

## What is a person? Margaret Archer's response

### O que é uma pessoa? A resposta de Margaret Archer

**Pierpaolo Donati**

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9794-132X>

Università di Bologna  
Itália

#### Abstract

Margaret Archer tackles the concept of human person within the framework of the *vexata quaestio* of the relations between individual and society. To sum up the problem: is it society (social forms and institutions) that make the human person or does the person make society? This issue has gripped all of social theory since the beginning of modernity. In past decades, the debate divided scholars between those inclined to forefront the person's free agency and those who instead gave first place to the constraints of social structures; the two solutions could be mixed, but the outcome was always somewhat hazy. The solution Archer offers is that neither answer is correct, nor is any mixture of the two, because these mixtures do not allow us to understand how action and structure are entangled. The challenge is to understand how and why there is this entanglement, or rather link, which preserves the autonomy of both the person (her freedom) and the social structures (their conditioning power), without confusing the two.

**Keywords:** human person; Margaret Archer; socialization; personification; relational sociology.

#### Resumo

Margaret Archer aborda o conceito de pessoa humana no quadro da *vexata quaestio* das relações entre indivíduo e sociedade. Resumindo o problema: é a sociedade (formas sociais e instituições) que faz a pessoa humana ou é a pessoa que faz a sociedade? Esta questão dominou toda a teoria social desde o início da modernidade. Nas últimas décadas, o debate dividiu os acadêmicos entre aqueles inclinados a colocar em primeiro plano o livre agency da pessoa e aqueles que, em vez disso, deram o primeiro lugar às restrições das estruturas sociais; as duas soluções em certa medida foram mescladas, mas o resultado foi sempre um tanto nebuloso. A solução que Archer oferece é que nenhuma das respostas está correta, nem qualquer mescla das duas, porque elas não nos permitem compreender como ação e estrutura estão entrelaçadas. O desafio é compreender como e por que existe este emaranhado, ou melhor, vínculo, que preserva a autonomia tanto da pessoa (a sua liberdade) como das estruturas sociais (o seu poder condicionante), sem confundi-las.

**Palavras-chaves:** pessoa humana; Margaret Archer; socialização; personificação; sociologia relacional.

## Person as a presocial, metasocial and reflexive being

Margaret Scotford Archer (20 January 1943 – 21 May 2023) was an English sociologist, who spent most of her academic career at the University of Warwick. She was the first woman to be elected president of the International Sociological Association (1986-1990) and in the years 2014-2019 served as president of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences. She is internationally known for her theory of social morphogenesis and research on reflexivity.

In this article I would like to present her vision of the human person, which I believe to be highly original, within the framework of her more general sociological theory.

The view held by Margaret S. Archer goes against the tide to save sociology from sociologistic reductionism: the human being is not a product of society, but a presocial and at the same time metasocial being. In other words, the human being cannot be reduced to a creation of society.

For Archer, self-consciousness derives from our *embodied practices* in reality and embodiment necessarily refers to human properties which are non-social in kind (Archer 2000). The primacy accorded to *practice* makes the emergent *sense of Self* independent from 'joining society's conversation'; even though language acquisition may be taking place, it is the dependent variable. The sense of Self is 'prior to, and primitive to, our sociality' (Archer 2000, p. 7). She writes: 'I wish to reclaim human beings as the ultimate *fons et origo* of (emergent) social life or sociocultural structures, rather than subjugating humanity, as if it were the epiphenomenon of social forces' (Archer 2000, p. 18).

She criticizes the current theories of socialization which, to a great extent, see socialization as a process of structural or cultural determinism or nevertheless of pure conditioning from the outside (what I call *sociologisms*).

Before the question 'how do the objective features of society influence human agents?', Archer, first of all, rejects the solution of determinism, according to which society precedes individuals and radically determines their actions. After criticizing determinism, she also seeks to distance herself from the theories of conditioning (classical, Pavlovian, behavioural, Skinnerian psychophysiological theories) according to which society may not completely determine individuals' actions, but it does condition them in thousands of ways, by offering certain opportunities and not others, restricting them to certain roles which they cannot shake off, and so on.

While it may be relatively simple to criticize determinism (when one observes that persons are not automatons), it is rather more difficult to distance oneself from conditioning theories. Indeed, these theories seem reasonable and fundamentally truthful at first sight, owing to the importance they attach to the way structural and cultural factors forge the context in which individuals act and spur them in a certain direction.

The point that Archer underlines is that all theories of determinism and conditioning neglect people's capacity to define what interests them most in their lives and establish a *modus vivendi* that expresses their 'ultimate' commitments or concerns. How can and must we understand the 'conditioning' of sociocultural structures on human agency?

The solution proposed by Archer does not provide a particular definition of conditioning (from the outside towards the human person's internality), but a new conceptual framework that takes a fresh look at the matter, right from the roots. Sociocultural structures do not condition individuals in the sense of managing to make them accept some conformity or certain incentives from a range of situated choices. Sociocultural structures only influence human agency through the person's internal reflexivity. The person is such because she must reckon with and introduce what is given by the external context into her strategies. It is not a conditioning from the outside that *directly* causes human agency. In short, the person is not socialized from the outside, but *self-socializes* during her lifetime. The person's internal reflexivity is what forms the solution to the problem, it is the missing link that mediates between structure and agency.

How does Archer demonstrate that it is not society, but the human person, that mediates between agency and structure?

### **From the two-step to the three-step model of socialization**

Archer says that the classical theory developed from a two-step or two-stage model that is fundamentally 'objectivistic' in that it favours objective factors to explain social facts. She sums it up as follows:

#### **Diagram 1**

##### *The two-step model*

(step 1) Structural and Cultural Properties objectively shape the situations agents confront involuntarily and exercise powers of constraint and enablement in relation to:

(step 2) Properties imputed to agents and assumed to govern their actions:

- objective interests (Critical Realism)
- instrumental rationality (Rational Choice Theory)
- habitus (Bourdieu)

In this model, the factors that play the leading role, that is, which explain behaviours and social facts, are the structural and cultural properties of a context

(step 1). They are what guide the actors, in the sense that they define the constraints and resources to which individuals are subject and with respect to which actors act, whether it be on the basis of objective interests, instrumental rationality or habitus.

As Archer sees it, this classical model displays two errors. The first is that the actors' subjectivity is greatly played down. The second is that the model does not show what is constrained or supported. Indeed, constraints and enablements require something able to be constrained and enabled.

In short, the two-step model ignores the reflexive capacities that person's exercise in relation to the circumstances in which they are involved. Archer places Pierre Bourdieu, Anthony Giddens and many others among the contemporary authors who adopt this way of explaining social actions.

The two-step model contrasts with empirical evidence, according to which every 'normal' human being acts on the basis of her internal conversation and operates neither as an expression of social structures, nor as an automaton. Reflexivity does not have one single form, it can have many, different ones. Generally speaking, it involves cognitive factors, decisions, emotions, desires for valued goods. Agents weigh up the situation in light of their concerns, as well as the circumstances, and have plans for reality. The notion of 'concern' has to be seen in the broad sense, and certainly not in a utilitarian, material or solely ideal sense: in short, a concern is what a person thinks can make her life happy.

Hence, the two-step model has to be altered to include the reality of the subject's reflexive agency. The result is a three-step model that incorporates human reflexivity (Diagram 2).

