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Efficiency and the Common Good: A Necessary Bond*

Eficiencia y bien común: un vínculo necesario

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Abstract

The central issue of the article is the interrelation between the common good and economic efficiency. We want to argue that 1) an interrelation between the idea of common good and the conception of economic efficiency is possible, and 2) that this interrelation is fruitful and constructive for the use of an ethically informed concept of economic efficiency that can be useful in public policy analysis. To this goal, 1) we will analyze various concepts of the common good in the literature; 2) we will carry out an exercise of theoretical interrelation between economic efficiency and the common good.

Keywords

Common good, efficiency, natural law, Pareto optimality, public policies.

Resumen

El tema central del artículo es la interrelación entre el bien común y la eficiencia económica. Queremos argumentar que 1) es posible una interrelación entre la idea de bien común y la concepción de eficiencia económica, y 2) que esta interrelación es fructífera y constructiva para el uso de una concepción éticamente informada de eficiencia económica. Para ello, 1) analizaremos las diversas concepciones de bien común en la literatura; 2) realizaremos un ejercicio de interrelación teórica entre eficiencia económica y bien común.

Palabras clave

Bien común, eficiencia, ley natural, óptimo de Pareto, políticas públicas.

Introduction

The common good can be understood in two ways. Firstly, in a sense proper to ordinary discourse, and secondly, in a philosophical-political sense. For ordinary discourse, the common good refers to “those benefits —whether material, cultural or institutional— that members of a community provide to all members to fulfill a relational obligation that all have to safeguard certain shared interests”. For the philosophical-political discourse, the common good is “part of a practical reasoning model within a political community”, which takes into consideration the relationship between the members of that community and generates specific duties in relation to the interests they have with each other (Hussain, 2018). The two concepts are related to each other since the common benefits to which the ordinary concept refers are linked to the way in which the duties of the members of the political community are defined by means of this structure of practical reasoning. On the other hand, these duties, and their configuration under this model of practical reasoning, require an interdisciplinary interconnection in order to define in concrete terms how the common good can be manifested through public policies. Hence, the way of understanding economic efficiency is relevant for the notion of common good to be operational. In this article we wish to review recent conceptions of the common good in order to integrate some of them into an economic efficiency framework that will enrich the analysis of public policies. We will begin with the classical concept of the common good, which has as its source the Social Doctrine of the Church, which is based on a natural law conception, and we will look at a contemporary proposal in dialogue with this tradition, that of Mark Murphy (2001, 2006), which approaches the common good from the analytical concept of natural law. Lastly, we will study the formulations of economic efficiency from a critical perspective.

One of the primary sources that comes to mind when reflecting on the common good is the Social Doctrine of the Church (SDC).¹ The notion of common good is defined in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, which, citing the pastoral constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, defines the common good as “the set of those conditions of social life which enable groups and each of their members to attain more fully and easily their own perfection” (n° 26, 27; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n° 1906). The Catechism identifies, as aspects of this definition, the following: 1) respect for the human person (n° 1907); 2) the social well-being and development of the community (n° 1908); 3) the stability that is the fruit of a just social order (n° 1909). The Compendium of the SDC states, for its part, that “the common good can be understood as the social and community dimension of the moral good and that it does not consist of the sum of particular goods but belongs to each and every member of the community (*Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, n°. 164). Pope Francis, in his encyclical *Laudato si'*, has stated that this principle “immediately becomes [...] a call to solidarity and an option for the poorest” (n° 158; Chomali, 2017: 70).

The concept of the SDC has a long history (Hollenbach SJ, 2007; Kempshall, 1999), the exposition of which exceeds the interest of the article presented here. The concept of the common good that we will present here is influenced significantly by the SDC, although it differs in some points, having a more properly philosophical than theological approach.

