G.H. Mead

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1. Driving Impulses

G.H. Mead (1863-1931) oriented much of his intellectual efforts to answering three inescapable questions imposed by the modern condition: how are selfhood, knowledge, and politics understood and organized in modern societies? Modern individuals are continually seeking to find answers to questions such as these even though no one has ever come up with a definite answer to them. Modernity, in other words, confronts us with inevitable problematics, which exert powerful paradigmatic force upon us, in various areas of life. For the purposes of my discussion of Mead, I focus on three of these modern problematics: science, selfhood, and democratic politics.

The problem-areas of science, selfhood, and democratic politics have been defining the parameters of modern philosophical reflection since its inception. The western variant of modernity can be described as a field of discourse defined by the tension between a dominant paradigm and several, less successful alternatives: within each paradigm, a plurality of proposals has been produced to answer those fundamental problematics, though no definite answer can ever be attained. The dominant paradigm's designation varies widely, although some reference to "liberalism" and "rationalism" are usually in order: from the "Grotian-Lockean theory of moral order" identified by Charles Taylor (2004) to Peter Wagner's "modernist" (1994) attitude in the social sciences the same overarching paradigm is suggested.

From this viewpoint, the objective and distant scientist of positivism, the disembodied and instrumental self of neo-classical economics and rational choice theories, and the abstract rights-endowed individual of political liberalism are but different aspects of one and the same conception of human beings and their place in the world. One of my main arguments here is that Mead's thinking can be better understood by reference to his (highly critical) responses to these three declinations of modernism.

Mead develops his critical responses to modernism within the tradition of classical American philosophical pragmatism. Classical pragmatism frames the way Mead confronts those problematics as it emphasizes a processual and relational worldview, a naturalistic and evolutionary conception of science, and a radically democratic agenda of social reform through school, social settlements and other social institutions. Pragmatists seek to find an alternative to the point of view of the "mechanical science" that had dominated the Western variant of modernity from Descartes to Kant. "But," as Mead writes, "the Romantic idealists changed all that. For them, the forms arose in the very process of overcoming antinomies, overcoming obstacles."[1] (MTNC, 155) By supplementing Hegelian idealism with Darwin's evolutionary theory, Mead is able to challenge the prevalent mechanical and individualistic conception of action, human autonomy and freedom, and to restate these problems in evolutionary and social terms. In short, it is as a pragmatist that Mead responds to the three central modern problematics.

A few words on each one of these problematics are now in order. At the heart of the modern project is science. The confidence – exemplary illustrated by figures

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[1] References to the following works by Mead will be made parenthetically in the text using the following abbreviations: MSS – *Mind, Self and Society from the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist*, Charles W. Morris, ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997; originally published in 1934); MTNC – *Movements of Thought in the Nineteenth Century*, Merrit H. Moore, ed. (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1972; originally published in 1936); MR – *G.H. Mead. A Reader*, Filipe Carreira da Silva, ed. (London: Routledge, 2011).

such as Galileo, Bacon, or Newton – in the combined powers of human reason and the principles of the experimental scientific method is a fundamental component of what is to be modern. Central to the modern epistemological problematic is the tradition inaugurated by René Descartes' *Discourse on Method* (1637). Classical pragmatists tend to reject this tradition on the grounds that it assumes an insurmountable divide between the realm of material, objective things and the sphere of idealist, subjective phenomena. The pragmatist alternative to the "Cartesian chasm between matter and mind," to use Mead's expression, is to equate knowing with intelligent problem-solving in particular contexts of action. The pragmatist epistemological critique is also thoroughly historicist. The pragmatist alternative to the rational, individualistic liberalism of the tradition that goes from Hobbes and Descartes to Kant points to an approach that takes temporality and historical time seriously. Mead's alternative to the abstract, atomistic and instrumentally rational individual of the contractualist tradition is a historically situated, social self whose rationality is defined in terms of the creative resolution of concrete action-problems.

