Semiosis & sign exchange: design for a subjective situationism, including conceptual grounds of business information modeling

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Especially after Austin and Searle, Mead offers reading more in touch with reality. At least he has his priorities right. Mead does not commit the error of mistaking the structure and rules of a language system for reality. As Chapter 11 shows, it is for different reasons that his assumptions fail to confer relevant variety.

What characterizes a community, Mead argues, is that individuals *share* a behavioral repository. Each member therefore knows what every other member is capable of qua behavior. Then, through a sign one member calls up a specific behavior by another member. This places meaning squarely in the relationship between members who are equipped, however, with identical behavioral repositories.

Recognizing the *relational* nature of meaning is a significant advance. However, Mead’s assumptions are one-sidedly social. And they even fail to explain *dynamics* at the social level. Initially, he presumes that participants in exchange relate a particular sign to identical behavior. Psychology and recognition of individual uniqueness do not enter his grounds. Neither does a change of repository. As a result, Mead’s concept of community is sterile.

Of course he acknowledges idiosyncrasy of individual behavior. But it occurs to him almost as an afterthought and it does not lead him to redesign his grounds. He adds repairs later on, only resulting in contradictions even when questioned against his own assumptions.

The example of Mead demonstrates by default the requirement for reconciling social and psychological perspectives. Participants who meet in (sign) exchange are by definition engaged in a relationship. This reflects the social aspect. But participants are also by definition different (psychological aspect), rather than similar. The most obvious difference is already that one is sign engineer and the other sign observer. Chapter 8 shows the correspondingly
different representational structures of the sign.

A community, or society, as MEAD has it acquires a strong utopian flavor. Neighborly behavior is the rule. It is especially this ideological flavor that returns in HABERMAS. They both sketch their perfect society, rather than supplying an explanatory framework for analyzing actual societies. MEAD seems unaware of his bias. HABERMAS at some point openly acknowledges the ideological nature of his theory. Subjective situationism helps to recognize that a paradox is thereby dissolved. The theory of HABERMAS has subsequently more explanatory relevance than MEAD’s. For subjective situationism holds that the bias of individual interests is not only inevitable but predominant.

Chapter 12 comments on HABERMAS’s theory of communicative action. The review is aimed at gaining a fundamental understanding of why communicative action appears as a concept in some theories of conceptual information modeling. A case is made that HABERMAS himself would probably find his concepts inappropriately applied, i.e., without regard for his overall scheme.

A reader who is not interested in criticism can skip to Chapter 13, likely after having already skipped Chapters 9, 10 and 11.
A remarkable characteristic of the concept of meaning is that theories abound. What is more, many theories can not even be aligned because (too) different assumptions underlie them. As a result they often mutually contradict fundamentally. I have already shown such irresolvable differences by discussing publications by Austin and Searle in the light of both their internal logic and the anatomy of meaning of this treatise. How is it possible that such theories all enjoy scientific recognition?

According to subjective situationism there doesn’t have to be unity in science. A particular scientific discipline may apply to particular situations, only. So, why not have different concepts of meaning in – and for the benefit of explaining – different situations, too?

I find this a valid argument. For theorists it means that they should emphasize the situational nature of their theories. In which situations does a specific theory hold, and in which not? And, of course, for relevant situations premature contradictions must always be avoided.

Let me therefore, first of all, succinctly state the situations for which I hold my anatomy of meaning applicable. It is where a sign user may be recognized who can engineer a sign and thereby offer it for exchange. He does so in the expectation of interpretation by an observer, and of that observer’s subsequent (re)action in compliance with the interests that evoked the sign.

A problem is that most theorists are not aware of ontological issues, let alone that they acknowledge situational constraints for their theoretical constructs. Or they openly sidestep such issues, as George H. Mead (1863-1931) does in Mind, Self, & Society (1934, p 332):

When [the psychologist] deals with the world about him, he just accepts it as it is. Of course, this attitude is shot through and through with metaphysical problems, but the approach is scientifically legitimate.
I don’t agree. In this chapter I demonstrate that MEAD indeed develops an interesting theory of meaning. However, and despite his own proclamation, it is not grounded on how he just accepts the world about him as it is, but on a partial idealization of his world. Now I find it even logical that especially axioms are ideas (also read: concepts), too. How could I think otherwise from the perspective of transcendental idealism? Where I believe MEAD is metaphysically mistaken is in explaining the whole from that specific, and idealized, part.

11.1 lost opportunities for inspiration

I realize this treatise doesn’t at all provide an exhaustive inventory of theories of meaning. Some particular theory, or other, is certainly found lacking. It depends on the interests of the reader. From my interests I argue that, anyway, such an inventory is a practical impossibility. Therefore, I don’t exclude the possibility of a theory largely equal to, and predating, the anatomy of meaning I have outlined here. Or the possibility of one or more theories I actually should have considered because they would have made me develop a different, better\(^2\) theory. Fully aware of the potential of justified criticism, I remark on what nonetheless strikes me as scientific negligence in some of the works under discussion.

AUSTIN, and SEARLE after him, theorize about speech acts. Is it not odd, then, that they don’t look for inspiration elsewhere, not even minimally? How can they have missed the earlier work of, for example, MEAD? For the concept of the act is central to MEAD’s theory of meaning. Or don’t they miss it but, rather, choose not to bother?

