

## **THE DIALOGICAL SELF AND THE RENEWAL OF PSYCHOLOGY**

Henderikus J. Stam  
*University of Calgary*

**ABSTRACT.** What is the problem to which the dialogical self might be an answer? I take up the question of the ‘self’ by opening with a perusal of psychology’s self and philosophy’s self. While psychology has all but abandoned the self save for an implicit and incoherent background to personhood, philosophy seeks the persistence of the self in the language of first-person pronouns. I then examine some brief conceptions of the contemporary consciousness literature only to discover that here too, the isolated form of an autonomous self remains not only the ideal but unaccountably comes into existence through the magic of neuronal organization to which is added a phenomenological being. None of these positions is able to account for our radical dependence on the other for what comes to be our agency. Finally, I examine the nature of the self according to Habermas as he reads Mead. The practical-relation-to-self is for Habermas the foundation of our originality, nonconformity and individuality although it remains curiously disembodied. I discuss this position in terms of Butler’s notion of interpellation and the creation of a self that is a linguistic field of enabling constraints. These limited excursions into the literature of the self are placed in the context of contemporary discussions of a dialogical self.

The simple phrase ‘dialogical self’ contains within it a host of historically rich and theoretically profound issues that are at the forefront of key changes in the disciplines of psychology, sociology, communication theory and social psychology. Impossible as it is to bring together all of the influences on the one hand and the ramifications on the other, I will highlight what I take to be the most important developments in the emerging notion of a “dialogical self” for the discipline of psychology. It is an important conceptual framework in that it unites common notions in the work of the socio-rationalist tradition from Mead to Berger and Luckman and beyond in sociology, including latter day ethnomethodology, the social constructionist movement (including realist versions such as Rom Harré’s) as well as the constructivists in the post-Kellyian tradition in psychology, and it draws significantly from a Bhaktinian interpretation that has made its way into psychology via the influence

**AUTHOR NOTE.** Aspects of this paper were first presented as a Keynote Address at the First International Conference on the Dialogical Self, June 23-26, 2000, Nijmegen and developed at the Second International Conference on the Dialogical Self, Ghent, Belgium, October 18-20, 2002. This version is an extension of these earlier papers and I am grateful to John Mills, Colin Grant and Flavia Monceri for comments on earlier versions. Please address all correspondence regarding this article to H. J. Stam, Ph.D., University of Calgary, Calgary, Alberta, Canada T2N 1N4. Email: [stam@ucalgary.ca](mailto:stam@ucalgary.ca)

of the Vygotskians such as Wertsch and Cole. Furthermore, it brings together the problems of the hermeneutics of persons in a manner that joins concerns from multiple traditions that inform a psychology of persons and does so outside of the context of a functionalized or thoroughly cognitivized subject, that is, the dialogical self is a feature of the way in which language constitutes identity. In addition, it serves to remind us that the problem of *subjectivity* is ultimately resolved by way of *intersubjectivity*.

I have two rather modest aims in this paper: First, I will briefly examine a limited set of concerns that make up the current literature in the psychology and philosophy of the self, with the aim of noting the persistence of the question of the self. Historically psychology confronts two related problems; on the one hand, the need to find a language of the self that is not defeated by its demands to capture what is understood by it in everyday language while, on the other hand, salvaging for psychological analysis the kinds of psychological, moral, and social problems associated with the self rather than defining them out of sight as is the case in contemporary evolutionary psychology, for example, or as might be the case in various reductionist programs such as a radical neuroscience program. Finally, the persistence of the self in psychology, while clothed in functionalist terminology and denied its status as a real question, has remained as an irritant to the discipline, to which the dialogical self is one kind of solution.

Second, I will argue that avoiding the question of the self is impossible since the very question of any human psychological endeavour demands some conceptualization of selfhood, if only as a countermove to ‘common sense.’ In addition, it requires a positioning vis-à-vis other theories of the self widely circulating in our culture, such as those originating in psychoanalytic traditions, religious traditions, legal traditions, and so on. This is largely due to the way in which the continuing ambiguity of psychology’s formal discourse accomplishes a relationship with ordinary language or a “folk” psychology. More importantly, it is precisely this ambiguous relationship and mutual reliance that forecloses the possibility of coming to what might be considered final conclusive considerations of ‘the self.’

### **Psychology’s Self**

There is no one, single overview that could possibly begin to show the degree to which the self is currently understood in psychology since the very term is, in fact, vague. This vagueness and ambiguity of the psychological term is useful in allowing psychologists to define the self in the context of multiple theoretical traditions. So when using the word “self” the question is always, according to what theoretical or conceptual framework? The very way in which the term is indexed and codified in the discipline presents us with some surprising results. A search of the *PsycINFO* database indicates that from 1967 to 1983 there were 45,559 references to ‘the self’ but that from 1984 to mid-2005 there were 194,161 references. Examined on an annual basis this

## THE DIALOGICAL SELF AND THE RENEWAL OF PSYCHOLOGY

reveals a steady increase in the codification of articles, chapters and books using the term 'self.' Despite the widespread proliferation of the term, one might expect to find some material relevant to the question of the nature of the self and persons. However, the term 'self' is a descriptive term or key-word used to index individual papers but there is no such *major* heading in the entire *PsycINFO* database. Instead, under the term 'self,' the database suggests 41 terms or sub-headings that range from "self actualization" and "self care" to "self stimulation" and "self talk." Of these, the only one that approximates a concern with the self as substance or process and the only one where the term 'self' is not a modifier of some other subject, is the notion of "Self Psychology." The contents of the database under the term "Self Psychology" is derived from the psychoanalytic tradition of self psychology, particularly the tradition that is derived from the writing of Heinz Kohut, signaling perhaps that it is in the analytic tradition that there are still deep concerns and debates about the nature and contents of the self.

