The Self

The concept of self for George Herbert Mead, as outlined in *Mind, Self, and Society,* can be found as emerging from any social process in which an interaction of selves takes place. According to Mead, the self continually develops as it carries on a "conversation of gestures" with others. In a "conversation of gestures", the self becomes more aware of its own attitudes as it internalizes the attitudes of others. A reflection of the attitudes of others affects the attitudes of the self so that the self responds to others in light of their attitudes. In order for the self to be truly actualized, Mead states that the self must become an object to itself, just as the self regards other selves as objects. When man views himself as an object, he is able to talk to himself and to see himself as others see him. This process permits man to reflect on his actions as he comes into contact with others. In any experience in which man is involved with others, the self takes the attitudes of others and this brings about a change in the self.

Any community, society, or particular organization is what Mead defines as "the generalized other" which organizes the attitude of the self and gives it unity. Man continually adopts the attitudes of his "generalized other", internalizes them and relates them to his own attitudes. His attitudes in turn affect "the generalized other". This process brings about a change in the self and hopefully a change in society. The constant "conversation of gestures" between the self and society affect social progress. The self continues to build as it influences society and as society influences the self. As man is affected by attitudes, the change in him affects society as a whole. "To the degree that we make the community in which we live different we all have what is essential to genius, and which becomes genius when the effects are profound."[1]

Since man relates to others in his experience and since he takes the attitudes of others and responds to them, language is seen for Mead as being all important in the development of the self. The body operates independently of the self. Parts of the body may be lost without any disturbance to the self. Mead offers the example of the eye being able to see the foot but not the body in its entirety, while the self can enter its own experience and view itself as a a whole. The drowning person, says Mead, is experiencing outside activity with respect to his own organism in which the self is not involved, and yet his memory lays before him scenes of his own life. In this instance, the self is viewed as an object. The ability to view one's self as an object comes from its relationship to other individuals within a certain experience. Communication enables the self to talk and respond to itself in the way in which others respond to it.

> "It is fair to say that the beginning of the self as an object, so far as we can see, is to be found in the experiences of people that lead to the conception of a 'double.' Primitive people assume that there is a double, located presumably in the diaphragm, that leaves the body temporarily in sleep and completely in death. It can be enticed out of the body of one's enemy and perhaps killed. It is represented in infancy by the imaginary playmates which children set up, and through which they come to control their experiences in their play."[2]

The self can only arise out of the social experience and employs "the conversation of gestures" for its development. What one says or does beckons a response in another and as one takes the attitude of the other's response to himself, he perhaps changes his action or response. In the same way, the self can talk over its actions with itself and modify them according to its own responses. In having a conversation with one's self, according to Mead, it might be possible to stop the cruel statement from being spoken.

The background of the genesis of the self is rooted in "the conversation of gestures" which takes place between individuals and "play and games" which begin on the child's level. The meaning of a gesture, whether physical or vocal, finds itself, for Mead, in the response which another self or organism has to that gesture. "Rationality means that the type of response which we call out in others should be called out in ourselves, and that this response should in turn take its place in determining what further thing we are going to say and do."[3] In communication, man's language should be universal, so that "the symbol should arouse in one's self what it arouses in the other individual."[4] The careful use of language as gesture in affecting the attitudes of others is essential for Mead, since our gestures reflect our own attitudes. Mead alludes to the fact that Helen Keller did not feel that she had developed a self until she had developed a communication involving symbols which helped to call out the same responses in her in which they called out in other individuals.

Role-playing is viewed as another factor in the genesis of the self. Children who take on the role of the teacher, policeman, or doctor, carry on a conversation between themselves and the role they are playing. The child says something and in responding in the other role, deliberates as to what the response will be. He must take on the attitude of the other to determine what his own response to that attitude should be. He uses the reflective process in determining his action. "He has a set of stimuli which call out in himself the sort of responses they call out in others. He takes this group of responses and organizes them into a certain whole. Such is the simplest form of being another to one's self."[5] Role-playing is, as Mead suggests, the training ground for the development of the self.

From role-playing, the child is introduced to the organized game in which he must take on the attitude of each of the players in order to fulfill his position in the game. He must, in determining the attitudes of the others, "know" what each one is going to do so that he will know how he should proceed. The organization of these attitudes for the child, represents the organization of attitudes that he will encounter in other "games" in life.

Mead relates the role-playing of the child to the religious pageants in which primitive peoples take the parts of their gods or heroes. The attitudes toward their gods and heroes are expressed in the way in which they take on the attitudes of their roles. Out of this, says Mead, a personality develops, just as it develops in the child who is role-playing. The

difference between role-playing and games is that in the game the child must take on the attitudes of the others in the organized play. This organization of attitudes becomes "the generalized other" for Mead.

"The generalized other" is any community or organized social group with which the self interacts. It gives the self a unity because it must now enter into an experience with an organization of attitudes and must regard those attitudes as it develops its own. Mead offers an example of interaction with the other as regards property rights. When a man says, "This is my property", he is calling out a response in the other. He is aware of the fact that "the generalized other", or members of community, recognize what property means to them and they respond with an attitude that expresses an understanding of his statement. In order to be a self, one must be a member of a community, according to Mead, for the organization of the self arises out of the organization of the various attitudes in the community. The community, says Mead, gives a man his principles, and he learns to put himself "in the place of the generalized other, which represents the organized responses of all the members of the group."[6] When man determines his actions in light of the attitudes of the group, he possesses character.