## **Diagram 2**

### *The three-step model*

(step 1) Structural and Cultural Properties objectively shape the situations agents confront involuntarily and possess generative powers of constraint and enablement in relation to –

(step 2) Agents' own configurations of concerns, as subjectively defined by them.

(step 3) Courses of action are produced through the reflexive deliberations of agents who subjectively determine their projects in relation to their objective circumstances.

The advantage of the three-step model proposed by Archer over the classical model is that it goes beyond the dualism between agency and structure, objective and subjective factors. Archer clarifies that it is not so much a matter of 'transcend-

ing' dualism but highlighting the emergence from the analytical duality of agency and structure. The emergence process must not be seen as a sort of mixing or interpenetration of the terms that it connects because agency and structure are ontologically different and analytically separate (analytical dualism) orders of reality. It is here that conditioning theory – which the first two-step model sees as structures' one-way influence on agency – is replaced by a more precise theory which better defines the autonomous role played by the various objective and subjective factors.

The properties and powers pertaining to agents/actors are totally different from those of structures. This is why social forms are not determined or conditioned purely by structures, as thought by those who adopt the first model (Diagram 1). The crucial point of the second model (Diagram 2) therefore lies in its introduction of a mediation between structures and actions, in which *human reflexivity* determines agency, despite all of the structures' constraints and conditionings.

In forging her paradigm, Archer draws from the thought of Roy Bhaskar and in particular a statement of his that very much inspired her: 'the causal power of social forms is mediated through social agency' (Bhaskar, 1989, p. 26). Archer translates it into a more concise form, '*the social form is mediated through agency*', which becomes the polestar of her research. The goal becomes to analyse the term '*through*' in this formula, which has to be unpacked and understood as a process of reflexivity, that is, as the internal conversation that each subject (as 'I') has with him- or herself. In short, the conversation one has with oneself about the situation, and one's feelings, visions and projects in relation to the social context.

Archer therefore proposes a morphogenetic and emergentist paradigm of socialization. According to this paradigm, social structures do condition agents, but by interacting with each other and the structures, the agents can change the structures, not in virtue of objectivistic dynamics but the potentials expressed by the agents/actors' internal reflexivity. In this way, new social forms are generated that we call 'emergent' because they are produced regardless of the properties and powers of both the agents and the structures.

### **The person's reflexivity and good life**

*What precisely is human reflexivity?* Archer gives an emblematic definition that she would repeat, unchangingly, in all her works: 'Reflexivity is the regular exercise of the mental ability, shared by all (normal) people, to consider themselves in relation to their (social) contexts and vice versa.' To put it simply, *human reflexivity is the internal (conscious) activity of the human subject pursuing that which he or she deems to be the good life.*

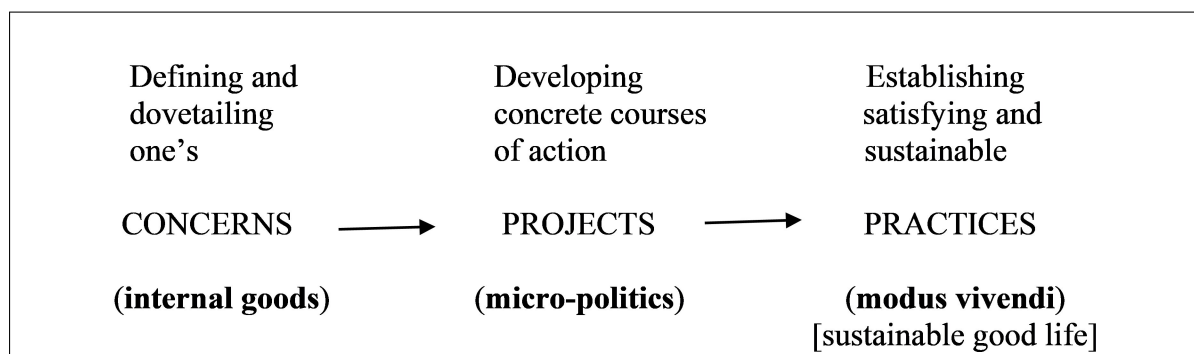
'Good life' is not predefined either by the actor or by the observer. *It consists of those which, in every circumstance, are the 'ultimate concerns' defined by the person as agent and actor.* Persons are social agents/actors who make decisions

on the single, real choices that can lead them to make internal resolutions on what to do to achieve their ultimate goals or aspirations, in other words, a *sustainable good life*.

Building a social life and social forms should therefore be understood starting from how people seek a good life for themselves. This takes place through the sequence (which is at the same time logical, temporal and empirical) that goes from the subjects' concerns – first defined internally in their internal conversation – through the *micro-politics* that they design in order to achieve them, to the *practices* that they effectively implement (Diagram 3).

### Diagram 3

*The internal conversation and pursuit of the good life*



The human person is such in that she is an agent/actor who configures her agency in the world according to Diagram 3. All people behave like this, even if they do not realize it, because they all have in mind an idea of a good life to achieve. Nevertheless, what the good life consists of depends on the type of internal conversation that the single person has.

If we observe people from the viewpoint of how they are embodied in the social structures that condition them, we can note that there are various reflexive modes, correlated to the different ways of creating relations with others, and therefore of creating social forms. Archer empirically finds three types of so-to-speak well-defined reflexivity (communicative, autonomous, meta-reflexivity), and a fourth type in which she places the remaining ('residual') types. They are residual, not because there are few of them – on the contrary, there can be more of them than the others – but because it is difficult to form a more analytical typology for them.

In short, here is how the types or modes of reflexivity are defined (see Table 1).

I. *Communicative reflexives*. Those whose internal conversations need, before they lead to action, to be completed and confirmed by others, in particular by those who are part of the primary network of belonging (close family, relatives, friends). Internal reflexivity has a way of presenting itself and a *modus vivendi* that favours social integration in the networks of traditional primary relations.

II. *Autonomous reflexives*. Those who sustain self-contained internal conversations, leading directly to action. They are the so-called self-directed, whose reflexivity mainly depends on themselves, and therefore they depend least on the external context. The modus vivendi is strategic, in that it favours systemic integration which consists of impersonal structural relations between parts of society. Systemic integration, unlike social integration which consists of interpersonal relations linking individuals' lifeworlds, enables greater individualization.

III. *Meta-reflexives*. Those who are critically reflexive about their own internal conversations and critical about effective action in society. Their modus vivendi is said to be *subversive* since it expresses a continual dissatisfaction both towards themselves and the results achieved. They are always in search of a new synergy between social integration and systemic integration since no concrete project, nor the actions implemented, achieve these subjects' ideals. This is clearly the type of human person that Archer identifies with.

IV. *Fractured reflexives*. Those who cannot conduct purposeful internal conversations but intensify their own distress and disorientation. Their modus vivendi is characterized by a lack of either social or systemic integration.

Here I propose Table 1 to sum up the typical features of the stance, modus vivendi and social mobility of each of the four types.

Nevertheless, in my opinion, a word of warning is needed: we must be careful not to identify a person with only one way of being reflexive, even though Archer often does just this. This is a limit of her theory. A person can adopt different reflexive modes on different occasions, and also be ambiguous in a specific moment. Therefore, a type of reflexivity does not in itself identify a human person as such but only her way of being in a certain moment and relational context. Furthermore, the typology does not describe all reflexive forms because it is possible to identify other types or combinations of internal conversation that Archer did not explore (Lee, 2021).

