



Understanding the human person from the standpoint of the relational sociology

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Abstract

This article deals with the question of how to conceptualize the human person as a living subject. The main difficulty consists on relating the single components of the human person to itself and to the external world. It is based on Margaret Archer's thesis about the shortcoming of modernity in dealing with the human person and the need for a new perspective. We need a new scientific paradigm to understand how the human person can be both dependent on society and autonomous, possessing its own powers. Modernity looks for possible solutions by adopting conflicting epistemologies. Archer proposes a conception of human person, from the perspective of social realism, which grants humankind temporal priority, relative autonomy, and causal efficacy, in such a way that human persons become social beings with powers of transformative reflection and action that they bring to their social context, powers that are independent of social mediation.

Keywords: relational sociology; human person; reflexivity.

1. The novelty of the issue

This article deals with the vexatious question of how to conceptualise the human person as a living subject (i.e. having an existence, meaning *ex-sistere*: to be out), from the viewpoint of the social sciences broadly understood, by commenting upon Margaret Archer's recent book on the "internal conversation" (Archer, 2003). The main difficulty does not consist in seeing what a human person is made of (i.e. the unity of body and mind, the continuity of a "substance" together with its "accidents", etc.), but what relates the single components of the human person (their properties and powers) to themselves and to the external world.

Archer deliberately starts the story from the Enlightenment. Why does she do so? Why not to start from previous eras, as scholars often do, particularly when trying to define the human person? The answer is trivial, but it deserves to be explained: the answer is that the social sciences she is talking about have been born with modernity. The attempt to tackle the issue by going back to previous conceptualisations would be vain. This is so for two main reasons.

i) The issue, as Archer proposes it has not been "thematized" (understood as a theme in itself) before the modern epoch. In other words, "the social dimensions" of the human person in his/her inner and outer life do not represent a meaningful and central issue *per se* in pre-modern thought, from ancient Greece to the Middle Age. So much so that, if we try to understand the social dimensions of the human person by relying upon the classical philosophical categories, we come across "natural explanations" which cannot grasp the reality we are trying to explain.

ii) The challenges issued by modern and post-modern society to the very existence of the human person have no precedent in the history. These challenges are so great and radical that they require the elaboration of a new paradigm, based on a social ontology able to comprehend the empirical evidences as offered by the social sciences. For the first time in history, our society describes itself as non-human, and even anti-human, in deeply conscious and convincing ways.

To put it bluntly, the issue of understanding the human person from the viewpoint of the social sciences can certainly resort to the wisdom and knowledge of the classical thought, but cannot find a solution within it. The basic reason for that is that modernity has



generated the issue of the *social relationality* inherent in the human person on the basis of modalities, which did not exist before the explosion of modernity. The unity of the human person has been submitted to processes of differentiation in every dimension. The relations between the differentiated dimensions (what one calls today "the process of individualisation of the individual") cannot be approached by applying to pre-modern knowledge categories.

In which way and to what extent this situation implies a revision of classical metaphysics is a topic that has been largely perceived, but certainly not solved. The revision should take into account the fact that classical metaphysics deals with the human person within the general ontology of *entia*, while the modern turn implies a distinct ontology of the human person as different from the other *entia* (Polo, 1991, 1993). The issue put forward by Archer appeals to an ontology of "the social" which is still to be fully developed.

Classical philosophy has conceived of the social as a pure "accident", which can be separated from the substance or nature of the *ens* (Fabro, 2004). If we conceptualise the "sociability" of the human person as "*relationality*" which is "constitutive" of him/her, we must go further than the distinction between substance and accident. We must treat the relational character (natural, practical, social and spiritual) of the human person as co-essential to his/her existence and to our understanding.

Archer responds to the challenge. She does so in an original way, in a distinctive way in respect to almost all those thinkers who have dealt with the same issue, for instance M. Buber and M. Heidegger and, as concerns sociology, the various schools which go back to the classics (Durkheim, Weber, Pareto and Simmel). They are rightly put under the headings of reductionist and conflationary theories.

