

## Towards a New Configuration of the Ego / Alter Relationship: The Rediscovery of Altruism

Hacia una nueva configuración de la relación Ego / Alter: El redescubrimiento del altruismo

**Emiliana Mangone\***

University of Salerno, Italy.

emangone@unisa.it

### Abstract

One should not imagine that the social sciences discovered altruism when Comte coined the term, understood as a powerful impulse to the intellectual and moral development of mankind. On the contrary, since ancient times scholars have tried to explain (cause and effect) and understand (sense and meaning) the reasons why in certain situations some men behave positively towards others (altruistic behaviour) while in similar ones the same men behave differently. While not every discipline used the term altruism, this does not mean that human and social sciences have not dealt with behaviours that could directly or indirectly be related to it. We will review the evolution of this phenomenology of human action based on its "concept of man" of reference. We will argue that the rediscovery of altruism can be considered a new configuration of the Ego/Alter relationship.

**Keywords:** Modernity; Altruism; Sociology; Ego/Alter relationship; Human being.

### Resumen

Las ciencias sociales no descubrieron el altruismo sólo cuando Comte acuñó el término, entendido como un poderoso impulso para el desarrollo intelectual y moral de la humanidad. Por el contrario, desde la antigüedad los estudiosos han tratado de explicar (causa y efecto) y comprender (sentido y significado) las razones por las que en ciertas situaciones algunos hombres se comportan positivamente con otros (comportamiento altruista) mientras que en situaciones similares se comportan de manera diferente. Aunque no todas las disciplinas han utilizado el término altruismo, esto no significa que las ciencias humanas y sociales no se hayan ocupado de comportamientos que podrían estar directa o indirectamente relacionados con él. Revisaremos la evolución de esta fenomenología de la acción humana basado en su "concepto de hombre" de referencia. Argumentaremos que el redescubrimiento del altruismo puede considerarse una nueva configuración de la relación Ego-Alter.

**Palabras clave:** Modernidad; Altruismo; Sociología; Relación Ego/Alter; Ser humano.

\* Associate Professor of Sociology of Culture and Communication, Department of Political and Communication Sciences. She is a Director of the International Centre for Studies and Research "Mediterranean Knowledge" and she is a member of several international research networks and groups. ORCID: 0000-0002-9958-4346

## Towards a New Configuration of the Ego / Alter Relationship: The Rediscovery of Altruism

### 0. Introduction

The social sciences did not discover altruism when Comte (1851-1854) coined this term. On the contrary, scholars, starting with philosophers, have long tried to explain (cause-effect) and understand - signifier and signified (see de Saussure, 1971) why in certain situations some people behave positively towards others (altruistic behaviour) and why in similar situations the same people behave differently. Obviously, not all disciplines have actually used the term "altruism", but this does not mean that human and social sciences have not addressed behaviours that can directly or indirectly be traced back to it.

The following reflections are based on this brief premise. Being the author a sociologist, they will inevitably be affected by the epistemological influence of sociology and particularly of the sociology of culture, but with disciplinary "encroachments" that will allow for as broad as possible a vision. Specifically, we will review the evolution of this phenomenology of human action based on its "concept of man" of reference (although we claim to be neither temporally nor theoretically exhaustive). We will argue that the rediscovery of altruism can be considered a new configuration of the Ego/Alter relationship.

### 1. The concept of man in modern times

As specialists in the field well know, the term altruism was first used by Comte (1851-1854). This term commonly refers to all actions whose benefits fall on others rather than on the agent (actor): altruism means "living for others" (*vivre pour autrui*). However, a similar phenomenology existed also in the previous centuries and evolved based on which "concept of man" was assumed as reference.

The Renaissance saw the affirmation of man in relation with other men, with the world of nature, and with God. This renewal – based on the awareness of man's relationship with nature – cannot be understood without considering two key issues. On the one hand, the new idea of science, based on

observation and experimentation (Copernicus and Galilei), according to which the human knowledge of the world is neither fixed nor based on a closed system, but is fallible and correctable. On the other hand, the relationship with politics, *i.e.*, a renewed thought of living in a community. In 1513, Machiavelli's *The Prince* (2011) refers precisely to the latter aspect, with quite a pessimistic view attributing man a nature that can be summed up in the *homo homini lupus* later taken up by Hobbes in *The Leviathan* (1651). In this logic, the man in his natural state is fundamentally selfish, and actions are determined essentially based on the instinct of survival and oppression. In the state of nature, everyone is driven by instinct and tries to eliminate whatever (or whomever) hampers the satisfaction of their desires. This viewpoint can be simplified by stating that individuals consider their neighbours as enemies (*bellum omnium contra omnes*) denying the possibility of approaching their fellow man under natural love. It follows that the state of man is a perpetual conflict abounding in evil and malicious actions.

The concept of man, also in relation to nature, shifts its attention definitively from religion to politics. The focus is not only on the individual but also on his life in the associated form. Machiavelli, in a way, ferries human history towards modernity and its conception of humanity that will characterize the following systems of ideas.