It is itself an interesting feature of academic publishing that, unlike in the academic journal literature, books on the self continue to live and generate continuous interest. The titles, sub-titles and chapters speak to the remarkable range of problems considered under the topic: the malleable self, fragmented self, protean self, saturated self, angry self, authentic self, existential self, autonomous self, empty self, cherished self, community of self, formless self, hungry self, infinite self, no-self, and so on. Web-based searches of booksellers easily turn up thousands of titles on 'the self.'

As a discipline psychology has come to deny the relevance and importance of questions of the self on the one hand, while, as I will argue later, maintaining an implicit reliance on it on the other. For explicating a notion of 'self' is a task fraught with metaphysical traps and as a self-professed science it is one more easily by-passed than addressed. Nonetheless, our common languages are filled with profound expressions of self-like entities that are requisite features of our negotiations of daily life. For psychology, the problem is both historical and theoretical; for it is in creating a discipline among an expanding population, immigration, industrialization and urbanization that led to a technologically inspired psychology. Historians such as Graham Richards (1996) and Kurt Danziger (1997) have argued that the conceptual categories of modern psychology are the unique invention of the past 100 to 200 years and not a natural outcome of a long process of ideational refinement that began in antiquity. The finely honed process of definition and redefinition of an extant moral, theological, philosophical, medical, and political language skilfully combined with the introduction of a new, frequently functional language created the vocabulary of contemporary psychology. The very conception of a 'human nature' makes its appearance, at least in the English-speaking world, in the British industrial revolutions of the eighteenth-century. It was reconstructed out of an older moral discourse but incorporated new conceptions of both reason and passions that gradually came into

general use. For example, reflections on the differences between violent passions and calm passions in Locke and others gave way to a distinction in Hume between emotions and motives (Danziger, 1997). Simultaneously, however, the category of reason was devalued from a causal power to an instrumental category. As a consequence, argued Danziger, a clear sense of human agency disappeared; individuals were seen to act under the influence of their passions and reason took the place of calculating the optimum path for this action. The will was reduced in status to transmitting mental impulses to the motor apparatus while it was also significantly reduced in importance relative to the concept of motive (Danziger, 1997).

The origins of our contemporary sense of self therefore lay in 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century thought, traditions that led to the gradual “privatization of the causes of action.... based on a pervasive sense of separation between human agents and their actions” (Danziger, 1997, p. 45). Industrialization and modernization came with a pervasive sense that actions were like property, and not unlike other objects we chose and certainly not necessary, nor prescribed by tradition. The new sense of self and personhood accompanying this change was one based on the notion of consciousness. But consciousness is a reification of the act of being conscious of what one is, does, thinks and so on, originating in our being conscious over time. William James most clearly captures this at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century by making it the core of his conception of “the sense of personal identity” (James, 1890, p. 330). What became our modern, western sense of self then was not an attribute of a personal soul or other more permanent transcendental structure but was the outcome of our being conscious and the continuity of our own consciousness, namely remembering that we are the same person today as we were yesterday. This is the beginning of the self that Charles Taylor (1987, p. 471) calls the “punctual self” and its concomitant atomistic construal of society composed of individual purposes. This punctual self was the beginning of an objectification of the self, an objectification that warranted investigation like other objects of nature. The gradual division between feeling and emotion, on the one hand, and sensation and perception on the other, contributed to the objectification of consciousness in the Romantic era. Although Descartes still serves as the scapegoat for such philosophical errors as the dualist conception of mind and self, contemporary notions of privacy and self-observation are of more recent vintage. They are more properly the outcome of developments in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and (at least in psychology) are attributed to Descartes in retrospect.

It would be incomplete, however, to insist that the individualized, autonomous and objectified self was *solely* a response to the dislocations of industrialization, urbanization, and the accompanying loss of traditions. Sociologists from Durkheim to Parsons and forward have argued that individualism (with related processes of individuation) is also a *normative* project. As a requirement of participation in

## THE DIALOGICAL SELF AND THE RENEWAL OF PSYCHOLOGY

industrial and post-industrial societies, individualism is itself institutionalized – a point I will return to later in my discussion of Habermas.

Historically then, it is possible to trace the gradual emergence of an individualized self to growing questions of privatization, individualization, and objectification. The fledgling discipline of psychology recruited this objectified self to its early investigatory programs. The theoretical program that made this kind of insubstantial but implied self possible, is to be found in the growing use of functionalism. I mean here functionalism in its broadest sense, namely the claim that functions are heuristically deployed with the promissory note that a reductive account will be available eventually, if only in the long run. On this account the self or related notions like self-concept, self-esteem, and the like are functionally ascribed to individuals by relating them explicitly to a set of investigative practices. This is not an obvious move and as Danziger has noted, it took a good half-century for this process to occur. These investigative practices make of psychological objects ‘variables’ that have measurable properties (Danziger, 1990). Once converted to variables they can be multiplied indefinitely, that is, there is no ontological claim attached to them beyond their heuristic characteristic. All the while, the researcher who produces such variables can call on the classic defence of functionalists, namely that there will come a time when the relation between functional properties and some reductive account will be apparent. Note that this account is slightly different from the typical symbol processing or connectionist cognitivist accounts in which it is assumed that the functional properties can be held apart from the physical instantiation of the functions, nor is it the same as a functionalist account focused on the causal relationships of functional states. To outline the differences would take us too far afield (see for example, Looren de Jong, 2003). The point I wish to make here is rather straightforward even if it has not penetrated the traditional havens of the discipline: A functional account of self and its properties is either incomplete, for it implies a reductive account yet to come, or threatens to lapse into dualism (see Stam, 2000, for a more detailed discussion). Cognitive accounts are special cases of functionalism but they are perhaps less relevant in this discussion only because cognitivists of various stripes do not take the problem of selves and persons seriously.