**Table 1**

*Reflexivity (or internal conversation) types*

<i>Type of reflexivity</i>	<i>Basic character</i>	<i>Stance and modus vivendi</i>	<i>Type of social mobility</i>
<b>Communicative</b>	Dependent	Avoids expressing personal intentions ( <i>evasive</i> ) = favours social integration in traditional relationship networks	Social Immobility

<b>Autonomous</b>	Independent	<i>Strategic</i> = favours systemic integration that enables maximum individualization	Upward Social Mobility
<b>Meta-reflexive</b>	Critical both towards self and society	Unsatisfied-innovative ( <i>subversive</i> ) = always in search of a new synergy between social and systemic integration that can achieve her ideals, given that no concrete project manages to satisfy them	Lateral Social Mobility
<b>Fractured</b>	Impeded or displaced	Highly <i>distressed</i> or <i>disoriented</i> = lacking both social and systemic integration	Fractured mobility

By way of this complex typology, Archer (2007) explains the different life trajectories of human persons from a sociological point of view. In particular, she demonstrates that the different forms of internal conversation explain the ways in which the social agents/actors govern their answers to social (structural and cultural) conditionings, and how they pursue their individual models of family life, job searching or social mobility. Ultimately, the prevalence of one reflexive type over another explains if and how stability or change is produced in the social order. The correlations are as follows (Table 1): communicative reflexivity is accompanied by social immobility, autonomous reflexivity is correlated to upward mobility, meta-reflexivity is correlated to lateral social mobility, while fractured reflexivity is identified generically as precisely that: fractured (Archer, 2007).

Archer sums up the types of society as follows: traditional social order is characterized by contextual continuity in individuals' social lives, which is correlated to communicative reflexivity; the social order of modernity is characterized by contextual discontinuity in individuals' social lives, which is correlated to autonomous reflexivity; morphogenetic social order is characterized by contextual incongruity in individuals' social lives, which is correlated to meta-reflexivity.

In our personal conversations, she was always keen to point out that her theory was not psychological but sociological. She used to repeat: 'Reflexivity is always indispensable to the social – "No Reflexivity, no Society".'

Archer completes her theory on reflexivity (after the volumes from 2003 and 2007) with a book (Archer, 2012) in which she makes a plea to young people to deal with morphogenetic society with the *reflexive imperative*. She asks herself: what do young people want from life? Through the analysis of family experiences and life stories, Archer explains to them that the internal conversation is the place in their interactions that respects the properties and powers both of the structures and the



agents. Her educational intent is evident: she presents her socialization paradigm as the right one to deal with the contrasting messages transmitted in families that are rarely normatively consensual and therefore cannot provide clear guidelines for action. In the face of the breakdown of the various reflexive modes, she calls upon young people to deal with morphogenetic society with the meta-reflexivity that, according to her, is starting to prevail, at least among the most highly educated young people. It is a hope that reflects her utopia for the future of society.

The hypothesis that I put forward here, as a path for future research, is that these types of reflexivity are correlated to precise and different forms of social networks having different types of social capital: it seems to me that the 'communicative reflexive' type can be correlated to bonding social capital (which bonds people in a tight-knit community, such as family, relatives, neighbourhood, groups of friends), the 'autonomous reflexive' type to bridging social capital (which connects individuals over and above the communities of belonging: like the brokers who manage the structural holes in the networks). The 'meta-reflexive' type is correlated to critical, innovative and creative forms of social capital (forms of which empirical research has not yet spoken), which we can hypothesize to be configured as highly mobile star networks characterized by a large degree of bridging and linking rather than bonding social capital. Finally, the 'fractured reflexive' type is correlated to lacking, distressed and disoriented forms of social capital.

### **The novelty of the paradigm**

We must not fall into the error of thinking that Archer's proposal is, deliberately or not, a sort of 'reversal' of the classical paradigm in the simplistic sense of turning the classical theory upside down (according to the image of Marx 'reversing' Hegel). It is not a matter of putting consciousness in place of structures. The three-step model (Diagram 2) neither overturns nor cancels the two-step model (Diagram 1) but repropose it at another level. This level is relational in the sense that, in the three-step model, the structure does not act in a direct, one-way manner on agency but through mediation mechanisms in which reflexivity plays a role. Hence, structure and agency interact in a relational manner and generate new social forms through morphogenetic processes.

The internal conversation is precisely the place where this interaction becomes an emergent phenomenon (that is, it acquires the property of an emergent power) and allows the person's *reflexivity* to take the place of the old concept of 'conditioning'. In other words, human agency and sociocultural structure are two orders of reality, property and powers, which have a *nexus*: this nexus is our internal conversation whose nature – as Archer underlines – *is not psychological but relational*. This relationship is called reflexivity. Reflexivity is therefore a social relationship between the inside and outside of the person, and the human person is unique because she actuates this relationship.

Archer emphasizes the fact that human reflexivity has an autonomous (albeit variable) role because it comes about in a presocial manner and goes beyond the social. In this sense, the internal conversation has a privileged position over the structural factors extolled by holistic sociologies. Nevertheless, while I understand Archer's intention to preserve the individual's autonomy and originality with respect to society, I observe that social structures also have an autonomous role in impacting the internal conversation. Let us think of the importance of structural networks – of family, friends, at work – in influencing the reflexivity of the person beyond her projectual capacities. This is a theme that remains in the background of Archer's theory and is a terrain that remains to a large extent to be explored.

From this point of view, Archer's solution may seem more 'individualizing' than 'personalizing' because the person is not an individual capable of doing without relationships with the context in which she is embodied. So long as the paradigm is read as personalizing, the individual of whom Archer speaks needs to be seen as being made of social relations, that is, the person needs to be understood as an 'individual-in-relation' where the two hyphens point to the structural nexuses of the relations of a biological, psychological, social and cultural kind that make up the person.

In any case, Archer's theory is useful to comprehend that human individuals are *persons* because in them not only is there the internal difference between being (existing) and being-as-such (existing in a certain way), but also because they can establish a distance from others and the world (that is, from that which is not their Self). The person does not simply bring her internal nature into the social but operates reactively with respect to an outside reality from which she receives input. Nevertheless, it seems to me that we should observe that the person can reflexively go back into herself because earlier she went outside herself or nevertheless had an experience outside her Self (Donati, 2024).

From the sociological point of view, if I may go off on a tangent, the person can be defined as that living being, the only one of its kind among all living beings, who has the capacity (= reflexivity) to consciously (reflexively) transform inside into outside and vice versa. This happens because the person (her internal nature) is connected to the social by a sort of Möbius ring: the relationship between sociocultural structure and agency is like the surface of a ring that can be followed in such a way that the Self can go towards the outside and go back towards the inside and nevertheless remain the selfsame person. Social structure influences the person through the external surface of the person, while the inside (internality) of the person remains hidden from it.

