

The Common Good and its Primacy

Charles De Koninck’s (1906-1965) Thomistic View

Antonio Petagine

Università degli Studi Roma Tre
antonio.petagine@uniroma3.it

DOI: 10.17421/2498-9746-09-09

Abstract

This article deals with the doctrine of the common good elaborated by the Canadian Thomist Charles De Koninck (1906-1965). In 1943, he wrote De la primauté du bien commun contre les personnalistes. This book generated a controversy involving Yves Simon, Ignatius Eschman, and, at least indirectly, Jacques Maritain. First of all, the author stresses how De Koninck defended the idea of the primacy of the common good, presenting it as a universal good shared by each single member of a community. So, the common good is not an “alien good” the individual good is sacrificed to, but what the individual good is enlightened by. Then, the article analyses De Koninck’s conception of the person and the link between the promotion of the correct idea of the common good and the primacy of speculative reason. The final part is devoted to some points concerning which De Koninck’s Thomistic proposal can provide criteria valid for addressing some of the challenges we face today regarding the way we conceive the common good: multiple forms of global crisis, the true promotion of human intelligence, and ecology.

Keywords: Common Good, Person, Charles De Koninck, Jacques Maritain, Thomism

CONTENTS

1 A Thomistic Controversy Regarding the Common Good	144
2 The Common Good as an “Architectural” Good	149
3 The Person as Part	152
4 The Intellectual Nature of the Human Being Taken Seriously	156
5 Conclusions	159

1 A THOMISTIC CONTROVERSY REGARDING THE COMMON GOOD

In 1943, Charles De Koninck, the then Dean of the Faculty of Philosophy at Quebec's Laval University, published a book dedicated to the Thomistic doctrine of the common good. The choice of the title itself — *La Primauté du bien commun contre les personalistes* (The Primacy of the Common Good against the Personalists)¹ — revealed a polemical intent. Writing this book, De Koninck intended to oppose a philosophical approach which placed the dignity of the person above all else. He claimed that personalists, by promoting such an idea, fostered individualism and, ironically, consolidated the cultural and social bases from which totalitarianism stemmed. To counteract this philosophical approach, De Koninck deemed it necessary to repropose the doctrine of Thomas Aquinas correctly, defending the primacy of the common good and considering the person as a part of the whole order of the universe. According to this view, the highest good human beings can achieve is the common good; indeed, they find their dignity — and their proper good — by becoming aware of their place in the world and locating their personal and social conduct harmoniously within it.

De Koninck directed this work against the “personalists”, without, however, specifying who they might be and which theses and texts he was targeting.² Some found this behaviour to lack elegance and suspected that De Koninck, without having the courage to say it openly, had targeted Jacques Maritain, the most prominent personalist author of the moment, appreciated particularly in America. For this reason, in a review of *The Primacy of the Common Good against the Personalists* written in 1944, Yves Simon urged readers not to yield to the temptation of believing that Maritain was the target of the criticism contained in the book: “those stupidities and monstrosities” that De Koninck considered as being the opinions of the personalists had nothing to do with Maritain's authentic

¹C. De Koninck, *De la primauté du bien commun contre les personalistes*, Éditions de l'Université Laval-Fides, Québec-Montréal 1943. Below, we shall quote from the English edition of De Koninck's works: *The Primacy of the Common Good against the Personalists*, in *The Writings of Charles De Koninck*, vol. 2, edited and translated by R. McNerny, Notre Dame University Press, Notre Dame (IN) 2009, pp. 63-163.

²It is true that in Appendix II, De Koninck explicitly criticizes the theses expressed by Mortimer J. Adler and Walter Farrell in the series of articles entitled *The Theory of Democracy*, published in *The Thomist* between 1941 and 1943. See C. De Koninck, *The Primacy of the Common Good*, cit., p. 129; M. J. Adler, W. Farrell, *The Theory of Democracy*, «The Thomist», 3 (1941), pp. 397-449 (Part I); 588-652 (Part II); 4 (1942), pp. 121-181 (Part III); 286-354 (Part III continued) and 6 (1943), pp. 49-118 (Part IV); 251-278 (Part IV Continued); 367-407 (Part V). A continuation of Part V was published in «The Thomist», 7 (1944), pp. 80-131. However, even Yves Simon, in his review of *The Primacy of the Common Good*, held it was implausible to believe that it was Adler and Farrell's articles that urged De Koninck to write the paper, although their theses embodied the personalist philosophy against which De Koninck argued. See Y. Simon, *On the Common Good*, «The Review of Politics», 6 (1944), pp. 530-533. Reprinted in *The Writings of Charles De Koninck*, vol. 2, cit., pp. 167-171, p. 169.

thought.³ The following year, the Dominican Father Ignatius Thomas Eschmann, professor at the Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies in Toronto, wrote a harsh article against De Koninck, accusing him of having targeted Jacques Maritain in an ignoble way and of having proposed an untenable interpretation of the doctrine of Aquinas.⁴ He accused De Koninck of basing his arguments on a grave theological error. Eschmann pointed out that people do not aim at God as if He were the common good, but as good in itself, to be enjoyed in a personal way. If De Koninck were right, Eschmann argued, we would aim at God as a simple *bonum universale in causando*, not as a universal *bonum universale in essendo*.⁵

Not everyone, however, was critical of De Koninck's work. De Koninck appeared to some as a person who had assumed a courageous position: at a time when personalism seemed to be a fashionable philosophy, he had fearlessly represented the correct Thomistic doctrine regarding the relationship between the person and the common good. According to Jules Baisnée, the personalists supported two doctrines that were both incorrect and incompatible with the genuine thinking of Thomas Aquinas. The first was the distinction they made between the individual and the person, the second was their failure to recognise the primacy of the common good. Pedro Descoqs had clarified the first error, Charles De Koninck the second.⁶

In 1945, De Koninck responded to Eschmann's article in such detail that he produced a work even longer and more substantial than the *Primauté du Bien Commun*. After pointing out that he had not targeted Jacques Maritain in his polemic against the personalists, De Koninck answered Eschmann's criticism point by point, citing long excerpts from Aquinas' texts to support his own position. This pedantic use of quotations was of polemical value: against Eschmann's attack aimed at defending Maritain, De Koninck reacted by declaring that he was defending Saint Thomas himself.⁷

In 1947, Jacques Maritain concluded the controversy by writing *The Person and the Common Good*.⁸ Aware of the dispute that De Koninck had triggered, Maritain began the work by thanking Eschmann for having sought to defend

³Y. Simon, *On the Common Good*, cit., p. 170.

⁴I. T. Eschmann, *In Defense of Jacques Maritain*, «The Modern Schoolman», 22 (1945), pp. 183-208. Reprinted in *The Writings of Charles De Koninck*, vol. 2, cit., pp. 173-204.

⁵Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 196-197.

⁶J. A. Baisnée, *Two Catholic Critiques of Personalism*, «The Modern Schoolman», 22 (1945), pp. 59-75.

