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The social structure of language and consciousness in George Herbert Mead

Abstract

This essay focuses on George H. Mead's *Mind, Self, and Society* (1934). In his seminal work, Mead gives birth to social psychology, differentiating it from pure behaviorism. Mead focuses on an observable activity, the gesture, the act, and yet he distances himself from behaviorism because he does not deny the inner experience of the individual. On the contrary, he is particularly concerned with the rise of inner experience within the process as a whole. The process of formation of the consciousness works from the outside to the inside. Consciousness is mostly to be explained, not to be certified; what must be explained is its development, its function, its usefulness. Mead maintained that consciousness has a social origin (like his contemporary Vygotsky), and that it is the outcome, and not the origin, of the process of communication (like Darwin). This process begins with a "conversation of gestures", continues with what Mead calls "taking the role of the other", and ends up with a social architecture of significant symbols. The Self appears as a Social Self, a Generalized Other made possible especially by that particular form of gesture that is the vocal gesture. I will insist on the particular form of "genealogy of consciousness" that Mead underlined, trying to clear up its novelty in reference to the metaphysical and psychological tradition. The inward-looking individual seems to fail to see his proper Self, because the truth of the Self lies in the outward and dynamical relations with others.

Key-Words – Mead, Vygotsky, Consciousness, Gestures, Symbols, Language, Communication.

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Vygotsky and Mead: a parallel - In Eastern Europe the outstanding figure of Lev Vygotsky is very well known. His long-life study on the relations between language and thought and on the social origin of consciousness grew stronger and stronger, often in opposition to the scholastic Marxist tradition. In this essay I wish to explore the thought of an American pragmatist – George Herbert Mead – who in the mid-30s followed a very similar path¹. It is interesting to note that Mead's *Mind, Self, and Society* and of Vygotsky's *Thought and Language* were both published in 1934,

¹ There are just few works on the relationship between Mead and Vygotsky: cf. H.-J. Glock, *Vygotsky and Mead on the Self, Meaning and Internalization* in "Studies in Soviet Thought", 31(1986); L.Koczanowicz, *G. H. Mead and L. S. Vygotsky on Meaning and the Self*, in "The Journal of Speculative Philosophy", Vol. 8, No. 4, 1994; René Van Der Veer, *The Relation between Vygotsky and Mead Reconsidered. A Comment on Glock*, in "Studies in Soviet Thought", Vol. 34, No. , Jul. - Aug., 1987; Id., *Similarities between the Theories of G. H. Mead and L. S. Vygotskij: An Explanation?*, in "Studies in the History of Psychology and the Social Sciences", eds. S. Bern, H. Rappard, W. van Hoorn, Leiden, 1985; R. Fischer, *Why the Mind is Not in the Head but in the Society's Connectionist Network.*, in "Diogenes", Fall 1990; Dorothy Holland and William Lachicotte, Jr., *Vygotsky, Mead, and the New Sociocultural Studies of Identity* (1998), https://people.ucsc.edu/~gwells/Files/Courses_Folder/ED%20261%20Papers/Holland%20Vygotsky_Mead%20on%20Identity.pdf.

respectively in the USA and in Russia. Yet, these two scholars worked in total independence from each other and made reference to different traditions (pragmatism – the new philosophy of the American frontier - and Marxism – the new philosophy of ‘900 European revolution). Both, however, made reference to Watson and behaviorism, and both read Hegel. Both – and this is of interest for us – traced a genealogy of consciousness, grounded on the idea that self-consciousness, in particular, is a sort of “transfer” from the outside to the inside, made possible by the use of language and of intersubjective communication. The human being becomes an ‘I’ when he learns how to use the public signs in a private way, when he learns to address himself as the others address him. Vygotsky, exactly like Mead, identified ‘external’ with ‘social’ and presumed that consciousness and all the superior psychic functions were an outcome of trans-individual social relations. It is exactly the public context and the social recognition that transform a mere impulse into a gesture, and a gesture into a symbolic sign, which only in a derivative form belongs to whom uses it. The internalization is a cultural operation, made possible by our multiple social and ‘external’ relations (languages, habits, praxes, rituals, etc.). In conclusion, all the superior psychic functions are born as social relations, and personality has to be considered as a social structure.

This is the common element to both thinkers, the same element that moves them away from Watson’s behaviorism. It is certainly true that Mead has been considered part of a tradition indebted to behaviorism. Charles Morris, the curator of *Mind, Self, and Society*, saw a close connection between Mead and the behaviorism, as his choice of the subtitle for the book (“From the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist”) clearly shows. Nevertheless, Mead, just like Dewey, was always careful in distinguishing his position from Watson’s, and in his written work² and public interventions clarified why his and Watson’s two positions did not coincide. Shortly put, for Mead observable actions are as fundamental as they are for behaviorism, but actions are understood not as mere response to a physiological stimulus, but as the product of social practices that are irreducible to the givenness of the senses.³ Also the careful genealogical study of consciousness, which sees it as the result of different acts of introjection rather than as the origin of the acts of perception, imagination, and intentionality, does not mean for Mead, as it does for Watson, that consciousness as the locus of introspection does not exist. Mead’s philosophy is rather a more complex attempt of explanation, capable of demonstrating the necessity and function of consciousness. From this point of view, it is possible to find many analogies between Mead’s approach and Vygotsky’s perspective. Vygotsky thinks in fact that the process of internalization should not be denied, but that it should be integrated with

² Cf. G.H.Mead, *A Behaviorist Account of the Significant Symbol*, in *Selected Writings*, A.J.Reck ed., University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1964. Cf. also *Mind, Self and Society* (The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1934, from now on MSS followed by the page number), part I, Ch 1.

