

## George's Bulldog: What Mead's Canine Companion Could Have Told Him about the Self

Leslie Irvine

THROUGHOUT MEAD'S WORK, there are numerous assertions that animals have no sense of self. Animals, Mead argued, have "no mind, no thought, and hence there is no meaning [in animal behavior] in the significant or self-conscious sense" (1964, 168). Any sense of self or personality that we might see in our animal companions is, for Mead, merely anthropomorphic projection. We may "act *as if* they had the sort of inner world that we have," Mead claimed, but "as we get insight into their conditions we see there is no place for this sort of importation of the social process into the conduct of the individual" (1962, 182-3; emphasis added). Mead is very clear on this point: animals lack the conceptual equipment of language that would allow them to have anything approximating the "inner worlds" that we humans enjoy.

Much more recently, in an interview in the *New York Times*, the primatologist Frans de Waal said, "Sometimes I read about someone saying with great authority that animals have no intentions and no feelings and I wonder, 'Doesn't this guy have a dog?'" (Dreifus 2001). De Waal is known for his claim that conflict resolution and compromise, rather than aggression, may be the fundamental basis for morality among primates, including humans. His work has revolutionized the way we think about primates, and his work on chimpanzee emotions would have been virtual heresy in Mead's time. During the *Times* interview, the reporter's dog came up to him with a toy, put the toy down, and barked. A discussion of the clarity of the dog's intention and communication followed. What makes this relevant is that Mead, too, had a dog. Apparently, when the dog brought him a toy and barked, Mead was looking the other way. Consequently, when scholars want to explore the notion of selfhood among animals, the leading sociological theorist of the self offers no insights at all.

For Mead, having a self required the ability to talk about having one. Mead acknowledged that animals had their own social arrangements, but relegated their interaction to a "conversation of gestures." The term refers to instinctual acts, such as when one dog growls at another or a cat hisses and spits at a rival. For Mead, the "conversation of gestures" was insignificant because there can allegedly be only one possible response to the growl. In Mead's framework, the dog's growl or the cat's hiss sends out a stimulus that results in a "Back off!" response in *all* other dogs and cats. Hewitt (2000) explains that "in no sense does either [animal] 'decide' or 'make up its mind' to act in a certain way." Animals' behavior may be *goal-directed* (i.e., aimed at getting food, a mate, or defending territory), but it lacks the premeditation and shared meaning that characterize human behavior. Humans, in contrast, use the vocal "gestures" known as language. Mead referred to language as "significant symbols," which produce a common definition of a situation in both sender and receiver. Language consequently enables people to anticipate the consequences of their actions, weigh alternatives, and coordinate their actions with others. The familiar example is when someone shouts "Fire!" Mead claimed that the word generates a mental image of the situation and one's position in it, which then allows the individual to consider potential plans of action. Through cyclically imagining and controlling responses, we constitute the self as an object.

Since Mead's time, a growing body of research has proven that language is *not* a uniquely human capacity. The working vocabulary of Washoe, the first chimpanzee to learn sign language, included 140 ASL gestures and twice as many two-sign combinations. Koko, the lowland gorilla raised by psychologist Penny Patterson, could use over 600 signs. Skeptics might claim that learning the names of things is not the same as understanding the meaning of language and using it to innovate on one's own. However, Koko and other primates have repeatedly shown that they can understand and use sign language in contexts other than the basic drills in which they name

objects. For example, Barbara Hiller, who worked extensively with Koko, recounts seeing Koko playing with some white towels and making the ASL gesture for the color red. Hiller corrected Koko, who only signed “red” larger, which is how one exaggerates in sign language. Hiller again corrected Koko, who again exaggerated “red,” and then plucked some red lint from the white towel and held it up to Hiller (Patterson and Linden 1981).

The capacity for symbol use is hardly surprising among primates, known as the “border species” between humans and animals. However, other species have also shown themselves capable of using the tool that long signified human superiority. For instance, consider Irene Pepperberg’s (1991) research with Alex, a twenty-two-year-old African Grey parrot. Alex’s abilities go beyond naming objects, which he must do in endless drills as part of Pepperberg’s research. Alex is capable of violating rules, which suggests that he understands both the rules and the abstract and complex idea of *distorting* them. For instance, Alex expresses his irritation with language drills by giving wrong answers so often that he is clearly doing so on purpose. He will also give *different* incorrect answers each time, frustrating the researchers until they give up. Although this could be statistical chance rather than defiance, the odds of giving so many wrong answers in a row are slim.

