

The Virtues of Golf, (Course) Management, and the Common Good

Stephen J. Laumakis
Professor of Philosophy
University of St. Thomas, Minnesota

Introduction

Except for publications dedicated to popular¹ audiences, there is little “professional” scholarly work that focuses on the intersection of philosophy, business, and athletics. As a result, the purpose of this essay is to consider the intersection of philosophy, and in particular, ethics, (business) management, and the common good in relation to the game of golf. More specifically, I am interested in the virtues (or excellences of character) that one needs in order to manage their own game (and their entire life), and simultaneously promote the flourishing of the other members of their foursome (and their community). In other words, I want to use the game of golf, and the set of practices required in order to play well, as well as the broader idea of course management in order to see how these contribute not only to the common good of your foursome but also how these same ideas can be transferred to the rest of your everyday life.

This essay begins by rehearsing the basic elements of an Aristotelian-Thomistic conception of virtue ethics and the natural law, and then applies these philosophical ideas to the game of golf. It then considers the basic principles of business management and applies these principles to the game of golf and golf course management. Finally, it considers the concept of the common good (and several formulations of it) and applies it to your foursome. In short, I plan to offer advice about how some basic philosophical ideas and business principles can be fruitfully and strategically applied not only to your golf game, but also, and most importantly, to your everyday life.

Virtue Ethics and the Natural Law

The basic features of Aristotelian-Thomistic virtue ethics and their conceptions of the natural law are remarkably clear and easy to understand.

According to Aristotle and Aquinas, the central focus or question of ethics² and morality is how to go about making or becoming good human beings. In other words, ethics is about trying to determine what kind(s) of actions help(s) human beings flourish and achieve their end, goal, or *telos*, and consequently be the best kind of thing that they are. In short, ethics is anchored in the metaphysics of the human person and what it takes for one to be a good human person.

Both Aristotle and Aquinas believe that human actions³ are goal-directed activities, and so it is useful to begin by starting with the aim, goal, or *telos* of human actions—the good. In Aristotelian-Thomistic virtue ethics “the good” is defined as that at which all human actions are aimed, or in other words, it is the target of our moral actions. According to Aristotle and Thomas, there are many possible ends or goals or targets to aim at, including: money, power, fame, material possessions, and happiness. Yet they both maintain that one of these ends, namely, happiness or *eudaimonia*—which they define as an activity of the soul in accord with virtue or excellence, or more clearly as “human flourishing”—is not only not a means to another end, but also the final end or *telos*⁴ at which all human actions are directed, precisely because it is chosen for itself and not for anything beyond itself. In fact, they insist that this ultimate end for human actions—human flourishing/*eudaimonia*—is tied to our nature as rational animals, that is, beings who are composed of the hylomorphic⁵ union of a material body and a rational soul.

So if we begin with a conception of the human person as a rational animal composed of a material body and a rational soul, with a composite nature directed at the characteristic activity of rational thought and contemplation, whose ultimate end is happiness or doing its characteristic activity (i.e., thinking or contemplating) well or in accordance with excellence/*arete*, or more precisely with virtue, then we can distinguish between actions and dispositions or habits that will help the human person achieve its end⁶ or hit its target, and other kinds of actions and dispositions or habits that will not help the human person realize their ultimate goal or happiness. The former character traits are known as virtues, and the latter are known as vices.

Aristotle and Aquinas’s common conception of the natural law involves practical, universal judgments about the rightness or wrongness of human actions as known by human reason alone. In other words, they think that certain kinds of human actions, as known by human reason, are objectively morally wrong. It is

useful to think of Aristotle's conception of the natural law as the "higher moral law" that all social activists (i.e., M. L. King, Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, etc.) appeal to when they claim that particular human and civil laws are unjust and contrary to the human good.

