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**Title:** Is Socrates Permitted to Kill Plato?

**Year:** 2024

**Version:** Published version

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**Please cite the original version:**

Toivanen, J. (2024). Is Socrates Permitted to Kill Plato?. In H. Haara, & J. Toivanen (Eds.), *Common Good and Self-Interest in Medieval and Early Modern Philosophy* (78, pp. 149-168). Springer. The New Synthese Historical Library. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-55304-2\\_9](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-55304-2_9)

# Chapter 9

## Is Socrates Permitted to Kill Plato?



Juhana Toivanen

### 9.1 Introduction

Aristotelian eudaemonist ethics rejects the idea that there might be a real conflict between the common good and the happiness of an individual moral agent. Human beings aim for their own good, but what is truly good for them is virtue, understood as an overall perfection of their human nature. Virtuous action is the all-things-considered best choice in a given situation: it constitutes the good of the moral agent and also brings about good to other people and to the community as a whole – that is, it promotes the common good. In this way, from the perspective of the moral agent, the common good and the good of an individual are united via virtue, and if there seems to be a conflict between the common good and the individual good, it is only apparent and results from a misunderstanding of what truly is best for the individual.<sup>1</sup>

The theoretical starting point of the present chapter is that a real conflict between the common good and individual good entails that there are cases in which this unity via virtue is broken. This fracture can come about at least in two ways:

1. virtuous action requires self-denial, that is, setting one's individual good aside; or
2. virtuous action perfects the agent but does not necessarily promote the common good.

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (trans. Ross 2009; hereafter *EN*), 1.2, 1094b8–11; *EN* 9.8, 1169a5–15; Annas 2017, 265–80. A clear example of this line of thought in medieval literature is Thomas Aquinas, *Sent. EN* 9.9., 532a108–b121 (ed. 1969).

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The first case is rather simple in the sense that it manifests a radical departure from the eudaemonist presupposition that individual perfection and happiness are constituted by acting in accordance with virtue. One should act virtuously, but acting virtuously requires, at least in some cases, putting the common good (the good of the community as a whole, or the good of other individuals) above one's own good. By contrast, the main thrust of the second option is that the connection between virtuous action and the common good is broken in such a way that either virtue does not always entail the common good or at least aiming for the common good is not a necessary condition for action to be virtuous.

As Anthony Celano points out above (chapter three), Aristotle's view concerning the relation between the common good and individual good leaves plenty of room for interpretation. Medieval philosophers took up the task of providing a coherent account of this relation in the context of moral psychology and ethics, but in doing so, they addressed various questions that are not directly related to Aristotle (e.g., the idea that true happiness consists of beatitude in the afterlife and the centrality of divine and natural law in ethics). In effect, they presented interpretations that build upon the general eudaemonist framework but also pave the way for a more radical departure from it.<sup>2</sup> The main purpose of the present chapter is to approach this general development via a case study of a lesser-known fourteenth-century author, Nicolas of Vaudémont. I argue that his theory entails a possible fracture in the unity of the common and individual good because he admits that there are cases in which a private person is not obliged to act for the common good and claims that action that fails to further the common good may in some cases count as virtuous action; that is, he accepts, with qualifications, position (2) mentioned above. In addition, I suggest that even though Nicholas does not advance position (1), his analysis opens up a theoretical possibility for a conflict between what is good for the individual and what is required by true morality.

Nicolas of Vaudémont was a late fourteenth-century master of arts from Paris.<sup>3</sup> Following the typical medieval practice of doing philosophy by writing commentaries on Aristotle's works, he composed, sometime in the 1370s, a question-commentary on Aristotle's *Politics*.<sup>4</sup> Although his analysis of the relation between

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<sup>2</sup>Particularly important contexts are (1) Anselm of Canterbury's moral psychology in his *De casu diaboli* and *De concordia*, which was later developed by John Duns Scotus, and (2) the late thirteenth-century discussion concerning self-sacrifice. See, e.g., Brower 2004; Irwin 2008; Kane 1981; King, 2011; Normore 2002; Osborne 2005, 15–23, 174–206; Toste 2012.

<sup>3</sup>For biographical information on Nicholas, see Flüeler 1992, 1:132–68; Courtenay 2004.

<sup>4</sup>Nicolas de Vaudémont (pseudo-Johannes Buridanus), *Questiones super octo libros Politicorum*, reprint of the Paris 1513 edition (Frankfurt: Minerva, 1969) (= *E*<sub>2</sub>). The dating is suggested by Courtenay 2004, 164–65. When quoting Nicholas' commentary, I mainly use MS Paris, BNF, NAL 1130, fol. 2r–219r (= *P*), which I compare to the 1513 edition and to two other manuscripts: Vatican, BAV, Vat. lat. 2167, fol. 1ra–139vb (= *V*); and Sevilla, Biblioteca Colombina, cod. 7.7.10, fol. 1ra–177vb (= *Se*). The variant readings are given only when I deviate from the reading of *P*; the variants are in {curly brackets}, and they refer to the preceding word unless stated otherwise. The references include the folio numbers of MSS used and those of the 1513 edition in square brackets for convenience. The work is hereafter abbreviated as *QPol*.

the common and individual good draws heavily from Henry of Ghent (d. 1293), Gerald Odonis (d. 1349), and John Buridan (d. ca. 1358),<sup>5</sup> there are two contextual reasons to focus on Nicholas' commentary. First, unlike many of his contemporaries, he raises the question concerning the relation between the common and individual good in a commentary on *Politics*, which gives him a certain freedom in relation to what Aristotle argues in *Nicomachean Ethics*, as we shall see below. Second, his commentary was rather popular: it is extant in seven manuscripts, and it was printed three times in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (two of these printings bear the name of John Buridan, and this attribution may have contributed to its popularity<sup>6</sup>). Thus, Nicholas' commentary transmits some of the main ideas from earlier discussions to posterity.

However, the main reason to focus on Nicholas is that although his originality may be questioned due to his tendency to draw arguments from earlier authors, he advances a position that is, to the best of my knowledge, original within the medieval Aristotelian framework: he suggests that the contents of virtuous behaviour vary depending on the fundamental presuppositions of one's ethical theory and that Aristotelian ethics recognises cases in which virtuous action does not entail furthering the common good. Moreover, he emphasises the difference between public persons whose task is to secure the common good (of the community) and private persons who do not need to pay similar attention to it. A detailed analysis of Nicholas' view reveals that the unity of the common and the individual good was challenged in the context of late fourteenth-century Aristotelian practical philosophy.

