Pursuing the Common Good: How Solidarity and Subsidiarity Can Work Together
Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, Acta 14, Vatican City 2008
www.pass.va/content/dam/scienzesociali/pdf/acta14/acta14-donati2.pdf

PROSPECTS

DISCOVERING THE RELATIONAL CHARACTER OF THE COMMON GOOD

PIERPAOLO DONATI

1. The common good as a relational good

1.1. In ordinary language, as well as in most empirical sciences, the common good generally refers to a 'something', an entity belonging to everyone by virtue of their being part of a community. The community can be big or small, from a family, a local or national community, to the whole of humankind. In any case, the common good is seen and treated as an *asset* or an opportunity to be preserved and enhanced, if possible, for the benefit of the individuals involved.

That 'something', which the common good consists of, generally refers to a tangible reality, but it may also be an intangible good. Tangible goods are, for instance, the natural resources that must be at everyone's disposal (such as air and water), spaces usable by everyone (such as streets and squares, though today we would include the web and internet as well), and artistic monuments that must be maintained without being commercialized. Examples of intangible goods include peace, social cohesion, international solidarity along with the appropriate institutions for safeguarding and promoting them.

Modern thought has increasingly identified the common good with a collective, materialistic and utilitarian good, which must be available to all members of the community. The notions of affluence, development and progress conform to the above when they are considered 'common goods'. Thus, modern thought is always in danger of reducing the sense and value of the common good to a possession (literally, a property), whose holders are conceived of as shareholders or stakeholders.

Hence, the supremacy and prevalence today of economic and/or political conceptions, which reduce the common good to a sum of individual goods.

Most current economic theories define the common good as '*the greatest possible good for the greatest possible number of individuals*'. In the best case scenario, the 'greatest possible number of individuals' would include *all* sentient beings (animals as well as humans). This definition of the common good presents it as an entity that is convertible or reducible to the sum total of all the private interests of the individual members of a given society and interchangeable with them.

In the prevailing definitions given by the social, economic and political sciences, the common good is *an allocation of resources such that everyone derives advantage from it*. Of course, this means that such an allocation can be also unequal and even unfair. Hence, the common good is cut off from justice. Instead, what is relevant is that everyone may derive some benefit from the allocation of the resources.

Difficulties are not considered to relate so much to the definition of common good as to the rules for its implementation. Such implementation may take place on the basis of one of four criteria, ranging from consent to the use of force: a) the first criterion is 'familiarity' (within the family, allocation of resources consists in giving something to each member and the distribution is accepted by *consent*); b) the second is *merit* or *credit*, as dictated by individual moral conscience (each accepts the allocation received because he/she believes himself or herself to deserve it); c) the third is mutual benefit (the allocation is accepted because it is based on the expectation of *cooperation that leaves everyone better off*; if some do not cooperate in creating a common good, they will be punished by exclusion from future cooperation because the principle of reciprocity is invoked); d) in case any of the former criteria do not work, the common good is produced by a fourth criterion, namely *enforcement* (the use of force by a third party, generally the State). Economists hold that the common good is produced only if there are sanctions against those who shirk their responsibilities. Such sanctions are different in the above four cases: a) the family takes one's consent for granted; b) individuals who did not deserve the benefits they received from the common good will experience inner guilt; c) in the third case, the possibility of future cooperation is forfeited (someone can no longer draw upon common goods); d) in the fourth case, sanctions take the form of external penalties (fines, sanctions of different kind, as in the case of tax evasion).

From the point of view of political studies, the common good is defined as the central and essential aim of the State. It consists in granting fundamental rights to those entering society, especially the rights of all to have

the opportunity to freely shape their own lives through acting responsibly and in accordance with the moral law. In that case, the common good is defined as the sum total of the conditions of social life that enable people more easily and readily to act in this manner. The object of State sovereignty is to provide the means for creating these conditions. Others, in particular John Rawls, make the distinction between the Good, which actively creates a better world (however that may be defined) and the Just, which creates a fair, liberal social infrastructure - one that allows the pursuit of virtue, without prescribing what the common good actually is.

1.2. Such ideas of the common good are institutionalized in contemporary *lib-lab* political structures, i.e. in those social, economic and political systems based on two complementary principles: on the one hand, the individuals' freedom in the market (the *lib* side), on the other hand, the equality of individual opportunities brought about by the political power (the *lab* side).

Such structures appear to be limited and misleading as regards a deeper and more inclusive notion of the common good because, from the moral point of view, they obscure both the social conditions transforming an object into something common and also into a good. If the good is a *common* object, it is because the individuals who share it also have certain relations among them. If it is a *good* (in a moral sense), this is because people relate *in a certain way* to such an object and also to one another.

In short: a good is a common good because *only together* can it be recognized and acted upon (generated and regenerated) as such, by all those who have a *concern* about it. At the same time, it must be produced and enjoyed together by all those who have a stake in it. For this reason, *the good resides within the relations that connect the subjects*. Ultimately, it is from such relations that the common good is generated. The single fruits that every single subject may obtain derive from each being in such a relationship.

The relational definition of the common good highlights those fundamental qualities that are obscured by proprietary definitions, previously mentioned.

To understand such qualities, let us start from a basic consideration. If we state that the common good is an asset belonging to the whole community, we must also admit that the good we are talking about is such because those belonging to that community recognize it as something both preceding and outlasting them. It is a good of which they cannot freely dispose. They can and must use it, but only under particular conditions, ones

excluding its divisibility and commodification. Should they divide or alienate it, they themselves would not be able to enjoy its fruits.

What makes the common good indivisible and non-commodificable? Is it perhaps an inner quality or power of that object (be it tangible as is water or intangible as are social cohesion and peace)?

In general, the answer is negative. The object in itself is always *potentially* divisible and marketable. For instance, both water and social peace, although common goods, are susceptible of being divided and marketed.[1] The reason why the common good cannot and must not be divided and marketed lies in the fact that, if it is divided or commodified, the relations among the members of that community would become estranged or even broken. The common good is, before and above anything else, the guarantee of their social link.

The quality making an entity a common good lies neither in that thing as an indivisible and inalienable 'whole' in itself, nor in the will of the members of a community. It does not depend on their opinions, tastes, preferences, individual and aggregate choices. People generate and regenerate it, but the good has its own (emergent) reality that does not depend on people desiring or benefitting from it. They contribute towards generating it, but they do not create it by themselves. Rather, they can destroy it by themselves. If they do so, they break the social links connecting them to the other people in question.

