

THE SELF'S METAMORPHOSIS IN THE CONTEXT OF SOCIAL EXPERIENCE: PRAGMATIC CONTRIBUTIONS

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Abstract: One of the most important changes in the field of human sciences is the transition from the psychological subject to the social subject. Man gets the self-experience by confronting others, by interacting with his family, school, culture, the group he is part of, in other words through communication. In G.H. Mead's vision the self builds progressively, it appears and develops in social experience and activity. Man is aware not directly, but only indirectly, from the different points of view of the other members of the social group or the generalized group of the whole social group to which he belongs. At the moment, it is no longer possible to study man in isolation, but at the risk of depriving him of an essential dimension of his reality: at all levels, the human being is fundamentally communicating. In this context we can talk about the fact that the form of enunciation does not express the autonomous thinking of the subject, as it is an adaptation imposed by external circumstances. The mechanism of developing self-consciousness is based on assuming roles of the other, involving language and communication. It is not mental activity that organizes expression, but, on the contrary, the expression organizes mental activity, modelling it and determining its orientation. The genuine substance of the language is not constituted by an abstract system of linguistic forms, neither by the isolated monological enunciation nor by the psycho-physiological act of its production, but by the social phenomenon of verbal interaction, made by enunciation. Verbal interaction is thus the fundamental reality of the language.

Keywords: social subject, social experience, communication, modelling, mental activity.

1. THE CONNECTION BETWEEN LANGUAGE AND SELF

One of the most important changes in the field of human sciences is the transition from the psychological subject to the social subject. It is precisely because of this paradigm shift that the human being has come to be analyzed largely due to his relationship to society. Throughout their lives, people manage to

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find themselves in countless circumstances and interrelationships with their peers. Due to the social context, one can see and perceive the individual characteristics, but also the group characteristics of the people who interact within the public sphere. People's social manifestations can also be distinguished by recourse to their ability to know themselves. Man reaches the experience of self through confrontation with others, through the game of interactions with family, school, culture, the group he belongs to, in other words, through communication.

A philosopher who analysed in a very interesting way the manifestation of the self in the social context was G.H. Mead, an American philosopher who lived and worked from 1863 to 1931. This philosopher offered us in his works an analytical depth and a scientific precision in the field of a philosophy of the act. Sociologists at the University of Chicago – where G.H. Mead taught philosophy – highlighted the original contributions made by Professor G.H. Mead in the field of what they called social psychology. In addition to his considerable contribution in the field of philosophy and social psychology, the philosopher in question also contributed to the development of anthropology. His contributions were therefore oriented towards the field of psychology and social philosophy, equally towards the intellectual history and philosophy of science, as well as the achievements in formulating a philosophy of the act (with its emerging temporality and its concept of perspectives).

G.H. Mead's philosophy is part of behaviourism and pragmatism. Like all those who are part of these currents, G.H. Mead is at the same time a psychologist and is more than a philosopher in the traditional sense. His philosophical paradigm focuses on the interactionist explanation of the genesis of language and the human spirit. In G.H. Mead's vision, the self is progressively built; it appears and develops in experience and social activity. The experience of knowing and re-knowing one's own self constantly requires a relationship with others, an understanding of the mechanisms and processes of interrelation. The context of social experience develops the effective framework for the manifestation of all possibilities and human resources. The whole human potential comes to be potentialized in this direct social context. We could say that the proper understanding of one's self depends to a large extent on its plenary manifestation in the public sphere.

Man becomes aware not directly, but only indirectly, placing himself from the various points of view of the other members of the social group or from the generalized group of the whole social group to which he belongs. "Living decently has almost always been much more troubling than aesthetically shaping a lifestyle."¹ The capacity of the human being to study himself from various points of view of others, present in the public sphere, is important and represents a measure that tends towards an objective appreciation. At present it is no longer possible to study man in isolation, except at the risk of depriving him of an essential dimension of his reality: at all levels, the human being is fundamentally communicative. In this

¹ Marga A., *Reconstrucția pragmatică a filosofiei*, vol. I, Polirom, 1998, p. 41.

context we can talk about the fact that the form of the statement does not express the autonomous thinking of the subject, as it is an adaptation imposed by external circumstances. The mechanism of self-awareness development is based on the assumption of roles of the other, which involve language and communication. It is not the mental activity that organizes the expression, but, on the contrary, the expression organizes the mental activity, shaping it and determining its orientation. "Any mental model is, of course, a sign, and modelling is not only an indispensable feature of the human world, but it is omnipresent throughout the organic world, where it has actually developed".² The true substance of language is not constituted by an abstract system of linguistic forms, nor by the isolated monologue enunciation, or by the psycho-physiological act of its production, but by the social phenomenon of the verbal interaction, realized by enunciation. Verbal interaction is thus the fundamental reality of language. Humans, as communicating beings, project their own selves into their individual language. Thus, language becomes the main centre of analysis of all human manifestations. It is not possible to understand human nature in the absence of the language that represents it. The uttered linguistic expression largely defines the state of affairs of human subjective realities.