If the above is reasonable then the functionalist explanatory program in psychology impoverishes both the biological and the cultural settings within which human psychology exists (cf. Margolis, 1984). That is, by courting dualism on the one hand and reductionism on the other, functional accounts of the self fail to give a satisfactory answer to questions such as *what does it mean to have a self?* Or to questions of *how does a self appear?* For as Margolis (1984) has argued in another context, on the claim of the holism of the mental, explanations of the self can never be free from the historical, culturally qualified, and linguistically informed, processes that account for our modern conception of self. In short, what the history of psychology has

already shown, functionalist accounts may be a poor foundation upon which to build a psychology of the self although such accounts have high theoretical survival value in other respects. The eminently slippery notion of self-esteem, for example, can be measured in multiple ways by virtue of its functional status. Nonetheless, once turned into a variable it also allows any investigator to compare artificially constructed groups of individuals with respect to one another on this variable or to compare them to some norm that was produced using a particular kind of measure on a larger set of individuals. Coupled with the introduction of inferential statistics, the investigator could identify psychological properties with the hypothetical distributions of statistical analyses. This meant that individual scores no longer mattered since these were merely the formal inputs into the distribution of scores which came to represent the theoretical processes at hand. Such processes as self-esteem (to stay with our example) could be captured not by studying individual acts of “esteem,” however defined, but by comparing how different groups (“experimental conditions” or treatments) of individuals perform on some highly limited and artificial task such as persisting on a problem in the face of failure. The resulting functional theoretical notion is one that no longer refers back to any single participant in the experiment, indeed is set up to prevent just that. Instead it refers to the abstract property of “self-esteem.” Without once having to consider, theoretically or otherwise, *what* self-esteem might be, beyond the numbers on a particular measure, the resulting notion of “self-esteem” is capable of slipping from the lab to any applied setting and back again.

A strategic consequence of functional accounts then is that the self, per se, is rarely, if ever, a topic in modern psychology. The lack of the self as a topic in data bases of the psychological literature is, on this view, a necessary device to prevent the emergence of it as a serious topic. It forecloses endless debate on what it *is*; yet it can be measured willy-nilly and applied whenever and wherever the rhetorical features of a self are needed. Save for the required discussions in undergraduate personality textbooks, the problem of the self is all but buried in contemporary psychology. This does not, however, prevent discussions of self-like properties that allow psychologists to smuggle in cultural appropriations of the self. Once again, to return to the example of self-esteem, most discussions of both the phenomenon and theoretical claims concerning it imply a stable, individual self underlying the esteem it has. Hence researchers may define self-esteem in strictly local, culturally appropriate and contemporary ways without ever having to ask the question of what might possibly be meant by a self that has “self-esteem.” That the very idea of self-esteem might have a political, historical and social context, particularly in the way it supports an ethos of individualism, need not ever be addressed.

### Philosophy's Self

Psychology obviously has no monopoly on the problem of selfhood. Contemporary philosophical accounts have attempted in various ways to settle the language of self, without much apparent success. This is due in part to the resurgence of topics in consciousness and in particular to the rediscovery of 'self-consciousness' or the problem of first-person accounts of experience, its pre-reflective nature and so on. The capacity of an individual to use the first person pronoun 'I' (or an equivalent) as an indexical expression is also the capacity of one who has first person thoughts. Note however that this is a concern about the meaning of the term 'self' and not a concern with whatever essential characteristics we might attribute to the self or what is sometimes called a *substantive* self (Lowe, 1995). Nonetheless, there are some interesting developments here for psychological consideration if only because they alert us to a number of seemingly irresolvable problems. They will also direct us to the question of dialogue as a possible foundational consideration in any version of the self.<sup>1</sup>

The semantic problem in its contemporary form is defined clearly by Elizabeth Anscombe (1975/1981) who argued that the common sense view of 'I' expressions were erroneous and the error derived from that "deeply rooted grammatical illusion of a subject" (p. 36). She wrote that, "[I is] neither a name nor another kind of referring expression whose logical role is to make a reference, at all" (p. 32). According to Garrett (1997), Anscombe means that "it does not belong to the category of singular terms. It is analogous rather to 'feature placing' occurrences of 'it' (as in 'it is raining' or 'it is snowing')" (p. 507). Retorts to this have been various and lengthy, attempting to retain for 'I' terms the feature of reference and indexicality. These counter-arguments hold the 'I' to refer to something, that is, that it has an object of reference. In having an object of reference the retort to Anscombe appears to salvage an ontological reference for the 'I' statement. In their argument with Anscombe, philosophers frequently come back to a number of crucial claims about self-representation, namely, to questions of ineliminability (non-substitution of 'I'), privacy (my 'I' statements are uniquely mine) and guaranteed reference (I cannot be wrong in my use of 'I' statements). Jenanne Ismael (2000) claims that these are not ontological relations but peculiarities or contextual relations (indeed they could be construed as 'dialogical'). Nonetheless, they raise the question of what kind of thing a 'self' is or must be to be capable of these kinds of representational relations. This worry about guaranteed reference is related to the question of immunity to error; after all we do not wish to be wrong in our use of 'I'.

---

<sup>1</sup> This discussion is limited to contemporary English-language philosophical discussions of 'self' equated with the capacity to use first-person thoughts. This will of course leave out a much larger and richer tradition of Continental philosophy that, beginning already with Kant and Hegel, clearly sees consciousness and personhood in broader, historico-cultural terms. See, for example, Taylor (e.g., 1989) and Ricoeur (e.g., 1992) for overviews.

That is, if we can identify the correct use of ‘I’ then we can “guarantee both that it has a referent and that the referent is the user” (Bermúdez, 1998, p. 9).