Even if language *were* the unique property of human beings, making it the sole vehicle of the self and meaningful behavior overlooks the significance of other forms of communication. Think how much a glance, a slightly raised eyebrow, a minute movement of the lips, a wink, or a sigh can mean. The focus on language eliminates many components of interaction that contribute to selfhood. We cannot ask animals—or mute humans, for that matter—about their inner lives, but we can gather evidence from other behaviors, such as the structure of interaction. A small but growing body of literature has begun to do so in the case of the severely retarded and mentally disabled (Pollner and McDonald-Wikler 1985; Bogdan and Taylor 1989), Alzheimer’s patients (Gubrium 1986), and infants (Brazelton 1984; Stern 1985). This research explores how family members attribute minds and selves to those who have no capacity for speech. It shows how “others literally ‘do’ the minds and selves” of those who cannot speak, building on an emerging sense of attitudes (in the case of infants and the retarded) or sustaining an established sense of identity (in the case of Alzheimer’s patients). The growing empirical evidence calls for new ways of conceptualizing the self that do not rely on language. Friends and caregivers of the mute, the autistic, the brain-injured, the Alzheimer’s patient, and the severely retarded see selfhood in interaction. This also occurs between people and animals. If we look for selfhood in interaction, we will see it even without language.

If factors beyond spoken language matter for the self, and I argue that they do, then animals can participate with us in the reciprocal process of self-creation. In the model of the self that I have developed, animals must themselves *be* subjective Others. The question then becomes one of how we sense their subjective presence. Even with other people, we cannot observe subjectivity directly. We perceive it *indirectly*, during interaction. To illustrate how this is so, I turn to William James’s efforts to gain access to the “I,” or the subjective sense of self ([1890]1950, [1892]1961). Along the way, James distinguished four facets that underlie and make us aware of subjectivity. Others have since refined these into a set of basic self-experiences that manifest themselves in infancy, before the acquisition of language (see Stern 1985; Myers 1998). The case can be made for the presence of these experiences among animals because they have the same structures of the brain, nervous system, musculature, and memory. Although human development leads us into a stage of language acquisition that adds to these basic experiences, the experiences themselves are preverbal. The four self-experiences consist of:

- (1) A sense of *agency*, meaning that you are the author of your actions and movements and *not* the author of the actions and movements of others;
- (2) A sense of *coherence*, meaning that you understand yourself as a physical whole that is the locus of agency;
- (3) A sense of *affectivity*, meaning patterned qualities of feelings that are associated with other experiences of the self;

- (4) A sense of *self-history*, meaning that you maintain some degree of continuity, even while changing.

If we think of self as a set of experiences having the features of agency, coherence, affectivity, and history, then our interaction with others—including animals—will reflect our perception of those features in the other. For example, agency evokes agency. When I perceive agency in an animal or another person, doing so confirms my own sense of agency. My interaction manifests my expectation and recognition of that agency, along with my response to it. Assuming that the Other can initiate action gives the interaction a particular structure. The Other and I will act toward each other as two beings who can orchestrate their own conduct. In addition, when I assume agentic qualities in an Other, I also assume the Other's subjectivity. At the same time, I understand myself as agentic, albeit without having to dwell on the matter. In the case of coherence, an Other's recognition of me as an embodied being confirms my own sense of myself in that way. For example, when I come home, the dogs and cats recognize me and greet me in ways that they would not greet someone else. Their doing so unconsciously confirms my sense of myself. The animals' (and other people's) consistent recognition of me makes conscious confirmation unnecessary. In the case of affectivity, people who live with animals commonly respond to the qualities and intensity of animals' emotions. Moreover, our recognition of animals' affectivity usually occurs in particular contexts, which offers another confirmation of our own experience. Finally, animals' self-history, enabled by the capacity for memory, confirms our own sense of history. To be sure, this occurs in a more limited way than the confirmation we experience with other people. However, animals use their bodies, gestures, preferences, and habits to demonstrate that they share a history with us. For instance, every night that I have been home during the past thirteen years, my grey, female cat, Pusskin, has slept at my side. No matter where she is when I go to bed, she joins me. She snuggles close in a way that none of the other cats has ever done. After thirteen years, this way of sleeping together defines our relationship, and I do not like to think about the inevitable time when she will no longer be there. I do not know why she seeks me out at night, but I can say with certainty that she remembers where she likes to sleep, and she and I share a history because she does so.

