The Blackwell Companion to Major Social Theorists

Edited by

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George Herbert Mead was trained as a philosopher, taught in a philosophy department, and published primarily in philosophy journals, but his lasting impact was in the field of sociology. The fact that the science of society was still young at the time helps to explain this anomaly. The borderline separating the fledgling discipline from its academic neighbors was still unclear: sociologists did not have much academic turf to protect and felt free to borrow their insights from neighboring fields. The peculiar blend of Romantic idealism and pragmatic activism accomplished by Mead also had something to do with his popularity among social scientists, who found in his life work a model for balancing scholarship and advocacy at a time when America was awash in reform. Finally, it was the bold manner in which Mead married philosophical and sociological idioms that inspired his contemporaries. Mead labored hard to spell out the sociological significance of contemporary philosophical currents and, along with John Dewey, brought a radically sociological imagination to philosophical discourse. While his role in social science is well recognized, Mead’s original contribution to philosophy has only recently begun to be fully appreciated (Habermas, 1984; Joas, 1985; Aboulafia, 1986, 1991).

This chapter explores the interfaces between Mead’s philosophical and sociological thought, his effort to combine academic pursuits with political engagement, and the impact his work has had on social theory. The discussion draws on Mead’s publications, as well as his unpublished papers and correspondence gathered in the Joseph Regenstein Library, University of Chicago (the Mead Papers gathered in this collection are abbreviated below as MP). In his lifetime, Mead published several dozen professional articles and book reviews; they were partially reprinted in 1956 under the title George Herbert Mead on Social
Psychology (abbreviated thereafter as GHM) and in a 1964 collection Selected Writings (SW). Most of Mead’s professional writings appeared in print after his death. His lectures on social psychology were published in 1934 as Mind, Self, and Society (MSS). More notes on the subject were brought out in 1982 under the heading The Individual and the Social Self (TIS). Mead’s philosophical writings were collected in the 1938 volume The Philosophy of the Act (PA), the 1936 book Movements of Thought in the Nineteenth Century (MT), and the 1932 publication Philosophy of the Present (PP), based on the lecture series Mead delivered at Berkeley one year before his death.

Mead’s life and theoretical corpus have been the subject of several studies which variously inform present discussion (Natanson, 1956; Barry, 1968; Miller, 1973; Joas, 1985; Baldwin, 1986; Shalin, 1984, 1988). Without attempting to do full justice to his numerous contributions, this survey sketches Mead’s social theory and places it in historical context. The chapter starts with Mead’s biography and intellectual sources, moves on to his social and political theory, and concludes with reflections on Mead’s relevance to contemporary social thought.

The Biographical Context

Mead was born in 1863, at South Hadley, Massachusetts, into a family distinguished by its long roots in New England Puritanism and passionate commitment to Christian values. His father, Hiram Mead, served as a pastor at various South Hadley congregations. In 1869, Hiram moved to Oberlin College, where he was offered a chair in Sacred Rhetoric and Pastoral Theology at the newly established theological seminary. When he died in 1881, at the age of 54, the obituary noted “the quiet, aggressive energy of our brother,” his “positiveness of conviction and of self-reliance… modified by delicacy of feeling and gentleness of manner” (The Oberlin Review, May 28, 1881, pp. 212-13). Many poor students, the obituary went on, would have had a hard time completing their college work were it not for Hiram Mead’s generous help.

Mead’s mother, Elizabeth Storrs Billings, a woman noted for her learning and piety, also taught at Oberlin College, and before that, served as a top administrator at Mount Holyoke College. She personally saw to it that the young George would go through his daily regimen of prayer, study, and good works. It was her desire to see her son follow in his father’s steps that stirred Mead toward the Christian ministry. Even after Mead began to waver in his faith, he continued to push himself along this path for his mother’s sake. “My mother lives in me,” Mead wrote to Henry Castle, his college buddy and soul mate, on March 30, 1885 (MP, box 1, folder 1). “Her happiness is bound up in me. I sometimes wonder if it is not my duty to profess Christianity just for the infinite satisfaction it would give her.” Shy, studious, and deferential to his parents, Mead seemed perfectly suited to continue the tradition that featured several generations of clergymen on both sides of the family. This must have been his main option when he enrolled at Oberlin College, where he took up the classics, rhetoric, and moral philosophy, interlaced with mandatory prayer meetings. But
the Christianity Mead imbibed in his formative years was now undergoing rapid changes, struggling to meet the challenges of the late nineteenth century.

German historical criticism, which made its way into the USA midway through the century, raised doubts about the historical veracity of the Bible. These doubts were reinforced by Darwinism, which offered a radically different perspective on the origins of humankind. The downturn in the economic cycle further undermined the appeal of mainstream Protestantism. With rising unemployment and labor unrest, it was harder to sustain its individualistic tenets that predicated personal success on the individual’s moral fiber. The mounting economic woes opened the door to socialist doctrine. Throughout the rest of the century, socialism steadily won recruits on US campuses, pushing evangelical Christianity to the left. While mainstream Evangelicals tended to moralize socioeconomic problems by blaming them on assorted personal vices, the Social Gospel movement placed moral issues into a social context and scolded society for its failure to furnish conditions under which every one of its members could thrive. Shaping the human being in the image of God, according to the new evangelicals, meant more than cleansing his soul by prayer; it also required changing the social and economic conditions that corrupted his spirit. “Christian socialists should teach by fact and not by sentiments,” explained the Reverend W. D. P. Bliss (quoted in Shalin, 1988, p. 915), “by fact about city gas works, not mere talk about city brotherhood.”

These momentous currents intersected at Oberlin College, a Congregationalist institution renowned for its piety and abolitionist sentiments and proud of its place in the forefront of the movement toward socially minded Christianity. The Oberlin Review, the campus publication that Mead coedited in his senior year, was among the first in the nation to open its pages to the new teachings. It debated the pros and cons of entering the ministry, pondered the impact of Darwinism on the church doctrine, and urged its readers to take up the Social Gospel, an increasingly influential creed that spurred municipal reform, immigrant surveys, and the social settlement movement.

The new spirit planted the seeds of doubt in Mead’s mind about ministry as a vocation. He began to drift away from church teachings, though the process was slow and painful. As late as 1884, Mead confessed to Henry Castle, “I believe Christianity is the only power capable of grappling with evil as it exists now. There can be no doubt of the efficacy of Christ as a remedial agent and so I can speak of him as such. . . . I cannot go out with the world and not work for men. The spirit of a minister is strong with me and I come fairly by it” (MP, April 23 and March 16, 1884, box 1, folder 1). The decision to shun the priesthood was further complicated by his father’s untimely death. This tragic occasion placed Mead’s family in a precarious financial situation, forcing him to wait on tables in the campus dining hall and sell books door-to-door as a way to offset his tuition costs. Thoughts about the heartache his decision to pursue a secular career might cause his mother terrified the young man. Still, Mead found traditional faith increasingly untenable on intellectual grounds and unappealing as a profession. Indeed, the latter offered less prestige than it once did, as well as fewer financial rewards. Should I choose ministry, explained Mead to his friend (MP, letters to
Henry Castle, March 16 and February 23, 1884, box 1, folder 1), “I shall have to let persons understand that I have some belief in Christianity and my praying be interpreted as a belief in God, whereas I have no doubt that now the most reasonable system of the universe can be formed to myself without a God.”

The June 23, 1883, issue of The Oberlin Review contained a brief entry on George Mead, who was about to leave Oberlin: “Mead, G. H., Oberlin. Phi Kappa. Essayist at oratorical contest. Has supported himself in part. After graduation will make money, then? Born Feb. 1863.” His acutely felt need to support his family led Mead to try his hand as a land surveyor for the Wisconsin Central Railroad Company. This was the first time Mead ventured far beyond the genteel environs of his alma mater and got to see up close the people whom he hoped to teach Christianity. The experience proved unsettling. Mead liked the job, the opportunity to work outdoors, the chance to learn practical skills, but the contacts with the workers on his team left him confused. He was distressed by their callous ways and the little interest they showed in spiritual matters. “The engineer has been drunk off and on and mostly on for the last week,” complained Mead to Henry (MP, March 30, 1885, box 1, folder 1), “and between his quarrels with his wife and quarrels with his [fore]man and quarrels with his boarders he has kept himself and the camp in an uproar and has so sickened me that I have about lost my interest in him and creatures of his species.... A drunken man howling right outside your tent would destroy the concentration of Socrates and hideousness of the scene seems to slowly close in upon your soul... and yet I ought to find my work and real life interest in working for such men.”

Mead also tried to work as a tutor, but the rewards turned out to be equally meager. His charges did not care much for scholastic exercises, and neither did their parents, who were more concerned with the kids helping on the farm than with their progress at school. Mead’s failures as a tutor deepened his depression, renewed the doubt about his calling. “I am discouraged Henry. I seem so far off from anything worth living for and I do not see that I gain strength at all by which I can reach anything. ... Even Christianity looks dreary to me now. I have nothing to offer any woman that would give love an opportunity [to] envigorate my life. It is a sapless dying” (MP, February 8, 1885, box 1, folder 3).

The turning point came in 1887 when Mead joined his friend Henry Castle at Harvard and resumed his secular education. Since his early college years Mead relished philosophical speculations, but he did not see therein any realistic prospects for a career. For one thing, teaching metaphysics was not a common occupation at the time. Also, it appeared to be removed from the burning issues of the day, not a field for someone anxious to serve humanity. But as Mead discovered at Harvard, the academic field was changing fast, drawing its members into a politically charged discourse and publicly minded activism. He could see this in Josiah Royce, perhaps the most influential teacher in Mead’s student career, as well as in William James, a highly visible Harvard psychologist and philosopher. The spirit of reform that permeated the country in the 1890s made it respectable for the professorate to engage in social advocacy. Quite a few
academics found themselves involved in local and national politics; some toyed with socialism and supported radical reforms.

Mead's decision to pursue an academic career was reinforced by his experience in Germany, where he went in 1888 after winning a prestigious Harvard scholarship that allowed him to pursue doctoral studies abroad. He appeared to have had some help from William James, who took a keen interest in Mead's career, corresponded with Mead's mother, wrote reference letters on Mead's behalf, and was so impressed with the earnest, studious lad that he asked Mead to tutor his children. In Germany, Mead was struck by the active role professors played in public policy debates and the respectability socialism commanded in academic circles. His letters home are brimming with enthusiasm for reforms. He wonders how they could be transplanted to the States, talks about "opening toward everything that is uplifting and satisfying in socialism," urges his friend "to get a hold upon the socialistic literature — and the position of socialism here — in Europe," and deplores in the most sweeping terms American politics: "American political life is horribly idealess. . . . Our government in ideas and methods belongs so to the past . . . We had never had a national legislature in which corrupt motives in the most pecuniary form could be more shamelessly used than in the present" (MP, August 1890, October 21 and 19, 1890, box 1, folder 3). At one point, Mead appeared to be ready to jump into politics himself: "Life looks like such an insignificant affair that two or three or more years of utterly unsuccessful work would not seem to me in the slightest dampening, and the subjective satisfaction of actually doing what my nature asked for of infinitely more importance than anything else. . . . I mean that I am willing to go into a reform movement which to my eyes may be a failure after all; simply for the sake of the work" (MP, October 19, 1890, box 1, folder 3).

With his political imagination running wild, Mead was neglecting his academic studies. An ambitious thesis on the perception of space and time that he intended to write would never be completed. In 1891, Mead returned to the States, without a degree but with an offer from the University of Michigan to become an instructor in philosophy and physiological psychology. He also brought with him to Ann Arbor his newly wedded wife, Helen Castle, the sister of his dear friend Henry Castle, and the future heiress of the Dole Pineapple fortune. The move to Michigan proved auspicious in one more respect, for there Mead met his lifelong colleague and friend, John Dewey. Already a well-established academic, Dewey shared with Mead a puritanic upbringing, a strong desire to do good (his mother used to ask John, "Are you right by Jesus?"), and a passion for social democracy and philosophical discourse. Dewey's encounter with socialism came at about the same time as Mead's. In 1888, Dewey (1969, p. 246) speculated about the "tendency of democracy toward socialism, if not communism" and opined that "there is no need to beat about the bush in saying that democracy is not in reality what it is in name until it is industrial, as well as civil and political . . . a democracy of wealth is a necessity." The foremost public intellectual of his generation, Dewey would become a role model for Mead, who was struggling to reconcile his secular career with his spiritual longings. That Mead's thinking was still utopian and religiously colored
at the time can be gleaned from a rambling letter he wrote in June of 1892 to his parents-in-law: "[I] have been able to follow the connection that has gradually been established between abstract philosophy and daily life. I have learned to see that society advances — men get closer and closer to each other and the Kingdom of Heaven is established on the earth, so far as man becomes more and more organically connected with nature... [I]t seems to me clearer every day that the telegraph and locomotive are the great spiritual [engines?] of society because they bind man and man so close together, that the interest of the individual must be more completely the interest of all day by day. And America is pushing this spiritualizing of nature [and] is doing more than all in bringing the day when every man will be my neighbor and all life shall be saturated with the divine life" (MP, box 1, folder 3).

