How Does Social Normativity Change and Can It Be Brought to Foster the Common Good?

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1. The issue

This contribution aims at dealing with the morphogenesis of normative change that can approximate more closely to the pursuit of the common good in coping with the issues of human trafficking.

First of all, I will consider and develop an account of the processes by which normative change takes place in a context of globalization and emergence of a new morphogenetic society worldwide. Secondly, I will tackle the issue of normativity in the phenomena of human trafficking, attempting to respond to the need for *preventive* solutions when we ask ourselves how to make malpractices such as forced labour, forced prostitution or unprotected domestic servitude of migrants (legal and illegal) normatively unacceptable not by legal coercion alone and not by financial penalties alone. Of course, legal and financial penalties are an important factor in fighting against the exploitation of human persons. There is nothing wrong with interventions that combine prevention and prosecution. But we need solutions that are of a positive character in order to foster the promotion of human dignity and the common good in a more civilised society. The common good will be understood here as a relational good (Donati 2008, 2015).

The paper is intended to draw mainly a theoretical framework, useful to the design and implementation of social policy(ies). What I am going to suggest is a general conceptual framework which can show how normativity can be changed in those social networks that foster trafficking in persons, so to further processes of social inclusion respectful of human dignity through a relational steering.

In the modern social sciences, moral norms are generally explained as a product of individual actions or as a manifestation of adaptation to socio-cultural institutions. These explanations are wholly insufficient and/or biased in order to understand the phenomenology of the ‘social morality’ that bolsters, or, vice versa, can fight human trafficking. Social morality is an expression of underlying social networks that feed the trade of human beings. Such networks can be modified so to reverse them into networks of social solidarity through appropriate interventions inspired by a certain morphogenetic approach.

I argue that, with globalisation, there are emerging processes of morphogenesis of moral norms that, alongside sequential and concomitant forms typical of modern morality, represent a possible *trans*modern form of morphogenesis, that I call ‘relational’, able to avoid the exploitation of human persons. This relational morphogenesis is characterised by the fact that moral norms must respond to the needs of a new relationality between human subjects and with nature. It is asserting itself wherever social relations are considered as a reality endowed with *sui generis* qualities and causal properties, thus becoming the foundational moral criterion of new social networks and practices respectful of our humanity.

In talking about human solidarity we must be careful. In her book *The Ironic Spectator: Solidarity in the Age of Post-Humanitarianism*, Lilie Chouliaraki (2013) has explored how solidarity towards vulnerable others is performed in our media environment. She depicts three major transformations: a) the instrumentalization of the aid and development field that is characterized by tendencies of (NGO) branding and the marketization of humanitarian practice; b) the retreat of “grand narratives” of solidarity resulting in an individualist morality of “feel-good” activism or what Chouliaraki calls an ironic solidarity that rewards the self and is motivated by the emotionality of the donor rather than by the vulnerability of the other; and c) the increasing technologization of communication leading to a new communicative structure that is predominantly defined by an invitation to self-expression through new media platforms and by the absence of normative morality. Drawing on an informed and detailed understanding of these historical transformations, she primarily focuses on the issue of “how changes in the aesthetics of humanitarian communication are also changes in the ethics of solidarity” (ivi, p.
3). Central to this book is a theoretical and empirical exploration of a shift in the communication of solidarity from an ethics of pity (anchored on the spectacle of the other) to a dominant ethics of irony (anchored on the spectacle of the others like us and hence self-reflexive) – a shift, Chouliaraki asserts, that, more than ever, needs to be addressed with caution and a critical spirit.

She argues that stories where famine is described through our own experience of dieting or where solidarity with Africa translates into wearing a cool armband tell us about much more than the cause that they attempt to communicate. They tell us something about the ways in which western people imagine the world outside themselves. By showing historical change in Amnesty International and Oxfam appeals, in the Live Aid and Live 8 concerts, in the advocacy of Audrey Hepburn and Angelina Jolie as well as in human trafficking news on the BBC, Chouliaraki shows how solidarity has become a consumerist choice rather than a conviction, and more about ourselves than others. The mass media spread an idea of solidarity that does not lead to civil engagement, but very often turns us into the ironic spectators of other people’s suffering. The ironic spectator is defined as “an impure or ambivalent figure that stands, at once, as sceptical [sic] towards any moral appeal to solidary action and, yet, open to doing something about those who suffer”. How can we change this sad situation?

Chouliaraki proposes to develop a ‘moral strategy for an agonistic solidarity’. In doing so, she relies upon Silverstone’s (2006) claim that the task of actively construing the world as ‘common and shared’ to all is a moral stake in its own right and itself an act of solidarity. This active and continuous reassertion of the world as if it were ‘common and shared’ to all, is what Arendt (1958/1999) refers to as the ‘agonism’ of the public world. These ideas are the starting point for a new vision of solidarity, called ‘agonistic’ solidarity. I will try to translate this moral appeal into a sociological frame of action that can help us to understand what can be done to achieve ‘agonistic solidarity’ in favour of people who are vulnerable to trafficking.

Against the contingent morality of irony that reduces the world beyond us to our own ‘truths’ about ourselves, agonistic solidarity re#asserts this world as distinct from us and re#appreciates the role that judgment and imagination can play in turning this world into an object of our reflexivity, empathy and action. Given the dominance of the morality of contingency today, however, how could the agonistic vision emerge as a convincing alternative to ironic solidarity?

I believe that only a peculiar, relational theological matrix of culture and society can really lead us to achieve this goal, i.e. a morality of active solidarity generating common goods (Donati 2010). Today, all Christian denominations are deeply engaged with combating human trafficking. They all are trying to answer the questions: how can we conceptualize the cause of modern forms of slavery and abolition, and why? Nevertheless, they show different modalities of doing so. The recent empirical data provided by Austin Choi-Fitzpatrick (2014), indicate that Evangelicals are more likely (than mainline Protestants) to suggest individual-level (rather than structural-level) causes of and solutions to human trafficking. In the concluding discussion, the Author claims that the difference between evangelical and mainline respondents is explained by a ‘salvation schema’ that underpins their conceptualizations of social change.

In this contribution, I claim that the Catholic approach is different from both the Evangelical and mainline Protestants in so far as it proposes a structural and relational level in the explanation of the causes of and solutions to human trafficking. This is due to its own ‘salvation schema’, which is based upon a theological matrix that is fundamentally ‘relational’ (Donati 2010). I have no room to enter into the details of these differences. I wish only to remind the reader how much the ‘salvation schema’ matters in dealing with social normativity, given the fact that religion shapes culture, and culture directs public action (Rao and Walton 2004: 28-30). To address a new ‘moral economy’ in combating human slavery, we must remember – as Kevin Bales (2012) warns us – that human rights are based on cultural premises, viz. the privileging and then codification of the victim’s definitions of an action, normally an action that harms them. Virtually every action that we now think of as a violation of human rights was once defined as acceptable. Trafficking and enslavement were once legitimate and legal activities, accepted economic pursuits in which the well-being of the slave was of concern only inasmuch as the beef farmer of today is concerned about the well-being of his cattle. In order to change this social ‘morality’, it is necessary to understand how the culture of social norms is generated and regenerated.

In order to combat human trafficking effectively, before asking for more restrictions and repressive binding norms, we need to understand how to foster a new culture of human social relations and its intrinsic normativity.

2. The issue: morality in the crucible of late modernity

2.1. It is important to underscore that the object of this contribution is not ethics as a reflexive theory on morality but, rather, it is morality as social phenomenon. The norms that I intend to address do not make reference to ethical theories, but have to do with practical agency and social relations in different social spheres, that
is, in kin networks, families, economic exchanges and markets, politics, the world of ICTs, relationships with nature, and so on.

In late-modern societies we are witnessing changes of moral norms that not only are occurring with unprecedented acceleration, but, moreover, are reversing the sense of what is good or bad from a moral viewpoint. Behaviours that until very recently were considered immoral or even ‘amoral’ are becoming morally acceptable. For example, stigmatising or discriminating against certain ethnic minorities, once considered morally justified behaviours, are now becoming morally unacceptable and are even sanctioned by apposite laws. Likewise, certain violent and aggressive ways of treating animals or of exploiting natural resources, which have characterised the modern epoch, are now held to be morally ‘unsustainable’. Anyway, to be effective, normative changes need to be sustained by new social networks implementing them.

Talking about ‘modern slavery’, maybe what is ‘new’ in it, compared to the past, is paradoxically produced by the same society that tries to enforce individualised human rights. I say ‘paradoxically’ because the change in social morality inspired by what is called ‘institutionalised individualism’ does not always go in the direction of the better, but may go towards the worse. In fact, while the past forms of human slavery were legitimised by traditional customs and an established normative order, it is precisely the disappearing of that old morphostatic society that fuels the ‘modernised’ forms of human slavery. In short, what I am suggesting is to observe present human trafficking as the product of new cultural and economic drives that are made possible precisely by the contradictions and double binds introduced in the normative order of our society by the morality of ‘institutionalised individualism’.

2.2. Some speak of a loss of morality in society while others applaud the birth of a new morality. Behind these diverse opinions we find a crisis of the traditional modern morality derived from the Enlightenment and its dissolution into so-called post-modern culture. The emerging morality seems to obey a ‘normative metacode’ that imposes the reversibility of the distinction good/bad. How it can happen constitutes our topic, related to the question of what the normative mechanisms peculiar to the ongoing morphogenesis are.

All social systems (the economy, politics, justice, family, etc.) are now operating without significant relations with a presupposed morality, understood as a predefined system of values and norms that justify actions in different social spheres.

We can cite many indicators of this trend. For instance, in September 2014 the Ethical Council of the German Federal Government recommended the decriminalisation of incest between consenting adult brothers and sisters on the grounds that “it is not the task of criminal law to apply moral standards”. The law is clearly separated from morality. The law waives its purview of evaluating how good or bad social relations are (sexual relationships between brothers and sisters, for instance), on the ground that the moral dimensions of social relations are a matter of private choice. In my language, moral norms are no longer the integrative components of social relations, since morality is placed in the environment of the normative system, which is made adiaphoric – i.e. rendered morally indifferent or neutral. Social relations are considered only as forms of communication between individuals who exercise their own (subjective) rights.

Notwithstanding these changes, it remains true that every subsystem encounters the moral problem of how to define good and bad social relations if, for no other reason, for the purposes of governability and social justice. For instance, the rise in human trafficking requires the activation of public policies aimed at changing the social relations in which trafficked persons are enslaved. This issue cannot be reduced to a problem of communication of esteem towards trafficked people through humanitarian declarations. It is a social fact that every societal system continues to have the moral problem of its own regulation in terms of substantial, and not only communicative, references to distinctive criteria of what is good/bad in social relations. Public choices such as the decriminalisation of incest or the legitimisation of polygamy imply moral choices that cannot be reduced to mere communicative acknowledgments of esteem or disesteem toward the individuals involved, for the simple reason that these choices are conducive to relational goods or bads.