A special contribution in the analysis of the self was made by the representative philosophies of pragmatism. For them, knowing the human self was one of the basic objectives in the pragmatist philosophy they developed. "Pragmatism converts theoretical assumptions into methodological principles, being a theory of autonomous mental activity, which reduces reality to the field of subjective experience".³ American philosophical thinking has a common concept - life. In this case, life, as a sense of direct living, of evolution without rest, is the essence of this philosophy. Life is considered as a profound reality, as a spiritual, free and creative desire to master matter. G.H. Mead insisted on the social origin of the spirit, as well as on the social character of the act. In social philosophy, G.H. Mead's theses were both theoretical and practical. Of particular importance to G.H. Mead was the provision of social psychology, which provided programs for the reconstruction of personality and society, and these desiderata gave social psychology developed by G.H. Mead a special place in the development of social sciences in the United States of America. In this context, we can identify, among others, the influence of Ch. S. Peirce's conception on G.H. Mead's theory of spirit and self-evolution. Both agreed that a philosophy also presupposes a semiology – a theory of knowledge as a system of signs; both subscribed to the triadic scheme according to which the subject responds to the object through the mediator of the interpreter, who transmits the sense (the meaning) of the experience. Within the social group, the human being has the opportunity to discover through the process of communication the consciousness of his peers. Being constantly aware of who others are, of one's

² Sebeok Th. A., *Semnele: o introducere în semiotică*, Humanitas, București, 2002, p. 187.

³ Câmpian A., *Din istoria gândirii americane. Filosofia comunicatională a lui George Herbert Mead în context pragmatic*, Napoca Star, Cluj-Napoca, 2004, p. 178.

own representations, this leads to an even more efficient understanding of one's own self and one's own consciousness.

The permanent awareness that the other is present in your mental field, that is, of your own consciousness even when the other is not physically present, leads to the idea that the relationship between your own self and the other's self is inevitable. This duality represents a whole. We have no way in social life to ignore the presence of others. They are like a mirror where the individual self is reflected. So, to a large extent, we are always a part of what others are constantly referring to during our communication experiences. "The truth lives, for the most part, on the basis of a credit system. Our thoughts and beliefs "pass" as long as no one denies them".⁴ We can say that in the process of communication we challenge others to respond to us according to our own communication system. That is, we act somehow and unconsciously when through gestures, the rhythm of speech, and the tone of voice we influence the other. When we relate to others, we end up assuming the roles of others. By assuming the roles of others, the individual self is able to return to itself and influence its own communication process. In other words, social communication enriches us and opens up new opportunities for manifestation. It is very important that participants in the communication process have something to communicate before communicating. There must be a common fact, e.g. some common ideas that would serve as an assumption for starting the dialogue. Communication between people cannot exist outside their thinking. "Thinking is nothing but the reaction, the response of the individual to the attitude of the other in the broad social process in which both are involved, and the guidance of the anticipated action of the individual according to these attitudes of others that may involve".⁵ There is a close interdependence between communication, thinking and social process. When the person relates to the public sphere, he also develops his own communication and thinking skills. In this triad – public sphere, communication, and thinking – all 3 components are in a relationship of interdependence. It is a chain reaction; one component influences the other two. It is in this form that there is true social communication, when one form communicates to another form an attitude that the other adopts towards a certain part of the environment that is important for both. Universal forms of the communication process based on sign systems have emerged in human society. Thanks to these systems of signs, people have reciprocal access to the other's experience, even if they are strangers to his language and culture. In this case we can speak of a cultural matrix that represents the cognitive spring of any society, including social group.

In the approach taken by the American philosopher G.H. Mead regarding himself, thought and society we can make a connection with the ideas of classical philosophers in ancient Greece. As if to complete Aristotle, G.H. Mead stated that

⁴ Marga A., *Filosofia americană*, vol. I, ALL Educational, București, 2000, p. 175.

