Individual and Sociality in Science: G.H. Mead's "Social Realism"

Indivíduo e Socialidade na Ciência: O "Realismo Social" de G.H. Mead

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Abstract: The classical pragmatists shared the confidence in the emancipating possibilities of scientific methods and results, although this attitude was maintained in different ways. One of their most important purposes was to show that scientific activity suggests the overcoming of a series of dichotomies – subject/object, mind/nature, theory/practice – that go through both idealist and empiricist traditional philosophies. G.H. Mead's utilization of biological knowledge and experimental psychology in the course of his philosophical research represents an attempt to achieve this purpose by means of an account of human consciousness as a specific phenomenon of biological life and, at the same time, through the development of a social psychology, conceived as an empirical analysis of the relationship between the structures of social life and the dynamics of subjectivity.

My intention is to outline the main arguments Mead offers in support of an epistemological realism centred on the idea of the social nature of cognitive activities. The formulation of the concept of individual experience in terms of functional, organic aspects of the development of sciences, and the outlook of these latter as a "constructive" process of socially valid objective meanings will be considered as the parameters of a philosophical perspective that aims at neutralizing the risk of scepticism implicit in the opposition of subject and physical world, which characterize traditional forms of realism, as well as the idealistic residues of theories that emphasise the logical aspect of scientific research. Taking into consideration a group of texts spanning the whole of Mead's work, I will focus on the congruence of this project with a naturalistic theory of mind and language through which he tries to restructure a number of basic philosophical notions, such as those of universality, symbolic meaning, truth and objectivity, in view of a conception of knowledge processes definable as "social realism."

Key-words: G.H. Mead. Realism. Sociality. Individual Experience. Naturalism.

Resumo: *Os pragmatistas clássicos compartilhavam da confiança nas possibilidades emancipadoras dos métodos e resultados científicos, embora de modo diferente. Um de seus propósitos mais importantes era mostrar que a atividade científica sugere a superação de uma série de dicotomias – sujeito/objeto, mente/natureza, teoria/prática – que perpassam as tradicionais filosofias tanto idealistas quanto empiristas. A utilização do conhecimento biológico e da psicologia experimental por parte de G.H. Mead, no decurso de sua pesquisa filosófica, representa uma tentativa de alcançar esse propósito*

por meio de uma explicação da consciência humana como um fenômeno específico da vida biológica e, ao mesmo tempo, por meio do desenvolvimento de uma psicologia social, concebida como uma análise empírica do relacionamento entre as estruturas da vida social e a dinâmica da subjetividade.

Minha intenção é esboçar os principais argumentos que Mead avança na sustentação de um realismo epistemológico centrado na idéia de uma natureza social das atividades cognitivas. A formulação de um conceito de experiência individual em termos de aspectos funcionais, orgânicos do desenvolvimento das ciências, e a perspectiva destes últimos como um processo "construtivo" de significados objetivos socialmente válidos serão considerados como os parâmetros de uma visão filosófica que visa à neutralização do risco do ceticismo implícito na oposição sujeito e mundo físico, que caracteriza as formas tradicionais de realismo, assim como os resíduos idealistas de teorias que enfatizam o aspecto lógico da pesquisa científica. Levando em consideração um grupo de textos cobrindo toda a obra de Mead, eu focalizarei a congruência desse projeto com uma teoria naturalista da mente e da linguagem por meio da qual ele tenta reestruturar uma série de noções filosóficas básicas, tais como de universalidade, significado simbólico, verdade e objetividade, à luz de uma concepção de processos de conhecimento definíveis como "realismo social".

