

# COMMENTARY ON PIERPAOLO DONATI'S "WHAT DOES A 'GOOD LIFE' MEAN IN A MORPHOGENIC SOCIETY? THE VIEWPOINT OF RELATIONAL SOCIOLOGY"

Aleksander Manterys  
Polish Academy of Sciences

One of the important innovations in Donati's analysis is his introduction of the category of opportunity.<sup>1</sup> The novelty does not reside solely in the employment of the term, but specifically in its exaltation to a key concept. As an analogy—not necessarily within the horizon of Donati's social theory—one can mention, for example, Peter M. Blau (1994), whose macrostructural theory attempts to define opportunities ascribed to social positions that, like Durkheim's (1964a [1895]) constraint, correspond to chances/probabilities of forming specific associations, i.e., relations between actors and their environment. Parsons (1968 [1937], 1951, 1960, 1977, 1978), like Donati, had a similar way of thinking: from the first scheme of the actor-in-a-situation, defining a voluntarily constrained ego, through pattern variables seen as tools characterizing the set of possible categorizations of human actions or the choices from a wide variety of structural and cultural possibilities, to a systemic interpretation presenting the interpenetration of the universe's various components, which from the actors' viewpoint create strings of legitimized goals and the means of their acquisition.

---

<sup>1</sup> The text "Human Fulfillment in a Morphogenic Society: Challenges and Opportunities from a Relational Standpoint" presented at the seminar "Humanism in an After-Modern Society: The Relational Perspective," University of Warsaw, March 6, 2017 is an enlarged version of *What Does a 'Good Life' Mean in a Morphogenic Society? The Viewpoint of Relational Sociology*, by Pierpaolo Donati in: Margaret S. Archer (ed.), *Morphogenesis and Human Flourishing*, Springer, 2017.

Theoretical interpretations are not as essential as certain modes of thinking, or more precisely, as an attempt to address these complexes of actors' orientations that cannot be reduced to any level (whether micro, meso, macro, or global). Neither can they be understood as, to cite Parsons again, "environments" of social action that, like ultimate reality in whichever form, are struggling to combat the uncertainty of the human condition (or, to use contemporary poetics, are mirroring an omnipresent and multileveled contingency). They are not fields either, but rather rules defining their emergence and mutual relations.

Donati (2017: 141–147) identifies three types of opportunities, or rather three different logics of their management: individualistic, systemic, and relational. These create three sets or platforms, on which individuals proceed toward a flourishing state, prosperity, wellness, a good life, or general *eudemonia*. To be less specific and to avoid valuations while recalling the language of practice theory (see, e.g., Schatzki et al. 2001), these types are sets of constitutive rules offering three "autonomous" images of the good life. Such analytical distinctions gain importance when applied to the analysis of historical transformations perceived as transitions from the vision of harmonized relations between the individual and the community/society in the pre-modern period to the decline, if not breakage, of these "natural" bonds during the dawn of modernity and the destruction of the human-nature project in after-modernity. The main task is to determine if the "flourishing" or the "good life" are possible under the circumstances of radical morphogenesis, and to what extent the re-constitution of associative relations between individuals—labelled as "relational policy," and in the context of after-modernity—is enabling the achievement of the good life.

Donati distinguishes three types of moralities of the good life. These include the norms/regulations that concern individuals and communities, define the status quo, and fuel and direct social changes. Liberal (capitalist market) morality makes a virtue of honest and effective competition multiplying the supply of goods and thus creating new (better) opportunities of the good life, while improving the status of society and its functional realms. Collective (socialist) morality emphasizes actions aimed at acquiring the common good in circumstances stabilized by the state, which guarantees civil rights and an equal start. Both these types of opportunities generate various dysfunctions, which are usually described as a flawed realization of the ideals, such as when, for example, getting rich overshadows being honest, or the free market remains beneficial as long as

it is preserving someone's dominion in a certain economic sector, or when the state appropriates, "licenses," or limits in any other way the civil rights or civic activities of individuals and communities. The third (associative) type of morality recalls the Enlightenment idea of *fraternité*, or solidarity, and refers to the criteria of reciprocity: trust, cooperation, partnership, etc., while excluding references to market rules or political citizenship. The area of this third morality depends on the circumstances created by the social networks of civil society inasmuch as they develop niches of activities not regulated by the market exchange and redistribution norms. These three types of moralities constitute three areas of social relations, or orders characterized by a different relational logic.