⁷C. De Koninck, *In Defence of Saint Thomas: A Reply to Father Eschmann's Attack on the Primacy of the Common Good*, «Laval théologique et philosophique», 1 (1945), pp. 9-109. Reprinted in *The Writings of Charles De Koninck*, vol. 2, cit., pp. 205-363.

⁸J. Maritain, *La personne et le bien commun*, Desclée de Brouwer, Bruges 1947. English translation: *The Person and the Common Good*, translation by J. J. Fitzgerald, Notre Dame University Press, Notre Dame (IN) 1966.

him. However, he did not continue the controversy in the direction undertaken by Eschmann. On the contrary, more in line with Yves Simon, Maritain declared his non-involvement in the position criticised by De Koninck and said he hoped that what he intended to write in *The Person and the Common Good* might help to overcome the “misunderstandings and confusions due to the original vice of such a controversy.”⁹

If it is true that Maritain’s ideas in *The Person and the Common Good* seem to agree, for the most part, with De Koninck’s doctrine on the primacy of the common good, it is equally true that Maritain reiterated the validity of two theses that appear to be in conflict with De Koninck’s position. The first is the distinction between the individual and the person, and the second is the conception of the human person as a whole that transcends any condition whatsoever of being a part.¹⁰ Despite this, Maritain put an end, effectively, to the controversy, and this for several reasons. First, both De Koninck and Maritain had explicitly made it clear that they had no intention of clashing with each other; secondly, what was written by both between 1945 and 1947 might be deemed sufficient to clarify their positions, with substantial agreement on the specific topic of the common good.¹¹ Furthermore, from a dialectical point of view, De Koninck’s response to Eschmann appeared impeccable.¹² As a result, no one returned to the issue in defence of Eschmann’s point of view – not even Maritain or Eschmann himself. Finally, Thomas De Koninck – son of Charles and he too a professor of philosophy at Laval University – continued along these lines by trying to prove that, rather than being opposites, the dignity of the person and the primacy of the common good imply each other.¹³

Though De Koninck, Eschmann and Maritain ceased their dispute after the end of the 1940s, interest in the exchange of views that the dispute promoted remained.¹⁴ In recent decades several works have been dedicated to the Thomist

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 16, note 6.

¹⁰See *ibid.*, esp. pp. 31-46; 49-70.

¹¹On this point, see M. Keys, *Personal Dignity and the Common Good: a Twentieth-Century Thomistic Dialogue*, in *Catholicism, Liberalism, and Communitarianism*, ed. by K. L. Grasso, G. V. Bradley, R. P. Hunt, Rowman and Littlefield, Lanham 1995, pp. 173-195.

¹²Ralph McInerney wrote that “it is fair to say that De Koninck demolished Eschmann” (R. McInerney, *Art and Prudence. Studies in the Thought of Jacques Maritain*, Notre Dame University Press, Notre Dame [IN] 1988, p. 85).

¹³T. De Koninck, *Dignité de la personne et primauté du bien commun*, «Laval théologique et philosophique», 70 (2014), pp. 13-25.

¹⁴For a review of the different positions taken in those years, see «Bulletin Thomiste», 7 (1943-1946), nn. 755-774; 8 (1947-1953), nn. 1194-1205. In 1957 John H. Wright acknowledged the fact that De Koninck had provided some very important clarifications concerning the common good (J. H. Wright, *The Order of the Universe in the Theology of St. Thomas Aquinas*, Pontificia Università Gregoriana, Rome 1957, pp. 119-135), while in 1959 Louis Lachance reprimanded De Koninck for having committed some “imprécisions regrettables”: according to him, De Koninck had confused

notion of the common good. Those who decided to deal with this topic certainly could not ignore what emerged from the Koninck-Eschmann-Maritain controversy.¹⁵ I have decided to dedicate this contribution to De Koninck's doctrine regarding the common good for three fundamental reasons. First, De Koninck's works have provided a formidable opportunity, in recent decades, to draw attention to the doctrine of the common good as drawn up by Aquinas. The second reason is historical: De Koninck wrote *The Primacy of the Common Good* at a dramatic time in recent history, that is, at the height of World War II. In 1942, he decided not to sign an appeal against totalitarianism promoted in May by Maritain and shared by several Christian authors who had emigrated to America. Luquet suggests that De Koninck's failure to join the petition was mainly due to the absence of explicit references to the primacy of the common good. In October 1942, De Koninck dedicated a conference at the *Académie St. Thomas* in Toronto to the theme of the primacy of the common good. In this conference, he anticipated what he was to publish in the spring of 1943 in the first part of *The Primacy of the*

bonum commune with *bonum in communi*. See L. Lachance, *Le Droit et les Droits de l'Homme*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris 1959, p. 104, note 2.

¹⁵See in this sense, besides the above-mentioned works by M. Keys, T. De Koninck, E. L. Fortin, *The New Rights Theory and the Natural Law*, «The Review of Politics», 44 (1982), pp. 590-612: 600-601, note 22; M. Novak, *Free Persons and the Common Good*, Madison Books, Lanham, New York-London 1989, esp. pp. 4-5; 32-35; G. Froelich, *The Equivocal Status of Bonum commune*, «The New Scholasticism», 63 (1989), pp. 38-57; L. Dupré, *The Common Good and the Open Society*, «The Review of Politics», 55 (1993), pp. 687-712, esp. p. 690; R. McInerny, *Art and Prudence*, cit., pp. 77-91; M. A. Smith, *Human Dignity and the Common Good in the Aristotelian-Thomistic Tradition*, Mellen University Press, Lewiston (NY) 1995; C. Roy, *Charles De Koninck at the Crossroads of Catholic Moral Thought: The "Common Good" Controversy and its Echoes in the Americas*, in *Historical Papers 2006: Canadian Society of Church History*, ed. by B. Gobbett, B. L. Guenther, R. Rogers Healey, pp. 81-92, <https://doi.org/10.25071/0848-1563.39191> (last access 04/01/2024); S. Walshe, *Fidelissimus Discipulus Eius: Charles De Koninck's Exposition of Aquinas' Doctrine of the Common Good*, «The Aquinas Review of Thomas Aquinas College», 19 (2013-2014), pp. 1-21; J. L. Nicholas, *The Common Good, Rights, and Catholic Social Thought: Prolegomena to Any Future Account of Common Goods*, «Solidarity: The Journal of Catholic Social Thought and Secular Ethics», 5 (2015), <https://researchonline.nd.edu.au/solidarity/vol5/iss1/4> (latest access 04/01/2024); B. L. Smith, *The Meaning and importance of Common Goods*, «The Thomist», 80 (2016), pp. 583-600; F. Daguét, *Du politique chez Thomas d'Aquin*, Vrin, Paris 2015; A. Guilbeau, *What Makes the Common Good Common? Key Points from Charles De Koninck*, «Nova et Vetera», 20 (2022), pp. 739-751. See also P. Santos Rodríguez, *Análisis de la discusión sostenida entre Charles De Koninck y Father Eschmann en relación a la polémica del personalismo y el bien común /Anexo I*, in Ead., *El humanismo político y jurídico de Louis Lachance*, Fundación Universitaria Española, Madrid 2008, pp. 317-329; T. P. O'Neill, *Was Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange a Personalist? A Rapprochement Between the Individual-Person Distinction and the Primacy of the Common Good Contra Maritain's Personalism*, «Reality: A Journal for Philosophical Discourse», March 20 (2020), <https://realityjournal.org/2020/03/20/article-was-reginald-garrigou-lagrange-a-personalist/> (latest access 04/01/2024).

