

European Cross-Border Cooperation: what kind of CBC communitariansim? An Aristotelian reading

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1. Introduction

The European Union has a clear finalité: to promote integration conceived as the process of creating a more unified, cohesive, and collaborative community among EU member states. As such, it is generally acknowledged that the European integration process is an emblematic example of «community-building» (Kleiner and Bücker, 2024)¹. This is a political community, since EU citizens possess several rights as the one to move and reside freely within the EU; non discrimination and the right to vote and stand as candidate in European Parliament and municipal elections. However, it is also a socio-economic community since it involves ethical/social concerns that underpin a specific governance (Wiener, 2004)². This governance is characterised by liberal norms and values (Schimmelfennig, 2002)³. On practice, outcomes of this “communitarian” normative approach are the single market, the Schengen Area, and the common currency (the euro) that have, evidently, an economic, political and social governance repercussion on EU

¹ T.M. Kleiner, N. Bücker, *Is a sense of community based on similarity? The perception of shared values and citizens EU identity*, in: “Journal of Contemporary European Studies”, 2024, DOI 10.1080/14782804.2024.2317947.

² A. Wiener, *Contested compliance: Interventions on the normative structure of world politics*, in: “European journal of international relations”, 10.2 (2004): 189-234, DOI: 10.1177/1354066104042934.

³ F. Schimmelfennig, *Liberal community and enlargement: an event history analysis*, in: “Journal of European public policy” 9.4 (2002): 598-626, DOI:10.1080/13501760210152457.

citizens. The EU integration process final goal is to create a socio-economic and political “community” that is joint by a “we-feeling”⁴.

In International Relations, integration is theorised in different ways. Realists argue that the EU integration is linked to the role of power, security concerns, and the chase for national advantages by countries (Grieco, 1996). Integration is pursued to «ensure that any cooperative arrangement states construct will include effective voice opportunities» (Grieco, 1996, 288-9). Hence, “*cooperation*” among states is singled out as an objective for a mutual benefit. Cooperation implies that actors, as agents, compromise, develop a certain degree of mutual understanding and share values and/or interests. As such, cooperation guide and shape actors’ behavior. That is why cooperation can be understood and conceived as a “normative value” as well. It is a matter of fact that cooperation foresees that states work together for the common good (i.e. guarantee peace).

Surely, realists highlight the important role of intergovernmental (interest led) bargains in this process. Hence a utilitarianistic communitarianism is pursued through cooperation. National actors take their domestic preferences in Brussels that are derived both from security concerns, and transactions costs (Moravcsik, 1995)⁵. States come to interconnect with one another because of mutual benefit, to guarantee peace and stability. Nevertheless, it is generally recognized that EU member states are linked to one another by «friendship» ties that should be regulated by “justice”⁶.

Liberalists focus on integration through the lens of promoting and implementing cooperation. Interreg fund⁷ play a crucial role in facilitating these processes of cooperation, network, and trust building. Put it differently, institutions, understood as informal norms as well as formal rules/laws and programmes as Interreg, “build” and determine actors’ behavior and the way they view reality. At least *prima facie*, this is in line with Aristotle’s views when he writes: «But a city state consists of a multitude and should be unified and made into a community by means of education», hence by «habits, philosophy, and laws» (Politics, 1263, 35-40). It is hence suggested that good habits (i.e. and thereby good norms and laws) promote the virtues of character.

⁴ I. Manners, “Critical Social Theory Approaches to European integration”, in: *The Routledge handbook of Critical European Studies*, eds. by D. Bigo, T. Diez, E. Fanoulis, B. Rosamond, Y. Stivachtis, London, Routledge, 2020, pp. 139-152.

⁵ A. Moravcsik, *Liberal Intergovernmentalism and Integration: a rejoinder*, in: “*Journal of Common Market Studies*”, 33, 4, 1995, pp. 611-28.

⁶ We will further analyse that “friendship”, “community” and “justice” are “goods” that leads to political stability according to Aristotle Politics.

⁷ Interreg are community initiatives that aims to promote EU cross-border cooperation, as well as construct and shape a European Union that is more homogeneous politically, economically, institutionally, and socially. This is achieved by acting directly at the sub-state level.

Following this line of thinking, constructivists agree by saying that «institutions» influence social life and shape preferences and identities (Christiansen et al., 1999)⁸. Theoretically, it follows that the EU values which underpin integration, (i.e. cooperation, political participation, trust, friendship, solidarity) play a transformative role on EU member states and its citizens through governance practice.

This brief theoretical overview on the understanding of the EU integration process has shown that each of the main international integration theories, despite being very different in conceptualizing EU integration, acknowledge – at least implicitly – that integration is not merely a pragmatic or strategic endeavour but also a way to pursue an EU “common good”. The hoped outcome is the making of an “EU community”. An empirical field where the EU integration can be analysed in a very holistic way is cross-border cooperation (CBC) in cross-border regions (CBRs). CBC is going to be the focus of our analysis in the next section.

2. The “EU community” through the lens of CBC

CBC, understood as cooperation between local governmental and non-governmental bodies located near the boundaries of a country, working together on initiatives that extend across these borders (Nadalutti and Jürgen, 2024) aims to strengthen relationships and develop collaborative projects between nation-states within the EU. This is achieved through two different strategies. One strategy emphasizes economic development, market integration, and competition, aligning them with Lockean liberalist economic principles. The other strategy enhances human relationships by fostering collaborative projects among nation-states within the EU. It focuses on fostering a shared cultural and social identity, recognizing and celebrating a common past.

While the former prioritizes free market and individual economic freedom, focusing on material prosperity as a marker of success and inter-state relationship, the latter transcends the EU liberal “materialism” in order to focus more on the relation between human actions and social structure in order to constitute a “cross-border community”.

In this essay, I will support the claim that CBC cannot only focus on economic benefits that respond to a Lockean liberalist perspective of CBC in order to be effective and promote integration. Conversely, it needs to embrace a ethical

⁸ T. Christiansen, K.E. Jorgensen, A. Wiener, *The Social Construction of Europe*, in: “Journal of European Public Policy”, vol. 6, no. 4, 1999, pp. 528–44.

dimension of cross-border relations since individuals, as socio-political beings, are part of a cross-border community (Nadalutti, 2020)⁹.