Socio-cultural systems are now supported by a ‘contingent morality’ that decides case by case, based on the situation, what is good and what is bad. Distinctive criteria must always be reversible and crossable in every direction, which signals that, behind the changes of moral criteria, there is a meta-norm[1] that guides them. This meta-norm recommends indifference toward substantial, absolute distinctions between good and bad, given that making such distinctions is considered to be an act of discrimination. Moral distinctions should be contingent and used for mere communicative functions. Their ontological status should be considered adiaphoric. On these grounds, morality is trapped in a double bind, because social actions are forced to make moral distinctions, but the latter lack any legitimation and are to be avoided.

Waging war on another nation or torturing prisoners are no longer problems to which one must respond with decisions based on universal and absolute moral assessments, inspired by what modernity has called
‘principles of justice’, but become a mere question of utility and opportunism. This is the post-ethical society spoken about by Doug Porpora and others (2013). No wonder if this same moral attitude is adopted when dealing with human beings and their exploitation.

Should we speak of a ‘loss of morality’ or of a ‘replacement of one morality by another’? For the morphogenetic approach it is clear that the process is that of a crisis of a traditional structure of morality and its transformation into new configurations, among which some are favourable to the availability of human slaves.

3. Understanding morality as a social fact

3.1. Beyond individualistic and holistic views of morality

In the modern social sciences two types of explanations about the origin and transformation of morality prevail. For some, morality arises from individuals’ agency; for others it arises from adherence to socio-cultural structures that are imposed on individuals through processes of socialisation and internalisation of norms and values. In short, the explanation of morality is based on methodological individualism (interpersonal or ‘private’ morality – i.e., hypo-socialised – which is prevalent among philosophers and economists) or methodological holism (impersonal or ‘public’ morality – i.e., hyper-socialised – which is prevalent among sociologists and political scientists). For example, on one side, scholars such as Emmanuel Lévinas and Zigmunt Bauman deny that the encounter between two subjects constitutes a social situation.[2] Their approach to morality is strongly individualistic. On the other side, Bourdieu and his followers treat morality essentially as a set of constrictions/constraints imposed by the cultural system and the social (class) system on the individual.[4]

In recent decades theories that combine these two paradigms in various ways have multiplied. We see this in the vast and ongoing debate on morality as the product of the binomial agency/structure and of its possible variations. The most widespread version is that of institutionalised individualism[5] as the morality typical of advanced modern societies.

In this contribution I start from the assumption that these modalities for explaining morality are reductive and fallacious for many reasons, basically because they conform to the structures of modern society, which is based on the individual/State (the micro/macro economy, etc.) axis. Today they no longer capture the dynamic of emergent morality because they are unable to treat morality as a social phenomenon, that is, as a relational fact between human persons. Moral norms are social relations and not only a dimension of individual actions (as Bauman holds) or an expression of structural (class) relationships (as Bourdieu thinks). We have to understand what this means in the context of a society undergoing globalisation in which typically traditional modern morality is being eroded and abandoned.

My intent is to show that the moral norms that regulate the social sphere are generated starting from social relations and not from individuals as such or from systems as such. Social morality is altered with the morphogenesis of relations (which is agential, structural, and cultural). Obviously, individuals are the ones who activate social relations, which are enacted in the context of structures, but moral norms correspond to their own order of reality, which is the order of social relations.

I would like to immediately clarify what this reasoning means.

The binary moral distinction of good/bad works as the observation and assessment of first resort of actions and social facts (first order of reality). However, if the binary distinction explains simple individual actions (the acts that the agent carries out in relation to first level observation directed toward an object or state of things), it is not sufficient for explaining social morality, which implies something more complex. Binary distinction, in fact, is in and of itself polemogenous. In order to prevent social life from transforming itself into a continual conflict between opposite moralities, social agency must give itself moral norms that are capable of a greater complexity than the simple counter-position of good/bad. This is realised by transforming binary distinction into a relation by means of a certain reflexivity (observation of the observation, on the second order of reality), which I call ‘relational reflexivity’. Binary distinction is applied to the outcome of such a relation after the norm to be followed in order to preserve or change the desired relation has been decided, on the basis of relational reflexivity.

To exemplify: if a farmer observes a field of wheat in which a great deal of weeds is growing, he immediately distinguishes the wheat (the good) from the weeds (the bad). His intent (moral end) is to promote the growth of the wheat and to eliminate the weeds. When he has to decide what to do (which norm to follow), he can stop at the first observation. If he proceeds to immediately pull out the weeds, he will also ruin the wheat, causing a disaster. He must decide what to do on the basis of the relation between the wheat and the weeds, and on
the basis of the properties and causal powers of this relation. In fact, he will be able to harvest the ripened wheat only on condition of letting the weeds grow too. It follows that he must preserve their relation, in which the good mixes with the bad. And, thus, we cannot say whether that relation is in itself only a good or only a bad because it is a carrier of both. On the second order of observation, the moral norm becomes, “It is good to let them grow together”. In other words, that it is good not to break the relation. When the wheat is ripe, the farmer will harvest it and will separate the wheat from the weeds, applying the binary good/bad distinction. In this process, he refrained from using positive/negative feedback as a first recourse.[6] He applied it only after elaborating a moral norm based on a relational feedback.[7]

Obviously, in social life actions that generate conflicts (‘simple’ actions, those based on positive/negative feedbacks) are much more widespread than ‘complex’ actions (based on relational feedbacks). But I am interested in clarifying the origin and morphogenesis of the actions that follow the social morality that often, and only in an implicit and barely conscious way, constitutes the normative cement of social coexistence.

3.2. The principal arguments of this contribution

What is it that comes to be socially defined as ‘morally good’ or at least acceptable? And by whom? Who defines which moral norms are accepted and which are excluded? For example, the morality of the ‘politically correct’ imposes the norm of not expressing any judgement (implied: negative judgement) on other people’s behaviours and lifestyles, which they believe to be positive, given that, according to post-modern public morality, a universal truth does not exist: only partial truths exist, all debatable and private. Who defines and imposes this new universal morality? Is it so-called ‘public opinion’, that is, the normative orientation of a supposed majority? Or is it certain social groups (lobbies) that are acquiring greater power in society? Or does this morality spread because it is imposed by laws enacted by the political system, making it legally binding?

Possibly all these explanations (public opinion, lobbies, laws) play a role in changing social morality. It remains always to be seen which specific combinations of them are working in a particular case.

The thesis that I intend to argue is that with the processes of globalisation, a dynamic of morality is emerging that, alongside the processes of privatisation and collectivisation of moral norms, is opening spaces for the moral norms that are the expression of autonomous social networks acting as mediators between individual morality and system morality. This dynamic is what characterises the different paths in changing social morality through a peculiar combination of public opinion, lobbies and legislation.

This thesis implies that changes in social morality are originated by the birth of a type of morality that is neither private (when the moral norm is defined or interpreted from a self-referential point of view) nor public (when the moral norm is defined by some sort of ‘public opinion’ or the like). The new morality becomes ‘public’ only at a later time.

This argument is prompted in the first place by two considerations.

On the one hand, impersonal morality is losing strength because socio-cultural systems are becoming increasingly pluralised, social networks are elaborating their own normativity with different types and degrees of individual and social reflexivity, and, therefore, the normative cement constituted by shared values and norms is breaking down. Society is expressing itself in many and differing social networks, which are working out their own morality.

On the other hand, individual (private) morality turns out to be too weak to influence collective processes.

There certainly exist phenomena of privatisation of moral norms (for example, in the area of human reproduction, sexual relations, organ donations), just as there are phenomena of forced collectivisation of moral norms, which are imposed on individuals without their consent (for example, citizens’ rights and duties over those of immigrants). From the point of view of relational sociology, these phenomena are also relational in that moral norms constitute themselves on the basis of a specific structure of relations between the involved subjects (for example, between individuals engaged in a process of artificial insemination, sexual intercourse, donation of human organs or between state apparatuses and civil society agents). In all cases, the norms express the power relationships between the involved actors.

Post-modern society is highly ambivalent, contradictory, and paradoxical because in it we see dynamics and mechanisms at work that attempt to assert universal values and moral norms while, at the same time, social groups (circles) are emerging in which individuals attempt to elaborate a new, ‘group’ morality separate from the tendencies that they perceive to be predominant.

All of these processes point to different paths of morphogenesis. I am interested here in elucidating those processes in which morality is changing in social networks. We can distinguish two kinds of networks. On the one hand, we find networks where social morality is devoted to the interests of a group working for its own
interest. Among these, there are the networks operating in the field of human trafficking. On the other hand, we
witness networks orienting themselves in the opposite direction. In these cases, human subjects feel the need
to relate to one another according to a moral sense that is neither strictly public (because it is not generalizable
in a universalistic way) nor strictly private (because it does not respond to particularistic interests), but is social
in that it must satisfy the needs, interests, and rights of social groups or communities that want to characterise
themselves according to their specific human relational qualities and properties. I am referring to those spheres
of society in which moral norms are elaborated because they have to meet the relational needs of a social
fabric of an associative type, which is not finding adequate answers in society’s institutional arrangement. The
issue of fighting against human trafficking is equal to the issue of reducing the former type of social networks
while increasing the latter.

In order to cope with this issue, we have to understand how the crisis of modern morality is generating various
forms of morphogenesis. We can certainly observe forms of sequential (in series) and concomitant (in parallel)
morphogenesis, as Al-Amoudi[8] has claimed. It is a matter of analysing in which fields these processes take
place, that is, wherever one moral norm replaces a prior norm (as one does with a consumer product that is more
refined than the previous one), and/or wherever a new moral norm simply takes its place alongside another
one in the framework of a morality that allows various types and degrees of pluralism (as in the political doctrine
of multiculturalism). However, here I am interested in focusing on those processes of morphogenesis that –
on a meso level – create new moral norms through the establishment of social networks that, by altering the
interdependencies between acting subjects and social systems, express societal (associational or corporate
agents) carriers of a new morality. The question of the scale at which moral changes take place is crucial,
since I maintain that the norms of social morality have a different dynamics at the levels of individuals (lib,
markets), within networks (informal groups, civil associations, more or less organized corporate agents) and in
systems (lab, structural ‘wholes’). Meso level networks/organizations are crucial in the prevention and uprooting
of human slavery.

