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Article (Submitted version)
(Pre-refereed)

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G. H. MEAD: THEORIST OF THE SOCIAL ACT

(10,405 words)

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TITLE

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ABSTRACT

There have been many readings of Mead's work, and this paper proposes yet another: Mead, theorist of the social act. It is argued that Mead's core theory of the social act has been neglected, and that without this theory, the concept of taking the attitude of the other is inexplicable and the contemporary relevance of the concept of the significant symbol is obfuscated. The paper traces the development of the social act out of Dewey's theory of the act. According to Mead, Dewey's theory does not sufficiently account for consciousness. Grappling with this problematic leads Mead to several key ideas, which culminate in his theory of the social act. The social act and taking the attitude of the other are then illustrated by the analysis of a game of football. The interpretation presented has two novel aspects: first, symbolisation arises not simply through self taking the attitude of the other, but through the pairing of this attitude with the complementary attitude in self; second, self is able to take the attitude of the other to the extent that self has in actuality or in imagination previously been in the social position of the other. From this standpoint the key issue is how the attitude of self and other become integrated. New directions for empirical research, aimed at advancing this question are outlined. Finally, the paper shows how the social act can contribute to our contemporary concerns about the nature of the symbolic.

One past displaces and abrogates another as inexorably as the rising generation buries the old. How many different Caesars have crossed the Rubicon since 1800? (Mead, 1938, p.95)

How many different George Herbert Meads have there been? His work has variously been described as social behaviourism (Morris, in Mead, 1934; McPhail & Rexroat, 1979), phenomenology (Natanson, 1956), dialectical empiricism (Burke, 1962), social pragmatism (Cook, 1993), a philosophy of social behaviourism (Lewis, 1979), symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1980) and symbolically mediated interactionism (Joas, 1980/1997). Few theorists have, posthumously, been as productive as Mead.

Mead would not be surprised at his own proliferation. For Mead (1932), the past is always constructed in the present and answers to contemporary concerns. Each new project, in utilising the past to address its own problems, creates its own past. I do not want to analyse the many Meads to see how each answers to a distinct project. Somewhat unashamedly, I want to add yet another Mead to this list: Mead, theorist of the social act.

MEAD FROM THE STANDPOINT OF OTHERS

Mead's ideas have been mainly propagated through the book *Mind, Self & Society* (Mead, 1934) which is edited by Charles Morris. The book is an amalgam: it combines a stenographic copy of Mead's Social Psychology course at the University of Chicago, which was "by no means a court record" (1934, p.vi) and some student notes, together with Mead's unpublished manuscripts. Several questions have been raised about Morris's editorship, which I will not repeat (see, Farr, 1996; Cook, 1993; Dodds, Lawrence & Valsiner, 1997; Orbach, 2004). But I do want to make salient the problem of separating Morris's voice from Mead's voice. For example, the subtitle "from the standpoint of a social behaviorist" purports to indicate Mead's perspective, but in the introduction, Morris (1934, p.xvi) admits that Mead never used the term

"social behaviorist." So who is talking/writing when the text states: "Our behaviorism is a social behaviorism"? (p.6; see also p.91). Does the "our" refer to Mead and the students he was addressing? Or does it refer to Morris and his Mead? Or maybe it is Morris alone drawing *his* readers into the utterance?

Morris' theoretical standpoint is quite distinct from Mead's. Morris (1927) developed his own theory of the symbol "from the standpoint of a radical empiricism" (p.281). In this paper, Morris states that there is a "fundamental" problem with Mead's theory of the symbolic, namely that he "makes the ability to take the rôle of the other essential to the nature of the symbol" (p.290). Taking the role, or attitude, of the other entails self responding to self in the same way that other responds to self, and of this ability Morris rhetorically asks, "just how does one take the rôle of the other?" (p.290). The problem, for Morris, is that 'taking the rôle of the other' appears circular: it depends upon significant symbols and is also used by Mead to explain the formation of significant symbols.

When Morris outlines his mature theory of signs in 1946, after the success of *Mind, Self & Society*, he claims a stronger affinity to Mead. He states for example that "Mead uses the term 'significant symbol' to cover what we have called a comsign" (1946, p.42). Morris defines a comsign as a "sign that has the same signification to the organism that produces it that it has to other organisms" (p.347). Demonstrating this affinity, Morris quotes Mead as saying, "[i]f there is to be communication as such the symbol has to mean the same thing to all individuals involved" (p.42; Mead 1934, p.54). Of course, because the quotation is from *Mind, Self & Society*, it is unclear to what extent Morris is quoting himself.

Although it is impossible to determine whose voice this is, I aim to show, with reference to Mead's own published material, that Morris here has at least contextualised Mead's words in a way that profoundly simplifies Mead's definition of the significant symbol. From the standpoint of Morris, taking the attitude of the other is no longer essential to the significant symbol, which he defines as the evocation of the same meaning in different individuals. Contrary to this, I will argue, from the standpoint of the social act, that taking the attitude of the other is essential to the significant symbol. In unedited papers, Mead clearly states that: "It is through the

ability to be the other at the same time that he is himself that the symbol becomes significant" (Mead, 1922, p.161). Thus the significant symbol is not a shared *singular* attitude, but arises when self takes the attitude of *both* self and other at the same time.

