G. H. Mead

Roles, the Self, and the Generalized Other

One of the most noteworthy features of Mead's account of the significant symbol is that it assumes that anticipatory experiences are fundamental to the development of language. We have the ability place ourselves in the positions of others—that is, to anticipate their responses—with regard to our linguistic gestures. This ability is also crucial for the development of the self and self-consciousness. For Mead, as for Hegel, the self is fundamentally social and cognitive. It should be distinguished from the individual, who also has non-cognitive attributes. The self, then, is not identical to the individual and is linked to self-consciousness. It begins to develop when individuals interact with others and play roles. What are roles? They are constellations of behaviors that are responses to sets of behaviors of other human beings. The notions of role-taking and role playing are familiar from sociological and social-psychological literature. For example, the child plays at being a doctor by having another child play at being a patient. To play at being a doctor, however, requires being able to anticipate what a patient might say, and vice versa. Role playing involves taking the attitudes or perspectives of others. It is worth noting in this context that while Mead studied physiological psychology, his work on role-taking can be viewed as combining features of the work of the Scottish sympathy theorists (which James appealed to in The Principles of Psychology), with Hegel's dialectic of self and other. As we will discover shortly, perspective-taking is associated not only with roles, but with far more complex behaviors.

For Mead, if we were simply to take the roles of others, we would never develop selves or self-consciousness. We would have a nascent form of self-consciousness that parallels the sort of reflexive awareness that is required for the use of significant symbols. A role-taking (self) consciousness of this sort makes possible what might be called a proto-self, but not a self, because it doesn't have the complexity necessary to give rise to a self. How then does a self arise? Here Mead introduces his well-known neologism, the generalized other. When children or adults take roles, they can be said to be playing these roles in dyads. However, this sort of exchange is quite different from the more complex sets of behaviors that are required to

participate in games. In the latter, we are required to learn not only the responses of specific others, but behaviors associated with every position on the field. These can be internalized, and when we succeed in doing so we come to “view” our own behaviors from the perspective of the game as a whole, which is a system of organized actions.

The organized community or social group which gives to the individual his unity of self may be called “the generalized other.” The attitude of the generalized other is the attitude of the whole community. Thus, for example, in the case of such a social group as a ball team, the team is the generalized other in so far as it enters—as an organized process or social activity—into the experience of any one of the individual members of it.

For Mead, although these communities can take different forms, they should be thought of as systems; for example, a family can be thought of systemically and can therefore give rise to a generalized other and a self that corresponds to it. Generalized others can also be found in concrete social classes or subgroups, such as political parties, clubs, corporations, which are all actually functional social units, in terms of which their individual members are directly related to one another. The others are abstract social classes or subgroups, such as the class of debtors and the class of creditors, in terms of which their individual members are related to one another only more or less indirectly.

In his Principles of Psychology, a book Mead knew well, William James discusses various types of empirical selves, namely, the material, the social, and the spiritual. In addressing the social self, James notes how it is possible to have multiple selves.

Properly speaking, a man has as many social selves as there are individuals who recognize him and carry an image of him in their mind. To wound any one of these his images is to wound him. But as the individuals who carry the images fall naturally into classes, we may practically say that he has as many different social selves as there are distinct groups of persons about whose opinion he cares. He generally shows a different side of himself to each of these different groups.

From Mead's vantage point, James was on the right track. However, the notion of audience is left undeveloped in James, as is the manner in which language is utilized in the genesis of the self and self-consciousness. For Mead, James's audiences should be thought of in terms of

systemically organized groups, such as we find in certain games, which give rise to generalized others. Further, we need an account of how we come to view ourselves from the perspective of these groups that goes beyond the concept of "sympathetic attachments." Such an account involves reflexivity, which originates with the vocal gesture and is essential to taking roles and the perspective of the generalized other. In addition, reflexivity helps make possible the capacity to "see" ourselves from ever wider or more "universal" communities. Mead relates the latter capacity to cosmopolitan political and cultural orientations. It's worth noting that for Mead a full account of the self should address the phylogenetic as well as the ontogenetic.

The "I" and the "Me"

One of Mead's most significant contributions to social psychology is his distinction between the "I" and the "Me." It's worth emphasizing that while this distinction is utilized in sociological circles, it is grounded philosophically for Mead. His target, in part, is no less than the idea of the transcendental ego, especially in its Kantian incarnation. It is also important to note that the "I" and "Me" are functional distinctions for Mead, not metaphysical ones. He refers to them as phases of the self, although he more typically uses the word self to refer to the "Me" .