2. Archer's thesis about the shortcoming of modernity in dealing with the human person and the need for a new perspective

Archer maintains that modernity has brought about an issue, the relational constitution of the human person, while treating it on the basis of distorted approaches, which cannot account for what really generates and regenerates the human person. In her opinion, the sociological problem of conceptualising the person is how to capture someone who is both partly formed by their sociality, but also has the capacity to transform their society in some part. The difficulty is that social theorising has oscillated between these two extremes. On the one hand, Enlightenment thought promoted an "undersocialised" view of man, one whose human constitution owed nothing to society and was thus a self-sufficient "outsider" who simply operated in a social environment. On the other hand, there is a later but pervasive "oversocialised" view of man, whose every feature, beyond his biology, is shaped and moulded by his social context. He thus becomes such a dependent "insider" that he has no capacity to transform his social environment.

Archer points out that modernity is intrinsically unbalanced: it sees only the over-socialisation and the under-socialisation of the human person. The well-known distinction between *homo sociologicus* and *homo oeconomicus* is based on these reductions.

Archer claims that the dilemma lies in the circular loop which links the person to society: the person is "both 'child' and 'parent' of society", the generated and the generator at the same time. We need a new scientific paradigm to understand how the human person can be both (a) dependent on society (a supine social product) and (b) autonomous and possessing its own powers (a self-sufficient maker). Classical philosophical thought has coped with this dilemma in a quite simple way: it has reduced the dependence on society to contingency and it has treated autonomy by means of the concept of substance. A "solution" which refers to a low-complex and "non-relational" society.

The idea of classical philosophy, according to which the person is a substance and society is an accidental reality, cannot be sustained any longer if we want to understand the vicissitudes and the destiny of the post-modern man. After modernity, it is not possible to understand social relations basically as a projection of the human person.



Differently from classical thought, which denies the paradox inherent in the sociality of man, modernity accepts it and, more than that, it generates it. But the question is: how does modernity solve the paradox, granting that it tries to solve it?

Archer claims that modernity looks for possible solutions by adopting conflationary epistemologies. And by this way modern social sciences lose the human person *as such*. She is undoubtedly right. So we are left with the task of "rescuing" the singularity of each human person, his/her dignity and irreducibility, and, at the same time, of seeing the embodiment and embeddedness of the person in social reality without confusing or separating the two faces (singularity and sociality). How can this task be accomplished?

Archer proposes a better conception of man, from the perspective of social realism, which grants humankind (i) temporal priority, (ii) relative autonomy, and (iii) causal efficacy, in relation to the social beings that they become and the powers of transformative reflection and action which they bring to their social context, powers that are independent of social mediation.

These three operations (i, ii, iii) – as seen from the viewpoint of the social realism - are not easy to be understood where one wishes to avoid a *desocialised* vision of the human person. As a matter of fact, Archer's proposal is to open a new perspective (a relational perspective) on the processes of human socialisation. The novelty lies in prompting that there is a temporal priority of the person *vis-à-vis* society (which is counter-intuitive), in conceiving of autonomy as experience guided by an internal conversation and by understanding the concept of 'relative' as 'relational', and by restoring the notion of causality.

These operations become likely within a theory that, going well beyond modern social sciences, states that:

- *reality is stratified*: whichever kind of reality we are observing, it is made up with multiple layers, each one possessing its own powers and emergent properties;
- in between the layers, there exists a *temporal relationality*, which means that powers and properties are emergent effects;
- all in all, the relationality of the human person is conceivable as a *morphostatic/morphogenetic process*.

By adopting this social theory, based upon a realist epistemology (which is called critical, analytical, and relational, without being *relationist*), it becomes possible to perform some operations which otherwise would be impossible.

1) We can see the *pre-social* and *meta-social* reality of the human person, so that the human person cannot be reduced neither to a social product (conflated with society) nor to an idealistic concept;

2) We can observe the identity of the self, its continuity and its ability to mature within and through social interactions, while displaying between nature and the *ultimate concerns*.

3) We can see how the singularity of the human person is realised in a unique and necessary combination of four orders of reality (natural, practical, social, spiritual or supernatural), so that the contingency turns into a necessity if the person must personalise his/herself and thus becoming 'more' human.

