Philosophy, Social Theory, and the Thought of George Herbert Mead

Edited by

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Introduction

Having delineated the goals and themes of this book in the Preface, I would like to set the stage for the expository and critical pieces that follow by offering an account of Mead's social thought. My aim is by no means to provide a definitive scholarly reading of Mead's mature thought, which, even if possible, would require a substantial work unto itself. Rather, my goal is to orient readers who are unfamiliar with Mead's thought (or have not read him for some time) through an account that avoids detailed criticism and shuns claims to comprehensiveness, but does highlight many of the ideas and topics discussed, criticized, and developed in this book.

Mead perhaps is best known as a theorist of the self, and there is good reason for this. Even when he does not directly address the issue of selfhood, one can see how deeply his thought has been informed by the analysis of the self, and through this analysis we will approach Mead. In following this course, we must begin with his concept of the mind, for without the mind there can be no self for Mead. As a thinker deeply indebted to the Darwinian turn of the late 19th century, he conceives of mind, both ontogenetically and phylogenetically, in terms of evolutionary development; that is, in terms of emergence. To explain how mind emerges, Mead has recourse to the gesture.

Mead tells us that animals gesture to one another and that in so doing communicate. When a dog bares its fangs at another dog, it makes a gesture; and a second dog may respond by running away or perhaps by baring its fangs. A gesture may be thought of as a stimulus that calls out a response. It also may be thought of as that feature of an action that can stand for or symbolize that which follows the gesture. For Mead, the meaning of a gesture is to be understood in functional terms, so that in our example the baring of fangs by the first dog means run or bare fangs (back), which is the response of the second dog. In this sense, meaning is objective and can be observed and studied, for it is defined in terms of the responses of organisms to each other.

For human beings, however, meaning is not simply a function of objective responses that can be noted by a third party, because human beings are aware of meanings and have the capacity to point them out to themselves, even in the absence of others. How does this
capacity arise? Human beings make use of vocal gestures. As we cross a busy street I turn to a friend and yell, “Stop!” to prevent her from stepping in front of an oncoming car. In so doing, we both hear the word stop, and there is a tendency to respond to it in me as there is in my friend, because I hear the same word my friend hears. Stop is a vocal gesture. Mead tells us that, “In the case of the vocal gesture the form [the organism] hears its own stimulus just as when this is used by other forms, so it tends to respond also to its own stimulus as it responds to the stimulus of other forms.”

The vocal gesture provides a mirroring or reflective dimension to our responses to stimuli. This dimension can be employed to distinguish the vocal gesture from the gesture or, in alternative terms, the significant symbol from the symbol. “Gestures become significant symbols when they implicitly arouse in an individual making them the same responses which they explicitly arouse, or are supposed to arouse, in other individuals, the individuals to whom they are addressed.”

In using significant symbols or vocal gestures, I respond implicitly as the other responds explicitly to my gestures. I say to my friend, “Open the window,” and I can feel a tendency in myself to respond as my friend does, even though I do not overtly do so. We have both learned to react to the same symbols in a similar fashion; and we both are aware of the responses that these symbols call out in us. “The critical importance of language in the development of human experience lies in this fact that the stimulus is one that can react upon the speaking individual as it reacts upon the other.”

Unlike animals, human beings are aware of meanings because they can hear their gestures as the other hears them, and can respond to them as the other has responded. How do I learn the meaning of a vocal gesture? I become aware of what it means by “viewing” it from the perspective of the other; that is, by being aware of alter’s (potential) response to my vocal gesture. I “see” my own gesture in light of this response.

