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Ideology and the Development of Sociological Theory

Irving M. Zeitlin
University of Toronto

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27

George Herbert Mead (1863–1931)

Among sociologists, Mead is probably the best known of the extraordinary thinkers associated with the American pragmatic-philosophical tradition. Mead's work is, of course, informed by the basic insights of Peirce and James; and early in Mead's career Dewey had hired him as his assistant, and the two scholars became the closest of friends until Mead's death in 1931. Mead's work on the social self, and the "I" and the "Me" in particular, laid the foundations of modern American social-psychology in the field of role-theory and symbolic interaction. Mead's approach was so original and persuasive that Dewey adopted it in its entirety whenever he found it relevant to the specific issues he addressed.[1] To understand why Mead's theory is original and sound, we have to grasp its *dialectical* character, the meaning of which will become clear in due course.

For Mead, the traditional bifurcation of nature into "mind" on the one hand and physical nature on the other was fallacious. The philosophical result of such a bifurcation was either that nature was divested of all independence and devoured by mind, as with the various Idealists, or mind was effectively extinguished by reducing it to material particles, as with the Materialists. Mead recognized that such extreme and defective views could not be fruitfully applied in the study of human nature and action. In *Mind, Self and Society* and throughout his other works, Mead undertook a single philosophical task: to overcome the traditional dualism by means of a dialectical conception of the relation of human beings to one another, and of human beings to nature. In Mead's dialectical view, the individual as a sensitive, active social being contributes to the constitution of his effective environment as truly as the environment (natural and social) influences his sensitivity and action. Throughout, Mead stresses that "the individual is no thrall of society. He constitutes society as genuinely as society constitutes the

individual."[2] In these terms, Mead's philosophical critique of the traditional dualism, and his repudiation of both Idealism and Mechanistic Materialism are reminiscent of Marx's efforts in that regard.

MIND, SELF, AND SOCIETY

There are aspects of human interaction that are immediate, that is, mediated by little or no thought, and which therefore resemble the interaction of animals. In Mead's famous illustration of a dog fight, each dog's gesture is a stimulus for the other's response, which in turn becomes a new stimulus.[3] They are engaged in a *conversation of gestures*, though these gestures are not significant ones, for they carry no meaning. The dogs interact with each other, each anticipating the action of the other *reflexively*.

Similarly, two boxers or fencers, Mead proposes, respond to each other's gestures reflexively, without deliberation. Although we shall want to qualify this statement, it appears that animals remain at this level of interaction: *conversation of nonsignificant gestures*. In human beings, in contrast, this constitutes a relatively small proportion of our total interactions. A man can strike another without intending to do so, or recoil from something before he knows why. But he can also shake his fist in anger, displaying a deliberately hostile attitude. In that case there is an *idea* behind his gesture. Indeed, when a gesture carries with it a specific meaning and arouses in the other individual the same idea it arouses in the first, Mead says "we have a significant symbol" (p. 45). That is what we commonly mean by "language," or communication by means of symbols. Among meaningful gestures the *vocal* ones are the most important for daily communication.

Gestures and significant gestures are therefore phases and aspects of actions that facilitate cooperation and the carrying out of tasks. However, a significant gesture offers a much greater facility for cooperation because it evokes the same attitude in the other participating actors that it does in the individual making it. A gesture as a significant symbol arouses in the individual making it the same response (meaning) he intends to arouse in the other. A conversation of significant gestures thus requires that *one take the attitude of the other toward one's own gestures* (p. 47).

It is precisely by means of such significant gestures, or symbols, that *thinking* takes place. What is "thinking," if not an internal conversation like the conversations we carry on externally with others! "Mind" may therefore be defined as *the presence in conduct of significant symbols*.

For Mead, then, mind presupposes a social process. In opposition to certain schools of "Idealist" psychology that posited minds and selves as antecedent to social process, Mead demonstrated logically that "selves must be accounted for in terms of the social process, and in terms of communication . . ." (p. 49). It is only within that process that minds and selves can

emerge. If one begins with mind and derives social process from it, "then the origin of minds and the interaction of minds become mysteries" (p. 50). If, on the other hand, one assumes the priority of social process and communication—priority in the sense that they are antecedent to any individual mind or self, and in the further sense that neither mind nor self can emerge except in the context of a social process—then the mystery ceases. For Mead there can be no equivocation here: mind first arises through communication by means of a conversation of significant gestures in a social process.