Common to both modern and ancient philosophy is the principle of the "receptivity" or "passivity" of individuals to external reality. Reality is external, but it acts on the perceptive-sensory apparatus of man. In this perspective, man's "perceiving" is passive (one is not free not to hear a signal, such as a sound, or to hear it differently), while the "thinking" is active (one is free not to think or to think differently).

The two ways in which the Enlightenment philosophy tried to solve this problem are: on the one hand, Empiricism, and, on the other, Rationalism.

The former highlights the revealing character of “perception” and theorizes reason as a set of powers limited by experience (there are no innate ideas), understood as the source of the cognitive process and tool through which to validate intellectualistic thought only if it can be verified and measured.

If Empiricism highlights the revealing character of “perception”, Rationalism, starting with Descartes, highlights its occulting aspect. Similarly, it is argued that Rationalism bases its knowledge on reason while Empiricism bases it on experience. In other words, for rationalists, the construction of “knowledge” happens based on principles disconnected from experience (*a priori* or innate). This does not detract from reality; on the contrary, knowledge, going beyond experience, creates a sort of bridge with reality, going beyond the occulting character of perceptions. It is not a question of going from an ever-developing reality to an immutable reality, but rather of building a passage from man’s representations to the external reality. This opens the way to man’s dualism (being and reason) that will then characterize the whole of modernity.

The centrality acquired by reason with the Enlightenment gains a new guise with Romanticism. With the term reason, we mean that “infinite” force that dominates and inhabits the world, and that was understood as consciousness, freedom, the ability to create. In its declination, it has taken on two interpretations: as “feeling” and as “absolute reason”. The former is understood as an activity free from any determination and manifested precisely in those activities more closely connected to feeling, such as religion and art; while the latter moves from one determination to another.

The Enlightenment influenced the system of ideas in many areas of human life and beyond. In Europe, it has taken on specific characteristics depending on the geographical area within which it was spreading. For example, England is characterized by Adam Smith’s political economy, which stated that the origin of civilization is due to a primordial division of labour into different trades – on this, his example of the pin factory is emblematic. For this contribution, however, much more important is another of Smith’s works, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1767), in which he explains man’s moral life which is aimed at maintaining the greatest possible amount of happiness over time. According to Smith, “sympathy” (in its etymological meaning of “similar feeling”) is what guides mankind to goodness and happiness. Through it, men can approve or disapprove of their conduct depending on whether or not other people sympathize with them: men must act as spectators of their actions and be in assonance with all other

spectators. In judging their behaviour, men resort to a sort of translation: to better analyse their behaviour, they split up, creating an imaginary “impartial spectator”, detached precisely because not directly involved. This spectator allows men to mediate between drives aimed exclusively at satisfying their own needs and the desire to be accepted by the community by reducing selfish actions in favour of those useful to the community.

The criterion of sympathy as a guide is the manifestation of an order or harmony prepared for men by God. In other words, men approve of those behaviours that reflect what they would be inclined to do and oppose those that follow will and instincts different from their own.

If the Enlightenment wants to bring man back to reason, Rousseau wants to bring reason to nature. The result, however, is the same: in both cases what is questioned is the relationship between the natural and the artificial man – the latter resulting from social constraints. Unlike Hobbes’ state of nature (*Homo homini lupus*), Rousseau’s is based on harmony between man and nature: when man satisfies his primary needs, he develops a feeling of compassion towards his fellow human beings. In the state of nature, there is neither private property nor overpowering, but as more and more structured forms of social organizations develop (especially because of the advent of ownership), civil society gradually emerges, based on the distinction between “mine” and “yours” (codification of inequalities). In this way, humanity left its original condition of naturalness to structure itself into a coercive organization, based on the distinction between rich and poor, masters and slaves.

What Rousseau was looking for was simply a new form of society to restore “in law the natural equality between men” (and not, as some may believe, to bring humanity back to living in woods and caverns). This can be summarized at the beginning of the first book *The Social Contract* (1762a). The question posed is that of finding a form of association for which each person remains master of himself and free. The aim of this social contract is, therefore, first and foremost to guarantee each and everyone’s freedom, which will no longer be the natural freedom of the state of nature, but the freedom arising from the contract based on the will of the contracting parties who decide to submit to a “general will”. Individual relations are replaced by the relationship of citizens with the law, the expression of the general will, to which everyone submits. Thus the “political body” is born in which men (citizens) are integral parts of the whole and in which everyone and everyone holds sovereignty. The state is, therefore, a *moral person*, a

collective body identified neither with a person nor with the arithmetic sum of the will of all, but with the “general will” that “restores in law the natural equality between men” and guarantees the freedom of each one, linked to reason and laws.

Rousseau also translates this issue as an individual educational question in the *Émile* (1762b), or the formation of the new man. A prerequisite for education must be the idea that nature is good, therefore the harmony and development of nature in the child must not be disturbed. The education of the child (*Émile*) must, therefore, be essentially *negative*, it must never intervene in the natural process of maturation of the child’s faculties, it must not pretend to “see the man in the child”. Children must find by themselves the first rudiments of science through contact with nature, unmediated by books and uninfluenced by society, from which they must stay away until they have reached, through reason, full freedom. Indeed, the culmination of education is the conquest of reason, full judgement, the affirmation of the moral conscience which reduces inequalities.

