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052161712X - Defining the Common Good: Empire, Religion and Philosophy in  
Eighteenth-Century Britain

Peter N. Miller

Excerpt

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## *Introduction*

The idea of a ‘common good’ is so tightly woven into all thinking about politics that any change in its content can be investigated as the manifestation of a significant shift in the conceptual foundations of political life. This book tells the story of just such a moment of fundamental change. In later eighteenth-century Britain the cluster of ideas which constituted the substance of what contemporaries meant when they talked of a ‘common good’, and which had taken its characteristic shape since the sixteenth century, was rearranged by those who felt it no longer of use in addressing the central issue of the relation of individuals to community. That the security of the community was the basic justification for government action was an ancient idea given its most systematic treatment by the philosophers and political theorists of the late middle ages; its specific early modern form reflected the needs of the states that emerged from the era of Reformation and Counter-Reformation. These were no longer found to be identical with the needs of eighteenth-century Great Britain. There was a pronounced discontinuity between the changed reality of imperial governance, and continuing justifications in terms of the ‘common good’. The crisis of relations with the North American colonies and the renewed demand for wider religious toleration at home struck at the theoretical foundations of that type of state. The consolidation of territorial power through force and the ideological suasion of a state religion both depended on a notion of community. Distance, dissatisfaction and dissent shattered this crucial support. Where the British government continued to rely on the older arguments into the nineteenth century, these late eighteenth-century events had inspired a group of reformers interested in the causes of America and toleration to articulate a different vision of that balance between the possibilities for individual action and the claim of communal necessity. The scope of this book, then, covers the lifespan of the state shaped by

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Reformation and Counter-Reformation, though its particular focus is on the 'end' of the story in eighteenth-century Britain and the specific events and arguments that highlighted the inadequacies of an older approach to politics for a self-consciously enlightened age.

An analytical history of the concept of the 'common good' cannot be told here. But in so far as the ideas of the ancients furnished the arguments and categories in which Europeans thought about politics for the subsequent millennium this heritage is inescapable. The 'common good' was just such a basic category capable of being identified with justice, social policy and liberty. Only very rarely was it perceived to be hostile to the good of individuals; rather, the two ends were believed to coincide. Still, the conceptual priority of the community was unchallenged and was to remain unchallenged for centuries. Aquinas' formulation was typical:

All who are contained in any community are related to it as parts to a whole. The part is what it is in virtue of the whole; therefore every good of the part is to be directed towards the good of the whole . . . Since every man is part of a state, it is impossible for any man to be good unless he is well adapted to the common good.<sup>1</sup>

With the revival of vigorous political life in the Italian communes in the thirteenth century, the emphasis on the service of the community took on an explicitly republican hue as writers like Cicero and Seneca, and then Aristotle, were incorporated as authorities. In several recent and important works, Quentin Skinner has traced the centrality of this republican reading of the common good through the thirteenth-century 'pre-humanists' into the *Discorsi* of Machiavelli.<sup>2</sup> The *res publica*, by definition, had as its goal the public good. But it could only be attained when citizens possessed that *virtù* which enabled them to place the well-being of the city above their own. This was the means to *grandezza*; the alternative was deadly and divisive faction. To this way of thinking, the good of the individual was achieved by pursuing the good of the many: 'not the particular good of individuals but the common good is that which makes a city great' (II.2). This is the particular Machiavellian

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Antony Black, *Political Thought in Europe, 1250-1450* (Cambridge, 1992), p. 32; see pp. 22-34 for a discussion of the common good.

<sup>2</sup> In particular, 'Ambrogio Lorenzetti: The Artist as Political Philosopher', in *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 72 (1986), 1-56; *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, 1978).

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tradition whose passage across time and space has been charted by Zera Fink, Caroline Robbins, Bernard Bailyn and John Pocock.<sup>3</sup> If the common good necessarily constitutes the centre of gravity for political thought, in the arguments developed by the publicists and politicians of these faction-ridden Italian city-republics it was shaped into an ideological weapon. Not only was the success of the commonwealth to be sought, but its attainment was made contingent on individuals identifying their private goods with whatever was determined by the governors to be their common, shared good. This strong republican argument could appeal to those, like Machiavelli, who sought a vantage point from which to criticize current political practice and social decay. The power of this interpretation has led to the conclusion that the message of classical antiquity to the eighteenth-century was univocal and republican.<sup>4</sup> The body of this study disputes that claim and argues that greater attention must be paid to the schools of hellenistic philosophy, as interpreted by the great Romans, and their much more considerable impact on the culture of early modern Europe.

