (espoused by John Rawls and others) that insist the formulation of some perfect institutional arrangement that would ensure justice in the interactions of citizens. Sen writes:

*There is, obviously, a radical contrast between an arrangement-focused conception of justice and a realization-focused understanding: the latter must, for example, concentrate on the actual behavior of people, rather than presuming compliance by all with ideal behaviour.*<sup>13</sup>

<sup>8</sup> A. Sen, *Development and Freedom*, Anchor Books, Random House Inc., New York 1999, p. 14.

<sup>9</sup> Aristotle, op. cit., 1941b, 1280b30–40.

<sup>10</sup> Aristotle, op. cit., 1940b, 1334a12–34.

<sup>11</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. and ed. R. Crisp, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2000, 1129a1–10.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, 1129b25–33.

<sup>13</sup> A. Sen, *The Idea of Justice*, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Massachusetts 2009, p. 7.

Sen is critical of the transcendental and Rawlsian conceptions of justice that assume, without much practical evidence, that all citizens must act in a certain manner if the ideals of justice are to be implemented in their pure form in concrete human situations.<sup>14</sup> For Sen, justice is concerned with the realization of human capabilities in particular contexts and that it may be possible to advance justice in the routine functioning of people, albeit imperfectly, as long as an individual's actions contribute to the actualization of her capabilities and add to her substantive freedoms. As to what these human capabilities and substantive freedoms are, Sen does not provide us with an explicit answer.<sup>15</sup> Martha Nussbaum identifies ten such capabilities: life; bodily health; bodily integrity; sense, imagination, and thought; emotions; practical reason; affliction; other species; play; and control over one's environment.<sup>16</sup> Ian Gough has expanded Sen's capability list even further: 'Sen's examples [of functionings] include being happy, being able to choose, having good health, being adequately fed and sheltered, having self-respect, being able to appear in public without shame, and taking part in the life of the community life'.<sup>17</sup> In addition to Sen, a more robust philosophical account of human capabilities can be found in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, where Aristotle identifies the chief functioning of human personality in terms of reason and works out its concrete manifestations in a social context.<sup>18</sup> Thinking that the aim of life is a good life, he elucidates his conception of a good life in terms of a flourishing human existence in association with family and friends, civic partnerships and shared life projects; insisting that a viable public policy must reflect all these elements.<sup>19</sup>

### 3. Public good and individual freedom

The very idea that we can attain our material and moral satisfactions only in association with others looks like a platitude<sup>20</sup> to a modern reader. It is suggested that by making my good dependent upon my association with others, Aristotle makes my good vulnerable.<sup>21</sup> In other words, since I can never be fully sure how others will behave or what their likes and dislikes are, any attempt to define my good in association with others would be a non-starter. Additionally, it is also claimed that Aristotle's view is inadequate to meet the complexities

<sup>14</sup> Ibidem, p. 70.

<sup>15</sup> M.C. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*, Cambridge University Press 2001, p. 13.

<sup>16</sup> Ibidem, pp. 78–80.

<sup>17</sup> I. Gough, *Global Capital, Human Needs and Social Policies: Selected Essays, 1994–99*, Palgrave, Basingstoke 2000, pp. 6–7.

<sup>18</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean...*, 1098a10–19.

<sup>19</sup> Aristotle, *Basic Works...*, 1940b, 1278b15–29.

<sup>20</sup> Richard W. Miller articulates contemporary moral concerns in the following terms: 'Our central moral anxieties are directed at questions of how to avoid objectionable interference with others and not how to develop ourselves in the best possible way [in association with others]'. R.W. Miller, *Moral Differences: Truth, Justice and Conscience in a World of Conflict*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1992, p. 30.