The challenge of the widespread argument about "the individualisation of the individual" is turned into the argument of "the personalisation of the person".

3. Why an after-modern paradigm?

The sweeping criticism of the modern social sciences worked out by Archer (what she calls the two complementary faces of Modernity's Man and Society's being) is intended to overcome the *modernism* itself as a mentality and as an obsolete scientific paradigm. That's why I believe that Archer is developing an *after-modern* way of theorising about social reality, and consequently about the human person.

She is able to show, in a clear and well argued way, how the two main strands of modern social sciences are now conflating in a particular version (the *central* conflation between agency and structure) - which can be also called the *lib/lab* conflation - where the human person and the surrounding society are mutually interacting and generating each other



without the chance to distinguish between different contributions, properties, powers and the temporal phases of the processes.

As I have already said, Archer rejects all forms of conflationary thought by elaborating the paradigm of morphogenesis/morphostasis, based upon a social ontology in which the human person recovers his/her priority both logical and temporal, but without getting into a metaphysical abstraction or an idealist entity. I'd like to reformulate her view in the following way. I suggest to criss-cross Archer's scheme concerning the development of the self (Archer, 2003) (1) with the AGIL scheme as revised in the relational theory of society (Donati, 1991, 2006). (fig. 1).

The human person is someone who, standing in between the natural world (bio-physical) and transcendence, develops through social interaction. At the start, the person is a subject or potential self ("I") who, through experience (practice), gets out of nature and becomes a primary agent ("me"), then a corporate agent ("we"), then an actor (*auctor*) ("you"). To me, it is at this point that the dialectic I/you meets the need to cope with the transcendental world. Then the subject returns on to the "I" as self. The "exit" from nature must always pass through the nature again and again. The transcendental reality is treated in the reflexive phase that the subject realises after having passed through practice and sociality. Through these passages, the subject becomes a more mature self-living in society.

Every mode of being a self (as I, me, we, you) is a dialogue (an internal conversation) with her own "I". The battlefields are everywhere. But I'd like to emphasise that they are particularly meaningful (i) at the borders between the "I" and the bio-physical nature, (ii) in social interactions, (iii) at the borders with the transcendental world (see fig. 1). Archer discusses the third area in detail because this battlefield is the most underestimated within the social sciences. She makes clear how the human person can get a progressive divinisation (*Theosis*) while being in the world. Figure 1 makes it explicit that the You can go out of the social and come back to it without living the circle of practice and experience of the world. That is why the personal identity (PI) emerges as distinct from the social identity (SI) exactly because the former is in constant interaction with the latter: but the latter (SI) is subordinated (i.e. is a sub-set) to the former (PI).

Social identity is the capacity to express what we care about in social roles that are appropriate for doing this. *Social identity* comes from adopting a role and personifying it in a singular manner, rather than simply animating it. But here we meet a dilemma. It seems as though we have to call upon *personal identity* to account for who does the active personification. Yet, it also appears that we cannot make such an appeal, for on this account it looks as though *personal identity* cannot be attained before *social identity* is achieved. How otherwise can people evaluate their social concerns against other kinds of concerns when ordering their ultimate concerns? Conversely, it also seems as if the achievement of *social identity* is dependent upon someone having sufficient *personal identity* to personify any role in their unique manner. This is the dilemma. The only way out of it is to accept the existence of a dialectical relationship between *personal* and *social identities*. Yet if this is to be more than fudging, then it is necessary to venture three "moments" of the interplay (PI <--> SI) which culminate in a *synthesis such that both personal and social identities are emergent and distinct, although they contributed to one another's emergence and distinctiveness*. By allowing that we need a person to do the active personifying, it finally has to be conceded that our personal identities are not reducible to being gifts of society. *Unless* personal identity is indeed allowed on these terms, then there is no way in which strict social identity can be achieved. *In the process, our social identity also becomes defined, but necessarily as a sub-set of personal identity*.