³ Cf. M. Natanson, *The Social Dynamics of G. H. Mead*, Public Affairs Press, Washington DC, 1956.

the dimension of social relations.⁴ Behavior is certainly the origin of psychological observation. But it is never purely individual, nor purely physiological response. Human behavior is from the very beginning social and collective. That is why behavior always implies a response to a gestural or symbolic attitude that is different in different cultures. The immediate and instinctive gesture of the baby, studied by Vygotsky and Mead, can acquire intentional meaning only because his mother or other adults give meaning to it. In this way, it becomes a communicative gesture; and it is the social context that transforms a pure reflex into an indicative sign and then into a linguistic symbol which is meaningful “for everybody.”

Consciousness is built by acting, and acting is always relational, interactive, social, “symbolic” in the proper sense. At this level, Mead and Vygotsky share the same path, even though their respective ties to behaviorism are different.

I will then present Mead’s account of consciousness and self-consciousness.

Gestural and Symbolic Conversations. In the years ranging between the nineteenth and the twentieth century, the word ‘consciousness’, ennobled by Hegel and by German idealism, undergoes a series of concentric attacks, arising from the most diverse directions. From Nietzsche – who takes consciousness to be a “surface effect”, a simple “commentary on an unknown text” and, even more radically, “our most miserable organ”, “a long-term mistake”⁵ – to William James who, in one of his last conferences, expresses himself in a totally inquisitive manner with respect to the existence of consciousness, coming to propose a consideration of it in terms of a simple function, and not as a substantial entity. The list might go on. Of course, supporters of consciousness will have still many cards to play in its defense, and with excellent arguments: from Brentano to Husserl, from Freud to Sartre, it will continue to exhibit its own primacy as a transcendental and foundational element of human knowledge.

Mead, instead, brightly follows the tradition inaugurated by Nietzsche and James in relation to the consciential ‘primacy’. By synthesizing the Pragmatist approach and the one which might well be defined ‘genealogical’ (by referring to Nietzsche along with Darwin), the American author proposes a consideration of consciousness which revolutionizes and configures *ex novo* the boundaries of Western psychological science.

⁴ Cf especially L. S. Vygotskij, *Mind in Society. The development of Higher forms of Psychological Processes*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (Mass.), 1978.

⁵ I have dwelled on these various Nietzschean interpretations in my *In comune*, Mimesis Milano, 2012.

Since the early years of his lecturing activity, George Herbert Mead⁶ firmly believes that the theme is to be set up in the following way: consciousness is today attested in the human species, but the problem is how to explain how the evolutionary “jump” which has brought to the genesis of such an important and species-related organ could take place. As it might be understood, Mead takes on a position which distances him, on the one hand, from one of his teachers, William James, who had already given farewell years before to that “entity named consciousness”, on the other from a second thinker like-minded with him, John Watson, who used to reduce consciousness, in a behaviorist manner, to the ways of visible conduct.

With respect to the former, Mead’s position is dissonant. Despite showing appreciation for his psychological writings, the theory of radical empiricism seems to him to pulverize an ineludible issue: consciousness, with its equipment of expressions and meaningful forms, is actually an indubitable and precious acquisition in the constitution of the human. Still, Mead admits, this is not a matter of fact: consciousness is a symbolic formation which is the outcome of a process of becoming and, throughout evolution, has undergone radical transformations which have turned it into something extremely different from that original sketch of knowledge which it used to be. Even more, contrary to what James used to believe, it is an entirely linguistic phenomenon, which means to all intents and purposes a social phenomenon, and it is not the expression of inward motions. We must then make an effort to trace its genealogy back.

With respect to the second, as Mead points out, “Social psychology is behaviouristic in the sense of starting off with an observable activity... but it is not behaviouristic in the sense of ignoring the inner experience of the individual – the inner phase of that process or activity. On the contrary, it is particularly concerned with the rise of such an experience within the process as a whole. It simply works from the outside to the inside” (MSS 7-8). Consciousness is mostly to be explained, not to be certified; what must be explained is its development, its function, its usefulness. It

⁶ Some preliminary biographical hints on Mead are needed, given his being an author relatively unknown to the philosophical audience. Mead works between 1891 and 1931, year of his untimely death, almost entirely at Chicago University, where, together with Dewey, he set up a famous school inspired to the principles of Pragmatism and social psychology. Actively committed even in civil and political society, he wrote just a few articles on specialized journals, still without managing to produce any monograph. His most interesting production has been posthumously collected by his pupils: from *Mind, Self and Society*, a transcription of his most relevant academic lectures, to *The Philosophy of the Present* (Open Court, Chicago, 1932) to the important and not yet well known *Philosophy of the Act* (University of Chicago Press, 1938). See especially, among others, Hans Joas, *G.H. Mead. A contemporary Re-examination of his Thought*, MIT Press, Boston 1997. But see also the recent F. Carreira Da Silva, *G. H. Mead. A critical Introduction*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2008; Burke, K. Skowronski (eds.), *George Herbert Mead in the Twenty-First Century*, Lexington Books, Idaho 2013; R. Madzia, *Self-Construction and Self-Awareness: which One comes First?*. In “Pragmatism Today”, 6-1, 2015; Anna M. Nieddu, *The Universal Meanings of Common Discourse: Intrasubjectivity and Intersubjectivity Communication* in G. H. Mead, in “European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy”, 7-1, 2015. See in Italian, as in Italy Mead has been very much studied, since the ‘60s of the XX century, G. Baggio *La mente bio-sociale, Filosofia e psicologia in G. H. Mead*, ETS, Pisa, 2015.

clarifies itself as emergency, initially scarcely relevant. What does allow it to advance and impose itself?