The origin of distinctively human communication—*language*—cannot be derived from imitation. In humans and in higher animals imitation plays a minimal role. Monkeys, dogs, and foxes, for instance, do not purely imitate; they learn, and even learn quickly. The young fox runs away from man not merely because that is what the older fox does; he rather comes to link the response of flight to the stimulus of man—the fox hunter's scent. That is learning, not imitation.

Animals do, of course, learn much. Their behavior is neither strictly instinctive nor imitative. They acquire adaptive "habits" in a given environment by responding adequately to specific stimuli. Among such stimuli is the gesture. In the conversation of (nonsignificant) gestures common to both animals and humans, the stimulus and the response *differ*: One animal's threat leads to another's flight; the baby's cry leads to the mother's care; a boxer's jab leads to the other's block. In all such cases the response differs from the stimulus. In a conversation of *significant gestures*, in contrast, stimulus and response are identical for all participants. "What language seems to carry," says Mead, "is a set of symbols answering to certain content which is measurably identical in the experience of the different individuals. If there is to be communication as such, the symbol has to mean the same thing to all individuals involved" (p. 54).

Although most animals learn to act appropriately and even to cooperate in their specific, natural environments, Mead asserts that the stimulus-gesture of one can never evoke the identical response-gesture in another. Animals do not possess the ability to produce significant symbols or language. There is no way of getting from the animal condition, in which stimulus and response differ, to the human condition, in which stimulus and response can be identical. The latter requires that uniquely human capacity for creating and transmitting symbols, meanings, ideas, and content. As a generalization, Mead's view is no doubt valid. When we consider that the Oxford unabridged dictionary of the English language contains over a half-million words, and that Shakespeare employed some 300,000 different words, and if we further consider that every man and woman employs many hundreds of words in their everyday lives, we can appreciate the cogency of Mead's proposition. If it required any qualification at all, it would be that some animals, notably certain insects and birds, do seem to possess a small repertory of significant gestures. Bees, for example, according to Karl von Frisch, appear capable of communicating "messages," such as the avail-

ability of flowers and nectar in another locale, and sparrows appear to convey the availability of seeds or grain in another locale. However, even if such "meaningful" communication is possible among animals, their total repertory of significant gestures could be counted on the fingers of one hand, and in that light Mead's generalization holds true.

The vocal gesture, and the human physiological ability to form a great variety of complex sounds, may involve a small element of imitation: We imitate when we learn to pronounce certain words. But by no means can vocal, symbolic communication be accounted for by a theory of imitation. No amount of vocal imitation will ever produce *meaning*—it never has among canaries or parrots.

Mead is not placing human beings on a pedestal; he is merely exploring as objectively as possible a basic difference between animal and human communication. It is a uniquely human capacity to symbolize and to interact with others and oneself by means of abstractions, generic concepts, and, in a word, universals of discourse. This has been understood since antiquity. Yet the various currents of behaviorism have fostered a conception of human beings in which they differ hardly at all from other animals. Psychologists like J. B. Watson, as we have seen, denied mind and consciousness altogether, while Idealist psychologists like Wundt simply posited mind as if it were a metaphysical entity given at birth or at conception. Mead's arguments must be viewed in that context, as polemically directed against the Behaviorists and the Idealists. Mead insists on the ontological validity of the concepts "mind" and "consciousness," rejecting, however, a metaphysical interpretation of them.