Closely connected with the epistemological critique of abstract individualistic rationalism and its rigid dichotomies, Mead's response to the modern problematic of selfhood is usually regarded as his main contribution for the social sciences. In which sense is this selfhood problematic distinctively modern? The relation between identity and modernity is clarified once one bears in mind that the latter entailed, on the one hand, the loss of certain key markers of certainty and, on the other hand, the continual attempts at their recovery. What is here at stake is the fact that the human self acquires a modern configuration insofar it is faced with the constant and unavoidable questioning of his or her location in the world.

At the core of the political dimension of the Western variant of modernity one finds the human effort to reconcile the notions of individual autonomy and liberty, on the one hand, and of predictability and certainty, on the other. Contrary to what is usually assumed constitutionalism and the rule of law are not distinctively modern, although they both developed new forms in the past couple of centuries. What is distinctively modern is the assertion of individual rights and, to a certain extent, the demand for universal social equality. What makes one more modern than the other is their time orientation: while constitutionalism is fundamentally backward-looking (one has to refer back to the founding text of the polity even if one wishes to interpret it in light of current problems), individual rights-based perspectives tend to be future-oriented and are therefore distinctively modern. The Grotian-Lockean moral theory, from which the doctrine of universal human rights stems from, is thus the dominant discursive resource of political modernity, in opposition to which all alternatives define themselves.

2. Key Issues

These modern problematics of science, selfhood and democratic politics shape Mead's key research interests. These include a problem-solving conception of science, an emphasis on democratic deliberation, a thoroughly social and intersubjective understanding of the human self, a distinctively pragmatist notion of meaning, and an often overlooked theory of objects. I discuss these five issues in turn.

Mead sees the scientific method of experimental science as the most developed and systematic application of human intelligence to the resolution of problems in specific segments of the unquestioned world in which we live. However, this does not equate to a positivist understanding of scientific method, according to

which the methods of the natural sciences are paradigmatic for all other scientific disciplines. Mead is all too aware of the fact that the relation between the objects of perception and the scientific laws supposed to explain them is not without obstacles. In the social sciences, the problematic character of this relation is all the more obvious given the self-reflective nature of their object of study. Consider the case of Mead's specialism, social psychology. Here "the solution of the scientific problem of the relation of the psychical and the physical with the attendant problem of the meaning of the so-called origin of consciousness. My own feeling is that these problems must be attacked from the standpoint of the social nature of so-called consciousness." (Mead 1917, 220) Mead's allegiance to a conception of experimental and problem-solving conception of science sheds important light on the foundations of his system of thought. Since the beginning of his career, Mead actively pursued research in the domain of the history and philosophy of science, endorsing a problem-solving conception of scientific activity that would lead his inquiries into the social nature of human consciousness and into the moral and political question of "how should man live in society?"

Mead's analysis of modern politics is a substantive area of research, closely related to his inquiries into modern selfhood. Mead's scientific approach to political modernity aims not only at the resolution of concrete political and moral problems, but is also internally organized according to the modern democratic principles of equal participation. Even though "science and democracy" is a well-known pragmatist motto, it acquires in Mead an added significance given his more prominent favoring of experimental science than both William James and John Dewey. In *Mind, Self and Society*, Mead speaks of an attitude in which the social psychological mechanism of "taking the role of the other" enables the individual to "enter into the attitudes of the

group and to mediate between them by making his own experience universal, so that others can enter into this form of communication through him." (MSS, 257) Mead is here referring to the statesman, whose ideal stance is as universal as the community in which he lives. Democratic politics, "this great co-operative community process which is going on," (MSS, 188) depends on the level of participation and communicative interaction between the citizens. The statesman is able to conduct social reform only insofar as he is able to adopt the attitude of the "generalized other." And it is this capacity for taking the generalized attitudes of their social group that provides politicians with a "universe of discourse" in terms of which they can address political problems in an impartial manner. (MSS, 89-90) Just as a critical moral agent is able to make use of abstract thought to formulate a hypothesis of an alternative moral order, a statesman is able to resort to the method of intelligence to reconstruct social and political problems intelligently. Critical moral and political reflection depends on a standpoint from which the "social or moral order" may be judged. Such is the perspective of abstraction, impersonality, and objectivity that distinguishes science from other human activities. Mead' reliance on the principles of the scientific method as valid referents to moral and political action should thus not be confused with the technocratic and elitist solutions that emerged in the 1920s, in the aftermath of World War I (Walter Lippmann being an obvious example here). On the contrary, Mead interprets the classical pragmatist motto "science and democracy" in radically democratic terms – if human rationality is a constitutive feature of the human self, then the "method of intelligence" is available, at least potentially, for all members of the political community. What he does try to avoid at all costs is what we could call "political monism," either of particularistic nature or of universalistic character. Mead's radical democratic inclinations, supported by his pragmatist epistemological