This is particularly important in the initiatives that fight against human trafficking, because the macro-structural
compromise between the market and the state (the lib/lab morality and politics) shows more and more failures
in dealing with this task. The failure of nation-states in dealing with the informal markets of human trafficking
is well known, and does not deserve a long explanation.

In short, the fundamental argument is that an emergent form of social morality exists, which constitutes a
(morphogenetic) response to the need to create a new relationality between (individual and collective) subjects,
inasmuch as such a relationality expresses an autonomous reality on a meso level, which becomes all the
more important the more the relations between the micro and macro levels of the social dynamic slacken,
fragment, and, in many cases, collapse.

Alongside those processes of the morphogenesis of morality that are sequential or concomitant compared
to the typically modern morality (which, by following a binary logic that separates the private from the public
spheres, feeds new informal markets where human beings are freed from moral constraints to be in solidarity),
we can see the rise of a relational morphogenesis that is characterised by meta-reflexivity, which defines
morality as the need to enter into more human relationships with oneself, others, and the world. This impulse
is driven by the need to achieve the uniqueness and peculiarity of the outputs that derive from a certain kind
of social relation rather than from other types of relations. These trends towards a new social morality are
advancing in parallel with the crisis in the lib/lab arrangements that characterise socio-political systems, which
are guided by a morality of compromise between private and collective interests.

The framework that I am about to delineate asserts that today’s rapid changes in morality can be explained as a
variety of responses to the ‘double binds’ that are inherent in the modern dialectic between agency and structure
(that is, lib/lab). The fundamental double bind is that which consists in the fact that the moral imperative dictated
by socio-cultural structures seeking a remedy for the oppression of individuals works exactly like a mechanism
for their oppression. The slogans, “You must be free”, “You must fulfil yourself by rejecting all constraints”, and
“You must take care of yourself without depending on others” today represent the prevailing moral norm which,
while it promises to free individuals, in reality it oppresses and estranges them from themselves inasmuch as
one’s identity is formed, exists, and operates in the context of relations with others, and cannot be completely
cut off from them.

This mechanism can be detected in many phenomena of human trafficking when trafficked people are recruited
with the promise of becoming free through migration and at the same time freeing their families from poverty
and deprivations in their native communities.

Responses to these double binds, whether real or virtual, can take various directions. Some individuals remain
stuck in the double bind and feel constrained within the bound morality of the double bind (communicative
reflexives). Others try to maintain an autonomous reflexivity, but with great difficulty and frequent failures. Still
others try to exit from the double bind by taking paths that avoid all constraints and adopt an unbound morality; a popular song widespread in these days among youngsters tells the youngsters “I do not want to go to school, I want to break the rules”; this kind of reflexivity is no longer able to be communicative or autonomous and becomes fractured or hindered. Still others try to exit from the double bind via various strategies that are based on compassion toward the double bind and on the separation of the two binds (‘you must’ and ‘be free’). These are meta-reflexives. Moral norms are then elaborated through a steered morality that is realised whenever reflexivity becomes relational. On the empirical level, it is a matter of identifying those social phenomena in which we can observe these different processes of morphogenesis of social morality. This should be done in those contexts in which people find themselves in front of traffickers and trafficked persons. We need a critical observation and profound empirical analysis of the normative processes which produce and reproduce social injustice, inequalities, abuses in the relations between those who exploit vulnerable people and the exploited.

4. The failure of the agency/structure debate in explaining social morality

4.1. The mainstream view of social morality

According to the scheme that I believe to be prevalent in sociology today,[9] morality is activated in the attribution of meaning to the action taken by individual humans who, in aggregating with one another, arrive at a consensus that constitutes collective morality. The latter is then reflected on to single individuals, directing their actions toward a social order in which the moral distinction between good and bad corresponds to that between normality and deviance.[10]

The two processes that go, respectively, (a) from the system to the individual and (b) from the individual to the system are often thought of as circular and somehow reversible. In such a case, we have the slide, found in certain theories, that Archer (1995) rightly calls ‘central conflation’ between agency and structure. This dynamics can explain why the collective norms authoritatively issued by political systems against many forms of human exploitation in everyday life worlds, and in particular in human trafficking transactions, do not work.

What I want to emphasise is that, in the mainstream view of social morality, the circularity between agency and (cultural and social) structure glosses over two problems: (i) the issue of the relational constitution of agency/Self[11] and (ii) the issue of the relational constitution of cultural and social structures.[12]

In my opinion, much of the debate over agency and structure is flawed by these ways of reducing morality to a game between individuals and social structures. What they seriously undervalue and distort is the theme of morality as a relational phenomenon. The morality of social relations is understood in terms of the morality of individuals as such, who feel uncertain, anxious, insecure. The autonomous role of social relations in forging morality is overlooked or relegated to the shadows.

As an alternative, I propose the framework of Figure 1, which will have to be explained specifically in terms of morphostasis/morphogenesis.

My intention is to understand the origin and change of morality, not as the result of more or less spontaneous aggregations of individuals in a context defined by certain (social, cultural, and communicative) structures or, vice versa, as the influence of structures (e.g. legislative binding decisions) on individuals’ agency, but as the product of the relationality that develops in networks of social relations that connect social agents/actors. The problem needs to be brought into focus.

It is a matter of understanding if – and if so, how – one can speak of an intervening variable such as the morality of social relations as such, which constitute their own order of reality inasmuch as relations have to simultaneously meet individuals’ needs, on the one hand, and those of the governability of institutions, on the other. The question is: does a morality of networks of relations exist that is distinct from the morality of individuals and from that of socio-cultural systems? Put another way: can we speak of morally good social relations/networks and morally bad social relations/networks? Can we do this without falling into the holistic fallacy of believing that social relations/networks could think (morally) on their own?

In my view, the morality of a social relation (or network of relations) is due to the fact that it can produce relational goods or relational bads. In order to produce relational goods, a social relation should meet the following requisites: i) be an emergent phenomenon; ii) be morally good in itself (in its structure or ‘molecule’ goal-means-rules-value pattern, and not only in the feelings of the subjects); iii) be such as to give the subjects individual goods that they could not reach otherwise (the achievement of a collective good may be present or not, in any case it is not utterly necessary).

Solidarity, subsidiarity, or friendship are social relations – and not only individual feelings – that are morally good, obviously on certain conditions (the structure of the relation must have an ethically good end). Contempt, the refusal to help, aggression, and violence are morally bad social relations, and not only individual feelings. Certainly, the moral qualities of social relations have correspondences in the qualities of individuals, but they
are not the same thing because they are two different orders of reality. The morality of reciprocity on the part of the individual (as feeling, attitude, or act) is not the same as the morality inherent to the social relation of reciprocity. I will now try to explain these assertions.

4.2. An alternative view

In Figure 1, morality can be analysed from three points of view, which correspond to three different paths for the formation of moral agency.

Path [1] explains social morality as the conditioning of social and cultural systems which, with their normativity, impose themselves on individuals’ agency. This is where theories of ‘collective conscience’ (for example, Durkheim and Douglas) and cultural traditions (for example, Putnam and Fukuyama) are situated. The morphostasis/morphogenesis of morality is explained here as the product of normative systems that reproduce or alter themselves on the basis of a logic that is inherent in the same social and cultural institutions, in functional and/or communicative terms. As Mary Douglas would say, morphogenesis happens when institutions, which are supposed to be thinking entities, change ‘their way of thinking’. As Luhmann would have it, the morphogenesis of moral norms is the product of the change of semantic codes due to the effects of reflective mechanisms of communication (it is assumed that the process of communication depends on the inherent laws of the communication system itself, which is ironically expressed in the aphorism, “Only communication can communicate”).[13]

Path [2], which is opposite and complementary to the first one, explains social morality as the product of individual actions that generate a collective system of values and norms by aggregation. A broad-based number of individuals, driven by mechanisms of an aggregative type, participate in processes of identification with a shared set of symbolic and normative values that replace other, existing values. This is where the collective movement theories of Smelser (1963), Pizzorno (1966), and others are situated. Examples are radical feminist, no-global, LGBT (actually, LGBTIN, where “I” stands for ‘indifferent’ and ‘N’ stands for ‘none of the above’) movements, and protest and revolutionary movements, such as the so-called ‘Arab Springs’. The collective movement replaces certain values and moral norms with others. It is a matter of understanding what this path’s specific morphostatic/morphogenetic process is. In general, it consists in the fact that, given certain systemic conditionings, large groups (or even masses) of individuals set themselves up in reaction to them and radicalise certain values: these groups can be of a conservative type (for example, fundamentalist religious or racial movements) or of a transgressive or rebellious type (for example, when gender difference or market competition is radically rejected).

As I have already said, the majority of theories explain social morality as the product of a sort of ‘combined provisions’ between these two paths. The most emblematic example is the morality that I call lib/lab. This consists in the fact that, on the one hand, the morality of individual freedom and of free aggregations of individuals (lib morality) is invoked while, on the other hand, morality is considered as an institutionalised entity that has the task of guaranteeing equality of opportunities in the relationships between individuals (lab morality).

In the language of Figure 1 (path [1]-[2]), it is assumed that: (i) on the one hand, free individuals can adhere (or not) to a shared system of values and moral norms (the lib dimension of moral agency) and (ii) on the other hand, the system of shared moral values works in such a way as to guarantee its own effective realisation through systemic mechanisms of an ‘automatic’ type (the lab dimension of moral agency), which end up strengthening individual orientations. Morphogenesis happens only if aggregations of free individuals change the moral system; otherwise, the system continues to be reproductive.

A macroscopic example of the lib/lab view is the idea of the European Union’s master plan supported by the former President of the European Commission, Romano Prodi (2002: 20): “The integration of free market forces and competition, on the one hand, with equality of opportunity for all citizens, on the other, is the master plan of the new European construction”. This is a vision of society that has its roots in early modernity and in recent times has found expression in such authors as Ralf Dahrendorf and Anthony Giddens (his Third Way, 1998). It was relaunched by Tony Blair in his speech to the British Parliament in July 2014, when he proposed the compenetration of state and the market because neither of them can resolve social problems by themselves. Lib/lab theoreticians care little that actual reality demonstrates that this model produces more problems than it solves. They do not see that its failures are due to the fact that it forces social subjects to act within the double bind between state and market.

Figure 1 indicates a rather more complex path. In this path [3/a,b,c,d] morality certainly depends on moral (primary and corporate) agents, but it has its own relational dynamic. If we think that individuals necessarily find themselves confronting already existing institutional structures, the morphogenetic process starts from individuals who create networks of social relations (line [3a]) which, on certain conditions, confirm or alter moral institutions (social and cultural systems) (line [3b]). Institutions, in turn, and always on certain conditions,
strenthen or alter the morality of networks of social relations (line [3c]) and, thus, influence individuals (line [3d]). In this path the explanation of morality must come to terms with what happens in the intermediate space between individuals and institutions (normative systems). The ways in which (intersubjective and/or impersonal) social relations, which structure social networks, operate become crucial. The understanding of the social morphogenesis of morality becomes much more problematic because the intermediate transitions are subject to great variability.