Perhaps due to Morris's influence in presenting Mead's ideas to later generations, the concept of taking the attitude of the other has generated considerable confusion. For example, although Cook (1993, p.89), to his credit, does recognise the concept as essential, he remains unconvinced by Mead's proposal as to the mechanism through which we take the attitude of the other. Cook thus develops the idea of "indirect imitation" as a potential mechanism. Indeed, he suggests that Mead "went astray" when he failed to recognise a role for "imitative behaviour." On the other hand, theorists like Gergen (1999) and Grant (2004, p.226) see no place for imitation, and thus remain highly sceptical of the very possibility of taking the attitude of the other. Taking the attitude of the other, Gergen (1999, p.125) writes, "poses the intractable problem of explaining how it is a person is able to grasp others' states of minds from their gestures." Between Morris's suppression, Cooks' supplementation and the scepticism of Gergen and Grant, it is clear that there are contradictory readings of the concept of taking the attitude of the other in circulation. One reason for this, I argue, is because the concept of the social act has been neglected.

The primary aim of the present paper is to offer an alternative reading of Mead which emphasises the centrality of the social act. Although the social act has gained some recognition in the last decade (e.g., Farr 1996; Dodds *et al.*, 1997; de Waal, 2002; Blumer & Morrione, 2004), the concept has been much less popular than has the concept of taking the attitude of the other. Yet, as I will show, without the social act, taking the attitude of the other is indeed an "intractable problem," and the important contribution of the significant symbol is obscured. In order to develop this argument, I will proceed historically. Beginning with Descartes and Dewey, I will set up Mead's problematic, and then detail, by increments, the contextual emergence of the social act.

THE PROBLEMATIC

The social act answers to Descartes' notorious dualistic conception of interaction.
Descartes developed this conception when, during a series of meditations, he
established, to his own satisfaction, that there exists both a thinking mind and a
material world: *res cogitans*, which refers to the mind, the soul and the rational
faculties, which are not extended in space, and *res extensa* which refers to all that is
extended in space. This ontological division of the world led Descartes (1664/1985) to
differentiate reflexes and dualistic interactions.

A reflex occurs entirely in the realm of *res extensa*. Descartes illustrates this with an
image of a child by a fire. If the child's foot comes too close to the fire, he speculates,
particles stimulate nerve fibres which "pull" so as to open a particular duct in the
brain, which in turn causes a muscular contraction – "just as when you pull one end
of a string, you cause a bell hanging at the other end to ring at the same time"
(1664/1985, section 142, p.101). The key point with the reflex is that it is entirely
mechanical, and involves only *res extensa*.

Dualistic interaction involves the intervention of *res cogitans*. Taking visual
perception as an example, Descartes argues that the external object causes a "figure"
to be "traced" on the sensory organs of the child, which pull on a certain configuration
of fibres, which in turn cause an image to be "traced" onto the pineal gland
(1664/1985, section 175, p.105). The pineal gland, for Descartes, is the material
window into *res cogitans*, and thus such stimulation of the pineal gland, he argued,
would cause conscious perception. Once the child thus perceives the fire, the child's
mind, by virtue of its rational faculty, may intervene in the reflex process and inhibit
or enervate certain muscular responses. However, the power of *res cogitans* is limited
relative to the body (which is part of *res extensa*), and Descartes notes that the mind is
often unable to mediate emotional or reflex responses.

Descartes' interactive dualism has posed extensive problems for psychology (see
Marková, 1982; Farr, 1997). How can there be interaction between *res cogitans* and
res extensa? Is the mind, or *res cogitans*, amenable to scientific analysis? How can we
be sure that *res cogitans* has a valid conception of *res extensa*? And, of particular
concern of the present paper, how can Self mind know the mind of Other? So long as

minds are ontologically separated from both the world and each other, this problem seems intractable. There have been several attempts to overcome Descartes dualism. The one that was to be taken up by Mead was Dewey's theory of the act. Making a fundamental break with Descartes, instead of taking *res cogitans* and *res extensa* as ontologically given substances which interact, Dewey reverses the sequence: starting with the interaction, he examines how *res cogitans* and *res extensa* have been constructed.

THE ACT

Dewey (1896) introduces his theory of the act by evoking the "familiar" (p.358) motif of the child and the flame. In the years since Descartes, the child, through the writings of Peirce (1868/1998, p.76) and James (1890, p.25) seems to have become progressively younger. In Dewey's example, the child, like a baby, is naively reaching towards the flame. According to Dewey, the common sense interpretation is that the bright light is a stimulus for the child to put out his/her hand, and that the resulting burn is a stimulus to retract the hand. Dewey rejects this interpretation, which is equivalent to Descartes' conception of the reflex, and instead emphasises the act as a whole.

> In other words, the real beginning is with the act of seeing; it is looking, and not a sensation [i.e., stimulus] of light. The sensory quale gives the value of the act, just as the movement furnishes its mechanism and control, but both sensation [i.e., stimulus] and movement [i.e., response] lie inside, not outside the act. (1896, p.358-9)

Dewey draws our attention to the processual and active nature of the act, to the reach*ing* and look*ing*. There is no passive one-sided 'pull' mechanics. There is an ongoing action, in which the response constructs the stimulus, just as the stimulus constructs the response:

> The reaching, in turn, must both stimulate and control seeing. The eye must be kept upon the candle if the arm is to do its work; let it wander and the arm takes up another task. In other words, we now have an enlarged and

transformed coordination; the act is seeing no less than before, but it is now seeing-for-reaching purposes. (1896, p.359)

The act is a temporal whole, which moves towards its goal, and within this larger temporal movement, stimuli and responses can be distinguished. The point is that no stimulus or response exists in itself, "in reality they are always inside a coordination and have their significance purely from the part played" (1896, p.360).

