

**PHD THESIS SUMMARY:
The Singular Plurality of Social Goods:
Social Ontology and Collective Dilemmas**

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Today, the ontological status of economic entities has become increasingly significant for different branches of philosophy (see Lawson 2003). Among such entities, public goods have attracted special attention in metaphysics due to their crucial role in shaping institutional actions. However, recent efforts to cope with global challenges (explicitly or implicitly) based on the theory of public goods appear incapable of fostering sufficient cooperation, as evidenced in the case of coping with climate change. Moreover, from a theoretical angle, it appears to be difficult to reduce such goods to the pursuit of individual goods. The sum of individual selfish acts is simply insufficient for explaining the emergence of the complex coordination necessary for supplying collective goods in large groups (Olson 1971), as evidenced in cases of common pool resources management (Ostrom 1990) and political participation (Uhlener 1989).

These shortcomings suggest the relevance of an inquiry into the different *standard* types of public and private goods as well as the classic categorization criteria of *excludability* and *rivalry*. Such an inquiry raises two key questions: (i) what kinds of goods are at stake in economic processes; and (ii) how can a more thorough theoretical image improve the understanding of institutional actions and collective responsibilities?

In this thesis, I address this matter by proposing the possibility of a coherent ontological taxonomy of irreducible and reducible social goods. By drawing on current research on collective intentionality within social ontology, I investigate the interplay between the categorization of a good, its robust provision, and its ontological dependence on socio-relational entities. By framing collective action gridlocks¹ through the lens of this suggested taxonomy, I re-examine prevailing approaches to social

¹ According to influential global policy authors, when a “specific set of conditions and mechanisms” (Hale, Held, and Young [2013] 2014, 3) impedes the demanded international cooperation, there is a gridlock.

dilemmas influenced by the traditional economic categorization of goods and instead argue for the consistency of a pluralistic account of social goods.

This dissertation consists of three main sections. In the first section, I investigate how the standard categorization of public and private goods in economic theories (Samuelson 1954, 1955) has influenced the ethical and political landscape of current collectivities. By drawing on disciplinary literature, I specifically examine how the standard categorization of goods has hampered global cooperation in at least three different areas: climate change policies (Hale, Held, and Young [2013] 2014), the fight against disinformation (European Commission 2018), and efforts to improve the quality of educational services (Anomaly 2018). I then explain how this shortcoming seems strongly related to two theoretical tendencies: the ontological bracketing of socio-relational entities (legitimacy and consensus, for instance) and a reductive understanding of the genesis and persistence of coordination involved in supplying and enjoying economic goods (Pecorino 2015).

Furthermore, I examine proposals based on the notions of *common-pool resources* (Ostrom 1990) and *relational goods* (Uhlener 1989), suggesting that they have been unable to cope with the drawbacks of the standard categorization of economic goods due to their conceptual dependence on *rational choice theory* (Herfeld 2018) and methodological individualism. The first section ends with an examination of how the current research on collective intentionality seems to provide a valuable alternative for inquiring into the ontological categorization of a good as either private or public.

The second section develops a refutation of the ontological reduction of all economic and social goods to the level of the individual, arguing instead that a form of cooperation grounded in *we-intentions* and *we-reasoning* attests to the plausibility of certain irreducible collective goods. This argument is accompanied by the presentation of a comprehensive taxonomy of goods. It begins by assessing Charles Taylor's views about irreducible social goods based upon some form of shared background, highlighting the need to clarify how individual attitudes combine into a "common understanding" (Taylor 1995, 139). By inquiring into the interdependence between *climate change mitigation* and *environmentalist culture*, I argue that a global public good, such as *mitigation* (Kaul 2016), depends on some form of shared background between individuals. It then presents the *crossroad problem* (Schweikard and Schmid 2021) of the

whole thesis as a coupling of the two following conflicting statements: an *irreducible social good* is not an aggregate, a sum, or a collection of individual goods (irreducibility thesis); nonetheless, individuals recognize *irreducible social goods* through individual evaluative acts or judgment (individualistic ontology thesis).

With this problem in mind, I dissect the *excludability* and *rivalry* criteria and attempt to show how they are ontologically dependent on individuals' intentional attitudes, judgments, and actions. Following this line of thought, I draw on Searle's theses (2010) to suggest that the existence of a *social good* necessarily depends on cooperation as a full-blown form of collective intentionality. By drawing from empirical literature (Garnett, Ealy, and Lewis 2015), I provide a sketch of different forms of cooperation, in order to show that achieving a common aim can involve various forms of belief sharing and coordination between collaborative actors. Following Tuomela (2013), three forms of cooperation are outlined: *I-mode cooperation*, *pro-group I-mode cooperation*, and *cooperation in we-mode*. The section then analyzes the issue of the ontological robustness of cooperative processes, with a particular focus on the observation that human collaboration is often dynamic and multi-layered (and can evolve or fade) (Pettit 2015). By relating different types of cooperation and categories of goods, I outline a three-fold *hypothesis of a taxonomy of social goods*: *private social goods* that depend on I-mode cooperation; *public social goods* that rely on pro-group I-mode cooperation; and *collective goods* based on we-mode cooperation. This is followed by an examination of the interdependence between the different types of goods along the axis of ontological robustness.

Moreover, I argue for the existence of *cooperative relational goods* by investigating how peculiar relational entities (such as trust) seem to be a necessary precondition for the durability of cooperative forms. On the other hand, the evolution of specific forms of cooperation can be linked to the variation of payoff sharing and expectations regarding modes of coordination. Therefore, by recalling the construct of *collective sensemaking* (Weick, Sutcliffe, and Obstfeld 2005), I propose that specific forms of reasoning can facilitate the evolution from I-mode to pro-group I-mode and, eventually, to we-mode cooperation. Consequently, shared reasoning practices can become the object of intentional enhancement and thus be categorized as a *developmental cooperative good*.

Finally, in the third section, by applying all these hypotheses to the cases of action gridlock presented in the first section, I provide a test of

the consistency of my proposed taxonomy. This part first results in a conceptual revision of the notion of *rivalry* as an emergent by-product of subjects' intentional attitudes towards the same target. It also investigates the emergence and persistence of cooperation in uncertain environments, stressing how reasoning transformation and fairness are crucial in, for instance, *common-pool resources* management. Moreover, the interplay between *developmental cooperative goods* and *relational* ones is highlighted by inquiring about the ontology of goods pursued in feasts and friendship. The last chapters offer a sketch of possible ways to reframe certain collective dilemmas by stressing, on the one hand, the pivotal role of relation goods such as fairness and trust, and on the other, the necessity of overcoming the individual empowerment paradigm regarding *disinformation*. Finally, it shows how promoting we-reasoning skills through the humanities (Nussbaum 2010) is not necessarily at odds with an education focused on economic and technical skills.

Let me conclude by suggesting some contributions of this thesis to different areas of the ontology of economics, collective action theory, and collective responsibility. By showing a viable path regarding the ontological irreducibility of certain collective goods and their dependence on cooperation in *we-mode*, I argue that the ontological robustness of private goods is based on the existence of specific public and relational goods. This interdependence paves the way for an interdisciplinary and organic understanding of collective actions and duties, which would be capable of coherently framing all the different economic and non-economic goods at stake. It is reasonable to highlight the constitutional linkage between private and public moral spaces (suggesting the de-individualization of collective dilemmas) and how education seems to be a precondition for coherent and intertwined we-reasoning practices.

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