

**LANGUAGE, BEHAVIOR AND CREATIVITY:  
G. H. MEAD'S RENEWED NATURALISM**

**Rosa M. Calcaterra**

University Roma Tre

[rosamaria.calcaterra@uniroma3.it](mailto:rosamaria.calcaterra@uniroma3.it)

**ABSTRACT:** George Herbert Mead delineates a post-Darwinian naturalism that brings decisive elements of novelty to the empirical and naturalistic tradition of modernity, typically represented by David Hume. I will try to enlighten the continuity as well as the differences between Mead's and Hume's naturalisms, focusing mainly on the concepts of experience, epistemological foundation, and individuality. Mead's work shows a treatment of these concepts that is in line with the theoretical-methodological structure that characterizes the pragmatist movement. At the same time, he introduces a behaviorist theory of language and meaning that opens new research lines not only of naturalism but also of the philosophical project of classical pragmatists.

**Keywords:** naturalism, behaviorism, experience, language, foundationalism, creativity.

### 1. In the Wake of Darwin and Hume

The philosophical structure of Mead's "symbolic interactionism" or "social behaviorism" represents a post-Darwinian naturalism that brings decisive new elements to the empirical and naturalist tradition of modernity. A pivotal aspect of his work consists in the Darwinian connotation of the idea of process as a decisive factor in overcoming the traditional empiricist view, which, in extreme synthesis, tends to conceive experience as a sort of collector of the sensory inputs of mental activity. In other words, Mead tends to enhance the anti-determinist component of Darwinian biology, which he implements by drawing an image of the human being as a *socio-bio-logical* entity. This means that the human subject is 'inside' nature yet overcomes its purely reproductive mechanisms. In particular, it means that humans are not 'spectators' but 'actors' in the realm of knowledge, to use the famous words of James, from whom Mead drew the initial directive of his own naturalism.<sup>1</sup> Equally

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<sup>1</sup> For Mead's relations with James, please allow me to mention my *Pragmatismo: i valori dell'esperienza*, Carocci, Roma 2003, pp. 117–132.

fundamental, is the fact that Mead's *socio-bio-logical* image of the human implies a renewed version of Peirce's so-called "logical socialism", precisely because it insists on the social quality of the cognitive and value processes of the human subject as well as on his peculiar ability to identify himself.<sup>2</sup>

I shall try to point out the convergence of all these aspects in a theory of language that favors the notion of 'creativity of the I' in such a way as to exhibit the exceeding of the human subject over the presumed mechanical rigidity of natural phenomena, showing, at the same time, the empirical-natural root of human 'creative' performances. Thus, he delineates a post-Darwinian naturalism that brings decisive elements of novelty to the empirical and naturalistic tradition of modernity, typically represented by David Hume. Compared to Hume's position, Mead introduces as a completely new element his naturalistic theory of language that, in turn, is supported by a description of the genesis of self-consciousness in which the normative value of language emerges. In other words, he shifts Hume's thesis of the 'natural legality' of human mental processes towards a point of view that identifies a normativity intrinsic to the emergence and mature exercise of human language. This is, in fact, a very significant contribution to the twentieth-century developments of philosophical naturalism.

To illustrate my interpretative hypothesis, it will be worth recalling some essential passages from Hume's naturalism. First of all, let us consider that, according to Hume, the human being is an entity of the natural world, certainly a rather peculiar entity and yet profoundly continuous with the vital components of animality. We therefore speak of Hume's so-called 'non-specism', of which both his *Treatise on Human Nature* and the *Research on the Human Intellect* present very eloquent pages. In this philosophical framework, the Scottish philosopher theorizes the 'natural legality' of the human

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<sup>2</sup> This aspect is discussed in R. M. Calcaterra, *Individual and Sociality in Science: J. H. Mead's 'Social Realism'*, "Cognitio. Revista de Filosofia", vol. 9, n. 1, 2008, pp. 27–39. Cfr. also H. Joas, *The objective reality of subjective perspectives. Rosa Calcaterra's defense of Meadian social realism*, in G. Baggio, M. Bella, G. Maddalena, M. Santarelli (eds), *Esperienza, Contingenza, Valori*, Quodlibet, 2020, pp.107–111.

