George Herbert Mead on Humans and Other Animals: Social Relations After Human-Animal Studies

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Abstract

The turn towards nonhuman animals within sociology has shed a critical light on George Herbert Mead, his apparent prioritisation of language and the anthropocentric focus of Symbolic Interactionism (SI). Although Herbert Blumer canonised Mead as the founder of this perspective he also played a key role in excising the evolutionary and 'more-than-human' components in Mead's work. This intervention not only misrepresented Mead's intellectual project, it also made symbols the predominant concern in Blumer's version of SI. Since groundbreaking animal sociologists in America framed much of their thinking in opposition to SI's emphasis on language, because it excluded alingual animal others from sociological consideration, Mead's *Mind, Self, and Society* has largely functioned as a negative classic within this sub-field. Although some scholars recognise there is more in Mead's work that is potentially applicable to this interspecies area the attempt to recover what might be helpful has yet to begin (e.g. Alger & Alger 1997). This paper suggests that if the ambiguities and contradictions that exist alongside Mead's oft-quoted anthropocentrism are also attended to this may open up a more positive reading and use of Mead's work for animal sociology.

Keywords: *Mead, Symbolic Interactionism, Human–Animal Studies, Animal Turn*

Introduction

1.1 In a little-known article published in 1928, *The Culture of Canines: A note on subhuman sociology*, Read Bain notes that the 'denial of culture to subhuman animals is probably a phase of anthropocentrism' (Bain in Wilkie & Inglis 2007: 8). In this paper, the American sociologist also observed: '[j]ust as animal intelligent and emotional behaviour, anatomical and physiological structure and function, and group life, have their correlates in human behaviour, so the dividing line between animal and human culture is likewise vague and arbitrary' (ibid: 9). In hindsight, although Bain had anticipated the emergence of 'animal sociology' and the need for multispecies scholarship (ibid: 6), it would take a further five decades for people's relations with other animals to register once again on the discipline's radar. Since early sociologists largely overlooked 'the influence of animals, or their import for, our social behaviour, [and] our relationships with other humans', it was the publication of Clifton Bryant's seminal paper in 1979 that influenced contemporary sociologists to address the 'zoological connection'; he did this by reminding colleagues that '[o]ur social enterprise is not composed of humans alone' (1979: 399 & 417).^[1] By drawing attention to the interspecies blind spot within sociology Bryant also contributed to the scholarly turn towards nonhuman animals within the social sciences (Armstrong & Simmons 2007).

1.2 This burgeoning interest in multispecies research facilitated the formation of Human–Animal Studies (HAS), a pioneering interdisciplinary field dedicated 'to examining, understanding, and critically evaluating the complex and multidimensional relationships between humans and other animals' (Shapiro 2008: 5; Shapiro & DeMello 2010). The proliferation in recent years of 'new books, journals, conferences, organizations, college programs, listservs, and courses, both in the United States and throughout Europe, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada' (Shapiro & DeMello 2010: 307) highlights the thriving nature of this 'more-than-human' field (Whatmore 2006: 604). Although two journals opened up this scholarly area, *Anthrozoös* (1987) and *Society and Animals* (1993), there are now seventeen HAS-related journals listed on the *Animals and Society Institute's* website (2013). The growing popularity of multispecies scholarship is further evidenced by the upsurge of human-animal edited collections (e.g. Wolch & Emel 1998; Atterton

& Calarco 2004; Knight 2005; Kalof & Fitzgerald 2007; Wilkie & Inglis 2007; Flynn 2008; Arluke & Sanders 2009; Carter and Charles 2011; Taylor & Signal 2011; Birke & Hockenhull 2012; DeKoven & Lundblad 2012) and the publication of two introductory textbooks (DeMello 2012; Taylor 2013).

1.3 As growing numbers of sociologists are conducting interspecies-related research (e.g. Arluke & Sanders 1996; Franklin 1999; Sanders 1999; Nibert 2002; Irvine 2004; Brandt 2004; Arluke 2006; Twine 2010; Wilkie 2010; Cudworth 2011; Hamilton & Taylor 2012; Morris 2012; Peggs 2012; Jerolmack 2013) professional sociological associations have responded to this development by setting up specialist research groups. The American Sociological Association set up the *Animals and Society Section* in 2002, and four years later, the British Sociological Association established the *Animal/Human Studies Group*. Despite these institutional developments and trends the perpetuation of such study groups is thought to lie with 'graduate students who have the courage to challenge the field's (i.e. sociology's) outdated ideas about animals' (Irvine 2012: s127). Since animal studies have been described as 'boutique' sociology (Arluke 2002: 370), and some sociologists have 'experienced responses that range from amusement to derision' (Kruse 2002: 377) with reference to the mixed-species focus of their research, this highlights the ambiguous status of nonhuman animals and HAS scholars within sociology, and the politicised nature of interspecies scholarship (e.g. Jerolmack 2005; Best 2009). Although some sociologists enthusiastically engage with mixed-species relations, to study nonhuman animals in what has largely been a human-centric discipline also has the potential to tarnish the academic status of those engaged in such scholarship (Wilkie 2013).

