

George Herbert Mead

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George Cronk

Bergen Community College

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Philip B. Dematteis

Saint Leo University

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Leemon B. McHenry

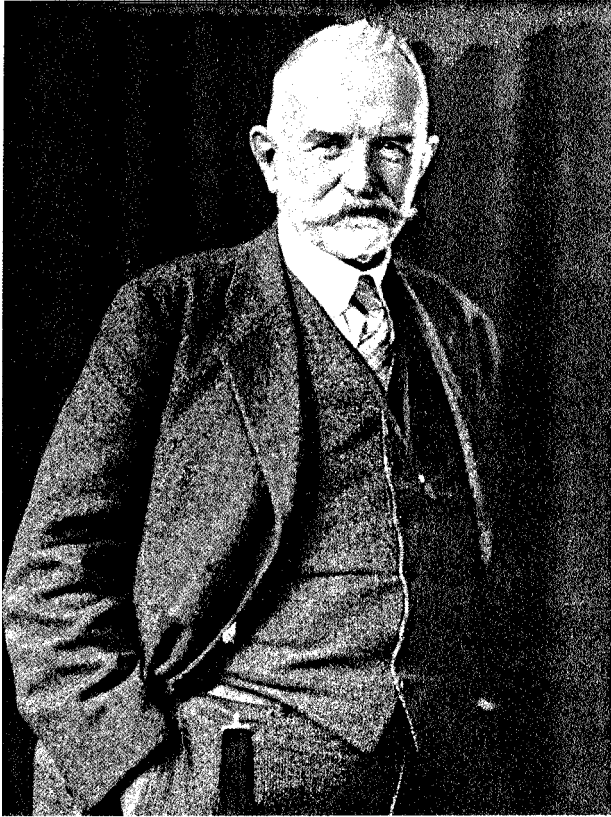
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George Herbert Mead

Along with Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, James H. Tufts, and John Dewey, George Herbert Mead was one of the founders of pragmatism, a distinctively American philosophical movement that called for an empirical and experimental approach to philosophical problems in which ideas and theories are evaluated on the basis of their practical consequences. Mead published many articles but no books (except a collaboration with several other authors) during his lifetime; after his death, several of his students produced four books in his name from his unpublished – and even unfinished – notes and manuscripts, from students' notes, and from stenographic records of some of his courses at the University of Chicago. The closest Mead came to completing a book during his lifetime was his Carus Lectures, delivered at the American Philosophical Association Meeting in Berkeley, California, in December 1930. These lectures, together with several supplementary essays, were edited by Arthur E. Murphy as *The Philosophy of the Present* (1932) – the first of Mead's posthumous works.

Mead exercised a significant influence on twentieth century social theory. His theory of the emergence of mind and self out of the social process of significant

communication became the foundation of the symbolic interactionist school of sociology and social psychology. Mead's thought also includes important contributions to the philosophy of nature, philosophy of science, philosophical anthropology, philosophy of history, and "process philosophy." Such eminent philosophers as Dewey and Alfred North Whitehead regarded Mead as a thinker of the highest order

Mead had begun teaching his course in social psychology at the University of Chicago in the fall of 1900 and had continued to do so, at more and more advanced levels, until the winter quarter of 1930-1931. *Mind, Self and Society from the Perspective of a Social Behaviorist* (1934), edited by Charles W. Morris, is based on a stenographic record of the 1927 course, two sets of student notes on the 1930 course, stenographic notes on some of Mead's related courses, and several unpublished manuscripts by Mead.

In *Mind, Self, and Society* Mead contends that the individual mind arises within the social process of communication and cannot be understood apart from that process. The communication process has two phases: the "conversation of gestures" and the "conversation of significant gestures," or language. Mead introduces the notion of the "conversation of gestures" with the example of a dogfight:

Dogs approaching each other in hostile attitude carry on such a language of gestures. They walk around each other, growling and snapping, and waiting for the opportunity to attack The act of each dog becomes the stimulus to the other dog for his response. There is then a relationship between these two; and as the act is responded to by the other dog, it, in turn, undergoes change. The very fact that the dog is ready to attack another becomes a stimulus to the other dog to change his own position or his own attitude. He has no sooner done this than the change of attitude in the second dog in turn causes the first dog to change his attitude. We have here a conversation of gestures. They are not, however, gestures in the sense that they are significant. We do not assume that the dog says to himself, "If the animal comes from this direction he is going to spring at my throat and I will turn in such a way." What does take place is an actual change in his own position due to the direction of the approach of the other dog.

In the conversation of gestures, the individual is unaware of the response that his or her gestures elicit in others; the individual is communicating but does not know that he or

she is communicating. That is, the conversation of gestures is unconscious communication. Language – conscious communication – emerges out of the conversation of gestures. Language supersedes but does not replace the conversation of gestures; it marks the transition from nonsignificant to significant interaction.

Mead defines language as communication through "significant symbols." 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." For example, "You ask somebody to bring a visitor a chair. You arouse the tendency to get the chair in the other, but if he is slow to act, you get the chair yourself. The response to the gesture is the doing of a certain thing, and you arouse that same tendency in yourself."

