**What Can It Mean to Say That
the Individual is Social Through and Through?**
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Abstract

This paper explores different ways of thinking about the group-analytic concept of the individual as social through and through. One explanation is based on object relations theory and regards the individual as social because the individual psyche is an 'internal world' of representations of social relationships. The paper argues that this represents a Kantian 'both / and' way of thinking. Another approach is based on Mead and this suggests that the individual is social trhough and through because individual mind is the same process of bodily action as the social. This represents a dialectical mode of thinking derived from Hegel.

In his paper, *Self development through subjective interaction: a fresh look at ego training in action*, Dennis Brown (1994) builds on Foulkes' (1948, 1964, 1971, 1973) views on the relationship between the individual psyche and the social by drawing on intersubjective perspectives in psychoanalysis (Stolorow, Brandschaft & Atwood, 1994), Stern's (1985, 1995) detailed studies of infant development, Merleau Ponty's (1976) phenomenology and object relations theory. Brown talks about a process of communication, of empathic relating, between people in a group in which there is the potential for personal transformation. He describes the process using Foulkesian notions of mirroring in which group members find themselves in each other, and resonance in which they emotionally attune to each other. This is a highly participative perspective, so well described by Merleau Ponty as 'consummate reciprocity'. It is clearly a social process. Brown then draws on object relations theory to formulate a view of individual psyche, which emerges in the social process, as an 'internal world' of representations of relationships between objects and between them and self objects. In other words, the individual psyche is social through and through because it is an 'internal world' of representations of social interactions. In this paper, I want to point to an alternative formulation drawing on George Herbert Mead (1934). I will then compare this way of thinking about the individual and the social with formulations based on object relations theory.

Mead's theory of gesture-response

Mead argued that all social animals, including humans, communicate with each other through a conversation of gestures: movement, touch, sound, visual display and odor. Each gesture by one animal calls forth a response from another and together, gesture and response constitute a social act, that is, an act that is meaningful to those gesturing and responding. The social is a responsive process of meaningful signaling in continuous cycles of cooperative and competitive interaction. However, although there is meaning in such a process, there may be no mind or consciousness. Mind is present when a gesture can call forth similar responses in the one making it as in the one to whom it is made. The maker of a gesture can be aware of what the gesture means only through the capacity for calling forth in him / herself a similar attitude to that being called forth in the other. For example, one can be aware that the gesture of shouting at another may arouse fear or anger in the

other because the gesture of shouting arouses the potential of fear or anger in oneself. Such a gesture is what Mead called a significant symbol. It is significant because it means the same thing to the maker of the gesture and to the recipient. It is a symbol because it points toward a meaning.

The elaboration of *vocal* gestures into language enables a more sophisticated development of mind as a process of action. Language enables the maker of a gesture to be aware, in advance, of the likely response of the recipient and it enables the maker of the gesture to signal to the recipient how the act is likely to evolve. The maker of the gesture is, thus, conscious and can think, that is, hypothesize likely responses to a gesture in a kind of role-play. To have a mind means to be aware of the possible consequences of actions, as those actions evolve, by means of silently conducted conversations in gesturing and responding. *Mind is silent, private role-playing of gesture-response* conducted during the vocal, public interaction of gesture-response that is social cooperation.

This is not a view of the autonomous individual first thinking and then choosing an action but of individuals in relationship continuously evoking and provoking responses in each other, responses that each paradoxically also selects and chooses through past history. The private, silent conversation of a body with itself is the same process as public, vocal conversation between bodies and in this sense mind is always a social phenomenon even though it is an individual conducting the private silent conversation. This theory of mind is firmly linked to the body because mind as a silent conversation of gestures requires a body. The conversation involves more than words; it is always interwoven with feelings and with direct communication between bodies in the medium of feelings. Furthermore, much of the gesture-response cycle may be unconsciously elaborated as Elias (1989) added. From this perspective mind is not an 'internal world' of representations according to which a body acts. From Mead's perspective, mind is not 'internal' at all because it is the role-playing action of a body directed toward itself, just as the social is the actions of bodies directed toward each other. Both individual mind and the social, therefore, emerge in relationships between people and both are conversations of gestures. The communicative interaction of gesture-response between people may, of course, create fantasies far removed from 'reality' and this applies equally to individual mind and to the social. Communicative interaction may be cooperative, caring and loving and it may, of course, be highly competitive and extremely destructive in both its individual mental and it its social forms. The communicative interaction of both individual mind and the social could flow in a fluid manner with a high potential for transformation or it may, of course take the repetitive form of habit and stereotype.