Figure 1 – The three ‘layers’ of morality (agential, relational, and systemic) and the different paths of their contributions to the moral fabric of society.

What I want to elucidate is the difference between the morphogenesis described through path ([1]-[2]), which corresponds to the morality of lib/lab arrangements, and the morphogenesis that passes through social networks (path [3]), which corresponds to new relational configurations.

In the circular path between [1] and [2], the T2-T3 phase of the morphostatic/morphogenetic diagram is observed as an aggregation of individual behaviours that identify themselves – positively or negatively (with positive or negative feedbacks) – with the same symbols/values that, if they are institutionalised, reflect on the aggregations of individuals and can be confirmed (morphostasis) or altered (morphogenesis) by new aggregations of individuals. The keystone of this interpretation of social morality lies in individual agency’s adhering to one or another ‘group consciousness’ (corporate actors), which can be of the majority or specific to minority groups (as called for by the doctrine of multiculturalism). According to this view, the participation of individuals happens through identification with a shared symbolic ‘centre’ (a social class, a cultural or religious tradition, a movement making demands, protesting, or in revolt) that does not necessarily require specific interpersonal and network relations among the participants.

In path [3], instead, we can observe changes of morality in much more detail through four moments (a, b, c, d) because a ‘relational logic’ operates in phase T2-T3, which is overlooked or underestimated by explanations based on the ([1]-[2]) path. I propose that we analyse these processes in greater detail and with several examples.

5. The morphogenesis of morality according to the relational paradigm

5.1. The obsolescence of classic paradigms

The lib/lab paradigms of social morphostasis/morphogenesis (M/M) can generally be traced back to a framework in which the conditioning structure at the initial time T1 dictates the moral norms with respect to which individuals must take a position in their interactions in phase T2-T3.[14] This is true whether the conditioning structure privilege moral norms of a libertarian and individualistic type (as it happens in the U.S. since the lib side prevails over the lab side there), or whether the opposite happens, as in Europe, where the lab side of political regulation prevails over the lib side of the free market. In this paradigm it is claimed that individuals can conform, or not, to the conditioning structure according to modalities that Merton (1938) synthesised in his famous five types of adaptation to legitimate ends and means (among which are moral norms) that characterise the conditioning structure.

Changes of moral norms are certainly combined provisions between the pressure of structures and individual behaviours, as Merton says, but in between there are network phenomena. ‘Relational’ reasons that lead to changes in morality are the same ones that also make theories of collective agency in response to systemic structures obsolete.

First of all, we have to admit that the conditioning structure does not have that relative homogeneity of ends and norms that Merton, just like many theories in the agency/structure scheme, assumes. In late modernity the conditioning structure becomes intrinsically plural in its ends and means (including norms), above all because it introduces a principle of indifference in the evaluation of values and moral norms. This fact changes all the processes of the formation of moral norms. Since the conditioning structure becomes plural in its cultural ends and moral norms, it becomes quite reductive to fall back on a binary code of acceptance/rejection. The problem of the agents in phase T2-T3 becomes how to manage relationality between plural ends and plural norms. In order to grasp these dynamics, it is not enough to know the networks between nodes and the power relations between the various networks that are established in phase T2-T3 on the empirical level, but it is necessary, instead, to introduce another type of feedback: the second order feedback that I call ‘relational feedback’.

Let us consider an example. In studying social capital, Cartocci (2007) explains the persistence, growth, or decline of social capital – defined as adherence to values of civic morality – using a Mertonian type of scheme. According to this author, social capital increases (or decreases) when the number of individuals who adhere to certain ends and civic norms increases (or decreases) apart from social networks and their forms. A large amount of research on the changes of civic culture and social morality follows the same scheme according
to which society’s morphostasis/morphogenesis (M/M) depends on the number of carriers of a certain social morality. For example, it is assumed that the spread of environmental morality, which supports the rights of animals and the earth, is producing a morphogenesis of society in that sense due to the fact that a greater quantity of individuals adhere to it.

My thesis is that the Mertonian type of scheme (which follows the [1]-[2] path of Figure 1) commits a series of fallacies. The first fallacy is that it explains morphogenesis only with positive and negative feedbacks. The second fallacy, in parallel, is to assume that morphogenesis is produced by automatic mechanisms. For example, Cartocci assumes that buying newspapers, donating blood or participating in sport or cultural associations automatically indicates that these individuals share a civic culture and have relations of trust, cooperation, and reciprocity with one another. Such a correlation or causal connection does not have an empirical foundation.

In other terms, these theories overlook the feedbacks activated both by individuals and institutions on social relations, and they think that adherence to certain norms produces social change in and of itself. In my way of thinking, it is not so. Adherence alone to the change of a moral norm (positive feedback) is not sufficient to explain the changes in the relations that individuals have with one another and with the object of their actions. If we want to understand the current morphogenesis of morality, it is necessary to introduce a relational view on the ways in which moral norms form and change society.

5.2. Why relationality matters in generating different morals

In previous contributions (Donati 2014a, 2015a) I have argued that feedbacks to social relations follow a different logic compared to the logic inherent in feedbacks to single actions.[15] In this contribution I want to develop this argument and make the claim that feedbacks to social relations (relational feedbacks), rather than feedbacks to simple actions, change the normativity (the logical rules) of the generative mechanisms that produce social morphogenesis through positive and negative feedbacks.

The argument’s key point is that reactions (feedbacks) to the single actions of Ego and Alter and reactions to the relation between them are different orders of reality. It is possible that Ego rejects (or accepts) Alter’s action and accepts (or rejects) the relationship with her/him, and vice versa, if and only if the feedback exercised toward the single action is of a different order of reality with respect to the feedback played out toward the reciprocal relationship. The different order of reality implies a different normativity inasmuch as agents refer to single actions or to social relationships, instead.

Table 1 synthesises the differences between conceiving M/M processes on the basis of mechanical mechanisms (MeMe) and on the basis of relational mechanisms (ReMe), with some examples. In the case of MeMe, moral norms arise due to the adherence/deviation of individuals’ actions vis-à-vis systemic morality. In the case of ReMe, moral norms arise as a consequence of taking into account the autonomous relationality between agents. Let us look at this in more detail.

(I) In the case of mechanical mechanisms (MeMe): moral norms are expected to operate independently of the social inter-relations among actors, and therefore:
- The normative order depends on conformity/deviance of individuals’ actions toward the system (this is the logic of the ‘agency and structure’ debate).
- The black box of the mechanism works with a trivial causality (operating with internal functional constraints and given boundary conditions).
- The normativity of social mechanisms is supposed to be ‘automatic’ in so far as the interactions in the mediating social network (phase T2-T3 of the morphogenetic process) are bound by standard norms.
- The outcomes are aggregative social phenomena or functional performances, i.e., the outcome is determined by the mechanisms inherent to the social network conforming to structural constraints.
- As examples we can think of: social systems/institutions working as goal-seeking machines (e.g. traffic norms); organisations relying upon belief-formation mechanisms, bandwagon effects, snowball effects, etc. (e.g. advertising agencies or election campaigns); procedural justice; procedural democracy.

(II) In the case of relational mechanisms (ReMe): norms are expected to emerge and operate through the dynamics of sociability/relationality among agents, and therefore:
- The normative order depends on social relations generated by agents and their networks.
- The feedbacks are positive and negative at the first order, and relational at the second order of the interactions in the network.
- The black box of the mechanism works with a non-trivial causality (operating in dependence on internal complexity and in interaction with the environment).
- The normativity of the social mechanisms is sensitive to the interactions in the mediating social network (phase T2-T3 of the morphogenetic process) and, for that reason, is _nomos-building_.
- The outcomes consist in the emergence of relational subjects (primary and corporate agents) whose normativity is an expression of an underlying interacting social network.
- As examples we can think of: relational couples (e.g. the higher the connectivity of the couple’s external network, the greater is the sharing of conjugal roles); civic associations; social streets; peer production, co-production; relational goods; ‘Beyond GDP’ indicators (where economic well-being depends on the quantity and quality of bonding and bridging social capital); justice based on norms of equity; deliberative democracy; associative democracy.

Relational mechanisms are generative inasmuch as they are relational operations. They are so when the normative dimension of the mechanism corresponds to a ‘logic’ (in the sense of a rule or set of rules) that combines the elements of the relationship between the agents (Ego and Alter) in such a way as to ensure some validity and efficacy in what emerges from their relationship. Otherwise, it is an automatic mechanism. For example, the basilary mechanism of Western political democracy is the rule that after a contest between the majority and minority, one votes yes or no on a proposal. This logic (normativity) is not relational. The morality is inherent in the logic of numbers: the political decision is taken with the criterion of the majority of votes. This is the moral norm leading to political decisions. In this case, voters vote with the mechanism of positive and negative feedbacks. Therefore, morality (the logic) is mechanical: what the majority of votes decide is (to be considered) good, what gets fewer votes is (to be considered) bad. The democratic process is regulated by power relations, and therefore its morality is based on power, not on truth or on certainty regarding consequences. If, instead, democracy proceeded on the basis of a reflexivity having as its goal the activation of a certain type of relations and a certain societal context (and not to do ‘something’), then democracy would use not only positive and negative feedbacks (which still decide the final vote), but also relational feedbacks. Their use makes it possible to better understand which type of society one is thinking of generating, and not only what one decides to accept or reject. Democratic procedures would become mechanisms of a relational, rather than a mechanical, type.

Types of mechanisms

**Mechanical mechanisms (MeMe)**
(norms are expected to operate independently of the social inter-relations among actors)

**Relational mechanisms (ReMe)**
(norms are expected to emerge and operate through the dynamics of sociability/relationality among agents)

The normative order
Depends on individuals and systems (agency and structure)
Depends on social relations
Positive & Negative feedbacks
Yes
Yes
Relational feedbacks
No
Yes
Black box
Trivial causality
(operating with internal functional constraints & given boundary conditions)

Non-trivial causality
(operating in dependence on internal complexity & in interaction with the environment)

Normativity of the social mechanisms

The interactions in the mediating social network (phase T2-T3 of the morphogenetic process) are bound by standard norms

The interactions in the mediating social network (phase T2-T3 of the morphogenetic process) are nomos-building

Outcomes

Aggregative social phenomena or functional performances where the outcome is determined by the mechanisms inherent to the social network under structural constraints

Emergence of a relational subject (We-relation, including a corporate agent) whose normativity is an expression of an underlying interacting social network

Examples

- Political-administrative systems that combat human trafficking through repressive apparatuses which impose only sanctions
- Organisations/agencies relying upon belief-formation mechanisms, bandwagon effects, snowball effects, etc. in advertising humanitarian messages
- Procedural justice
- Procedural democracy
- etc.
- Primary networks and civic associations producing social inclusion and relational goods
- Co-production between a plurality of public and private (socially strong and weak) agents
- Public services fostering the quantity and quality of bonding and bridging social capital among vulnerable and poor people, immigrants, etc.
- Justice based on norms of equity
- Deliberative democracy
- Associative democracy
- etc.

