RIVISTA INTERNAZIONALE DI FILOSOFIA E PSICOLOGIA
DOI: 10.4453/rifp.2015.0027
ISSN 2039-4667; E-ISSN 2239-2629
Vol. 6 (2015), n. 2, pp. 297-304

Studi

The Social Roots of Human Identity and the Interplay of the Selves

Riccardo Williams

Ricevuto: 6 febbraio 2015; accettato: 12 aprile 2015

Abstract In this paper, two main aspects of Cristina Meini's *From Cradle to Internet. The Social Nature of Personal Identity* are taken into consideration. In the first place, Meini's argument concerning the structuring role for self development of *caregivers*' communicative mirroring is analysed in the light of current literature concerning the multi-layered architecture of identity. I propose to integrate Meini's interesting socio-cultural perspective with a dialectical view of the interaction between fundamental self-monitoring mechanisms addressing bodily self-awareness and psychological as well as social components of self-knowledge. This integration widely relies on the most recent contributions from Peter Fonagy's model of mentalization deficits studied in the clinical field of personality disorders. In the second section of the comment, I present some possible ways to tackle the problem of "extended mind" through internet devices raised by Meini. In particular, the notion of extended mind is confronted with the specificities of identity building in the use of social networks.
KEYWORDS: Self; Mentalization; Adolescence; Personality Disorder; Bodily Self-awareness.

Riassunto *Le radici sociali dell'identità umana e l'interazione dei Sé* – In questo articolo saranno presi in considerazione due aspetti principali del lavoro di Cristina Meini *From Cradle to Internet. The Social Nature of Personal Identity*. In una prima parte l'argomento di Meini relativo al ruolo strutturante per lo sviluppo del sé del rispecchiamento comunicativo con i *caregiver* sarà analizzato alla luce della letteratura attuale relativa all'architettura pluristratificata dell'identità. Propongo di integrare l'interessante prospettiva socio-culturale di Meini con una visione dialettica dell'interazione tra i meccanismi di base di automonitoraggio che si rivolgono alla consapevolezza di sé corporea e alle componenti psicologiche e sociali della conoscenza di sé. Questa integrazione poggia ampiamente sui contributi più recenti derivanti dal modello di Peter Fonagy dei deficit di mentalizzazione, indagati nel campo clinico dei disturbi di personalità. Nella seconda parte di questo commento presenterò alcuni modi possibili per affrontare il problema sollevato da Meini della "mente estesa" dai meccanismi di internet. In particolare, la nozione di mente estesa sarà comparata con le specificità della costruzione di identità in uso nei social network.
PAROLE CHIAVE: Sé; Mentalizzazione; Adolescenza; Disturbi di personalità; Consapevolezza di sé corporea.

R. Williams - Dipartimento di Psicologia Dinamica e Clinica, Università di Roma "La Sapienza", via degli Apuli, 1 - 00185 Roma (I)

E-mail: riccardo.williams@uniroma1.it (✉)

CRISTINA MEINI'S CONTRIBUTION OFFERS VERY stimulating questions for diverse sectors of research that, although separate, have shown converging interests: developmental models of social cognition, philosophy of mind, investigations into the nature of subjectivity and personal identity, the neurosciences, and psychodynamic views on affective development and personality building.

Overall, I agree with Meini, that this multidisciplinary connection starts with the crisis of the Cartesian approach to the self. In the Cartesian tradition, whose influence lasted up until 20th century philosophy and psychology, self-experience was thought to be unitary, continuous throughout time, coherent and, even more importantly, totally self-transparent to the mind itself. As clearly stated by Meini, current approaches in philosophy of mind, cognitive psychology and, more recently, neuroscience have paved the way to a view that not only considers the diffused activity of unconscious mental states, but that radically questions the traditional idea of personal introspection as the unique reliable and actual source for self-consciousness. Contemporary perspectives point to the inherently illusory, transient and multi-faceted outlook of processes implied in the building of human subjectivity, especially self-awareness.[1]

The general idea of a multi-track model of self-consciousness is well accounted for by Meini's quotations concerning the Neisserian and Gibsonian multi-layered notion of self.[2] Indeed, according to current neuroscientific perspectives, the sense of personal identity seems to hinge on a complex architecture of the mind in which low-level self-monitoring mechanisms, mainly related to the perception of body image, enteroceptive and proprioceptive modifications and agency, work independently from higher processes involved in the psychological and social definitions of personal identity.[3] Cristina Meini accurately traces the origin of such a complex model back to Williams James' tripartite notion of self. What Meini interestingly and originally introduces is the possibility of understanding, at least some parts of self-development, the ones more related to the construction of psychological and social identity, to social processes, including technological achievements. In her proposals, she is explicitly reminiscent of Vygotsky's and more recent socio-constructivist perspectives. Given this broad and articulated framework for the understanding of personal identities, Meini explores the heuristic of the multilayered model of self in two proposals that I find intriguing from the point of view of my clinically informed stance. Before going into the details of my comments on such proposals, let me briefly discuss my general point of view on the multilayered model proposed by Neisser and presented by Meini in her paper.