1.4 Contemporary sociology has clearly responded to the 'animal turn', but its response has been somewhat slower than cognate disciplines (Armstrong & Simmons 2007: 1). In the words of Nik Taylor, a human-animal sociologist herself, 'The humanities have been slow to catch up with many other disciplines such as ethology in seeing animals differently ... and arguably the social sciences – particularly sociology – are even further behind' (2012: 44). That said, other species are registering on sociology's radar and more sociologists are attracted to and participating in human-animal scholarship. As groundbreaking scholars animalise their sociological imaginations a recurring field-forming narrative has materialised within animal sociology to explain why nonhuman animals, and interspecies relations, have not been studied sociologically. The social theorist who has most often been singled out for this disciplinary oversight is George Herbert Mead; since Mead's 'interpretation of humans as profoundly distinct from other animals seems to be accepted as the origin of the fundamental division between humans and other animals in sociology' (Peggs 2012: 6) we will now consider in more depth the case against Mead's work, and follow it by a somewhat different reading of his texts.

A critical reading of Mead by human–animal sociologists

2.1 The common reading of Mead as a 'symbolic interactionist' may be both anachronistic and an oversimplification of his work, but it has nonetheless been a productive misreading (Bloom 1973). Similarly, because pioneering animal sociologists have been critical of Mead's apparent prioritisation of verbal language, their human-centric reading of Mead would inspire important empirical and theoretical innovation (e.g. Sanders 1993, 1999; Alger & Alger 1997, 2003; Irvine 2003, 2004). Animal sociologists often argue that since Mead elevated the spoken word above all other forms of communication (a point to which we shall return at length later), he asserted human exceptionalism (Alger & Alger 1997). By separating human-human interaction from all other species, Mead thereby bolstered 'the conventional sociological belief that "authentic" interaction is premised on the abilities of social actors to employ conventional linguistic symbols' (Sanders 1993: 205–206). Since animals do not converse as people do, the nature and significance of mixed-species relations ought to be of minimal interest to sociologists. Given this disciplinary backdrop, Sanders argues that Mead's view of animals

came to be a taken-for-granted assumption when sociologists occasionally passed lightly over the topic of animal–human interactions. Since animals were not full-fledged social actors from the Median point of view, their encounters with humans were one-way exchanges, lacking the intersubjectivity at the heart of true social interaction. People interacted with animals-as-objects (1999: 118).

2.2 This reading of Mead suggests that he supplanted the 'Aristotelian and Cartesian markers of human difference – "soul" or "mind" – with a secularized ... version: language behaviour' (Myers 2007: 42). The sociological significance of Mead's prioritisation of language is that the "verbal gesture" enables self-reflectiveness, the only means by which the person integrates the various perspectives of others. Thus, selfhood is only attained in the context of a society of other language users, in which animals are not participants' (Myers 2007: 42).^[2] As alingual others, nonhuman animals were consigned to the instinctual exchange of insignificant expressions, to a 'conversation of gestures'. As Mead explains in one oft-quoted passage,

Gestures may be either conscious (significant) or unconscious (non-significant). The conversation of gestures is not significant below the human level, because it is not conscious, that is not *self*-conscious (though it is conscious in the sense of involving feelings or sensations). An animal as opposed to a human form, in indicating something to, or bringing out a meaning for, another form, is not at the same time indicating or bringing out the same thing or meaning to or for himself; for the animal has no mind, no thought, and hence there is no meaning here in the significant or self-conscious sense. A gesture is not significant when the response of another organism to it does not indicate to the first organism what the second organism is responding to (Mead 1964: 168 *emphasis in original*).^[3]

The depiction of animals as non-minded creates a categorical distinction between humans and other animals, which is undoubtedly present in this passage – even if Mead's thought elsewhere is much more nuanced (as we discuss below).

2.3 Human exceptionalism was the norm when Mead was writing, although it was contested, and would be cast into increasing doubt as the century progressed (e.g. DeMello 2012; Ingold 1994; Manning & Serpell 1994). Since the 1970s, attitudes towards and knowledge about animals in industrialised societies has been characterised by a decline of 'anthropocentric instrumentality' and a rise in 'zoocentric empathy' (Franklin 1999: 175).^[4] The proliferation of animal-orientated fields, such as cognitive ethology, primatology and animal science, have contributed to this trend by presenting a more propitious perception of animals; these areas have enhanced and refined our understanding of animal intelligence, emotion, sociality, communication and culture in different species of animals (e.g. Bekoff 2006; Birke & Hockenhull 2012; Degrazia 1996; de Waal 2001; Griffin 1976, 1984; Hillix & Rumbaugh 2004; Masson & McCarthy 1994). For example, 'Ethologists and comparative psychologists have discovered increasing complexities in animal behaviour during the past few decades. ... [Such research indicates that] complex processes occur within animal brains, ... that ... may have much in common with our own mental experiences (Griffin 1976: 3). This is perhaps most evident in primate language research that explores how 'border animals' have been taught to use lexigrams, which are 'abstract symbols representing words', and American Sign Language, a system of gestural symbols (Sanders 1999: 128–129; Great Ape Trust 2012).

2.4 Such studies have stimulated debate and also softened hard-and-fast distinctions between animal communication and human language (Alger & Alger 1997: 66; Sanders 1999; Segerdahl 2012).^[5] This blurring of the human–animal boundary indicates that animals may have varying capacities to engage in forms of communication, and that 'the absence of language in animals does not necessarily preclude the existence of mental experiences and consciousness' (Alger & Alger 1997: 66). Although lay accounts readily depict companion animals as minded beings, this commonplace practice of 'endowing ... domestic animals with personality' according to Mead is the result of anthropomorphic projection i.e. 'We put personalities into the animals ... We talk to them and in our talking to them we act as if they had the sort of inner world we have' (cited in Sanders 1999: 118).