MEANING

Meaning, for Mead, is generated *in* the social process. Meaning can be objectively present even in the absence of awareness. "Meaning is . . . a development of something objectively there as a relation between certain phases of the social act; it is not a physical addition to that act and it is not an 'idea' as traditionally conceived" (p. 76). The adjustive response of one organism to another is its "meaning." When, however, one becomes *conscious* of one's own and the other's gestures and responses, and the context, gestures become significant symbols. But what we call "interpretation" is not exclusively in the mind; it is in the "actual field of social experience":

> meaning can be described, accounted for, or stated in terms of symbols or language at its highest and most complex stage of development (the stage it reaches in human experience), but language simply lifts out of the social process a situation which is logically and implicitly there already. (p. 79)

Mead's point here is that meaning resides in a total social process, and not in "mind" as if it were a separate province. To return to the illustration we

employed in our discussion of "habit" in Dewey's work, take a violinist who has memorized an entire concerto. Here we have the phenomenon of "habit" again. The virtuoso violinist has so often and thoroughly practiced the concerto that the technique has become flawless. Strictly speaking, then, "memorization" of the concerto resides also in the body and not merely in the mind. There is such a thing as "muscle-memory," after all. Furthermore, in the violinist's performance of the music with a symphony orchestra, the habitual experience has given the performer a sensitivity to pitch, nuances of interpretation, and so forth, which enable him or her to adjust and blend spontaneously and automatically. Adjusting and blending have become "second nature"—or as William James had observed, "tenth nature." In these terms the "meaning" of the situation resides in a "field," consisting of the violinist, the orchestra, its conductor, and the audience. Meaning resides in the total social process. Similarly, in the everyday interaction of every man and every woman, meaning resides in the total social process, not merely in the individuals' minds.

Mead employs the term "constitute" to describe how we select specific sensory objects from a mass of events and objects. We select from what William James called the "blooming, buzzing confusion" only such objects as are relevant and of interest to us. Not all the objects or stimuli out there exist for us; only such objects exist as are relevant to our everyday social life. In that sense we constitute or "create" the objects and stimuli of our experience by abstracting them from a totality of objects and stimuli. Animals also constitute their objects and stimuli. Animals, however, can only relate to *specific* others, objects, and gestures. Humans, in contrast, can relate to abstract objects, to concepts, and to categories of things and organisms. "Dog" as a *universal* simply has no meaning or existence for dogs. Whenever I say "dog" in the presence of my dog, his ears prick up and his whole body becomes alert because he has the impression that I am talking about him. But "dog" and "human" in *general* are the very kind of universals that humans communicate with and about. This human ability enables us to break out of narrowly and inevitably specific responses. When we say "dog," "tree" or "hammer," we think not of a particular dog, tree, or hammer, but of a *universal*, which means we are thinking about something "not given in the particular occurrence which is the occasion of the thought. The thought transcends all occurrences" (p. 88).

Human perspectives also acquire universality. If one individual indicates to himself the same thing he indicates to others, they share a meaning. One individual indicates to the other from his own perspective and to himself from the other's perspective. And since that which is indicated is identical to all observers or participants, regardless of their different perspectives, it must be a universal. Indeed, the tendency to generalize or universalize is developed in the process of socialization, whereby any given

individual goes beyond all particular attitudes toward himself and soon crystallizes

> all these particular attitudes into a single attitude or standpoint which may be called that of the "generalized other." (p. 90)

This ability to generalize, to grasp universals and to communicate them, gives humans their unique capacity for thinking and reflecting. *Reflection* takes place when one has stopped acting, if only for a moment. By means of reflection humans can explore alternative courses of action without taking actual steps in any of the apparently available directions. Humans can assess the consequences of their actions before actually engaging in them. Humans can also convey the character of that future state to their fellow humans without the latter engaging in actual acts. A dog can pick out a specific odor, but he cannot indicate that odor to another dog. A man can identify another man to a detective; a dog, however, can only follow a scent himself. This, says Mead, absolutely distinguishes man from beast, or a detective from a bloodhound.

Human beings can draw attention, their own and that of others, to specific analytical aspects of a situation or field, and thus guide and control their actions. An animal has no such ability to focus on an analyzed element. Animals can only guide their actions in actual trials and errors in the here and now. It is this complex human ability to construct and deconstruct mentally, and to explore alternate possibilities of future response, which contrasts fundamentally with behavior that is either reflexive, habitual, or impulsive. There are, therefore, significant degrees of freedom in human conduct, not found in animal behavior.