Such was the French Enlightenment climate, although Rousseau cannot be considered the greatest populariser of French Enlightenment ideas. At the same time, the rest of Europe and France itself, due to the ongoing profound cultural, social and economic changes, felt the need for a new legal-normative structure of public law as the assumptions of Enlightenment law proved insufficient to take account of the ever-changing social reality. One of the major disseminators of this orientation was the Italian Cesare Beccaria who developed the liberal conception of criminal law, marking the beginning of what can be considered a new approach to the issue of punishment. Beccaria started from the works by Montesquieu (1721) and Rousseau (1761). The former criticized the legislation in force, considering it extremely damaging to individual dignity and the effective exercise of free will. The latter maintained that seeking good and escaping evil is only the application of the law of nature and, therefore, when the life of individuals is an evil one can also end it. The judge must apply the law without any evaluative interpretation of the causes of the crime. These principles were structured in the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the Classical School of Criminal Law, which contributed to the affirmation of the so-called “tariff system” relating the punishment to the seriousness of the crime. This conception of crime determined a strongly dogmatic abstraction: the crime was to be considered as an “entity of law and not of fact”.

If these are the assumptions and basic concepts that influenced the thought of the eighteenth and first half of the nineteenth century,

the second half of the century saw the first signs of further revision. Positivism transpose in science the Romantic tendency to identify finite and infinite, and to consider the former as the progressive realization of the latter. Comte’s social positivism is of greater importance for the present reflections. He stands out, by both personal intention and his contemporaries’ perception, as a prophet of a new religion stemming from philosophy and is so convinced of it that he even writes *The Catechism of Positive Religion* (Comte, 1852).

With this term “altruism” - deriving from the Italian “altri” (another person) - the French scholar indicated the willingness to take an interest in others and their well-being. In other words, for Comte, *Live for Others* is the simplest summary of the whole moral code of Positivism; altruist is he who selflessly places the good of others as the end of his actions. Of particular importance is Comte’s doctrine of science, since the science of nature has shown that only by knowing the laws it is possible to govern nature for the social development of mankind. On this basis, for Comte, there is a need for a science of society – and here he coins another term, *sociology* – and for knowing the laws of human conduct to found true social engineering (Comte, 1830-1842) that must tend towards the “religion of humanity”. Science is – or must be – positive knowledge, that is, knowledge which renounces the knowledge of causes, restricting itself to the verification of phenomena and their relations, constructing general laws to make science pragmatic for social ends. The characteristics of this new society are its orientation and regulation towards the common good, with a great associative spirit and altruistic feeling, which also becomes a religious feeling, having Humanity as its new god.

## **2. The social sciences and the rediscovery of altruism: an indissoluble pair (individual and society)**

As the social sciences developed and became an autonomous set of knowledge, more and more categories of phenomena were “removed” from philosophical speculation, and from moral or political “discourse” to form the core of the new disciplines. Demography, statistics, economics, and sociology were a way of collecting data and observing the new and complex society emerging from the great transformations that had affected western societies since the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In other words, there is a tendency to break with tradition, and the analysis of phenomena is brought back to experience. The man begins to be studied as *homo sociologicus*, that is, as an acting subject at the centre of a dense network of social relationships.

The question we must ask ourselves, then, is: which changes occurred at the end of the nineteenth

century in studies on social change? On the one hand, the religious aura that accompanied the reading of the transformations of primitive societies is lost, and, on the other hand, new research methods, developed mainly for the natural sciences, are adopted to analyse the social transformations characterizing that historical period.

The choice to ponder *altruism* must be considered in the light of these social transformations. "Altruism" is one of the two terms coined by Comte that became paramount for the development of social sciences – the other term being, indeed, "sociology". Comte also coined others, such as "sociocracy" and "biocracy", but these did not find proselytes, nor did they catch on like the first two. As Habito and Inaba made clear, "The original French term 'altruisme' was suggested by the French legal phrase 'le bien d'autrui' (the good of others), and was formed from the Italian equivalent, 'altrui', itself a derivative of the Latin 'alter' or 'other.' Altruism is 'other-ism': the effort or actual ability to act in the interest of others" (2006: 1). Since the birth of the term, although with ups and downs, altruism becomes an analytical construct of the social sciences.

These budding sciences that study society entail a few open questions, including the debate on altruism or, in other terms, on moral solidarity or social solidarity. The term altruism is one of the few terms born in the scientific field that will then enter the common language keeping more or less the same meaning it originally held: the opposite of egoism (selfishness). The importance of altruism in the social sciences can be found in many classics (Wuthnow, 1993; Bykov, 2017). For example, Durkheim explains the basis of social solidarity in modern society precisely through the contrast between altruism and egoism (Durkheim, 1893). He defines its implications in his well-known work *Suicide* (Durkheim, 1897) by counterposing altruistic and selfish suicide, identifying what will later become the most famous type of suicide. Later, the functionalists (Parsons and Merton) will again subordinate individual action to society in a functionally positive way, thus with a strong orientation towards the collective. Similarly, both Weber (1963) and Marx,<sup>1</sup> while not using the term altruism as such, refer to it indirectly. The first, when describing the ethics of love of charismatic authority as opposed to legal and rational authority, the second, when raging against Christian charity.

