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Self as a second-order object: Reinterpreting the Jamesian "Me"

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ABSTRACT

Existing definitions of the self can be lumped into three groups: self as self-reflectivity, self as self-concept, and self as the individual. This article traces current disagreements over the definition of the self to a crucial ambiguity in William James's original delineation of the "Me." Implicit in James's delineation was a distinction between first-order objects and second-order objects: while first-order objects are things as they are, independent of the perception of a knowing subject, second-order objects are things as perceived by a knowing subject. This article makes this distinction explicit and argues that the self is a second-order object associated with the first-person or "emic" perspective. Defined as the empirical existence of the individual (first order) perceived by the individual as "me" or "mine" (second order), the self is distinguished from the "I" which is the mental capacity for self-reflection; the self-concept which is the mental representation of the individual's existence; and the individual which is the empirical referent of the self-concept. As a second-order object, the "Me," i.e., the self, is the unity of the existence and perception of the individual.

The scientific study of the self phenomenon began with William James's seminal book (1890/1950), *The Principles of Psychology*. In the chapter on the "Consciousness of Self," James defined what the self is and how it is constituted. Since then, studies of the self phenomenon have emerged in many fields across multiple disciplines. However, despite the growth of research on this topic for more than a century, there has been considerable confusion and disagreement among scholars over the definition of the phenomenon they seek to investigate. Both within and across disciplines, scholars have difficulty reaching a consensus on what the self is, although they generally agree on what the self is about. Scholars tend to agree that the self is about the individual, the individual's capacity to reflect upon him- or herself, and the individual's thoughts and feelings about him- or herself. But when it comes to an exact definition of the self, scholars find themselves in major disagreement with one another (Blumer, 1969; Cooley 1902/1956; Gecas, 1982; Mead, 1934; Siegel, 2005).

It is my view that this definitional disagreement is due primarily to the combination of two factors: (1) the "second-order" nature of the self that makes the phenomenon hard to grasp, and (2) an ambiguity in James's original delineation regarding this very attribute of the self, which adds to the confusion. In this article, I seek to clarify this ambiguity and explicate the second-order attribute of the self phenomenon. I will first present a critique of three major definitions of the self, pointing out the problems in each; I will then identify the ambiguity in James's depiction of the "me" and reveal the two different interpretations of the delineated concept. I argue that these two connotations of the "Me" are incompatible and only one of them, which I call the "emic" conception, i.e., the first-person perspective, leads to a better understanding of the self. Finally, I discuss the theoretical implications of this reinterpretation. While a general consensus on the ontological status of the self may not be established anytime soon, it is my hope that the conceptual clarifications I seek to make here will help narrow the gap in our understanding of the self phenomenon.

1. Three competing definitions of the self

The multiplicity of the conceptions of "self" in the literature has been well recognized (Gecas, 1995; Katzko, 2003; Leary & Tangney, 2012). In general, existing definitions of the self can be divided into three distinct groups: self as self-reflectivity, self as self-concept, and self as individual, with each group placing an emphasis on a particular aspect of the self phenomenon.

1.1. Self-as-self-reflectivity

Scholars in this group define the self as "a psychological process that is responsible for self-awareness and self-knowledge" (Leary &

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Tangney, 2012, p. 5). Included in this process are things like "reflective capacity," "executive agent," and "self-conscious subjectivity." Also included in this psychological process is the interaction between the organismic "I" and the socialized "Me," an idea that was introduced by George Mead (1934):

> The self is not so much a substance as a process … This process of relating one's own organism to the others in the interactions that are going on, in so far as it is imported into the conduct of the individual with the conversation of the "I" and the "me," constitutes the self. (pp. 178–179)

According to Mead, the "I" is "the response of the organism to the attitudes of the others," and the "me" is "the organized set of attitudes of others which one himself assumes" (1934, p. 175). This notion of self-as-process was further promoted later by another well-known sociologist, Herbert Blumer (1969), who stressed that "Mead saw the self as a process and not as a structure" (p. 62), and that this reflective process "alone can yield and constitute a self" (p. 63).

This definition of the self is, in a way, similar to what James termed the "I" or the "knower," which refers to the mental capacity that enables an organism to become an object to itself. Some scholars have argued that the "I" and the "me" are two aspects of the self. Allport (1961), for example, called the "I" "I-self" or "self as knower" and the "me" "Me-self" or "self as known." In other words, "[t]he term *self* includes both the actor who thinks ('I am thinking') and the object of thinking ('about me')" (Oyserman, Elmore, & Smith, 2012, p. 71, italics original). However, to James, the mental capacity or "I" is not the self. The self is the entity that the "I" identifies as "me," or that which is known to the knower to be its own existence. While self-reflectivity is indispensable to the resulting self, the self as an outcome of reflection is not equal to the process or capacity that produces it.

