

Preface

Were it not that George Herbert Mead has been well known in sociological circles for much of our century, I might have titled this anthology, "An Invitation to the Thought of G. H. Mead." There is little doubt that certain audiences require an invitation, given the rather peculiar reception Mead has encountered for the better part of half a century. Although he is viewed by many as one of the giants of classic American philosophy, the interest he has generated and the impact he has had outside of the school of symbolic interaction simply cannot compare to that of James, Peirce, or Dewey. Although he is hailed as the progenitor of a school of sociological thought, the relative scarcity of monographs about Mead stands as compelling testimony to his failure to achieve philosophical renown or to shake the popular imagination.

Both Dewey and Whitehead praised Mead as "a seminal mind of the very first order."¹ Several of his ideas, for example, role taking and the generalized other, have the ring of accepted wisdom; and a number of philosophers, primarily in the pragmatic tradition, have addressed his thought over the years. So why has Mead not received the critical treatment that a figure of his stature deserves? Why should this key figure, a veritable storehouse of interesting ideas, have been overlooked by so many for so long? Why have some of the implications of his most seminal ideas only recently begun to see the light of day? Why have a number of highly respected German thinkers—for example, Habermas, Tugendhat, Joas—sought of late to highlight the insightfulness and unique untapped potential of Mead's work? Why is now the time to turn to Mead?

These questions are clearly historical as well as philosophical. They presume, of course, that there is considerable depth to Mead's thought and that it has only begun to be fully mined. Ample support for these assertions, I believe, will be found in the work of the authors in this anthology. We might speculate here as to why Mead has not received his due in the past, although such speculation may tell us more about Mead than about "objective" historical conditions. In so doing, we could begin by noting that he drew upon diverse and often warring traditions. His ideas, for example, encompass the seemingly antithetical camps of the Enlightenment

and Romanticism, and he utilizes the perennially American languages of behaviorism and functionalism to develop an idealistically inspired dialectic of the self and the other. But this in itself explains little, for being received as a synthetic thinker might just as well enhance one's reputation as detract from it.

Mead was an interdisciplinary thinker at a time when disciplinary lines were deepening into active fissures, and his apparent fence straddling well could have appeared monstrous to those engaged in "rigorous" philosophical, sociological or psychological investigations. Needless to say, Mead's hybrid philosophy, his mode of thought, and the nature of his writings would not have offered themselves in a very positive light to analytic philosophers in the heyday of analysis. At the same time, continental thinkers, be they phenomenologists, critical theorists, existentialists, or orthodox Marxists, for the most part, had little use for pragmatists. Mead was so classed by one and all. And this is especially unfortunate because many of those attuned to continental thought would have found his dialectic of the self and the other rather congenial, had they been inclined to look beyond this appellation and the jargon of behaviorism.²

It also is worth noting that, on the one hand, Mead was something of a systems theorist, whose ideas would have appeared insufficiently systemic for those inclined to grand models. On the other hand, although he saw himself as a supporter of novelty and individual agency, his claims regarding agency were such that they would have appeared too weak for the existentialists and their anti-systemic protégés. Finally, whereas his good friend Dewey would produce enough volumes to fill a small library, Mead never wrote a contemporary classic: no *Being and Time*, no *Tractatus*, not even an *I and Thou*. His most famous book, *Mind, Self, and Society*, is a compilation of notes—as such it gravitates to the imprecise and repetitive—and many who have read it have never bothered to consult the limited number of more carefully argued articles he saw fit to publish. Mead, it seems, for the better part of half a century, was in the wrong place, with the wrong approach, with the wrong sort of publishing record, for both professional philosophers and those who followed their lead.

Yet Mead's place is one that many now find themselves turning to, whether they know it to be Mead's or not. As modernity strives to come to terms with the challenges of postmodernity, as the walls between analytic philosophy and continental thought show signs of decomposition, as philosophers either yield to or strive to confront the extreme cultural relativism of our times, as many