This interest in altruism as an object of study in the social sciences, however, gradually decreased,

1 There is no specific references about Marx because as argued from Wuthnow, "only Karl Marx is silent on the topic, unless his scattered polemics against Christian and bourgeois concepts of charity are considered" (1993: 345).

especially in Europe, as shown by both theoretical and empirical studies since the 1950s. An exception is the Russian-American sociologist Sorokin who, in 1949, with funding from Mr Eli Lilly and the Lilly Endowment, established the *Harvard Research Center in Creative Altruism*. In recent years, however, the study of altruism seems to take on new vigour, especially in the United States: in 2012 the American Sociological Association started including in its ranks the section "Altruism, Morality & Social Solidarity"<sup>2</sup> (Nichols, 2012). So, the scholars promoting this section have considered these three aspects a single field of specialization because they are significantly interdependent in the socio-cultural reality (Jeffrey, 2014). Europe also experienced a renewed interest in studies on altruism, particularly in French sociology. This resurgence was threefold: it started starting from the numerous retakes on Marcel Mauss' work on the gift (1925), followed the anti-utilitarian movement (Caillé, 1988; Steiner, 2016), and was indebted to Moscovici's studies of social representations (2000) which lead to the definition of the elementary forms of altruism.

Despite this renewed vitality of the studies on altruism, especially in European literature, Pitrim Sorokin is not numbered among the classics that made a significant contribution to the development of these studies. In the United States, however, his intellectual heritage has been collected by various scholars (Jeffrey, 2002; Johnston, 2001; Krotov, 2012; 2014; Nichols, 2009; Weinstein, 2000). For the intellectual legacy, we refer to the works of the authors mentioned above, while here we will try to outline how this rediscovery of altruism can lead to a new configuration of the Ego / Alter relationship in contemporary society. We will make use of deduction in presenting this idea, because the term altruism, or rather the concept of altruism, even after Comte, has never been central to the studies of social sciences. References to altruism can, therefore, be deduced indirectly from references to those actions that benefit others than the actors and for which have been used the terms *solidarism* and *social solidarity* – see for example Durkheim (1893).

In light of the above, studies on altruism must combine the system with individuals (there is an indissoluble pair between individual and society). They must combine objective and subjective aspects, taking into account all the dimensions, levels and

2 The promoter was Vincent Jeffries who, together with other colleagues, outlined the reasons for the need for this field of study in the article *Altruism and social solidarity: Envisioning a field of specialization* (Jeffries et al., 2006). Subsequently, as early as 2009, a Newsletter of the nascent section of "Altruism & Social Solidarity" was launched, which will then take its final name when "Altruism, Morality & Social Solidarity" was established in 2012.

factors involved in the expression of altruism. This suggests that its analysis must consider the multidimensionality and multifactorialism that characterizes altruism as stemming from human relations. This way privileges the spaces of the *Ego/Alter* relationships within societal processes, since all social phenomena, attitudes, and actions, are built in a social context<sup>3</sup> that has its places, times, and symbols, which are fundamental in the cognitive processes of self-signification activated by individuals for the construction of social realities in their daily relational experience.

In his essay *Les formes élémentaires de l'altruisme* (2000), Moscovici raises two fundamental claims for the study of altruism. First, that both altruism and egoism can be problematic behaviours depending on their interpretation, which in turn is based on the social and cultural expectations of the reference society. Second, that altruism is linked to the relationship between individuals (intensity and duration) and to the situation they live in. This suggests that the renewed interest of the social sciences in altruism can be considered as an attempt to reconfigure the *Ego/Alter* relationship starting from the transformations of society and the 'doings and beings' of human beings.

Over the last two centuries, societies have become increasingly complex in both relationships and processes, whose gradual unfolding changed according to the different geographical areas and, above all, to the socio-cultural contexts that are considered as a reference for the analysis. Three processes are at work here: secularization (loss of relevance of religion in social life), rationalization (predominance of purposive rationality) and, finally, individualization (*Gemeinschaft vs Gesellschaft* with the replacement of Durkheim's mechanical solidarity with organic solidarity). All these have transformed both the social representations and the beliefs through which individuals interpret the surrounding society. Furthermore, they changed the values by which they orientate themselves within it, and on which they base their relations. These processes led to redefining the relationship between individuals and their social context, producing a sort of "break" (transformation) in rhythms and lifestyles and affecting, in general, people's representation of their life and world, as well as their actions towards others. These changes in rhythms and lifestyles lead to a sort of "decline in daily life", meaning a measure of human well-being that goes beyond economic parameters and includes

aspects related to the ability of individuals to perform an activity – the *capability approach* (Nussbaum and Sen, 2004) – their cultural identity and sociality, up to aspects related to their living context.

### 3. Towards a new configuration of the *Ego/Alter* relationship

In light of the statement above, the starting hypothesis to overcome the egoism/altruism dichotomy is that there is no such thing as altruism or egoism understood in a behavioural sense, as claimed by socio-biologists or behaviourists<sup>4</sup>, but there are "altruistic relationships" and "egoistic relationships". It follows that the focus will be on "rela(c)tion", that is, on a relational process that is at the same time action and interaction between individuals who are placed in a socio-cultural context. The latter partly influences these processes and they, in turn, influence the context.

