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Social life and the enigma of the relationship: the paradox of relational goods

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Abstract. Social relationships always contain enigmas, since they must relate the different, i.e. single persons or collective subjects, who are puzzles for each other. Solving these puzzles means solving the relationship paradox, which consists in being able to unite the different ones while *at the same time* promoting their diversity. This challenge is faced and won in the creation of relational goods, which are answers to paradoxes. So much so that the probability of having relational evils is much greater than that of having relational goods. The latter consist of relationships created by subjects who realize that they can obtain certain goods only if they produce them and use them together with others. The very enigma of the relationship helps us to understand why these goods cannot be produced in any other way and do not have functional equivalents.

Keywords. Social relation, enigma, relational good, reflexivity, relational sociology.

THE TOPIC

Social life is made up of social relations which are always problematic because they have to relate the different, i.e. single persons or collective subjects, who are puzzles for each other. Solving the enigmas contained in social relations means being able to unite the diverse while at the same time maintaining their diversity. This is a task that modernity cannot accomplish, because for it the enigma of the relationship can only generate paradoxes. However, what I call *after*-modern society (beyond the post-modern) shows an inclination to solve these paradoxes through the creation of relational goods. The latter consist of relationships created by subjects who realize that they can obtain certain goods only if they produce them and use them together with others. Certainly, the probability of having relational evils remains higher than that of having relational goods. If we want to understand the society that is emerging before our eyes, that is the society that takes care of the environment and nature, which practices the green and circular economy, which regenerates the common goods, then we must learn how to solve the enigma of the relationship and produce relational goods.

THE RELATION AS AN ENIGMA

Where do we come from and where are we going? These primordial questions refer to relationships: the relationships that each one of us has with an origin and with a goal or with an end. In turn, the two terms of the origin and of the goal of human existence send us back to the problem of their mutual relationship, assuming that they cannot be completely separated from each other. And yet, we do not see these relationships, which are not only logical. In short, the relationships that bind us to our origin and our destiny are a big problem. The problem, really, is that we need to answer the question of our identity (who am I? who or what do I want to be?). Identity is formed in relation to something else, but this is precisely the point that is hard to deal with.

The difficulties in giving meaningful answers to these questions lie in the fact that the reasons for our existence are not made explicit; they remain obscure, silent, latent, if not completely empty, because we do not know how to relate to them. Reasoning on the causes and purposes of what makes us exist is almost always looking for something or someone who is concrete and easily identifiable, certainly not a relationship. The relationship is considered as a derivative, something that is residual, and in any case accidental and impalpable. This attitude seems natural. It is so, in fact, when it is not supported by a sufficient reflexivity. The reality, in fact, should be investigated with a certain reflexivity if we want to understand more of what it shows the naked eye. With observation of first order we do not go very far, we need to dig into the deeper layers of reality.

Knowing the relationship we have with what has generated us (and continues to beget us, that is, why we are the way we are) and what we are thrusting toward (who or what we want to be) is necessary not only to better identify the two terms, but also to understand what is *between them*, that is our concrete existence over time. Our existence remains obscure unless we investigate the hidden reality that is our relationship with what is relevant for us. Of course, addressing the relationships we have with others and with the world is difficult and often painful. If it is so, it is because there, in relationships, the enigmas of our lives lie.

The word *enigma* comes from the Latin *aenigma* -ātis, which in turn comes from the greek αἴνιγμα -ατος, on the theme of αἰνίσσασθαι : ‘to speak covertly.’ Reality speaks to us ‘covertly’, without uncovering itself, without telling us its secret. The enigma is expressed by a sentence of obscure meaning, an ambiguous or veiled expression, which proposes - through images and allusions - a concept, an inexplicable or incomprehensible entity, a mys-

tery, or even a word whose meaning has to be understood or even to be guessed. The enigma of human life lies in the fact that the relationship implies stepping out of ourselves to meet an Other who is unknown to us and with whom we do not know what to do.

The heart of the enigma that is inherent in human relationships is something that escapes us, that we fail to identify, because it does not have a name. We cannot grasp it. We feel that the relationship with ourselves, even before the one with the others, is an enigma. Most of the time we react thinking about how to avoid it, how to do away with it, or at least how to make it harmless, indifferent. These are examples of an impeded or fractured reflexivity.