I gather most persons, academics included, guard their hard-won – often situationally differentiated – axiomatic systems. When firmly established, they decline to comply with requests for even slight modification. And a most effective act of non-compliance is – the pretense of – non-exchange. That is, a sign is simply ignored. Whether or not a different theory has actually come to the attention of the theorist aiming to establish himself or, especially, to

\[1.\] That book is published posthumously. C.W. MORRIS edits lecture notes, mainly taken during MEAD’s 1927 course in social psychology. As with the books ‘by’ PEIRCE, DE SAUSSURE, and AUSTIN, I acknowledge the editing process. However, I assume – again falsely, in some way, no doubt – MEAD to be the single author of Mind, Self, & Society.

\[2.\] What is good? Better? Best? A theory is better than another theory when it covers more situations and/or leads to fewer premature contradictions. It is even better when fewer contradictions occur as it is applied to fewer situations.
maintain an already established position, the result of not venturing beyond his own discipline is especially that of consolidating its axiomatic system. Such grounds, however, don’t serve a purpose for themselves. D.H. Wrong points to the danger of forgetting about the relevance of theory (1970, p 29):

If the initiating questions are forgotten, we readily misconstrue the task of theory[,] and the answers previous thinkers have given become narrowly confining conceptual prisons, degenerating into little more than a special, professional vocabulary applied to situations and events that can be described with equal or greater precision in ordinary language.

Forgetfulness of the questions that are the starting points of inquiry leads us to ignore the substantive assumptions “buried” in our concepts and commits us to a one-sided view of reality.

Speech act theory, too, could benefit greatly from an orientation outside traditional language philosophy. By the time Austin and Searle develop their theories, especially social psychology has surely advanced enough to supply valuable inspiration. But there is no trace of cross-fertilization, let alone of synthesis. The bias of W.P. Alston (1964) confirms how analytically oriented theorists shape the establishment of language philosophy.

Mead is credited as a pioneer of the discipline of social psychology. Around 1890, he studies for three years in Germany. There he is influenced by Wilhelm Wundt (1832-1920) who is acknowledged as the founder of experimental psychology. This physiological basis is clearly recognizable in Mead’s


4. Hothersall, 1984. Note 11 in Chapter 3 points out that Wundt does take explicit metaphysics seriously. What is especially relevant at this stage is that, using the concept of community (Gemeinschaft, Gesamtheit), Wundt’s System der Philosophie (1889) ends on a distinctly social note (p 621): “Darum ist von Anfang an der Einzelne in weit höherem Maße durch die Gemeinschaft, als diese durch den Einzelnen bestimmt.” (My translation: “Fundamentally, the determining influence of the community on the individual is far greater than the other way around.”)

Mead even removes the duality, as I will demonstrate later in this chapter. Actually, there are several passages in Wundt’s book that seem to reappear in the neighborly doctrine of Mead, who adds radical emphasis on the social determinants. Wundt still writes, for example (p 635): “So erweist sich […] die organische Verbindung der Menschheit zu einer einzigen sittlichten Gesamtpersönlichkeit als ein letztes, vielleicht nie wirklich erreichbares, aber doch immerfort zu erstrebendes Ideal.” (My translation: “Thus the organic association of humanity presents itself as a single, communal moral personality. It is an ultimate ideal that, although it may remain forever beyond reach, should always be pursued.”) With Mead, such community is no longer a lofty goal, but the assumption on which his social theory rests. The communal moral personality of Wundt becomes Mead’s generalized other (my introduction of this concept of Mead follows later in this chapter). A detailed comparison between
writings. They are, indeed, a pleasure to read for an engineer like myself because, in spite of his exaggerated idealization, he largely remains in touch with questions about reality. At the time, his answers surely are an important theoretical advance. I believe the anatomy of meaning, proposing that every sign is a request for compliance, is now an improved theory.

11.2 opposing quadrants

As the title justly indicates, Mind, Self, & Society is a work of great depth and breadth. The subtitle reads: from the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist. Its major theme is (p 336) “the relation of the conduct of the individual to the environment.” The emphasis on conduct makes MEAD a behaviorist. Placing individual behavior within a particular environment completes the label of social behaviorist. Because he acknowledges different environments or, as he also calls them, situations, MEAD can already be considered a situationist in the sense of Chapter 3 of this treatise.

For his conceptual system MEAD feels forced to make a choice of priority. What comes first, the chicken or the egg? Transposing this proverbial question to his own theme, he argues for (p 82) the necessity, in social psychology, of starting off with the initial assumption of an ongoing social process of experience and behavior in which any given group of human individuals is involved.

However, his use of “social” may be interpreted in different ways. At its most general, social stands for any interaction between the individual organism and his environment. Actually, social action is almost a pleonasm. For all environmentally oriented action is, by such definition, social.

Within social action in its most general sense MEAD distinguishes four subclasses. To aid my discussion of Mind, Self, & Society, I call them here by separate names of my own invention (except of course when directly quoting MEAD). In addition I project MEAD’s subclasses of social action on a two-dimensional plane. Its horizontal axis has at its opposing extremes the orientations at community and individuality, respectively. The opposites at the vertical axis are occupied by identity and difference, respectively. To start with, Figure 11.2.1 shows this bare coordination scheme. Actually, it does not really classify (sub)classes of social acts but rather classes of attitudes of the individual organism who is initiating (social) acts.

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5. As it already is, in fact, with SCHOPENHAUER who studies medicine for some time (SAFRANSKI, 1987).
As I have already commented, MEAD himself doesn’t apply such a scheme, at least not explicitly. But it is highly instructive to interpret his statements against this background. In the development of his theory, movements may be detected from quadrant to quadrant in the matrix of attitudes.