3. Cross-border cooperation in cross-border regions: the state-of-the-art

Cross-border regions are geographical-territorial units that comprise bordering sub-regional entities (Perkmann and Sum, 2002)¹⁰. They have been singled out both by the Commission and other supra-regional bodies as the Committee of the Region or the Association of European Border Regions as “laboratories”, as unique microcosmos for the empirical study of formal and informal processes that can influence and foster regional integration and cohesion¹¹.

The Committee of the Regions¹² has recognized that «cross-border cooperation has proved to be the most effective tool for overcoming the barrier effect and the dividing role of borders and for strengthening the territorial cohesion of border regions»¹³ since they are structures for collaboration, shared governance, and common/joint socio-economic responses to shared problems. Put it differently, cross-border regions serve as living laboratories where the ideals of EU integration — interconnectedness, economic and social cohesion, participation and socio-economic unity — are actively pursued. They are the frontiers where EU aspirations confront the realities of historical divides, cultural differences, and varied economic development levels.

The EU’s regional policy, by aiming at fostering cooperation and diminishing (physical and mental) barriers, embodies the EU’s foundational goal of creating an “ever closer union”. One mode for fostering integration is the principle of subsidiarity and citizens participation, that is linked to «justice». Justice is not a

⁹ E. Nadalutti, *Can cross-border cooperation boost cross-border ethical governance*, in: “Journal Common Market Studies”, 58, 6, 2020, pp. 1377-1392.

¹⁰ M. Perkmann, “Trans-border regions in Europe significance and drivers of regional trans-border cooperation”, in: *European Urban and Regional Studies*, vol.10, no.2, 2002, pp.153–171.

¹¹ *Cross-Border Enforcement and Cooperation*, in: “Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council”, 2016, available at http://ec.europa.eu/consumers/consumer_rights/unfair-trade/docs/cpc-revision-proposal_en.pdf.

¹² The Committee of the Regions (CoR) is the EU Assembly of Regional and Local Representatives who have taken the lead in CBC activities and the dissemination of CBC best practices linking them closely with multi-level governance across the EU as well as across the world.

¹³ Committee of the Region, in: “Opinion of the European Committee of the Regions — Cross-border public services in Europe” (2021/C 106/04).

mean through which integration is achieved, but an end, since a «just society» in the one that politically, socially and economically benefits EU citizens' lives¹⁴.

While the existing literature on CBC has predominantly delved into the economic and political ramifications of CBC activities and projects (Basboga, 2020)¹⁵, it has, to a lesser extent, broached the normative-ethical dimensions that are intrinsic to the practice of integration. There exists a lacunae in comprehensively theorizing the ethical underpinnings of CBC. Surely, there is a handful of recent studies that have tentatively etched the outlines of ethical considerations within the realm of CBC, acknowledging the complex interplay of “values” and the imperative of transcending narrowly defined national interests in favour of a wider regional good (Nadalutti 2016, 2020)¹⁶. Despite this, the field is underdeveloped because the ethical framework of CBC lacks a comprehensive theoretical basis, highlighting the need for a stronger philosophical foundation.

As highlighted in the first section, Aristotle's ethical-socio-political philosophy, particularly from his *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics* could help to better problematize, theorise and assess CBC activities through an ethical-political perspective¹⁷. Aristotle's emphasis on *eudaimonia* as the end goal of human endeavours, the significance of justice in interpersonal and political relations, and the cultivation of *philia* or social bonds, resonates with the foundational aims of CBC to foster harmonious, integrated, and flourishing cross-border communities.

Aristotle's ethical approach shows that human beings are socio-political beings, whose actions and choices are fundamentally shaped by their embedment in shared practices and thereby in “society”. It follows that while the aim of ethics is to lead individuals to their happiness (NE 1094'22-24), social political philosophy aims at achieving that same good not just for one individual but for an entire community, i.e for each and all citizens (1323'14-23, NE 1094b7-11). Because of men's socio-political nature, this end can be achieved only within a joint community.

It appears evident that this understanding of the individual and its society is very relevant for CBC. This is due to the fact that CBC activities are not, and must not be mechanistic arrangements for economic and political cooperation.

¹⁴ Committee of the Regions, in: “Mission Statement”, available <https://cor.europa.eu/en/about/Pages/default.aspx>, (accessed 12 October 2022); Medienservice Sachsen, 20 June 2022.

¹⁵ K. Basboga, *The role of open borders and cross-border cooperation in regional growth across Europe*, in: “Regional Studies, Regional Science”, 7, 1, 2020, pp. 532-549

¹⁶ E. Nadalutti, *Is cross-border cooperation underpinned by an ethical code of values? A theoretical analysis*, in: “Regional and Federal Studies”, 27, 1, 2016, pp. 41-62.

¹⁷ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, in: “Introduction to Aristotle”, ed. by R. McKeon, New York, Random House, 1947,

CBC occurs in cross-border zones that are ethical spaces where cross-border communities seek to achieve the highest common good.

In sum, including Aristotle's ethical-politico-philosophical thinking allows for the integration between the personal dimension of ethics and the broader societal underpinning of individual action that are the concern of CBC and EU integration generally. The theoretical exploration here outlined will be anchored in an empirical analysis that examines how far key CBC ethical-norms as human agency, common good, friendship, responsibility, subsidiarity, trust, rights/obligations, and concord find their equivalents in CBC schemes.

Evidence will be provided by several empirical examples of EU CBC that rests on 48 expert interviews, which lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, conducted digitally and face-to-face between 2018-2023. EU officials, representatives of funding organizations, executives of CBC lobbying organizations, managers of CBC schemes, politicians at the national/local level, business people and scholars have been interviewed. Newspaper databases including LexisNexis, official documents, statistics and published literature served as additional sources of information.

Focus is on the European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation that represents a tangible instance where the principles and challenges of CBC are actively manifested. As an entity that operates across national borders, it embodies the practical implications of the philosophical and ethical considerations discussed. The EGTC could be a good tool to foster cohesion and cooperation among member states, thus providing a rich context for examining how ethical values translate into governance practices.

