

# REMARKS ON PIERPAOLO DONATI'S PAPER: "HUMAN FULFILLMENT IN A MORPHOGENIC SOCIETY: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FROM A RELATIONAL STANDPOINT"

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Donati's paper (2017b) is very rich in content, dense, and extensive in analysis.<sup>1</sup> It is impossible to comment on everything worth noting in it. Therefore, after briefly discussing my understanding of some of its basic ideas, I will focus on a few selected topics. Donati's paper is actually a modified version of a chapter in a volume devoted to the issue of human flourishing in late modernity, which is characterized by the dominance of morphogenetic processes over morphostatic ones (Archer 2017a). In the introduction to the volume Archer elaborates on the processes that lead from a morphostatic type of society to a morphogenetic one. Archer differentiates between a "fully blown Morphogenic Society," which she calls a "Concrete Utopia" (after Ernst Bloch), and a society of "unbound morphogenesis." A Concrete Utopia involves "possibilities of emancipatory praxis, which are real but not yet actualized." A society is envisioned in which

the production, exploration and exploitation of 'contingent compatibilities' constitutes novel opportunities (jobs, roles, *modi viv-*

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*endi*) whose take-up follows a situational logic of opportunity (the new being found more attractively advantageous than the old) and meets with little opposition because no vested interests have yet been consolidated on this novel terrain (Archer 2017b: 10).

In turn, the society of unbound morphogenesis is

one where morphogenetic processes intensify until they predominate over morphostatic ones, becoming less and less constrained by them and hence will proceed to generate increasing variety. It follows that social action becomes less governed by routinization, by habitus or habits and that it lies in the hands of individuals and groups to seize their own means of flourishing or implicitly to accept that they will not thrive, or at least as well as they might (Archer 2017b: 11).

For Donati morphogenetic society consists in an environment which, on the one hand “produce large existential vacuums, life failures, processes of alienation,” but also provides the paths to achieve human fulfilment, culminating in possibilities of social change and a project of the “society of the human” (2017a: 155ff). Thus he avoids the problem of justifying the historiosophical conception of directional development from one social formation (a morphostatic one) to another (morphogenetic). This is the first problem that bothers Archer and the authors of the volume on human flourishing. The second is the precise character of the relation between the intensification of morphogenetic processes and human flourishing (or eudaimonia, the good life). In Archer’s formulation, “why would it be thought at all that intensified Morphogenesis could foster Eudaimonia rather than the two lacking any determinate relationship?” (Archer 2017b: 11).

Donati offers not only theoretical and analytical tools to analyse and explain, in novel ways, the phenomena of late modern societies, he also argues at length that “a good society, under conditions of radical morphogenesis, is feasible only through a peculiar ‘politics of relationality’” (2017a: 137).

In the paper Donati explores the opportunities for the good life and the good society, asking “what human flourishing means—or can mean, whether theoretically or empirically”; “which morphogenetic dynamics in human persons’ ways of life make them more or less happy or unhappy”; and “which good life becomes desirable and possible in a morphogenetic

society” (2017a: 137) His main analytic tool is the concept of a “relation” and a “relational good,” and his basic theoretical claim is the “primacy of relation.” There are at least three important senses of this primacy: the “relation” is a good in itself, which, secondly, entails the priority of caring for the relation. And, thirdly, the primary theoretical unit of investigation is not an individual but a relation consisting of the individual human entities. All these constitute the sense in which we can speak about the primacy of the relation: “the human being is a *sui generis* potentiality that can be actualized only through the relationality with other human beings” (2017a: 141), or in another formulation, “the human person is not a self-sufficient entity: he or she is an ‘individual-in-relation,’ where the relation is constitutive of the person” (2017a: 154). A similar logic applies to “relational goods”: “relational goods are goods that consist of relations: they are not material entities, they are not performances, they are not ideas (...)” (Donati 2017a: 152). Donati exemplifies this by such a relational good as friendship:

Friendship is a social relation that goes beyond individual dispositions. Certainly, friendship flows from people, and only people can be friends and create friendship, which is a virtue for them as persons. But it cannot be an individual undertaking. Ego and alter are not friends as individuals. Friendship is the acknowledgement of something that does not belong to either of the two, although it is of both of them. This is the relational good (...). It is the good that exists in common between people; only they can create it, but it does not belong to either of the two people, even if it is of both of them. Likewise, friendship cannot be the product of a social structure; it cannot become an institution, a structure to which people must conform (Donati 2017a: 152).