insights, lead him to subscribe to a political pluralism in which dialogue between all perspectives should be oriented to the pursuit of the common good. In this specific sense, I argue that Mead, no less than Dewey, can be seen as a forerunner of contemporary deliberative democrats.

There are two main components to Mead's treatment of modern selfhood. On the one hand, Mead discusses it from the perspective of childhood development. In particular, the genesis of the self is explained by means of two developmental stages. The first is the stage of "play," during which children learn how to put themselves in the place of another individual: it is at this time that children acquire a self – they do that by learning to take the role of other individuals. The second developmental stage is that of "game," a more elaborate and demanding social experience. Here children have to take the role not only of a single individual, but also of all the individuals involved in the game; moreover, children have to learn how to coordinate their actions according to the rules of the game. At this juncture, Mead introduces one of his best-known concepts, the notion of the "generalized other." By this notion Mead wishes to convey the idea of an internalized set of social attitudes: by learning how to take the role of the "generalized other," children acquire the ability to import the attitudes of the social group into their own selves. They thus begin to see themselves from the perspective of everyone else. On the other hand, Mead analyses the self from the viewpoint of its internal structure. Following the insights of his fellow pragmatists James and Dewey, Mead conceives of the self as an ongoing social process with two distinct phases: the "I," which is described as the spontaneous response of the individual to the social situation, and the "me," a socially structured, conscious self-image that we build by seeing ourselves through the eyes of the others (MR, 20). Imagine yourself having breakfast this morning: you can see yourself having milk and

cereals, talking to your parents and so on. Mead calls these two aspects (or facets) of the self the "I" and the "me" – the "I" is that phase of the self that remembers while the "me" is the remembered self-image. For Mead, the "I" is a source of novelty and creativity, indispensable for the assertion of individuality, while the "me" refers to the set of organized social attitudes within one's self. Mead thus rules out the rigid distinction between inner, subjective life and external, objective reality; on the contrary, he conceives of the self as a process through which social experiences are permanently being incorporated into the self (through the "me") and reconstructed by the "I."

A key element of Mead's social pragmatism is his theory of meaning. For Mead, meaning is neither a subjective phenomenon lodged in the individual mind, nor something external to it. Instead, meaning emerges and develops between social organisms through gestural interaction. Mead explains the intersubjective emergence of meaning with a three-fold logical structure. This includes 1) the gesture of one individual ("organism," in Mead's terminology); 2) the responding gesture of the second organism; and 3) the "resultant" of the social act. The response of the second organism to the gesture of the first organism is the interpretation of that gesture – this response brings out the meaning (MSS, 80). Meaning is thus implicit in the structure of the social act and can be studied by analyzing patterns of action resulting from social interaction. This means that Mead's theory of meaning is not limited to social interaction (i.e. between selves). If it were, as a symbolic interactionist reading of Mead would assume, its exclusive focus would be on communicative action at the expense of instrumental action. Mead, however, refuses to privilege one type of experience over another. Instead, his aim is to undercut the social/communicative versus physical/instrumental dichotomy by including the creation of meaning between

selves and all "social objects" that compose their environments. "Social objects" include whatever has a common meaning to the participants in the social act, from physical objects, to oneself and other selves, to scientific, religious, or political objects. Crucially, Mead conceives of the process of meaning creation between individuals and social objects as being dialectically generative. From the continuous tension between individuals and objects there is the constant emergence of new individuals as well as new objects (MR, 38). Mead illustrates his claims with the societal shift toward modernity (MR, 40-41). Modern individuals have emerged as new scientific, political and social objects gradually came into being.