But Machiavelli's evocation of Roman republicanism, like Cicero's own, contained much else that was of value for non-republicans. The primacy of the political community could be rendered as an admonition to a prince 'to maintain his state' (*mantenere lo stato*) as easily as a republican warning for citizens to take all steps necessary for their common self-preservation.<sup>5</sup> Cicero, who so ably served the republican theorists of the late middle ages and Renaissance, conveyed a message as ambiguous as his own political theory and practice had come to appear in the letters,

<sup>3</sup> Zera Fink, *The Classical Republicans* (Evanston, 1945); Caroline Robbins, *The Eighteenth-Century Commonwealthmen. Studies in the Transmission, Development and Circumstance of English Liberal Thought from the Restoration of Charles II until the War with the Thirteen Colonies* (Cambridge, MA, 1959); Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, MA, 1967); John Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Political Tradition* (Princeton, 1975).

<sup>4</sup> Gordon Wood has argued that 'In the eighteenth century to be enlightened was to be interested in antiquity, and to be interested in antiquity was to be interested in republicanism. Certainly classical antiquity could offer meaningful messages for monarchy too, but there is no doubt that the thrust of what the ancient world had to say to the eighteenth century was latently and at times manifestly republican' (*The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York, 1992), p. 100). It is, of course, arguable whether enlightenment was coterminous with 'interest in antiquity'. But that is a different question.

<sup>5</sup> See Quentin Skinner, 'The State', in *Political Innovation and Conceptual Change*, ed. Terrence Ball, James Faar and Russell Hanson (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 90–131, for a history of the changing character of the concept of the 'state' from the late middle ages to the seventeenth century.

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speeches and tracts whose rediscovery constituted one of the high points of Renaissance scholarship. It was, of course, precisely this ambivalence that Machiavelli exploited.

The history of the political thought of the hundred years following the publication of Machiavelli's works has often been written in terms of the death of republicanism at the hands of princely tyranny. In this story Cicero gives way to Tacitus. It is certainly true that the systematic destruction of the Italian republics and the horrendous dislocation of the civil wars of religion in France and the Netherlands made the search for stability, often in the person of a single ruler with undisputed power, seem absolutely essential. The formulation of prudent, *politique* maxims of policy was the constructive side of Tacitist scepticism about the practice of politics – both republican and princely.<sup>6</sup> Because the writers on statecraft, almost from the very beginning of this later sixteenth-century *genre*, are said to have taken Tacitus as a model at the expense of Cicero, analysis of the literature concerning what contemporaries termed, variously, *ragion di stato*, *razón de Estado*, *raison d'état* and 'reason of state' has often become conflated with a discussion of Tacitism.<sup>7</sup>

From Gustav Schmoller and Friedrich Meinecke onwards it has been customary to approach this literature as the ideological consequence of, if not justification for, a process of 'state-building'.<sup>8</sup> The reason of state, to this way of thinking, evolved *because* of and coordinate with the rise of states. Phenomenologically, of course, this is true. There *was* a pronounced alteration in the character and

<sup>6</sup> Richard Tuck has recently provided a most compelling account of the relationship of political and moral philosophy in this period. See *Philosophy and Government 1572–1651* (Cambridge, 1993). Some of the basic investigations of this theme can be found in R. de Mattei, *Dal premachiavellismo all'antimachiavellismo* (Florence, 1969); *Il problema della 'ragion di stato' nell'età della controriforma* (Milan and Naples, 1979); *Il pensiero politico italiano nell'età della controriforma* 2 vols. (Milan and Naples, 1982); Etienne Thuau, *Raison d'état et pensée politique à l'époque de Richelieu* (Paris, 1966); William F. Church, *Richelieu and Reason of State* (Princeton, 1972); Roman Schnur, ed., *Staatsräson: Studien zur Geschichte eines politischen Begriffs* (Berlin, 1975).

<sup>7</sup> See Tuck's illuminating account of the role of Florentine *émigré* writers in the shift from Cicero to Tacitus in sixteenth-century France (*Philosophy and Government*, pp. 40–2). Those accounts perhaps most influential in identifying Tacitism and reason of state with a Machiavellism *manqué* have been those of Giuseppe Toffanin (*Machiavelli e il 'Tacitismo'* (Naples, 1972; 1st edn, 1921) and Friedrich Meinecke. In the latter case, the English translation bears a share of responsibility for adding the word 'Machiavellism' to a title that originally read *Reason of State in Early Modern History*. See also, Peter Burke, 'Tacitism', in *Tacitus*, ed. T. A. Dorey (London, 1969), pp. 149–71; Kenneth Schellhase, *Tacitus in Renaissance Political Thought* (Chicago, 1976).