Having that theoretical framework in mind enables some problems to be addressed. The first problem concerns the opportunities for “human fulfilment,” “human flourishing,” or the “good life.” In several places it is claimed that opportunities exist or emerge (in the worlds of the capitalist market, the welfare state, civil society, the media, and especially social networks) for individuals to enter relations which produce relational goods and thus create the possibility for a “society of the human.” These opportunities can be realized through “productive practices” and “new processes.” Donati claims that “these new conceptions and practices of the good life are the product of ‘conscious’ and ‘free’ agents who make ‘rational

decisions” (2017b) by pursuing “politics of relations,” or “doing relational work.”

It seems that the emergence or existence of these opportunities is contingent on particular circumstances, which are present in a society of unbound morphogenesis. Donati shows these particular circumstances in various social domains by analysing numerous examples. He convincingly demonstrates that relational goods really emerge and accordingly that human flourishing or the good life is possible. Morphogenetic processes create opportunities that make both the relational goods and the good life possible but not inevitable. Such relational goods as justice, solidarity, subsidiarity, cooperation, friendship, recognition, mutual help, etc., have greater possibilities of emerging in a morphogenetic society than in any other kind. Consider one of Donati’s examples: “One discovers that working as a team, cooperating with others rather than acting individually, is more effective and satisfying, on condition, obviously, that the task has not been imposed and that teamwork is not a tool used by those in charge to make higher profits” (Donati 2017a: 154).

The awareness of these processes, that is, the realization of opportunity that leads to discovery, is not driven by any recognizable, persistent, and directional tendencies (directional in the sense that, over time, these processes become more frequent). Social change depends on a kind of discovery, on the emergence of awareness, on realizing that something can be achieved, and on a special kind of reflection.

This can be seen as the weak side of the theory of opportunities for a good life in postmodern societies. On the one hand, we have a “situational logic of opportunity,” on the other, the reflexive activity of the relational subjects. It seems that such an approach overloads the motivational and reflexive activity of the subjects. Donati claims that:

People are forced to ask themselves: what is human in me? Which means: what is good for me? What is the good life in which the-human-that-is-in-me can flourish? In other words, how can I be happy? To answer these questions, individuals have to reflect, take distance from themselves, and appeal to the social morality of certain relations instead of others. Their happiness or unhappiness lies in the choices they make (Donati 2017b).

And he repeats similar claims to the above (“people are forced to ask themselves (...)”) many times: “it is necessary for acting subjects...”, “you

must choose whom to depend on...”, “individuals have to reflect, take distance from themselves.” It might legitimately be asked what “forces,” what “necessitates,” what “prompts” choosing and reflecting? It is certain that all of these do not reside in “reflective activity” itself.

Donati’s paper does not explicitly address the basic driving and transforming force of modern and postmodern civilization and societies, namely, science and science-based technology. Of course, science and technology do appear in the context of morphogenetic processes and human flourishing. Archer, in the volume mentioned, theorizes on the processes of applying scientific theories and their impact on—to use her language—“natural,” “practical,” and “social orders” of “natural reality” (Archer 2017c). But the main thrust of her interest is the role of science and technology as the tool that produces changes in the orders of natural reality that confront and challenge humans: climate change as a consequence of economic growth on a global scale and, at the other pole, the introduction of computers (in place of typewriters) to the secretarial world on the individual level. Science and technology—being, in a way, external forces of material growth—are causing changes and exerting pressures, which Archer analyses in terms of human capacities and liabilities.

But the impact of science and science-based technology is deeper than the above conceptualization. It can be said—and this is the main argument in my remarks—that science and technology change the soul of the “relational subject” and the essence of “relational goods.” Science and technology penetrate and exert a powerful impact on every aspect of modern and postmodern life. They promise to provide—and deliver with ever greater efficiency—at least four instrumental goods: security (and relief from suffering and pain), order, predictability, efficiency, and productivity based on the control and manageability of causal relations. It is very difficult to avoid the logic of efficiency and control. Hence, our relations with others always come under the pressure of being instrumentally used to deliver security, relief from suffering, and decent living conditions.