Moreover, even separating the terms stimulus and response is problematic. In most acts, Dewey (1896, p.366-7) claims, there is no distinction between stimulus and response, between the object and the action. Although these distinctions may be in the mind of the psychologist analysing the act, to attribute the consciousness of the psychologist to the actor would be to commit the psychologist's fallacy. From the standpoint of the actor, the action, the goal, the actor and the object usually remain undifferentiated or fused within the act.

So far we have seen how Dewey re-conceptualises Descartes' conception of the reflex, but what about *res cogitans* mediating the reflex? Dewey also provides a theory of how mind mediates action. Instead of presupposing mind as an ontological entity, Dewey theorises how mind might arise through a conflict of responses within the act.

> But now take a child who, upon reaching for bright light (that is, exercising the seeing-reaching coordination) has sometimes had a delightful exercise, sometimes found something good to eat and sometimes burned himself. *Now the response is not only uncertain, but the stimulus is equally uncertain; one is uncertain only 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. The question of whether to reach or to abstain from reaching is the question what sort of a bright light have we here? Is it the one which means playing with one's hands, eating milk, or burning one's fingers? (1896, p.367-8)

Within this act there are two responses and thus two objects. The child on the one hand wants to reach toward the milk, and on the other hand, to draw away from the flame. Such contradictory responses, Dewey argues, are the basis of consciousness. Contradictory responses create a rupture within the act and stall the act. Dewey abandons Descartes static conception of mind, and re-defines mind as a process of reconstruction. Mind for Dewey, is oriented toward reconstructing the object and associated response so that the act may continue. The flame/plaything becomes subjective, remains so until reconstructed by mind, and only returns to objectivity once it is sufficiently reconstructed for the act to proceed. It is in this phase of the act that stimulus and motion, perception and action, differentiate.

> It is the temporary disintegration and need of reconstitution which occasions, which affords the genesis of the conscious distinction into sensory stimulus on one side and motor response on the other. (1896, p.370)

The basic movement can be schematised as a movement from a rupture of ongoing action, to reconstructive effort (experienced as consciousness), which resolves in the continuation of action. Situating consciousness as a phase within the temporal act marks a fundamental break with the Cartesian paradigm. To use Holton's (1975) terminology, Descartes and Dewey subscribe to different themata. Descartes conceives of the object and the mental image as existing side-by-side in parallel universes, and thus utilises a spatial metaphor. Dewey, on the other hand, uses a temporal metaphor and conceives of the response, the stimulus and the mental reconstruction as sequential phases of the same temporal whole, the act. For Descartes, that which is *res extensa* cannot become *res cogitans* nor *vice versa*. But for Dewey, during the course of action, the stimulus may first be objective, then subjective (through conflicting responses) and then reconstructed (in consciousness) into objectivity again.

Dewey's mechanism for the emergence of consciousness takes the form of what I call a contradiction theory, because it is through the tension of contradictory responses that consciousness arises. Broadly speaking, the theory is not unique to Dewey. An earlier variant can be found in Peirce (1878/1998, p.141-142), and post-Dewey variants are evident in Bateson's (1972) work on reflection, in Freire's (1973) theory

of conscientization and in Engeström's (1987; Engeström *et al*., 1997) theory of expansive learning. Central to contradiction theories consciousness, is the idea that contradictory or conflicting responses toward a phenomenon create consciousness of that phenomenon. For Dewey, the theory is non-Cartesian for consciousness is nothing but a duplication of Descartes' elementary reflex. But, does the contradiction theory, as detailed in the Deweyan act, provide a satisfactory account of consciousness?

RECONSTRUCTING THE ACT

Mead rapidly and enthusiastically took up Dewey's theory of the act, and directed his attention toward the reconstructive, or conscious, phase of the act. For example, Mead (1903) substantiates Dewey's theory by integrating it with James' "classical description" of the stream of thought. Paraphrasing James, Mead shows how James' introspective account of thought fits very nicely into the idea of reconstruction, or problem solving, within a ruptured act.

> The kaleidoscopic flash of suggestion, and intrusion of the inapt, the unceasing flow of odds and ends of possible objects that will not fit, together with the continuous collision with the hard, unshakable objective conditions of the problem, the transitive feelings of effort and anticipation when we feel that we are on the right track and substantive points of rest, as the idea becomes definite, the welcoming and rejecting, especially the identification of the meaning of the whole idea with the different steps in its coming to consciousness - there are none of these that are not almost oppressively present on the surface of consciousness during just the periods which Dewey describes as those of disintegration and reconstitution of the stimulus - the object. (1903, p.101-2)

Here we have a detailed phenomenological description of consciousness as a phase of ongoing problematic action. Conflicting responses are juxtaposed. Aspects of the world shimmer between objectivity and subjectivity. The mind scrambles to reconstruct the environment into such a configuration as can bring about the goal of the act.