For example, when an engaged or married couple do not understand each other anymore, the easiest thing is to get out of the relationship, since it seems that no reflexivity can be applied to it. Or when we meet on the street a poor man who asks for help, we feel embarrassed for the situation and our inability to relate to him, so we tend to avoid it. The same happens when we are confronted with someone who thinks the opposite of us, because the simple fact of having to confront someone is a vexatious experience that contains reasons (the enigma of the relationship) that we do not understand. In all these cases, we are unable to deal with the difference – the distance – that separates us from others. The difference is shunned, unless other factors turn it into open conflict in which we hope to have a certain outcome. Most often, however, under the pressure of postmodern culture, we learn how to immunize ourselves against the differences, to put them aside. This happens not only in liminal situations, as in the encounter with the immigrant who wanders the streets, with the homeless, with those who are captive of an addiction that they cannot get rid of, but it also happens in the most common situations of ordinary life, in families, in meetings at work, with friends.

I speak, therefore, of the everyday experience. For example, let’s think about what happens when we talk to other people. We turn toward the other, we exchange with them words, gestures, things. We do it thinking of ourselves and them as individuals, because we see individuals (or we think we see them) and we are not aware of the relationships that are in play. To know where we come from and where the others come from, and where each person is headed is something that is out of range. Too difficult and complicated to think that way. But the fact of ignoring these relationships leads, in the end, and, paradoxically, to be ‘out of ourselves’, rather than within ourselves. We think we are the one that is acting, while it is our relationships that are acting. We think

we are asserting our individuality, while it is the context that brings us elsewhere. We would like to say or do something, while the situational context makes us say or do something else.

Human life is hanging on the thread of relationships, those with ourselves, with others and with the world. Yet we care very little about those relationships. We use them, but do not think about them. While they are the ones, our relationships, that are the source of many of our daily dilemmas. It is from them, before than from the 'things', that we derive our happiness or unhappiness. They necessarily come into play when we need to make sense of situations and make choices. People, situations and 'things' certainly influence our destiny, but the way we relate ourselves to the world is decisive. When we feel 'thrown' against our will in the world, that's where the relationship takes the form of an enigma; it becomes an unanswered question.

The enigma can be simply expressed with this question: why must we live with others? Why, in order to realize what we love and what we want, do we have to go through the others we meet on our way? Why can human beings not live their life for themselves and in themselves, without having to relate to others?

When we have a hard contact with the world, then we feel something that is vexatious in the space that is 'in the middle' between us and the reality that surrounds us. If we run into a difficult situation, we realize that, before this impact, there was a distance that kept us away from that situation, and we did not think neither about it nor about its consequences. It happens when we learn of someone we know who committed suicide because he/she was left alone in front of a personal drama, or someone who lives near to us and has fallen into absolute poverty, when we learn about abuse and violence against the weak, and in general of violation of human rights and catastrophic situations. Only then do we realize, because we 'feel' it, that there is such a thing as 'a (contextual) relationship' with the world to which we had not paid enough attention.

If it happens that a person, maybe a friend, wrongs us (i.e., our *I* bumps into a wall), we realize that - beyond the behavior of the Other - there is something else at stake: it is '*what is between us*'. This something certainly depends on how we behave ourselves and how others behave, but it demands to be considered separately, in and of itself, because it exists and goes beyond our intentions. It is a reality that demands attention in itself and for itself. In fact, when we ask "what must I do?" we are actually asking ourselves "do I have to continue to stay in the relationship or shall I get out?", "What am I to make of this relationship?", "How do I deal with this

space-time between me and the other?". We react to individuals, but the game is about relationships, even if this happens unconsciously.

THE ENIGMA AND THE WESTERN MODERNITY

Western modernity has exalted the *Self* at the expense of its relationships (*Cogito ergo sum*). It thought it could forge social relationships at will. Even when it thought and thinks in systemic terms, 'the system' is intended as a tool for liberation of what is called the individual *Subject*. Modernity has refused and continues to refuse to answer to what I call the enigma of the relationship, which consists of having to understand if and how we can find something in common or a convergence between opposite positions, or at least whether and how to compose different subjects especially when the differences seem incompatible and insurmountable (*les différends qui nous opposent*). When modernity has tried to give an answer, it has created new problems, either because the answer was that of a clash, or of established and then betrayed contracts, or even of strategy games that ended badly.

Eventually, modernity has removed the reality - that is, the space-time dimension - of social relations, to create an infinite number of relationships, all virtual, all possible in other ways, so that we can play with them. In the end, modernity has become a play on social relationships as enigmas. Post-modernity loves to treat relationships like riddles that are its irrational passion, according to the famous saying of F. W. Nietzsche: "*Et quid amabo nisi quod aenigma est?*" (What will I love if not what is an enigma?).