The point of this brief essay has been to show that there is more to animal selfhood than Mead thought there was. Our attributions of animals' selves are not merely anthropomorphic projection. In human-animal interaction, the features of agency, coherence, self-history, and affectivity coalesce, with memory helping to integrate them. Combined, these give the animal a subjective perspective, or a core Self, and concurrently, make core Others available. Expanding our image of the self and our means of studying it has implications far beyond the arena of human-animal interaction. As I have mentioned, it opens up possibilities for research among humans who cannot use language. In addition, the relationship between *selfhood* and *personhood* has significant implications. I will illustrate with an example from my friend and colleague, biologist Marc Bekoff (2002). Marc is widely known for his work on animal consciousness, emotions, and selfhood. His elderly mother has lost most of her cognitive, physiological, and locomotor capacities. She needs round-the-clock care. She does not recognize Marc and has little if any awareness of her surroundings or her physical body. In sum, she meets few of the criteria that commonly designate *personhood*. However, few among us would deny that Marc's mother has the right to be considered a person. In contrast, Marc's now-deceased companion dog, Jethro, manifested more of the qualities of personhood than did Marc's mother. Jethro responded to his name, recognized Marc, communicated when he was hungry or needed to relieve himself, and demonstrated the aspects of core selfhood. Many people would nevertheless refuse to call Jethro a person, in any meaningful sense of the word. To be sure, Jethro's human friends granted him personhood, as did the dog owners in Sanders's (1999) study (and cat owners, too. See Alger and Alger 1997, 2003). Apart from this circle of friends, however, the objections to calling Jethro a *person*, with all the rights and protections that accompany that status, would be strong.

The implications of acknowledging selfhood apart from spoken language can be tremendous. They can potentially enrich sociology, but extend the legal and moral realms, as well.

Although Mead cannot be of much use along the way, the shortcomings in his work have nevertheless opened a door. George's bulldog, it would seem, is finally having his proverbial day.

#### REFERENCES

- Alger, Janet M., and Steven F. Alger. 1997. "Beyond Mead: Symbolic Interaction between Humans and Felines." *Society & Animals* 5: 65-81.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2003. *Cat Culture: The Social World of a Cat Shelter*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Bekoff, Marc. 2002. *Minding Animals: Awareness, Emotions, and Heart*. Oxford (UK): Oxford University Press.
- Bogdan, Robert, and Steven Taylor. 1989. "Relationships with Severely Disabled People: The Social Construction of Humanness." *Social Problems* 36: 135-148.
- Brazelton, T. Berry. 1984. "Four Stages in the Development of Mother-Infant Interaction." Pp. 19-34 in *The Growing Child in Family and Society*, edited by Noboru Kobayashi and T. Berry Brazelton. Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press.
- Dreifus, Claudia. 2001. "Observing the Behavior of Apes, Up Close." *New York Times*, D3, June 26.
- Goode, David. 1994. *World Without Words: The Social Construction of Children Born Deaf and Blind*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Gubrium, Jaber. 1986. "The Social Preservation of Mind: The Alzheimer's Disease Experience." *Symbolic Interaction* 6: 37-51.
- Hewitt, John P. 2000. *Self and Society: A Symbolic Interactionist Social Psychology*. 8th edition. Needham Heights MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Holstein, James A., and Jaber F. Gubrium. 2000. *The Self We Live By: Narrative Identity in a Postmodern World*. Oxford (UK): Oxford University Press.
- Irvine, Leslie. In press. *If You Tame Me: Understanding Our Connection with Animals*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- James, William. 1890. *The Principles of Psychology*. New York: Dover, 1950.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1892. *Psychology: The Briefer Course*. New York: Harper, 1961.
- Mead, George Herbert. 1962. *Mind, Self and Society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. [Originally published in 1934].
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1964. *George Herbert Mead on Social Psychology*. Edited by Anselm Strauss. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Myers, Gene. 1998. *Children and Animals: Social Development and Our Connections to Other Species*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Patterson, Francine, and Eugene Linden. 1981. *The Education of Koko*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.
- Pepperberg, Irene. 1991. "A Communicative Approach to Animal Cognition: A Study of Conceptual Abilities of an African Grey Parrot." Pp. 153-186 in *Cognitive Ethology: The Minds of Other Animals*. Edited by Carolyn A. Ristau. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Pollner, Melvin, and Lynn McDonald-Wikler. 1985. "The Social Construction of Unreality: A Case Study of a Family's Attribution of Competence to a Severely Retarded Child." *Family Process* 24: 241-54.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1999. *Understanding Dogs: Living and Working with Canine Companions*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Stern, Daniel N. 1985. *The Interpersonal World of the Infant: A View from Psychoanalysis and Developmental Psychology*. New York: Basic Books.