<sup>21</sup> M.C. Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development: The Capability Approach*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2000, p. 359.

of a modern life and is inconsistent with the modern idea of social pluralism, that is, a respect for the divergent traditions, cultures, and concepts of a good life. Will Kymlicka remarks: 'The 'fact of pluralism' defeats not only traditional communitarianism, but also the revival of Aristotelian republicanism'.<sup>22</sup> Since Aristotle's conception of a good life revolves around a closely-knit *polis* and presumes some form of underlying social unity and moral structure, and present day liberal societies (states) are large and contain a diffused value system, they are inherently incompatible with one another and cannot be reconciled. In other words, the Aristotelian ideal of a good life cannot be infused into modern liberal societies without reversing the historical progress – from a pluralistic and diversified view of a good life, which accords equal value to the competing conceptions of a good life and does not prioritize one conception at the expense of the other, to a unitary and local conception of a good life: 'Aristotelian republicans are trying, in effect, to reverse this historical shift, and restore the primacy of the 'liberty of ancients' to our conceptions of a good life'.<sup>23</sup>

Kymlicka is critical of the above move of Aristotelian republicans.<sup>24</sup> He questions the authenticity of their premises and disputes the point of their departure. His arguments can be grouped under two broad heads. First, our current conception, i.e., the liberal conception, of a good life is much more rich and complex than that of Aristotle's, as Aristotelian republicans fail to see.<sup>25</sup> And second, Aristotle's conception of a good life, as a public policy goal, can easily slide into coercive regimes and threaten an individual's freedom of choice and moral autonomy. That is, it can, with very little amendments or defects, lead to the majority's domination of the minority, and undermine the central tenets of the liberal way of life.<sup>26</sup> Below, I will discuss the merit and significance of Kymlicka's arguments. I will show, specifically, that his first argument entails a liberal preference. It prioritizes the liberal conception of a good life over the ancients without providing us with satisfactory reasons to do so; and so it must be rejected. But his second argument (if we accept its underlying rationale, which is disputable though) has strength; it reflects some genuine modern worries and is grounded in historical experiences.<sup>27</sup> Hence, it deserves our complete consideration.

Kymlicka's first argument questions the premises that constitute the starting point of Aristotelian republicans. Aristotelian republicans argue that a good life necessitates an intrinsic relationship between the personal and social aspects of an individual's conduct, such that they both manifest virtue. Accordingly, Aristotelian republicanism, in its most potent form, holds that a good life requires a moral coherence between an individual's personal and civic conduct. It equates and identifies a good citizen with a virtuous person – a good citizen is a virtuous person, and a virtuous person a good citizen. As a result, an individual must reflect an active political consciousness to live a good life, or to qualify as a virtuous person. This view of a good life, Kymlicka contends, has run its course, and Aristotelian republicans are mistaken in seeking its revival.

<sup>22</sup> W. Kymlicka, *Contemporary Political Philosophy: An Introduction*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2002, p. 295.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 295.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 295.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 297–298.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 299.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 295.

Against Aristotelian republicans, Kymlicka argues that it is indeed possible (and even desirable) to live a good life without an active political participation or an animated sense of virtue in public institutions. Our personal and social life, he contends, is much more richer than that of the ancient Greeks. The implication is that our contemporary life has more elements and is much more fulfilling than its historical counterpart. Hence, Aristotelian republicans are wrong in their contention that only a moral coherence between the personal and civic domains will facilitate a good life:

*Aristotelian republicans assume that people have turned away from political participation [civic life] because they find politics unfulfilling. Our attachment to private life, I believe, is the result, not (or not only) of the impoverishment of public life, but of the enrichment of private life. We no longer seek gratification in politics because our personal and social life is so much more richer than that of the ancient Greeks.<sup>28</sup>*

The veracity of Kymlicka's remark can be disputed both on theoretical and practical grounds. First, Kymlicka's observation confuses a conceptual fact with an empirical reality, that is, Aristotle's concept of a good life is identified with the particular realities of the Greek society. The inference seems to be something like this: since modern (liberal) societies provide us with a better life than the one that ancient Greek society provided to its people, our conception of a good life is better than that of the ancient Greeks. But it may not be so; in fact, it is not so. Even a cursory look at Aristotle's conception of a good life shows that it entails a genuine satisfaction of all human faculties, and a full-fledged realization of all human potentialities. Aristotle envisions a good life in terms of moral and material gratifications, virtue and happiness, and, as such, his conception of a good life is wholesome, thorough and complete. Hence, Kymlicka's critique oversteps its primary purpose, that is, to show how the modern liberal concept of a good life is better than that of the ancient Greeks', particularly Aristotle's.

