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# GEORGE HERBERT MEAD: AN UNPUBLISHED REVIEW OF JOHN DEWEY'S *HUMAN NATURE AND CONDUCT*

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The previously unpublished manuscript that appears below is preserved among the George Herbert Mead Papers in the Department of Special Collections at the Regenstein Library of the University of Chicago.[1] Although the manuscript bears no date, it is reasonable to assume that it was composed shortly after the 1922 publication of Dewey's *Human Nature and Conduct*. It was probably intended for publication in either the *American Journal of Sociology* or the *International Journal of Ethics*, two Chicago-based journals for which Mead occasionally did book reviews. Why it was not published remains a mystery, but a plausible guess might be that Mead decided belatedly to withhold it rather than to publish a review critical of Dewey's work. A bit of background information may help to support this hypothesis as well as throw some light upon the character of Mead's review.

Mead began his professional career as an instructor of philosophy and physiological psychology under the chairmanship of John Dewey at the University of Michigan in the fall of 1891. He moved to the University of Chicago, where he was to stay for the rest of his career, when Dewey became chairman of the new department of philosophy there in 1894. Mead and Dewey, along with their respective families, were on close personal terms at both Michigan and Chicago, and they remained good friends even after Dewey's move to Columbia University in 1905. Reasons of friendship, then, may well have made Mead reluctant to publish any review of Dewey's book that was less than laudatory.

Additional motivation for such reluctance can be found in the fact that throughout his career at Chicago Mead was clearly indebted to Dewey for the general framework of his own thought. Indeed, he devoted much of his intellectual energy to the patient and detailed exploratory articulation of Dewey's orientation in areas of experience whose features Dewey mapped out only on a rather large scale. Mead's contributions to the field of social psychology are a case in point. John Dewey laid the foundation for the functional psychology of the so-called Chicago School with the organic model of action set forth in his famous 1896 essay on "The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology." But it was Mead who showed how a distinctively social psychology could be built upon this foundation. In the courses on social psychology he taught regularly at Chicago beginning in 1900, and in a series of journal articles[2] published between 1909 and 1925, he transformed the Deweyan model of action by enriching it with an analysis of the social dimensions of both animal and human conduct. He then went on to use this analysis as the basis upon which to construct original social psychological theories concerning the genesis of language, self-consciousness, and reflective intelligence.

By the time Dewey published *Human Nature and Conduct* in 1922, Mead was well versed in the current literature of social psychology and had begun to make original contributions to this new field. It is therefore not surprising that he found Dewey's book

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something of a disappointment. For in spite of its subtitle—"An Introduction to Social Psychology"—the book really had very little to say about the subject matter of this field of inquiry. Rather, as Mead notes in his review, Dewey devotes his discussion almost entirely to the further elaboration of ideas he had already presented in such works as *Ethics* (1908) and *How We Think* (1910). Dewey's book perhaps comes closest to a specifically social psychological topic in its treatment of habits. But Mead considers Dewey's account of how children acquire habits "sketchy and inadequate." Dewey, he says, "falls back on the outworn doctrine of imitation"—a doctrine that Mead in his own writings had repeatedly criticized and sought to replace with the notion of "taking the attitude or the role of the other." Furthermore, Dewey fails to give a satisfactory account of the development of the self in the experience of the child. "I am confident," Mead asserts, "that the psychology of this is to be found first in the little child's assuming the roles of others in his continual play, and thus taking over their habits, and addressing himself as an other, in other words acquiring what is commonly called self-consciousness."

In short, Dewey's book gave no indication that he had been paying much attention to the kind of questions with which Mead and other social psychologists had been wrestling since the turn of the century. Mead's review is of particular interest precisely because it emphasizes this fact, thereby helping to illuminate the very limited contribution Dewey's book made to the development of American social psychology. It is worth noting in this connection that when Dewey delivered a eulogy at a memorial service for Mead in 1931, he remarked that Mead's social psychological ideas, his social interpretations of life and the world, had "worked a revolution in my own thinking though I was slow in grasping anything like their full implications."[3] Whether Dewey grasped the implications of Mead's social psychological ideas in the years following 1922 is open to debate, but he gave no sign of it in *Human Nature and Conduct*. If he had, Mead would certainly have found more to praise in his review of this book!

