

# The Genesis of Morality

by Harvey Sarles

*The problem for the m/other is to get her child to take care of itself much as she would do. Here, I suggest, is much of the idea of the emerging social-moral self. The child now sees itself, but always within the context of m/other. It is becoming more separate, has an increasing sense of its own boundedness and continuities. But its viewing of self is within the moral necessity of taking care of its own being.*

*This is to say that the very basis for our moral being is located in the necessity of the m/other to have her developing child take on the moral equivalent of her responsibility for her infant. The child must begin to see itself as its m/other would: a sense of conscience, a sense of/for itself which sees itself.*

*The seat of morality is located in identifying oneself as oneself—a deepening sense of self—always within the context of how others see us, and would have us be. In the early years, the power of the m/other to confirm and direct her child is pervasive... and necessary; a sine qua non of our being.*

I propose that the idea of a moral foundation of the self has, until now, remained fairly vague; lacking much of anything like a “mechanism” which would account for our being moral *by-our-nature* as individuals, or via our interactive experience. The mechanisms of emergence of the infant from an attachment with its m/other—a G. H. Mead informed idea—leads to the development of the social self, a self which is (also) moral.

My thinking and observations convince me that it is important to re-study the human in our actuality, and attempt to free ourselves from the dualist traditions which have framed the study of the social-moral self. How to go about this study? John Dewey, in his less philosophical practice, points to some procedures by which we might continue to engage our study of ourselves (Mead and Dewey were close friends.)

All of this is important to an understanding of the moral self. Our being and becoming moral are aspects of our very nature. (I might also make the case that much of the development of religious thought works within what I think is a *gap* in theories of the self.)

In developing a self, G.H. Mead suggested that a child is somehow different from, not directly continuous with its earlier physical being. The physical infant/child undergoes very significant change, an *emergent transformation*, on the way to becoming a social self. The self which is, which one is, is thus (already) social:

The self has a character which is different from the physiological organism proper. The self is something which has a development: it is not initially there at birth, but arises in the process of social experience and activity, that is, develops

in the given individual as a result of his relations to that process as a whole and to other individuals within that process.<sup>1</sup>

To attempt to extend this idea: the social self is (also) a moral self, and one's moral being is (also) emergent. How this occurs involves the emergence of the social self, which I will dub the social-moral self.

Mead suggests that it is somehow through the use of gestures that we develop language and reason, and become a social self. But the *mechanism*, how this might actually occur during development, has remained unclear. And the parallel question of morality remains more an afterthought, not usually posed as a problem in becoming or of development within the contexts of social interaction.

Why this has not been clear or obvious occupies much of the foundational story of the Western tradition, and it continues in a debate which is currently heating up.<sup>2</sup> The physical child is presumed to be primary; what is beyond to be debated: mentalist, spiritual, ideas. The individual has been held to be primary (that is, until Mead), and continues to dominate the debate about the human to this day, with occasional nods to the idea of having others who confirm us, or at least our knowledge.

Continuing as well is the attempt to embed the idea of the human within presumptions of superiority: humans are considered to be *unique*: the only species which has achieved language, rationality, knowledge, understanding, consciousness...and, moreover, is the (only) moral animal.<sup>3</sup> This thinking includes an implicit depiction of other species as *lesser*, usually as non-moral. How humans are, has been and continue to be prescribed by our "differences" more than how we actually are, and has neglected a great deal of our being in our understanding of ourselves.

How do we proceed to (re)study the human? Dewey frames the issue of knowing as our experience:

No one would deny that we ourselves enter as an agency into whatever is attempted and done by us. That is a truism. But the hardest thing to attend to is that which is closest to ourselves, that which is most constant and familiar. And this closest 'something' is, precisely, ourselves, our own habits and ways of doing things as agencies in conditioning what is tried or done by us...the one factor which is the primary tool in the use of all these other tools, namely ourselves; in other words, our own psycho-physical disposition, as the basic condition of our

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<sup>1</sup> Mead, G.H. 1934. *Mind, Self, and Society: from the standpoint of a social behaviorist*. Ed., Charles W Morris. Chicago: U. Chicago Press: 135

<sup>2</sup> Pinker, Steven. 2002. *The Blank Slate*. New York: Viking. Currently the attempt to prove that the brain is what effectively makes us human, developing from some evolutionary psychology model is seen as opposed to the postmodernist elaboration of subjective-idealist notions of our being. My position, within the anti-dualist pragmatist tradition, is that this way of thinking about being is miscast or overly simple.

