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George Herbert MEAD, *The Philosophy of Education,* Gert Biesta and Daniel Tröhler (eds.)

Paradigm Publishers, 2008

Filipe Carreira da Silva

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1 G. H. Mead (1863-1931) is often portrayed as a thinker of exceptional import and originality whose unwillingness to write down his ideas has prevented him from achieving an even greater recognition in fields as varied as sociology, social psychology or philosophy. According to this view, the task of current practioners is to engage with the scant materials available, including lecture notes, and make the best of it to re-examine contemporary problems. Gert Biesta and Daniel Tröhler, the editors of the book in review, are among the latest to join the large number of commentators who have employed this particular approach over the years.

2 Such an approach, of course, has some advantages. One advantage is to make use of materials that are much easier to read than Mead's own writings. A substantial part of the success of *Mind, Self, and Society* is due exactly to its conversational tone, a far easier read to undergraduates than the journal articles in which Mead dealt with those very same issues. The same can be said of *The Philosophy of Education*, a fairly accessible and pedagogical introduction to Mead's ideas on the subject of learning and education. A second advantage is related to the widening of scope of Mead's contributions. By not limiting themselves to Mead's own writings, Biesta and Tröhler are able to uncover materials of interest to domains of inquiry beyond those already familiar with Mead's work. As they convincingly show in the introduction, this certainly seems to be the case

with education, a research area that has a lot to gain from Mead's insights on the production of meaning.

3 Meaning, according to Mead, is an emergent of the interaction between selves and objects: the meaning of an object lies in what it means to us, in our response to it. To understand the meaning of an object is not so much a question of *discovery* of some objective reality as it is a matter of *creation*. The implications of this for educational purposes are far-reaching. As the editors explain in the introduction, "meanings cannot be handed down to the learner, but arise 'only through the reaction of the learner'." "From this it follows that the communication of meaning is not a process of imitation. For Mead, education is a process of creative (trans)formation of meaning." But, of course, "education is not simply about evoking *any* response from the learner; the key question is how and to what extent the response of the learner can be 'organized'." Education, understood as the "conveying of meanings," is "not a process of imitation, but a process of action and reaction, of social stimulation and response. It is, in other words, a creative process, a process in which meaning is constantly made, rather than reproduced" (6-7). The editors go on to conclude, in my view convincingly, that:

> "In all of this, we can see a theory of education in which the child is not simply on the receiving end of the process. Education is not the transfer of meaning from the teacher to the learner, from the parent to the child, from the current generation to the next generation. Education is a process of communication in which the child is as much a meaning-maker as the adult is. For Mead, the child is not an empty vessel that has to be filled; the child ultimately is a source of new meanings and of the renewal of meaning." (8)

4 In formal terms, the editors' work deserves applause. The criteria they followed are consistent and allow the reader to know the status of the materials offered to them: this is not a verbatim record of Mead's words in the classroom, but lectures notes of Mead's course on "philosophy of education" taken by a student, Juliet Hammond; the titles the editors added to many of the lectures are clearly indicated by square brackets, as are all their other additions and changes; helpful notes throughout the text help the reader navigate these lecture notes taken a century ago.

5 *The Philosophy of Education* comprises 38 lectures delivered by Mead in 1910-11. Each lecture offers a brief discussion of a particular topic, with some repetition (Mead usually begins by resuming what he taught in the previous lecture), and without much detail or sophistication: this was, after all, an undergraduate course. In the first half of the course, Mead provides an overview of his social conception of education, discussing concepts such as "consciousness of meaning," the different phases of the self, gesture, object, perception, reflective consciousness, or value judgements. In lectures 17 and 29, Mead discusses Greek classical philosophy in order to historically reconstruct the genesis of social consciousness. The last nine lectures continue to trace the historical development of this process of social consciousness to the modern era, with particular attention to the scientific method, for, as Mead points out, "The problem of education then is that of introducing a method of thought" (168).

6 There is, however, a general problem with this sort of undertaking. The assumption that Mead published very little is simply wrong. During the course of his career, Mead published over 100 papers, including journal articles, book chapters and other smaller pieces. There is also a substantial amount of unpublished manuscript materials. There is no need, therefore, to rely on lecture notes taken by students in order to have access to Mead's ideas, including his ideas on education. On both the production of meaning

and educational matters (not only from the perspective of the philosophy of education, but also from the perspective of school systems, vocational training, etc.), there are plenty of other sources to rely upon whose authorial status is unquestionable. Why rely on a third person's account, especially someone who was not primarily concerned with the accuracy of Mead's discourse like Juliet Hammond, when one can have Mead's own written words? Besides this non-trivial issue, there is the problem of the relevance of the lectures themselves. Originally intended with a specific pedagogical purpose, these is no way offer us Mead's ideas in all their complexity and richness. What one gains in accessibility, one looses in rigour and density. It is high time students and scholars start to engage with Mead primarily on the basis of his own writings, which are both numerous and easily accessible, and stop relying on third persons' accounts of his words.

7 *The Philosophy of Education* is a useful, carefully edited secondary source for all those interested in Mead's pragmatist perspective on educational matters. But it should not to be taken as a primary source. That privileged status should be reserved to Mead's own writings, not lecture notes.

AUTHORS

FILIPE CARREIRA DA SILVA

Institute of Social Sciences of the University of Lisbon
fcs23[at]ics.ul.pt