TRACING THE BORDERS OF HUMAN FREE WILL. SKETCHES AFTER MICHAEL NOVAK

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Abstract. This contribution aims to reconstruct the concept of *common good*, as elaborated by the American-Slovakian philosopher Michael Novak in his text *The Catholic Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Published in 1993 by The Free Press, this book deals both genealogically and theoretically with this notion, indicating it as the only one capable of guaranteeing integral development for human beings in the new millennium.

The *common good*, in fact, has the merit of tracing the limits within which human beings can be defined as persons and, in this context, indicate their freedom. This contribution, taking its starting point precisely from this definition, will be concerned, on the one hand, with presenting the fundamental stages which, according to Novak, have contributed to the formation of the *common good* as we know it and, on the other, with highlighting the innovations proposed by Novak himself.

The working methodology is historical-hermeneutic. After having framed the text from a historical point of view, enucleating the author's editorial motives, we will move on to analyse its key moments in order to highlight its most decisive contents.

Keywords: freedom, goodness, free will, Catholicism, capitalist ethics

INTRODUCTION

This paper is an attempt to understand how the thought of Michael Novak, as analysed in the living voice of some of his texts, traces the limits of human freedom in society between Catholic and capitalist ideals. So, he can fully and freely self-determine himself

and call himself a good subject within the society in which he lives. To understand Novak's work, reference will be made to the theoretical systems elaborated in *The Catholic Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1993). Influenced by the thought of Catholic social ethics, both academic and Vatican, this text has the merit of investigating the depths of the human spirit as it grapples with the construction of a new society, disengaged from the ideals proper to the history of thought up to the 20th century and open to the formation of social agglomerations that aim at both the fulfilment of the individual and the satisfaction of the needs of his group. This process is carried out in order to build a theory of socio-political and economic action that is guided by the principles of solidarity and subsidiarity towards society, and that pushes for the defence of the dignity of the individual, with a view to the realisation of the common good, both of society as a whole and of individuals as its constituents.

1. Freedom and Centrality. The Importance of the Catholic-Capitalist Ideal for the Common Good

> Indeed, besides the earth, man's principal resource is man himself. His intelligence enables him to discover the earth's productive potential and the many different ways in which human needs can be satisfied. It is his disciplined work in close collaboration with others that makes possible the creation of ever more extensive working communities, which can be relied upon to transform man's natural and human environments. Important virtues are involved in this process, such as diligence, industriousness, prudence in undertaking reasonable risks, reliability and fidelity in interpersonal relationships, as well as courage in carrying out decisions which are difficult and painful but necessary, both for the overall working of a business and in meeting possible setbacks. (John Paul II, 1991).

Borrowing the quote that begins the introduction to *The Catholic Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, we return to Michael Novak to the important role John Paul II played in the creation and renewal of

his theological-economic and political thought. The passage from *Centesimus Annus* quoted here is fundamental for tracing the hermeneutic track towards understanding a part of the American philosopher's thought, the one related to tracing the relationship between Catholic thought and capitalist ideology. In this sense, the encyclical quotation is already illuminating. First of all, the correlation between man and the world is posited as fundamental, since without one, the other cannot be and vice versa. In addition, it is stated that for man, the main reference for self-enhancement is his own person. This consideration is fundamental because, given the truth of the correlation, for man to turn to himself means to understand what his own potential is, to understand the potential of others as well, and to open himself to the world with this awareness. Therefore, through and after this work of turning, he will be able to satisfy both the needs of his fellow human beings and those of the world around him.