The focus of the studies is on the individual, an individual who is capable of significant interactions that fit into a cultural context. Undoubtedly these relationships are influenced, on the one hand, by culture, and, on the other, by the indissoluble link with everyday life and context. Consequently, it is possible to transition from an approach to the study of social phenomena aimed at searching for a cause (causality) to one focusing on the overall significant interactions between what Sorokin (1948) defined as "indivisible sociocultural trinity" (Society, Culture, and Personality).<sup>5</sup> This passage outlines the reciprocal

<sup>4</sup> For sociobiologists, who base their discipline on Darwin's notions of individual selection and survival of the fittest, altruism presents a major theoretical problem. For these scholars, altruism is achieved through either kin or group selection, with the necessary exceptions, such as those identified by Monroe (1994; 1996) of individuals who sacrifice themselves for relatives. It follows that evolutionists and sociobiologists, when they claim to study altruism, refer to statistical trends, in the long-range genetic selection of behaviours, which can fit the common idea of altruism. The sociobiological hypothesis, by extending Darwin's model (Darwin, 1871; 1872), claims that the maximization of their overall identity is the main reason for action for human beings. If this hypothesis holds, it is because natural selection has led to the multiplication of "behaviour-specific" or "cultural-generic" genes that govern human social behaviour. As Durham, an anthropologist, states: "Where the natural selection theories of sociobiology have been right in their prediction or explanation of human behaviour, it has often been for the wrong reasons. The apparent consistency between biological theory and human behaviour suggests *not* that there is necessarily an underlying biological basis that guides, steers, controls, programs, predisposes, or inclines every human activity, but rather that the traditions and customs produced by cultural processes are often adaptive in the 'biological sense'. I believe that these coherences can best be explained by the joint evolution of biology and human culture" (Durham, 1979: 41).

<sup>5</sup> In this work, given the epistemological influence of the sociology of culture, the studies on personality in a psychological sense will not be examined - even if they are considered important. But starting from Sorokin's "indivisible sociocultural trinity", the term

<sup>3</sup> The concept of "social context" (or social environment, social-cultural context or milieu) refers to the physical and social setting in which individuals and social organizations interact. Therefore, the "social context" includes culture.

relationship between life-world and social system and represents the pivotal moment in which attention is paid not only to the individual as the recipient of decisions but to the individual as a “subject” and active part in relational processes (Donati and Archer, 2015; Mangone, 2019).

These aspects were examined by both Mauss (1925) and Moscovici (2000): the former referred to the need to close the “give/receive/return” cycle of the gift, while the latter discussed the elementary forms of altruism. Both highlight how these actions are based on the relationality of individuals. Sorokin, moreover, in his last researches fully devoted to the activities of *The Harvard Research Center in Creative Altruism*, focuses his attention on the transformation of human solidarity that would be replaced by the “love relationship”, that iceberg-looking feeling “Love is like an iceberg: only a small part of it is visible, and even this visible part is little known” (Sorokin, 1954: 3) that the Russian-American sociologist considered as “the supreme and vital form of human relationship”.

What should be analysed, therefore, is neither altruism nor egoism, but the relationship. This procedural and methodological order overcomes the altruism/egoism dichotomy since these two static terms are replaced by processes: the “altruistic relationships”, for society (pro-social or heterodirect) and the “selfish relationships”, for oneself (anti-social or self-directed).

Showing some ambiguity, any form of relationship fluctuates between the exchange of information and the symbolic action on the other: implemented and experienced relations are, therefore, problematic actions that most often do not allow reciprocity between the subjects, which is paramount for “altruistic relationships”.

If the social relationship connects *Ego* and *Alter*, it is precisely through the relationship that one discovers the Other and the actions towards them. The idea of otherness, which usually leads to the concept of “unfamiliar” or “foreign”, depends on the recognition or not of the other within the cognitive order pre-established by the society or reference groups (Gutmann, 1992). As Simão stated in describing the importance of human relations, “the process to which the notion of otherness concerns a complex and even paradoxical recognition of similarities and differences among an I and his or her Others, with

---

“personality” indicates the subject of interaction in the form of a single individual or one or more groups. In both forms, the subject of interaction is the bearer of a *Weltanschauung* deriving from the dominant cultural mentality in the society in which she is born and lives: “individuals are the indispensable components of all social and cultural systems, their personalities (i.e.—the organization of their minds and behaviour) influence the framework of the social and cultural patterns” (Sorokin, 1962: 342).

which the I could share or not his or her experiences, expectancies, hopes, and fears, in affairs related to work, educational, leisure, familiar, private, and public situations” (2012: 1281).

For example, in Bauman’s (1995) reading of contemporary society, “the other” as “foreigner” is defined by *distance*, perceived as an element of “strangeness” that separates what we need to know from what we do know, or believe we know, about the potential or actual attitudes that others will assume. “Otherness” is almost always traced back to “strangeness” and therefore to the foreigner, but it should be noted that each society has its own “foreigners”. For example, Simmel’s work on the stranger (1908) characterizes this category by dichotomies (near/far, same/different, inside/outside the community). Nowadays, however, they no longer apply only to the “foreigner” *per se* – understood as someone from faraway places with her specific symbolic dimension – but also to someone (other) among us who creates ambiguity or undermines the degree of certainty for not being ascribable to a specific category.