2.5 By elevating the spoken word above all other forms of communication Mead's thinking has been typically understood by animal sociologists to have perpetuated the 'Cartesian error', 'establish[ing] two states of consciousness: one for those who could converse about it, and another, lesser form for those who could not' (Irvine 2004: 122). Mead does identify the use of symbolisation and language as a difference between humans and other animals. However, he is also inconsistent about the extent to which this was an absolute species difference or one of a series of characteristics that distinguish a range of different species. We suggest – and will later show – that Mead's texts are full of unresolved contradictions;^[6] there are times when he indicates that some nonhuman animals may be capable of the significant gesture, and then at other times he recoils from this position and asserts that only humans can use significant gestures. Such inconsistencies are suggestive of a much more nuanced and ambivalent understanding of the species boundary in Mead's thinking than has generally been recognised.

2.6 A significant source for subsequent misunderstandings of Mead's thinking may stem from the work of editors and interpreters who have re-constructed – and perhaps misrepresented – his ideas. In the preface to Mead's important posthumous work, *Mind, Self, and Society* Charles Morris explains that it was constructed from a mixture of student lecture notes, 'a stenographic copy of the 1927 course in social psychology' given at the University of Chicago, and 'unpublished manuscripts left by Mr Mead ... [thus] the whole is by no means a court record' (Mead 1934: vi). Furthermore, although his book consists of three parts, each corresponding to an element in the title, it is also unlikely that students have read every section of this magnum opus; many sociologists will have focused on the *Self* and few will have ventured into the chapters on *Mind* and *Society*. To the extent to which this is true, this will have contributed to the perception that the self was Mead's overriding concern, however doubtful it is that this middle term can be adequately understood without reference to either *Mind* or *Society*. Finally, we also suggest that Herbert Blumer, who was the 'principal interpreter of Mead's thought' and the person who coined the term 'symbolic interactionism' in 1937 is largely responsible for narrowing Mead's intellectual project (Turner 1991: 391; Blumer 1969: 1). By portraying Mead's contribution as a social conception of the (human) self that prioritised the importance of language, Blumer pushed aside the human–animal comparative element and excised the evolutionary framework that also runs through and shaped Mead's thinking.

2.7 Since Blumer canonised Mead as the founder of Symbolic Interactionism he popularised a version of Interactionism that prioritised the importance of symbols and language. Although animal sociologists have reacted to, and been rightly critical of this overemphasis in Mead's work, we suggest that the human-centric version of Interactionism put forward by his posthumous editors and Blumer have done an intellectual disservice to Mead's 'more-than-human' focus (Sanders 1993: 206; Whatmore 2006: 604) and has contributed to his work acting as a negative classic within animal sociology. For example, the thinking of some groundbreaking American sociologists within this interspecies field, was initially framed in opposition to Mead's emphasis on language, which excluded alingual animal others from sociological consideration. As Irvine notes, 'Even if language *were* the unique property of human beings, making it the sole vehicle of the self and meaningful behaviour overlooks the significance of other forms of communication' (2003: 47; see also Konecki 2005).

2.8 By deemphasising language and decentering the 'significant gesture' these human–animal sociologists (some from the school of Symbolic Interactionism itself) opened-up an alternative line of sociological enquiry that would draw on, and attend to, non-verbal forms of communication in interpersonal interactions

to understand interspecies relations. For example, studies have shown that when people routinely interact with those who are severely disabled (e.g. Bogdan & Taylor 1989) or suffer from Alzheimer's disease (e.g. Gubrium 1986) they carry out a form of 'symbolic ventriloquism' i.e. they 'speak for' the linguistically impaired or non-verbal other (Owens 2007: 577). Since carers and family members accrue intimate knowledge about and understanding of their loved one's non-verbal gestures, preferences and emotions this enables them to speak on their behalf. This interlocutory practice draws heavily on a shared interpersonal history as it is this that provides the basis from which the socially competent person feels they can convey what they think the socially impaired person is 'really' trying to say. Although it has been noted that 'attributing selves to those who cannot speak simply imposes a sense of self' (Irvine 2007: 10), taking the role of and giving voice to the inarticulate other has nonetheless enabled carers to construct the 'minded "personhood"' of alingual and socially impaired others which (re)integrates them into the 'language community' (Arluke & Sanders 1996: 62–64). Such work highlights an interactional understanding of selfhood that is less reliant, if at all, on language (Irvine 2003: 47).

2.9 The idea of 'doing mind' in non-linguistic ways also resonates with ethnographic accounts of people who routinely interact and work with animals (Sanders 2003). This is because animal carers 'who have practical interests in making ongoing sense of their [animal's] behaviour consistently see ... [them] as subjective actors and define interactions with them as being "authentic" and reciprocal social exchanges' (Sanders 1993: 206). Although Mead might have sometimes been inclined to see these as 'mere anthropomorphic delusions' Sanders found that those 'who regularly interact with companion canines typically assume a practical "as if" stance with regard to the thoughts, feelings, and interactional abilities of their nonhuman intimates' (1999: 141–148).^[7] Just as carers construct the identity of socially and verbally impaired loved ones by recognising their capacity 'to reason, understand and remember', seeing them as individuals who have the ability to reciprocate, and fully integrating them into social networks such as the family, animal carers also draw on these 'categories of evidence' to construct the 'person-like' like status of their nonhuman animal companions (Bogdan & Taylor 1989: 139; Sanders 1993: 211, 221; Charles & Davies 2008). If people *perceive* animate and non-animate others as having the capacity to 'act meaningfully and independently' then they will act towards them accordingly (see also Cerulo 2009). As Owen further notes,

Whether or not it is inherently "possible" or "real" for ... objects [and animals] to participate actively in interaction is irrelevant. Interaction does not require that both parties willingly and purposefully engage with one another. All that is required is the assumption by one party that this is so, as anyone who has ever mistaken a stranger's wave and waved enthusiastically in return may attest. Nor is it required that both parties be able to symbolically interpret and share meaning (2007: 568).