Directly following WUNDT, MEAD introduces language use by referring to gestures (p 14):

Dogs approaching each other in hostile attitude carry on such a language of gestures. They walk around each other, growling and snapping, and waiting for the opportunity to attack. Already at this early stage of his exposition, I disagree with MEAD. Let me, as a thought experiment, take the perspective of one of the dogs. When he growls at the other dog, this does not at all mean he wants to fight. On the contrary. If he really wants that, he would just … fight. Action itself can only be immediate. Why alert the other dog, why give him a chance to prepare? I am inclined to say that the dog wants something else. In fact, he probably even wants to avoid a fight by behaving aggressively. A more balanced view is already expressed by H.C. SHANDS who argues (1977, p 13):

If we observe a threatening posture in one of a pair of animals and predict that the animal will soon be involved in a fight, we may find ourselves very badly mistaken. In many such situations, a threatening posture on the part of the protagonist is followed by the assumption of a submissive posture on the part of the antagonist.

Suppose, instead, one dog wants the other dog to disappear. He can right away fight him with that objective. But he might lose. And of course, then he would have to leave himself. Add to this possible outcome that fighting takes a lot of energy. He may get injured, etcetera. His particular gesture might therefore just be the optimal choice to request compliance from the other dog. So, he doesn’t really show that he wants to fight. All he is showing is that he is prepared to fight to get what he really wants. Or the dog may even be bluffing. Then, he may be just pretending he is prepared to fight. He might in fact be too scared to fight but see no other option that to appear intimidating.
Anyway, his gesture is action, too. And as action it is also always immediate about what he wants. When he acts, say, non-fightingly, at least at that particular moment he doesn’t want to fight. He will be bodily known to want something when he actually does it. As Schopenhauer remarks (1813, 1847; p 101):

zwischen dem Willensakt und der Leibesaktion ist gar kein Kausalzusammenhang; sondern Beide sind unmittelbar Eins und das Selbe, welches doppelt wahrgenommen wird: ein Mal im Selbstbewußtsein, oder innern Sinn, als Willensakt und zugleich in der äußern, räumlichen Gehirnanschauung, als Leibesaktion.

between the act of will and the bodily action there is no causal connexion whatever; on the contrary, the two are directly one and the same thing perceived in a double way, namely in self-consciousness or the inner sense as an act of will, and simultaneously in external spatial brain-perception, as bodily action.

A simple feedback loop is sufficient for acquiring the behavior of growling at other dogs as a means to make them take their distance. When successful, the dog will do it again in a similar-enough situation. And when not, next time around he must try another gesture. He has simply learned behavior.

I am in complete agreement with Mead, however, that language as such, that is, isolated from an act, does not carry meaning. What does create, so to speak, meaning is the language use in a particular situational relationship. Taking the liberty of extending Voloshinov’s philosophy beyond its original realm of human communication, I consider his idea of integrating sign with existence generally valid (1929, p 21):

The process of the causal shaping of the sign by existence stand[s] out as a process of genuine existence-to-sign transit, of genuine dialectical refraction of existence in the sign.

From this perspective, language as such does not even exist. Nor does meaning as such. It is always (p 13) “a part of social behavior,” of the act.

This, say, act speech is of course a perspective that is the opposite of that of speech act. The behaviorist perspective is definitely more fruitful (Mead, 1934, pp 75-76):

Meaning arises and lies within the field of the relation between the gesture of a given human organism and the subsequent behavior of this organism as indicated to another human organism by that gesture. If that gesture does so indicate to another organism the subsequent (or resultant) behavior of the given organism, then it has meaning.

Indeed, the similarities between Voloshinov and Mead are striking. It is therefore only right that current proponents of dialogical theory almost without exception refer to both authors (Wold, editor, 1993).

Mead’s approach still takes gestures too literally when compared to the anatomy of meaning developed in this treatise. He misses the point that an organism will often show both what he wants, and how he proposes to act when the other organism does not comply. It is the proven concept for any solid contract; both positive and negative consummation of a proposed trans-
action are treated. MEAD mistakes the threat, or promise, or whatever, for the organism’s ‘real’ interest that leads the sign user to engineer and exchange a particular sign. He is actually also a victim of the deceit underlying the sign he comments upon.

The aggressive behavior falls within the attitudinal quadrant as determined by the poles of individuality and difference. In Figure 11.2.1 it occupies the lower right-hand corner. In fact, later in his book MEAD does write explicitly about what he calls antisocial behavior. Here I call it hostile, or antagonistic.

For the moment MEAD elaborates on the concept of gesture, as introduced through his example of the growling dogs. Quite rightly, he says that (p 14)

[we] are too prone […] to approach language as the philologist does, from the standpoint of the symbol that is used.

His own approach is that (p 17)

[Language has to be studied from the point of view of the gestural type of conduct within which it existed without being as such a definitive language. And we have to see how the communicative function could have arisen out of that prior sort of conduct.

And MEAD accords to Wundt the (p 42)

very valuable conception of the gesture as that which becomes later a symbol, but which is to be found in its earlier stages as part of the social act. It is that part of the social act which serves as a stimulus to other forms involved in the same social act.

So (p 43),

[the] term “gesture” may be identified with these beginnings of social acts which are stimuli for the response of other forms.

For Wundt, as MEAD reports with compliance, gestures (p 44) “became the tools through which the other forms responded.” MEAD continues that

[when] gestures did give rise to a certain response, they were themselves changed in response to the change which took place in the other form.

