A SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONIST ACCOUNT OF THE PROCESS OF PSYCHOTHERAPY: AN APPLICATION OF MEAD'S CENTRAL CONCEPTS[1]

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Psychotherapy is a practice or set of practices aimed at "curing" or "reintegrating" individuals who have become disintegrated, lost, or out of control. There are many forms of psychotherapy (psychoanalytic, behavioristic, humanistic, etc.), each of which claims to possess the "key" to psychic-behavioral balance and which views other therapeutic approaches as off the track or erroneous. But there are those who argue that no one school of psychotherapy possesses the key to "mental health" and that, therefore, various (but not all) forms of therapy "work" in the sense that these therapies can (but do not always) put psychologically disoriented persons back on the "right path," or "back in control." There are still others who view all forms of psychotherapy as useless in the theoretico-practical effort to understand and treat psychic-behavioral disorders. I shall return to this point of view, or at least a version of it (which I call "sociologism"), later in this essay.

If it is the case that various forms of psychotherapy, with contrasting and even contradictory views of human psychology, are successful in putting disordered persons "back together again," then how is this phenomenon to be explained? It would appear that the theoretical perspectives of competing schools of psychotherapy are inadequate as explanations of what actually takes place in the therapeutic process, for there is, in my view, a wide gap between theory and practice in most forms of psychotherapy. What takes place in therapy is a far cry from what is *thought* to take place by both therapists and clients.

George Herbert Mead's "symbolic interactionist" model of communication, when applied to the process of psychotherapy, can clarify what actually does take place in that process. It is my contention that Mead's symbolic interactionism can account for the "success" of various forms of therapy, that the symbolic interactionist perspective is not tied to any one form of therapeutic practice, and that, therefore, the symbolic interactionist interpretation of the therapeutic process is an adequate and true account of that process. The implications of Mead's thought for psychotherapy are

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many, but I shall confine myself herein to two areas of his work: (1) his social theory of the self and (2) his description of the temporal structure of human existence.

Symbolic Interaction: The Sociality of the Self

Human experience, from Mead's point of view, is socially constructed on the basis of a self-other dialectic in which the individual becomes aware of and defines herself with reference to (specific, significant, or generalized) others. Human consciousness is oriented, not only toward its external environment, but also toward itself. The self is a reflective process, i.e., "it is an object to itself" (*Mind, Self and Society* 136). How is this objectification of the self possible? The individual, in Mead's view, "can enter as an object [to himself] only on the basis of social relations and interactions, only by means of his experiential transactions with other individuals in an organized social environment" (*Mind, Self and Society* 225). Self-consciousness is the result of a process in which the individual takes the attitudes of others toward herself, in which she attempts to view herself from the standpoint of others (*Mind, Self and Society* 172). Thus, the self-as-object arises out of the individual's experience of and her assuming the roles of other selves outside of herself. The "process of taking the role of the other," then, is the primal form of self-objectification and is essential to self-realization.

The self, then, is a social emergent. By means of "symbolic interactions" (i.e., social interactions which take place via shared symbols such as gestures, words, definitions, rituals, etc.), the individual assumes the roles of others and views herself from the standpoint of these assumed roles. Mead's account of the social emergence of the self is developed through an elucidation of such intersubjective activities as *language*, *play*, and *games*. Language is communication via "significant symbols." A significant symbol is a gesture (usually a vocal gesture) which calls out in the individual making the gesture the same response which is called out in others to whom the gesture is directed. When the individual making a gesture understands the response of another to her gesture, she is capable of significant communication (language). In gesturing significantly, the individual responds to her own gestures as others might respond. Within the linguistic act, the individual takes the role of the other, i.e., responds to her own gestures in terms of the symbolized attitudes of others.

In playing and gaming, as in linguistic activity, the key process in the generation of self-consciousness is the process of role-playing. In play, the child takes the role of another and acts *as though* she were the other (mother, doctor, nurse, Indian, cop, soldier, and countless other symbolized roles). This form of role-playing involves a single role at a time. Thus, the other that comes into the child's experience in play is a "specific other" (*The Philosophy of the Present* 169).

The game involves a more complex form of role-playing than that involved in play. In the game, the individual is required to internalize, not merely the symbolized character of a single and specific other, but the roles of *all* others who are implicated

with her in the game. She must, moreover, comprehend the (explicit or implicit) rules of the game which condition the various roles. This configuration of roles-organized-according-to-rules brings the attitudes of all participants together to form a unity, which Mead calls the "generalized other." The generalized other, then, is "an organized and generalized attitude" (*Mind, Self and Society* 195) with reference to which the individual defines her own conduct. When the individual can view herself from the standpoint of the generalized other, "self-consciousness in the full sense of the term" is attained.