And it is precisely recognition that can push the relationship in an altruistic or selfish direction. Indeed, the lower the anonymity of the individual with whom one relates, the more the individual is oriented towards an altruistic relationship. In this way, the *Ego/Alter* relationship is no longer based on *inequality* (in what) but *differentiation* (for whom). The focus should be on *Ego’s* attitudes, as she perceives herself as similar to/different from *Alter* in a given symbolic sphere, as well as on *Alter’s* responses within a relational framework built on expectations that may influence the determination of closeness/distance and openness/closure. The reference to anonymity brings our reflection to focusing on remote vs. direct social interactions (Berger and Luckmann, 1966): the more anonymous the contact with the Other (remote interaction) is, the more difficult it is to find common elements that also allow civil coexistence – as in the case of discriminatory actions against minorities or weaker sections of the population. This is even more evident when one is faced not only with imposed relevance, but also when knowledge is transformed from socially derived (as most of an individual’s knowledge derives from others, and just a small part of it actually results from his experience) into socially approved (because it is recognized and accepted also by others and not only by those who own it).

Based on the Socratic doctrine, each acts according to her convictions by doing what she considers good for herself, hence the idea that “no one does evil voluntarily” for the pleasure of doing so: if she knew that her actions are not good for her, she

would not act so. In other words, if individuals could always recognize what is positive for themselves, they would always act in the direction of good, because good is preferable to evil and will and desire would both tend towards it. These aspects of the Socratic doctrine were also taken up by Hannah Arendt (2006) in her analysis of Adolf Eichmann's trial as a *New Yorker* correspondent from Jerusalem. As she attended the trial in the courtroom, Arendt developed the idea that the evil perpetrated by Eichmann – and by the Germans co-responsible for the Shoah – was due not to the malignant nature of their soul, but to a complete unawareness and inability to understand the meaning of their actions.

Tending towards community does not mean denying the value of individuals; on the contrary, it means building bonds of solidarity and justice between them. Starting from the knowledge of himself, man must tend towards the knowledge of actions (what he must do) and essence (what he must be); this is the signature virtue of men. Human knowledge is not merely linked to reason or intellectual activity but derives from the continuous search for conjugation between being and doing.

Actions towards others depend on the idea that individuals construct of them, the interpretations of their past and present actions, and the predictions of what they will do in the future (Berger and Luckmann, 1969). One of altruism's presuppositions is a hypothetical (not guaranteed) restitution of the good or service granted to the other. It can be argued, therefore, that attitudes (positive or negative) towards others are oriented by one's perception of them. Individuals construct their action schemes based on the meanings they attribute to their daily existence. These social representations (Farr and Moscovici, 1984) understood as systems of interpretation of the social context that constitutes reality (the idea of the world, *Weltanschauung*), determine the meaning and significance of actions and events. Furthermore, they define the experience of reality by identifying limits, meanings, and types of interactions by reducing the information ambiguity and making the meanings of actions unequivocal (turning the unfamiliar into familiar).

If we try to further analyse this process based on representations as cognitive-descriptive processes, we find that the recognition of otherness refers to a wider and more complex categorization process. This, in turn, leads to the visibility of the *Ego/Alter* nexus (the basis of social identification) and at the same time makes the near/far dimension apparent and visible. The *Ego* strengthens and unfolds positively, thus negatively defining the *Alter*. This process is particularly significant when the individual is already

aimed at "defending her world". The opposite happens instead in an altruistic relationship and particularly with what Moscovici (2000) defined as "participatory altruism". This form of altruism gives rise to an "Us" that connects and binds together the members of the group, community, or society, and it is for this "Us" that individuals are ready to sacrifice themselves. Individuals still defend "their world" but this world is no longer individualized but referred to the collective as humanity. In this case, the altruistic relationship is directed towards supporting that bond that cannot be broken for the survival of the group of which one is part (humanity), regardless of its form. In a certain way, *Ego* connects with *Alter* in the "Us", becoming almost interchangeable – so much so that it is no longer possible to distinguish when something is being done for the other or our good.

It is, therefore, necessary to activate the transformation processes of the perceptive and cognitive system of individuals so that their experience unfolds as a synthetic re-interpretative experience of the *Ego/Alter* relationship. A widespread idea in contemporary society is that globalization hindered the *humanitarian ethos* aimed at that communicative interaction for the "understanding" between two subjects in action who refer to each other and act taking into account their mutual intentions, motivations and expectations. And yet this ethos should be considered a valuable opportunity for individual growth, in the perspective of changing everything that hampers the construction of a new civil and solidaristic coexistence.