2.10 A recurring theme in this literature on mixed-species relationships has been the endeavour of animal sociologists to develop a form of symbolic interactionism that demonstrates that 'shared understanding, communication, and construction of minds and selves are possible without language' (Jerolmack 2005: 658).^[8] For example, by drawing on infancy research Irvine's model of animal selfhood proposes that like infants, nonhuman animals have a 'core self [that] is pre-verbal' (2004: 126; see also Irvine 2007). Based on the experiences and accounts of those who visited an animal shelter, some of whom had no intention of adopting an animal, she found that they all wanted to talk to and about the animals therein. By expressing concern about the 'animal's needs and well-being' they also indicated that they perceived these animals as relational and subjective others. Irvine develops her work in response to what she understands of Mead's view that it is people who endow animals with personality and subjectivity. She identifies four dimensions that collectively constituted the animals' 'core self': 'agency, coherence, affectivity and history' (Irvine 2008: 1964). Since those interacting with the animals perceived them to have a 'subjective presence', i.e. 'as having a mind, beliefs, and desires ... [t]his not only confirms the other's sense of self to us; it also confirms our own' (Irvine 2004: 119).

2.11 In order to make these arguments, animal sociologists such as Irvine, Alger and Alger, and Sanders have paid more attention to the sense of self as a 'system of experiences' i.e. that 'allows us to feel and to know' (Irvine 2004: 127; see also Alger & Alger 1997: 69–71). This more experiential understanding of the self resonates with Randall Collins, because he advocates 'an emotional dimension to the concept of role-taking' and envisages two types of symbolic interaction, i.e. either orientated towards practical or social goals (Alger & Alger 1997: 70). Since social goals 'are generated by our relationship to social groups, and they focus on symbols of solidarity' Collins believed such goals arise out of 'natural interaction rituals' that 'require at least two participants in the same location to "focus attention on the same object or action, ... are aware that each other is maintaining this focus", and ... "share a common mood or emotion"' (Alger & Alger 1997: 70).^[9] The Algers, unlike Collins (1989), think these interaction rituals are not necessarily reliant on linguistic exchanges. When applied to human–animal relations it is the 'emotive discourse' that takes place between the species that is of more significance (Gubrium in Sanders 1993: 222). What binds people and nonhuman companion animals is the affectionate bond they build up as they mutually participate in routine ritual activities such as play (e.g. Sanders 2003). As Sanders explains:

The generative context within which this emotionally focused construction of animal mind takes place involves the accretion of mutual experience of what Collins (1989) referred to as "natural rituals". Caretakers and their dogs ongoingly share activities, moods, and routines. Coordination of these natural rituals requires human and animal participants to assume the perspective of the other and, certainly in the eyes of the owners and ostensibly on the part of the dogs, results in a mutual recognition of being "together" (1993: 222).

2.12 The extent to which animals mutually participate or experience the same meanings as their human

partners in such interactions is difficult to evaluate; just as it is in human–human interactions (Jerolmack 2005: 658). In light of this limitation, other animal sociologists have questioned the need to 'elevate animals to symbolic interactants ... [or] assume "minds" or shared meanings' between people and animals. Instead Jerolmack believes that 'associations with humans and animals are still possible and enjoyable to humans even if symbolic interaction is impossible' (2009: 376). Given this standpoint, he thinks it is more 'useful to consider symbolic interaction as an ideal type by which to compare various interactions along a continuum of intersubjectivity'. He also contends 'there are layers of intersubjectivity – from absolute shared perspective/understanding among two or more actors down to a simple shared awareness of an object in the setting' (Jerolmack 2009: 372), and illustrates this using the example of playing 'tug of war' with his cat:

If I use a string to play 'tug of war' with my cat, we both share awareness of and action toward the string. The string is shared among us, intersubjectively. However, while our actions meet in a way that brings off this coordinated activity, we *need not* take the other's point of view or share the other's understanding of the situation to carry this out. We could have entirely different practical purposes or understandings of the encounter, and yet, *for all practical purposes*, the game works (Jerolmack 2005: 659 *emphasis in original*).

2.13 This line of argument highlights that coordinated action is still feasible without establishing a shared understanding of the situation (Jerolmack 2009: 373). In his most recent work, *The Global Pigeon*, Jerolmack notes that 'Interacting parties [in this case, people feeding pigeons], ... can have different intentions in "successful" interactions and can assign *asymmetrical meanings* to them' (2013: 38 *emphasis in original*).^[10] This is an important point because Mead also recognises that 'individual organisms', human and other animals, act and interact socially by coordinating their actions by means of gestures, one organism 'calling forth' actions of other organisms participating in the coordinated (inter) action – this being the hallmark of sociality (Mead 1934: 13–14). Given this more species inclusive understanding of Meadian sociality, we suggest he would concur with contemporary animal sociologists who believe that the difference between humans and other animals is a matter of degree not kind. Our re-reading of Mead thus casts doubt on descriptions that '[h]is illustrative presentations of the limitations of squirrels, horses, elephants, foxes, canaries, cats, dogs, and various other nonhuman animals were, in essence, neocartesian' (Sanders 1999: 117). Although Mead does often draw a sharp line between human and animal species, at other times his understanding of this species boundary was more nuanced.