What this means, Mead stressed throughout, is that human actions are never strictly determined by past events, and cannot, therefore, be precisely predicted in advance. Because of the elements of creativity, spontaneity, and contingency, and because a human's ideas of the future and its alternatives enter his or her present conduct as determinants, human conduct is inherently unpredictable. For humans, their expectations concerning the future are an active determinant of their actions, though they never know precisely the nature of that future. Humans thus possess a unique capacity: the ability to solve present problems or cope with present adversity in the light of past experience and in terms of possible future consequences. Humans are able to act "in the light of or by reference to, both the past and the future . . . both memory and foresight" (p. 100).

All of this is made possible, as Mead demonstrates, by the fact that a human being can become an object to himself by taking the role of another toward himself. That is how an individual's "self" emerges, and with it the ability to project the self into reflective situations in which he is now subject,

now object. Self, like mind, emerges and develops as an aspect of the social process of interaction.

THE SELF

Mead, as we have seen, defines "mind" as the presence in conduct of significant symbols, and he defines "self" as the process of taking the attitude of the other toward oneself. The self is a social entity distinct from the physical organism, although, of course, it cannot emerge except as a quality of that organism. The self emerges only in the context of social experience and interaction, and continues to develop in such contexts. Eventually the self becomes an object to itself and, hence, the center about which all bodily experiences are organized. I can experience this hand, foot, or spine as my own because I am aware of my self and all that belongs to it. The hand, foot, and spine belong to the self in a way that the dog never can experience the tail as his own—which is why dogs tend to chase their tails as if they do not belong to them.

The self is both subject and object; it is an object to itself. This is what fundamentally differentiates humans from animals. The ability to become an object to oneself means that one can achieve *self*-consciousness, not just consciousness. And self-consciousness means that one can adopt an objective and impersonal attitude toward oneself and the situation in which one acts. The human capacity for intelligence and rational action rests squarely on this uniquely human ability to look upon oneself *objectively*. Indeed, in the development of the self it is the objective side that appears first. The self is an object before it is a subject because one's first experiences of oneself are from the standpoint of others—mother, father, siblings. An individual's first experience and awareness of self are objective because he first becomes an object to himself by taking toward himself the attitudes of the significant others about him. It is symbolic communication that makes this phenomenon possible. The very young child begins to relate to himself as others do, by means of words: He addresses himself and responds to himself, so that soon the *subjective* side emerges ("I," "me," "mine," and so forth), and he becomes both subject and object.

The self, then, is a "social structure" (Mead's term) and once formed achieves a certain autonomy—that is, it "provides for itself its social experiences . . ." (p. 140). We can therefore conceive of an adult hermit who has only himself as a human companion and who talks to himself as he would with others, but what is absolutely inconceivable is a "self arising outside of social experience" (p. 140).

Conversation with oneself is an essential aspect of communication with others. When one speaks to another, one, in effect, speaks to oneself. One affects oneself while one affects the other, so that in the very process of speaking, one checks, controls, and guides one's speech by assessing its effect

on others according to its effects on oneself. One also takes account of the specific other to whom one is relating, and one speaks and acts accordingly. In that way one becomes many selves, exhibiting one self here and another there.

Each of us, then, has multiple and different selves, depending on our relationships and associations. "A multiple personality is in a sense normal" (p. 142). But each of us is also a unified self, exhibiting a degree of consistency in our personality characteristics, a relatively stable configuration. It is not the conversation of gestures, but the conversation of *significant* gestures that makes the emergence and development of self possible. In the absence of language or communication by symbols, or universals, neither mind nor self is conceivable. All symbols are universal, Mead reminds us. "You cannot say anything that is absolutely particular; anything you say that has any meaning at all is universal" (p. 146). The term "universal" conveys the fact that thinking and talking involve symbols which, in any given society, evoke in others the same response they evoke in oneself. Symbols enable one to say to oneself what one says to others. Hence, "such a symbol is a universal of discourse" (p. 147). Helen Keller had become blind, deaf, and mute due to a severe illness that afflicted her while still in the crib; but prior to the illness she had, of course, already experienced language. And it was only after she had, as a young girl, rediscovered the symbol or word "water" that she regained the ability to communicate symbolically. It was only then that she could arouse in her self the response she aroused in others.