As we can see, Mead thinks in a Darwinian fashion – consciousness is an evolutionary effect – and behavioristically – consciousness makes its first appearance as a form of conduct visible in its sensible effects - still he does not miss the opportunity to take account of the lesson of the idealists, with whom he was acquainted thanks to Royce. His might be well defined as a phenomenology of consciousness, genealogically and symbolically oriented. Mead moves from some relevant suggestions of Wundt, whose teaching he had personally attended during his sojourns in Germany, and mostly from the following one: each and every behavior stems from a gesture, which is to be considered as the germinative nucleus of the act. We might start from here in order to explain every anthropological form of structuring: from the social act, which is not willed, intentioned, decided, but which simply *gets made*. The crucial datum in psychology, as Mead notices (MSS 8), is the act, not the individual tract, and the act is a complex ‘organic’ process, one being socially rooted. It is never exerted singularly, but demands a shared and publicly recognized practice. The gesture, then, is initially the simple incentive that triggers a social response⁷. It is the gesture that enables the reciprocal adjustments between different individual organisms, which ‘pro-vokes’ an appropriate response, within which the second organism performs its own part so contributing to the constitution of the act in its wholeness and by producing a behavioral analogy.

Mead’s stance is less Darwinist than it might seem at a face value: in fact, in *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, Darwin wisely analyzed the gestures leading to the expression of the emotional attitude of individuals, but, as a matter of fact, he hypothesized the shift from an inner (mental) state to an exterior (expressive) state, position which does not convince Mead. There is no evidence, as he thinks, to postulate the existence of states of consciousness vibrating beyond and before the expressive gestures. The same objection is addressed to his master Wundt, and just in relation to the concept, among other things enlightening, of “gesture”. No gesture is given as exteriorization of a process of thought: simply, the act is the whole and it is also the *primum* from which one must start.

Let us carefully consider Mead’s position: gestures are responses, not reflections, as he says. Thus, they are actions, which are empirically observable and pragmatically assessable. Actions repeatable and, in the long run, habitual, which structure themselves in forms of life different and gradually more complex. The centrality of the act – and in the first place of the gestural act – is a theoretical move which, by itself, ratifies the philosophical relevance of this author, and that deftly distinguishes him from the great mass of social psychologists which begin to impose themselves at his time, starting just from Chicago.

⁷ The gestures are “early stages of social acts that precede the symbol proper, and deliberate communication” (MSS 15). See on this L. Quéré, G.H. Mead: *La pensée comme conversation des gestes interne*, in “Revue Synthèse”, 131-1, 2015, C. Di Martino, *Signe, geste, parole*, Hermann, Paris, 2016.

If read under a philosophical perspective, his path brings us to say, along with Carlo Sini⁸, that the gesture works as a true world-openness, inasmuch as it inscribes a primeval nucleus of *in fieri* praxis, in-cising the real and de-ciding the course (*poros*) of experience⁹. The gesture is an emergence which changes the surrounding horizon, by tracing in it the furrow of a path. It is the pragmatic unity *par excellence* in that it is a “grapheme”, a writing of the body and, all together, of the world¹⁰ or, better, the birthplace of these two polarities. “The gesture is not ‘someone’s gesture’; to the contrary, each and everyone is entrusted to the event of the gesture which articulates it and puts it into being in the oscillation of the distance: provenance *from* an openness which is direction *towards* an object”¹¹. In its opening itself up, the gesture calls for an answer: it lays out the harmonic threshold of the responding and of the cor-responding, so allowing the syntony, the shared resounding of the living beings.

Mead’s favorite example is that of the fighting between dogs, which he designates as a “conversation between gestures”. A dog sets out to attack the rival dog: to hypothesize the existence of an inner canine consciousness to which the exterior gesture of the teeth-grinding corresponds is nothing but an anthropomorphic projection of the state which we have learnt to determine as ‘conscious’. Gestures here are not “meaningful” yet; a dog does not reflect over what is going to happen and does not decide to shift itself because it is aware of the consequences of its and other people’s behavior.

Notably, what offers itself to our view is only the reciprocal adjustment of stimuli and responses, of actions and reactions which, in this case, are dissimilar. To the first dog’s stimulus of rage responds the reaction of fear of the second: a dog launches an attack, the other flees away. As in a dance, positions change in a reciprocal connection with the partner’s movement, they adapt themselves to the change of his gestures. There is no language here, no intention or psychism is attestable. “The other person’s gesture means what you are going to do about it. It does not mean what he is thinking about or even his emotion” (MSS 49). The first gesture means the performed action of the attack, the second the unavoidable reaction of the escape. The symbol has not arisen yet, because there is no sharing of common attitudes. The same thing happens – although with a stronger reciprocity – when we silently answer to a glance launched in the air just in our direction: enticed into a “common place”, we find ourselves somehow compelled to respond, that is, to take part in the act, as if a ball had been thrown at us which we find instinctive to prevent from falling down. We swiftly tune in the gestural openness of the other-

⁸ My reading follows the path proposed by C. Sini, mainly in his *Gli abiti, le pratiche, i saperi*, Jaca Book, Milano, 1996.

⁹ ‘Experience’ stems from the Latin words *ex-perior*, meaning “finding a way which leads out of”. Within the theme survives the Greek word *poros*, which stands for “path”, “itinerary”, “stratagem”.

¹⁰ C. Sini, *Gli abiti*, cit., p. 20. “The gesture is the happening of that border, of that threshold, so that there is something to do, that is, there is something to respond and correspond to what happens”.

¹¹ Ivi, p.21.

even if only by lowering our eyes – and it is just this mutual correspondence that determines the subsequent relation, with its symbolic and mediated practice.

Mead analyzes with phenomenological subtlety these steps of progressive reciprocal adjustment and starts thinking that consciousness comes ‘ex post’, so to speak, that it raises up as an *outcome* of these adjustments, as a specialization designed to achieve a better syntony. Gestures do not presuppose consciousness. Rather, consciousness is the product of the acts becoming more and more complex and reciprocal.

He follows the example - an extremely convincing one – of the relation between the parent form and the kid form: the succession between the “stimulating cry, the answering tone on the part of the parent-form and the consequent change in the cry of the child-form” (MSS 44) become stimuli for a reciprocal re-adaptation until the social act gets accomplished in the most satisfactory way for both, thanks to a syntony which is not simply the intermingling and synthesizing of the voices. “So the child has her own self in that ‘other’ from himself which is the breast: the thing for which he experiences his being ‘breast-fed’. But even the mother has her own self into the other who is the child, for whom she is mother and source of nourishment”¹². The gesture of the cry of the breast-fed is a stimulus which calls for caring, activating a series of answers more and more elaborate which will bring to language and to the reciprocal understanding, thanks to the activation of a shared meaning.