4. Delving in the analysis: what values for CBC?

EU CBC's aims to increase economic growth through cooperation¹⁸ as well as to overcome cultural and social division that can be rooted in past conflicts. Interdisciplinary methodologies are employed extensively, drawing upon diverse theoretical frameworks such as cross-border regionalism (Scott, 1999), multi-level governance and new regionalism (Nadalutti, 2015), constructivism, developmental regionalism (Dent and Richter, 2011), and social-network approaches (Svensson, 2015)¹⁹ in order to better understand how «CBC can be more socially

¹⁸ K. Basboga, *The role of open borders and cross-border cooperation in regional growth across Europe*, in: "Regional Studies, Regional Science", 2020, 7, 1, 532-549, DOI: 10.1080/21681376.2020.1842800.

¹⁹ J.W. Scott, J.W., *European and North American contexts for trans-border regionalism*, in: "Regional Studies", 33, 7, 1999, pp. 605-617; E. Nadalutti, *The rise of trans-border regions in Southeast Asia: behind the dynamics of informal and formal integration processes in the Indonesia-Malaysia- Singapore growth triangle* in: "The

embedded as an everyday process of transcending borders» – and can therefore become «more inclusive as it also encompasses more mundane forms of interaction across borders» (Scott, 2020: 63)²⁰.

Emblematically, Scott suggests that CBC is deeply integrated into daily life and can include the everyday, seemingly minor interactions that occur across borders. Consequently, CBC can foster a network of social relationships that surpass national borders by encouraging interactions and cultivating a community that goes beyond specific border areas. This does not imply that the border community relinquishes its national identity. Rather, it suggests that a distinct cross-border community can emerge through CBC interactions at the cross-border level.

To achieve this kind of cohesion, there is both a top-down strategy where the EU provides funds for regions to cooperate (INTERREG programs), and a bottom-up mobilization and participation by local-municipal and regional actors to create a “we-feeling” through cultural and socio-economic activities. However, while the EU promotes an integration which politico-economic outcomes are surely linked, it does not explicitly include in its CBC language (and action) socio-ethical values.

Hence, while CBC “justice” is not formally defined, it is however understood as the operationalization of solidarity and friendship²¹. Moreover, it is acknowledged that cooperation can foster trust and enable continuous dialogue and collaboration among stakeholders, including national and local governments (Cheema et al., 2011)²². Nevertheless, despite the strategic alliances formed between stakeholders (like governments, organizations, and businesses at the local/regional level) and contiguous territories (neighbouring regions or countries) have been established to promote regional integration there remains a significant gap in the vertical and horizontal integration of these actors within joint border management processes (Nadalutti and Rüländ, 2024)²³. These hindrances are not

Pacific Review”, 28, 4, 2015, pp. 607–630; C.M. Dent, P. Richter, *Sub-regional cooperation and developmental regionalism: the case of BIMP-EAGA*, in: “Contemporary Southeast Asia: A Journal of International and Strategic Affairs”, 33, 1, 2011, pp. 29–55; S. Svensson, *The bordered world of cross-border cooperation: the determinants of local government contact networks within Euroregions*, in: “Regional and Federal Studies”, 25, 3, 2015, pp. 277–295.

²⁰ J. Scott, “The European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation as a process of Europeanisation”, in *15 years of the EGTCs. Lessons learnt and future perspectives* ed by Gy. Ocskay, Central European Service for Cross-border Initiatives (CESCI), Budapest pp. 63–80.

²¹ For a comprehensive overview, refer to: *Spatial justice and cohesion*, ed by M. Fritsch, P. Kahila, S. Nemeth, J. Scott, Oxon, Routledge, 2020.

²² “Cross-Border Governance in Asia”, in: *Regional Issues and Mechanisms*, ed by G.S. Cheema, C.C. McNally, Popovski, V, New York, United Nation University Press, 2011; Interview: Italy, Municipal stakeholder, 2023.

²³ E.Nadalutti, J. Rüländ, *Cross-border regionalism in the EU and ASEAN: another dimension of the “varieties of regionalism”*, in “Journal of European Integration”, 2024, pp. 1–22.

just material, they also pertain to ethical values such as “concord” and “good will”, which have not been thoroughly or systematically examined at the supra-national or regional-local level.

That is why delving into Aristotelian virtue ethics and their manifestation in a political community can enable the creation of a comprehensive model for cross-border cooperation that thoughtfully incorporates economic, political, social, and ethical aspects.

5. Diverging Paths: Aristotelian Virtue and EU Economic Integration in Cross-Border Cooperation

The analysis of empirical examples through an Aristotelian lens can clarify the importance of our ethical-political claim for CBC. It has been pointed out that the Interreg V-A Hungary-Slovakia Cooperation Programme aimed to improve the cross-border region’s overall quality of life, economic development, and cohesion with the EU’s broader goals. However, in practice, some projects faced challenges due to differing national and regional regulations and priorities, which resulted in delays and inefficiencies. Hence, while Hungary prioritized water management systems due to a national policy, the corresponding region in Slovakia aimed to focus on improving road infrastructure, hence the joint objective of improving cross-border connectivity suffered because of lack of concordance²⁴, of a common “community plan”.

Moreover, the First Phase Evaluation of the INTERREG V-A Slovakia-Hungary Cooperation Programme shows that there was a low interest in specific calls as around cross-border public transport and logistics (Priority Axis 2). The programme had identified needs that apparently did not align with the interests or priorities of potential applicants, which resulted in a low absorption rate for the financial resources allocated to this area.

As a consequence of this misalignment and the lack of interest, funds that were not absorbed had to be transferred to Priority Axis 1, where there was a much higher demand – ten times larger than the financial capacities available. This transfer of funds required approval from the European Commission, which took several months, further contributing to the delays in the programme’s implementation.

If we analyze this issue through Aristotle’s politico-ethical lens, it becomes apparent that human needs are tied to both material and immaterial necessi-

²⁴ *First phase evaluation of the CBC programmes managed by Hungary*, by CESCO, Slovakia-Hungary Interreg V-A Programme, 2018, pp. 1-199.

ties obtained from external sources (Aristotle, *Politics*, 1257a30). It is possible to respond to needs by providing commodities. However, there are two different types of commodities. Ones that are productive because they aim at the common good of the community. The others, linked to business, that are based on accumulation of wealth in the hands of a few, that become the very purpose of these activities (*Politics*, 1257b17).

It is suggested here that INTERREG activities respond, at times, to the second category. This means that INTERREG and its operationalisation through projects can be disconnected from peoples' life and expectations. This detachment may account for why these actions do not always raise either the interest, nor the willingness to act from all the actors involved.