Despite the Deweyan act being able to provide a rich description of problem solving, Mead came to realise that the contradiction theory is insufficient. Mead, returning yet again to the child and the fire, writes:

> There is the leaping flame which means to the child a plaything, there is heat which means a burn. In this case the results of the past responses are related to characters in the content of stimulation - movement means plaything, heat means burn. Still the meaning of plaything is playing and the meaning of burn is drawing back the hand. The association of these contents with the dancing flame does not enable the child to present to himself the playing or hurried withdrawal. It simply gives other contents, other stimulation values to his immediate experience. The association of one content with another content is not the symbolism of meaning. (1910a, p.400)

Conflicting responses to play and to withdrawal, Mead argues, will only lead to an oscillation between responses, not to consciousness that one is responding. In non-human animals there are conflicting responses, yet there is no consciousness. A dog may oscillate between being friendly and aggressive to a second dog, but it does not become conscious of either itself or the second dog. Indeed, humans seem only poorly aware of the contradictions in which they are embedded. Marx, for example, would be disappointed with the proletariat's current lack of awareness of the contradictions of capitalism. Contradictory responses are insufficient to prise the actor out of ongoing action, and thus unable to provide a non-Cartesian conception of mind.

The failure of the Deweyan act to account sufficiently for the mental phase of the act, was, for Mead, a rupture that demanded reconstruction. In a series of published and unpublished papers we can observe the kaleidoscopic flash of suggestion at work as Mead (1910/2001, 1910a, 1910b, 1912, 1913) struggles to reconstruct the Deweyan act (Gillespie, 2004). For example, Mead (1910a, p.400) discusses and dismisses James' (1890, p.25) idea that mind arises through the repeated perception of the same object. He also explored the idea, which he later abandoned, that mind arises in the space of manipulation opened up between the subject and the object by the action of the hands (1910/2001, p.52-56). Both of these inadequate formulations are, like the

contradiction theory, still in one important sense, Descartes' heirs, for they all take the subject-object interaction as primary. Mead's first major breakthrough was to turn his attention to subject-subject interaction.

Based on this paradigmatic shift of emphasis, Mead put forward what I call, a feedback theory of consciousness. According to this theory, it is the feedback an actor receives from others that determines the meaning of his or her action, and thus, that produces consciousness.

> We are conscious of our attitudes because they are responsible for the changes in the conduct of other individuals. A man's reaction toward weather conditions has no influence upon the weather itself. It is of importance for the success of his conduct that he should be conscious not of his own attitudes, of his own habits of response, but of the signs of rain or fair weather. Successful social conduct brings one into a field within which a consciousness of one's own attitudes helps toward the control of the conduct of others. (1910a, p.403)

Because the actions of self are of consequence for the actions of others (which in turn, are of consequence for self) there is both an incentive and a potential mechanism whereby self can become conscious of his or her actions.

The feedback theory is not unique to Mead. It is clearly evident in the work of Adam Smith (1759/1982, p.110) who wrote that society provides the individual with a "mirror" through which the individual becomes self-aware, and it may be that Mead got the idea from Adam Smith. There are also interesting parallels in the work of Vygotsky (Valsiner & van der Veer, 1988). Consider, for example, Vygotsky's (1978, p.56) analysis of a child's "internalization" of the meaning of pointing. Vygotsky begins with a child is reaching for some unspecified object. The act is goal directed, but carries no awareness of itself. While the desired object is meaningful for the child, the act of reaching is not. Then Vygotsky introduces the mother. From the standpoint of the mother, the child's reaching is meaningful, and the mother responds by bringing the unspecified object nearer to the child. Thus through feedback, Vygotsky argues, the mother converts the child's grasping into pointing. Importantly, such feedback does not imply that the child takes the perspective of the mother.

The feedback interpretation adds to the motif of the child-flame interaction the mother, thus moving from a dyadic to a triadic model. The attitude of the mother within this triad provides feedback to the child who is engaged in a Deweyan act with the object. The child's actions become meaningful to the child through the responses of the mother. This is quite different from the Deweyan act. The similarities and differences between Dewey and Vygotsky have been the subject of debate (Tolman & Piekkola, 1989; Glassman, 2001; Gredler & Shields, 2004). On the basis of the preceding analysis, I would add to this debate that, the extent to which Vygotsky espouses the feedback theory and not the contradiction theory is an important dimension of difference between the theorists.

Although the feedback theory of consciousness is sometimes attributed to Mead, Mead himself came to reject the theory. Firstly, why should the animate world provide any more feedback than the inanimate world? Food eaten disappears, and there is no reason to see why this should bring about consciousness. Secondly, non-human animals, right down to social insects, live amidst others, receiving feedback from others, and yet they do not appear to have minds. Finally, there is nothing in feedback *per se* that would seem to lead to consciousness or mind. For example, a dog can be taught to point at food, through reward and punishment feedback, but the dog is not aware of the meaning of pointing.

The core problem is that the feedback theory does not really deal with a subject-subject relation. The other is a pseudo other, who may as well be an object or a mechanical device. The feedback theory is the subject-object paradigm in disguise, for the perspective is still focused on the actor and the other is not endowed with any independent perspective. It is not until the perspective of the other is actually brought within the analysis that the analysis of the subject-subject relation can begin in earnest. And this is precisely why Mead's concept of taking the attitude of the other is of fundamental importance.

THE SOCIAL ACT

There are two related insights that comprise Mead's theory of the emergence of consciousness and self-mediation. First, Mead defines consciousness as becoming other to oneself. It is by becoming other to self that self is able to mediate self's own reflexes. Second, Mead realised that self is already other from the perspective of other within social interaction, and thus if self could take the attitude of the other (toward self) then we would have an explanation of consciousness.