It sounds difficult, but MEAD is essentially describing the dynamics of gesture exchange:

[We] have a set of adjustments of the two forms carrying out a common social act. I can only make sense out of MEAD’s subsequent exposition, though, when I assume he shifts his perspective to another quadrant as suggested by Figure 11.2.1. It sounds like any social act has built-in adjustment right from the start. For he states that (p 47)

[gestures become significant symbols when they implicitly arouse in an individual making them the same responses which they explicitly arouse, or are supposed to arouse, in other individuals, the individuals to whom they are addressed.

I believe MEAD is now theorizing exclusively from – please note: what I have introduced as – the quadrant determined by the poles of identity and community, i.e., from what lies exactly opposed to the quadrant reflecting antagonistic behavior. It is the area of neighborly, cooperative behavior.6 There, the indi-
individual identifies himself completely with the community he is a member of. For the individual’s consciousness of the content and flow of meaning involved depends on his thus taking the attitude of the other toward his own gestures. In this way every gesture comes within a given social group or community to stand for a particular act or response, namely the act or response which it calls forth explicitly in the individual to whom it is addressed, and implicitly in the individual who makes it; and this particular act or response is its meaning as a significant symbol.

I agree with MEAD where he means that a sign engineer empathizes with potential sign observers. But I strongly disagree that, in general, the sign engineer fully sympathizes with them. Such identity is impossible. He cannot take “the attitude of the other toward his own gestures” because he is always promoting his own interests. Every individual is a unique objectification of the will and therefore shows uniquely different interests (SCHOPENHAUER). And when – mistaken or not – a particular sign user believes it fits his interests to fully identify himself with a particular community, he will attempt do so, too. But that will never completely explain his behavior for, again, uniqueness precludes identification between individuals. Figure 11.2.2 shows, in my terminology that is, the two classes of behavioral attitudes so far discussed.

Figure 11.2.2.
Opposition of behavioral attitudes.

11.3 empathy, not absolute solidarity

One specific organism taking “the attitude of the other” is a social concept that is clearly limited to neighborly behavior. In spite of its limitation, MEAD applies it as the ground for deriving concepts such as meaning, consciousness, mind, and self. Throughout Mind, Self, & Society he repeats it as a principle, or axiom. At the same time, he shows awareness of the conditional nature of that very principle (p 56):
What is essential is co-operative activity, so that the gesture of one form calls out the proper response to others.

I am afraid what MEAD considers “proper” conduct guides him toward his theory, rather than being explained by it. For he commits himself firmly to giving priority to social process over participating organisms. His conceptual system expresses his utopian view of society, i.e., as a collection of individuals sharing their attitudes, and therefore sharing (identical) meaning, too. And though he clearly recognizes other behavior, MEAD still tries to explain it from that praiseworthy, but limited, perspective of neighborly action. He doesn't succeed, of course. His failure undermines his theory in so far as he claims wider application for it. From a Schopenhauerian perspective I just don’t believe that (p 62)

the vocal gesture […] is one of those social stimuli which affect the form that makes it in the same fashion that it affects the form when made by another. That is, we can hear ourselves talking, and the import of what we say is the same to ourselves that it is to others.

This does not explain, at all, what meaning is. It is, rather, a utopian idea of meaning.

I believe it is realistic to start reasoning, not from an evident subclass of attitudes, but from the most general behavioral concept possible. That is SCHOPENHAUER’s will. At least I have not discovered, or thought up myself, a superior alternative. So, an interest-driven organism promotes his … own interests. An enlightened organism also promotes the interests of others toward fulfillment of his own interests. Being interest-driven doesn’t at all prevent an individual to empathize with – one or more other individuals in – one or more communities. Indeed, in practical life, every individual person must participate to some extent in social action. But the pervasiveness of social involvement does not yet qualify it as the single ground for a theory of meaning, etcetera.

What makes MEAD’s *Mind, Self, & Society* so interesting to read, despite his theoretical bias toward neighborly behavior, is that he nevertheless packs it with detailed insight into what I have reconstructed here as different attitudinal quadrants of a comprehensive interpretation matrix (see Figure 11.2.1). Actually, a society that is only ‘lived’ by persons identifying with it through fully shared attitudes would be utterly boring. I therefore agree with his emphasis on differences later in his book (p 310):

Ultimately and fundamentally societies develop in complexity of organization only by

6. BALDWIN writes (1986, p 7): “A brief review of Mead's life provides useful background information for understanding his intellectual work.” What seems relevant is that his father was a church minister. MEAD comes to deny concepts of the supernatural but apparently retains the earthly philosophy of christianity.
means of the progressive achievement of greater and greater degrees of functional, behavioristic differentiation among the individuals who constitute them. I also believe that, at this point of his argument, Mead is right to attribute constitutional character to the individual. It makes his insistence on his biased assumptions all the more peculiar. Another example of a statement of his more limited principle is that (p 67)

[the meaning of what we are saying is the tendency to respond to it. You ask somebody to bring a visitor a chair. You arouse the tendency to get the chair in the other, but if he is slow to act you get the chair yourself. You are always replying to yourself, just as other people reply.

First of all, and perhaps regretfully, I know a good many persons who would not even dream of following up themselves on an order they have issued but that somebody else subsequently refuses to carry out. When the request is made from an antagonistic attitude, the sign engineer will certainly not comply himself. And Mead’s assumption of a priori shared attitudes also does not make strictly logical sense. For it could equally be possible that the tendency of refusal is aroused in the other person. Now that would mean that the person who issues the order refuses to get it, too.

I could fill page after page with quotations from Mead, all amounting to his assumption that (p 69)

[we are, especially through the use of vocal gestures, continually arousing in ourselves those responses which we call out in other persons.