The concept of conversation of significant symbols provides the basis for Mead's theory of mind: "Only in terms of gestures as significant symbols is the existence of mind or intelligence possible; for only in terms of gestures which are significant symbols can thinking – which is simply an internalized or implicit conversation of the individual with himself by means of such gestures – take place." Mind is a form of participation in a social process: it is the result of adopting the attitudes of others toward one's own gestures. Mead says that there is no "mind or thought without language" and that language – the content of mind – "is only a development and product of social interaction. Mind is not reducible to the neurophysiology of the individual but emerges in "the dynamic, ongoing social process" that constitutes human experience.

Like the mind, the self is a product of social interaction: "The self is something which has a development; it is not initially there, at birth, but arises in the process of social experience and activity, that is, develops in the given individual as a result of his relations to that process as a whole and to other individuals within that process." The self "is an object to itself"; this reflexivity of the self "distinguishes it from other objects and from the body," for they are not objects to themselves:

It is perfectly true that the eye can see the foot, but it does not see the body as a whole. We cannot see our backs; we can feel certain portions of them, if we are agile, but we cannot get an experience of our whole body. There are, of course, experiences which are somewhat vague and difficult of location, but the bodily experiences are for us organized about a self. The foot and hand belong to the self. We can see our feet, especially if we look at them from the wrong end of an opera glass, as strange things which we have difficulty in recognizing as our own. The parts of the body are quite distinguishable from the self. We can lose parts of the body without any serious invasion of the self. The mere

ability to experience different parts of the body is not different from the experience of a table. The table presents a different feel from what the hand does when one hand feels another, but it is an experience of something with which we come definitely into contact. The body does not experience itself as a whole, in the sense in which the self in some way enters into the experience of the self.

Mead distinguishes two uses of the term consciousness. It may refer to "a certain feeling consciousness" that is the outcome of an organism's sensitivity to its environment; animals are conscious in this sense. Consciousness may also denote a form of awareness that "always has, implicitly at least, the reference to an 'I' in it" – that is, self-consciousness. Human consciousness is of this type. In self-consciousness the individual appears as an object within his or her own experience but does so "only on the basis of social relations and interactions, only by means of his experiential transactions with other individuals in an organized social environment." Self-consciousness is the result of a process in which the individual attempts to view himself or herself from the standpoint of others. Thus, the self as an object arises from the individual's experience of other selves.

Three major forms of intersubjective activity are language, play, and games. All are types of "symbolic interaction" in that they take place by means of shared symbols such as words, definitions, roles, gestures, rituals, and so forth. In language, or communication via "significant symbols," the individual responds to his or her own gestures in terms of the symbolized attitudes of others. This "process of taking the role of the other" is the primal form of self-objectification. In play and in games, as in linguistic activity, role-playing is the main process that generates self-consciousness. In playing, the child acts as though he or she were the other person – mother, doctor, nurse, Indian, and countless other symbolized roles. Play involves taking on a single role at a time. "If we contrast play with the situation in an organized game, we note the essential difference that the child who plays in a game must be ready to take the attitude of everyone else involved in the game, and that these different roles must have a definite relationship to each other." The attitudes of all the participants in the game are brought together in "an organized and generalized attitude" that Mead calls the "generalized other." The individual defines his or her own conduct with reference to the generalized other. When the individual is able to view himself or herself from the standpoint of the generalized other, Mead says, "self-consciousness in the full sense of the term" is attained.

According to Mead, the self has two phases: "The 'I' is the response of the organism to the attitudes of the others; the 'me' is the organized set of attitudes of others which one himself assumes." The "me" is "a conventional, habitual individual," while the "I" is the "novel reply" of the individual to the generalized other. The "me" constitutes the principle of conformity, while the "I" is the foundation of individuality: "both aspects of the 'I' and the 'me' are essential to the self in its full expression." The "me" is a symbolic structure that makes the action of the "I" possible: "without this structure of things, the life of the self would become impossible." The generalized other, internalized in the "me," is the mechanism by which the community gains control over the conduct of its members.

Social control, however, is limited by the "I" phase of the self. Furthermore, Mead distinguishes two types of social groups: "concrete social classes or subgroups," in which "individual members are directly related to one another," and "abstract social classes or subgroups," in which "individual members are related to one another only more or less indirectly, and which only more or less indirectly function as social units, but which afford unlimited possibilities for the widening and ramifying and enriching of the social relations among all the individual members of the given society as an organized and unified whole." Abstract groups allow for a vast expansion of the "definite social relations" that constitute the individual's sense of self: the individual may identify with a "larger" community than the one in which he or she has been involved – for example, a nation rather than a tribe.

Mead presents two models of the relationship between consensus and conflict in societies: intra-group consensus combined with extra-group conflict and intra-group conflict combined with extra-group consensus. In the first model the members of a group are united in opposition to another group that is characterized as the "enemy." Mead points out that many organizations derive their sense of solidarity and even their *raison d'être* from the actual or putative existence of an "enemy" – communists, fascists, infidels, liberals, conservatives, or whatever the case may be. The second model describes the situation in which an individual opposes his or her own group by appealing to a "higher sort of community," such as "all of humanity"; thus, intra-group conflict is carried on in terms of an extra-group consensus, even if the consensus is only imagined

[For the complete article, see pp. 223-236 in Volume 270 of the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, "American Philosophers Before 1950."]