The sub-title of Professor Dewey's book is *An Introduction to Social Psychology*. There are all manner of introductions—from "May I present Mr. Jones?" to the condensed biography of Mr. Jones, with which one prefaces the advent of Mr. Jones carrying his card of introduction. Mr. Dewey's introduction is of the first order. He wants us to meet Social Psychology. But he gives us almost no information as to what Social Psychology is. And this is seemingly unfortunate, for the essential of an introduction is that the newcomer should be adequately identified. The Social Psychologies of Professor McDougall, of Professor Le Bon, of Professor Ross, of Professor Ellwood are quite distinguishable from each other.[4] If a great responsibility is to be laid upon this relatively new science, one would wish to know whose formulation of the science is accepted.

That, in Mr. Dewey's opinion, a great responsibility is to be laid upon the science is evident from the following quotation from the 323rd page of his book:

> It sounds academic to say that substantial bettering of social relations waits upon the growth of a scientific social psychology. For the term suggests something specialized and remote. But the formation of habits of belief, desire and judgment is going on at every instant under the influence of the conditions set by men's contact, intercourse and associations with one another. This is the fundamental fact in social life and personal character. It is the fact about which traditional human science gives no enlightenment—a fact which this traditional science blurs and virtually denies. The enormous role played in popular morals by appeal to the supernatural and the quasi-magical is in effect a desperate admission of the futility of

> our science. Consequently the whole matter of the formation of the predispositions which effectively control human relationships is left to accident, to custom and immediate personal likings, resentments and ambitions. It is a commonplace that modern industry and commerce are conditioned upon a control of physical energies due to proper methods of physical inquiry and analysis. We have no social arts which are comparable because we have so nearly nothing in the way of psychological science. Yet through the development of physical science, and especially of chemistry, biology, physiology, medicine and anthropology we now have the basis for the development of such a science of man. Signs of its coming into existence are present in the movements in clinical, behavioristic and social (in its narrower sense) psychology.[5]

Le Bon's Social Psychology is a justification for the abandonment of democracy to be found in the study of so-called "mob-consciousness." Ross and Ellwood present a composite field, partially from the standpoint of descriptive sociology and partially from that of individual psychology. They certainly have not succeeded in presenting such a science of human conduct as Mr. Dewey calls for. McDougall, in his *Introduction to Social Psychology*, undertook to give the theory for the origin of the individual—the self—from the so-called instincts which were predominantly social. Unfortunately the self once arisen out of this social matrix, Mr. McDougall contemplates him in quite the fashion of the traditional individual psychologist. It is fair to say that none of these psychologists have found in their analyses of the social origin and social experience of the individual the analysis and methods which will make social control scientific.

It is perhaps enlightening that Mr. Dewey, in the last sentence of the quotation above, has coupled with social psychology clinical and behavioristic psychologies. Behavioristic psychology has come to us from the psychological study of animals lower than man. Here, deprived of introspection, the scientific observer was confined to the study of the behavior or conduct of the animal. Refreshed by study in a field free from the pitfalls of epistemology and other metaphysical complexities, the animal psychologist, now called a comparative psychologist, was seized with the ambition to study the human animal from the same standpoint, on the assumption that his whole inner life could be stated in terms of external behavior. Clinical psychology, in other words psychoanalysis or Freudian psychology, is interested in acts which the individual does not himself understand, and which must [be] interpreted in the terms of past behavior and attitudes.