Second, Kymlicka's view that modern life is richer than that of the ancient Greeks is not totally unquestionable. Without indulging in a thorough exposition of the Greek concept of life, it can be said with some confidence (if the Greek intellectual tradition be our guide) that the ancient Greeks had a very rich and fulfilling concept of life.<sup>29</sup> This is not to deny that modern life, with its technological advancement and other forms of material progress, is much more complex than that of the ancient Greeks, but to challenge whether complexity entails enrichment. In the present context, it does not. Moreover, even if we grant to Kymlicka that the modern personal and social life is richer than that of the ancient Greeks, it would not justify his inference that a withdrawal from civic life is legitimate. All that it does is to explain why members of liberal societies are less interested, and at times, even apathetic towards civic engagements and political cooperation with other citizens. It does not provide a justification for this disengagement. In fact, this disengagement is detrimental to the liberal principle of democratic and political participation.

<sup>28</sup> Ibidem, pp. 297–298.

<sup>29</sup> A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, University of Notre Dame Press, Indiana 2008, pp. 155–160.

Kymlicka's second argument states that the realization of Aristotle's conception of a good life, as an intimate union of personal and civic elements, in our times will necessarily invite coercion and abuse of power. He writes:

*This doctrine [Aristotle's concept of a good life] could only be implemented through a coercive form of state perfectionism, in which the government pre-empts and constrains individuals' own judgements about the good life. This violates liberal commitments to individual autonomy and state neutrality.<sup>30</sup>*

Kymlicka is saying that a privileged Aristotelian conception of a good life will legitimize coercive state intervention in individuals' lives and will undermine their freedom of choice. Before we proceed with the counter-argument, a clarification is required. Kymlicka's argument has two aspects, and both aspects are intimately connected on a deeper level. The first aspect is obvious. It rejects, on the grounds of coercion, the applicability of Aristotle's theory of a good life in our times. The second aspect is implied, yet contextually clear. Kymlicka contends that modern liberal societies are plural and diverse, and their citizens free and autonomous. Hence, the very idea of a 'unitary concept of a good life', Aristotelian, or otherwise, is out of order. Accordingly, a satisfactory reply to Kymlicka's objections must establish two things: that Aristotle's concept of a good life is inherently incompatible with all forms of coercion and violence (mental or physical), and secondly, that it is fully compatible with all forms of pluralism. In the next section, I will reconstruct a full-fledged Aristotelian response to Kymlicka. Moreover, following Sen, I will argue that the idea of human capability, substantive freedoms and quality of life – or good life, as Aristotle calls it – ought not to be pitched against genuine human longing for freedom; on the contrary, they must be seen as valuable sources that can anchor freedom on solid grounds.

#### 4. Public policy and social good: theory, practice and beyond

A good life, according to Aristotle, necessitates virtue. And 'Virtue is a state of rational choice, consisting in a mean relative to us and determined by reason – the reason, that is, by reference to which a practically wise person would determine it'<sup>31</sup> That is to say, a good life, as Aristotle understands it, has three prerequisites. In the first place, it requires a rational reason, that is, a reason unhindered by raw feelings and passions.<sup>32</sup> A virtuous person must properly appropriate his reason such that it empowers him to make good and knowledgeable decisions. Next, it entails practical knowledge. A virtuous individual must have the practical capacity to understand the daily life-situations, and a will to act in vir-

<sup>30</sup> W. Kymlicka, *Contemporary Political Philosophy...*, p. 299.

<sup>31</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean...*, 1107a1–3.

<sup>32</sup> Aristotle, *Basic Works*, 1278b15–23, 1280a31–34.

tuous ways and to resist the vicious. Finally, the first two attributes depend upon a free moral agent, namely, the individual who rationally deliberates on the goods that he desires, the actions that he wants to perform, and the virtues that he wants to practice.<sup>33</sup>

Accordingly, Aristotle argues that a good life requires a proper gratification of an individual's moral and material ends, of personal and civic gratifications.<sup>34</sup> It requires a harmonization of an individual's personal interests, pursuits, aims and objectives with his wider social context and its inhabitants, such that his actions lead to the satisfaction and flourishing of all individuals who share his personal, moral and physical space. For Aristotle, the pursuit and realization of a good life is contingent upon an individual's virtuous conduct both in the personal and civic domain. Indeed, Aristotle also suggests that an individual must associate himself with other citizens in a noble way. He must act in a just and truthful manner, and must be friendly, generous and temperate in his dealings with his fellow citizens.<sup>35</sup> This idea of virtuous social interaction constitutes the heart of Aristotle's concept of civic friendship.<sup>36</sup>