We realize that the common good has its own inalienable nature, resting upon the relations existing among those sharing it, because it preserves the foundations of the social bond. But the *sharing* must be, and is, indeed, voluntary. It has not, and cannot have, a character reliant upon force. Precisely because the common good has a relational character, it resides in the mutual actions of those who contribute to generating and regenerating it.

Should the social link break, there would be a collapse of the qualities of the people sharing it, since human qualities depend on the link itself. Only if we see the common good as a relational good, can we understand its inner connection with the human person.

That is exactly what is stated by the Catholic social doctrine.

[1] It may seem strange to think of 'marketing peace', but this is precisely what occurs when 'good industrial relations' are advanced as a reason for the location of a factory or a 'safe and secure environment' is given as the reason for higher house prices.

1.3. As a matter of fact, the social doctrine of the Church proposes a concept of the common good that is quite different from economic and political versions of it. In the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC n. 1905-1912) and in the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (CDS n. 164-170) a vision of the common good is outlined, according to which:

(a) the common good is the social link joining people together, on which both the material and non-material goods of individuals depend (as the CDS n. 165 states: '*The human person cannot find fulfilment in himself, that is, apart from the fact that he exists "with"others and "for" others.* This truth does not simply require that he live with others at various levels of social life, but that he seek unceasingly – in actual practice and not merely at the level of ideas – the good, that is, the meaning and truth, found in existing forms of social life. No expression of social life – from the family to intermediate social groups, associations, enterprises of an economic nature, cities, regions, States, up to the community of peoples and nations – can escape the issue of its own common good, in that this is a constitutive element of its significance and the authentic reason for its very existence'.

(b) the common good does not consist either in a state of things, or in a sum of single goods, or in a prearranged reality, but it is 'the whole *conditions* of social life that allow groups, as well as the single members, to completely and quickly reach their own perfection' (*Gaudium et Spes*, 26); in particular, it consists in the conditions and exercise of natural liberties, which are essential for the full development of the human potential of people (e.g. the right to act according to the promptings of one's conscience, the right to the freedom of religion, etc.);

(c) in brief: the common good represents the social and community dimension of the moral good; the common good is the moral good of any social or community relations ('*The common good does not consist in the simple sum of the particular goods of each subject of a social entity. Belonging to everyone and to each person, it is and remains "common", because it is indivisible and because only together is it possible to attain it, increase it and safeguard its effectiveness, with regard to the future.* Just as the moral actions of an individual are accomplished in doing what is good, so too the actions of a society attain their full stature when they bring about the common good. The common good, in fact, can be understood as the social and community dimension of the moral good', CDS n. 164).

Therefore, the social doctrine of the Church is critical towards materialist, positivist and utilitarian objectifications (reifications) of the common good. Its picture of the common good openly clashes with the 'proprietary and utilitarian' picture given by the ideas prevailing today. It appeals to reasons based on the fundamental sociability of human beings.

From this sociability, it draws conclusions that mean the common good cannot be confused with concepts whose similarity is only apparent, such as concepts of the *collective* good, of *aggregate* good, the good of the totality, vested interests, *general interest* and so forth. With that, the social doctrine preserves a potential for critique and for the advancement of human emancipation that modern and postmodern thought seem to have lost or relegated to the fringe of society.

Nonetheless, the concrete application of the Catholic social doctrine does not yet appear yet to be living up to its potential.

In fact, the concept of the common good – rather than being developed in a relational way – is often, in practice, traced back to an organic and vertically stratified picture of the society. This image is based on two mainstays: (a) the assertion of the primacy of politics as 'synthesis' of the common good ('Each human community possesses a common good which permits it to be recognized as such; it is in the *political community* that its most complete realization is found', CCC n. 1910), and (b) the consequent granting to the State of the privileged role of being the apex of society, which protects, rules and creates its civil society ('It is the role of the state to defend and promote the common good of civil society, its citizens and intermediate bodies', CCC n. 1910).

In presenting these 'Prospects' to the XIV Plenary of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, I wish to push the social doctrine forward by claiming that, today, it can and must enlarge its horizons on the common good through an adequate *widening of its relational vision*. That is, it can develop its potential for illuminating and supporting new politics and social practices, only in so far as it widens the relational basis of the common good and derives the necessary consequences from it in terms of applications and operative principles in the new context of globalization.

In fact, this context underlines certain problems that can no longer be bound by the political configuration to which the social doctrine still refers when it claims: *'The responsibility for attaining the common good, besides falling to individual persons, belongs also to the State, since the common good is the reason that political authority exists*. The State, in fact, must guarantee the coherency, unity and organization of the civil society of which it is

its expression, in order that the common good may be attained with the contribution of every citizen. The individual person, the family or intermediate groups are not able to achieve their full development by themselves for living a truly human life. Hence the necessity of political institutions, the purpose of which is to make available to persons the necessary material, cultural, moral and spiritual goods' (CDS n. 168). Certainly, 'The goal of life in society is in fact the historically attainable common good' (CDS n. 168), but the State is not the exclusive bearer of such a task. The task of ensuring participation, social inclusion, security and justice is certainly what justifies the existence and the action of the State, but the State must accomplish those tasks in a subsidiary way as regards the civil society, local, national and international, and in any case it is not the one and only and supremely responsible body involved.

A development of the social doctrine is required that takes into account globalized society's great differentiation into spheres, which are more and more distinct and articulated among themselves, both at an infra-state and at a supra-state level. The common good becomes a responsibility not only of individuals and of the State, but also – in a completely new way – of the intermediate social bodies ('*civil societarian* networks')[2] now playing a fun-

[2] M.S. Archer (personal communication March 20, 2008) has rightly pointed out that a network, *per se*, is not necessarily relational, as in the case of a distribution list. She suggests that 'perhaps, the key is the distinction between relational and non-relational networks (say, the difference between kinship and genealogy)'. I agree with that. I must point out, however, that, in my language (see my *Relational Theory of Society*: P. Donati, *Teoria relazionale della società*, FrancoAngeli, Milano, 1991), networks are always intended to be networks of relations (and not networks of material objects or simply 'nodes') and, therefore, since a social relation implies a reciprocal action, what I call networks are to be understood as 'relational networks' (for instance, from the sociological point of view, 'a gift' must be understood not as 'a (material or non-material) thing' freely given to somebody which links two or more persons, but as a social relation inscribed within a network of free giving-receiving-reciprocating actions which relate a complex chain of actors to each other). That's what distinguishes my critical (and relational) realism from others, viz. Dave Elder-Vass', to whom social relations are understood as 'real' structures (as in the relation between two atoms of hydrogen and one of oxygen in a molecule of water). Social reality is ontologically different from material (physical, chemical, biological) reality. And therefore relations are made up of a different stuff (which implies a different concept of 'structure'). The term 'civil societarian' can be explained in the following way. A *Civil Societarian* strongly supports the institutions of civil society. These include families, corporations, religious groups, private schools, charities, trade associations, and the other peaceful, voluntary collective organizations

damental role in mediating the processes by which the common good is created. These are no longer solely *bottom-up* (realization of the common good though movements that come from below) and *top-down* (the creation of the common good by the State and then spreading downwards to the grassroots), but are also horizontal and lateral processes that depend neither upon the State nor upon the Market.