'Fatal strategies', as Jean Baudrillard says? 'Functionalist dynamic', as Luhmann says? We can find the explanation already in the Greek myth, represented by Perseus, who managed to survive because he had adopted a precise relational strategy, which was to avoid the deadly gaze of the Gorgons (the enigma) through a continual change of position, in order to never cross the gaze of the Gorgon (Luhmann 1990a). Not surprisingly, the prevalent culture today recommends this way of life (Luhmann calls it 'Euryalistic') as a solution to be adopted when we meet the enigma of the relationship: it is that way of relating to others that believes that we cannot and should not have any certainty in the face of problems. It is argued that we cannot and we should not speak of 'truth', because all answers to problems are temporary, indefinite, uncertain, relative and linked to a particular time and a particular point of view. Changing the relationship becomes the substitute for the search for truth.

The solution of the problems, then, is found in avoiding problems, in the ability to avoid them, waiting for the problems (enigmas) to dissolve by themselves (without being 'resolved'). Consequently, our ways of life undergo an increasingly radical crisis, made of existential emptiness and loneliness. The society of the twenty-first century will not be able to find new reasons to exist if it is not able to address and respond to the enigma of the relationship.

In this contribution, I would like to try to understand if and how this is possible. While, on one hand, we note that modernity continues its path of erosion of human relationships, on the other hand we see always more resurface the need for new forms of sociability, in which we can live with confidence, cooperation, and reciprocity among people. Some will say that these are fantasies, dreams, utopia devoid of hope and meaning. I will try to explain why things are not exactly like that. This is not about re/launching some abstract utopia, but to read the signs of new historical dynamics that bring social relationship at the center of the time in which we are entering.

The relationship becomes the solution rather than the problem. If it is true that social relationships create enigmas and that enigmas contain paradoxes, some solvable and other unsolvable, then we must learn to manage the paradoxes (a paradox is constituted by self-reference and indeterminacy). The unsolvable paradoxes can be addressed not only by accepting the absolute relativism for which it is enough to change constantly and endlessly our viewpoint to be able to avoid the problems (the Luhmannian 'Euryalistic'), but also in other ways. For example by adopting 'counter-paradoxical' strategies. When we are caught in a double bind, the counter-paradoxical response consists first in assuming an attitude of compassion towards the double bond that oppresses us, and then in separating the two bonds that contradict each other, redefining them as relations to another term and, therefore, completely changing their initial relationship.

For example, it is easy to see that today's culture requires us as a moral imperative that you 'must be free', 'you have to be yourself, freeing yourself from any constraint', 'you do not have to depend on anything but yourself'. This requirement is a double bind because it enjoins us to act in a way that is caught in a trap from which we cannot get out: in fact, if we act freely (with total spontaneity), we are actually obeying the precept, and if, conversely, we fulfill the precept (we act out of duty), we are not free. In both cases freedom is unavailable. We must, over all, smile in front of this cultural injunction, and then redefine freedom as choosing on

whom to depend instead of denying any dependency. This means to refuse the semantic code of late modernity which requires that the identity of Ego should be found in denying everything that is different from Ego [A = not (non-A)] (on this semantic see Donati 2011: 70-71). In fact, there is no human being that does not depend on other human beings, and of course on the many relationships that goes with it. A pure dependence on one's own *Self* is called narcissism, leading to self-consumption. Consequently, moral obligation is redefined as the authenticity of the choices of dependency that we make, and how we accept the consequences. Our act is free as it consists in the choice of meaningful relationships with the world.

It is a matter of exploring a new horizon. We need a culture of inter-human relations that is capable of generating forms of social life which are such as to put people in a position to know and be able to respond creatively to the inevitable enigmas of living together.

THE REALITY OF THE ENIGMA

I will begin by proposing some sociological riddles.

What is that reality for which a person is someone (and not 'something') to another person, but not as an individual? For example, in everyday language we say: this person is my mother or my father, my brother or sister, my friend, my colleague, my neighbour, a member of my association, a person I meet at the pub or at the park, and so on, referring to a meaning that is not about the individual qualities of that person. What is this reality that a certain person is significant to me, but not for his or her individual qualities?

It is, in fact, the enigma contained in each relationship. This is true even with our parents or our children, with our colleagues, with our acquaintances or those we know better, who are significant to me not only for their peculiar individual qualities, but also - and in a distinct manner - for the kind of relationship that link each of them to me. *It is the causal qualities and properties of the relationships with these people that make them meaningful for me*, regardless of how I feel and how I judge their personal qualities. The enigma alludes to something difficult to understand, to a reality that we do not see with the naked eye, but that exists. For example. John and Maggie are children of their parents beyond the personal qualities of these parents. Or: we work with Tom and we live close to Mary, who are significant to us beyond the fact that we like them more or less, because we share work and neighborly relationships. But who sees these relationships?

What is this reality that belongs to two or more persons, and only to them, but does not belong to any of them considered separately? What are we actually talking about?