Around the time this letter was penned, the University of Chicago invited John Dewey to chair its Philosophy Department. Dewey accepted the offer on the condition that he could bring along his junior colleague. This gave Mead an opportunity to join a premier university in a city famous for its social experimentation. From the fall of 1893 until his death in April of 1931, Mead remained active in city politics. He served as a treasurer for the University of Chicago settlement, helped arbitrate the labor-management dispute in the Chicago garment district strike, and headed the Chicago Educational Association and the Immigrants Protective League of Chicago. In 1918, he was elected president of the City Club, a reform-minded organization of professionals and business people, a high honor that confirmed Mead's standing in the community and sealed his reputation as a public intellectual.

On the academic front, Mead's career was less spectacular. He did not publish enough to reach the top of the academic pecking order. In fact, he did not publish a book during his lifetime. Reasons for this are many. Mead found academic writing to be a painful exercise, so much so that the struggle to commit his ideas to paper would sometimes leave him on the verge of tears. Although Mead generated enough material to fill several volumes, he rarely felt satisfied with what he wrote, continuously reworking his ideas and putting off publication dates. The insights he was trying to communicate required a new theoretical framework, a language that was yet to be invented. "As I look back," Dewey observed on Mead's death (PP, pp. xxxvii, xxxix–xl), "I can see that a great deal of the seeming obscurity of Mr. Mead's expression was due to the fact that he saw something as a problem which had not presented itself at all to other minds. There was no common language because there was no common object of reference... He was talking about something that the rest of us did not see... The loss which American philosophy has suffered by Mead's untimely death is increased by the fact that there is every reason to think that he was beginning to get a command of his ideas which made communication to others easier and more effective."

Another trait distinguishing Mead and explaining his relative obscurity was "the combination of great originality and unusual deference to others which marked his personality... While he was an original thinker, he had no sense of being original. Or if he had such a feeling, he kept it under. Instead of bringing to
the front as novelties the problems which were occupying his mind (which they
were even as problems), he chose to link them to ideas and movements already
current” (Dewey, in PP. p. xxxvi). Indeed, Mead often credited others with
insights that were largely his own. His style, deceptively exegetic at times,
made many colleagues miss the originality of his thoughts, which came across
in Mead’s conversations more clearly than in his writing. It was during his
lectures on ethics, logic, philosophy, and social psychology that Mead articu-
lated his path-breaking ideas. Soft-spoken, somewhat retiring, but friendly in his
demeanor, Mead evoked warm feelings in those who were privileged to know
him personally, even though he tended to speak in monotone in the classroom,
sometimes repeated himself during lectures, and felt ill at ease with questions in
the classroom. Students flocked to his classes. His course on social psychology in
particular attracted attention at the university, drawing students from different
departments and establishing his reputation as an innovative thinker. At some
point, students hired a stenographer to capture his continuously evolving
thought. We owe them a debt of gratitude for preserving Mead’s ideas for
posterity.

**The Intellectual Sources**

Even after Mead embarked on an academic career, he continued to wonder
about his true calling and search for discursive props that could satisfy his
longing for spiritually meaningful existence. Several intellectual currents making
the rounds in his days imprinted themselves on Mead’s mind. One was Darwin-
ism, which placed human agency in a broad evolutionary context and demysti-
cied reason as a natural phenomenon that belongs to a wide behavioral
continuum stretching from the lowest biological forms to the highest ones.
John Watson, Mead’s colleague at the University of Chicago, radicalized Dar-
win’s premises, vowing to purge psychology from the remnants of spiritualism
and to turn it into an exact science of human behavior reducible in its entirety to
environmental pressures. Early in the twentieth century, Albert Einstein formu-
lated his relativist physics, which impressed Mead deeply and caused him to
rethink his social theory. Important though these developments were in shaping
his imagination, they came to Mead filtered through the dual prism of German
idealism and American pragmatism – the two intellectual currents that aggres-
ively tackled social issues and passionately advocated responsible being in the
world.

Transcendental – or as Mead calls it “Romantic” – idealism is a philosophy
that sets itself against dualism and tries to bridge the gap between mind and
matter, subject and object, freedom and responsibility. The reality is objective
because there are subjects who turn it into an object of their activity – mental
activity, that is, for idealists understood reason as primarily an affair of the mind.
In and of itself, reality is meaningless, indeterminate; an *a priori* scheme must be
imposed on it before it begins to make sense, an *a priori* scheme inherent in the
mind. Thus, the subject plays a constitutive role in generating reality. Yet it is
only dimly aware of this role, of the fact that reason continuously constructs reality as an objective and meaningful whole. Romantic idealists sought to rectify this situation; they set out to illuminate the transcendental categories humans use to construct their universe, and in the process make humanity realize its responsibility for the world they inhabit.

What Mead found so intriguing about this metaphysics is its sociological underpinnings. "In a very definite sense," he wrote, "we can speak of this philosophy as one which is social in its character" (MT, p. 147). We can see this already in Kant (1951, p. 137), who stipulated that every time the individual makes a generalization, "he disregards the subjective private conditions of his own judgment and reflects upon it from a universal standpoint (which he can only determine by placing himself at the standpoint of others)." The rational individual raises a claim on behalf of the entire community whenever he judges something to be the fact. Reason is not idiosyncratic, nor is it compelled by things themselves; it is guided by the spirit of the community, whose logic reason imposes on the outside world. Notice the peculiarly interactionist locution Kant uses to explicate the public nature of reasoning – placing oneself at the standpoint of the other. It thematizes the self which, according to Kant, is the mark of a genuinely human being: "That I am conscious of myself is a thought that already contains a twofold self, the I as subject and the I as object. How it might be possible for the I that I think to be an object... is absolutely impossible to explain, even though it is an indubitable fact; it indicates, however, a capacity so highly elevated above sensuous intuition that... it has the effect of separating us from all animals, to which we have no reason to attribute the ability to say I to themselves" (Kant, 1983, p. 73). What makes humans unique is that they can grasp themselves as objects without ceasing to be subjects, and they can do so by recourse to a priori categories, or, which is the same thing, by assuming the standpoint of the community. Yes, the self as an objective phenomenon is socially constituted. A moral being is a self that places itself in the shoes of other people and follows the golden rule: "Do unto others as you would like others to do unto you." Kant generalized this old biblical injunction into the theory of "categorical imperative," which bids us to do what stands to reason. Act in such a way that the principle underlying your conduct could serve as a law for the entire community, urged Kant, and the community in question would be rational and just. This precept is not only profoundly social, it is also radically democratic in its premise that every individual is a rational being entitled to speak on behalf of the whole community.

To be sure, Kant's thinking was sociological only in its implications. It is the humans' transcendental abilities that constitute society, Kant thought, and not the other way around. The a priori categories are universal, unalterable, and inherent in each individual mind; they represent not a particular group or society but the widest possible community – humanity as a whole. Still, the sociological dimension implicit in this philosophy was undeniable, and it came clearly to the fore in Kant's successors. Reality is constructed, Hegel agreed with Kant; things themselves are grasped objectively when they become objects for the mind; but the mind in question is not individual, nor are its a priori categories eternal. The
flesh and blood person is the mind’s immediate locus, but its a priori categories are historically emergent and socially derived. This is particularly evident in the case of self, which cannot grasp itself through immediate introspection and which implies a community: “The self perceives itself at the same time that it is perceived by others,” contended Hegel (1967, pp. 661, 229). “Self-consciousness exists in itself and for itself... by the very fact that it exists for another self-consciousness; that is to say, it is only by being acknowledged or ‘recognized’.” As seen from the Hegelian perspective, human history is an ongoing process that gradually brings humanity to self-consciousness, compels it to take stock of its taken-for-granted beliefs, and allows reason to reshape the objective world according to its own consciously chosen rationales.

Romantic idealists made an important discovery: something at the very core of consciousness must remain unconscious if consciousness is to do its job of apprehending objective reality. This unconscious transcendental hideaway is socially and historically emergent. For as long as individuals remain oblivious to the constitutive nature of their a priori judgments, the objective world they generate persists in its unyielding thingness. When they stop taking for granted their a priori categories and subject them to self-conscious critique, they are bound to disrupt the old structures and, to the extent that new a priori beliefs take hold of their minds, bring about a new reality.

These romantic ideas would reverberate throughout the human sciences, engendering new strategies for conceptualizing the bio-psycho-social processes. These strategies aimed at overcoming the dualism and bringing the macro-world directly in touch with the micro-world. The key metaphor of this era was the microcosm recapitulating the macrocosm. It is present in the psychologists’ concern for the unconscious, the biologists’ discovery of the genetical code, the linguists’ preoccupation with the universal grammar, anthropologists’ interest in cultural values — everywhere the search was on for an equivalent of the transcendental a priori enciphering the larger whole. Romantic idealism left its mark on sociology as well. Feuerbach, Marx, Stirner, Coleridge, Emerson, and other late Romantic thinkers would translate its message into the notions like “species being,” “social being,” “the self,” and kindred concepts undermining the dichotomy of personality and society and re-establishing humans as masters over their fate. “Above all we must avoid postulating ‘Society’ again as an abstraction vis-a-vis the individual. The individual is the social being,” wrote Marx (1964, pp. 137–8). “Just as society itself produces man as man, so is society produced by him. Activity and mind, both in their content and in their mode of existence, are social: social activity and social mind... Man, much as he may therefore be a particular individual... is just as much the totality – the ideal totality – the subjective existence of thought and experienced society for itself.”

In Europe, the transcendentalist strategy crystallized into interpretive sociology, with its constructionist agenda and signature attempt to telescope macro-structural phenomena into individual action. “Such concepts as ‘state,’ ‘association,’ ‘feudalism,’ and the like,” maintained Weber (1946, p. 55), “ designate certain categories of human interaction. Hence it is the task of sociology to reduce those concepts to ‘understandable’ action, that is, without exception to
The actions of participating individual men. The same strategy was realized in Simmel, who linked his famous question "How is society possible?" to the Kantian one, "How is nature possible?" His answer mirrors the transcendentalist logic: "The unity of society is directly realized by its own elements because these elements are themselves conscious and synthesizing units. ... The large systems and the super-individual organizations that customarily come to mind when we think of society are nothing but immediate interactions that occur among men constantly, every minute, but that have crystallized as permanent fields, as autonomous phenomena" (Simmel, 1971, p. 7; 1950, p. 10).

A similar strategy was at work in the United States, where Josiah Royce, James Baldwin, Charles Cooley, George Mead, and other minds laboring at the turn of the century sought to appropriate the Romantic legacy. They tackled the problem from a different angle, however. Whereas European sociologists focused on the a priori beliefs that motivate conduct and bind together individuals into a social whole, American philosophers and social scientists centered on self-consciousness as a locus of social control and societal change. As Mead (MT, p. 125) put it, "The Romantic philosophy pointed out that the self, while it arises in the human experience, also carries with it the very unity that makes society possible." The Identitätspolitische (yet another name for transcendental idealism) was interpreted here to mean that reality has to be processed through self-consciousness to emerge as an objective and meaningful whole. Whatever can be said about nature, the famous idealist principle "no object without a subject" sounds almost like a truism when applied to society: the self must identify with a social role before the latter comes to be an objective fact. There would be neither slaves nor masters without individuals acting the part. The structure of social roles found in any given group is inseparable from the structure of selves discernible in its members. The romantic intertwining of self and society had an added appeal to reform-minded Americans because it implied that human agency matters, that the self critically reflecting on its own taken-for-granted beliefs can bring about a more rational society. This activist creed, originally formulated in the aftermath of the French Revolution, fitted well with the Progressive spirit of the time: "When the Revolution came, many institutions which long seemed to be things in themselves, showed that they were nothing but phenomena. And when new constitutions and social orders had to be planned, the spirit of the age emphasized the fact that, at least in the social world, it is the office of human intelligence to impose its own forms upon the phenomena, and to accept no authority but that of the rational self" (Royce, 1919, p. 277).

The last statement belongs to Josiah Royce, the Harvard professor who, in a series of articles published in the 1890s, laid out an agenda that had much to do with Mead's research program. Two of these articles are particularly noteworthy as precursors of Meadian thought, one titled "The External World and the Social Consciousness" (Royce, 1894) and the other "Self-consciousness, Social Consciousness, and Nature" (Royce, 1895). What Royce (1894, p. 531) proposed here was that "neither vividness, nor intrusive resistance to our will, nor peculiarly insistent relation to our muscular experience, nor regular recurrence,
suffice to define the notes of externality as we now define them. It is social community that is the true *differentia* of our external world.” As an object in our experience, Royce argued, the self submits to this principle as well, for it is social in its origin and substance. Royce credited Romantic idealists in general and Hegel in particular for articulating this insight: “Self-consciousness, as Hegel loved to point out, is, in fact, a mutual affair... I am dependent on my fellows, not only physically, but to the very core of my conscious self-hood, not only for what, physically speaking, I am, but for what I take myself to be. Take away the conscious Alter, and the conscious Ego, so far as in this world we know it, languishes, and languishing dies” (Royce, 1894, p. 532; 1895, p. 468). Along with James Baldwin (1897), Royce speculated about role-playing among children as a mechanism for appropriating self-identity, the relationship between self-consciousness and mental illness, the self’s responsibility for its community, and similar subjects that pointed to a fruitful line of inquiry. Mead took it over and pushed it further along than any other scholar of his generation. Much as he was indebted to this tradition, however, Mead transcended it in at least one crucial way: unlike Royce, Mead looked at the dynamics of mind, self, and society not from the idealist but from the pragmatist standpoint. Along with Peirce, James, and Dewey, Mead fastened his intellectual enterprise to “the assumption of the pragmatist that the individual only thinks in order that he may continue an uninterrupted action, that the criterion of the correctness of his thinking is found in his ability to carry on, and that the significant goal of his thinking or research is found not in the ordered presentation of the subject matter but in the uses to which it may be put” (PA, p. 97).