The SDC's concept of the common good has a determining influence on the construction of both the moral philosophy and the political and legal philosophy of the analytical theory of natural law. The theory of natural law is a structural part of the SDC and, in general, of the pontifical teachings (John Paul II, 1993). Therefore,

¹ About the SDC: Albuquerque (2006), Ballesteros Molero (2014), Guitián & Muñoz, (2019), Ornaghi (2004).

the analytical theory of the natural law proposes an updated and systematically robust concept of the common good.

The common good, from the analytical theory of natural law, has been treated systematically by at least two authors: John Finnis (1980) and Mark Murphy (2006). In what follows, we will present in a general way the analytical concept of natural law, and then look at the contributions of Finnis and Murphy to the concept of the common good.

The analytic theory of natural law is a conception of moral, political, and legal philosophy that distinguishes itself from approaches linked to neotomism, by proposing, on the one hand, its own interpretation of the philosophy of St. Thomas (Finnis, 2019; Grisez, 1964), and on the other hand, by entering into dialogue with contemporary analytic philosophy, especially legal and moral philosophy (Finnis, 1983; George, 1999). With regard to the common good, the analytic theory of natural law starts from an ethical-political conception founded on basic human goods, on the basic good of friendship as the normative foundation of the political unity of a society, and on the way in which basic goods pose legally enforceable demands (Finnis, 1980; Murphy, 2001, 2006).

In general terms, the analytical theory of natural law is based on a threefold deliberative structure that sustains moral propositions as well as political and legal propositions. This threefold structure is based on the consideration of values, principles, and norms. In this sense, the authors of this tradition propose a general model of practical deliberation. The values are the basic human goods identified by the authors of the natural law theory. The principles are both the propositions that enunciate these principles, as well as those principles that serve as a bridge between “the first principles of natural law” (the principles that enunciate the basic goods) and the moral norms that govern concrete situations (Chappell, 1998; Finnis, 1980; Gómez-Lobo, 2002; Murphy, 2001; Oderberg, 2000). These intermediate principles are called “principles of practical reasonableness” by Finnis, or “modes of responsibility” by Grisez (1983). Within the diversity of values or basic human goods identified by the authors we find life, knowledge, aesthetic experience, or the

experience of beauty, among others, while in the principles of practical reasonableness, or modes of responsibility, we find the demands inherent to the common good, the efficiency within reasonable limits and the honoring of every basic good in every act (Finnis, 1980). As for the norms, we will not delve into them.

Finnis (1980: 125, 154-155) identifies the common good as both a demand of practical reasonableness and the social or communal realization of the basic good of friendship. For Finnis, it is more appropriate to speak of community than of society, as the latter term is subject to various kinds of vagueness. Community, on the other hand, is a type of unifying relationship, founded on the basic good of friendship. Following Aristotle, Finnis identifies three types of community: the community of play, of business and of friendship. In communities of play, members share a common interest in a specific game or in several games. Moreover, a definition of the common good is described in the business community: the common goal of a business between two parties is a common good for both. Finally, he distinguishes the community of friendship as the most perfect, and it differs from the other two types of communities in that the collaboration between the parties is, at least in one sense, by the other, *for the sake* of the other (Finnis, 1980; Osina, 2020).

For Finnis, the concept of the common good applies to what he calls the “complete community” (Finnis, 1980: 147), which, following Aristotle, is the final form of the realization of friendship at the community level, including the intermediate communities such as the family (which, however, continue to retain their autonomy). The common good, for Finnis, can be defined as “the factor or set of factors [...] which, present as considerations in a person’s practical reasoning, would give meaning to, or a reason for, his or her collaboration with others [...]” (Finnis, 1980: 154).²

Finnis’s conception of the common good will later be criticized by Mark Murphy. This author considers Finnis’s conception as being instrumentalist.

2 The translation to Spanish used in this passage when writing the original paper is that of Cristóbal Orrego (Finnis, 2000: 183).