Palavras-chave: *G.H. Mead. Realismo. Socialidade. Experiência individual. Naturalismo.*

1. Introduction

G.H. Mead's philosophy reflects classical pragmatists' confidence in scientific methodology as a concrete point of reference for overcoming a number of dichotomies implied in traditional thought – such as subject and object, mind and nature, theory and practice, logics and experience. In fact, he makes use of biological knowledge and experimental psychology, and is persuaded that, despite the divergence between science and philosophy occurring in certain phases of modernity, the main and certainly most productive task of philosophical speculation has always been that of "interpreting the results of science".[1] The birth of pragmatist movement was owed, in his opinion, to two particular events in the history of scientific progress: on the one hand, the development of behavioural psychology, which prompts "to put intelligence in its proper place within the conduct of the form (individual) and to state that intelligence in terms of the activity of the form itself"; on the other hand, the development of scientific techniques of empirical research, which "comes back to the testing of hypothesis by its working".[2] These two elements inspire the all of Mead's work, and are put into action, respectively, in the description of human consciousness as a phenomenon of biological life and in a social psychology based on the empirical study of the relationship between social life's structures and subjectivity's dynamics.

1 MEAD (1936, p. 243).
2 *Ibidem*, p. 351.

I will focus on Mead's main arguments for an epistemological perspective that emphasizes the social character of cognitive activities, and elucidates the field of individual experiences and reflections in terms of functional, organic aspects of science's development, thus maintaining a conception of scientific knowledge as a "constructive" process based on socially shared interpretations of reality. Showing the interactive relationship between individual and community, Mead especially aims at neutralizing both the risk of scepticism implicit in the opposition between subject and physical world that characterizes traditional forms of realism, and the idealistic features of epistemologies that stress the logical aspects of scientific research.

The congruence of Mead's approach to scientific knowledge with his naturalistic theory of mind and language comes out in a theoretical attitude that can be labelled as "social realism". In fact, even though he calls into question the ontological as well as the ultimate significance of scientific propositions, his arguments uphold their objective link with those elements of reality that lend themselves to human actions and to interpersonal controls.

2. Towards a Dialectical Solution of the Subject/Object Dichotomy

Mead's reflections on the history of philosophy and science point out the progressive modification of the problems of traditional metaphysics that comes along with the developments of the epistemological perspectives. A group of academic lectures published with the title *Movements of Thought in the Nineteenth Century* devote special attention to the problem of the relationship between the knowing subject and the physical world. Starting from the Aristotelian concept of a "science of nature", Mead looks at its development during medieval and modern philosophy, and finally pinpoints the shift from a conception of physical laws as world's static features to the notion of its evolutionary character. This new point of view, propagated by Hegel's philosophy, and Lamarck's and Darwin's biological theories, is directly connected – according to Mead – to the progressive dismissal of a rigid contrast between objectivism and subjectivism; he also indicates James's and Dewey's pragmatism, Russell's and Whitehead's logical realism as examples of such trend. Their works' significance consists, in fact, in the effort of importing into the philosophical sphere the pattern of modern science as problem-solving activity, that is, as a knowledge process that deals with specific problems and with the construction of particular theoretical apparatuses, without any claim of giving a systematic picture of the physical world. Just because of that, pragmatism and logical realism are equally involved in the analysis correlating the formal and material conditions of cognitive experience, that is, they are engaged in a type of research aiming to break down knowledge into its elements and study their interconnections, apart from any rigid contrast between "forms of reality" and "structures of the mind".[3]

[3] *Ibidem*, p. 264-92 and 326-60. In this text Peirce is never mentioned, and in all of Mead's works there are only rare and very brief references to him. The reason is probably that Mead did not know Peirce's writings firsthand, having come to Pragmatism through James and especially Dewey, his friend and main interlocutor.

In subscribing to this line of thought, Mead acknowledges the shift of gnoseology from the ontological level to that of the logic of scientific practices as a revision of traditional conceptions of individual experience. In particular, the methods of modern science, from which the new logical theories draw inspiration, keep out the solipsistic view of reality implied in some kinds of "subjective idealism" and surely reject the idea of reciprocal non-translatability of individual experience, as well as the assumption that there is an inescapable discrepancy between experiential contents and "real" structures of the objective world. In addition, according to Mead, the method of modern science rejects ancient thought's attitude to arrange only logically individual scientific observations, offering no criteria for reconstructing the conditions under which they are made, either for verifying their validity, or critically evaluating their relationship to the theories which they eventually displace. But, then, modern science does not consider any longer individual experiences as "exceptional" events which have no import with respect to the scientific task of describing reality in terms of universal laws. Rather, the most important aspect of modern science consists precisely in its tendency to develop a number of tools for controlling individual experiences, which eventually become an integral part of research.[4]