Re-reading Mead on humans, animals and social relations

3.1 On the one hand, Mead's anthropocentrism is central to the field-originary myth that has emerged within animal sociology. On the other hand, because this aspect of Mead's work is more nuanced than the myth currently allows, we suggest the development of animal sociology actually provides an opportunity to retrieve the more species inclusive elements that were lost when Mead's thought was truncated to serve as the founder of symbolic interactionism (Da Silva 2006). It is our contention that much of the criticisms that have been directed at Mead have only been partially true, and reflect, among other things, the way Mead's work has been reconstructed as a founding classic of Symbolic Interaction (Da Silva 2006), beginning with Herbert Blumer's work in the years following Mead's death in 1931 (Blumer 1937). In the same way that Blumer's productive misreading (Bloom 1973) of Mead has been important for the construction of a school of thought called 'Symbolic Interactionism', so too have the criticisms developed by animal sociology of this symbolic interactionist Mead been a productive misreading. Although the symbolic interactionist's Mead and the animal sociology critics of Mead are worlds apart on the 'animal question' they nonetheless share a very similar understanding of Mead. This view of Mead is, however, rather partial. We argue that, if we attend to the complexities and contradictions of Mead's work, we find a rather different Mead, one whose work may be more compatible with HAS.

3.2 In this paper we draw primarily on Mead's best known texts, *Mind, Self, and Society* (1934) and *George Herbert Mead on Social Psychology* (1964), even though these texts have a definite weakness in the manner by which they have come to us. Recent scholarship shows a much more fulsome picture of Mead's oeuvre, including the publication of selections from Mead's archives, until recently the preserve of those who made a trip to the Regenstein Library at the University of Chicago (see Da Silva 2011). Nonetheless, we show that, even in these canonical, 'symbolic interactionist' texts, we find a much more nuanced understanding of the human–animal boundary, of the 'self' in non-human species, and of the social life of some other animals. Just as contemporary animal sociologists are keen to debunk reductionist and mechanistic accounts of animal behaviour, Mead was similarly engaged in an intellectual project at the turn of the Twentieth Century that aimed to counterbalance the asocial behaviourist accounts of the human animal that was emerging in psychology.

3.3 Mead usually describes himself as a '*social*' behaviourist', *social* distinguishing his own approach from that of John B Watson, also for a time at the University of Chicago. Although Mead considered behaviourist psychology's empirical manner a major scientific breakthrough, his thinking had long been deeply shaped by his engagement with Darwinian evolutionary theory (Miller 1973) and by his dialogue with Dewey (Cook 1993) and the philosophy of Hegel (Joas 1997). As a result, he was convinced that *asocial* behaviourism, as promoted by Watson, was inadequate for understanding the psychology, particularly – but not exclusively – of the human animal that was his primary interest.

3.4 Asocial behaviourism begins with a particular kind of 'animal psychology', derived from laboratory experiments with solitary animals, rather than from *in situ* observations, and then extrapolates from these results to the psychology of the human animal (Mead 1934: 2). Mead himself regularly refers to our species as 'the human animal', and he has no objection to beginning with other species as a means of understanding humans. Rather, he is concerned that Watson and other behaviourists bracket out the question of consciousness (and self-consciousness), treating the mind as a black box; like the Queen in

Alice in Wonderland, the behaviourist demands: '[o]ff with their heads!' (1934: 3) – behaviour (including that of the human animal) stems from conditioned responses to stimuli. Consciousness and self-consciousness is epiphenomenal to behaviour; behaviour is explained without reference to conscious decision-making. Consciousness may run parallel with behaviour, but it is disconnected from it.

3.5 Mead cannot accept that Mind (or his cognate terms, 'self-consciousness' and 'the self') is a chimera, disconnected from, and irrelevant to explaining, action. We are not, he insists, 'simply at the mercy of the different stimuli that play in the central nervous system – the natural view of the physiologist' (1934: 24); rather, Mead argues that *all* organisms respond creatively to stimuli, sensitising themselves selectively to stimuli, and they thereby constitute the environments in which they act. This is true of all organisms, though it is more so of social animals (which Mead understands as a continuum from more to less social), and it is especially the case for self-reflexive social animals (of which his prototype is the human animal). This last group does indeed respond to stimuli, but at least some of those stimuli originate with the organism itself; in particular, Mead argues, we think about ourselves and act upon ourselves; we are not mere passive responders to stimuli. It is sometimes suggested that this is the essence of the social, and that it applies exclusively to human beings. As we will show in the following sections, this is far from self-evidently the case.

3.6 All social life (for humans as much as for other social animals) depends on gesture as a means of coordinating the conjoint action without which it is impossible to speak of social interaction. Social interaction is not exclusively dependent on symbols – *pace* Blumer and Symbolic Interactionism. As Mead explains,

[Symbols] go to make up [the objects] in our experience, and the function of the word is a function which has its place in that organization; but it is not, however, the whole process. We find that the same sort of organization seemingly extended in the conduct of animals lower [sic] than man: those processes which go to make up our objects must be present in the animals themselves who have not the use of language (Mead 1934: 13).