The act is then the outright ‘fact’; a fact straightforwardly social and not surely elementary, that paves the way for the setting up of subjectivity and interiority. Original is the communicative conduct, the ‘for’ of the reference towards something other in taking distance ‘from’ other; the hendiadys of co-science¹³. The intentionality and cogitating rationality supervene at a second time: “Contrary to Darwin, however, we find no evidence for the prior existence of consciousness as something which brings about behavior on the part of one organism that is of such a sort as to call forth an adjustive response on the part of another organism, without itself being dependent on such behavior. We are rather forced to conclude that consciousness is an emergent from such behavior; that so far from being a precondition of the social act, the social act is a precondition of it. The mechanism of the social act can be traced out without introducing into it the conception of consciousness as a separable element within that act” (MSS 18).

Organism and environment, then, are always involved in a pragmatic-gestural relation which marks the creation of a perspective on the world, an articulation¹⁴ in pre-semiotic terms, but certainly already anticipatory of symbols. As Mead in fact writes, the shift from the gesture to the symbol in human culture occurs rapidly. When gestures become the vehicles of an intentional and aware communication, fundamentally institutionalized, the symbolic apparatus with its supply of meanings

¹² Ibidem.

¹³ I remind the reader that the etymological root of the word is *cum-scientia* or, as Tertullian used to put it, *communis complurium scientia*.

¹⁴ C. Sini, *Gli abiti*, cit., p. 20..

makes its appearance. But the specific nature of symbolic experience lies properly in that process which Mead defines as *taking the attitudes of the others* or *taking the role of the other*.

Taking the role of the other. Let us see how this further passage in the genealogy of conscience configures itself. When the gesture expresses an idea which presupposes it, one stabilized at the public level, and has, at the same time, the same idea emerge in another individual, then we enter the field of an outright symbolic exchange. When the gesture evokes in us the same response and the same attitude which the gesture evokes in the others (the rage itself of the first dog, as it were, and not a reaction of escape and fear), here we have a symbolic conversation and no longer a purely gestural one. It is evident, then, that in the animal world such an exchange gives itself in rare and specific cases. It is in the anthropologic environment, precisely in the place where language and signification do arise, that such a process sets itself up in the fullest way: in fact, it is the only one which entails a symbol corresponding to a meaning in the experience of the first individual, that, in its own turn, evokes the same meaning in the second individual, being recognized by the social group. “The meaningful gesture, then, makes the one who accomplishes it aware of the others’ attitude towards the gesture itself and allows him to adjust his own behavior subsequent to that of other individuals in the light of that given attitude”¹⁵. The answer to the first gesture started up by me gets then “impersonated” and assimilated by others: I take on myself such a new attitude by rebound, playing from within the relation the same role as the one of who is in front of me, a role which allows me to recognize myself, making the gesture of the other become part of my being conscious of the whole situation. In order to structure my own interiority, I am compelled to *alter* and *communicate myself*: only in other people’s response, broadly and generically speaking, I retrieve the boundaries of my own self and of its (very important for life in society) states of consciousness. Consciences –we might say – stem from a process of disambiguation with respect to an originally blurred and promiscuous ground of continuous exchange between the involved parts.

The “internalization”, Mead concludes, fully and legitimately constitutes the essence of thought; and ‘mentalization’, as it is generally said today, implies taking other people’s acts as if they were one’s own, in a rebound from the explicit being observable from the outside to the implicit which is internally stated. Thus, Internalization means, just as it used to be for Nietzsche, a counter-stroke in virtue of which the self lifts up and imposes itself starting from the ‘average measure’ established by common thinking. Consciousness, as we read in the *Gay Science*, does not belong to the individual, but to the “social and communitarian side” and man only is the “sign-inventing man” who can afford it¹⁶.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

¹⁶ F. Nietzsche, *The gay Science*, § 354.

Mead thinks exactly in the same way (in whose view, however, the common is not certainly the gregarious, nor is it what conduces man to get sick): we interiorize the primitive conversation of gestures and assimilate the public and conventional answers, by making them become private and by depositing them in a shared place which we define as ‘mind’ or ‘consciousness’. But the ‘my’ remains what originally it used to be: the ‘ours’, or, better said, the ‘other’s’, taken on as “mirror” and “surface” of consciousness. As in the germinal forms of reflections typical of Archaic Greece, the Self addresses the “I” in the second person and only in this way it manages to detect it and tease it out from the circularity of the acts. ”And hence the origin and foundations of the self, like those of thinking, are social” (MSS 173). With reference to this, I will confine myself to quoting once again one passage of *Mind, Self and Society*, among the many dedicated to a lucid outline of the issue: “Selves must be accounted for in terms of the social process, and in terms of communication; and individuals must be brought into essential relation within that process before communication, or the contact between the minds of different individuals, become possible” (MSS 49-50). What comes first is this essential “ontology of relation”. The same body does not originally experience itself as belonging to a self: it becomes as such when it “develops a mind in the context of social experience” (*ibidem*). An extremely simple and magisterial definition of an ancient and long-debated issue: only when it emerges something which is defined as “mind”, thanks to the symbolic exchange operated within that bigger body which is society, we can say that we have a body and that body and mind constitute our own self¹⁷. Mead then goes on in the same passage:”Mind arises through communication by a conversation of gestures in a social process or context of experience – not communication through mind” (MSS 50) We can therefore end up with saying that “Language as made up of significant symbols is what we mean by mind” (MSS 190 n.18). Or, even better, that the mind (or the self-conscious Self) is an act expressed by that common linguistic body which nourishes us all.