Thus we return to the concept of taking the attitude of the other which I discussed at the outset of this paper. However, we are not quite back where we started, for we now have the Deweyan act and the problematic to which the concept answers. But we still have the so-called 'intractable problem' of how self can take the attitude of the other. It is important to realise the extent of this problem, for it is both central to understanding Mead's insight and his consequent theory of the significant symbol. The problem is the divergence of perspectives within social interaction. It is easy for us to overlook this divergence for we automatically conceive of a situation from the perspectives of diverse participants simultaneously. Returning to the example of the mother, child and flame will illustrate the divergence. The situation for the child is that of reaching for a play-thing or a burn-thing. The situation for the mother is attentiveness to her child, of both protecting the child and fulfilling the child's desires. Despite the actions of both mother and child constituting, in part, the situation for the other, each is clearly embedded in a different situation. The question is: how can the child transcend her own perceptual field and begin to experience the situation of the mother within which she (the child) is the other?

The answer to this question is found in the social act. A social act is more specific than social interaction in which two Deweyan acts interact. A social act refers to a social interaction that has become an institution, with established positions (i.e., buyer/seller, teacher/student, parent/child, boss/subordinate) which are stable over time. The introduction of both time and social structure is a breakthrough. Although the perspectives of self and other within any ongoing social act are necessarily divergent, if one takes into account time and a stable social structure, then it is possible that at some previous point in time, the positions of self and other were

reversed. Given this, each participant in a social act may, by virtue of previous responses while in the position of the other, already possess the attitude of the other.

> Those attitudes which all assume in given conditions and over against the same objects, became for [the child] attitudes which every one assumes. In taking the role which is common to all, he finds himself speaking to himself and to others with the authority of the group. These attitudes become axiomatic. The generalization is simply the result of the identity of responses. (1922, p.161).

It is because self and other are often in the same situations, or social positions, and acting toward the same objects, that the child comes to acquire the same attitudes that others have. These attitudes, which self has in common with the rest of the community, are axiomatic, for this identity of attitudes is the route through which self can take the attitude of the other. The attitudes that self has held towards other, and which self turns upon self (through taking the attitude of the other), comprise the attitude of the generalized other. The generalized other does not refer to the attitudes of others becoming generalized into an abstract attitude, but instead refers to *the generalization of self's own previous attitudes into the attitude of the other.*

Thus the problematic is narrowed down to the tractable question: *how are the attitudes that self has held towards others reversed, such that self reacts to self in the same attitude that self has reacted to others?* The simple answer to this question is that this occurs through self changing positions within the social structure. The problem with this simple answer is that, although our positions within the social structure do change, they do not change to a sufficient extent. Our positions as men/women, consumers/salespersons, students/teachers, children/parents are quite stable. Although the theory can explain how teachers take the attitude of students (because they were previously students), the theory cannot explain how men can take the attitude of women, or how children can take the attitude of parents. It is for this reason that Mead introduces play and games. Both play and games are characterised by changing positions within imaginary social acts (Mead, 1922; 1925). Although children do not take the position of parents in actuality, in play and in games they put themselves in the situation of parents and thus cultivate the attitude of parents.

Through such means, children enact the attitudes of parents and babies, of thieves and police officers, of patients and doctors, of students and teachers, of hunters and the hunted and so on, building up the stock of attitudes that comprise society.

THE GAME AS A SOCIAL ACT

In order to illustrate how the social act enables us to take the attitude of the other, we must abandon the motif of the child, the fire and the mother, because this motif does not possess institutionalised social structure with exchanges of social position. Instead, we will take as our motif a child playing football (which we will later extend into a game of football). The young child plays at kicking the ball and at catching the ball. The child may first strike the ball against the wall as if to score a goal, and then, as the ball rebounds, change to the attitude of a goalkeeper and lunge to block the ball's return. The sight of the wall calls out the attitude of the striker and the approaching ball calls out the attitude of the goalkeeper. Through such play the child cultivates both the striker and the goalkeeper attitudes. However, these attitudes remain un-integrated for they are context dependent. The situation within which each attitude is evoked is quite different. These attitudes are not evoked at the same time. The child is, so to speak, determined by the situation. As the situation changes, so the child's attitude changes from striking to goalkeeping. In Mead's terminology, the child is a bundle of 'I' attitudes without any 'me.' At this stage, the child never arises as a goalkeeper or striker in his or her own experience. Nevertheless, play allows the child to cultivate the attitudes appropriate for being both a goalkeeper and a striker. The only problem is that they are evoked in different situations. *How can both of these attitudes be evoked at the same time, in the same situation?*

One important point to note about the attitudes that the child enacts in play is that many of the attitudes are complementary. For example, the attitude of goalkeeper and striker are complementary because each attitude is, in part, responding to the other attitude. Yet these attitudes are also incommensurable, in the sense that they belong to different positions within a social act. Mead's thesis is that because such attitudes are both complementary and incommensurable, if they could both become paired or integrated within the same individual then that individual, in regard to a specific social act, will become conscious of his or her actions (from the standpoint of the

other within the specified act). The game is a social institution that can create such pairing or integration of complementary yet incommensurable attitudes. A close reading of Mead's work suggests three possible mechanisms through which the game can integrate complementary attitudes.

