

BOOK REVIEW:

FILIFE CARREIRA DA SILVA.

G. H. MEAD: A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

(Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007. 156 pp.)

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In one of his numerous letters François-Marie Arouet, more widely known by his pen name Voltaire, wrote: „Dear friend, I apologize for having written such a long letter but I did not have enough time to write a short one.” I would like to elaborate a little bit on the words of this great figure of political liberalism because its message is closely connected to the way Filipe Carreira da Silva treated his topic in the book *G. H. Mead: A Critical Introduction*. First, as Voltaire seems to point out, we are generally more attracted to things and texts we can conceive in relatively short period of time. It may not be like this every time, but generally people tend to prefer rather short letters and books than otherwise. The reason is quite simple and especially holds for book reading: namely, until we manage to familiarize ourselves with a subject we can never be certain whether this endeavor of ours is actually worth it or not. Thus, if we happen to be totally ignorant about certain matters, we usually take the shortest credible way out. The second interesting matter to the aforementioned quotation is the realization, that it is actually more challenging and difficult to write a short pregnant text on a subject than an extensive treatise. In other words, the better our understanding of a particular subject, the shorter amount of time it takes us to present it coherently to somebody else. All of what has been said so far counts for Filipe Carreira da Silva’s notable monograph *G. H. Mead: A Critical Introduction*.

In his work, Da Silva (by training a sociologist) not only has come up with an insightful treatment of almost all crucial ideas of George Herbert Mead but also has been able to put Mead’s thinking into proper philosophical

contexts – mainly the pragmatist one. However, not only this is the case – speaking of putting ideas into various contexts, da Silva seems to have found a strong typological connection between the social issues Mead addressed a century ago and the problems we are facing at present. At first glance, the aim of da Silva’s book looks surely manifold – from factual examination of Mead’s intellectual heritage, through placing it into various perspectives, up to an attempt to find a place for Mead in contemporary social debates. How do the outcomes of da Silva’s efforts meet the needs of general academic public on the one hand, and to what extent they are able to satisfy the demands of professional Mead researchers on the other, these are the issues I would like to deal with in this paper.

Although the systematization of the book presented by the author on its very first pages is a little bit different, we could say that da Silva’s book basically falls into two major parts. The first part addresses Mead’s fundamental social and philosophical concepts, whereas the second one familiarizes the reader with the reception of these ideas by various intellectual schools of thought in the 20th and 21st century. Right at the outset of this review, it should be noted that one of the most exceptional characteristics of the book *G. H. Mead: A Critical Introduction* is its great balance when treating philosophical and sociological aspects of Mead’s work. From philosophical point of view, it comes as a true surprise that a professional sociologist is actually able to present such an authentic and dependable picture of philosophical pragmatism, which has been the most abused and misrepresented current of thought of the last century. In fact, the transdisciplinarity of research is a crucial aspect in contemporary Meadian studies and da Silva executes this task very well. Mead himself was an eclectic thinker who was able to link philosophical currents in his work as disparate as idealism, naturalism, French vitalism, behavioral psychology and many others. There is absolutely no doubt about the necessity of putting forth some amount of philosophy when discussing Mead’s work. Since da Silva’s book main goal

is to present Mead to social sciences' students, the level of its philosophical accomplishment is adequate and does not slip into any extremes on either side.

As mentioned before, we could divide da Silva's book to two parts. The first one (chapters 1 to 5) provides for readers without prior knowledge of Mead an intellectual map of his basic philosophical concepts as well as a portrait of his biography. In the case of including biography into da Silva's research, I consider this historical proceeding to be a correct one for the following reasons: 1) When talking about pragmatist philosophy of Mead, and also of Dewey or James for instance, it is highly appropriate to point out to significant moments of their lives because they are quite reflective of what they wanted their philosophy to become – and that is – a philosophy-put-to-work. In other words, philosophy should actually make a difference to the individual (James) as well as to the society (Mead, Dewey). Mead remained faithful to this idea for all his life not only theoretically but also through getting practically involved in strivings for social reforms. 2) The second reason why we should not omit Mead's personal history is the incompleteness of his work, which I propose (as well as da Silva does, after all) to be taken rather as an advantage than otherwise. Knowing Mead's historical background enables us to develop some of his ideas in new and fruitful directions.¹

As for the rest of the first half of his book (chapters 3 to 5), da Silva presents clear although sometimes a little too compendious treatment of Mead's fundamental social and psychological concepts. For those readers, who are not familiar with Mead's thought, it is absolutely necessary to go through the first part of the book to get at least a basic grip on his key concepts such as „taking the role of the other“, „conversation of gestures“, „significant symbol“ etc.