1.4. Summing up what has been said so far, the common good is not the result or the sum of the individuals' actions, because it is a reality exceeding individuals and their products. On the other hand, it is not an 'already given whole', possessing inner properties and powers, making it indivisible and not commodifiable. It has an ontological status by virtue of its fruits because, without the common good, those fruits could not exist. But people can always make it divisible and commodifiable. When they do so, they destroy the common good and consequently the community ceases to exist.

The common good belongs to that reality which is relational in character ('Life in its true sense … is a relationship', affirms Benedict XVI in the encyclical *Spe Salvi*, n. 27).

Social dynamics continuously both create and destroy common goods. Within modernity, those processes which have become detached from social relations have made the destructive forces more powerful than the creative ones. But, at the end of Western modernity, in what I call an *after*-modern society (or 'relational society',[3] which M.S. Archer would prefer to call 'morphogenetic society'[4]), the opposite may occur: society can make inalienable what was actually divisible and marketable, namely it can generate a new and novel common good.

that promote our individual and collective well-being in so far as they are relational networks. These are the civil societarian networks to which I am referring. The stereotypical libertarian might cite Ayn Rand and exalt the independent individual. Instead, a civil societarian would cite Alexis de Tocqueville, and his observation that democracy is based upon people who, whatever their age, social conditions, and personal beliefs, constantly form associations. These voluntary associations are what a civil societarian sees as the key to civilization. Government may contribute to civil society, but it also intrudes on it. The means of avoiding colonization is precisely to appeal to the principle of subsidiarity. Jean-Jacques Rousseau's theory of the General Will serves as a good contrast to the civil societarian's view.

[3] I have introduced the term 'relational society' since 1986: see P. Donati, *La famiglia nella società relazionale. Nuove reti e nuove regole*, FrancoAngeli, Milano, 1986.

[4] See M.S. Archer, *The Reflexive Imperative*, CUP (forthcoming).

Empirical processes are always reversible, at least in principle if not as a matter of fact (this is what sociology means when it says that society is becoming more and more complex along with higher-order cybernetic processes). In any case and in concrete terms (i.e. ones not restricted to a metaphysical notion of common good), it can be seen that in human society there are a variety of common goods: there are non-negotiable common goods and others that, under some circumstances, may be subject to considerations of utility or convenience.

How is it possible to trace these distinctions?

To trace the distinction between the common goods which can be made negotiable (e.g. some natural resources) and those which are not negotiable in any way (e.g. human dignity and peace) is the task of a relational vision of the common good.

Let us make this claim clearer by introducing a basic argument. The first common good is the dignity of the human person, which is – at the same time – also the basis of any further common good. In this apparent circularity lies the solution of self-paradoxes of the postmodern thought (for instance, J. Derrida, N. Luhmann), according to which the common good is a paradox based on unsolvable paradoxes. It is a fact that the human dignity of a single person cannot be violated without all the surrounding community suffering because of this. To violate human dignity means to wound the possibility of pursuing the common good from the start.

But what is human dignity? What can be or cannot be negotiated within it?

Human dignity is not a quality that individuals may individually own and upon which they can individually decide. On the other hand, neither is it the sum (the aggregate) of a quality pertaining to all members of a community. It is something coming before them and going beyond them. It is something that they enjoy without being able either to divide or to alienate it.

From the Catholic point of view, human dignity is rooted in the filial relation with God. Such a relation is therefore the first, originary (*fontalis*) and decisive common good of and among human persons. It is so for all the great world religions. If we deny the existence of such a relation, as do non-believers, atheists or agnostics, human dignity is hardly justifiable as a common good: in fact, from where else can it spring?

From the above, we can define that which can be negotiated in the common good. It is that which does not touch its vital root, namely the divine filiation of the human person and its implications for interpersonal relations. The remainder can be discussed, modified, made the object of agreements or circumstances, with the purpose of achieving further good.

Without its religious basis, human dignity, being the first among common goods, must find some source of justification, yet those proffered are always seemingly insufficient. All the criteria advanced by the contemporary social sciences are insufficient. They appeal to human reason, but scientific reason is not enough. They appeal to the individual's abilities, but such a criterion results in discrimination between those who are able to perform functionally and those who are not. They appeal to an abstract concept of humanity, but this appears to be a purely artificial and contingent construction.

That is why a certain 'secularized reason' of our time appeals to 'a religion without God' (as claimed, for instance, by G. Teubner). Postmodern thought needs religion to solve its paradoxes, but it does not accept the divine filiation, where the solution to those paradoxes lies.

Nonetheless, Catholic thought also needs to take some steps forward. In fact, in the field of Catholic thinking, the 'metaphysics of the common good', as formulated in past centuries, needs considerable revision. Such a metaphysics has defined the common good of humankind as consisting in God, and – as a consequence – the relation of each individual with Him. Such a perspective is certainly not wrong, it is undoubtedly right, but not completely adequate. To take it in a simplistic way is to obscure the common good existing *among* human persons (if this is not viewed as a reflex of their fundamental individual filiation and as an expression of the Mystical Body). Today, such metaphysics should be considered necessary but not sufficient, they require revision starting from the premise that the dignity of the human person is neither an individualistic (inherent to the individual *qua talis*) nor an holistic property (emanating from the Mystical Body). This is because human dignity is both inherent in each human person but also in their connections with other persons. It is supplied both by the relation of filiation with God, but also by the inter-personal relations that constitute it. The dignity of the human person, if considered as a common good, shows us that such a quality is not an individual one, but it is connected and inherent in the relations of the person with the whole creation, with God and with other human persons.

