THE CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE OF GEORGE HERBERT MEAD'S SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY AND PEDAGOGY

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While his work is often overshadowed by that of his friend and colleague John Dewey, fellow pragmatist and progressive educator George Herbert Mead also made significant contributions to the philosophy of education and social psychology. In this paper, I will explicate some of the key components of Mead's social psychology and tie them to his work in pedagogical theory. Furthermore, I will show how Mead's insights not only presage much later work in psychology of education, but also can be applied to gain critical insight into many contemporary debates concerning standardized testing, the push for "accountability" in schools, and outcomes-based methodologies. Here, I will focus on one of these "reforms"—the push for regular testing of all students, as offered by President Bush's educational program.

George Herbert Mead's Social Psychology and Pedagogy

Notoriously, George Herbert Mead left only short essays and scattered notes. The larger works ascribed to him, such as *Mind, Self, and Society*, are actually assemblages of notes (some Mead's and some from his students) put together by editors. Any attempt to show connections among the various components of Mead's work must be done in this way, for Mead left no unifying work to show these links. As a result, I will be going through several articles rather quickly to pull out relevant aspects of Mead's thought so as to construct a broader theory of consciousness, attention, learning, and growth.

In his 1903 article, "The Definition of the Psychical," George Herbert Mead offers an answer to the question of the proper subject matter of psychological inquiry.[1] In short, his goal, as the title of the essay clearly states, is to answer the question, what is the psyche? His opening suggestion is that the psychical be regarded *not* as a "permanent phase," or even a "permanent possible aspect" of consciousness, but rather as a "moment" in consciousness that arises for particular ends in a particular context.[2] Specifically, the psychical does not arise unless and until cause for reflection internal to a problem occurs.[3] In other words, we are only fully aware of, and engaged in, our situation when confronted with some dislocation of expected happenings. In this way, psychical consciousness is entirely functional—it arises as a way of adjusting the organism to a novelty in its environment.[4] Put simply, for Mead conscious life is a continuous process of solving various problems.[5] Thus, the psychical always corresponds to some specific concern.[6] And when these problems do not present themselves, the psychical fades from consciousness.

In this way, Mead defines the psychical as a phase of experience in which one is subject to a variety of conflicting impulses. These impulses change the way in which that person is aware of her environment such that objects become problematic and a previously unreflective understanding of behavior becomes transformed into an attitude of possible new adjustment and inquiry.[7] And so, for Mead, psychology is aimed at studying that mode of consciousness in which and by which we address and resolve problems. Furthermore, consciousness is always social in that consciousness always involves engagement with objects of consciousness—without some focus, there is no thought. And so the self *qua* self is fundamentally woven into a fabric of relations.

Later, in 1913's "The Social Self," Mead presents a theory of the self in which growth occurs as a product of these conflicts, these problematic situations. Situations present themselves as problems; tendencies and inclinations within the self pull in various directions (old habits, for instance, conflict with new ideas); objects of consciousness become analyzed, evaluated, and reconstructed; and the self responds through creating new habits and modes of action. In short, psychological growth requires this struggle (a point central to Mead's pedagogical theories). Mead writes: "The growth of the self arises out of a partial disintegration—the appearance of the different interests in the forum of reflection, the reconstruction of the social world, and the consequent appearance of the new self that answers to the new object."[8] Additionally, this growing self is social because these disintegrations and reintegrations always occur within a social framing—the acts themselves are dependant upon the activities and reactions of others.[9]

Mead carries these psychological considerations forward into the realm of educational theory quite early in his career. In the 1908/1909 article, "Industrial Education, the Working-man, and the School," Mead explains intelligence not as a lofty and esoteric mystery of thought, but rather as an ability to accomplish specific tasks. Namely, intelligence is the way in which we may abstractly consider the relationships among various means and ends—that is, again, to solve problems that may arise.[10] And theory is recast as "nothing but the consciousness of the way in which one adjusts his habits of working to meet a new situation."[11] Clearly, the upshot of this work is to rethink education in terms not of the acquisition of isolated bits of information, but instead the ability to think—the means and methods of "the solution of problems."[12] Thus, Mead's notion of intelligence is *not* about ultimate answers or solutions, but rather about continual readjustment and reconstruction. As such, pedagogy should be about learning to learn, and *not* merely ingesting something pre-given.

In "The Psychology of Social Consciousness Implied in Instruction," Mead argues that pedagogy should take place as an interchange or dialogue. The point of departure for educational processes should always be *the experiences*

of the child. These experiences can then be brought to the classroom "to be interpreted" through the experiences of the teacher.[13] If this sort of give and take does not take place, Mead continues, then the attention and focus of the student will be scattered, unable to genuinely concentrate on the task at hand. When a problem truly presents itself as a problem, we can turn our self toward it. That is, psychical activity rises to the task. When, on the other hand, a problem is presented from an outside authority with no authentic connection to one's existential life and concerns, then the student will be continually divided between the "problem" given and the reasons she must perform well. In short, there will be a dual or double psyche at work within a single person, a split between two tasks. When, on the other hand, the problem and reasons for its resolution are united, so too will the student be.[14]

There is a fairly weak, and obvious, way of interpreting this understanding of consciousness and attention. This would be to say that a student learns better if that student cares about the task at hand. Mead, however, is pushing for something more. Simply put, the conscious and psychical self simply is not even present unless there is some genuine problem. In short, where there is no engagement and no attention, there is no student. And, consequently, there is no learning. Furthermore, when the problems confronted are multiple, there will be multiple activities driving and splintering the focus of the student.