¹ For instance, the fact that Mead studied and wrote his doctoral dissertation under Wilhelm Dilthey may rise some interesting questions concerning the influence of modern hermeneutics on the development of certain aspects of American pragmatism.

On the other hand, the more advanced readers of Mead can skip to the second half (chapters 6 to 8) of the book right away. Whilst the first part only [sic] offers a systematic depiction of Meadian conceptual basics, in the second part one can find several portions of refreshing ideas concerning the way Mead's work has been interpreted by different schools of sociology and philosophy. What needs to be especially appreciated in the second half of da Silva's book is the rare attempt to put Mead into real discussion with contemporary thinkers in the way far from trivial. Therefore, in the text below, I am going to go through the individual chapters and examine them not so much from the perspective of its „objective accuracy“ (there is no such need) but I will rather try to discuss with its particular fragments or eke them out with some supplemental ideas that have not been made explicit.

As mentioned above, there are several good reasons for including Mead's personal and intellectual portrait to monographs that have the ambition to deal with the work of this thinker in its complexity. In this respect, da Silva takes up the approach of the leading Meadian authorities such as Gary Cook and Hans Joas. In the case of da Silva's treatment of Mead's work, however, there is at least one more reason for doing this. By depicting the historical background of the evolution of Mead's ideas da Silva tries to point out to the condition of *fin de siècle* that Mead (being a citizen of one of the most dynamically developing cities of that times, Chicago) experienced firsthand. As da Silva thoughtfully asserts, the times of Mead and our time bear surprisingly many commonalities indicating that the problems addressed by Mead are very likely be of the same nature that we are facing today.² Our present, exactly like the turn of 20th century, can be characterized as culturally and socially vibrant period combined with a shared prospect of unavoidable radical change in society or some

² Da Silva rigorously examines this problem in his book: Da Silva, F. C.: *Mead and Modernity: Science, Selfhood, and Democratic Politics*, Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008.

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approaching „end“. Right from the start da Silva also calls attention to the way Dewey influenced Mead's thinking. However, from the historical and systematic point of view it can be claimed that the author slightly overestimates Dewey's influence on Mead. Whereas it is true, that Mead's own conceptual and philosophical points of departure began to crystalize to its mature form not until he worked with Dewey in Ann Arbor and later in Chicago, it can be doubted that for instance Dewey's neo-hegelianism could have had any significant influence upon Mead (pp. 24-25).³ On the other hand, the author seems to neglect the impact⁴ of Mead's ideas upon Dewey's own thinking. Except for these two slight inaccuracies the Mead's short intellectual biography put forth by da Silva is fully sufficient for the purposes of his treatise and introduces the whole subject very well.

At the outset of chapter three da Silva decided to examine arguably the most important notion of Mead's thought – taking the role of the other. In brief manner da Silva explains basic concepts like gestures, symbols, significant symbols etc. All of these are defined quite clearly, although it is my impression that they deserve a little more space to being dealt with really profoundly. What can be considered the biggest problem of this chapter, however, is the author's understanding of Mead's concept of *social object* which represents one of very few factual mistakes in the whole book. Da Silva writes: „For Mead, human beings live in a world made of