The individual mind is then logically the same process as social relating, in that both are cooperative and competitive interaction. The only difference is that one is the action of a body silently and privately directed toward itself, while the other is the actions of bodies vocally and publicly directed toward each other. It is impossible to have a mind without the social, just as it is impossible to have the social, that is, sophisticated cooperative action typical of humans, in the absence of minds. Neither form of conversation is primary nor prior to the other. They must both arise together, simultaneously. This immediately renders problematic the labeling of one as more or less fundamental and suggests that the individual and the social are at one level of analysis, not two. Meaning is not something that is going on in a mind as thought before action but, rather, arises, and continually re-arises, in the conversation of

gestures, in the action and interaction, through social relationships conducted in significant symbols. There is no need to postulate a separate social level, or any kind of transpersonal processes, or any notion of a group mind. Nor is there any need to postulate to something separate called a 'mind' *in* which meaning is arising. Instead mind is meaning arising in the communicative interaction of a body with itself. This avoids thinking about mind as an abstraction, as a place located somewhere. Rather, mind is a process. From this perspective, mind is not an entity located anywhere. Mind is the action of a body experienced in a body and it is this embodies characteristic that makes it impossible to say that a group has a mind.

Mead took the argument a step further with his concept of the generalized other. By this he meant that one does not simply call forth in oneself the attitude to one's gesture of a particular other but comes to call forth in oneself the collective attitude towards one's gesture. In other words, in the private role play of silent conversation, the attitude of one's group towards one's actions finds a voice.

Mead went further to suggest what it means to be self-conscious. One is self-conscious when, as a subject, one becomes an object to oneself. To be an object to him / herself, an individual must experience him / herself from the standpoint of others; he or she must talk to him / herself as others talk to him or her. This happens as an individual learns to take up the roles of others to him / herself, as a unique identity, in a form of role-play with him / herself. The silent conversation then involves a 'me', which is the attitude of one's group towards oneself. The individual's response to this 'me', is the 'I', that is, the action that an individual takes in response to the perceived community view of him / herself. The 'I' response is potentially novel and hence unpredictable. The 'I' response has the potential to change others, opening up the way for simultaneous individual / group evolution. Mind and self do not emerge out of a clash between something that is already there in the individual and social constraint as in the classical Freudian view. Mind and self emerge in social relationships. Individuals are forming and being formed by the group at the same time. Mind and self arise between people rather than being located in an individual. The notion of an 'internal world' then becomes unnecessary.

In this explanation, it is in the detailed interaction between people that their minds and selves arise. They arise in patterns that display both continuity and potential transformation. At the same time, the social, the cooperative interaction of humans, is also formed as continuity and transformation. The movement here is paradoxical in that it is both continuity and transformation at the same time, the known and the unknown at the same time, the individual and the social at the same time, all arising in the micro detail of interaction.

An analogy from the sciences of complexity

The process of interaction between people, then, is iterative interactionar that takes place in the medium of embodied symbols, for example, in sounds called words. However, as one imagines such interaction between larger and larger numbers of individuals, one wonders how any kind of global coherence could arise in such huge numbers of local interactions. This is not an issue that Mead dealt with, but it is one where the complexity sciences (Stacey, 2000; Stacey, Griffin & Shaw, 2001) offer important insights.