A person is something for another person regardless of his or her individual qualities by the fact that there is a bond that unites them. There is a reality that belongs to two people, and only to them, without being owned by any of them. It is the relationship that is 'between' them. Apparently, it unites them as a constraint, but up to a certain point, because they are reflexive, and therefore still distinct. The bond unites them for something that is not individual, but which comes into existence only through individual agency. The relationship, in fact, unites and holds people separate at the same time. This reality depends on the individuals, because they are the ones who accept it or not, and act in it or not. But it cannot be understood as an individual act or fact. The enigma of human social relations is precisely in this: it is made 'by' individuals, but it is not made 'of' individuals.

The child who is born is a person, but his or her existence is the product of a relationship between those who generated him or her. This generative relationship cannot be understood as a fact or an act of two individuals (or more individuals in the case of the use of artificial techniques), because it is their relationship that generated the child, not the sum of individual acts that were needed to conceive. The enigma lies in this *difference* (the 'gap') between the contribution of the individuals and the emerging effect. The individuals deem they generate the emerging fact, but it is not like that. It is there where the riddle lurks. The workers of a company believe they create the company, the members of a family believe that they are creating their family, the members of an association believe they are the ones building the association, the members of a social street think that it is their product, but it is not so. The company, the family, the association, the social street is an emerging effect that goes beyond the single acts of the participants, beyond their intentions and expectations. There is a 'third party' at work. In sociology, this 'third' was made explicit firstly by Georg Simmel, who defined it as 'effect of reciprocity' (*Wechselwirkung*) (Fitzi 2012). In this 'third party' which is between the individuals and the facts that they generate is the enigma of the relationship.

The reality of our relationships with others questions us and makes us restless because we know that the relationship goes its own way, does not obey the individual intents. We wonder why certain things happen in the social context in which we live, and often we impute them to individuals, and other times to the structures. But the structures do not act alone, while individuals

realize that social phenomena go far beyond their intentions and expectations. What happens is like a puzzle. Take for example the social movements, such as the anti-global or the so-called 'Arab Spring' movements. The collective movements of this type are produced by masses of people who seem to agree on their intents and objectives, but in all the historical cases what happens never corresponds to their intentions and objectives, except in their conflictual and destructive dimension. I am not referring to the well-known theory of the unintentional ('perverse') consequences of intended actions. I am talking about the way relations among people can generate outcomes that depend precisely on the kind of relationships that they have among them. The aggregative features of mass movements necessarily produce outcomes very different from a relational steering of collective action (Donati 2013).

We meet someone on the street and we wonder: who is this person for me? We see a critical situation and we wonder, what have I to do with this situation? The reality urges us to respond indicating that there is a relationship to be established, although it does not tell us its nature.

We must draw attention to the crucial importance of the relational character of social phenomena over against the ubiquitous risks and dangers of resorting to the dualism subjectivism/objectivism in explaining social reality. The basic reason for that lies in the fact that, according to the relational explanation, the subjects are at the same time (but not in the same respect) both immanent and transcendent to social reality, which therefore is a mix of subjectivity and objectivity (the reflexive bond). In particular, Nicos Mouzelis has underlined the peculiar significance of the apophatic dimension of reflexivity over against its eurocentric (or western-centric) and over-activistic (or cataphatic) dimension, which inevitably leads to an excessive analytic emphasis upon a highly ordering, instrumental, and chronically monitoring approach to the inherently dynamic and fluid processes of self-awareness, self-experience, self-identity, and the spontaneous emergence of open-ended self-self and self-other relationships (Mouzelis 2010).

TO MANAGE THE ENIGMA, ONE NEEDS TO ACT WITH RELATIONAL REFLEXIVITY AND RELATIONAL FEEDBACKS

To get 'in a relationship', to get in a given relationship with other people is always a problem. Often we see that there is a refusal to relate to others. This refusal is

the concern of relational sociology, it is its 'black hole', because when the relationship is rejected, the enigma appears in all its negative force of annihilation, and one does not really know what to do. The relationship becomes a point (space-time) where everything vanishes. No matter how much effort is made to do something to activate it, nothing happens. I am thinking about the relationship with a chronic drug-addict or a seriously ill autistic or schizophrenic person, and more generally with those people whose reflexivity is completely self-referential or hindered. There is no way to establish a meaningful relationship with such a person that would succeed in activating a vital form of relation to the world.

To think consciously and actively on how to relate is the problem of problems of human life. This is so because the instinctive, primary attitude, is to see things in our own mind and consider and evaluate them from the point of view of our own mind, that is, from the observation system of the *Self*. The reason why it is difficult to get in a given relationship, to reflect on the relationship and on its reasons as different reasons from those of the *Self*, for instance taking the point of view of the relationship, is that the relationship is enigmatic, and we trust only ourselves. In first instance, the *I* is self-referential. The *Self* does not easily accept to surrender to the relationship, because he is afraid of getting lost, and he follows a kind of self-preservation instinct. But living according to nature's principle of self-preservation (*oikéiosis*, as invoked by Epicureans and Stoics) leads nowhere.