Going back to our example, INTERREG V-A Slovakia-Hungary Cooperation Programme, it therefore emerges that there was a lack of good evaluation and practical wisdom in assessing the actual needs and interests of the Slovak-Hungarian "community". Additionally, the discrepancies in funding and support between Hungarian and Slovakian partners illustrate a deviation from the principle of "justice", as it creates an imbalance that is "unjust" to the stakeholders involved.

It appears that, in order to understand CBC obstacles and weaknesses, it is not sufficient to provide empirical data, but also an ethical-normative reading of these issues. Hence, it is argued that despite the implicit CBC ethical underpinnings (Eberlein and Kerwer, 2004; Sorensen and Torfing, 2005)²⁵, the European Commission's failure to analytically articulate the normative ethical dimension leaves a gap in understanding the full dimension of CBC. As put by one of the interviewees contacted for this research:

Indeed, the EU does not have a narrative that addresses this ethical dimension [...] Certainly, the value of trust is the layer from where we start from with cross-border cooperation [...] but we [the European Commission] have not defined trust. Nevertheless, I can say that we have illustrated what trust is through several projects that were trying to heal the scars of the past²⁶.

The reliance on consensus and trust among a broad range of actors to ensure compliance and foster a sense of responsibility is acknowledged as central to CBC. However, this approach tends to prioritize the economic agency of individuals as 'human capital'. This is a reductionist approach that emphasizes the economic utility of persons. It does not acknowledge the very nature of men, that are «social

²⁵ B. Eberlein, D. Kerwer, *New Governance in the European Union: A Theoretical Perspective*, in "JCMS", 42, 1, 2004, pp. 121–42; E. Sorensen, J. Torfing, *The Democratic Anchorage of Governance Networks*, in: "Scandinavian Political Studies", 28, 3, 2005, pp. 195–218.

²⁶ Interview: Brussels, EU DG Commissioner, 2018.

and political animals» (NE, 7). The European Commission's discourse appears to prioritize the economic contributions that individuals can make through CBC, essentially viewing people primarily as agents who consume and contribute to the *economic outcomes* of these initiatives. Conversely, it does not address the issue of how the changes and the development of common practices fostered by CBC policies, affect the potential for human flourishing of all individuals involved.

This characterization potentially sidelines the intrinsic value of individuals belonging to a community by focusing narrowly on their capacity to generate economic value. It risks overlooking the broader, holistic considerations of human flourishing, social equity, and cultural richness that are also integral to cross-border collaborations. Such an orientation towards economic agency might undervalue the significance of fostering sustainable communities that thrive not only economically, but also socially and culturally, within the CBC framework. Moreover, this is not in line with present CBC mobilization. As an interviewee pointed out: «Potentially twin cities can acquire some political relevance because they can really show what Europe is. To show how to solve common problems together, though we belong to different systems. To find a solution that is for the common good of both sides» (interview, Frankfurt-Slubice, CBC stakeholder, 2023).

Twin cities, also known as sister cities, are a form of legal or social agreement between cross-border towns, cities in geographically and politically distinct border areas to promote cultural and commercial ties (Plangger, 2019)²⁷. Here it is clearly stated that CBC partnerships can transcend the traditional, utilitarian concept of “human capital” and embrace a richer, more complex normative approach. This is done first, through cultural exchange that can lead to a deeper understanding between different peoples. According to Kleiner and Bückler (2024), this form of cultural diplomacy is instrumental in nurturing a cross-border identity grounded not just in economic interaction, but also in shared practices and a common heritage.

Second, politically, since by working together, twin cities can demonstrate the European ideal of “unity in diversity”. Twin cities can become platforms for experimenting policies and initiatives that may be adopted on a wider scale, showcasing the ability of different communities to work in harmony (emblematic is the case of bilingual schools). It is important to highlight that border actors share challenges, such as environmental concerns, public health issues, or economic development. By sharing best practices and solutions, they can jointly develop strategies for the common good that transcend national borders and benefit all parties

²⁷ M. Plangger, *Exploring the role of territorial actors in cross-border regions*, in: “Territory, Politics, Governance”, 7, 2, 2019, 156-176.

involved and improve peoples' lives. In a nutshell, this interviewee suggests that twin cities have the potential to be much more than just economic partnerships. They can play a significant role in demonstrating the values of cooperation, mutual understanding, and pursuit of the common good, thereby providing a compelling narrative of what Europe stands for beyond the concept of human capital.

This short overview has shown that the existing discourse on cross-border cooperation (CBC) predominantly interprets its underlying ethical principles through a liberalist perspective. Liberalism often views these principles from an economic vantage point. This approach leads to the conception of "human development" primarily in terms of "human capital", reflecting a prioritization of economic over holistic human flourishing.

Instead we suggest that CBC governance is imbued with an ethical dimension as well. Yet, *identifying* this dimension is not synonymous with *defining* a static set of values. Therefore, the next section will aim to provide a theoretical and philosophical framework that addresses the ethical aspects involved in CBC governance.

6. An Ethical Approach to Cross-border Cooperation

The previous section has shown that conceptualising CBC mainly through a Lockean-liberal perspective, has several analytical and empirical draw backs. The Nobel economic prize, A. Sen (1999, 2009)²⁸ clearly pointed out that having this approach leads to shortcomings since economics and politics *are* underpinned by ethical imperatives. Sen's capabilities approach introduces a critical framework for assessing economic arrangements by their impact on individuals' freedom to achieve well-being.

Applied to CBC, this approach re-orientes CBC towards fostering not just market efficiencies or regulatory harmonizations, but also equitable human flourishing. Sen's discourse on consensus and the rights-obligations dyad delineates the empirical operationalization of these values, highlighting the freedom and trust required for consent and the categorization of obedience to rules into consented and non-consented (Nadalutti, 2020).

The collective focus on empathy, and participatory agency illuminates key aspects of how individuals and communities might engage in CBC (Nadalutti, 2016; 2020). For instance, a common CBC challenge for CBC actors asks for

²⁸ A. Sen, *Development as Freedom*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999; Id., *The Idea of Justice*. Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 2009.

concord of action, and consensus for common objects. As a interviewee on the border Italy-Slovenia pointed out to me:

«One of the main difficulties in CBC is to reach a consensus for joint cross-border purposes. This is since border activities are not yet felt to be common activities led for and by a border community for the common good. Instead, it seems that often regional and national interests prevail over transnational ones. This is clear when Interreg IV is considered».