THE "I" AND THE "ME"

The "I" is the actual process of thinking and acting; the "me" is the reflective process. By taking the attitudes of others, one introduces the "me," to which one reacts as an "I." One can never catch oneself as "I," because one cannot literally observe oneself at the same time that one thinks, speaks, or acts.

> The "I" therefore appears only in memory and by that time it has become a "me." The "I" of this moment is present in the "me" of the next moment. The "I" in memory is there as the spokesman of the self of the second, or minute, or day ago. As given, it is a "me," but it is a "me" which was the "I" at the earlier time. If you ask, then, where directly in your own experience the "I" comes in, the answer is that it comes in as a historical figure. (p. 174)

If the "me" is the organized attitudes of others that one assumes toward oneself, the "I" responds to the "me" and the "me" reflects the "I" in an ongoing dialectical process. The "I" is inherently unpredictable. What one does as "I," one does not precisely know in advance. The "I" exists in the specious, knife-edge present, which means one can become aware of the "I" only as a memory image, as a part of the "me." The "I" is the actual steps one takes into the future with all the uncertainty that this necessarily entails. The

"I" is therefore associated with spontaneity, novelty, freedom, and initiative. An important implication of the "I" is that humans can never be wholly passive or totally socialized so as to become "mes" exclusively, as it were. In opposition to the Behaviorists, Mead thus insists that the "I" changes the world, however infinitesimally.

THE "BIOLOGIC I"

The "I" involves a paradox: on the one hand, it represents freedom, creativity, spontaneity, novelty, and initiative; on the other hand, because the "I" is essentially biologic and impulsive, it is blind. The "I" is a process we become aware of only after it has become an accomplished fact. It is the "biologic I" that is involved in our enjoyment and excitement in the present. It is the realization in some sense of this pleasurable self that we are continually seeking (p. 204). But it is also the "biologic I" that tends to laugh when an individual falls. If he hurts himself we sympathize but it was funny, after all, to see him sprawling out. Mead's "biologic I" thus shares some parallels with Freud's *id* or *libido*. In a formulation not too remote from Freud's, Mead says that the sophisticated "me" soon gains control of the naive "I":

> one behaves perfectly proper, suppresses his laughter, is very prompt to get the fallen person on his feet again. There is the social attitude of the "me" over against the "I" that does enjoy the situation . . . (p. 207)

The "biologic I" is the source of our creativity, our passions, our vital energy. In the artist's attitude, therefore, the "me," the *conventional* side of the self, is reduced to a minimum, while the "I," the novel element, is "carried to the limit" (p. 209). Explicitly employing Freud's concepts, Mead further elucidates the relation between the "I" and the "me":

> Impulsive conduct is uncontrolled conduct. The structure of the "me" does not there determine the expression of the "I." If we use a Freudian expression, the "me" is in a certain sense a censor. (p. 210)

The "me," in a word, is the conventional side of the self that regulates the relation of the "biologic I" to the outside world, in much the same sense in which the *ego*, in Freudian psychology, regulates the *id*'s relation to the outside world.

For Mead as for Freud, there exists a definite tension between the "biologic or impulsive I" and the conventional "me." The "biologic I"—think of children at play—seeks fun, enjoyment, pleasure, exciting and gratifying experiences. The "me" represents the values and norms of the society. In some circumstances the "me" may suppress or inhibit certain actions, but in other circumstances the "me" loosens its control and enables the "I" to carry out its actions. Hence, the "I" is rooted in our biological nature. It is active, impulsive

and blind. But if it is blind, how can it be the source of freedom? What good is spontaneity if one does not know what one is actually doing, and one becomes aware of one's actions only after they are accomplished facts?

Mead's reply rests on the nature of the self as a dialectical, processual unity, enabling humans to *reflect* on acts, modifying them accordingly. In Mead's homely example, it is strictly *impulsive* to tug harder and harder on the handle of a wooden drawer that refuses to open. The process of *reflection* enters when we think intelligently and analytically about the drawer: It is a wooden thing; it may be swollen here and there; it has contents that might account for the drawer's resistance, and so on.