It is largely a truism that in order to solve the problem of reference, many of today’s philosophers in the Anglo-American tradition rely on linking the self, as they understand it, to the body. However, this is the naturalized body of the neurosciences, or sometimes the body as a material entity, not the body of hermeneutics, phenomenology or post-structuralism (a question to which I will return). For example, Ismael’s (2000) claim is that the self cannot be anything but the body and no other kind of thing (see also Ismael, 1999). Susan Hurley (1998) intimates that the self is the embodied outcome of perspectival self-consciousness, that state of affairs that shows us the interdependence of perception and action. Lynne Baker (2000) has argued for a ‘constitution view’ whereby persons are constituted by their bodies and simultaneously distinguished from their bodies by their capacity for a first-person perspective (hence a constitution view and not an identity view). Note, however, that the notions of bodies as material entities do not solve the problem of reference, for we are doing nothing more than updating Descartes yet all the while repudiating him. The self is embodied to be sure, but the kinds of selves that populate the work of these philosophers are highly individual creatures, the origins of which remain obscure and, indeed, mysterious. Although they are philosophically important they are, psychologically, largely uninteresting, except insofar as they appear to reinforce psychology’s failure to take the self seriously at all.

These efforts parallel the upsurge in research attempting to resolve the puzzle of consciousness in the past decade, driven as it is by biology and neuroscience. It is not surprising that this literature has also influenced the manner in which the question of the self is now understood. The work of biologists such as Gerald Edelman and William Calvin, along with other work proposing a selectionist brain or the brain as a ‘Darwin Machine,’ re-opened the question of consciousness for other disciplines and reframed a series of fundamental psychological problems. Once consciousness was reconceptualized as a property that emerges via neuronal group selection as well as a property that could be deciphered using connectionist or neural-network type models, it was immediately recast as one of the central problems of science, despite having been thoroughly neglected, especially in psychology, for about 80 years (cf. Shapiro, 1997). Consciousness, as a new topic for philosophers and neuroscientists, inevitably led to multiple claims about the nature and status of selves. These consist largely of arguments concerning the irrelevancy of selves to a scientific (read reductionist) project and/or the quasi-illusory nature of the self, as in Dennett’s (1991) return to the self as a problem of representation.

There are some more serious contenders. One example will suffice. José Bermúdez (1999) has recently written that there are:



## THE DIALOGICAL SELF AND THE RENEWAL OF PSYCHOLOGY

... two fundamental questions in the philosophy and psychology of self-consciousness: (1) Can we provide a noncircular account of full-fledged self-conscious thought and language in terms of more fundamental capacities?

or, in other words, the reductive science question, and

(2) Can we explain how full-fledged self-conscious thought and language can arise in the normal course of human development? (Abstract).

Bermúdez (1999, Abstract) argues that, “a paradox (the paradox of self-consciousness) arises from the apparent strict interdependence between self-conscious thought and linguistic self-reference.” The paradox is that, “the only way to understand self-conscious thoughts is through understanding the linguistic expression of those self-conscious thoughts ... [and] the paradigm cases of self-conscious thoughts .... involve ascribing certain properties to oneself” (Bermúdez, 1998, p. 13). The question then becomes: How do we apply certain predicates to ourselves in certain ways? The *paradox* arises presumably from the problem of development, namely, how can we ever learn to ascribe ‘I’ predicates to ourselves unless we are able to think certain self-conscious thoughts? Or, as Bermúdez puts it, “I can only learn to employ the first-person pronoun by learning that there is an expression governed by the rule that it refers to me when I intend to refer to myself . . . So, to master the first-person pronoun, I must already have mastered the first-person pronoun” (1998, p. 21). If this sounds like a paradox generated by a poorly framed problem, it is.

This paradox is built on the philosopher’s problem of identifying the self, self-consciousness and the like with linguistic usage. What is interesting about the case and the discussion Bermúdez’s book generated in the electronic journal *Psycoloquy* in 1999-2000, is that the solution to the paradox was taken to be, in part, a scientific one based on the problem of consciousness. Bermúdez essentially cuts “the tie between self-conscious thought and linguistic self-reference through reference to primitive forms of nonconceptual self-consciousness manifested in visual perception, somatic proprioception, spatial reasoning and interpersonal psychological interactions” (Bermúdez, 1999). Bermúdez argues that a “nonconceptual point of view” will solve the paradox of self-consciousness. This is because a nonconceptual point of view focuses on distinctions between self and environment, spatial reasoning, and social interaction by explaining self-consciousness reductively, that is, as the outcome of more elementary processes in the process of development. Now in this, he is not different from an army of social scientists who have attempted to do likewise and the addition of consciousness, does not, in the first instance, help the case. Most interesting, however, was the problem articulated by one of the neuroscientific commentators on Bermúdez. Gallese (2000) argued that Bermúdez was right to argue for a non-conceptual content

and prelinguistic account of self-consciousness and provided a number of neuroscientific findings to support the case. Ironically, he then adds that:

Having reached these conclusions we desperately need a “glue” capable of giving coherence to the cubist multiplicity of perspectives and levels of descriptions produced by this de-constructivist account of the self and its features (Gallese, 2000).

In other words, the thing to be explained, self-consciousness, requires the glue of self or self-consciousness to hold it together. Even the neuroscientific account only gets so far before resorting to phenomenological tricks to warrant its account at the psychological level. Wedded to an individual notion of selves that must somehow emerge *ex nihilo* from the neuroscientific properties of brains, psychologists will search long and hard for the “glue” of coherence. Once again, the dialogical self points to a particular solution that escapes this kind of vicious regress.