It is a matter of conceptualizing the human person as a 'living subject' that exists not in herself but insofar as she is in relation (the Latin term *ex-sistere* indicates 'being outside' oneself).<sup>1</sup> The human person differs from other beings precisely be-

---

<sup>1</sup> The term 'to exist' derives from the Latin *ex(s)istere*, which is made up of *ex* ('from, outside') and

cause, beyond the fact of sharing a thrownness into the world, as Heidegger says, she is also capable of placing herself outside herself in such a way that other living beings cannot do. Indeed, the human being is a person precisely insofar as she is reflected in the Other and lives a positive alterity with the Other, according to a second-person ethics (Donati, 2023).

In other words, in order to understand the relational nature of the process by which structures influence human agency and vice versa, we need to understand that social structure is not directly influenced by action, and that action does not directly influence structure, but that the relationship mediates. If the social relationship does not have autonomy, the paradigm risks being more 'individualizing' than 'personalizing' because it places too much power in the Self. The social relationship is a constitutive part of the person and not only a factor of individualization.

In order to appreciate the possible humanizing effects of Archer's paradigm, we have to understand why and how modernity was incapable of understanding the *constitutive* relationality of the human person, so much so that it immunized the person from social relations (Esposito, 2002).

Archer reveals this shortcoming of modernity when she asserts that modernity is intrinsically imbalanced: she sees only an *oversocialization* or *undersocialization* of the human person. For her the famous distinction between the (oversocialized) *homo sociologicus* and (undersocialized) *homo oeconomicus* is misleading. In order to find the person a socialized but autonomous agent/actor, the human person needs to be understood as a subject who is at once (a) dependent on society (a supine social product) and (b) autonomous and with her own powers (a self-sufficient maker). But it will be necessary to arrive at the *relational subject* (Donati & Archer, 2015) to see this.

Archer proposes a better conception of the human being, from the perspective of social realism, which grants humankind (i) temporal priority, (ii) relative autonomy and (iii) causal efficacy, in relation to the social beings that they become and the powers of transformative reflection and action which they bring to their social context – powers which, for her, are independent from social mediation. This latter assertion is problematic for me because it risks causing the reader to think that, for Archer, the individual is a self-sufficient being who decides and determines social forms by herself, that is, that she makes society herself, as in rational choice theories and the likes, in general of an economic kind. Something that Archer definitely does not want to assert.

Hence, the paradigm needs to be read in the sense of recognizing that: (i) the person's temporal priority with respect to society is counterintuitive, (ii) the term '*relative*' to the context (in Archer's definition of reflexivity) actually means '*relational*', and (iii) the concept of efficient causality of reflexivity is problematic as the internal conversation can take on various, often deficient, defective or never-

---

*sistere* ('place oneself, be, go out, stand up' and therefore 'appear').

theless problematic forms, in those modus vivendi that we call deviant, resulting from malaise, discomfort, and so on.

In substance, Archer's solution helps us to understand that socialization is not determination of the human individual from the outside, as if it were a matter of 'filling' the individual's mind with models of behaviour provided by society. Nevertheless, if the paradigm is to be personalizing and not only individualizing, the individual has to be seen as made up of relations, and not only of a Self (mind-body) that relates to the world in itself.

### **The process of socialization and personification**

In *Being Human*, Archer understands the relationship prevalently as a means that the individual uses to project herself into the social. She is quite against thinking that the social relationship in itself makes up the individual. This can be grasped owing to the fact that she wants to distance herself from theories that proclaim to be relational (for example, those of Mustafa Emirbayer (1997) and François Dépelteau (2018)), but are in actual fact relationist, in the sense that they consider the social relationship as primary in forging the individual's identity. For relationists the person is a flow of transactions. But this vision, Archer says, is based on a flat ontology, while for her social ontology is stratified (Donati, 2021). For her, reality has to be observed as if it were made up of 'layers', each of which possesses its own causal powers and properties. This fact also concerns the concept of person which has to be stratified into agents, actors and human beings (Archer, 1995), rather than conceived of as a flow of interactions or only a reference point for communication, as the relationists do.

The stratification concerns both the person considered socially in her agency, and the person in herself, given that she emerges from the relations between the various layers (body, mind and soul) which make her up (Smith, 2010).

Through this realist epistemology – at once critical, analytical and relational (but not relationistic) (Porpora, 2018) – we can perform some operations to understand the human person which would otherwise be impossible. In particular, we can understand the *presocial* and *metasocial* reality of the human person, so we see that the human person can be reduced neither to a social product nor to an idealistic concept; we can see the identity of the Self and its capacity to evolve (mature) in and through social interactions, starting from the practices implemented right from birth, then in linguistic interactions and in the person's transcendental tension towards her ultimate concerns. The person can be conceptualized as a singular and unique subject who inhabits four orders of reality (natural, practical, social and spiritual or supernatural) which she has to go through to become personalized in the sense of becoming human.

The paradigm that emerges leaves behind the two complementary faces of *Modernity's Man* (as Archer calls the undersocialized individual of the political econ-

omy) and *Society's Being* (as Archer calls the holistic conception of the classical sociology that hypostasizes society and therefore has an oversocialized conception of the individual).

I would like to make a personal interpretation of Archer's paradigm to reformulate her vision in a relational key.

To this end, I suggest intersecting the diagram on the development of the Self (set out in Ch. 3, fig. 3.4 of Archer 2003 and then developed in successive writings: Archer 2004, 2005, and Donati & Archer 2015) with the reformulated relational sociology version of the AGIL diagram (Donati, 2011; 2021)

The Figure 1 that I propose indicates the human person as a subject who is between the natural world (bio-psycho-conscious) and transcendence meant as a world of ultimate or supernatural (and, in this sense, 'religious') realities. When she is born, the human individual is a subject endowed with her own 'potentiality' which, through practice, that is, by experiencing the world and learning from this, goes beyond her natural – corporeal (biophysical) and innate conscious – endowment and proposes to explore more and more, guided by her capacity of internal reflection.

From the outside world, she receives the attributes of social identity (she is called by a name, given certain labels that represent her Me: 'they call me this'). In those interactions she becomes a primary agent. While she experiences this, she discovers that she belongs to a collective entity: she realizes that she is in a different family from others, she discovers that she lives in a different family from others, she discovers that she lives in a particular area, city or neighbourhood that is different from other ones, that she speaks a certain language and not another, and so on, that is, she realizes that her belongings are different to the others with whom she interacts. These belongings – first ascribed and then acquired – form a sense of 'We' in her. That is, the individual, finds that her Self belongs to a social group (I am from that family, region, race, religion, etc.).

In this social world, she gradually has to take on some roles, that is, become an actor (in the Latin sense of *auctor*, from the verb *augere* which means 'to increase, to grow'). In taking on the responsibility of her social role, the moment she has to play the role of a free, responsible actor (for example, as a child in a family, as a student in a school, then as a worker, then as a spouse, parent, voter, consumer, as belonging to a faith and a church, etc.), the person deals with the transcendent world, because it is in that role that she is placed before some 'fundamental' choices. She has to internally resolve what is most dear to her. In a word, has to define and take a stance on her ultimate concerns.

The process portrayed in Figure 1 is circular and continually repeated in a sort of spiral that develops in time (in the figure, circularity in time is indicated by the arrows). The subject starts her life in the world as a presocial being that has a Self filled with potentiality, which she puts into practice as *Me* (the identity attributed by others: you are so-and-so, child of so-and-so, etc.) and then as *We*

(identity as a sense of belonging to a 'We': being Italian, Milanese or Roman, etc.) and then as a *You* (someone who has to take on certain tasks in society).