The dialectic architecture of personal identity

I share Meini's view of parallel, multilayered, unconsciously organised processes producing what we commonly refer to as the self or sense of identity. I also agree that this progress in the understanding of self-awareness has once for all ruled out the view of a transcendental first-person privileged self-transparent knowledge or its awkwardly updated version which calls into play brain *homunculi* or Ego structures.[4]

As a clinician, I finally acknowledge the importance of current research interpreting the self as a specific interpersonal coordinate emerging from transactions between social agents and unavoidably defined through cultural symbols. However, I propose that such a wide framework should also consider the other side of the coin, that is, how the diverse levels of self-monitoring interact, sometime integrate or influence each other. I argue that this more dialectic stance could help in discussing some of the interesting questions raised by Meini herself. My analysis starts from the realization that self-monitoring processes often remain isolated from each other and do not actually contribute to the

most explicit aspect of self-identity. Some of these aspects of self-monitoring experience come to light only when something goes awry, for instance, in body or movement perceptions. On the other hand, it has to be noted that very frequently there is an interplay between various aspects of self-experience that form the Jamesian stream of consciousness through which the sense of "me" is maintained.

Starting from Sperry and Gazzaniga's neuroscientific investigations, we know that the sense of continuity, unity, and coherence of the self derived from the Cartesian tradition is but an illusion; what Dennett defined as the virtual captain of the Cartesian theatre. At the same time, we also acknowledge that individuals' narrative and representational self-definitions are not inconsequential for behaviors and experience.

On the contrary, we notice that the natural flow of subjective mental life opposes itself to any final attempt at self-appropriation: it is inherently incoherent, multilayered and multi-coded, and indeed impossible to be fully captured through representations. However, this ineffable nature of self-representation seems to constitute a reason for continuous striving on the part of what Gazzaniga defined as the interpreter, that is, the functional operator of self-descriptions paving the way to self-consciousness and identity.[5] Furthermore, contemporary research on the phylogenetic and ontogenetic meaning of self-awareness stress the problem of congruence between the abstract self-descriptions and more basic mechanisms of organismic self-monitoring anchored to somatic and affective markers.[6]

In the clinical field, it is possible to find evidence that a central aspect of severe psychiatric conditions consists in the patients' inability to found their identity narrative on the building blocks of what Meini introduced as the ecological and interpersonal self.[7] In the case of autistic or psychotic individuals, for instance, gross biases in the perception of the sense of agency or the meaning of interpersonal acts determines a profound deficit in the exploration and representational re-descriptions of internal dispositions.[8] Peculiarly, this deficit in self-descriptions results in important identity distortions, that can be easily accounted for by the attempt to "interpret" and give meaning to the altered perceptions of bodily and affective markers. Higher-level representations can't do without lower level self-monitoring perceptions. In Neisserian terms, the psychological as well as social self seems to be highly dependent on the ecological and interpersonal self.

Introspection: the structuring role of the caregiver's communicative mirroring

Meini founds her constructivist position on two assumptions directly derived from Fonagy and his developmentalist colleagues Gergely, Csibra and Watson[9]: (a) introspective awareness is not given at birth, but it develops secondarily in a process of social transactions that starts with the baby's ability to attribute mental states to other social agents and interiorize their communicative mirroring; (b) the access to internal states is by no means transparent, direct, all-encompassing.

If ever, the possibility to refer to one's mental activity is carried out, as suggested by Fonagy and colleagues who in turn quote MIT scholar Annette Karmiloff-Smith, through re-presentational re-redescriptions that selectively rely on some of the behavioral, visual, proprioceptive and enteroceptive indexes that accompany each internal disposition. Such indexes through which each internal state is described are then unified under a conceptual label, often provided by the parental linguistic definition of an emotional state (e.g., fear, anger, joy, tiredness). The child is gradually brought into a world of self-defining descriptions including external labels and relative internal indexes through which she will be able to "recognize" and represent her own experience to herself.