In order to better comment on his proposal (which is in fact only vaguely foreshadowed in his writings, so that one must work hard to tease out of it the philosophical reminder), let us try to sum up what we have seen so far, by taking up the analysis of the conversation between gestures. In this first communicational relationship, as we have noted, the stimulating gesture is different from the responding one and we are spectators of pure idiosyncratic conducts, although reciprocally accommodated and belonging to a common act. They are idiosyncratic because they do not enjoy public recognition, because no common idea seems to act as their horizon. To the child’s cry the parent’s care follows, but only for the one who observes and is equipped with conceptual tools linked to the concept of

¹⁷ And Mead goes on: “For if, as Wundt does, you presuppose the existence of mind at the start, as explaining or making possible the social process of experience, than the origin of minds and the interactions among minds become mysteries. But if, on the other hand, you regard the social process of experience as prior (in a rudimentary form) to the existence of mind and explain the origin of minds in terms of the interaction among individuals within that process, than not only the origin of minds, but also the interactions among minds cease to be mysterious or miraculous” (*ibidem*).

causality and responsibility. It is not certainly so for the child, and, only in a confuse manner for the new parent. Still, step by step, the adult and the newly born baby will tune themselves to a shared response, which will establish for anyone that one cries *in order* to be looked after. It is here that sign and signification do make their appearance. However, in order to effectively promote a shift from a conversation between gestures to a symbolic conversation, along with the upsurge of that fundamental gesture which is the vocal one, a different condition must be given. It is not sufficient for the stimulus A to ‘provoke’ (that is, literally speaking, to call for) the response B. It must even stimulate itself to give the same answer as B, which, then, will no longer become ‘mine’ or ‘your’ own response, but a response commonly negotiated, one publicly participated; that is, an answer which is no longer mine or yours, but, generically and much more efficaciously, ours. With a view to doing that, I take the attitude of the other, I ‘evoke’ (etymologically: call from the outside) in myself the same answer which I evoke in other people, I answer *as if* I were the other, or, even better, as if I were all the other participants in the linguistic ‘game’. I hypothesize, then, a common idea behind the conduct (mother and son both think of the pap), that is, I hypothesize a consciousness which acts as a coordinating agent of the organized responses. The invention of consciousness is substantially designed to the following aim: to persuade oneself of one’s being part of a common world, to communicate himself to others. Even for Mead consciousness is first and foremost *communis complurium scientia*.

“We are more or less unconsciously seeing ourselves as others see us. We are unconsciously addressing ourselves as others address us; in the same way as the sparrow takes up the note of the canary we pick up the dialects about us... We are calling out in the other person something we are calling out in ourselves, so that unconsciously we take over these attitudes. We are unconsciously putting ourselves in the place of others and acting as others act. I want simply to isolate the general mechanism here, because it is of very fundamental importance in the development of what we call self-consciousness and the appearance of the self. We are, especially through the use of vocal gestures, continually arousing in ourselves those responses which we call out in other persons, so that we are taking the attitudes of the other persons into our own conduct” (MSS 68-9).

In this second phase of the social encounter we envisage not only the correspondence, as it happens in the conversation between gestures, but the projection, the analogy of conduct, the replacement of the self with the other and that of the other with the self and, therefore, the outright constitution of one’s own personality thanks to the activation of the highly symbolic mechanism of the *as if*: ultimately, a metaphor-generating activity which allows me to trans-fer myself (*meta-pherein*) in the role of the other. Which means: to take on the *mask* of the other and only in this way to become ‘*person*’¹⁸.

¹⁸ As it is well known, the Latin word ‘person’ meant ‘mask’. On the theme cf. Cicero’s *De officiis*, where it is made clear how each person is to wear a mask which suits one’s own private or public role well, and, even better, which suits the many different social roles one is called to perform. Personality is therefore with no

I recognize my inwardness in the exteriority of the other's gesture, I transfer (*metaphero*) the "outside" in the "inside". That I have a "Me" is therefore a counter-stroke of the intention which I attach to you in the process of formulation of a symbolic act, by conceiving of it as *similar* to the one which leads myself to express the way I do. Consciousness stems within this interstice between the 'you' and the 'us' from which ultimately the "I" comes out: as a *mirroring* of the meaningful attitude of *others*, a recognition of a reciprocal *being similar*, and, as a consequence, of the *assimilation* of the same pragmatic act on one's own. *Taking the role of the others* is to be understood as "playing with masks" with others, 'wearing the mask of the community'¹⁹. At the very origin we do not find pure thought, nor functioning consciousness, but communication, conversation, role-exchange²⁰, ultimately, being in a differentiating - and *therefore* identifying - relation, in which we identify ourselves in what the others are, and, all the same, are not; the "all" in general and the nobody in particular. Consciousness - as Royce already used to indicate it - is a crowded place, a noisy one, unfit for a meditative introspection. Mead meaningfully adds: consciousness is a *theatrical scene*

"Until this process has been developed into the abstract process of thought, self-consciousness remains *dramatic*, and the self which is a fusion of the remembered actor and this accompanying chorus is somewhat loosely organized and very clearly social. Later the inner stage changes into the forum and workshop of thought. The features and intonations of the *dramatis personae* fade out and the emphasis falls upon the meaning of the inner speech, the imagery becomes merely the barely necessary cues. But the mechanism remains social, and at any moment the process may become personal"²¹.

Self-consciousness is therefore "dramatic": it structures itself in the ekstatic echo of the chorus which accompanies it and in the amplification of the role as *dramatis persona*. Nietzsche reminds us of it in the *Birth of Tragedy*: in the satyrs on stage, who represent the dramatic phenomenon in its peculiarity, the spectator sees himself, transfigured and embodied in another body in action, and acts *as if* he was a satyr herself. Only transformed *by* and *in* the gaze of the others we can sense the complexity of the scene in which we take part. The spectator is the actor of a representation which leads him to become what he is: by bouncing from the whole scene to the singular part, from the personification of the character to individual personality, from the third to the first person and, ultimately, by configuring the "I" as a declension of the "We". But the 'We' is not the sum of many "I", nor is it an

doubt multifaceted, and whoever performs an institutional role is called to wear the mask of the city, that is, of the community, in its wholeness.