The social role to impersonate (the 'You') is something that is in front of the Self, who can make it her own, reject it, rehash it or interpret and animate it in her own way. The Self becomes actor (*auctor*) insofar as she compares the given reality with the one that for her 'has to be': in that moment, she relates with what transcends the given (experienced) reality.

The transcendent reality is not given *a priori* or in a single moment for the person but is grasped in a reflexive process that the subject has with herself, as she goes through social practices over and over. It is these passages that allow the subject to become a more mature Self (person) who lives in the midst of society. It is these processes that make persons inhabit the institutions and make them decide how to act in, through and beyond them.

In the area between the *Self* and the *Me* (individual and private area), where the person becomes a primary agent through day-to-day practices, is a process of *differentiation* of the person. In the area between the *Me* and the *We* (the area that leads from the private to the collective), where the person becomes a corporate agent, is the process of *socialization* of the person. In the area between the *We* and the *You* (the area that leads from the collective to the public space), where the person becomes an actor, is the process of *personification*. In the area between the *You* and the *Self* (the area that leads from the actor in the public space to the individual I), where the person becomes and I that exercises social practices, is the process of value commitment.

### **A relational interpretation**

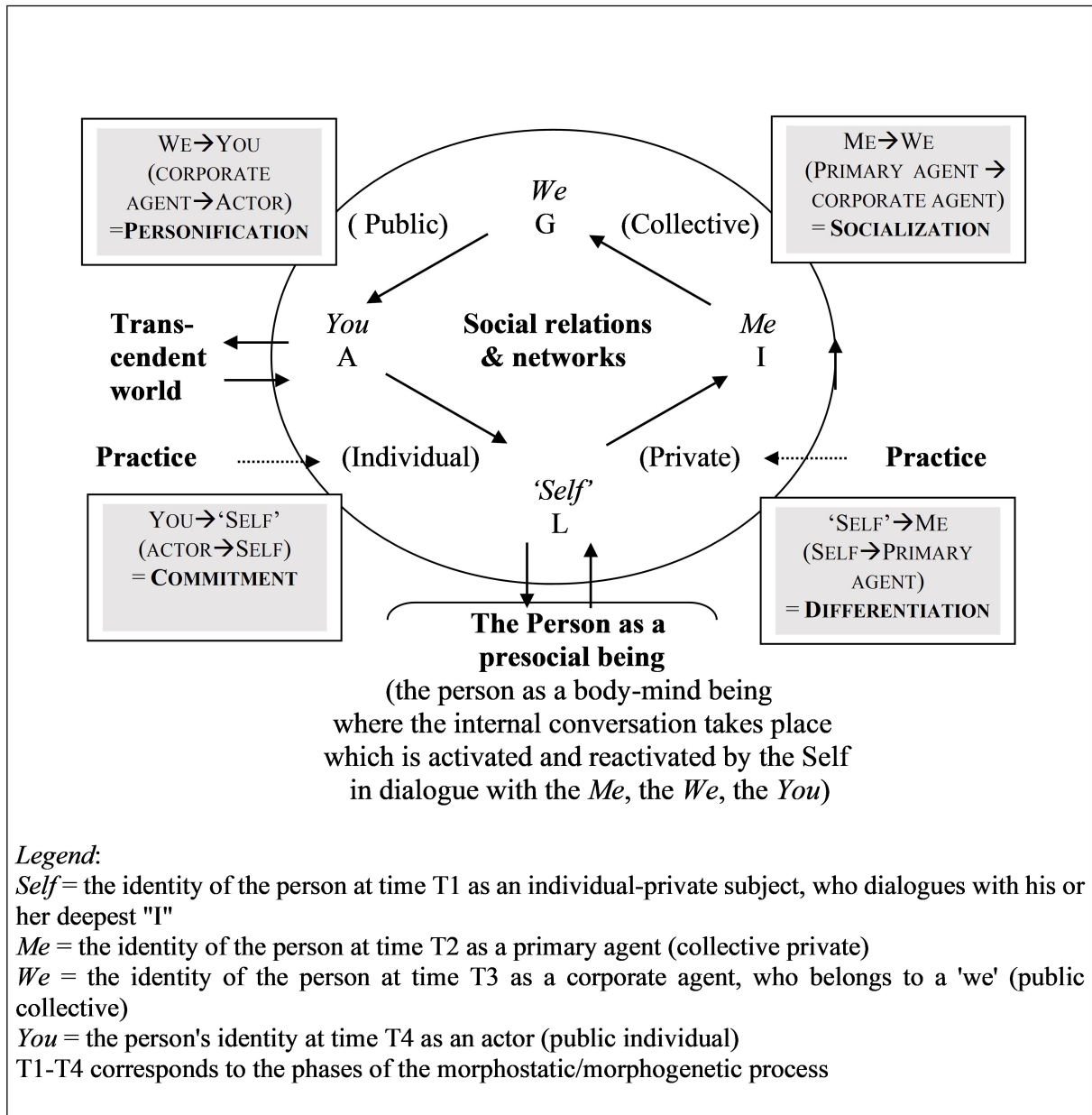
#### **The paradigm seen from the relational version of AGIL**

Now let us read Figure 1 in the light of the relational version of AGIL. Some will wonder why, in the diagram, I place the world of transcendence on the edge with the adaptive, or rather 'economic' dimension of agency and the social relationship (the A in AGIL). There is no *a priori* reason, it is logical and empirical: it comes about from applying a combination of the AGIL relational diagram with the phases of development of the Self. Transcendence lies on the edge with the dimension A because it is in assuming, redefining and carrying out the tasks connected with a certain social role (function), that is, in acting as a *You*, in the family, at school, at work, and in the public and political arena, that the Self wonders whether or not she is giving herself a satisfactory ultimate sense (in terms of 'good life') to her activity, choices and life.

Applying the AGIL relational diagram to the socialization process allows us to see that the natural world occupies the latent dimension (and function), while the

**Figure 1**

*Conceptualization of the human person as a subject that develops through human nature, practice, social interaction and transcendence*



*Source: author's elaboration based on Archer 2003: 123–129, and Donati & Archer 2015: 111–114; for letters A, G, I and L see the AGIL relational diagram in Donati 2011*

transcendent world occupies the adaptive dimension (and function). In my opinion, this must be interpreted in the sense that the same Self is a latent reality (that becomes 'explicit' during its existence), while the human person's adaptation to the

social dynamics (including institutions) does not consist of tangible tools or means but lies in her ultimate concerns. And so a sense is given to the assertion borrowed by Archer from Harry G. Frankfurt, according to whom 'who we are is what we care about' (Frankfurt, 1988, p. 91), in the sense that over time our Self becomes what we care about most, namely, our ultimate concerns.

Ultimate concerns are the answers to the *existential* questions that the person asks herself when she has to respond to her need for happiness, the desire for a 'good life' for herself, in the dialogue that she has with the social institutions. Here it is not a matter of letting in any metaphysical or religious prejudice, in particular in defining the relationship between the person and social institutions: suffice it to consider the need for happiness innate in every human being. Indeed, religion comes into play here as an answer or opportunity offered to the person to give an ultimate sense to her agency and her being in the world.

