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Meadian Reflections on the Existential Ambivalence of Human Selfhood

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Introduction

This paper examines the existential ambivalence of human selfhood by drawing upon George Herbert Mead's influential distinction between the 'I' and the 'me'. The centrality of this distinction to Mead's analysis of the self is reflected not only in the numerous references to these two pivotal categories in Mead's writings[1] but also in the fact that it is widely recognised as one of Mead's core conceptual tools in the literature on symbolic interactionism[2]. Although the distinction between the 'I' and the 'me' has been extensively discussed in the literature and studied from different theoretical angles, neither advocates nor critics of Mead's symbolic interactionism have provided a comprehensive and systematic account of the variety of meanings which the notions of the 'I' and the 'me' are given in Mead's analysis of the self. The standard interpretation of the distinction between the 'I' and the 'me' identifies the former with the idiosyncratic and innovative aspects of the self, whilst associating the latter with the social and conservative components of the self.[3] Without seeking to demonstrate that this view is mistaken, this paper offers a detailed analysis of the multifaceted theoretical and practical implications of Mead's distinction between the 'I' and the 'me'. As we shall see, the conceptual complexity of Mead's analytical separation between the 'I' and the 'me' is indicative of the existential ambivalence of the human self, that is, of the coexistence of various opposing forces which pervade every ordinary subject's relation to the world.

Given that Mead conceives of the 'I' and the 'me' as two constitutive components of the self, it is important to clarify the meaning of the notion of the self within the Meadian framework of social analysis. Hence, before embarking upon the examination of Mead's central distinction between the 'I' and the 'me', it is essential to consider three key presuppositions that underlie Mead's theory of the self.

First, according to Mead, the self is a defining feature of human beings. In other words, the self represents a *human specificity*.[4] To assume that the self

is a feature of human beings – and of human beings alone – means to suggest that human beings are the only entities capable of developing a notion of personhood. In fact, what raises us out of nature is our 'self-based' nature: human beings have a deep-seated need to construct their own world beyond the natural world because their existence is permeated by the existence of selfhood. People are different from animals in that they have both the capacity and the need to create a sense of who they are as individuals. The existence of selfhood grants every ordinary subject the privilege of being both a member of society and a member of humanity.

Second, according to Mead, the self is always and unavoidably social. Put differently, the self is the subjectively developed expression of *human sociality*.[5] To recognise that the self is an indispensable part of human society – and of human society alone – means to acknowledge that human societies are the only collective entities capable of producing subjects with a sense of personhood. Indeed, what distinguishes the social world from the natural world is the 'self-based' constitution of the former as opposed to the 'self-less' constitution of the latter: human societies have an inherent need to create subjects capable of acquiring a sense of selfhood, for the emergence of human societies is inconceivable without the development of human personalities. The human world is different from the physical world in that it has both the capacity and the necessity to generate social selves whose interconnectedness constitutes the ontological cornerstone of human coexistence.

Third, according to Mead, the self is linguistically structured. Hence, the self is both the creator and the carrier of *human linguisticality*.[6] To accept that the self is at the same time a producer and a product of a linguistically mediated relation to the world means to understand that language is an empowering symbolic vehicle which allows for the possibility of reflectively guided interaction between social actors. To be sure, what elevates the symbolic world of human beings from the symbolic world of animals is the linguistic nature of the human universe: human subjects have a deep-rooted need to convert the givenness of their immersion in the world into the meaningfulness of their encounter with the world because, for human beings, the world of physical and social objectivity is always a world of linguistic signifiability. The human universe is part of, yet also different from, the physical world in that it is composed of reflective selves whose daily search for meaning is embedded in their linguistically mediated relation to the world.

These are three fundamental presuppositions underlying Mead's theory of the self.[7] The question remains, however, how both the 'I' and the 'me' are embedded in the self and to what extent they allow us to grasp the complexity of selfhood. It is the task of the following analysis to shed light on the complexity of the self by exploring the various meanings of Mead's fundamental distinction between the 'I' and the 'me'. When having a closer look at Mead's study of the self in terms of the 'I' and the 'me', it becomes clear that, in his writings, these two concepts are given a variety of meanings which are symptomatic not only of the complexity of the self but also of what might be described as 'the condition of human ambivalence'. In essence, what manifests itself in the condition of human ambivalence is the fact that we, as entities capable of developing different identities, are caught up in a permanent struggle between the 'individual selves' and the 'social selves' which inhabit our personalities. Stating this problem is simple; grasping its complexity could hardly be more difficult.