A relatively sophisticated nervous system is required in order to be able to discriminate the kinds of stimuli that the vocal gesture demands. The genesis of this nervous system, in terms of both the evolution of the species and the development of the individual, owes much to the capacity of the hand to grasp and manipulate objects. In his Philosophy of the Act, Mead divides experience into perceptual, manipulatory, and consummatory phases; and this division is predicated on the importance of physical contact with objects, specifically the unique sort of contact accessible to human beings because of the hand. The world of immediacy, to which the animal is confined, gives way to a realm of mediation as human beings extend the “distance” between the perceptual and consummatory stages of the act—for example, seeing the plant as food and eating it—through the increasing complexity of the manipulatory stage. The latter stage allows us to treat objects in different ways, and hence see them as means to different ends. Only with the use of significant symbols, however, is the full potential of the manipulatory stage of the act realized, for then direct contact can be superseded by the innovations of language.

Given Mead’s sensitivity to the importance of the hand, it is no surprise that he is well aware that the hand allows us to develop sophisticated sign languages. We can see the hand as the other sees it, in a fashion analogous to the manner in which we can hear the vocal gesture as the other hears it. The hand can be used to produce significant symbols. Nevertheless, Mead argues that the vocal gesture holds a unique place in the genesis of the mind for both the species and the individual; and he investigates significant symbols in light of our ability to produce vocal gestures.

For Mead, significant symbols allow us to be aware of meaning; and meaning is defined in terms of the similarity of responses; that is, in functional terms. This understanding of meaning is criticized by both Tugendhat and Habermas as conflating the similarity of responses with the identity of meaning; and both point to the source of this confusion in Mead’s failure to grapple with the intricacies of language. Be this as it may, when one is aware of a meaning, for Mead, one is “self-conscious.” This designation stresses that the awareness of meaning rests on the reflective character of significant symbols. However, it should be noted that the term self-conscious in this context does not imply a consciousness of self; that is, an explicit awareness of having a self, a self-consciousness. (I will address the relationship of the self to self-consciousness later.)

Significant symbols go hand in hand with (self-conscious) meaning, and from their use mind emerges.

Mentality on our approach simply comes in when the organism is able to point out meanings to others and to himself. This is the point at which mind appears, or if you like, emerges. It is absurd to look at the mind simply from the standpoint of the individual human organism; for, although it has its focus there, it is essentially a social phenomenon; even its biological functions are primarily social.

To develop a mind one must learn to anticipate the response of the other to specific symbols, and this task of anticipation can be spoken of in terms of “taking the attitude of the other.” In
responding as the other has responded to gestures, I learn to take the attitude of the other toward these gestures. This means that I am prepared to respond as the other has responded to them, even if I do not overtly do so. Eventually I am able to respond to my own gestures in the absence of the other; that is, I am able to talk to myself. There is an ambiguity in Mead's use of the term response, however, which should be mentioned here; and in this ambiguity we can catch a glimpse of how Mead's model begins to transcend ordinary behaviorism in the direction of a theory of communication. Mead does indeed use the term response for the simple reaction to a stimulus, but he also uses it to suggest the answer—that is, the response—one receives in addressing the other. As such, the term response comes to connote something more than a mere reaction to a specific stimulus; it comes to suggest the ability address another in a fashion that shows a communicative intent. We address ourselves as we address the other; and in so doing, we do not simply wait for a reaction, but expect an answer, a response. We behave as speakers and listeners.

Human beings learn to respond not only to specific signs or behaviors of others, but to complex groupings of these behaviors; and in so doing, they learn to take roles. The child learns various roles by playing the self and the other, so to speak. He or she learns these roles by taking over the behaviors associated with these roles; for instance, father, nurse, or police officer, and by also learning to take the roles of child, patient, or bad guy. "The child says something in one character and responds in another character, and then his responding in another character is a stimulus to himself in the first character, and so the conversation goes on." The child responds in certain ways that call out other responses, and these networks or integrated sets of responses are what we call roles. We might think of roles as selves, but, for Mead, they are only nascent selves. A role or even a number of roles in themselves cannot produce a fully developed unified self.

