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The mystery of GH Mead's first book [book review]

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The mystery of G. H. Mead's first book

GEORGE HERBERT MEAD, Essays in Social Psychology. Edited with an introduction by Mary Jo Deegan. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2001. 199 pp. ISBN 0765800829 (hbk)

In her introduction to this collection of essays by Mead, Mary Jo Deegan, the editor, claims that it is Mead's first book. It comprises eighteen essays, half of which have never been published before. Mead had prepared the essays for publication as a book, up as far as receiving the galley proofs, and the fact that the collection was pulled back from the brink of publication, sometime in 1910, Deegan calls a mystery.

For understanding the origin of Mead's ideas the collection is immediately useful because it dates from a much earlier period than his other books, like Mind, Self, & Society, which is based on lectures given in 1927 when he was close to retirement. In this regard, Deegan's introduction provides a helpful account of Mead's social context during this early period. For example, Mead was an active member of Hull House, a social settlement pursuing social reform, headed by Jane Addams. This interest in social problems is evident in one of the essays, entitled 'A psychological study of the use of stimulants,' where Mead tries to address the reasons for drunkenness. Interestingly, he classifies not only alcohol, but also religion, art and poetry as stimulants, because they are all cultural "means of gaining control over the emotions" (p.35). The theory he puts forward builds on Dewey's (1896) conception of 'the act' as a unit of analysis. An act is an entire movement of action, which subsumes both

organism and environment, and within which stimulus, response and goal are defined. Stimulants, according to Mead, shortcut the act as a whole, taking the user straight to the goal, or consummation, without the effort. Mead observes that it is much easier to feel close to a fellow being through the use of stimulants than it is to produce such a situation in earnest. But this does not mean that stimulants are to be denigrated, as by the temperance organizations. Mead stresses that the emotions expressed through the use of stimulants can overcome conventions that have stifled development, leading to new acts.

Another facet of Mead's early social context, which Deegan also points to, is the Laboratory School. This experimental school, which was founded by Dewey, provided both Mead and Dewey with a concrete context for developing and testing their ideas. Again this interest is evident in the essays. About half of the essays address applied issues in education – an interesting contrast to Mead's later predominantly theoretical work. Mead's approach to education is developed in conjunction with his ideas about play. There are three types of human activity, Mead writes: work, art and play. Play is distinguished by being spontaneous action, non-reflective and not goal directed. He posits that play has the function of preparing the child for later actions. In this sense play is effortless education. Mead criticises traditional schools because they operate only on work activity, and fail to incorporate play. Work, being effortful, needs to be forced, and thus ends up teaching the child mainly discipline. In contrast to the work act, there is a sense, for Mead, in which play is a natural act.

Here again, with Mead taking the act as the unit of analysis, we can see the influence of Dewey's (1896) conception of the act. During the early years at the University of Chicago, Dewey and Mead were close, and developed their ideas in dialogue with each other. In the years before 1904, when Dewey left Chicago, Mead makes affirmative use of Dewey's formulation of the act. But in the essays, in this collection, leading up to 1910, Mead's relation to the act becomes more critical. Mead is convinced that something like the act can provide a solid theoretical frame for psychology, but he is concerned that Dewey's formulation fuses the organism and the environment into a non-symbolic functional entity. How could technologies of the emotions have a place in such acts? How could people gain control over themselves if there is only the organism and environment in seamless motion? It is symbols, Mead writes, that "put our experience under our control" (p.50) and it is symbols that Dewey's act does not satisfactorily account for (e.g., p.50-51).

Dewey (1896) had speculated that conflicting tendencies within the act might be the origin of consciousness and symbols. In response Mead argues that this would only lead to a shift of attention, not to an awareness that one is attending. Amongst these essays we see Mead struggling to find a place for symbols within the act. In one essay he develops the idea that manipulation of objects, because it separates the organism from the goal of action, is the basis of symbolisation. Yet in an other he argues that it is only through expanding the act into a social interaction that symbols could arise.

There is, then, a dialogue running between the lines of the whole collection, in which Mead progressively manages to articulate the limitation of Dewey's formulation of the act, and simultaneously to lay the groundwork for his own fundamentally social

approach to meaning and self. This emerging approach is evident in an essay that Mead (1910a) did decide to publish, after the whole collection was mysteriously withdrawn from publication, with the following augmented conclusion:

> If we may assume, then, that meaning is consciousness of attitude, I would challenge any one to show an adequate motive for directing attention toward one's own attitudes, in a consciousness of things that were merely physical […] It is only in the social situation of converse that these gestures, and the attitudes they express could become the object of attention and interest (1910a, p.179-180)

For Mead, meaning arises when one is aware, or conscious, of one's own, or an other's, attitude. He challenges any one to show how such consciousness could arise from the organism-environment relation (i.e., Dewey's conception of the act). As an alternative, Mead points towards the social situation, the organism-organism relation as providing the necessary conditions for the emergence of meaning, or awareness of attitude.

Shortly after the collection of essays was withdrawn from publication, Mead (1910b, 1912, 1913) wrote three articles in which he developed this organism-organism relation into a theoretical framework which he called the social act, which would become the kernel of his social psychology. In the collection of essays, which Deegan has now published, we find traces of the tentative and sometimes confused first steps of this emerging theory. A theory that, perhaps, only crystallised on the brink of the books publication, and that, I suggest, is why Mead did not publish his "first" book.

References

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