intellect's functioning: the exercise of ideas, as well as that of memory and imagination, imply universal principles, i.e. "laws of the association of ideas" which operate "in the same way in all human beings" and whose criteria of similarity, space-time contiguity, cause-effect can certainly be indicated Surprisingly in advance of Wittgenstein's well-known invitation to philosophize by formulating examples rather than definitions, Hume points out that his list of legal principles of the association of ideas, i.e. the normative criteria of the functioning of the human mind, has no claim to completeness. On the contrary – he argues – it is very difficult to prove that there are no other principles of association than those he lists. In short, "All we can do in these cases is to scroll through examples, to examine carefully the principle that links the different thoughts to each other and not to stop until we have made the principle as general as possible".<sup>3</sup>

There is a semantic ambiguity in Hume's use of the concepts of "universality" and "generality" to be annexed to logical-normative principles. However, it is important to notice the lively attention Hume pays to the social nature of the human being, by setting the sentiment of *sympathy* as a sort of universal groundwork or, we could say, transversal principle, of the social and cultural institutions that qualify the human world. It follows that the norms of human knowledge and action are determined not only by the physical-natural constitution of individuals but also by their social nature or their 'natural' placement in a relational and cultural context.<sup>4</sup> As we will see later, the Humiana notion of sympathy is a crucial aspect of the naturalist behaviorist theory of language and meaning proposed by Mead.

Turning now to the question of Hume's anti-specism, it is worth pointing out how it is in some respects harmonious with, though divergent from the view present-

ed by Leibniz. The two positions are in fact indicative of the different philosophical modes, still paradigmatic today, with which one can give prominence to the 'natural' constitution of the human being; 'modes' which, moreover, seem to coexist tacitly in Mead's naturalism precisely where he focuses on the notion of the creativity of the ego. As we know, for Leibniz animals have organs structured in such a way that they receive refined and distinct impressions from the outside world. The perceptions corresponding to these impressions are also refined and distinct, so much so that the soul of the animal is "accompagnée de mémoire" of which a certain echo remains for a long time, capable of being heard on certain occasions".<sup>5</sup> The animal therefore has a thought through images, connects the content of its memory to external events whenever they occur and acts accordingly. The clarity of the feeling depends mainly both on the repetition of the same perception that produces a corresponding habit and on the intensity of a given perception, even if experienced only once. However, Leibniz strongly denies that this mnemonic concatenation can be understood as a rational cognitive process precisely because it is based only on facts and not on the knowledge of their causes.

For his part, Hume, too, believes that animals possess an empirical capacity for reasoning: they expect, by analogy with past observations, similar effects from similar causes and thus acquire knowledge in the course of their lives. This can be noticed from the simple observation – Hume says – that the puppies' actions are less perfected than those of adult animals, and it is interesting that he remarks how puppies can learn rules of behavior through discipline and education, as well as through spontaneous experience. Animals not only possess knowledge acquired through experience, but also benefit from an "original hand of nature", to which "many parts" of the animal's knowledge are owed. This knowledge in itself exceeds "the capacity that they pos-

<sup>3</sup> Cf. D. Hume, *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2007, pp. 16 ff.

<sup>4</sup> The sentiment of "sympathy" is focused particularly in D. Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* e in *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*.

<sup>5</sup> G. W. Leibniz, *Principes de la nature et de la grâce fondés en raison. Principes de la philosophie ou monadologie*, ed. A. Robinet, PUF, Parigi, 1986, p. 80.

sess on ordinary occasions"; moreover, it shows little or no susceptibility to the influence of practice or experience. We denominate these 'parts' of animal knowledge – continues Hume – "*Instincts*" and tend to admire them "as something very extraordinary, and inexplicable by all the disquisitions of human understanding". Then he concludes that "our wonder will, perhaps, cease or diminish when we consider that the experimental reasoning itself, which we possess in common with beasts, and on which the whole conduct of life depends, is nothing but a species of instinct or mechanical power, that acts in us unknown to ourselves".<sup>6</sup>