The notion of opportunity (Donati 2017: 149–158), redefined in relational categories, stands for a situational contingency that, by establishing the complementarity between certain components of the universe, creates the probability of rearrangements that are favourable to the agent, and are useful or beneficial (generally not morally indifferent) under any crucial practical circumstances. The situational character of such logic is in some measure doubled. First of all, it refers to actions performed on the comparatively firm ground of possibilities defined by a particular situational stage. Secondly, such possibilities, although embedded in the source reference system (e.g., as moral criteria), remain conglomerates of modality-forming components, which direct actions related to various ingredients of the social universe, various levels of human actions, various types of actors, and finally, various spheres of human activity: the economy, culture, politics, etc. We can say that the situation becomes the real locus of circumstances processed into accessible here-and-now proposals of a modality of action, employing predispositions and dispositions inherent to the agents and described by their habitus. Employing these proposals—understood as making a choice from a situational menu of chances—entails reproduction and transformation related to action directed toward categories of the good life. If we speak of the good life, it is a morphogenesis of *eudemonia*, creating situations facilitating access to goods that are not given per se, nor simply "present." The good life is a trajectory of deeds formed under the label of enhancing chances/possibilities of accessing beneficial opportunities, which maintain a basic sense of security and trust in alter ego and network relations.

The three situational logics correspond to the three interaction systems. The first, lib/lab logic, even though not generically morphostatic, results in a replication of the existing structures. New opportunities change

neither the liberal morality nor the perception of the good life by actors interacting in situations defined by the situational logic distinctive to this morality. This leads inevitably both to exclusion from participation in consuming the benefits and to the generation of opportunities that are accessible only to relatively narrow circles or categories of persons, who are predisposed to exploit the advantages intrinsic to these new situational circumstances. The second logic, sheltering under the auspices of equality, drives the emergence of interaction systems, which are somehow escapist in relation to existing structures, and do not necessarily represent a compromise between market and state. An “anonymous communication matrix” is a platform of morally unrelated interactions, network opportunities, or temptations to behave immorally, which stretch civil rights to include illegitimized demands and behaviours. An apparent sense of safety and impunity promotes the blurring of such logic and buries the chances for the good life in categories of equality.

Paradoxically, processes that create conditions of authentic relational morphogenesis and opportunities for the emergence and propagation of communitarian or associative forms accompany this civilizational transformation in the spirit of after-modernity. This is the most astonishing aspect of Donati’s (2017: 153ff.) thought. In this overwhelming contingency, in conditions which amplify and preserve inequalities and blur the core of human nature, and when morality is often limited to incidental rules realizing egoistic goals, how is it possible for a range of opportunities accentuating cooperation, solidarity, or *fraternité* to emerge? It is, in essence, a question of the possibility of innovation being oriented toward the creation of common goods. According to Donati, such a possibility requires meta-reflexivity, or the relational direction of interaction to transcend the constraints, limitations, and dysfunctions of economic exchanges and unbridled civic autonomy. If we were to go beyond references to Donati’s text, we could recall images of bored bankers for whom conspicuous consumption is not enough, or Internet users for whom the illegal utilization of cultural goods ceases to suffice. To speak even more definitely, the destruction of the social fabric in after-modernity creates pressures on cooperation and arriving at a consensus that respects the rights of all, as it is impossible to leave the iron cage of the “anonymous communication matrix” without it. Relational re-normativization becomes functionally indispensable, and while dysfunctions potentially influence all social actors, this direction of movement is not a paroxysm, but a meta-reflexivity that, even if forced and defensive, remains the nucleus of the new, truly relational social forms, and

it constructs the We-relation in the frames of effective new social praxes. This requires answering the question about the relational nature of the subject and the possibilities of its constitution and persistence through subsequent situational stages.

