

# **Theory of G.H. Mead (I and me):**

# George Herbert Mead

- American philosopher and social psychologist George Herbert Mead (1934) developed his ideas about the emergence of a sense of self.
- He emphasised the two-part structure of this self and represented this by the terms 'I' and 'me'. He described in detail the whole process of child development and explained how children learn to use the concepts 'I' and 'me'.

# The 'I'

- The 'I' is the immediate response of an individual to others. It is the unpredictable and creative aspect of the self.
- People do not know in advance what the action of the 'I' will be. "The 'I' is the unsocialised infant—a bundle of spontaneous wants and desires" (Giddens, 1997). The 'I' reacts against 'me'.

# The 'me'

- The 'me' consists of the attitudes of others that the child adopts and makes his own. Thus, when a parent says things like 'good child' or 'good behaviour' and 'bad child' or 'bad behaviour', such communications from 'significant others' (parents, siblings, playmates, teachers, relatives) become increasingly patterned or organised into that part of the self that Mead calls the 'me'.

# I & me

- In other words, the 'me' is the adoption of the 'generalised other', which according to Mead is the 'social self.
- Individuals develop self-consciousness by coming to see themselves as others see them.
- For Freud this is the outcome of Oedipal phase, while for 'me', it is the result of a developed capacity of self-awareness.
- In contrast to 'I', people are conscious of the 'me'; the 'me' involves conscious responsibility.
- It is through the 'me' that society dominates the individual in the form of social control—the domination of the expression of the 'me' over the expression 'I'.

# Phases of the development of self:

- **(1) Play stage:**
- At this stage infants and young children develop as social beings first of all by imitating the actions of those around them. In their play small children often imitate what adults do.
- They often play 'house' (Mummy-Papa) or 'school' (Teacher- Student), enacting the role of mother, father, teacher, student or any other person important to them—significant others.
- Mead calls this process as taking the role of others (role-taking)— learning what is to be in the shoes of another person.

# (1) Play stage.....

- By taking the role of these significant others, they can better understand their own roles as children, students, sons or daughters.
- By practicing the roles of others in play, children learn to understand what others expect of them, and they learn how to behave to meet those expectations.
- As a result of such play, the child becomes cognisant of himself and obtains a picture of himself by assuming the role of others.
- However, it is a limited self because the child can take only the role of distinct and separate others. They lack a more general and organised sense of themselves.

## (2) Game stage:

- Occurs at about eight or nine, the child starts taking part in organised games. To learn organised games, one must understand the rules of the play, notions of fairness and equal participation.
- The child at this stage learns to grasp what Mead terms the 'generalised other'—the general values and moral rules involved in the culture in which he or she is developing.
- This generalised other is an individual's total impression of the judgments and expectations that other persons have toward him. At this stage, the sense of the self in the full sense of term emerges.



- In the play stage, children are not organised wholes because they play at a series of discrete roles. In Mead's view they lack definite personalities.
- However, in the game stage, such organisation begins and a definite personality starts to emerge.
- Thus, for Mead, taking the role of generalised other, rather than that of discrete others, is essential for the full development of self.