After a brief contextualisation of Nicholas' discussion against its Aristotelian and medieval background in section two, I explain Nicholas' rather complicated view concerning the relation between the common and individual good in section three. I argue that his view entails at least the theoretical possibility that virtuous action does not necessarily further the common good. Finally, section four raises the question posed in the title of this chapter: Are there cases in which Socrates is allowed to kill Plato? And what does this discipulicide tell us about the relation between the common and the individual good?

## 9.2 The Common Good or Individual Good?

Nicholas' commentary includes several questions that operate with the notion of the common good and relate it to the good of an individual. Here, I focus on the two most important ones: Should the common good be preferred over the private or particular good, and is the ruler allowed to kill vicious people or evildoers?<sup>7</sup> The

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<sup>5</sup>Toste 2012, 416.

<sup>6</sup>The false attribution is discussed in Flüeler 1992, 1:150–55.

<sup>7</sup>“Utrum bonum commune sit praefendum bono privato seu particulari” (*QPol.* 1.1, fol. 6r *P* [1ra]); and “Utrum principi licitum sit occidere homines vitiosos sive malefactores” (*QPol.* 3.10, fol. 74r *P* [38va]).

first question in particular lays down the main principles of Nicholas' view, and although he puts forth several important qualifications, the gist of his answer is negative. His initial arguments take up two central themes that are in tension with each other. On the one hand, taking care of one's own good – both material goods and virtue/happiness – is what people in fact do, and this is in accordance with the natural law and the order of love. On the other hand, the common good is better and more noble, lovable, useful, divine, and inclusive than the private good, and it should thus be preferred over the private good.<sup>8</sup>

After setting the scene, Nicholas appeals to two divisions of ancient origin (trumpeted by Aristotle and Cicero, among others; see Calvin Normore's chapter above). The first is that "the good" itself may mean different things, namely, things that are either pleasurable, useful, or belong to the moral good (*honestum*). Although Nicholas will use this division later, he points out that in some cases it is only conceptual, as moral virtue is both useful, pleasant, and *honestum*.<sup>9</sup> The second division is between different kinds of good that can be attributed to human beings: external goods, such as property and friends; bodily goods, such as health and beauty; and goods of the soul, that is, knowledge and virtues.

At this point one might expect that Nicholas is advancing a traditional view that the common good should be preferred over external and bodily goods and that moral virtue in fact promotes the common good – or even that promoting the common good is a necessary condition for being virtuous. Indeed, this order is proper when the common good and virtue happen to coincide.<sup>10</sup> But when Nicholas addresses the relation between moral good and the common good, he rejects the primacy of the latter:

The first conclusion is that the private moral good (*bonum privatum honestum*), like one's own virtue or happiness, must be preferred to any common good. This is proved, for a virtuous human being loves the common good mainly due to his own virtue, and therefore he loves more his own virtue. [...] Second proof: according to the right reason, each human being should choose his own moral good (that is, one's own well-being) without qualification more than anything else, save God; therefore etc. The consequence is clear, and the antecedent is certain because otherwise he would desire his own imperfection.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup>Nicholas refers to Aristotle's *Politics* (hereafter *Pol.*) 1.2 and *Nicomachean Ethics* 1.2 (1094b7–10). For a discussion on the order of love in the political context, see Kempshall 1999, 293–315 and *passim*; Osborne 2005, esp. 87–150; Knuutila 2016, 22–29.

<sup>9</sup>See, e.g., *EN* 2.3, 1104b30–35 (trans. Ross 2009); Cicero, *De officiis* 3.9–13 (trans. Miller 1968).

<sup>10</sup>Usually when Nicholas claims that the common good should be placed above the individual good, the opposition seems to be between (1) virtuously promoting the common good and (2) viciously aiming for bodily and external goods (see, e.g., *QPol.* 3.20; 5.1; 5.21; and 8.13 [44vb, 68rb, 83rb, and 107vb]). Admittedly, some passages defy this interpretation and suggest that he may not offer a completely coherent picture: "Probatur, quia bonum commune praefertur bono privato, loquendo non solum de honesto bono sed etiam {s.e.}  $V E_2$ ; immo loquendo  $P$  de bono fortunae et corporali" (*QPol.* 3.16, fol. 81v  $P$  [48va  $V$ ; ed. 1513, 42rb–va]).

<sup>11</sup>"Prima conclusio est: bonum privatum honestum – ut virtus sive { $V$ ; *om. P E\_2*} felicitas propria – cui libet bono communi est praefertendum. Probatur, nam homo virtuosus diligit bonum commune principaliter propter propriam virtutem; ergo magis diligit propriam; ergo etc. [...] Secundo sic {s.s.}  $V$ ; secunda conclusio  $P$ ; secundo probatur  $E_2$ : quilibet homo debet magis eligere secundum

This claim is clearly related to the well-documented debate concerning self-love, love of God, and self-sacrifice for the sake of the community, which dates back at least to the end of the thirteenth century. Of the two major participants in the debate, Henry of Ghent and Godfrey of Fontaines (d. 1306/9), Nicholas sides with the former. Henry had argued that self-love surpasses love of the common good and that while human beings should love the common good, they should do so mainly because that makes them virtuous and happy in the eudaemonist sense of the word. One's own virtue is higher in the order of love than the common good.<sup>12</sup>

We shall see below that Nicholas departs from Henry's view in a significant way, but let us first focus on the suggestion that moral good is private. It may sound odd, especially to a modern reader, but Nicholas repeats it explicitly several times in the course of his work. He writes, for instance, that "happiness and virtues are private and particular goods".<sup>13</sup> Although he does not explain this point in any detail, I take him to mean that virtues are perfections of the human soul, and thus they belong to the agent and make her good, happy, and prosperous. This is something the agent should, according to right reason, value more than she values the common good. In this way, Nicholas remains strongly within the eudaemonist framework. Human beings ought to act virtuously for the sake of their own perfection: it is good for the agent to be brave, honest, compassionate, and so forth. The common good just happens to be one target of virtue in the sense that when one acts virtuously, one usually does things that promote the common good. However, one does not act bravely, honestly, and compassionately for the sake of the common good but for the sake of one's individual good, which one loves more than the common good.

To be sure, this order applies only to moral goodness (*honestum*) as the other types of good (external and bodily) should be valued less than the common good. The order of one's preferences should be (1) private moral good, (2) common good, and (3) external and bodily good, because doing what is good for the community is more virtuous than securing one's own wealth and health:

For such a person [scil. one who flees when justly condemned by a judge] would break the order of justice and prefer private non-moral good to common and moral good, because the moral and common good is that evildoers get punished. [...] Likewise, it is said that it is better to suffer every evil than to do dishonourable deeds, also if there were no life after the present one.<sup>14</sup>

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rectam rationem suum proprium bonum honestum, scilicet salutem propriam, simpliciter quam quodcumque aliud citra Deum; ergo etc. Patet consequentia et antecedens apparet, quia alias appeteret suam imperfectionem" (*QPol.* 1.1, fol. 6v–7r *P* [1va *V*; ed. 1513, 1va]).