<sup>3</sup> Wright, Robert. 1994. *The Moral Animal: evolutionary psychology and everyday life*. New York: Vintage Books.

employment of all agencies and energies, has not even been studied as the central instrumentality.<sup>4</sup>

This essay will include ourselves in the study of interaction.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps this is so *obvious* within our being and experience, that its neglect should not surprise us. But we need to remind ourselves of the contexts in which we consider ourselves, and the pragmatist attempts to move outside prevailing modes of thought.

Most of the thinking which has gotten us here embeds the dualistic concepts of mind and body which pragmatism contests. Dualistic thinking has presumed the notion of the individual child *facing the world* alone; the major question of how we are has had to do with how we *know* the world.

But what or who is the self which knows? As Dewey says, how we are, what is our human agency, remains virtually unstudied. As long as we are pulled into the sort of debate of mind vs. body, *our very selves* will remain outside our discourse and thinking about being.

Within the traditions of thinking about the human, the *mechanisms* of how we are have remained elusive: theme and variation on pure reason and ideas within the idealist-mentalist tradition. More currently, postmodernism demands that narrative and representation is all. Currently, as well, the locus of our essential being is the brain on the oppositional physical-body side. I suggest that Mead's ideas can lead us, with some history and ongoing observation, to a clearer and more accurate understanding of the human condition; in the context of this essay, toward a sense of our moral being.

In an increasing literature on child development, there is a recognition of Mead's thinking that relationships are part and parcel of our being who and what we are. The infant is said to become *attached* to its m/other. The development of the self is now seen as an interactive process, from which the self emerges; a process of *co-regulation*.<sup>6</sup>

The early life-relationship is between/shared by the infant and that person who takes deep (24/7) and continuing responsibility for (usually) her infant: the m/other. It is in the involving relationship between infant and m/other that the child enters the relationship - enters *deeply* or *becomes* the m/other in many senses, *attaches* in current rhetoric, and emerges as a social self, but also as a moral self. I will add that the infant becomes *student* of its m/other's being and relating to the (her) infant and the world.

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<sup>4</sup> Dewey, John, "Introduction" in Alexander, Frederick Matthias, *Constructing Conscious Control of the Individual*, New York. E.P. Dutton, 1923. xxxii

<sup>5</sup> Sarles, Harvey. 2003ms. *The Archeology of the Body*, and other essays within the context of the *Body Journals*. Currently being edited for posting to <http://www.harveysarles.com>.

<sup>6</sup> Fogel, Alan. 1993. *Developing Through Relationships*. Harvester Wheatsheaf. Mead's thinking frames the approach of more and more developmental psychologists. The persons who significantly developed the interactive dynamic approach include Mead's student - my teacher - Ray Birdwhistell, the originator of Kinesics, the study of the body in interaction, Erving Goffman, and Gregory Bateson, and others whose outlook developed within the Meadian: Chicago school of Symbolic Interactionism. Also see, Daniel Stern. 1985. *The Interpersonal World of the Infant*. New York: Basic Books, and Alan Sroufe. *Emotional Development*. 1995. Cambridge U. Press.

As the seat of the social self, the infant gradually emerges as a social-moral self. How does this occur? What are some of the dynamics, the *sine qua non* of our continuing existence?

The heart-stopping thing about the new-born is that, from minute one, there is somebody there. Anyone who bends over the cot and gazes at it is being gazed back at.<sup>7</sup>

The moment when parents first meet their newborn is quite amazing.<sup>8</sup> They look at it, check its gender, note its parts, then dwell upon the face. What they actually see is facial and optical tissue reflecting muscles, reflecting light.<sup>9</sup>

What they bring to their observations, however, is centrally important to our human story. They do not merely see that there is somebody there; they read, interpret into, ascribe being to their infant. Whether there is anyone there, gazing back—or how this comes to be—is part of our search for a moral mechanism and the social self. But, for the m/other, the operating presumption, informing and absorbing idea that there is somebody gazing back, is crucial for our understanding of the social-moral self.