As Shapiro pointed out in her discussion of consciousness, what yet remains to be fully understood is the well known phenomenon that in about the fourth year of life,

children’s lexicon bursts; their syntax becomes like that of adults, their confusion about the markers of time (yesterday, tomorrow, last month, etc.) is less pronounced, and their use of the inflections denoting the past tense of verbs becomes consistent. It is around the same age that children can be taught ballet and musical performance, and those taught how to read and write can learn both. It is at the same age that their attention span begins to approximate that of adults. It is to the same age that we date our first memories. And it is around the age of 3 that children begin *consistently* referring to themselves as ‘I’ instead of the ‘me’ used since they were around 16 months old” (Shapiro, 1996, p. 221).

This is the classic problem of the appearance of self-consciousness, or the ‘I’ that has formed a major inspiration for the work of developmental psychologists yet forms little more than an assumed background to most neuroscientific accounts of the emergence of self-reflective consciousness.<sup>2</sup> It is this that requires an explanation.

I have suggested that the neuroscience of consciousness relies on a tacit understanding of the self, as do most psychological accounts of persons in human psychology. Indeed, on a functional account there is no way to escape the inherently

---

<sup>2</sup> I am aware that there are further, multiple connections I have not made using the developmental literature on the emergence of the self. Some of this literature suffers from a similar kind of functionalization of the self that I have already noted although this is not universally the case. I take the omissions here as a lacuna in my account of the self but the literature is simply too voluminous to cover in a paper that is devoted to exploring what is dialogical about the self.

## THE DIALOGICAL SELF AND THE RENEWAL OF PSYCHOLOGY

assumed, locally produced understanding of selves since functional accounts cannot make sense of persons otherwise, for they have no centre or coherent view of persons (cf. Smythe, 1998). Note that this is a kind of requirement for human psychology since those who occupy local cultures in which psychologists teach and practice are the recipients of psychological knowledge and practices and hence demand some explanation for their 'self-problems.' Clinical, counselling, school, and organizational psychologist need to have some manner of addressing the question of self, of what the 'I' refers to, and what ails it when things go wrong, that is more than just a functional account of properties of the self. Hence it is in its conversation with the culture at large that human psychology finds itself incapable of escaping the conceptual categories that have wide circulation outside the academy and hence the functional self, as a kind of empty concept, can easily slip into place.

Having argued that psychologists theorize an implicit and reflexively entailed autonomous and individual self, it behoves me to argue for an alternative version. There is, as is well-known, a parallel conception that has been built around the problems of the self in alternative traditions, especially those that emerge out of the confluence of the work of Vygotsky, Mead, the social constructionists and constructivists.<sup>3</sup> One of the powers of this tradition is to address the question of the assumed self and the problem of the self as a functional entity. Furthermore, ordinary self-consciousness does not have to be assumed in this tradition but, instead, is communicatively generated. This is a non-intuitive outcome of the understanding of a self that emerges in and with language.

In the remainder of this article I have some suggestions to make in response to Habermas's interpretations of Mead (Habermas, 1992). I am particularly interested in Habermas's reading for it provides a number of extensions of Mead that give Habermas an account of intersubjectivity that is at once thoroughly social without depending on an implicit self. I also see this as a response to Bermúdez and the problem of the origin of self-consciousness and it has affinities with the concept of a dialogical and relational self as formulated in a diverse set of contemporary authors (e.g., Gergen, 1997; Hermans & Kempen, 1993; Sampson, 1993; Shotter, 1995).

### **Habermas On Mead's Self**

The picture of individuation in Mead is one of a linguistically mediated process of socialization and a self-conscious constitution of a life-history. I will not further elaborate on Mead's position here since it has been detailed so often (see Dodds, Lawrence & Valsiner, 1997, for one update). One of the problems with Mead's published oeuvre is that it is composed not only of his articles but also of edited versions of public lectures and rewritten lecture notes, such as the well known *Mind, Self and Society*. Nonetheless, the earlier published papers already make clear Mead's

---

<sup>3</sup> Sometimes this is characterized by the notion of 'the social mind' (see Valsiner & van der Veer, 2000).

distinction between an 'I' and a 'me' that proves crucial for laying the foundations for a social self that is simultaneously capable of self-reflection.

Habermas takes Mead to provide the possibility of working through, sometimes against Mead himself, the manner in which we find ourselves via an “externalization in other things and in other humans” (1992, p. 153). Habermas’s conception of the meaning of individuality is “in terms of the ethical self-understanding of a first person in relation to a second person” (1992, p. 169). Thereafter Habermas puts this conception to use for his theory of communicative action. Nonetheless, it seems to me that it is possible to benefit from his conception of Mead without adopting the entire edifice of the overall theory.

The beginning of interaction is gesture-mediated. Even here the key to Mead is the notion of recognizing oneself in the other. Hence the “elementary form of self-relation is made possible by the interactive accomplishment of another participant in the interaction” (1992, p. 175). However, Mead notes that this “gesture-mediated interaction is still steered by instinct” (pp. 175-6). With the emergence of vocal gesture, however, the “actor affects” herself “at the same time and in the same way as” she “affects” her “opposite number.” It is *this* that makes “original self-consciousness ... not a phenomenon inherent in the subject but one that is communicatively generated” (1992, p. 177). This is because a vocal gesture obtains meaning for the person who utters it, “from the perspective of the other who reacts to it” (1992, p. 176). Here the “stimulus turns into a bearer of meaning” (1992, p. 176).