Mead argues that the 'gesture' – which encompasses much more than language – is the 'basic mechanism' of social processes for all social animals. As Mead explains (in text that the editor, Charles Morris, has relegated to a footnote):

It is the mechanism of gesture, which makes possible the appropriate responses to one another's behavior of the different individual organisms involved in the social process. Within any given social act, an adjustment is effected, by means of gestures, of the actions of one organism involved to the actions of another; the gestures are movements of the first organism which act as specific stimuli calling forth the (socially) appropriate responses of the second organism (1934: 13–14 footnote 9).^[11]

It is important to highlight at this point that Mead does not conceive of social life or 'society' as distinctively human; the units in the social processes he discusses here are referred to as 'individual organisms', though he often prefers to speak of 'forms'. Forms act and interact socially, coordinating their actions by means of gestures, one organism 'calling forth' responsive actions from other forms. This is what sociality consists of – and the social relationship changes everything, even the way that instincts are acted upon. Although '[t]here is no living organism of any kind whose nature or constitution is such that it could exist or maintain itself in complete isolation from all other living organisms...' all life exists on a continuum from less to more social (1934: 228).

3.7 Making no distinction between humans and other animals, Mead argues that while social interaction may ultimately stem from biological instincts, behaviour cannot be reduced to those impulses: the ways in which all organisms respond to the gestures of others shapes the direction of action:

By social conduct I refer simply to that which is mediated by the stimulations of other animals belonging to the same group of living forms, which lead to responses which again affect these other forms – thus fighting, reproduction, parental care, much of animal play, hunting, etc., are the results of primitive instincts or impulses which are set going by the stimulation of one form by another, and these stimulations again lead to responses which affect other forms (1912: 401–402).

For Mead, the sexual impulse is most basic – not just for the partnering of adults, and the production of offspring. In a broader sense, Mead understands the 'impulse or attitude of neighborliness [as] a kind of generalization of the parental impulse or attitude and upon which all co-operative social behavior is more or less dependent' (1934: 228–229). Speaking specifically about human societies, he argues that families, clans, tribes, and all the generalisations or elaborations of the familial tendency derive from this basic impulse.

In short, all organized human society—even in its most complex and highly developed forms—is in a sense merely an extension and ramification of those simple and basic socio-physiological relations among its individual members (relations between the sexes resulting from their physiological differentiation, and relations between parents and children) upon which it is founded, and from which it originates ... [These] are the essential physiological materials from which human nature is socially formed; so that human nature is something social through and through, and always presupposes the truly social individual (1934: 229).

Here Mead's presumption *may* be that human beings are the most social of animals, but such sociality (actual and aspired to) exists on a continuum; such a tendency towards sociality is not something that

sets us apart from nature and other animals, it stems from our species' biological tendencies. It is important to distinguish, however, that although the basic impulse for social life may be instinctual, the way in which it is enacted is shaped in the course of the interaction to which it gives birth; for Mead this is an essential foundation for his thinking about all social animals, including the human animal.

3.8 Social animals respond to others, gesture to others and respond to the responses of others; therein lies the essence of the social. Such gesturing does not necessarily result in mutual or cooperative action, which for Mead is the fullest or highest form of sociation. Thus, in Mead's famous example of two growling dogs

...the stimulus which one dog gets from the other dog is to a response which is different from the response of the stimulating form. One dog is attacking the other, and is ready to spring at the other dog's throat; the reply on the part of the second dog is to change its position, perhaps to spring at the throat of the first dog. There is a conversation of gestures, a reciprocal shifting of the dogs' positions and attitudes. In such a process there would be no mechanism for imitation. One dog does not imitate the other. The second dog assumes a different attitude to avoid the spring of the first dog. The stimulus in the attitude of one dog is not to call out the response in itself as it calls out in the other (1934: 63).

Animal sociologists have often taken this story as a parable of the human-animal divide – animals converse with gestures (and are not minded), while humans use significant gestures (and are minded) (e.g. Sanders 1999; Irvine 2004; Peggs 2012). Mead's point, however, is not that the dogs *cannot* use the significant gestures (though he may believe it to be the case to some extent); here, however, his point is that the dogs he describes *are not* calling out the same response in the other. The growl of one dog communicates with the other and tries to call out a *different* response (fear, retreat, submission); the dogs position themselves in response to the other, but their purposes and actions are not aligned, they are not cooperatively creating a situation of mutual understanding or mutual purpose. As we will discuss below, two human beings fighting are no more using significant gestures than are fighting dogs.

3.9 The capacity for the alignment of consciousness and complicated social arrangements is greatly enhanced, Mead argues, by vocal gestures, which allow for the possibility of self-consciousness and the significant gesture. Mead insists that the development of self-reflexivity (or the 'self') requires the vocal gesture, because only by the vocal gesture can the organism provoke the same reaction in itself as it does in the other:

Conscious communication—conscious conversation of gestures—arises when gestures become signs, that is, when they come to carry for the individuals making them and the individuals responding to them, definite meanings or significations in terms of the subsequent behavior of the individuals making them; so that, by serving as prior indications, to the individuals responding to them, of the subsequent behavior of the individuals making them, they make possible the mutual adjustment of the various individual components of the social act to one another, and also, by calling forth in the individuals making them the same responses implicitly that they call forth explicitly in the individuals to whom they are made, they render possible the rise of self-consciousness in connection with this mutual adjustment (1934: 69 footnote 7).

3.10 This calling forth of the same response in the self and in the other can be seen clearly in imitation – the vocal gesture of one form is repeated by the vocal gesture of another. Mead does sometimes state that the human animal is distinctive in its capacity to imitate, an activity which he identifies as strong evidence of the presence of a self. Imitation emerges from the human capacity to 'take on the role' of the other – a capacity which is associated with self-consciousness. Nonetheless, we find recurring references in Mead's text to birds engaging in imitation. Mead writes that

The mocking bird does seem to take up the calls of other birds. It seems to be peculiarly endowed in this particular way. But in general the taking over of the processes of others is not natural to lower forms. Imitation seems to belong to the human form, where it has reached some sort of independent conscious existence (1934: 59).