Another interviewee reinforced this view:

«There are projects in which you do your own small calculation to see how much resources go to you and me. These strategies are carried out by regional actors in a secretive way since they know that the central administration does not accept this kind of logic» (Interview, Italy, regional stakeholder, 2018).

These interviews show that there is a lack of genuine connection and understanding between different communities. There is a failure to recognize and respect the shared human nature and common needs of the border community. Hence, there is a socio-economic politico conflict between the equality/inequality principle. There is a lack of “feeling responsible” towards the collective good and self-serving calculations raise. To better explain this dynamic Aristotle (Politics, Book VII, Ch. 2, 1302a22) ethical approach is highlighting. He argues that political instability raises when agents (political-social and economic actors) “who think are getting less despite being equals of those who are getting more, start factions from the desire of equality, while others, if they suppose they are not getting more, but equal or less, despite being unequal, start factions from the desire of inequality and superiority”. This is exactly the major problem that CBC faces.

Additionally, the lack of understanding between regional and national stakeholders hinders the development of a sense of shared purpose. Hence actions that prioritize individual gains over common benefits replace the feeling to be part of a larger, interconnected group working towards a common goal. Sen’s capability approach clearly points out to the lack of distribution of resources because of regional actors’ utilitarian calculations that reflect a failure to expand the capabilities of all individuals involved.

This brief analysis shows that there is the need for a more comprehensive ethical approach that must underpin the EU liberal model. Aristotle’s virtue ethics offers a rich and robust philosophical foundation to overcome CBC ethical weaknesses. While Sen’s economic-human-ethical approach provides the scaffolding for understanding the individual’s relationship with the economic community and governance, Aristotle introduces a comprehensive ethical perspective that encapsulates the entirety of the political community’s pursuit of the good life.

His emphasis on virtues and the flourishing of individuals within the *polis*,

offers a timeless paradigm for assessing the qualitative aspects of cross-border cooperation. It invites a reflective inquiry into how these principles of the good life, inherent in human nature, should inform and practically shape contemporary CBC strategies. We hence aim to articulate a vision for CBC that harmonizes economic objectives with the cultivation of communal well-being and the virtuous character of individuals and institutions. In this way, we seek to forge a path that integrates the rich ethical discourse of the past with the complex, interconnected realities of our present cross-border endeavours.

7. Reading cross-border cooperation through the Aristotelian lens²⁹

Aristotelian ethics centers on action, positing that individuals who cultivate virtues through consistent practice and habitual good actions are agents striving for eudaimonia³⁰. *Eudaimonia* “is not a state”, it is an activity which is achieved through the practice of virtue. It is not a momentary state but a long-term one; not a feeling, but rather the fulfilment of one’s capacities and the actualization of one’s potential. Operationalized to CBC, it is immediately clear the added value of this ethical approach. Economic stability, social cohesion, cultural richness, and environmental sustainability, i.e., the practical ethical ends of CBC as visioned by the EU Commission, can only be truly achieved through the flourishing of individuals and communities in and with cross-border territories. Surely, this cannot be only a top-down process. There is the need of a bottom-up dynamic mobilization and response. Following Aristotle’s ethical reasoning, this is possible through “virtues”.

Virtues are distinguished between intellectual and moral ones. Intellectual virtues belong to men from their birth. Moral virtues are acquired through practice and result of habit. Aristotle says that “legislators make the citizens good by forming habits in them, and this is the wish of every legislator [...] and it is in this that a good constitution differs from a bad one”³¹. That is why activities are very important: they shape characters.

The EU Commission’s regulations show an awareness of the basic structures of the interplay between individual and social agency that are so central in Aristotle’s analysis. Indeed, the Commission attempts to provide “CBC tools and discourses” for the development of a CBC “culture”. CBC objectives must be un-

²⁹ This part largely draw from Aristotle, *The Nicomachean ethics*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009.

³⁰ Though the “Aristotelian virtue ethic” system in its integrity is relevant in order to develop a comprehensive ethical framework for cross-border cooperation and EU integration, I will focus here only on the main virtue ethic principle because of space constrain.

³¹ *Ivi*, 1103 a, 23.

derstood, grasped, shared at the national/local level to be effective and operative. Hence, the Commission tries to develop this knowledge by supporting the establishment of shared practices. However, the persistence of the liberal conceptual framework highlighted in the first section, prevents a full development of this line of thinking. Aristotle's perspective underscores that effective cross-border cooperation (CBC) goes beyond the establishment of formal frameworks and programs. It necessitates active efforts to provide opportunities for individuals and communities to engage and participate in CBC endeavors, which is essential for their successful execution.

In the following section I give some examples showing, first, that CBC policies display awareness of the need to support share practices, and, second, that full consciousness of the Aristotelian line of argument could very much benefit the implementation of those policies.

8. Aristotle's Ethics in Action: Strengthening Community Through EU Cross-Border Cooperation

Following the Aristotelian reasoning, cross-border regions' citizens are for their nature "border citizens" of a "border community". As such, they are called to practice cooperation, solidarity, and mutual respect. Official documentation already explicitly points this out in socio-cultural cross-border projects (BidBook Go 2025)³². CBC activities and programs involve repeated interaction, collaborative projects, and shared initiatives that serve as practical exercises to form habits that align with the virtues of CBC.

This is operationalized on the ground through cultural exchanges, educational programs, joint environmental efforts, and collaborative business ventures. As such, the character of the citizens becomes aligned with the EU objectives, creating a virtuous cycle that supports the ongoing success of CBC (Nadalutti and Rüdland, 2024). In this respect, Aristotle's claim that agents are not passive actors is particularly relevant. His arguments suggest that agents must have "knowledge" to act and be able to choose. Finally, when actions occur, they must proceed from a firm and unchangeable character³³.

Agents refer to the stakeholders in EU CBC, which include member states, regional and local authorities, businesses, and the citizenry. These actors are active participants that shape and realize cross-border initiatives. However, to be able to influence and shape CBC they need knowledge and must be informed and get in-

³² https://euro-go.eu/sfoglia-online/2748?file=/documents/2748/BidBook2_GO2025_IT.pdf

³³ *Ivi*, 1105 a, 27.

formed about the laws, regulations, cultural norms, and economic conditions that affect cross-border activities. This is operationalized on the ground through cross-border seminars, workshops, and the dissemination of informational materials. By developing knowledge and “know-how” agents can choose. Aristotle’s reflections suggest that such measures are effective to the extent that they allow all voices in society express their preferences, deliberate on various options, and decide on the best course of action for CBC projects through dialogue and negotiation.