Prior to all else, the good is common thanks to its dignity. And dignity is a quality that cannot be circumscribed and limited to a single individual (qua isolated monad), but spreads to the relations in which the individual expresses him/herself, where it is preserved and where it flourishes. The family, for instance, is a common good if and because it is seen as a specific relation realizing the dignity of the human person.

So we come to see the moral dimensions of the common good, ones which trespass beyond its concretely expressible dimensions (material and non-material).

The moral dimensions signal that the common good is a relational good, which is legitimated by the foundational criterion of human dignity.

In brief: the common good is neither a 'collective heritage' that may be expressed concretely in an entity separate from the human person, nor an aggregate of individual goods (in that case, we call it the collective good or the good of the totality). It is something that belongs, at the same time, *to all the members of a community and to each of them, as it resides in the quality of relations amongst them.*

As regards the social sciences, it is here that the principles of subsidiarity and solidarity come into their own. In fact, only a relational theory can represent the common good as an emergent consequence of the combined actions of subsidiarity and solidarity, on the part of subjects (individuals or social groups) as conceived of from within the framework of a relational anthropology. From such a relational vision it is possible to differentiate the negotiable from the non-negotiable common goods. The task of discovering and understanding the relational character of the common good has just started and must be further and more thoroughly analyzed in the future.

2. Consequences for the definition of subsidiarity and solidarity

2.1. There is a variety of definitions of subsidiarity, as well as of solidarity. The list is very long and there is no need to itemise it fully now.

For example, subsidiarity has been defined as follows: as entailing proximity to the subjects concerned or, according to the organizational dimension, as devolution, privatization, articulation of citizenship rights, multilevel governance, and so forth. Many different types of subsidiarity have also been delineated: vertical and horizontal subsidiarity, defensive and promotional subsidiarity, reflexive subsidiarity, strengthened subsidiarity, and so on. Solidarity, in its turn, has been conceived of as: redistribution, beneficence, charity, social welfare benefits, interdependency etc.

What we want to point out here is that to conceptualize these two terms (subsidiarity and solidarity) properly, we need not only to employ them together, but also to *define them in relation to one another*. That is exactly what the relational approach does. It claims that, considered in their social phenomenology, *common goods are the products of those action systems that have*

human dignity as their value model (referring not only to the individual as such, but also to his or her social relations) *and which operate through social forms that are both solidary and subsidiary among the subjects concerned.*

The relational definition of the common good leads to a relational vision of the principles of subsidiarity and solidarity, meaning that subsidiarity and solidarity are seen as two ways of relating to others, both of which acknowledge the dignity of the Other.

Solidarity is a relation of Ego with Alter, in which both do what they can in relation to the responsibility that everyone has towards the common good. Solidarity means that all play their own part, according to their capabilities. Subsidiarity means to relate to the Other in a manner that assists the Other to do what he or she should, according to a relational guidance system of action.[5]

These two principles should generally operate *together* (co-operate) because, if they do not, no common good will be generated. At the same time, it is clear how one is defined in terms of its relationship with the other. If Ego wants to help Alter without oppressing him or her, then *subsidiary and solidary* must co-exist between them. Subsidiarity (the very fact that Ego wishes to help Alter to do what Alter has to do) requires an act of solidarity. In this case, solidarity is neither (unilateral) beneficence nor charity,

[5] A relational guidance system of action is needed in order to avoid the fallacy that subsidiarity presupposes a 'normative approach' governing the giving of assistance. When I say that subsidiarity means that Ego helps the Other to do what s/he has to (or must) do as a *suum munus*, I do not imply that Ego dictates the norms of conduct to Alter, by providing him or her with a sort of Decalogue. In that case Alter's internal and external reflexivity would be impeded. On the contrary, relational guidance means that Ego acts as a stimulus to the internal and external reflexivity of the Alter, since all the needs, desires, and projects of Alter should be met by supporting him or her to develop their own capabilities, aspirations, concerns, etc. through an evolving relational setting in which Ego is charged with the task of ensuring that the goals selected are ethically good and that the means chosen are adequate to the pursuit of these goals. The goals themselves are primarily defined by Alter, or, when Alter is a child or an handicapped person, jointly by Alter and her/his in/formal helper (see the 'relational guidance scheme' discussed in P. Donati, *Teoria relazionale della società*, *op. cit.*, ch. 5). In parent-child situations, relational guidance is not a directive command or impulse (it is not directly normative), but is a prompt to activate those relationships which lead the child towards the good things he desires. Ego is helping in so far as s/he assesses the goodness of the goals adopted by the child and makes sure that appropriate reflexive relations are activated and established in order for those goals to be attained.

but the assumption and practice of the joint responsibility that both Ego and Alter must have towards the common good (this is also the meaning of solidarity as interdependence, which is still valid when one party cannot give anything material to the other party).

The common good is therefore the fruit (the emergent effect) of *reciprocity between solidarity and subsidiarity*, as implemented by Ego and Alter in their mutual interaction.

At this point, one can now appreciate the importance of the claim that the common good is the fruit of reciprocity understood as the rule of action, which stems from the spirit of free giving. Reciprocity exists in society as an irreducible phenomenon, since it is neither a sharing of utilities (*do ut des*: such a form is appropriate to contracts and the sharing of equivalents, as Alvin Gouldner maintains), nor a sharing for sharing's sake (as Mark Anspach argues), namely reciprocal giving, serving to underline the sense of belonging to a common tribal entity (the *Hau* as interpreted by Marcel Mauss). *Instead, reciprocity is a mutual helping, performed in a certain way. In other words, reciprocity is help concretely given by Ego to Alter in a context of solidarity (that is, one of common responsibility and recognized interdependency), i.e. such that Ego is aware (recognizes) that Alter would do the same when required (namely, Alter would assume his/her responsibility within the limits he or she can afford) when Ego needs it.*

Reciprocity is upheld and is effective as long as it is firmly grounded upon a recognition of the dignity of the Other. The common good takes root in the human person precisely because it exists and derives its meaning from serving the other person in his/her dignity.