The immediate consequence of this is being able to operate in the world with 'disciplined work, in close collaboration'. This expression deserves a closer look. John Paul II indicates that work must be disciplined, but not in the sense of scrupulous and slavish observance of rules, but in the derivative sense from the Latin *discipulus*. Thus, the man who works with discipline becomes a disciple of the needs of the society in which he lives and understands what the real needs of his environment are. The result is that man, every man, will be able to produce what he really needs and in the ways that most respect his society, understood both as an associated group of men and as a fragment of the world in which these men exercise themselves in various activities. But the Pope does not limit himself to this ontological consideration and proceeds further, indicating how, from the point of view of the anthropology of society, this work is to be carried out, namely, through the exercise of 'close collaboration', so as to say, in solidarity. Having become a principle of Christian ethics since the appearance of the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* in 2004, solidarity is that principle that allows each person to act within society through an immediate

understanding of the needs of those around them. It might seem redundant to what has been stated before, but solidarity adds an extra element of suggestiveness. Deriving etymologically from *solidum*, which in Latin meant the obligation to pay someone jointly and severally, it indicates the need to share and to universally allocate available goods to all men in such a way that each can enjoy the same degree of well-being. In this way, it will be possible to satisfy the needs of the individual and ensure the prosperity of their society at the same time.

Thus, the expression used by John Paul II in his encyclical takes on universal value, determined by the need to guarantee the universal and transversal common good. This is why, again following the Pope, the human environment and the natural environment are to be righteously modified by man, according to his needs, but disengaged from a mere 'rhetorical' exercise of his free will and through the exercise of the virtues that contribute to the formation of a good person and a good society. [Novak himself warns that the use of '*individual*' is normally accepted in this type of discussion. However, to be truly adherent to Catholic thought, it is necessary to use '*person*'. To respect the author's instructions, the noun '*person*' will also be used in this contribution instead of '*individual*'. On the concept of person, *see* the enlightening and still topical introduction by Joseph Endres (Endres 1972).]

This opens, through the application of virtuous behaviour, to the conscious use of this way of acting in solidarity, which enables all individuals to discover themselves as protagonists of the present and future of the societies in which they live. This is particularly important when linked to the fundamental topic of social ethics, namely that of understanding how the individual and society can go hand in hand. Taking up the prodromes of the theorisation of social ethics as an academic discipline, we can problematise with Heinz-Dietrich Wendland that the great difficulty man faces in discovering himself part of the world is the resolution of the dilemma between individuality and sociality (*see* Wendland 1970, 21-34). If the former, in fact, refers to the making of man through his individual beliefs

and aspirations in respect of the principle of self-determination, the latter refers to the opposite tendency, i.e. respect for the social rules that limit action and, therefore, the making of the person.

The result is a practical contradiction that would make it way more difficult the realisation of the man-world relationship, as conceived by John Paul II. Man would be faced with a choice, either to be for himself or to be for others. In both cases, however, the principle of self-determination would be violated and, consequently, the concept of disciplined solidarity would be more of a constraint than a drive towards realisation. With Wendland himself, however, we are able to overcome the difficulty, because he shows us the true meaning of 'social ethics' (*see* Wendland 1970, 8). It is social and individual in equal measure, insofar as the two former attributes are two sides of the same coin, that of ethics. Society, in fact, is an extension of individuality, without which it could not exist and which accommodates man's free self-determination. Starting precisely from his individuality, the assumption remains valid: every man is a person precisely because no one can be truly isolated in society. [This is an aspect that, in the course of the history of thought, has been successfully addressed by Edith Stein, who forcefully proclaimed the entirely social aspect of man. *See* Stein, 2013, 37-38.] In this way, acting according to the principle of solidarity means truly listening to other human beings, understood as an integral part of society and realised in themselves in their potential. In other words, the dignity of man is transversally respected according to all the dictates of his individuality and sociality. From an economic-political point of view, this enables the realisation of the Catholic thought connected to the establishment of capitalist ideology, since neither the individual nor society is forced to withdraw from each other to ensure the existence of either.

And it is precisely from here that Novak, recognising the words of social ethics, brings out two attributes that are necessary and sufficient for human economic policy to preserve every human being:

1. Presence of the element of solidarity;
2. Presence of a connection between the individual and society at the socio-political level.

