

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

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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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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