That pragmatism and transcendental idealism are kindred currents goes without saying. The continuity between the two was acknowledged by all principal players in the American pragmatist movement: Charles Peirce, William James, John Dewey, and George Mead. In the words of James (1970, p. 133), pragmatism represents “a new *Identitätsphilosophie* in pluralistic form.” Both pragmatists and Romantics stressed agency, responsibility, and the constructed nature of reality, often making it hard to say where romanticism ends and pragmatism begins. There is, of course, one crucial difference, and it has to do with the way each philosophy conceives of human agency. Romantic idealists equate agency with conceptual reasoning continuously perfecting itself throughout the spiritual evolution; pragmatists define reason in post-Darwinian terms as an embodied conduct evolving through biosocial evolution. For Romantic idealists, the transcendental *a priori* is the domain of abstract thought and values; pragmatists transform it into an emotionally charged, biologically grounded, socially informed *a priori* that stands for habit or routine action in which humans are implicated before they can grasp it conceptually. Pragmatists endeavored to reclaim “the universe of nonreflective experience of our doings, sufferings, enjoyments of the world and of one another” (Dewey, 1916, p. 9). They keep reminding us that “mental processes imply not only mind but that somebody is minding” (PA, p. 69). “The mother minds her baby; she cares for it with affection. Mind is care in the sense of solicitude, anxiety, as well as of active looking after things that need to be tended” (Dewey, 1958, p. 263). Once the
cognitive abilities were reconnected to the body, reason lost some of its luster. “Reason, anyway, is a faculty of secondary rank,” observed Peirce (1976, p. xxi). “Cognition is but the superficial film of the soul, while sentiment penetrates its substance.”

This momentous shift in perspective marked a turning point in the evolution of pragmatism. First articulated by Charles Peirce, pragmatism found a new life in James’s Principles of Psychology (1890), a widely read volume which tied mental processes to action and brought into wide circulation the concept of social self. Mead and Dewey worked out a similar version of pragmatism in the 1890s, through intense discussions about the nature of the psychical that went back to their Michigan years. Like many of their colleagues at the time, Dewey and Mead sought to find answers to intractable metaphysical problems with the help of psychology, a fledgling discipline that broke away from philosophical discourse while retaining some of its concerns. It was during his preparation for the college course on physiological psychology that Mead realized that “the body and soul are but two sides of the same thing,” that “our psychical life can all be read in the functions of our bodies,” that “it is not the brain that thinks but our organs insofar as they act together in the processes of life” (MP, letter to the Castle family, June 1892, box 1, folder 3). Dewey came to see mind as minding via his critique of the stimulus–response schema. Of particular interest in this respect is his influential article “The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology” (Dewey, 1972, volume 5, pp. 100, 106), in which he demolished the notion that stimulus precedes conduct: “In any case, what precedes the ‘stimulus’ is the whole act, a sensori-motor co-ordination. What is more to the point, the ‘stimulus’ emerges out of this co-ordination... Now the response is not only uncertain, but the stimulus is equally uncertain; one is uncertain only in so far as the other is. The real problem may be equally well stated as either to discover the right stimulus, to constitute the stimulus, or to discover, to constitute, the response.” As the last statement shows, pragmatists were fighting their battle on two fronts: they sought to break with the idealist propensity to intellectualize human agency and, at the same time, tried to avoid the reductionist tendency inherent in behaviorism and positivism. The label “physiological psychology” under which pragmatists packaged their discoveries should not mislead us, for this was a nonreductionist, philosophically sophisticated, and, above all, social psychology that they strove to articulate.

Pragmatists were aided in their efforts to steer away from reductionism by the insight into the intimate relationship between reason and community. “The unit of existence is an act,” postulated Mead (PA, p. 65), “the act stretches from the stimulus to response,” but the act in question, Mead would hasten to add, is itself a part of a larger social undertaking: “What I have attempted to do is to bring rationality back to a certain type of conduct, the type of conduct in which the individual puts himself in the attitude of the whole community to which he belongs. This implies that the whole group is involved in some organized activity and that in this organized activity the action of one calls for the action of the other organisms involved. What we term ‘reason’ arises when one of the organisms takes into its own response the attitude of the other organisms
involved. . . When it does so, it is what we term 'a rational being’” (Mead, MSS, p. 334). Dewey took a similar sociological turn. “[M]an is essentially a social being,” he claimed from the outset (1969, volume 1, p. 232), “the nonsocial individual is an abstraction arrived at by imagining what man would be if all his human qualities were taken away.” To establish human agency as social to the core was important to pragmatists because this placed humans on the same level with society and accorded it a status befitting a truly democratic society. In such a society, individual actions count, each human being is a society in miniature, and the fate of the whole is intertwined with the fate of its individual parts. Here, again, pragmatists revealed their debt to romanticism and its favorite metaphor of man-the-microcosm, which resonated with the progressive creed: “If then, society and the individual are really organic to each other, then the individual is society concentrated . . . the localized manifestation of its life . . . its vital embodiment. And this is the theory, often crudely expressed, but none the less true in substance, that every citizen is a sovereign, the American theory, a doctrine . . . that every man is a priest of God. In conception, at least, democracy approaches most nearly the ideal of all social organization; that in which the individual and society are organic to each other (Dewey, 1969, volume 1, p. 237).

As time wore on, Mead and Dewey would increasingly shun Protestant rhetoric and Romantic shibboleth. In one of his last articles, titled “Royce, James, and Dewey in Their American Setting,” Mead distanced himself from his Harvard teachers, whose lofty idealism, he charged, was alien to the pragmatic spirit of America (SW, p. 391). Alas, he overstated his case. Mead and his colleagues owed more to their Romantic predecessors than they were willing to concede. Blended with Protestant yearnings and thoroughly Darwinized, Romantic teaching foreshadowed a theory that sought to explain America to itself and guide the changes ravaging society on the eve of the twentieth century. Pragmatism was the name of this theory, and it found in George Mead “a seminal mind of the very first order” (Dewey, in PP, p. xi), one of its most original interpreters.

The Theoretical Corpus

Any attempt to reconstruct Mead’s theory faces hurdles. His publications, lecture notes, written fragments, and correspondence give us a good idea about the evolution of his thoughts, but they do not convey a developed theoretical system. It is up to the interpreter to trace the missing links, to recover the systemic features binding together Mead’s theoretical corpus.

We also need to bear in mind that Mead was not a professional sociologist. A philosopher by training, he dabbled in physiology, psychology, pedagogy, political theory, and theoretical sociology. His thinking transgressed interdisciplinary boundaries, and this became a handicap once the rationalization process in academia began to favor autonomous disciplines whose practitioners looked askance at their colleagues venturing too far into neighboring fields. If an
interest in Mead is now growing, it is in part because the boundaries separating rival academic fields have grown porous and tolerance for alternative research styles is on the rise.

Another problem in reading Mead is his propensity to mingle analytical perspectives. It is one thing to explicate self in the evolutionary perspective, i.e. phyllogenetically, where any reference to “other selves” is illegitimate, and another to explain how children acquire selves ontogenetically, with a developed human society already in place and other selves lending themselves as the backdrop for conceptualizing the socialization process. A still different approach is called for when behavior is explained in situ or sitogenetically, when the researcher confronts fully minded individuals juggling their identities and transcending established norms. Mead often shifts gears, moving briskly between phylogeny, ontogeny, and sitogeny, and in the process confuses his interpreters.

One last difficulty to be mentioned is the unconventional nature of Mead’s theory, especially as it evolved in the last two decades of his life, when Mead endeavored to revamp his thoughts in line with the developments in nonclassical physics. This new tack brought Mead into an uncharted territory where he struggled to find language adequate to his insights and to formulate a pragmatist cosmology built on the notion of pansociality. Reconstructing this phase of Mead’s thinking is all the more important, given the attention social theorists now pay to neighboring fields and nonclassical perspectives.

While it can hardly do justice to Mead’s theory in all its richness and complexity, the following sketch highlights the sociological imagination that distinguishes American pragmatism and its contribution to our understanding of what it means to be human in this world.

**Evolution, relativity, and sociality**

Modern evolutionary theory has painted natural history as a process evolving in stages from inchoate blobs of matter to complex mechanical systems to elementary biological forms to higher primates, and then all the way to humans with their self-conscious conduct and rational organizational forms. Social scientists traditionally focus on the tail end of this evolutionary process and model their insights on those of natural science. Mead pretty much stood this approach on its head when he looked at naturalists’ discoveries through the social scientist’s eye. “The difficulty is found in the fact that the physical scientists present a situation out of which the human animal and his society arose,” observed Mead (PA, p. 606). “It has indeed been the procedure of science to explain society in terms of things which are independent of social characters and to represent the social situation as one that has been fortuitous and utterly unessential to its existence of that out of which it has arisen. [Our] undertaking is to work back from the accepted organization of human perspectives in society to the organization of perspectives in the physical world.”

What set Mead’s imagination off and led him into uncharted waters was the theory of relativity. Its author, Albert Einstein, displayed an uncommon curiosity about the way things appear when sampled from different perspectives. He used
to imagine how passing objects would appear to people inside the train and to those gathered on the train station; or else, he would place himself on the edge of a light beam and try to figure out whether the observer stationed on the nearby planet would experience the passing event in the same fashion as the one riding the light beam. Such practice, Mead realized, is a kind of role-taking that marks an intelligent creature simultaneously inhabiting several reference frames: “the relativist is able to hold on to two or more mutually exclusive systems within which the same object appears, by passing from one to the other... as a minded organism he can be in both” (PP, p. 81). This ability to be in several places at once engenders the possibility of different yet equally objective measurements for the same event. Whether light signals emanating from two distant objects were emitted simultaneously cannot be ascertained without the observer being positioned somewhere between the two sources of light. When observers change their positions, the objective reality as measured by the instrument will change as well. The moving body has as many objective readings for its mass, length, and momentum as there are inertial systems in which it is registered.

Relativist phenomena point to the vaguely social manner in which physical things interact with each other. Physical relativity reveals “sociality in nature which has been generally confined to thought,” “the social” in its most primitive form (PP, p. 63). Sociality signifies the simultaneous presence in more than one reference frame that alters the character of the event. “Relativity reveals a situation within which the object must be contemporaneously in different systems to be what it is in either... It is this which I have called the sociality of the present... Sociality is the capacity to be several things at once” (PP, pp. 63, 49). The fact that a body can have one mass in one inertial system and a different mass in another points to a protosocial situation in which an object enjoys multiple memberships in several systems exerting a cross-pressure on the thing. “I have referred to the increase in mass of a moving body as an extreme case of sociality,” wrote Mead (PP, pp. 52-3). A quality that a moving body acquires as a result of its multiple memberships is called “emergent” and the process that brings it into existence “emergence,” which Mead defined as “the presence of things in two or more different systems, in such a fashion that its presence in a latter system changes its character in the earlier system or systems to which it belongs” (PP, p. 69). Mead understood that relativist physics appeared to have boosted idealism, but he declined to endorse its subjectivist implications. Neither emergence nor relativity implies subjectivity, he contended; both are natural phenomena requiring no subject; reference frames belong to nature, not consciousness, which appears on the scene belatedly as a by-product of the increasingly more complex relativist phenomena.

