George Herbert Mead
The Making of a Social Pragmatist

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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. 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. 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.

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.” 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,” 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.
I have drawn from the Henry Northrup Castle Papers in chapters 1 and 2 and also from the collection entitled Presidents' Papers ca. 1925–1945 in the epilogue dealing with the controversy between Hutchins and the Chicago department of philosophy in the years immediately preceding Mead's death.

A second, and extremely important, category of Mead documents consists of the essays and book reviews Mead published in various periodicals. The bibliography of his writings includes over ninety such items, at least forty of which are fairly substantive in character. For a number of years these documents were largely overlooked in scholarly discussions of Mead's thought, perhaps because they were not readily accessible. But many of these publications have now been reprinted in two anthologies of Mead's essays edited, respectively, by Andrew J. Reck and John W. Petras. I have relied heavily on these essays throughout my book, and for two reasons. First, unlike much of Mead's posthumously published work, they bear definite dates—a consideration of some importance when one is trying to trace the development of an author's thought. Second, in contrast to student lecture notes and fragmentary manuscripts posthumously edited by others, these documents were given their finishing touches by Mead himself; presumably, therefore, they represent what he took to be his best work at the time of their submission for publication.

A third category of documents pertaining to Mead's intellectual development consists of official records of his remarks and actions as a member of various organizations. In chapter 7, for instance, where I explore his involvement in organizations dedicated to social and educational reform, I draw upon such records as the University of Chicago Settlement Board Minutes and the Bulletins of the City Club of Chicago. These documents enable me to pin down with considerable specificity the nature and dates of Mead's reform activities.

Lastly, there are the four volumes of Mead's work published in the decade following his death in 1931. The first of these posthumous volumes, The Philosophy of the Present (1932), was edited by Arthur E. Murphy, one of Mead's colleagues at the University of Chicago, and was published by the Open Court Publishing Company as part of its series of Carus Lectures. Approximately half of this volume consists of Murphy's edited version of three Carus Lectures delivered by Mead at the Pacific Division meeting of the American Philosophical Association in December 1930. The remainder of the volume includes related material drawn from several previously unpublished (and undated) manuscripts and from two essays published in the late 1920s. In chapter 9, I try to show how the new ideas Mead tentatively explores here—especially in the portion of The Philosophy of the Present based upon the 1930 Carus Lectures—grew out of his earlier work.

Three additional posthumous volumes of Mead's work were published by the University of Chicago Press during the 1930s, due mainly to the efforts of Mead's son and daughter-in-law. Convinced that Mead's lectures and manuscripts were of sufficient importance to deserve a wider audience, Henry and Irene Tufts Mead secured the services of Charles W. Morris and Merritt Hadden Moore to undertake the task of selecting and editing suitable portions of Mead's unpublished work for posthumous publication. From this editorial project there eventually issued two volumes based upon student notes taken in Mead's courses, Mind, Self and Society (1934) and Movements of Thought in the Nineteenth Century (1936), and a third volume containing previously unpublished manuscripts and fragments, The Philosophy of the Act (1938).

The well-known Mind, Self and Society, as Charles Morris indicates in his editorial preface, is based upon student notes taken in several different offerings of Mead's course on advanced social psychology during the years from 1927 to 1930. After rearranging and rewriting these notes, Morris added a number of undated items he labeled supplementary essays. The most important of these, "Fragments on Ethics," is derived from a set of student notes taken in Mead's course on elementary ethics offered during the autumn quarter of 1927. I have made some use of this volume in chapters 5 and 6, where I consider Mead's mature social psychology, as well as in chapters 8 and 10, dealing with the development of Mead's views on ethics and his social pragmatism. But, in general, I have preferred to rest my analysis of his social psychology, ethics, and pragmatism upon the more secure ground of materials actually written by Mead rather than upon reconstructions of student notes.

Movements of Thought in the Nineteenth Century is based primarily upon student notes taken in Mead's offering of the course by that name during the spring quarter of 1928. In addition, it contains some material from student notes taken in Mead's course on the philosophy of Bergson in the summer quarter of 1927. For the most part, I have not found his discussions of nineteenth-century intellectual history to be particu-
larly useful for my study. But Mead also ventures into such areas as the philosophy of science, pragmatism, behaviorism, and social psychology in the course of these lectures. And while he discusses all of these topics more fully in other places, his remarks in this volume sometimes help to clarify his mature views with respect to them. Hence, I have occasionally drawn relevant information from this work in connection with my treatment of these matters in the later chapters of my book.

Of all the posthumously published volumes of Mead's work, the most problematic for the purposes of the present study is The Philosophy of the Act. It is problematic not because of the diversity of the many previously unpublished manuscripts and fragments it contains, but because all of these are undated. Professor Harold Orbach of Kansas State University is currently attempting to date these items on the basis of various evidence, including the typescript and paper used in the original manuscripts; until the results of this enterprise have been made available, however, we can do no better than to use the content of the most important of these manuscripts as a basis for assigning them an approximate place in the chronology of Mead's work. One very helpful clue in this regard is provided by the influence of Whitehead. As I show in chapter 9, Mead did not begin to read the writings of Whitehead until the summer of 1921, and he did not begin to make references to Whitehead's ideas in his publications until 1925. Hence, we may safely infer that any of Mead's undated manuscripts that refer to Whitehead's works or that employ Whiteheadian terminology (and there are many such manuscripts included in The Philosophy of the Act) were composed no earlier than 1921 and probably somewhat later. I rely upon this clue in my selection of items from this volume to supplement my use of Mead's dated publications when I deal in chapters 9 and 10 with his philosophical explorations during the final decade of his life.

One further comment about the posthumously published volumes of Mead's work is in order before bringing this introduction to a close. David L. Miller has edited an additional volume of Mead's previously unpublished work under the title The Individual and the Social Self, published by the University of Chicago Press in 1982. The main body of this volume consists of Miller's edited version of two sets of student notes taken in Mead's courses on social psychology and preserved among the Mead Papers at the Regenstein Library. Miller identifies the first of these as being from Mead's course of 1914 (although, in fact, it dates from the fall quarter of 1912); the second set of notes was taken in Mead's course on advanced social psychology during the winter quarter of 1927. In addition, the volume includes an undated twenty-page manuscript that Miller has entitled "Consciousness, Mind, the Self, and Scientific Objects," and an appendix of commentary on Mead's work by an author Miller is unable to identify. None of these documents, as far as I can see, adds much substance to the materials already mentioned above—although the student notes presented here do provide a helpful supplement to those used in the composition of Mind, Self and Society. But, again, I have chosen to rest my analysis of Mead's social psychology primarily upon relevant essays he published in various journals rather than upon reconstructions of student notes; thus I have seldom cited Miller's volume in my examination of Mead's intellectual development.