The self that arises in relationship to a specific generalized other is referred to as the "Me." The "Me" is a cognitive object, which is only known retrospectively, that is, on reflection. When we act in habitual ways we are not typically self-conscious. We are engaged in actions at a non-reflective level. However, when we take the perspective of the generalized other, we are both "watching" and forming a self in relationship to the system of behaviors that constitute this generalized other. So, for example, if I am playing second base, I may reflect on my position as a second baseman, but to do so I have to be able to think of "myself" in relationship to the whole game, namely, the other actors and the rules of the game. We might refer to this cognitive object as my baseball self or "Me." Perhaps a better example might be to think of the self in relationship to one's family of origin. In this situation, one views oneself from the perspective of the various sets of behaviors that constitute the family system.

To return to the baseball example, one may have a self, a "Me," that corresponds to a particular position that one plays, which is nested within the game as an organized totality. This self, however, doesn't tell us how any particular play may be made. When a ball is grounded to a second baseman, how he or she reacts is not predetermined. He reacts, and how he reacts is

always to some degree different from how he has reacted in the past. These reactions or actions of the individual, whether in response to others or self-initiated, fall within the “sphere” of the “I.” Every response that the “I” makes is somewhat novel. Its responses may differ only in small ways from previous responses, making them functionally equivalent, but they will never be exactly the same. No catch in a ball game is ever identical to a previous catch. Mead declares that, “The ‘I’ gives the sense of freedom, of initiative. The situation is there for us to act in a self-conscious fashion. We are aware of ourselves, and of what the situation is, but exactly how we will act never gets into experience until after the action takes place”. The “I” is a “source” of both spontaneity and creativity. For Mead, however, the “I” is not a noumenal ego. Nor is it a substance. It is a way of designating a locus of activity.

The responses of the “I” are non-reflective. How the “I” reacts is known only on reflection, that is, after we retrospect.

If you ask, then, where directly in your own experience the “I” comes in, the answer is that it comes in as a historical figure. It is what you were a second ago that is the “I” of the “me.” It is another “me” that has to take that role. You cannot get the immediate response of the “I” in the process.

In other words, once the actions of the “I” have become objectified and known, by definition they have become a “Me.” The status of the “I” is interesting in Mead. In trying to differentiate it from the empirical, knowable, “Me,” he states, “The ‘I’ is the transcendental self of Kant, the soul that James conceived behind the scene holding on to the skirts of an idea to give it an added increment of emphasis” However, this statement should not to be interpreted as endorsing the notion of a transcendental ego. Mead is seeking to emphasize that the “I” is not available to us in our acts, that is, it is only knowable in its objectified form as a “Me.” This point is clarified by a remark that directly follows the statement just cited. “The self-conscious, actual self in social intercourse is the objective ‘me’ or “Me's” with the process of response continually going on and implying a fictitious ‘I’ always out of sight of himself” . A transcendental ego is not fictitious. But for Mead, since we are dealing with a functional distinction here, it is quite acceptable to refer to the “I” as fictitious in a metaphysical sense.

Why, then, do we seem to experience what Mead refers to as a "running current of awareness," that is, an ego that appears to be aware of itself as it acts and thinks, if the "I" is not immediately aware of itself? William James sought to explain this phenomenon in terms of proprioception and the relationship between "parts" of the stream of consciousness. (James 1890, 296–307; James 1904, 169–183; James 1905, 184–194). Mead developed a unique explanation based on the relationship of the "I" to the "Me." As we have seen, the "I" reacts and initiates action, but the actions taken are comprehended, objectified, as a "Me." However, the "Me" is not simply confined to the objectifications of the immediate actions of the "I." The "Me" carries with it internalized responses that serve as a commentary on the "I's" actions. Mead states, "The action with reference to the others calls out responses in the individual himself—there is then another 'me' criticizing, approving, and suggesting, and consciously planning, i.e., the reflective self". The running current of awareness, then, is not due to the "I" being immediately aware of itself. It is due to the running commentary of the "Me" on the actions of the "I." The "Me" follows the "I" so closely in time that it appears as if the "I" is the source of the "running current of awareness."

Freud's super-ego could be conscious or unconscious. One might think of the "Me" as similar to the conscious super-ego in the commentary that it provides, but one would have to be careful not to carry this analogy too far. For Mead, the "Me" arises in relationship to systems of behaviors, generalized others, and, therefore, is by definition multiple, although the behaviors of various "Me's" can overlap. Further, Freud's model assumes a determinism that is not inherent in the relationship of the "I" to the "Me." Not only does the "I" initiate novel responses, its new behaviors can become part of a "Me." In other words, "Me's" are not static. They are systems that often undergo transformation. This will become more apparent in the next section when we discuss Mead's ideas regarding emergence. In this context it is enough to suggest the following: when a ballplayer makes a catch in a manner that has never been made before—that is, makes a play that is significantly different from prior catches—the new play may become part of the repertoire of the team's behaviors. In other words, the play may alter the existing generalized other by modifying existing behavioral patterns. In so doing, it gives rise to a modified or new self because the game as a whole has been changed. Once again, this may be easier to see in terms of the transformations that take place in families when new reactions occur as children and adults interact over time. New selves are generated as family systems are transformed.