I.   Individual and Society

The most obvious meaning of the Meadian distinction between the 'I' and the 'me' is perhaps also the most essential source of existential ambivalence in the formation of human selfhood: the relationship between *individual and society*. One fundamental – if not, *the* most fundamental – question in social theory is the following: what is the relationship between individual and society? From the point of view of Mead's symbolic interactionism, the straightforward answer to this question is that, by definition, human selves are both individual and social selves. In other words, just as there are no individuals without society, there is no society without individuals. To the extent that individuals depend on their immersion and participation in society, society depends on the creation and reproduction of individuals. Rather than conceiving of the relationship between individual and society as an existential antinomy, we need to recognise that individual and society stand both in an interdependent and in an interpenetrative relationship: they are interdependent insofar as one cannot exist without the other, and they are interpenetrative insofar as they cannot but permeate one another. Thus, not only do individual and society depend on each other, but they are also impregnated with each other. On the face of it, the individual represents the inner reality of a single entity, and society designates the outer reality of a collective entity. Yet, the single entity called individual and the collective entity called society cannot be divorced from one another, since the presence of the former presupposes the presence of the latter, and *vice versa.* The existence of individuals is inconceivable without the existence of society, just

as the existence of society is unthinkable without the existence of individuals.

One of the main analytical advantages of the conceptual distinction between the 'I' and the 'me' is that it permits us to account for the fact that both human individuality and human society are located within the human self. According to Mead, every human subject is composed of both the 'I' and the 'me', and the combination of these two core components of human subjectivity is precisely what makes one a person: "Both aspects of the 'I' and 'me' are essential to the self in its full expression"[8], that is, every self is composed of an 'I' and a 'me', both of which can be regarded as two competing yet complementary cornerstones of the human subject.

Mead's ontology of the human subject is based on the assumption that "[t]he separation of the 'I' and the 'me' is not fictitious. [. . .] Taken together they constitute a personality as it appears in social experience."[9] Given Mead's emphasis on the complementary coexistence of the 'I' and the 'me', his conception of the self is founded on both a differentialist and a holistic view of human nature. On the one hand, Mead's approach to the self is *differentialist* insofar as he insists that the *separation* between the 'I' and the 'me' is real, rather than invented. Hence, the 'I' and the 'me' exist as *two autonomous ontologies* within every person. On the other hand, Mead's account of the self is *holistic* insofar as he suggests that the *unity* of the 'I' and the 'me' is genuine, rather than imagined. Thus, the 'I' and the 'me' exist as *one conglomeratic ontology* within every person.

What manifests itself in the paradoxical nature of Mead's – simultaneously differentialist and holistic – conception of the self is the paradoxical constitution of the human subject: every self is equipped with the idiosyncratic and innovative aspects of the 'I', whilst being shaped by the collective and conservative aspects of the 'me'. Of course, just as our subjective worlds cannot be dissociated from our social worlds, our social worlds cannot be divorced from our subjective worlds. To the extent that our subjective worlds are pervaded by the 'I' *and* the 'me', our social worlds are constructed by virtue of the 'me' *and* the 'I'. Society is a collective force which resides in our individuality, and our individuality is a subjective force which inhabits our society.

Although the 'me' and the 'I' fulfil complementary functions, the nature of the former is fundamentally different from the nature of the latter. Whereas the 'me' is a direct product of the social communities to which we belong, the 'I' embodies the irreducible components of our personality by which we

distinguish ourselves from other members of our communities. Put differently, every self is at once an expression of individuality and an expression of society: as an expression of individuality, it enables us to convert ourselves into *unique and distinctive* members of a given community; as an expression of society, it permits us to become *integrated and assimilated* members of a given community. Our individual identities, which we develop as unique entities, reassert our need to create a sense of *personality*; and our collective identities, which we develop as integrated entities, reaffirm our need to generate a sense of *commonality*. In short, Mead's distinction between the 'I' and the 'me' serves as a conceptual tool to account for every person's simultaneous immersion in individuality and society.

II.   Freedom and Control

Another meaning of the distinction between the 'I' and the 'me' in Mead's writings is perhaps a less obvious, but certainly an equally significant, source of existential ambivalence: the relationship between *freedom and control*. From a Meadian perspective, there is no human freedom without the creation of a personally developed 'I', and there is no social control without the assimilation of a socially constructed 'me'. "The 'I' gives the sense of freedom, of initiative"[10], and of inventiveness. The 'me', on the other hand, equips us with a sense of control, of directive, and of normativeness. Individual freedom is the expression of the 'I' over against the expression of the 'me'. By contrast, "[s]ocial control is the expression of the 'me' over against the expression of the 'I'"[11]. As soon as we enter the stage of being, we are protagonists of a social process which is based on the interaction between ourselves and others: we enjoy the freedom to be part of the world as individuals, and we are exposed to the control exercised over us by our consociates. Human selves are caught up in the dialectical interplay between freedom and control, self-determination and social determination, individual autonomy and social constraints; in brief, we are trapped in the eternal struggle between the 'I' and the 'me'.