Mead's idea of emergence is that a social self emerges from the relationship with its m/other: there will be someone there, as the infant becomes it's self. It will be able to refer to itself as "I," it will know itself, begin to know the world, etc. It will also be a child with some sense of responsibility for itself, in terms similar to how its m/other would have taken care of her/him: the basis of morality, I suggest. How does this occur?

To elaborate Mead's insight into the idea of an emergent social self, I first want to suggest that the physical child is not survivable without the relationship with its m/other. Data on this goes back to the 1930s, particularly the work of Rene Spitz, who examined children in foundling homes, and found that up to 50% of them did not survive to two years of age.<sup>10</sup> TLC, and the notion of the m/other, somebody, actively reading, working with, interpreting her child, updating, responding—m/othering—is an ongoing part of the narrative of emergence. Much is changed, much changes, much is added to the child. The infant-m/other relationship is a *sine qua non* for our continuing being.<sup>11</sup>

The individual essentially does not exist, is not coterminous with the physical self. Mead was correct in specifying that we are social selves. In searching for mechanisms of that emergence—moving back to Dewey's concerns—I think it is important that we

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<sup>7</sup> Elaine Morgan - *The Descent of the Child: Human Evolution from a new perspective*. Oxford U. 1995:99. Quoted by Daniel Dennett in *Kinds of Minds: Toward an Understanding of Consciousness*. Basic Books, 1996:15.

<sup>8</sup> My spouse (Janis Sarles) was a manager in an OB ward at a local hospital for several years; and I was privileged to witness a number of parents "meeting" their infants for the first time within the newborn observation center.

<sup>9</sup> For an elaborative description of what is a face, see Harvey Sarles. *Around the Cartesian Impasse*. Chapter 14. In *Language and Human Nature*. Mpls: U. Minnesota Press, 1985: 229-30.

<sup>10</sup> Montagu, Ashley. 1955. *The Direction of Human Development*. Harper & Brothers: p.207-210.

<sup>11</sup> In this context, I suggest that the idea of feral children, being brought up by other species, is not any actual part of the human condition.

ponder something like an Archeology of the Body.<sup>12</sup> We have to resituate ourselves in our present, examine where and how we are, and how we got here, much beyond reflecting on how we are now, as adults.

To enter somewhat more deeply into the question of our emergence it is useful to ponder Dewey's sense of human agency. How, for example, do we speak or move, remain in balance? The muscles which we rely on in our ordinariness, are quite amazing. The great violin teacher, Suzuki, thinks that ordinary speech is as complicated (perhaps more complicated) as performing on the fiddle. Those of us who are of some age, recognize the changes which being-in-gravity wreaks upon our facial and other tissues. All this to say that our habits of our human agency are much more complex than we presume, and require our rethinking and analysis.

It is also useful to follow the arguments of Dewey's close colleague, F. Boas, especially his student Ashley Montagu, whose book, *Touching*, takes us ever more deeply into an appreciation of what an infant is and does; and more of what we take as obvious and habitual.<sup>13</sup> Taste, smell, sound, an enormous fixation on the face of its m/other, glancing there at most moments of unquietude, for re-attachment to its m/other... to itself.

Since this early period of attachment leading to the emergent social self, seems to occur very rapidly; since the habits which Dewey postulates and ponders enter us and/or we become them, I would like to add to our thought several ideas (perhaps they are more observations) about the new-worldly experience of the infant. Mere observation may be insufficient, especially from our current framings of space and time.

How are we? How did we get here? Look in the mirrors of life, but also rethink our own early experience. Some questions:

Why does the world of experience seem to speed up with age? A year in our older lives passes increasingly quickly, while a year in the life of a small child is very slow and enduring. I suggest, therefore, that with little experience, the sense of time, eventness, duration is very long, at least relatively, for the developing infant. There are few contrastive events in an infant's life. What we consider quick, the infant experiences as drawn out very considerably. Bring this idea back to Dewey's notion of our habits and agency.

With respect to space, I suggest that the infant experience is much more Brobdingnagian than ours. I infer, for example, from what happens to our tongue whenever there is slight irregularity in our teeth: a chip, a seed, a dentist probing. Our tongues seem to refocus much or most of our being, demanding, as it were, that the errant event cease and desist. I infer from this that we continue to experience as Deweyan habits, the sense that our faces are really, really large; that infants experience their m/others' facial surfaces, eye movements including focus on the faces and eyes, in minute detail. A m/other's smile is as large as the experience of fire-works up close (plus the explosive noise of speech).