In order to better understand the position of Mead, let us point out a relevant difference between Hume's and Leibnitz's ideas of the animal-human knowledge continuity. The latter, in fact, supports the extraordinary nature of human reason as the ability to lead to the knowledge of causes and certain truths, despite the recognition of the continuity between the empirical reasoning of animals and that of humans. Hume, on the other hand, mainly focuses on the relationship between empirical knowledge and instinctual endowment to sanction its strong impact "on the entire conduct of life" both animal and human, thus assigning to the operations of the intellect a complementary bio-logical role that is, however, far from dispensable. As if to say that on the level of intellect or reason we play much more complicated and significant games with scientific progress, than those dictated by the concreteness of experience and instinctual powers. Most importantly, according to Humian empiricism, these games must inevitably draw on the naturalness of experience in order to be able to aspire to the qualification of logical correctness. It is not here the case to dwell on the rule that Hume establishes regarding the formulation and verification of the correctness of ideas and theories: to trace their origin in sensory impressions and, where they are not found, to set them aside.

<sup>6</sup> D. Hume, *op. cit.*, p. 78.

## 2. Pragmatist Constituent Elements

We do not know to which extent George Herbert Mead recognized himself as a theorist representative of pragmatism. However, his adherence to the theoretical-methodological project of the pragmatist movement seems quite clear if one considers, in addition to his Darwinian concept of process, the use he makes of the concept of experience, which he in fact defined similarly to Peirce, James and Dewey, i.e., according to a plurality of semantic and epistemological values.

Overall, it can be said that, unlike the modern empiricism, the pragmatist notion of experience coincides with a form of epistemological holism that excludes the priority of sensory data over ideas or their foundational role in the formation of beliefs and, therefore, also their function as the ultimate or self-sufficient criterion for defining their validity. In other words, for classical pragmatists as for Mead, it is necessary to adopt an inter-relational and dynamic view of cognitive processes, for which Humian isolationist theory of sensations, on which classical empiricism rests, is unsustainable.<sup>7</sup> The pragmatists, on the other hand, try to assert the irreducible interweaving of the sensory sphere with the intellectual one and, more precisely, the virtuous circularity between the concrete field of action, the logical-semantic sphere and the cognitive sphere. This point of view paves the way for a pragmatic meaning of the notion of 'foundation', which tends to combine the epistemic and ethical criteria of truth and objectivity with the field of action as a socially tangible testament to the polyvalence of the concept of experience, i.e., of its functioning as an instrument for the formation of beliefs as well as a concrete source of their correction or denial.

It should be stressed that the pragmatic notion of 'foundation' does not correspond to a pure and simple

<sup>7</sup> James develops his criticism to classical empiricism and particularly to the atomistic conception of sensations in his *Principles of Psychology*. See M. Bella, *Ontology after Philosophical Psychology. The Continuity of Consciousness in William James's Philosophy of Mind*, Lexington Books, Lanham–Boulder–New York–London, 2019, pp. 23ff.

reversal of the terms of the rationalist/idealist relationship between conceptual and empirical plans or, more generally, between theory and practice. Rather, it is a question of giving a much more substantial meaning to the usual statement that ideas or theories have reflected in practice, recognizing in the latter a constitutive factor not only of the building of knowledge but also of the awareness of its fallibility in principle. Here we touch on a typical aspect of both classical and contemporary pragmatist thought, although we must bear in mind that some leading representatives of the latter, such as Richard Rorty and Robert Brandom, tend to detach fallibility from the notion of experience. Indeed, by virtue of the important contaminations between pragmatism and analytic philosophy, there is an invitation to take leave of the term experience because it is apparently too vague and, in any case, too compromised by its strong association with the 'internalist' logic that underpins the philosophies centered on the idea of conscience. In contrast, philosophical analysis should be confined to the field of problems regarding the function of language, its forms, its structural devices, its limits and its potentials, precisely because all this would offer greater epistemic guarantees or reliability.<sup>8</sup>