Human action, as a whole, must be understood as the most appropriate way to behave in different situations. It mirrors the relevant aspects found within the context in which situations occur, thus resolving the dualism between "doing" and "being" and the disharmonies often resulting from social relations. The relationality expressed in the role-playing between the individual and the system is a fundamental defence against negative actions. And in a similar context, the social sciences assume a double leading role. First, they redefine the paradigms of study, with which they connect the lifeworld (subjectivity and intersubjectivity) and the social system (organizational and subjective structure). Second, they foster the relationship between the individual and the social system by orienting the definition of needs, rights and duties towards an "ethics of responsibility".

#### 4. Some Conclusions

The relationship is therefore the process here analysed. It is this method that overcomes the altruism/egoism dichotomy, since static forms and terms are replaced by processes: "altruistic relations", such as relations in favour of society (pro-social or

hetero-directed), and “egoistic relations”, such as relations in favour of oneself (anti-social or self-directed).

This way privileges the spaces of social relations (Ego/Alter) within the processes developing in society: all social phenomena and attitudes and actions towards others are built in an environment that has its own places, times and symbols, which are fundamental in the cognitive processes of self-signification activated by individuals for the construction of social realities in their daily life experience. Moscovici (2000) argues that the study of altruism is linked to the relationship between individuals (intensity and duration), as well as to the situation that they experience. This suggests that the renewed interest of the social sciences in altruism – or similar forms of relationships – can be read as an attempt to reconfigure the Ego/Alter relationship starting from the transformations of society and the “doings and beings” of human beings.

For this reason, these reflections propose to overcome the altruism/egoism dichotomy in a relational key because the social relation is not a constraint for the individual, rather, it is what promotes the self-determination of the subject based on reflexivity (May and Perry, 2017). If these are the general elements of social relations, the “altruistic relationships” and the “egoistic relationships” present some peculiarities: in everyday life, they are not “neutral categories” and their results will depend on the type of balance established between “goals and means” (Merton, 1949) as a consequence of the pressures of the social structure on its members.

## References

- Arendt, H. (2006) *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. London: Penguin Books.
- Bauman, Z. (1995) “The Stranger Revisited and Revisiting” in Bauman Z. *Life in Fragments. Essays in Postmodern Morality* (pp. 126-138). Oxford: Blackwell.
- Berger, P.L. & Luckmann, T. (1966) *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. New York: Doubleday & Co.
- Bykov, A. (2017) “Altruism : New prespectives of research on a classical theme in sociology of morality” *Current Sociology Review*, vol. 65, issue 6, p. 797-813.
- Caillé, A. (1988) *Critique de la raison utilitaire. Manifeste du MAUSS*. Paris: Éditions la Découverte.
- Comte, A. (1830-1842) *Cours de philosophie positive* (Voll. 6). Paris: Bachelier.
- Comte, A. (1852) *Catéchisme positiviste*. Paris: Chez l’Auteur.
- Comte, A. (1851-1854) *Système de politique positive, ou Traité de sociologie* (Voll. 4). Paris: L. Mathias, & Caeilian-Goeuey and V<sup>or</sup> Dalmont.
- Darwin, C. (1871) *The Descent of Man*. London: John Murray.
- Darwin, C. (1872) *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*. London: John Murray.
- de Saussure, F. (1971 [1916]) *Cours de linguistique générale*. Paris: Payot.
- Durham, W.H. (1979) “Toward a Coevolutionary Theory of Human Biology and Culture”. In Chagnon N.A. & Irons W. (Eds.), *Evolutionary Biology and Human Social Behavior. An Anthropological Perspective* (pp. 39-59). North Scituate: Duxbury Press.
- Durkheim, É. (1893) *De la division du travail social*. Paris: Alcan.
- Durkheim, É. (1897) *Le suicide. Etude de sociologie*. Paris : PUF.
- Donati, P. & Archer, M.S. (2015) *The Relational Subject*. Cambridge: University Press Cambridge.
- Farr, R.M. & Moscovici, S. (Eds.) (1984) *Social Representations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gutmann, A. (1992) “Introduction” in Gutmann A. (Ed.), *Multiculturalism and ‘The Politics of Recognition’* (pp. 3-24). Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Habito, R.L.F. & Inaba, K. (2006) *The Practice of Altruism: Caring and Religion in Global Perspective*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Press.
- Hobbes, T. (1651) *The Leviathan*. Available in: [https://www.ttu.ee/public/m/mart-murdevve/EconPsy/6/Hobbes\\_Thomas\\_1660\\_The\\_Leviathan.pdf](https://www.ttu.ee/public/m/mart-murdevve/EconPsy/6/Hobbes_Thomas_1660_The_Leviathan.pdf) [Retrieved: 29/12/2018].
- Jeffries, V. (2002) “Integralism: the promising legacy of Pitirim A. Sorokin” in Robinson M.A. (Ed.), *Lost sociologists rediscovered* (pp. 99-135). New York: Mellon Press.
- Jeffries, V. (Ed.) (2014) *The Palgrave Handbook of Altruism, Morality, and Social Solidarity: formulating a field of study*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Jeffries, V., Johnston, B.V., Nichols, L.T., Oliner, S.P., Tiryakian, E. & Weinstein, J. (2006) “Altruism and social solidarity: Envisioning a field of specialization”. *The American Sociologist*, vol. 37, issue 3, p. 67-83. doi.org/10.1007/s12108-006-1023-7.
- Johnston, B. V. (2001) “Integralism, altruism, and social emancipation: a Sorokinian model of prosocial behavior and social organization”. *Catholic Social Science Review*, vol. 6, p. 41-55.