While Thomas Aquinas accepts the basic features of Aristotle's conception of the natural law, his own account of this law understands it as the rational creature's participation in the eternal law—or God's law for governing all of creation. In other words, since God has created the world in accordance with divine wisdom (eternal law), and revealed the divine law (in the Hebrew Scriptures with the Mosaic Law and in the New Testament in the teachings of Jesus) in order to help humans achieve their ultimate end and happiness with God in the next life, God also helps us determine the morality of actions not covered by these other kinds of law. In Thomas's account, our rational understanding of the principles of human morality is referred to as the natural law. Thomas also insists that our human or positive laws (civil law) are to be judged by their conformity with the higher natural law, divine law, and ultimately with the eternal law. As a result, it should be clear that both thinkers share a conception of morality and ethics that is about trying to determine objectively what kind of actions help a human being flourish and achieve their end, goal, or *telos*, and consequently be the best kind of human person they can be. In short, ethics is anchored in the metaphysics of the human person and what it takes for one to be a good human person.

Virtue Ethics, Natural Law, and Golf

When we turn our attention to the game of golf and how it is played, it should be clear how the game can be helpfully understood from both the point of view of virtue ethics as well as from the vantage point of natural law theory. Let's begin with what I will call the "Virtue Theory of Golf."

As we have seen, the goal or target or aim of virtue theory in ethics is to produce a good and flourishing human person. So when we apply this theory to the game of golf, we can say that the aim of golf is to produce a good golfer. But what makes one a good golfer? For some, a good golfer is anyone who consistently shoots good scores and/or consistently beats their opponents. For others, a good golfer is someone who not only knows the rules of golf but also plays by them. For still others, a good golfer is a playing companion who makes playing the game enjoyable, even when they are not playing well, but especially when you are not playing your best. And I am sure the reader can probably think of some other ways their playing partner might be considered a "good golfer."

However, both Aristotle and Aquinas would argue that there is, properly speaking, just one way to be a good and flourishing golfer, and that way involves both knowing how to and actually hitting the right shot, in the right way, at the right time, in the right circumstances in order to achieve the ultimate goal of golf, which is shooting the lowest score while playing the game in accordance with its constitutive rules. Failing to play in accordance with the rules would mean that you are not actually playing the game of golf (as constituted by its rules), and being successful by way of luck or chance or what is commonly referred to as the rub of the green, is not to be a good golfer, properly speaking, but merely accidentally—as when one hits an approach shot off of a rake that was in a bunker, and the ball miraculously not only ends up on the green but also somehow finds the bottom of the cup after ricocheting off the flag stick (or any other versions of what are commonly called “lucky shots”).

What makes one a good golfer, on this view, is an acquired set of good habits or virtues that allow one both to know what shot is called for in any given situation and to possess the ability (acquired through hours of practice!) to execute the appropriate shot in the same way as the acknowledged masters of the game. For example, it means practicing flop shots until one is able to hit them like Phil Mickelson does, or practicing bunker shot until one is able to play them the way Seve Ballesteros did or Luke Donald or Paula Creamer do. In short, one becomes a good golfer by practicing the kinds of shots that good golfers execute, and then one executes them in the course of a good round.

The vices of golf, as one can imagine, are the bad habits that prevent one from exercising good golf shots in the course of a round. These bad shots, as every bad golfer knows, include: hooks, slices, topping the ball, hitting it fat, under or over clubbing, the wrong grip, the wrong address, an improper backswing, an improper pivot, coming over the top, coming in too steeply, lifting your head, and, more generally, simply failing to hit the appropriate shot at the time it is needed. These vices also include not knowing the rules of golf, and violating them even when you know them—for example, taking a mulligan or using a foot wedge to escape from behind a tree or otherwise improve a bad lie.

A natural-law perspective on the game of golf, on the other hand, would say that the game itself is constituted by its constitutive rules and that violations of the rules mean either that you are not actually playing the game, or that the attendant penalties must be applied to your score. Of course, competitors could always agree to stipulate some changes to the rules for the purposes of a given competition, but again, any violation of the “new rules” means either that you are not actually playing the game as specified by your agreement, or that the attendant penalties must be applied to your score. Nevertheless, there is an objective set

of rules that specify what is or is not permitted in order for one to be playing the game in the appropriate way.