First, the game increases the movement between complementary social positions. Although non-human societies have social structure, only human societies have extensive position exchange within that social structure. The game takes the exchange of social positions to an extreme. Generally, in social life, the exchange of positions is quite rare. For example, it is unusual for a policeman and thief, or for a shop assistant and customer, to change social positions. However, in games, position exchange is normal. The significance of frequent position exchange is that it entails frequent exchange between complementary attitudes. Thus moving between complementary social positions scaffolds the pairing and integration of complementary attitudes. After some time, one can conceive that actual position exchange no longer becomes necessary, as the complementary attitudes have become so integrated, such that the attitude of the other can be evoked by merely being in the social position complementary to the position of the other.

Second, the game is comprised of *rules* which bridge attitudes isolated within the different situations that comprise the game. At a certain age, children, Mead (1922, p.162) writes, have "a passion for rules and standards." The rules of the game apply equally to all positions, and thus enable the child to see him or her self in the eyes of the group. Neither the goalkeeper nor the striker can run off the field with the ball. Whether self sees other do this, or whether self does this, the same rule applies, and as such, the divergence between self's situation and other's situation is bridged. The action in which self, in possession of the ball, runs off the field to avoid an opponent, is, it must be borne in mind, quite a different action to that of self chasing an opponent in possession of the ball and then seeing that opponent run off the field. This is the very divergence which creates the 'intractable problem.' The important feature of rules is that they bridge these two complementary situations, thus providing a reversible structure which facilitates taking the attitude of the other in regard to some action (i.e., taking the ball off the field). Of course some rules are divergent. A goalkeeper can pick up the ball but a striker cannot. Yet still there is reversibility, for

the same rule applies whether other is the goalkeeper or self is the goalkeeper. Thus self is again forced to bring together the attitude of the goalkeeper (picking up the ball) and the response of a striker to a goalkeeper (seeing the goalkeeper pick up the ball, and then ceasing the offensive and not calling foul).

Finally, there is the peculiar property of vocal gestures. Mead (1912) used vocal gestures to explain the phylogenesis of significant symbols. For Mead, vocal gestures are distinct from other gestures, such as facial gestures or bodily gestures, because they are experienced in the same way by both self and other within a social act. That is to say, vocal gestures normally sound the same in all the situations that comprise a social act. Visual stimuli, on the other hand, are usually divergent for self and other within any social act. Thus vocal gestures can potentially weave together the disparate situations that comprise a social act. For example, in the game of football, the vocal gesture of another player calling 'pass' is the same sound that self may make when self is in the position of the other. Such stimuli, because they are not divergent within the social act, and thus evoke both the response of self and other (in both self and other) simultaneously, can facilitate the integration of attitudes. This theory of the peculiar significance of the vocal gesture relies upon feedback, because the vocal gesture is both a response and a stimulus (for self and other). It is because self reacts to the vocal gesture in the same way that other reacts to it that self ends up taking the attitude of the other.

DEVELOPING THE SOCIAL ACT

Are these three mechanisms sufficient to account for the integration of attitudes, and thus the emergence of significant symbolisation? My own opinion is that they are not, and that further theoretical elaboration is required to tackle this problem. Although, as Mead pointed out, each 'rising generation buries the old' and creates its own past, it is equally evident that sometimes "the dead bury the living" (Nietzsche, 1874/1997, p.72). The issue of ascertaining the most satisfactory reading of a text must not be conflated with the text offering the most satisfactory reading of our phenomena.

In a sense, Mead's theory, as it is, is very coarse. Mead often blurs the line between phylogenesis and ontogenesis, which allows him to work at an abstract level and

oversimplify ontogenetic development. In order to develop the theory of the social act, empirical research is needed which looks at the messy actuality of ontogenetic development. My suspicion is that such research would both complicate and enrich Mead's theory. Three possible avenues for empirical research stand out.

First, a good candidate for research is self-reflection engendered through social interaction. In ontogenetic development, qualitatively new mechanisms for integrating complementary attitudes arise once a rudimentary language is established. When there is a divergence of perspective, people can and do exchange perspectives through dialogue (Farr & Anderson, 1983). We can imagine that the team mate who did not receive the desired pass will make his attitude clear to the 'glory-hunting' child. Both the team captain and the coach may take the 'glory-hunting' child aside and point out to him/her the interests of the team. In such instances, and through such dialogue and patient explanation, others are trying to create an integration of complementary attitudes (i.e., aiming to score a goal and calling for a pass). The shame engendered through this reproach constitute a painful, but clear, moment of self-reflection and integration.

Second, self-reflection can also arise through the child's own mental processes. For example, after the match, the child may experience, against his/her will, a sequence of thoughts, in which he/she takes the attitude of having the ball and then moves to the attitude of calling for a pass and then maybe to the attitude of the team as a whole. Examining the content of such a stream of thought should yield traces of the child's own previous attitudes of calling for a pass and dismay at other team mates who have not passed. Here one would be searching for the relation between the child's attitude towards other 'glory-hunters' and his/her own self-reflections.