Donati (2017: 148–151) notices the traps or paradoxes imminent in late modernity: from the double bind—the demand of being free confronted with obligations that potentially or actually constrain freedom; through being free as the need to choose whom to depend on, such as in relations and affiliations defining one’s identity; to the injunction to be free meaning being independent from all social relations that attribute to individuals the responsibility for everything that happens to them. Finally, these conditions are continuously self-transcending and moving toward a post- or trans-human subject. No less important are the dangers to privacy: the technologization and virtualization of primal relations, and on the public level—bureaucratization, technocratization, and mass mediatization. All such processes (and most probably many more) lead to the degeneration of human nature and the destruction of social bonds, replacing subject-subject relations with an artificial (trans-human) construct.

To rephrase, the dynamics of such processes are superseding all forms of symbolic exchange and creative processes, sustaining and transforming what lingers between significant subjects, i.e., the sphere that (according to Donati 2017: 150–153) includes the nest of normative reciprocity and the respective form of *eudemonia*. The cardinal dysfunction of the lib/lab system is the generation of relational evil, thus leading to perception of the common good rather as an investment than a quality shaped by normative cooperation in the name of the good society. Defining the common good in relational categories is only made possible by an understanding of the relative success of restoring the logic of mutual obligations. This is a question of the conditions under which social networks become moral and create and transfer moral values, or analogously, become the arena of exploitation, oppression, marginalization, or injustice. In both cases the process of establishing values and anti-values is relational. This does not signify that actors’ intentions are *ex definitione* irrelevant, and the realm of structural and cultural constraints remains indifferent; it is rather an indication of processes achieved with the participation of, in relation to, and in connection with, what characterizes relative, analytical, and empirical independence when constituting relational qualities. To be more precise, according to Donati (2017: 153ff.) there are three conditions to be met: (a) a particular relational molecule must relate to aims and means defined by norms and

values (which implies, as I understand, the moral “saturation” of actors’ feelings, aspirations, and intentions); (b) a social relation must lead to the emergence of a phenomenon, which in itself or in its consequences can be good to all the actors; and (c) there is no possibility of acquiring this good in any other way, without constituting the We-relationship.

Fundamentally, this is the same riddle with which, for example, Schütz (1967 [1932]; Schütz & Luckmann 1980 [1973]) was struggling when precis-ing the “we-relationship” and then contemplating—to name the thing in exchange-theory jargon—extra-dyadic forms of social relations. Donati, a bit like Schütz or Giddens (1984), is embedding his thought in the char-acteristics of friendship, which is a purely relational form of good: ego and alter can create it, but it cannot be privately appropriated by either of them. In this moment the analysis of social networks, or their inher-ent ambivalences, which constitute the environment of their reproduction and transformation, can indicate circumstances in which friendship miti-gates competition and fosters the creation of social capital, or, to clarify, facilitates its transmission, and likewise the conversion of certain assets included in the habitus, to relational goods. From the actors’ viewpoint these are shared orientation components, present and accessible as ingredi-ents of the interactional equipment at hand, yet not imposed by anyone or anything. They are good not as a result of how costly their constitution was (although it could have been costly), but because their price is regulated by a relationally established and sustained value. It is, if we insist on economic language, another currency, or (after Luhmann) a different zone with a dif-ferent generalized medium of exchange and categories of honesty, justice, and solidarity, or in other words—an interactional decency that is morally measured, in contrast to references to market value and rules arbitrarily imposed by the state and defining relations between freedom and equality.

In what circumstances can the externalities of human activities be posi-tively utilized, supporting the emergence and maintenance of the common good? Donati indicates such “pro-relational islands,” e.g., in ethical eco-nomics or in certain new types of media. Generally, these are areas that enable the production of relational goods evaluated in categories of good or evil, and in this sense they enable binding persons and agency with social and cultural structures. These moments, when someone’s activity cannot be reduced to the expression of an autonomous personality but can be un-derstood only in relation to significant others, are almost imperceptible yet spectacular in results. Being a person, according to Donati, involves main-taining relations—constituting one’s own personality not only in solipsistic