When we act under impulse, the drawer is strictly something to be tugged at, and once the handle comes off, all we can say is, "What have I done?" With reflection, in contrast, the "drawer has ceased for the time being to be a mere something to be pulled" (p. 356). Reflection and analysis now accompany and guide action, so we can say, "What am I doing?" or "What is to be done?" Here action and theory are more nearly a unity. But reflection never takes us totally out of the field of impulses, for we continue to use our hands, feeling for resistance and trying to overcome it. Thus applying Peirce's proposition that thwarted action leads to *doubt*, which in turn prompts inquiry, Mead defines *reflection* as the unique human capacity for analyzing and recombining our impulses "in the presence of obstacles and inhibitions" (p. 362). That is the way the otherwise impulsive "I" receives guidance from the reflective self and acquires the possibility of conscious and rational action.

THE PHILOSOPHY OF THE ACT

In his brilliant essays on *The Philosophy of the Act*, we find a further enrichment of Mead's theory. For Mead, "sociality"—the tendency to associate in or form social groups—characterizes, in varying degrees, the relationship of all organisms to their environments. Building on William James's "insurgent character" of the organism, and on John Dewey's essay, "The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology," Mead assigns due weight to the *active* side of all organisms and the reciprocal determination of organism and environment. The main trend in Mead's time was to portray the organism as passively adapting to an environment that actively determined and controlled it. This one-sided, defective view, Mead recognized, must be replaced by another: *That an organism actively seeks to express its impulses, and it is only in terms of such impulses that it attends to, or takes an "interest" in a given stimulus. A stimulus becomes such only insofar as it corresponds to the organism's sensitivity and impulsive needs. The organism thus actively constitutes the objects of its environment.* And, of course, what is true of the "lower" organisms is all the more true of human beings.

Behaviorism, as we have seen, *begins* an organism's act with a response to an external stimulus, thus implying that an organism possesses no inner

principle, with which to initiate an act. Mead, in contrast, fully recognized the inner principle, which—like James and Dewey—he called "impulse" or "impulsive need." Mead thus makes a momentous contribution to our understanding of organisms, *by designating impulse as the first stage of the act.* The stages of the act in animals, therefore, are: *impulse, perception, consummation.* A hungry animal feels an impulse to find food. The impulse impels it to act—to seek food. The impulse determines what will stand out in the environment as a stimulus to guide the developing action. A carnivorous animal, for example, approaches the stimulus-object, clawing, biting, and downing it; finally it eats, consummating the act with the satisfaction of the original impulse. In humans, however, there is an additional stage in the social act—*manipulation*—which involves *reflection.* Impulse is illuminated by reason, and action takes place in a world of meaning. Thus in humans the stages of the social act are: *impulse, perception, manipulation, and consummation.* The significance of the additional stage, manipulation, will soon become clearer.

Mead follows Peirce in defining thinking and reflection as instrumental, problem-solving acts. Thought and action are moments in a dialectical, processual unity. It is precisely when action is blocked that reflective thinking arises to test the hypothetical, alternative ways of resuming the action. The exploration of alternative options, which animals can engage in only directly by trial and error, humans can engage in reflectively. Like Peirce, Mead draws no sharp distinction between the thinking of the scientist and that of every person in everyday life. In both cases the point is to get back to some useful or worthwhile process. And for Mead a real process cannot be grasped with either the mechanistic thinking of the Behaviorists and the Instinctualists or the metaphysical categories of the Idealists.

Theory and knowledge, then, from Mead's pragmatic standpoint, is the process of active discovery that enables us to solve the problems and overcome the obstacles thwarting our action. If we are able to resume acting, more or less realizing our purposes, our knowledge has proved itself adequate and practicable. This kind of knowledge, Mead maintains, is the only kind that justifies our confidence in it. We search in the past in order better to understand the present problematic world. And the only test we have of whether we understand it or not is our ability to change the condition that has stymied us. The goal of theory or reflective thinking, whether in science, everyday life, or historiography, is therefore practical. That is the heart, then, of the pragmatic epistemology.