Upon these premises, we can understand the specific configuration of the action system generating a common good (fig. 1). The relation between the human person and the common good is the referential axis, which is needed to link that which has an inalienable dignity in itself with the situated (i.e. particular) relational good in a given context (the axis L-G). To become operative, an action system oriented towards the common good also needs means and rules (the adaptive axis A-I), which must complement the value of human dignity. Only such an action system can avoid both holism and individualism. What enables the action system for the *situated* common good (namely a concrete common good that must be produced here and now, context after context, situation after situation) to work in this way are the two principles of subsidiarity and solidarity. They have the task of specifying the means and rules of the acting 'system'. Without them, the common good could not actually be generated.

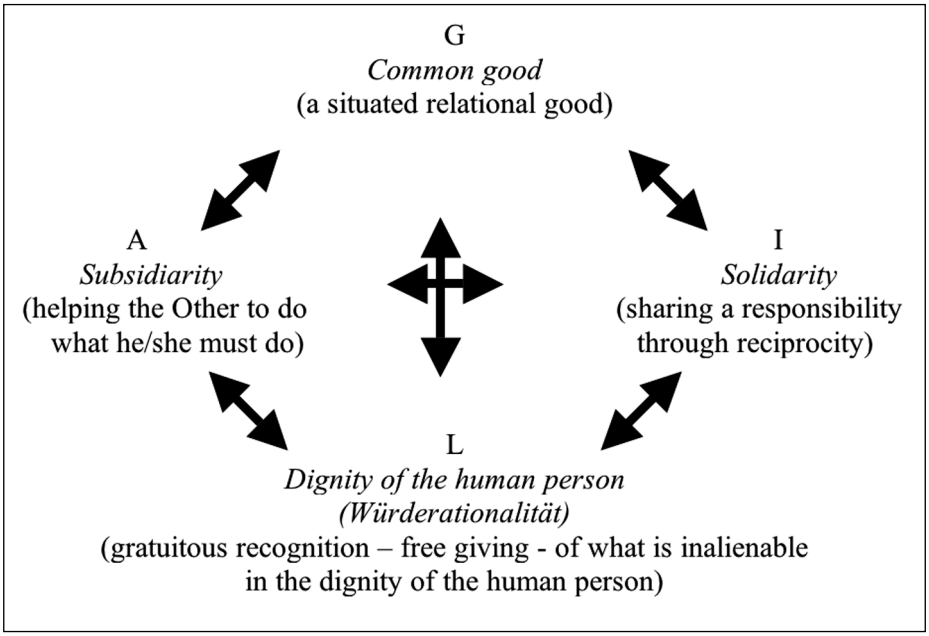

Fig. 1. The configuration of an action system for the common good.

Thus, it may be stated that *the common good is the emergent effect of an action system operating under the 'combined provisions' of subsidiarity and solidarity to increase the value of the dignity of the human person* (fig. 1).

The principle of subsidiarity is an operating instrument. It is not to be confused with the principle of competence attribution (the distribution of *munera* – as is clearly stated by Russell Hittinger). The distribution of tasks lies on the axis that connects the dignity of the human person to the common good.

Subsidiarity is a way to supply the means, it is a way to move resources to support and help the Other without making him/her passive. Subsidiarity allows the Other to accomplish his/her tasks, namely to do what he/she should do, what is up to him/her and not to others (*munus proprium*). Instead, solidarity is a sharing of responsibility, operating according to the rule of reciprocity.

In fact, providing means, resources, aid and benefits to Alter could have the consequence of making him dependent on Ego, or of exploiting him for

some other purpose. That is why subsidiarity cannot work without the principle of solidarity. Through it, Ego recognizes that, when helping Alter, there is a responsibility (shared with Alter), that is, Ego and Alter are linked by their interdependence on one another – and interdependency is viewed as a moral category according to the encyclical *Centesimus Annus*.

2.2. The above framework serves to explain why the common good does not coincide with justice.

Certainly, the common good is a 'just' good. Justice is a means to reach the common good (being its aim). However, by itself, justice runs the risk of being purely legal. What makes it 'substantial' (or rather 'fully adequate') is that its constitutive criterion (*suum cuique tribuere*) works through the connection between subsidiarity and solidarity. For instance, the person committing a crime must be sanctioned because he/she has violated the common responsibility (solidarity), but the sanction must not have a merely punitive or revengeful aim. Its objective should be to assist the guilty person to do what he/she has to, namely, to re-establish the circuit of reciprocity.

If an act of solidarity towards those who commit a crime is not subsidiary to them (in order to have them re-enter the circuits of social reciprocity) it would not be a right action. Solidarity by itself does not produce the common good: quite often, it becomes pure charity or the kind of egalitarianism that does not take real differences and diversities into account, not to speak of cases where solidarity can lead to real 'bads' or evils.

On the other hand, neither does subsidiarity alone produce the common good. In itself, subsidiarity may easily be interpreted in a reductive way as *devolution*, as a system of balancing powers (*check-power-check*) or, at worst, as *laissez-faire*.

Justice generates the common good only if it works through an active complementarity between solidarity and subsidiarity (fig. 2). We must remember that, according to the CCC (n. 1905), 'In keeping with the social nature of man, the good of each individual is necessarily related to the common good, which in turn can be defined only in reference to the human person: Do not live entirely isolated, having retreated into yourselves, as if you were already justified, but gather instead to seek the common good together'.

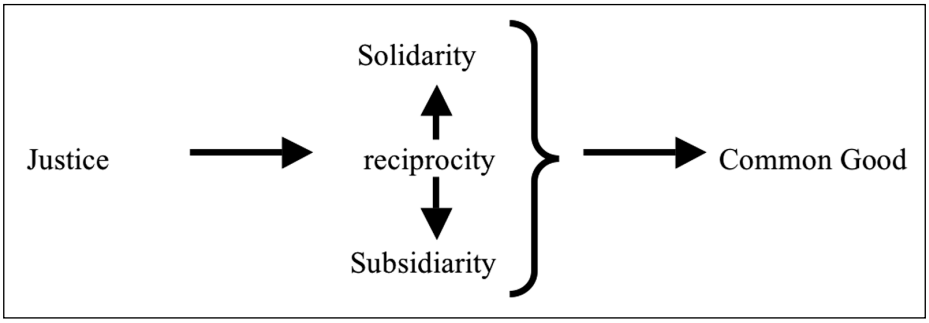

Fig. 2. Justice produces common good only if it passes through the combined work of solidarity and subsidiarity.