Finally, we could ask: how does the developing child interact with pre-existing symbolic forms? Although Mead does repeatedly emphasise the significance of novels, newspapers, autobiographies, films, and dramas as technologies for cultivating, in imagination, the attitudes of others (Mead, 1925; 1926; 1936, chapter 18), he does not integrate this with the theory of the social act. Indeed, his theory often seems a-historical. A child, however, does not create his or her own symbolic world, but is born into a symbolic world that has been constructed over many

millennia and which orients to the child (Duveen, 2001). This symbolic world, which the child enters into, may facilitate the integration of complementary attitudes in two ways. First, these symbolic forms may be used as symbolic resources (Zittoun, *et al.*, 2003) that aid the child to imagine the attitudes of significant others. These narratives may even be mapped onto experience. Thus, for example, the child might identify his actions with those of a glory-hunting footballer in a film and then through the film take the attitude of the team in the film toward him/herself. Second, the narrative structure, in itself, may encourage the integration of complementary attitudes. Narratives usually entwine the actions and reactions of a group of people engaged in complex social interactions. The narrative leads the individual, in imagination, from the attitudes and actions of a hero to the consequences of those actions for others and the resultant attitudes and actions of those others. Thus narratives, like the changing of positions within a game, by leading individuals from one attitude to its complement, may scaffold the integration of the generalized other.

Although I have raised more questions than answers, these questions build upon Mead's theory of the social act and as such should illustrate how the problem of taking the attitude of the other is tractable. Leaving these circumscribed problematics aside, I now want to return to Mead's conception of the significant symbol in order to tease out the consequences of the present reading of the social act.

THE SIGNIFICANT SYMBOLIC MIND

A significant symbol is not, as Morris suggests, a 'sign that has the same signification to the organism that produces it that it has to other organisms.' From a Meadian standpoint, this would not produce awareness of meaning, or mind, only a response common to two organisms. Nor is a significant symbol simply the attitude of the other. If this were the case it would be a circular concept, for everyone would become conscious by taking the perspective of the other, and thus there would be a sort of infinite regress. The attitude of the other, while necessary, is not sufficient as it is missing the embodied attitude of the actor. It is the integration and double evocation of both the attitude of self and the attitude of other that comprise the significant symbol. This is what Mead means with the statement: "It is through the ability to be the other at the same time that he is himself that the symbol becomes significant"

(Mead, 1922, p.161). A significant symbol entwines two or more attitudes that belong to the two or more positions within a social act. Significant symbols always have two references, "one to the thing indicated, and the other to the response" (p.162). The thing indicated, the object being acted towards, arises in self's response to that thing. The response towards the thing indicated arises in the attitude of the other. The process through which these two responses are paired, this process is what the social act theorises, namely, the social emergence of mind, or self-mediation.

This double response does not arise through contradictory responses, as in the Deweyan act. A significant symbol only arises with the evocation of complementary yet incommensurable attitudes. The attitudes are complementary, because they belong to the same social act, and the attitudes are incommensurable because they arise in different positions within that social act. If this double evocation is not present, and the gesture evokes a response in the other but not in self, then we have a non-significant symbol.

Mead's conception of the significant symbol provides an original and useful way of thinking about the nature of the symbolic. For example, both Saussure's (1916/1983) sign and Morris's (1946) comsign emphasise a singular relation between the sign, or comsign, and an object. Mead's significant symbol, on the other hand, is genuinely intersubjective and dialogic for it is, even in its most minimal form, the integration of at least two different perspectives. The theories of Bühler and Peirce are closer to Mead in this regard. Bühler (1934/1990) recognises that there may be a divergence between the expression of a sign for a speaker and the appeal of the sign to a receiver. Peirce similarly states that the sign, or representamen, needs an interpretant, and that the meaning of a sign varies with the interpretant. In this sense both Bühler and Peirce bring to the fore the potential divergences in the meaning of a sign. However, they do not conceive of this divergence as inherent in the structure of the sign.

For Saussure, Morris, Bühler and Peirce, a word like "pass," in the context of football, refers to the act of passing a ball, even if, in different contexts and for different people the precise meaning of the word varies. Considered from a Meadian standpoint, "pass" has a more specific meaning, or rather, two divergent meanings: for the player without the ball it expresses the attitude of opportunity, it is a calling for the ball; and

for the player with the ball it means giving up an opportunity, it means giving the ball away. Thus "pass," when situated in the game of football, *means both getting the ball and giving the ball away*. These meanings are both incommensurable (because they originate in different positions within the social act), yet complementary (because they belong to the same social act). One could say that a significant symbol is like a space-time worm-hole which connects different perspectives, or different points in space and time.

The pronouns, such as "me" and "you," exhibit the structure of the significant symbol dramatically. Pronouns are generalizations that do not belong to a specific social act like "pass." Depending on one's position within a social act, "me" and "you" have the same meaning. As Farr and Rommetveit (1995, p.273) have pointed out, "me" spoken by you means "you" to me, and "me" spoken by me means "you" to you. And if you say "you" then the meaning for me is "me." Such a structure is exemplary of the integration of incommensurable yet complementary attitudes that is common to all significant symbols.

How does this theory of significant symbols account for mind? For Mead, the mind is fundamentally symbolic. That is to say, it is an ingrown intertwining of attitudes. Mind comprises self's own attitudes, from various real and fictional social acts, which have been integrated in such a way that some of these attitudes are the objects of other attitudes. When two integrated or paired attitudes are evoked, 'me' arises in self's conscious experience. Self becomes an object to self in the act of mediating self's first attitude. 'Me' is symbolic, in the sense that it arises when self is both in the attitude of self (engaged in some action) *and* in the attitude of other (reacting to that action). Thus, what Descartes articulated in terms of dualistic interaction, Mead articulates in terms of self mediating self's own action from the standpoint of the other.