<sup>12</sup>This debate is well documented; see, e.g., Coleman 2006; Kempshall 1999, 157–234; id. 2018; Knuutila 2016; Marenbon 2019; Osborne 2005, 119–28, 138–50; Posti 2022; and Toste 2012.

<sup>13</sup>"[...] felicitas et virtutes sunt bona privata et particularia" (*QPol.* 1.1, fol. 6r *P* [1ra]).

<sup>14</sup>"Tertio: nam talis frangeret ordinem iustitiae et praeferret bonum privatum non honestum bono communi et honesto, quia bonum honestum et commune est quod malefici moriantur. [...] Item, dicetur ad hoc quod melius est omnia mala pati quam aliquod turpe committere, etiam si [e.s.] *Se*; si *P*} non esset vita post istam vitam" (*QPol.* 3.16, fol. 81v *P* [57va *Se*; ed. 1513, 42va]).

However, the reason for placing external and bodily goods below the common good is that this order follows the general principle that private good should be preferred more than anything else. One should value the common good because it is the virtuous thing to do and it is thus within one's private good. Therefore, even though one and the same action realises one's private moral good and the common good – that is, a virtuous act is usually good both for the individual and for the community – at the level of the reasons for action, there is a clear difference. In this way, Nicholas acknowledges that the common good is preferable in a qualified sense, but the overall tone of his answer leans heavily to the side of the individual good.

A careful reader may have noticed the qualification “usually” that I have used above when suggesting that according to Nicholas, one should act so as to promote the common good. The reason for using this qualification is that although in most cases the common good is the content of virtuous action – by this I mean that the concrete action that manifests virtue also happens to promote the common good – the connection between virtue and the common good is not a necessary one. There are exceptional cases.

One such exception becomes apparent when we realise that Nicholas repeatedly states that taking care of the common good is not actually everyone's responsibility. The ruler of the political community is the only one who should systematically place the common good over his individual good and lay down claims for preferring his private good in temporal matters<sup>15</sup>:

[...] when comparing the partial private good to the partial common good, one's own good is to be preferred by those, who do not rule the community. [...] Those who] rule the community must sometimes neglect their own good and do what is good for the community.<sup>16</sup>

The background of this rather radical suggestion is a division that Nicolas makes between the “total common good”, “partial common good”, “total private good”, and “partial private good”. Unfortunately, he does not explain what he means by these notions, and we can only make educated guesses as to their precise meaning and scope. My current hypothesis is that the term “common good” is here taken in a distributive sense, that is, each of us has a part of the total common good as we are parts of the whole. The total common good includes the good of all individual members of the community, while the partial common good is partial precisely because it excludes the good of some individuals: the partial common good is the good of other parts and members of the community but not me.<sup>17</sup> If this is on the right track, then in the case of a conflict between individual good and the common good that does not include the good of an individual, one should aim for one's own

<sup>15</sup>This theme remains central also in early modern theories: see the chapters by Alexandra Chadwick and Heikki Haara in this volume.

<sup>16</sup>“[...] comparando bonum privatum partiale ad bonum commune partiale, bonum proprium est praefendum ab illo, qui non habet politiam regere. [...] habent regere politiam debent negligere proprium bonum quandoque et facere bonum commune [...]” (*QPol.* 1.1, fol. 7r P [1va]). See also *QPol.* 6.1, fol. 161v–62r P [86va–b], where Nicholas argues that it is not always a sin to choose a lesser good instead of a greater good (such as the common good).

<sup>17</sup>I thank Matthew Kempshall for suggesting this reading.

good – unless one happens to be the ruler, in which case one must neglect one’s own good for the sake of the community.

The interpretative difficulty is partially constituted by the fact that, to the best of my knowledge, Nicholas never properly spells out what the exact relation between the common and the individual good is. Several earlier authors, such as Thomas Aquinas and Albert the Great, thought that the individual good is somehow metaphysically identical with the common good.<sup>18</sup> This strong identity remained a contested issue well into the early modern period – Thomas Hobbes, for one, rejected it while (as Heikki Haara shows in chapter thirteen) Richard Cumberland subscribed to it. Nicholas does not, however, focus on the metaphysical unity but on individual happiness, understood as virtuous activity, and one gets the impression that although promoting the common good is usually virtuous (and harming it is usually vicious<sup>19</sup>), the common good is but an object of virtue: the good that results for the community is distinct from the virtue of the agent.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, on some occasions he seems to imply that the common good should be understood strictly in terms of utility. For instance, he explains that the good of the political community comes in three kinds: material goods, the well-being of the rulers, and political happiness – which he equates with tranquility, peace, and harmony.<sup>21</sup> There are no traces of a robust metaphysical notion of the common good that would necessarily include the good of each and every member of the community.

On the basis of the foregoing, it seems that private persons do not need to place even their external and bodily goods below the common good. Nicholas’ position in this regard is quite unclear because his theoretical commitments do not seem to allow for this, and yet he repeats the point several times. An illustrative case is his reply to a counterargument that if the common good should be preferred over the individual good, then one should be ready to give up one’s possessions for the sake of the community (which seems unreasonably harsh, according to the argument). Nicholas replies that those who are responsible for governing the community indeed must give up their treasures, but “if one is not governing the political community and is not a prince, then one does not need to give anything”.<sup>22</sup> Although the extent to which Nicholas is willing to accept this view is uncertain, it is significant that he proposes such a strong demarcation line at the very beginning of his commentary.

<sup>18</sup> Kempshall 1999, 29–52, 79–83; see also Osborne 2005, 69–112.

<sup>19</sup> “Modo quaestio intelligitur de malefatore cuius vitium nocet toti reipublicae” (*QPol.* 3.10, fol. 74v P [38vb]; see also *ibid.*, 5.1 [ed. 1513, fol. 6rb]).

<sup>20</sup> Note that Nicholas nevertheless accepts the idea that individual humans are parts of the community; see *QPol.* 3.10, third supposition (ed. 1513, fol. 38vb).

<sup>21</sup> *QPol.* 1.1 (ed. 1513, 1rb). See also footnote 46 below. None of these ideas were completely new in the late fourteenth century; see Kempshall 1999, 54–75 and *passim*.