¹⁹ Cf. what has been said in the footnote above.

²⁰ The same thought is to be considered as "implicit conversation with oneself" (MSS 90).

²¹ G.H.Mead, *The Social Self*, "Journal of Philosophy, Psychology and Scientific Methods", 10, 1913; this can be consulted at the page <http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/us/mead3.htm>.

undifferentiated “All”. It is first of all the Common Body (the Chorus) of language, where the evoking agent *par excellence* is the gesture of vocality itself.

The vocal gesture. Among many symbolic acts, the most emblematic of all, as the true founder of self-consciousness, is the vocal gesture. Mead has devoted extraordinary pages to the setting out of such a concept, and Carlo Sini has taken up its suggestions by laying down a comment which proves in truth to be a powerful philosophical hypothesis²². I refer thus to his analyses, and confine myself to adding some word which might prove functional to our itinerary of investigation. The voice-the scream, for instance, the first scream of the child - comes from the ‘outside’, even for whoever emits it. There is an anonymous and impersonal ‘It screams’, which bounces back to the addresser and the addressees, by situating simultaneously their answers²³. The voice explodes in any direction, literally gashing the world, by causing a sense to resonate. The voice comes for everybody: not only for me who scream and amaze myself at my screaming, not only for you who are listening, but for each of us, in a very well-spread out field of the audible. It evokes in myself the same answer which it evokes in the other, especially when it becomes meaningful and awakens a common idea correlated to it. In the development of such “con-science” [*co-scire*], I can fix *as a consequence* the limits of my personal *scire* and understand the role which I perform in the “it screams”. The voice comes first and foremost for me, for the ‘me’ who I am. It is the voice that objectivates me as a speaking and, therefore, as a thinking subject. The self is so the outcome and the origin of the voice, the origin inasmuch as it is the outcome²⁴, spring and, all the same, effect of the imperious vocalism of communicating oneself. It is the vocal gesture which fixes the Mine and the Other people’s, subjectivity and inter-subjectivity, and it is only stemming from the gestural explosion of vocalism that the two poles dispose themselves within the circle of the responding and the cor-responding. The vocal gesture, then, presents a special reflexivity of its own, by realizing an “auto-affective” and “auto-graphic” capacity which no other sign succeeds in reaching²⁵.

There is a specific “enchantment of vocal gestures”, i.e. one that persists even when the child learns how to undertake a dialogue with the others. An enchantment which in every culture subsequently turns into the wisdom and melodic articulation of the

²² C.Sini, *Gli abiti, le pratiche, i saperi*, cit., “Il gesto e la voce”. On the issue see also *Il simbolo e l’uomo*, Egea, Milano, 1991, “La pragmatica del linguaggio”.

²³ “These experiences belong at first to the ‘group’, which aggregates around the first examples of *vox significativa*: that is, to the ‘anonymous’ group, not to individuals, given that individuals are just in the process of reflected formation. It is with reference to this collective body (linked and interconnected by sex, nutrition, parental cares, etc.) that the scream acquires its eso-somatic nature. By mirroring itself on the ‘operators’, it gives them an ‘inner’ sign of their being (that is, of their having become) *agents of the scream*” (C.Sini, *L’uomo, la macchina, l’automa*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino, 2009).

²⁴ Ivi, p. 28.

²⁵ On these themes, besides the already mentioned Sini, C. Di Martino works efficaciously, in the last chapter of his *Segno, gesto, parola*, ETS, Pisa, 2005.

singing in its proper form. It is just in this enchantment that the Self comes to take shape: ‘resounding’ organ of the community.

Whereof there was peace, thereof there is a scream which tears the silence, which says something *about me to me* and the others, which imposes me and the others, and the other various “me” to myself. The vocal gesture does never have characters of privacy: just as the conscience which it brings about, it is an eminently public phenomenon. “The voice, by resounding and re-bouncing, puts the ‘us’ in which the ‘all’ of the inter-subjective activity of responding consists”²⁶. Eventually, the meaningful vocal gesture, just insofar as it does not possess specific objects differently from touch or taste, has them somehow at its own disposal. The voice is the only sensory organ which produces new things, literally, un-heard of.²⁷ His poverty is his richness: it names the absent, the universal point of view, the public truth, that is, the concept²⁸. The concept of “I” is obviously included.

The universality and publicity of the reference implied by the vocal signs fix its properly symbolical element and the presupposition of ‘reality’. For this reason, as we might say, when between two persons a shift takes place from conversation between gestures, as glances for instance might be, to word-exchange, one is compromised and an outright affective relationship – whether good or bad - gets undertaken. Unlike any other gesture, the word elicits identical meanings in all those who listen, publicly recognized meanings and bearers of universality. By saying ‘table’ we will all head for the table and ‘will be ready to use’ the table in the same way: by saying ‘love’ we will have defined in a conceptual sense and ‘for all’ that elusive responding which used to attract us, but that could immediately be dismissed.

How does – Mead wonders – such a community of response structure itself? By pure imitation? It is important for the American psychologist to wonder how language arises, by offering an hypothesis which is not content to speak of imitation, as Wundt used to do. When we hear the birds’ singing and admire the sparrow’s warbles repeating those of the canary, it seems to us that they enact an imitative process, such as the one which appears in the baby who learns how to speak from the parents’ mottoes. But it is not really a matter of imitation, as Mead says: it is a strengthening of one’s own answer to the other, modeled on the other’s vocalism, in the attempt to elicit in oneself the attitude one arises in the others. There is, then, an incorporation of the gesture of the other and an empowerment of its own, by trial and error (as it in fact happens in the infant’s lallation, who tries to “tune in” better and better on the verse of the adult). The sparrow uses the same note as the canary not simply by repeating it, but also and especially by responding and evoking in himself the counter alter of the one who flies besides him. In fact, the sparrow responds ‘to the point’. In this way, it affects in a double-fold way both himself and

²⁶C.Sini, *Gli abiti*, cit., p. 35.