The discrepancies between individual experiences and codified scientific propositions, Mead says, are now considered the basis of new problems and theoretical hypotheses.[5] However, what is important is not "the mere fact that takes place in the experience of a single individual", but any incongruence between individual observations and the accepted conceptual system.[6] In brief, it is a matter of considering an individual experience not so much for the single factual propositions it might bring about, but for the new approaches to the objects of science that it introduces, and whose relevance could supersede the particularity of the individual. Importantly, the novelty of individual experiences does not bring about merely a modification of the way the facts are currently looked at, but the evolution of an implicit cultural agreement on the interpretation of the world.[7]

As the new problems correspond in type to the "exceptions" which individual experience can bring about, they do not ever appear in a general form: "the problem in itself is always individual", Mead says. However, its arising immediately brings about an attempt to resolve it and "the solution we work and test becomes universal".[8] Although it is always the particular individual generating the need for revision of established beliefs, it is only in the translation of personal experiences into inter-subjective terms, by way of a successful process of intersubjective verification, that they acquire importance for scientific progress. In short, science is an activity in which individual contributions converge into the social context of research. More precisely, it is a process characterized by the acquisition of "universalistic" points of view regarding a particular problem, that is, by indicating points of view that can be equally assumed by any individual.

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4 See MEAD (1936, p. 407-8).
5 *Ibidem*, p. 411.
6 *Ibidem*, p. 406.
7 *Ibidem*, p. 409-10.
8 *Ibidem*, p. 410.

Mead points out an analogy of scientific activity with subjective consciousness: the dynamic of science – he says – is not "anomalous" with respect to the "nature of consciousness itself", but rather represents its own activity. Like science, the life of consciousness also occurs in a continuous confrontation of new problems and in the active search for their solutions. These problems present themselves in the specificity of individual experience, but come into "the outlook on the universe which belongs to each one of us alone, and it appears in so far as we have in us a reflective consciousness in which life seems to be interpreted".[9]

The recurring emphasis on the particularity of human perspectives seems, at a first glance, to distance Mead's concept of subjective consciousness from Peirce's and Dewey's pragmatist account of subjectivity, since they mostly underline its dependency on the interpersonal context.[10] However, Mead's argumentations make evident that he intends to grasp the function of the subject in scientific knowledge beyond any idiosyncrasy, that is, in the light of the notion of "social consciousness", with respect to which the very word "particularism" can actually have a sense. In fact, he declares that the pivotal question both for science and philosophy is the relationship among individuals, namely among the perspectives that each individual may possibly develop. In this regard his position is precise: science, just as much as social realities, is nothing but "an organization of the perspectives of real individuals".[11] Accepting this point of view implies, on the one hand, a redefinition of the relationship between the particular and the universal, according to the logic and methodology of science; on the other hand, it implies an investigation of the peculiar capacity of the individual subject to "discover certain exceptions to universals" and "proceed with the formation of other universals". In both cases Mead appeals to the "interpretative", "constructive" and "fallibilistic" character of scientific knowledge: to its task of shaping a system of universal laws, which can give "a meaning to the world" rather than mirroring its ontological structures; to its search for solutions to particular problems through the development of new explicative hypotheses; to its typical attitude of correcting and possibly rejecting its own statements; finally, to the inter-subjectivity of experimental verification processes as well as to science's capacity of unfolding a certain conceptual background.

3. The Social Structure of Scientific Knowledge and the Cognitive Role of Action

These two last aspects define the intertwining of science and the socio-cultural apparatus. In particular, there is, according to Mead, a congruence of scientific activity with problems concerning the control and utilization of natural facts that the community may encounter

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9 *Ibidem*, p. 410-1.

10 Rather, Mead seems here under James' individualism influence, which he elsewhere criticises. Even having recognized that the individual consciousness is intertwined with the field of social activity, James – according to Mead – had not sufficiently clarified the value of this dimension, and the "social self" described by James simply mirrors the characteristics of the individual self. See MEAD (1964, p. 25-9 and 94-104). For Mead's critique of James' psychology, see CALCATERRA (2003, p. 121-132).