However, the contrast between 'experience' and 'language' is increasingly proving to be inconsistent and pretentious in the context of recent developments in pragmatist philosophy.<sup>9</sup> In particular, such a contrast seems to obscure some of Peirce, James, and Dewey's important insights, which have shown the actual impossibility of clearly distinguishing the semantic fields indicated by the two terms in question – experience and language.<sup>10</sup> Mead's work is emblematic in this respect. Indeed, a cornerstone of his thought is the assertion of

continuity between the biological sphere, sociality and intellectual processes. It is an assertion based on a theory of perception that also ascribes a kind of intentionality to the body level, which is however structured by the linguistic-symbolic space generated from inter-individual experiences.<sup>11</sup> In other words, Mead's basic idea is that the objects perceived by the human individual are selected according to his or her specific biological needs and nevertheless framed in a context of meanings deriving from the linguistic interactions that characterize the specificity of inter-individual human relationships.<sup>12</sup> It is an idea that Mead consolidated by the rejection of the substantialist conception of conscience, a conception that he found at work also in the new 'scientific psychology' established in Europe and America at the time, despite the great innovative efforts promoted by experimental methodologies. In particular, the new scientific psychology seemed to him implicitly dependent on the Cartesian notion of consciousness as an autonomous substance with respect to the physical-natural world, just because the 'new' psychologists tended to explain perceptive experience in terms of the mechanical relationship between 'external' and 'internal', between object-stimulus and psychic states.

In the initial part of his best-known work, *Mind, Self and Society*,<sup>13</sup> Mead states his intention to follow the methodological criteria of John Watson's behaviorism, which in turn derived from the experimental psychology carried out by Wundt, James and Galton in the mid-nineteenth century. Thus, Mead shared with Watson the idea that the study of the mental is better guaranteed by an 'externalist' approach, i.e., by the observation of behavior. At the same time, he strongly contested Watson's intention to eliminate the concept of consciousness, arguing rather that it should constitute a central

<sup>8</sup> See R. M. Calcaterra (ed.), *New Perspectives on Pragmatism and Analytic Philosophy*, Rodopi, Amsterdam–New York, 2011.

<sup>9</sup> For an account of most recent positions on the matter, see D. Hildebrand (ed.), *Language or Experience: Charting Pragmatism's Course for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, in «European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy», Vol. 6, N. 2, 2014.

<sup>10</sup> A detailed analysis of the matter is in R. M. Calcaterra, *Contingency and Normativity. The Challenges of Richard Rorty*, Brill-Rodopi, Leiden–Boston 2019, pp. 31–36.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. S. B. Rosenthal, P. L. Bourgeois, *Mead and Merleau-Ponty: Toward a Common Vision*, State University Press, Albany 1991.

<sup>12</sup> A synthetic presentation of this argument is in G. H. Mead, *A Behaviourist Account of the Significant Symbol*, in A. J. Reck (ed.), *Selected Writings. George Herbert Mead*, University of Chicago Press, 1964, pp. 240–247.

<sup>13</sup> G. H. Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society: The Definitive Edition*, Chicago University Press, Chicago 2015 (MSS).

moment of behaviorism itself. In his view, "Watson's attitude was similar to that of Alice's Queen in Wonderland: 'cut off their heads!'"<sup>14</sup>

The line of this argument is typically pragmatist: in order to renew philosophical and psychological research, it is necessary to emancipate oneself from the Cartesian dualism that orients the traditional theories of conscience and mind, without however falling back into physicalist reductionism. According to Mead, the existence of the mind or conscience as a psychic entity or substance, ontologically separate from the field of physical-natural phenomena – as the Watsonians intended – can be denied, but it cannot be denied that mind and conscience are an integral part of human action. Indeed, mind and conscience must be conceived as functional elements of behavior, which, as such, lend themselves to an objective or scientific description. The quarrel with Watson closes with a statement of principle:

Mental behavior is not reducible to non-mental behavior. But mental behavior or phenomena can be explained in terms of non-mental behavior or phenomena, as arising out of, and as resulting from complications in, the latter.<sup>15</sup>

Contemporary philosophy has advanced as much criticism as approval of this type of reasoning, which however is far from resolute. On the other hand, precisely in light of the current debate on the mental, Mead's anti-reductionist naturalism presents itself as an exemplary symptom of the difficulty of closing a series of 'classical' philosophical problems and, at the same time, as a remarkable step in the process of changing the conceptual paradigms of our tradition.