²⁷ Ivi, p. 27.

²⁸ On these issues see C. Sini, *ivi*, p. 40 sgg. Very meaningfully, an analysis not very dissimilar from the one by Mead concerning the phenomenon of the voice is conducted also by J. Derrida (*La voix et le phénomène*, Editions Quadrige, Paris, 2003), but in the total absence of any reference to the American author.

the canary in the act of listening. There is no imitation, then, but the retrieval of an identical attitude to the purpose of accentuating the symbolic reach (Cf. MSS par.20). We are faced to the structuring of the transcendental condition of language, as emergence from the ‘common’ basis of the practical responses which intervene in the different forms of life.

The Generalized Other and the Social Self. Mead tells us even more concerning the ‘common thought’ by introducing a notion which will have a great fortune: that of the *Generalized Other*. Self-consciousness and the Self, as he explains, configure themselves only if the personal attitude becomes the social one expressed in a collective undertaking. But then we have to accept that, in order to become a self or a “social object”, it is necessary to identify ourselves with what can be named “the Generalized Other”. “The organized community or social group which gives to the individual his unity of self may be called ‘Generalized Other’. The attitude of the generalized other is the attitude of the community” (MSS 154). It is only taking the role of the others, and especially taking the role of that Other that is an organization of the attitudes of those involved in the same process, that we can get back to ourselves. Such *Generalized Other* is the community, which structures the individual in his own organic unity as member of a ‘superior’ body: every single individual must take on this aware attitude by adopting well defined rules within the social game, he must learn how to assume this *common* role (that is, neither mine nor yours, but both mine and yours), and not simply the role of the other who confronts me; he must prove to be able to know how to play the game of his time and of his group. The notion of *game* then becomes fundamental: games are principally mediated by language, they are ‘language games’, as Wittgenstein would have said. *Game* is something seen different by Mead from mere *play* (MSS, par.20). In the *game* we see producing not only an “alter-a[c]tion”, but “comun-a[c]tion”. The distinction between *play* and *game* guides Mead in these central pages of the work: he analyzes the organized unity of the team-game (a privileged example is baseball), in which I must take part in the match by knowing how to indistinctively assume the roles of the various players and by learning how to take my action under control in conformity to them, by equipping it with normativity. Alternatively, suffice it to think of language, in which we assume the role of all the speakers of a certain *langue*²⁹, and we learn how to control our expressions, by sticking to some rules. Different are the things, evidently, in the free play, where the child identifies himself in a role and then in another (I act *as* the fireman, *as* the princess), with no organization, with no hierarchical and architectural units, with no finality.

Coming progressively to identify himself as the Generalized Other of his own community and assuming the attitude of the whole group, the child finally equips himself with a Self, equally Organized and Social. It gets clear why Mead can say

²⁹ I refer to the distinction between *langue* and *parole* evoked by De Saussure in his *Cours de linguistique general* which I will take up later, as distinction between competence and execution in the use of a language.

that I am “the Others” and, in particular, I am the “Other” ‘in general’. “The structure, then, on which the self is built is this response which is common to all. For one has to be a member of a community to be a self” (MSS 162). In the ultimate analysis, as Mead writes, self-consciousness means nothing but “an awakening in ourselves of the group of attitudes which are arousing in others, especially when it is an important set of responses which go to make up the members of the community” (MSS 163). Any attempt to distinguish the Self from the Others is doomed to defeat, because precisely our selves do exist and come to be part of our experience inasmuch as we experience the selves of the others throughout their attitudes and common living. The author concludes in a poetical and impressive way, in one of the few writings come down to us in their published form: “The desire of knowledge of the conditions in which other populations live, work, love or fight springs up from that fundamental curiosity that is the passion of self-consciousness. We must be the others if we want to be ourselves”.

Self, I, Me. Let us more specifically come to the issue of the Self, which Mead analyses in a very important writing, “The social self”, published in 1913 and already quoted above. The Self is here distinguished from the physical organism in that it can be an object to itself.

The English word *self* brings us back to the reflexive which indicates at the same time a subjective and an objective form. Just insofar as the Self can be an object to itself, it qualifies itself as a social and collective experience, and not as a personal and inward one. The Self is not “a more or less isolate and independent element... When we reach a self we reach a certain sort of conduct, a certain type of social process which involves the interaction of different individuals” (MSS 164-5). That is to say, the Self is constituted by an entirely public stuff, by the material distributed by the lives of the others or, more exactly, of the material of the life in common with others. This appears all the more true if we stick to the pioneering investigations of the Austrian psychologist René Spitz. He was the first to describe the behaviors of those kids who, for some reason, were kept apart - for a long time or forever- from the person who used to take care of them, without managing to find a valid replacement. The physician visited many orphanages, where these kids were looked after very satisfactorily from a physical point of view, still without caring the relational and affective aspect. Many of these children inexplicably deteriorated, in some cases to the point of death. They displayed behaviors like bemoaning and calls (first month of separation), crying and weight lost (second month), rejection of physical contact, delay in motor development, tendency to get diseases, absence of expressiveness, procumbent position (third month), cessation of the crying and rare screams, lethargic state (after the third month). If within the fifth/sixth month of separation the child had the chance to find his attachment figure or someone who could replace it, these symptoms used to disappear; otherwise a coma could occur,

or even death³⁰. These investigations confirm Mead's intuition: the structuring of the Self – even from the point of view of physical survival – is a process by all means social and relational. My own Self is, literally, into the hands and the gazes of the others.