In short: the common good is that relational good stemming from the fact that Ego freely recognizes the dignity of what is human in Alter and he/she moves through actions which jointly invoke solidarity and subsidiarity towards Alter. The common good of a plurality of subjects is generated on the assumption of the equal moral dignity of persons as an emergent effect of actions combining reciprocity (incident to the principle of solidarity) with the empowerment of the Other (incident to the principle of subsidiarity).

Important consequences follow from all that for the configuration of society.

3. Implications for the relationships between state and civil society

3.1. The relational understanding of common good leads to various implications for society's organization, beyond the *lib-lab* configuration typical of the 20th century.

(I) Firstly we see that *the common good coincides neither with the State*, nor with the State-Market compromise, but is the product of a system of social action, involving a plurality of subjects orientating themselves one another on the basis of reciprocal solidarity and subsidiarity.

(II) Secondly we see that *subsidiarity does not concern only the vertical relations* existing in a society, conceived of as a pyramid sloping downwards from the supranational to the national level (State, regions,

municipalities), to the family and to the human person. Such a version of subsidiarity is quite limited and is fit only for the internal hierarchic relations of the political-administrative system (that is why it is called '*vertical* subsidiarity').

When we affirm that subsidiarity means that responsibility is taken closer to the citizens (*subsidiarity means having responsibility at the actual level of actions*), generally we refer to that kind of subsidiarity defined by Pius XI in *Quadragesimo Anno* n. 80. All instances are not of this kind because the idea of closeness to citizens implies other ways in which subsidiarity may operate: (a) there is a principle of subsidiarity between State and organizations of civil society (for instance municipalities and voluntary organizations) termed '*horizontal* subsidiarity'; and (b) there is a principle of subsidiarity among the subjects of civil society (for instance, family and school; between an enterprise and the employees' and clients' families, etc.) which may be called '*lateral* subsidiarity'.

Only by having a generalized idea of subsidiarity is it possible to differentiate its different modalities (vertical, horizontal and lateral). This general concept is that of *relational* subsidiarity, which consists in helping the Other to do what he/she should. Such a generalized concept is then developed vertically, horizontally and laterally, according to the nature of problems and subjects at issue.

(III) Thirdly, as was the case with subsidiarity, solidarity too can take various shapes. There is solidarity that is generated through redistribution, but also through free giving, through solidarity contracts or through reciprocity. Solidarity as a sharing of responsibility within interdependency is its more generalized meaning, namely, one always effective as a value model, but defined in different ways according to subjects and circumstances.

In brief, the relational approach leads to an understanding of what is meant by saying that global society can and must *extend* and *enlarge* the concepts of subsidiarity and solidarity.

To extend those two principles of social action means to be able to generalize and differentiate them at the same time, though always treating them in combination.

Hence, for instance, to extend subsidiarity means having a generalized concept (relational subsidiarity) structured in its different modalities (vertical, horizontal and lateral) and applied at different times and places, according to the performative exigencies of the various social spheres involved and of their actors. Exactly the same goes for solidarity. Thus, we

can conceptualize a generalized system for the creation of common good through the extension of the solidary-subsidiary relationship (fig. 3).[6]

The norm of reciprocity nourishes recourse to the subsidiary-solidary relation (complementarity between subsidiarity and solidarity) among distinct, varied and differentiated spheres, such as an enterprise and the employees' families, or the local political-administrative institutions, a volunteers' organization and the beneficiaries of the voluntary work.

Nonetheless, reciprocity needs a reason to be activated (who gives first?). In fact, the 'structural coupling' of the various spheres being distant and different from one another, and probably scarcely disposed to create subsidiary-solidary relations with each other (i.e. a local government and an organization for mutual aid, an enterprise and the employees' families, etc.), means that there is a need for a free act of recognition (a 'gift') to kick-start the mobilization of solidarity and to direct it towards subsidiarity. A symbolic, though rare, case is that of an enterprise not only activating *family friendly* services for employees, but conceiving more widely of professional work as being subsidiary to the family rather than the contrary (it is called 'corporate family responsibility').

A society that, because of its organization, is inspired by the common good must extend its subsidiary-solidary relations throughout all spheres of life – inside them and between them.

[6] One might query if this is a typology of subsidiarity rather than an action system. From a theoretical point of view this question goes back to the meaning of the Parsonian AGIL scheme, whose formulation was intended to be both in a very ambiguous and misleading way. In the relational version, the AGIL scheme is never a pure typology, but is a compass to orient observations of the structure and dynamic of an action which is supposed to be reciprocal (in the sense of being an action in response to another action). This is where reflexivity comes in. The paper by M.S. Archer on 'Education, Subsidiarity and Solidarity; Past, Present and Future' (pp. 377-415 in this volume) is a fine example of how the scheme can work when applied to the field of education. The four dimensions of subsidiarity must, and in fact do interact and work together if we want to get out of the Modern System which is now producing a deficit, instead of an increase, of common goods (as relational goods) in education (for an empirical investigation see: P. Donati, I. Colozzi (a cura di), *Capitale sociale delle famiglie e processi di socializzazione. Un confronto fra scuole statali e di privato sociale*, FrancoAngeli, Milano, 2006). The same holds true of health care and many kinds of social services (particularly family services: P. Donati, R. Prandini eds., *Buone pratiche e servizi innovativi per la famiglia,* FrancoAngeli, Milano, 2006).

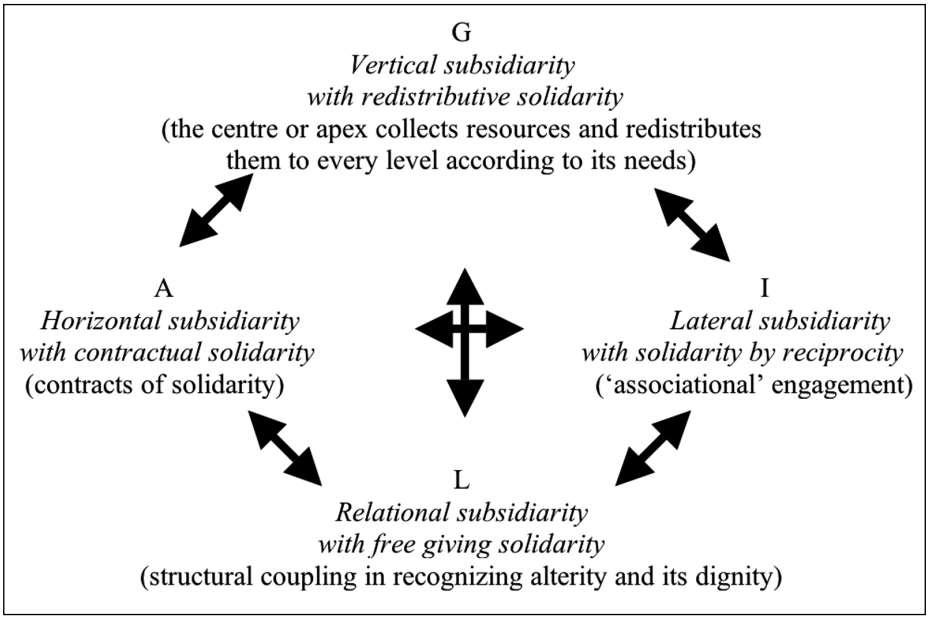

Fig. 3. The extension of the solidary-subsidiary relation in its various articulations.