question the very future of philosophy as a separate discipline, Mead stands out as theoretician whose views directly address or bear on these themes, and as one who merits our concerted attention. He is a philosopher whose thought is attuned to the profound philosophical issues at stake in the myriad of contemporary challenges to foundationalist and transcendentalist assumptions. He is a social psychologist and sociologist who understands the importance of genetic and developmental approaches, while, for the most part, avoiding the reductionism from which these approaches often suffer. He is a thinker who understands the key role language plays in the development of the self and self-consciousness, but who also understands that there is a world from which language emerges, and that practical activity informs and nurtures linguistic interactions. He is a theoretician who strives to account for the way in which the social can generate and nurture the individual without producing an overly socialized self in the process. And, even if he does not succeed in deciphering this puzzle, he presents us with numerous intriguing leads; for example, his concept of sociality, for breaking the code. His thought in many ways is compatible with important currents in both continental and Anglo-American theorizing, once these orientations are set free from their often parochial pasts. (It is here, by the way, I would locate some of the reasons why a number of contemporary German theoreticians have found Mead to be a thinker worthy of intensive study. Mead has aroused interest in a postwar, postanalytic, post-Americanized Germany, but nevertheless a Germany in which there are still thinkers who have imbibed the tradition of German idealism that nurtured Mead's own thought.) Last but not least, Mead is a behaviorist whose thought inherently transcends behaviorism. As Habermas aptly notes, "If we want to release the revolutionary power of the basic concepts of behavior theory, the potential in this approach to burst the bounds of its own paradigm, we shall have to go *back* to Mead's social psychology."³ But, as Habermas knows, one can never *simply* go back to Mead's social psychology, if for no other reason than that his social psychology breaks the bounds of its own discipline.

The accuracy of these rather breathtaking claims for Mead's thought can be assessed only by coming to terms with his work. Some important thinkers already have attempted to do so. In part, this book is being offered to bring their work on Mead before different audiences. In selecting elements to be anthologized I have kept several goals in mind. First, I wished to introduce readers to Mead's thought or reinforce existing interest by publishing some of

the best recent expository and historical material on him. Hence, I have attempted to select pieces that cover many of the fundamental themes of Mead's approach, placing them first in the order of articles in the book. Second, I wished to show the potential of Mead's thought for addressing some of the more compelling present-day issues. To this end I have sought pieces that both critique Mead's ideas and develop them. And, although I have not attempted to cover in depth every aspect of Mead's thought—for example, his intriguing ideas on the nature of the physical thing—the cornerstones of his social thought indeed are presented here. I hope that, in reading this work from cover to cover, a reader with little background in Mead's thought will find a congenial and sophisticated introduction to Mead and the avenues that his thought opens up. Those already familiar with Mead should be delighted and intrigued by the breadth and originality of insights offered. Mead surely does not have the answers to all our questions, but he can assist us in approaching them from a fresh angle; and the articles in this volume begin to show us how.

However, these ends do not exhaust my hopes for the book. I also wish to place before a wider audience several dimensions of Mead's thought that have not been given their due. One of these is the political dimension. Whereas few would hold that Mead is a major political theorist, considerable evidence demonstrates that political concerns and interests were crucial in the development of his ideas; and far too little has been written about this aspect of Mead. Hans Joas—whose work, along with Dmitri Shalin's, leads off this book—stakes out this territory when he tells us that in his opinion, "the development of Mead's [social] theory... was made possible by the positive relationship of the American pragmatists to the ethical implications of a categorical notion of democracy and to the emancipatory prospects of progress in technology and the natural sciences."⁴ The pivotal importance of specific progressive ideals in Mead's personal and intellectual development is documented in Shalin's contribution to the volume.

This is not to say that Mead's political ideas would be of interest only to antiquarians. Although we may smile affectionately at the naivete of certain of his claims, his vision of dialogue, rationality, and democracy as the triumvirate necessary for the good society appears to gain in authority as the years pass. This is in spite of all that we know about the difficulty of defining and achieving rational discourse. Although Mead was more than willing to criticize American society for the excesses of its capitalism and for its denial of community, he also was an ardent defender of the

transformative power of democracy, especially the grass-roots variety. Mead, of course, shared his desire for a truly democratic and just social order with other noteworthy thinkers of his generation; for example, Dewey. If Mead were with us today he, no doubt, would be looking for ways to support those who, from Eastern Europe to China to the Philippines to grass-roots movements in Western Europe and the United States, are struggling to assert control over their own lives.