There is a unity or wholeness to the self that transcends the specific roles any of us might play. How are we to understand this unity? The self, for Mead, is a phenomenon of cognition, and as such, self-consciousness is intimately connected with the possibility of having a unified self. We need, then, a way of being aware of ourselves that transcends the specific "seeing" of ourselves from the perspective of a particular other, which is merely a seeing that takes place in relation to specific behaviors or roles. We must be able to view ourselves from the perspective of an other that is more general and abstract than those previously mentioned, an other that can frame the various "facets" of the self—its behaviors, gestures, and roles—and from whose perspective we can be aware of them as elements of a greater whole. This other, for Mead, is the generalized other; and it arises as we take the perspective of a social group.

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.

Mead turns from individual roles to his notion of the game to clarify how a self comes into being. Take, for example, the game of baseball. To play first base, I must be able to take the attitudes of all of the members of the team and experience them as an integrated system. Games contain implicit rules of behavior that we often seek to make explicit—in the case before us, not only the rules of baseball, but of a particular team's manner of dealing with other teams. To have a self under these circumstances I must be attuned to the rules and attitudes that organize and constitute my self as they do the community of the team. Needless to say, Mead's rather notorious example of a baseball team providing a generalized other, which in turn gives rise to a self, has left quite a few commentators rather cold. The self appears, after all, to be more than a mere set of behavioral dispositions, learned in relation to some social group.

In spite of Mead's example, concentrating on his phrases "whole community" and "organized process or social activity" may be of some value in dealing with this most slippery of Meadian neologisms. For Mead, there are systemically organized spheres of activity; and when we participate in these spheres we learn to "see" ourselves from their perspective, so that our own behaviors are integrated because those of the social group are integrated. We view ourselves from the perspective of the group/system when we follow the rules that make the group possible. In this respect, for example, a family may be viewed as a system, for there are implicit rules that organize the behavior of the group as a group, and individual interactions within the group are comprehensible because of the overall organization. The self, then, is the constellation of responses that I cognize as me, because of a certain social group; and I can be aware of this object—this me—because I can view it from the
perspective of an other, that is, a generalized other, that frames and integrates what I see.18

But this still seems a bit unsatisfactory, for even if we accept this definition of the self—which, as we shall see later, Mead qualifies—we appear to be left with a multitude of selves rather than a self. And Mead himself provides support for this view. He tells us that there are a multitude of social groups, and each appears to give rise to its own generalized other.

Some of them are concrete social classes or subgroups, such as political parties, clubs, corporations, which are 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.19

So, if we are to follow Mead here, not only is the self a cognitive object—one that we can be aware of because a generalized other frames and demarcates as we take its perspective—but there are a multitude of such cognitive objects. We have looked for a unified object to call the self and instead have found a multitude of unities, as poor Meno was able to find only a multitude of virtues when Socrates asked for merely the definition of virtue. Mead’s position, however, actually is more intriguing than this rather contemporary vision of a multitude of selves might lead us to believe: (1) because he expands the notion of the generalized other in an interesting direction, and (2) because of the manner in which his notions of novelty and sociality account for transformations of the self. I will turn to the former point first.

There is a sense in which a society as a whole can be spoken of as having a generalized other; and, if so, it follows that one could have a self that corresponds to this generalized other. Where might we look for such a generalized other? A turn to the normative and the notion of a moral community will prove fruitful.

There are what I have termed “generalized social attitudes” which make an organized self possible. In the community there are certain ways of acting under situations which are essentially identical, and these ways of acting on the part of anyone are those which we excite in others when we take certain steps. If we assert our rights, we are calling for a definite response just because they are rights that are universal—a response which everyone should, and perhaps will, give.20

The scope of what is referred to as a community can extend far beyond the subgroups that produce generalized others. A society, a culture, or even a global community can give rise to a generalized other that has as its source shared normative standards. This generalized other would allow individuals to transcend the so-called subgroups and have selves that are integrated on a “higher” level of abstraction, selves that depend on norms that permeate the whole of a society or a world community. Under these circumstances, similar responses to ethical issues pervade the entire society or global community. Mead tells us that,

We all belong to small cliques, and we may remain simply inside of them. The “organized other” present in ourselves is then a community of a narrow diameter. We are struggling now to get a certain amount of international-mindedness. We are realizing ourselves as members of a larger community. The vivid nationalism of the present period should, in the end, call out an international attitude of the larger community.21

Although sharing a kinship with Freud’s superego, the generalized other is inherently more rational and consciously accessible than the superego. It is not simply an external power that infiltrates our more primordial id, but, in a basic sense, it is us.22 We are rational beings, after all.