That is to say, a good life, for Aristotle, involves a rational recognition of authentic personal and social interests, and a constant desire to exhibit virtue in one's conduct, and such a life is totally incompatible with all kinds of coercion. The underlying theme that runs through Aristotle's conception of a good life is not that an individual can be forced or should be forced to choose a life of virtue and perfection;<sup>37</sup> on the contrary, it impinges upon a rational choice and moral autonomy, which are manifested in, and by, only a free individual.<sup>38</sup>

Thus, unlike the modern liberal conception of a good life, including Kymlicka's, which prioritizes *simply* an individual's freedom of choice, the Aristotelian view insists on the *right choice*, and the right choice here means a 'choice according to an individual's reason and virtue'.<sup>39</sup> So, it cannot be based upon an individual's personal prejudices and narrow-mindedness. For instance, a free choice, for Aristotle, requires a voluntary virtuous conduct, not a forced adherence to virtue. Likewise, it facilitates coherence between an individual's personal and civic obligations, that is, private and social commitments. It leads to a harmony among the diverse spheres of an individual's life and does not set them apart.

Kymlicka, along with other liberals, questions the above Aristotelian understanding of a free choice. The reasoning is that virtue as the content, and (or) determinant of an individual's free choice, may, or will lead to an arbitrary perfectionism and social coercion. It will restrict an individual's free choice: since both the content and determinant – virtue – of a free choice are already given, there is not much to choose from. Kymlicka argues that it possible to have a more robust form of individual choice, such that an individ-

<sup>33</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean...*, 1113a3–14.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibidem*, 1171b27–35.

<sup>35</sup> M. Pakaluk, *Commentary* [in:] *Nicomachean Ethics: Books VIII and IX*, trans. M. Pakaluk, Oxford University Press, New York 2005.

<sup>36</sup> R. Shukla, *Justice and Civic Friendship: An Aristotelian Critique of Modern Citizenry*, *Frontiers of Philosophy in China* 2014, Vol. 9, No. 1, pp. 18–19.

<sup>37</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean...*, 1110b1–17.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibidem*, 1113a3–14.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibidem*, 1105a30–31.

ual can adopt or abandon an end (personal or social) depending upon his free will, and address positively his concern towards the welfare of his fellow citizens, or, the pursuit of virtue in the civic domain. He writes:

*The liberal view is sensitive to the way our individual lives and our moral deliberations are related to, and situated in, a shared social context. The individualism [the conception of an individual's free choice, and his social associations with others] that underlies liberalism isn't valued at the expense of our social nature or our shared community. It is an individualism that accords with, rather than opposes, the undeniable importance to us of our social world.*<sup>40</sup>

That is to say, the liberal notion of a free choice must not be construed in terms of social ambivalence, such that an individual is so self-centered and self-absorbed that he has no positive concern for his social context, civic associations, and fellow citizens.<sup>41</sup> The liberal concept of free choice is in full agreement with the moral and material welfare of others, and this agreement is to be found in the fundamental liberal belief that each individual is capable of constituting his own personal and moral ends and principles, and no one (neither a person nor an institution) should influence or impede his rational deliberations regarding such ends and principles. The liberal understanding of free choice is not without a content; on the contrary, it has a rich content, but this content is constructed and derived through an individual's rational investigation.

The idea that we all choose our moral ends and principles independently of our social context was put forward by Kant; and liberal political thinkers, including John Rawls and Will Kymlicka, embrace it without much reservation.<sup>42</sup> The thinking is that this Kantian presupposition is necessary to ward off interference and coercion in an individual's life, whereby an individual may be forced to adopt certain principles of conduct which are external to his being and alien to his individuality. But this presupposition separates an individual's moral choice from his material choice and creates a schism between her personal and social interactions. And by doing so, it leads to an impoverished understanding of a free will and free choice. On this view, there remains a perpetual gap, and a difference, between an individual's personal and social commitments.