Habermas, using this Meadian argument as a building block, advances his position by noting the distinction between an originary self-relation founded on communication in vocal gesture (prior to language) and the self-relation that becomes possible in language.<sup>4</sup> This latter self-relation “discloses the domain of representations attributable to me” (p. 178), that is, makes it possible for me to know what it is that constitutes my thought. Habermas calls this the epistemic self-relation, which emerges on this basis a “reorganization of the stage of prelinguistic, instinct-steered interaction” (p. 178). However, for Habermas there is in Mead a new, second kind of self-relation that emerges at the same time. This is the practical-relation-to-self (translated from the German *Selbstverhältnis*<sup>5</sup>). Symbolically mediated interaction allows one to monitor and control one’s own actions, not through a common instinctual repertoire but through

---

<sup>4</sup> The originary self-relation is one founded on communication in vocal gesture. It consists of the notion that in vocal gesture “the actor affects himself at the same time and in the same way as he affects his opposite number” (Habermas, 1992, p. 176). Vocal gestures become meaningful because I become aware of the other’s perspective as I hear my own vocal gesture. The self-relation that is the outcome of conversation with oneself “presupposes linguistic communication” (p. 178).

<sup>5</sup> Habermas’s translator uses the ‘practical-relation-to-self’ as a preferred translation but it could also be rendered as ‘relation-to-self.’

## THE DIALOGICAL SELF AND THE RENEWAL OF PSYCHOLOGY

self-referential cognition. The instinctual basis of human action is reactive whereas self-reference introduces an entirely novel level of human self-control. In other words, the epistemic “me” is the seat of self-consciousness whereas the “me” of the practical-relation-to-self is an agent of self-control.

This practical-relation-to-self is similar to Mead’s “taking the perspective of the other” or the me that is the generalized other. However, the “I” in this ‘I-me’ relation is not an epistemic ‘I’ but an ‘I’ that is the source of impulses subjected to control as well as the source of resistance or the “source of innovations that break up and renew conventionally rigidified controls” (p. 180). In short, it is the source of impulsiveness on the one hand and creativity and originality on the other hand, that is, it is the source of the experience of the ‘I-will’ as in “I can posit a new beginning.” Hence, on Habermas’s account there are two levels of self-relation that are the outcome of Mead’s analysis of the self. One allows us to recognize what is legitimately ours cognitively, such as our memories—this is a version of the traditional or Cartesian self-relation. The second self-relation allows us to apprehend ourselves through the experience of others while simultaneously allowing us to creatively change this object of apprehension that is the product of the gaze of the other. This second self-relation is the more important for it is the source of originality, nonconformity and eventual individuality as well as the source of our assurance that we are the font of our own action.

In dividing the Meadian self-relation into two separate spheres, Habermas lays the foundation for a communicative foundation of intersubjectivity. There is however an objection that I would like to draw out. On a traditional interpretation of Mead, the “me” is the bearer of moral consciousness that adheres to the conventions of a specific group. Recall, however, that on a number of modernist accounts, individuation is demanded of us in modern (or postmodern, postindustrial) societies. Habermas reminds us of this need for a self-project by noting that the self-project is expected to include both autonomy and self-determination combined with a conscious conduct of life or self-realization. The self from whom these independent achievements are expected is thoroughly social, as outlined above, as well as individual in the possibility of the ‘I’ to posit the ‘I-will.’ Individuation, on this reading of Mead, proceeds through the social and socialization proceeds through the individual.

Returning to an earlier point I made above, there is a significant conclusion that Habermas draws from this account. Individuation, by its very nature, eventually demands what Habermas calls a post-conventional morality, that is, a morality not governed by rigid conventions. To be consistent, however, a post-conventional identity must also be conceived of as socially constituted, that is, as another moment of an ‘I-me’ self-relation. The ‘me’ here is no longer constituted as a response to others’ *agreement* with my judgement but on others’ *recognition* of my claim to uniqueness. That is, we remain social beings who engage in the project of individuation and self-determination precisely because we are social beings whose validity claims *presuppose*

a recognition of one another's autonomy. Identity, then, is not just a matter of belonging to a particular group or culture, that is reaching consent with others. It is also a matter of being recognized as a *unique* member of one's community. It is only through the recognition of uniqueness that an individual is capable of developing a post-conventional morality.

This account makes the social psychology of the self a problem of the "intersubjective core of the ego" and shows that a "post-conventional ego-identity does not develop without at least the anticipation of transformed structures of communication" (1992, p. 200). The post-conventional ego struggles against potential forms of domination as well as forms of rationality that deny the uniqueness and autonomy claims of individuals. In conceiving of the self as an abstract 'I-me' self-relation it is possible to conceive of a universal grammar of communicative action, just the sort of emancipatory theory Habermas has in mind. Furthermore, Habermas renders a conception of morality and individuality possible within the context of a critical theory that escapes the binds of transcendentalism on the one hand and historicism on the other (see also Nielsen, 1991).

It is precisely the historicism of the 'I-me' self-relation that haunts the theory as a residue of its universal impulse. For the self must begin in oral gesture, even on Habermas's account. It owes its existence to the place it has as the primary impulse of a social body. The body that is addressed at the earliest of ages is already thoroughly signified as a particular kind of body that has a gender, a race, and an ethnic, social, political or other local figuration. If so, the development of an 'I-me' self-relation proceeds first out of that bodily sense, out of the feelings that mark me as a member of a particular social world (see Shotter, 1993, for a related account). Post-conventional identities are not just abstract claims to uniqueness but claims to individuality within the context of particular social worlds and hence practices. So what is post-conventional in one context may be entirely conventional in another; post-conventionality is the outcome of the shifting configurations of an unstable, continuously changing social world. The moral standards implied by Habermas do not, of course, concern such trivial matters as minor deviations from a group (my clothes are different, my car is different....) but those of a person capable of reflection in a genuine moral, post-conventional sense (I do not kill because I judge such acts profoundly immoral). However, is not the move to a universal level of moral reasoning itself the outcome of a historical discourse and sets of practices that constitute moral, ethical and legal codes? And is a post-conventional identity not post-conventional with respect to some specific conventions? As such, it is not a post-conventional morality that concerns the post-conventional identity but rather a different form of conventionalism wherein we adopt differing and arguably more just conventions (e.g., universal human rights), or question layers of conventions (e.g., rampant consumerism) not all of which are transparent or open to question at once. For not all conventions are capable of being discarded, we