What we term “reason” arises when one of the organisms takes into its own response the attitude of the other organisms involved. It is possible for the organism so to assume the attitudes of the group that are involved in its own act within this whole co-operative process. When it does so, it is what we term “a rational being.” If its conduct has such universality, it has also necessity, that is, the sort of necessity involved in the whole act—if one acts in one way the others must act in another way.23

Given this view of reason, and his claims concerning community and the generalized other, we can conclude that, for Mead, the scope and growth of the self is intimately connected with its capacity for the universality of the rational. The explicit linkage of the development of the self to the growth of a community highlights the importance of the political and normative in Mead’s scheme. His views on these matters must be addressed if we are to fully understand his social psychology; Dmitri Shalin’s and Hans Joas’s contributions are of considerable assistance in this regard. I should
also mention Guy E. Swanson’s article here, for it addresses the importance of community in the development of certain capacities.

Having invoked Freud’s name, I should at least note in passing Mead’s position on the notion of instinct. Mead argues that human beings possess impulses, but he views impulses as having greater plasticity than instincts. “An impulse is a congenital tendency to react in a specific manner to a certain sort of stimulus, under certain organic conditions. Hunger and anger are illustrations of such impulses. They are best termed ‘impulses’ and not ‘instincts,’ because they are subject to extensive modification in the life-history of individuals.”

Mead does not dismiss the impulsive from his analysis of human development and behavior. However, he does have a tendency to see impulses, and the conflict that they may engender when met by societal or parental demands, in terms of alternatives for growth. It can be argued that he does not sufficiently consider the range of psychological consequences that conflict may bring in its wake.

There is a tension between the particular and the universal in Mead’s concept of the generalized other, and this tension can be placed in the context of a more pervasive friction in his thought, one that can be spoken of in terms of the Enlightenment and Romanticism. Mead is dedicated to the Enlightenment’s notion that science, empirical science, and progress truly go hand and hand. In general, his political and social vision exhibits a profound kinship with Kant’s enlightened cosmopolitanism. Yet, we also can see elements of the Romantic in Mead; he is deeply committed to honoring the particular and the unique, in an almost Herderesque fashion. This comes through in his awareness of the multiplicity of subgroups and generalized others and in his understanding of the limits history places on reason; it also comes through in his claims regarding novelty, which will be addressed later. We can see another feature of the Romantic sensibility, actually a quasi-Hegelian sensibility, in his concept of the self, a self that develops as it encompasses otherness and yet gives otherness its due. Nevertheless, as important as the particular and the unique are for Mead, he is dedicated to the goal of internationalism, which is linked directly to our capacity to take the roles of others. There is a deep commitment in Mead to the notion that our actions will become ever more rational as we have ever greater contact with the perspectives of others. Rationality, universality, and the experience of taking other perspectives all are intimately tied together for Mead, although universality must be understood in functional, not Platonic, terms.

Mead’s appreciation for the unique can be seen in his metaphysics of the novel, which claims, for example, that time itself would have no direction if it were not for the upsurge of (novel) events. Without the novel, the universe would be lost in the perpetual present of a closed system, in which elements of the system would merely exchange places in the eternal now of an eternal recurrence. Darwin put an end to any such fantasies for Mead. Even if we wish to bypass Mead’s metaphysical speculations on emergence and time, we cannot bypass the novel, for we cannot understand Mead’s concept of the self without it. In my view, Mead’s famous “I” and “me” distinction should be viewed as an attempt to clarify the novel’s place in human experience, although as J. David Lewis’s article so aptly documents, there indeed has been much debate on this subject.