Caution: in fact, the *Self* perceives the relationship immediately, he 'feels' it without mediation. If I see David and Elena strolling affectionately together, don't I think that maybe they are a couple? If I see a man, a woman and a child go for a walk together, don't I think that maybe those three people form a family? When there is a disagreement with a son, a friend, a life partner, don't we ask ourselves: *What will become of my relationship* with my son, with my friend, with my life partner if we continue to fight? But more often than not the *Self* perceives the relationship thoughtlessly, without adequate reflexivity.

Putting oneself reflexively in a relationship is problematic because this action raises enigmas. They are the enigmas contained in that relationship, in which the existential problem of the subject that has to act is put in play.

The fact is that, choosing to live by a certain relationship is often hard, and difficult, it costs self-denial, it is painful. This is why humans roam the world, leaving often relationships drag on rather than driving them firmly towards their fulfillment. Take the case of Ulysses, as it is depicted in a painting by Arnold Böcklin, as a prisoner in the island of Calypso. Ulysses is restless

about what to do; he is waiting for Hermes to come and save him. Ulysses wants to return to Ithaca; he thinks about his wife and his son, but he is also attracted by the idea of exploring the world; he wants to see new lands, he is curious to know so many things that fascinate him, like listening to the Sirens, without dying however. At every step of the journey, he has to decide whether to return immediately to Ithaca or not. Ulysses wishes so, but at the same time avoids it, because on the scale there is the desire for another relationship, one with a world that promises to make him see things that no other man has ever been able to experience. From moment to moment, in a time sequence that lasts for many years, he responds to his goal, namely Ithaca, with neither a clear 'yes' nor a clear 'no'. His relationships with the world on the horizon are always problematic, since they are fascinating and, at the same time, terrible as an unanswered enigma. Ovid wondered: why do "I see the better things and I approve of them, but I follow the worse ones"? (*"Video meliora proboque, deteriorates sequor"*, *Metamorphosis*, VII, 20). These relationships are not strictly useful and they may not solicit a clear answer with a 'yes' or a 'no', because the reactions to certain opportunities are driven by the attraction for the goods contained in those specific relations at a certain time. The reader might say: but it is always an accepting or rejecting the relationship that was wanted at a certain time. System theory claims that the relationship to our concerns can be only a positive or negative feedback, it does not admit the existence of what I call the *relational feedbacks* (Donati 2015). Relational feedbacks, being feedbacks on the relations, are not subject to the dualism yes/no. The agent/actor redefines the structure of the relationship with what s/he cares about in a given context without responding positively or negatively to that concern, but in a way that opens the relationship to a further relationship.

Yes, eventually we have to say 'yes' or 'no'. In fact, Ulysses' final route is the one heading to Ithaca, but, in redefining his relationship with the final goal, there is another relationship that takes over. Ulysses wants to return to Ithaca, but meanwhile he puts on hold the relationship with the final goal waiting to experience another relationship. We see how the enigma of the relationship is at play in him, containing both the attraction (a promise) and the aversion (fear, the risk of losing something). In the end, Ulysses will reach Ithaca, but after having lived *in* and *of* relational feedbacks with the situations of the moment, that is, considering the 'motives' of the attraction - beyond the risk of losing the chance to return - of the relationships that he met, and in which he got involved before his final return.

THE SOLUTION OF THE ENIGMA REQUIRES A
RELATIONAL SOCIAL ONTOLOGY

The answer we give (or not give) to the enigma of the relationship is the key to human happiness or unhappiness. My thesis is that the solution of the enigma is to be found in the relationship itself, i.e., entering into human relationality, discovering 'the being of the relationship.' This expression (the being of the relationship) means two things: it refers both to the being who is *in the* relationship and to the fact that being in that relationship makes us *be in a certain way*, and not in another. It is the 'value-relation' (*Wertbeziehung*) mentioned by Max Weber. It brings along those fundamental enigmas that make our life dramatic, and often tragic. At the same time, however, it provides the answers, perhaps nebulous and uncertain as the prophecies or the attraction of the charisma, but it indicates a path that promises to make human life more worth living.

In the social relationship, in as much as it is and can only be human, is in fact the secret of our origin and of our destiny. It is true for all living beings, but it is particularly so for the human person. The answer to the enigmas (where do we come from and where are we going, what are the reasons for which we live, what is the ultimate meaning of our destiny?) is inscribed in our relationships, but we cannot see it, because they are invisible and intangible. To see them - even in sociology - we must take an appropriate standpoint which is ontological and implies an observation that goes beyond what is visible and material.