Some of the work in the complexity sciences explores the properties of iterative processes of interaction between computer programs in the medium of digital symbols. It is possible that certain properties of interaction demonstrated in the abstract models might, therefore, offer analogies for human interaction, interpreted through Mead's thought. The modeling of complex interactions demonstrates the possibility that interactions between large numbers of entities, each entity responding to others on the basis of its own local organizing principles, can produce coherent patterns with the potential for novelty in certain conditions, namely, the paradoxical dynamics at the edge of chaos. This dynamic is one of coherent patterns that are stable and unstable, predictable and unpredictable at the same time. In other words, the very process of self-organizing interaction, when richly connected enough, has the inherent capacity to spontaneously produce coherent pattern in itself, without any blueprint or program. Furthermore, when the interacting entities are different enough from each other, that capacity is one of spontaneously producing novel patterns in itself. Abstract interactions can pattern themselves where those patterns have the paradoxical feature of continuity and novelty, identity and difference, at the same time. This is important because it suggests that interaction itself is sufficient to account for coherent pattern in relating. There is no need to posit causal powers in some system above, beneath, behind or in front of that interaction.

By analogy, the circular process of gesturing and responding between people who are different to one another can be thought of as having intrinsic patterning capacity through self-organizing relating in the medium of symbols. In other words, patterns of relating in local situations in the living present can produce emergent global pattern in the absence of any global blueprint or any system outside of the interaction itself. And emergent patterns can constitute both continuity and novelty, both identity and difference at the same time. This amounts to a particular causal framework, where the process is one of perpetual construction of the future as both continuity and potential transformation at the same time. Individual mind and social relating can be thought of as patterning processes in bodily communicative interaction forming and being formed by themselves.

Culture and social structure are usually thought of as repetitive and enduring values, beliefs, traditions, habits, routines and procedures. From the perspective being put forward here, these are all social acts of a particular kind. They are couplings of gesture and response of a predictable, highly repetitive kind. They do not exist in any meaningful way in a store anywhere but, rather, they are continually reproduced in the interaction between people. However, even habits are rarely exactly the same. They may often vary as those with whom one interacts change and as the context of that interaction changes. In other words, there will usually be some spontaneous variation in the repetitive reproduction of patterns called habits. These habits and routines, values and beliefs are not at some higher level to the individual. They are part of the pattern of interaction between people. Furthermore, there is no requirement here of any sharing of mental contents, or any requirement that people should be engaging in the same private role plays. The only requirement for the social, understood as habits, routines and so on, is that people should be acting them out. Habits here are understood not as shared mental contents but as history-based, repetitive actions, both private and public, reproduced in the living present with relatively little variation.

Comparing different ways of thinking about the individual and the social

Stern (1985, 1995) describes mother infant interactions in minute detail. These interactions are, of course, bodily communications between mother and infant through touch, sound, gazing, smell and taste; what Mead called a 'conversation of gestures'. Stern infers that within days after birth an infant's sense of a coherent self emerges in the conversation of gestures. From Mead's perspective, mother and infant are forming the social, that is their conversation of gestures, while at the same time they are being formed by that conversation, for it is not simply the infant self that is emerging because the mother too changes in the process. This is a rather different interpretation of Stern's observations to that made from an object relations perspective.

Brown (1994) says that the infant self emerges from a barely differentiated unity with the mother as the infant comes to experience objects as part of the self. These objects influence perceptions of what is inside the infant and outside, so that inside and outside mutually recreate each other. Later, relationships with others are internalised as representations of self in relation to others, forming an 'internal world'. This internal world consists of representations of objects and relationships between them, all interacting with each other and the self, so becoming organised together with the ego and the superego. The ego mediates and adapts the mind to the outside world. Some say it might be though of as rules for relating to objects. It scans the field, differentiates and synthesises experience. What is being postulated here is a 'system' storing representations, which lies behind interaction exercising causal powers over it. In the course of this internalising, the relationships internalised are said to be impregnated by values, customs, history and so on. In other words they are impregnated by the social and this is how the social is transmitted from one generation to the next. What is being postulated here is a 'system' of shred values and customs, which exists outside interaction itself and exercises causal powers over it.

Leader (2000) describes the origins of thinking about the mind as an internal world in seventeenth century debates about the distinction between inner and outer. At that time the camera was used as the metaphor for vision. Images, or representations were said to from on the retina just as they formed on the inner surface of the camera. The eye was then taken as a metaphor for the mind and the mind's eye was said to form representations rather like the eye, rather like the camera. Those critical of this move in the seventeenth century agued that it introduced a misleading topography of internal and external and a third term between the thinker / actor and the object. This moves the focus of attention away from thinking, and other aspects of mind, as action.