We have spoken of how the self comes into being as one views the constellation of our responses from the perspective of the (or a) generalized other. The self in this respect is a cognitive object; and this object can now be spoken of as the “me.” What then is the “I”? The “I” is that which is both aware of the “me” and the “initiator” of responses; and its responses exhibit varying degrees of novelty. “The ‘I’ is the response of the organism to the attitudes of the others; the ‘me’ is the organized set of attitudes of others which one himself assumes. The attitudes of the others constitute the organized ‘me,’ and then one reacts toward that as an ‘I.’”

In being the seat of awareness and activity, the “I” might be spoken of as the transcendental ego; the “me” would be its empirical counterpart, the objective ego. This said, it is important to emphasize that Mead wished to have the “I” and “me” interpreted “from the point of view of conduct itself.” He wanted them to be understood in functional, not metaphysical, terms. Mead was even willing to refer to an “I” as fictitious and as a presupposition. Gary Cook’s article is of considerable value here, for it is one of the finest accounts of Mead’s functionalism to date; and it specifically addresses to the “I” and “me” distinction from this perspective.

The “I” is never immediately found in experience. It acts, or reacts, and then one becomes aware of its actions. “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.” For this reason we often are surprised by our own actions; that is, the “I” reacts and we become aware of its actions only after they are transformed into the “me.” That which becomes
aware of the “me” is not the “me” itself, but a new “I” hidden from view, which now allows us to be aware of the previous “I”s responses, responses that have been transformed into the “me.”

We can resort again to baseball for an example of what Mead has in mind. A player may anticipate how he or she will react when making an upcoming play, but then be surprised by what actually happens in the situation. The awareness of the play is not due to the “I” that acted, but to a new “I,” one that is aware of the objectified action, an action now seen in terms of the “me.” “The ‘I’ gives a 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.”

Mead does not deny that we can predict responses based on prior behavior, but he does claim that because of the element of novelty we can never be absolutely certain that we will respond in a specific fashion. It is not that the “I” always responds in absolutely novel ways—such a claim would destroy any possibility of understanding human behavior—but that it acts in ways that exhibit varying degrees of novelty.

Although the “me” is presented as “the organized set of attitudes of others,” it must serve the additional function of being the “site” at which we become aware of the “I”s novel responses as my own responses. In other words, the “me” has a personal and unique dimension because the “I”s novel responses modify the “me” as they become integrated into the prior organization of the “me,” and it is this new organization that I become aware of (as the new) “me.” With Mead’s “I” and “me” distinction we have before us a self that contains a seat of novelty as well as a set of organized prior responses, a set of responses that comes not only from others but also results from one’s own past novel reactions. I should note here that Mead’s language of the self can lead to a good deal of confusion. At other times, the “me” functions as if they were taking place at the same time as the original action, actually are happening after the original action and require our own observer consciousness? What we call the observer consciousness is “not the actual ‘I’ who is responsible for the conduct in propris persona—he is rather the response which one makes to his own words.” I speak. In speaking, I respond to my own words, in that my words call out a response. Now this response may seem as if it were made by the “I” that originally spoke. In fact, what I am aware of is the response to my first words, a response that I can be aware of because it has been objectified, and as such is now the object of a new “I.” The action with reference to the others [or to oneself] calls out responses in the individual himself—there is then another ‘me’ criticising, approving, and suggesting, and consciously planning, i.e., the reflective self.

I say to myself, “I hate to go to bed early,” and I hear, seemingly at the same instant, the response: “But it’s bad for you to stay up late.” I naively take this response to be a product of the original “I” that spoke the words, “I hate to go to bed early,” when actually these words are a commentary of the “me”; that is, of prior learned responses on the “I”s original words. The action, the speech, of the original “I” has been converted into an object, and is joined to a network of prior attitudes that serves as a commentary on it. The speech becomes part of a network of relations that provides a context for interpretation and action.