Society is surely a contingent reality, but contingency does not mean pure accident. It is in fact the notion of contingency which is in need for new semantics. Contingency can mean "dependency on" (T. Parsons), or "the chance not to be, and therefore to be potentially always otherwise" (N. Luhmann), but it can also mean "the need for personal identity to mature through social identity". The third position implies that contingency



can be monitored by the 'sense of self', and guided through the internal conversation of the subject.

Without this different semantics of contingency, the human person could not take the steps, which are necessary to go from nature to the supernatural world, discovering its transcendence in respect to society. This is the deepest sense of reflexivity as the proper operation of that "internal conversation" which *makes* the human person more human. The social relationality is precisely the fuel or food for the reflexivity, which makes the human person effective.

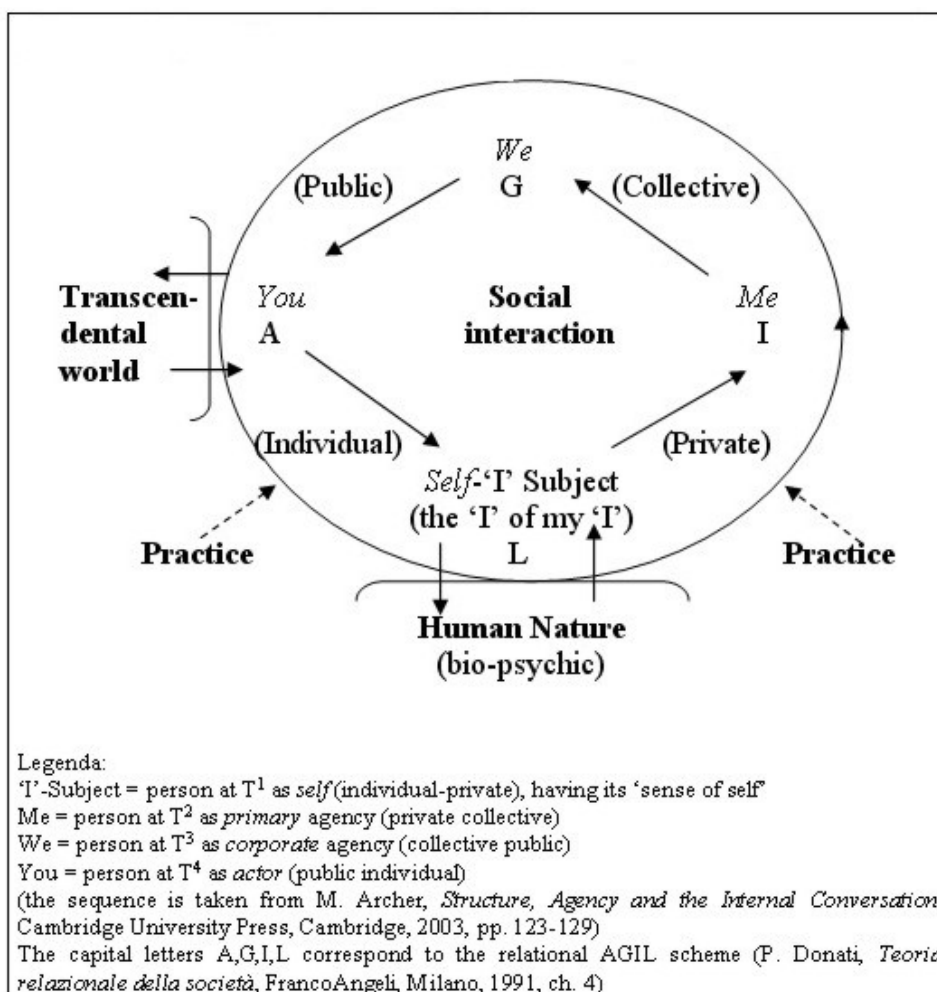


Fig. 1- The conceptualisation of the human person as someone who develops in between nature, practice, social interaction and transcendence.