Common Good. Evidently, De Koninck believed that the fight against totalitarianism could not be conducted successfully without making it clear that the root of so great an evil lay precisely in the relinquishment of the correct meaning of the common good. To focus everything on an appeal to the dignity of the human person was, in his opinion, misleading and would ultimately be in vain: even a totalitarian ideology, like Marxism, aimed at achieving greater protection of the dignity of the human person.¹⁶

The third reason regards the value that a reflection on the common good, such as that of De Koninck, can have for us today. The current context is different not only from that of the 1940s, but also from that of the 1980s and 1990s, when the rhetoric of a strong individualism seemed to marginalise the attention paid to the common good. During the first decades of the 21st century, appeals to the common good have come once more to the foreground. We are led to believe humanity is being threatened by an uninterrupted series of crises and emergencies: from international terrorism to economic-financial crises, from pandemics to global warming. International agencies, governments, and the media that support them urge citizens to adopt, as quickly as possible, styles of behaviour considered most functional if we are to overcome these emergencies. They do so by appealing to collective responsibility and the need for coordination. In circumstances like these, the common good is evoked as a *superior good* in view of which the State appears to be morally authorised to exercise its power of action over citizens, imposing new obligations or limiting some aspects of individual freedom. It is easy to see that if the common good is interpreted in this manner, we run the risk of hiding the adoption of paternalistic, authoritarian, police-like attitudes behind the rhetoric of the common good. In this sense, *The Primacy of the Common Good against the Personalists* by Charles De Koninck provides us with the opportunity to take into consideration an idea of the common good which escapes the logic of both individualistic and collectivist/statist positions around which the relationship between the common and particular good continues to be polarised in Western society. We shall see that De Koninck, following Thomas Aquinas, presents us with the common good as the greatest good towards which to aspire, a good that far transcends the social and political dimension and provides human action with an indispensable criterion of justice, truth and personal development.

I shall divide the present work into three parts. In the first, I shall analyse the way in which De Koninck conceives the primacy of the common good. The second part will be devoted to De Koninck's conception of the person as a "part" and the resulting relativisation of the appeal to the dignity of the person, typical

¹⁶See S. Luquet, *Introduction*, pp. 7-8; J. Vallée, *Introduction à la philosophie politique de Charles De Koninck*, in *Œuvres de Charles De Koninck*, Tome II.1: *Tout homme est mon prochain*, Avant-propos de T. De Koninck, Introduction par J. Vallée, Les Presses de l'Université Laval, Québec 2009, pp. 3-29, esp. pp. 7-13; C. De Koninck, *The Primacy of the Common Good*, cit., p. 79.

of personalism. The third part will be dedicated to the link between the primacy of the common good and the primacy of speculative reason, upon which he focuses in *The Principle of the New Order*. This point will be emphasized, since it seems to be a neglected aspect of De Koninck's thought that, nevertheless, illuminates his vision of the common good. In the conclusion of this article, I shall refer to some points with respect to which De Koninck's Thomistic proposal can provide us with valid criteria for addressing some of the challenges we face today regarding the way we conceive the common good.

2 THE COMMON GOOD AS AN "ARCHITECTURAL" GOOD

A good is "common" when it is capable of overcoming the boundaries of singularity and of constituting itself as a good shared by a plurality of individuals. The crucial point upon which De Koninck intended to focus was that a good could not be authentically common if individuals did not pursue it as their proper good. The good of the family is a common good because it is able to benefit the whole community and each member simultaneously. De Koninck points out that it is this capacity to be "both-for-one-and-for-others" that makes the common good superior to the singular good. As Aquinas wrote, in keeping with Aristotle, it is certainly a good thing that an individual access his own good, but it is even more beautiful when *that same good* is achieved by multiple individuals, rather than by one alone.¹⁷

De Koninck makes it immediately clear that the prime and foremost property of the common good is universality: just as concepts are universal, because predicative to all the individuals belonging to a group and to each of them singularly, so too is the common good seen as the good of all those who share in it and, at the same time, as the good of every single member of the community.¹⁸ This means that because of its universality, communicability, and diffusivity, the common good is not only quantitatively more extensive than the singular good but also qualitatively different from it. When the individual aims to achieve a singular good, such as preserving his/her life, he/she aims at something impossible to communicate to others, because it refers strictly to the single individual who pursues this goal. On the contrary, it is characteristic of the common good *to be shared*. De Koninck insists that people cannot truly love the common good unless they sincerely love its shareability.¹⁹ Loving the common good without this element would mean expecting to appropriate a good as if it were for oneself alone. De Koninck explains that the common good can be loved in two contrary ways.

¹⁷Cf. C. De Koninck, *The Primacy of the Common Good*, cit., p. 75. De Koninck quoted for this claim Thomas Aquinas, *In I Ethicorum*, lect. 2. See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, I, 2, 1094b7-11.

¹⁸C. De Koninck, *The Primacy of the Common Good*, cit., p. 75.

¹⁹Cf. *ibid.*, p. 79.

We can either possess it or conserve and spread it. In the first instance, that of possession, the common good is loved the way a tyrant who aspires to dominate the city loves it; in the second case, by conservation and diffusion, we love it correctly, aiming for the good of the whole without manipulating it for our own interest.²⁰

If this is true, then the common good is neither the simple sum of individual goods nor something generically supra-individual. According to De Koninck, the common good is often misunderstood because the correct meaning of the notions of ‘particular’, ‘singular’ and ‘proper’ is surrounded by a certain degree of confusion, so we tend to consider them essentially as synonyms. This causes two problems: first, it prevents individuals from acknowledging that singular good is not the most outstanding value in our lives; second, it obfuscates the fact that no common good is genuinely such if it is not beneficial to individuals.²¹

Starting from these premises, De Koninck explains that we entertain a distorted vision of the common good when we conceive it as “alien good,” i.e., separated from the proper good of individuals. Individualism and collectivism commit this same fatal mistake, although in opposite directions. Individualism separates the common and the singular good to assign primacy to the latter, relegating the former to a position of a simple instrument for promoting the particular good. On the other hand, collectivism undoubtedly promotes the primacy of the common good, but it does so in a perverted way, replacing the common good with what the State claims to have the right to impose upon individuals. By separating the common good from that of the single person, collectivism and individualism both lead, inexorably, to tyranny — although tyranny is achieved differently in the two cases. In the case of collectivism and totalitarianism, those who occupy the top positions of power tyrannise others in the name of a false common good; in the case of individualism, manipulating the common good to attain particular goods produces a “society of tyrants” who follow their whims as the guiding principles of their actions.²²

Therefore, the common good should not be seen as a “Hobbesian” principle, which, to be promoted as such, requires individuals to renounce some of their

²⁰Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 78-80; 103-107.