Given that freedom and control coexist in the human world, the productive and executive side of human autonomy cannot be disentangled from the regulative and grammatical side of human heteronomy. The production and execution of our actions is inconceivable without the regulation and normalisation of our actions. Every time we act, the world has already acted upon us; and every time the world acts upon us, we have already acted upon the world. One central feature of the human being-in-the-world is the relative determinacy which pervades our existential engagement in *individual*

autonomy: only insofar as we are immersed *in* the social world are we capable of going *beyond* the social world by affirming the idiosyncrasy *of* our subjective world. Yet, another significant feature of the human being-in-the-world is the relative determinacy which permeates our existential exposure to *collective heteronomy*: only insofar as we are immersed *in* our subjective world are we capable of going *beyond* our subjective world by assimilating the idiosyncrasy *of* the social world.

We are able to be what we want to be, but only to the extent that society allows us to realise and exploit the potentiality of our individual determinacy. And we are prepared to be what society wants us to be, but only to the extent that we allow society to exercise and enforce the potentiality of its collective determinacy. Grammars of freedom are always permeated by grammars of control, just as grammars of control are always pervaded by grammars of freedom. The assumption *that* human existence is shaped by the struggle between freedom and control is relatively uncontroversial; the question of *how* human existence is shaped by this struggle, however, could hardly be more controversial.

The strength of the Meadian conception of human existence is its capacity to account for the subjective immediacy of the struggle between freedom and control. For the struggle between individual freedom and social control takes place not only *between* human selves but also *inside* every human self. The potential conflict between who we *want* to be and who we are *expected* to be describes a source of existential ambiguity which is inscribed both in our societies and in our subjectivities. As a subjectively articulated ambiguity of existential significance, the human struggle between freedom and control is always located *within* the human self, that is, *within* every ordinary subject equipped with an 'I' and a 'me'. To be sure, as relatively autonomous beings, we have privileged access to our subjective world. Nevertheless, although our subjective world escapes the parameters of direct observational scrutiny and empirical measurement, it is always already intruded by our external world. In fact, the social world is by definition a collective intruder of the subjective world, just as the subjective world is by definition an individuative intruder of the social world.

The dialectic of freedom and control is embedded in the socio-constructive locus of human existence: *culture*.[12] Whether we live in a primitive or complex, tight or loose, horizontally structured or vertically structured, collectivist or individualist, relatively homogeneous or relatively heterogeneous culture – *any* form of culture is necessarily based on the

structural interplay between control and freedom. Traditional and collectivist societies tend to be control-based, whereas advanced and individualist societies tend to be freedom-based. Whatever type of society we live in, we – as human actors – are equipped with both an 'I' and a 'me'. The more society succeeds in imposing its rules and regulations on the individual, the more it succeeds in shaping the constitution of the self by virtue of collective control. The more society allows its members to act and function according to their own needs and desires, the more it enables them to shape the constitution of their selves by virtue of individual freedom. In the former scenario, the 'me' is the exogenously determined engine of the self. In the latter scenario, the 'I' is the endogenously determined architect of the self.

In order to be effective, the preponderance of social control needs to be reproduced by the predominance of the 'me', just as the preponderance of individual freedom needs to be confirmed by the prevalence of the 'I'. Freedom and control, then, are not simply external matters of socially negotiated regulations and expectations, but they are also internal matters of individually developed schemes of action and habituation. The potentiality of freedom and control can only become a human reality insofar as selves are impregnated with the generative complementarity of the 'I' and the 'me', which carries the organisation of their coexistentiality right into the condition of their subjectivity. Put differently, the 'me' equips society with relative control over its individuals, just as the 'I' endows the individual with relative freedom from society. Human selves cannot escape the existential ambivalence caused by the struggle between freedom and control, but they can convert the social determinacy of individual potentiality into the social potentiality of individual determinacy. If the existence of the 'me' permits us to be thrown into the world as members of the world, the existence of the 'I' empowers us to throw ourselves back into the world as creators of the world.

III.   Transformation and Reproduction

In Mead's writings, the distinction between the 'I' and the 'me' refers to another key source of existential ambivalence: the relationship between *transformation and reproduction*. Every human self has both a transformative and a reproductive side: the 'I' is the source of the subject's power to shape 'the' natural, 'our' social, and 'its' subjective world; the 'me', by contrast, is the vehicle of the subject's capacity to be shaped by these worlds. The far-reaching significance of this matter can be summarised in two fundamental

questions. First, how do we explain the possibility of *social order*? And, second, how do we explain the possibility of *social change*? A Meadian answer to these two key questions relies upon the 'me' to account for the possibility of social order and upon the 'I' to explain the possibility of social change. Whereas the existence of the 'me' allows for the social continuity of our actions, the existence of the 'I' manifests itself in the individual idiosyncrasy of our actions. Insofar as our actions are normatively regulated, they are motivated by the – individually internalised, yet socially constructed – 'me'. Insofar as our actions can transgress already existing norms, they can be driven by the – individually externalised, yet socially embedded – 'I'. From a Meadian point of view, there is no social order without the reproductive power of the 'me', and there is no social change without the transformative power of the 'I'.