If we apply the AGIL scheme (in the revised, relational version I have offered in the book "*Teoria relazionale della società*": Donati, 1991) to the sequence I-me-we-you, we can see a quite curious thing: the natural world occupies the dimension (function) of latency, while the transcendental world occupies the dimension (function) of adaptation. Why so? My interpretation is that the self is a latent reality rooted in its nature, while the means which realise the human person as such do not consist of material instruments, nor of practices as such, not to mention the processes of socialisation due to the *contrainte sociale*, but consist of its *ultimate concerns*. From this perspective we can better understand the meaning of Archer's statement according to which "who we are is what we care about": it means that our *self* becomes what it generates in the "I" by way of adaptation to (confrontation with) the ultimate concerns during the life span.

This internal work (reflexivity) must be accomplished in the dialogue that the "I" has with itself, i.e. when the "I" asks who is really its own "I" when confronted with a Me, a We



(fellowship) and a You (one who play a social role in which ultimate concerns are involved). To operate the distinction, "the 'I' of my 'I'" does not mean to be self-referential by re-entering the same distinction (as Luhman thinks): it is also, and at the same time, to choose which environment to refer to (and therefore it is also an etero-referential operation, but accomplished by the same identical person). When discussing with his/herself and deciding where to bring the "I", one self has to be both self-referent and etero-referent (this is where "the social" comes into play).

In order to understand the process of humanisation of the person, it is necessary to disprove the epistemic fallacy according to which "what reality is taken to be, courtesy of our instrumental rationality or social discourse, is substituted for reality itself" (Archer). In other words, in order to arrive at a scientific model able to avoid any conflation in the understanding of the human person as a relational being, it is necessary to refute what is known today as epistemological "constructionism", be it radical or moderate. This can be done by using what I'd like to call the epistemic triangle suggested by critical realism (fig. 2).

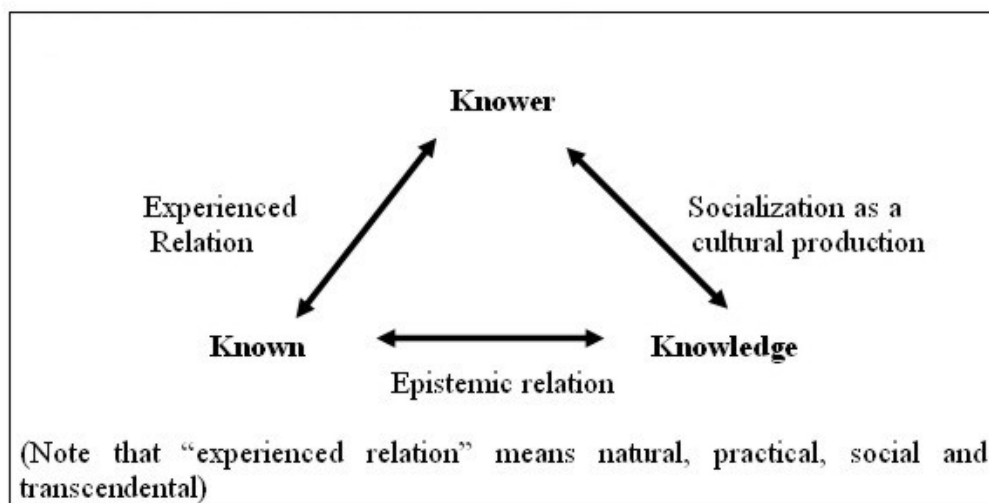


Fig. 2 – The epistemic triangle of critical realism

As a matter of fact, most contemporary social sciences claim that: i) the human person can be known only as a product of knowledge (the person is viewed as a cultural production of socialisation), meaning that the knower can only know through the cultural products of the context he lives in; ii) the relation between knowledge and known is supposed to be relativistic; iii) the experienced relation of the knower towards the known is reified (Pierre Bourdieu gives us an excellent example).

Archer is able not only to criticise all these assumptions, but also to clearly show how, behind the methodological and epistemological debate, lies an "ontological issue". What we are used to call methodological individualism and methodological holism harbour opposite ontologies that she calls anthropocentrism and sociocentrism. Only the epistemic triangle can overcome this fallacies, in so far as it allows us (i) to distinguish between knower, known and knowledge as stratified realities of different orders, (ii) to consider their relations as reflexivity driven (instead of being reified) (fig. 2).