²¹Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 80-81.

²²“A society made up of persons who love their private good above the common good, or who identify the common good with the private good, is a society, not of free men, but of tyrants [...] who would use force on one another and whose eventual chief would be the shrewdest and strongest of tyrants, his subjects being only frustrated tyrants. Refusal of the primacy of the common good proceeds, at bottom, from the distrust and scorn of persons” (*ibid.*, p. 80). Later in the text: “the State, taken in this sense, that is to say a city rooted and closed on itself, is by nature tyrannical. In the condition of liberty of this State, obedience is substituted for the legal justice of the citizen-subjects. The State absorbs the citizen and substitutes for him an abstract citizen and an abstract liberty” (*ibid.*, pp. 106-107).

particular assets in the name of a good considered of a higher order. De Koninck points out that this occurs when “that monster of modern invention that is called the State”²³ is elevated, dangerously, to the rank of a natural person and behaves like an individual competing with others. This contest is asymmetrical, because the State holds a position superior in strength to that of individuals. This permits the State to gain freedom and power of action at the expense of individuals.²⁴ Therefore, the Thomistic perspective that De Koninck promotes casts suspicion upon visions that place the common good and the good of individuals in a competitive position. The true primacy of the common good does not take anything away from individuals or distract them from the legitimate pursuit of their particular good. Instead, the perspective of the common good permits individuals to access a dimension of their own good that the singular good fails to reach.²⁵ Rather than appearing as the supra-individual superior good with regard to which the individual benefit needs to be set aside, the common good opens up to individuals a horizon of personal and social action of a higher value than they might expect if they acted within a context in which only the singular good existed. We might say that, from this perspective, the common good appears to be endowed with architectural primacy: it is not superior to the particular good in order to dominate or limit it but to illuminate it. Therefore, it provides individuals with criteria by which to locate the particular good properly within their personal lives, their social communities, and even within the entire universe.

In support of this interpretation of the common good, De Koninck paraphrases a passage from the *Summa contra Gentiles*, III, c. 24, in which Aquinas explains that a good can be seen by an individual as “proper” in four different hierarchical ways. A strictly singular good may be said to be a proper good when it contributes to the conservation of the singular being. However, individuals aim at their proper good even when they pursue the good of their species — as animals do — or of the entire genus of living things, as in the case of the heavens and spiritual substances. Furthermore, Aquinas assumes the principle according to which everything aspires to the greatest good it can comprehend. Given that the most universal, the greatest, and noblest

²³*Ibid.*, p. 106.

²⁴Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 106-107.

²⁵“[The common good] extends to the singular more than the singular good does: it is the better good of the singular. The common good is better, not insofar as it comprises the singular good of all the singulars: it would not then have the unity of the common good insofar as it is universal but would be a pure collection. It would be only materially better. The common good is better for each of the particulars that participate in it insofar as it is communicable to the other particulars: communicability is the very reason of its perfection. The particular does not attain the common good under the note itself of common good if it does not attain it as communicable to others” (*ibid.*, p. 75).

good, the principle from which everything derives is God,²⁶ it follows that the highest good towards which rational creatures tend is God himself, whom they can grasp as the supreme good, outstandingly communicable and diffusive of himself.²⁷ De Koninck points out that the principle that structures this hierarchy is the communicative and diffusive power that good is capable of exercising over things: the more the communicability of good increases, the higher the level of perfection it is allowed to achieve. For this reason, De Koninck concludes that the most proper good to which an individual could aspire is the greatest common good in view of which he/she might act.²⁸

3 THE PERSON AS PART

What we have said so far induces us to reflect on the point that more than any other marks the distance between the Thomistic interpretation of the common good proposed by De Koninck and the personalist vision. The correct view of the common good is linked to a precise conception of the created person, who needs to be considered as part of the order of the universe. On this point, there is a direct clash with Maritain's doctrine and the language typical of his personalism, regardless of the presence or absence of any explicit polemic directed against him. As we know, one of the cornerstones of Maritain's personalist vision consists of conceiving the person as a whole that transcends the simple political community. Maritain deduces this from the fact that individual people are masters of their own acts and that they are subsisting, independent spiritual beings, capable of having a direct relationship with the Absolute (God), producing their own acts of intelligence and freedom.²⁹

De Koninck easily demonstrates that the quote Eschmann uses to claim that Thomas Aquinas held that the *ratio personae* contradicts that of the part is out of place. This quote is from a passage discussing the separated soul. Aquinas is saying that the separated soul is not a person, because it does not constitute a whole.

²⁶See C. De Koninck, *The Primacy of the Common Good*, pp. 76-77; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles*, III, c. 24, § 2052, ed. by P. Marc, C. Pera, P. Caramello, Marietti, Torino-Roma 1961, p. 31.

²⁷Cf. C. De Koninck, *The Primacy of the Common Good*, cit., pp. 80-81.

²⁸Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 77-80.

²⁹"[Such a being] must be endowed with a spiritual existence, capable of containing itself thanks to the operations of the intellect and freedom, capable of super-existing by way of knowledge and of love. For this reason, the metaphysical tradition of the West defines the person in terms of independence, as a reality which, subsisting spiritually, constitutes a universe unto itself, a relatively independent whole within the great whole of the universe, facing the transcendent whole which is God" (J. Maritain, *The Person and the Common Good*, cit., p. 40). See also, Id., *Scholasticism and Politics*, translated and edited by M. J. Adler, McMillan, New York 1940, pp. 71-72.

However, this discussion does not concern the issue at hand.³⁰ Beyond this error in the reference to the texts, De Koninck highlights a more profound point: without acknowledging that the person is part of the entire order of the universe, it is impossible to conceive of the person's specific good adequately. To affirm with the personalists that the person is a whole would mean maintaining that a person, as such, could not be placed within any order and would, therefore, become the ultimate goal of human action. To say this would be equivalent to saying that the human being — not God or the common good — is the absolute of human action. On this point, De Koninck found it straightforward to show that Aquinas, whom Maritain quoted in support of his position, states that spiritual substances achieve their own good by realising the good of the entire universe in their own way, not by realising a good different from that of the entire universe. According to authentic Thomism, independence is not the person's specific character: created people remain entities radically dependent on the order into which God placed them.³¹ De Koninck underlines that this is the correct way to understand the Thomist statement according to which God created persons for themselves: spiritual substances are not created as a function of other entities, and they can tend towards God through a direct act. However, this does not mean that people are themselves the purpose of their actions; otherwise, we would have to maintain that the good of persons would be simply a matter of the expansion of their personalities beyond the good and evil that might be accomplished within this expansion.³²

³⁰See C. De Koninck, *In Defence of St. Thomas*, cit., pp. 225-227; Thomas Aquinas, *In Sent.*, III, d. 5, a. 2, ad 3. De Koninck refers to Eschmann, *In Defence of Jacques Maritain*, cit., p. 197.