The body traversing the mechanical universe does not “choose” among the possibilities it faces, though there is a measure of uncertainty as to where its trajectory will bring it in the end. Nor does it feel pleasure or pain while suffering through its permutations. It is not until the evolutionary process reaches the next stage that the physical body begins to feel its immediate surroundings. The ability to sense one’s way around turns the mechanical body into a biological organism, elevates mechanical motion to the level of purposeful conduct, and
transforms physical matter into organized environment inhabited by sentient creatures. This crucial step in evolution signifies the beginning of life, which Mead (PP, p. 69) explicated as “a process in which the individual by its action tends to maintain this process both in itself and in later generations, and one which extends beyond what is going on in the organism out into the surrounding world and defines so much of the world as is found in the sweep of these activities as the environment of the individual.” Environment is always someone’s environment, whether it is a particular individual or the entire species, and when different species appear on the scene, they bring with them an altered environment. There is “a relativity of the organism and its environment, both as to form and content... Emergent life changes the character of the world just as emergent velocities change the characters of masses” (PA, p. 178; PP, p. 65). As a food object, grass comes into being with certain kinds of animals, while the organism’s digestive tract adjusts to the changes in its environment. The important point that sets Mead’s approach to evolution apart from Spencer’s is that the organism does not simply adapt itself to external stimuli – it picks its stimuli through its sensitivity and action, such as food foraging, nest-building, mating behavior, and similar practices, and through its agency displays a rudimentary intelligence. “Stimuli are means, but the tendency, the impulse, is essential for anything to be a stimulus. This tendency is what marks intelligence. We find it in all stages, perhaps even below life, in crystals... Intelligence is the selection by the organism of stimuli that will set free and maintain life and aid in rebuilding the form” (TIS, p. 109). Life is relativity brought to a higher level; it signifies a more advanced form of sociality that brings choice into the universe, allows selection between alternative reference frames. It also brings a temporal spread within the organism’s purview, which spans the duration of the ongoing act and reflects the organism’s ability to foresee the outcome of one’s action. A sentient organism favors some reference frames over others, evading those threatening its existence and searching for the ones beneficial to its survival. “Each organism puts its frame of reference on the world” (TIS, p. 115), and in doing so, it maintains, expands, and transforms its environment.

The natural selection process changes its character with the onset of life. Now it features a conflict between competing reference frames favored by species striving to maintain their habitat. A reference frame that organism imposes on the world is called “perspective” – the term Mead borrowed from Alfred Whitehead to describe emergent characteristics that organisms confer on the world through their action and the adaptive changes that the organism undergoes in the process. “The perspective is the world in its relationship to the individual and the individual in his relationship to the world” (PA, p. 115). As species evolve, they bring into the world new perspectives, and as the range of their activity increases, so does their ability to control their environment. This control reaches a qualitatively new stage when the individual succeeds in “getting oneself into the field of one’s action,” when it emerges as an object within its own field of experience, when it becomes a “self” (TIS, p. 123).

Before the self takes its rightful place as the latest evolutionary emergent alongside mechanism and organism, the living creature must catch its own
reflection in other reference frames. Some of this proto-reflexive conduct is already apparent in lower biological forms endowed with senses, yet the animal is unable to switch perspectives or take up a different role at will, nor does it go about its role-playing in a systematic fashion. The animal cannot be another to itself because its biological, physiological, and psychological limitations do not allow it to move in and out of its reference frame. “A perspective can be recognized as such only when lying in the field within which it is no longer a perspective” (PA, p. 607). The ability to leave one’s perspective at will and consciously take the role of the other transcends the biological organization of perspectives rooted in heredity. The perspectives must be organized socially for the human being to engage in interaction with oneself, to bring one’s action under symbolic control. This breakthrough signifies that the organism has brought within its purview the social process as a whole: “The social organization of perspectives arises through the individual taking the role of the other within a social act whose various phases are in some sense present in his organism. . . . [B]y the social mechanism of thought and reflection, the individual transfers himself to another object and organizes the environment from the standpoint of the co-ordinates of that center, he selects another family of duration, another space-time” (PA, p. 610).

Individuals mastering this feat are conscious and self-conscious at the same time. They now have what is commonly referred to as mental life, the ability to move freely from one reference frame to another: “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 structure that each involves. It is the realm of continual emergence” (PP, p. 85). This transition presupposes the sociological organization of perspectives, and it signifies the arrival on the evolutionary scene of “minded organisms.” In Mead’s vocabulary, the term “mind” designates the ability to place oneself in different perspectives in a systematic fashion, to survey oneself from the standpoint of other individuals, to direct one’s actions with reference to the social act, and ultimately, to criticize and reconstruct this social act as a whole. “Mind is coterminous with a group. [It] is that part of experience in which the individual becomes an object to itself in the presentation of possible lines of conduct” (TIS, pp. 162, 177). The emergence of mind signifies a new stage in the evolutionary process “when the process of evolution has passed under the control of social reason. . . . Men in human society have come into some degree of control of the process of evolution out of which they arose” (PA, pp. 508, 511).

To sum up, Mead proposed a cosmology that took the category of the “social” as its fundamental principle. He recast evolution as a process that is accompanied by the growth in sociality, by the ability to occupy more than one reference frame or perspective at the same time. He envisioned physical relativity as a primordial form of sociality and conceived of self-consciousness as the highest known evolutionary form of relativity. In this pansocial reckoning, mind and matter are not juxtaposed to each other: the two are perennially evolving sides of the ongoing process of natural evolution: “mind as it appears in the mechanism of social conduct is the organization of perspectives in nature and at least a phase
of the creative advance of nature. Nature in its relationship to the organism, and including the organism, is a perspective that is there. A state of mind of the organism is the establishment of simultaneity between the organism and a group of events” (SW, p. 316). This theory suggests “a universe consisting of perspectives. In such a conception the reference of any perspective, as a perspective, is not to an absolute behind the scenes but from one perspective to another” (PA, p. 119). With this daring discursive turn, Mead raised a host of fresh issues and suggested new ways of conceptualizing problems that traditionally occupied social scientists. The new social theory, which Herbert Blumer would later label “symbolic interactionism,” brought into one continuum mind, self, and society as three aspects of the same process that calls for a thoroughly sociological treatment and that must be examined in concrete situations.

Mind, self, and society

Mechanism, organism, and the self are the key evolutionary emergents representing three stages in the development of relativity-cum-sociality. Each stage is ushered in by a set of agents who bring their own perspectives to bear on the world, turning it into an environment or a field of objects peculiar to themselves. “A social organism – that is, a social group of individual organisms – constitutes objects not constituted before…. Wealth, beauty, prestige and various other objects appear in this environment because of its determination by the human social individual, and these are the springs of conduct. The same may, of course, be said of the environment of the biological form. Food, danger, sex, and parenthood are all springs of action and are such because these objects are determined as such by the susceptibilities of the animal forms. Finally, physical objects are at rest or are in motion because of their determination of the here and the there of the percipient event” (PA, p. 201 and MSS, pp. 130). Central among the objects comprising the human environment is the “self” – an emergent property of the human body transformed by social interactions to a point where it grows conscious of its multiple presence in different systems and uses this awareness to conduct itself intelligently. As a minded organism, the self simultaneously inhabits mechanical, biological, and symbolic worlds. While all three are relatively autonomous from each other, they are tied together through multiple feedbacks. Intelligent behavior feeds back into the biological organism: it reshapes its central nervous system, rewires neural connections in the brain, alters the structure of affect. Germs, earthquakes, and interstellar calamities, in turn, remind the minded agents who pride themselves on being the evolution’s pinnacle that they are very much a part of the physical and biological realms. All evolutionary domains are tied together by the bonds of sociality. Strictly speaking, there is no reality that is asocial and no minded existence unburdened by the flesh.

Such is the logic underlying Mead’s general enterprise. It has several implications for social theory, none more important than this: social theory has to integrate self-conscious humanity with biological corporeality and mechanical physicality in an ecologically sensitive framework that leaves ample room for
qualitatively different evolutionary spheres. What are the other features distinguishing this pragmatist approach? It must be *dialectical, decentered, emergent, interactionist* and *process-oriented*.

Like all pragmatists, Mead avoids the dichotomies commonly found in social theory, such as nature and culture, behavior and institution, self and society. He adopts a dialectical strategy that places polar terms on equal footing and renders both contingent on each other. This essentially Romantic strategy makes superfluous questions like “What comes first, self or society?” Each is an abstraction representing a measured linguistic take on the unfractured process: “Human society as we know it could not exist without minds and selves, since all its most characteristic features presuppose the possession of minds and selves by its individual members; but its individual members would not possess minds and selves if these had not arisen within or emerged out of the human social process. . . . The organization and unification of a social group is identical with the organization and unification of any one of the selves arising within the social process in which that group is engaged” (MSS, pp. 227, 144). Mead follows a similar strategy when he talks about social institutions. He declines to elevate them into a separate realm of social facts. Dialectically understood, an institution is “nothing but an organization of attitudes which we all carry in us. . . . It makes no difference, over against a person who is stealing your property, whether it is Tom, Dick or Harry. There is an identical response on the part of the whole community under these conditions. We call that the formation of the institution” (MSS, pp. 211, 167). The circle involved in this reasoning is called “hermeneutical.” Polar sociological terms are explicated in this circle as flip sides of an ongoing process in which the individual is reproduced as a self-conscious whole while society is generated as a concrete totality of individual perspectives: “The organization of social perspectives in human society takes place through the self, for it is only the organization of a group as the attitude of the individual organism toward itself which gives rise to the self, and it is the activity of the self, so constituted toward and in the group, that is responsible for the peculiar organization of a human community” (PA, p. 625).

The dialectical strategy deployed by Mead results in a characteristically decentered view of consciousness, vaguely reminiscent of Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Mind*. Whereas traditional theory locates subjectivity within the organism and juxtaposes it to objective reality on the outside, pragmatist theory disperses consciousness widely and treats mind as a property of social structure. “The locus of mind is not in the individual. Mental processes are fragments of the complex conduct of the individual in and on his environment. . . . If mind is socially constituted, then 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” (PA, p. 372; MSS, p. 223). Individual mind is not a mental event; it is practical minding in the course of which the individual comes to terms with a larger social act. When the agent places itself in the group perspective and successfully completes a social act, it proves itself to be a mindful, conscious being. When individuals fail in their concerted effort to
mesh their action with that of a social group, they open themselves to charges of
being mindless or subjective: “The subjectivity does not consist in the experience
having the metaphysical nature of consciousness but in its failure to agree with a
dominant common perspective which claims the individual... The objectivity
of the perspective of the individual lies in its being a phase of the larger act. It
remains subjective in so far as it cannot fall into the larger social perspective”
(PA, pp. 610, 548). This is not to suggest that disagreement with the dominant
perspective automatically renders the act asocial and the individual involved
mindless. The mind embodies group spirit, particularly during the individual’s
early stages of growth, but if its growth is healthy, mind evolves into a critical,
reflective, and reconstructive agency that makes personal experience available to
others and compels the group to look at the world in a new way. The affairs of
the mind, therefore, are not inherently subjective; mind transcends the indi-
vidual, it can take up a new perspective at any time. Self-conscious mind is
society unto itself in its concrete historical manifestation, and this is precisely
why the mind’s activity has such a pervasive impact on society. “[T]he whole
nature of intelligence is social to the very core,” urges Mead (MSS, 141); its
immediate locus may be individual, but it reaches as far as society ever extends.
Mind’s raison d’être is to embrace what it is not, which is why it remains open to
novelty and serendipity. A decentered mind changes the world by changing itself,
by revamping the familiar structure of worn-out perspectives that no longer
allow the world to test its potentialities.

Pragmatist social theory zeroes in onto the world’s emergent properties.
Reality evolves, pragmatists contend, and it never ceases to do so, even at the
rudimentary stages of physical evolution: “Things emerge, and emerge in the
mechanical order of things, which could not be predicted from what has hap-
pened before” (MSS, p. 88). Unsuspected objects appear on the evolutionary
scene whenever a new agent is powerful enough to impose on the world its own
reference frame. While major evolutionary events are recorded in the annals of
science as epoch-making breakthroughs, minor metamorphoses or emergent
transformations abound in any given era. This is most notable in the environ-
ment populated by self-conscious creatures who are endowed with the extra-
ordinary capacity to change their perspective at will. “The self by its reflexive
form announces itself as a conscious organism which is what it is only in so far as
it can pass from its own system into those of others, and can thus, in passing,
occupy both its own system and that into which it is passing” (PP, p. 82). The self
is always on the move, reaching beyond itself, turning into another. At any given
moment it is poised to take a quantum leap from one perspective to another and
thereby cause an instantaneous – emergent – evolution in its environment.
Objective world is the world full of objects brought into existence by self-
conscious agency. “There is no self before there is a world, and no world before
the self” (TIS, p. 156). This Romantic locution is meant not to mystify but to
assert that multiple realities are normal, that ours is the world in the making,
that we dwell in what James called “the pluralistic universe” or the universe
contingent on our ability to identify with many a universal. A social universal is
real when enough individuals generalize their actions in its terms. The new terms
bring about a new reality and a new present. "Reality exists in a present" (PP, p. 32), says Mead. An indefinite article in this statement reminds us that there is no absolute time frame to measure the simultaneity of events in nature. With each emergent transformation, a different time structure appears that binds together those involved by a shared sense of the past, with the past understood as "a working hypothesis that has validity in the present within which it works" (PA, p. 96). According to Mead, the past is as hypothetical as the future; it changes with the perspective, with the practical task at hand. "Now the past that is thus constituted is a perspective, and what will be seen in that perspective, and what will be relations between the elements, depends upon the point of reference. There are an infinite number of possible perspectives, each of which will give a different definition to the parts and reveal different relations between them" (PA, p. 99). As the situation runs its course, so does its time structure. A situation has a duration, it endures as long as the agents involved in it keep joining perspectives, sharing a past, and working for a common future. Once the engaged selves assume different guises and adopt alternative time lines, the situation mutates, and so does the reality it engenders. Outside of the time-bound situation, reality remains indeterminate. It takes a quantum of action to salvage it from its indeterminate state, to frame it in definite terms, something that can happen only in the here and the now and that can be grasped only in situ and in actu.