We need a new ontology of the relationship if we are to find the path to make sense of the enigma that western culture carries since its Greek origins. But the road is marked by many obstacles.

The first one is the temptation to say that everything exists only as a relationship, that there is no 'substance', that nothing has consistency in and of itself, nothing that does not find its solution but in the relationship. This position is the one of the *relationists* (relational thinkers fully relativists) for whom the meaning of human characters and objects is entirely resolved within and by the transactions that take place in different social situations. To them, the relationship is an *eschaton* (an ultimate end that never ends) in itself.

Are things just like that? I do not think so. The relationship does not eliminate the substances, but it forges them in the social time, so we always have to look at reality as consisting of *substance and relationship as co-principles of being*.

There is always the question of which social ontology do we need to consider reality under this perspective,

and if such ontology needs or not a transcendent matrix. Here we find two opposing positions.

On the one hand there are those who believe that relationality is constituted and is readable without any need for either a realist ontology, or a transcendent theological matrix. This position is the position of Niklas Luhmann, who does not speak of the relationship as an exchange or interdependence, but as an operational closure and, at the same time, as a cognitive openness of every system. What unites him to the relationists is the use of a holistic formula of total immanence of the social processes, which excludes the use of any formula of transcendence in the relational emergence (Teubner 2009). Luhmann says: "The (social) system is formed, *etsi non daretur Deus*". This means: the system (any system, which, for Luhmann, is an emerging relationship that constitutes itself autopoietically) takes shape *even if God were not a given* (see Luhmann 1990b: 207, 210).

Thomas Aquinas has a different view: for him, the relationship - as ontological entity (as it is) - has its *raison d'être* in transcendence. According to Aquinas, not only God is relationship in himself, but He lives off internal and external relationality. He states: "*In Deo abstracta relatione nihil manet*" ["In God, if we make abstraction of the relationship, there is nothing left": *Sent. I, 26, 2*). Since creation is the work of God, creation is all relational. Whilst creation is continuous, not limited to an initial source. Which means that nothing comes into existence except through /for /with the relationship that has in itself a principle of transcendence. The relationship has a reality of its own (realist social ontology) and in order to read it, we require a transcendent matrix.

In these two perspectives, Thomist and Luhmannian, that seem opposite, there is the enigma of the relationship which has come down to us through history. The riddle to solve is this: does the social relationship in the world self-generates (as Luhmann says) or does it depend on a formula of transcendence (as Thomas Aquinas claims)?

The answer is not simple. In a way, one is tempted to say that both positions are true, but not in the same plane. If we compare these two positions (those who say that the social relationship exists even if God does not exist and those who argue that, if God is not a given, the relationship - ontologically speaking - does not come into being), and we ask, 'who is right?', we could say that they are both right, but from totally different points of view.

The first (the followers of Luhmann) are right in the sense that it is true that relationships are formed 'naturally', and yet, in each case, it is by no means assured that it is a positive relationship, rather it is more likely to

happen otherwise. For Luhmann, the relationship is an emerging phenomenon, but completely contingent and devoid of moral distinctions rooted in absolute values. To him, relational evils are more likely than relational goods.

The others (those that refer to a theological matrix) are right in the sense that one can empirically demonstrate that an emergent dynamic rooted in the transcendent generates relational goods that the other way fails to generate. In the same way, however, it can also generate relational evils.

We can consider this perspective as a thesis to be verified. In short, the thesis to prove is that the social relationship has its own autonomous dynamics in terms of the 'secondary' causes in the sociological sense (understood as the empirical contingent causes that unfold in space-time, i.e. located in the historical context, by agents/protagonists and social structures), but has no absolute dynamics in terms of 'first' causes in the sociological sense (meaning causes that are inherent to the ontological potential of an entity in its coming to emergence as *sui generis* reality). For this reason we need to test the idea that the vital relationship, which is together human and social (as the human and social dimensions are, in turn, in relationship), cannot have its identity (i.e. be *sui generis* relationship) if not under certain conditions, which are those of its potential *being* (in the sense of *ex-sistere*) 'standing outside' the terms it connects, with *its own qualities and causal powers*.

According to the sociological theory of systems (Luhmann), these conditions depend on how the relationship is constituted in relation to its surroundings, that is, its environment, to reduce an excess of contingencies that may undermine the system. The relationship is therefore reduced to communication and only communication, which dissolves any substance, including the *sui generis* structure (the 'substantive' nature) of concrete social relations. From the point of view of the relational paradigm, instead, it is important to consider the ontological level (the social ontology) of the conditions that make the relationship exist. These conditions depend on the nature of the being that is *in the* relationship.