What makes Mead interesting here, of course, is not so much his political positions, which have been admirably defended and critiqued from many quarters, but the manner in which his own support of them was related to his arguments about the development of the mind and the self. If we are the sort of social beings that Mead thinks we are—and if our capacities, including rationality, are linked to our interactions with others in the manner that Mead argues—then there indeed are good reasons for defending dialogue and democracy. There would be good reasons even for believing that a much (and often justly) maligned strategy for interpreting and grappling with our world, namely, the belief in social and economic progress, would have its merits. Such a belief merits reconsideration to the extent that growth in the density of human interaction and communication leads us not to an inevitable iron cage of anonymity, but to new modes of interaction that enhance the likelihood of democratically inspired dialogue and negotiation.

Habermas, that contemporary dreamer of rationality and democracy, is no doubt a more sophisticated political theorist than Mead. Yet, it is no accident that Mead turns out to be one of the central figures in his *Theory of Communicative Action*. Although Habermas clearly criticizes Mead—for his lack of development of a theory of language, for his failure to come to terms with the phylogenetic, and ultimately for his lack of systemic model of social and cultural organization—Mead is a seminal figure for him, in part because of his insights into the capacities that we must nurture if we are to create the good society. To understand the conditions necessary for developing and living in a democratic society, both Mead and Habermas would have us look to the sources of communicative competence and foster those institutions that would develop its rational components.

Mead was committed to actively searching for ways to improve the lot of humankind. He believed in the promise of science; and he believed that if the scientific sensibility were properly understood and employed, it could assist us in eradicating misery and in improving our lives. He believed that progress in human affairs is

not only possible but the likely result of our active endeavors to achieve it. These are not new themes. They are in some ways the dominating icons of our (Western) culture. They have been seriously challenged from several directions, of course; and numerous critiques have made it clear that it is neither prudent nor acceptable to take them as they have been passed down to us by previous generations. Indeed, given the persistent dangers of living in a world in which instrumental reason thinks it is entitled to run amok, it behooves us to ask if we can and should adhere to these icons at all. Mead, however, would ask us not to throw out the baby with the bath water.

Although many of the authors gathered here are critical of important features of his thought, by and large, they are—as most Mead scholars have been—sympathetically disposed to what we might call Mead's ameliorationist vision. Several explicitly direct themselves to themes related to it. For example, Shalin takes up Mead's progressive political agenda; Joas discusses the emancipatory potential of Mead's nonpositivistic approach to science; Swanson suggests the importance of collective experience in the development of our skills and powers, among them reflective intelligence; and through a reading of Hegel informed by Mead, I address the stunting of potentialities and the deformations of character that can occur in relationships of domination.

Invoking Hegel's name provides an opportunity for noting an additional concern of the book. In my view, Mead's indebtedness to German idealism, specifically Hegel, has not been addressed in the depth it merits; hence much of what is subtle and unique about Mead has been missed or misconstrued. This is not to say that scholars have been unaware of Mead's early interest in Hegel, rather that the usual approach has been to mention it as just that, an early interest, and then to move on to more important topics at hand. A second strategy has been to acknowledge idealism's impact, but to see it as so pernicious that it must be avoided at all cost in developing the more valuable sides of Mead.⁵

It appears that with few exceptions most of those who have written on Mead simply were not well-versed in, or hostile to, the Hegelian tradition. For those with only limited familiarity with Hegel's work, it makes admirable sense to see him as the quintessence of much that Mead actively opposed: a conservative political vision and the denigration of the empirical sciences in the name of a higher rationality. But there is another Hegel; viz., the unrivaled dialectician who gave us the dialectic of recognition. Hegel the organic thinker, like Hegel the theoretician of the

development of the self through the other, left an indelible imprint on Mead. To what degree this was a direct imprint and to what degree it came through Josiah Royce is a question worthy of further investigation. In any case, not only should Hegel's influence not be sidestepped, it should be acknowledged and explored. But aside from the question of influence, a dialogue between Hegel and Mead has much to offer, for they are admirably suited as foils for each other. So, for example, Tugendhat, a thinker well-versed in German idealism with commitments to analytic philosophy, confronts Hegel with Mead in his *Self-Consciousness and Self-Determination*.⁶ As will be apparent, a number of our authors are quite knowledgeable about Hegel, and their approaches to Mead reflect this fact.