objects. Most objects around us are physical: a pen or a mobile phone are possible examples of what Mead calls „objects of immediate experience.‘ We can grab them, feel them, use them. Moreover, Mead suggests that human beings are also to be considered as objects, only of a different sort: the reflective self of the human self makes it a social object. Social objects (i.e. human beings) are distinguished from physical ones through their ability to reflect upon surrounding environment, including other social objects.“ These words of the author imply at least two things that actually are not faithful to what Mead seems to present in his writings. The first problematic moment of the passage cited above is the implication that according to Mead, all objects can be basically classified into two categories: physical and social. Physical objects are those we can touch, see, smell, grab (to put it simply) etc. and the social ones are selves. As long as Mead's ontology is concerned, da Silva is right about the first category, but apparently fails to understand the second one. In Mead's ontological texts we can really see him operating extensively with the notion of physical object, but social objects are something quite different. They have a lot more to do with Mead's theory of meaning than ontology. Social objects are not primarily selves as da Silva seems to suggest. By contrast, they can be defined as whatever that has a common meaning for each participant in the social act.⁵ Thus, it is conceivable that social objects can be some selves as well as physical objects but also some other „objects.“ This brings us to the second possible objection concerning the author's treatment of objects. According to Silva, in Mead, the world only consists of physical and social objects, in other words – material things and selves, nothing more. Well, cannot we think of many other objects? What about political parties, bank accounts, language or various kinds of social institutions? They are neither physical objects, nor are they selves. Also in the light of this objection we can see that the author's account of

³ There are at least two reasons for this: 1) Mead met Dewey in 1891, i.e. at the time when Dewey was already in the process of moving away from neo-hegelianism [Cf. Dewey's articles: *Is Logic a Dualistic Science?* (1890), *Logic of Verification* (1890) and *The Present Position of Logical Theory* (1891)]. 2) There was basically no need for Dewey to inspire Mead in the neo-hegelian way, because Mead at that time was already well aware of it – he studied under Josiah Royce at Harvard and then spent three years in Germany.

⁴ We have quite strong historical evidence, that some of key philosophical premises of Dewey's thinking have actually their source in Mead. Cf. Dewey, J. M.: *The Biography of John Dewey* in: Schipp, P.A. (ed.): *The Philosophy of John Dewey*, New York: Tudor Publishing Co. 1939, pp. 25-26.; Morris, Ch. W. in: Mead, G. H.: *Mind, Self, and Society*, Morris, Ch.W. (ed.), Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 1967, pp. xi.

⁵ Cf. Mead, G. H.: *Mind, Self, and Society*, Morris, Ch.W. (ed.), Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1967, pp. 277-280.

social object is a little problematic. I am aware of no Mead's paper providing us with an enumerative account of what is to be counted as an object and what is not. By contrast, Mead seems to claim that an object should be counted as such if we are able to act toward it. To put it a little differently, the criterion of something being an object is the possibility of taking action toward it.⁶

The rest of the chapter presents logical and sophisticated explanation of Mead's account of the emergence of symbolic processes and the mechanism of social organization resting upon it. What is particularly useful and at the same time helpful for beginning researchers are the distinctions within particular Mead's concepts (subjective and intersubjective reflectivity etc.). In describing the conceptual starting points of Mead's theory of communication and sociality it is very necessary to explain the differences between gestures, conversation of gestures and significant symbols – it is on the background of these that we should get a proper picture of what Mead actually meant by taking the role of the other. Da Silva, being aware of this fact, did this work very well. There is also another important thing that the author pointed out to, namely the existence of Mead's taxonomy of language moods (pp. 38-39), that we actually know (obviously in much more elaborated form) from the Oxford ordinary language philosophers. Although the existence of Mead's distinction between language moods is probably more important for philosophers than sociologists, it displays how far ahead of his times Mead actually got in his analyses of language and communication.