But of course, as I have argued, self does not take the actual attitude of the other. The 'me' that arises to self is in fact a composite of self's current attitude and self's previous attitude towards some other (who was in a similar position to self's current position). 'You' at time one become an aspect of 'me' at time two.

MEAD'S CONTEMPORARY CONTRIBUTION

I have tried to contextualise Mead's contribution by situating his work in relation to Dewey's act. Although Mead carries forward the pragmatist and fundamentally temporal Deweyan act, he elaborates this into a much more subtle theory which can account for the mind as a form of self-mediation. The kernel of this contribution, I have argued, is the social act. The social act, and not the act, provides a means to escape Cartesian solipsism.

In Meadian scholarship to-date, the distinction between the Deweyan act and the Meadian social act has not been emphasised. Particularly functionalist interpretations of Mead have tended to collapse the social act into the Deweyan act, thus making Mead's theory more functional than symbolic. Even Shibutani (1961, p.64ff), who develops a subtle Meadian social psychology, conceives of the act primarily in terms of impulse, perception, manipulation and consummation – that is an act (self-object dyadic relation), which although symbolically mediated, has little room for the other. The origin of this interpretation is in *The Philosophy of the Act* (Mead, 1938), which is edited by Morris and his colleagues. The first chapter in this volume, entitled 'Stages in the act: Preliminary statement,' does indeed present the act as a self-object relation. While I do not doubt that Mead wrote this chapter, I do doubt that it presents his main contribution: the chapter details the stages in the act, not the phases of the social act. It is misleading to see the act rather than the social act as the comprising Mead's contribution. Based on the preceding analysis I suggest that a more precise title for this volume would have been *The Philosophy of the Social Act*.

In order to distinguish the subtlety of the social act I have differentiated it from the contradiction and feedback theories of mind. In the literature, Mead's position amongst these theories is often unclear. For example, de Waal's (2002) recent book, *On Mead*, seems to attribute a variant of Dewey's contradiction theory to Mead. De Waal (p.21-22) states that: "In short, for Mead, consciousness is a product of the problematic situation" and a problematic situation "arises when one's habits are inhibited or when there are conflicting tendencies to act." Moreover, despite recognising the centrality of the social act, de Waal assimilates it into the contradiction theory. He states that because social acts demand "adjustment and readjustment," the interaction is problematic and thus "will generally show a high

degree of attentive, conscious involvement" (p.41). The problem with this type of reading of Mead is that it reduces Mead's posthumous productivity because it obfuscates the uniqueness of Mead's theory.

Differentiating Mead's social act from Dewey's act, as I have done, makes Mead's work productive in potentially contributing to contemporary debates. For example, there has been a recent resurgence of interest in Dewey (e.g., Tolman & Piekkola, 1989; Wertsch, 1998; Benson, 2001; Glassman, 2001; Biesta & Burbules, 2003). In this regard, the history of the social act, and its emergence from the Deweyan act, can provide a useful resource. Can Mead's critique of Dewey be sustained? Does the critique apply to contemporary theories? And if so, is Mead's theory a viable alternative?

The social act, as presented, is also productive in answering to the current debates about the nature of the symbolic and intersubjectivity (Coelho & Figueiredo, 2003; Marková, 2003; Valsiner, 2003). From the standpoint of the social act, significant symbolic intersubjectivity is not the sharing of a single meaning, as espoused by Morris, but is the sharing of a divergence of perspective. Interestingly, the peculiar nature of the divergence which Mead makes central to the symbolic, namely the pairing of divergent attitudes within a social act, is quite consonant with the discovery of so-called 'mirror neurons' (Rizzollati *et al.*, 1998; Kohler *et al.*, 2002).

Aside from answering to contemporary debates, Mead, as theorist of the social act, can also open up innovative new questions. For example, given the idea that the 'you' becomes the 'me,' to what extent does it follow that the way in which self perceives others is indicative of the way in which self perceives self? Simply put, are jealous people adulterous? Are paranoid people Machiavellian? Of course there is no simple relationship between the way that self perceives others and the way that self perceives self. Others are heterogeneous, and not all self's attitudes towards others are held towards self. Indeed, we know that there are important divergences in how self perceives self and how self perceives others (Ichheiser, 1949; Jones & Nisbett 1972; Farr & Anderson, 1983). Nevertheless, it seems reasonable to suspect, for example, that the pride that self feels upon a certain success is entwined with the esteem that self has previously had for others who have succeeded in a similar task.

One past displaces and abrogates the next, because the past is always reconstructed in the present and oriented to present concerns. Pasts, however, can be either more or less productive in contributing to present concerns and enriching the field of knowledge. I have argued that reconstructing Mead as the theorist of the social act is particularly productive given our contemporary concerns about the nature of the symbolic and its relation to interaction. The social act can make taking the attitude of the other, and the formation of significant symbols, an empirically tractable research issue. The crux of the conceptual shift being advocated is to conceive of taking the attitude of the other in terms of self reacting to self in the attitude that self reacts to others (either in actuality or in imagination). Before taking the attitude of the other self takes (in actuality, in role play or in imagination) the position of the other. This refocuses our attention upon how the attitudes belonging to complementary social positions become integrated, thus producing the shared divergence that underlies consciousness, self-mediation and significant symbols. The social institution, or pattern of interaction, that coordinates this reversal and integration of attitudes, I have argued, is the social act.

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