So much for the “ethics” of golf; we now turn to the business and management side of the game.

Principles of Management

Like almost every other arena of business, the field of business management has undergone significant changes, especially in response to the application of scientific and social scientific findings and principles. At its most basic level, management is both the study of the principles of social organization and organizational leadership, and the application of this kind of knowledge⁷ to the administration of the organization in question. It is possible to distinguish two different historical forms of management and three basic theories of management.

The earliest form of management study and practice⁸ presupposed a conception of human persons, organizational members, and laborers as lazy, unmotivated individuals who need to be watched, motivated, and held accountable for their weaknesses and actions. A more recent view of management studies⁹ holds a very different view of the person. According to this view, people are actually self-motivated and want to succeed, and so managers need to understand this and learn how to direct these motivated individuals toward the ends or goals of their organizations.

These two historical management views of the human person have led to three distinct theories of business management. The first theory of management, which tends to see each individual person as a cog¹⁰ in a complex organizational machine, employs a “scientific” conception of business management. On this theory, management focuses on how jobs, work, and incentive schemes can be designed to improve both the efficiency and productivity of the organization or business using industrial engineering methods and practices. The second theory of management accepts the more recent view of human persons as rational, self-motivated, and self-interested utility maximizers who want to succeed, and, as a result, it conceives of organizations not as machines with human and material cogs, but rather as systems of interdependent human beings who share a common interest in the survival and effective functioning of the organization or business. Finally, a third theory of management extends this interdependent view of the human beings who compose the organization or business to the organization and the relationship that exists between the organization itself and the environment in which it exists. On this theory, the purpose of management is to coordinate the fit or alignment between the business or organization and

the environment within which it has come into existence and on whose features it interdependently relies. In other words, on this theory, management is about cultivating and enhancing the social, political, and economic relationships that constitute the environment in which the business and organization have not only come into being but also in which they continue to survive and flourish. This particular theory clearly shares important features with both the traditional Buddhist notion of *paticca-samuppada* or interdependent arising or dependent origination (as a theory of causation) and deep ecology (as a holistic view of the ecosystem) in environmental ethics and environmental philosophy. On this view, the organizational or business environment is viewed as a network or web of contextual forces and factors—in ongoing interactions—in both the internal and external environment of the organization or business.

In addition to these theories of management, and the historically changing views of management studies and its conceptions of human beings, there have also been evolving conceptions and changing perspectives on the basic purposes of a business. It is to these views that we now direct our consideration.

What Is a Business For?

Like the changing views of the human person and the competing theories of business management discussed in the previous section, there have been correspondingly evolving perspectives on the basic purpose of a business. It is customary in the literature of professional scholarly journals in business to distinguish three main views of the purpose of a business: first, the managerial view; second, the shareholder view; and third, the stakeholder view. Not surprisingly, each of these unique views of the purpose of a business depend on a specific view of the human person and their relationship to the business or company.

According to the managerial view, which is based on the view of the person as a cog in the machine of the business, and whose manager's job is to advance the efficiency and productivity of the business using industrial engineering methods and "scientific" practices, the business is quite literally a mechanism for converting raw materials into products to sell to customers. The shareholder view, on the other hand, looks beyond the relationships of workers and the raw materials and the efficiencies involved in the business *per se*, and instead employs an economic framework where the job of the top managers is to produce the highest possible stock market valuation of the business's assets. In other words, the purpose of the business is to make money for those who have invested in it. The third and final view of the purpose of a business is the stakeholder view. According to this most common view, a business exists as a nested set of relationships that include

various and multiple groups all with at least some kind of vested interest in the survival and ongoing existence of the business. These stakeholders include the business leaders, managers, employees, customers, suppliers, and everyone and everything else that is affected by the business and its operations. This obviously broader and more expansive view of what constitutes a business also includes a richer and more complex conception of the purpose of a business, because it includes all those with a stake in its existence.