11 MEAD (1936, p. 411-3).

along the development of its ways of life. Moreover, scientific innovations are nothing but adjustments of socially pre-constituted paradigms of reflective experience.[12] Much like Popper's critical rationalism, Meadian epistemology stresses the value of current belief-systems, and considers scientific progress as a continuous problematization, on empirical bases, of the common sense representations of real phenomena.

However, while Popper links the development of science to a profusion of "imaginative hypotheses" that lead to the discovery of new facts through the eventual falsification of theories, Mead speaks of events that occur in individual experience.[13]

In a piece of writing of 1917, he asserts that particular experiences originate in a world that "is organized and universal" in its logical structure, and acquire consistency only through the conflict they generate with that given structure. In contrast to positivism and psychologistic epistemologists, he points out that for science "individual experience *presupposes* the organized structure; hence it cannot provide the material out of which the structure is built with".[14] From this point of view, also the so-called errors of scientists cannot be considered something purely subjective: according to Mead, considering them as such implies the risk of a sort of idealistic scepticism, which, in his opinion, is common to Hume, Mill, Russell and all the psychologistic philosophers. To avoid this risk, it is necessary to consider that science always deals with a real and *effective* problem, namely it properly deals with a conflict between an individual experience and certain established theories or beliefs.[15]

But, overall, Mead intends to keep firm the presupposition of a world of real objects that science necessarily assumes.[16] As a consequence, scientific errors are nothing but statements that are no longer sustainable in light of experiments that broaden the interpretation of physical phenomena: rather than rejecting them as mere errors, they must be ascribed to "a different phase of reality which a fuller history of the past records or a fuller account of the present interprets, giving them thereby their proper place in a real world." In other words, "The error remains as a historical incident explicable perhaps as a result of the conditions under which it occurred, but in so far as it was an error, not a part of reality."[17]

Therefore, Mead's fallibilistic conception of science differs from those radical forms of epistemic relativism that have marked recent philosophy of science.[18] Rather, his outlook recalls Quine's fallibilistic realism: when a new discovery or theory leads to the modification of the current conceptual apparatus, we should not say that the truth has changed, but that we had wrongly supposed something as true and we then gained a

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12 For an examination of the social concept of scientific progress in Mead's texts, see JOAS (1985, p. 199-214; 1990, p. 165-94).

13 An adequate analysis of this relationship should consider Popper's distinction between "context of discovery" and "context of justification," which Mead does not expressly thematize.

14 MEAD (1964, p. 203; 1996, p. 100).

15 MEAD (1964, p. 204-5; 1996, p. 102).

16 MEAD (1938, p. 45-61).

17 MEAD (1964, p. 204-205).

18 For the characteristics and the themes of epistemological relativism see EGIDI (1998).

better knowledge.[19] Similarly to Quine, Mead believes that the concrete connection between science activity and empirical data must be safeguarded.

The "real" world to which science refers is a world that "is simply there," and that is "used" although its ontological constitution is not completely known. It is the common field from which problems arise (in fact, they "are not born *in vacuo*"), and it is in the real word that experimentation and discoveries gradually take place. But, just because the real world is not completely known, the logical necessity that structures scientific hypotheses cannot be ascribed to it. Indeed, it is for this reason that experimental sciences do not find any contradiction in the fact that within the same world new problems can always arise.[20] Logical necessity concerns the sphere of reflective thought. More specifically, necessity "means nothing but the given or accepted conditions of the act that is being carried out, especially the widely cooperative acts with which science is concerned."[21] These conditions are "ideal" in a double sense: they are abstractions from real objects or facts (they are symbols indicating certain features of the real world), and also represent well-defined possibilities of interacting with the physical environment. According to Mead, science's "ideal" structure matches with that one of inter-subjective communication, which he defines according to Peircian theory of signs, namely as a system of logical meanings involving a reference to possible actions.[22]