Again and again, I don’t think so. Though equally assuming the priority of social process, Voloshinov doesn’t refer to the identity of response. What he maintains, more neutrally, is that (1929, p 102)

[any genuine kind of understanding will be active and will constitute the germ of a response. [...] To understand another person’s utterance means to orient oneself with respect to it, to find the proper place for it in the corresponding context. [...] In essence, meaning belongs to a word in its position between speakers; that is, meaning is realized only in the process of active, responsive understanding. [...] Meaning is the effect of interaction between speaker and [p 103] listener produced via the material of a particular sound complex.

Applying the Schopenhauerian perspective outlined in Chapter 6, more radically I hypothesize that a sign engineer seeks to promote his interests. He may feel the need, or the opportunity, to seek help. His particular interest defines one or more observers for him. He empathizes with them only to the extent of enhancing the success of compliance that the sign he will offer for exchange is attempted to elicit. Depending on the boundaries for time and space the sign engineer applies, through his empathy he takes more or less of his relationship with the observer(s) into consideration. In his turn, every observer is equally active in promoting his interests with characteristic (also read: situa-
tional) empathy.

On p 70 of Mind, Self, & Society MEAD also uses the terminology of request but he still advocates complete solidarity between participants in the act of neighborliness:

Your request stirred up in you that same response which you stirred up in the other individual.

An encompassing theory of meaning must not start from identity but from difference. The rare event of identity, should it ever occur, is then easily explained as the absence of difference. Now, relevant differences are not traced by putting social acts committed from a neighborly attitude highest in the conceptual order. Many premature contradictions are eliminated, simply by applying the conceptual scheme of Schopenhauer. But MEAD is of course right that meaning occurs in the act. And precisely because it occurs right there, that very social act does not provide the necessary background perspective for serious explanation. It needs other ‘variables,’ and this is exactly the theoretical role of the – make-up of the – participants in sign exchange. Apart from materialistic determinism, there is nothing beyond some general force of life to conceptualize. That is all, and everything, that the fiction of the will is.

11.4 triadic convergence

In his book MEAD doesn’t mention PEIRCE at all. But he does introduce a triad (p 76):

A gesture by one organism, the resultant of a social act in which the gesture is an early phase, and the response of another organism to the gesture, are the relata in a triple or threefold relationship of gesture to first organism, of gesture to second organism, and of gesture to subsequent phases of the given social act; and this threefold relationship constitutes the matrix within which meaning arises, or which develops into the field of meaning. The gesture stands for a certain resultant of the social act, a resultant to which there is a definite response on the part of the individuals involved therein; so that meaning is given or stated in terms of response. Meaning is implicit—if not always explicit—in the relationship among the various phases of the social act to which it refers, and out of which it develops. And its development takes place in terms of symbolization at the human evolutionary level.

This contrasts with PEIRCE whose concept is one of triadic dynamics occurring inside the intellect of the sign user. PEIRCE also views the process of sign use as essentially open-ended. One interpretant leads to the next, and so on. I have included some feedback mechanism so that each process instance may come, even temporarily, to an end (see § 2.3). MEAD, on the other hand, reasons from a closed set of neighborly acts, only (p 80):
This threefold or triadic relation between gesture, adjustive response, and resultant of the social act which the gesture initiates is the basis of meaning; for the existence of meaning depends on the fact that the adjustive response of the second organism is directed toward the resultant of the given social act as initiated and indicated by the gesture of the first organism. The basis of meaning is thus objectively there in social conduct.

MEAD overlooks that “[t]he basis of meaning is thus objectively there in social conduct” because he assumes it to be, in the first place. It makes his concept of meaning, though different in many ways, just as literal as AUSTIN’s and SEARLE’s (p 89):

The significant gesture or symbol always presupposes for its significance the social process or experience and behavior in which it arises.

Indeed, such an explanation might do for a stable society, stable in the sense that the set of social acts is both fixed, and known and agreed upon by all members. Of course, MEAD recognizes social dynamics. But he doesn’t reckon with them for his concept of meaning.

Contrasting him with PEIRCE, I interpret MEAD as suggesting that inside an organism’s intellect there are no complex, generative dynamics of semiosis. Instead, dynamics of symbolic interaction only rest in a fairly straightforward manner on a stable, a priori existing, relationship between organisms. Meaning according to MEAD appears to be a matter of, first of all, setting the desired resultant as the agenda. Next, the appropriate gesture is selected, and subsequently executed. Finally, this gesture by the first organism is trusted upon to evoke the necessary cooperative response by the second organism in
achieving the originally desired resultant. For the arousal of like attitudes and corresponding resultants is MEAD’s precondition of meaning. It is a tautological report.

Figure 11.4.1 captures the sequence of moves derived from MEAD’s account. It enables MEAD’s triad to be easily traced. The first angle [1] he mentions is the “relationship of gesture to first organism.” It corresponds to selecting gesture \( m \), given – the acting of – neighborly act \( n \). The second angle [2], relationship “of gesture to second organism,” may be conceived of, on the basis of gesture \( m \), as the invocation of joining the neighborly act \( n \). And then, the third angle [3] relates act \( n \) to initial gesture \( m \) [3a], and to response \( p \) [3b], respectively. The relationships [1] and [3a] are identical. That is the relationship, according to MEAD existing in all participants, “of gesture to subsequent phases of the given social act.” Thus is the triangle closed, he suggests. The neighborly act \( n \) is now performed jointly by the first and the second organism. I find it characteristic that MEAD writes of a given act. In his scheme, the meaning of a gesture is the conventional neighborly cooperation it activates.