This does not mean that one speaks only through the voice of the community. Mead was always mindful at preserving the space of liberty and individual responsibility. In the distinction to which he comes in the third chapter of *Mind, Self and Society*, by distinguishing between Self, I and Me, the author in fact manages to successfully reach a further articulation of his own psycho-social analysis. A similar distinction had already been put forward by James, and resonated in Peirce³¹. But Mead, no doubt, works more deeply on it, and lays it out with sharper clarity. The Self is to be conceived of as split into the 'I' and the 'Me'. The 'Me' represents the organized set of attitudes inherited by the community: it is the conventional, institutional aspect of subjectivity, which I tacitly share with others. The I is instead the excess, the atypical emergence, the irreducible singularity which stands against the Me; it is the unforeseeable discard, the idiosyncratic break whose nature we cannot define beforehand. The individual is not only a member of the community, but reacts to that community and, in the reaction itself, he modifies it: his answer to the "organized attitude" provokes the change, at times radical, of the latter, in ways that conduce to the steady reset of the collective environment and of the public forms of life. The 'I' causes the 'Me' to arise and, all the same, responds to it. Both contain *in nuce* different cores of the Self. The Self is, in the ultimate analysis, nothing solid and structured around a rigid centre, it is not sub-stance, but always predicate. It is, so to speak, "an eddy in the social current and so still a part of the current. It is a process in which the individual is continually adjusting himself in advance to the situation he belongs to, and reacting back on it" (MSS 182) The Self, to sum it up, is the correlation between different communicative signs, understood as a "dynamic process" of the experience. It does not have the nature as *unicum* and *fundamentum*. Rather, it has the nature of the double: it is 'I' and 'Me', 'I' and 'Other', 'I' and 'Other Generalized', subjective and objective pole of conduct.

In all these cases, as Mead sharply notes, I cannot still split myself with such a rapidity that I can fully capture my own self in my 'originality'. At the time in which I see and represent myself, I am already far from the "I" and re-conquered by the "Me". The 'I' is therefore "a historical figure", an effect of memory and recognition; what I was a second ago is the 'I' of the 'Me'. "The I is in certain sense that with which we do identify ourselves. The getting of it into experience constitutes one of the problems of most of our conscious experience; it is not directly given to experience" (MSS 174-5). The normal situation is one which involves a reaction of

³⁰ R. A. Spitz, *The first year of life : a psychoanalytic study of normal and deviant development of object relations*, New York, International Universities Press, 1965.

³¹ James speaks expressly about this in the tenth chapter of *Principles of Psychology*. Peirce had hinted at the issue in *Immortality in the Light of Synechism*, written and posthumously published in the collection *Essential Peirce* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, Vol. II).

the individual which is socially determined, but to which he brings his own responses as an I. Yet, we cannot exhibit the response while responding.

The 'I' emerges then within the folds of the Self; by the time it gets recognized it is already a "Me"; "The 'I' of this moment is the 'me' of the next moment" (MSS 174)³². And 'Me' is the organized, habitual, conventional set of the common attitudes (*the* various individual "Me"), just as they get deposited thanks to the system of language and symbols. The "I" names to the contrary the emerging of novelty, the competence in singular execution, the modifications, throughout individual answers, of the community asset. The 'I' is responsible for the conduct "in the first person", the one which escapes and will always escape the "social control" which is expression of the 'Me'. Something similar was thought by De Saussure when he used to distinguish between *langue* and *parole*.

Within the "I" we find the "Me", or, even, within the "Me" we find the "I", on which the 'Me' never succeeds in keeping hold. The 'I' is the break from the 'Me' and of the 'Me' from the 'Self' (because it is, nevertheless, always the chorus of the 'Me' which brings to the solo of the 'I'). And again: it is the Self, structured in the rebound of the community, which generates the 'Me' and the 'I'. The Self as *it-self*. As a third person who lives within the first.

I would like to conclude by quoting an extremely beautiful sentence from a fragment added in note to the edition of *Mind, Self and Society* (MSS 223n.25). Mead refers to his own theory speaking of "a social theory of mind": if the mind structures itself in a social way, he writes, "the field or locus of any given individual mind must extend as far as the social activity or apparatus of social relations which constitutes it extends; and hence that field cannot be bounded by the skin of the individual organism to which it belongs". What resonates here is the ancient saying by Heraclitus: "You will not find out the limits of the soul when you go, travelling on every road, so deep a logos does it have" (B45). Heraclitus speaks about profoundness, but the reference to the road leads us to think of the horizontal extension of consciousness, rather than of the vertical profoundness. It leads us to think of an extended and distributed mind, just as the one of which many bright cognitivist thinkers³³ maintain today, who from Mead, as I believe, would have much to learn.

³² "The I of introspection is the self which enters into social relations with other selves". And again: "The mechanism of introspection is therefore given in the social attitude which man necessarily assumes towards himself, and the mechanism of thought, in so far as thought uses symbols which are used in social intercourse, is but an inner conversation" G.H.Mead, *The Social Self*, cit..

³³ I can here recall primarily A. Clark, *Supersizing the mind*, Oxford University Press, 2008. In the latest years, we have several interesting articles on the relation between Mead and the Theory of Extended (or Embedded, or Enactive) Mind: see R. Madzia, *Chicago Pragmatism and the Extended Mind Theory: Mead and Dewey on the Nature of Cognition*, in "European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy", 5-1, 2013, R. Madzia, M. Jung (eds.), *Pragmatism and Embodied Cognitive Science: From Bodily Interaction to Symbolic Articulation*, de Gruyter GmbH, Berlin/Boston 2016, pp. 185-21.

In the light of the new researches of the neurosciences, see also: T. Solymosi; J. Shook, *Neuropragmatism: a neurophilosophical Manifesto*, in "European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy", 5-1, 2013. R. Fabbrichesi, *Peirce, Mead, and the Theory of Extended Mind*, The Commens Encyclopedia, The Digital Encyclopedia of Peirce Studies. Edited by Mats Bergman and João Queiroz,

URL <http://www.commens.org/encyclopedia/article/fabbrichesi-rossella-peirce-mead-and-theory-extended-mind>, 2016.