Principles of Golf Course Management

I think it should be rather obvious that the principles of golf course management assume that human persons and golfers are rational, self-motivated, and self-interested utility maximizers who want to succeed even in the face of a game that is not only virtually impossible to master but also has been described by Mark Twain as “a good walk spoiled.” As a result, golf course management, like business management, depends on how you think about the game.

One possibility is to see the game as a series of discrete actions—that is, gripping the club, taking a stance, driving the ball, hitting long iron shots, hitting short iron shots, playing from the sand, recovering from a wayward shot, chipping, and putting—whose ultimate success depends on the successful completion of each individual component. A second approach sees the game itself as a whole, whose overall quality depends on one’s ability to adjust their thinking and shot-making to the current circumstances in which one finds oneself and one’s ball. This more pragmatic view recognizes that a perfect round is virtually impossible, and so one has to learn how to deal with the practically unavoidable bad shots and bad lies. A third view sees the game as just one (enjoyable?) part of one’s entire life, and tries to appreciate it and the accompanying beauty of the course and its setting as a leisurely and relaxing walk (*pace* Twain) through nature and a reenergizing break from the demands of ordinary life. This approach to course management takes the widest or broadest conception of the game and its place in a well-ordered and flourishing life. It takes a “big picture” view of both the point and purpose of life as well as the point and purpose of the game, especially if you happen not to be a professional golfer. I am sure reflective, thoughtful readers can easily think of other ways to manage their games in light of other ways they might think about the meaning and purpose of the game of golf and its place in their lives.

The Common Good

At this point it should not be surprising to hear that there is not a single agreed-upon concept of the “common good.” Historically, philosophers, theologians, economists, and political scientists have had sometimes competing and often inconsistent descriptions of what they understand the common good to encompass.

For the sake of simplification and easy classification, we can distinguish two broad categories of conceptions of the common good. On the one hand, there are substantive definitions that consider the common good to be the goods that are shared by all and that benefit all of the members of a given community, for example, clean air, clean water, and other natural resources. On the other hand, there are procedural definitions that see it as that which is achieved or produced by all as the outcome of a given community’s collective efforts and participation, for example, education, knowledge, and national defense. Nevertheless, on either conception, the common good may refer to public goods, public interests, the sum of individual goods, what benefits the whole vs. what benefits the individual, and more generally, according to Catholic social teaching, “the sum of those conditions of social life which allow social groups and their individual members relatively thorough and ready access to their own fulfillment.”¹¹

On this last understanding, the “common good” refers to the social conditions that allow people to reach their individual fulfillment, and it also specifies their end as the good that is sought by all human beings precisely because of the kind of thing that human persons are—social animals whose proper end or goal or aim in life is flourishing with other human persons.

It should also be noted that this same notion of interdependent arising and interdependent flourishing that Western ideas of the common good share with non-Western views can be found in both Chinese and Buddhist conceptions of human goods and human flourishing. In fact, it would not be an exaggeration to suggest that the concept of the common good, like the game of golf itself, is indeed a worldwide phenomenon. How this useful idea can be fruitfully applied to your own foursome is the subject of the last section of this essay.

The Common Good of Your Foursome

Given the different and competing conceptions of the common good just noted, it should not be difficult to distinguish at least two different understandings of the common good of your foursome. On the one hand, the common good of your foursome is the rather intuitive idea that all of the members of your group are doing well and playing well, because all the members of the group are playing

well and quite literally feeding off of the successes of the other members of the foursome. In fact, professional golfers often talk about feeding off of the good vibes being generated by an opponent with whom they are playing who happens to be playing well. The same thing can also be experienced in a nonprofessional setting when members of your foursome are playing well; good play can be and often is infectious, especially when you are pulling for one another. One might reasonably think of this as the procedural or aggregate view of the common good of your foursome.

On the other hand, the substantive or collective view of the common good of your foursome is the fellowship and comradery of the group that exists independent of how either the particular members of the group are playing or how well you are playing as a group. This sense of your foursome's common good is rooted in the fact that you genuinely like playing with one another and is rooted in the fellowship and friendships of the foursome—even prior to playing the game. In a certain sense, it is the condition for the possibility of playing as a foursome in the first place, because it is the reason why you look forward to and actually want to play with one another to begin with.