Unlike Luhmann's systems theory, relational sociology responds that, to see the solution to the enigma, we need a proper social ontology that supports a sociological epistemology respectful of reality. Relational sociology proposes an ontology and an epistemology inspired by critical, analytical, and relational realism according to which the relationship has a structure in itself which is formed, precisely as relational reality, on the relationship with something other than itself. The relation depends on the elements that are carried by

the agents/actors in a situation, and yet it is not a simple aggregation or transaction between these elements, because the latter are combined in a structure by a relationality that exceeds them. This relationality does not consist only of symbolic references (the *refero*), but includes structural bonds (the *religo*), and for this reason the relation is a concrete entity, not a pure communication. The systems theory can operate at the level of communication, but it is insufficient when confronted with the whole factual reality.

The solution to the enigma of the relationship is in the fact that the constitution of a relationship is necessary to ensure that each agent can get *from the relationship itself* (not from the other agent) what they could not get in any other way. The relationship is not only the medium (the means) to get something through the exchange, and it is not only a mutual dependence necessitated by circumstances. It is for this reason that the relationships are never equal to each other. Their being 'always possible otherwise' is not available when the relationship is an emerging, unique phenomenon, that cannot be standardized, that is not reproducible in an automatic or autopoietic mode. There are no functional equivalents to those relationships that have a *sui generis* reality.

HUMAN FLOURISHING CONSISTS IN ENJOYING RELATIONAL GOODS

The most hidden reality of human life can mature as such only if it passes through adequate social forms, that are relationally valid to express and to help flourish the *humus* of the human person, that is, the relationality of the good life. Social forms are adequate when they respect and develop the proper nature of each relationship lived in a reflexive manner.

When I speak of the *nature* of the relationship, I mean its internal principle of operation. It is this operating principle that justifies the assertion that "in the beginning [of all social reality] there is the relationship." This statement coincides with the ontological principle that is the basis of relational sociology (Donati 2011: 25). It is in this principle, on it, with or without it, that the fate of western reason is being played, and therefore, of 'western society' itself.

Relational sociology observes that society or, in fact, any social phenomenon or formation (a family, a business or commercial enterprise, an association, a national State) including society as a whole, is neither an idea (or a representation or a mental reality) nor a material reality (biological, physical, technical, economic, or oth-

erwise): it is a ‘complex’ of social relations. It is neither a ‘system’, more or less preordained or above the individual facts or phenomena, nor a product of individual actions aggregated or added together, but it is another order of reality: society is relationship, and any social formation - we also think of the Internet - is made of social relations. Every society or social form is distinguished by its *sui generis* mode to combine the elements that make up what I call its constitutive ‘social molecule’, where these elements interact according to certain relational dynamics bringing out a structure which can simply reproduce itself (morphostasis) or significantly modify itself (morphogenesis) in time.

Every social form is therefore characterized by a peculiar relational structure, by the fact that it configures relationship in its own way, *sui generis*. If Ego and Alter, and in general N participants, want to create and stand in a certain relationship, which is not a simple interaction or exchange of the moment, they must find convergence on the purposes of the relationship, but they do it through means, rules, and also values attributed to the relationship that are different. And they are so much more different as we consider the fact that, for each of these elements and for each agent, there are different ‘environments’ with which each of them is related by virtue of its autonomy. This is the structure of a social relation which is realized as an emerging phenomenon. I cannot stress enough the fact that the common good (unlike material public goods such as roads, squares, monuments, gardens, museums, etc.) is not a ‘thing’, but it is a relational good, i.e. it consists of relationships, because it is to unite what is diverse, maintaining the differences.

At the basis of this reading of the social reality, there is the *fact* (not the idea or the mere *figuration* or *fiction*) that the social relationship should be conceived not as something accidental, secondary or derived from other entities (individuals or systems), but as a specific reality of its own kind. This reality has an autonomy which consists in the particular way in which the affective, cognitive, and symbolic elements are combined. Stating that “society, indeed the whole of human reality, is relationship” may seem almost obvious, but it is not at all where the statement is meant as a general ontological and epistemological presupposition and therefore we are aware of the enormous implications that flow from it.

This does not mean in any way joining a perspective of cultural relativism, in fact it is exactly the opposite: relational sociology is based on a realist and inductive social ontology (not an abstract and deductive metaphysics), that sees in relationships the constitutive element of every social reality according to their own

nature. Relational sociology has nothing to do with philosophical or sociological *relationism*.

Encounter and recognition are relational goods not because, as some believe, they carry with them a particular ‘human warmth,’ or a feeling of good will, or a special *pathos* (elements that in any event have their own weight and importance), but because they realize a relationship upon which depend the goods of those who participate in the relationship. And this dependence is rational, or at least reasonable.

