

## **Charles Horton Cooley: Concept of the Looking Glass Self**

### **Introduction**

Cooley was influenced by approaches such as Pragmatism and Darwinism. Even though Cooley was influenced by Weber, Cooley's examination was more psychological than Weber's. Cooley's most significant contribution was his idea of the "looking-glass-self." The concept of the looking glass self demonstrates that self-relation, or how one views oneself is not a solitary phenomenon, but rather includes others. Cooley states that society and individuals do not denote separable phenomena, but are simply collective and distributive aspects of the same thing. Developmentally, Cooley theorizes that human beings possess an inherent tendency to reach out, interact, or socialize with those people and objects that surround them.

From the beginning and throughout one's life, the differentiated self is always in reference to a common ground. Whether it is in terms of defining oneself as distinct from others, noting differences of opinions, or whether one is harboring a secret place or project, all of these significant instances of differentiation include a shared foundation. Cooley observes that this bond is so strong that only the imaginative student, in his best hours, can really free himself – and that only in some respects – from the limitations of his time.... We can scarcely rid ourselves of the impression that the way of life we are used to is the normal. From this, Cooley suggests that self-feeling and social feeling must be harmonized and made to go abreast. Since self-feeling and social feeling are two sides of the same phenomenon, then personal freedom is tied to the relations that comprise society. Cooley's comment about harmonizing self-feeling with social feeling is not intended to suggest that people should lose themselves in society, but rather that they should examine responsibly the effects of their actions on others.

### **Human Nature and Social Order**

A separate individual is an abstraction unknown to experience, and so likewise is society when regarded as something apart from individuals. The real human life, which may be considered either in an individual aspect or in a social aspect, is always both individual and general. In other words, society and individuals do not denote separable phenomena, but are simply collective and distributive aspects of the same thing.

According to Cooley, that persons make society would be generally admitted as a matter of course, but that society makes persons would strike many as a startling notion, though I know of no good reason for looking upon the distributive aspect of life as more primary or causative than the collective aspect. The view that Cooley regards as sound is that individuality is neither prior in time nor lower in rank than sociality; but that the two have always existed side by side as complementary aspects of the same thing, and that the line of progress is from a lower to a higher type of both, not from one to the other.

The question often asked is whether the individual is free or a mere piece of society. For Cooley, he is free, but it is an organic freedom, which he works out in cooperation with others, not a freedom to do things independently of society. It is teamwork. He has the freedom to function in his own way, like the quarterback, but, in one way or another, he has to play the game as life brings him into it.

There appears to be a general impression that children are far more subject to control through suggestion or mechanical imitation than grown-up people. However, on the other hand, they have less of the mechanical subjection to habit that goes with a settled character.

The fact is, for Cooley, that the main current of our thought is made up of impulses absorbed without deliberate choice from the life about us, or else arising from hereditary instinct, or from habit; while the function of higher thought and of will is to organize and apply these impulses.

The chief reason why popular attention should fix itself upon voluntary thought and action, and tend to overlook the involuntary, is that choice is acutely conscious and so must from its very nature, be the focus of introspective thought. Because he is an individual, a specialized, contending bit of psychical force, a man very naturally holds his will in its individual aspect to be of supreme moment.

Our particular minds or wills are members of a slowly growing whole, and at any given moment are limited in scope by the state of the whole, and especially of those parts of the whole with which they are in most active contact. Our thought is never isolated, but always some sort of a response to the influences around us so that we can hardly have thoughts that are not in some way aroused by communication.

National habits and sentiments so completely envelop us that we are for the most part unaware of them. The more thoroughly American a man is the less he can perceive Americanism. He will embody it, all he does, or writes, will be full of it; but he can never truly see it, simply because he has no exterior point of view from which to look at it. Once again, only the imaginative student, in his best hours, can really free himself and that only in some respects from the limitations of his time and see things from a height. We can

scarcely rid ourselves of the impression that the way of life we are used to is the normal, and that other ways are eccentric.

It is by intercourse with others that we expand our inner experience. In other words, the personal idea consists at first and in all later development, of a sensuous element or symbol with which is connected a more or less complex body of thought and sentiment; the whole social in genesis, formed by a series of communication.

Opposition between one's self and someone else is also a very real thing; but this opposition, instead of coming from a separateness like that of material bodies, is, on the contrary, dependent upon a measure of community between one's self and the disturbing other, so that the hostility between one's self and a social person may always be described as hostile sympathy. The main thing here is to note that personal opposition does not involve mechanical separateness, but arises from the emphasis of inconsistent elements in ideas having much in common.