<sup>22</sup> “[...] vel talis est princeps civitatis vel quia habet regere civitatem – si sic, tunc tenetur dare thesaurum; si non habet regere civitatem nec est princeps, non tenetur dare quicquam” (*QPol.* 1.1, fol. 8v P [2va]). See also: “[...] praeferentes bonum commune, quidam sunt cives qui non habent regere in politia; alii sunt qui habent politiam regere, et debent tales bonum proprium negligere et bonum commune praeferre, si conti<n> gerit” (*ibid.*, 6v P [1va]); but cf. *ibid.*, 8.3 (ed. 1513, 112rb).



Here we see how the context matters: it is arguably more natural to distinguish between the ruler and the subjects in relation to the common good in a commentary on *Politics* than it would be in a work that is directly related to Aristotle's ethics.

### 9.3 Self-Sacrifice

The suggestion that there is a difference between the ruler and non-ruling members of the community is not the only way Nicholas draws a gap between virtuous action and the common good. Another exception, also familiar from the debate between Henry of Ghent and Godfrey of Fontaines, is related to Aristotle's (and Cicero's) statement that a virtuous person is ready to die for the community. Aristotle's view is that there are situations in which one should sacrifice one's life because a noble death is better than any other thing that humans generally consider as good: by sacrificing one's life, one chooses what really is good. It is the virtuous thing to do, and as such it promotes both the happiness of the agent and the common good of the community.<sup>23</sup>

This claim puzzled medieval authors, and they gave several highly nuanced accounts of how it could be the case. Thomas Aquinas explained that one chooses a greater good (virtue) instead of lesser goods (money, honours), while for instance Henry of Ghent suggested that Aristotle's example, when applied to a person who enjoys theoretical happiness, must be understood as a situation where one chooses the lesser of two evils (death vs. vice).<sup>24</sup> However, the immediate background of Nicholas' view is in the works of Gerald Odonis and John Buridan. As Marco Toste has shown, both of them accept that self-sacrifice makes sense only when one has hope for the afterlife. However, their answers differ if we suppose that there is no life after this one. Odonis argues that in this case, one should not sacrifice one's life for the sake of the common good, while Buridan follows the Aristotelian path and claims that self-sacrifice is virtuous and thus constitutes perfection of human nature. However, ultimately these two philosophers agree that according to Aristotle, one should sacrifice one's life: Odonis just happens to think that Aristotle implicitly believes in the afterlife.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>23</sup> *EN* 9.8, 1169a18–33 (trans. Ross 2009); see also *EN* 3.6, 1115a24–b6; *EN* 4.3, 1124b7–10. For Cicero and his influence on Henry, see Nederman 2020, 32–35, 87–91.

<sup>24</sup> Respectively, *Sent. EN* 9.9, 532b132–48 (ed. 1969); and Henry of Ghent, *Quodlibet* 12.13 (ed. and trans. McGrade et al. 2001, 261–65). See Kempshall 1999, 170–78; and Fioravanti 2002. Note that Henry's view concerning a person who enjoys practical happiness is more straightforwardly Aristotelian: the agent chooses a greater good (Henry of Ghent, *Quodlibet* 12.13 [ed. and trans. McGrade et al. 2001, 263]).

<sup>25</sup> Toste 2012, 407–13; see also Marenbon 2019, 339–42. For Odonis' and Buridan's arguments, see Geraldus Odonis, *Expositio cum quaestionibus super libros ethicorum Aristotelis* (ed. 1500), 4.9, fol. 61va–b; John Buridan, *Quaestiones in decem libros Ethicorum Aristotelis ad Nicomachum* (ed. 1637), 3.18, 221–25.

As many others before him, Nicolas gives two answers to the question whether it is acceptable to flee instead of defending the community at the risk of one's life:<sup>26</sup> one that is based on the supposition that there is an afterlife, and another that he calls the "Philosopher's opinion" (*opinio propria Philosophi*). In other words, he gives one answer that is based on how things actually are according to Christian theology and another that follows the principles of Aristotelian philosophy.

In the first case, the answer is rather straightforward: a Christian who believes in the afterlife should defend the commonwealth. The good of the soul, moral virtue, is greater than bodily good, and a good Christian prefers to suffer every other evil over committing a sin.<sup>27</sup> Fleeing from the defense of the community counts as a sin, while defending it is a virtue, and therefore one should be ready to sacrifice one's non-moral goods, including one's life, for the community. However, Nicholas considers this as an exceptional case that applies only if there is no other way to save the Christian community.<sup>28</sup> If the defender sees that it is possible to save the community without putting his life at risk, he should save his life. In both cases, the defender acts virtuously, but the circumstances alter the content of the virtuous course of action.<sup>29</sup> In both cases, the agent chooses something that is good for him. Dying for a greater cause is a virtuous thing to do and thus greater than the bodily good of life, but when it is possible to save the community by some other means, fleeing is the virtuous (magnanimous<sup>30</sup>) thing to do, and it also preserves the bodily good of life.

The answer to the second case is more complex. It is based on the presupposition that there is no afterlife, which Nicholas takes to be Aristotle's view ("the Philosopher posited only meritorious happiness"<sup>31</sup>). There are two possibilities: (1) either death seems certain, and the defender has no hope of survival if he keeps rank; or (2) the defender has hope that he may survive as a prisoner of war. If death does not seem

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<sup>26</sup>It is notable that Nicholas seems to hold that the question concerning self-sacrifice pertains only to one who "is actually ruling and defending the republic" ("utrum in aliquo casu homo licite a defensione rei publicae posset cessare fugiendo, et hoc si ipse sit actu regens et defendens rem publicam [et hoc...publicam] om. P)" (*QPol.* 1.1, fol. 8r P [2rb Se; 2rb V; ed. 1513, 2ra]). Although MS P omits this qualification, V Se and E<sub>2</sub> testify to it, and it is in line with the limitation we saw above, namely that securing the common good is primarily the task of the ruler.

<sup>27</sup>This idea comes from Augustine, *De libero arbitrio* 3.6–8 (ed. Green 1970, 285–89). See Kempshall 1999, 170.

<sup>28</sup>He begins his answer by stating that "in aliquo casu non est licitum" to flee (*QPol.* 1.1, fol. 8r P [2ra]).

<sup>29</sup>Nicholas does not explicitly state whether the evaluation of the situation is subjective rather than objective. He systematically uses expressions such as "the just person sees", "someone sees", "he sees and has hope", which suggest the former, but it is also possible that he presupposes a fully rational agent who has all the relevant information, and that the subjective evaluation is objectively true as well.

<sup>30</sup>Nicholas refers to *EN* 4.3, 1124b5–10 in this connection.