Although either conception of the common good of your foursome is a good in itself and pleasant to experience, as I am sure all those who have played golf for any significant amount of time know; nevertheless, there is something intrinsically and more profoundly fulfilling about the latter conception because it is rooted in both the friendships of the foursome and, if only occasionally, the excellence of playing the game well. And the same considerations, *mutatis mutandis*, can be said about and applied to business and corporate relationships, especially when they can incorporate the game of golf into their network of relationships. In fact, it is precisely for this reason that some basic philosophical ideas and business principles can be fruitfully and strategically applied not only to your golf game but also and most importantly to your everyday life.

Notes

1. See, for example: The Philosophy of Popular Culture Series from the University of Kentucky Press, which includes: *Golf and Philosophy*; *Basketball and Philosophy*; *Baseball and Philosophy*; *Football and Philosophy*; see also Open Court Publishing Company's Popular Culture and Philosophy series, which includes, *The Simpsons and Philosophy*; *The Matrix and Philosophy*; and *Harry Potter and Philosophy*; and the Blackwell Philosophy and Pop Culture Series, which includes *Wonder Woman and Philosophy*; *X-Men and Philosophy*; *Spider-Man and Philosophy*; and *The Hunger Games and Philosophy*.
2. Virtue ethics is not about producing the greatest amount of happiness or pleasure for the greatest number (as it is in Utilitarianism or Consequentialism), nor is it about fulfilling one's duty or obligations (as it is in the Deontological ethics of Kant).
3. At least those in the sphere of morality, properly speaking. Thus, they distinguish human actions, which involve intention, free will, and rational choice, from "acts of a man," which involve involuntary actions, such as acts of digestion, the beating of the heart, and knee-jerk bodily reactions and passive sensory perceptions.
4. Aristotle insists that happiness or the ultimate end consists in the rational activity of philosophical contemplation. Thomas, on the other hand, distinguishes two kinds of happiness: natural happiness, which coincides with Aristotle's account of philosophical contemplation, and, second, supernatural happiness, which consists of the beatific vision of God in the afterlife.
5. Aristotle and Thomas are committed to the view that a human being is a single substance, composed of two metaphysical principles: matter, which is a principle of individuation and potency, and form, which is a principle of determination, making the substance be the kind of thing it is—and yet neither principle is a complete thing or substance in its own right (as, for example, Plato, Descartes, and any dualist would typically maintain). Moreover, in the case of living things—that is, plants, animals, and human beings—the form of the composite or its substantial form is also known as the soul. There are, on their view, three distinct kinds of souls: vegetative souls in plants, sensitive souls in animals, and rational souls in human beings. These forms or souls are part of the nature of the being in question. In other words, they help explain why each kind of being—a plant, an animal, or a human being—does the kinds of characteristic things it does, since *agere sequitur esse*—action follows being, or more generally, a being does the kinds of characteristic things it does precisely because it is the kind of being it is. So, in the case of plants, the vegetative soul explains why it grows, takes in nourishment, and reproduces. In the case of animals, the sensitive soul explains why it not only grows, takes in nourishment, and reproduces, but also moves, and has sense experiences. Finally, in the case of human beings, the rational soul explains why humans do all of the activities of plants and animals, and also are able to engage in rational thought.

6. Happiness, flourishing, or philosophical contemplation in this life, for Aristotle, and the contemplative life of the beatific vision in the next life, for Thomas.
7. Ranjay Gulati, Anthony J. Mayo, Nitin Nohria, *Management: An Integrated Approach*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Cengage Learning, 2017).
8. Douglas McGregor, *The Human Side of Enterprise* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1960).
9. McGregor, *The Human Side*.
10. Think, for example, of Charlie Chaplin in *Modern Times*.
11. Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* (December 7, 1965), 26.