4. Symbolic Apparatuses and Scientific Discoveries: The Construction of Universals

The "ideal" scientific apparatus forms the "world of knowledge" of a given historical phase, which implies the translation of some individual cognitive experiences into a communal set of beliefs. In fact, it is the result of a normal, successful process of communication, since what is involved here is the mutual acceptance of symbols that have relevance in the cooperative activities of the group. When new individual scientific experiences occur, there must be new symbolic representations that enable interpersonal acknowledgment of those experiences. Thus, science's development corresponds to the formation of new 'worlds of knowledge', and it is an exquisitely social process since "in the thought of the scientist – Mead claims – the supposition of his mind and his self always involves other minds and other selves as presuppositions and as standing upon the same level of existence and evidence".[23]

Anyway, the "different worlds of knowledge" brought about by scientific discoveries do not amount to a total upsetting of previous symbolic and practical paradigms, but rather to their reconstruction and enrichment. In other words, scientific innovations are not "revolutions" in the sense described by Thomas Kuhn. Notwithstanding the close similarity between Kuhn's idea of "normal science" and the Meadian concept of a "world of knowledge", the relationship between the pre-existing scientific apparatus and the event of discovery is not conceived by Mead in terms of radical transformation. Rather,

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19 QUINE (1981).
20 Cf. MEAD (1938, p. 45-62).
21 *Ibidem*, p. 389.
22 *Ibidem*, p. 388-390.
23 *Ibidem*, p. 53.

he maintains a dialectical perspective, based on the idea that the peculiarity of the human mind consists in the capacity to progressively re-adapt to its own vital environment, and just because of that Mead's philosophy has come to be defined as "constructive pragmatism".[24]

In such a framework, universality has no longer the form of an abstract entity nor is it equivalent to the idea of unconditioned truth. For Mead nothing exists but truths relative to the specific problems the mind is confronted with, or else to the specific logical-empirical context within which science operates.[25] Universality corresponds to a particular settlement of the logical, experiential, and predictive factors, which constitute science's functioning and allow the formation of more and more appropriate representations of real phenomena. Additionally, as far as science involves an inter-subjective agreement, universality deals with the interactions of the individual point of view with those of the community, rooting itself in and emerging from a world of meanings and real objects that is shared, namely 'social'.[26]

Therefore, Mead contests the Platonic position, according to which universals are permanent or immutable, estranged from experience and opposed to the contingency of particular facts. He equally rejects the separation of universality and particularity that is based on the opposition between sensory perception, conceived as a process belonging to the world of "appearances", and reason, conceived as a "supersensory" faculty.[27] He aims, in fact, at demonstrating that there is no clear line of demarcation between the logical and the empirical, since experience, in both its logical and sensory aspects, consists of a pragmatic unit founded on the "construction" of social perspectives.

The core of Meadian approach to universality is the conception of consciousness as a function of human conduct. Consciousness is in itself teleological, not mechanical, and develops through reflective thought, which in turn is intended as a "preparation" for action when behavioural adjustments are required.[28] This mechanism lies in the peculiar human ability to plan different alternatives of action and, consequently, to affect the conduct's environment. It is the specific ability to reconstruct repeatedly, accordingly to particular problems and experiences, the objective world that surrounds human beings.

Every reconstruction is at first a disposal of new plans of action, and the scientific knowledge's significance consists in unfolding a novel field of practical potentialities. However, Mead claims that the value of science lies in its independence from particular ends: the definition of the ends, in fact, is intertwined with the community's resources, and properly concerns a different level of reflective experience, namely the critical appraisal of social and ethical implications of scientific acquirements.[29]

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[24] See MURPHY (1932, p. XIII).

[25] MEAD (1964, p. 69 and 320-44).

[26] MEAD (1938, p. 338-83 and 632-5).

[27] *Ibidem*, p. 389-92.

[28] For the teleological conception of action in Mead, see CRONK (1987, Chapter 8); for the relationship between teleological action and "creativity," see JOAS (1985).