<sup>8</sup> Gustav Schmoller, *The Mercantile System and its Historical Significance* (New York, 1931; 1st edn, 1895).

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quantity of analyses of political practice during this period and contemporaries often remarked on it. More scholastic accounts of the origin of political power gave way to manuals written by and for statesmen about what to do with it. Nevertheless, from a conceptual point of view it is simplistic to assume that the issue of necessity had never confronted a statesman prior to the later sixteenth century. In fact, as will be argued at greater length in chapter 1, when those later statesmen sought guidance for their actions and justifications – for precisely what has come to be called the ‘reason of state’ – they looked to ancient Roman history, as presented by Cicero and Tacitus. For the particular shape taken by this later sixteenth- and seventeenth-century debate about political necessity owes much to both men as well as to Seneca. Tacitus’ scepticism towards the world of politics inculcated a wariness towards appearances and hypostatized values which was complemented by the teachings of Seneca, who taught the ways of preserving oneself in such a world. Cicero, however, remained in use for those concerned with the realm of public order and the principles of communal preservation. In his rhetorical and philosophical works Cicero laid down explicit political principles; in the voluminous surviving correspondence that constituted his *apologia pro vita sua*, readers could gain a sense of the political context of ancient political thought unavailable elsewhere. So, despite the disappearance of those city-states whose greenhouse-like atmosphere nourished a powerful republican reading of Cicero, his usefulness to writers on politics did not lessen. We must, however, look for him in different places.

As the philosophically inclined defender of political legitimacy and the rule of law, there was no greater ancient exemplar of patriotic statesmanship. Cicero’s Stoic defence of the good and of religion had enabled the Church Fathers to co-opt him as a pagan authority. But, at the same time, Cicero’s recognition that in politics nothing could override the claim of necessity and his philosophical definition of expediency in terms of the public good offered welcome support to civil rulers making tough decisions. At a time when Machiavelli, and even Tacitus, threatened to make statecraft a dangerous word, Cicero’s discussion of these issues was, as we shall see, couched in unobjectionable terms. Moreover, the central place occupied by Cicero in contemporary culture – his works formed the nucleus of basic educational programs from the fourteenth century through the nineteenth, at least – served to domesticate arguments

which, on close inspection, were potentially no less subversive than those they were designed to marginalize.

The legitimacy of the political entities that emerged from the Protestant Reformation and Catholic Counter-Reformation remained subject to question by internal and external rivals. Its theorists defended the notion of political community that had taken shape in the later middle ages though now focusing on the spiritual and political responsibilities of temporal rulers rather than the value of the universal church.<sup>9</sup> In attempting to hold together this notion of politics at a time of increasing intellectual and political complexity, many of these writers drew on and developed this Ciceronian argument about the pre-eminence of the common good. His analysis of the relationship between the good and the useful (*honestum* and *utile*) in *De Officiis*, after the Bible one of the most widely and continuously read works in the history of Europe, was framed in terms of the needs of the public. This same public utility also mandated support for the religion of the state and its ancient customs, the *mos maiorum*. Several key features of states on either side of the theological and political 'iron curtain' that separated Protestant and Catholic Europe in the later sixteenth century gave especial relevance to Cicero's presentation of this issue.<sup>10</sup>

First, the maintenance of a particular confession, whether Roman Catholic (or Gallican or Venetian) or any of a variety of Protestant creeds, was deemed an interest of state and among the leading responsibilities of the civil magistrate. The Reformation and Counter-Reformation had made a specific moral posture part of the redefined character of civil government.<sup>11</sup> The Tridentine reforms, especially in so far as they affected the relation between governance

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Antony Black, *Council and Commune. The Conciliar Movement and the Fifteenth-Century Heritage* (London, 1979), pp. 162–8. The chapter titles in Black's new survey of medieval political thought (*Political Thought in Europe, 1250–1450*) emphasize the continuity scholars now perceive in the centuries before and after the Renaissance: 'The political community', 'Church and state', 'Empire and nation', 'City-states and civic government', 'Kingship, law and counsel', 'Parliamentary representation', 'The state'. Nevertheless, as regards this last category, it is doubtful that the sense of national identity so characteristic of later periods was at all as widespread in the middle ages.

<sup>10</sup> Though trenchantly characterizing this as a problem for Baroque political thought, Robert Bireley has made Machiavelli the causal agent and read out the antique, and especially Ciceronian, character of this issue. See *The Counter-Reformation Prince: Anti-Machiavellism or Catholic Statecraft in Early Modern Europe* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1990), p. 28. 'Cicero' does not rate even a listing in the index of the book.