Mead's analysis of the game as a form of symbolic interaction is paradigmatic of his view of the relation between individual and society. Szasz, commenting on Mead's work, notes that "the social situation in which a person lives constitutes the team on which he plays and is, accordingly, of the utmost importance in determining *who he is* and *how he acts*" (224). For this reason, Mead is said to hold a "game-theory" of society; society itself is a great game in which roles are organized according to rules (Szasz 223-225).

Another important aspect of Mead's theory of the self is his distinction between the "me" and the "I," the two phases (or poles) of the self. The self is not merely a passive reflection of the generalized other. The individual's response to the other is active: she *decides* what she will do *in the light of* the attitude of the other; but her conduct is not mechanically determined by that attitude. Thus, the "me" is that phase of the self that symbolizes the attitude of the generalized other, and the "I" is that phase of the self that *responds to* the attitude of the generalized other. Mead's game-theory of society, we have seen, is a "theory of the dialectic between society and the individual" (Berger and Luckmann 194), and this dialectic takes the form of the polarity of the "me" and the "I." The "me" is the internalization of roles that derive from such symbolic processes as linguistic interaction, playing, and gaming; whereas the "I" is a "creative response" to the symbolized structures of the "me."

What are the implications of Mead's social theory of the self for an understanding of the psychotherapeutic process? (1) The relation of client and therapist in psychotherapy is a social relationship involving a variety of symbolic interactions. (a) The primary process is *linguistic interaction*. The client speaks while the therapist listens; and the therapist speaks(or "analyzes") while the client listens. In speaking, the client is defining her situation for both the therapist and for herself; and she is doing so via significant symbols that have meaning in a social milieu and that represent the assumed attitudes of the generalized other. And in listening to the responses of the therapist, the client experiences directly the attitudes of another (a significant other) toward her situation. And she must take the responses of the therapist into account as either affirming or as suggesting a reconstruction of the client's definition of her situation. Analytic comments and questions on the part of the therapist are opportunities for the client to extend her interpretation of the self-situation dialectic. As the therapeutic process develops, the client's conception of her situation is altered, and she begins to understand herself in terms of "new" symbols (e.g., unresolved urges, repressed experiences, existential anguish, etc.)

It should be noted, by the way, that the therapist's definition of her *own* self-situation gestalt undergoes alterations as she interacts with her clients; i.e., psychotherapy, contra some theoretical perspectives, is a two-way process in which both client *and* therapist are deeply and existentially involved. For this reason, questions might be raised as to what impact on therapy takes place as a result of the *therapist's* attitude, whether that attitude be theoretical, emotional, or what have you.

In addition to linguistic communication, (b) *play and games* may also take place in the psychotherapeutic process, either openly or covertly. In fact, linguistic interaction often involves forms of play and games, e.g., ploys, provocative questions, lies, parables, jokes, etc. The entire process of psychotherapy may be viewed as a form of play, as a relatively unstructured dialogue in which gestures and responses are freely expressed and hypothetically interpreted. Where role-playing is used as an explicit method (as in psycho-drama and in certain forms of behavior therapy), the play element in therapy is obvious: in taking on roles (of mother, husband, lover), both client and therapist *play* at alternative definitions of the self-other relation. The value of this sort of playing, from a symbolic interactionist standpoint, is that the individual's self-image may be broadened as her conception of significant, specific, and generalized others is broadened. Play may well be one of the most effective instruments in redefining a situation that has become "hopeless."

In current psychotherapies, interest in explicit game-playing is expanding at a rapid rate. But even in traditional psychoanalysis, game-playing has been present, although it has not been recognized as such. Dream-analysis and free-association, for example, are activities involving interpretation of symbols according to pre-established "rules" of meaning. The value of such games does not lie in alleged "discoveries" of hidden unconscious truths and meanings, but in the *definition* and *interpretation* of dream-images and freely-associated expressions as *having* certain meanings or as *indicating* certain truths. The "actual" truth or meaning of dreams or free-associations are less significant therapeutically than the client's *belief* that these symbols, as *defined* in the client-therapist relation, are true or have certain meanings. It is the *belief* of the client (and perhaps of the therapist) that leads to a redefinition and reinterpretation of the existential situation in which the client (and perhaps the therapist) finds herself.