It is clear how such a configuration differs from all those theorized in the modern age, starting from T. Hobbes to F. Hegel, K. Marx and the great theorists of the welfare state of the twentieth-century, to the current *lib-lab* structures. The *lib-lab* welfare systems do not take their inspiration from the model of systems oriented towards the production of common good through the principle of subsidiarity combined with that of solidarity. Instead, they are based on the compromise between Market and State (profit & political power), i.e. they stand on two legs: the one, individual liberties to compete in the market, the other, state interventions to ensure equality of opportunities for all.

It should be underlined that the relational model of common good is necessary today not only to solve the failures of the combination 'State + Market'. It is not a model simply understandable in terms of better evolutionary adaptation. It stems from a new 'relational anthropology of civil society', that is from a new way to practise human reflexivity in civil relations (those which are not 'political' because they *do not* refer to the political-administrative system, though not excluding it, but even less are they reacting against it).

3.2. After these considerations, we may be in a better position to point out the implications of the relational theory of the common good for configuring the relations between State and civil society in a new way.

The discontinuity with the past does not imply any need to revise the key-concepts (person, subsidiarity, solidarity, and the common good). Instead, the discontinuity affects the interpretation and implementation of such concepts, which is *no longer functionalist in kind*.

In the context of the functionalist approach, the common good is a state of affairs that, other things being equal, improves the position of at least one participant. It does not require solidarity, not to mention reciprocity. It says nothing about human dignity. Subsidiarity is used to refer to a kind of *smooth functioning*. Solidarity is understood as resulting from social compensation (redistribution, charity), necessary in order to make the system work.

In the context of the relational interpretation, everything is very different. The common good is *a quality of relations* on which the concrete *goods* (in the plural) of the participants in a given situation depend, that is, the goods of everyone and of all those belonging to a community, according to their different needs.

In short: the State (or the political-administrative system, from the supranational to the local one) has four ways to relate to the civil society (fig. 3):

G) a vertical modality, maintaining solidarity through re-distributional measures;

A) an horizontal modality, supporting the organizations of civil society through a type of relational contract, called 'contracts of social solidarity', not dependent upon political command and not oriented to mere profit, but operating on the basis of mutual subsidiarity;

I) a lateral modality, generating subsidiarity among subjects of civil society, without any intervention (or only a residual one) by the state, so that the basic social norm followed by actors is reciprocity (reciprocal subsidiarity) instead of (political, legal) command or monetary equivalence (for profit);

L) a generalized relational modality simply recognizing the dignity of the Other and giving him/her the gift of such recognition, thus establishing the free credit that sets reciprocity in motion.

Such a configuration seems to be able to produce common goods far beyond that of current configurations, where the State relates to civil society as an absolute power (Hobbes' Leviathan), or as an ethical State (F. Hegel), or as an expression of the hegemonic forces of civil society (A. Gramsci), or as the political representation of the Market (R. Dahl).

In such a 'relational' configuration, the Third sector and the Fourth sector (constituted by informal networks and families) play a central role, precisely because they are moved by free giving and reciprocity. These two sectors are put in a position from which to express their potentialities (namely to develop their own *munera*) precisely because they are not treated as residual subjects, as if they needed only aid, rules and control by the complex of the State + Market.

Third sector organizations and family associations become social actors with their own powers, independent from State and Market. Concrete instances are: the *community foundations* widespread in many Countries, the *charter schools* in the USA, the Forums of family associations in Italy, Spain and other countries.

4. A new sociocultural order suited to globalized society

Is it possible that these new actors, generating common good through the conjoint work of subsidiarity and solidarity, can indicate a generalized model of action for the governance of globalizing society?

On the whole, this seems to be the case. In fact, in the 21st century, society is no longer pyramidal or hierarchical, but reticular and self-poietic in its structures and in its morphogenetic processes. Given such structures and processes, common goods are produced more effectively, efficiently and fairly through modalities based on subsidiarity and solidarity, rather than all outcomes depending upon the primacy of command and/or profit (as in *lib-lab* systems). Concrete instances are: fair trade, NGOs for health assistance in developing countries, and the novel 'epistemic communities', transferring knowledge and learning outside commercial circuits.

The main problem is represented by the political system, which is now incapable of representing and governing civil society. The latter enhances its developmental potentials far beyond the ruling and controlling abilities of political systems, be they local, national or supranational ones. In some cases, in fact, political systems are seen to be perverting civil society, because they introduce ideological and interest divisions characteristic of the political parties, rather than directing civil actors towards the promotion of the common good.

The principles of Catholic social doctrine – as regards the common good, subsidiarity and solidarity – were expressed in the context of the *political constitutions* of nation States, with supranational political systems – such as

the E.U. – on the horizon. But the age dominated by the political constitutions of nation States is disappearing (it survives only in those areas which have yet to pass through it, such as the former Yugoslavia, the Balkans, and some geopolitical areas of Africa and Asia). Nation States cannot govern the global social context. Nor we can think of the UNO as a supranational State. To cope with globalization, new political configurations are necessary on a supranational and infra-national level, and it can be useful to draw on the principles of subsidiarity and solidarity in order to envisage them. These principles must be interpreted from a new perspective – no longer that of nation States, but rather of an emergent global civil society, which is not limited or bound to the frontiers of the nation States any longer.

The idea is growing that these principles can form the basis of action systems able to generate common goods and elaborate and promote the rights/duties of persons through the networks of civil society, which are now emerging from the processes summarized as globalization. This it is the theme of *civil constitutions*. It has to do with *charters* or *statutes* drawn up by civil bodies, rather than by the political apparatuses of nation States, ones which regulate the actions of the civil subjects who operate in a certain sector of activity. These activities may be economic, social, and cultural ones including the mass media. Some examples are found in the statutes of the ILO and WTO, internationally proscribing child labour, or in the Charters of international organizations approved by journalists, forbidding the exploitation of children in TV advertising.