Murphy presents his idea of the common good from the perspective of a theory of law, specifically, from a natural law jurisprudence approach, as well as from a natural law political philosophy approach (2006: 10). The central proposition is the following: *the common good of the political community provides the definitive reasons that provide validity to the law*. For Murphy, the jurisprudential approach consists of affirming that there is a “positive and internal” relationship between law and decisive reasons for action, and these reasons are decisive for the compliance with the law (2006: 1). The philosophical-political approach, on the other hand, seeks to describe the conditions under which these reasons for compliance are present or not (2006: 8). Both approaches combine to provide a foundation for the idea of the common good. From the point of view of jurisprudence, Murphy defends a weak natural law thesis, namely, that a law devoid of decisive reasons is a defective law. This idea is contrasted with the strong natural law thesis, in which a law devoid of decisive reasons is no law at all (2006: 25). The weak thesis, then, establishes the validity of legal reasons (as authoritative reasons). On the other hand, from the philosophical-political point of view, Murphy wonders about the reasons that citizens have for complying with the law. The author argues that it is the common good of the political community that provides the decisive reasons for compliance. Hence, it is the common good. To the question: “what thing (or type of entity) is the common good?”, Murphy answers that it is a state of affairs, probably very complex, characterized by two features: 1) it is a good state of affairs, in the sense that we have reasons to pursue it, seek it, honor it, etc., and 2) it is common, in the sense that it has value for all members of the political community (2006: 61).

A fundamental point in Murphy’s proposal is the distinction between aggregative, distinctive, and instrumental conceptions. The aggregative conception is the one defended by the author. This conception states that the common good consists in the realization of some set of individual intrinsic goods, of all (and only) those members of the political community in question (2006: 63).³

3 It is important to note that Murphy does not propose that the good is a merely individual issue, nor is his conception of aggregation linked to a utilitarian or conse-

On the other hand, the distinctive conception is that which identifies the common good to a specific good of the political community as a whole (Murphy, 2006: 63). He attributes it to Thomas Aquinas. Finally, the instrumental conception: the common good is a set of instrumental conditions so that each of the members of the political community can realize its own ends (Murphy, 2006: 62). He attributes it to John Finnis (Finnis, 1980).

Murphy defends a form of aggregative conception. For this he argues against the other two options. The basic argument against the instrumental conception is that it is not explanatory. The flourishing of individuals can directly explain the common good without the need to posit an intermediate practical reasonableness principle as Finnis does (Finnis, 1980: 103-126). For the distinctive conception of the common good, the latter is a specific good of the political community. Murphy attributes this view to St. Thomas, in positing that the common good consists in justice and peace (Murphy, 2006: 73; Aquinas, 2007, I-II, q. 96, a. 3). One argument in favor of the distinctive conception lies in the recognition of intrinsically social goods. One way in which Murphy responds to this is that there are several ways in which a good can be social, and that the aggregative conception recognizes that individual well-being includes goods that are irreducibly social in the sense that they cannot be divided into individual states of affairs (2006: 74). For example, the good of friendship, of community and of religion (as basic human goods) are mutually constitutive of a person's individual well-being, and at the same time they are irreducibly social. For example: x and y are friends. The friendship relation between x and y (let us call it A) constitutes both x 's and y 's individual good. Then, A is 1) irreducibly social and 2) is part of the individual good of both x and y .

Finally, Murphy defines the principle of the common good. This is stated in the following terms: "each person is obliged to do his or her part for the common good" (2006: 86). This principle, by virtue

quentialist perspective. In this sense, Murphy rejects the maximizing dimension of utilitarianism, which is not present in his approach, and also rejects the commensurability of goods, proposing, in line with the analytical conception of natural law, the incommensurability of basic human goods (2006: 83).

of the natural law conception on which it is based, is authoritative from the legal point of view. This principle, moreover, constitutes a regulative ideal, insofar as it is not effectively attainable. It is not effectively attainable insofar as it is feasible only to find some common points of determination to guide common action (2006: 88). In the author's terms: O is the state of affairs that defines the common good of the community C , and O^* is the state of affairs that is effectively determinable for C . Therefore, O and O^* are two distinct states.