These two attributes open up for a non-contradictory dialogue between Catholicism and capitalism, addressing what John Paul II calls, in the quoted passage from *Centesimus Annus*, 'possible set-backs'. According to Novak (Novak 1993, XIII), this theoretical element finds its full practical realisation mainly in two geographical poles, historically since the second decade of the 1980s: Eastern Europe and Latin America. These poles show that since the collapse of socialism, the socio-political sphere in those regions of the world has sought a foothold in a new type of social action that respects both society and the individual. Hence, we see the emergence of Catholic-capitalist thought and language, which seems to be the one that best meets this need for respect. This, following Novak's argument, happens on three levels. [Novak warns that, in this context, it is necessary to speak of Catholicism and not Christianity, as the former offers a better perspective than the latter in terms of its theoretical, hermeneutical and historical inclusiveness. In this regard, *cf.* Novak, 1993, *Preface and Introduction*.]

The first level is that of *consensus*, which inaugurates the dialectic between Catholicism and capitalism since it intercepts the introductory stage of the constitution of a society. Consensus, in fact, allows both horizontally and transversally all the members of a given society to understand what their actual needs are and how they should be satisfied. Once the best proposals have been identified, the members of that society will generate agreement, and thus consensus, on needs and satisfactions. The result is that such a society will be built on sound theoretical and practical ideals, not only of political innovation, but of respect for a tradition of thought that aims to defend both society and the people in it. In fact, society will be able to stabilise and begin to act functionally. This opens up the second level, that of the consolidated economy. This level is a direct and almost natural consequence of the previous level, in that the functionality of action allows society to be able to progress with

respect to the ideals from which it starts and thus consolidate its role in the panorama of the world's societies. By consolidated economy, of course, we do not just mean the pecuniary aspect of society, but that entire system of values that gives rise to social roles and the application of the principles of solidarity and subsidiarity that make the very existence of its parts possible. Finally, the third level, that of personal initiative. Having established that the first and second levels create and stabilise a society based on the Catholic-capitalist ideal, and being aware that society and the person are sides of the same ethical-social coin, it will be possible to open a space for the person and his capacity to realise himself and all his potential within the social group of reference. This includes promotion in both public and private spheres, acting in solidarity, free professionalism and all activities that, in general, allow society to progress. The union of these three levels fully and concretely realises the functioning of society according to the Catholic-capitalist ideal.

Novak, however, warns that such a system is entirely feasible on a theoretical level of discussion, but has found little application in today's existent societies, because none of them has succeeded in balancing the Catholic side with the capitalist side, sometimes resulting in a society too little open to the risk of investing in itself, and sometimes in a society too greedy to excel over its own members and others, failing the principles of solidarity and subsidiarity. The reason for this imbalance, however, is not due to systemic dysfunctions or the prevarication of one social group over another, but to a more 'simple' misunderstanding of the role that persons should play in such societies. In fact, it is often the case that man as an individual is involved only at the moment of the beginning of the movement to apply the ideal, as if he were a 'demiurge' who, once given the initial touch, would let society develop according to its natural and uncontrollable becoming. In reality, in order for the Catholic-capitalist ideal to be realised, the very opposite must happen, *i.e.* man must be trusted and given credit for his creative abilities at all times. Following the suggestion of *Centesimus Annus*, Novak proposes that the application of the

principle of solidarity, exemplary of all other principles and values of social ethics, makes it possible for every man to be able to act according to virtue. That is, to realise himself according to his own personality both intellectually and volitionally. Each person will know what he wants and will want what he knows, realising a virtuous circle that realises and perfects society. Thus, almost by collating the theorisations of Wendland and John Paul II, Novak succeeds in precisely defining that man must be at the centre, that he is a person and not an individual because his free initiative realises not only his usefulness in the society in which he lives, but above all his usefulness, his living as stated before for himself and for society. This opens, as Felice argues, to the redefinition of the traditional notion of social justice (Felice 2022, 96). [*See* Felice's volume for an exhaustive and complete bio-bibliographical apparatus on Novak.]

