

The Self and Its Methodology: An Argument *from* Interaction
Brian Moon

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“I wish to state clearly and unambiguously that I am convinced that selves exist...I suggest that being a self is partly the result of inborn dispositions and partly the result of experience, especially social experience.” – Popper, The Self and Its Brain (TSAIB, 1970)

With these remarks, Popper put forward the basic components of his theory of the human self. His exploration with John Eccles¹ into the interaction between the self and its brain is a magnum opus that never quite earned same level of interest as his other works. Indeed, few so-called “Popperians” engage with his theory of self, and few writers on the topic have seriously engaged with Popper’s view. Even Popper himself did not fully explore his own theory of self in his discussions on methods of social sciences.²

This paper seeks to advance two threads. The first is to bring into higher relief the affinity between Popper’s and G.H. Mead’s theory of self – an affinity noted by Jeremy Shearmur. Beyond just noting the affinity, I also explore recent critiques of Mead’s theory offered by Lonnie Athens to consider how such critiques stand up to Popper’s views. The second thread is to consider Popper’s methodological position on the social sciences in light of a theory of the self. The ultimate goal of the paper is to build a bridge between the theories and the respective communities of interest in them so that all can pursue advancements in the light of the other.

Popper’s Theory of Self

While Popper admitted that concepts such as “self”, “person”, “mind”, “person(ality)”, “soul” (which he excluded from analysis) are not synonyms, for all intents and purposes he used them synonymously in TSAIB. To wit:

with selves, or minds, or self-conscious minds; Obviously, people exist; and each of them is an individual self; The activity of the self, or of the consciousness of self; the task of being a person; individual and personal identity; human individual persons, and of human selves, or human minds; our personality, our self.

Expanding on the opening quote (but keeping it short for this paper), Popper’s theory of the self can be summarized by the following key and supporting conjectures:

- 1. Sociality. “Consciousness of self begins to develop *through the medium of other persons,*

¹ While co-authored, Chapter 4 from which the quotes in this paper are drawn, was a “(P)opper” chapter in TSAIB.

² While true, Jeremy Shearmur has pointed out that Popper’s primary writings on methodology in the social sciences preceded TSAIB.

- Just as we learn to see ourselves in a mirror, so the child becomes conscious of himself by sensing his reflection in *the mirror of other people's consciousness of himself*,
- The child learns to know his environment; but *persons are the most important objects* within his environment; and *through their interest in him* – and through learning about his own body – he learns in time that he is a person himself,
- A human child growing up in *social isolation* will fail to attain a full consciousness of self.”
- 2. Learning. “We have to *learn to be selves*,
- Even before the child acquires a mastery of language, the child learns ... *to be approved or disapproved of*
- We obtain self-knowledge by *developing theories about ourselves*”
- 3. Individuation... “seems fundamental for the evolution of a self”
- 4. Mutability. “Self-identity is, at least partly, of a surprisingly *contingent* character
- the *changing self* which yet remains itself appears to be based on the changing individual organism which yet retains its individual identity
- The *self changes*. We start as children, we grow up, we grow old. Yet the continuity of the self ensures that the self remains identical, in a sense.
- The *self changes* slowly due to ageing, and due to forgetting; and much faster due to learning from experience.”
- 5. Dispositional. “Our personality, our self, what *we make use of in action or in contemplation*, remains unconscious or subconscious
- unconscious self which is indeed largely dispositional, and at least partly physical...consists of dispositions to act, and of dispositions to expect: of unconscious expectations.
- there are *at least two kinds of unconscious dispositional states*...that bear heavily on the self.
 - (1) Dispositions to recall to consciousness (which may or may not lead to conscious action)...; memory which produces the potential continuity of the self, or the continuity-producing memory... to be distinguished from...
 - (2) Dispositions to behave unconsciously... is, essentially, theory formation or skill formation by action and selection, leading to unconscious dispositions to expect and to act...memory in the sense of what one has acquired by some method of learning...”