<sup>31</sup>"Philosophus non posuit nisi meritoriam felicitatem" (*QPol.* 1.1, fol. 8r P [2rb]). This term refers to happiness in this life, in contrast to *felicitas praemiatoria*, happiness in the afterlife; see *ibid.*, 1.14 (ed. 1513, fol. 22vb); Costa 2002, 85–88.

imminent, the defender is not permitted to flee because that would be cowardly. But in the former case, when there is no hope of survival, fleeing is licit. The core of Nicholas' argument, which is heavily indebted to Odonis,<sup>32</sup> is as follows:

To anticipate <death> is not happiness or a part of happiness [...] because there can be no happiness without life, and he [viz. the defender] dies. Moreover, happiness is pleasurable, and this [viz. dying] is unpleasant. Moreover, this death does not lead to anything else. Second, it is proved: virtue ought not be against a manifest natural inclination but rather its perfection; but not fleeing is against natural inclination; therefore etc. [...] It follows from this that courage, which is a moral virtue, does not incline to the anticipation of death if there is no life after this one. It is thus clear that it is a lesser evil to flee than to persist.<sup>33</sup>

Nicholas holds that life is necessary for happiness, and if there is no afterlife, self-sacrifice makes no sense. No doubt, this is an intuitively acceptable position, but it is notable that he presents it as Aristotle's view. It surely does not look like that: in particular, there are no traces of Aristotle's claim that a noble death is better than a shameful life (in *EN* 9.8). Life simply is better than no life.

The very end of the previous quotation seems to indicate that the agent is in a tragic situation where he must choose between two evils (*à la* Henry), but in fact, Nicholas entertains a more radical idea that fleeing is the virtuous thing to do in this situation. This line of thought is visible especially in his reply to a counterargument that by fleeing, the agent prefers a non-moral individual good over the common good and thus violates the correct order of love, according to which only moral good (*bonum honestum*) should be placed above the common good. Nicholas disagrees and claims that the one who flees

would not only prefer non-moral private good but he would also prefer moral good. Or it is understood, following the adversary, that private good other than moral good should not be preferred to the common good – barring corporeal death.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>32</sup>Toste 2012, 407–12; Geraldus Odonis, *Sententia et expositio* (ed. 1500), 4.9, fol. 61vb.

<sup>33</sup>“[...] expectare <mortem> non est felicitas nec pars felicitates [...] quia felicitas non est sine vita, et ipse moretur. Item, ipsa felicitas est delectabilis et hoc est tristabile. Item, ista mors ad nihil ulterius ordinatur; ergo {et ipse ... ergo} *V*; *om. P E<sub>2</sub>*. Secundo probatur: virtus non debet esse contra manifestam inclinationem naturae, sed potius perfectio eius; sed non fugere est contra inclinationem naturae; igitur etc. [...] Ex isto sequitur quod fortitudo quae est virtus moralis non inclinatur ad expectationem mortis, si non ponatur vita post mortem. Patet: minus malum est fugere quam perseverare” (*QPol.* 1.1, fol. 8v *P* [2va *V*; ed. 1513, 2rb]). The idea of a lesser evil is mentioned also in *in oppositum* (ed. 1513, fol. 2ra): “if one sees that death is imminent, it is licit to flee (*minus malum*)”. See also *ibid.*, 1.14, fol. 44v *P* [22ra]: “[...] loquendo pure moraliter secundum dictamen rectae rationis, fortis moralis pro bono reipublicae debet mortem expectare in trepide antequam fugiat.”

<sup>34</sup>“[...] non solum praeferret bonum privatum aliud ab honesto, immo etiam bonum honestum praeferret {privatum...praeferret} *V*. Vel intelligitur secundum adversarium quod bonum privatum aliud a bono honesto non est praeferendum bono communi, citra mortem corporalem” (*QPol.* 1.1, fol. 8v *P* [2vb *Se*; 2va *V*; ed. 1513, 2rb]). The crucial part of this passage follows the reading of MS *V* (confirmed by *Se* and *E<sub>2</sub>*) instead of the garble of *P*, which reads: “non solum praeferret bonum honestum proprium privatum sed bonum commune praeferret immo honestum”.

Here we have two ways to undercut the counterargument. The first solution is that in this situation fleeing does not violate the proper order of goods (moral, common, bodily, external) because it counts as a virtuous action. After all, the virtue of fortitude does not require sacrificing one's life for the sake of the common good (unless there is an afterlife),<sup>35</sup> and although Nicholas does not properly explain how preserving one's life is a moral good in this situation, he clearly thinks it is.

The other solution is that even though life is only a bodily good, preserving it is an exception to the rule that only moral good may be preferred over the common good. This suggestion leaves open whether the order "virtue – life – common good" is the order of *virtuous* action – that is, whether the two resolutions are alternatives or complementary. However, it is of some importance that Nicholas acknowledges earlier in the same question that self-preservation is a natural inclination that follows natural law: "no-one is permitted to act against the natural law; but failing to avoid death when it is possible to avoid it is against the natural law".<sup>36</sup> By connecting these two ideas, it is possible to read Nicholas as stating that preserving one's life by fleeing the battle is the virtuous course of action according to the second solution as well.

Although Nicholas' arguments are taken from Odonis, his position differs from both Odonis and Buridan (but it is not necessarily without a precedent<sup>37</sup>). He agrees with Odonis that one should not sacrifice one's life for the sake of other people or the common good without the hope for the afterlife, but he also accepts Buridan's interpretation that Aristotle did not believe in the afterlife. Despite their differences, Odonis and Buridan acknowledge that according to Aristotelian ethics, one should be ready to sacrifice one's life: Buridan defends this conclusion because that is what Aristotle thinks, and Odonis reaches the same conclusion by arguing that Aristotle believes in the afterlife. In Nicholas' view, Aristotle's theory entails that fleeing is virtuous, and thus he breaks with the tradition that firmly held that there is no "double truth": Henry of Ghent, Godfrey of Fontaines, Geraldus Odonis, and John Buridan all think that what applies to a believer must apply to an Aristotelian who

<sup>35</sup>"[...] fortitudo quae est virtus moralis non inclinatur ad expectationem mortis, si non ponatur vita post mortem {fortitudo...mortem] *Se V; om. P*]" (*QPol.* 1.1, fol. 8v P [2vb *Se*; 2va *V*; ed. 1513, 2rb]).