Chapter four revolves around Mead's treatment of the emergence of self through individual's participating in communicative processes. Again, probably the greatest value of this chapter does not lie in presenting a systematic treatment of the subject (as presented in many other books on Mead before) but in introducing

careful distinctions into sometimes a little messy Mead's texts. What needs to be especially appreciated is the distinction between various „stages“ of consciousness, i. e. consciousness as awareness, consciousness as reflective intelligence and mind. These very closely related concepts cause a lot of misunderstandings in dealing with Mead's social psychology. While consciousness as awareness should be understood as a subjective experience of objects or feelings to the individual, consciousness as reflective intelligence has to do with our dealings with the social world as reflective intelligent beings. This is where language and symbolization start to play an absolutely crucial role. Using symbols and language seems to considerably enhance our capability of selective thinking because it portions the continuum of experience into functional parts helping us cope with broad scope of problems within it. If Mead says, that „intelligence is largely a matter of selectivity“⁷, this is what he has in mind. Moreover, reflexivity is the ability to test various available options of conduct mentally, so we actually do not have to try every alternative course of action. Reflexivity is also a necessary condition for the emergence of mind. We can call an individual as minded if it is able to become an object to itself in the presentation of different lines of conduct. We see, then, that reflective intelligence and mind are closely connected but not coextensive terms. Mind, the way Mead uses it, has a lot to do with the social dimension of conduct, in other words, it is something that arises from a social matrix of interactions among individuals. Reflexivity, on the other hand, is basically a function of our cortex that enables this kind of social interaction, but still can not be called mindedness because mind, according to Mead, is not something that can be localized⁸ in any part of our body.⁹ Da Silva, being well

⁶ Cf. Mead, G. H.: *The Philosophy of the Act*, Dunham, A. M.; Miller, D. L.; Morris, Ch. W. (eds.), Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1938, pp. 430.

⁷ Mead, G. H.: *Mind, Self, and Society*, Morris, Ch. W. (ed.), Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1967, p. 99.

⁸ For instance, Cornelis de Waal goes as far as to place mind wholly in the space of social discourse. Cf. de Waal, C.: *On Mead*, Belmont: Wadsworth 2002, p. 66.

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aware of this, presented the reader with the useful distinction between what we can call „stages of consciousness“ but probably could have gone a little bit further when discussing the difference between reflexivity and mind.

As a kind of recapitulation of previous findings we can read chapter five called „Society, Mind, and Self.“ Da Silva deliberately mingled the words' order in the title of Mead's most famous book *Mind, Self, and Society* and used it in his own favour. According to da Silva, Charles W. Morris (who was the actual collector of this Mead's text) did not choose the proper order of words when he decided to put mind in the first place, and self and society in second and third place respectively. Is it not the case that according to Mead it is society that logically comes first, and only after that do we have mind and self? It is an interesting question. Da Silva's argument seems to be sound but only to a certain extent. If we read *Mind, Self and Society* what we can actually see is Mead's attempt to put forth a genetic interpretation of how society possibly could evolve out of gestural interactions between human beings. In this respect it is appropriate to read Mead's theories of society as Israel Scheffler¹⁰ proposes, namely as being of similar kind as for instance social contract theory. Although (with most probability) there was no such moment in the human history when social contract was actually made, it still provides us with very deep insights that can hardly be doubted. These insights immensely have helped us understand the existence and functioning of political and legal systems. The same counts for Mead's theories of communication and society. Even though we will never be able to trace the origins of human language, the explanations and interpretations of it in Mead's texts show us where to look for it's logical (not historical) roots, because they

hardly ever took place in the form Mead writes. To get back to da Silva's above mentioned proposal of reversing the order of words – in the condition of individuals being born to already existing social groups – obviously, it would be more appropriate to start off with society, nevertheless this is not Mead's point. Arguably, from Mead's pragmatist evolutionary perspective such an approach would be clearly anachronistic. We do not need society (a large social group – in the ordinary sense of the word) to become selves, all we need is a second individual.¹¹

Owing to application of his social-philosophical ideas even to interactions between nations Mead shows how remarkably coherent and encompassing his philosophy really is. The issues of foreign policy were at the center of Mead's attention mainly in the times of World War I. The author accurately points out to some of Mead's opinions of how international relations should be structured and managed. It is also on the background of these that we can see (unfortunately) that not much has changed since then. In this part of the book we can also notice one more aspect, making Mead's thought up-to-date and inspiring, especially when we take Mead into an imaginary discussion with some European thinkers such as Foucault. As well as Foucault, Mead thoroughly examined the relation of individual and society in terms of social control. What is interesting though, Mead's conclusions differ enormously from those of Foucault even though they both can be identified as social determinists of some sort. As we know, the picture of the relation between society and an individual we are presented by Foucault is rather a pessimistic one. He can not see any possibility for an individual how to set free from certain social forces, not to speak about her potential of *changing* society. However, even if we take the historical point of view, what Foucault says, is apparently not true; and Mead is well aware of that. For Mead, the fact that an individual is able to change

⁹ Cf. Mead, G. H.: *Mind, Self, and Society*, Morris, Ch. W. (ed.), Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1967, p. 53.