It is worth mentioning that both the 'me' and the 'I' are at the same time immanent and transcendent forces of the social. As an *immanent* force, the 'me' inhabits every socialised subject capable of reproducing the social order in which it finds itself situated; as a *transcendent* force, the 'me' allows the self to go beyond itself by immersing itself in intersubjectively negotiated realms of sociality. As an *immanent* force, the 'I' dwells in every individual subject capable of transforming the social order in which it finds itself situated; as a *transcendent* force, the 'I' enables the self to go beyond itself by immersing itself in subjectively affirmed realms of individuality.

Thus, social change – conceived of in Meadian terms – is essentially due to the transformative force of the 'I'. In Mead's words, "[t]he 'I' is the response of the individual to the attitude of the community [. . .]. His response to that organized attitude in turn *changes* it"[13]. The social is never for ever. By definition, every social order is potentially subject to social change, because the reproductive power of every 'me' is potentially exposed to the transformative power of the 'I'. Due to the reproductive force of the 'me', selves are capable of absorbing their environments: every interaction *with* our social environment is an action *upon* human subjectivity. Due to the transformative force of the 'I', selves are capable of changing their environments: every reaction *to* our social environment is an action *upon* human objectivity. As Mead remarks, "the individual is constantly reacting to the social attitudes, and *changing* in this co-operative process the very community to which he belongs"[14]. It is in the various processes of assimilation of the individual, within the situation in which the 'me' finds itself, that social order falls into place; and it is "in such reactions of the individual, [. . .] over against the situation in which the 'I' finds itself, that

important social changes take place"[15]. Hence, rather than deriving the possibility of social order and social change from structural forces that are *external* to the human self, we can locate the possibility of social order and social change in the reproductive power of the 'me' and the transformative power of the 'I', both of which are *internal* to the human self.

IV.   Unpredictability and Predictability

The Meadian distinction between the 'I' and the 'me' allows us to shed light on a further source of existential ambivalence: the relationship between *unpredictability and predictability*. Human life is characterised by yet another paradox: the actions undertaken by human beings can be both relatively unpredictable and relatively predictable. In other words, while some of our actions are unforeseeable and irregular, others are foreseeable and regular. We are performative entities whose practices can either deviate from or coincide with the norms and expectations which are constantly thrown at us by society. In any case, our actions are embedded in socially negotiated patterns of behavioural normativity. If the possibility of social change is due to the relatively unpredictable nature of social action motivated by the 'I', the possibility of social order is rooted in the relatively predictable nature of social action guaranteed by the 'me'.

Both the unpredictability and the predictability of our actions are considerable species-constitutive accomplishments: the fact that we can never entirely foresee the actions of other human subjects means that every social encounter can be a coexistential journey into largely insecure territory, and the fact that we can often – consciously or unconsciously – foresee the actions of other human subjects means that every social encounter can be a coexistential ritual on fairly secure territory. Human existence is always situated between the unpredictable and the predictable nature of social actions: the course of human history is a product of performative sociality. The interplay between the 'I' and the 'me' enables us to make history by constructing and reconstructing sociality. The construction of humanity is a permanent process of social reconstruction. To the extent that we, as human beings, are condemned to move within spaces of social reconstructability, we are doomed to confront the performative ambivalence of our actions, which are always located between the individuative power of purposive agency and the collective power of coordinative determinacy.

Following Mead, the relatively unpredictable nature of human action emanates from the existence of the 'I', whereas the relatively predictable

nature of human action stems from the existence of the 'me'. Given that "the 'I' is something that is never entirely calculable"[16], the interactions which take place in society are never completely predictable. Given that "the 'me' is the organized set of attitudes of others which one himself assumes"[17], the interactions which take place in society are relatively predictable. The fact that the development of human societies is at the same time relatively unpredictable and relatively predictable cannot be dissociated from the fact that human beings are both individual and societal beings who seek to come to terms with the existential contingency of their inner worlds by constantly oscillating between the – endogenously determined – heterodoxy of their 'I' and the – exogenously determined – orthodoxy of their 'me'.