(2) Clients in psychotherapy often describe themselves as "stuck," "trapped," "paralyzed," "unable to cope," etc. According to Jung, the majority of people who seek the aid of psychotherapy experience themselves as being "stuck;" i.e., the "resources of consciousness have been exhausted" with the result that the individual cannot act with reference to her situation. She can find "no possible way of going ahead . . ." (Jung 60-61). While this formulation may not take into account all conceivable forms of psychological disorientation, it does extend, more than likely, to most cases of psychic disruption. Thus, for the purposes of this essay, I have confined myself to the consideration of the relevance of psychotherapy to the experience of being "stuck." In such cases, the aim of psychotherapy is to redefine,

through symbolic interactions, the client's situation in such a way that she can transcend her paralysis. Here, Mead's distinction between the "me" and the "I" can clarify the function of the therapeutic process. What happens in existential crises is that the "me" has been so defined that the "I" loses its creative capacity to respond. What is necessary is a restructuring of the "me" by means of new symbolizations that will allow the client to see her self as "larger" than she had previously conceived it to be. This will involve introducing the client to a "larger" generalized other which can present alternative avenues of action to the "I." When this redefinition takes place, the client's paralysis is (at least temporarily) overcome.

For example, suppose an academician has become "stuck" in her effort to write. She is inhibited from putting her thoughts on paper for fear of the reaction of her colleagues in the academic world (her generalized other). It may well be that her sense of self (particularly her "me") has been too rigidly and too narrowly defined; perhaps her creativity can be expressed, at the moment, only in non-academic ways (e.g., in poetry or in fiction). If this is the case, then, in order to transcend her paralysis, she will have to broaden her conception of herself in such a way that her "me" is not confined to the academic profession; she will have to consider herself a writer in a broader sense than an academic writer. If she succeeds at this process of redefinition (and she may need psychotherapy to do so), then she will be able to say, "Now 'I' can go on!"

(3) Since the self emerges out of socio-symbolic interactions, psychotherapeutic theory must take into account the social context in which the individual-in-therapy lives. Mead views the relation of self and situation as a dialectical, i.e., an interactive, relation. The self arises out of and is rooted in a social situation, and it is within this social situation that the individual is either able to act or prevented from acting. While psychotherapy may not be able to act directly on the client's social milieu, it can provide the client herself with the means by which she can redefine her situation. For it is quite often the case that it is not the individual's social environment alone that prevents her from functioning, but that environment *as it is mediated* through the individual's definitions and interpretations (i.e., her *symbolizations* of her situation). What is needed, from this standpoint, is a definition of the situation that will enable the individual to experience herself (i.e., the relation between her "me" and her "I") in a new way, in a way that will open up new avenues of activity to her.

The symbolic interactionist interpretation of the relation between self and situation stands midway between the "psychologistic" view that psychic-behavioral problems are purely individual and the "sociologistic" view that such problems are caused entirely by social forces operating on the individual from the "external" social world. From the standpoint defended in this essay, psychic-behavioral problems arise out of a *dialectical interaction* between self and society. Thus, what is called for is neither the "psychoanalysis" and "adjustment" of a neurotic individual to an uncriticized social system, nor an abandonment of the psychotherapeutic project in favor of movements for social reform or revolution. On the one hand, psychological problems are also social problems, and the "cure" of an individual will involve, not her

"adjustment" to society, but her redefinition of and *action* with reference to her social situation. But, on the other hand, the "activization" (or "actualization") of the individual need not be postponed until "after the revolution." What is needed is both therapy *and* social action.

Temporality, Crisis, and Reintegration

According to Mead's principle of sociality, the individual exists in a world that is socially and symbolically defined. The individual, on the one hand, is what she is for-the-world-and-in-relation-to-the-world (especially the world of human others); and, on the other hand, the world (including others), which is defined through symbolic acts in which the individual participates, is what it is for-the-individual-and-in-relation-to-the-individual. This is an interactive relationship, one in which the individual is active. The self, we have seen, is characterized in part by its activity (the "I"). But *how* is the individual active with respect to her world if not in her choices and in her awareness of her choices? One loses one's freedom, even one's selfhood, when one is unaware of one's choices, or when one refuses to face the fact that one *has* choices. Such modes of unawareness and evasion, which Sartre refers to as "bad faith" (47-70), are characteristic of the kind of experience that leads individuals into psychotherapy. What is the nature of situations that give rise to this paralysis and its attendant anguish and suffering?

Mead's description of the temporality of human experience provides a strategy by means of which the latter question might be answered. The temporality of experience, Mead argues, is a flow that is primarily *present*: the past is part of my experience *now*, and the future (in the modes of hope, expectation, anxiety, etc.) is also part of my experience *now*. I exist in the *now*, and whatever *is* for me is *now*; and whatever is of importance or whatever is meaningful for me is of importance or is meaningful *now*. Past and future, then, are modes of the present. Thus, existential time is *time lived in the now*.