¹⁰ Cf. Scheffler, I.: *Four Pragmatists: A Critical Introduction to Peirce, James, Mead, and Dewey*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974, p. 175-176.

¹¹ Of course, the scope of social relations in the case of „society“ consisting of only two individuals would be considerably limited, yet in the most basic sense, we logically have all we need to become „selves.“

(sometimes quite radically) the course of society's life comes very naturally. In fact, in his writings he does not devote too much space for justification of this idea, which indicates that the clash between radical social determinists and those who advocated more liberal position was not the true reason why he wrote on this topic. In this respect da Silva convincingly shows, how Mead's individual psychology (I-me distinction) is in accordance with the relation of self and society. Since the self is an internalization of social practices (*me*) it mirrors in itself the moral order of this society; on the other hand the creative and dynamic side of our personality (*I*) puts this order repeatedly to test in the course of social life of the individual. Very rarely are both sides of our selves in total balance. Most of our personalities are dominated by one of these sides. Those selves that are dominated by the "I" tend to put the social order more often to question and creatively reconstruct not primarily the moral order of the society, but first – themselves. Thus, Mead displays how social criticism is but a form of self-criticism. If the person is able to address and reconstruct in herself the problems of the broader scope of members of the society, she can bring about a radical change in it. This is also the main message of Mead's pragmatist ethics; if we are able to build a society that will always preserve free discussion, exchange of ideas and individual's creative potential we actually make sure, that it is going to move toward greater common good of the whole.

With chapter six the reader enters the second part of the book. As mentioned above, through presentation of all the crucial aspects of Mead's social theory da Silva had prepared the conceptual background for an imaginary discussion between Mead and the continuators of his work. The main value of da Silva's treatment of this subject can be found in thorough examination of the influence of the tradition of American pragmatism not only on Mead but also on the „Chicago school“ of sociology as a whole. In this respect he mentions Dmitri Shalin's important work „Pragmatism and Social Interactionism“ (1986) that summarizes the main areas

in which pragmatism has been most influential in the process of formulating the conceptual and methodological background of symbolic interactionism. Da Silva convincingly shows that pragmatism's main goal, which was nothing less than overcoming the Cartesian rationalism by means of a naturalistic philosophy of action is at the same time one of the most important conceptual resources of the whole new tradition of symbolic interactionism. Speaking of the relation of Mead and the Chicago school of sociology, one more issue should be noted; it is highly probable that the unproblematic fusion between Mead's philosophy and social psychology on the one hand, and the newly emerging current of sociology on the other, was made possible by Mead's great programmatic openness toward empirical research. For all his life, Mead strived to find appropriate means of putting his theories into practice and evaluating them. Although he himself did not fully succeed during his lifetime, his students pushed these efforts much further and also succeeded remarkably. In this respect, the person of Herbert Blumer should be mentioned. Blumer was one of Mead's most devoted students (beside Ellsworth Faris, for instance), who remained faithful to the main route of research, set by his teacher, for all his life. It was also him, who in 1937 coined the term „symbolic interactionism.“ Blumer's role in spreading Mead's ideas in the world of social sciences can hardly be overemphasized; it was actually owing to him, that symbolic interactionism became the leading current of sociological research in 60s and 70s of the last century. Apart from this, as da Silva contends, in many aspects of his work, Blumer drags his teacher to directions Mead would himself probably never have gone.