One central question in social and political theory is why it is so difficult to control human behaviour by virtue of systemic – for example, economic or administrative – forms of power. Put differently, a key phenomenon that haunts social and political theorists is the performative elasticity of human agency, which seems to transcend the systemic rationality of societal structurality: it is far from clear to what extent it is possible to impose steering mechanisms on society which allow for the calculable control of social development through the use of systemic power. This problem can be summarised in the following question: why is it so difficult to control human action 'from above' through systemic action? From a Meadian perspective, an answer to this question can be found in the sociological power of the relationship between the 'I' and the 'me': it is the unpredictable force of the 'I' which can always potentially challenge the predictable force of the 'me'. The most powerful steering media of society can never annihilate the decision-making capacity of the individual. No matter how deeply ingrained social rules and norms may be in the predictable force of the 'me', they do not possess the power to eliminate the unpredictable force of the 'I'. The human house of being is constructed upon the coexistential cornerstones of the 'me' and the 'I': the former permits us to dwell in the house of being as collective – and, hence, relatively predictable – entities; the latter, by contrast, allows us to inhabit the house of being as individuative – and, thus, relatively unpredictable – entities. What we can never entirely predict, therefore, is the predictability of the social; what we can certainly predict, however, is its unpredictability.

V.   Future and Past

Another, rather complex, implication of Mead's distinction between the 'I' and the 'me' has to do with the historical nature of the human being-in-the-

world: the relationship between *future and past*. Human activity is unavoidably embedded in and conditioned by worldly temporality. Just as social practices are spatially determined because they take place in collectively constructed realms of human territoriality, they are temporally determined because they are situated in relationally created spheres of human historicity. As the German word *Geschichte* suggests, history is essentially a cumulative conglomerate of temporally interconnected layers. The 'me' enables us to absorb and internalise the historical layers accumulated by our social environment; conversely, the 'I' induces us not only to act and work upon the layers that have been transmitted *to* us from the past, but also to invent and externalise new historical layers that can be generated *by* us in the present to create a future.

The existence of the 'me' illustrates the fact that we are *always already* thrown into the world. The existence of the 'I', on the other hand, corroborates the fact that we are *always still* to throw ourselves back into the world. Our immersion in the past can challenge, but never do away with, our orientation towards the future. In fact, our 'being-here-in-the-present' would be pointless without our capacity to mediate between the 'has-been-there-in-the-past' and the 'will-be-there-in-the-future'. The interpenetrative power of the 'I' and the 'me' lies at the heart of our situatedness in the present, the immersive power of the 'me' permits us to cope with our embeddedness in the past, and the projective power of the 'I' allows us to face up to our placedness in the future.

"That movement into the future is the step, so to speak, of the ego, of the 'I'. It is something that is not given in the 'me'."[18] The future-oriented nature of the 'I', as opposed to the past-laden nature of the 'me', reveals the significance of historical openness for the constitution of human existence on four levels. First, historical openness is a *constitutive element* of the human being-in-the-world. From a Meadian point of view, the categorical openness of human society is mainly due to the existence of our future-oriented 'I', which is inherent in every ordinary subject capable of speech and interaction. Second, historical openness is a *deep-seated need* of the human being-in-the-world. According to Mead, the existence of the 'I' is indicative of the fact that subjects have a deep-rooted need to project themselves into the future. We have to be able to look forward to the world in order to look forward to life. The reality of the human today is impregnated with the potentiality of the human tomorrow. Third, historical openness is an *inevitable feature* of the human being-in-the-world. Following Mead, every human practice is an act towards the future. Even when we wish to restore the past or maintain

the present, we are always already oriented towards the future. Just as the 'I' is an inherent feature of the human self, the future is an intrinsic element of the human social: every time the 'I' responds to the 'me', the future inserts itself into the presence of the past. Fourth, historical openness is an *empowering facet* of the human being-in-the-world. The future can always go beyond the present because, put in Meadian terms, the 'I' is capable of bypassing – and sometimes even transforming – the 'me'. Human selves are able to go beyond society because they are equipped with the capacity to go beyond themselves. Our orientation towards the future is a source of existential empowerment, allowing us to invent human reality over and over again. Since all human selves are doomed to engage in the coexistential exercise of articulating themselves by virtue of the 'me' and the 'I', they carry both the past and the future within the presence of their existence.

VI.   Self-Realisation and Self-Alienation

The distinction between the 'I' and the 'me' reveals another major source of ambivalence in human life: the relationship between *self-realisation and self-alienation*. As entities capable of self-realisation, we can exploit our capacity to cultivate the 'I', which inhabits our subjectivity. As entities capable of self-alienation, we can be colonised by the 'me', which is dictated to us by our society. Thus, the autonomy of the 'I', whose ego-affirming power allows for human self-realisation, can be undermined by the heteronomy of the 'me', whose ego-colonising power can lead to human self-alienation. Our need for self-realisation is not a fiction but a reality: only insofar as we find ourselves self-realised as human beings are we able to experience the worthiness of human life. Life seems worth living not only because the world seems worth relating to but also because we are capable of inventing our relationship to the world as entities with an inner drive towards self-realisation.