<sup>11</sup> Mario d'Addio, *Il pensiero politico di Gaspare Scioppio e il machiavellismo del seicento* (Milan, 1962), p. 330. Also, de Mattei, *Il pensiero politico italiano nell'età della controriforma*.



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and spirituality, implied that no separation ought to be effected between morality and the quotidian tasks of policy-making. It is, perhaps, this imperative, at a time in which there *was* an undeniable expansion in the competence and invasiveness of central government, that generated such explicit discussion about the exercise of power. While the needs of governors were no different in the sixteenth century than in the sixth, the public and international dimension of the insistence that Christian princes uphold Christian morality surely complicated the justification of certain necessary, though unsavoury, practices. Cicero had been incorporated into the canon of Christian political thought because he could, quite legitimately, be read as a stoic philosopher. That he had also faced the hard questions which confronted statesmen in every era not only made his judgments more palatable, but deflected any possible allegation of base motives. Cicero had shown how it was possible to integrate the demands of morality and those of policy – precisely the task faced by civil rulers in states washed by the Counter-Reformation and by Protestant princes who had taken upon themselves the supreme headship of national churches. In this sense, contemporary needs forced the Ciceronian issue of *honestas* and *utilitas* to the top of the political agenda.

Secondly, many of these states were themselves composed of smaller entities, absorbed, amalgamated and otherwise retained in a variety of constitutional forms. These ‘composite monarchies’ or ‘multiple kingdoms’ were often held together by a fragile equilibrium of laws, privileges, custom and, of course, force. The task of establishing a legitimate central authority coincided with the creation of a single community with a specific vision of the good in place of the variety of pre-existing private goods which reflected differences of religion, region or legal privilege. This, too, lent itself to Cicero’s analysis of the relationship between the good and the useful since the public good, or utility, could be used by governments to marginalize people or policies that could be described as serving private gain rather than the public good. In this context, the Ciceronian argument provided a justification for the legitimacy of central power. Though his analysis was framed in terms of personal morality, *De Officiis* was of equally great value for statesmen. For the disagreements between the constituent communities within the early modern state could also be sketched as a conflict between claims of the good and the expedient. In both ‘composite’ as well as

theoretically unified states, the process of welding together a single entity reproduced the circumstances in which the claim of 'public utility' could be used to justify the drive of the single, central authority for a monopoly of political power.

Finally, while Cicero's analysis of this potential clash between the good and the useful was not directly concerned with community, its resolution in terms of the *utilitas rei publicae* obviously depended upon it. Moreover, in works such as *De Amicitia*, he had underlined the particular constitutive bonds the sum total of which comprised the community whose survival and improvement was the statesman's aim.<sup>12</sup> The seventeenth-century revival and adaptation of Stoicism made the concept of friendship the pre-eminent personal relationship and its requisite virtues the core of a new notion of virtue, one which was normative both for rulers and citizens. Scholars have observed that neo-Stoic personal morality provided the ethical training for the increasingly sophisticated bureaucratic infrastructures of increasingly sophisticated states.<sup>13</sup>

Discussions of the common good in the post-Reformation state, whether Catholic or Protestant, relied on a notion of community. For some, its content and shape were determined by a set of religious beliefs. Hence the terrific civil problems engendered by religious diversity, leaving aside their theological impact. For others, however, sheer physical existence, rather than ideological agreement, mattered most. This has been described as a newer argument, and is associated with thinkers like Montaigne and the neo-Stoic Lipsius. Scepticism about universals and despair at the desolation of

<sup>12</sup> The theorists of the medieval communes had explicitly put friendship at the heart of the notion of community they sought to inculcate. Henry of Ghent wrote that civil life was impossible without 'the highest friendship, by which each one is held by the other to be another self, and supreme charity, by which each one loves the other as himself, and the greatest benevolence, by which each one wishes for the other the same as for himself' (quoted in Black, *Political Thought in Europe, 1250-1450*, p. 121). An explicitly political history of the concept of friendship would have to recognize the importance of monastic, or spiritual, friendship for medieval writers; an interesting investigation would illuminate the different sources of its early modern role.

<sup>13</sup> This was the gist of Gerhard Oestreich's valuable and posthumously published *Neostoicism and the Early Modern State* (Cambridge, 1982). It is unclear whether Oestreich, had he lived to complete this work, would have wished to put such a strong emphasis on neo-Stoic philosophy as preparation for Prussian absolutism (see esp. pp. 119-26). J. H. Elliott has placed Olivares squarely in the context of Spanish neo-Stoicism, both in terms of the friendships of his early years in Seville and later on when confronted with the death of his daughter and the perils of statesmanship (*The Count-Duke of Olivares: The Statesman in an Age of Decline* (New Haven, 1986), pp. 21-4; 279-80).



