



DANIEL R. HUEBNER

# REINTRODUCING GEORGE HERBERT MEAD

Reintroducing...



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George Herbert Mead has long been known for his social theory of meaning and the ‘self’ – an approach which becomes all the more relevant in light of the ways we develop and represent ourselves online. But recent scholarship has shown that Mead’s pragmatic philosophy can help us understand a much wider range of contemporary issues including how humans and natural environments mutually influence one another, how deliberative democracy can and should work, how thinking is dependent upon the body and on others, and how social changes in the present affect our understandings of the past. Historical scholarship has also changed what we know of Mead’s life, including new emphasis on his social reform efforts, his engagement with colonization and war, and critical reinterpretation of the works published after his death. This book provides an approachable introduction to Mead’s contemporary relevance in the social sciences, showing how a pragmatic view of social action serves as the core of Mead’s theory, offering striking insights into human agency, symbolism, politics, social change, temporality, and materiality. As such, it will appeal to scholars of sociology and the social sciences more broadly, with interests in social theory and the enduring importance of the sociological classics.

**Daniel R. Huebner** is Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, USA. He is the author of *Becoming Mead: The Social Process of Academic Knowledge* and the co-editor of *Mind, Self, and Society: The Definitive Edition* and *The Timeliness of George Herbert Mead*.

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*Daniel R. Huebner*



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# 1

## MEAD AS PUBLIC INTELLECTUAL AND SOCIAL THEORIST

George Herbert Mead (1863–1931) was an American philosopher, considered to be one of the classical representatives of American Pragmatism. Mead's ideas have had a major influence in the behavioral and social sciences, especially in sociology and social psychology, where he is best known for his theory of the development and process of human symbolic communication and for his account of the social nature and genesis of the “self” – ideas that are relevant in new ways in the era of online self-presentation and social media. Although particular aspects of Mead's theory have been influential, *Reintroducing George Herbert Mead* makes a case for the broader relevance of Mead's overall pragmatic philosophy as a general theoretical approach in the contemporary social sciences and brings Mead's ideas up-to-date by examining how they are being reinterpreted and rediscovered in recent scholarship.

Starting from his core conception of social action, Mead articulated a theory that sought to explain the development of personality and individual agency, cultural meaning and symbolism, the practical ethics and epistemology of democratic politics, and rational self-reflection and cognition. He sought to ground an approach to the natural world as fundamentally social, including striking views on materiality and temporality, the mutual responsiveness of environment and organisms, and human relationships with nonhuman animals. Scholarship published since Mead's life makes a compelling case for the renewed relevance of Mead's pragmatic social theory in developing fields such as cognitive science, new media studies, material culture, science and technology studies, environmental studies, contemporary politics, and others. Recent scholarship has also changed what we know of Mead's life, including new emphasis on his social reform efforts, his engagement with colonization and war, critical reinterpretation of the works published after his death, and the rediscovery of important aspects of his work that had been lost.

## 2 Mead as Public Intellectual & Social Theorist

The text begins by introducing Mead's life and influence in the remainder of Chapter 1. Drawing upon recent concerns for "public sociology," the chapter focuses especially on Mead's social reform efforts. For Mead, the Hull House Social Settlement in Chicago and his wife's family connections in Hawaii were particularly important as centers of thinking and action around labor rights, women's suffrage, educational reform, vocational training, juvenile justice, the rights of immigrants and racial minorities, public infrastructure, and international peace. The ways these issues are tied with Mead's philosophy are discussed. The chapter then compares Mead's dominant influence in the social sciences and social theory with new historically-informed and more holistic scholarship on Mead.

Chapter 2 lays out the core of Mead's social theory and the kinds of reasoning that Mead pursued. Mead's theory is spelled out step-by-step, beginning with the ongoing social process of cooperative social acts, leading to the development of the social self, self-reflection and role taking, and rational thought and symbols. Mead argued that grounding analysis in the normal social processes of action resolves questions about the nature and development of consciousness. One of the most characteristic aspects of Mead's work is how rigorously he worked through the logic and presuppositions of these topics, and how he sought to uncover the most adequate, encompassing perspective from which to pursue such inquiries. Outlining this logic is especially useful as an introduction, because it enables us to use Mead's way of thinking to inform our own projects and to update his conclusions in light of contemporary society. With this baseline, the analysis turns to the implications of Mead's theory. The chapter discusses the essential roles of embodiment in the development of human cognition, highlighting the ways recent authors have drawn upon Mead's work, and underscoring his early physiological and functional psychological studies.

Building upon this analysis, Chapter 3 traces Mead's theory of the broader social and political processes beyond the scope of individual and direct interpersonal relationships. Recent scholarship has sought to recover these aspects of Mead's theory in light of predominant micro-sociological interpretations of his work. The chapter begins by returning to the idea of social process and underscoring how this view grounds an approach to the emergent and dynamic complexity of the social world and the need for collective political action that is revised as society changes. In this view, Mead focused on how modern society develops and reflects upon itself. Mead's views on institutions and social reform movements are outlined. Mead sought to show, on the basis of his theory of social consciousness, how inclusive practices of participatory democracy led to better decision-making and a more universal worldview. This approach has implications for the conduct of science and ethics, which Mead addressed. Critics of Mead have questioned his analysis of social inequality and power, but recent works have emphasized the implications of his analysis of human rights and hostility, especially in relation to World War I, and his reflections on social reform as an answer to these criticisms.