Self-realised subjects are actors able to recognise themselves in and identify themselves with their actions. Self-alienated subjects are actors compelled to place themselves outside and distance themselves from their actions. The dictatorship of the 'me' can easily lead to complete self-alienation when there does not seem to be any room for self-realisation. Analogously, the dictatorship of the 'I' can easily produce the illusion of complete self-realisation when there does not seem to be any room for self-alienation. The struggle over the humanisation of humanity has always been, and will always remain, a struggle for and against self-realisation and self-alienation. The challenge consists in creating an equilibrium in which neither the former

dominates the latter nor the latter dominates the former. The ego-affirming power of the 'I' and the ego-colonising power of the 'me' coexist in the universe of human selfhood. Our need for individuality and our need for sociality force us to accept our need for humanity.

From a Meadian perspective, we seek to realise ourselves by realising the potentials inherent in our 'I'. Insofar as we succeed in realising the potentials inherent in our 'I', we draw on our capacity to go beyond the constraints imposed upon us by society and embodied in the 'me'. In the light of the liberating function of the 'I', Mead is willing to attribute not only significant power but also an emancipatory mission to the 'I'. The Meadian emphasis on the – distinctively human – need for self-realisation is based on a firm belief in the transcendental function and ordinary reality of the 'I': "It is that 'I' which we may be said to be continually trying to realize, and to realize through the actual conduct itself."[19] Within the Meadian framework of social analysis, self-realisation is conceived of as a human practice. In other words, we realise ourselves only insofar as our daily activities constitute invaluable sources of autonomy and creativity. From a pragmatist point of view, we need to focus on concrete human practices, rather than on abstract human capacities, if we aim to demonstrate that the emancipatory potentials of our existence are always already part of our daily activities, rather than of transcendental imperatives.

VII.   Self-Assertion and Self-Adaptation

The distinction between the 'I' and the 'me' points to another source of existential ambivalence: the relationship between *self-assertion and self-adaptation*. As entities whose inner worlds are impregnated with the individuative force of the 'I', we have a deep-seated need to assert ourselves before others as expressive subjects who are unique members of a given community. As entities whose inner worlds are permeated by the collective force of the 'me', we have a deep-rooted need to adapt ourselves to others as assimilative subjects who are integrated members of a given community. Only if we are able to *assert* ourselves before others as *unique* members of a given community are we capable of developing a sense of personality which allows us to situate ourselves in the world as irreplaceable entities whose existence confirms the particularity of individuality. And only if we are able to *adapt* ourselves to others as *integrated* members of a given community are we capable of developing a sense of solidarity which permits us to situate ourselves in the world as replaceable entities whose existence reinforces the generality of society. Social selves, in the Meadian sense, can only exist as

assertive and adaptive entities, for only insofar as we assert ourselves before others, as indistinguishable beings, can we develop a sense of individuality and only insofar as we adapt ourselves to others, as adjustable beings, can we develop a sense of sociality.

The daily rhythm of our lives always depends on our capacity to establish equilibrium between our need for self-assertion and our need for self-adaptation. The most assertive individual is nothing if not integrated *into* society, and the most adaptable individual is nothing if not distinguished *from* society. Just as we seek to be recognised as meaning-producing entities with an individual sense of identity, we aim to be recognised as meaning-fusing entities with a collective sense of identity. The development of an individual sense of identity depends upon our capacity for self-assertion, and the creation of a collective sense of identity is contingent upon our capacity for self-adaptation. The rhythm of our everyday life is marked by the percussive power of the 'me' and the repercussive power of the 'I'. Whatever is thrown at us by society in order to make us conform to what is *always already* constructed can be thrown back by us at society in order to make us reform what is *always still* to be reconstructed.

The reconstructive power of society is inextricably linked to the reconstructive power of consciousness. Consciousness is never simply a private matter but always a thoroughgoingly social affair.[20] Indeed, consciousness enables us to go back and forth between ourselves and other selves. We are eternal commuters between who we are as inhabitants of our individuality and who we become as inhabitants of our society. Every time we assert ourselves before others we seem to *be* what we are without ever having become who we are, and every time we adapt ourselves to others we seem to *become* what we are without ever being who we are. The dialectical interplay between the authentic and the performative aspects of our existence describes a social process based on a constant going-back-and-forth between ourselves and others. No human being can possibly escape from the reciprocal processes of social interaction. For the authenticity of our individuality has no currency without our performative encounter with others, just as the performance of our individuality has no currency without our authentic encounter with ourselves. The self-assertion of the 'I' equips us with the capacity to develop a sense of authentic integrity, whose existence we can only undermine if we deny ourselves the privilege of affirming ourselves as carriers of individual identities. The self-adaptation of the 'me' gives us the opportunity to develop a sense of performative integrity, whose existence we can only undermine if we deprive ourselves of the ability to

take on collective identities.