True to form, Popper’s theory is at once simple and deep. Becoming a self is a learning process, the correction of errors about ourselves being provided first and foremost by *other people*, primarily those closest to us. Our selves are our individuality, the somewhat hidden source of our actions and contemplations, and are subject to change yet retain a general continuity across our lifetimes.

The inclusion of social experience as the *sine qua non* for the development of a self was noted by Shearmur to be aligned G. H. Mead’s theory of self (TSAIB, Chapter 4, Footnote #7). However,

this affinity, and the methodological perspective proffered by Mead's scholarly descendants – i.e., symbolic and more recently radical interactionists – has rarely been explored in depth.³
Popper and Mead Revisited: Athen's theory of self

Sociologist Lonnie Athens has advanced Mead's theory of self in important ways. Athens' theory accounts for most of the key aspects of Popper's, and extends both Popper's and Mead's theories in ways that they either did not specify or that clarify where their conjectures introduced confusion. Chief among the advancements Athens has made are the specifications of the "self as soliloquy," "phantom community," "principle of domination," and "dramatic self-change". I shall discuss each as they pertain to Popper's five conjectures.

Athens, like Mead, is clearly aligned with Popper's conjecture 1. *Sociality*. For Athens, though, developing and maintaining selves is an ongoing, lifelong process of internally conducting soliloquies with our phantom community – i.e., the specific people in one's life who have an interest in us and we them, who stay with us even when we are not in their immediate presence.

"People converse with themselves as if they were conversing with someone else, except that they converse with themselves elliptically...When soliloquizing we always converse with an interlocutor, even though it may deceptively appear as if we are only speaking to ourselves... However the people in whose company we find ourselves undergoing a social experience are not our only interlocutors. We also converse with phantom others, who are not present, but whose impact upon us is no less than the people who are present during our social experiences" (Athens, 1994).

Incidentally, Popper recognized the existence of such self-talk, even going so far as to admonish those who denied its existence:

"(T)here is no doubt that we achieve full consciousness – or the highest state of consciousness – when we are thinking, especially when we try to formulate our thoughts in the form of statements and arguments. Whether we *do this silently by speaking to ourselves – as we all do, sometimes, in spite of the fact that this has been denied...*" (Popper, 1994).

Athens' introduction of phantom others avoids confusions raised by Mead's notion of the "generalized other," which Mead used to represent the perspective of the "community" in the same way that Popper employed concepts like "culture". While Popper did not discuss the notion of the omnipresent phantom community, nor did he discuss at length the ongoing soliloquizing process, he clearly had an intimate collection of "others" in mind for his sociality conjecture: "*persons are the most important objects within his environment; and through their interest in him...*"

³ Verhoeven (1995) offers a light treatment.

About 2. *Learning.*, Athens' theory also posits that human beings learn to be selves. Athens', though, elevates the importance of learning *roles* – particularly the social order of roles into the dominant and subordinate. As we learn to be selves, we learn too the social order of our selves and others'. With the focus on domination, Athens departs dramatically from Mead, who's animating principle for social life is that of cooperation. Though Popper does not directly address the issue, I conjecture based on the following quote (among others) that Popper would agree that domination, rather than cooperation, is the animating principle for life: "the animal is always actively attempting to control its environment." In any event, on the idea that selves are learned, all are in alignment.

Regarding conjecture 3. *Individuation* (which Popper said little about, save for its value in the evolutionary process), Athens' theory is more closely aligned with Popper's than Mead's. Athens' theory recognizes that every person will be different than any other because of the diversity of their phantom communities. In contrast to Mead's notions of:

"the 'generalized other' or 'me,' which both spring from the *attitudes* of an individual's present corporal community, the phantom community usually springs from the *biographies* of individual corporal community members. *No two* corporal community members' biographies are *ever exactly alike* because their biographies are etched from their own personal histories of participation in social acts" (Athens, 2007).