For Mead, I can be confused about my own mental processes; although my awareness of the “commentary” on my original words requires a new “I,” I presume that there is only the original. I assume this because I am not aware that there has been a “reply” from the “me,” and so instead believe that I am immediately aware of my own “I.” The “comments” of the “me,” which we become aware of as if they were taking place at the same time as the original action, actually are happening after the original action and require a new “I” to hear them. But they happen with such rapidity that they feel as if they are taking place at the same time as the original.
speech. I assume my "I" is transparent to itself in the immediacy of the present, when actually mediation is required for self-consciousness (or even consciousness of meaning) to arise. This clearly is a view that seeks to avoid the need for a transcendental ego. As a matter of fact, one way of approaching Mead's model of the "I" and "me" is to view it as providing a refined social interpretation of William James's stream of consciousness.

Mead does not believe that all of our actions entail a running commentary of this sort. In fact, he argues that we can be so involved in our activities in the world that no awareness of self occurs.40 For Mead, prior to an awareness of self and prior to the mind, there is the world that is there; and, from this world of immediacy, all of our intellectual and conscious activities ultimately arise.

This immediate experience which is reality, and which is the final test of the reality of scientific hypotheses as well as the test of the truth of all our ideas and suppositions, is the experience of what I have called the "biologic individual." ... I have termed it "biologic" because the term lays emphasis on the living reality which may be distinguished from reflection. ... [Actual experience did not take place in this form but in the form of unsophisticated reality.41

Mead views us as problem-solving creatures. Problems press us out of the immediacy of the world that is there into the realm of hypothetical behavior. Science, in this regard, is viewed by Mead as a methodical extension of the very typical human behavior of formulating alternative responses. Problems force us to reflect; and we can reflect on problems because we have learned how to become aware of our own responses, and alternatives to them, through the use of significant symbols. The ability to reflect on a problem—that is, to engage in one of the modes of thought known as reflection—owes much to the reflective ("mirroring") dimension of significant symbols.42 For Mead, our engagement with the world can be divided into reflective and nonreflective spheres; and the object-self appears only in the former. It is not clear that room can be found in Mead's thought for what several commentators—Sartre, for instance—have called prereflective (self-)consciousness; this (self-)consciousness would allow us to have a sense of self without invoking a Kantian or Husserlian transcendental ego, and yet would not bifurcate consciousness into nonreflective and reflective spheres, as Mead appears to do.43

There is an intimate connection between problem solving and the reflective character of significant symbols; and there also is an intimate connection between problem solving and novelty. Novel events can confront us with problems and novel responses can help supply solutions. It is worth noting in this context that novelty simply may be due to ignorance; that is, something appears new because we have been unaware of its existence or have not understood it. Mead, however, is convinced that there are truly novel events in the world and that our own responses are the locus of some of them.

We distinguish that individual who is doing something from the "me" who puts the problem up to him. The response enters into his experience only when it takes place. If he says he knows what he is going to do, even there he may be mistaken. He starts out to do something and something happens to interfere. The resulting action is always a little different from anything which he could anticipate.44

Because of both unexpected happenings in the world at large and the "I's" own unexpected and novel responses, problems occur and solutions are found.

The uniqueness of the self can be addressed from two basic directions for Mead. We can speak of it in terms of every individual mirroring his or her social group from a slightly different angle. In this respect, each one of us is something of a Leibnizian monad mirroring not the universe, but a community, from our own specific vantage point.45 However, Mead does not stop at this systemic notion of uniqueness, he goes on to claim that unique individuals arise because there are novel events in our world. If there were no such events, our universe would be a static Parmenidean one. "For a Parmenidean reality does not exist. Existence involves non-existence... The world is a world of events."46 Once again bypassing the metaphysical—in this case questions regarding the nature of events and their degrees of novelty—we can make the general claim that (novel) events transform individuals and also guarantee their uniqueness. However, before we rush off and treat Mead as something of a proto-existentialist with such remarks, we will have to investigate the manner in which the individual adjusts to novelty.