Kymlicka realizes the above difficulty, at least partly, and seeks to rectify it by proposing a broader understanding of the self, that is, the liberal self. He argues that, though the self is ontologically prior to its personal and moral ends, in practice it is intimately associated with them.<sup>43</sup> In this way, he intends to secure a free choice, without any content in the ontological realm, yet with an enriched content in the empirical domain – a content that is exclusively determined by an individual's own thought and rationality. He is saying that we can retain the Kantian distinction between the moral will and material will, such that an individual's moral choice, in its pure form, is without a content – that is, the content is constructed, formally, by an individual himself – and that this still provides a meaningful account of the lib-

<sup>40</sup> W. Kymlicka, *Liberalism, Community, and Culture*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1989, p. 3.

<sup>41</sup> R. Shukla, *Justice, Virtue, and Character: An Aristotelian Interpretation*, "Maritain Studies" 2013, Vol. XXIX, pp. 83–84.

<sup>42</sup> R. Shukla, *Justice and Civic Friendship...*, pp. 17–18; W. Kymlicka, *Liberalism, Community...*, p. 62.

<sup>43</sup> W. Kymlicka, *Liberalism, Community...*, pp. 53–57.

eral notion of free choice. But this is problematic. It restores the dichotomous nature of the Kantian free will (material and formal will), and creates a conflict between an individual's moral and material will, and his personal and social conduct. Moreover, the rigid division of an individual's will into material and formal, and her life into personal and social compartments can be questioned on numerous grounds.

Amartya Sen argues that such rigid divisions between the material and formal aspects of an individual's will, her notions of freedom and choice, and consequently conceptions of justice, hamper her capabilities and have a diminishing effect on her being.<sup>44</sup> Against the above Kantian dichotomy, Sen contends that there are two aspects to an individual's freedom – the opportunity aspect and the process aspect – and that these two aspects are deeply interconnected and cannot be separated in experience,<sup>45</sup> and that we must understand them in association with one another, not in opposition to one another.<sup>46</sup> According to Sen, the opportunity aspect of an individual's freedom deals with the pursuit of those things that she values and has reason to pursue; and the process aspect ensures that the essential conditions required for a reasonable and fair pursuit of an individual's preferences are met. For instance, assuming that an individual wants to paint a picture or join a protest rally against environmental degradation in China or India, the process aspect of her freedom will ensure that her decision to paint or join the rally remains totally voluntary, and is not made under coercion, and the opportunity aspect will help her obtain the resources needed for the execution of her decision. These two aspects of freedom, Sen insists, are essential to the realization of an individual's substantive freedom in a specific context and that it is arbitrary and unproductive to divide them into two groups, as Kant, Kymlicka, Rawls and other transcendentalist thinkers require.<sup>47</sup>

Another problematic outcome of the above division of material and formal aspects of an individual's choice and freedom can be located in the contrived conceptions of public policy in vibrant liberal democracies such as the United States, Britain, France, Canada and India. Note that in the real life of an individual, the two aspects of choice and freedom are intimately connected, but theoretically they are totally apart; and as a result of this theoretical separation it becomes very difficult to formulate an effective public policy on important issues facing a country, including health care for citizens, reduction of poverty, immigration, the education of children, etc. Consider, for instance, a hypothetical (or not so hypothetical) scenario regarding the construction of an educational curriculum in present-day Britain, France, and the United States (and other liberal democracies too). A comprehensive educational curriculum, one would agree, must provide children with an all-round exposure to important subjects including mathematics, science, literature, an improvement of human capabilities, and the cultivation of social sympathy and fellowship with other citizens, etc. But social sympathy and fellowship with others are not an important part of current educational curriculum in the mentioned countries, and cannot be so, except in an ephemeral sense.<sup>48</sup> Contem-

<sup>44</sup> A. Sen, *Development...*, pp. 13–21.

<sup>45</sup> A. Sen, *The Idea of Justice*, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Massachusetts 2009, pp. 228–238.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 17–26.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 65–70.