The pragmatist emphasis on emergent transformations does not imply that pragmatist theory is indifferent to the world's structural properties. Society is very much a structure, according to Mead, and so is the "self as a certain sort of structural process" (MSS, p. 165). Society is comprised of groups, organizations, institutions, and suchlike historical formations that constrain individual action. Each such structural formation revolves around a bundle of privileged perspectives sustained by a power arrangement that reproduces an institutional past in the present and extends the status quo into the future. Recalcitrant individuals unwilling or unable to abide by the existing structure of perspectives will be punished. Yet all these social entities are interactional emergents rather than impenetrable castes. These are emergent universals that have to be brought into being anew with every situational encounter. Individuals are the ones who will ultimately have to choose a perspective and subsume themselves under a social universal. The self's capacity to leap from one universal to another renders social universals fuzzy, makes them appear less as solid "bodies" and more like overlapping "fields." The last term surfaces in Mead's writings, as it does in James and Dewey, who often speculate about "fields of interaction" and "relatively closed fields," and alert us to the changes a thing undergoes "according to the field it enters" (quoted in Shalin, 1986a, pp. 16–17). This is indeed an apt metaphor for the interactionist outlook on social structure. It bids us to look at society as a vast sea of intermeshed fields populated by conscious selves ever ready to make a quantum leap from one symbolic reference frame to another. It is this incessant coming and going, entering and departing, identifying with and dumping the role that is at the heart of social dynamics, as seen from the pragmatist viewpoint. "Membership," correlative, is more of an achievement than it is an ascription in this pragmatist universe, an on-again/off-again affair.
or an “actual occasion” (Alfred Whitehead). Social structure makes itself felt as an ongoing process which ebbs and flows, as group members wander through perspectives and juggle their identities. While the social universe comprised of perspectives is undeniably real, it derives its reality from the particulars who must unlock these perspectives and situate themselves in its time horizons. A towering presence in every individual’s experience, society is but a structure of competing time-lines and emerging identities. All power in society is ultimately dependent on the power to universalize the particular and to particularize the universal.

To sum up, Mead’s pragmatist theory invites us to look at society as a pluralistic universe at the core of which are perspectives managed by self-conscious individuals. These perspectives are structured, but the structures in question are in flux – they never cease to emerge in the here and now of situational encounters during which humans haggle over the past, present, and future. In this quantum-like world, structure is a processed time or time processing. “You cannot have a process without some sort of a structure, and yet structure is simply something that expresses this process as it takes place” (MT, p.164). Social structure manifests itself in a regime of simultaneities that gives disparate individuals a past to share, a present to grapple with, and a future to strive for. An emergent community thus formed persists as long as a sense of it continues to nourish its members. Intermittent and elusive as this structural process must be, it is the primary focus of interactionist sociology.

Intelligence, conversation of gestures, and significant symbol

Now we turn to evolutionary social psychology, an important part of Mead’s theoretical corpus in which he traces consciousness, language, and self-regarding conduct to their evolutionary precursors. We saw earlier how Mead tackled the problem philosophically by hitching consciousness to relativity: “If we accept those two concepts of emergence and relativity, all I want to point out is that they do answer to what we term ‘consciousness,’ namely, a certain environment that exists in its relationship to the organism, and in which new characters can arise by virtue of the organism” (MSS, pp. 141, 330). This philosophical insight was fleshed out further, with the substantive input coming from physiology and psychology. One scientific current exerted an especially strong influence over Mead’s research agenda: “behaviorism,” a radical teaching championed by John Watson, who favored behavior-oriented inquiry over the more traditional, introspection-based psychological research. Mead accepted the notion that psychology must approach its subject from the standpoint of behavior, yet he rejected the reductionist strictures prohibiting references to consciousness. In particular, Mead parted company with behaviorists on what qualifies as “stimulus.” For Watson, stimulus was an event existing prior to and independent from the response it elicits. Mead cast stimulus as a by-product of an ongoing action, as a phase in the larger act in which the actor selects among many possible perspectives those best answering its current agenda. What is or is not a stimulus cannot be decreed by an outside observer, but must be determined in situ and in
control its conduct. Our social psychology "is behavioristic," explained Mead (MSS, p. 8), "but unlike Watsonian behaviorism it recognizes the parts of the act which do not come to external observation, and it emphasizes the act of the human individual in its natural social situation." In keeping with the behaviorist agenda, however, Mead sought to trace consciousness to animal conduct in its advanced social forms.

Several conditions must be met before instinctive behavior evolves into mindful conduct and the organism seizes itself as an object in its own experience. First of all, a highly sophisticated physiological apparatus has to be in place that enables the organism to delay its immediate response. Second, the cooperation between individual members of the species must reach a high degree of organization, with every member assigned a place in its group and compelled to carry out a part in the larger social act. Third, a prolonged period of infancy is required, during which youngsters practice role-taking, build their sense of self, and learn to measure their conduct by a collective yardstick. Fourth, self-consciousness calls for the forms of communication based on the language of significant symbols. And, fifth, a new regime of managing perspectives has to emerge that separates the sociological principle of organization from the biological one.

Already in graduate school Mead took a keen interest in the physiology of social conduct. He closely followed the developments in brain research and was fascinated with the workings of the central nervous system, in which he saw a biological network uniquely suited for mapping social relations. Its sociological import, Mead surmised, is to be found in the progressively expanding neuron paths that enable the organism to anticipate the future course of action and control its conduct. "[I]t is the function of the central nervous system in the higher forms to connect every response potentially with every other response in the organism... The central nervous system, in short, enables the individual to exercise conscious control over his behavior. It is the possibility of delayed response which principally differentiates reflective conduct from nonreflective conduct" (PP, p. 125; MSS, p. 117).

Another biological factor favoring humans in their evolutionary ascent is the hand. The versatility that manipulation added to behavior gave humans an edge in the animal kingdom. Along with the hand came tool-making. "Man is essentially a tool-using animal," stressed Mead, "man's hand provides an intermediate contact that is vastly richer in content than that of the jaws or the animal paws... Man's implements are elaborations and extensions of his hands" (PA, p. 471; MSS, 363). As tool-makers, humans expand their ability to reshape their environment, and to the extent that they master the ultimate tool — symbolic language — they gain control over their own species and affect the direction of evolution itself. "The human hand, backed up, of course, by the indefinite number of actions which the central nervous system makes possible, is of critical importance in the development of human intelligence... Man's hands have served greatly to break up fixed instincts... Speech and the hand go along together in the development of the social human being" (MSS, pp. 249, 363, 237). This last point needs to be elaborated further.
Humans are not the only intelligent creatures in the universe. Intelligent behavior is widespread among animals. However, intelligence on the subhuman level differs from what Mead variously calls “social intelligence,” “rational intelligence,” or “reasoning conduct” found among tool-making animals. At the level of rational intelligence, action is differentiated into several increasingly autonomous phases: “impulse,” “perception,” “manipulation,” and “consummation.” Impulse begets image, manipulation tests the percept, purposeful conduct consummates action and satisfies the original drive. It is an impulse – hunger, danger, sexual arousal, or any other drive – that sets the act in motion and makes an object appear in experience. “The starting point of the act is the impulse and not the stimulus” (TIS, p. 114). Impulse converts random events into a definite “situation,” turns chaotic reality into “a world in which objects are plans of action” (SW, p. 276). A situation registers in the actor's experience as an “image,” “percept,” or “perceptual object” that invites “manipulation” – testing of experienced objects via direct contact. Tactile experience either reaffirms the reality of a distant perception or calls it into question, suggesting new perceptual hypotheses. The action's final phase is “consummation” – behavior that appropriates the thing and satisfies the organism’s original impulse. “We see what we can reach, what we can manipulate, and then deal with it as we come in contact with it. [The animal’s] act is quickly carried to its consummation. The human animal, however, has this implemental stage that comes between the actual consummation and the beginning of the act” (MSS, p. 248). What makes tool-aided behavior so important in the history of intelligence is that it enriches the range of perceptual objects in experience, adds ideas to our mental repertoire, expands time horizons open to the individual, and broadens the spatial properties of the environment within which humans can act: “Ideation extends spatially and temporally the field within which activity takes place” (PP, p. 88). Ideational processes free conduct from its blind reliance on biological drives. The organism that delays its impulsive response and methodically tests its percepts takes a giant step toward rational intelligence. “[R]easoning conduct appears where impulsive conduct breaks down. When the act fails to realize its function, when the impulsive effort to get food does not bring the food, where conflicting impulses thwart each other – here reasoning may come in with a new procedure that is not at the disposal of the biological individual” (MSS, p. 348).

The final step on the road to rational intelligence requires the introduction of symbolic tools into the behavioral repertoire, something that happens to primates involved in complex social interactions. Mead takes great pain to emphasize that this advance implies group behavior. Reason originates in collective behavior implicating the entire community, where every member has a role to play, all roles are potentially interchangeable, and each bit player can, in principle, substitute for the other. On that definition, elaborate social organizations found in insect societies do not qualify as rational. Individual members in such communities are biologically programmed to do their parts – they are physiologically unable to exchange their roles. A honey bee genetically fit to scout a field for pollen cannot collect it, the one that brings it back to the beehive does not know how to process it, the honey-producing specimen would not bear
offspring, the queen bee is incapable of defending itself, and the fighting bee can do little more than sting, after which it may die. Mead calls this pole of social differentiation “individual or physiological,” and contrasts it with the “personality” or “institutional pole,” which presupposes the basic physiological identity of individual members and the fundamental interchangeability of social roles (MSS, pp. 227–34). The latter organizational principle can be traced to collective behavior “in which one organism, in a group of organisms, by its conduct stimulates another to carry out its part in a composite co-operative act... the individual act [is] a part of the larger social whole to which it in fact belongs, and from which, in a definite sense, it gets its meaning” (PA, p. 189; MSS, p. 8). The various strands of individual conduct implicated in this communal act are, in Mead’s vocabulary, “social roles,” while the individuals who weave their actions into the tapestry of a group exercise are “personalities” or “social actors.” “A person is a personality because he belongs to a community, because he takes over the institutions of that community into his own conduct” (MSS, p. 162). Mindful conduct, then, consists in acting according to a collective script, with every player ready to step in and take the role of other actors in a group: “The evolutionary appearance of the mind and intelligence takes place when the whole social process of experience and behavior is brought within the experience of any one of the separate individuals implicated therein, and when the individual’s adjustment to the process is modified and refined by the awareness or consciousness which he thus has of it” (PA, p. 189; MSS, pp. 8, 134).

What makes mind different from other brands of intelligence is that it is mediated by symbolic tools. These tools immensely expand time horizons, give symbol makers a grip on their selves, and turn language users into responsible moral creatures. No matter how smart animals might be, they do not have reason or rational intelligence. Only symbolically mediated conduct can properly be called rational: “Reason is the reference to the relations of things by means of symbols. When we are able to indicate these relations by means of these symbols, we get control of them and can isolate the universal characters of things, and the symbols become significant. No individual or form which has not come into the use of such symbols is rational” (PA, p. 518). Philogenetically, symbolic communication grows from a nonsymbolic one, which Mead characterizes as “the non-significant conversation of gestures.” Each participant engaged in this conversation keeps a close watch on everyone else’s movement, posturing, facial expression, and other body language signs communicating behavioral attitudes. “Gesture” is the term Mead adopted from the psychologist William Wundt to designate a behavioral act in its early stages, “which serve as the cues or stimuli for the appropriate responses of the other forms involved in the whole social act” (PA, p. 448). Whatever the gesture’s social significance, it is not initially available to the actor (the point on which Mead parted company with Wundt). It is only when gestures become transparent to actors themselves that they can be termed “conscious,” the conduct involved “rational,” and the communication accomplished “conscious conversation of gestures.” Mead calls gestures purposefully used to communicate and identical in meaning to all parties involved “significant symbols.” The totality of symbols mediating inter-
actions in a society at any given historical stretch is "language." Mead is quick to point out that, from the evolutionary-behavioristic standpoint, meaning is not a subjective event but a social relationship between various components of group behavior: "Meaning is thus a development of something objectively there as a relation between certain phases of the social act; it is not a psychical addition to that act and it is not an 'idea' as traditionally conceived. A gesture by one organism, the resultant of the social act in which the gesture is an early phase, and the response of another organism to the gesture, are the relata in a triple or threefold relationship [that] constitutes the matrix within which the meaning arises, or which develops into the field of meaning. . . . Language is ultimately a form of behavior and calls for the rationally organized society in which it can properly function" (MSS, p. 76). For all its behavioral grounding, significant symbol is a qualitatively new stage in the evolution of intelligence that coincides with the emergence of thinking and that makes the social organization of perspectives possible. Symbols transformed intelligent behavior peculiar to animals into rational, self-conscious conduct separating human beings from their most developed ancestors.