The fact that, based on the AGIL diagram, ultimate concerns end up in the (analytically defined) field of the means or resources of relational agency (A) suggests that it is not the economy of instrumental advantages that – ultimately – orients people's choices in their relational lives, but their *unconditioned* concerns (ultimate, often not rational values), which transcend all considerations of utility.

It is the transcendent world as a reference and bond with ends, valid in themselves, that are attractive regardless of any utility they may have. Utility cannot work as an ultimate end (it does not have the requirements of an absolute value). The terrain of utility only lies in advantages in social exchanges considered from the instrumental point of view and cannot connote the quality of relations that are on the edge between the 'You' and transcendence, when the Self reckons with its own commitment. In other words, the means to become personalized (and therefore human) cannot have a purely instrumental nature but has to be an ultimate end in itself.

The choice of ultimate concerns is reflected in the cycles of maturation of the Self, when the person's choice is looked at and verified in relation to her own conscious I (emergent from the bio-psychic nature of the human person), the denominations of identity attributed by others (the Me), and her own cultural belongings (the social groups of which the individual is part, characterized by certain lifestyles, languages, etc., including religion as a community of believers).

In all these relational spheres, it is the sense of the ultimate values, namely what is truly important in life, that is 'played' by the person. The ultimate concern does not come about inside our 'pure I', which would be solipsistic. It comes about in relation to how the I defines its choices when it acts as a 'You'. The You has to respond on one hand to the requirements of society and on the other to the deeper requirements of the I. The subject defines her interest when she has to say whether or not she is satisfied with the Me that attributed to her by others and when she compares the sense of her belongings (the We to which she belongs) with that of



other belongings.

*Personal* identity ('who am I for myself?') consists of the way in which the person feels she is herself because she talks to herself. Even if she acts as Me, We or You, she is always in dialogue with her 'I'. Instead, the person's *social* identity ('who am I for others?') is formed in the dialogue between the Self and other persons and the social institutions (family, work organization, state, church or religious community). Identity conflicts in/of the person are due to discrepancies between her personal and social identity. However, the two identities are not unrelated to each other, but connected.

When a person introduces himself saying 'I am X' (I am Mario, Riccardo's father, Giulia's husband, a Catholic, a Muslim, etc.), he is presenting his social identity. The identity that he presents is what emerges from internal reflexivity, but social identity cannot emerge except in dialogue with the personal identity (how the Ego defines itself). The person cannot act independently from the relationship with the Other, because the relationship with the Other is what motivates the relationship with one's own Self. This is where and how personal identity interweaves with social identity. The latter enters the personal identity through the I's external relationship with the social world. Without this relationship between internal and external life, the person would not be able to respond ('adapt', according to the A in AGIL) to the social world. Social institutions serve to humanize the nature that the person has as a presocial being.

What place do they have and what role do institutions play in forming the personal and social identities? Institutions are definitely a contingent reality but without this contingency the person would not be able to complete the necessary passages to go from nature (her bio-psychic-conscious being), to form valid interpersonal relationships, take on public roles, and then draw from the deepest spiritual experience (supernatural reality), to discover her transcendence with respect to society. This is the deepest sense of reflexivity as constitutive of that 'internal conversation' that *makes* the human person in dialogue with the social institutions.

### **Critical realism confutes constructivism**

Summing up: the process of full humanization of the person takes place in the passage from the I to the Me to the We to the You, while continually returning to the Self in a circle. In order to understand this process, it is necessary to confute the epistemic fallacy of constructivism which consists of replacing reality with what is assumed to be real on the basis of sole observation, discourse and mere communication. Luhmann (1995) does this operation with his constructivism, ending up in anti-humanism. He loses the human person who becomes a mere point of reference for communication. In short, constructivism assumes that reality is our observation, that is, what we think or communicate about it, and not something that exists, despite being difficult to determine.

Therefore, the critical realist has to establish a non-reductionist and non-conflationary model of scientific analysis that can challenge more or less radical constructivism, which is without doubt prevalent in the social sciences.

A large part of the contemporary social sciences is reductive in one way or another because:

(i) some theories maintain that the known (or knowable) is a product of culture (sociological knowledge); therefore, the typical position upheld is that 'a person is not a natural object but a cultural artefact' (Harré, 1983, p. 20); according to this vision, typical of constructivism, when the known or knowable is a person, she can only be known as a product of the cultural representations of what a person is in the context in which she lives (to cite two well-known authors: Alexander & Thompson, 2008); conceiving the human person based only on the representational patterns of a particular context is clearly a form of reductionist determinism;

(ii) other theories suppose that the known (for instance the human person) is only a reference point for communication for a self-referential knowing subject, and therefore entirely dependent on the observer and his or her culture in the way of communicating; therefore, it is a wholly relativistic knowledge (to cite another author: Luhmann 1995);

(iii) other theories assert that the experiential (empirical) relationship of the knowing subject towards the known is always reifying, hence the person – as an object of knowledge – appears as a *homunculus* (authors such as A. Schütz and P. Bourdieu offer two examples of this constructivist position).

Those who join social constructionism deny that knowledge can be a critical relationship experienced at a distance between a knowing subject, a known and a culture *referred or referable to an underlying latent reality*. This perspective was launched by Bhaskar (1989), who was the basic inspiration for Archer's social ontology.

Within the framework of critical realism, the human person is considered both knower and known. However, the relational character of the cognitive process avoids the hermeneutic circle as the person is seen as an agent/actor of a complex series of operations: (i) which are carried out by the Ego-Self as the primary subject of the interactions; (ii) through a reflexive activity on one's own relationships aimed at grasping the layer of the real in each relationship; (iii) in which the knowledge already acquired by society (its culture) is nothing more than an environmental datum that the knowing person subjectively interprets and verifies in her existential practice, and is able to modify on the basis of the fact that the sense of action arises in her own irreducible relational subjectivity (Zahavi & Zelinsky, 2023).

The human person who knows and acts is therefore configured as a *relational subject* (Donati, 2016). Who is the relational subject? It is he or she who does not only reflect in him- or herself, but reflects *on/with/through* relations, and therefore on how the Other, by altering relations, influences his or her agency. In order

to exit constructivism as well as the risk of individualism (which is also present in Archer), we have to adopt not only a first-person, but also second-person ethical perspective.

### Open issues

I think that it is reasonable to divide Archer's theory into roughly two periods: the period in which she deals with the human physical person and the period in which, from around 2018 onwards, she generalizes the concept of person to other entities (robots). Let us look at the different issues that her theory involves in these two periods.

#### (I) First period.

In reference to my Figure 1, I would bring up the following open issues. They concern respectively the relations between the person's internal reflexivity and the social networks of which the person is part, as well as the boundary between society and transcendence.

(i) The human person's internal reflexivity needs to be connected to the properties and powers of the social networks, in the sense that the latter can have a more powerful influence on the modes of internal reflexivity than Archer is willing to admit. This happens in particular where these networks have a great internal reflexivity (let us think of the 'groupal' symbolic elaborations of family networks, clans, 'gangs' of young people, etc.). This fact can give the impression that Archer lays too much importance on the reflexive capacity of people as individuals in themselves even though she defines their reflexivity as relational to the social context.