If the self is to contain a "pole" of novelty, how then are we to understand the self as a unity? One of the basic contributions of the generalized other to the existence of the object-self is that it allows
With the introduction of the "I," we may wonder how the self can maintain itself as a unity in the face of the disruptive force of the novel, especially given that foundationalist claims regarding the ego would be unacceptable to Mead. At this juncture we must turn to Mead's views on sociality to see how he replaces the static notion of a unified self with that of a unifying self, a self that can transcend the discontinuity or upsurge of the novel.

Mead views his concept of sociality as a way of thinking about systems and the changes that they undergo. Suppose that we have an ecosystem before us; for example, a small pond. The pond exists in a state of homeostasis until the introduction of a new organism or a significant mutation of one of the pond's organisms. If we assume that the new organism will be accommodated by the pond, we must also assume that there will be some modification of the original ecosystem. The old system will have to give rise to a new system; but until it does, both the pond and the new organism exist in something of a state of limbo. Mead would refer to this stage in the transformation of the pond as one of sociality. He argues that such stages are a basic feature of reality, both of the human social world and of nature in general.

When the new form has established its citizenship the botanist can exhibit the mutual adjustments that have taken place. The world has become a different world because of the advent, but to identify sociality with this result is to identify it with a system merely. It is rather the stage between and between the old system and the new that I am referring to. If emergence is a feature of reality, this phase of adjustment, which comes between the ordered universe before the emergent has arisen and that after it has come to terms with the newcomer, must be a feature also of reality.47

Mead insists that not only are there genuinely novel events, but that these events can modify and become part of the fabric of the universe. In support of this claim he would look to the random mutation and the role that it plays in the process of natural selection. Given that there are systems in the limbo of transformation and that individual organisms often pass through such a stage, sociality must be a basic feature of our world. "The social character of the universe we find in the situation in which the novel event is in both the old order and the new which its advent heralds. Sociality is the capacity of being several things at once."48 How then do these speculations regarding nature as a whole pertain to the unification of the self?

A return to some of Mead's claims regarding language acquisition should be of assistance. Let us assume for the present that we do not have to commit ourselves to Mead's metaphysical claims regarding novelty to explore how sociality and novelty play key roles in the development of the self. We learn to respond as the other has responded to vocal gestures, and this learning entails a good deal of anticipatory experience. I speak, I hear my own words, and I presume that the other will respond in the manner in which he or she has in the past. But the other does not always so respond; and this is a matter that is going to have to be taken into consideration by the individual. Each of us learns to accommodate this fact by learning to anticipate a multitude of responses from the other, and by learning to anticipate the unexpected, the new, the novel. (In this context the line between novelty due to ignorance and the "truly" novel can be ignored, for the impact of the novel on the development of the individual is crucial, and this can be addressed in pragmatic terms.) A novel response, which for Mead may be made by the other or by oneself, can be, and often is, integrated into the prior repertoire of signs. After the novel response is introduced, but before it is fully integrated, we can speak of a stage of sociality. Mead would have us conclude that states of sociality are basic to language acquisition. This, however, is but the beginning of sociality's impact on us; for the rest of the story we must turn to the process of integrating the novel in connection with roles and the self.

Roles and selves can be understood as systems of behaviors; although, of course, we must include here a very unique set of behaviors that transcends the merely behavioral; that is, language. My roles, and the capacity for seeing these roles as an integrated object-self, are dependent on my interactions with others. I must be able to "see" myself from the perspective of the other if I am to become cognizant of my own responses. To make the other's responses my own and to view myself from the perspective of the other, I depend on the other to respond in a consistent fashion to my gestures. The consistency of the other is crucial for both language and role acquisition.