Finally, Chapter 4 shows how Mead's social-relational theory extends beyond the analysis of the relations of humans to other humans into an analysis of the

natural world itself. Mead's understanding of "perspectives" is key, and the chapter begins by explaining the emergent, relational nature of perspectives, according to Mead. The chapter elaborates Mead's theory of the interconnections between organisms and their environments, which recent authors have drawn upon in discussing ecological and environmental studies and human-animal interactions. From this, Mead developed a theory of temporality and the ways social change in the present changes our relationship to the past and future.

This new introduction to Mead concludes by bringing his ideas together around the idea of science, which he examined as a social process of working to incorporate new experiences of observers into a continually reformulated, universalizing perspective. His approach to science considers the essential role of individual selves in scientific advance and of the relationship between science and democratic society. Mead's approach to science offers a way of thinking critically about the nature of our contemporary society and its social issues. This study is accompanied by a bibliography that includes the most relevant and rediscovered works by Mead and a classified bibliography of commentaries on Mead. These lists are intended to provide guidance to those who wish to investigate any of the issues discussed in the text further.

## Public Sociology

In the past two decades, there have been calls for a return to "public sociology," which means reconnecting sociology with nonacademic audiences and problems, reemphasizing its role in addressing social problems, and utilizing disciplinary knowledge to advocate for social change. By focusing on George Herbert Mead's social reform efforts and their often-forgotten place in his intellectual biography, this chapter brings out some of the ways in which Mead can be seen as a precursor to this kind of informed public engagement. Although many people encounter Mead as a social theorist through his professional publications, he was not an "armchair" intellectual who only wrote about social issues from afar. Instead, he participated in contentious public debates about workers' rights, women's suffrage, the rights of racial and ethnic minorities, juvenile delinquency, international peace, and other issues. In this chapter we will explore these issues. Some of the questions we will seek to answer are: How were Mead's ideas meant as interventions into contentious public issues of his time, and not just as abstract concepts? What are the practical consequences of his views as he interpreted them? And where did Mead fall short of his own ideals?

In order to understand Mead's approach to social theory, it is useful to see him as a real person in context, and to identify what influenced his thought. The chapter begins by examining Mead's early family life and education, and then reviewing the major shifts in his professional career. Here, Mead's struggle to establish a meaningful path for his life helps us understand what motivated him. Then the chapter examines what may be considered the most important missing piece of the puzzle of Mead's intellectual biography, his social



reform work. This work, especially in the industrial city of Chicago, was centered on the various social movements that converged in the social settlement houses of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, and in one way or another they all involved the reform of public education. Mead advocated for the democratization of decision-making about public schools and for expanding educational opportunities.

Mead held positions of influence in several major civic organizations, and he sought to advocate democratic decision-making that reflected the interests of the community as a whole and incorporated many different voices in the process. He also consistently worked to base his advocacy on empirical investigation and detailed knowledge of issues at stake. He publicly presented investigations on vocational education programs, working conditions and grievances, housing conditions, educational opportunities, and other issues, and used them as a basis for the positions he advocated for reform. But Mead's positions in public debates were often contentious, and this only becomes more apparent as we consider them retrospectively. The chapter examines Mead's advocacy of American colonization of Hawaii and his shifting support for military confrontation in World War I, for example, which suggest some of the ways Mead may have been naïve to certain economic, racial, and political inequalities.

Finally, the chapter examines the professional recognition that Mead received late in his career, the intellectual legacy that was created in his name after his death, and the major avenues of influence that he has had, especially in sociology and social theory. This chapter sets the stage for the subsequent chapters by seeing Mead's ideas in the process of formation as he engaged with his everyday social contexts, and especially in his social reform efforts. In the following chapters, then, these ideas can be considered in more detail and reevaluated in terms of their contemporary relevance.

### **Early Life and Childhood**

George Herbert Mead grew up in a family environment that valued broad education with an emphasis on religious teachings and service to others. He was born in South Hadley, Massachusetts on February 27, 1863. South Hadley was at that time a small village of fewer than three thousand inhabitants in the rural, western part of New England. His immediate family included his father, Reverend Hiram Mead, his mother Elizabeth Storrs Mead, and his older sister Alice. Hiram was the pastor of the church of the Congregationalist denomination of Christianity in South Hadley, and several of Hiram's family members were also religious professionals. George's mother Elizabeth likewise came from a large, educated family, which included her twin sister Harriet. She attended one of the few institutions for higher education open to women in the United States at the time, the Ipswich Female Seminary, and she taught in secondary schools prior to her marriage to Hiram. Later in her life, Elizabeth Mead became the President of Mount Holyoke College, one of the oldest still-existing institutions for women's higher

education in the United States, which was located in South Hadley. Especially during George Mead's early professional career, his mother was one of the most prominent women in higher education in the United States.