<sup>36</sup>"Nullus potest licite facere contra legem naturae; sed non evitare mortem ubi potest evitare est contra legem naturae {sed...naturae] *VE<sub>2</sub>; om. P* (homoioteleuton?)" (*QPol.* 1.1, fol. 7r P [1vb *V*; ed. 1513, 1vb]). Although this argument is *in oppositum*, Nicholas accepts it (ibid., *conclusio secunda* [ed. 1513, fol. 1vb–2ra]). He repeats the idea that aiming to preserve one's life is in accordance with the natural law in *QPol.* 3.8 (ed. 1513, 37ra–b).

<sup>37</sup>John of Legnano (c. 1320–1383), who was a doctor of canon and civil law in Bologna, discusses the issue in his *Tractatus de bello* (dated to 1360). Legnano's analysis appears to be influenced by Buridan: he repeats the two mortalist positions concerning self-sacrifice that Buridan discusses in his work – one that is Odonis' and the other Buridan's own – and he sides with Odonis *without* saying anything about Aristotle as an implicit believer in the afterlife. Thus, he implies that it is virtuous to flee in this case. See John of Legnano, *Tractatus de bello, de represaliis et de duello* (ed. Holland, trans. Brierly 1917), cap. 28, 109–10 (Latin), 251–52 (English). For the dating and biography, see Holland 1917, x–xxi. I thank Mikko Posti for pointing out the importance of this text to me.

follows natural reason,<sup>38</sup> but Nicholas maintains that this is not the case. This difference is nuanced, not the least because Nicholas does not think that the Aristotelian theory is true, but as I shall argue below, it is nevertheless important.<sup>39</sup>

The crucial difference between the believer and the Aristotelian is that belief in the afterlife alters one's normative evaluation in a radical way. In effect, the conception of true happiness is different: it requires life in one form or another, but one who believes in happiness in the afterlife (beatitude) does not give the same weight to this life as one who does not believe in it and accepts only eudaimonistic happiness in the form of a virtuous life. Also, the contents of the virtuous action are different. Nicholas thinks that for the Aristotelian eudaimonist, self-sacrifice is not virtuous because Aristotelian ethics encourages one to flee instead of standing and dying. By contrast, sacrificing oneself for the common good is virtuous for the believer if there is no other way to save the community. Nicholas does not of course think that the Aristotelian gets things right, but the theoretical difference is nevertheless significant, especially as Nicholas defends the idea that ignorance may, at least in some cases, remove moral culpability – that is, the intention of the agent is morally relevant.<sup>40</sup> Thus, he may even imply that the ignorant Aristotelian eudaimonist *is* virtuous when he flees, and not only that there is a respectable moral theory that states that the agent is virtuous when he flees. However, this is a complex matter that would require a detailed analysis of Nicholas' moral psychology, and it cannot be properly dealt with in the present context.

Be that as it may, there is also a common element between the two cases: both the believer and the non-believer act virtuously and for their own good, and the common good is not the most crucial element in their considerations. Nicholas' understanding of Aristotelian eudaimonism leads him to posit a case in which virtuous action does not promote the common good: without belief in the afterlife, it is virtuous to secure one's own life even at the expense of the good of the community and the common good.

As I suggested in the introduction, a real conflict between the common and individual good presupposes that there are cases in which either (1) virtuous action requires setting one's individual good aside, or (2) virtuous action does not promote the common good. Applying this suggestion to the case at hand entails that either dying for the community is virtuous but not good for the individual, or fleeing is virtuous even though it does not contribute to the common good. Now, consider the case of the Aristotelian: by keeping rank, he would promote the common good, but

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<sup>38</sup>For Henry and Godfrey, see Kempshall 1999, 171–73, 211–14; Marenbon 2019, 335–39; Henry of Ghent, *Quodlibet* 12.13 (ed. and trans. McGrade et al. 2001, 261); Godfrey of Fontaines, *Quodlibet* 10.6 (ed. and trans. McGrade 2001, 275, 283–84). For Odonis and Buridan, see footnote 25 above.

<sup>39</sup>Here again the context may have influenced Nicholas' analysis. Had he asked this question in relation to *EN* 9.8, he might have had difficulties in explaining how the argument fits Aristotle's view. However, because he raises the issue in a commentary on *Politics*, he can more easily defend an interpretation that does not explain how the crucial passage in *EN* 9.8 should be understood.

<sup>40</sup>*QPol.* 5.7 (ed. 1513, fol. 71va–72rb); *ibid.*, 5.15, fol. 78va–79rb.

his individual good calls for self-preservation. What is crucial is that the traditional way of overcoming this apparent conflict – appealing to virtue – does not apply in Nicholas’ interpretation of Aristotelian eudaimonism. So, when the situation is analysed purely on philosophical grounds, we have a clear case of position (2): virtuous action does not promote the common good.

The case of the believer is more traditional. If there is no other way to save the community, he should keep rank. He prefers a greater good in the afterlife to a lesser good, survival in this life. In doing this, he in fact promotes both his own good and the common good – the same action actualises both goods, and virtue accounts for the unity. Yet, Nicholas’ view is that also the believer should always aim for his individual good (virtue), but when defending the common good of a Christian community, the content of a virtuous action happens to be the preservation of the common good. Thus, we may conclude that in Nicholas’ analysis, it is actually the believer who comes close to Aristotle’s description of the virtuous person who sacrifices his life for the sake of the community (in *EN* 9.8) – with the obvious difference that Nicholas’ believer is motivated by the prospect of the afterlife, and with the less obvious difference that Nicholas approaches the question with a more pronounced distinction between the common and the individual good than what Aristotle had.

## 9.4 Killing Plato

We are finally in a position to turn to the question raised in the title of the present chapter: Is Socrates permitted to kill Plato? This discipulicide is not just a rhetorical device from my pen as it stems from an illustration that Nicholas uses when tackling a traditional moral problem that concerns capital punishment.<sup>41</sup> Medieval authors were torn between two clusters of ideas. On the one hand, they accepted the idea that killing is an intrinsically evil act, which was familiar to them not only from the sixth commandment of the Decalogue (“Thou shalt not kill”) but also, for instance, from *Nicomachean Ethics* 2.6.<sup>42</sup> On the other hand, there were several commonly accepted exceptions to the prohibition of killing. One such case is self-defense, which was not only a traditional theme but also one that continued to be highly relevant for moral and political theories well into the early modern period.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, killing another person was considered licit also when the common good is at stake, as in the case of capital punishment and just war.<sup>44</sup> The core idea is that the common good may justify actions that were otherwise considered morally

<sup>41</sup> It should be noted that the question is not related to the historical people. In medieval philosophical literature, the names Socrates and Plato were used as placeholders for unspecified individuals.

<sup>42</sup> *QPol.* 3.10 (ed. 1513, fol. 38va); *EN* 2.6, 1107a9–15 (trans. Ross 2009).