Table 1 – Two different types of social mechanisms working with a different normativity and producing a different normative order.

The activation of relational mechanisms does not happen in the current political system of parties because they operate with a binary morality and do not allow consensus building to happen through the establishment of networks of relations among the political decision makers who are situated in the different political parties. If this were possible, it would be possible to form networks of decision makers in political bodies who reflect the networks of civil society. This possibility is available, instead, in the decision making sphere of certain Third Sector organisations (such as in true social cooperatives) if and when they give priority to the value of the relations of civil society, which their decisions create. It could also happen in the political system if a ‘relational state’ model were adopted, which would operate through relational inclusion rather than through a compromise between market and state, i.e., lib/lab inclusion.[16] ‘Relational inclusion’ means that full participation of people in society (or a social subsystem) is realised by providing citizens with the opportunities to act as relational subjects in relation to other social subjects – with the same rights and obligations – and not on the ground of adhering to a market competition ruled by the political power.
Put schematically, the reason that the individualism/holism mix (in other words, lib/lab) does not work and is generating moral bads — due to the double bind into which it is forcing individuals — is that it does not take into account the fact that the individual, with his/her action, alters or interprets in his/her own way the moral norm (lib), but it is not a given that the actual relation that ensues from this will change the system in a morally good direction (lab) because a network of relations operates between the individual and the system. The lib/lab system is built precisely in such a way as to make the system immune to this network of social relations.

Conversely, if the system alters its own normativity, it is not the case that social relations are automatically altered in the same direction and, then, that individual actions conform to systemic change of norms. In between there is the normativity of relational networks. Luhmann’s a-relational functionalism[17] leads to erroneous conclusions because it assumes that the functional mechanisms of social differentiation can separate what is human from what is non-human in moral norms, given that the moral norm becomes a pure, functional communication,[18] whereas communications are non-human when operated by the social system and human when they are enacted by humans in the system’s environment. His slogan is: “Everything that is possible becomes morally licit”. In such a way, paradoxically with respect to its premises, the Luhmannian theory ends up by converging with the relationalism of neo-constructivists (for example, McFarlane 2013), who assume that the human and the non-human can merge with each other, giving life to moral norms which are identical for human beings, animals, and other non-human living beings. In this way, the human-social and non-human moral norms are ‘fused’ (conflated) with each other while experience and empirical research tell us that they remain ontologically and practically distinct from each other, precisely due to the substantial differences in their inner relational constitution. For instance, animals do not have relations of sophisticated mutual envy or long-term strategies in their behaviour, while humans do.

6. Applying the relational framework: the case of welfare morality

From its inception, the welfare state has been the object of endless discussions regarding its moral foundations and its consequences for the morality of society as a whole. It is not possible herein to extensively discuss this issue, which has been the object of a vast literature. I will come to the point.

The point is that over the course of its development, the welfare state has adopted an increasingly impersonal morality. The moral responsibility for social problems (poverty, unemployment, health needs, pensions, social assistance, as well as education and housing, etc.) was handed over to the ‘system’. The welfare package (inclusive of all basic needs that must be satisfied to have a decent level of life) has become an automatic social right (a right of citizenship), in the sense that it does not take into consideration the beneficiaries’ conduct. The morality of this welfare resides in the principle of solidarity (that is, of inclusion and social cohesion) realised through state redistribution.

With reference to Figure 2, we can say that moral responsibility passed from individuals to the system (from [1] to [2]), completely skipping social networks (path 3/a, b, c, d). The system has thus proceeded to protect single individuals, relieving the social networks (families, informal networks, associations and institutions of civil society) of obligations toward the collective well-being.

Figure 2 – The three ‘layers’ of welfare morality (agential, relational, and systemic).

In recent decades a vast literature has shown the negative effects that this course of action has had on the forms of primary solidarity (informal networks) and secondary solidarity (networks organised in associative forms). The outcome of this story has been, and is increasingly, the crisis of the welfare state, which is due not only to the State’s inability to address social problems (the fiscal crisis, the inadequacy of public bureaucracies, etc.), but also, and especially to the fact that it generates perverse effects, among which are the de-responsibilisation of individuals and the fragmentation of the social fabric. Undoubtedly, the rhetoric of conservatives and parties on the right when they speak about this issue is overblown.[19] Nevertheless, beyond the rhetoric of conservatives, the problem is real.

The morphogenesis of the moral norms that justify the welfare state has thus encountered a radical crisis. My thesis is that the morphogenetic process of the moral norms that must give a moral meaning to welfare is blocked today because the existing model of the welfare state is propped up by the reproduction of lib/lab morality: the lib side calls for a return to individual responsibility (autonomous individual reflexivity) while the lab side relaunches public intervention with Keynesian types of adjustments, reaffirming the primacy of collective responsibility. The proposal of a ‘third way’ that introduces a new mix between moral lib principles and lab principles (Giddens 1998) has not given significant results. In my scheme, proposals of this type cannot work because lib/lab morality is blocked; it does not produce a creative morphogenesis, but only a bound morphogenesis.
In the past there were those who attempted to propose a typology of the welfare state according to its differing constitutive moralities. For example, Zijdervel (1986) has observed that welfare systems are rarely moral (with the important exceptions of the United States and Japan), but more often are a-moral (like Italy’s) or immoral (like Holland’s). The moral ones take into account the moral responsibilities of single individuals. The amoral ones consider the person’s conduct as morally indifferent when it comes to enjoying the rights and benefits of welfare. The immoral ones offer compensation without conditions or reward – directly or indirectly – morally irresponsible behaviour. According to this author, only moral welfare systems can adequately deal with the social challenges that result from a constant and progressive inclusion of the population in the politics of welfare.

It is evident that Zijdervel’s moral argument, and the moral typology of the welfare state that he elaborated, is carried out from the point of view of individual morality. He overlooks the problem of solidarity and redistributive justice as elements of morality. On the other hand, however, one could ask: can the moral norm of solidarity (and redistributive justice) nullify the moral responsibility of individuals?

It is here that the argument about the morality of social relations makes its entrance. Individuals must be morally free, and the social system must guarantee social solidarity, but how can we proceed so that by choosing one we do not eliminate the other term?

Figure 2 suggests that we look at how individuals and systems interface through social networks: in other words, whether or not they invest the relationality of the networks with morality and how they consider the morality of interpersonal and communitarian relations as such. Freedom must make reference to the concrete relations that individuals create and in which they live. And the system must take care of relations by evaluating whether they produce relational goods or bads (this is the ‘relational state’). The good or bad of social relations comes into play, in and of themselves and in their effects. It is here that a new morality of welfare comes into being. Alongside other morphogenetic processes, another type of morphogenesis is taking form, which I call ‘relational’.

On the theoretical plane, the sequence of change that the morality of welfare has undergone can follow different paths of morphogenesis in the cycle T1-T4. I offer three as examples (Figure 2).

# T1: the starting situation is given by the systemic crisis of the welfare state’s morality: the welfare state enters into crisis perhaps because it nullifies individuals’ moral responsibility with completely impersonal principles of responsibility, or perhaps because – vice versa – it appeals to individual responsibility while overlooking the norms of solidarity.

# In the intermediate T2-T3 phase: the interactions between agents represent the search for moral norms in response to the systemic crisis; these interactions can follow, roughly, three paths.

(I) The interactions are guided by an action model that tries to adjust the norms of negotiation between state actors and market actors, leaving aside other actors; this modality (of communicative reflexivity within the lib/lab system) represents a search for internal adaptations to the ‘system’, which are generally of an opportunistic type.

(II) In the interactions, action models characterised by an autonomous reflexivity prevail, so that the social networks, lacking any shared moral constraints, become chaotic.

(III) The interactions adopt action models supported by a meta-reflexivity that is oriented toward building social networks in which there is an important effect of ‘open coordination’ between the parties, valorising the morality of reciprocal relations (relational steering).

# T4: the structure of emergent morality depends on how the normativity of phase T2-T3 was elaborated; according to the three aforementioned paths, three types of morphogenesis are possible:

(I) A morphogenesis of lib/lab morality (the lib/lab is not in and of itself morphostatic); the emergent norms are a combination of criteria of efficiency and efficacy in the definition of welfare morality.

(II) An unbound morphogenesis of lib/lab morality, which means the appearance of moral norms of individual freedom and of collective constraints that proceed on their own, without significant connections, thus producing contradictions and perverse effects.

(III) A morphogenesis of morality that amplifies, selects, and stabilises new opportunities on the basis of a normative criterion that valorises relationality between the parties as primary good; for example, welfare measures come to be considered as morally good/bad depending on whether or not they lead to the flowering of interpersonal relations (in the positive case, one speaks of ‘relational state’, ‘welfare society’, etc.); here the moral norm of social structures is based on the qualities and causal properties of the social relations that are promoted.
The third alternative (III) indicates a morality characterised by the moral norms of an equitable and sustainable welfare as product of sui generis relational networks. As examples one could cite: co-production (Pestoff 2009); public-private partnerships generating new networks at the local level (Evers 2015); social cooperatives able to be counter-cyclical instead of having only a buffering role on the impact that the systemic crisis has on citizens (Vidal 2015); and, in general, the so called ‘relational turn’ in social innovation (Fløysand and Jakobsen 2011).[23] Every society has to come to terms with an intrinsic ambivalence: on the one hand, it must make individuals understand that they depend on the collectivity and that, therefore, the altruistic orientation must prevail over an individualistic orientation but, at the same time, it has to push individuals to maintain a certain distance from the prevalent norms so as to be able to always also develop their own evaluations and thus guarantee a certain degree of creativity, innovation, and pursuit of change on the part of the individual.