- Krotov, P. (2012) "Pitirim Sorokin Studies in Russia in the Context of the New Section on Altruism, Morality, and Social Solidarity in the American Sociological Association". *The American Sociologist*, vol. 43, issue 4, p. 366-373. doi.org/10.1007/s12108-012-9166-1.
- Krotov, P. (2014) "Pitirim Sorokin's Heritage: From Core Ideas to Syntheses of Theory and of Practice". In Jeffrey V. (Ed.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Altruism, Morality, and Social Solidarity: formulating a field of study* (pp. 123-147). New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Machiavelli, N. (2011[1532]) *The Prince*. London: Penguin.
- Mangone, E. (2019) "Gratitude and the Relational Theory of Society". *Human Arenas. An Interdisciplinary Journal of Psychology, Culture, and Meaning*, vol. 2, issue 1, p. 34-44.
- Merton, R.K. (1949). *Social Theory and Social Structure: Toward the Codification of Theory and Research*. New York: The Free Press.
- Montesquieu (de Secondat, baron de la Brède et de), Ch.-L. (1721) *Lettres persanes*. Cologne: Pierre Marteau.
- Monroe, K.R. (1994) "A Fat Lady in a Corset: Altruism and Social Theory". *American Journal of Political Science*, vol. 38, issue 4, p. 861-893.
- Monroe, K.R. (1996) *Heart of Altruism: Perceptions of a Common Humanity*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Mauss, M. (1925). "Essai sur le don. Forme et raison de l'échange dans les sociétés archaïques". *L'Année Sociologique*, Tome 1 (1923-1924), p. 31-186.
- May, T. & Perry, B. (2017) *Reflexivity. The Essential Guide*. London: Sage Publishing.
- Moscovici, S. (2000) "Les formes élémentaires de l'altruisme" in Moscovici S. (Ed.), *Psychologie sociale des relations à autrui* (pp. 71-86). Paris: Nathan.
- Nichols, L. T. (2009) "The Russian roots of Pitirim A. Sorokin's sociological work in the United States" in A.F. Smetanin, E.N. Rozhkin, U.P. Shabaev, V.E. Sharapov, I.L. Zherebtsov, P.P. Krotov, I.A. Goncharov & N.F. Zyzev (Eds.), *Pitirim Sorokin in the history, science and culture of the 20th Century, Materials of the International Conference Celebrating the 120th Birthday of P. A. Sorokin*, Syktyvkar (pp. 149-160). Syktyvkar: Institute of Language, Literature and History-Komi Scientific Center.
- Nichols, L. T. (2012) "North Central Sociological Association Presidential Address. Renewing sociology: Integral science, Solidarity, and Loving kindness". *Sociological Focus*, vol. 45, issue 4, p. 261-273.
- Nussbaum, M.C. & Sen, A. (Eds.) (2004) *Quality of Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Rousseau, J.-J. (1761) *A discourse upon the origin and foundation of the inequality among mankind*. London: R. and J. Dodsley.
- Rousseau, J.-J. (1762a) *Du contrat social : ou principes du droit politique*. Amsterdam: Marc Michel Rey.
- Rousseau, J.-J. (1762b) *Emile, ou De l'éducation*. Paris: C.F. Simon.
- Simão, L.M. (2012) "Otherness". In Anheier H.K., Juergensmeyer M., & Faessel V. (Eds) *Encyclopedia of Global Studies* (pp. 1280-1282). Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Simmel, G. (1908). *Sociologie. Untersuchungen über die Formen der Vergesellschaftung*. Berlin, Germany: Duncker & Humblot.
- Smith, A. (1767) *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. London: A. Millar, A. Kincaid and J. Bell.
- Sorokin, P. A. (1948) *The Reconstruction of Humanity*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Sorokin, P.A. (1954) *The Ways and power of Love. Types, Factors and Techniques of Moral Transformation*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Sorokin, P. A. (1962) *Society, Culture, and Personality: Their Structure and Dynamics. A System of General Sociology*. New York: Cooper Square.
- Steiner, P. (2016) *Donner...Une histoire de l'altruisme*. Paris: PUF.
- Weber, M. (1963) *Sociology of Religion*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Weinstein, J. (2000) "Creative Altruism: restoring Sorokin's Applied Sociology". *Journal of Applied Sociology*, vol. 17, issue 1, p. 86-117.
- Wuthnow, R. (1993) "Altruism and Sociological Theory". *Social Service Review*, vol. 67, issue 3, p. 344-357.

Citado. MANGONE, Emiliana (2020) "Towards a New Configuration of the Ego / Alter Relationship: The Rediscovery of Altruism" en Revista Latinoamericana de Estudios sobre Cuerpos, Emociones y Sociedad - RELACES, N°34. Año 12. Diciembre 2020-Marzo 2021. Córdoba. ISSN 18528759. pp. 75-84. Disponible en: <http://www.relaces.com.ar/index.php/relaces/article/view/411>

Plazos. Recibido: 27/08/2020. Aceptado: 10/10/2020