To summarize, Mead traces rational intelligence and consciousness to the changing physiology, hand manipulation, tool-making, and role-playing that bring into experience a wide array of new perceptual objects with which humans can experiment in a systematic fashion. The most consequential tool that appears along this evolutionary path – significant symbol – weakens the organism's dependence on its biological drives and opens the door to self-conscious social control. A system of significant symbols is language, and "language [is] a principle of social organization that has made the distinctly human society possible" (MSS, p. 260). Symbolic communications bring rationality into the world and turn members of a community into moral creatures responsible for their conduct. "It is as social beings that we are moral beings" (MSS, p. 385). Community-minded, language-mediated, self-referential conduct is socially rational, and society it engenders is rational – human – society.

Play, game, and the generalized other

Mead is perhaps best known for his theory of the self. His writings on its genesis, structure, and function shift analytical focus from the phylogenetic inquiry to the ontogenetic one, which no longer prohibits references to consciousness, language, and social institutions. Ontogeny deals with children growing up among adult members of their species. While most of what Mead has to say on the subject falls within this theoretical perspective, we should bear in mind how such sociopsychological concepts as "role-taking" and "generalized other" fit into his pragmatist cosmology.

The self is a special case of relativity designating an organism that is aware of its multiple relationships with other things in the pluralistic universe. The body that has reached this evolutionary stage dwells in its multiple perspectives consciously, chooses among affiliations at will, and knows beforehand the role it takes. From the cosmological standpoint, "generalized other [is] the object as
expression of the whole complex of things that make up the environment. . . . The generalized attitude of the other is an assumption of a space that is absolute over against the relativity of individual organisms." (PA, pp. 193, 310). The generalized other is a totality of perspectives constituting the situation in someone's experience at any given moment, and role-taking is the mechanism that allows the individual to explore the otherness of the world by assuming emotionally charged attitudes and becoming another to oneself. We can see this most vividly in children engaged in play-acting. The individual takes the role of a mother, of a dog, of a train; one child claimed to be scrambled eggs! No object is immune from being enacted by a human fledgling exploring the meaning of things in their relationship to the self and the self in its relationship to the world. In infancy and early childhood, all things appear alive in experience; it is only later that children learn to differentiate between physical and social objects and reserve role-playing for expressly social occasions: "The physical object is an abstraction which we make from the social response to nature. We talk to nature; we address the clouds, the sea, the tree, and objects about us. We later abstract from that type of response because of what we come to know of such objects. [Nature] acts as it is expected to act. We are taking the attitude of the physical things about us, and when we change the situation nature responds in a different way" (MSS, p. 184). The whole universe arising in experience is, thus, social through and through. It is in this world that the child "is gradually building up a definite self which becomes the most important object in his world" (MSS, p. 369). Unlike objects experienced by intelligent animals, the self belongs to the realm of signification and implies an elaborate group life in which the individual takes active part. The following statement captures the thrust of Mead's theory: "The individual experiences himself as such, not directly, but only indirectly, from the particular standpoints of other individual members of the same social group, or from the generalized standpoint of the social group as a whole to which he belongs. For he enters his own experience as a self or individual, not directly or immediately, not by becoming a subject to himself, but only in so far as he first becomes an object to himself just as other individuals are objects to him or in his experience; and he becomes an object to himself only by taking the attitudes of other individuals toward himself within a social environment or context of experience and behavior in which both he and they are involved" (MSS, p. 138).

Play-acting is the form in which the self grows in ontogenesis. Children engaged in role-taking accomplish several things. They explore the social structure, find their place in a group, master rule-bound conduct, face punishment for rule-breaking, learn to negotiate conflicting identities, and discover the meaning of creativity. Mead singles out two critical stages in this process: "play" and "game." At the play stage, children act in a way resembling things and people immediately surrounding them. No partners are necessary for such an exercise, for all the parts are played by the same person. "The child becomes a generalized actor-manager, directing, applauding, and criticizing his own roles as well as those of others" (PA, p. 374). The youngsters commonly address themselves in the third person or invent "the invisible, imaginary companion which a good
many children produce in their own experience” (MSS, p. 150). At this early stage, the child’s sense of self is quite rudimentary, reflecting more or less superficial characteristics of those who stimulate the child’s imagination the most. With time, this self begins to exhibit a greater coherence, as the child connects several disparate parts and navigates between them with confidence. “In the play period the child utilizes his own responses to these stimuli which he makes use of in building a self. The response which he has a tendency to make to these stimuli organizes them. He plays that he is, for instance, offering himself something, and he buys it; he gives a letter to himself and takes it away; he addresses himself as a parent, as a teacher; he arrests himself as a policeman” (MSS, pp. 150–1).

The situation changes when imaginary companions are replaced with real partners who interact with a child according to the rules of the game. The self corresponding to this stage is more coherent, internally differentiated, and it is increasingly generalized to reflect the social act as a whole. Playing at being someone does not require a clear-cut time perspective; the past and future are here ill-defined. The game, on the other hand, brings into experience a bigger chunk of environment and offers a far more elaborate time frame where the legitimate past and possible future outcomes are spelled out in vivid details. “The child is one thing at one time and another at another, and what he is at one moment does not determine what he is at another,” articulates Mead on the transition from play to game. “He is not organized into a whole. The child has no definite character, no definite personality.... But in a game where a number of individuals are involved, then the child taking one role must be ready to take the role of everyone else.... The nature of the game is such that every act in the game is determined and qualified by all the other acts. This is expressed by the rules of the game, and implies in each individual a generalized player that is present in every part that is taken” (MSS, pp. 159, 151; PA, p. 374). Game is no longer a childish matter; it is a serious learning exercise modeling responsible conduct in the adult world. The child engaged in game activity “is becoming an organic member of society. He is taking over the morale of that society and is becoming an essential member of it” (MSS, p. 159). A society, after all, is but a series of games adults play, games governed by certain rules, offering tangible stakes, punishing the losers and showering benefits on the winners. To play these high-stake games, humans must learn how to speak the right language, sign themselves in proper terms: “The alley gang has its vocabulary, and so does the club” (TIS, p. 151). Participants in the game also need to know how to juggle identities competing for their attention, to negotiate their membership in various interactional fields, to integrate their disparate selves into a more or less coherent whole, and to bring their action into line with the generalized perspective of the entire community.

“Concrete other,” “specific other,” “organized other,” “generalized other” – these are the terms Mead uses to describe the range of individual and collective others whom we encounter on the road to a full-grown selfhood. The expression “significant other,” widely used today, was coined by Harry Stack Sullivan, but it goes back to Mead’s concept of a person on whom we model our conduct. The term “generalized other” designates a play team or community of indefinite size
whose perspectives have been incorporated into the individual's self. "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.... It is in the form of the generalized other that the community exercises control over the conduct of its individual members; for it is in this form that the social process or community enters as a determining factor into the individual's thinking" (MSS, p. 154-5). The self fashioned after the generalized other and guided by the group rules is an instrument of social control. By providing its members with selves and minds, society equips them with an ability to criticize their own conduct and to correct their actions accordingly. Self-regarding conduct is by its nature self-critical, the person possessing self-consciousness has a critical attitude built into his or her conduct. "Thus he becomes not only self-conscious but also self-critical; and thus, through self-criticism, social control over individual behavior or conduct operates by virtue of the social origin and basis of such criticism. That is to say, self-criticism is essentially social criticism, and behavior controlled by self-criticism is essentially behavior controlled socially" (MSS, p. 255).

It would be wrong to infer from the above that selfhood turns humans into social robots forever chained to their predetermined identities. Those partaking in numerous symbolic fields are bound to experience a cross-pressure on their identities, which routinely bump against each other and force on the actor tough choices. The conflict is endemic to the social process, and this conflict is inscribed in the selves that emerge in its course. "A highly developed and organized human society is one in which the individual members are interrelated in a multiplicity of different intricate and complicated ways whereby they all share a number of common social interests, yet, on the other hand, are more or less in conflict relative to numerous other interests.... Thus, within such a society conflicts arise between different aspects or phases of the same individual self,... as well as between different individual selves" (MSS, p. 307). Which particular interest or affiliation wins in any given encounter is problematic; not even the self-conscious individual can be entirely sure how the situation will break out in the end. Self-regarding behavior is creative, either by serendipity or by design. It is also critical and reconstructive; to the extent that self-conscious actions jolt the situation from its original course, they serve not only as an instrument of social control but also as a springboard for social change: "Human society, we have insisted, does not merely stamp the pattern of its organized social behavior upon any one of its individual members, so that this pattern becomes likewise the pattern of the individual's self; it also at the same time, gives him a mind, [and] his mind enables him in turn to stamp the pattern of his further developing self (further developing through his mental activity) upon the structure or organization of human society, and thus in a degree to reconstruct or modify in terms of his self the general pattern of social or group behavior in terms of which his self was originally constituted" (MSS, p. 263).

To conclude, the self is a social structure that appears on the evolutionary scene alongside rational intelligence and symbolic communication. It evolves in stages, beginning with the play stage during which the child tests the otherness of
the world by assuming emotionally charged attitudes and imitating animate and inanimate objects, followed by the game stage where the self begins to exhibit a structure reflecting a set of rules. “The game, in other words, requires a whole self, whereas play requires only pieces of the self” (TIS, p. 145). A mature self takes the attitude of the generalized other—a set of privileged perspectives binding together group members. To those who measure their actions by the same generalized other and feel bound by the same reference frame, the emerging structure might appear absolute. Yet this generalized perspective, institutionally privileged though it might be, is relevant only in a given situation and to the present set of participants. The game goes on as long as people keep on playing by its rules; the situation is restructured when those involved take on different disguises and switch to other symbolic fields. While it comes into being within a particular society, the self is not fettered by its symbolic confines. Self-conscious agents criticize the existing perspectives, dump the familiar guises, and conceive new communities endowed with alternative structures of past, present, and future. To understand these dynamics, we need to move beyond phylogeny and ontogeny and immerse ourselves in sitogeny—a theoretical perspective that examines embodied selfhood and the emergent evolution of human society.

**Self, biological individual, and the “I”—“me” dialectics**

We saw earlier how human agency gradually emancipates itself from its physical limitations by substituting the social organization of perspectives for the biological one, rational action for impulsive reaction, nonsignificant conversation of gestures for significant communication, and time-conscious conduct for behavior with undifferentiated time-structure. The term “supplementing” is, actually, more appropriate here than “substituting,” for the sociological organization of perspectives does not cancel the patterns of sociality found in phyletically more primitive forms. Although the evolutionary process gives humans the hitherto unknown measure of control over their destiny, it does not turn them into disembodied creatures subsisting in purely symbolic space. The human being is very much a body weighed down by its physical, biological, physiological, and psychological characteristics, all of which exert a continuous influence over individuality and critical reflexivity.

“The line of demarcation between the self and the body is found, then, first of all in the social organization of the act within which the self arises, in its contrast with the physiological organism,” maintains Mead (PA, p. 446). Yet he is quick to point out that “the self does not consist simply in the bare organization of social attitudes,” that it “is a social entity that must be related to the entire body,” that “Walking, writing, and talking are there as physiological processes as well as actions of the self,” and that, consequently, it “would be a mistake to assume that a man is a biologic individual plus a reason, if we mean by this definition that he leads two separable lives, one of impulse or instinct, and another of reason” (TIS, p. 148; MSS, pp. 173, 347). Society blends together mechanism, organism, and the self in a complex system of feedbacks that tie together the organizational principles governing perspectives in each
evolutionary domain. The question that particularly interested Mead was how the body responds to its selfhood and how the self manages its body. The Freudian solution to the self-body problem gave primacy to unconscious instincts over self-consciousness. Mead, who was very much aware of this solution, rejected it on the ground that Freud underestimated the extent to which the social forces transform our impulsive life. Reason is not just a cipher for immutable drives, a rationalization disguising primordial impulses, nor is society merely a censor reigning in the recalcitrant soma. The societal influence goes far deeper. Society remolds the body's circuits, reshapes the structure of affect, and supplies human agents with symbolic tools that help them mobilize bodily resources for the public good. At the same time, society never obliterates impulses and stamps out emotions. The body or biological individual is a vital link in sociological dynamics.