³¹"[T]he most elevated end of man belongs to him, not insofar as he is in himself a certain whole where the self is the principal object of his love, but 'insofar as he is a part of a whole', a whole accessible to him because of the very universality of knowledge. [...] It is then indeed as part of a whole that we are ordered to the greatest of all goods which cannot be ours except in its communicability to others. If the divine good were formally 'a good proper to man insofar as he is a singular person', we would be ourselves the measure of this good, which is very properly an abomination" (C. De Koninck, *The Primacy of the Common Good*, cit., pp. 82-83). See also Id., *In Defence of St. Thomas*, cit., pp. 239-255.

³²"The being-for-itself of every created person is for the sake of its end which is God. Nothing is anterior to this indissoluble being-for-itself-for-God. The only thing that can dissolve it is evil. Since he has from God all that he is—*secundum hoc ipsum quod est, alterius est*—the created person ought to advance toward the end by a direct movement. In this fundamental perspective, and there is no other as fundamental, any deliberately reflexive regard for himself is a nocturnal regard and aversion from God. If the human person were truly what the personalists say, man would have to be able to find in himself a loveableness which would be his as opposed to his end: the self would be itself the principle of its destiny and would be as well the term: he would not subordinate himself to an end other than himself except to subordinate it to himself; he would be borne toward things other than himself only in order to make them his own as the end. In truth, the end of persons would consist in the expansion of their personality" (Id., *The Primacy of the Common Good*, cit., p. 90). See also Id., *In Defence of St. Thomas*, cit., pp. 214-220.

De Koninck, therefore, considers appealing to the person's dignity problematic when the necessary reference to the whole within which this dignity is determined is wanting. Referring to the texts and doctrines of Thomas Aquinas again, De Koninck recalls that persons derive their dignity from their own nature. Nature is the principle that assigns to each entity the goals towards which it aims, constituting itself as the principle of the actions of that entity. Therefore, the person's dignity lies within the specific way he/she pursues the ultimate goal of the universe as his/her own good. Thus, this dignity cannot be considered an absolute. On the contrary, it can be obfuscated or decay when the rational creature distances itself from adherence to the goal that confers this dignity. For this reason, Aquinas uses dramatic words regarding the state into which sin leads a human being. He holds that sin takes away our dignity because it enslaves us and deprives us of the characteristics of humanity, making us akin to beasts.³³

The absolutisation of human dignity corrupts the proper relationship between people and the whole because dignity is linked to order. To separate the two concepts or to imagine that dignity is what escapes the order of the whole is a *demonic* act: what was the sin of the angels, asks De Koninck, if not their refusal to accept the place within the whole that God had assigned to them? Does their sin not lie, perhaps, in their claim to put their own dignity above everything?³⁴

According to De Koninck's Thomistic view, these considerations show that the common good goes far beyond the good achieved within a political community. Like Maritain, De Koninck also shares the words of Pope Pius XI, who, in his *Divini Redemptoris* of 1937 declared that "the city exists for man, man does not exist for the city."³⁵ This suggests that a person's noblest purpose is not found in social life. However, De Koninck is keen to point out that transcending the political dimension does not mean transcending the dimension of the common good.

³³Id., *The Primacy of the Common Good*, cit., p. 89. De Koninck quoted this text: "In sinning, man departs from the order of reason and consequently falls from human dignity, which consists in this that a man is naturally free and that he exists for his own sake, and puts himself in a certain manner in the slavery of the beasts. [...] For a bad man is worse than a beast" (Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 64, a. 2, ad 3). This view of Aquinas/De Koninck was taken up again by A. MacIntyre in a public speech in 2021 at the de Nicola Centre of the Notre Dame University: *Human Dignity: A Puzzling and Possibly Dangerous Idea?*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V727AcOoogQ> (latest access 19/Jan/2024).

³⁴"The fallen angels did not refuse the perfection of the good that was offered them, they refused its community and they scorned that community. If the singular good of the person truly came first, how would they have sinned against the common good? Above all, how would the most naturally worthy rational creature have been able to turn away from the most divine good of all?" (C. De Koninck, *The Primacy of the Common Good*, cit., pp. 79-80).

³⁵Cf. Pius XI, *Divini Redemptoris*, March 31, 1937, n. 29, https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_19370319_divini-redemptoris.html (latest access 21/Jan/2024). This passage is quoted by C. De Koninck in *The Primacy of the Common Good*, cit., p. 103.

Indeed, the higher man rises, the more he aims for goods capable of universality, communicability, diffusivity. Therefore, it would be contradictory to believe that a common good (that of a city) is ordered to obtain a good that is both singular and of a higher order. Only a common good can be superior to another common good. And people, explains De Koninck, can be members simultaneously of different communities, ordered among themselves but formally distinct from each other, communities such as the family, the city, the motherland, the celestial city.³⁶

De Koninck considers the objection according to which wisdom, from an Aristotelian and Thomistic point of view, surpasses political activity in dignity and is enjoyed by the wise man in solitude without the help of others. De Koninck replies that the solitude of the wise man does not prove in the least that there is an object nobler than the common good, which the wise man achieves “privately.” The good experienced in intimate solitude remains intrinsically shareable and communicable to many others. Even when a person reaches celestial bliss, God will appear to him/her as the good of the individual and everyone: the fact that others are not what the blessed require to enjoy the beatific vision does not mean that God does not appear to them as the good to be shared with other saints. This makes the blessed members of a true “celestial city.”³⁷ It is not surprising, therefore, that Aquinas himself, at various points of his work, presents God explicitly as the highest common good towards which man can aspire.³⁸

³⁶Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 103-105; Id., *In Defence of St. Thomas*, cit., pp. 324-330.

³⁷Cf. Id., *The Primacy of the Common Good*, cit., p. 100. See also Id., *In Defence of St. Thomas*, cit., pp. 311-316.

³⁸“Cum amor respiciat bonum, secundum diversitatem boni est diversitas amoris. Est autem quoddam bonum proprium alicujus hominis in quantum est singularis persona; et quantum ad dilectionem respicientem hoc bonum, unusquisque est sibi principale objectum dilectionis. Est autem quoddam bonum commune quod pertinet ad hunc vel ad illum in quantum est pars alicujus totius, sicut ad militem in quantum est pars exercitus, et ad civem, in quantum est pars civitatis; et quantum ad dilectionem respicientem hoc bonum, principale objectum dilectionis est illud in quo principaliter illud bonum consistit, sicut bonum exercitus in duce, et bonum civitatis in rege; unde ad officium boni militis pertinet ut etiam salutem suam negligat ad conservandum bonum ducis, sicut etiam homo naturaliter ad conservandum caput brachium exponit; [...] et hoc modo caritas respicit, sicut principale objectum, bonum divinum, quod pertinet ad unumquemque, secundum quod esse potest particeps beatitudinis” (Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestio Disputata de Caritate*, a. 4, ad 2). See also Thomas Aquinas, *In IV Sent.*, d. 49, q. 1, a. 1; Id., *Summa contra Gentiles*, III, c. 17; Id., *Quaestiones de Quolibet*, I, q. 4, a. 8, *resp.*; Id., *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 60, a. 5, ad 5. As we have already mentioned, Eschmann concentrated his criticism of De Koninck on this point, accusing him of misunderstanding, completely, the meaning of the blessed man’s enjoyment of God: “[t]he very first and essential element of our ordination to God is not the fact that God is the first *bonum universale in causando*, the fountain of all communications, but that He is the *bonum universale in essendo*” (I. T. Eschmann, *In Defense of Jacques Maritain*, cit., p. 188). De Koninck answered Eschmann by observing first of all that in his writings Thomas Aquinas clearly maintains that man