"It is this recognition of the individual as a self in the process of using his self-consciousness which gives him the attitude of self-assertion or the attitude of devotion to the community. He has become, then, a definite self."[21]   In order to engage in social life we are obliged to engage in a permanent process of negotiation between what and how we *want* to be and what and how we are *expected* to be. The assertion of our individual will cannot be divorced from our devotion to the societal will, since the former is necessarily shaped and constrained by the latter. To be sure, *philosophical* accounts of the self can differ fundamentally from *sociological* accounts of the self: the former – for example, in a Kantian or Cartesian fashion – tend to emphasise the power of *self-assertion*, derived from individual consciousness and transcendental rationality; the latter – for instance, in a Marxian or Durkheimian fashion – tend to stress the power of *self-adaptation*, expressed in collective consciousness and social solidarity. "There is a new social whole [. . .] because of the self with its own assertion of itself or its own identification with the community."[22] To the extent that the self asserts itself before others as a unique member of its community, it contributes to the variegated nature of the social whole. To the extent that the self adapts itself to others as an integrated member of its community, it contributes to the bonding nature of the social whole. As individuative creatures, we seek to distinguish ourselves from our social environment; as collective creatures, we seek to be accepted by our social environment. Fully-fledged defenders of individuality need to be fully-fledged members of society in order to become fully-born children of humanity. "Let us assert ourselves before others as individuals" and "let us adapt ourselves to others as consociates" – these are two categorical imperatives that underlie Mead's conception of the human subject.

VIII.   Individuality and Conformity

Mead's distinction between the 'I' and the 'me' serves to explore yet another pivotal source of quotidian ambivalence which permeates the nature of human existence: the relationship between *individuality and conformity*. The analysis of this source of existential ambivalence is particularly important as the critical study of the relationship between individuality and conformity obliges us to examine the normative presuppositions that underpin Mead's conception of society. As Mead puts it, "[t]he value of an ordered society is essential to our existence, but there also has to be room for an expression of the individual himself if there is to be a satisfactorily developed society"[23].

In other words, the possibility of social order is just as fundamental to the healthy functioning of human coexistence as the possibility of individual expression, which may or may not diverge from the normative canon of society. The stability of every social order depends on its capacity to tolerate or deprecate, promote or repress, include or exclude different forms of individuality. As 'me'-based entities, we have a need for social conformity and coexistential stability; as 'I'-driven entities, we have a need for self-referential individuality and biographical volatility.

Far from embracing either an individualist or a collectivist model of society, and far from suggesting that either a pluralist or a monist model of society is capable of promoting the genuine empowerment of the human subject, Mead insists upon the complexity of the social universe, reminding us of the fact that in every human society there is a need for the expression of singularity and individuality, on the one hand, and for the expression of loyalty and conformity, on the other.[24] To be more precise, both individuality and conformity are central driving forces of the social: as individuative beings, we contribute to the transformative diversity of society; and, as conformative beings, we contribute to the reproductive stability of society. Every society is composed of different cultural, political, and ideological traditions; the challenge consists in articulating our need for individuality and our need for conformity in such a way that the former and the latter do not undermine but complement each other. In fact, individuality and conformity need to be cross-fertilised by society in order to contribute to enhancing the overall well-being of humanity.

Nonetheless, the question remains how the ideal of a balanced society, in which there is enough room for individuality and conformity to coexist in a fruitful manner, can be measured against the reality of an unbalanced society, in which there is a disproportionate emphasis either on individuality or on conformity. Put differently, the ideal of a society which is freedom-based enough to allow for the cultivation of individuality and control-based enough to allow for the consolidation of conformity clashes with the reality of societies in which the prioritisation of individual freedom implies the destabilisation of collective control or in which the prioritisation of collective control requires the abolition of individual freedom.