The concept of capitalism proper to the Catholic-capitalist ideal, then, is no longer to be understood as a mere economic conception, but shifts from indicating a *modus* of getting rich to a true perspective of life, thus moving from a *tour court* capitalism to a human capitalism. And Novak, in this sense, also indicates what the characteristics of this capitalism must be that keep the person, his actions and his relations with society at the centre. Maintaining, while detaching himself from it in content, the Weberian theory of the man who embraces capitalism by vocation, Novak argues that the first two moments that endorse the birth of capitalism, keeping the person at its centre, are inventiveness and initiative. As we understand, the birth of this existential perspective is subsequent to the three moments that generate the Catholic-capitalist language. Once society and its people understand how to 'speak' using such language, the history of that society can begin. And the beginning occurs by recognising the inventiveness of each individual member of society who is able, through his or her spirit of initiative, to bring something innovative and original to the world he or she is experiencing. Consequently, this contribution will develop the progress of the same society that 'undergoes' it, in a virtuous spiral that allows for authentic and human development. Automatically,

due to the spirit of sociality innate in all human beings, the third moment proper to the development of the society taken as a model here is cooperation. A multifaceted concept often used in our contemporary socio-economic debates, for Novak, it represents the gateway to strengthening the internal cohesion of any group of individuals. Co-operation, in fact, does not only mean helping each other, but bringing the concept of social cohesion to maturity through the mutual recognition of innovation and inventiveness, which allows the image of 'making (human) capital together' to emerge.

This leads to the last moment, which Novak defines as that of *know-how*, which certifies, stabilises and systematises the competences of each individual person. This one will be proficient and successful in building a society that recognises and stands on the potential expressed by each individual human being. The Catholic-capitalist ideal, thus, progressively moves away from the socio-political hermeneutic standard, to embrace the ethical one: to be a capitalist in the Catholic sense means to recognise that society is truly free when each individual can freely self-determine in it, contributing to its development.

2. Creative Person, Capitalism and Catholicism. Novak in Dialogue between Tradition and Innovation

The implication of what was expressed in the previous paragraph is summed up in an eminently cogent way by Novak with the introduction of the expression 'creative person', which he defines as the epilogue of his research on the relationship between Catholicism and capitalism.

Indeed, the author argues, 'the most valid justification of the capitalist system is not only the fact that, poor though it is, it protects freedom better than any other known system [...]. The real moral force of capitalism lies in its ability to foster human creativity' (Novak 1993, 237). Novak's statement, however comprehensible it

may be on a superficial reading, contains within it a number of issues that will have to be addressed in order to render his idea unobjectionable. In the first instance, he calls the capitalist system a 'poor system'. Such juxtaposition, in absolute value, is heuristically untenable, since it is not possible to say that a capitalist system that transversally seeks the greatest profit is simultaneously poor. According to Novak's new perspective, however, this is an adequately demonstrable fact. If we admit, in fact, that the capitalist system must be a structure governed by Catholic ethics, then it will be relatively easy to assert that every human being, in such a system, will naturally aim to express himself. Moreover, it will show his power of invention and initiative and not to accumulate wealth. Therefore, the capitalism proposed by Novak ontologically guarantees this lack. A lack that is certainly not to be understood in a negative way, since it indicates that every person places himself at the centre and is aware of his centrality.

Another concept that needs to be clarified to understand Novak's theory is that of capitalism promoting human creativity. Again, it is difficult to equate the concept of capitalism with that of creativity, as one would immediately be tempted to equate the former with nouns such as wealth, profit, gain, etc. In fact, consulting any of the dictionaries available to us, one notes that capitalism is defined as 'an economic system in which a country's businesses and industry are controlled and run for profit by private owners rather than by the government' (Oxford Dictionary, entry 'Capitalism'). Thus defined, it does not allow any room for human creativity.