<sup>43</sup> See, e.g., Sreedhar 2008, 785–97; Haara 2020, 93–99. Nicholas places some restrictions on killing others for self-defense in *QPol.* 3.15 (the common good plays a central role).

<sup>44</sup> For a justification of killing in the context of a just war, see Russell 1975.

wrong. Thus, Nicholas' question concerning Socrates and Plato must be understood in light of the more general philosophical question concerning the relation between the common and individual good. A simple denial of killing is not enough as the question is more complicated.

One of the most important aspects of Nicholas' analysis is that he places a strong emphasis on the social status of the agent: Socrates is a private person, so he is never allowed to kill another private person, Plato. Only the ruler of the political community may use capital punishment, and there are certain limitations for him as well. The reason or motivation for killing is relevant as the ruler's personal feelings should not be involved, but also the notion of the common good plays a central role: if Plato sins but does not harm the common good (he is *malus in corde*), the ruler is not permitted to punish him.<sup>45</sup> Punishments serve a social role, not a moral one, and the purpose of political power is the advantage (*utilitas*) of the community.<sup>46</sup> Here the terminological choice that Nicholas makes is again significant as it shows that he understands the common good in terms of utility instead of more robust moral good.

These limitations notwithstanding, the ruler holds the right to use capital punishment. Here Nicholas turns to traditional arguments. He points out that human beings are parts of the community and ordered to the whole, much like the parts of the human body are to the body as a whole.<sup>47</sup> Since the task of the ruler is to secure the well-being of the whole, he may remove parts that are detrimental to the whole: "it is permitted to cut off a rotten part so that the whole body is not ruined".<sup>48</sup> In addition to this traditional justification of capital punishment that is based on upholding the common good, Nicholas justifies the killing of an individual by appealing to a change in the status of a wrongdoer:

A human being who sins, withdraws himself from the order of reason and by consequence recedes from human well-being and dignity, and falls into brutish servitude. This presupposition is evident because one is not called a human being according to the sensitive part and sensuality, but according to the rational part that operates according to right reason. As a corollary, it follows that as it is permissible to kill brute <animals> for human use, so it is

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<sup>45</sup>"[...] in politica aliquis potest esse dupliciter malus vel vitiosus: uno modo quod vitium suum noceat toti communitati; alio modo quod suum vitium sibi solum noceat, ut quod aliqui sunt mali in corde" (*QPol.* 3.10, fol. 74v P [38vb]).

<sup>46</sup>"[...] tota intentio principalitatis {V E<sub>2</sub>; principaliter P} in principatu civili vel politico debet versari principaliter circa utilitatem reipublicae et communitatis" (*QPol.* 3.10, fol. 74v P [44rb V; ed. 1513, 38vb]); "[...] tota intentio principis debet esse circa utilitatem communitatis" (*ibid.*, fol. 75r P [38vb–39ra]).

<sup>47</sup>"[...] quaelibet persona privata ordinatur ad totam communitatem sicut pars ad totum" (*QPol.* 3.10, fol. 74v P [38vb]). Cf. *de An.* 2.1, 412b17–22 (trans. Shields 2016); *Pol.* 1.2, 1253a18–24 (trans. Reeve 1998).

<sup>48</sup>"Ideo licitum est partem putridam in corpore abscindere ne totum corpus pereat" (*QPol.* 3.10, fol. 74v P [38vb]).

permissible to kill brutish humans for human advantage. For, in a moral sense, they are animals with respect to their souls.<sup>49</sup>

This idea resembles Aristotle's discussion of the brutish humans in book seven of *Nicomachean Ethics*, but the picture that Nicholas presents is in many ways different to the one we find in Aristotle.<sup>50</sup> First and foremost, here we have a sinner and not someone whose nature is completely corrupted. Such dehumanisation of wrongdoers is alarming to a modern ear, but it allows Nicholas to remove any doubt concerning the killing. There are no moral limitations for the ruler of the community, who is responsible for the realisation of the common good, to take the life of a wrongdoer.

By contrast, even though the wrongdoer places himself outside morality (indeed, outside humanity), the prohibition that a private person is not allowed to kill another private person still holds. Nicholas explains that.

those things belong to any private person, which concern the advantage of the community without injuring or causing harm to other private persons; and if it were the opposite, it is not permitted.<sup>51</sup>

Although this remark resembles classical formulations of the limits of negative liberty – everything that does not harm others is permitted – Nicholas is not proposing a universal rule for human action but rather setting limits for actions that aim for the common good. Acting for the sake of the common good is usually permissible and recommended. However, the situation changes if the action harms other individuals, and thus killing a wrongdoer is not something private persons may do. One reason for this limitation is that two private persons are equal in the sense that one is not set above the other; another is that one should never perform evil deeds to achieve good results, not even for the sake of the common good. The end does not justify the

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<sup>49</sup>“[...] homo in peccando ab ordine rationis recedit et per consequens ab humana salute et dignitate decedit, et in bestialem servitutem incidit. Patet suppositio, quia aliquis non dicitur homo secundum partem sensualem et secundum sensualitatem sed secundum partem rationalem operantem secundum rectam rationem. Correlarie sequitur quod sicut licitum est occidere propter usum hominum bruta <animalia> {E<sub>2</sub>; om. P V}, ita licitum est occidere propter utilitatem hominum homines brutales, quia animo sunt bestiae, moraliter loquendo” (*QPol.* 3.10, fol. 74v P [ed. 1513, 38vb]; see also *Ad 2*, fol. 39rb).

<sup>50</sup>*EN* 7.5, 1148b15–1149a21 (trans. Ross 2009); see also *Pol.* 1.2, 1253a27–33 (trans. Reeve 1998). The idea that sinners act irrationally and are like animals was made, e.g., by Thomas Aquinas (although he speaks of “human *dignity*”); see *ST* 2–2.64.2 (ed. Caramello 1948–50). Nicholas may also have in mind Aristotle's part/whole argument (*Pol.* 1.2, 1253a18–24 [trans. Reeve 1998]), according to which a human being who is not a part of the political community is not really a human; thus, just as it is good for the whole body to remove an injured eye to save the whole body, similarly there is no moral problem in killing someone who has ceased to be a human being.

<sup>51</sup>“[...] quilibet personae privatae pertinet illud quod respicit utilitatem rei publicae sine nocumento et laesione alicuius personae privatae; si oppositum fuerit, non est licitum” (*QPol.* 3.18, fol. 75r P [39ra]).



means.<sup>52</sup> Private persons are allowed to kill animals for food but, apparently, they are not allowed to cause harm to other people even if these have made themselves beastlike. Nicholas does not explain why a beastlike wrongdoer still retains the right of not being harmed by other private persons, but it is notable that the principle that one is allowed to promote the common good only if that does not harm other individuals reveals that the relation between the common and individual good cannot be understood in terms of inclusion. If individual good were unproblematically included in the common good, it would be impossible to further the latter while violating the former.