As an alternative to Watsonian behaviorism, Mead's proposal supported a 'functionalist' view of the sphere of psychic facts, on the basis of James and Dewey's psychological research.<sup>16</sup> Mead endeavored to offer concrete justifications for functionalism by exploring the

theme of action in conjunction with a cohesive group of philosophical intuitions.<sup>17</sup> The most important items of his works are in fact strictly connected to some important philosophical questions to which Mead tries to answer from a new naturalist perspective: the theory of human language as the evolution of the "conversation of gestures" that takes place in the animal world; the description of the social genesis of the Self; the definition of thinking as the "internalization" of the "significant vocal gestures" that qualify human life and of which action is, according to Mead, the matrix and parameter of objective cognitions. Overall, just like Dewey, he clearly maintains that language is a form of behavior and, since language is an eminently social activity, the analysis of human behavior must necessarily pass through the verification of the structural devices of intersubjective verbal communication.

In all this, the choice to adopt the empirical precept of sticking to experience is evident. "Experience," wrote Peirce, "is our only teacher" and Mead, like the classical representatives of pragmatism, intended to show the dynamic and procedural nature of experience. Through his theory of language, the latter is configured as an interpretative process of reality, and it is assumed as a fallible source of our cognitive criteria as well as the place where the 'subjective' inevitably fades into the intersubjective and vice versa. In other words, according to Mead's analysis, what forms the field of subjectivity appears inseparable from the concreteness of the social interactions from which it stands out and in which the very possibility of handling the concepts of consciousness and self-consciousness, traditionally constitutive of the philosophical discourse on subjectivity, falls.

### 3. Self, Society, and Creativity

As noted above, Mead's theory of language exhibits an image of the human being as a *socio-bio-logical* entity.

<sup>14</sup> G. H. Mead, MSS, pp. 22.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>16</sup> A detailed analysis of the origins, developments, and current importance of Mead's and Dewey's form of functionalism is in G. Baggio, *La mente bio-sociale. Filosofia e psicologia in G. H. Mead*, ETS, Pisa 2015, pp. 7–55.

<sup>17</sup> G. H. Mead, *The Philosophy of the Act*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1938.

The pivotal point of this proposal is the idea that the human being regulates his conduct through the ability to use meaningful symbols, which reflect the constructive and intentional character – in the biological sense of the term – of the relations she/he has with the surrounding reality, i.e., with physical objects and with her/his fellow human beings. The linguistic-symbolic factor is decisive for the specific ‘natural’ constitution of the human being, who is configured as a social subject by virtue of his ability to produce and use linguistic symbols. In other words, unlike the social relations observable in the animal world, the relations between human individuals, as well as between them and the surrounding physical world, are not simply relations of interaction but of *linguistic interaction*, i.e., they include the symbolic transposition of the experiences that weave the development of both personal and collective reality. These realities are, for Mead, eminently ‘historical’. First, historicity is the necessary correlate of pragmatist criticism of essentialism and of philosophical or scientific dogmatism; in addition, historicity is an implicit factor of the concept of symbolic activity on which Mead bases his notion of the ‘I’ as a free and ‘creative’ agency.

Like Chauncey Wright – the lively defender of Darwinism, whom Peirce defined as the “coryphaeus” of the meetings of the “Metaphysical Club” from which the pragmatist movement took shape – Mead interprets the capacity of language as the “resultant of a long evolutionary path”. More precisely, it would be the passage from the “conversation of vocal gestures” observable in the animal world to the exercise of “symbolic or significant vocal gestures”, whose functioning – according to Mead – can be described according to the stimulus-response model. However, Mead's use of the stimulus-response model excludes its classic mechanistic character: signifying vocal gestures act as intermediaries in the relationship between two or more individuals and what counts is the mutual adjustment of their behavior to which linguistic communication gives rise. To put it differently, the intersubjective exchange of linguistic

expressions does not only consist in knowing how to respond to them as others would respond. Rather, linguistic communication consists in the ability to indicate to others the response we wish to provoke, that is to say, the ability to circumscribe the impulsive components of the linguistic act and therefore to have a constructive impact on the social situation. The suspension of the mechanism implicit in the stimulus-response model is in fact constitutive of Mead's definition of the concept of meaning:

Meaning is thus a development of something objectively there as a relation between certain phases of the social act; it is not a psychic addition to that act and it is not an “idea” as traditionally conceived. A gesture by an organism, the resultant of the social act in which the gesture is an early phase, and a response of another organism to the gesture, are the relata of a triple or threefold relationship of gesture to first organism, of gesture to second organism, and of gestures to subsequent phases of the given social act, respectively [...]. The gesture stands for a certain resultant of the social act, a resultant to which there is a definite response on the part of the individuals involved therein; so that meaning is given or stated in terms of response.<sup>18</sup>

To sum up, as it already was for Peirce, the meaning of symbolic-linguistic entities has a triadic structure that – by definition – goes beyond the idea of an immediate relationship between denoting and denoted. Moreover, Mead's conception of *language as a gesture* also offers important cues for a pragmatic integration of the theories of meaning developed within analytical philosophy. Indeed, the decisive aspect of linguistic communication lies – according to Mead – in the reference to one's self, i.e., self-consciousness, which precisely qualifies the level of “meaningful vocal gestures” as the exclusive prerogative of the human world (at least according to current scientific knowledge). Self-consciousness coincides with what he identifies as the basic device of the functioning of language: the ability to “take the role of the other” in the communicative interaction and, therefore, to anticipate the reaction of the interlocutor to

<sup>18</sup> G. H. Mead, MSS, p. 76.

her/his own expressions. It is not, however, a mere imitation, since the space of mutual understanding clearly borders on that of the interpretation of linguistic acts and the constructive activity of human intelligence, which feeds the symbolic plane of language.

The ability of 'taking the role of the other' is, in fact, the basic factor of the emergence of meaning, which Mead theorizes drawing on the concept of sympathy theorized by Hume.<sup>19</sup> The passage from animal 'conversation of gesture' to the human vocal communication is nothing but a "sympathetic" inter-subjective relation:

If the gesture simply indicates the object to another, it has no meaning to the individual who makes it, nor does the response, which the other individual carries out, become a meaning to him, unless he assumes the attitude of having his attention directed by an individual to whom it has a meaning. Then he takes his own response to be the meaning of the indication. Through this sympathetic placing of themselves in each other's roles, and finding thus in their own experiences the response of the others, what would otherwise be an unintelligent gesture, acquires just the value which is connoted by signification, both in its specific applications and in its universality.<sup>20</sup>

Accordingly, the phenomenon of 'role-taking' is the core of the whole activity of thought, where it acquires the position of objective foundation of the ethical responsibility of the individual towards social reality.<sup>21</sup> We are tackling here the notion of the *Generalized Other*, which Mead introduces to indicate human ability to internalize the set of behavioral attitudes of the social group to which she/he belongs. On the one hand, the notion of the *Generalized Other* is the precondition of human possibility to establish a society with their fellows, name-

ly is to arrange a group of individuals according to cooperative relationships or a *Koinoia*. On the other hand, the human capacity of internalization represents the primary condition for the possibility of relating to one's own individuality and, above all, of conceiving oneself as a subject aware of one's own actions and needs.

From the latter point of view, the *Generalized Other* represents a grounding experience of the rational subject, since Mead's analysis underlines the normative function of this experience in the development of thought, placing it as the condition of the "universe of discourse" that constitutes thinking, namely the "system of common or social meanings that thinking presupposes in its context". The normative value of the experience of the *Generalized Other* is therefore closely linked to Mead's theory of the social genesis of the Self, which he provides in order to counterbalance the influence of the social dimension with the safeguard of individual initiative. Mead's argument is the following: the experience of the *Generalized Other* is the primary condition for the possibility of recognizing oneself as a subject; however, the individual can obtain "his unity as Self" only through the dialectic between a "Me", namely the individual dimension which collects the socially pre-constituted cognitive and value patterns, and an "I", which instead is the functioning aspect of subjectivity that can offer free and creative answers to such patterns. Indeed, the 'unity of the Self' is nothing but the subject's self-identification as a member of a real universe that not only incorporates him, but of which he is himself an effectual instrument of development. For Mead, the "I" matches with the bio-logical capacity of the human being to relate constructively to a given objective situation, i.e., to grasp its possible problems and overtake them. More precisely, this ability is the distinctive factor of human intelligence, which Mead conceives of in the same way as Dewey, i.e., as a problem-solving activity.