⁵ Marga, Andrei (ed.), *Filosofia americană. vol. I*, Ratio et Revelation, Oradea, 2014, p. 92.

for social psychology, the whole (society) is a priority of the part (the individual) and not the part for the whole; and the part is explained in terms of the whole and not the whole, in terms of the part. And from this point of view, we can consider G.H. Mead's approach Aristotelian. The social context and social experience play major roles in G.H. Mead's thinking, in the sense of a causal priority in terms of influence on language and intelligence. According to G.H. Mead, an analysis of human behaviour cannot assume that society arises as a result of the expression of self-consciousness. Eventually human behaviour and self-awareness intertwine; behaviour would represent the effect of what he thinks, man thinks about himself, others and directly conditions the emergence of new states, attitudes at the level of consciousness.

I know of no other form of behaviour than language, in which the individual is an object for himself and the individual is not a self in the reflexive sense, as long as it is not an object for himself. This fact attaches great importance to communication, since it is the type of behaviour in which the individual responds to himself. "Human existence is what remains of the monopolistic language, the only ruler in consciousness".⁶ The mental development of a person consists in obtaining on his own some answers regarding his relationship involved in relation to the other. The society we belong to is an organized set of responses to certain situations in which the person is involved. The unity of the individual is the unity of the whole social process, and the social control over man consists in this common process that takes place, a process that differentiates man as a particular function, while, at the same time, controlling his reactions. The person's ability to put himself in the place of other people gives him certain predictions about what he has to do in a given situation. The self-possessed human being is a member of a larger social community, of a larger social group than the one in which he is immediately and directly, or to whom he belongs. The most important social activity that promotes the genesis of the self is language, since, through the use of language, an individual can respond to his own vocal gestures, in the same way that other individuals would respond. "The study of the process of language or speech is considered by Mead as a branch of social psychology, because it can be understood only in the social production of the behaviour of a group of interacting individuals".⁷ G.H. Mead uses the examples of children's games and the roles they play in different games, these activities being in G.H. Mead's opinion also causal factors for his emergence. In the multitude of roles that people play in society, a series of characteristics of the social group can be intertwined; this characterizes the cultural level of a society. Each person, when he takes over certain social roles, eventually comes to identify with the role taken over. This process is a complex one; we can talk about a multifaceted person. The meanings that others understand

⁶ Răducea I., *Arta semnificării*, Junimea, Iași, 2012, p. 24.

⁷ Câmpian A., *Din istoria gândirii americane. Filosofia comunicatională a lui George Herbert Mead în context pragmatic*. Napoca Star, Cluj-Napoca, 2004, p. 191.

and receive from the roles that people take on in social communication depend on their more or less adequate capacities for understanding and interpretation. There is always the closest possible connection between language and self. The connection between language and self is permanent. Through language, man exposes himself in the process of social communication

2. BEHAVIOURAL CONTEXT AND THE SELF

Self-discovery is a consequence of the process of educating gestures, which become increasingly complicated; as a result of this process, the biological individual is transformed into a spiritual self. G.H. Mead analyzes the complexity of the context in which social experiences are lived. Man experiences himself from the point of view of the social group, as a whole to which he belongs. He brings his own experience, not to become a subject for himself, but when he becomes an object for himself; and it becomes so when it takes over the attitude of other individuals towards himself, within a social environment or a behavioural context in which both the individual and the others are involved. The self, which can be an object for himself, has essentially a social structure and is born in the social experience. "The object perceived in an experience has the content related to the self of the person who perceives it".⁸ Once formed, a self can ensure for itself the social experience and thus we can conceive of an absolutely solitary self. But, it is impossible to conceive of a self that arises outside of social experience. Self-discovery is the essential condition of intelligent behaviour and language consisting of significant symbols or, conversely, intelligent behaviour involves self-discovery. We can conclude that the self and intelligent behaviour influence each other. The whole universe of the self is projected within the behavioural context of a person. Significant gestures are of great importance in terms of behaviour. By using meaningful gestures, the person takes over some of the roles of others in regulating their own behaviour. In the end, communities of meaning are created between people. Common meanings determine more or less common senses and meanings. Along with the significant gestures, we can also talk about the presence of significant symbols. Human language is abundantly full of significant symbols. "Because people speak, explaining how and why they speak today means determining how they will speak tomorrow".⁹ In the historical context we can say that significant symbols have made the transition from unconscious to conscious communication. Through meaningful gestures and symbols, man becomes a thinking being.

⁸ Mead G.H., *The philosophy of the act*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, p. 442.

⁹ Eco U., *O teorie a semioticii*, Trei, București, 2008, p. 54.