Temporal structure, according to Mead, arises with the appearance of novel or "emergent" events in experience. The emergent event is an unexpected disruption of continuity, an inhibition of passage. The emergent event cuts the individual's present off from her future: the present is unfamiliar, and the future is in doubt. The individual's past, moreover, upon which she had based her expectations of present and future, is to some extent invalidated. There is an immediate sense of pastness (a sense *that* something has happened), but *what* has happened is open to question. Prior to the emergent event, the temporality of experience takes the form of continuous and harmonious passage and is more or less taken for granted; it is the emergent event that jolts the experiencing individual into awareness of past, present, and future, and these are experienced as radically discontinuous.

The emergent event, in other words, constitutes a problem for human action, a problem *to be* overcome, a *crisis*, an *emergency*, what Mead calls a "problematic situation." The emergent event, which arises in a present, establishes a barrier

between self and world, and fragments past, present, and future; emergence is an inhibition of conduct, a disharmony, which projects experience into a (relatively) *distant* future in which harmony may be reinstituted. The individual, blocked in her activity, confronts the emergent problem in her present and looks to the future as the field of potential resolution of conflict. The future is a temporally, and frequently spatially, distant realm to be reached through *action*. Human action is action-in-time.

From the standpoint of Mead's description of the temporality of action and his emphasis on the importance of problematic situations in human experience, "crises" in one's life are of great existential significance. The human individual is a being that exists in relation to a world. As such, it is essential that the human individual experience herself as "in harmony with" the world; and if this proves difficult or impossible, then she is thrown into a "crisis," i.e., she is threatened with *separation* from the world; and separation from the world, from the standpoint of a being-in-the-world, is tantamount to non-being. From Mead's point of view, a crisis is a turning point in the individual's existence. It is simultaneously a threat to the individual's continuity in and with her world *and* an opportunity to redefine, broaden, and deepen her sense of self and of the world to which her self is onto-dialectically related.

Returning to the question of choice, it would appear that crises may in fact undermine the sense of freedom of choice; and yet, it is also the case that crises constitute opportunities for the exercise of freedom, since such "breaks" in one's experience demand that one make decisions as to what one is "going to do now." It is Mead's stress on the *activity* of the individual in her world that is of interest here, for therapy may place the individual in a better position to act with reference to her world.

The last point requires amplification. In Mead's theory of time as lived process, the emergent event creates a crisis in which the individual's present is cut off from her future and from her past. As Mead points out, an important phase in the individual's attempt to transcend her crisis is a *reconstruction* of the past. The continuity and rationality of the individual's experience is at stake, and a "new look" at the past is necessary for movement into the future. The past must be redefined and reinterpreted in such a way as to "integrate" the emergent event into the individual's ongoing experience; i.e., the emergent situation must be rendered continuous, must be understood as following coherently from the individual's past, must be made *rational*.

A continuing strategy of psychotherapy has been the analysis of the client's past. A symbolic interactionist account of this strategy might run as follows: We have seen that human experience, from Mead's point of view, is symbolically and socially constructed on the basis of a self-other dialectic involving communicational acts, role-playing, and a variety of interactional games. The socio-symbolic construction of experience is characterized by the general temporality of human existence. According to Mead, time is a lived process that involves incorporation of past into present consciousness as well as the anticipation of the future. From this standpoint, psychotherapy may be regarded as a symbolic reconstruction of the client's past and

as an assimilation and utilization of this past in her ongoing present-toward-future experience.

The present of the self, which includes a symbolized (i.e., interpreted and defined) past and future, portends either hope or despair. Since therapy may produce a greater immersion in and "possessing" of her present on the part of the client, it may be considered as a means of awakening (or even creating) hope. And this "possessing" of the present will require a "repossession" (redefinition, reinterpretation, re-membering) of the client's past. The client's past is reflectively reconstructed in such a manner that it is rendered continuous with the newly emergent situation. In this way, the emergent event, the occurrence of which is by definition unpredictable, is retrospectively determined and placed within the ongoing experience of the individual. Thus arises the possibility of a new future based on a new past and present, or on a newly symbolized past-in-present. The key here is a symbolically restructured temporality in the client's experience. The "re-possessed" past becomes a source of energy in the client's present and allows her to proceed more effectively toward her future.

Psychotherapy, then, is a communicational process in which "reality" is reconstructed by means of new symbolizations of past, present, and future.

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