3. Seeing Things Differently

Chief among these objects were modern individual rights. Rights are conceived by Mead as part and parcel of political modernity, and specifically, as a constitutive part of the normative structure of modern political communities (Silva 2013). Understood as "social objects," rights are both an aspiration and a defining feature of processes of political modernization. As such, rights help constitute individuals into modern citizens. Mead's great achievement has been to render this idea, which could have remained a political philosophical insight, into a post-metaphysical working hypothesis. Testing this hypothesis involves as much solving a scientific problem, involving epistemology, social psychology, and political science, as it requires solving an ethical-practical problem, which requires a democratic political solution. To seek a combined solution to these problems is as urgent today as it was in Mead's time.

The notion of the "generalized other" plays a key role in Mead's approach to rights (MR, 221-244). First, Mead's generalized other enables one to appreciate the

extent to which rights are a common attitude shared by members of a political community. Mead's point is straightforward. Any given society's "generalized other" encompasses common attitudes, i.e. what we would today call "social norms." Rules are one kind of social norm. Very much like the rules of games, social norms help define the institutional framework upon which social cooperation is possible, rights-norms among them. As such, rights are an objective component of the normative structure of modern societies.

Second, the internalization of the attitude of the generalized other is to have a general attitude towards all members of the community, including oneself. Mead's point is that rights are as much a part of the normative structure of a society as they are a part of the political identity of each individual citizen. But Mead has a very specific understanding of what this entails. To have a right is not the same as having a physical object, something that can be accumulated, measured, quantified. As a social object, to have a right is to enter a political relation, to belong to a community whose norms include that right as something anybody can assert and that everybody can recognize. Mead sees the social relationships rights refer to as intrinsically reflexive. They require every member of the political community to take both roles or positions involved in a rights relation, that of entitlement and that of the obligation to respect it – this is how rights help constitute individual political identities.

Third, for Mead, to conceive of rights as relational and reflexive is also to assert their contested nature. The contested nature of rights stems from the tension within the social self between the "I" and the "me," the former being a source of unpredictable creativity, the latter ensuring the internalization of social conventions through the attitude of the generalized other. The dialectical nature of the relation between the two phases of the self means that social norms, rights-norms included,

are being continuously internalized and reproduced (through the "me") while being contested and questioned (through the "I"). For Mead, then, rights are contested not only within oneself (i.e., one's legal consciousness is a dialectical process, responsive to concrete action-problems in real world situations, and which potentially evolves over time in contradictory ways), but between different selves as well (politicians, judges, and ordinary citizens, for example, often disagree about the interpretation and application of rights). In this sense, to affirm the contested nature of rights is to affirm the political nature of the processes of identity-formation that sustain the claim to rights. Socialization is as much about social reproduction as it is about social transformation. The "I" is constantly questioning the norms integrated by the self via the "me" and does this by appealing to an ideal future community.

Contested, reflexive, relational; this is how Mead conceives of rights, whose meaning lies in concrete patterns of political interaction, whose institutionalization is as much a symbolic as it is a material process – bills of rights, constitutions, and the state derive much of their power and legitimacy from their fictional character, a power that, for that very reason, often makes itself felt all too tangibly in peoples' lives.

4. Legacies and Unfinished Business

In the last few decades, most of the categories that characterized the state-organized phase of western modernity have been increasingly questioned: the nation-state is no longer the sole source of political legitimacy and sovereignty, societies are increasingly fluid as social norms are ever more denaturalized, and individuals now face an overburden of possibilities of action that makes self-realization even more difficult. Contemporary societies are characterized by their growing differentiation,

the acceleration of historical time and the concomitant compression of space, intense migratory fluxes, and unprecedented technological advances. The proliferation of social roles, reference groups, and social networks triggered by social experience in a globalized world often results in multiple bonds of belonging. The nomad, once considered the epitome of a bygone epoch, re-emerges today as a central sociological category; in order to understand the global "tribes" that cross the planet in search of entertainment, consumer goods, and leisure it seems that one has to adopt a fundamentally fluid and flexible conception of modernity.