Modern cognitive science is built squarely on this notion of mind / brain representing an external reality, added to which is the metaphor of the computer used to think of the mind / brain as an information processor. This leads to cognitive science's version of the internal world, taking the form of mental models, much of which are below the level of awareness. The seventeenth century debate about this approach has re-surfaced in the constructivist challenge to cognitivist science by Maturana and Varela (1992) and by neuroscientists Kelso (1995), Freeman (1995) and others who argue that the brain does not represent reality in any simple sense, nor does it store and retrieve memories in any simple sense. In various ways they

stress the way in which the body / brain, enacts, selects and so creates the world into which one acts. Object relations theory differs from a cognitivist perspective in that its 'representations' are not simply accurate reflections of reality but are elaborated by unconscious phantasy and by their own internal interactions. This 'internal world' also enacts or selects behaviour on the basis of past object relations. However, there is still the problem of just how this 'internal world' of representations can be reconciled with a more complex view of brain functioning. Furthermore, in both cognitivist and object relations perspectives, a third realm, a hidden order or process, is introduced outside the bodily action of relating or communicating. It is this idea of a 'third' that I want to focus on.

When we say that the relationships internalised as representations in the 'internal world' are impregnated by the social, that the individual is permeated by the social, we are positing a system external to the interaction, which we call the 'social'. In other words, we are ascribing agency to this social system, 'as if' it had purpose or a kind of intention. Then when we talk about an 'internal world', we are positing another system in which agency is also located in, say, the mediating ego. It is also 'as if' this has purpose, or a kind of intention. What we do is then determined by the action of *both* the social *and* the 'internal world'. This is the kind of 'both / and' appraoch to be found in Foulkes' figure-ground thinking. Foulkes stated that the inside (individual) and outside (social) world cannot be separated except by artificial isolation so that both are 'abstractions' in thought. Foulkes suggested that we need to think about this matter in figure-ground terms. Sometimes one focuses attention on the individual as figure against the ground of the group, and at other times, one focuses on the group as the figure against the ground of individuals. This is clearly a 'both / and' way of thinking: sometimes one thinks in one way, and sometimes one thinks in the other way, according to one's purpose.

This kind of thinking is very much reflected descriptions of the group matrix as a multi-personal *field* in which subjects and objects appear, interact, change and transform in personal, interpersonal and transpersonal functions. The matrix is the *common ground* which ultimately *determines* the meaning upon which *all communications rest.* Brown links this with Merleau Ponty's treatment:

> .. my thoughts and his are interwoven into a *single fabric*, … in which my words and his are called forth by the *state of the discussion* and are inserted into the *shared opinion* which neither of us creates. (1976, p354)

The matrix is also thought of in terms of levels: the primordial, the foundation, the projective and the dynamic (Foulkes, 1964).

In talking in this way we are postulating a system that is behind, above, across, beneath the action of communicating and relating. This system is described as field, common ground, single fabric, state of discussion, shared opinion and it determines the meaning on which communication rests. In other words, we are postulating a system outside of interaction itself that has agency, causal powers, some kind of purpose or intention. We are clearly doing this when we casually say, 'it is in the matrix'. So, when we interact with each other in a group, the agency or cause lies outside, behind, across the interaction in *both* the agency of the 'inner worlds' of each, including the internalised shared social (foundation matrix), *and* in the dynamic matrix, or ground, that we together form. This agency of the matrix is

sometimes referred to as a 'group mind' or as transpersonal processes. Ultimately, however, it seems that human freedom and the possibility of novelty and transformation lie in the capacity of the individual to become aware through the group process and choose to change.

I want to suggest that it is worth reflecting on this kind of 'both / and' thinking and how it differs from the kind of thinking Mead proposed. 'Both / and' thinking is very widespread and it has come to feel quite natural. For example, we do not think it odd to ascribe intention, or agency to an organisation. We say that Nike exploits the poor in less developed countries and we say that the government has caused the fuel crisis. Where does this kind of thinking come from? To answer the question we have to go back to Immanuel Kant.