self-relation; it is Mead's (1934) conversation with significant others, a looking-glass self, per se relational (as Cooley (1902) would prefer to see it), or, finally, in the theoretical redaction of Goffman (1959, 1974) or Scheff (2006), a strategic yet morally saturated self-presentation. Social networks are depositories of virtual relations, instruments that can be used to form intersubjective relations. These virtual relations comprise opportunities that can be described situationally as commodified or decommodified. In other words, social bonds are molecules that can be understood as dynamic processes (in the sense of the transformation and emergence of new social forms), as well as instituted reality. They can be "subjectified" under circumstances of progressive contingency, thus deepening actors' alienation. The bonds become really associative, as they function as autonomous orders of reality, sets of rights and obligations that should be reciprocated and taken into account as the orientation axes of participants in interactions. Symbolic and subjective components are not sufficient, and the *religo* component becomes indispensable, being a structure forcing diversity and modality, and, so to speak, normatively half-open, or precised in terms of mutual obligations but opened in the sense of moral good and evil. Relational reflexivity is essential; it points toward the components of situationally accidental relation; it is, to paraphrase, situationally specific. Cooperation, friendship, recognition, solidarity, and mutual assistance—these are all social forms (or virtual bonds) that can be filled with content belonging to all levels of social life.

According to Donati (2017: 155ff.), a *sui generis* renaissance of human nature is an essential recipe for how to achieve the good life. It requires a choice—but understood neither as an injunction to choose, nor a compulsive pursuit of creating new social relations. It resides in openness to new meanings, other relational worlds, and areas that do not divide its participants into winners and losers, the included and excluded.

Donati's article is thought-provoking. The author employs the notion of "utopia," which can be misleading. In a certain sense all theories are utopias, as they are "idealized visions" of so-called reality. Donati, just like Parsons or Durkheim (and many others), ponders the nature of social orders. Such an inquiry is, on the one hand, universal in the sense of being the most generic (although precise!) formula possible for constituting and re-constituting order, or for defining, so to speak, the optimal parameters or characteristics of actors, structures, processes, social networks, etc., along with the no less optimized set of connections between them. It is, to employ Pareto's language, a certain state of dynamic equilibrium. On the other hand, the question refers to the possibilities of approaching such



a state in various historical eras, political formations, or types of societies. Durkheim asked the same question, and in regard to modern society it was in fact a question about the possibility of forming individuals into moral individualists. Parsons (1951) talked about a community of values as a certain theoretical situation in which the top-down regulations become useless. Such a community provides a common moral fundament, or point of reference, as well as the possibility of creating new situations or opportunities fuelled by the efforts of free actors. Like Dahrendorf (1958), for example, (although not with his own theoretical concepts), this could be labelled utopian thinking, and thus in fact thinking that preserves the status quo. According to Donati (2017: 158ff.), the after-modern era and its inherent dynamics create niches for constituting morally saturated associative opportunities. What is essential in such thinking is a certain presupposition related to the concept of human nature.

It may seem that this whole narrative (including the classics mentioned above) is presenting human nature as something relatively stable, while the fact that the social world is not necessarily a proper stage for its realization and development can be interpreted as negative externalities, which sometimes crucially deform, so to speak, the natural or relational pathways of the good life. If, instead of the flat and banal optics of the developmentalist school, we were to perceive this problem as evolutionary, we could comprehend culture as an increasingly crucial part of this evolution. It is not a coincidence that we speak of a dual inheritance, which reveals at least two paths in the transformation of human nature. The biological part remains relatively unchanged, while the cultural one, even if we recall only the images of trans-human subjects, is transforming abruptly and radically. In what sense thus can we speak of a return to human nature? I understand Donati's intentions to be a reframing of Kant's question of the possible realization of the ideal of the good life in the sense of a theory that would indicate and define possible scenarios of such an accomplishment.

