In Search of the Good Society

What constitutes the ‘Good Society’ and how can we flourish as individuals within its structures and institutions?

Professor Maeve Cooke, UCD School of Philosophy, has spent decades reflecting on the best imaginable form of social order and how to improve existing societies in light of it.
Ireland needs to move away from warehousing asylum seekers and towards a system that respects the civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights of asylum seekers.

Dr Liam Thornton
UCD Sutherland School of Law

Professor Maeve Cooke
UCD School of Philosophy

"Probably until I die, I will be working out what I think the Good Society is and what we can do to achieve the social conditions necessary for human flourishing."

Professor Maeve Cooke
UCD School of Philosophy
In Search of the Good Society

What we need in order to flourish as human beings and the kind of society that is required for this purpose has been a central theme in the writings of Professor Maeve Cooke.

Engaging with the work of earlier and contemporary thinkers, she explores the question of what a good society might look like — a society that would place importance on the flourishing both of each individual human being and of the social order as a whole. She regards this as an issue that is relevant to every person on the planet.

Exploring possibilities for an alternative path to social development was the main concern of a group of critical social theorists that came to be known as the ‘Frankfurt School’. The group’s initial base was an independent institute set up in Germany in the 1920’s to foster critical thinking against the backdrop of the turbulent growth of capitalist societies, and the socialist regimes emerging in response to them.

Taking her lead from this body of theory Professor Cooke initially intended to present her own vision of the social conditions necessary for human flourishing in what became her 2006 book, Re-Presenting the Good Society. But the philosophical complexities of what is involved in theorising about social change for the better forced her to “take a step backwards”.

The critically-acclaimed publication instead became primarily a reflection on theorising about the Good Society.

Professor Cooke, a social and political philosopher in UCD School of Philosophy, stresses the importance of critical theorising as a contribution to social change for the better; at its best such theorising is enlightening and illuminating; it opens our eyes to the socially produced obstacles hindering our flourishing as human beings and invites us to imagine alternative, better social orders. However, she also points out that in contemporary social theorising there are multiple ideas of the Good Society, often merely implicit ones. Even within Frankfurt School critical theory there are very different imaginative projections of a better social order and very different views as to how—or indeed, whether—it could be achieved. How do we evaluate the merits of these competing pictures? Professor Cooke urges critical social theories to recognise the contestability of their critical diagnoses and visions of an alternative, better society, and to take seriously the challenge of defending them with reason in the public domain.

Professor Cooke continues her project to present an enlightening and illuminating picture of human flourishing within a Good Society. However, it remains very much an ongoing endeavour and, in her view, is likely...
always to do so: “Probably until I die, I will be working out what I think the Good Society is and what we can do to achieve the social conditions necessary for human flourishing,” she says.

Decades of research, however, have enabled Professor Cooke to identify elements she regards as indispensable for a Good Society.

At its core must be institutions and policies that foster individual freedom, not “a perniciously individualist freedom” but the kind that individuals can have only “through their interactions with others”.

Connecting individual flourishing to the flourishing of other people, she says, requires a kind of society that would ensure that every human being is respected for their capacity to form and pursue their own ideas of what it is to lead a good life. In addition, it would make the substance of ideas of the good life a matter of public reflection and discussion.

She has come to appreciate the central role of institutions in shaping our identities, from the family, through sports clubs, schools, churches and workplaces, to the administrative, legal and political bodies that govern our lives as members of society. She points out that all these institutions can also be obstacles to human flourishing and must, therefore, be seen as open to criticism and transformation.

“This is a firm conviction of mine and is based on my view that our identities, together with our capacity for freedom, are always open to development, and that we are formed by the institutions in which we live,” she says.

Institutions, likewise, are always open to development. Thus, it is always a two-way process.

Furthermore, she believes that the legal and political principles constituting the State, and regulating life within it, should be a matter of deep concern to citizens (broadly understood). She cannot conceive of a Good Society in which there wouldn’t be democratic citizen engagement and efforts to work together to determine collective goods, even a “common good”. But she cautions that the common good must be understood as permanently “under construction” by individuals and groups who hold divergent ideas of the good life and good society.

Moreover, it is important to bear in mind that politics is not always just about the Good Society but is often taken over by power interests, which “have to be contested and combated” in imaginative and effective ways.

Her more recent research focuses on the critical role played by acts of public protest such as civil disobedience and whistleblowing, particularly within a democratic context.

In a recently published paper ‘Civil Obedience and Disobedience’ she contends that civil disobedience should be thought of as a form of political protest that intentionally breaks the law for the sake of ethical transformation of the law and the system of political authority it enables.

“The transformation is ethically motivated in the sense that it aims to change society for the better, which I take to mean a social order more conducive to the flourishing of each of its members.”

Every legally regulated association – such as the State – must punish law-breaking. However, in her Good Society there would be laws and public policies that acknowledge the importance of acts of civil disobedience for the on-going endeavour to make existing society better in an ethical sense.

By contrast, whistleblowers don’t as a rule break the law but seek to highlight a discrepancy between the laws that are in force and actual observance of the law. Indeed, “whistleblowers are commendable for taking the law very, very seriously.” But they too are driven by ethical concerns for a better social order. Thus, the contribution of whistleblowers to making society more conducive to human flourishing should also be acknowledged and reflected in laws and public policies.

While she doesn’t see herself as having any specific or direct role to play in policymaking, Professor Cooke believes that the kind of work she and her fellow social and political philosophers do should have an indirect impact on public policy.

She has contributed to public fora on constitutional reform, she regularly organises public discussions on matters of social and political concern at the Royal Irish Academy and her books and published papers have enjoyed international critical acclaim and global distribution.

My role is primarily to offer an orientation, a way of thinking about questions relevant to the Good Society and show the importance of thinking about these questions.

Professor Maeve Cooke
UCD School of Philosophy