![Figure 11.4.2. Preparing the triad of MEAD’s social act.](image1)

![Figure 11.4.3. The triad of MEAD’s social act.](image2)
Figure 11.4.2 prepares the construction of a triangle from – of course, my interpretation of – MEAD’s statements. The actual triangle is shown in Figure 11.4.3.

Interestingly enough, this triad as constructed from MEAD’s instructions largely resembles the triad of PEIRCE. The “subsequent phases of the given social act” are an object. The sign user at time $t_n$ is the first organism, while that very same sign user at time $t_{n+1}$ is the second organism. Through subsequent ‘gestures,’ the sign user develops his objectified reality, rather than starts from what is given as social reality.7

### 11.5 social instrumentality

MEAD also doesn’t mention SCHOPENHAUER in Mind, Self, & Society. There are nevertheless remarkable correspondences. They become easy to recognize when instrumental is substituted for social. A typical passage from MEAD reads (p 133):

The subjective experience of the individual must be brought into relation with the natural, sociobiological activities of the brain in order to render an acceptable account of mind possible at all; and this can be done only if the social nature of mind is recognized.

This statement is consistent with MEAD’s first principle of the social act. But instead placing the will and its individual objectifications first, leads to a similar conclusion. It is just a matter of reversing themes. Starting from an individual person as an objectification of the will, that person’s brain may be taken as an element – just one, for there is more to the body – of the physiological instrumentation of his intellect. Next, his intellect (also read: mind) is a functional instrument – and, again, ‘only’ one element of it – for necessarily willful8 behavior. And much of an individual’s behavior is outwardly directed, i.e., it concerns exchanges with his environment. It is therefore equally valid to state that “an acceptable account of mind […] can be [rendered] only if the” instrumental “nature of mind is recognized.” MEAD can be brought in line with SCHOPENHAUER by saying that the intellect/mind is socially instrumental for the individual ‘owning’ it.

Why insist, as MEAD does, that an individual is only socially active? Even when I would agree with MEAD on the all-pervasiveness of the social act, I still favor explaining what happens between individuals from premises about indi-

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7. I have not included an enneadic elaboration of MEAD’s triad. It would place acts in particular situations, etcetera.

8. There is nothing but willful behavior, of course.
viduals, rather than the other way around.

Mead feels forced to move in Schopenhauer’s direction – again, without ever mentioning him9 – when he admits that (p 147)

...[t]here is, of course, a great deal in one’s conversation with others that does not arouse in one’s self the same response it arouses in others.

Precisely. But Mead still tries to limit it to “the case of emotional attitudes.” This of course implies the concept of the rational attitude. Then from Mead it does not come as a surprise that (p 149)

...[r]ationality means that the type of response which we call out in others should be so called out in ourselves. ... For what is essential to communication is that the symbol should arouse in one’s self what it arouses in the other individual. It must have that sort of universality to any person who finds himself in the same situation.

Concepts such as meaning, mind, and rational behavior, all originate implicitly from Mead’s concept of the neighborly act. In my scheme of Figure 11.2.1 it only occupies one quadrant. Is Mead actually redefining meaning in its neighborly sense as rational meaning? For meaning clearly also occurs in the other three quadrants. But elsewhere it is even the purpose of the sign engineer not to arouse with his sign “in one’s self what it arouses in the other individual.”

I don’t believe it helps to call irrational all behavior except neighborly acts. Actually, what is irrational from a Schopenhauerean perspective often is precisely such behavior between neighbors as they feel required to oblige with. Mead defines (p 154):

The organized community or social group which gives to the individual his unity or self may be called “the generalized other.”

This concept of the generalized other indeed shares many characteristics with what I have introduced, in § 8.4, as the group as a personalized abstraction. My emphasis, though, is quite different. I stress compliance with interests. A request may also be seen as preparation of compliance at a much later time and, possibly, a very different place.10 When the continued presence of a particular person is not guaranteed an abstraction may be invoked. And whenever the need for compliance arises, that abstraction is in turn ‘represented’ by

9. Having studied for three years in Germany just when Schopenhauer enjoys a high reputation, it seems unlikely that Mead escapes from being influenced by the former’s publications, directly or indirectly. Some passages, especially about the self (Part III of Mind, Self, & Society), read as mere repetitions of Schopenhauer’s views. Yet, Schopenhauer is not treated, nor is Wundt for that matter, in Mead’s Movements of Thought in the Nineteenth Century (1936).

10. This is a usual precaution against non-compliance by the immediate participants in the exchange. Any mature contract, for example, also specifies what needs to happen when the parties to it fail to comply to its primarily intended purpose.
actual persons who are available at the required time and place. MEAD, howev-

er, narrows his attention again to shared attitudes. It limits the applicability of

his concepts.

A wider scope results from assuming different attitudes, making the occur-

rence of an identical attitude a special case of difference. Though he starts

from very different assumptions, MEAD essentially arrives at a similar notion

of a priori meaning as AUSTIN, SEARLE and ECO do, that is, as existing inde-

pendently of – in fact, even as a precondition for – particular sign exchanges

and related process instances of individual sign use (p 155):

It is in the form of the generalized other that the social process influences the behavior of

the individuals involved in it and carrying it on, i.e., that the community exercises control

over the conduct of its individual members; for it is in this form that the social process or

community enters as a determining factor into the individual’s thinking.