However, Novak has already suggested that a capitalism that allows itself to be inspired by Catholicism will soon abandon this conception, to make room for the person. The ontological change of such a form of capitalism was already evident in the first paragraph of this contribution, when we described the moments leading to the formation of Catholic capitalism. Here, we show how Novak introduces a new element of discussion, which is the connection between capitalism, ethics and creativity. Man's action

in this new type of society is guided by the binaries of capitalism and (Catholic) ethics, but is not bound by blind adherence to their normative statutes. Man naturally knows what his role is in this new type of society, since the dictates of Catholicism he finds himself complying with are inherent to him and are species-specific to the very society in which he finds himself living: this stems from the historical stratification that has led to the all-human awareness of roles in the world. As Bianchi suggests, 'man's creative gifts are nothing but resources developed over millions of years to satisfy existential needs. A fundamental event in human history must have been the intuition that what a single individual cannot do, an organised group can' (Bianchi 2018, 79). Thus, there is no contradiction between a society governed by Catholic ethics and simultaneously driven by a capitalist-type system. The only thing to keep in mind, Novak points out, is the character of the vocational trait of such a system, so that the human creative trait can enable a social 'I', 'you' and 'we', 'fostering the full development of that capacity' (Novak 1993, 227).

Thus, Novak invites us to reflect on what he calls the 'seven moral issues for developing a social ethic suited to our times' (Novak 1993, 221). These, we would add, are also diriment to understanding how a person frees himself from his shadow, becomes an integral part of society as a person, and turns into his centre by exercising his total freedom in view of the common good:

1. *Human sociality*. This is a question rooted in man's historical and intellectual past, for from the very beginning of the history of thought, asking how human beings can preserve their individuality while coexisting within them the unbounded desire to associate with others. An understanding of human sociality is necessary to understand why family, friends and, in general, civil society are agglomerations in which each person can best express himself. They are also the places where they can apply the principles and ethical values, of which subsidiarity is the clearest expression.

2. *Principle of subsidiarity*. A direct consequence of human sociality is the application of the principle of subsidiarity. Well before its standardisation by the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, Novak recognises the centrality of this principle, since it is the one that succeeds in maximising cooperation between different human beings, so that every part of society receives the same help and collaboration, in order to achieve the common good. This stands as a guarantee of the process of applying the principle of subsidiarity because, when correct, it leads to the whole well-being of the social environment.

3. *Human Dignity*. What has now become the cornerstone of social-ethical speculation on man represents for Novak the starting point for understanding human freedom and responsibility. Indeed, when discussing human freedom, it is usual to invoke the concept of free will to show that each person is born ontologically free to decide what is best for him or her, almost being able to do what he or she wants. In reality, freedom as understood here does respect free will, but in its original Catholic connotation, it is closely linked to dignity. [And it could not be otherwise, given the Catholic-capitalist proposal that Novak inaugurates and carries forward.] In this perspective, it consists of the free capacity that each person has to recognise his or her individual and social limitations and, from these, begin his or her proposal of self-determination that opens up a good life. Such a self-determined good life through dignity also carries within itself the principle of responsibility, which admonishes man about the consequences of his actions. Once again, Novak finds a way to show that man must be at the centre of all ethical speculations about his role in society.

4. *Necessary virtues*. Clearly, dignity and freedom enable man to self-determine, but what are the starting points of such self-determination? Who or what makes it possible for man to realise that such action leads him to ethical success? Novak's answer, borrowing precisely from Catholic ethics, is the concept of

virtue. For the American thinker, this concept takes on historical-intellectual value with the entry into the field of the *Summa Theologiae* of Thomas Aquinas, who Christianly defines the concept of 'person, quite distinct from the concept of the individual' (Novak 1989, 28). Man, identified as a person, receives from the moment of his creation the status of *imago Dei* and, because of this, is invested by *analogia entis* with the virtues that God himself possesses. Man is indeed endowed with free will, but he is inherently derived from the divine nature. This one, when man withdraws into himself, emerges in all its power and enables him to discern right from wrong, thus giving him the possibility of creating a society that has objective moral values, referring to the subject, but valid and valuable for the whole of society. The consequence is that virtue, or rather virtuous action, brings about the downfall of ethical relativism and thus generates a virtuous and value-stable society.