When reflecting upon the historical transition from traditional to modern society, Mead makes a case for the view that the emergence of modern individualist societies is a historical opportunity which can, at least in principle, contribute substantially to the progress of humanity. Mead puts

it as follows:

> [. . .] primitive human society offers much less scope for
> individuality – for original, unique, or creative thinking and
> behavior on the part of the individual self within it or belonging
> to it – than does civilized human society; and indeed the evolution
> of civilized human society has largely depended upon or resulted
> from a progressive social liberation of the individual self [. . .].[25]

Not that a Meadian interpretation of human evolution compels us to be
uncritical of the damaging social and psychological effects of
individualistically structured forms of coexistence, but it certainly obliges
us to recognise the emancipatory potentials which are set free in societies
committed to the promotion and protection of individual freedom and
expression. Again, from a Meadian point of view, the problematisation of
the interplay between individuality and conformity is a sociological dynamic
which takes place both outside *and* inside the subject: it is *outside* the subject
where the societal norms which determine the interplay between
individuality and conformity are negotiated; and it is *inside* the subject where
the rules of this interplay are articulated through the internal, and often
disconcerting, dialogue between the 'I' and the 'me'. Thus, a comprehensive
sociology of individuality and conformity cannot do without a critical
psychology of the 'I' and the 'me'.

Just as the colonisation of the 'I' by the 'me' can lead to the creation of an
overly 'me'-dependent – that is, *oversocialised* – personality, the colonisation
of individuality through the pressure of conformity can result in the
consolidation of an excessively control-based – that is, *oversocialising* –
society. And just as the rejection of the 'me' by the 'I' can bring about the
formation of an overly 'I'-centred – that is, *overindividualised* – personality,
the rejection of conformity through the celebration of individuality can
produce an exceedingly freedom-based – that is, *overindividualising* – society.
The existence of the 'I' suggests that we need a healthy dose of individuality,
the existence of the 'me' indicates that we need a healthy dose of conformity,
and the coexistence of the 'I' and the 'me' reminds us of the fact that we
depend on a balanced dose of conformative individuality and individuative
conformity. The potentialities of individuality and conformity manifest
themselves in the realities of the 'I' and the 'me'.

Conclusion

As demonstrated above, the analysis of the 'I' and the 'me' is central to the Meadian account of the self, not only because it is of crucial referential relevance in Mead's writings, but also – more importantly – because it obliges us to confront the complexity of the existential ambivalence of human selfhood. If we acknowledge that every subject is internally divided between an 'I' and a 'me', then we need to face up to the deep ambivalence of human existence, which arises from the multifaceted interplay between individual and society. To suggest that the relationship between the 'I' and the 'me' can be regarded as an expression of our existential ambivalence means to assume that we develop a sense of selfhood through the constant interaction between the individuative and the collective aspects of human life. As subjects capable of reflection, we can convert our existential ambivalence into an object of contemplation; as subjects capable of action, we can transform our existential ambivalence into the motor of our worldly situation. Whether we reflect or act upon the world, the world is ours if we accept that we are of the world.

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Endnotes

[1] See, for example, Mead (1967 [1934]: 173-178, 192-200, 209-213, and 273-281). Here we shall focus on Mead's *Mind, Self, and Society*, in which the distinction between the 'I' and the 'me' has a number of different meanings. It should be noted that Mead's distinction between the 'I' and the 'me' was heavily influenced by William James, who put forward a dualistic conception of the self (see James, 1890).

[2] See, for example: Baert (1998: 70); Crossley (1996: 55-56, 61, 78, 90, and 144-145); Habermas (1992 [1988]: 171-173, 177-182, and 187-193); Silva (2007a: 49 and 53); and Silva (2007b: 5-6, 43, 51-59, 62-65, and 82).

[3] See, for example: Baert (1998: 70); Habermas (1992 [1988]: 172, 179, and 187); and Silva (2007b: 51-55).

[4] See, for example: "It is the self as such that makes the distinctively human society possible" (Mead, 1967 [1934]: 240).

[5] See, for example: "The human being is social in a distinguishing fashion" (ibid.: 241).

[6] See, for example: "Language does not simply symbolize a situation or object which is already there in advance; it makes possible the existence or the appearance of that situation or object, for it is a part of the mechanism whereby that situation or object is created. [. . .] Out of language emerges the field of mind" (ibid.: 78 and 133).

[7] Cf. Baert (1998: 68-69).

[8] Mead (1967 [1934]: 199).

[9] Ibid.: 178.

[10] Ibid.: 177.

[11] Ibid.: 210.

[12] See Susen (2007: 214 and 287-292). See also Triandis (1996: 408-409).

[13] Mead (1967 [1934]: 196, italics added).

[14] Ibid.: 199-200, italics added.

[15] Ibid.: 217.

[16] Ibid.: 178.

[17] Ibid.: 175.

[18] Ibid.: 177.

[19] Ibid.: 203.

[20] See, for example: "No individual has a mind which operates simply in itself, in isolation from the social life-process in which it has arisen or out of which it has emerged, and in which the pattern of organized social behavior has consequently been basically impressed upon it" (ibid.: 222).

[21] Ibid.: 193.

[22] Ibid.: 192.

[23] Ibid.: 221.

[24] See Mead (1967 [1934]: 221-222).

[25] Ibid.: 221.

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