4 THE INTELLECTUAL NATURE OF THE HUMAN BEING TAKEN SERIOUSLY

We have seen that De Koninck establishes universality as the main characteristic of the common good. Following the Thomist approach, he holds that the specific trait of our intellectual nature resides in the ability to grasp the universal. While a being in actuality can only be particular and singular, a concept is, by definition, universal. Therefore, the will is an intellectual appetite, since it acts driven by intellectual cognition. It is not limited to a particular and singular apprehension, as would happen if it were based on purely sensory knowledge. Instead, the realm of the concept permits us to act “here” and “now” without limiting ourselves to the perspective of the here-and-now. Thanks to human intellectual nature, each of us, despite being a particular individual, is able to grasp reality by going beyond the subjectivity of moods, the contingency of the moment and the particularity of interest. This permits us to assume the *whole* as an object of knowledge and action. Our ability to act for the common good is closely related, therefore, to the fact that our intellectual nature enables us to aspire to the greatest universal goal.³⁹

To affirm this is not to deny that human beings, as composites of soul and body, have experiences like perceptions and emotions, which, strictly speaking, are particular and cannot be shared with other subjects. In this regard, De Koninck claims that the harmony between the dimension of our sensitivity and that of our intellectuality is not guaranteed and “subjects us to a certain contrariety.”⁴⁰ Starting from this, authors like Maritain assumed the idea of the distinction, within the human being, of two poles: individuality, linked to materiality, and personality, linked to the more specifically spiritual dimension.⁴¹ De Koninck did not adopt such a polarised description of human complexity. Instead, he sought

aspires to God as a certain common good; furthermore, he makes it clear that the common character of this good derives from the fact that man aspires to God since God is the cause of him. Therefore, it makes no sense to separate the tension towards the very being of God and the tension towards the realization of the universe order, of which God is the prime cause. See C. De Koninck, *In Defence of St. Thomas*, cit., pp. 256-259; 272-295. For an effective and extensive analysis of this aspect of the dialogue between De Koninck and Eschmann, see M. A. Smith, *Human Dignity and the Common Good*, cit., pp. 99-121; S. Luquet, *Introduction*, cit., pp. 54-95; F. Daguët, *Du politique chez Thomas d’Aquin*, cit., pp. 353-388.

³⁹C. De Koninck, *The Primacy of the Common Good*, cit., p. 77.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, p. 92.

⁴¹“The human being is caught between two poles; a material pole, which, in reality, does not concern the true person but rather the shadow of personality or what, in the strict sense, is called individuality, and a spiritual pole, which does concern true personality. It is to the material pole, the individual become the center of all [...]. St. Thomas’ expression on the contrary refers to the spiritual pole, the person, source of liberty and bountifulness. Thus, we are confronted with the distinction between individuality and personality” (J. Maritain, *The Person and the Common Good*, cit., p. 33).

to acknowledge that the orientation of particular goods towards the good of intelligence is the fruit of a free and meritorious act. This, in turn, permits the cultivation of virtues.⁴²

This explains an aspect that has been underestimated somewhat in studies dealing with De Koninck's role in this controversy regarding the common good. In *The Principle of the New Order*, De Koninck associated distortions of the conception of the common good with the diffusion of mistaken images of the intellectual nature of man: when human beings lose sight of the most profound sense of the presence of the intellect, they also lose sight of the place that humans occupy within the universe. The underestimation of this point has made it difficult to explain the link between this part of the work and the first part dedicated directly to demonstrating the primacy of the common good.

In *The Principle of the New Order*, De Koninck describes the modern world's abandonment of the primacy of speculative thinking in favour of instrumental reason. In ancient and mediaeval times, wisdom – which, as a good pursued for its own sake, provides knowledge of the ultimate causes and the noblest substances – was considered the supreme achievement of human reason. Modern man inverts this primacy, so that it is no longer the thinking human being that represents human excellence, but the person who does things – the *Artifex* – who transforms the world, bending it to his/her own desire for life. Thus, modern man no longer aspires to realise himself by aiming for what is superior to him, but rather by taking himself and his power of acting in the world and upon the world as the measure of everything. Thus, man has become anti-human and self-destructive in his attempt to dominate the earth. This happened, according to De Koninck, because man, by abandoning the primacy of the speculative, incurred into a serious loss; what is heralded as a form of emancipation from theological constraints and the limits of nature is shown to be alienation from that which is most proper to him. Having dethroned God and denied the primacy of the speculative, man has lost the correct measure of his own worth and distanced himself from the authentic order of things. Assigning primacy to instrumental/practical reason is

⁴²“In the very interior of man, the good of intelligence is higher than the good of sense. The union of intellectual nature with sensible nature subjects man to a certain contrariety. Sensible nature carries us toward the sensible and private good, intellectual nature has for object the universal good under the very notion of the good, which is found principally in the common good. The good of intelligence whence man derives his dignity as man is not assured by the very nature of man. Sensitive life is basic in us: we cannot attain to the acts of reason save by passing through sense which, in this respect, has the note of a principle. So long as a man is not rectified by the cardinal virtues, which he ought to acquire, he is chiefly drawn toward the private good against the good of intelligence. There exists for man, envisaged even in the purely natural order, a liberty of contrariety which makes him as such defectible with regard to his purely natural end. In order to use to advantage his dignity, he must submit his private good to the common good” (C. De Koninck, *The Primacy of the Common Good*, cit., pp. 92-93).

tantamount to denying the existence of any order other than that which man produces himself. Thus, having lost the authentic measure of his own reason provided by speculative thinking, modern man lives in a society where the irrational dominates; one of the most evident proofs of this irrationality was the questioning of some of the very principles of logic, such as the principle of non-contradiction. De Koninck prophesied (in 1943) that an unliveable “society of selves” would soon arise.⁴³

In this sense, De Koninck’s *The Principle of the New Order* sought to indicate the historical and theoretical roots of contemporary society. The diffusion of an idea of the common good as oscillating dramatically between individualism and collectivism is associated with the denial of the primacy of the speculative. Starting from this distortion, man has sought his dignity in an order that he claims to build rather than in an order to be contemplated, within which he constitutes himself as a part and seeks to position himself as best he can. In this context, warns De Koninck, stating that the dignity of the human person is the measure of the social and political order does not favour the recovery of the correct position of man in the universe; rather, it ends up consolidating this distorted vision of man and the common good.⁴⁴ For this reason, he concluded the first part of the work by stating that “[t]he common good, and not the person and liberty, being