Civil constitutions are normatively binding and have the following features. i) They are 'constitutional' because they concern the fundamental rights of the human person (e.g. bioethics, labour and consumption). ii) They are civil because the social subjects, to whom these constitutions are addressed in order to define a complex of rights and duties, have a civil, rather than a political character (they are not the expression of political parties or political coalitions, but of the associational world in the economy and in the non-profit sectors, e.g. WTO, NGOs, etc.). iii) They give shape to deliberative, rather than representative, forms of democracy, since the social subjects to whom civil constitutions are addressed (and applied) are, at the same time, the subjects that have to promote them through forms of societary governance, rather than political government. In other words, the subjects of such constitutions are at the same time the bearers (*träger*) of rights and duties and the actors responsible for their implementation.

These civil constitutions are quite independent from territorial boundaries because they are elaborated and implemented by global networks,

often international ones, made up of civil subjects. Thus, they place themselves alongside (not against) the classical political relation of citizenship (namely the relation between the individual citizen and the nation State), by assuming certain functions, particularly those concerning the advocacy and empowerment of the rights/duties of persons and of social bodies.

This is the new scenario that renders obsolete the old *lib-lab* configuration of society. Social sciences have coined several terms to capture this new reality. They talk of 'connectivity', of a 'society of networks' or 'network society' (Manuel Castells), of 'project-cities' (Luc Boltansky and Eve Chiapello), of 'atopia' (that which does exist anywhere geo-locally), instead of utopia (that which exists nowhere) (Helmut Willke). We talk of a 'relational society'.

All those expressions point to the advent of a society that is a plural whole made up of different spheres, which are all now de-territorialized, where different criteria of justice (and ultimately of justification) are valid.

The 'pluralization of spheres of justice' spreads without solving the problem of how to put the more and more differentiated spheres of justice in relation with one another (a problem actually left unsolved by Michael Walzer).[7] To confront that problem requires a 'relational reasoning' (Pierpaolo Donati)[8] that is capable of exercising 'meta-reflexivity' (Margaret S. Archer).[9]

From that point of view, the principles of the social doctrine that would configure a social system, capable of generating the common good, appear to be exactly what is needed in order to meet the new demands of a society that is 'relational' in new ways.

The mix of subsidiarity and solidarity (the axis A-I of fig. 1) may lead to building up social practices that, on the one hand, are sensitive to basic human rights and, on the other, are able to generate those common goods that neither political command, nor the economic profit motive can realize.

There are many examples of social practices reflecting, or acting as pointers to such a new spirit of the new millennium: the *économie solidaire*, the economy of communion, the local Alliances for the family (*Lokale Bündnisse für die Familie*), the Food Bank, electronic giving and sharing,

[7] See M. Walzer, *Spheres of Justice: A Defence of Pluralism and Equality*, Basic Books, New York, 1983.

[8] On the concept of 'relational reason' see P. Donati, *Oltre il multiculturalismo. La ragione relazionale per un mondo comune* (*Beyond Multiculturalism. The Relational Reason for a Common World*), Laterza, Roma-Bari, 2008.

[9] On the concept of 'meta-reflexivity' see M.S. Archer, *Making Our Way Through the World: Human Reflexivity and Social Mobility*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2007.

NGOs like Médecins sans frontières, microcredit run by non-profit entrepreneurs, ethical banks, and so forth.

It is essential to initiate a new process of reflection to examine whether, how far and in what ways those initiatives are sensitive to human rights and foster the emergence of new common goods through the conjoint operation of solidarity and subsidiarity – each of these operating within its proper 'sphere of justice'.

The task remains of analyzing the concrete examples, mentioned above, in the light of the theory summarized here (fig. 1, 2, 3). Such an analysis should show under which conditions these instances of seemingly 'good practice' actually do produce new common goods or not. At the moment, it seems that good practices need a more precise and shared theoretical-practical framework that underlines how subsidiarity and solidarity cannot currently produce common goods if they do not operate as forms of recognition of the dignity and rights-duties (*munera*) of the human person, in the respective social spheres in which they work.

To pursue the common good in a generalized way, we need to widen the scope of reason, namely human thinking has to be able to embrace and to handle the properties of those action systems generating the common good.

In such systems, the subsidiarity-solidarity relation certainly has to play a central role. Nonetheless, there is no doubt that the most delicate and critical dimension concerns the recognition of the human rights, because there is the ever-present risk of ideological or reductive distortions of human dignity.

Contemporary Western culture urgently needs to elaborate a theory of the recognition of human rights, one that does not lose, forfeit or sacrifice the peculiar quality of the human being. Certainly, modernity expressed strong ethical tensions when elaborating the different forms of recognition based on love (friendship), rights (legal relations) and solidarity (community normativity). Nevertheless, current exemplifications of de-humanization go far beyond the expectations of modernity. There is talk of the coming of a post-human, trans-human, in-human, cyber-human era. There is also talk of the hybridization and metamorphosis of humankind. Those phenomena present such radical challenges as to need a new vision: we have to re-configure human rights from the point of view of the common good, that is, to *conceive of human rights as common goods*.

A society wanting to pursue the common good in a progressive rather than a regressive (not to say ideological) way must reformulate the criteria of what is human through good practices, i.e. practices which can be called 'good' insofar as they combine four elements: *the gift of dignity conferred*

upon the human person, interdependency among people, acting so as to empower the Other, and caring for the relations among persons as goods in themselves (the common good as a relational good). These elements are relational in themselves and relational to one another.

Each element is a relation endowed with its own 'value'[10] and, at the same time, has to realize itself in relations with others. Each has value in relation to the others, not according to a sequence of 'dialectic overcoming' between a thesis and an antithesis that should 'unite them while preserving their inner truth without any contradiction with each other' in a utopian 'synthesis' (*Aufhebung*). The common good is not like this. Rather, it is constituted by and constitutes relations (reciprocal actions!) combining to generate the common good in the various social spheres – which now endorse more and more differentiated and plural criteria of justice and worth.

[10] Value here means its own criterion of assessment according to its own directive distinction, which is contained in the latency (L) dimension of the social relation (in my relational version of AGIL).