In sum. Not only philosophy, but also social sciences need a relational ontology to solve the enigma of the relationship, as only this ontology can highlight the fact that *the unity of reality is relational*, that is: it consists in the specific relationality that it contains. The enigma of the relationship lies in the capacity of the relationship to keep united the different while respecting and valuing their differences. To recognize the enigma means being able to see this power of the relationship that can cause and constitute the relational goods. The latter are responses to many social paradoxes, such as combining democracy and leadership (English 2018), producing common goods (Brouwer 2015), creating trust and collaboration between subjects that have opposing interests and values (Walecka 2018), and in general creating a new sociality (Donati 2019).

To solve the enigma means being able to configure the qualities of the relationship in such a way as to face and deal with the enigma that it contains. This possibility is not always given, of course. In any case, it requires an adequate relational reflexivity.

CONCLUSIONS: THE NEW SOCIETY STEMS FROM RELATIONAL GOODS

An advertising fundraising slogan says: “Be selfish, do good to others!” This slogan states a paradox: your happiness lies in making others happy. In this, as in so many other injunctions, a social relation is offered that contains an enigma: how can it be that by doing good for others I do good for myself? If I get rid of my goods, how can I get better?

Certainly this relationship is *paradoxical* if we see it from the point of view of today’s society that is based on global competition, where it is expected that everyone tries to maximize their own interests without regard to the consequences that fall on others. The one who formulates the enigma (from which oracle?) recalls a sociological reality that all societies that have survived throughout history had to eventually recognize: that society is based on a wide network of donation (or

‘expanded symbolic exchange’ according to M. Mauss, C. Lévi-Strauss, A. Caillé, J. Godbout) without which social cohesion collapses and society declines and heads towards decadence.

Today, many social innovations in everyday ordinary life, community development, social policies aiming at configuring a relational welfare state that revises the old welfare state, new emergent prosocial movements and virtuous social networks (for instance social streets) are built on these premises. These are warning signs that a forthcoming ‘relational society’ - based on the production of relational goods - could be possible, despite conflicts and wars. The deeper motivation of these innovations lies in the fact that well-being and happiness reside primarily in achieving satisfactory human relations. This is also the idea that underlies the possible passage from the GDP to other indexes of human development (like BES-Fair and Sustainable Welfare) as the measure of real growth and progress. Central to all these new measures of human and social progress are the concepts of social capital and relational goods which consist of relations of trust, cooperation and reciprocity.

The idea of urging people to adopt a relationship with themselves which consists in giving up what is called emancipatory individualism and redefine their interests as promoting the good of the other (if you want to love yourself, renounce yourself) might seem an (apparent) contradiction *in adjecto*. On the contrary, it leads to a recognition that the relationship with oneself (inner conversation) comes from treating others in a certain way that depends on the social relationship with others (external conversation): the happiness that I experience in myself depends on the happiness I experience in the others as a result of my concern in relating to them according to the ethics of donation, that is, in having produced a relational good.

Understanding the enigmas of relations, such as the one just mentioned that said “when you give, you receive”, “when you deny yourself, you find yourself,” means being able to see *a latent relational structure that is hidden from direct view*. This is the challenge: confronting the latent reality of relationships.

With a warning. Seeing relationships and the enigmas they bring with them is not an easy exercise and especially not always pleasant. Gregory Bateson (1972) stated that the one who sees the relationship is both blessed and cursed. I interpret this phrase to mean that those who see the relationship are blessed as they are able to have a deeper look at what connects the things of the world and human affairs, but it carries a risk, because, if they fail to solve the enigma, they will find themselves in front of paradoxes that will not make

them happy. In any case, this is where they will have to go through. As I wrote years ago (Donati 2011: 19), “*the relationship, not duality or ambivalence or anything else, is ‘the game of / on the games’*”. The relationship is an enigma, and it generates paradoxes, but it also offers a way to resolve them. The fact that social relations follow vague, fuzzy, or ambiguous rules is part of the daily experience of each of us, as well as their tendency to polarize. For example, we find this outcome in the widespread use of binary codes, like interior / exterior, symmetric / asymmetric, equal / unequal, good / bad, immanent / transcendent, etc. which is the most trivial way to simplify reality. But social relations cannot be, as a rule, always *structurally* uncertain, ambiguous, or dichotomous: their task is to carry beyond the ambiguities and dichotomies that is, beyond the enigmas that even they themselves generate continuously.

Human existence is meaningless when seen in and for itself, either in the things, or in the people around us as such, but it finds meaning in the *vital relationship*, the one that gives meaning to human life because it possesses it in itself. Social life is in the enigma of the relationship. The enigma of the relationship contains the meaning of social life.

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