In order to analyze the general socio-

constructivist position on identity building, at least partially embraced by Meini, I would start with the very beautiful passage from Williams James' *Principles* that Cristina herself introduced. This passage places the emphasis on the highest step in Neisser's architecture of self, namely, the social self. In this regard, I agree that not only the relational affective matrix of self has been widely underestimated by both cognitive and clinical studies, but also that the relevance and impact of the social representations of self cannot be overvalued with respect to personal feelings of worthiness and adequacy.

However, the inner feelings contributing to the sense of personal identity seem to be nested in a complex neural network of which interpersonal communication is only a part. In a recent update of his model of mentalization within the attachment framework of development, Fonagy has stated that the development of the self has to be understood as a more complex process of social learning.[10] This process of learning, in keeping with current social Darwinian perspectives such as Tomasello's, implies that each human being is biologically pre-wired and inherently motivated to have access and share interpersonal models of behaviors as well as operative approaches to the problems of everyday life.[11] However, the process of imitative identifications with cultural models conveyed by other, more expert, social agents does not entail a mechanical reproduction of models of behavior or socially acknowledged outlooks.

The social model presented is interiorized when the child or, more generally, the individual is recognised for her own personal features and is treated as an epistemic, learning-driven agent by other social agents. When such prerequisites are attended by the social model (this is the true inheritance of secure attachment bonds according to Fonagy and Luyten),[12] then the child will develop the basic condition of "epistemic trust". Moving on from such a socio-affective background the child will experience the possibility to recognize and mould her own personal motivations into a network of interactions and contents of learning. While stressing the ultimate aim of building and expanding the self through social interactions, Fonagy articulates a dialectic stance concerning the components leading to evaluation of social interactions from very early stages of development.

According to Fonagy and Luyten, any evaluation of social exchanges springs from a multiple-track recording of interaction.

On the one hand, structures mainly located at the sub-cortical levels of the brain provide implicit information concerning the affective values that social encounters acquire for the self. In a way, this implicit level of social information processing is close to what Damasio referred to as "values" or "bodily markers" or to what Meini, recalling Neisser, defines as the ecological and interpersonal self.

On the other hand, the brain also allows for a more explicit understanding of the epistemic meaning of social transactions. Those interactions that do not seem to offer any enhancement for the child's personal epistemic perspective on the world result in a progressive loss of trust in the possibility for self-development within other social relationships. If these inadequate modes of interactions perpetuate, just as in the case of early traumatic relationships,[13] a condition of "epistemic hypersensitivity" is engendered. This condition leads to short-circuited interpretations of social reality in which the individual compulsively seeks for epistemic mirroring by other people but she is then misled by the internal implicit negative cues sustained by traumatic memories of past experiences.

In this model, therefore, there is a double-entrance circular hypothesis as to the construction of social and self-understanding. Information coming from biological systems concerning the self and the other are continuously matched and interplay with identity cues coming from social agents. This model has direct consequences for the understanding of certain clinical conditions such as borderline or anti-social personality disorders.

According to Fonagy, part of the efficacy of diverse psychotherapeutic strategies may be due to the interruption of this short-circuited social interpretation, resulting in the possibility of learning new self-experiences in an interpersonal context.

Psychological possibility of the extended mind

In the second section of her stimulating reflections, Meini tackles an apparently subversive question: can we extend our inner sense of self, the bodily or ecological self, to apparatuses that do not belong to our bodies? While introducing this perspective Meini is explicitly reminiscent of Vygotsky's idea that technological devices increase perceptive and cognitive skills expanding the individual's phenomenal reality, thus being entitled to enter the domain of human mental activities.[14] I believe that Meini's argument is indeed composed of two separate points that need to be discussed separately. The first point of the argument concerns the actual possibility of technological devices and related operations fully acquiring the property of mental activities. The second point of the argument concerns the actual possibility for technological devices and related operations to fully acquire the attribute of personalization otherwise attributed to several aspects of individual mental functioning.

As far as the first point of the argument is concerned, Meini clearly succeeds in providing direct examples (remember Maria and Otto's visit to New York's MOMA) and literature background to support the idea that many activities supported by technological devices should be in fact considered at least part, if not the whole part, of human mental activities. Nonetheless, I would like to stress that a positive answer to the first question does not necessarily entail a positive answer to the second point. In general, as Meini herself states at the beginning of her contribution, the cognitive neurosciences show us that only a relatively small percentage of the product of mental activities ends up under the focus of attentional mechanisms and becomes an object of conscious awareness.[15]

Well aware of this general aspect of functioning, Meini explores the exact conditions under which we may think that cognitive operations implemented via support of technological devices enter the sense of self. Meini's slant on this discussion derives from Clark's and Chalmers' functionalist analysis. Meini interestingly tries to integrate the four conditions of possibility indicated by these two philosophers of mind with a more phenomenological criterion derived from William James's idea that the self is built upon the intimate appropriation of the world. In order to enhance the validity of her argument Meini proposes to analyze the situation of mental activities which are nowadays so often totally delegated to the decision-making heuristics of web search engines. Do these decisional routines really enter our sense of personal identities?