Lest the reader think that the readings at hand are all committed to extravagant Hegelian ruminations, let me explain without further ado that most of the pieces either fail to mention Hegel or expend little energy in directly discussing him. In addition to seeking articles that exhibit the political and dialectical sensibilities of Mead, I have sought material that would juxtapose Mead with a number of thinkers who traditionally have not been associated with him, hoping that such material might suggest new lines of research. And, as previously mentioned, I also have sought articles that would address a number of trends in 20th century thought.

The book opens with the aforementioned pieces by Shalin and Joas that locate Mead within specific intellectual and political traditions. Joas connects Mead with a number of important continental theoreticians, for example, Fichte and Dilthey, in addition to exploring the more well-worn path of Darwin's impact on Mead. The next part, Functionalism and Social Behaviorism, begins with Cook arguing for the importance of reading Mead as a functionalist to understand the development of his social psychology and takes up the evolution of Mead's ideas where Joas's contribution leaves off. Cook is followed by Lewis's reading of Mead as a social behaviorist, in an article that summarizes various interpretations of Mead's view of the "I." These two papers have been joined together because of the historical and conceptual connections between functionalism and behaviorism and because they provide valuable alternative interpretations of Mead's distinction between the "I" and the "Me." Their conjunction in the same section is not meant to suggest that functional and behavioral readings of Mead do not differ in significant respects.⁷

Drawing on the work of Habermas and Tugendhat, the third section takes up one of our century's most enduring obsessions:

Language. Both thinkers are well-versed in continental thought and both have spent a good deal of time studying analytic philosophy. Coming to Mead with this background has yielded some intriguing results, including Habermas's striking attempt to augment Mead with Wittgenstein and Tugendhat's relentless critique of what he considers Mead's failure to come to terms with important distinctions; for example, that between practical and theoretical inner dialogue. Tugendhat also presents us with the rather interesting option of reading Heidegger and Mead as supplements to each other. In addition, joining Habermas and Tugendhat in one section highlights important features of a dialogue they have had with each other over the years. The final section brings together Swanson's article and my article under the rubric of the Interpersonal and Intrapersonal. These pieces are concerned with demonstrating how Mead's dynamic conception of the self as a social self contributes to our understanding of its capacities. Swanson refers to a number of empirical studies and discusses his own work in this area, whereas I proceed by analyzing Hegel's master and slave text in light of certain basic Meadian and Freudian assumptions. Both articles suggest that Mead and Freud might be used to augment certain weaknesses in each other's views.

Several important perspectives in 20th century thought are addressed in the book: behaviorism, functionalism, linguistic analysis, socialism, and psychoanalysis. Nevertheless, given the constraints of space and availability of material, an anthology by its very nature must be plagued by certain gaps. Here, phenomenology and Marxism are discussed far too briefly, and structuralism is left totally by the wayside. Mead's potential contribution to feminism also is not addressed; and this is especially regrettable given Mead's lifelong commitment to women's rights.⁸ The source of these defects, in certain instances, can be attributed as much to a dearth of appropriate material as to criteria for inclusion. Still, not only have certain approaches been given short shrift, but a number of respected scholars have been excluded. It will be immediately obvious, for example, that I have not done justice to those writing as symbolic interactionists, especially given the quantity of material they have written on Mead over the years. In defense I can plead that their work already is closely associated with Mead's name, whereas one of my goals has been to show Mead's potential for connecting with those in different traditions. (I do expect that the papers anthologized here will be of interest to symbolic interactionists.⁹) I have made a modest attempt to redress some of these omissions by including a wide-ranging bibliography of recent material on Mead.

There always is the undeniably idiosyncratic and circumstantial in the genesis of anthologies. I focused on material that could heighten interest in Mead among a variety of different audiences, but even in this regard certain hopes were deferred. Perhaps this book will assist in kindling interest in Mead among those attuned to the current debate between proponents of the so-called postmodernist and modernist perspectives. In general, far too little has been written on Mead and recent intellectual currents; for example, on Mead and those dedicated postmodernists, the deconstructionists.¹⁰ Mead, after all, is a thinker of novelty, one who would tell us that we can give the novel its due without descending into, or being absorbed by, an endless play of signs. But these and other movements will have to await another day and another book, a day and a book that ideally this book will help to realize.

The contributions to this volume have been collected from a wide variety of publications. I have sought to adhere as closely as possible to their original formats. Explanatory notes and references have been added to several of the selections. They are designated by superscripted lower case letters in the text.