1.2. Self-as-self-concept

Scholars in this group regard the self not as a capacity for, or process of, reflectivity, but rather "a product of this reflexive activity"; i.e., "the concept the individual has of himself as a physical, social, and spiritual or moral being" (Gecas, 1982, p. 3). This notion of self has come to be known as "self-concept," namely, "the totality of the individual's thoughts and feelings with reference to oneself as an object" (Rosenberg, 1979, p. 7). Allport (1955) identified eight essential components of this construct, or "*proprium*" as he called it, including the sense of one's own body, self-identity, self-esteem, and self-image. Other similar concepts that belong to this group are "possible self" (Markus & Nurius, 1986), "ideal self," and "ought self" (Higgins, 1987). These conceptions have one thing in common: they all define the self as a form of consciousness or mental representation of oneself.

An important proponent of the notion of self as consciousness was Charles Cooley (1902/1956), who coined the famous concept of the "looking-glass self." Cooley defined the self as "simply any idea or system of ideas, drawn from the communicative life, that the mind cherishes as its own" (p. 179). In other words, the looking-glass self is a self-concept or a representation of oneself that one has in one's mind. But, is it really true that self-concept and self are the same? If the concept of an apple and the apple are not identical, then self-concept and what the concept is "of" or "about" cannot be the same. To say that self-concept is synonymous with self is akin to saying that the concept of an apple is the same thing as the apple that the concept refers to.

1.3. Self-as-individual

Contrary to equating self with self-concept, scholars in this group equate the self with the entity that the self-concept is of or about. This entity is identified as the individual, personality, or "the whole person" (see Leary & Tangney, 2012, p. 4; McAdams, 2009, p. 23). Basically, the self refers to the individual, a unique person who is distinguishable from all other individuals:

> By "self" we commonly mean the particular being any person is, whatever it is about each of us that distinguishes you or me from others, draws the parts of our existence together, persists through changes, or opens the way to becoming who we might or should be (Siegel, 2005, p. 3).

This notion of self as a unique person is similar to what James called the "empirical existence of the individual," which includes all that the individual can call "me" or "mine." This is the empirical entity that self-concept refers to, as opposed to the mental construct of the entity that resides in the mind of the individual. In other words, it is now the "apple," rather than the "concept of an apple," that becomes the core of the definition.

However, defining the self as a person or individual causes another problem. While every individual has an empirical existence, not all individuals have selves. Infants do not have selves, and adults with damage to the brain in the region of the prefrontal cortex lose their selves. This suggests that, while the self is about the individual, the individual *per se* does not constitute a self, for "the individual is not a self in the reflexive sense unless he is an object to himself" (Mead, 1934, p. 142). As such, notes Blumer (1969), any attempt to "lodge the self in a structure" is doomed to fail:

> For any posited structure to be a self, it would have to act upon and respond to itself —otherwise, it is merely an organization awaiting activation and release without exercising any effect on itself or on its operation (p. 63).

To put it another way, no entity, human or otherwise, can be a self without being self-reflective. This is why infants or adults with prefrontal lobe damage do not possess a self: these individuals lack self-reflectivity and are incapable of recognizing themselves. Unfortunately, in seeking to lodge the self in the process of self-reflection, Blumer narrowly missed the target he had correctly identified. The truth is that the self is neither an entity nor the reflectivity of an entity, but, rather, the *unity* of the two:

> Not only is the self not to be equated with the lifeworld person, but also it should not be equated with a self-image or self-representation as is so often done … When I think about myself, have feelings about myself, look at myself, what I am thinking about, having feelings about, and perceiving is not an image or representation of anything, but quite simply a person, my own person seen from my own perspective, as distinct from the lifeworld perspective (McIntosh, 1995, pp. 15–16).

If we consider an entity *as it is* a "first-order" object and a *perceived* entity a "second-order" object, then the person is a first-order object and the *self is a second-order object*; in generic terms, the self is an entity perceived by the entity itself to be its own. This is a subtle but crucial distinction for understanding the self phenomenon, and it is exactly where the ambiguity lies in James's original delineation of the self.

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