Economic Efficiency

Among the many senses in which the term efficiency is used in economics, there are two main ones. The first is efficiency in the Pareto sense, and it states the following: "if we can find a way to make some people better off without making anybody else worse off, we have a Pareto improvement. If an allocation allows for a Pareto improvement, it is called Pareto inefficient; if an allocation is such that no Pareto improvements are possible, it is called Pareto efficient" (Varian, 2010: 15).

Economic efficiency aims to order different social states of affairs in relation to the allocation of resources. To this end, the idea of economic efficiency assumes the following premises: firstly, welfarism: i.e., that the ordering of social states of affairs is based on individual preferences. Secondly, subjectivism: that the individual is the best judge of his or her preferences. Thus, this agenda assumes that social states of affairs can be ordered in terms of which one promotes the highest welfare. However, the Paretian improvement criterion is only partially able to order social states of affairs, provided that there are comparisons on which it cannot make pronouncements, namely, any pair of alternatives among which there are winners and losers. On the other hand, there are usually multiple efficient or unimprovable alternatives in the Pareto sense.

Kaldor's efficiency is similar to the Paretian approach, only that it aims to move in the direction of completing the judgments in which the Paretian improvement criterion does not pronounce

itself. Indeed, it proposes that to the extent that those who benefit from the change in social state can compensate those adversely affected and still be better off than without this action, then it should be considered that society is better off. In other words: a social state E^* is an improvement in Kaldor's sense with respect to E , if and only if those who increase their well-being in the change from E to E^* can fully compensate those who decrease their well-being in the global increase in welfare that E^* implies with respect to E (Coleman, 1998: 98).

Some authors would say that it is "efficient" to carry out a Kaldorian improvement, but this is not accurate. We can, in the spirit of Pareto's definition, declare that a social state is efficient in the Kaldorian sense if it does not admit improvements in the same sense, and we will do so in this article.

However, a difficulty arises at this point: Kaldor's criterion could not only produce an incomplete ordering (such as Pareto's), but, moreover, an incoherent one; more precisely, it could fail to order the alternatives. Indeed, the criterion could declare that state E is better than E^* , and at the same time that E^* is better than E (Scitovsky's and Boadway's paradoxes). The reason is that the winners' willingness to pay, or ability to compensate, depends in general on income, and the social states considered may change the incomes of those involved. Willingness to pay being an unstable measure of value in such a sense, reversals such as this cannot be ruled out. The Kaldor-Hicks criterion is a modification of the Kaldor criterion that reduces its applicability to avoid this problem, but it does not completely succeed. The Kaldor-Hicks criterion then is not necessarily coherent.

The Pareto and Kaldor criteria have been subjected to several critiques. The first is that they end up separating questions of efficiency from questions of distribution or equity (Zerbe Jr., 2001: 5, 8). In Sen's words: "a state can be a Pareto optimal with some people in extreme misery and others rolling in luxury, so long as the miserable cannot be made better off without cutting into the luxury of the rich" (Sen, 1988: 32). This is a critique of a moral nature, but there have also been technical critiques: firstly, a minor significance

is assigned to the fact that there is an initial distribution of welfare (the status quo), with respect to which there may be relevant criticisms (Zerbe Jr., 2001: 8-9).