Here it is clearly recognizable where SCHOPENHAUER and MEAD, in spite of

the latter’s agreement on important points, harbor fundamentally different

concepts. The former doesn’t place “control over the conduct of its individ-

ual members” in the hands of “the social process or community.” Individual

behavior is ultimately controlled by the individual’s will. The social process,

then, should be explained from exchanges in all modes of causation between

individuals. It might of course be convenient to abstract a particular social

process onto a social object, that is, to conceptualize an institution. But it must

always be clear that such institutions are ‘just’ concepts.11

VOLOSHINOV and MEAD both contrast SCHOPENHAUER with their priority

of the social over the psychological. Several quotations taken from VOLOSHI-

NOV (1929) make his position clear:

[p 12] The individual consciousness not only cannot be used to explain everything, but, on

the contrary, is itself in need of explanation from the vantage point of the social, ideological

medium. The individual consciousness is a social-ideological fact.

11. I would like to offer a metaphor, derived

from PLATO’s cave. In the original metaphor,

what the case dweller observes are appear-

ances, only. The shadow on the wall is not

‘the real thing’ or, as PLATO suggests, the

idea. Now suppose the projection on the wall

shows individuals engaged in exchanges.

Does it make sense to call that appearance

a(n) (social) institution? Yes, why not? But it

must be clear that it is determined by it being

a projection in the first place, by the angle of

projection, by the point of view of the

observer, etcetera. Perhaps MEAD has some-

thing similar in mind (p 242): “The institu-

tions of society, such as libraries, systems of

transportation, the complex interrelationship

of individuals reached in political organiza-

tions, are nothing but ways of throwing on

the social screen, so to speak, in enlarged

fashion the complexities existing in the cen-

tral nervous system, and they must, of

course, express functionally the operation of

this system.”
Consciousness takes shape and being in the material of signs created by an organized group in the process of its social intercourse.

Objective psychology must be grounded in the study of ideologies. The reality of ideological phenomena is the objective reality of social signs. The laws of this reality are the laws of semiotic communication and are directly determined by the total aggregate of social and economic laws.

Of course, all the social accents of ideological themes make their way also into the individual consciousness (which, as we know, is ideological through and through) and there take on the semblance of individual accents, since the individual consciousness assimilates them as its own. However, the source of these accents is not the individual consciousness. Accent, as such, is interindividual.

The conscious psyche is a socioideological fact. The processes that basically define the content of the psyche occur not inside but outside the individual organism, although they involve its participation.

The reality of the inner psyche is the same reality as that of the sign. By its very existential nature, the subjective psyche is to be localized somewhere between the organism and the outside world, on the borderline separating these two spheres of reality.

Thus the personality of the speaker, taken from within, so to speak, turns out to be wholly a product of social interrelations. Not only its outward expression but also its inner experience are social territory. Consequently, the whole route between inner experience (the “experience”) and its outward objectification (the “utterance”) lies entirely across social territory. When an experience reaches the stage of actualization in a full-fledged utterance, its social orientation acquires added complexity by focusing on the immediate social circumstances of discourse and, above all, upon actual addressees.

When premature contradictions arise during ongoing conceptual derivation, their origin often lies with such institutional concepts. A new start is mandatory. The institution must be deconstructed into ‘constituting social processes’ which, in turn, require deconstruction into participating individuals. And there is nothing left to deconstruct beyond the interests of an individual, i.e., beyond his will that manifests itself through behavior. 

It is interesting to see how MEAD tries to reason himself out of the difficulties his limited axiomatic system is causing him. He does acknowledge there are (p 166) “experiences which we may at all times identify with selves” but I do not now want to discuss metaphysical problems, but I do want to insist that the self has a sort of structure that arises in social conduct that is entirely distinguishable from this so-called subjective experience of these particular sets of objects to which the organism alone has access.

12. SCHOPENHAUER is a behaviorist, too. I am inclined to say that he is a pure behaviorist, even, and not as MEAD proclaims himself, a social behaviorist.

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Well, he may “want to insist” but that doesn’t make it any more credible. He admits, anyway, that what “arises in social conduct” is not all there is to the self. Because he states that “the two sets of phenomena stand on entirely different levels,” MEAD retains his primacy of the social act. I agree that subjective and social phenomena occur at different levels of conceptualization. In fact, it is precisely why the subjective world provides the background perspective for — explaining — the social world. My conceptual priority, following SCHOPENHAUER, therefore lies with the individual and his interests.

Figure 11.5.1. Finally acknowledging individualistic behavior.

Recognizing that not all behavior is neighborly, MEAD after all draws up a structural theory of the self, too. He calls its elements the “I” and the “me.” Roughly speaking, what he has earlier defined as “the generalized other” becomes the “me.” An organism does not immediately behave as its “me,” though. Structurally, the “me” informs the “I” who actually decides on the action (p 175):

The “I” is the response of the organism to the attitudes of the others; the “me” is the organized set of attitudes of others which one himself assumes.

Instead of being committed to a fixed repertoire of social acts, an individual is suddenly allowed indeterminacy of his behavior (p 175):

The response […] as it appears in his immediate experience is uncertain, and it is that which constitutes the “I.”

I interpret this as the belated introduction of what SCHOPENHAUER proposes as the will. From the perspective of the matrix of Figure 11.2.1, MEAD is now ready to acknowledge as social behavior actions that an organism undertakes from his individual identity. My interpretation scheme is updated accordingly as Figure 11.5.1.

The limited — for strictly socially determined — scope of MEAD’s concepts of meaning, mind and self is actually confirmed by his distinctively Schopenhauerean remarks. I select a few, indicating the extent to which MEAD
does after all recognize behavior deviating from control of the generalized other (for neighborly acts, see upper left-hand corner in Figure 11.5.1):

[p 175] The “I” is his action over against the social situation within his own conduct, and it gets into experience only after he has carried out the act.