The problem of lib/lab is that its moral norms do not provide a solution to this ambivalence. We can take the case of the bibliometric evaluations of scientific research. Leydesdorff (2014) considered the ethical and cultural consequences of relying on metrics to assess the quality of scholarship, and reached the conclusion that the present system, centred on individual production, penalises the research of groups, networks, and between cooperating individuals. The answer to the problem of how to combine individual creativity and collective subjectivity can only come from a relational approach that highlights that innovation is a product of networks that share norms formed in an autonomous manner by the sociability of participants without being imposed by a superordinate structure. The problem is whether the network is able to avoid the absence or lack of clarity in the norms. The answer is the relational subject, the morality of the we-relation (Donati and Archer 2015). Lacking this, networks fail.

What this excursus on the concepts and practices of social welfare wants to teach us is that welfare interventions, when dealing with human trafficking, should be configured in such a way as not to be addressed to mere individuals or ‘people in general’, but to social networks. Through the application of life course theory, a more complete understanding of the dynamics affecting vulnerability to exploitation in sex trafficking can be gained, providing enhanced information regarding plausible strategies for prevention and intervention (Reid 2012).

The morality of welfare interventions must be able to foster relationships of mutual help and inclusion not only among the destitute, but among all local actors concerned with the well-being of a population, which is proper to a ‘relational state’ (Donati 2015b). Surely we need to work on the normative reduction of ‘Demand’ for both forced labour and prostitution. But we must be aware that welfare policies following the mere philosophy of ‘damage reduction’ are often ineffective in changing the normative context that produces the demand for human trafficking, since these policies do not change the networks where people live and act. On the other side, relying upon the simple statement of human rights proves to be ineffective, as it is generally the call to ‘obey the rules’. As Land and Rüssel Beattie (2008) have demonstrated in regard to the rules governing international security, compulsory morality not only guides a variety of practices within international politics but also contributes to the chaos and tension on the part of agents in light of the structures they sustain. The four central themes – practice, legitimacy, regulation, and responsibility – that reflect the main dimensions of a rule-governed political order are extremely difficult to implement at the international level. While many assume that ‘obeying the rules’ will bring more peaceful outcomes per se, the argument presented here seeks to demonstrate that this may occur in some cases, but more often than not the very nature of a rule-governed order will create tensions and stresses that require constant attention to underlying social and political dynamics.

On the basis of the above considerations, I believe that any single institution can provide a single new set of rules for governing an increasingly chaotic international system that produces human trafficking. Instead, I think it is possible to pursue a course of action that aims to change moral rules at the level of civil society, by engaging the transnational networks in setting up some sort of ‘civil constitutions’ (Teubner 2012).

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The problem of lib/lab is that its moral norms do not provide a solution to this ambivalence. We can take the case of the bibliometric evaluations of scientific research. Leydesdorff (2014) considered the ethical and cultural consequences of relying on metrics to assess the quality of scholarship, and reached the conclusion that the present system, centred on individual production, penalises the research of groups, networks, and between cooperating individuals. The answer to the problem of how to combine individual creativity and collective subjectivity can only come from a relational approach that highlights that innovation is a product of networks that share norms formed in an autonomous manner by the sociability of participants without being imposed by a superordinate structure. The problem is whether the network is able to avoid the absence or lack of clarity in the norms. The answer is the relational subject, the morality of the we-relation (Donati and Archer 2015). Lacking this, networks fail.

What this excursus on the concepts and practices of social welfare wants to teach us is that welfare interventions, when dealing with human trafficking, should be configured in such a way as not to be addressed to mere individuals or ‘people in general’, but to social networks. Through the application of life course theory, a more complete understanding of the dynamics affecting vulnerability to exploitation in sex trafficking can be gained, providing enhanced information regarding plausible strategies for prevention and intervention (Reid 2012).

The morality of welfare interventions must be able to foster relationships of mutual help and inclusion not only among the destitute, but among all local actors concerned with the well-being of a population, which is proper to a ‘relational state’ (Donati 2015b). Surely we need to work on the normative reduction of ‘Demand’ for both forced labour and prostitution. But we must be aware that welfare policies following the mere philosophy of ‘damage reduction’ are often ineffective in changing the normative context that produces the demand for human trafficking, since these policies do not change the networks where people live and act. On the other side, relying upon the simple statement of human rights proves to be ineffective, as it is generally the call to ‘obey the rules’. As Land and Rüssel Beattie (2008) have demonstrated in regard to the rules governing international security, compulsory morality not only guides a variety of practices within international politics but also contributes to the chaos and tension on the part of agents in light of the structures they sustain. The four central themes – practice, legitimacy, regulation, and responsibility – that reflect the main dimensions of a rule-governed political order are extremely difficult to implement at the international level. While many assume that ‘obeying the rules’ will bring more peaceful outcomes per se, the argument presented here seeks to demonstrate that this may occur in some cases, but more often than not the very nature of a rule-governed order will create tensions and stresses that require constant attention to underlying social and political dynamics.

On the basis of the above considerations, I believe that any single institution can provide a single new set of rules for governing an increasingly chaotic international system that produces human trafficking. Instead, I think it is possible to pursue a course of action that aims to change moral rules at the level of civil society, by engaging the transnational networks in setting up some sort of ‘civil constitutions’ (Teubner 2012).
The welfare initiatives aimed at combating human trafficking by reducing or eliminating ‘supply’, should be reoriented towards a relational perspective of action focused on changing the networks of the actors involved. An example of such a social practice can be found in the way juvenile crimes have been reduced or eliminated by changing people’s networks through a relational intervention (Weaver 2012). An example of similar civil projects is given in Table 2.

Table 2 - Stop Human Trafficking

‘STOP Traffick!’ is a transnational project on reduction in demand for the sexual services of victims of trafficking. This project will explore different attitudes of buyers and potential buyers to human trafficking, its context and impact in order to inform demand-reduction awareness-raising initiatives, implemented through a partnership of civil society, public and private enterprises. The programme will target employers to pilot the demand-reduction strategy as part of their corporate responsibility.

The programme will aim to develop a strategy leading to the development of a toolkit of products and activities to raise awareness among buyers and potential buyers of services delivered by human trafficking victims in the sex industry, in order to reduce demand for purchase of sexual services. The toolkit and awareness activities will be informed by research on men’s attitudes to buying sex in some of the participating member states and further informed by case studies documenting the experience of women and girls who are trafficked for the purpose of sexual exploitation.

A further aim of the programme is to strengthen the capacity of citizens and civil society organisations, to challenge the demand for victims of trafficking, further influencing the reduction of demand. It will also develop appropriate referral mechanisms for buyers or ex buyers who want to report human trafficking to law enforcement authorities or support victims of trafficking in accessing appropriate protection and support through structured referral to appropriate services.

The priorities of the project are as follows. Prevention, protection, assistance and support to victims, prosecution and investigation of offenders, coordination and cooperation mechanisms, as well as research into new forms of trafficking: 1) Demand and supply reduction for products and services provided by victims of trafficking, including measures aimed at implementing corporate social responsibility and awareness raising among employers and civil society. 2) Protection and support for assistance to victims of trafficking, including specific vulnerable groups.

Let me recapitulate, then, the fundamental argument. In all of these cases, the social and cultural structure given at T1 enters into a systemic crisis as regards the moral norms that it contains, explicitly or implicitly. The crisis leads to the commencement of play in phase T2-T3, from which derive effects to which, de facto, society responds, depending on the case in question, with three types of morphogenesis that have three types of outcomes: a) circularity of the morality between subjective norms and institutional forms (Beck, Bonss and Lau 2003); b) widespread anomie and morality of the ‘hit the bottom’ type (Teubner 2011); c) morality generated through new forms of relational steering (Donati 2013, 2015a). This is the moral scenario of society as it transitions beyond modernity that I would like to now briefly delineate.

7. The morphogenesis of the societal moral fabric in the era of globalisation

The scenario that we have before us is that of lib/lab systems continuing to operate while encountering growing failures and perverse effects. Their morality is self-defeating. The rapidity of failures depends on the accelerating erosion of certain values and traditional norms that early modernity had preserved in the past. The immediate consequence of such failures is perceived as unbound morphogenesis, which means growing widespread anomie.

If we generalise the scheme in Figure 2, we can hypothesise that morality in the era of globalisation will proceed according to three concomitant types of morphogenetic changes (Figure 3).

The processes can be described through the morphogenesis of the basic structure of social relations (see the framework in Donati 2014a: 144-159), or what we can call the ‘founding relation’ – or else the ‘relational pattern’– that characterises a social network.[24] Such a structure (CTMN) consists in the emergence of interactions among the following components: (C) the value attributed to the relation’s concern/interest; (T) the concrete and situated target/goal selected or selectable for the implementation of the relation on the ground of the relation’s value; (M) the means available to pursue the relation’s concern/interest; (N) the logic of relating C, T, and M (through distinctions and connections).
At time T1 we find a structure that contains its own Morality-1, which conditions agents when they begin to interact with one another.

In phase T2-T3 three scenarios are possible:

(a) The network of agents operates on the basis of Morality-1, which at time T4 can produce both morphostasis (communicative reflexivity) or a bound morphogenesis (autonomous reflexivity); for example, in the double bind of lib/lab morality, CTMN-2 is unvaried compared to CTMN-1.

(b) The network of agents breaks the structure of Morality-1 and at time T4 generates an unbound morphogenesis, that is, an anomic morality. Here the CTMN-2 structure is characterised by a relational logic that is unable or refuses to draw distinctions (thought to be discrimination)[25] and, thus, does not valorise connections, but reflects in a fragmented or hindered way. Clearly this is the way in which malpractices such as forced labour, forced prostitution or unprotected domestic servitude of migrants can arise. What I want to stress is the fact that they can be produced, and as a matter of fact they are produced, by the lib/lab structure of state control apparatuses working on individual behaviours with normative regulations that do not use an adequate relational reflexivity.

(c) The network of agents operates with strategies of a relational steering type and produces relational morphogenesis. The structure of CTMN-2 is characterised by a meta-reflexive logic that indicates ends and means as a function of relations’ value. This is the case of morality that is generated in those social spheres where relationality is taken seriously as a source of moral norms. In other terms, interactions are guided by the morality of the relation as such, which is based on relational feedbacks. New opportunities are created by means of relational steering: the network, in interaction with the outside, introduces variations in resources, actors, power relations, and norms that legitimate the variations that stabilise relational feedbacks.

Figure 3 – The different paths of the social morphogenesis of morality from a relational perspective (as it emerges in late modernity) (in a cycle T1-T4). For the more general theory, see: Donati (2013: 216)

The framework of Figure 3 underscores the fact that the structure of the relation that establishes and characterises the social network contains the moral norm that organises the means and ends of agency – both individual and collective – as a function of the value of the relation itself.

In case (a), a norm of collective utility prevails that maximises the criteria of efficiency and efficacy. An example is found in organisations that operate with a managerial style (business morality).