The biological individual, according to Mead, is the organized group of drives, impulses, and habits that we carry within ourselves and that are variously molded by our group life. Humans excelling in social etiquette have to master the complex machinery of the body to dramatize their social identities. The self abiding by social norms, however, "is very different from the passionate assertive biological individual, that loves and hates and embraces and strikes. He is never an object; his is a life of direct suffering and action" (MSS, p. 370). It is not that this passionate beast is closed to self-consciousness, although our impulses and gestures are more transparent to outside observers than to ourselves. The point is that impulses and habits are informed by social processes as much as they inform them. The fact that they are amenable to social control does not mean that they can be readily accessed by self-consciousness. "The sets of habits which we have of this sort mean nothing to us; we do not hear the intonations of our speech that others hear unless we are paying particular attention to them. The habits of emotional expression which belong to our speech are of the same sort. We may know that we have expressed ourselves in a joyous fashion but the detailed process is one which does not come back to our conscious selves. There are whole bundles of such habits which do not enter into a conscious self, but which help to make up what is termed the unconscious self" (MSS, p. 163). The biological individual is a creature of impulses and habits, a body unconscious of itself. While the body can exist without a self, the self is fundamentally an embodied experience, an agency that situates itself in the world by mobilizing the organism's semiotic resources. As it signs itself in the flesh, the self gives the body its marching orders, molds it according to a script, and in the process, transforms an indeterminate situation onto an acting stage with distinct spatio-temporal characteristics. An embodied self has a past to claim and the future to strive for, though each is real only in the present where social actors situate themselves with respect to particular reference frames. Once the time structure binding disparate agents into a group has dissipated, the self recedes into the background, the body slips into unconsciousness, and the biological individual takes over. "The biological individual lives in an undifferentiated now; the social reflective individual takes this up into a flow of experience within which stands a fixed past and a more or less uncertain future.... The subject is the biologic
individual – never on the scene, and this self adjusted to its social environment, and through this to the world at large, is the object. . . . Thus the biological individual becomes essentially interrelated with the self, and the two go to make up the personality” (MSS, p. 351, 372–3).

It might seem odd that a theorist who cast the self as a rational process would talk about the “unconscious self.” To understand this conceptual twist, we need to remind ourselves that Mead sought to bridge the gap between various evolutionary forms of sociality, that he was a biosocial theorist who took a keen interest in Freud. Mead’s views on the subject should also be judged in light of his interest in Romanticism and the subject–object dialectics. We find the direct counterpart to idealism in the theory of “I” and “me,” which recast the idealist a priori in quasi-naturalistic terms. The transcendental ego, a mysterious realm of paradigmatic preconceptions informing our judgment, turns up in Mead as the unconscious self, biological individual, or “I” – the domain of habituated drives and semi-socialized impulses. What the Romantics called phenomenal self appears in Mead’s theory as the conscious self or “me.” “The ‘I’ is the transcendental self of Kant,” Mead tells us. “The self-conscious, actual self in social intercourse is the objective ‘me’ or ‘me’s’” (SW, p. 141).

The distinction between “I” and “me” serves several strategic functions in the Meadian discourse. It helps square off sociological theory with the notion of indeterminacy, with the fact that our calculated actions routinely produce unanticipated consequences: “However carefully we plan the future it always is different from that which we can prevail. [The individual] is never sure about himself, and he astonishes himself by his conduct as much as he astonishes other people” (MSS, pp. 203–4). This distinction biologizes the transcendental a priori, which Mead reinterprets as a domain of embodied values and creative drives: “The possibilities of the ‘I’ belong to that which is actually going on, taking place, and it is in some sense the most fascinating part of our experience. It is there that novelty arises and it is there that our most important values are located” (MSS, p. 204). “Me,” by contrast, “is a conventional, habitual individual who is always there. It has to have those habits, those responses that everybody has” (MSS, p. 197). From the sociological standpoint, “me” is an actor obeying common rules. Our “me’s” are modeled after conventional roles and historical identities waiting to be claimed as our own. “We are individuals born into a certain nationality, located at a certain spot geographically, and such and such political relations. All of these represent a certain situation which constitutes ‘me’; but this necessarily involves a continued action of the organism toward the ‘me’ in the process within which that lies” (MSS, p. 182). While the “me” is socially scripted, the “I” is not; it represents an improvised response of the body to whatever the situation demands. The resultant self-framing does not always fall within a conventional perspective, though; it can break the established time frame and turn the situation into a stage with action props and time horizons all its own. Whether they stumble on new reference frames or consciously look for alternatives, agents do more than replicate old meanings in the course of interactions. They also express their individuality and imaginatively reconstruct the present situation. Social creativity, according to Mead, flows
from “those values which attach particularly to the ‘I’ rather than to the ‘me,’ those values which are found in the immediate attitude of the artist, the inventor, the scientist in his discovery, in general in the action of the ‘I’ which cannot be calculated and which involves a reconstruction of the society, and so of the ‘me’ which belongs to that society. . . . To the degree that we make the community in which we live different we all have what is essential to genius, and which becomes genius when the effects are profound” (MSS, pp. 214, 218).

Now, we can see how the “I–me” dialectics advances the Meadian enterprise as a whole. It does so by making make room for the primitive forms of relativity in the world transformed by reason. There is the perennial tension between the biological and sociological imperatives, between the impulsive “I” and the rational “me.” For society to maintain its current structure, the “me” has to get a hold of the “I”: “The relation between the rational or primarily social side of the self and its impulsive or emotional or primarily anti-social and individual side is such that the latter is, for the most part, controlled with respect to its behavioristic expressions by the former” (MSS, p. 230). Social control works its magic by colonizing the body, compelling it to hide itself under familiar guises, transforming primeval urges into socially acceptable conduct. Self-consciousness is a process that situates the body within its environment by harnessing impulses and mobilizing emotions for public display. Looked at in this perspective, emotions are early warning signals that the body sends to itself as it symbolically traverses numerous references frames, relates itself to others, and evaluates prospective selves. Temporal spread is crucial to understanding human emotions. The more complex the spatio-temporal structure, the richer the organism’s emotional life. Intelligence is an emotionally charged agency evaluating its spatio-temporal options in the pluralistic universe.

This is not to say that the rational self always keeps the biological vessel in check. The self weaves its texture from an unyielding stuff, which makes the fit between the body and the self problematic. Having failed to follow the script, the body finds itself in an unfamiliar self, surrounded by an unknown universe, generalizing the other in as yet uncertified fashion. Such experiences are at first accessible to the individual only, but they become part of the public agenda as individual experiences are isolated through symbolic media and incorporated into the communal reality: “This common world is continually breaking down. Problems rise in it and demand solutions. They appear as the exceptions . . . in the experience of individuals and while they have the form of common experiences they run counter to the structure of the common world. The experience of the individuals is precious because it preserves these exceptions. But the individual preserves them in such form that others can experience them, that they may become common experiences” (SW, p. 341).

To recapitulate, Mead undertook a sitogenetic inquiry into the relationship between the body and the self. The question he raised was how the biological organism maintains its selfhood and the conscious self manages its biological agency. His answer to this question was that selfhood is an embodied experience marshaling the semiotic resources of the body with the help of the symbolic stock of society. Whatever feats we accomplish as self-conscious, creative beings,
accomplish because we have bodies, for "only insofar as the self is related to the body is it related to the environment" (TIS, p. 148). The embodied self is a self-conscious body, an organism referenced in a particular perspective, an emotionally engaged subject situated in time and space. Mead distinguished between the "I" and "me" phases of the self, the former representing impulsive, unconscious parts of ourselves, and the latter the rational, self-conscious parts. "Taken together they constitute a personality as it appears in social experience. The self is essentially the social process going on with these two distinguishable phases" (MSS, p. 178). The "I–me" dialectics brings into sociological focus human agency and places embodied subjectivity in its sociohistorical context. It also raises critical questions about the relationship between personal freedom and public necessity and the historical transformation of the pluralistic universe. The last section of this chapter is devoted to these issues.

Democracy, progressivism, and social reconstruction

Picture a game in which everyone takes part freely, all players follow the generalized other, and no one is barred from trying a particular role. Add to this a provision for revising the rules and inventing new games, and you will get the Meadian blueprint for a humane, democratic community permeated with team spirit and open to continuous improvement. Whatever part the individual plays is illuminated here by the sense of shared purpose and the enjoyment of common products, the sentiments equally prized in a fair game and just society. "It is this that gives joy to creation and belongs to the work of the artist, the research scientist, and the skilled artisan who can follow his article through to its completion. It belongs to co-ordinated efforts of many, when the role of the other in the production is aroused in each worker at the common task, when the sense of team play, esprit de corps, inspires interrelated activities. In these situations something of the delight of consummation can crown all intermediate processes. It is unfortunately absent from most labor in modern competitive industrial society" (PA, p. 457).

This statement captures the ambivalence that Mead shared with many contemporaries whose belief in the perfectability of human society was tempered by the keen awareness of its multiple failures. Indeed, Mead's pragmatist cosmology was tailor-made for the Progressive era. It envisioned the pluralistic universe whose inhabitants incessantly multiply perspectives, reinvent their selves, and reconstruct their community for the common good. No society embodies this ideal better than democracy. At its heart is a universal discourse or system of symbols binding individuals into a social whole and transparent to "every citizen of the universe of discourse" (PA, p. 375). Democratic society never stops restructuring its perspectives and broadening its horizons of universality - "universal" discourse to be universal has to be continuously revised" (MSS, p. 269). Democracy makes its symbolic and material resources available to all its members - it is "responsible for the ordering of its process and structure so that what are common goods in their very nature should be accessible to common enjoyment" (SW, p. 407). Democratic society teaches its members to place themselves
in each other's shoes. More than that, it gives everyone a practical chance to experiment with new roles and selves. When it lives up to its promise, democracy approximates what Mead calls "a universal society in which the interests of each would be the interests of all" (PA, p. 466).

The above description should not be taken to mean that the pluralistic universe is devoid of tension, that everything in it hangs together. Local lingos and competing agendas find their place in a democratic society alongside overarching cultural symbols. If attitudes we carry in ourselves clash, it is because institutions of society operate at cross purpose: "Each social institution with the good that it subtends asserts and maintains itself but finds itself in this assertion in conflict with other institutions and their goods" (PA, p. 498). Far from being a threat to the democratic discourse, conflict is its lifeblood. Democratic society does not merely tolerate competing discourses — it encourages and protects them. What makes the tension between perspectives vying for attention in a democratic society constructive is the fact that they are open to criticism. Democratic society teaches its members to use their mind critically, it makes its symbolic resources available to all its members, and it systematically lowers the barriers separating classes and impeding communication across group boundaries. By contrast, nondemocratic societies limit their members' participation in common discourse and zealously police the selves they can rightfully call their own. Castes, estates, classes, cliques — human history abounds in exclusive interactional fields formed around privileged perspectives designed to keep nonmembers at bay. The most insidious in this respect are social configurations based on caste. Superficially, they resemble insect communities whose members are stuck with their parts because they are physiologically outfitted to play them. Ideology that goes with such a society often blames biological differences for the fact that some of its members are barred from particular roles. In reality, social conventions backed by power are primarily responsible for the rigid pattern of role-taking in closed societies. "The development of democratic community implies the removal of castes as essential to the personality of the individual; the individual is not to be what he is in his specific caste or group set over against other groups, but his distinctions are to be distinctions of functional difference which put him in relationship with others instead of separating him" (MSS, p. 318). Like every game, democratic society calls for a division of labor, which poses no immediate threat to social intelligence. As long as every role is there for the taking and no one is shut out of the game, there is ample room for our universal nature to play itself out. Needless to say, American society in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries fell short of this democratic ideal.

Mead hammered away at the last point in his political writings. He decried the fact that symbolic means for self-realization were distributed unequally among American citizens. He urged the lowering of economic barriers hampering the disadvantaged. He personally participated in the Chicago immigrants' surveys, documenting their living conditions and educational needs. Immigrants who flooded the country at the turn of the century and supplied much of its labor power, Mead pointed out, were often shortchanged by a system that favored industrial education for future laborers and liberal arts education for well-to-do
classes. Mead singled out the factory system for his criticism, charging that the assembly-line technology threatened to reduce universal beings to an appendage in a mechanical process whose overall purpose and ultimate products eluded a machine operator: “The man who tends one of these machines becomes a part of the machine, and when the machine is thrown away the man is thrown away, for he has fitted himself into the machine until he has become nothing but a cog” (quoted in Shalin, 1988, p. 928). Tearing down class barriers, eliminating artificial restrictions, revamping dehumanizing social technologies — such were the causes to which Mead dedicated himself in his political life. Progressivism meant for him a commitment to “the ‘democratic ideal’ of removing such restrictions,” of getting on with social reconstruction and advancing democratic reforms (SW, p. 406). How can the democratic changes be effected? Mead sought the answer to this question in the temporal dynamics of social interactions.

