

George Herbert Mead

The Making of a Social Pragmatist

Gary A. Cook

University of Illinois Press *Urbana and Chicago*

Contents

Acknowledgments ix

Bibliographical Abbreviations xi

Introduction xiii

1. Early Life and Letters: Part 1 1

2. Early Life and Letters: Part 2 20

3. From Hegelianism to Social Psychology 37

4. The Development of Mead's Social Psychology 48

5. Behaviorism and Mead's Mature Social Psychology 67

6. Taking the Attitude or the Role of the Other 78

7. Mead and the City of Chicago: Social and Educational Reform 99

8. Moral Reconstruction and the Social Self 115

9. Whitehead's Influence on Mead's Later Thought 138

10. Mead's Social Pragmatism 161

Epilogue: Mead and the Hutchins Controversy 183

Notes 195

Bibliography 215

Index 227

Introduction

The work of the American philosopher and social psychologist George Herbert Mead (1863–1931) has been the object of growing scholarly interest from several different quarters in recent years. Sociologists and historians of the social sciences have been debating the legitimacy of his long-standing honorary status as one of the founding fathers of symbolic interactionism in American sociology; they have devoted attention not only to his social psychological ideas but also to such matters as his influence upon the Chicago School of sociology and his involvement in Progressive social reform.¹ Meanwhile, philosophers have increasingly come to regard him as one of the canonical figures in the history of American pragmatism; they have sought to specify his contributions to the pragmatic tradition and to assess the relevance of these contributions for issues of current concern.² And, in addition, certain German thinkers have begun to investigate Mead's writings with an eye to suggestions bearing upon their own research in the areas of philosophical psychology and critical social theory.³

Despite the increasing attention being paid to his work, however, Mead's thought remains to this day an only partially explored territory. This is due in large measure to the often fragmentary character of his writings: "I am vastly depressed by my inability to write what I want to," he lamented in a letter to his daughter-in-law late in his career. "The distance between what I want and what I can is so unbridgeable. It is an ancient theme."⁴ Perhaps because of this inability, or because of what his long-time friend and colleague John Dewey called "a certain diffidence which restrained George Mead from much publication,"⁵ he never published a systematic treatment of his many social psychological and philosophical insights. Anyone who wishes to do justice to the full scope and coherence of Mead's intellect must therefore struggle to

discern unifying threads running through the numerous short essays and reviews he published during his lifetime; he or she must further attempt to identify and find linkages between the central themes in a small mountain of additional materials consisting mainly of unfinished manuscripts, correspondence, and student notes from Mead's most important courses at the University of Chicago.

It is just this sort of scholarly inquiry that I have undertaken in the present study. My approach here is essentially that of an intellectual historian: I am primarily concerned to elucidate the meaning and coherence of Mead's key ideas, and I seek to accomplish this by locating these ideas within a well-documented account of his development as both a thinker and a practitioner of educational and social reform. Thus, I begin my discussion of Mead's thought in chapters 1 and 2 by looking carefully at his early life and letters. Here I trace the initial stages of his intellectual development, from his undergraduate education at Oberlin College through the beginning of his professional career as an instructor at the University of Michigan. These two largely biographical chapters show what can be gleaned from historical documents about the formative influence of Mead's early encounters with such important teachers and colleagues as Josiah Royce, George Herbert Palmer, William James, Wilhelm Dilthey, and John Dewey. The next several chapters are devoted to the development of what I take to be the core of Mead's thought, his social psychology. In these chapters I follow Mead's transition from an early Deweyan version of Hegelianism to an interest in social psychology (chapter 3), examine the deployment of his distinctive social psychological ideas in a series of essays he published early in his career at the University of Chicago (chapter 4), and consider the culmination of these ideas in his mature social psychological writings and lectures (chapters 5 and 6). Mead's social philosophy and ethics are taken up in chapters 7 and 8; the former chapter deals with his involvement in social and educational reform activities in the city of Chicago, while the latter surveys the development of his ideas on ethics and moral psychology. The next two chapters address the continuing development of Mead's thought in the years following 1920: chapter 9 examines the various ways in which the writings of Alfred North Whitehead influenced the development of Mead's later thought, and chapter 10 seeks to supply an overview of Mead's social pragmatism, especially as this relates to his mature understanding of experience, nature, and knowledge. Finally, the epilogue offers a biographical ac-

count of the end of Mead's career at the University of Chicago, focusing upon his involvement in a controversy between the department of philosophy and Robert Maynard Hutchins—a controversy that resulted in the virtual demise of the Chicago School of pragmatism.

Although I shall occasionally refer to the secondary literature on Mead's thought in the course of this study, I make no attempt to survey this literature in a systematic fashion. Nor do I attempt to assess the various ways in which Mead's teaching and writing have influenced subsequent creative work in sociology and philosophy. Rather, my concern here is to dig deeply into Mead's own writings and related historical materials that shed light upon his intellectual development. Since these primary documents are a heterogeneous lot, it may be helpful to alert the reader in advance to some of their salient features and also to indicate how they are to be utilized in what follows.

Let me begin with the materials in the George Herbert Mead Papers at the Department of Special Collections at the Regenstein Library of the University of Chicago. Of the many unpublished documents included in this collection, I have found particularly helpful Mead's early letters, which provide information about his years as an undergraduate at Oberlin College, his years of graduate study at Harvard, Leipzig, and Berlin, and the beginnings of his relationship with John Dewey at the University of Michigan: the treatment of this period of his intellectual development found in chapters 1 and 2 is based in large part upon his long correspondence with an Oberlin friend and subsequent intellectual companion, Henry Northrup Castle. Similarly, letters Mead wrote during the 1920s to his daughter-in-law, Irene Tufts Mead, were a source of information helpful in tracing the influence of Alfred North Whitehead's writings upon Mead's later thought. With very few exceptions, all of the better manuscripts (as opposed to personal correspondence) contained in the Mead Papers have been published in the posthumous volumes of Mead's works to be mentioned later; hence I have seldom had occasion to cite these manuscripts in their unpublished form. The Mead Papers also include a variety of student notes taken in Mead's courses at the University of Chicago. But, again, the best of these have been posthumously published, and the others contain little that is relevant for my purposes; consequently I have cited these unpublished student notes only in one or two cases. In addition, the Department of Special Collections at the Regenstein Library houses several other collections containing materials related to Mead's career.