In case (b), a norm that maximises criteria of contingent preference prevails. It could be an expressive or opportunistic type, in the sense of seizing the most attractive opportunities of the moment: for example, the morality of Facebook networks.

In case (c), a norm that gives priority to the criterion of the moral value (the dignity) of the relation that characterises the social network prevails. Civic networks, such as ‘social streets’ (http://www.socialstreet.it/), are an example of this type if and when the relation that inspires associative agency is the value to be pursued, independently of its utility, efficacy, or efficiency. In these social practices, what matters is not the material goal that can be achieved (for instance, the maintenance of a common good like a public garden in the neighbourhood) as such, but ‘the sociality behind it’, i.e., the sociality among the neighbours that produces it.

The third solution at time T4 (Morality-2 c in Figure 3) entails the primacy of the moral value over the relation’s other components.[26] Moreh (1986) has shown that the economic theory of utility does not take into account moral behaviour, that is, behaviour in which an individual faced with two courses of action may choose the one that is less profitable to him or her. According to relational theory, when the goals that the individual has to achieve consist of peculiar social relations (e.g. personal care, education, friendship, etc.), then the morphogenesis has to be steered toward the achievement of higher relational goods. My thesis is that this behaviour has greater probabilities of being chosen when the individual is in a relational context endowed with certain qualities and properties rather than in another one. The context is not only a constraint, but also a resource, a pool of opportunities offered by the network formed with others.

Luhmann (2008b) wonders: ‘Are there indispensable norms in our society?’ His answer is negative. To his view, it is impossible to reasonably expect that any given moral or legal norm is normatively indispensable. This answer is in line with the ontological and epistemological premises of his approach, which is decidedly sceptical and amoral. I think that he should be challenged with an even more paradoxical question: ‘Are there still indispensable social relations in our society?’ The latter issue is strictly linked to the former. Let us take the example of work relations. No doubt that work is increasingly considered an indispensable social relation, not only from the standpoint of economic support, but also of the person’s emancipation/humanisation, and in this sense it is a moral imperative, which of course admits exemptions in special circumstances.
To understand the argument according to which there are social relations that are morally indispensable, it is necessary to consider the fact that social relations always involve a morality. The practical moral norm (not the ethical principle, which is located on another level of reality, i.e., in the cultural system) is redefined and changes in the moment that the agent reflects on relations with others in a context, and not when he/she reflects internally on his/her own ‘I’. The individual’s internal reflexivity considers the moral norm in order to define his/her moral agency in terms of the aspect of his/her subjective determinations (the process of discernment, deliberation, dedication is analysed in depth by Archer 2003), but the moral norm has a dynamic that does not depend only on individual agency, whether of a single individual or of a multiplicity of N individuals (aggregated or interacting with one another) – just as it does not depend entirely on the dynamic of structures (social and cultural institutions). The practical moral norm is formed and created in the relational process among agents. The problem is how we can analyse the contribution given to the formation of the moral norm inherent in the social relation (for example, that of work and family) by, respectively, the single agents, institutions, and the relation itself.

The present moral imperative in Western culture, which has been absorbed into social theory, is that individuals should be active, intentional, autonomous, independent, reflexive, capable, and constantly able and willing to make rational choices in their lives. Behind this moral imperative to agency, other aspects of what it is to be human lie in the shadows.

In terms of actions, the human aspects consist in the fact that agents ‘always and as such have patients, beings which the action affects’ (Reader 2007: 588). Whoever teaches influences the student necessarily, but the student retroacts upon the teacher. Whoever sells necessarily conditions the buyer, but is also conditioned by him/her. Whoever cares for a poor or ill person has an impact on him/her, but is also influenced by him/her. Whoever cares for an immigrant or a trafficked person has an impact on him/her, but is also influenced by him/her. To put this more sociologically, every action entails a relationship. No single person is ever completely an agent or a patient in any one moment of interaction. The Self is called, like it or not, to acknowledge itself as a relational subject (Donati and Archer 2015). This reality is grasped if one understands that, from the moral point of view, what is at stake resides in the relation; indeed, what is at stake is the relation itself, considered for its moral qualities and properties, because it is in the relation that what is good/bad, right/wrong is defined in (and is relevant to) the identity of being an actor or a patient, an active or a passive subject. When the relation presents itself as ambivalent, the ambivalence can be dissolved by observing what type and degree of reciprocity exists between Ego and Alter, given the fact that it is in the qualities and causal properties of reciprocity that is defined what is good or bad.

8. The importance of communication (mass media and ICTs) in distorting or, vice versa, improving the emergence of a new morality toward human trafficking

Mass media and ICTs play a crucial role in mediating the diffusion and emergence of social morality. They can contribute to combatting human trafficking or, vice versa, can obliterate and distort what we can call ‘humanitarian moral norms’. We should assess their ‘ethics of mediation’ in dealing with the issues of changing the mentality of those who despitefully use of vulnerable people, on one side, and nurturing relationships of care and responsibility for the people in need. Empirical research is lacking on these issues.

Indeed, it is not easy to evaluate the mediating role that the virtual reality of the ICTs exerts in sustaining or, vice versa, undermining a culture of ‘humanity’ and proper human relations through the positioning of vulnerable others along the axis of proximity#distance which that characterizes the different media. As Silverstone (2006: 47) reminds us, a ‘proper distance’ is in itself a normative dimension when facing the issue of changing the normative orientations of people for the humanization of vulnerable others.

Chouliaraki (2011) has highlighted the different ways in which the particular articulations of proximity#distance in media communication produce distinct conceptions of humanity and, therefore, distinct proposals for solidarity towards vulnerable others. To this regard, she has proposed a typology of paradigms of solidarity, namely ‘pity’, ‘irony’ and ‘agonism’.

Pity is associated with ‘universal’ proximity solidarity, which assumes a false sense of ‘common humanity’ and suppresses difference between ‘us’ and ‘them’, whilst irony is associated with self#distance solidarity that takes the self to be the source of morality and assumes an equally misleading radical difference between ‘us’ and ‘them’. Neither paradigm, Chouliaraki argues, puts forward a political and morally productive proposal for solidarity.

Her discussion of NGO#branding appeals, celebrity advocacy and new media journalism, shows how their self# oriented textualities shift the claim to solidarity from a morality of pity to a morality of irony. ‘Irony’ celebrates consumerism as a reflexive distance from the self and is, therefore, unable to put forward a morally acceptable proposal of solidarity. This is because, rather than regarding human vulnerability as a politics of injustice, irony
views vulnerability as a politics of the self. Specifically, irony renews the promise of solidarity today, by replacing the moral proximity between self and other, inherent in the logic of ‘common humanity’, with an opposing but structurally equivalent moral distance from the self – between us and the motivations of our action (but, consequently, also between the self and the other). Far from a purely philosophical affair, this transformation is co#nascent with the increasing ‘instrumentalization’ of solidarity in the global humanitarian market, which, by turning solidarity into self#centred consumerism, ultimately reproduces rather than challenges the existing relations of power between affluent people and vulnerable others. Solidarity as irony, in this sense, flourishes within a world of situated meanings and values not in the form of a ‘universal’ truth, but in the form of stories of suffering that, by way of ‘sentimental education’, mundanely cultivate the virtue of ‘being kind to others as the only social bond that is needed’ (Rorty 1989: 93, emphasis added).

On the other hand, even the ICTs (Internet) do not appear to produce by themselves a public realm of reflexive judgment where the voice of distant others becomes an object of our empathetic identification and a cause for our solidary action. ICTs are only technical means which may serve or not, in one way or another, the real (face-to-face, interpersonal) relationships in the life worlds.

Chouliaraki asks the question: would it not be possible to imagine a different communicative structure of humanitarianism that navigates beyond pity and irony and escapes both the arrogant proximity of the former and the narcissistic self#distance of the latter? Is it not possible to produce an alternative vision of solidarity through media communication?

Her response is positive, provided that we reconsider the imperative to act on vulnerable others on the basis of neither proximity nor self#distance. Her proposal is to resort to a different space of communication, that of a proper distance conceived of as ‘space of imagination’, that goes ‘beyond the individual and the solitary self’ so that it ‘opens the doors to understanding and in turn to the capacity to make judgments in and through the public world’ (the quotation is from Silverstone 2006: 46). Far from maintaining the strategic distinction between imagination and judgment, characteristic of the ironic preference for self#expression as playfully imaginative and its marginalization of judgment as irrelevant to solidarity, Chouliaraki shares Silverstone’s views according to which a proper distance favours, instead, the co-articulation between judgment and imagination as the only way in which solidarity can go ‘beyond the solitary self’ and become a practice of the ‘public world’. Proper distance requires therefore a dual engagement with human vulnerability, which both enables us to reflect upon this vulnerability as a political question of justice and invites us to relate to the vulnerable other as an ‘other with her or his own humanity’. Her conclusion is that it is precisely this recovery of the public world as a space of both judgment and imagination that promises to renew the morality of solidarity, today.

Personally I can agree only to some extent, since sociological researches show that a public world of real solidarity can only be founded in those civil social networks where primary and secondary interpersonal relations are generated and regenerated regularly. So that we need mass media and ICTs that, instead of manipulating the life worlds, serve them to know and manage better and better the human meaning and social functions of everyday social relationships, certainly in connection with the public sphere.

I can agree on the idea that agonistic solidarity is neither about the sharing of the same humanity for an impersonal ‘whole’ nor the mere sharing of our own feelings for distant others but about the communication of human vulnerability as a political question of injustice that can become the object of our collective reflection, empathetic emotion and transformative action. This is proven to be true provided that we understand that collective reflection, empathetic emotion and transformative action depend on the sense attributed by people to human social relations in their situational contexts, insofar as the common good is really practiced as a relational good.

9. Conclusions

Morality is a social fact, but it is treated like a problem of the individual or the system, or a mix of the two. Current mainstream sociologies explain changes of morality according to opposing versions. For some, morality evolves by ‘systemic emergence’. For others, morality evolves through an ‘emergence of subjectivity’. If until a few years ago these two versions were seen as antithetical (Durkheim’s ‘collective conscience’ vs. Weber’s ‘individual subjectivity’: in particular, ‘charisma’), today structure and agency seem to operate in a synergetic manner. My explanation is that this happens because a lib/lab configuration of morality prevails, which intrinsically contains a double bind (the double bind of the systemic constriction on individuals to be morally ‘free’).

a) The theses arguing for morality as ‘systemic emergence’ maintain that morality becomes a product of functional systems that, inasmuch as they proceed only through communications and are (ontologically) only communication, de-normativise society, including human beings, in a system that includes animals, plants, and every other entity, obviously including the entire artificial world of technology.
This thesis claims that in the differential and complex modern societies, the true protagonists of such events and processes are no longer humans or groups of humans with their material needs and their ‘values’, but roles and functions, systems and environments: a whole world of givenness and systemic relations in which human individuals operate like mere interchangeable and perfectly fungible elements. According to Luhmann (2008a), this fact leads to a new style of morality that is founded on the shared interest in reducing fear, and no longer on norms.