[p 177] That movement into the future is the step, so to speak, of the ego, of the “I.” It is something that is not given in the “me.”

[p 177] Now, the attitudes [an individual] is taking toward [others] are present in his own experience, but his response to them will contain a novel element. The “I” gives the sense of freedom, of initiative.

[p 178] [T]he “I” is something that is never entirely calculable. The “me” does call for a certain sort of “I” in so far as we meet the obligations that are given in conduct itself, but the “I” is always something different from what the situation itself calls for.

[p 204] The possibilities of the “I” belong to that which is actually going on, taking place, and it is in some sense the most fascinating part of our experience. It is there that novelty arises and it is there that our most important values are located. It is the realization in some sense of this self that we are continually seeking.

But then, MEAD apparently doesn’t want to completely relinquish his earlier conceptual investments. Even after he so clearly acknowledges the essentially individual nature of the “I” he states that (p 178)

[i]f the self is essentially a social process going on with these two distinguishable phases [of the “I” and the “me], it is always something different from what the situation itself calls for.

My conclusion from his sketch of the “I” would be radically different. It effectively undermines the earlier assumptions on convention. Rather than a social ground for behavior, how MEAD presents the “I” clearly points at a psychological ground. It is possible to arrive at social explanations with requisite variety starting from adequate psychological assumptions. The other way around doesn’t work as MEAD’s theory confirms.

11.6 full spectrum of behavior

The distinction between the “I” and the “me” within the individual self does not give MEAD reason to restructure his theory of the social act. He remains committed to what I consider the special case of a priori agreement upon cooperative, neighborly action that only needs an initiating gesture to materialize. But near the end of Mind, Self, & Society he does reframe his theory somewhat. It is where he writes that (p 281)

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there is in human society a universality that expresses itself very early in two different ways—one on the religious side and the other on the economic side. Again roughly speaking, his original class of social acts now becomes the sub-
class of religiously inspired acts. It is what I have presented right from the start as the subclass of neighborly acts. And MEAD adds the subclass for which the lower left-hand corner of my overall interpretation matrix is reserved. When an individual behaves with a sense of community but, at the same time, emphasizes the difference between himself and the other, he is involved in trading. It fits the quadrant of economic behavior. See Figure 11.6.1 for the completed matrix in support of my interpretation of MEAD's *Mind, Self, & Society*.

![Figure 11.6.1.](image)

Completed interpretation matrix.

MEAD holds that religious and economic attitudes find expression in all societies. That is precisely why he calls them (p 297) universal in their character, and so far as they get expression they tend to build up in some sense a common community which is as universal as the attitudes themselves. So, only what he considers “common” deserves recognition as action. But from the perspective of the will, such community-oriented actions are not the rule. With behavior under the ‘rule’ of the will, acts are individuality-oriented. This makes the oppositions underlying my matrix irregular. The quadrants should not be taken as to signify disjunct behaviors. Instead, they reflect aspects that are incorporated to some extent\(^\text{13}\) in every act, that is, when act is taken as a sign.

An act is primarily individualistic. It is simply dictated by the unique organism executing it being interest-driven. The act is antagonistic to the extent that

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13. With the minimal extent, of course, being the complete absence of a particular aspect.

14. Philosophers like SCHOPENHAUER and NIETZSCHE even explicitly profess themselves as essentially psychologists. In *Arthur Schopenhauer als Psychologe* R. HOBENEMSER summarizes (1924, p 428, my translation from the German): “Schopenhauer as psychologist has made his greatest contribution through his theories of the will and knowledge. On the will his contribution is quite
the other organism must one-sidedly suffer its consequences. The act can also be partly economic; the other is then expected to profit from the act, too, and to make a contribution in return. When the other benefits but is not expected to make an offer in exchange, the neighborly aspect is also present in the act. This aspectual account is summarized in Figure 11.6.2.

![Diagram](image)

Concluding my discussion of *Mind, Self, & Society* I remark that MEAD overemphasizes social determinants of behavior. His both biased and narrow axiomatic system is not realistic enough to account for the full spectrum of behavior. The title of an essay by D.H. WRONG sums up the problem: *The Over-socialized Conception of Man in Modern Sociology*. He states that (1961, p 35)

[[t]he insistence of sociologists on the importance of “social factors” easily leads them to stress the priority of such socialized or socializing motives in human behavior.

In *Skeptical Sociology* (1976), offering a postscript to his earlier article, WRONG draws additional attention to (p 49) “psychological underpinnings.” Though MEAD clearly recognizes individual determinants, and irrational at that, he apparently feels they fall outside a framework for social psychology. MEAD might have argued for that as a sociologist, I find, but not as a social psychologist. I hasten to add that a scientific discipline of institutions must always be alert, and prepared, to deconstruct its subject matter into … individual subjects.
Actually, this holds for all disciplines dealing with motivated acts. Its practitioners must ultimately embrace psychological understanding\textsuperscript{14} to which subjective situationism aims to contribute conceptual grounds.

functions of the will.” So, which is also of direct interest to the anatomy of meaning this treatise presents, HÖHENEMSER declares himself even more a voluntarist than SCHOPENHAUER. He continues: “Concerning epistemology, Schopenhauer has improved upon, and has added much detail to, Kant’s theory of the intellectual nature of perception, i.e., that a priori, internal elements are involved in the processes of external perception. Despite a number of misconceptions, Schopenhauer has already come surprisingly close to the latest results in psychology.”