In Archer's conceptual framework, personal knowledge is the product of a complex series of operations, done by the self, through a reflexive activity in relation to the reality to be known, in which the knowledge already existing in society (its 'culture') is only a given (in systemic terms: an environment).

Only this epistemic triangle can valorise the human person as subject and object of his/her own activity.

4. A few questions



The work by Archer offers many suggestions, which should be treated more properly and more deeply than I can do here. Let me just raise some questions.

With reference to my figure 1, we can envisage the following open issues. They lie a) at the borders between nature and the person in society, b) in the relationships between the internal reflexivity of the person and its social networks, c) at the boundaries between the human person and transcendence.

a) The border between nature and the person in society (the battlefield of practical experience) becomes more and more problematic in so far as society changes nature continuously. Certainly nature reacts. But changes produced by science and technology are challenging the ability of the human person to dialogue with nature in its very roots. The question is: is/will the subject be able to relate itself to nature when society has made/shall make nature more and more unrecognizable, or fuzzier and fuzzier? It is evident that changes in the natural world can shift the thresholds within which the experience of the 'sense of self' can be adequately managed.

b) The second question concerns the relation between the internal reflexivity of the person and the social networks he/she belongs to. The core claim of Archer's argument is that consciousness should be understood as emergent, where emergence implies the non-reducibility of analysis; the epistemological impossibility of the reduction of the emergent state is determined by the constitutive feature of consciousness, namely, *reflexivity*. I agree on that. But, possibly, the emphasis on the internal reflexivity needs to be connected to the properties and powers of the social networks in which people live, given that these networks may have their own "reflexivity" (of a different kind).

c) The third set of questions concerns the borders between the person and the transcendental world. The ability of the human person to connect him/herself to the transcendental world strongly depends on his/her ability to "symbolize", i.e. to understand and appropriate the symbolic world (to know reality through symbols). The question is: how is this ability produced in the internal conversation? How is it promoted or endangered by society? Certainly we must distinguish between different types of symbols: prelinguistic, linguistic and "appresentative" (in the Luhmannian sense). But it seems to me that much effort should be made in understanding the importance of symbols - their formation and their use - to get a person properly involved in the supernatural. My feeling is that sociology has reduced the symbols to what sociologists call the "media" (the generalised media of interchange according to Parsons and the generalised means of communication according to Luhmann). It is evident that symbols cannot be reduced to 'means' when dealing with the transcendental world. There is the need to better understand the role of symbols in Archer's framework.

To conclude

The emergentist paradigm worked out by Archer in order to understand the human person puts the old query of the relation between personal identity and social identity in new terms. I have used the word *after-modern* to catch it.

Within the social sciences, the relation Personal Identity \leftrightarrow Social Identity is usually observed as an antithesis by. But it is clearly not an antithesis. It is an interactive elaboration, which develops over time, provided that the personal identity side operates it. It can induce humanisation only by being asymmetric.

We can therefore go well beyond those scholars who, in the last century, have thought of the relation between Personal Identity and Social Identity as something necessarily reifying the person (neo-marxists) or conceiving it in dualistic terms (for instance Buber, but also Habermas and many others). The human person must deal with all kinds of social relations. We need not to oppose system relations and lifeworld relations, good and bad relations "in themselves", or warm and cold relations as Toennies referred to, in so far as *what is relevant is the reflexivity of the human person in dealing with them*.

Only this vision can explain why and how the human person can emerge from social interactions, while he/she precedes and goes beyond society. In short, the relation between PI and SI is a dialogue between the lifeworld (intersubjective relations) and social institutions (role relations), but it must not be conceived as symmetric, because it



is acted by the subject (agent and actor) who does not want simply to animate a role, but also to personify it in a singular manner.

Archer's vision has positive implications in the long run: her critical realism allows us to give room to, to think of and to promote the capabilities of the human person to forge a more human society, notwithstanding the fact that modernity has brought us into an anti-human era. That's why I have tried to comment on her book, by saying that the "economy" of the human beings does not lie on their natural, physical or material means, but on what fuels their ultimate concerns.

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Note

(1) See Archer, 2003, pp. 123-129.

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Data de recebimento: 19/06/2006

Data de aceite: 30/10/2006