<sup>48</sup> E.M. Immergut, *Institutional Constraints on Public Policy* [in:] *Oxford Handbook on Public Policy*, eds. R.E. Goodin, M. Moran, M. Rein, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2008, pp. 560–564.

porary debates on education seem to focus more on religious and cultural issues (India), dress codes (France) and the politicization of schools (USA) rather than the cultivation of friendship and justice in public domain. The fall out of this narrow educational focus is obvious worldwide. In recent years, there has been a growing demand from many politicians in the United States to cut funding for the Public Broadcasting Services (PBS) because of its socially conscious programs that are said to undermine an individual's sense of self-initiative and free enterprise, and add to the federal deficits.<sup>49</sup> These programs include, among other things, teaching children the values of sharing and social sympathy. Given the nature of contemporary politics, economic deficits and lack of social concerns, such demands should not surprise us. To sympathize with others requires, Aristotle rightly points out, developing a sense of friendship (*philia*) towards them, and possessing a character and capacity to act in a virtuous way;<sup>50</sup> but all these aspects of education have a moral texture that cannot be realized without transgressing the Kantian dichotomy of will and freedom which informs the institutional frameworks in contemporary liberal societies.<sup>51</sup> As a result, these countries find themselves caught up in a brewing social crisis with failed public policies, not knowing how to improve the lives of their poor people or how to develop a more compassionate citizenry. Something is clearly not right when we learn that the 'Africans Americans as a group have no higher – indeed have a lower – chance of reaching advanced ages than do people born in the poorer economies of China and India or the Indian state of Kerala (or in Sri Lanka, Jamaica or Costa Rica);<sup>52</sup> and that even today women are not paid equally for equal work in the developed as well as developing countries. Other countries are plagued with worse problems: 'The fact is that the poor in India are lacking in political cohesion to varying degrees, with varying consequences, and varying causes'.<sup>53</sup> No public policy measure can address these difficulties on a philosophical level without renegotiating the Kantian conception of an individual's will and freedom, and adopting a stronger idea of freedom as the realization of human capability.<sup>54</sup>

Aristotelian republicans also chide Kant and Kymlicka for their weak and formalistic understanding of human self and personality. For Kant, as well as Kymlicka, the deepest aspects of an individual's freedom reside at the core of her being and can be expressed by her alone and no other individual can have any access to that core.<sup>55</sup> Moreover, this deeper aspect is contrasted with contingent aspects of an individual's life, and all social interactions and pursuits are somehow reduced to the contingent aspect. No matter how much I value my citizenship and no matter how much I want to co-operate with other citizens, they can never be a necessary part of my deepest pursuits, my inner freedom, or my

<sup>49</sup> Proposed changes and cuts to the US school-education system and Public Broadcasting Corporation (PBS), and consequent emphasis on the voucher system in education reinforce the above rationale in a fundamental way: <http://www.bbc.com/news/education-39479034>.

<sup>50</sup> Aristotle, *Basic Works...*, 1941b, 1332a15–26.

<sup>51</sup> J. Rawls, *op. cit.*, pp. 134–140.

<sup>52</sup> A. Sen, *Development...*, p. 21.

<sup>53</sup> N. Lakshman, *Patron of the Poor. Caste Politics and Policymaking in India*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2011, p. 5.

<sup>54</sup> A. Sen, *Development...*, p. 18.

<sup>55</sup> M.J. Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1998, pp. 176–178.

authentic self. This leads to a very contrived notion of public co-operation and citizenship where an individual's public actions are supposed to be limited to the political realm without having any bearing on the private aspects:

*In an Aristotelian perspective anyone who can formulate such a contrast [between personal and social] has no country, has no polis; he is a citizen of nowhere, an internal exile wherever he lives. Indeed from an Aristotelian point of view, a modern liberal political society can appear only as a collection of citizens of nowhere who have banded together for their common protection.<sup>56</sup>*

Kymlicka also argues that Aristotle's concept of a good life is at odds with the present-day liberalism, which celebrates pluralism by assigning equal moral merit and consideration to divergent conceptions of a good life.<sup>57</sup> Present day societies, he argues, exhibit tremendous internal differences in terms of conceptions of a good life. There are several reasons for this. First, unlike the ancient Greeks, modern societies (and states) are much bigger in terms of population. They house different and often competing cultures, religions, social sects, and individuals. Furthermore, each of them embodies a conception of a good life, and so a fair and equal treatment to all of them requires that the state must not promote one conception of the good life over others. Second, sometimes there are bitter disagreements between different communities, cultures, and individuals; hence, a neutral state is required as an arbiter. Thus, Kymlicka's critique requires Aristotelian republicans to show that Aristotle's concept of a good life is consistent with modern political pluralism.