One of the issues at stake nowadays in CBC, is the fact that there is sometimes political inconsistency in CBC. Aristotle warns about the need for consistent and reliable behaviour from all stakeholders. This consistency is crucial for building trust and ensuring the durability of cross-border partnerships. Hence the necessity of long-term strategies, consistent policies, and regular interaction that reinforce these character traits and do not end with the closing dates of projects. That is why Aristotle insists on the fact that what leads to “eudaimonia” is a process, that is pursued through and by means of rational, participated discussions. It is important here the distinction between “the end” (eudaimonia) and “deliberation” that refers to the process, the means through which the end is achieved³⁴. This is recognized as an important issue also from practitioners that work daily with CBC issues. One voice for all summarizes this well:

«In 2009 we hold a conference to discuss a unified vision for the development of twin cities. The goal was to outline a prospective plan leading up to the year 2020. It is believed that having a clear strategy will foster greater mobilization and participation» (Interview, Germany, Local stakeholder, 2018).

Deliberation is another important Aristotelian political concept that operationalized to CBC refers to the methodologies, dialogues, and decision-making processes through which EU CBC strategies are planned and implemented. An example is the INTERREG program, which supports CBC and involves extensive deliberation among stakeholders to design and execute projects. This includes discussions on how to best use funding; how to manage joint initiatives; how to overcome barriers to cooperation.

Interreg faces numerous pressing concerns that necessitate attention, particularly because of the bureaucracy involved in its decision-making procedures. It is evident that to successfully achieve an end the quality and effectiveness of the planning and decision-making processes (i.e. deliberation) is essential. The case of CBC health system is emblematic. It is a matter of fact that although the EU aim is to improve patient care across borders, the deliberation and implementation process is still very complex and inefficient, with variations in how different

³⁴ *Ivi*, 1113 b, 46.

member states interpret and apply EU CBC directives. What is ethically needed is an effective operationalization of “justice”.

Justice is characterized by its “relational” dimension. It should guarantee fair distribution and exchanges among different actors³⁵. Justice in EU CBC must navigate between the extremes of national self-interest and total self-sacrifice for the greater EU good. Funding is a good operationalization of this principle. Funding from the European Structural and Investment Funds should be allocated in a way that reflects the needs and contributions of different regions, avoiding both neglect and preferential treatment. Nevertheless, such funds often face criticism for being allocated through complex bureaucratic processes that may not adequately reflect the needs of local communities, or for being influenced by political considerations rather than purely equitable criteria (this is strongly confirmed by the interviewees selected for this research).

Additionally, justice should ensure that exchanges between different actors are fair and that there is a just distribution of benefits and responsibilities. The principle of just distribution is reflected in the EU’s cohesion policy, which aims to reduce disparities between regions. Programs designed to stimulate economic growth in regions lagging behind should provide comparable benefits to those in more prosperous areas. Nevertheless, it has been observed that regions with already established administrative capacities tend to benefit more from such policies, thereby exacerbating inequalities rather than reducing them.

A way through which justice is guaranteed is “friendship”. Aristotle devotes a substantial section of the *Nicomachean Ethics* to this virtue³⁶. The Philosopher distinguishes three different kinds of friendship: of utility, of pleasure and of good. The first, is based on the utility or benefit that friends gain from the relationship. The individuals involved are not friends for the sake of the other person but because of the benefit they receive from the relationship. Such friendships are often temporary, accidental; when the benefit ceases, so does the friendship. The second sees individuals drawn to each other based on the pleasure they derive from the relationship. This could be a shared interest in activities, or any other source of mutual enjoyment. As with friendships of utility, these relationships often last only as long as the pleasure continues. The last one, is the highest form of friendship and is based on mutual appreciation of the virtues the other person holds. In this form of friendship, each person wishes the good for the other for the sake of the other. These friendships are stable and tend to last because they are based on the characters of the friends themselves and not merely on external factors like utility or pleasure. Virtuous friendships also involve mutual respect,

³⁵ *Ivi*, 1133 a, 89.

³⁶ *Ivi*, Book 8.

admiration, and genuine care, and they contribute to the eudaimonia, or flourishing, of the individuals involved.

Applying Aristotle's three types of friendship to the context of EU CBC can illustrate the varying depths and motivations of relationships between member states and regions, each with its own strengths and weaknesses. Friends of utility is common in economic agreements or trade partnerships where the primary motivation is mutual benefit. Regions or states cooperate because of the tangible benefits each receives, such as shared infrastructure projects or trade agreements that boost local economies. These relationships are practical and goal-oriented, often leading to efficient and mutually beneficial outcomes in the short term. However, they may lack depth and long-term commitment; if the utility diminishes or a more beneficial opportunity arises elsewhere, the cooperation can easily dissolve. They are also vulnerable to changes in political or economic climates.

Friendship of pleasure can be operationalized in cultural exchanges, shared interests, and social programs. They might be exemplified by twin cities that celebrate shared cultural festivals or student exchange programs. They often engender positive feelings and can enhance people-to-people connections and understanding between regions, which can be a fertile ground for strengthening other forms of cooperation. Nevertheless, these relationships might not survive challenges that are not pleasurable or when the initial excitement fades. Or due to crises, as during the COVID 19 health crises. A representative of a twin city in Finland pointed out that:

«Historically, the bond between the two cities has been strong. Nevertheless, the pandemic period marked a significant drop in mutual support. This decline can be attributed to a lack of awareness about each other's circumstances, compounded by the constraints of distinct national legislation. As a consequence, the cities diverged in their approaches to managing the crisis. In an effort to rectify this, we engaged in strategic advocacy at the national level, directing our efforts towards our respective capitals. This initiative led to ministerial visits, during which the solidarity of our cities was acknowledged. We received assurances that, should another pandemic occur, there would be no return to the border restrictions that once divided us» (Interview, Finland, Local stakeholder, 2023).