At least in the transcribed and posthumously edited text that comes to us in *Mind, Self, and Society* (1934), we find no indication that Mead is aware of this contradiction. By his repeated use of birds as examples in his discussion of imitation, he seems to suggest that the capacity for imitation and self-consciousness exists as a continuum, even as some of his categorical statements deny that this is the case.

3.11 Mead explains that he does not understand the inclination to imitate in the same way as the sexual instinct because

... "imitation" is hardly an immediate tendency, since it takes quite a while to get one bird to reproduce the song, or for the child to take over the phonetic gesture of the human form. The vocal gesture is a stimulus to some sort of response; it is not simply a stimulus to the calling out of the sound which the animal hears. Of course, the bird can be put into a situation where it may reach the mere repetition of that which it hears. If we assume that one sound that the bird makes calls out another sound, when the bird hears this first sound it responds by the second. If one asked why one note answers to another, one would have to go to some process where the vocal gesture would have a different physiological significance. An illustration is the cooing process of pigeons. There, one note calls out another note in the other form. It is a conversation of gestures, where a certain attitude

expressing itself in a certain note calls out another attitude with its corresponding note (1934: 61).

Even if it helps to coordinate social action and interaction, insofar as one person or bird calls out a different response in another, the vocal gesture does not differ from the (non-vocal) gesture. The significant gesture goes one important step further, because one form calls out in herself the same response as she calls out in the other. 'If,' however,

...the form is to call out in itself the same note that it calls out in the other, it must act as the other acts, and use the note that the other makes use of in order to reproduce the particular note in question. So you find, if you put the sparrow and the canary together in neighbouring cages, where the call of one calls out a series of notes in the other, that if the sparrow finds itself uttering a note such as a canary does, the vocal gesture here must be more or less of the same type. Where that situation exists, the sparrow in its own process of vocalization makes use of such notes as those which the canary makes use of. The sparrow is influencing not only the canary, but also in hearing itself it is influencing itself... *Such are the situations in which the sparrow does take the rôle of the canary in so far as there are certain notes to which it tends to react just as the canary does* ... One has to assume a like tendency in the two forms if one is going to get any mechanism for imitation at all (1934: 61–63 *emphasis added*).

Here two birds imitate one another – and this both requires and indicates the capacity to take on the role of the other. This is the fundamental capacity for self-consciousness, or, to use Mead's parallel term, it means that, insofar as the sparrow is able to take on the role of the canary, she or he has a self. Intriguingly, Mead argues that some birds (like human babies), not only engage in significant vocal gestures in conversations with others, but readily communicate with themselves:

...birds tend to sing to themselves, babies to talk to themselves. The sounds they make are stimuli to make other sounds. Where there is a specific sound that calls out a specific response, then if this sound is made by other forms it calls out this response in the form in question. If the sparrow makes use of this particular sound then the response to that sound will be one which will be heard more frequently than another response... "Imitation" depends upon the individual influencing himself as others influence him, so that he is under the influence not only of the other but also of himself in so far as he uses the same vocal gesture (p. 65).

3.12 So, at least some birds are able, just like human babies, to self-reflexively shape the course of their own conversation, to provide the vocal stimulus for their own response. This, as Mead discusses elsewhere, is the essence of Mind, or 'intelligence' in the specific sense (1934: 47); in philosophical terms, this is, in an admittedly rudimentary way, rationality in Hegel's sense (which consists of thought thinking about thinking). More practically, however, the ability to call out the same response in oneself and in others confers enormous advantage in practical social coordination. Thus, Mead uses the example of the way a mother hen and her chick use vocal gestures to refer to the same object, be it food or a danger; this is the use of the significant gesture because the same response is called out in the self and in the other. Thus 'the chick's response to the cluck of the mother hen is a response to the meaning of the cluck; the cluck refers to danger or to food, as the case may be, and has this meaning or connotation for the chick' (1934:77). This does not entail the complex syntax we normally associate with language, but his description of the hen's clucks fit his own description of a significant gesture, even if he is sometimes known to deny that it does (1922: 160): they are gestures that call out a common attitude and refer to a common object constituted by the communication (cf. Joas 1997: 145–166).

3.13 While animal sociologists have often criticised Mead for reifying the human/animal divide, the distinction is in fact rather fuzzy in Mead's work. Mead does clearly and repeatedly argue that human beings are distinctive *in the extent* to which they use significant gestures, and *in the extent* to which human social organisation is dependent on significant gestures. Sometimes he even describes this as a categorical difference, though as we have shown, this is a difference with very fuzzy boundaries once we take account of his own examples. It seems likely that Mead considers humans, dependent on significant gestures for their social organisation, as exemplifying the most social pole on a continuum of sociality amongst different animals.

3.14 In fact, the most important distinction in Mead's work is not the difference between humans and animals, but between non-cooperative and cooperative relations, the latter being more fully social – where such carries with it even the implication of being *socialist* (Shalin 1988). Thus, Mead writes

We have used the term 'social' in its broadest and strictest sense; but in that quite common narrower sense, in which it bears an ethical connotation, only the fundamental physiological human impulses or behaviour tendencies ... which are friendly, or which make for friendliness and co-operation among the individuals motivated by them... are 'social' or lead to 'social' conduct; whereas those impulses or behaviour tendencies of the latter class (those which are hostile, or which make for hostility and antagonism among the individuals motivated by them) are 'anti-social' or lead to 'anti-social' conduct...yet[,] in the broadest and strictest non-ethical sense they are obviously no less social than are the former class of such impulses or behaviour tendencies (1934: 304).