Kant's thought

In Kant's time the natural scientific method was emerging. This method is one by which humans come to know reality through careful observation, formulating hypotheses about cause and effect links having an 'if-then' structure applied to one part of a whole, and then testing those hypotheses empirically. Parts are thus postulated to behave predictably according to efficient causality, while the interaction between them is accorded no significance. The claim is that nature is entirely determined by necessary laws of the 'if-then' kind, yielding continuity and repetition without the possibility of novelty.

Kant (1790) recognised the importance of this emerging scientific method but was concerned with the way in which it conflicted with the notion of human freedom. Humans are part of nature and so subject to natural laws but they are autonomous and so can choose goals. Kant saw this conflict as an 'antinomy', that is, mutually contradicting statements that defied human understanding. He formulated this as thesis and antithesis and solved the antinomy by arguing for a "both…and" position, or synthesis.

First, he made a distinction between a mechanism and an organism in nature. A mechanism is defined as a functional unity in which the parts of the mechanism exist for one another in the performance of a function. They receive their function as parts from the functioning of the whole. A finished notion of the whole is, therefore, required before the parts can have any function and the parts must be designed and assembled to play their particular role, without which there cannot be the whole. Mechanisms were subject to linear cause and effect links, that is, the efficient causality of the scientific method. An organism, however, is both a functional and a structural unity in that the parts not only exist for each other but by means of each other. The parts of a living organism are not first designed and then assembled into the unity of the organism. Rather, they arise as the result of interactions within the developing organism. The parts do not come before the whole but emerge in the interaction of spontaneously generated differences that give rise to the parts within a unity, in a dynamic of stable repetition. Here, organisms develop from simple initial forms, such as a fertilized egg, into a mature adult form, all as part of an inner coherence expressed in the dynamic unity of the parts.

Kant described this as 'purposive', that is, displaying a unified form in itself. An organism is not goal-oriented in the sense of having a movement towards an external result, but rather, moves to a mature form, which is unique in a particular

context. Kant proposes that organisms were to be understood in a systemic way in which causality was predominantly formative in that it was in the self-organizing interaction of the parts that those parts and the whole emerged. In this way, Kant introduced, for the first time, a systems theory. Furthermore, he argued that nature could be understood as moving toward a purpose or final cause, not as an objective explanation, but rather as a regulative idea or principle. This regulative idea provides an explanation "for us". In doing this, Kant established a functional perspective on nature as systems in which the formative process of the systems was the dominant form of causality, to which was subordinated an 'as if' purpose (teleology), namely, to realise a mature form of itself.

Secondly, however, Kant held that this systems notion of causality, with its 'as if' purpose, could never apply to humans because, although part of nature, humans exercise a causality based on freedom. Human action had to be understood in terms of autonomously chosen goals and autonomously chosen actions to realize them. This was the first time that the "both…and" way of thinking was used Kant laid the basis for a way of thinking which eliminates paradox and avoids settling for one or the other extreme in that humans are *both* subject to the laws of nature as system with 'as if' purpose *and* free of them to set their own goals. Kant argued that we are truly human in setting on-going goals for our actions but we can also approach nature using an understanding of this causality of on-going goal setting. When we do so, however, we do it in a kind of "as if" way of thinking. Nature is understood as an unfolding form that has a goal of its own, that is, as a system. However, it is not the dynamic of nature but the observing scientist who hypothesizes the 'as if' goal.

Although Kant held that this way of thinking should not be applied to human activity, we have come to do so in a widespread way. For example, physicians often talk a about the body sensing a need, or repairing damaged tissue, 'as if' the body were exercising intention or agency. We speak of a nation, an organization, or a group as acting with intention. We talk about culture, or overriding values, as if they were outside human interaction and we ascribe an intention or agency to them. This removes the explanation from immediate experience. This is what we are doing when we talk about 'the social permeating an individual' or when we talk about the 'internal world' of an individual. What we are doing is locating intention or agency in a system that is behind or above the phenomenology of the interaction between people.

Mead, however, avoids this appeal to a 'system' behind, beneath or above interaction and stays with the phenomenon of interaction itself. In doing this he follows Hegel rather than Kant.