In 1869, Hiram Mead was appointed to the professorship in Sacred Rhetoric and Pastoral Theology at Oberlin College, so the family moved west to Oberlin, Ohio. Oberlin was almost unique in this period in the United States for permitting men and women to be educated together and admitting African American students alongside white students. The small town of Oberlin was, itself, founded by Protestant missionaries and became an important center of advocacy for the abolition of slavery in the period prior to the US Civil War. After attending the preparatory school connected with the college, George Mead attended Oberlin College from 1879 to 1883, graduating with a bachelor's degree in Philosophy and the Arts. He became close friends with classmate Henry Northrup Castle in the last two years of college, bonding over mutual interests in philosophy and literature. In 1881, his father died, and both George and his mother took jobs to try to make ends meet. George worked in the college cafeteria, and Elizabeth was a language tutor and instructor.

As in many private American colleges of the nineteenth century, Oberlin's humanities faculty emphasized intuitional religious interpretations of how people perceive and experience the world. As George Mead and Henry Castle were exposed to the critical, materialist doctrines of modern scientific research, however, they became increasingly skeptical about this philosophy. They also coedited and contributed to the student news and literary paper during their final college year, 1882–1883. When Henry's older sister, Helen Kingsbury Castle, came to Oberlin to attend school that year, Mead met his future wife for the first time, although they would not marry for almost another decade. Helen and Henry were the youngest children of one of the most prominent American settler families in the (then independent) Kingdom of Hawaii. Their parents had arrived in the Hawaiian Islands with early American missionaries, and they took up business in sugarcane plantations and shipping. As a result, Helen and Henry were heirs to the large company Castle & Cooke, a fact that would play a major role in Mead's life.

## Finding a Career

After college, Mead took a series of jobs from 1883 to 1887 to help support himself and his mother while he struggled to find a meaningful direction for his adult life. He taught at an elementary school where he was reprimanded for being too quick to suspend students. He worked on a railroad surveying crew where he learned the practical applications of the physical sciences and enjoyed working outdoors. And he privately tutored boys preparing for college. During this period, he wrestled spiritually with an increasing agnosticism, resulting at least in part from his independent study of modern critical philosophy and evolutionary science. He considered possible careers, including starting a preparatory school or a literary magazine or going into the Christian ministry. However,

Mead was too conflicted to pursue a religious calling, and he did not have the resources for the other career paths. Meanwhile Henry Castle, who had worked for a period in his brother's law office in Honolulu, Hawaii, and had attended courses in Germany, decided to attend graduate school at Harvard University in 1886. Henry's letters to George Mead, and George's trip to visit Henry at Harvard that year, seem to have helped him to decide on pursuit of graduate education in philosophy.

Mead attended Harvard beginning in the fall of 1887 as an advanced undergraduate (Harvard did not accept his degree from Oberlin). He roomed with Henry and likely received financial support for his education from the Castle family. Mead took courses with influential philosophers Josiah Royce, George Herbert Palmer, and others. His views on the self, symbolic communication, the history of science, and social progress evince influences from Royce's Idealist social philosophy, and Mead wrote a reminiscence of Royce after he died in 1916. At the end of the first year, 1887–1888, Mead took the oral examination for an honors degree, and his performance impressed William James, one of the founders of modern psychology and of American pragmatist philosophy. Although Mead did not take courses with James at Harvard, he was invited to tutor James's son at his country house in the summer of 1888, and he received encouragement from James to apply for fellowships to pursue further graduate study in Germany. In the late-nineteenth century, Americans who wanted a cutting-edge education in the human sciences often studied in Germany.

As a result, Mead began coursework at the University of Leipzig in the winter 1888–1889 semester, where he studied with Wilhelm Wundt, among others, and again roomed with Henry Castle, who had decided to again take courses in Germany. Although Wundt was the leading psychologist in Germany and directed what is often considered the first experimental psychological laboratory, Mead took only his philosophy course on "Metaphysics." After that one semester, Mead transferred to the University of Berlin. By this time Mead had decided to focus his study on "physiological psychology" because, according to Henry Castle, this was a topic upon which he could pursue critical inquiry without fear of "anathema and excommunication" from the "all-potent Evangelicalism" of American Protestantism. Physiological psychology at the time was a new field that sought to use experiments with precise measuring devices to study psychological processes such as perception and consciousness.

At the University of Berlin, Mead became a laboratory assistant working on psychophysical experiments, and he took advanced courses in anatomy and physiology that focused on recent discoveries about the central nervous system. From Wilhelm Dilthey he took courses in ethics and the history of philosophy, and under Dilthey's supervision he planned to write a dissertation on the ways that the human conception of space is constructed by the interaction of touch and vision, a topic to which Mead returned in his late career. Dilthey was a leading philosopher of the human sciences, arguing that descriptive and interpretative methods were better able to study human experience than were natural-scientific