As space and time effectively diminish/speed up as we mature, at the level of Deweyan habits, I suggest that thinking about the emergent social-moral self, the architectonic of human agency is not directly inferable from our usual observational

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<sup>12</sup> Sarles, H. 2003. *Archeology of the Body*(ms).

<sup>13</sup> Montagu, Ashley. 1978. *Touching*. Harper & Row.

stances. The infant during the experience of attachment with its m/other, is very fully engaged.

Further, I suggest that the infant is less directly a student of the world, as most of our theories of development have assumed. Rather, the attachment relationship involves the child first as student of and to its m/other, thence of and to the world—as she depicts it to her child.

During all these processes of early development, the m/other is doing, handling, feeding... observing her infant and interpreting its behavior, wants, and needs. The infant is changing, growing, and m/other is also changing in her observation, and estimation of her child. She is realistic in her readings, but also and at the same time, has a number of ideals, future-directed senses of what the child will be and become. Importantly, for our quest concerning morality, is that m/other and child are a kind of singularity.

M/other's glances, for example, effectively direct her child to look where she wants, then back at her. Much of this process is about sound, but also involves faces and eye directives and games. It entails a continuous confirming of the child (seeing somebody gazing back). The (vast) facial movement of a child's smile, for example, is welcomed by m/other's own smiles.

On our way to the emergence of the social-moral self, I suggest that the m/other utilizes the attachment process to direct her child to the world. But the major point here, is that the child attends to the world through its study of its m/other's facial movements and voice. The infant does not directly study the world, but develops through the sense that the m/other is providing questions and context to the world, and her child is responding by organizing and beginning to understand the world... as its m/others sees and directs her experience of the world to her infant.

I call it the Question-Response (Q-R) System,<sup>14</sup> and think its study will tell us a great deal about our language development. Its pursuit will also, I think, free us from the ancient/current habit of implicit comparison with other species whom we presume to be mentally inferior to ourselves. This presumption only excuses us to not observe our selves, and to presume that we as observers are somehow removed from what (and how) we observe.

Meanwhile, the child is growing, changing, beginning to develop muscular abilities to move: sitting, crawling, beginning to walk, then move, then move quickly. The ease of caring for an infant until the moment when he or she can move on their own, seems amazingly simple in the hindsight of guarding against the infant hurting itself.

Until this point, m/other could literally leave the child on its own. It was safe to do this. Later, however, after several months, after the first steps of about a year old, the infant is increasingly dangerous to itself. Fingers in electrical sockets, touching a hot stove, running, trying to go downstairs. What's a m/other to do?

It is at this point of development, that the self begins to emerge much more clearly: a sense that the (now) toddler, has a sense of itself, knows much of what there is in its world, is involved and entranced in its existence, has begun to speak, and is on the way to figuring how to call itself by the impossible-to-teach word of self-description: "I."

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<sup>14</sup> Sarles, H. 1985. *Language and Human Nature*. Chapter 11. Minneapolis: U. Minnesota Press.

The child begins to have an internal dialogue, begins to be able to gather memories which for us, to this day, wander in our heads as our first memory; the first thing, event, that I have in my memory... who I am. It begins to have, to be, a self; a self which exists within the (always) social context of its m/other, and gradually including others.

At this moment of development, every m/other has a deep dilemma. The child can be safeguarded from itself only to a certain point. M/other can put him (usually, metaphorically him) on a leash, keep it from wandering into dangerous territory; try hortating or even screaming. But there are limits on what anyone can do. The (moral) problem is in somehow getting the child to take care of itself (much as m/other would).

But what does the child know of itself, of taking care? The very idea of the self indicates that the child has a sense of itself which is independent of the world, especially its m/other, and in interesting ways, independent from itself.

The problem for the m/other is to get her child to take care of itself much as she would do. Here, I suggest, is much of the idea of the emerging social-moral self. The child now sees itself, but always within the context of m/other. It is becoming more separate, has an increasing sense of its own boundedness and continuities. But its viewing of self is within the moral necessity of taking care of its own being.

This is to say that the very basis for our moral being is located in the necessity of the m/other to have her developing child take on the moral equivalent of her responsibility for her infant. The child must begin to see itself as its m/other *would*: a sense of *conscience*, a sense of/for itself which sees itself.