One of the authors who has been critical of Kaldor's approach is George DeMartino, (2019) who uses an interesting play on words to refer to the limitations of the model: "*Kaldor-Hicks efficiency: normative deficiencies*" (2019: 480). In this sense, the author takes up several of the critiques made of this model. In the first place, there is the now classic argument of compensation, in the sense that, if compensation should not be made (it is only optional according to the model), then nothing guarantees that there is really an improvement over the previous situation. Along with the above, there are several ethical-deontological concerns, in particular the relationship between voluntary improvements in the Pareto sense vs. coercive and potential improvements, along with equity concerns. The author notes that these concerns have been extensively addressed in the literature, but that an approach from a harm perspective is needed (DeMartino, 2019: 480). Specifically, in the application of the Kaldor-Hicks efficiency model there is not a sufficiently developed approximation of harm. For DeMartino, economists treat harm and benefit not only as morally comparable but as identical. In contrast, a significant part of the literature in moral and legal philosophy has considered that there is an important moral difference between harming and benefiting, in the sense that moral priority should be given to not harming than to benefiting (DeMartino, 2019: 480-481). Therefore, it is necessary to pose the following questions, in order to understand the ethical dimension of the harm done: 1) Do those who receive the benefits and harms have the appropriate entitlements or rights to them? 2) What impact do the benefits and harms have on fundamental freedoms and aspects of people's lives? 3) Finally, an essential point lies in the compensable or non-compensable nature of the harm, and the nature of such compensation. This compensation may not only be economic, since a damage may be compensated through honor or social recognition, gratitude, and other non-economic forms. There are also economic compensations. However, there are damages that cannot be compensated, neither financially nor non-financially. For

this, it is necessary to understand that the moral goods affected by the harm are not necessarily commensurable. In this sense, DeMartino suggests that there are two types of goods: commensurable/substitutable and incommensurable/non-substitutable. For the former, compensating the damage in economic terms is feasible. For the latter, it's necessary to determine if the damage is repairable or irreparable. In both cases, the damages are uncompensable, but in the first case, it can be addressed either with recognition or other non-economic responses, whereas in the latter, there is no possible compensation (DeMartino, 2019: 481-482).

Dialogue between efficiency and the common good

In this section, we attempt to put Pareto's and Kaldor's notions of efficiency in dialogue with Murphy's and the SDC's notions of the common good. In fact, the concept of the SDC considers categories and variables different from those of efficiency, so we will be satisfied in this article focuses on emphasizing a particular dimension of the complexity of this concept, namely, that it considers as good not the realization of perfection, but merely the capacity of the individual to reach or advance towards perfection.

The notions of efficiency and common good differ then in two fundamental aspects. The first is their subject, scope of application, or domain (in the mathematical sense). Indeed, the criterion of efficiency is concerned with the well-being of individuals, and in mainstream economics, this well-being is understood subjectively, and is expressed in their preferences. That is to say, it assumes that what is best for the individual is whatever he or she prefers. In contrast, the notions mentioned here of the common good consider an objective good, namely, flourishing and the ability to attain perfection. Any attempt at dialogue then needs either to show compatibility between both domains, or to shift the domain of one of these notions, either by redefining efficiency in terms of flourishing or the ability to attain perfection, or by defining the objective good in terms of well-being.

Secondly, the common good is concerned with the good of all members of a community, whereas efficiency is not concerned with distribution. Indeed, traditional conceptions of economic efficiency, based on both Pareto and Kaldor optimality, do not adequately ponder the dimensions of equity and justice.

It is clear then that the notions of common good and efficiency, in any of the above-mentioned senses, are not equivalent. When we propose a dialogue between efficiency and the common good, the ultimate question is whether it makes sense to think of a concept created from the conjunction of the former, let us say, the “efficient common good”. In other words, is it possible to find a meeting point for both concepts, in any of their versions?

The concepts of Paretian improvement and Pareto optimum, although in mainstream economics are understood as defined on a subjective notion of well-being, can easily be adapted to consider an objective notion of well-being or of good, such as flourishing or the ability for perfection. The definition needs no change to achieve this. What does happen is that with that change, Paretian efficiency loses the connection it has with laissez-faire through the First Welfare Theorem, since the behavior of individuals is not necessarily guided by the search for that objective good. In order to indicate that at the base we are considering an objective, external notion of good, we can call it objective Paretian efficiency. On the other hand, the concept of Kaldorian improvement cannot be adapted to this objective notion, because it finds its basis in the willingness to pay, which is a behavioral variable, not a value variable. Thus, the concept of Kaldorian improvement is hopelessly subjective.