Now the outstanding characteristic of both these incipient disciplines is that they start their investigation of human experience with impulses—a safer term than instincts—and undertake to explain what men want by the direction of the impulses rather than by their satisfactions and dissatisfactions. States of consciousness, sensations, images, ideas and the like instead of being the ultimate elements into which human experience is to be analyzed in our explanation of conduct and the technique of its control, are rather contents to be deciphered and explained themselves. They either pass over into constituent parts of objects, or become attitudes and signs of attitudes, or incipient gestures in social intercommunication. The field of thought becomes an inner forum within which is nothing but internalized conversation. To quote from Mr. Dewey again: "In language and imagination we rehearse the responses of others just as we dramatically enact other consequences. . . . An assembly is formed within our breast which discusses and appraises proposed and performed acts. The community without becomes a forum and tribunal within, a judgment-seat of charges, assessments and exculpations."[6]

This inner forum, as the mind, the forum in which in the roles of others or with the voice of the whole group we admonish ourselves or indicate to ourselves things and characters of things that are of importance, is the part of the social psychology which

has yet to be worked out. Such a piece of work would enable us to carry the whole of our mental operations over into behavior. It is of course within such minds that the symbols appear which indicate the new meanings of things and the world, both in science and morals. It is there that problems may be solved, purposes formed, and values formulated. The mind is the workhouse of the self, but the mechanism is importation of social behavior within the individual.

Now such a Social Psychology is only indicated by Mr. Dewey. In this sense and no other can the book be considered an introduction to social psychology. What the author has done is to elaborate and present in non-technical form from the standpoint of such an implied Social Psychology, his ethical doctrine, which is already before the public in his and Professor Tufts' *Ethics* and in various other of his writings.

The outstanding features of this doctrine are first that all moral conduct is social conduct, that morality is by its nature social: that "Right is only an abstract name for the multitude of concrete demands in action which others impress upon us, and of which we are obliged, if we would live, to take some account. Its authority is the exigency of their demands, the efficacy of their insistencies."[7] Any object or experience is good in so far as it gives expression to an impulse, or satisfies it, and goodness is the relation of the object or experience to the impulse. A moral good is then the meaning of that which satisfies a social impulse or group of social impulses. Such goodness—the moral end—becomes however a problem only when there is conflict between our impulses, and in that case the good is found in the object that harmonizes these conflicting impulses, or enables us to act with due regard to all the goods or values involved. Evil would be found in the selected end which disregards certain of the goods involved in a social act. The relation of the Right to the Good is found then in the recognition of the whole community in a social act. The relationship of all places an obligation upon us to select that which takes the claims of all into account. Freedom is found in the initiative of the individual in discovering or creating the social situation which enables him to act with due regard to interests of all whom his conduct affects, and in the recognition that his interests or good make an essential part of this problem. That is, the man is morally free in working out the best hypothesis for the solution of a social problem as the scientist is free in his working out the best hypothesis for the solution of a problem in physics or biology. In morals the man is under obligations to take into account all the values, as in science he must take into account all the facts.

The import of the doctrine is best seen in its contrasts with other familiar theories. It is empirical as is that of the utilitarians, but it does not find its good in pleasures and the absence of discomforts, but in the expression of impulses and habits in the objects that they call for. Right is not an abstract demand made by a conscience, but the recognition of the claims which others make upon us as essentially social individuals. Freedom is found neither in an indifferent will nor in a recognized necessity, but in the capacity of the individual to deliberate in the presence of a social problem and create the best hypothesis of action he can, in the face of all the values involved with definite recognition of his own good, and finally to act upon that hypothesis, or to be a lesser self or social individual in disregarding values which are involved.

The review follows:

Mr. Dewey, as in his pragmatic philosophy, rejects all eternalistic theories, all reference of action to distant ideals, to future states. His ideal is a moving ideal constantly changing with the appearance of new problems. There are for him no abstract

standards, no standards except those that appear as values implicated in the present act. Responsibility arises from the individual's actual effectiveness in social conduct and the demands which others involved make upon him. His freedom is an achievement gained through his recognition in deliberation of his effectiveness and his initiative in constructing and formulating his plans of action. And his very self is an achievement attained through his deliberate interaction with others in the social conduct of which he is a part.

The implications of social psychology in this book are found in the treatment of the material under three heads, that of custom and habit, that of impulse and change, and that of deliberation. Under the first he shows how inevitably these habits and customs are social, how the child enters into a vast complex of habits, and how these become the very structure of his nature as a social individual. The psychological account of the child's acquiring these habits is sketchy and inadequate. Mr. Dewey has fallen back too much upon the outworn doctrine of imitation, and for this reason he has no satisfactory account of the arising of the self in conduct. I am confident that the psychology of this is to be found first in the little child's assuming the roles of others in his continual play, and thus taking over their habits, and addressing himself as an other, in other words acquiring what is commonly called self-consciousness.