One of the intriguing aspects of Mead's position raised by the issue of consistency is that it can be seen to turn on a notion of recognition, a notion that has a certain kinship with the idea of recognition so important in the Hegelian tradition.49 To comprehend any specific response, I must be able to view it from the
perspective of the other, and I must be confirmed in this view. The other provides verbal and nonverbal cues that allow me to know (or at least believe) that my responses are the proper ones, that what I think is the case, in fact is the case. If I have certain rudimentary language skills, I may be aware of my response, but I would not know if I accurately understand it until I can re-cognize it from the other's vantage point. We might regard the response of the other that makes this possible as an instance of recognition, or of proto-recognition, that is necessary for the acquisition of a language. We might then say that what is typically spoken of as recognition occurs when the other validates and confirms us in our roles. Eventually, we learn to turn from others who recognize specific roles to generalized others for confirmation of our actions and selfhood. My actions, and my self, then can be recognized by communities that transcend my immediate surroundings; for instance, the community of scientists or internationalists.

The importance of recognition, seen in terms of the consistency of the other's responses, highlights the challenge we face when confronted by the novel reactions of others. I must evaluate and integrate these responses into my prior repertoire of responses. In addition, I myself may react in new ways, perhaps due to a problem that I have never before encountered. These responses must then be integrated into the object-self that I have presumed is "me." But before such an integration takes place, there will be a betwixt and between that can be described in terms of sociality. This betwixt and between increasingly will become a feature of my world as I encounter new people, as I actively search for solutions to problems, and as I become more aware of myself as a self.

But the animal could never reach the goal of becoming an object to itself as a whole until it could enter into a larger system within which it could play various roles... It is this development that a society whose life process is mediated by communication has made possible. It is here that mental life arises— with this continual passing from one system to another, with the occupation of both in passage and with the systematic structures that each involves. It is the realm of continual emergence.

Our social interactions lead us to become increasingly aware of our sociality. In experiencing sociality we become sensitive to both the possibility and actuality of different perspectives, for sociality places us in the midst of alternative perspectives. We stand between the alternatives confronting us—perhaps, an old habit versus a new approach—and we can reflect on the alternatives. We redefine our selves in following new approaches or in modifying old ones.

The "stream of consciousness" itself can be interpreted in terms of sociality, for the "I" reacts in new ways; and these new reactions may be integrated into the "me." The phase of integration is one of sociality. Here, then, is where we can locate how the introduction of novelty does not permanently disintegrate the self. The self is not a fixed unity but, to use the jargon of our times, an open system. It fluctuates between a state of unity, when the "I" is quiescent in terms of novel responses and merely allows us to view the object-self, and one of adjustment, when novel responses place the self in a state of sociality. This state either gives rise to a newly unified object-self or results in a return to the old one (barring, of course, pathological or developmental crises). The individual becomes self-creative as he or she learns to utilize the state of sociality to engage alternative courses of action. For Mead, it is unnecessary to posit a transcendental ego to account for the integration of old and new behaviors. The "me" is a system; as such it adapts to certain novel events and rejects others, in a manner analogous to the ecosystem, which supports certain new organisms but not others.

Needless to say, Mead is far from reproach. Mead's model of the self and his views on social interaction raise a considerable number of questions, one of the more obvious ones being whether Mead's functionalist social psychology, in spite of its attempts to sidestep the metaphysical, can handle the strain that Mead's metaphysics of the novel brings to bear. Following on the heels of this, we might question the status of freedom in Mead's model, as the "I" appears to respond in its novel ways from behind our backs, so to speak, and only after it responds do we really come to appreciate its actions as part of the object-self. Or, we could cast our net a bit wider and wonder how his model can deal with the sort of conflict between self and others that Freud presents us with on the micro level and that Marx and the neo-Marxists present us with in terms of class and structure. A bit further down the road, we might wonder whether Mead's perspectivalism and rationalism sans transcendence can deal with the fulminations of a Lacan or the ruminations of the deconstructionists (or even Nietzsche himself). Questions abound—with a good number to come in the pages ahead. Perhaps, Mead and his commentators will manage to supply almost as many answers.