5. *Creative subjectivity*. To speak of objective values and virtues that derive from man's filiation to his Creator runs the risk of arguing about the actual practical flattening of people's lives in relation to a system that already provides that man innately knows how to choose what is right. Novak amends this risk by introducing the question of creative subjectivity. Every person is, indeed, formed in the manner just described, but he or she is not a passive object of the making of society, but is a subject (in the Latin sense of the term, *subiectum*) that underlies and forms the basis of any ethical development of the reference group. It is creativity, 'creativities', that makes it possible for a society to survive and to recognise itself in its members.

6. *Unity and diversity*. A direct consequence of the previous question is the recognition that each person is identical and different to all others. In the first moment, that of identity, one reaches the realisation that all people in society act as a *unicum*. Thus, the Catholic-capitalist ideal can be realised. In the second moment, precisely in order to avoid anthropological flattening, diversity

comes into play. I.e. the creative moment that allows each man to understand the ways in which he can be a protagonist in the society in which he lives, this time in his being a *unicum* with respect to others.

7. *Being, acting and receiving the Grace*. With these three terms, Novak finishes the discussion of moral questions about man and indicates a practical way for every person to realise freedom and the common good in society. First, one *must be*: by abandoning the Protestant ethic of capitalism by accumulation, every man will be aware that to show and realise oneself in a society means to build a stable and inalienable welfare for the social body itself. Next, one *must act*: conscious of his centrality, the self-conscious person will be able to act with the awareness of one who knows that his contribution is certainly positive for the society in which he lives. Thus, all of this is conducted in the light of an ethic that defends and reassures him. Finally, precisely because of the Catholic perspective of the proposal, it is necessary to put oneself in a position to receive Grace and hope to receive it: while recognising the centrality of man and his freedom to self-determination, Novak is convinced that human beings cannot easily complete the task that the author himself assigns to them. This task can be facilitated by divine Grace, which, by giving itself to man, illuminates his path.

Thus, through the resolution and collation of these issues, Novak has ready the reference system for the construction of a free society, which enables free men themselves to create freely and exercise their creativity in self-determination.

3. Traces for Future Research

In this part, we shall trace the main line of argumentation that leads Novak, within one of his major works, to reconsider the role of man in the world, inheriting here and there the tradition on man that

from Thomas Aquinas through the Renaissance arrives at our contemporary times. The journey inaugurated by Novak, thanks also to the concepts of Catholic-capitalist society, freedom and the common good, intends to reach a goal: to understand how a potential new society that might arise in our world might be able to enable its members to express themselves to the fullest extent of their potential.

What, almost certainly, Novak did not know while writing his texts is that his thought managed to cross the boundaries of his own theorising, especially in the direction taken by 21st-century Catholic social ethics, which, in some ways, is indebted to Novak himself with regard to speculation on the status of man in the world.

In an era ethically characterised by the negative connotation usually attributed to human action, which takes the form of the emergence of the so-called 'science of the Anthropocene', Novak's rediscovery may allow us to understand more about the human being. Without having to give up the new moral acquisitions, but rather by turning to the tradition, of which Novak himself is now a fully-fledged member. We are enabled to give to any human being the possibility to understand the world and understand himself, in order to improve his living conditions and those of the society in which he lives. Novak himself is aware that his proposal is more a theorisation of the perfect society to be realised in our contemporary times, rather than a socio-anthropological description of one that already exists. However, he himself is confident that mankind, by recovering itself, will indeed recover the conditions to be able to realise his system. Concluding in Novak's own words, 'new wealth can be created. Human beings themselves are the primary cause of the wealth of nations' (Novak 1993, 237).

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