MORE ON MEAD'S PRAGMATIC EPISTEMOLOGY

Following Peirce, Mead proposes that it is the inhibited or interrupted act that gives rise to reflective thinking, a process in which the individual represents to himself his relational experiences in the world through images and

symbols. The interruption of the act and the resulting reflection make abstraction possible. Human beings can analytically separate objects from themselves, separate one sensory experience from another, separate sensory experience from contact experience, and separate contact experience from distance experience. We can also separate spatial from temporal experiences and the experience of the specious present from the experiences of the past and the future. (Mead always calls the knife-edge present "specious" because of the Heraclitean flux of reality in which there is no real present.) Human beings can thus grasp aspects of process and represent them to themselves symbolically. Only human beings become "metaphysical" in that sense when their actions are thwarted.

A good illustration of Mead's pragmatic epistemology pertains to the stage of *manipulation* in the human social act. The traditional philosophical dichotomy (for example, Locke's) between "secondary qualities," such as color, sound, odor, and the like, as "subjective" and "primary qualities," such as extension, occupation of space, motion, and so forth, as "objective" is a false one for Mead. What the philosophers have called "secondary qualities" are simply the character objects have in distance experience while the "primary qualities" are the character they have in contact experience. Both depend on the relation of the individual to the objects concerned.

Mead therefore regards as uncritical the distinction between the so-called primary and secondary qualities, rightly insisting that neither is more objective than the other since neither is independent of the active, sentient, observing, knowing individual. For Mead, however, it is pragmatically understandable why the distinction has been made: The association of subjectivity with distance experience and objectivity with contact experience is "natural" because we test "the reality of what affects us from a distance . . . by coming into contact with it."[4] As we touch and feel the object, it retains its color, sound, odor, and the like. With further handling it "crumbles," analytically speaking, until we reach its ultimate elements, particles of energy "so minute that they could not subtend a light vibration" (p. 286). In that way, science creates the hypothetically ultimate elements of material reality, translating into abstract mathematical models an assumed contact experience in which distance experience disappears or becomes impossible. Hence, this scientific theory of nature and material reality has its experiential basis in everyday life —

> in the fact that the *hand* naturally breaks things up into parts which can be rolled between the thumb and the finger. (p. 296, italics added)

But while the crumbled object in the hand retains both its distance and contact qualities, the scientifically analyzed object substitutes contact quality for distance quality—but a contact quality of an assumed or hypothetical character.

In these terms, the emergence of the "physical or material thing" and its accompanying concept, must be seen, Mead avers, in the context of the *social act*—or more precisely in relation to its interruption at the *manipulatory stage* by the human hand. It is in the context of this stage that "matter" appears, and

> which under the crumbling analysis of the hand suggests the hypothetical atom. (p. 326)

Mead stresses the uniquely human mode of practical action in which the *hand* mediates human interaction with nature and with other humans. With regard to the evolution of the human species, Mead underscores the interdependence of practical experience, mediated by the hand, and the emergence and development of speech, consciousness, and self-consciousness:

> Speech and the hand go along together in the development of the social human being. (*Mind, Self and Society*, p. 237)

Mead's recognition of the role of the hand was anticipated in an essay by Frederick Engels titled, "The Part Played by Labor in the Transition from Ape to Man." Engels had recognized that the human being's faculties evolved "only side by side with the development of the human hand itself through the medium of labor."[5] The concept of "labor" here refers to the practical activities of the protohumans who became humans in the course of interacting with nature and cooperating with one another. Engels and Mead are in basic agreement that the *practical*, cooperative experiences of the protohumans antedate speech and self-consciousness. Engels wrote:

> First labor, after it and then with it speech—these were the two most essential conditions under the influence of which the brain of the ape gradually changed into that of man . . . (Ibid.)