Man must take an objective and impersonal look at himself in his relationship to others. Since the self is essentially social, it cannot be wholly subjective. Pain and pleasure are experienced subjectively and relfection may be thought of as being subjective because a person experiences it himself. In so far as a man's reflection involves the attitudes of others and determines his conduct with regards to others, the self is an object to himself.

Although man takes on the attitudes of the generalized other, he has the ability to override those attitudes if he feels that a change must take place in the community. The self must speak out over the generalized voice and have its case heard in hopes of affecting a change in the order of things.

Consciousness involves certain experiences which are personal. Self-consciousness involves treating the self as an object. Just as it is possible to relieve one's own pain by treating it as an object, it is possible to relieve one's own pain by treating it as an object, it is possible for a man to view an offense against him objectively and forgive his offender. A separation of the experience from the individual could enable a forgetting of the offense. According to Mead, the self must forgive and forget and this can only be done by stepping outside a situation and viewing it objectively.

It is possible to carry on a "conversation of gestures" with nature. Man talks to the physical world about him and receives a response. He is able to take on the attitudes of nature. An example of an engineer building a bridge is given by Mead, in which, through the struggles of his planning, the engineer talks to nature, takes its attitudes and adapts them to his construction. In a sense, he "cooperates with nature".

The "I", for Mead, is that part of the self which responds to the attitudes of others, while the "me", which is the other phase of the self, is the combination of attitudes which the self internalizes. The "I" is responsible for calling on the "me" for a response to certain attitudes. "It is what you were a second ago that is the "I" of the "me".[7] The "I" and the "me" constitute the personality for Mead. The "me" is a constant, forever adapting itself to the attitudes of the community, while the "I" responds to the attitude of the community. The "I" is that phase of the self which might seek to modify the community. After the "I" speaks, it calls on the "me" to carry on "the conversation of gestures" with the community.

The mind, for Mead, is involved in the interaction of the 'conversation of gestures' in which the self engages. It is actualized as the attitudes of others are internalized by the self, and since language plays such an important role in gestures, Mead suggests that language exists before the mind.

The individual self, in its relationship to the generalized other, becomes a part of the experience of the other just as the other enters into the experience of the self. Attitudes and values of the self and the other express similar meaning. The creative self, for Mead, is one which makes a difference in a community. Great characters in history, such as Jesus and Buddha, made a difference in their communities because they affected a change and enlarged the communities to symbolize families with common values and attitudes. Each man possesses potential to create a new society through change. The self emerges from the social experience, according to Mead. It cannot exisst by itself, but only exists in its relationship to other individuals in the social situation. As such, it bears the responsibility of affecting change in that social situation by building a self which considers itself objectively and puts itself in the place of other selves. This very process affects a change, however slight, in the "generalized other."

In Chapter Three, Episode Four of *Mark,* Lisa asks, "Miss Williams, are there any social relationships that are basic?" A discussion then begins concerning different kinds of relationships, including friendly and business relationships. Mead's answer to Lisa would be a "yes" since the self exists only in relationship to others. The internalization of the attitudes of each self to the other forms the basis of relationship. The very fact that a self can respond to the attitudes of others suggests that a "conversation of gestures" is taking place. One understands the meaning of the gesture of another, takes it to himself, and responds in like manner. In just the same way, the self responds to the community, forming a basic relationship.

Later, in the same episode, Harry remarks, "Getting back to what Lisa was saying, does it mean we become who we are by engaging in various social relationships? . . . It's like there are a web of relationships that I'm at the center of." 32/33-36. Harry mentions his relationship to his teachers and his relationship to his parents at which he feels he is the center. According to Mead, each relationship that man has is a factor in the building of the self. As he states in *Mind, Self, and Society,* the self begins to build at a very young age when the child, in the role-playing stage, assumes a role in which he calls out a response in himself. He is aware of the responses that he shold give if he is playing the role of a policeman and also aware of return responses that he should give as the person being arrested. He is organizing a process of internalizing attitudes, making them his own, and responding to the "other". This procedure continues with each relationship the child has, whether individual or

group. As the self builds, the personality builds, and the individual begins to examine relationships as a whole. His relationships broaden as he becomes a member of a larger community which enters into his realm of experience. To answer Harry, we could not become who we are without engaging in various relationships that help build the self.

Suki helps Sandy to differentiate between an association and a community, "In an association, you cooperate with others because it's to your advantage to do so. In a community, the question of whose advantage it is never even comes up because you always take other people's point of view into account. In a community, you understand and accept other people, and they understand and accept you." 33/6-9 In a "conversation of gestures" it is necessary to take the attitudes of the "generalized other" and internalize them. The attitudes of the individual become part of the "generalized other" and so what is involved is a consideration for all of the members of the community. As Suki says, the points of view of each of the members are taken into account. If this were not so, it would not be possible for one individual to make a difference in society, as Mead suggests. It is the acceptance of the attitudes of others that makes for social progress. It is the same acceptance which gives a community unity and an organization of attitudes which function for the good of all of the members of the "generalized other".

Terry Riordan

Footnotes

1. George H. Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society,* (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1962), p. 218.
2. Ibid, 140.
3. Ibid, p. 149.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid, p. 151.
6. Ibid, p. 162.
7. Ibid, p. 174.

Bibliography

Lipman, M. *Mark.* New Jersey: First Mountain Foundation, 1980, pp. 31-33.

Mead, G. H. *Mind, Self and Society.* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1962, pp. 135-226.