According to da Silva, probably the most serious problem in Blumer's reception of Mead is his alleged nominalism. Blumer seems to argue, that Mead understood symbolic interaction as involving interpretation, or ascertaining of meaning of the actions or the remarks of the other person, and definition, or conveying indications to another person as to how she is to act. Da Silva, on the

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other hand, claims that in Mead nothing like this is possible because meaning is something that lies in the social act even prior to the emergence of consciousness (p. 79). Da Silva is right, according to Mead, the meaning of a social act is present in it before the awareness of meaning occurs. This is after all why some animals can act in meaningful way without being aware of it. But does it necessarily mean that we get to this meaning in any other way than interpretation? Da Silva writes: „...Blumer's Mead is said to conceive of symbolic interaction as a formative process through which meaning is created.“ Does the term interpretation mean creating the meaning out of nothing as da Silva maintains? Certainly not. What he apparently fails to understand is the fact that interpretation and prior existence of meaning are not contradictory notions. If we are involved in a social act the nature of which is not yet clear to us, we have to figure it out. And how do we figure it out but through interpretation? Let me give an example: say, I go across a crowded center of town, smoking my cigarette and out of the sudden I can see a person in the distance waving her hand in my direction. Since I am a little short-sighted I cannot recognize her face. There is definitely a purpose (representing the meaning of the social act) in her waving hand but at that moment I am not aware of it. What I have to do is to *interpret* it; say, by looking around me I make sure she is not waving at somebody else or by recalling the local law I make sure I am allowed to smoke in public places, I can also go closer to ask her etc. In other words, although the meaning of the act as a whole is present in the situation from the very beginning, in order to follow it, sometimes we have to take some action, in the pragmatist words – we have to do inquiry. The only difference is that in social dealings with other human beings we do not call these research activities inquiry but interpretation. Since moving in the world of human communication is not moving primarily among physical objects but meanings, we do not inquire, we interpret. Coming back to Blumer, it is probably a little too harsh from da Silva to contend that Blumer misrepresents Mead in this aspect of his work.

In the rest of the chapter the author carefully maps the development of Mead's ideas in for instance in the „Iowa School“, and also in the work of renowned sociologists like Anselm Strauss, Erving Goffman and Howard S. Becker. The positions of the aforementioned sociologists are examined by da Silva from strictly Meadian perspective which gives us a very good outlook on how divergent currents of thought Mead's texts provoked. The way da Silva has treated his subject in this chapter makes it attractive and comprehensible even for those students of humanities who have not undergone any thorough sociological training.

The main value of chapter seven lies in relating Mead's thinking to several outstanding European intellectuals such as Arnold Gehlen, Jürgen Habermas, Axel Honneth, Hans Joas and also to head representatives of conflict theory (Randall Collins) and neofunctionalism (Jeffrey Alexander). In this chapter da Silva excellently explains why it was in post-war Germany where Mead's work anchored so strongly. In short, the changed social and political conditions of this country paved the way for Mead's thinking in two ways: 1) Through Mead, and American pragmatism in general, Germany was able to return to its intellectual roots – idealism; 2) Since Mead's social theory can be seen as a democratic alternative to the work of Marx, Mead's ideas were immediately embraced and further developed within the second generation of Frankfurt school.

In the last chapter da Silva sums up the conclusions of his book trying to answer the question „Why read Mead today?“ Throughout his book da Silva not only has shown that Mead was one of the founding fathers of modern sociology, social psychology and pragmatism, but also presented how his work continuously provokes new and fruitful ways of thinking about society. Yet, there is one more idea the author deliberately has not fully developed in this particular book¹² – Mead's work is to a great extent an answer to problems, that are

¹² See footnote no. 2.

actually very similar to our own. As well as we do, Mead lived in a historical period when the social structure was deeply shaken by the upcoming uncertainties of the new era. His early liberal modernity was a subject to similar historical contingency, uncertainty and pluralism as our late post-industrial modernity. Having said all the above we must admit that George Herbert Mead is the kind of thinker, who will long remain a great source of original

ideas in various disciplines of social sciences. In the book *G. H. Mead: A Critical Introduction* the author has done an impressive work in presenting some key aspects of Mead's thinking and also the reasons why he is still worth reading. This work on Mead places Filipe Carreira da Silva among the leading scholars in the field.