(ii) The capacity of the person to connect to the transcendent (ultimate concerns) depends greatly on the person's capacity of symbolization and the symbolic means of which she can avail. What is the role of the symbolic in the maturation of the human person? Definitely a big one. Nevertheless, Archer always refused to give importance to symbols (see for example her criticism of G. H. Mead in Archer (2003, pp. 78-90)). Instead, I believe that we have to grasp the importance of symbols and of the processes that lead to their formation in the personal consciousness, as well as the congruity of symbols with agency and the morphogenesis of the person. In other words, we have to distinguish between the *prelinguistic* symbolic (which Archer takes very much for granted and deems spontaneous), the linguistic and the social (cultural) symbolic, and grasp their relations.

#### (II) Second period.

Starting roughly from 2018 until her death, Archer insists on also attributing personhood to AI robots which, in her opinion, can be human beings' 'friends' (Archer, 2021). It is a turn which, in my opinion, raises various issues and forces a further investigation of the foundations of the Archerian paradigm as regards: the concept of person referred to intelligent robots and the distinction between inter-human and human-robot relations.

Archer extends the concept of personhood to sophisticated robots as a result of embracing Lynne Rudder Baker's theory of the person, which identifies the person in any entity that can think and act according to first-person ethics, whatever its body may be. In short, Archer asserts:

- (1) 'Bodies' (not necessarily fully or partially human) furnish the necessary but not the sufficient conditions for personhood.
- (2) Personhood is dependent upon the subject possessing the First-Person Perspective (FPP). But this requires supplementing by reflexivity and concerns in order to delineate personal and social identities.
- (3) Both the FPP and Reflexivity require concerns to provide traction in actuating subjects' courses of action and thus accounting for them.
- (4) Hence, personhood is not in principle confined to those with a human body and is compatible with Human Enhancement. (Archer, 2019a, 2019b, italics mine)

This last assertion paves the way to the attribution of personhood to AI robots too. In my opinion, this extension overemphasizes the mental nature of reflexivity and undervalues the fact that social relations also exercise some reflexivity of their own on persons.

But there is more. Archer insists on strongly defending Robophilia against Robophobia. She goes so far as to uphold the possibility of a 'friendship' between human beings and robots, justifying this possibility by maintaining that, through co-action with human beings, robots can be considered 'persons' too ('the dyadic synergy of the co-action between a human academic and an AI robot - who became a person through their co-action...') (Archer & Maccarini, 2021, p. 3, italics mine).

This perspective arouses some perplexities. The idea that robots can be 'friends' of a human person and become persons by way of interaction with humans is perplexing. The perplexity diminishes if the term 'friendship' is taken to simply mean the ability of robots to collaborate with human persons, providing help in terms of services that they can give. If we remain within the limits of co-working between human person and robot, Archer's position is without doubt acceptable, even though we have to highlight potential risks in the robots' operations, and problems of imputation of their responsibility. If, instead, friendship is taken to mean an intersubjective relationship between relational subjects, then the idea that robots can be relational subjects (according to the definition in Donati & Archer (2015)) becomes difficult to accept, even if the robots are very sophisticated. In certain cases, we speak of 'relational artifacts' (robots) as work or study 'companions' (Turkle, 2006). However, company is not friendship. Pets, for example, also provide company, but they are only 'friends' in a metaphorical sense, because they are not subjects of human relations.

The fact is, first of all, robots lack human physical corporeality. For a person, it is a limit to have a body, but also a necessary support. Archer recognizes this necessity but does not recognize that the human body conditions the activity of the

mind and influences social interactions and relations. The body is not a contingent accessory, it is a constitutive part of a person. If the body is totally artificial, we are talking about cyborgs, not human persons.

But there is another very important issue: if we are to uphold that robots can have a similar personhood to humans, as Archer says, we make the error of considering relations between humans and robots in the same vein as relations between humans. Instead, we know that interhuman relationality is not comparable to the relationship between humans and robots owing to the different causal qualities and powers of the relations in the two cases.

These problems always arise for the same reason that I have already mentioned several times: the fact that Archer identified the distinctive core of the 'person' (in general) in her mental capacity to act in the first person.

In substance, assimilating the concepts of synergy and co-working between humans and robots to the concept of friendship is an operation that to me seems misleading, because friendship in the strict sense (mutual exchange of relational goods) is a social relationship that requires two human subjects. We speak of friendship between man and dog, but in a totally metaphorical sense. The problem is not taking the side of Robophilia or Robophobia, but noting the ambivalence of robots, which can help but also dehumanize the person and society (Al-Amoudi, 2022).

And there is more. Archer does not take into consideration the fact that hybridization of the human with robots, and with new technologies more in general (ICT, AI), further changes the concept of person as the gap between human and machine disappears. Indeed, rather than cooperation between human and machine, the person and digital technology are merged together, like in the cases of biological brains in a robot body, general-purpose brain implants, deep brain stimulation, and so on (Warwick, 2013). Furthermore, Archer has not considered the fact that the human person can survive beyond physical death through the digital person (Arnold et al., 2018), and that this fact creates new and serious problems of a psychological, social and legal kind. Is a friendship with a person who has physically died and whose digital identity remains on the web still friendship? It could be, but it is a virtual friendship.

As far as the concept of reflexivity is concerned, in my opinion we have to distinguish more clearly between personal and relational reflexivity, and then link them to the human body. I will explain myself with an example.

Ferrito et al. (2020) observed that identities change after important interpersonal events. These authors did some research through in-depth individual interviews with men who committed intentional homicide, examining their experience in living with their crime and giving a sense to the action committed. The results confirm Archer's theory of reflexivity, because these persons are reflexive, but they correct two aspects of the theory: first, the person's inner reflexivity is active, but

it does not exist without reflexivity on relations with others; second, the research highlights the importance of the murderer's bodily experience on his lived experience and the definition of his Self.

In essence, the reflexive work on their identity by perpetrators of intentional homicide proves to be an essentially intersubjective process mediated by the body. This study highlights the importance of reflexive spaces for the murderers to face up to the impact of their crimes, so that they can maintain a new identity and a new life with safe and responsible social connections. It highlights how the victim's pain is reflected in the murderer: he feels the pain of the people dear to the victim, such as wives and children, by reliving it inside himself.

Reflexivity on one's Self and reflexivity on relations with others are closely correlated to each other, but distinct. This is why we have to speak not only of internal reflexivity on one's Self, but also reflexivity on relations. These two kinds of reflexivity are not the same, not only because one refers to the Self and the other to relations with the world (as Archer (2015) upholds), but because they have substantial differences.

Indeed, internal reflection addresses the Self, and it works according to first-person ethics, while relational reflexivity addresses others (for example, those who suffered the consequences of the homicide) and it works according to second-person ethics (insofar as the subject regulates the Self and her relations by accounting for others' reflexivity). The operations of the mind (for example, recognizing the consequences of the homicide) are not separable either from the experiences of one's own body or from those of the bodies of those who suffered because of the homicide (the pain of the victims and their relatives). We have to 'feel the Other's wounds' in order to heal our own.

To sum up, a limit of Archer, in my opinion, lies in the fact that she ignores second-person ethics, and, by mentalizing the individual's reflexivity, she undervalues the importance of social relations as such. She does not see reflexivity in its relational form as the product of social relations with the Other rather than relations with the Self.

### **Final prospects**

The paradigm drawn up by Margaret Archer puts the old question of the relationship between personal and social identity in new terms, according to a morphogenetic and emergent vision.