Thus, whereas Mead's theory struggled to account for the individual – bringing his theory into the company of Hegel, Marx and Engels, and Bradley, as Shearmur noted – Popper's and Athens' theories account for the individual in evolutionary and logical terms.

Athens' theory advanced conjecture 4. *Mutability* in a fundamental way. Both Mead and Popper acknowledged the mutability of the self. Popper's theory, however, is somewhat simplistic regarding the reasons for and process underlying change: "we grow up, we grow old... slowly due to ageing, and due to forgetting; and much faster due to learning from experience." Mead's theory recognized additional causal factors – for example, "social experiences that provoke 'emotional upheavals' (that) fragment our selves" (Athens, 1995). Like Mead, Athens' theory spells out how problems can initiate dramatic self-change and specifies the process by which people's selves undergo significant change. In brief summary, Athens' theory conjectures a process very much in line with Popper's problem-solving formula:

PP: people undergo a traumatizing social experience so utterly foreign to them that they cannot, try hard as they may, assimilate it,
TT: they seek provisional phantom communities with whom to converse,
EE: they put their new provisional selves to the "crucial test of experience",
PP: they consolidate and socially segregate their new selves (Athens, 1995).

In Popper's conjecture 5. *Disposition* he made critical distinctions regarding memory of *one's self* and what *actions one might take*. Popper made no particular transition in Chapter 4 of TSAIB, *Some Remarks on the Self*, between the earlier focus on the self and the later focus on

knowledge, consciousness, learning, and memory, but distinguished the two features in terms of different dispositions. On the issue of the sub- or unconsciousness of the self, Athens aligns with Popper, particularly with regard to the phantom community:

“Most of the time we take their presence in our lives so much for granted that they lie far beneath our normal level of awareness; so that we are rarely aware of their existence in our lives. Their disembodied figures are ‘there,’ but they are hidden from our conscious purviews” (Athens, 1994).

Athens departs from the “continuity-producing memory” aspect of Popper’s theory, however. For Athens, it is the general *continuity of our phantom communities* that yield the general uniformity of our selves overtime, not a process of continuously remembering, consciously or unconsciously, our selves:

“The phantom other customarily stays the same across our different social experiences as long as the self, which metaphorically speaking, embodies it remains intact.”

“If people were always preoccupied with finding an answer to [the question, ‘who am I’], they would undergo an experiential paralysis so severe that it would be impossible for them to discharge any of the obligations necessary for them to sustain their lives” (Athens, 1995).

Popper’s distinction between two types of unconscious dispositional states seems an attempt to *separate* the self from both learned skills and knowledge and from contemplation. Suffice it to say, while Athens’ theory recognizes the dispositional sense of the background/foreground experience, his theory makes no clear distinction between the self and skills/knowledge/contemplation. Indeed, for Athens, there is a tight coupling between “who” one is, and “what” one might do:

“An individual judges the situations that confront him and other people’s opinions of him from the attitudes or standpoints of this generalized other” (Athens, 1997, p. 61; prior to Athens’ phantom community advancement).

It is not clear why the distinction may have mattered to Popper. Conjecture 5. *Disposition* deserves deeper consideration than space here allows.

Indeed, other comparisons of their theories of self might also be explored, to include but not to be limited to the central roles that language, self-talk, and senses of time and memory.

Methodological Considerations about the Self

To my knowledge, Popper never fully reconciled his theory of the self with his methodological perspective on the social sciences⁴ -- which comprises four main components – methodological individualism, situational analysis, the rationality principle, and historicism. Commentators on his methodological position have generally paid more attention to the first three (e.g., Neck, 2021), despite the broad-reaching implications of his remarks on historicism.