## THE DIALOGICAL SELF AND THE RENEWAL OF PSYCHOLOGY

must hold on to something for our personal grounding and hence our sense of belongingness. It is likewise with popular assertions and assumptions of uniqueness. On Habermas's own version of Mead, our very uniqueness must come from a recognition by the other; it must be an expression of those who live with us in the immediate world we inhabit. Claims to uniqueness and individuality, however, can be appropriated readily to new levels of conformism—witness contemporary consumerism, fads and the advertising industry; our contemporary claims to uniqueness are themselves artefacts of social worlds. Being recognized as unique is not only a requirement of selfhood but also a way of *regulating* individuality in a complex social world. The attributes of uniqueness, however, are frequently no more than reifications of the facts of our personal identities—we are unique in the historical features of our biography (e.g., birth, parents, education, 'life-styles'). These form the foundations to claims of unique identities (which of course we are expected to hold as contemporary consumers of everything from clothes to education and spirituality). Ironically, if Habermas's version of Mead is right, then there is no emancipation from conventionalism to a postconventional identity. We can only feel our way out to different positions, which are developmentally different versions of conventionality within the limits of particular socio-historical configurations. To put this in a way to foreshadow what I will take up in the next section; there is no escape from the body even as we resist certain forms of embodiment.

### **Interpellation and the Self**

The foregoing dilemma I have discussed elsewhere in the context of an examination of the work of Judith Butler (Stam, 2003). In brief, Butler asks us to consider the paradox that our vulnerability to language is “a consequence of our being constituted within its terms” (Butler, 1997, p. 2). We are constituted (‘interpellated’ in Butler’s sense) in language even as we use that language to speak, potentially, against the formation that creates us. This dependence on the address of another both sustains us and makes us vulnerable. Individuality is incomplete; we are always dependent on the other for our sustenance just as we sustain others. Our sovereignty is incomplete and our agency is of a different sort: our actions come about because we are constituted as actors and we operate “within a linguistic field of enabling constraints from the outset” (Butler, 1997, p. 16). The limits of individuation make agency possible and our autonomy is the obverse of our dependence. It is the very historicity of speech that enables us to become subjects, through speech that is addressed to us, while simultaneously that historicity marks us as members of particular worlds of feeling that keeps the radically autonomous ideal out of reach. Autonomy is always limited and limiting, whereas our belongingness is equally partial – on this account our becoming a self is exactly why our membership in the social world is partial and continually in need of shoring up just as the other continues to define us.

Although this particular paradox is not only irresolvable, but necessary, it is also the source of much confusion in notions of selfhood. It helps to posit the self not as a substance in any traditional sense of that term; instead the capacity to *be* ‘a self’ is on that very same account made possible by our reliance on the other. For it is only in responding to the assertion of the other that a self is brought into being. It is a response to an asseveration, but this response can be a denial as easily as an assertion. It is in a refusal of recognition too that a self is posited, as in “I do not recognize you.” Further, it is only in responding ‘yes’ or ‘no’ that the contours of the self as a response are made possible. This deep dependence of the self is manifested in all of our narratives of ourselves, for the self is an ongoing narrative of the possibilities made manifest in our refusals and acquiescences, resistances and assents. The question of substance is moved aside for the problem of our location in an ongoing conversation, a point made by Harré many years ago (e.g., Harré, 1983). But the point has to be extended to make sense of the dialogical nature of the self.

The body’s presence as the source of the self, rather than merely its carrier, creates the preconditions for this dialogicality. For the conversation is always located, not just in a physical being, but also in a body that is always already meaningful. The interpellation is an interruption, one that interjects the name into the life of a body. That body is always dependent on the interpellation and carries the sign of the interpellation. This is the source of the body’s ‘otherness.’ The tradition of phenomenology from Husserl to Merleau-Ponty and through to Ricoeur has named this body ‘flesh’ to indicate it as the organ of desire. In connecting with the hermeneutic tradition in this way we can see the relation between the question of self and otherness as a single problem that finds its origins in the body that is itself both the origin of the ‘self’ as well as ‘the other’. It is in the otherness of our body that we know the other to be a subject like ourselves just as the self that is the outcome of an ‘other’ that calls us to become a self. Otherness is in the flesh, so to speak, just as the other is a necessary precondition for my becoming a self.

Having merely sketched a position on the dialogical self I want to acknowledge that this notion of dialogicality needs further development. In particular, recent work such as Tappan’s (2005) attempt to integrate the notion of ‘ideological becoming’ into the broader question of identity development would go some way to shaping the agenda for research on dialogicality and the nature of selves and identity. Along with the rich tradition already articulated by Hermans (e.g., 2002), the ‘dialogical self’ will undoubtedly establish itself as a serious topic within contemporary psychology.