⁴³“Man turns away from research into and contemplation of things better than man, which is to say that he turns away as well from that which is best in himself. He falls back on the powers that are most properly his. Among these powers, there is one, in a way, the most profound, which touches on all the principles absolutely first for us: the power of properly human language. One can say and write things that one cannot think. One can say, ‘It is possible to be and not to be at the same time and in the same respect’, or ‘The part is greater than the whole’, even though one cannot think of them. And yet, these phrases are grammatically correct. The transcendent power of language: one can utter both the thinkable and the unthinkable. A power to use the purely irrational. I can say, ‘I do not exist’. And, lo, I can ground my ‘I exist’ on pure non-being. I say it. Who can stop me? Let him try. I say it again. The self. Selves. Soon a society of selves.” (Id., *The Principle of the New Order*, cit., p. 117). In 1990s, in harmony with what De Koninck held in *The Primacy of Common Good* fifty years earlier, Charles Taylor defined as “malaise of modernity” the combination of individualism, the primacy of instrumental reason and loss of genuine political freedom under the threat of the advent of soft despotism. See C. Taylor, *Malaise of Modernity*, Ananasi, Concord 1991.

⁴⁴“Because no other being is itself its supreme end and because the proper end of its nature can be ordered to a higher end, the rational creature is defectible and can lose his dignity: his dignity is only assured insofar as it is kept within order and acts in conformity with that order. Unlike irrational creatures, the rational creature must keep himself in the order established independently of him; but, to keep within that order is to submit oneself to and to be measured by it. Dignity is linked to order; to turn away from it is to lose one’s dignity. If dignity belonged absolutely to the rational creatures, if it was assured by his liberty of contrariety, in his capacity to submit to order or not to submit, his dignity would be inalienable. The excellence of the rational creature does not consist in the ability to escape order, but in his ability to will that order in which he ought to be; he does not have the right to leave it” (C. De Koninck, *The Primacy of the Common Good*, cit., pp. 90-91).

the very principle of all law, all right, all justice, and all liberty, a speculative error on this subject fatally entails the most execrable practical consequences.”⁴⁵

5 CONCLUSIONS

Concluding this work on the Thomistic notion of the common good as proposed by Charles De Koninck, we can highlight three elements according to which De Koninck’s position constitutes a fruitful reflection worthy of attention today.

The first concerns the revival of the primacy of the common good that is characterising the first decades of the twenty-first century. As we anticipated in the first part of this work, this revival is mainly associated with the language of emergency. In circumstances such as these, the primacy of the common good is presented, above all, as a reason that validly *limits* the practice of individual rights whose freedom is subjected to it as to a superior good.⁴⁶ De Koninck provides effective reasons to highlight the risks inherent in this way of conceiving the common good. Rather than evoking limits to the fruition of the particular good or the exercise of individual freedom, the common good is the criterion that permits us to place individual liberty and the enjoyment of singular good in its rightful place: within the framework of personal existence, community life and the human presence within the universe. In this sense, if it is true that the common good is not the sum of individual goods, it is equally true that it cannot be authentic if it is subservient to the logic of paternalism or authoritarianism.⁴⁷ De Koninck

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, p. 108.

⁴⁶An emblematic expression of the tension between the assumption of collective responsibility and the exercise of individual freedom can be found in a well-known speech that Sergio Mattarella, President of the Italian Republic, made in 2021 to promote the anti-Covid vaccination campaign at the University of Pavia: “Do not invoke freedom to avoid vaccination, because that invocation is equivalent to requesting permission to put the health of others at risk and, in some cases, to endanger the lives of others. Those who claim the right not to be vaccinated, naturally with the exception of those who cannot do so for reasons of health, and to lead a normal life by frequenting places of work or leisure, force everyone else to limit their freedom, to renounce prospects of normal life” (S. Mattarella, *Discorso presso l’Università di Pavia*, 5th of September 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xoLfX5eYfIA> [late access: 28/Dec/2023]). The translation in English is mine.

⁴⁷On this point, see the pertinent observations on De Koninck’s position made by Michael Smith, in *Human Dignity and the Common Good*, cit., pp. 98–99. Furthermore, we fully subscribe to what Luis Dupré observed thirty years ago: “We feel, rightly I think, that respect of individual freedom ought to be a non-negotiable feature of any polity. The demand for individual autonomy has so fully taken possession of our moral outlook that even weakening it would inflict major injury to that very dignity we seek to preserve. A person’s ‘right’ to exercise basic control over their destiny has, whatever the adequacy of its theoretical justification, become a moral cornerstone of our culture. This implies that any positive, trans-individual determinations of the common good must be freely accepted. No argument of *raison d’état* should be allowed to overrule democratic liberties. We need a conception of the good that itself includes individual autonomy” (L. Dupré,

explicitly opposed centralized forms of government, which not only minimize the role of individual citizens, but also that of intermediate bodies, groups, and local communities, which animate genuine social life. In this direction, De Koninck underlined the need that the United Nations avoid promoting an abstract and shapeless idea of humanity.⁴⁸

We could say that there exists an authentic “emergency of the common good” in our world. Indeed, the common good continues to be conceived as an alien good (to use De Koninck’s words), which repeats and aggravates the opposition between the State and the individual, presenting it anew in recent decades as a clash between the interests and the ideological attitudes of the *élites* and the good of citizens and local communities.⁴⁹ De Koninck’s Thomistic vision prompts us to ask this crucial question: are the solutions imposed by current governments (justified as those most consistent with international agendas, as the best for the economy and public health or even as those based most appropriately on science and the opinion of experts) those best equipped for the pursuit of the good of citizens?

Secondly, we have noticed that the debate on the common good that had De Koninck as its protagonist tends to overlook what he wrote in *The Principle of the New Order*. The relevance of what De Koninck thought of the common good, as presented in this part of his work, lies in the observation that distorted visions of the common good find fertile ground where the nature of human reason is misunderstood and distorted to satisfy a purely practical, technical, instrumental function. This aspect of De Koninck’s critical analysis has retained its relevance: we continue to experience the paradox of a culture that does not place the development of human thinking as such at its centre, despite proposing scientific, technological, and professional itineraries of greater and greater complexity. Only the recovery of the primacy of the speculative would be able to restore intelligence to full recognition of its stature and dignity. The fact that we are far from this objective is highlighted by the minimal importance assigned to purely theoretical disciplines in secondary and university studies. In this regard, in 2010, Martha Nussbaum made a heartfelt protest against the increasing marginalisation of humanistic culture in the American education system, a phenomenon linked

The Common Good and the Open Society, «The Review of Politics», 55 [1993], p. 706).