After making these moves, Nicholas is in a position to answer the question: Socrates is *not* permitted to kill Plato. But there is one exception:

However, one may argue against the foregoing view: Socrates sees that Plato wants to cause something bad for the whole community, namely to betray or destroy it; and if Socrates cannot find the ruler, then it is permissible for Socrates to kill Plato. I respond that in this case Socrates probably is permitted to kill Plato. And in this case, he does the killing not as a private person but as a public one.<sup>53</sup>

If Plato is doing something that harms the common good, thereby placing himself on par with nonhuman animals, and the ruler is nowhere to be found, Socrates ceases to be a private person, and he may act in the capacity of the ruler for the time being. Here, preserving the common good is an aim that gives rise to a complex reinterpretation of the normative situation, and killing another person becomes licit. But when these conditions are not met, we have another case in which acting for the common good is not virtuous for a private person. Even if Plato is about to act against the common good, Socrates must refrain from killing him because that is the virtuous course of action for him, presuming that the ruler takes care of saving the community from Plato's malice. Virtuous actions do not usually go against the common good, understood as the utility of the community; it is only when one sins that one harms the common good. But this does not go both ways: aiming for the common good might in some cases be against one's own good, understood in terms of virtue. Removing the rotten part is good for the community, but Nicholas thinks that if a private person went about killing wrongdoers, he would be harming another individual and thus doing an evil deed to reach a good aim, and that would not be good for him.<sup>54</sup> Killing Plato would be good for the community, but Socrates is not

<sup>52</sup> *QPol.* 3.10 (ed. 1513, fol. 39ra). It should be noted that Nicholas distinguishes acts that are bad in themselves from ones that are bad because they are forbidden by law. The latter may be occasionally done for the sake of the common good because the intention of the lawgiver is not to prohibit acts when failing to do them reduces the common good. See *QPol.* 1.1 (ed. 1513, fol. 1b).

<sup>53</sup> "Sed contra hoc aliquis diceret: nam videat Sor quod Plato vult et procurat malum toti communitati scilicet ipsam prodere vel comburere; et si Sor non potest principem invenire, tunc licitum est Sorti Platonem interficere. Respondetur probabiliter quod in illo casu licitum est Sorti interficere Platonem. Et in illo casu hoc non facit tanquam persona privato {om. *P*} sed ut persona communis" (*QPol.* 3.10, fol. 75r *P* [39ra]).

<sup>54</sup> Nicholas argues that killing another person is illicit precisely because it is an evil act (*actus malus*) – except when the person has done harm to the common good, thus falling from humanity, and capital punishment is imposed by the ruler (*QPol.* 3.10 [ed. 1513, fol. 38va–39rb]; esp. *Quod non 2, Conclusio responsiva*, and *Ad 2*).

allowed to do that because in this situation he should aim for his own good, virtue, instead of the common good.

Nicholas' argumentation concerning Socrates and Plato accentuates that there is a clear conceptual difference between the common good and the private good. Considering the common good is a distinct horizon, which directly concerns only the one who has been given the task to take care of it. As a matter of fact, the private good of the wrongdoer (Plato) overrules any considerations of the common good: the point about "negative liberty" shows that private persons should not place the common good above the private good of a sinner. Plato obviously should not have started terrorising the community, but when he did, there are several conditions that must be met before he can be killed in the name of the common good.

## 9.5 Conclusion

Nicholas' analysis of the relation between the common good and the good of an individual is highly complex, and the views he defends in different contexts may not form a coherent theory. However, he is quite consistent in suggesting that virtuous action does not always and necessarily promote the common good and that aiming for the common good is not always virtuous – which is the latter of the two possible ways in which the common and individual good may be separated from each other as mentioned in the introduction of this chapter. In this sense, Nicholas suggests a position in which the connection between morality and the common good is shaky, to say the least.

As we have seen, one of the clearest cases in which this connection is questioned is Nicholas' analysis of self-sacrifice for the common good. He claims that if we consider the question "Whether one should sacrifice one's life for the sake of the common good?" from a purely philosophical perspective, without presuming an afterlife, the answer is no. By arguing that belief in the afterlife makes a difference, Nicholas suggests that there are two different conceptions of morality, two distinct and incommensurable criteria for judging whether certain action is morally virtuous.

Although Nicholas does not treat the matter in these terms, the distinction between Aristotelian eudaemonism and true morality (which is here the Christian one) opens the door for a theoretical possibility to analyse the situation as a conflict between morality and the good of an individual – which is the first way to separate the common and individual good suggested above. In Nicholas' view, an Aristotelian eudaemonist strives for his individual good, but judging from the perspective of true morality, he should act for the common good and sacrifice himself. The crucial point is that the eudaemonist is not portrayed as someone who misunderstands what is the all-things-considered best choice for him in that situation. His mistake is on a higher level and appears only when we pit the two moral theories against each other. According to Nicholas, fleeing is good for the eudaemonist if individual good is considered without theological grounding; but if the situation is viewed from the perspective of Christian ethics, the eudaemonist fails to do what is morally right.

Following this line of thought, we may speculate about a possible development – which, I emphasise, we do not find in Nicholas’ work. This development involves three steps: first, accepting the idea that the individual good consists of securing one’s life; second, the idea that true morality requires sacrificing one’s life for the common good remains valid; third, rejecting the eudaemonist element of the latter view, that virtuous action is rewarded in the afterlife. It follows that morality becomes a matter of self-denial: the eudaemonist framework is replaced by a view that calls for limiting one’s self-interested aims in light of moral considerations that do not directly contribute to one’s own good. Whether this kind of development takes place in the subsequent history of moral philosophy is a question that goes beyond the scope of this chapter; but it clearly is a philosophical possibility.

The reason why I mention this hypothetical development is that medieval discussions – such as the one we see in Nicholas of Vaudémont – introduce new ways to understand the relation between the common and the individual good. The historical lesson we learn is that late medieval philosophers were deeply puzzled by this relation and considered it worthy of detailed philosophical scrutiny. Even though their departure from Aristotelian eudaemonism may not be obvious at first glance, they made several theoretical divisions and offered conceptual tools for a more detailed analysis of the relation, thus laying the ground for an explicit rejection of the eudaemonist framework.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>55</sup>This study was funded by the Academy of Finland.

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