

BOOK REVIEW/ COMPTE RENDU

Joas, Hans, and Huebner, Daniel (eds.). *The Timeliness of George Herbert Mead*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016. pp. 368, \$65.00, paper, (9780226376943).

The *Timeliness of George Herbert Mead* stems from a conference, held at the University of Chicago in 2013, celebrating the 150th birthday of George Herbert Mead. The fourteen essays are arranged and edited by Mead experts Hans Joas and Daniel Huebner, who have also recently edited the “definitive version” of *Mead’s Mind, Self and Society* (2015). Authors of essays in this volume come from the United States, Canada, Germany, Austria, and France, and from the disciplines of sociology and philosophy, but with subspecializations in religion, environment, social theory, science and technology studies, cultural theory, democratic theory, and cognitive science. The diversity of expertise among the authors underlines the interdisciplinarity of Mead’s thought.

The volume is excellent, lively, and engaging. Despite a wide variety of topics, the book holds together well with many essays complementing each another. While essays include discussion of familiar topics (e.g. social self, I and Me, generalized other, play and game stages of development), it is not just a recapitulation of well-worn ideas. The chief merit of the volume is that it pushes our understanding of Mead beyond the dominant social psychological interpretation of his work, emphasizing influences and interests including American pragmatism, the history of ideas, comparative and developmental psychology, and relativistic physics. Alongside extensive reference to Mead’s most familiar book *Mind, Self, and Society* (1934), essays make frequent reference to his lesser known books, *Movements of Thought in the Nineteenth Century* (1936) and *Philosophy of the Present* (1932). Ryan McVeigh’s contribution (Ch 10) on Mead’s theory of mind, captures the spirit of the volume when he says: “...although widespread, [Mead’s] thought is largely presented in a fragmented manner that is unrepresentative of his full philosophical system. In fact, it is the unacknowledged and underappreciated components of Mead’s thought that make his unique brand of pragmatism particularly relevant for contemporary sociology” (209).

In addition to pushing the traditional sociological understanding of Mead, the volume addresses Mead’s relevance for contemporary sociological and philosophical theorizing (hence, the *Timeliness* of GH Mead).

The volume is organized into three sections, each of which addresses a theme of contemporary relevance. The first section covers topics related to history and historiography, and therefore hooks up with contemporary work in comparative-historical sociology. Chapters in this section discuss Mead's lectures on nineteenth century intellectual history (Camic, Ch 1), introduce Mead's thought on this history of science (Huebner, Ch 2), examine Mead's connection to the German traditions of historicism and philosophical anthropology (Joas, Ch 3 and Rehberg Ch 5), and Mead's contribution to democratic theory (Westbrook, Ch 4). An abiding theme in this section is that for Mead all human thought, and consequently selfhood, is historical. Though clearly far apart in their ideas about subjectivity and selfhood, this nevertheless situates Mead alongside scholars like Michel Foucault and Charles Taylor, each of whom considered the relationship between human personhood and socio-cultural milieu.

Section two draws together essays that discuss Mead's ideas about nature and the environment. Though Mead was by no means an environmentalist (as we now use the term), essays in this section show that Mead's theory treated humans as inextricably woven into both social and natural environments. This section introduces the origins of Mead's evolutionary thought (Pearce, Ch 6) and a chapter on Mead's relationship to the Chicago school (Cefai, Ch 8). Several essays examine the challenging topic of the "sociality of nature." How can nature be social? Isn't sociality a uniquely human function? For Mead, sociality, in its most basic, is defined as the capacity to take the perspective of others. More broadly this refers to "the connectedness and mutual adjustment" that comes with all relationships (Brewster and Puddephat, Ch 7: 151). This includes relationships between humans, but also between humans and nonhumans, such as animals and the "environment." By emphasizing the ways that humans can take the perspective of nonhumans, Brewster and Puddephat (158-9) hope that "we can better imagine the needs and interests of the nonhuman world" and thereby position ourselves to address problems such as climate change. Thomas (Ch 9) pushes this idea further. He compares Mead with the process philosopher Alfred North Whitehead. Referring to Mead's *Philosophy of the Present*, Thomas argues that: "Mead's notion of sociality shifts in his later works from a particular view of the intersubjectivity of human perspectives to a more general view of the relativity of perspectives found in nature" (189). Organisms, both human and non-human, "process their environment," and in so doing "[alter] themselves" and "the world around them" (191). Humans, as role taking beings, participate in this broader natural process, only that they do so with the additional, uniquely human, capacity for acting with intention.