That large-scale social changes are closely related to transformations at the level of the individual psyche should not come as a surprise, as Mead never ceased to emphasize the socially constituted nature of human subjectivity. Mead's radically social conception of the self thus seems to regain, at the dawn of the twenty-first century, an added significance. Ours is an age of uncertainty and indeterminacy. To a certain extent, the same can be said of the early twentieth century "Progressive Era" in which Mead lived. In both periods, modernity has been perceived as undergoing a time of crisis. I believe that by reading an author whose work can be interpreted as an attempt to solve the epistemological and political problems posed by the first crisis of modernity we can draw valuable lessons to cope with modernity's second crisis. In particular, one of the most important insights to be explored in Mead's work is his intersubjective conception of creativity.

Mead sees creativity as both cognitive and democratic: it expresses the human ability for reflective thinking and problem-solving and, as such, it is not limited to the figure of the "artist" or the "genius." Every rational individual is endowed, Mead argues, with the ability to cope creatively with concrete action problems: the extent to which individual creativity is developed and refined is as much a question of personal

development, as it depends on the kind of social experience one is exposed to. In turn, the degree of collective creativity a given community attains (expressed, for instance, in the quality of its artistic or scientific achievements) depends, as Mead puts it, on the actual scope offered for "individuality – for original, unique, or creative thinking and behavior on the part of the individual self within it." (MSS, 221) For Mead, individual and social creativity are thus but different phases of the same process by which original and innovative solutions are imagined to answer the problems individuals and groups face in everyday life. As an expression of reflective thinking, creativity is both a feature of the human species and a defining characteristic of modernity, the evolutionary stage of humankind in which the principles of rationality and individuality have attained their fullest expression.

Throughout his career, Mead aimed at solving the problem of reaching a socially sensitive account of the origins, process of development and internal structure of human subjectivity. Mead's proposed solution to this problem makes no concessions to Cartesian individualism – his is one of the most coherent versions of intersubjectivism produced in the twentieth century. It should not come as a surprise that Mead's process view of social life has received renewed attention in sociology since the early 1980s, approximately the same time as the sociological debate on the exhaustion of the project of modernity started to gain prominence. Symbolic interactionists, from Herbert Blumer to Ken Plummer, led this first sociological appropriation of Mead. Since the 2000s, however, it has been mainly through neo-pragmatism that sociologists have been interpreting Mead. A case in point is the pragmatic interest in exploring the materiality of meaning production. With the recent publication of texts such as "On the Self and Teleological Behavior" or "On Social Consciousness and Social Science," (MR, 21-44; 183-192) we are now able to see

Mead following in the footsteps of Hegel's theory of objectification, yet resisting Marx's one-sided interpretation of it as fetishism, a suspicion that would persist throughout the twentieth century in the Frankfurtian strand of critical thinking from Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of the Enlightenment* (1944) to Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man* (1964). Avoiding this suspicion of material culture as materialism enables Mead to take the materiality of culture seriously without receding into the idealism of Platonic solutions.

Mead accomplishes this by his unique understanding of pragmatist philosophy. Mead's pragmatism is a social pragmatism, i.e. both a thoroughly intersubjective process philosophy entirely compatible with the principles of the scientific experimental method (which sets Mead apart from James and Dewey), and a progressive world-view at home with radical democracy (which places him closer to Dewey). As a process philosophy, Mead's social pragmatism is at odds with dualistic modes of thinking, from Platonism to modern Cartesian philosophy, with its characteristic ontological distinctions between mind and body, or between thought and action. According to such dualistic philosophies, things can be studied independently of the uses people give them and, conversely, ideas, beliefs, and practices can be studied separately from the environment in which they play out. By contrast, for Mead, human agents are fundamentally problem-solvers and thought's main function is to guide social action to the solution of practical problems that confront individuals in their dealings with the environment.