Before proceeding with an Aristotelian reply to the above contentions, it may be useful to take note of some of the challenges confronting contemporary liberal democracies. This will also include re-thinking Kymlicka's claim that a specific conception of a good life (as a political and public policy goal) is necessarily incompatible with the liberal democratic system; and if it is so, then how do these democracies deal with the fundamental difference of opinion among their citizens. Moreover, a satisfactory answer to our questions must be based on the everyday functioning of liberal democracies and not on some abstract theoretical framework, Kantian or otherwise. The liberal view that every individual is inherently capable of constructing her conceptions of a good life on her own and without any social assistance has come under serious strain in the wake of politics of identity and politics of recognition in the USA, Britain, Canada and India. It is argued that that an individual constructs her notions of a good life in a social and cultural context and that such contexts not only have a potent role in the determinations of her conceptions of a good life, but also her sense of identity, personhood, freedom and choice. Commenting upon the socially accepted elements of the good life in Quebec, Canada – where government prioritizes and promotes French language and culture over others as a form of collective manifestation of Quebecers' aspirations, Charles Taylor writes:

<sup>56</sup> A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue. A Study in Moral Theory*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame 1984, p. 156.

<sup>57</sup> W. Kymlicka, *Contemporary Political Philosophy...*, p. 299.

*Quebeckers ... and those who give similar importance to this kind of collective goal, tend to opt for a rather different model of a liberal society. In their view, a society can be organized around a definition of the good life, without this being seen as a depreciation of those who do not personally share this definition. Where the nature of the good requires that it be sought in common, this is the reason for its being a matter of public policy.*<sup>58</sup>

One could find similar instances of shared goals in the resurgent caste politics in India, where people from a particular caste exercise their electoral rights in organized groups to make their voices heard and to elect the candidate best suited to advance their cause. Indeed, over the years, the government of India has taken many measures to recognize castes as the unit of political redistribution of resources in the economic and social sphere, and yet remained thoroughly liberal and democratic in the political sphere of individual rights and representative government: 'The Indian state's institutionalization in the above terms occurred through a process whose roots lie not in a class conflict and violence, but a (largely) peaceful transition to democracy.'<sup>59</sup> In the light of the above discussion, it is clear that there is a gap between the theoretical principles that guide liberal democracies on a philosophical level and their practical manifestations that tend to be more amenable to the shared pursuits of collective goals.

Without completely endorsing the elements of identity politics in Canada and caste politics India, I want to recognize their strength and draw out their implications in the field of public policy. Both countries are thriving liberal democracies, with a strong tradition of civil liberties, free press, independent judiciary, public reasoning, social activism, political and cultural differences, and representative governments. And yet both countries would appear to go a step too far, if we take Kant and Kymlicka seriously, in allowing the Quebeckers in Canada or Dalits in India to take *their group, or historical aspects of their social and political identity, and not the individual, as the metric of resource distribution, public policy and political consideration*. Moreover, these manifestations of the group as units of political distribution and public policy considerations would be particularly troubling for Rawls and Kymlicka. Indeed, all such group-driven considerations go against the liberal credo that individuals, not groups, ought to be the sole units of political decision-making. I think that the premise of the above argument, i.e. the individual as the sole unit of political decision-making, is essentially correct but its contention that an *a priori* recognition of shared social goals and projects (and human capabilities) *conflicts* with individualism requires rethinking.

Aristotle not only rejects the liberal formulation of group and individual divide but also argues that a society (and a state, for that matter) is an association of associations.<sup>60</sup> More explicitly, for him, a state is a larger political association which is constituted by smaller associations, such as family, friendship and village. Family is the first form of a social association, and other associations come into being with human need, progress, and advancement. Since a good life requires multiple kinds of goods (material and moral), and a proper attainment of these goods requires an engaging and meaningful association with other human beings, one association leads to another (for

<sup>58</sup> *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, eds. Ch. Taylor, A. Gutmann, Princeton University Press, New Jersey 1994, p. 59.

<sup>59</sup> N. Lakshman, op. cit., p. 158.

