

Philosophy, Social Theory, and the
Thought of George Herbert Mead

Edited by

Mitchell Aboulafia

State University of New York Press

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Introduction

Having delineated the goals and themes of this book in the Preface, I would like to set the stage for the expository and critical pieces that follow by offering an account of Mead's social thought. My aim is by no means to provide a definitive scholarly reading of Mead's mature thought, which, even if possible, would require a substantial work unto itself.¹ Rather, my goal is to orient readers who are unfamiliar with Mead's thought (or have not read him for some time) through an account that avoids detailed criticism and shuns claims to comprehensiveness, but does highlight many of the ideas and topics discussed, criticized, and developed in this book.

Mead perhaps is best known as a theorist of the self, and there is good reason for this. Even when he does not directly address the issue of selfhood, one can see how deeply his thought has been informed by the analysis of the self, and through this analysis we will approach Mead. In following this course, we must begin with his concept of the mind, for without the mind there can be no self for Mead. As a thinker deeply indebted to the Darwinian turn of the late 19th century, he conceives of mind, both ontogenetically and phylogenetically, in terms of evolutionary development; that is, in terms of emergence.² To explain how mind emerges, Mead has recourse to the *gesture*.

Mead tells us that animals gesture to one another and that in so doing communicate. When a dog bares its fangs at another dog, it makes a gesture; and a second dog may respond by running away or perhaps by baring its fangs. A gesture may be thought of as a stimulus that calls out a response. It also may be thought of as that feature of an action that can stand for or symbolize that which follows the gesture. For Mead, the meaning of a gesture is to be understood in functional terms, so that in our example the baring of fangs by the first dog means run or bare fangs (back), which is the response of the second dog. In this sense, meaning is objective and can be observed and studied, for it is defined in terms of the responses of organisms to each other.

For human beings, however, meaning is not simply a function of objective responses that can be noted by a third party, because human beings are aware of meanings and have the capacity to point them out to themselves, even in the absence of others. How does this

capacity arise? Human beings make use of vocal gestures. As we cross a busy street I turn to a friend and yell, "Stop!" to prevent her from stepping in front of an oncoming car. In so doing, we both hear the word *stop*, and there is a tendency to respond to it in me as there is in my friend, because I hear the same word my friend hears. *Stop* is a vocal gesture. Mead tells us that, "In the case of the vocal gesture the form [the organism] hears its own stimulus just as when this is used by other forms, so it tends to respond also to its own stimulus as it responds to the stimulus of other forms."³

The vocal gesture provides a mirroring or reflective dimension to our responses to stimuli. This dimension can be employed to distinguish the vocal gesture from the gesture or, in alternative terms, the *significant symbol* from the symbol. "Gestures become significant symbols when they implicitly arouse in an individual making them the same responses which they explicitly arouse, or are supposed to arouse, in other individuals, the individuals to whom they are addressed."⁴

In using significant symbols or vocal gestures, I respond implicitly as the other responds explicitly to my gestures. I say to my friend, "Open the window," and I can feel a tendency in myself to respond as my friend does, even though I do not overtly do so. We have both learned to react to the same symbols in a similar fashion; and we both are aware of the responses that these symbols call out in us. "The critical importance of language in the development of human experience lies in this fact that the stimulus is one that can react upon the speaking individual as it reacts upon the other."⁵ Unlike animals, human beings are aware of meanings because they can hear their gestures as the other hears them, and can respond to them as the other has responded. How do I learn the meaning of a vocal gesture? I become aware of what it means by "viewing" it from the perspective of the other; that is, by being aware of alter's (potential) response to my vocal gesture. I "see" my own gesture in light of this response.

A relatively sophisticated nervous system is required in order to be able to discriminate the kinds of stimuli that the vocal gesture demands. The genesis of this nervous system, in terms of both the evolution of the species and the development of the individual, owes much to the capacity of the hand to grasp and manipulate objects. In his *Philosophy of the Act*, Mead divides experience into perceptual, manipulatory, and consummatory phases; and this division is predicated on the importance of physical contact with objects, specifically the unique sort of contact accessible to human beings because of the hand.⁶ The world of immediacy, to which the animal is confined, gives way to a realm of mediation as human

beings extend the "distance" between the perceptual and consummatory stages of the act—for example, seeing the plant as food and eating it—through the increasing complexity of the manipulatory stage. The latter stage allows us to treat objects in different ways, and hence see them as means to different ends. Only with the use of significant symbols, however, is the full potential of the manipulatory stage of the act realized, for then direct contact can be superseded by the innovations of language.

Given Mead's sensitivity to the importance of the hand, it is no surprise that he is well aware that the hand allows us to develop sophisticated sign languages. We can see the hand as the other sees it, in a fashion analogous to the manner in which we can hear the vocal gesture as the other hears it. The hand can be used to produce significant symbols. Nevertheless, Mead argues that the vocal gesture holds a unique place in the genesis of the mind for both the species and the individual; and he investigates significant symbols in light of our ability to produce vocal gestures.⁷

For Mead, significant symbols allow us to be aware of meaning; and meaning is defined in terms of the similarity of responses; that is, in functional terms. This understanding of meaning is criticized by both Tugendhat and Habermas as conflating the similarity of responses with the identity of meaning; and both point to the source of this confusion in Mead's failure to grapple with the intricacies of language.⁸ Be this as it may, when one is aware of a meaning, for Mead, one is "self-conscious." This designation stresses that the awareness of meaning rests on the reflective character of significant symbols.⁹ However, it should be noted that the term *self-conscious* in this context does not imply a consciousness of self; that is, an explicit awareness of having a self, a self-consciousness. (I will address the relationship of the self to self-consciousness later.) Significant symbols go hand in hand with (self-conscious) meaning, and from their use mind emerges.

Mentality on our approach simply comes in when the organism is able to point out meanings to others and to himself. This is the point at which mind appears, or if you like, emerges. . . . It is absurd to look at the mind simply from the standpoint of the individual human organism; for, although it has its focus there, it is essentially a social phenomenon; even its biological functions are primarily social.¹⁰

To develop a mind one must learn to anticipate the response of the other to specific symbols, and this task of anticipation can be spoken of in terms of "taking the attitude of the other." In