The conflation of ethical and theoretical/empirical terms in this passage may be unsettling for those who prefer to keep their moral and empirical statements at arm's length from each other. However, for ethical reasons, Mead is an advocate of cooperation, which he sees as ethical rationality. If, in the significant

gesture, I call out the same attitude in the other as I call out in myself, this is not at all unlike an action in which I do to the other what I would have them do unto me (a religious principle developed in secular terms in Kant's categorical imperative). It is for this reason that Mead's sociological thinking is so important to Jürgen Habermas's *Theory of Communicative Action* (1987).

3.15 As much as Blumer made of Mead's work, Mead is not (only) a proto-Symbolic Interactionist and does not think that all human action and interaction is organised by symbolic meaning. Indeed, much of human social behaviour consists of gestures, and not of symbolic gestures. Boxers are not making significant gestures to one another in the ring (1934: 68). They gesture towards each other, but each is not trying to do to themselves what they are doing to the other. Likewise, the 'bully' is not trying to intimidate himself as he endeavours to make the other bow to his wishes (p. 66). To dominate is not to engage in the significant gesture, nor is it fully social in the moral sense; the associated gestures are more properly considered anti-social, rather than social behaviours. We need to understand Mead's parable of the growling dogs in the same light: the growling dogs are described exactly as Mead describes humans in parallel situations.

Conclusion

4.1 Mead may treat human beings as to some degree exceptional because of our extensive use of, and dependence on, significant gestures for social coordination, and the construction of complex institutions. Nonetheless, this is more a matter of degree than an absolute difference. Social life is not dependent on the significant gesture for Mead – as it would be for Symbolic Interactionism: the basic mechanism of social life is, in the first instance, the gesture, which provides the essential coordinating mechanism for both human and nonhuman social life. All animals are on a continuum from less to more social, and Mead's work includes important examples of nonhuman animals using significant gestures. In treating all animals as situated on continua of difference, rather than simply distinguishing between humans and animals, Mead was far ahead of his time.

4.2 Even if Mead is not quite the anthropocentric boundary-defender as some of his critics have maintained, the criticisms themselves have been extraordinarily productive for rethinking the human/animal divide and multispecies social relations. The latter is particularly underdeveloped in Mead's work, even in those places where we would most hope to find it: are there humans holding firmly to the leashes of the growling dogs? Who is placing the canary and the sparrow's cages in close proximity that they are able to take on the role of the other? And who watches all of these intra-species interactions?

4.3 The pioneering interspecies ethnographic work of Sanders (1999, 2003), Alger and Alger (1999, 2003), Irvine (2004) and Jerolmack (2009, 2013), among others, has provided the impetus and starting point which opens up Mead's text for re-reading in light of the animal turn. Mead's theoretical framework, we argue, has much to offer animal sociology. It provides a non-species-specific conception of the social (conjoint action and interaction mediated by gestures), which may prove useful in interspecies contexts. It may also be worth considering Mead's arguments about imitation as a starting point for further consideration of the possibility of identifying interspecies intersubjectivity: insofar as one actor is able to take on the role of the other, therein we have (at least the rudimentary beginnings of) intersubjectivity.

Notes

¹It is interesting to note that Bryant did not refer to Bain's paper in his bibliography.

²Mead uses 'vocal gesture' as opposed to 'verbal gesture'.

³Mead's somewhat imprecise use of particular terms sometimes makes it easy to misconstrue his meaning. Unfortunately for later readers, for example, he uses the terms 'consciousness' and 'intelligence' in very different ways; both have a more general meaning that he attributes to all animals, and a more specific sense which he sometimes seems to restrict to the capacities of the human animal. Thus, in its most basic sense, consciousness refers to awareness; in its more specific form, it is a specific reference to self-consciousness or 'the self'. Intelligence likewise has this double meaning: a more general sense of mentally capable (attributed to many animals, even to a 'high degree' (1934: 55)), and a more specific sense which is a synonym for 'rationality'; this latter sense derives from the German philosophical tradition from Hegel onward, which involves abstract thought, or thought thinking about thought. There is obviously a great range of degrees between the narrow and more specific terms in each case.

⁴Cudworth is critical of Franklin's zoocentric attitudinal shift towards nonhuman animals because 'it ignores the contradictions embedded in our relations with animals and the ways different kinds of relations with different specific kinds of animals are co-constitutive of our relations with each other, and cross cut by formations of social hierarchy (2011: 26).

⁵See e.g. Hillix and Rumbaugh (2004) and Trachsel (2010) for a critical discussion of this research.

⁶Konecki (2005: 72) also notes 'incoherence and inexactness in Mead's reasoning'.

⁷See e.g. the critical exchange between Hilbert (2004) and Arluke and Sanders (2004).

⁸See e.g. Alger and Alger who drew on and extended Sanders groundbreaking work on canines by conducting an ethnographic study into human–cat *and* cat–cat interactions in a no-kill cat shelter (1999,

2003).

⁹Collins uses 'natural rituals' as opposed to 'natural interaction rituals' (1989: 17).

¹⁰He also notes this may apply to adult–infant interactions too.

¹¹Since many of Mead's less anthropocentric arguments seem to have been relegated to footnotes, this indicates the importance of and need for a critical rereading and edition of Mead's collected works.

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