These two cross border cities on the border between Finland and Estonia point out that they developed a harmonious friendship. This was due not only because of CBC, but also due to the sharing of a common border territory. However, the pandemic exposed the fragility of this relationship, revealing a surprising lack of solidarity. The challenges were not merely due to geographic division but were compounded by a disconnect in understanding each other's specific legal constraints and crisis strategies.

Finally, friendship of the good is the deepest level of partnership and involves cooperation based on shared good purposes, mutual respect, and a genuine desire

for the flourishing of the other's community. An example might be regions that work together on long-term environmental conservation projects out of a shared commitment to sustainability and future generations. These relationships are likely to be more resilient to external pressures because they are rooted in shared principles and long-term objectives. They are based on a commitment to common good that transcends immediate benefits. Having said that, such relationships may be more challenging to develop as they require a deep level of trust and mutual understanding. They can also be more abstract and difficult to quantify, making them harder to justify to stakeholders looking for immediate benefits.

Keeping the Aristotelian distinction between types of friendship can help profiling and implementing EU CBC policies. Indeed, in the practical world of EU CBC, the different types of friendships often overlap or evolve from one type into another. For instance, a relationship that starts as a friendship of utility, such as a trade agreement, could develop into a friendship of pleasure through cultural exchanges and eventually into a friendship of the good if both parties come to share deeper values and goals. The aim of strengthening friendship based on virtue can offer operational criteria on how to manage CBC relations.

Of course, having operational criteria is not tantamount to having an ideal than can easily be put to practice. States and regions have their own interests, and these interests sometimes conflict, making the purest form of cooperation elusive. Moreover, the political and economic pressures facing different EU regions can stress relationships, revealing their underlying nature. For example, during economic downturns, utility-based relationships might be tested, or pleasure-based friendships might wane when they no longer serve the interests of all parties involved³⁷. But Aristotle's operational criteria can help us to interpret actual situations and to profile the best, realistic strategies to strengthen CBC.

9. Delving in Aristotle's "Nicomachean ethics" applied to the European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC)

Aristotle's conception of the political community as a partnership for achieving the good life provides a critical lens through which to view CBC. His ideas on justice—both distributive and corrective—offer a framework for examining the equitable distribution of resources and the rectification of injustices that may arise in cross-border interactions. Furthermore, his understanding of friendship (*philia*) enriches the discourse on trust and empathy, suggesting that strong cooperative relationships are essential for the stability and effectiveness of political

³⁷ *Ivi.*1099 b, 15.

structures. In this light, the operational challenges of CBC, such as those faced by the EGTC, become not just logistical issues but ethical opportunities to foster deeper connections and mutual benefits across borders (Nadalutti, 2013)³⁸.

The EGTC emerges as an important EU tool established by the European Commission, that holds legal personality and helps to forward cooperation and integration (Scott, 2020). It is generally recognized that the EGTC, thanks to its legal status, provides effective means to deliver public goods, infrastructure investments, besides favouring sustainable forms of partnership between different levels of decision-making cooperation. Nevertheless, the results so far obtained by EGTCs are overall rather modest in their operations and the projects they have facilitated are relatively small-scale and targeted (Evrard & Engl, 2018)³⁹.

The EGTC performs a dual function. Its first role is formal, designed to address the complexities inherent in implementing and managing cross-border projects in the realm of territorial cooperation. These complexities primarily arise from the necessity to harmonize disparate legal frameworks and administrative procedures, thereby facilitating the collaborative management of CBC projects (Evrard, 2016)⁴⁰. Its second role is informal, serving as a medium for disseminating the European Union's normative vision of CBC. This vision aims to transcend the interests of individual member states, advocating for the principle of subsidiarity through processes of decentralization and enhancing socio-political participation among a wide spectrum of actors (Nadalutti, 2020)⁴¹. In this context, the EGTC may be regarded as a nascent form of governance institution, one that effectively facilitates linkages between actors within a policy network.

However, despite the formal/informal advancements, EGTCs face practical challenges (Scott, 2020). The requirement for unanimous agreement on national legislative formats and funding arrangements introduces a time-consuming bureaucratic layer that can stifle initiative. Moreover, while EGTCs have supported a broad range of projects, from environmental to economic development initiatives, their operations seem to be modest and not fully leveraging the opportunities provided by their legal frameworks. They often default to nationally oriented procedures rather than embodying a truly cooperative spirit. The EGTCs, therefore, run the risk of functioning as mere extensions of national regulations rather

³⁸ E. Nadalutti, *Does the 'European Grouping of Territorial Co-operation' Promote Multi-level Governance within the European Union?*, in: "Journal of Common Market Studies", 51, 4, 2013, pp. 756-771.

³⁹ E. Evrard, A. Engl, "Taking Stock of the European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC): From Policy Formulation to Policy Implementation", in: *European Territorial Cooperation*, ed. by E. Medeiros, Cham, Springer, 2018, pp. 209-227.

⁴⁰ E. Evrard, *The European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC): Towards a Supra-regional Scale of Governance in the Greater Region SaarLorLux?*, in: "Geopolitics", 21, 3, 2016, pp. 513-37.

⁴¹ E. Nadalutti, *Is Cross-Border Cooperation an On-Going Process that Could Help Boosting a Cross-Border Ethical Governance?*, in: "Journal of Common Market Studies", 58, 6 2020, pp. 1377-1392.

than as dynamic facilitators of cross-border collaboration. An application of the principle of subsidiarity more conscious of the Aristotelian underpinnings of that principle would be helpful in profiling and implementing of these policies. On the one hand, the Aristotelian perspective acknowledges the existence of layers of autonomy which should be recognised and accepted in their attempt to seek the common good rather than managed from above. On the other hand, the appeal to the common good can support the coordination of different political communities in view of sharable causes of action and development. This interpretation of the principle of subsidiarity implies a rejection of the modern concept of sovereignty, and the acceptance of multilevel forms of authority. Nonetheless, the concept of state sovereignty persists, which is evident even when considering the most effective European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC) instances.

The EGTC Eurocity of Guadiana exemplifies a more successful model, building on existing Portuguese-Spanish cooperation with a focus on tourism and cultural heritage (Gomez, Gomez, Pinto, 2019)⁴². However, the achievements of EGTCs like the Eurocity of Guadiana, and the broader efficacy of EGTCs, are tempered by their reliance on regional and national government involvement, with the omnipresence of national borders still shaping administrative and regulatory realities. The modern notion of sovereignty still prevails.