Social change in the pluralistic universe is inextricably linked to its spatio-temporal structure and heavily relies on our ability to fashion disparate actions into a meaningful whole via the continually renewed sense of shared past and future. Each society has its own time horizons, its own unique history that its members recount to themselves and their offspring. When the historical narrative changes, the pluralistic universe slips off its symbolic moorings and expands its familiar confines. “The past that is there for us, as the present is there, stands on the same basis as the world about us that is there.... The histories that have most fastened upon men’s minds have been political and cultural propaganda, and every great social movement has flashed back its light to discover a new past” (PA, pp. 94–7). We can pull off this remarkable feat of rediscovering — reinventing — our pasts because society provided us with minds whose locus is not in the head but in the situation implicating the entire group and the generalized other. It is this decentered, time-conscious mind that “frees us from bondage to past or future. We are neither creatures of the necessity of an irrevocable past, nor of any vision given on the Mount” (PP, p. 90). Thanks to its special brand of relativity, rational intelligence not only cushions the effect of biological drives but also delivers humans from the dictate of implacable social norms. Our minds allow us to revise our past, set up a hypothetical future, select suitable means, and appropriate the self that ties all the elements of the situation together in a continual passage from the past to the present and into an indefinite future. The pluralistic universe owes its spatio-temporal structure to self-referential conduct. When the latter undergoes restructuring, the former changes as well: “The relations between social reconstruction and self or personality reconstruction are reciprocal and internal or organic.... In both types of reconstruction the same fundamental material of organized social relations among human individuals is involved, and is simply treated in different ways, or from different angles or points of view, in the two cases, respectively; or in short, social reconstruction and self or personality reconstruction are the two sides of a single process — the process of human social evolution” (MSS, p. 309).

It would be a mistake to conclude from the above that Mead saw reconstruction in society as a purely cognitive affair. Social institutions are ingrained in our
emotional habits as much as in logical thinking, which is why social change has
to engage both “me” and “I,” with the rational “me” pointing the way and the
unconscious “I” realizing the imagined future. It takes time for the biological
individual to slip into the new self, to change the habits of the heart, which resist
the coercion. The new discourse must be backed up by the adjustments in the
entire body where our values are sedimented into habits. To achieve its goal,
social reconstruction has to mobilize the embodied self, “the individual as
embodying the values in himself.... We want a full life expressed in our instincts,
our natures. Reflective thinking enables us to bring these different values into the
realm of possibility” (PA, pp. 625, 463-4). Social reconstruction feeds on emo-
tional substance, it is literally “bodied forth” by the agent redeeming its claim to
selfhood in the flesh. Social changes that result in lowering social barriers release
emotions conducive to democratic discourse and bring about selves conversant
with wider ranging communities: “The breakdown of barriers is something that
arouses a flood of emotions, because it sets free an indefinite number of possible
contacts to other people which have been checked, held repressed. [The] person
does get out of himself, and by doing so makes himself a definite member of a
larger community than that to which he previously belonged” (MSS, p. 219).

Despite the confident outlook Mead shared with other progressives, he stayed
away from optimistic predictions about the future of democracy; nor did he put
a seal of approval on specific forms it ought to take. Such predictions ran
contrary to his pragmatist spirit that favored experimentation over doctrinaire
social engineering. The future is uncertain, Mead said repeatedly, “there are no
fixed or determined ends or goals toward which social progress necessarily
moves; and such progress is hence genuinely creative and would not otherwise
be progress.... The moral question is not the one of setting up a right value
against a wrong value; it is a question of finding the possibility of acting so as to
take into account as far as possible all the values involved” (MSS, p. 294; PA,
p. 465). Still, we can glean the broad outlines of a democratic society he favored
from praises he sang to “team work,” “universal discourse,” “international
mindedness,” and “the community values of friendship, of passion, of parent-
hood, of amusement, of beauty, of social solidarity in its unnumbered forms”
(SW, p. 311). Whatever helps make the universe of discourse more inclusive is
progress. Whoever incorporates the experience of the other into one’s own and
guides one’s actions accordingly is a moral being. Whichever value finds its
embodied expression in a democratic community is a concrete universal.

Mead’s pragmatic optimism was tempered by the realization that no society
can assure the individual a happy life. Meaningful, yes, but not necessarily a
happy one. Because the pluralistic universe is forever changing, humans are
never completely at home in it: “Human society is not at home in the world
because it is trying to change that world and change itself; and, so long as it has
failed to so change itself and change its world, it is not at home in it as the
physiological and physical mechanism is” (PA, p. 476). What this statement
implies is that we cannot lead an authentic life in society as long as we are not
trying to change it, yet our concerted efforts to transcend the existing order turn
us into spiritual nomads unable to identify completely with any given self. There
is no such thing as an authentic self in Mead's social cosmology. Every self we claim as our own will have to be shed, however snugly we might be wrapped into our conventional "me's." The biological individual disguised under a historical mask will sooner or later turn into a corpse, but our dramatic personae will go on, re-enacted by numerous others, eager to step into our shoes: "There is a need for salvation – not the salvation of the individual but the salvation of the self as a social being" (PA, p. 476).

In sum, Mead's social theory called for a continually expanding social universe in which no perspective is foreclosed to its inhabitants, all symbolic resources are distributed equally among its members, and everyone can – and ought to – be an agent of social change. The political system that best approximates this blueprint is democracy. For all its failures, democracy comes closest to realizing the universality of human nature and the creativity of social intelligence. To live up to its promise, democratic society has to keep reinventing itself, and that means re-examining its past, reconstructing its present, and reimagining its future. Social change has a temporal dimension, predicated on the fact that social structure is rooted in a past continually recycled by skilled narrators. When the old historical narrative is revised and the new one finds its way into public discourse, individuals discover a new past, which turns out to be as emergent as the future. "The past is a working hypothesis that has validity in the present within which it works but has no other validity" (PA, p. 96). Social change has a somatic dimension. It requires an alignment between the biological resources of the "I" and the discursive skills of the "me." Social reconstruction is not a teleological process gravitating to some predestined goal; it is an open-ended process whose time horizons are revised by successive generations. The social change that brings down class barriers, levels economic disparities, spreads around symbolic resources, and increases team spirit is progressive. For all the good change brings to society, it does not guarantee happiness and fulfilled selfhood. For transcendence is a distinctly human mode of being in the world and the ultimate form of authenticity available to humanity.

**Conclusion**

I have pieced together disparate strands of Mead's thought and tried to show them as parts of a vast, unfinished project that will continue to nourish our sociological imagination well into the future. In my closing remarks, I would like to bring into sharper relief a few key insights and unresolved issues in his pragmatist cosmology.

Central to the pragmatist project is the problem of historically situated agency. There are two radical solutions to this problem that Romantic idealists bequeathed to modern social thought. One equates human agency with reason, grammar, norm, or a similar structural principle that disembodies subjectivity and drains agency of its emotional substance. Another approach tends to naturalize and deracinate human agency, reducing the transcendental *a priori* to more or less immutable drives, impulses, and behavioral dispositions. Pragmatists
refuse to linguistify or biologize agency. Steering between these two extremes, they conceptualize human agency as a historically situated, fully embodied, emotionally grounded selfhood. Mead acknowledges that the individual is born into a symbolic universe that is already there, but he declines either to dissolve agency into symbolic forms or to reduce it to behavioral drives. There is more to personhood than its symbolic hulk; we are vested in the world with our entire bodies, which are as much a product of society as our beliefs and values. Sociality shapes our neural circuits and affective responses, but our emotional habits and behavioral proclivities feed right back into social structure. Sociological analysis is impoverished when it is preoccupied exclusively with the normative/structural/discursive or the impulsive/affective/behavioral side of the social processes. That is what social pragmatists mean when they say that culture is embodied and body is uncultured—the two must be studied jointly in the context of human society.

While Mead brought into focus the relationship between the biological individual and the self, he might have drawn too sharp a line between conscious and unconscious processes, between the rational self and the biological individual. This can be gleaned from his belief that animals have no selves, that they know neither past nor future, and that, consequently, "animals have no rights" and "there is no wrong committed when an animal life's is taken away" (MSS, p. 183). An argument can be made that for all their inferior instrumental and symbolic skills, animals are not as different from humans as Mead contended. Since we think not just with our heads but with our entire bodies, rational thinking and emotional intelligence may share considerable evolutionary grounds. Pragmatist sociologists should take a closer look at the continuity of animal and human intelligence. They might want to juxtapose Mead and Freud and reconceptualize the unconscious as historicized, fleshed out, habitualized agency. They also need to re-examine the "I–me" dialectics, and particularly the manner in which the self cares for its body in different cultural settings. The sitogenetic analysis of self–body interactions is a promising line of inquiry that Mead's followers should take seriously.

Mead's social cosmology offers a fresh look at social structure as an emergent event predicated on its members' ability to manage perspectives and process time. This view breaks with the classical theory that casts social structure as something akin to an immovable ether subsisting in absolute space and time and informing individual conduct without being informed by it. In the pragmatist reckoning, social structure is an event unfolding in situ where its strategic properties are determined by conscious agents situating themselves across space and time. The self is perceived here as a nonclassically propertied object, a social particle quantum leaping from one interactional field to another. Every time agents assume new disguises and lend emotional substance to their selves, they affect the group's status as a universal, objective, and meaningful whole. This relativist approach renders social structure contingent on the quantum of objectivity supplied to it by self-conscious individuals. The structure of the self evolving in the individual's experience reflects the structure of the community to which this individual belongs, and vice versa, the group structure is encoded in
the self-identities of its individual members. Society as a whole transpires here as an emergent system of generalized perspectives held in common by individuals inhabiting the same symbolic niche or environment endowed with emergent spatio-temporal properties by self-conscious agents.

This innovative approach raises questions regarding the relationship between the micro and macro levels of sociological analysis, questions that Mead has not answered adequately. His theory may be seen as positing an over-emergent view of social order that does not do justice to recurrent patterns in social interactions and overarching time sequences. It is true that group perspectives owe their objectivity to self-conscious agents, but the degrees of freedom with which individuals may choose a particular perspective as the basis for self-identification vary greatly from one interactional field to another. Societies tend to privilege some perspectives and discourage their members from taking others. Social control mechanisms determine who can raise specific self-claims, under what circumstances, and how such claims can be redeemed and validated. Mead showed that the emergent evolution is built into human agency as it manifests itself on the micro level in concrete situational encounters. He did not explain why certain families of duration become privileged. Neither did he outline the logic that governs the historical evolution of macrostructural patterns. More conceptual work has to be done here. Interactionists need to demonstrate how the emergent time-processing generates relatively stable societal patterns. The gap between macrostructural dynamics and emergent transformations on the micro level is yet to be bridged in interactionist sociology.

The pragmatist emphasis on corporeal selfhood adds a potentially valuable dimension to the theory of social and political institutions. The latter are generally equated with a symbolic code or a normative grammar enciphering relations between individuals in a given organization. The Meadian approach draws attention to the corporeal dimension of social institutions and invites an inquiry into authoritarian emotions, aristocratic demeanor, and the body language of democracy. Indeed, polity affects our entire body. Democracy, in this sense, is an embodied institution. There is more to it than a constitutional system of checks and balances and a list of civil rights. It is also a demeanor, the practical care we take of our own and other people's bodies and selves. The body politic is the politics of the body. The strength of democracy is in civility, which cannot be legislated any more than it can be reduced to a biological drive. Democracy communicates in the flesh; it is a conversation that blends nonsignificant and significant gestures, with each set codifying democratic politics in its own special way. Body language speaks volumes about the body politic and measurably affects the quality of life.

The problem with Mead's political theory is that it does not confront head on the issue of power. Mead tends to blur the distinction between symbolic and economic resources, understates the barriers that market economy places on equitable distribution of resources, and underestimates the extent to which economic, cultural, racial, ethnic, and other divisions subvert the universal nature of intelligence. While he acknowledged the role conflict plays in the pluralistic universe, Mead believed that the cooperation between individuals,
groups, and nations is the order of the day, that "revolutions might be carried out by methods which would be strictly constitutional and legal" (SW, pp. 150–1). Alas, Mead might have overdosed on the Progressive era's optimism about the plasticity of human nature and the perfectability of society. His enthusiasm for democracy is infectious, but his take on American political institutions and their democratic promise needs to be complemented by a closer analysis of power, class, and privilege. The pragmatist challenge is to conceptualize the obdurate realities of power that delimit our freedom to assume roles and devise new perspectives.

Finally, I want to single out the ecological dimension of the pragmatist social cosmology. Mead places humans at the pinnacle of evolution and treats self-consciousness as the highest known form of relativity. At the same time, he considers human agency to be an extension of natural phenomena, an emergent product of natural evolution. Although self-referential conduct dramatically alters the way living beings exist in the world, social intelligence does not exempt humans from mechanical laws, nor does it insulate them from biological limitations. For all our fabled reflexivity, we are still suffering, mortal beings. Physical, biological, physiological, psychological, spiritual, and sociological perspectives intersect in our existence, determining our unique mode of being in the world. Selfhood simply designates a new mode of integration of these qualitatively different forms of relativity. Divested from its corporeal substance, the self is just a linguistic fiction, an unsubstantiated discursive claim. By the same token, agents outside their self-conscious reference frames are nothing more than biological entities devoid of rationality and unable to feel oneness with the rest of the world. Our ability to empathize with all creatures, large and small, to place ourselves in the shoes of any other thing, is, indeed, unique. "Is it necessary that that feeling of unity or solidarity should go beyond the society itself to the physical universe which seems to support it?" asks Mead (PA, p. 478). He hesitates to answer this question in the affirmative. As a lapsed Protestant, he probably did not want to be accused of anything like spiritualism and religious exaltation. But our ecological awareness might cause us to reconsider this question and ponder the spiritual implications of Mead's social cosmology.

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