And Mead:

> It is true that some sort of cooperative activity antedates the self. There must be some loose organization in which the different organisms work together, and the sort of cooperation in which the gesture of the individual may become a stimulus to himself of the same type as the stimulus to the other . . ., so that the conversations can pass over into the conduct of the individual. Such conditions are presupposed in the development of the self. (*Mind, Self and Society*, p. 240)

Earlier we observed that Mead consistently places the accent on the "dialectical" or interactive character of human relations with the environment. Far from being passively conditioned as in the behaviorist doctrine, humans determine the conditions of their existence, and are not merely

determined by such conditions. Marx had defended and qualified this proposition by saying that humans make history, but "not just as they please, not in circumstances wholly chosen by themselves." Conditions created before we ever came into the world continue, like a nightmare, to weigh heavily upon us. It seems clear that just as Hegel's philosophy contributed to Marx's dialectical approach, Hegel's philosophy also contributed to Mead's conception of the "self-other" dialectic. Hegel's philosophy, Mead averred,

> marks the first time that the self had been definitely given a function in the experience of reaching the truth (*Philosophy of the Act*, p. 634)

Moreover, Mead acknowledges a more general applicability of the Hegelian dialectic to social development:

> If we take the starting point of the appearance of the reflective attitude in society, we can locate an Hegelian moment in the social development; the self realizing itself over and against the individuals of the community so that it finds itself in opposition to the other as essentially a social being. That is, when a man finds himself in opposition to some social order, as in labor conflicts, then the attitude between labor and employer is one of hostility, which we call class war. It appears, of course, in the conflict with the employer over such control as is expressed in wages and labor conditions, but the laborer as such under those conditions has to realize himself in relation to the employer. This characteristic, as we know, appears in class war. *Individuals do realize themselves definitely in their oppositions to one another. Those oppositions are the starting point for the development of the new social order. This is characteristic of social development as such*, not simply of such modern problems as labor troubles . . . (*Philosophy of the Act*, p. 655, italics added)

Given this Hegelian influence on Mead, we can say that for him as for Marx the external world is a humanly shaped world that humans mold and change by means of their theoretical-practical activity. For both thinkers nature is no mere object independent of the human will, and humanity is no *tabula rasa* passively receiving impressions from the outside world, or merely responding to external stimuli. On the contrary, human beings are active, creative, cognizing subjects who come to know the world as they act upon it, thereby changing themselves in the process.

We said in our introduction to this chapter on Mead that in order to grasp why his theory is original and sound, we have to recognize its *dialectical* character. And we have in fact discerned a prominent dialectical element in his pragmatic approach. Let us therefore try to give a more definite meaning to the concept "dialectical" and explain how a dialectical approach would help us avoid errors. A dialectical approach would keep us alert to the following: that an adequate comprehension of the human condition entails a twofold task, giving due attention to the processes that con-

strain and highly influence human actions, but also due attention to the active and creative efforts humans make to diminish and remove constraints by changing practices that are unnecessarily repressive.

There are two types of errors that often result from the failure to think dialectically. The first is to minimize or ignore altogether the constraining influences of social relationships and institutions. This error looks upon human beings as if they were superhuman and thus able to transform their existential conditions at will. The opposite error is to exaggerate the staying power of existing institutions, objectifying them and thereby underestimating the ability of humans to modify their circumstances. This error leads to a pronounced diminution of the human potential. By avoiding these errors, we may more effectively learn of real human possibilities.

NOTES

1. Alan Ryan, *John Dewey and the High Tide of American Liberalism* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997), p. 79.
2. George H. Mead, *Mind, Self and Society*, ed. and with Introduction by Charles W. Morris (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1962; orig. 1934) p. xxv. Hereafter, all references to this work will be cited in parentheses immediately following the quoted passage.
3. Although Mead, like James and Dewey, rejects the one-sided premises of Behaviorism and the mechanistic way in which Behaviorists conceived of the terms "stimulus" and "response," he deliberately employs these terms heuristically to make his point.
4. George H. Mead, *The Philosophy of the Act* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1938), p. 285. Hereafter, all references to this work will be cited in parentheses immediately following the quoted passage.
5. F. Engels, "The Part Played by Labor in the Transition from Ape to Man," in Marx and Engels, *Selected Works* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1951), vol. II, pp. 74–85.