A number of important and wide-ranging epistemological implications follow from this claim, including Mead's corollary that individuals, while responding to problematic situations, engage with the environment in a relationship of "mutual determination." It is such a "mutual interrelationship of the individuals and their

environments" (MR, 27) that accounts for the characteristics that define objects. For Mead, then, persons and things do not live separate lives. Rather, they mutually determine one another. The implication of this philosophical insight for contemporary sociology is obvious. In a world in which the lives of things and the lives of people are fundamentally entangled, the central task of neo-Meadian pragmatic sociology is to study how this dialectic plays itself out empirically with a view to destabilize pervasive yet unduly rigid approaches.

5. Further Reading

Mead, George Herbert. 1959. *The Philosophy of the Present*. Edited by Arthur E. Murphy, with prefatory remarks by John Dewey. New York: Open Court Publishing.

Murphy assembled in this volume the Carus Lectures Mead delivered in California in December 1930 (chapters 1 through 4), two preliminary drafts of those same lectures (the first three of the Supplementary Essays), and two previously published pieces. Despite its unrevised nature, this volume is of central importance for a clear understanding of Mead's philosophy of time. Originally published in 1932.

Mead, George Herbert. 1967. *Mind, Self, & Society: from the Perspective of a Social Behaviorist*. Edited with an Introduction by Charles Morris. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press.

Contrary to popular belief, the bulk of the material used to compose this volume is not from student notes but from a verbatim record of a 1928 offering of the "Social Psychology" course at the University of Chicago taken by a professional stenographer

hired by former students. Creatively edited by Morris, this volume has nonetheless served as the basic introduction to Mead's thinking for generations of students. Originally published in 1934.

Mead, George Herbert. 2008. *Self, War, & Society. George Herbert Mead's Macrosociology*. **Edited by Mary Jo Deegan. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.**

Commented collection of writings by Mead on warfare. Highly pedagogical, the volume is divided into five parts that follow America's involvement in World War I. Each part is illustrated with several pieces by Mead, some of which are published here for the first time. Deegan's commentary is sound and helpful.

Mead, George Herbert. 2011. *G.H. Mead. A Reader*. **Edited by Filipe Carreira da Silva. London: Routledge.**

This collection of Mead's writing includes thirty pieces, ten of which published here for the first time, divided into three main parts – social psychology, experimental science and epistemology, and democratic politics. It includes an introduction by the editor and a chronology of Mead's writings.

Joas, Hans. 1985. *G.H. Mead. A Contemporary Re-examination of His Thought*. **Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.**

The first historically sensitive yet philosophically sophisticated study of Mead's contributions to contemporary social theory, Joas's book brought into the limelight the crucial formative influence of German idealism upon American pragmatism in

general, and upon Mead's thinking in particular. Includes an extensive listing of primary and secondary sources. A classic. Originally published in 1980.

Cook, Gary A. 1993. *George Herbert Mead. The Making of a Social Pragmatist.* **Urbana-Champaign, IL: Univ. of Illinois Press.**

Historically meticulous, this is one of the best studies of Mead's social psychology ever written. It also covers Mead's moral and political thinking and philosophy of nature. The listing of primary and secondary sources was the best at the time of publication. A must read.

Silva, Filipe Carreira da. 2008. *Mead and Modernity. Science, Selfhood and Democratic Politics.* **Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.**

Aimed at a sociological audience, this study provides a historically minded yet theoretically sophisticated re-examination of Mead's social pragmatism. It suggests Mead's system of thinking to have a triadic structure covering epistemology, social psychology and political philosophy.

Hubner, Daniel (2014) *Becoming Mead.* **Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.**

The most recent historical study of Mead's ideas. Meticulous, encompassing and sophisticated, this is one of the most ambitious readings of Mead to come up in years. Pitched at a relatively high level, it is of interest mainly to experts.

References

Mead, George H. 1917. "Scientific Method and Individual Thinker," in *Creative Intelligence: Essays in the Pragmatic Attitude*, John Dewey and others, eds. (New York: Henry Holt).

Silva, Filipe Carreira. 2013. "Outline of a Social Theory of Rights. A Neo-Pragmatist Approach." *European Journal of Social Theory* 16(4): 457-475.

Taylor, Charles. 2004. *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press)

Wagner, Peter. 1994. *A Sociology of Modernity. Liberty and Discipline* (London: Routledge)