The vision that she lays out has wide-ranging and long-term implications. Her critical realism allows space to be given to, and allows us to imagine and promote, the capacity of people to forge an ever-new and therefore possibly also more human society, since modernity ran aground in anti-humanism. While the prevalent culture in the West emphasizes the decentralization and destructuring of the human person, and favour types of social structures and institutions that fragment

and alienate social relations, Archer indicates why and how people nevertheless have the potential capacities to draw up new personal and social identities as a result of their practical experiences.

Archer's original contribution proves to be most fruitful in terms of its operational outcomes and application in social work professions. In this light, two conclusive indications can be made.

First of all, her identification of the different types of internal conversation can be of great help to the educational, welfare, consultancy and care professions. These professions need to adopt an operational point of view according to which socializing the person does not simply mean providing direct normative recipes, or having values introjected, or requiring conformity to certain behaviours, or carrying out certain technologically specialized therapies on them, but soliciting the development of potentials inside the single person and her relational networks. In particular, the new paradigm gives a fundamental contribution to understanding and managing the relationship between care giver and care taker. The former can act more effectively if in possession of a scheme for reading the type of reflexivity connotating the latter, also in relation to the latter's networks of relations.

Indeed, taking care of the other person in difficulty – the openness to realize that a person is not well and adapting one's life project to that of the person in difficulty through 'care work' – is one of the human being's most characteristic 'ultimate concerns'. Archer helps to make these relations more conscious and reflexive, and therefore potentially more sensible and effective, precisely because her paradigm connects people's internal life with their networks of external relations, creating more reflexive connections between those in need of help and those offering it.

More generally, also for those not in a particular state of suffering, the fact of being able to connect the single person's reflexive characteristics with the characteristics of the networks in which she lives can go to alter those networks in such a way as to help people's internal reflexivity. The defects, imbalances and disorientations of people and their *modus vivendi* can therefore be channelled and dealt with in a framework of relational steering which points towards more mature (autonomous) forms of reflexivity of the single subjects in co-responsibility to their networks of relations.

In conclusion, Archer provided decisive explanations about the human person, her development and influence in generating relations and forms of social life. The concepts of the person's morphogenesis and reflexivity hold great potential for advances in the social sciences. She did not have time to go into the problematic issues that I have mentioned. It remains to us to do so.

## References

Al-Amoudi, I. (2022). Are Post-Human Technologies Dehumanizing? *Human En-*

- hancement and Artificial Intelligence in Contemporary Societies. *Journal of Critical Realism*, 21(5), 516-538.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14767430.2022.2134618>
- Alexander, J. C., & Thompson, K. (2008). *A contemporary introduction to sociology: culture and society in transition*. Paradigm Publication.
- Archer, M. S. (1995). *Realist Social Theory: The Morphogenetic Approach*. Cambridge University Press.
- Archer, M. S. (2000). *Being Human. The Problem of Agency*. Cambridge University Press.
- Archer, M. S. (2003). *Structure, Agency and the Internal Conversation*. Cambridge University Press.
- Archer, M. S. (2007). *Making Our Way Through the World*. Cambridge University Press.
- Archer, M. S. (2012). *The Reflexive Imperative in Late Modernity*. Cambridge University Press.
- Archer, M. S. (2015). Foreword: Varieties of relational social theory. In P. Donati, A. Malo & G. Maspero. (Orgs.). *Social Science, Philosophy and Theology in Dialogue. A relational Approach* (pp. viii-xxvii). Routledge.
- Archer, M. S. (2019a). Bodies, persons and human enhancement. Why these distinctions matter. In I. Al-Amoudi & J. Morgan (Eds.). *Realist Responses to Post-Human Society: Ex Machina* (pp. 10-32). Routledge.
- Archer, M. S. (2019b). Considering AI personhood. In I. Al-Amoudi & E. Lazega (Eds.). *Post-Human Institutions and Organisations: Confronting the Matrix* (pp. 28-47). Routledge.
- Archer, M. S. (2021). Can humans and AI robots be friends? In M. Carrigan & D. Porpora (Eds.). *Post-Human Futures. Human Enhancement, Artificial Intelligence and Social Theory* (pp. 132-152). Routledge.
- Archer, M. S. & Maccarini, A. (2021). Introduction. In M. S. Archer & A. Maccarini (Eds.). *What is Essential to Being Human? Can AI Robots Not Share It?* (pp. 56-73). Routledge.
- Arnold, M. et al. (2018). *Death and digital media*. Routledge.
- Bhaskar, R. (1989). *The Possibility of Naturalism*. Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- Dépelteau, F. (2018). From the concept of 'trans-action' to a process-relational sociology. In F. Dépelteau (Ed.). *The Palgrave Handbook of Relational Soci-*



- ology* (pp. 499-519). Palgrave.
- Donati, P. (2011). *Relational Sociology. A New Paradigm for the Social Sciences*. Routledge.
- Donati, P. (2016). The 'Relational Subject' According to a Critical Realist Relational Sociology. *Journal of Critical Realism*, 15(4), 352-375.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14767430.2016.1166728>
- Donati, P. (2021). *Transcending Modernity with Relational Thinking*. Routledge.
- Donati, P. (2023). *Alterità. Sul confine fra l'Io e l'Altro*. Città Nuova.
- Donati, P. (2024). *Being Human in a Virtual Society: A Relational Approach*. Peter Lang.
- Donati, P., & Archer, M. S. (2015). *The Relational Subject*. Cambridge University Press.
- Emirbayer, M. (1997). Manifesto for a Relational Sociology. *American Journal of Sociology*, 103(2), 281-317.
- Esposito, R. (2002). *Immunitas. Protezione e negazione della vita*. Einaudi.
- Ferrito, M. et al. (2020). Making sense of the dark: a study on the identity of men who committed homicide. *Journal of Forensic Psychology Research and Practice*, 20(2), 163-184.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/24732850.2020.1714399>
- Frankfurt, H. G. (1988). *The Importance of What We Care About*. Cambridge University Press.
- Harré, R. (1983). *Personal Being*. Basil Blackwell.
- Lee, S. (2021). Unpacking the black box of a mature student's processes of social engagement: focusing on reflexivity, structure and agency. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 51(6), 785-801.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0305764X.2021.1927986>
- Luhmann, N. (1995). *Social Systems*. Stanford University Press.
- Porpora, D. (2018). Critical Realism as Relational Sociology. In F. Dépelteau (Ed.). *The Palgrave Handbook of Relational Sociology* (pp. 395-411). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Turkle, S. (2006). *A Nascent Robotics Culture: New Complicities for Companionship*. AAAI Technical Report Series, July 2006. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003074991-12>

Warwick, K. (2013). The disappearing human-machine divide. *Approaching Religion*, 3(2), 1-15.

Zahavi, D., & Zelinsky D. (2023). Experience, Subjectivity, Selfhood: Beyond a Meadian Sociology of the Self. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 54(1), 1-16. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jtsb.12396>

### **Author's notes:**

Pierpaolo Donati is Alma Mater Professor (PAM) of Sociology at the University of Bologna and former President of the Italian Sociological Association. E-mail: [pierpaolo.donati@unibo.it](mailto:pierpaolo.donati@unibo.it)

**Received:** 19.12.2023

**Accepted:** 15.04.2024