The innovative role assigned to the 'I' in the process of Self formation is a leitmotiv of Mead's social philoso-

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 300. Mead's concept of sympathy also recalls the development of the Hume version of this concept in Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. An interesting comparison between Mead's implication of sympathy in the emergence of symbolic meaning and Quine's use of the concept of empathy in his own theory of meaning is in G. Baggio, *Language, Behaviour, and Empathy. G. H. Mead's and W. V. O. Quine's Naturalized Theories of Meaning*, *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, 27: 2, 180–200.

<sup>20</sup> G. H. Mead, MSS, p. 246.

<sup>21</sup> See A. Nieddu, *The Universal Meanings of Common Discourse. Intra-subjective and Inter-subjective Communication in George H. Mead*, in *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy*, VII–1, 2015.

phy, action theory and epistemology.<sup>22</sup> Unlike the perspectives that tend to withdraw the sphere of individuality from that of the ethical-political organization of human life, he focuses on the “natural” dialectic between “Me” and “I” to claim the indissolubility of public and private dimensions as well as to confer on the “I” an epistemic and ethical value that appears more consistent than that of the “Me”, precisely because it represents a tangible factor of social improvement. It is important to underline that the innovative function of the “I” is conceived in terms of linguistic interaction: the new experiences and the new epistemic and value criteria of which the “I” can be the bearer, count precisely to the extent that, once introduced into the social communication circuit, they lend themselves to intersubjective recognition. In brief, everything that concerns the operativeness of the “I” is closely linked to the functioning of the “significant symbols” in the context of intersubjective and infra-subjective relations. It is by virtue of these relationships that the ‘I’ can be perceived as individual subjectivity, as a singular and unrepeatable agent belonging to the “universe of discourse” which, as said, is for Mead the basic condition both of social reality and of the most peculiar expressions of human intelligence.

On the other hand, Mead’s insistence on the creative character of the “I” and his concept of “affirmation of self” tend to focus on the link between individual autonomy and social norms. The innovations produced by the “I” are indeed a sort of rebellion against some criteria of the current normative context, which – according to Mead’s theory of the social genesis of the Self – must be understood and evaluated by the subject before he can contrast it. However, producing an innovation does not mean eliminating the cooperative matrix of one’s own social group in favor of one’s individuality. Rather, the creativity of the ‘I’ and the self-affirmation of the Self imply an ethical quality for which the validity of its expressions must be justified in light of the discursive or

intersubjective canon of the ‘Me’.<sup>23</sup> This is precisely because the creative component of subjectivity is not activated, according to Mead, automatically or by virtue of a metaphysical principle, but rather depends on the linguistic dimension of the “Me”, which mediates the productions of the “I”<sup>24</sup>.

In conclusion, language, behavior and creativity of the ‘I’ form an indissoluble whole for a vision that insists on the non-predetermined character of our cognitive and evaluative practices. In Mead’s perspective, this amounts to granting an ethical meaning to the potential of the human mind to respond constructively to the suggestions of experience, especially to the problematic situations that it can present, to those “real and living doubts” to which Charles Sanders Peirce referred the positive development of our knowledge.

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<sup>23</sup> See A. M. Nieddu, *Il Sé ‘creativo’ e i processi di universalizzazione*, in R. M. Calcaterra (ed), *Semiotica e fenomenologia del Sé*, Nino Aragno Editore, Torino 2005, pp. 123–146. For a detailed account of theoretical meaning of creativity in pragmatist tradition, see G. Maddalena, F. Zalamea (eds), *Pragmatism and Creativity*, European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy, V–1, 2013

<sup>24</sup> See on this argument G. Baggio, *Pragmatism and Verbal Behaviourism. Mead’s and Sellars’ Theories of meaning and Introspection*. *Contemporary Pragmatism*, 2020, 17: 4, pp. 243–267.

<sup>22</sup> See the paradigmatic text by H. Joas, *The Creativity of Action*, Oxford, Polity Press, 1996.

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