The emotion or feeling of self may be regarded as instinctive, and was doubtless evolved in connection with its important function in stimulating and unifying the special activities of individuals. It seems to exist in a vague though vigorous form at the birth of each individual, and like other instinctive ideas or germs of ideas, to be defined and developed by experience, becoming associated, or rather incorporated, with muscular, visual, and other sensations, with perceptions, apperceptions, and conceptions of every degree of complexity and of infinite variety of content, and especially with personal ideas.

The first definite thought that a child associates with self-feeling are probably those of his earliest endeavors to control visible objects – his limbs, his playthings, his bottle, and the like. Then, he attempts to control the actions of the persons about him and so his circle of power and of self-feeling widens without interruption to the most complex of objects of mature ambition.

An important statement from Cooley is that where there is no communication there can be no nomenclature and no developed thought.

In a very large and interesting class of cases the social reference takes the form of a somewhat definite imagination of how one's self – that is any idea he appropriates – appears in a particular mind, and the kind of self-feeling one has is determined by the attitude toward this attributed to that other mind. A social self of this sort might be called the reflected or looking glass self:

- 1) Each to each a looking glass – Reflects the other that doth pass.

As we see our face, figure, and dress in the glass, and are interested in them because they are ours, and pleased or otherwise with them according as they do or do not answer to what we should like them to be; so in imagination we perceive in another's mind some thought of our appearance, manners, aims, deeds, character, friends, and so on, and are variously affected by it.

A self-idea of this sort seems to have three principle elements:

- 1) The imagination of our appearance to the other person
- 2) The imagination of his judgment of that appearance
- 3) Some sort of self-feeling such as pride or mortification.

The comparison with a looking glass hardly suggests the second element, the imagined judgment, which is quite essential. The thing that moves us to pride or shame is not the mere mechanical reflection of ourselves, but an imputed sentiment, the imagined effect of this reflection upon another's mind. For example, we are ashamed to seem evasive in the presence of a straightforward man, cowardly in the presence of a brave one, gross in the eyes of a refined one, and so on. We always imagine and in imagining share the judgments of the other man.

The process by which self-feeling of the looking glass sort develops in children may be followed without much difficulty. Studying the movements of others as closely as they do they soon see a connection between their own acts and changes in those movements; that is they perceive their own influence or power over persons. The young performer soon learns to be different things to different people, showing that he begins to apprehend personality and to foresee its operation.

According to Cooley, persons of great ambitions, or of peculiar aims of any sort, lie open to disorders of self-feeling because they necessarily build up in their minds a self-image which no ordinary social environment can understand or corroborate, and which must be maintained by hardening themselves against immediate influences, enduring or repressing the pains of present depreciation, and cultivating in imagination the approval of some higher tribunal. If the man succeeds in becoming indifferent to the opinions of his neighbors he runs into another danger, that of a distorted and extravagant self of the pride sort, since by the very process of gaining independence and immunity from the stings of depreciation and misunderstanding, he has perhaps lost that wholesome deference to some social tribunal.

The trouble with out industrial relations is not the mere extent of competition, but the partial lack of established laws, rules, and customs, to determine what is right and fair in it. This partial lack of standards is connected with the rapid changes in industry and industrial relations among men, with which the development

of law and moral criteria has by no means kept pace. Hence, there arises great uncertainty as to what some persons and classes may rightly and fairly require of other persons and classes, and this uncertainty lets loose angry imaginations. An ideal social system would be one in which the work of individuals in each occupation, the work of occupations in relation to one another, that of class in relation to class and of nation in relation to nation, should be motivated by a desire to excel, this desire being controlled and subordinated by allegiance to common social ideals.

This idea of freedom is quite in accord with a general, though vague, sentiment among us: it is an idea of fair play, of giving everyone a chance; and nothing arouses more general and active indignation among our people than the belief that someone or some class is not getting a fair chance. There seems, however, to be too great complacency in the way in which the present state of things is interpreted, a tendency to assume that freedom has been achieved once and for all by the Declaration of Independence and popular suffrage, and that little remains but to let each person realize the general blessing to the best of his ability. It is well to recognize that the freedom which we nominally worship is never more than partly achieved, and is everyday threatened by new encroachments, that the right to vote is only one phase of it, and possibly, under present conditions, not the most important phase, and that we can maintain and increase it only by a sober and determined application of our best thought and endeavor.