It is in this way that the era of globalisation presents itself, according to some, as morally ‘adiaphoric’. Decisions that need to be taken can no longer and should no longer be regulated based on a substantial distinction between good/bad that appeals to some ‘nature’, ‘reality’, or ‘objectivity’ because decisions on good and bad become ‘technical’, ethically indifferent, adiaphoric.

In this contribution I have tried to show that this vision commits a macroscopic error of perspective because it does not see the human character of the social as a nomos-building activity. The type of morphogenesis that it observes is only that of the de-humanisation of social morality, in particular, unbound morphogenesis.

b) In contrast, the theses arguing that morality is becoming completely subjective (morality as ‘emergence of subjectivity’) commit an error of perspective that is symmetrically opposed to the previous one because they make the morality of institutions (structures) coincide with that of individuals. Those who support this thesis (including many academic scholars and even many magistrates in courts) argue that morphogenesis takes place through those cultural movements that claim that people, as pure individuals, have the right to define their identities and their relations as they like. The distinction between social relations (as structures) and subjective consciousness is no longer productive. What individualisation of social relations essentially means is that the perceived relation is the social structure, and that, consequently, both the individual perception and the social structure might vary at people’s will. In their opinion culture becomes an experiment whose aim is to discover how we can live together as equal but different; the aim of normativity is less and less to prescribe a certain way of living and more and more to clear the institutional conditions for a multiplicity of lifestyles to be recognised. This means that any collectively-shared definition of relationships and individual positions is gone.

My opinion is that these two broad currents are, at the same time, antithetical and complementary (the moral norm refers to two polarities that are simultaneously opposite and complementary) because they entrust impersonal morality to the system and collocate free individual morality in the system’s environment where they can fluctuate at will. Systemic morality guarantees subjective morality, which can create the most disparate social forms. On the basis of this perspective, the morphogenesis of morality would be destined to play out this game between individuals and the social system (the circular and conflative path between 1 and 2, skipping path 3, in Figure 1)

In this contribution, I have tried to show that this scenario identifies the processes of morphogenesis inside lib/lab that lead to the dissolution of lib/lab. If we manage to see that morphogenesis happens through complex social networks, in which specifically human relationality takes on increasing importance – which is different from that of animals and other living beings – we can glimpse other forms of morphogenesis. These forms are not simply the crisis of morality tout court or the replacement of modern morality by the synergy between systemic a-morality and subjective a-morality, but rather the birth of a new morality that valorises the good/bad of social relations upon which people’s moral identity and their common goods depend.

Once upon a time, society was believed to rest on a morality. When a foundation could no longer be found in religious beliefs, it had to be sought either through reinterpretation of these beliefs or looking elsewhere. Contemporary society does not deny that there still exists morality. Rather, it renders morality morphogenetic by continually generating and destroying moral norms through the reduction of what is moral to pure communication, understood as the transfer of information and images. Moral norms seem to become purely communicative. This kind of morphogenesis configures a society riddled with paradoxes. One of them is the concomitant appearance of a stronger defence of human rights and their large-scale violation in human trafficking.

There are those who play on these tendencies to gain advantages. Others become their victims. Still others react, creating other ways of making society, and are carriers of a new morality. In any case, over the long run, the key to solving the problem lies in the fact that a sustainable morality must come to terms with the normativity that is intrinsic in the qualities and causal properties of each kind of social relation and, specifically, of the ‘founding relation’ that characterises the social network to which individuals refer their primary identity at any given moment, and in any given context, of their agency. This is true both for the traffickers and for the trafficked people.

References


[2] As Junge (2001: 105) rightly claims: “Bauman’s attempt to develop a sociological theory of morality turning around fundamental premises of Durkheim’s approach fails in the last analysis, since in Bauman’s view the ‘moral party of two’ does not constitute a social situation”.


[4] See the critique of Bourdieu’s works by Sayer (2005). Nevertheless, Sayer’s own critique against the structuralist viewpoint held by Bourdieu is grounded in an individualistic approach. He maintains that morality is not just a matter of convention or an arbitrary social construct reflecting material interests, but anchors morality in universal physical and psychological human qualities, including the capacity of human beings to suffer and...
flourish, our psychological need for recognition and self-respect, and our ability to feel emotions such as shame and empathy.

[5] Institutionalised individualism was first theorised by Talcott Parsons, but was later reformulated by various authors who completely altered its moral meaning. According to Parsons, institutions morally orient the individual in a positive way toward the common good and social order. According to the post-moderns (for example, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002), institutionalised individualism consists in the fact that institutions legitimize the individual to become the creator of his/her own morality.

[6] It is evident that the subject acts with a certain rationality and reflexivity. Morality implies different modes of both rationality and reflexivity, just as it implies different degrees of both (“Being immoral”, just as ‘being moral’, is a state that admits of degrees”: Zavaliy 2012: 365).

[7] The concept of relational feedback is explained in previous contributions (Donati 2013, 2015a) and will be further commented on below.

[8] Ismael Al-Amoudi (2014) has proposed the interesting distinction between sequential morphogenesis (which consists in the accelerating displacement of one institution by the next) and concomitant morphogenesis (which consists in the multiplication of concomitant institutions, without necessarily entailing the disappearance of earlier ones).

[9] The list of authors who use this scheme is quite long, and I thus avoid citing them. Just to give an idea, I shall limit myself to naming a few emblematic authors: Coleman (1990), Bourdieu and Coleman (1991), Hechter, Opp and Wippler (eds.) (1990).

[10] To be more specific, I can say that the mainstream explanation for the emergence of norms is evolutionary and employs the behavioural model of economics, plus the research findings from social psychology and sociology (Opp 1982). According to this narrative, norms may emerge in a variety of ways: institutions may prescribe behaviours (institutional norm formation), they may be created by a social contract (voluntary norm formation) or they may gradually emerge without either bargaining or the involvement of a norm-making institution (evolutionary norm formation). According to this model, the evolutionary emergence of norms starts with a recurrent behaviour, leading to the development of preferences for a behaviour, and, ultimately, to the acceptance of norms (internalisation) and the enforcement of activities.


[13] Luhmann defines morality as a special form of communication that carries with it indications of approval or disapproval. “The moral is not something good. Of course, that should not lead us to say that the moral is something bad. [...] The moral functions only as a distinction” (Luhmann 1993: 996). Trust itself, which for Parsons arose from the normative order of the open society, in Luhmann can no longer count on norms that disappear and must be entrusted to communication (Jalava 2003).

[14] I am referring here to the M/M scheme elaborated by Archer (1995, 2013) and discussed by other authors (contributions to Archer (ed.) 2014, 2015).


[17] I call Luhmann’s theory ‘a-relational’ not because he ignores the relation – indeed, it permeates his thinking – but because he refuses to base sociology on the social relation. Specifically, it is a-relational for two reasons. The first is that he uses a binary code, which is notoriously inappropriate to treat relations (Luhmann 1995: 445). The second reason is that the system as such (specifically: biological, psychic, and social) is for him immune to the social relations of the living world.

[18] According to Luhmann, morality is becoming a self-referential system that is specialised in responding to the problem of esteem and disesteem in communication. He defines morality as an ability to sustain the self-referential reproduction of communication: “Neither life as such, nor the functions of the brain, nor the conscious operations of perception and thinking have intrinsic moral quality. [...] The moral makes an important difference only in communication, namely, a difference in the communicative reaction to the expression of esteem or disesteem. [...] There are, in other words, no good people or bad people, but only the possibility of indicating people as good or bad” (Luhmann 1993: 1000). To him, recourse to the ‘normativity of norms’ or to ‘values’ proves to be untenable because all norms and values reveal themselves to be undecidable (Luhmann 2008b).


[20] Zijderveld’s favourable assessment of the morality of welfare in the United States is merely comparative. His affirmation that the welfare state in the U.S. is more moral is not meant to imply that it is always ethical, but merely that in the U.S. debate regarding the ethical criteria of welfare is more explicit and carries more weight than in other countries.

[21] As an example, we can refer to the open method of coordination (OMC) adopted by the European Union. The OMC provides a new framework for cooperation between the Member States, whose national policies can thus be directed towards certain common objectives. Under this intergovernmental method, the Member States are evaluated by one another (peer pressure), with the Commission’s role being limited to surveillance. The European Parliament and the Court of Justice play virtually no part in the OMC process. The open method of coordination takes place in areas which fall within the competence of the Member States, such as employment, social protection, social inclusion, education, youth and training.

[22] “Co-production of social services offers new opportunities as well as challenges for collective solutions to growing problems facing the public provision of social services in Europe. It gives citizens both more choice and more voice, as well as a more active role in the provision of public services. But, greater citizen participation and more third sector provision of social services can meet resistance both from traditional public administration and New Public Management (NPM), each based on a separate logic. However, New Public Governance (NPG) is based on network governance and relies on greater citizen participation, co-production, and more third sector provision of public financed social services” (Pestoff 2015).

[23] Fløysand and Jakobsen (2011) argue that recent contributions within the system of innovation approach are marked by an instrumentalism that views innovation as a predictable and standardised process that in most aspects counters theories and empirical observations stressing the multilevel, spontaneous, and complex features of innovation. Informed by the relational turn within economic geography these scholars develop an alternative analytical framework. They do this stepwise: first, by elaborating on how innovation was originally defined within the systems of innovation approach; second, by outlining a relational based analytical framework based on the concept of social fields; and, finally, by demonstrating how it has been applied.

[24] Every social network has a ‘relational pattern’. We could think of any organisational or associative form describable as a network that is inspired by a certain relational modality among participants (a company can be hierarchical or not, a voluntary association or a rehabilitation community for drug addicts identifies with (and uses) a certain relational pattern of help, a cooperative has a relational pattern among members, a sport or cultural association contemplates a certain modality by which the members relate to one another, a network of families think about their relations as ‘family’ relations, a social network on the Internet comes into being from a relation-type among people who communicate, etc.

[25] For example, in his essay On Being Morally Considerable, the American ethical philosopher Kenneth E. Goodpaster (1978) maintains that any distinction between organisms thought to be in some way “worthy” of moral consideration and others that are not is clearly a case of discrimination.

[26] I provided a relational theory of ‘value’ in Donati (2014b: Figure 2).