I am inclined to share Meini's view that this example (many other instances, as we shall see could be taken into account) actually meets the four criteria identified by Chalmers and Clark, with specific reference to the aspect of personal endorsement of a causal role played by technological operations in one's own mental activities. However, I am less convinced of the ensuing relationship identified by Meini between cognitive endorsment and the Jamesian notion of warmth, which is, the real marker of personal identification. Undoubtedly, the feeling of "warmth" should be based upon the recognition of mental causality for any mental activity engendering the sense of self. My point here is that the quality of personal investment in the mental activity that confers the sense of intimacy to any object of self-reflection could derive from different processes of self-recognition. Again, I refer to the interplay among the various layers composing the architecture of the sense of self that Meini proposed by introducing Neisser's view of identity. I propose that the analyses

of the concrete circumstances under which a sense of personalization is attributed, though fleetingly, to technological devices and operations can further support and specify some psychological margins of Meini's reflections.

As already discussed, psychotic individuals who are unable to clearly establish the source of their own movements and thoughts within the boundaries of their body report excruciating feelings of depersonalization and estrangement from themselves. In this extreme case, what James referred to as a sense of warmth can be nearly automatically derived by calculations pertaining to what Meini evoked as the ecological self. In some other cases, the sense of personal identity attributed to operations computed for us by cybernetic agents can also be reached independently of an explicit acknowledgement of higher levels of self-architecture.

Many adolescents, but this is more and more true of adults as well, are at a loss in distinguishing their own mental operations and products from the ones computed by electronic devices. Many of these individuals tend to confound their own sense of social identities with the routines, outputs and "rules of engagement" characterizing the social network interactions to which they entrust so many of their acquaintances, romances, or close friendships. Many adolescents coming to my office describe their cyber friendships or affairs as completely real, even if they have not even met their counter-part. An old borderline patient I had been following reported feelings of void anytime his facebook profile was not appropriately rated by women in connection with him. At the same time, he could feel totally elated, describing himself as a completely different kind of man when a new woman friend joined his network of friendships. It is not uncommon to hear, even from people in their thirties, that someone's personal appeal is fixed by the signs of appreciation given by the "network".

Another female patient of mine, a cultivated, highly educated and charming woman, was always complaining that as a person she felt at the margins, since the man she was having an affair with for quite a long time then, used to prefer other women to her in his chatline exchanges. Undoubtedly, adolescents or particularly fragile or immature individuals tend to abuse such network interactions. It is also obvious that many people, both in their adolescence and adulthood, make a more flexible and more distanced use of such social technologies. But it is a fact that, at least transiently, most individuals build their sense of identity on these mechanisms of social mirroring. It seems that this powerful impact is due to the fact that social networks are able to establish shared procedures and contents of the intersubjective negotiation of identity that starting from adolescence becomes a primary and conscious need for the individual.

People can easily attribute a *causal endorsement*, as well as a sense of personal warmth, to procedures that make them feel so effective in establishing relevant social encounters. I argue that a social network is a technological tool that offers an extension of the phenomenal domain, in Meini's sense, by indicating how to get in touch with aspects of personal identities, which aspects of intimacy can be shared and denied, magnifying and minimizing intersubjective closeness. Thus, the "craving" for social network exchanges that we observe in adolescence is probably only the outcome of a peculiarly sensitive window of learning for the creation of intersubjective relationships characterised by intimacy and mutual recognition of one's own subjective experience. Many questions could arise around the nature of the factors through which individuals extend (or disavow) a personal quality to use of technologies.

A clarifying step could, for instance, concern the type of intersubjective communication facilitating or hindering personification. Fonagy drawing on Gergely's studies has recently argued that under peculiar conditions the child tends to spontaneously share her parents' view of the world believing it's her

own view.[16] According to Gergely's experiments such "personalized identification" occurs only when the child perceives that the adult proposes to her a real relationship of learning. A relationship in which the adult conveys the message to the child that she is a distinct epistemic agent, whose point of view is worth consideration. Can we imagine that such prerequisites are met by an electronic device? Why should an adolescent identify with a machine's point of view? Are social technologies successful in moulding an individual's growing sense of identity because they closely respond to the epistemic relationship prerequisite indicated by Fonagy and Gergely?