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This experience of the child continues, and expands to other persons—family, community, etc., as the child develops and grows—with others seeing and judging the child in many ways, but most always including various judgments about the self-as-moral. Who am I, and who I am, includes questions and judgments about m/others and others. Who am I thus includes questions of what am I to do.

It begins from the sense that one has/is a self, that one has to take care of and for, but within the context that taking care of oneself is much as one's m/other would have one do. It derives from, is located within the directly moral commitment (and very full-time relationship) of the m/other to and with her developing child.

It is not merely m/othering, but brings to the interaction and care of her child, innumerable pictures of her child—in each immediacy, in the very idea of each next moment; in a while, tomorrow, and toward the idea which she brings to her observations of and responses to her child, of it developing and becoming a person...much as she is and would be; much as the child will. She includes a deep sense for the idea of futurity, of hope, of the possibilities; but also of its evanescences.

The foundation, the genesis of the self, the genesis of morality, is thus located in the emergent transformation of the developing child with its m/other. Its study and implementation is increasingly focused beyond the mere study of the child, into the study of its early relationship with its m/other.

My observation or wonder is that without taking seriously the Meadian idea of emergence of the social-moral self, we have been left without any way of accounting for

our morality; or being-moral. The sense that the individual develops as it were, independently, has left us wondering how it can be, even might be, that humans are moral. This is much of why, I think, we are continually tempted to look outside our being, outside of life itself, to account for our moral being. *Locating* mechanisms for our moral being is thus crucial in establishing us as naturalistic subjects.

It is the morality, the actual morality, of continuously being parent to a child that is the locus of morality. It is an aspect of our being social, that we are also moral, as it were, by-our-nature. It resides within the complex of experiences of the moral ongoing involvement of infant with its m/other.

## Notes

1. G.H. Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society: from the standpoint of a social behaviorist*, ed., Charles W Morris, Chicago: U. Chicago Press, 1934: 135
2. Steven Pinker, *The Blank Slate*, New York: Viking. 2002. Currently the attempt to prove that the brain is what effectively makes us human, developing from some evolutionary psychology model is seen as opposed to the postmodernist elaboration of subjective-idealist notions of our being. My position, within the anti-dualist pragmatist tradition, is that this way of thinking about being is miscast or overly simple.
3. Robert Wright, *The Moral Animal: evolutionary psychology and everyday life*, New York: Vintage Books, 1994.
4. John Dewey, "Introduction" in Alexander, Frederick Matthias, *Constructing Conscious Control of the Individual*, New York. E.P. Dutton, 1923, xxxii
5. Harvey Sarles, *The Archeology of the Body*, and other essays within the context of the *Body Journals*, 2003. Currently being edited for posting to <http://www.harveysarles.com>.
6. Alan Fogel, *Developing Through Relationships*, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993. Mead's thinking frames the approach of more and more developmental psychologists. The persons who significantly developed the interactive dynamic approach include Mead's student—my teacher—Ray Birdwhistell, the originator of Kinesics, the study of the body in interaction, Erving Goffman, and Gregory Bateson, and others whose outlook developed within the Meadian: Chicago school of Symbolic Interactionism. Also see, Daniel Stern, 1985, *The Interpersonal World of the Infant*, New York: Basic Books, and Alan Sroufe, *Emotional Development*, 1995, Cambridge U. Press.
7. Elaine Morgan, *The Descent of the Child: Human Evolution from a new perspective*. Oxford U, 1995:99. Quoted by Daniel Dennett in *Kinds of Minds: Toward an Understanding of Consciousness*, Basic Books, 1996:15.
8. My spouse (Janis Sarles) was a manager in an OB ward at a local hospital for several years; and I was privileged to witness a number of parents "meeting" their infants for the first time within the newborn observation center.
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10. Ashley Montagu, *The Direction of Human Development*, Harper & Brothers, 1955: pp. 207-210.
11. In this context, I suggest that the idea of feral children, being brought up by other species, is not any actual part of the human condition.

12. Sarles, *Archeology of the Body* (ms).
13. Montagu, *Touching*.
14. Sarles, *Language and Human Nature*, Chapter 11, Minneapolis: U. Minnesota Press, 1985