### **Discussion**

What I have discussed in this article is relevant to the question of the dialogical self in several respects. Having argued that the psychology of the self is non-existent but implied, I also find the philosophical considerations of first-person statements



## THE DIALOGICAL SELF AND THE RENEWAL OF PSYCHOLOGY

incomplete in giving an account of a self that must be inherently dialogical. The conception of dialogue entails a number of potential difficulties that raise profound ontological and epistemological questions. First, The self that is in dialogue is made possible by that very dialogue. There can be no ‘real’ self that is not in dialogue with other selves - implied, imagined or real. To put it another way, selves just are dialogues, although this is not to be taken as a reduction of the self to mere conversations. Such dialogues are not just an effect of being addressed; they are understood precisely because we ourselves are ‘flesh’ capable of calling the other. Agency is meaningful because we remain historically embodied and are called out by another even as we are capable of returning the address. Recognition is ‘regulated, allocated and refused’ according to Butler, and as such we remain vulnerable to the other. Hence dialogue is the double-negotiation of that dependence and agency. Second, our expressions of self are always in dialogue with a past and a potential future. We are not the sum of the positions in which we have been addressed nor are we free to remake ourselves in an endless play of possibilities. For while history has named us and the future allows us to re-name ourselves, it is still as Ricoeur once had it: I may not be the author of my life but I can nonetheless be its narrator. The dialogical self, on this account, is an important contribution to a psychology that is not just a functionalism within an empiricist agenda but rather one that takes seriously our existence, which serves as a precondition to any functional account, as moral and embodied beings.

### References

- Anscombe, G. E. M. (1981). The first person. In G. E. M. Anscombe, *Metaphysics and the philosophy of mind, Collected Philosophical papers*, Vol. II (pp. 21-36). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. (Original work published 1975)
- Baker, L. (2000). *Persons and bodies: A constitution view*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bermúdez, J. L. (1998). *The paradox of self-consciousness*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press.
- Bermúdez, J. L. (1999). Precis of “The Paradox of Self-Consciousness”. *PSYCOLOQUY*, 10(35). Retrieved from <http://www.cogsci.soton.ac.uk/cgi/psyc/newpsy?10.035>
- Butler, J. (1997). *Excitable speech: A politics of the performative*. New York: Routledge.
- Danziger, K. (1990). *Constructing the subject: Historical origins of psychological research*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Danziger, K. (1997). *Naming the mind: How psychology found its language*. London: Sage Publications.

- Dennett, D. C. (1991). *Consciousness explained*. Boston: Little, Brown.
- Dodds, A. E., Lawrence, J. A., & Valsiner, J. (1997). The personal and the social: Mead's theory of the 'Generalized Other.' *Theory & Psychology*, 7, 483-503.
- Gallese, V. (2000). The brain and the self: Reviewing the neuroscientific evidence (Review of the book *The paradox of self-consciousness*). *PSYCOLOQUY*, 11(34). Retrieved from <http://www.cogsci.soton.ac.uk/cgi/psyc/newpsy?11.034>
- Garrett, B. (1997). Anscombe on 'I'. *Philosophical Quarterly*, 47, 507-511.
- Gergen, K. J. (1997). The place of the psyche in a constructed world. *Theory & Psychology*, 7, 723-746.
- Habermas, J. (1992). *Postmetaphysical thinking: Philosophical essays* (W. M. Hohengarten, Trans.). Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press.
- Harré, R. (1983). *Personal being*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Hermans, H. J. M. (2002). The dialogical self as a society of mind: Introduction. *Theory & Psychology*, 12, 147-160.
- Hermans, H. J. M. & Kempen, H. J. G. (1993). *The dialogical self: Meaning as movement*. San Diego, CA: Academic Press.
- Hurley, S. (1998). *Consciousness in action*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Ismael, J. (1999). Science and the phenomenal. *Philosophy of Science*, 66, 351-369.
- Ismael, J. (May, 2000). "I" Paper presented in the Department of Philosophy, University of Calgary, Calgary, Alberta.
- James, W. (1890). *The principles of psychology*, Vol. I. New York: Henry Holt.
- Looren de Jong, H. (2003). Causal and functional explanations. *Theory & Psychology*, 13, 291-317,
- Lowe, E. J. (1995). Self. In T. Honderich (Ed.), *The Oxford companion to philosophy* (pp. 816-817). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Margolis, J. (1984). *Philosophy of psychology*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Nielsen, K. (1991). *After the demise of the tradition*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Richards, G. (1996). *Putting psychology in its place: An introduction from a critical historical perspective*. London: Routledge.
- Ricoeur, P. (1992). *Oneself as another* (K. Blamey, Trans.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Sampson, E. E. (1993). *Celebrating the other: A dialogic account of human nature*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

## THE DIALOGICAL SELF AND THE RENEWAL OF PSYCHOLOGY

- Shapiro, Y. (1996). The perceiving brain: Turing's machine or Darwin's machine? Whose brain? *Theory & Psychology*, 6, 195-228.
- Shapiro, Y. (1997). The consciousness hype: What do we want explained? *Theory & Psychology*, 7, 837-856.
- Shotter, J. (1993). *Cultural politics of everyday life: Social constructionism, rhetoric, and knowing of the third kind*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Shotter, J. (1995). In conversation: Joint action, shared intentionality and ethics. *Theory & Psychology*, 5, 49-73.
- Smythe, W. E. (Ed.) (1998). *Toward a psychology of persons*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Valsiner, J. & van der Veer, R. (2000). *The social mind: Construction of an idea*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Stam, H. J. (2000). Theoretical Psychology. In K. Pawlik & M. R. Rosenzweig (Eds.), *International Handbook of Psychology* (pp. 551-569). London: Sage.
- Stam, H. J. (2003). Addressing oneself as another: Dialogue and the self in Habermas and Butler. In C. B. Grant (Ed.), *Rethinking communicative interaction: New interdisciplinary horizons* (pp. 87-100). Amsterdam, The Netherlands: John Benjamins.
- Tappan, M. (2005). Domination, subordination and the dialogical self: Identity development and the politics of 'ideological becoming.' *Culture & Psychology*, 11, 47-75.
- Taylor, C. (1987). Overcoming epistemology. In K. Baynes, J. Bohman, & T. McCarthy (Eds.), *After philosophy: End or transformation* (pp. 459-488). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Taylor, C. (1989). *Sources of the self: The making of the modern identity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