[29] MEAD (1938, p. 210). The lack of an adequate consideration of the relationship between scientific institutions and the economic and socio-political contexts within which they operate compromises the organic comprehension of the function of science in social behavior. It also renders difficult the utilization of scientific rationality as a model for the

5. Language, Action and Reality

The realistic resort of Mead's epistemology is tightly connected to his theory of action, according to which it is the origin, the expression, and the functional parameter of objective meanings implied in language and cognitive practices. Human action is, in fact, considered as the most evident attestation of the functional and dynamic relationship between subject and its physical environment, as well as the pivotal aspect of the development of symbolic activity that constitutes cognitive processes. The production of "meaningful symbols" is, for Mead, the most advanced form of humans' interactions with their physical world, and consists precisely in the transition from the "conversation of gestures" carried out by animals to linguistic communication.[30] Linguistic communication is basically a "meaningful vocal gestures" practice, whose function lies in its capacity of generating reciprocal action's responses in the members of the social group; and it is just for this reason that "meaningful vocal gestures" have an "objective" character.[31] Mead writes:

> Meaning is thus a development of something objectively there as a relation between certain phases of the social act; it is not a psychical addition to that act and is not an "idea" as traditionally conceived. A gesture by one organism, the resultant of the social at in which the gesture is an early phase, and the response of another organism to the gesture, are the *relata* in a triple or threefold relationship of gesture to first organism, of gesture to second organism, and of gesture to subsequent phases of the given social act. […] so that meaning is given or stated in terms of response. (MEAD, 1934, p. 76)

The formation of conceptual and practical attitudes of 'universal' value results from the social nature of the symbolic activity. However, though intersubjective agreement on "meaningful symbols" is of fundamental importance, it is not the essential element of universality, which, in fact, is not reducible to a mere social convention. Neither should universality, says Mead, be confused with similarity, because that can only help for a psychological interpretation of action. Rather, what defines universality is the cognitive content of symbols, namely the actions to which they refer. In brief, in science as in ordinary experience, action is the primary instrument of an "objective" knowledge of things, and therefore the social recognition of symbols and beliefs that it brings about is much more than an extrinsic agreement.

Moreover, every single action has from the beginning a social connotation, which is not additional but structural. Precisely for this reason, individual action, at least in

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solution of ethical problems in the sense proposed by Mead, wherein the "collective creativity" of ideal values permeates the instrumental relationship between the world and humanity. See MEAD (1964, p. 294-305). For a discussion of these themes, see JOAS (1985, p. 212-4); VAITKUS (1991, p. 17-26); MILLER (1980, p. 163-71); GUNTER (1990).

30 MEAD (1934, p. 161-3).

31 For a discussion of the relationship between gestures and objective meaning, see HABERMAS (1991, p. 140-63; 1988, p. 210-2).

principle, may acquire a universal meaning, namely may arrive at being considered as a common criterion of knowledge and practical attitudes. Unlike James, Mead maintains that human action can never be ascribed to the subjective mind but, rather, it involves the real context of experiences and beliefs of a given social group.[32] In other words, human action is co-existent with a world of perceptions and cognitive practices that is common and "social," and stands for "the beginning of actions," namely represents the "shared attitudes" from which the specific actions of the subject take place.

This claim is justified in the essay *The Social Factor in Perception*,[33] where the social character is attached to both physical objects and sensory perceptions: the percept marks the experience as a "perspective" depending on "the susceptibilities and attitudes of the individuals who make up human society", while the physical object marks the experience as an "organization of perspectives", in the sense that a physical object "is" in the perspective of an individual just like "it may lie in the perspectives of other individuals". In other words, what the individual perceives "is or may be perceived by others who are fortunately located spatio-temporally and similarly endowed".[34] It is important that neither the physical object nor the capacity for perception is conceived as *a priori* conditions of experience, that is, as static factors of the knowing activity. Instead, for Mead, they both depend on the development of empirical and reflective processes and on phylogenetic evolution. Anyhow, he states that "The substantial reality of our perceptual world lies in the area of manipulation and its extensions, and the other characters of things inhere in this substantial reality".[35] More specifically, the act is "antecedent to the appearance of things and of the organism [the perceiving subject] as objects", namely "perception of physical things presupposes an act that is already going on in advance of perception and is a process within which perception lies."[36]