The third section examines Mead's relationship to contemporary research in cognitive science and neuroscience. Some of the essays assess how Mead's writing on human and animal cognition/communication stacks up against recent research. By and large the authors agree that Mead's ideas have been confirmed. In addition to learning about Mead, readers of these chapters will be schooled on: human and animal cognition, in particular the topic of imitation (Ch 11), human speech (Ch 15), the relevance of the "mirror neuron" to Mead's work (Ch 10, 11, 12), and the relevance, for pragmatism, of developmental/comparative psychologist Michael Tomasello (Ch 10, 11, 12, 15). In this section, readers are also introduced to the intriguing field of neuropragmatism - an effort to develop the findings of neuroscience within the context of pragmatism. As several authors point out, despite his abiding concern for problems of human cognition and communication, to date Mead has been left out of contemporary conversations. The strength of Mead's philosophy is that cognition and communication are fully embedded in the social and natural milieu; they develop functionally to solve problems posed by the surrounding world. In this, Mead's pragmatism overcomes the solipsism of much contemporary cognitive science (i.e. treating the brain and nervous system as stand-alone, self contained entities). Madzia's essay (Ch 14) on "situated cognition" is particularly helpful here. Like others in this section, Madzia says that thinking is not a process that occurs inside the individual mind. Attacking the Cartesian bias of cognitive science, he criticizes the idea that language and thought "mediate" the human relationship to the world. Thought is not a framework or a schema, but another kind of action; an outgrowth of our bodily engagement with the world. Perhaps drawing too close a comparison with phenomenologists like Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Charles Taylor, Madzia treats Mead as the "first philosopher to have taken embodiment seriously" (308). Indeed, Daniel (Ch 13) makes a similar point in his essay about "conscience" when he says that "fitting in" to the roles and norms of the social world is not only an intellectual act, but one that depends upon the "coordination" and "choreography" of bodies in shared spaces (282).

Despite the diversity of essays touching on such an impressive range of themes, there are unifying ideas. Central to almost every essay is Mead's focus on intersubjectivity and sociality. This without a doubt is the kernel of Mead's theory. Here, Mead should be called a "radical" relational thinker. For Mead relationship is not just an afterthought, something that already existing selves and bodies, come into. Rather, humans are first in relationship to the world, and then they come into themselves. Another refrain heard through the book is Mead's rejection of all kinds of dualism: mind and body, materialism and idealism, person and world,

or even biology and culture. Since, as a pragmatist, Mead takes his starting point as practical action, what matters is the way in which various entities become part of a natural process by which humans (in concert with environments and objects) create shared “social worlds” or “ecologies” (Cefai, Ch 8). This provides for a very dynamic view of social life, consistent with many contemporary theoretical perspectives. Finally, it is remarkable that many of the essays in this volume emphasize the concept of embodiment in Mead’s theory. This, I suggest, stands in contrast to the received interpretation in which Mead is treated primarily as a theorist of language and significant symbols. While, of course, symbols are crucial to human life, this volume shows again and again that human consciousness always develops within particular socio-historical eras, in particular natural environments, and in particular bodies, all of which are grounded in physical, material realms. Here too, of course, Mead anticipates the relatively recent importance of the body to sociological theory.

In addition to general scholarly interest, this book would best be used to supplement upper level lectures and classes on Mead. Alongside Mead’s original writing it would be an excellent book to assign in graduate seminars on sociological theory, pragmatism, and social psychology. More daring instructors might consider using the relevant sections of the book in courses further afield and even outside of sociology: psychology and cognitive science classes would benefit from essays in section 3, and classes studying comparative historical sociology, especially focused on subjectivity, could use section 1.

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