Reference to the world of norms and values is justified, but in the form presented by Donati it becomes questionable. Such re-normativization of human activity, forming relations in categories of symbolic exchange and moral good and evil, entails a choice—of course not between salvation and damnation or with irreversible consequences to a certain life course but rather as a confirmation of relationally realized values. Are these values objective, as Scheler (1973 [1966]) would like them to be, and are they to be spontaneously declared, sensed, and realized, or discovered as implementable attributes of human relations? Is the world of anti-values, or what we perceive as evil,



equally objective? Is such interactional Manichaeism creating new dysfunctions? Is it really always better to act according to the *fraternité* category? If Newton, acting in the name of truth, had considered the opinions of others, he would not have revolutionized physics, and, indirectly, he would not have questioned the morally saturated optics of societies based on—as Durkheim (1964 [1893]) would have said—mechanical solidarity. How does the good life according to Newton relate to the good life according to the then “cultural dopes”? And finally, the majority of seemingly morally indifferent behaviours are elements of everyday life routines, and they define if and to what extent one needs to engage emotionally, morally, intellectually, or in any other sense. It is morally reprehensible, or at least alarming, to ignore somebody’s greeting, and likewise to indulge in inappropriate associativity, violating the rules of netiquette. These “pieties,” the replicated logics of everyday practices, determine the sphere of clearly moral—through reference to good and evil—choices. Truly relational being “on-line” denotes a morally nuanced, skilful use of symbolic instruments: from seemingly unconscious routines, through more or less morally determined choices labelled “one ought to,” to practices constituting associative communities.

#### Bibliography:

- /// Blau P.M. 1994. *Structural Contexts of Opportunities*, The University of Chicago Press.
- /// Cooley C.H. 1902. *Human Nature and Social Order*, Charles Scribner’s Sons.
- /// Dahrendorf R. 1958. *Out of Utopia: Toward a Reorientation of Sociological Analysis*, “American Journal of Sociology”, vol. 64(2), pp. 115–127.
- /// Donati P. 2017. *What Does a ‘Good Life’ Mean in a Morphogenic Society? The Viewpoint of Relational Sociology*, [in:] *Morphogenesis and Human Flourishing*, ed. M.S. Archer, Springer, pp. 93–114.
- /// Durkheim É. 1964a [1893]. *The Division of Labor in Society*, transl. G. Simpson, Free Press.
- /// Durkheim É. 1964b [1895]. *The Rules of Sociological Method*, transl. S.A. Solovay, J.H. Mueller, ed. G.E.G. Catlin, Free Press.
- /// Giddens A. 1984. *The Constitution of Society: An Outline of the Theory of Structuration*, Polity Press.

/// Goffman E. 1959. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Doubleday, Anchor Books.

/// Goffman E. 1974. *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*, Harper and Row.

/// Mead G.H. 1934. *Mind, Self, and Society from the Standpoint of the Social Behaviourist*, ed. C. Morris, The University of Chicago Press.

/// Parsons T. 1968 [1937]. *The Structure of Social Action*, 2 vols, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Free Press.

/// Parsons T. 1951. *The Social System*, Free Press.

/// Parsons T. 1960. *Pattern Variables Revisited: A Response to Robert Dubin*, "American Sociological Review", vol. 25(4), pp. 467–483.

/// Parsons T. 1977. *Social Systems and the Evolution of Action Theory*, Free Press.

/// Parsons T. 1978. *Action Theory and the Human Condition*, Free Press.

/// Schatzki T.R., Knorr-Cetina K.D., von Savigny E., eds. 2001. *The Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory*, Routledge.

/// Scheff T.J. 2006. *Goffman Unbound! A New Paradigm for Social Science*, Paradigm Publishers.

/// Scheler M. 1973 [1966]. *Formalism in Ethics and Non-Formal Ethics of Values: A New Attempt Toward the Foundation of an Ethical Personalism*, transl. M.S. Frings, R.L. Funk, Northwestern University Press.

/// Schütz A. 1967 [1932]. *The Phenomenology of the Social World*, transl. G. Walsh, F. Lehnert, Martinus Nijhoff.

/// Schütz A., Luckmann T. 1980 [1973]. *The Structures of the Life-World*, transl. R.M. Zaner, H.T. Engelhardt, Jr., Northwestern University Press.

/// **Aleksander Manterys**—full professor of sociology at the Institute of Political Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences. His main areas of interest are sociological theory and microsociology. He is currently working on the book *Impression Managers: Cooley's Paradigm*.

E-mail: amanterys@isppan.waw.pl