Dialectical movement of thought

Hegel (1807) challenged Kant's paradigm of a "both…and" resolution to paradox and proposed a unified theory that dealt with paradox as the dialectical movement of thought. Dialectical can mean the testing of truth by logical disputation when, for example, one talks about the dialectic between systems theory and psychoanalysis. This is not what Hegel's dialectic means. Another interpretation of dialectic is expressed in the Kantian language of thesis and antithesis, where the interaction of these polar opposites yields a new synthesis, which still contains *both* thesis *and* antithesis and they continued to interact to yield yet another synthesis. This has

become the most widespread interpretation of dialectic, to found, for example in Marxist thinking. In this interpretation, forms unfold in a continuing movement in which each form brings forth its opposite and it is the interaction between these opposites that produces the self-organising movement of emergent states, which are not truly novel but, rather, rearrangements of what was already there. The time structure here is linear movement from the present of thesis-antithesis to the future of synthesis.

In Hegel's thought, however, Kant's resolution of paradox in a "both…and" paradigm is replaced by a paradigm of living experience as the paradox of movement. Hegel understood thought solely from within the process of thinking, drawing attention to continuously evolving identity and change. In this movement of identity, there is both the possibility of sameness, or continuity, and the potential for spontaneous transformation at the same time. This movement is the dialectic and it is paradoxical in that it is both the repetition and the transformation of identity at the same time. It is in this movement of repetition and change at the same time, that the future is being perpetually constructed.

Mead took this kind of perspective in talking about communication between organisms as social acts consisting of a gestures made by one organism and the responses to that gesture by others. Here meaning arises solely within the social interaction. There is no need to posit an 'internal world' behind action or a 'social system' above interaction. All emerges in interaction.

In conversation, we follow the same iterative movement in which one discovers the meaning of what one is saying in the response of others to it. We find ourselves recognizing the meaning of what we are saying as we speak into the response of others and as we do this, the meaning of what we are saying may well be transforming. This is a process in which the movement is not from here (your word) to there (the other's understanding of it) but a circular movement that transforms where you have moved from (your word) and where you are moving to. Each statement takes meaning from the subsequent response and even changes in meaning in the light of even later responses. This paradoxical, dialectic process has a known-unknown quality in which there is the transformative possibility of the genuinely new as well as the possibility of simple repetition of the past. Communication is a movement from and towards an as yet unrecognised position that comes to be recognised (known) in the act of communication itself. That recognition may sustain or shift the communicants' identities. The experience of meaning is occurring in the present. However, this is not a dismissal of history because each present is a repetition of the past but with the potential for transformation. The source of change lies in the detail of interactive movement in the living present.

Conclusion

If one takes the perspective of object relations theory, the individual is social through and through because the social, as a system outside of interaction itself and at a higher level than the individual, impregnates the 'internal world' of the individual, a

system behind the interaction with others. From the kind of dialectical perspective of Mead, the individual is social through and through because the individual psyche is the same process as the social. Both are communicative action, the psyche being the communicative interaction of a body with itself and the social being the communicative interaction of a body with other bodies. The one is private and silent while the other is public and vocal but both are the same process. Instead of locating 'the unconscious' in an 'internal world' unconscious processes are essentially aspects of communicative interaction in both its private silent and public vocal forms. When Brown quotes Gordon, one can hear what I think Mead is talking about:

> In the intersubjective realm there is no inner and outer, only a body of context and experience which expresses itself in a "consummate reciprocity" in which we discern ourselves through the other. (Gordon, 1991, p43)

It may be useful to explore how we can move away from 'both / and' ways of thinking in terms of both 'internal worlds' and the 'social', because that way of thinking distances us from direct experience in the living present by postulating some causative system behind, above, beneath or across interaction and relationships. We might explore how we can stay with the phenomenology of direct interaction, holding the kind of paradox in which individuals form while being formed by the social at the same time. Individual minds and the social are then the same processes of communicative interaction, in which the social is not outside the interaction, nor are unconscious processes. The only relevant culture, values, beliefs, and so on, are those in the process of reproduction and transformation in a local situation in the living present. The social is then not some impersonal force with a kind of intention or causal power of its own, but a process of communicative interaction in which the person (the individual, mind, psyche) emerges as continuity and potential transformation, as does the group.

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