To *very* briefly summarize his methodological position:

“The theoretical social sciences operate almost always by the method of constructing *typical* situations or conditions...By a situational analysis...which provides us with models of typical social situations...I mean a certain kind of tentative or conjectural explanation of some human action which appeals to the situation in which the [individual] agent finds himself... and to that extent make the action ‘understandable’ (or ‘rationally understandable’), that is to say, adequate to his situation as he saw it...(which) contains all the relevant aims and all the available relevant knowledge, especially that of possible means for realizing these aims...This method of situational analysis may be described as an application of the rationality principle...the principle of acting appropriately to the situation...(which) replaces concrete psychological experiences (or desires, hopes, tendencies) by abstract and typical situational elements, such as ‘aims’ and ‘knowledge.’ (Popper & Miller, 1983; Chapter 29).

To this can be added Popper’s singular opposition to historicism:

The evolution of life on earth, or of human society, is a unique historical process. Such a process, we may assume, proceeds in accordance with all kinds of causal laws, for example, the laws of mechanics, of chemistry, of heredity and segregation, of natural selection, etc. Its description, however, is not a law, but only a single historical statement (Popper, 1957).

Thus taken as a whole, Popper’s position requires that situations be described to the extent to which a person acts in accordance to the situation, but is only compelled to do so by reference to such situational elements – which include “aims and knowledge”; that is, not by some particular causal law or “concrete psychological experience” (Popper & Miller, 1983).

Nowhere does Popper invoke his theory of self. Considering the clarity and unambiguity of his conviction, and the role of social experience in their formation and ongoing character, this seems more than a minor oversight. I submit that inclusion of Popper’s theory of self in his methodological formulation would have saved Popper considerable effort in defending his methodological position.

Fortunately, the methodological position of the interactionists has included the self as a core element in situational analysis. Indeed, the self is both developed and maintained through

⁴ Again, Shearmur has pointed out the temporal order of Popper’s writings on these two topics.

engagement in social events – as Popper’s theory notes – and is inextricably responsible for their emergence and outcomes – which neither Popper’s theory of self nor his methodological perspective, included. Moreover, it is conjecture 3. *Individuation*, that gives each person and human society, their/its unique historical process.

Athens’ seminal works exploring the process by which people become violent (Athens, 2017) and commit violent acts (or refrain from doing so) is a brilliant and hard-earned application of Popper’s methodological position (Athens, 1997). Central to his theory is the inclusion of the self-images people hold of themselves across time, as well as the dispositions to act that accompany such images. Athens discovered that people develop non-violent, incipiently violent, and violent self-images, and he developed complex, testable models of typical social situations – both in terms of the process of becoming a violent actor and the acts themselves – through deep exploration of individuals.

Interestingly, Popper’s supposition about the actions of a “madman” was, at least partially, a prescient model of Athens’ theory, including notions of dramatic self-change:

“We may explain how the madman arrived at his madly mistaken view: how certain experiences shattered his originally sane view of the world and led him to adopt another – the most rational view he could develop in accordance with the information at his disposal, so far as he found it credible; and how he had to make this new view incorrigible, precisely because it would break down at once under the pressure of refuting instances which would leave him (so far as he could see) stranded without any interpretation of his world; a situation to be avoided at all costs, from a rational point of view, since it would make all rational action impossible” (Popper & Miller, 1984; p. 363.)

Compare this to Athens’ description of stage two of the violentization process:

(Following the brutalization stage in which he has been subjected to, witness to, and coached to engage in, violence)...the problem finally becomes crystallized in his mind. This problem may be stated in terms of a personal query: ‘What can I do to stop undergoing any further [brutalization]?’ This agonizing problem has now grown to such an immense proportion in the subject’s mind that a definite solution must finally be found. The real solution that finally dawns upon the subject is to begin taking violent action himself against other people who unduly provoke him.

Athens’ work stands a validation of Popper’s methodological position – indeed, it is the finest such example I know of. It might be said that by including the self in his analysis, Athens more thoroughly executed Popper’s guidance than did Popper himself.

Conclusion

In briefly contrasting Popper’s, Mead’s, and Athens’ theory of self, I have attempted to lay the groundwork for further exploration of the self and its place in the social sciences. At present,

the tides have very much turned against their suggested directions. Perhaps by unifying like minds and their rational perspectives, we can help correct the course.

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