Even visionary projects like the Prussian Eastern Railway⁴³ revitalization encounter obstacles, particularly from national authorities, illustrating the complex interplay between local initiative and state-level endorsement. The EGTC clearly shows the extent to which there are limitations to the European integration process since diverse regulatory regimes between states persist as significant hurdles to effective CBC. Additionally, while EGTCs have proliferated, their success is notably confined to economically robust and politically influential core European areas, raising concerns about the inclusivity and equitable distribution of CBC benefits.

It is interesting to note, that generally, there is a clash between the ideal and real action of EGTCs. For instance, on the border Italy-Slovenia, the Management Authority of Interreg V (2014–20) in Trieste, and the EGTC-GO founders and promoters argue that the novelty of this specific EGTC is that it is

⁴² T. González Gómez, J.A. Domínguez-Gómez, H. Pinto, *Eurocity: From Political Construction to Local Demand... Or Vice-Versa?*, in: "Sustainability", 11, 22, 2019, pp. 1-17.

⁴³ As an East-West transportation axis linking German and Polish regions and serving the mobility needs of those who travel frequently between them; P. Ulrich, *Territorial Cooperation, Supraregionalist Institution-Building and National Boundaries: The European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC) at the Eastern and Western German Borders*, in "European Planning Studies", 28, 1, 2019, pp. 57-80.

«the sole beneficiary of EU funds. In other words, there is going to be one single actor operating on both sides of the Italy-Slovenia border» (EGTC-GO Kick-off event, November 2017).

Nowadays, this does not correspond to truth since as I was reported by one interviewee, “Institutionally, when the EGTC-GO received this title, there was an issue regarding the management of the funding that had to come from the Slovenian Ministry of Culture in Ljubljana. Obviously, the government of Ljubljana told me:

«I cannot directly give Slovenian funds to an entity that belongs to Italian law.’ Therefore, for the sake of traceability, they had to establish on the Slovenian side the Javni Zavod (GO! 2025), which is a public institute set up to carry forward the European Capital of Culture’s projects» (Interview: regional stakeholder, Italy, 2023).

This interview refers to the institutional structure for managing funds related to the Gorizia-Nova Gorica European Capital of Culture project within the EGTC-GO (European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation of Gorizia and Nova Gorica) and the establishment of a Slovenian public institute.

The establishment of a separate entity like the Javni Zavod (GO! 2025) in addition to the EGTC-GO could be seen as a divergence from the ideal of a unified approach to cross-border governance. From an ethical perspective, this puts at stake not only the very principle of joint CBC action, but also with the telos of the EGTC. If the purpose of an EGTC is to enable cross-border cooperation seamlessly, then the establishment of additional structures could be seen as counterproductive to achieving that end. Surely, it must be recognized that if the present legal framework does not allow for the direct transfer of funds across borders due to national laws, then creating a structure like the Javni Zavod is a necessary, albeit imperfect, step towards realizing the project’s goals within the constraints of the current system.

In sum, while EGTCs embody a post-national promise for public policy and cooperation, their actual impact is uneven and often constrained by national prerogatives and regional disparities. EGTCs, although reflective of the EU integration process have not led to a standardized approach to CBC. Individual interests still arise among the actors involved in CBC. This difficulty is rooted in the perception of border activities as not truly communal but rather dominated by regional and national prerogatives, undermining the ethos of CBC which aims to promote the common good (Nadalutti, 2020).

This tension between the ideal form of the EGTC and its practical enactment is where an Aristotelian critique can provide depth, as we have seen.

For Aristotle, the ethical life is also a practical life, which involves the application of phronesis – practical wisdom. The EGTCs would embody this virtue by

not only having the structure in place but by realizing it in practice, navigating through the complexities of legal and financial arrangements with wisdom to achieve their objectives. In conclusion, it is questionable that EGTCs can foster a community where individuals and entities work together in a harmonious and mutually beneficial manner, unless the principle of subsidiarity is applied in a more Aristotelian fashion, which overcomes the theoretical constraints of sovereignty.

10. Conclusion

This study has focused on the EU integration process and its nature. We questioned what integration is and what is its aim. We pointed out that the present academic and official literature on CBC tends to primarily concentrate on aspects of power and economics, when integration is considered. However, this is a very limited understanding of the term. It is argued that an important dimension that is often neglected in this literature is the ethical aspect of integration.

This gap in the analysis is astonishing *per se*, since integration and cooperation aim at creating a stable, harmonized socio-political community made by human beings that are agents who act for the common good (of the border territory). Integration consists of activities that imply both ethical considerations and practical realities, aiming for outcomes that enhance the human flourishing of all parties involved. That is why this analysis is important: it offers a fresh lens to examine how CBC policies and initiatives foster not only economic growth and stability, but also contribute to the ethical and moral development of the cross-border community in particular, and the EU community in general.

Integration suggests a paradigm shift in how we conceptualize and implement CBC, moving away from a framework primarily influenced by liberal theory – which often emphasizes individual freedoms, economic interests, and subjective interpretations of justice – to one grounded in Aristotelian practical philosophy. Aristotelian practical philosophy focuses on the development of virtuous character, the importance of communal relationships, and the pursuit of the “good life” or *eudaimonia*, which is achieved through the practice of virtue in a political community.

The *eudaimonia* concept emphasizes the flourishing of the community and the individual’s role within it. Applied to CBC, this perspective encourages policies and initiatives that promote the common good of all communities involved, rather than prioritizing the interests of one group over another. It suggests a holistic approach to development that includes cultural, social, and ethical dimensions, beyond mere economic considerations.

As explained by Aristotle, a community *can* be formed when members need one another to solve common problems since «the need holds things together as a single unit»⁴⁴. Therefore, integrating Aristotle's philosophy into the analysis of EU integration and CBC bridges the gap in integration literature by highlighting that power, economics, and ethics are interconnected in the EU community building process. Aristotle's ethical framework offers a critical lens to evaluate how they might embody the virtues of justice, civic friendship, and the common pursuit of eudaimonia. In conclusion, this approach values the character and moral integrity of the individuals and institutions involved, promoting cooperation that is not only beneficial but also morally enriching.

⁴⁴ Aristotle, *The Nicomachean ethics*, cit., p. 89.