Beyond the anecdotal meaning of some of the examples I contributed, I believe that the answers to such questions may represent one possible way to deal with the more general theme of the extended mind posed by Meini.

Notes

[1] See D.C. DENNETT, *Consciousness Explained*, Little, Brown, Boston (MA) 1991; D.C. DENNETT, *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*, Simon & Schuster, New York 1995.

[2] See T. KIRCHER, S. DAVID (eds.), *The Self in Psychiatry and Neuroscience*, MIT Press, Cambridge (MA) 2003.

[3] See M. JEANNEROD, *The Mechanism of Self-recognition in Humans*, in: «Behavioral and Brain Research», vol. CXLII, n. 1-2, 2003, pp. 1-15.

[4] See D.C. DENNETT, *Consciousness Explained*, cit.; G. JERVIS, *Il mito dell'interiorità*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino 2011; M. MARRAFFA, A. PATERNOSTER, *Sentirsi esistere*, Laterza, Roma-Bari 2013.

[5] See M.S. GAZZANIGA, *The Mind's Past*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1998.

[6] See, e.g., A. DAMASIO, *The Feeling of What Happens*, Harcourt Brace and Company, New York 1999; P. FONAGY, G. GERGELY, E. JURIST, M. TARGET, *Mentalization, Affective Regulation and the Development of the Self*, Other, London 2002; T. FUCHS, *The Temporal Structure of Intentionality and its Disturbance in Schizophrenia*, in: «Psychopathology», vol. XL, n. 4, 2007, pp. 222-235; M. JEANNEROD, *The Sense of Agency and its Disturbances in Schizophrenia: A Reappraisal*, in: «Experimental Brain Research», vol. CXCII, n. 3, 2009, pp. 527-532.

[7] See R. WILLIAMS, G. VALERI, *Inconscio e formazione dell'identità nei pazienti psicotici e autistici*, in: «Sistemi Intelligenti», vol. XXVI, n. 1, 2014, pp. 103-118.

[8] See C.D. FRITH, S. BLAKEMORE, D.M. WOLPERT, *Explaining the Symptoms of Schizophrenia: Abnormalities in the Awareness of Action*, in: «Brain Research Review», vol. XXXI, 2000, pp. 357-363; T. FUCHS, *The Temporal Structure of Intentionality and its Disturbance in Schizophrenia*, cit.; M. JANNEROD, *The Sense of Agency and its Disturbances in Schizophrenia*, cit.

[9] See P. FONAGY, G. GERGELY, E.L. JURIST, M. TARGET, *Mentalization, Affective Regulation and the Development of the Self*, cit.

[10] See P. FONAGY, *What I Have Come to Change my Mind About*, paper presented at the 3rd International Congress on Borderline Personality Disorder, Rome 16-18 October 2014.

[11] See M. TOMASELLO, *The Cultural Origins of Human Cognition*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA) 1999.

[12] See P. FONAGY, P. LUYTEN, *A Developmental, Mentalization-based Approach to the Understanding and Treatment of Borderline Personality Disorder*, in: «Development and Psychopathology», vol. XXI, 2009, pp. 1355-1381.

[13] See the reference to disorganized attachments in C. MEINI, *From Cradle to Internet. The Social Nature of Personal Identity*, in: «Rivista Internazionale di Filosofia e Psicologia», vol. VI, n. 2, pp. 282-296; R. WILLIAMS, *Trauma e relazioni. Le prospettive scientifiche e cliniche contemporanee*, Raffaello Cortina, Milano 2009.

[14] Incidentally, I would argue that Vygotsky's position was never entirely constructivist, since he posited the existence of parallel lines of development of thoughts and knowledge grounded on previous steps in the biological evolution of mind. Interestingly, Vygotsky analysed the course of development through which these lines of knowledge interact and are progressively transformed into the mature form of conceptual thinking. Undoubtedly, he placed social constructions at the heart of mature consciousness, but he still left room for other aspects of experience and knowledge to co-exist with the product of interiorization of social activities and constructs. See in this regard the difference stated in *Thought and Language* between the "sense" and the "signifi-

cance" of a word. Notwithstanding this complex deployment, I agree that Vygotsky remains the first and most influential representative of a current of thought identifying the cultural matrix of superior mental activities, potentially including upper grades of self-recognition even if the great Soviet psychologist never really expanded on this aspect.

[15] See K. KOCH, *The Quest for Consciousness*, Roberts and Company, New York 2006.

[16] P. FONAGY, *What I Have Come to Change my Mind About*, cit.