In G.H. Mead's vision only in terms of gestures as significant symbols, thinking can take place. Initially, communication between people was achieved through insignificant gestures, people relating to each other in an imitative way, and those gestures did not have spiritual significance, and they were not driven by reflexivity. By internalizing communication and taking over the role of another, one reaches gestures with spiritual significance, driven by reflexivity, gestures that involve linguistic communication. Based on this communication, the individual and social identity is constituted spiritually. Due to this factor, the transformation of society takes place, in the sense of obtaining characteristics related to the spiritual and moral side. People acquire in society reflexive capacity, i.e. the ability to carry out their own behaviour. When we master in behaviour the symbols that indicate certain characteristics and their relationships with the corresponding answers, the symbols allow us to choose all sets of answers, in such a way as to determine our social behaviour. Significance always depends on the abilities of the human individual. Equally, the significance of an object depends on the body's sensitivity to that object, a sensitivity mediated by the body's ability to adopt the point of view of others.

The specificity of a human behaviour that acts rationally is that the person in question indicates certain characteristics of the objects of another person and himself, and ultimately are the tools for intelligent behaviour. The spirit represents the presence in behaviour of significant symbols; it also represents the internalization in the individual of the social process of communication; it means the ability to indicate in oneself the answer that one's own gesture indicates to others and to control one's answer in these terms. The essence of the self consists in the capacity to be an object for oneself. Self-discovery is a consequence of the process of educating gestures that become increasingly complicated; as a result of this process, the biological individual is transformed into a spiritual self. G.H. Mead shows us that self-discovery is the essential condition of intelligent behaviour and language made up of significant symbols. The most important social activity that promotes the genesis of the self is language.

G. H. Mead distinguished 2 stages in the evolution of the self:

1 - the constitution of the individual self – simply, by organizing the particular attitudes of other individuals towards the individual himself, in the specific social acts in which the individual participates together with the others.

2 - at a higher level of development, the constitution of the self through an organization of the social attitudes of the other or of the social group as a whole, to which it belongs.

We see that G.H. Mead distinguished between I and Me as components of the self. I is the reaction of the individual to his own behaviour; Me appears in the field of conscious experience as a social self, as a self that is able to maintain itself in the community, which is recognized by the community in so far as they are recognized by other individuals.

If personality were identified only with the Me stage, it would mean that we are dealing with a theory in which the individual dissolves into a social group, without having an identity of his own. Me represents that organized world which is present in our own nature, it means capacity to have those habits, those reactions that everyone has, so the individual would not be a member of a community. I represents a condition for the reconstruction of social experience, the self-expression of the individual being acquired through I's reactions to the organized attitudes of a social Me. Meanings arise in the field of gestures and communicative responses to stimuli, therefore, in the social behaviour determined by the relationships between organisms and objects, during a social act. The environment is socialized or endowed with meanings through the social process of group activity or attitudes.

The self, in so far as it becomes an object for itself, is essentially a social structure and arises in the context of social experience. Thus we cannot think at all of an absolutely solitary self, but of a solidary one, proven by social experience. By virtue of the importance of the whole social process of communication, the individual acquires the ability to direct his activity according to the foreseeable consequences of the actions and to integrate in a moral-social community. The individual identities that form or contribute to the formation of the complete self reflect the various aspects of the structure of the social process as a whole. The structure of the social self is thus a reflection of the complete social process. Human society, Mead observes, could not have existed without spirits and individuals, just as its individual members would not have acquired spirit and self without the existence of society.

For G.H. Mead, what is essential in the approach on society is the fact that this category of the social is the key to all subsequent explanations. Man is a biological being that society has spiritualized and moralized. The human act is social, it being imposed by the social and current environment which is meant to solve the problems posed by the environment: to solve these problems means to think. That is why the social made man a thinking being, then a self. The thinking being builds the material universe; the self builds the moral world. "The mind is related to the meaning of things and these meanings can be expressed in terms of very well-organized attitudes of the individual".¹⁰ Both the material and the moral universes have existence and meaning only in and through society. The ego always manifests itself creatively through its act on the social stage. The organization of personality and self takes place within the structuring of attitudes and responses common to the group to which the person belongs. The self is a social structure that emerges from the social process and yet is individual. His individuality is involved in his sociality. The self is individual only because of its relationships with others. The essence of the self is reflexivity, i.e. the ability to consider oneself as an object from the point of view of others. This reflexivity is cognitive in nature, which is

¹⁰ Mead G.H., *Mind, Self and Society*, Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 1934, p. 125.

why the self is also cognitive. The language of a group, its system of communication, represents a generalized one, that is, the answers and attitudes of the organized group determine the communication through significant symbols. This system is the one with which the individual addresses himself and, at the same time, the others. The concepts used by G.H. Mead to expose his position of thinking represent an interesting paradigm regarding the explanation of how the individual acquires his own spirituality in society due to the communication process.

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