⁴⁸See De Koninck, *Tout homme est mon prochain*, cf., pp. 120-121; Id., *La Confédération, rempart contre le Grand État*, in *Œuvres de Charles De Koninck*, Tome II.3: *Le dilemme de la constitution*, avant-propos par T. De Koninck, Introduction par J. Vallée, Les Presses de l’Université Laval, Québec 2015, pp. 65-98. See also, C. Roy, *Charles De Koninck at the Crossroads of Catholic Moral Thought*, cit., pp. 87-89.

⁴⁹See what Christopher Lasch wrote in this regard in *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy*, Norton & Co, New York-London 1995.

to the depreciation of whatever does not appear to fuel some form of profit. Nussbaum argued that the diffusion of such a mentality represents a serious threat to the democratic system: to function well, a democracy needs to be made of mindful citizens endowed with a critical spirit and capable, therefore, of making responsible choices. On the contrary, purely technical training, oriented solely towards the needs of the market, cannot help but debase the minds of individuals, because it accustoms people to function rather than to think.⁵⁰

A final point regarding which De Koninck provides a valuable reflection is the way in which we can and need to pose the ecological question. Starting from the 1980s, when ecological sensitivity began to increase in Western culture, scholars such as Leslie Armour intuited the potential positive contribution that De Koninck's vision of the common good might make to the acquisition of a correct approach to environmental issues.⁵¹ After the publication of the encyclical *Laudato Si'*, several authors highlighted the contribution that Thomism might make to the promotion of what Pope Francis calls "integral ecology."⁵²

Today, ecological issues are presented by the media as a global emergency; the fight against climate change is at the top of many international agendas, and Western governments commit themselves solemnly to guarantee the "ecological transition." De Koninck provides us with a criterion by which to engage with the ecological question; in his analysis, the common good requires human beings not only to live well within social relationships alone, but also to become aware of the position they occupy within the entire universe. In this context, we have seen that De Koninck believed it was a fatal error to conceive the common good as a good alien to one's own. He shows that, by absolutising human dignity, Modern man has adopted a logic of domination over people and the environment. In this context, ecology is constituted as a meritorious reaction to the dangerous idea that everything technically possible or economically advantageous ought to be pursued. However, De Koninck's doctrine of the common good also prompts us to move beyond this reaction and take the argument in another direction. Since

⁵⁰See M. C. Nussbaum, *Not for Profit. Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*, Princeton University Press, Princeton-Oxford 2010, esp. pp. 7-11.

⁵¹Cf. L. Armour, *Charles De Koninck, the Common Good, and the Human Environment*, «Laval théologique et philosophique», 43 (1987), pp. 67-80.

⁵²See D. P. Scheid, *Saint Thomas Aquinas, the Thomistic Tradition, and the Cosmic Common Good*, in T. Winwright, *Green Discipleship: Catholic Theological Ethics & the Environment*, Anselm Academic, Winona 2011, pp. 129-147; Id., *Thomas Aquinas, the Cosmic Common Good, and Climate Change*, in J. Schaefer (ed.), *Confronting the Climate Crisis: Catholic Theological Perspectives*, Marquette University Press, Milwaukee 2011, pp. 125-144; C. J. Thomson, *The Joyful Mystery: Field Notes Toward a Green Thomism*, Emmaus Road, Steubenville (OH) 2017; D. P. Deavel, *Preface: Thomism and the Challenge of Integral Ecology*, «Logos. A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture», 21 (2018), pp. 5-17; T. De Koninck, J.-F. de Raymond (éds.), *Beauté oblige. Dignité et écologie. Manifeste*, Presses de l'Université Laval, Québec 2018.

the fatal error remains that of separating the common good from the good of particular entities, a healthy perspective regarding the common good also warns us against “ecologism,” i.e., against ideological visions of ecology, which consider the environment as a good separate from that of human beings. We have noticed that neglect of the cosmic order has led to the exaltation of instrumental reason and continues to expose us to the risk of a technical development devoid of humanity. However, the same oblivion can generate an anti-human brand of ecology, where the salvation of the planet is expressed in terms of hatred towards human beings, towards the proliferation of the human species on earth, and towards all the social and economic advantages that Western civilisation – despite all the critical shortcomings involved – has produced.⁵³ The problem with ecologism is that it presupposes an abstract and “divinised” image of nature, which mirrors the primacy of instrumental reason and the divinisation of technology that characterises modern humanity. Thus, paraphrasing the title of a recent book, ecologism contrasts Prometheus with Gaia, thus fuelling the error that it seeks to fight: a vision of an irremediable conflict between human beings and nature.⁵⁴

De Koninck’s sagacious reflections prompt us to acknowledge that no conception of nature can be acceptable if it fails to include humans and does not acknowledge the place they occupy within the universe; the realization of human life is an essential part of the good of the whole universe. Human life is created to promote the common good by activating human intellectual, practical and technical resources. Therefore, if it does not aim at promoting the place of human beings in the world, ecology seriously risks becoming a new form of totalitarianism, in which the earth – rather than the “common home” – becomes *Gaia* (with

⁵³See D. Mestre, *L’écologie et le bien commun*, «Catholica», 106 (2009-2010), pp. 21-28; S. François, *Antichristianisme et écologie radicale*, «Revue d’éthique et de théologie morale», 272 (2012), pp. 79-98; Id., *Le retour de Pan. Panthéisme, néo-paganisme et antichristianisme dans l’écologie radicale*, Archè, Milano 2016; L. Larcher, *La Face cachée de l’écologie*, Cerf, Paris 2004; G. Meotti, *Il Dio verde. Ecolatria e ossessioni apocalittiche*, Liberlibri, Macerata 2021; H. Fluss, L. Firm, *Prometheus and Gaia: Technology, Ecology and Anti-humanism*, Anthem, London-New York 2022.

⁵⁴“These words evoke the surprising coincidence of opposites between eco-pessimist and accelerationist thinking between Gaia and Prometheus. [...] The Gaians favour the local reality and live according to the maxim that ‘small is beautiful’. They celebrate a sacralised, opaque version of nature which cannot (and should not) be entirely comprehended. Nature (or whatever term they prefer) is beyond our ken since it is always alive and on the move. Our rightful behaviour towards nature is not one of exploitation but, instead, of deep reverence. As opposed to this, the Prometheans stress the nullity of nature. Being is less than nothing and can be rearranged to suit the desires of a strong, creative will. Reverence is a holdover of slave morality, and even the ‘Truth’ is no barrier to the hyperstitional imagination. Nonetheless, these seemingly opposite ideologies (when taken to their logical extreme) find a surprising identity in one another. This culminates in a common anti-humanism, where the human being is always a burden or ‘drag’ on some valorized, superior *other* (whether this be the Earth or A.I.)” (H. Fluss, L. Firm, *Prometheus and Gaia*, cit., p. 151).

a capital G), seen as an abstract entity – the “planet” – in the name of which the good of many is sacrificed, as it was by the twentieth-century ideologies that De Koninck had before his eyes.

© 2023 Antonio Petagine & Forum. Supplement to Acta Philosophica



Quest'opera è distribuita con Licenza [Creative Commons Attribuzione - Non commerciale - Non opere derivate 4.0 Internazionale](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

[Testo completo della licenza](#)