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their familiar world by ideologically inspired warfare led these men to redefine the character of that *patria* worth defending. Nannerl Keohane has commented that, to this way of thinking, ‘Our love of our country is an extension of our love of things that belong to us, bolstered by our awareness that our personal security depends on that of the community.’<sup>14</sup>

National, as a prerequisite for self- , preservation, whether for reasons of ideology or selfishness, made security the measure of policy. There can be no surprise at the prominence in the contemporary literature on politics of Cicero’s declaration that the ‘well-being of the people is to be the highest law’ (*salus populi suprema lex esto*).<sup>15</sup> Well-being was only possible where security was assured. Necessity dictated the means to this end, and, as was well known, necessity knows no law (*necessitas non habet legem*). Thus, even as Cicero argued that what was beneficial to the public determined whether an action was judged good, he also acknowledged that survival was the highest law. But, reflecting his indebtedness to the Greek philosophical tradition, Cicero was also deeply committed to the notion that the life to be strived for was much more than bare existence. In a chapter focusing on the need for a prince to know the art of war, Pedro de Rivadeneira, the Spanish Jesuit, went beyond the application of brute force in time of need to sketch that other, richer vision of a society whose security was, nevertheless, guaranteed by force.

These are what can support religion, give strength and force to justice, maintain peace, give rebuke to the enemy, punish the daring and rebellious; under its tutelage and protection the labourer can go out and sow in the field, cultivate his vine, harvest the fruits of the earth, sleep without fright in the shadow of his vine and fig tree; and the merchant explore, provide and enrich the realm; and the virgin preserve her chastity, the married raise her children in security; and the official work, the scholar study, the monk occupy himself in prayer, the religious contemplate and raise his hands to heaven, the judge do justice, and, finally, the prince be master of his estates.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Nannerl Keohane, *Philosophy and the State in France* (Princeton, 1980), p. 131.

<sup>15</sup> J. A. W. Gunn, in his valuable book, concluded that the recourse to this maxim in the seventeenth century was designed to make private rights the basis of the public good (*Politics and the Public Interest in the Seventeenth Century* (London and Toronto, 1969), p. xi). I disagree.

<sup>16</sup> Pedro de Rivadeneira, *Tratado de la religion y virtudes que debe tener el principe cristiano para gobernar y conservar sus estados*, in *Obras Escogidas* (Madrid, 1868), II.43, p. 582.

Sheer survival justified the use of force; but so too did any threat to the welfare of individuals within the well-ordered community. Perhaps the clearest presentation of these two justifications of necessity is found on a wall in Siena. On one side, the figure of *Securitas* floats over the thriving Sienese *contado* guaranteeing freedom of passage on the byways and labour in the fields. In Ambrogio Lorenzetti's (d. 1348?) fresco, security is the product of good government and, in turn, makes possible the liberty and flourishing of individuals. On the other side of this very same wall is depicted a blasted countryside in which towns are besieged and the landscape stripped of all life. The allegory of *Securitas* is itself displaced by a larger-than-life hero, the *condottiere* Guidoriccio da Fogliano. No longer a means to an end, the struggle for security is described as the fundamentally grim essence of civic life. The open question, and one central to Post-Reformation political thought, is the one at the heart of *De Officiis*: what cannot be justified in the name of the *utilitas rei publicae*?

Fundamentally, security defined the common good, for, as represented by Lorenzetti and Rivadeneira, without it no other private goods were likely to be attained. It would have been difficult for anyone living in the later sixteenth century to disagree with this judgment. Yet, though the security of the community and the notion of a common good have been recognized as central to the reason of state, and even linked to the Ciceronian tag, this is usually described as the *product* of post-Machiavellian political thought and is often ascribed exclusively to the impact of Tacitus.<sup>17</sup> Surely a more exact evaluation would be that the character of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century politics put new stress on old concepts. Religious schism, warfare, consolidation of territorial power, overseas expansion, commerce, the print revolution, all these – and no doubt other salient features of the time – impacted upon the contemporary understanding of community. Since serving the 'common good' remained the touchstone of political justification, the uncertain nature of community remained a constant threat to the legitimacy of states.

One historian of early modern Europe has consistently argued that the creation of a community was the key to the creation of a viable state. Robert Evans' account of the making of the Habsburg

<sup>17</sup> For example, André Stegmann, 'La place de la praxis dans la notion de "Raison d'état"', in *Théorie et pratique politiques à la Renaissance*, ed. Stegmann (Paris, 1977), pp. 483–5.