Under impulse Mr. Dewey treats the situations in which the individual reacts against the organized body of custom in which he finds himself and which has become the structure of his own nature. The term impulse is unfortunate because it implies in Mr. Dewey's treatment tendencies to action which break through the structure of habit. This is in a measure a true account of much of the experience of adolescence, where maturing social attitudes first come to [the] child's consciousness, but most of the situations to which he refers are those that arise through the conflict of habits, and in which the individual finds himself face to face with a situation within which he must act in a fashion novel to him, in which he asserts himself and undertakes to maintain that self over against the community. The uniqueness of these situations is admirably displayed.

Under deliberation Mr. Dewey is retreading the ground of his book entitled *How We Think*. In this Mr. Dewey has insisted on thought as an essential part of the objective situations within which it occurs. Meanings lie in things and suggest those meanings, while our thought lies in the social process by which we indicate these meanings to others and to ourselves. But thought in us is always the solution or attempted solution of problems that have arisen in the conflict of impulses. From the standpoint of social conduct and morals the interest lies in the goods involved and the claims made upon us, but we are still dealing with meanings and these lie in the relation of the objects to our tendencies to action.

So much for an inadequate statement of the detailed structure of the book, but the picture that lies in one's mind after reading it has not been suggested I fear. That picture concerns especially the possibility of applying science—experimental science—to social problems. There appear two conditions that must be met if human intelligence in this its highest form is to be fully applied to the problems of society.

In the first place we must state the values, the goods, that are involved in terms of the immediate problem. Abstract values, and standards that lie in [an] unreachable future either in this world or the next cannot enter into a scientific statement. Institutions must be means and not ends in themselves. And the end must be stateable in terms of an immediate plan of action. In the second place the working hypothesis of these plans of action must arise in the minds of individuals who are so consciously parts of

the complex of social habits and customs that have come into conflict that all the values can be registered there, and are free both within and without to formulate and present their hypotheses.

I think Mr. Dewey is entirely correct in insisting that we can free ourselves neither safely nor effectively from dogma in ourselves or in our institutions, nor can we so realize ourselves and society that we can intelligently attack these problems without the aid of a scientific Social Psychology.

## Notes

1. The manuscript is located in Box 2, folder 4 of the *Mead Papers Addenda*. It is a typed manuscript, with Mead's handwritten corrections. I have added several bracketed footnotes, amended inaccuracies in the quotations from Dewey's book, and corrected a few spelling or typographical errors. I wish to thank the Regenstein Library of the University of Chicago for permission to publish this manuscript.

2. See the following essays by Mead: "Social Psychology as a Counterpart to Physiological Psychology" (1909); "What Social Objects Must Psychology Presuppose" (1910); "Social Consciousness and Consciousness of Meaning" (1910); "The Mechanism of Social Consciousness" (1912); "The Social Self" (1913); "A Behavioristic Account of the Significant Symbol" (1922); "The Genesis of Self and Social Control" (1925). All of these essays are reprinted in George Herbert Mead, *Selected Writings*, edited by Andrew J. Reck (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

3. "George Herbert Mead as I Knew Him," in John Dewey, *The Later Works, 1925–1953* 6:27 (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985).

4. [See William McDougall, *Introduction to Social Psychology* (1908); Gustav Le Bon, *Psychologie des foules* (1895)—English translation, *The Crowd* (1917); Edward A. Ross, *Social Psychology* (1908); Charles A. Ellwood, *Introduction to Social Psychology* (1917).]

5. [The page number Mead supplies for this quotation refers to the original edition of John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct: An Introduction to Social Psychology* (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 1922). The quoted passage appears on pages 221-222 of the later edition of this book found in John Dewey, *The Middle Works, 1899-1924*, Volume 14 (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1983). Subsequent page references in footnotes refer to this later edition.]

6. [Dewey, *Middle Works* 14:217]

7. [Dewey, *Middle Works* 14:224]