This represents a constant threat to relations, which are valuable in themselves, and which for relational subjects are objects of care. To give a few examples: there may be a caring relation between a child and a parent, especially in the case of an elderly parent who, due to disabilities, is unable to be self-sufficient in everyday life and may require constant care. Sometimes an adult child will engage in providing care for such a parent. What emerges is a relational good. But, as we know, in recent times a tendency clearly prevails for elderly people with chronic illnesses or disabilities

to be placed in professional facilities, which offer constant care, including medical and social services. Usually adult children carefully consider the kind of arrangements that will ensure their parents a decent life. But personal engagement in a relation that involves care for an elderly parent is something very different from providing the parent with professional, residential care in a nursing home. From the viewpoint of the theory of relational sociology we might also call such an arrangement an emergent relational good. But why do adult children prefer the latter choice? Because of the efficiency and professionalism of the medical treatment, especially the alleviation of pain and suffering by various medicines, the 24-hour assisted living, the predictability and security. It is an instrumental perspective, which emphasizes securing an acceptable and decent life for the parent through customer-centred life-sustaining services. But this instrumental relation of an adult child and an elderly parent in residential care is a very different relational good in comparison with the child's personal care of the parent. Nevertheless, in the case of the former we rarely, perhaps never, say that it is a kind of necessary, emergent relational evil.

I could recall other examples: friendships rarely survive when one of the friends has to relocate to a distant place for work; teamwork is almost exclusively viewed as an instrument for increasing labour productivity; family bonds are seriously stretched when husband and wife work and live in distant places. In all these examples, caring for the relation (with its relational goods) loses against the demands of instrumentality and efficiency. And in order to overcome the tendency to view and evaluate relations from the perspective of instrumentality and efficiency based on the control and management of causal relations (cause and effect) we need different perspectives, with different concepts of the phenomena in question. In the perspective of instrumentality and efficiency promoted by science and technology, our attention in regard to the concepts of pain and suffering, for instance, is focused on their reduction, control, or complete elimination by administering the appropriate medicines. Their meaning is thus reduced or impoverished—some might even say their meaning is completely changed by this special perspective of the medical science. But impoverished or changed in comparison to what? The obvious answer is, for example, in comparison to the religious meanings of pain and suffering. Concepts are always concepts from a given perspective. “A loving parent,” “a friend,” “a caring relation”—all these concepts have different meanings from the perspective of the opportunities provided by the nascent morphogenetic society in comparison with the religious perspec-

tive. The latter also has concepts that have no counterparts outside of it, for instance, “unconditional love,” “the glory of God,” and “caring for the salvation of one’s own soul.” Douglas Porpora, in an interesting and—in the context of all the other contributions—rebellious essay in Archer’s volume questions the perspective of “human flourishing” as a goal and argues that from the religious perspective the “glorification of God” constitutes such a “goal” (Porpora 2017). This difference of perspectives is well illustrated by a biblical parable. Postmodern men are confronted by a situation similar to that of the rich young man in the New Testament parable: “Jesus said to him, if you will be perfect, go and sell all you have and give to the poor, and you shall have treasure in the heaven; and come and follow me. But when the young man heard that saying, he went away sorrowful; for he had great possessions” (Matthew 19: 21–22, AV). It will not be an abuse of the parable if in place of “great possessions” we put “human flourishing.” The rich young man had the means and opportunities for a good life. And he turned out to be blind to this other perspective. He lived, in a sense, in a morphogenetic phase of his social environment but was unable to discern and appreciate the new possibilities. It is hard to say what constitutes this other perspective for today’s human beings. From the perspective of the dominant role of science and technology it seems that the Weberian diagnosis in the form of the metaphor of an “iron cage” is still in place—at least Weber would certainly think so. And perhaps the remedies envisaged by him are also still in place:

No one knows who will live in this [iron] cage in the future, or whether at the end of these tremendous developments **entirely new prophets will arise**, or there will be **a great rebirth of old ideas and ideals**, or, if neither, mechanized petrification, embellished with a sort of convulsive self-importance. For of the last stage of this cultural development, it might well be truly said: “Specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart; this nullity imagines that it has attained a level of civilization never before achieved” (Weber 1989 [1930]: 182) [emphasis added].

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