Let us then take objective Paretian efficiency, and the good as the flourishing. If we consider flourishing as a binary concept (flourished, not flourished), which is reached when objective well-being exceeds a certain threshold, the connection between efficiency and the common good is weak. In this case, depending on the resources of society, there may or may not be a set of feasible states compatible with the common good – the flourishing of all. If there is, within that set, a Paretian improvement would not alter the common good. The search for efficiency would be indifferent to it. In this case, we

would say that it is not possible to establish a dialogue between both concepts.

On the other hand, let us suppose that flourishing is not binary but continuous (a flourishing scale). The search for the flourishing of all (i.e., the greatest well-being) has echoes in the concept of Paretian improvement, since it shares with the latter the universal quantifier. However, for the objective Paretian improvement, the quantifier is weak: it does not demand progress for all. It is enough that some people improve their position if no one makes it worse. A change that improves a specific person and makes no one worse off is a Paretian improvement, but it is not a progress of the common good. In other words, it is conceivable that adopting a Paretian improvement does not mean progress of the common good.

Now, in the other direction, an improvement of the common good typically entails a Paretian improvement, because the common good involves the well-being of all. It follows that if society achieves the maximum common good that its resources allow, then it will also have achieved objective Paretian efficiency. The efficient common good would then be this ideal state of affairs, in which within all the alternative states that are efficient, the one that is compatible with the greatest possible flourishing of all has been selected.

It should be noted that this is the same compatibility with Pareto efficiency that the utilitarian criterion and the economists' adaptation or reading of Rawls' criterion, namely the maximin criterion of social welfare, have: the optimum of each respective criterion is one of the efficient states in the Pareto sense. Certainly, the other efficient states, of which there may be many, are not optimal for any of these criteria.

The objective Paretian optimum would then converse with a notion of common good, if both regarded flourishing, or the ability to attain or advance toward perfection, as the underlying good. On the other hand, if each regards a different underlying good, then there would be no such thing as the efficient common good in general. While efficiency would ask for there to be no subjective Paretian improvements, the common good would ask for a path of flourishing improvement or potentialities of perfection, even if this is not sought by the individuals.

Conclusions

In this article we discuss the idea of the common good and the possibility of a dialogue with the notion of economic efficiency. We distinguish a philosophical-political vision and one from the everyday use of the term “common good”. We conclude that both conceptions complement each other and require a relationship with the economics in order to make this concept operational in public policies. Then, two notions of common good, John Finnis’s and Mark Murphy’s, are explained. They are framed within the analytical tradition of natural law. This tradition, in turn, inherits the reflection of the Church’s teachings expressed in the SDC. It was argued that Finnis identifies the common good both with a principle of practical reasonableness and as a manifestation of the basic good of friendship. For Finnis, the political community is a form of unifying relationship that occurs to the extent that its members seek, to a significant extent, the good of the other. The political community is the culmination of natural human sociability, and the common good relates to the conditions that give individuals reasons for mutual cooperation. Murphy, for his part, identifies the common good with a highly complex state of affairs that aggregates individual well-being in a non-utilitarian way. He criticizes the conceptions of both Finnis (instrumental conception) and Thomas Aquinas (distinctive conception) and argues that all these conceptions are, in some sense, grounded in the aggregative conception.

Next, we review the conceptions of economic efficiency, which aims to order different social states in relation to the allocation of resources. The two traditional conceptions, based on the assumptions of neoclassical economics, are efficiency as Paretian optimality and Kaldor efficiency. Both conceptions have as their methodological foundation, firstly, individualism, which is understood as the ordering of social states based on individual preferences. Secondly, it is assumed that social states can be ordered in terms of well-being. These conceptions, and their assumptions, have been the subject of critiques. In this regard, we review George DeMartino’s critiques.

Examining both concepts at their root, however, we see that no reconciliation is possible if the common good is conceived of as an objective good, while efficiency is seen as a subjective one. We can construct an idea of “efficient common good” if we adapt Pareto’s notion to an objective notion of good. The same is not possible with Kaldor’s criterion, since its basic component, namely the willingness to pay, is intrinsically subjective.

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