<sup>60</sup> Aristotle, *Basic Works...*, 1941b, 1252a1–6.

instance, several families form a village), and finally they mature in the constitution of a *polis*. The *polis* is a perfect association in that it facilitates all the essential ingredients of a good life.<sup>61</sup>

If so, then the very idea of a *polis* would seem to entail both political and moral pluralism. That is, it is an embodiment of diverse kinds of associations, each equally important and meaningful. These associations signify a difference in interest, pursuits, aims and objectives. For instance, an association of carpenters does not have the same interests as that of musicians. Likewise, pleasure and advantage friends have radically different priorities in comparison to moral friends.<sup>62</sup> For Aristotle, a *polis* contains different and even opposing associations. However, all individuals and associations, Aristotle argues, desire a good life – a life of personal and moral fulfillment. Aristotle's concept of a good life is meant to encompass a diversity of goods, values, and associations, and it is, in theory, perfectly compatible with all forms of pluralism.

However, it can be said that the citizens in modern societies (may) have certain irreconcilable differences regarding the concept of a good life, and, if so, then liberalism requires that those differences must be respected. Kymlicka writes:

*A liberal democracy must respect such diverse conceptions of a good life, as far as possible, and should not compel people to adopt a conception of a good life which privileges political participation [an individual's active participation in the civic spheres] as the source of meaning and satisfaction.*<sup>63</sup>

The merit of the above argument is undeniable, but its point of reference is disputable. Kymlicka is right in saying that a civilized society must not coerce its citizens or any other human person, but he is wrong in implying that an Aristotelian conception of a good life is open to such abuse. I have argued that Aristotle's conception of rational choice necessitates a complete realization of an individual's moral and material capacities, and is inherently incompatible with any form of force, coercion, and violence. A simple look at his idea of civic friendship shows that civic differences must be resolved within the context of virtue, not through power or coercion.

Civic friendship, Aristotle argues, entails a deep appreciation of the good of the other people.<sup>64</sup> It encourages an individual to contribute to the well-being of fellow-citizens and social cohabitants in a meaningful and positive way. It requires us to value the material prosperity and gratification of other people. In simple terms, while seeking my own gratification and material well being, I am conscious that I live in a shared social space, and must not do anything that will cause harm to its inhabitants. I must not indulge in asocial or anti-social activities. I must undertake positive acts of generosity, magnanimity, friendliness, and sympathy. My civic conduct must be in agreement with virtue,<sup>65</sup> and such con-

<sup>61</sup> Ibidem, 1941b, 1280a31–32.

<sup>62</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean...*, 1156b1–15.

<sup>63</sup> W. Kymlicka, *Contemporary Political Philosophy...*, p. 299.

<sup>64</sup> J.M. Cooper, *Reason and Emotion: Essays on Ancient Moral Psychology and Ethical Theory*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1999, p. 371.

<sup>65</sup> Aristotle remarks: 'The good person, however, acts for the sake of what is noble, and the more so the better he is; and he acts for the sake of his friend, neglecting his own interest' (Aristotle, *Nicomachean...*, 1168a33–35).

duct, Aristotle believes, has an influential effect. That is, when other civic members see my commitment to virtue, they develop a positive outlook towards me, and also towards our overall civic interactions. Accordingly, my virtuous conduct secures virtue in my social spheres, and it reduces my differences with others.

## 5. Conclusion

I have argued that Aristotle's conception of a good life and Sen's theory of human capabilities can not only help us resolve the tension between personal freedom and social choice, but also provide us with a meaningful and cohesive foundation for liberalism in general and public policy in particular. I have shown that the liberal principle of free choice is somewhat abstract, lacking in an empirical moral content, and that it needs to be contextualized. Liberalism prioritizes an individual's right to construct her own moral goods, without adequately providing her with principles that can facilitate her efforts. The inherent reasoning behind the liberal view is that each individual is capable of constituting her own social and moral goods and that she must avoid all outside assistance in this process.

But the above liberal position does not reflect the true nature of contemporary democratic politics, freedom and choice. I have argued that many citizens prioritize their common social projects and democratic rights. Following Aristotle and Sen, I have also shown that there is a close connection between various elements of an individual's life and that a viable concept of public policy and social good must reflect it. Without the realization of the above moral coherence, democratic politics can hardly realize its full potential. Their proper moral coherence, I have shown, will yield results. Among other things, it will bring citizens together, enhance their sense of community, strengthen their civic bond and soften the thrusts of competitive politics.

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