Mead's close connection of knowledge processes to the cooperative conduct of human beings, to their gestural and verbal conversation, finally to meaningful symbols' employment, reflects his account of the origin of thought's activity and self-consciousness. Thinking is, in fact, an "internalized conversation of meaningful gestures", namely: "in order that thought may exist there must be symbols, vocal gestures generally, which arouse in the individual himself the response which he is calling out in the other, and such that from the point of view of that response he is able to direct his later conduct."[37]

In brief, thought and language are primarily the expression of the pragmatic value of sociality. This value rests on "taking the role of the other, a tendency to act as the other person acts", which also makes possible for each member of a given community the control of his or her individual actions in the context of participation in the social process or, more precisely, "with reference to that participation". Most importantly, it is through the capacity to assume the attitudes of the "generalized other" into individual

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32 See MEAD (1934, p. 69 *passim*).
33 MEAD (1938, p. 140-153).
34 *Ibidem*, p. 140.
35 *Ibidem*, p. 141.
36 *Ibidem*, p. 147-149.
37 MEAD (1934, p. 73).

experience, that is, to recognize the whole of the interactions that make up a community, that human beings manage to constitute themselves as an organic, self-conscious unit, with perspectives and behaviour, that is, to form a society. It is worth quoting in full Mead's definition of this concept:

> The organized community or social group which gives to the individual his unity of self may be called "the generalized other". The attitude of generalized other is the attitude of the whole community. […] This getting of the broad activities of any given social whole or organized society as such within the experiential field of any one of the individuals involved or included in that whole is, in other words, the essential basis and prerequisite of the fullest development of that individual's self: only in so far as he takes the attitudes of the organized social group to which he belongs toward the organized, co-operative social activity or set of such activities in which that group as such is engaged, does he develop complete self or possess the sort of complete self he has developed. And on the other hand, the complex co-operative processes and activities and institutional functionings of organized human society are also possible only in so far as every individual involved in them or belonging to that society can take the general attitudes of all other such individuals with reference to these processes and activities and institutional functionings, and to the organized social whole of experiential relations and interactions thereby constituted – and can direct his own behaviour accordingly. (MEAD, 1934, p. 170-1)

On the other hand, it is first in the social implications of intellectual and practical responses that the individual finds his or her own specific capacity of thinking, acting and possibly improving the social situation:

> The individual is constantly reacting to the social attitudes, and changing in this co-operative process the very community to which he belongs. Those changes may be humble and trivial ones. [One may not have anything to say, …] And yet a certain amount of adjustment and readjustment takes place. […] He belongs to a society of all rational beings, and the rationality that he identifies with himself involves a continued social interchange. The widest community in which the individual finds himself, that which is everywhere, through and for everybody, is the thought world as such. He is a member of such a community and he is what he is as such a member.
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> The fact that all selves are constituted by or in terms of the social process, and are individual reflections of it – or rather of this organized behaviour pattern [which it exhibits, and which they prehend in their respective structures] – is not in the least incompatible with, or destructive of, the fact that every individual self has its own peculiar individuality, its own unique pattern; because each individual self within that process, while it reflects in its organized structure the behaviour pattern of that process as a whole, does so from its own particular and unique standpoint within that process, and thus reflects in its organized structure a different aspect or perspective of this whole social behaviour pattern from that which is reflected in the organized structure of any other individual self within that process (just as every monad in the Leibnizian universe mirrors that universe from a different point of view, and thus mirrors a different aspect or perspective of that universe). (p. 199-201)

To sum up, each individual's behaviour, experience, thinking, and talking are relative "to the social organism," but not in the sense of an absolute, rigid determination of the individual by the community. Rather, individuals and communities constitute themselves as such and express their own specificity in virtue of a continuous dialectical relationship between sociality and individuality. Mead emphasises that this point of view, apart from the metaphysical implications that it can involve, is constantly confirmed in our biographies and in historiography. To reason differently would mean lapsing into solipsism or determinism, philosophical positions unsustainable in his opinion. It is these positions that Mead's "social realism" excludes, instead treating science – a facet of human experience that is highly specialized and yet similar in its fundamental structure to all others – as a function of cooperation and interaction among individuals and the natural and social environments. In this process is expressed the dynamic and not mechanically determined nature of the various vital activities of human beings.

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