Many excellent examples of *not* dividing students' attention, of giving students more power in their own educational practices and thus sharpening their focus are given in George Wood's book *Schools That Work*. One such story involves a science classroom. Rather than simply working their way through the textbook as some end in itself, the book is regarded solely as a tool. The students open up the text, find topics "that interest them," and list those areas on the board. Then the books are put away. When Wood was doing his research, the students chose reproduction as their main area of interest. They then proceeded to construct a "learning web." That is, they placed the general theme in the middle of the board, and drew outward from there the various subtopics to be explored. For example, as specific areas of inquiry, they chose plant reproduction, animal reproduction, DNA, genetics, and an "other" category. They then divided up tasks and proceeded to do their own research—specifically *not* relying upon pre-given information in a textbook. And, in every task, they asked the same basic questions: "what do we already know, what more do we want to learn, and how can we find out?" As the teacher of the class explained, "We learn *how* to learn."[15]

Another place Mead explores the need for beginning with the child's own interests is in his early essay "The Relation of Play to Education," published in 1896. In this article, Mead makes a very loose distinction between "work" and "play." Importantly, Mead means for this distinction to be taken functionally.

That is, we in fact tend to mark this difference in our reflections on activity even though in activity itself these are quite often well blended. Mead's criticism here is that too much of the time we think of and practice education as a form of work only, ignoring the play aspects of it. Work here refers to specific reflection and activity focused on accomplishing some end established before that work begins. Play, on the other hand, entails a free, spontaneous form of activity, or experimenting. Whereas work begins only *after* some end is established, the use to which play may be put is developed internal to that activity.[16] The example Mead gives is learning to walk. A baby begins not with *trying to walk*, not with a fixed end in mind. Rather, she begins with simply the expenditure of energy through the movement of her limbs. Only much later do these movements become coordinated such that a particular task (that is, walking) may be accomplished.

And so, Mead continues, teaching should not be focused on external control, or direction toward a pre-established end. Rather, it ought to strive to nourish and support the student such that the developing energy may be channeled without harm, and within a range of exploration.[17] Again, Mead returns to his example of a child learning to walk. We do not explain to a child how to walk and then try to manipulate her legs such that walking could take place through the rote memorization of activity. Rather, we structure the environment such that in the child's always already ongoing exploration of movement, he or she will not be hurt, and perhaps aid the walking process by lending a hand of support.[18] If we do not allow for the natural unfolding of the student's potential through supporting experimentation and channeling already present energies, then we are left with some form of external control—the forcing of activities and attentions toward goals the student is perhaps not yet ready to undertake. If we force external motivation in a place where there is clearly a source of intrinsic activity, we serve not to bolster the already present activity, but rather to sever it from its source, splitting the consciousness regarding that activity and hampering the drive to act.

In the remainder of this paper, I will argue (alongside Mead) that because of these methods of external control, we do not give students the ability to concentrate well on problems. They become accustomed to moving their attention back and forth between problems forced upon them, and a concern for an external power structure pushing them to investigate these issues. Thus, they cannot focus, and, in a real sense, cannot learn. As Mead explains in "The Psychology of Social Consciousness Implied in Instruction," if the whole of the emotional and social life of the student is not attentively focused, any learning can only ever be a half-hearted, incomplete, and short-lived holding of information accomplished for the purpose of appeasing whatever mode of external control is being enforced at the time.[19]

EXAMPLES OF CONTEMPORARY EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY

In a 1998 article, "Standards, Accountability, and School Reform: Perils and Pitfalls," Kennon Sheldon and Bruce Biddle summarize four contemporary studies in educational psychology to show dangers in the move for more rigid and stringent testing standards and accountability.[20] In short, these studies show that such techniques actually harm the ability of the student to learn, especially if we think of learning as including long-term understanding and the critical ability to evaluate and reflect. I want to briefly discuss three of these four cases to bolster a Meadian understanding of social psychology and its consequent pedagogical upshots. In each, what is at stake is the difference between motivating teachers and students with that which is intrinsic to the activity at hand, and motivating with something quite extrinsic to that process.

In the first study, conducted by Edward Deci, two groups of teachers were given the similar task of teaching students how to work a set of spatial relations puzzles, but with differing instructions. The first group of teachers was told that their role was "to facilitate the student's learning how to work with the puzzles. There are no performance requirements; your job is simply to help the student learn to solve the puzzle."[21] The other group was told that they were "to ensure that the student learns to solve the puzzles. It is a teacher's responsibility to make sure that students perform up to standards."[22] The result of the study was that the students of the first set of teachers completed fewer puzzles in the allotted time. It was also the case, however, that the second group of teachers (whose students solved more puzzles) did much of the work for their students. They assisted their students heavily and rarely allowed students to complete puzzles on their own.[23] And so when strict standards and controls were emphasized, the researchers found a consequent upswing in the outcomes they were looking for. But this was the case only because the teachers were actually doing tasks for the students—there was little evidence that the students themselves were genuinely learning. In this case, the attention-split was on the part of the teachers. But in the remaining two, we will see it in the students.

In a similar study, conducted by Wendy Grolnick and Richard Ryan, three groups of students were given different instructions regarding the task of reading a passage of text. The first group was "nondirected." They were simply told, "After you are finished, I'll be asking you some questions." The second group was "directed," and told, "After you're finished, I'm going to asking some questions about the passage. It won't really be a test, and you won't be graded on it. I'm just interested in what children can remember from reading passages." The third group was "controlled." They were instructed, "After you are finished, I'm going to test you on it. I'm going to see how much you can remember. You should work as hard as you can because I'll be grading you on a test to see if you're learning well enough."[24] When asked questions immediately following

the reading, the students in the first group showed the lowest number of facts recalled, but the highest level of conceptual understanding—they had given the reading more in-depth thought. Conversely, the students in the third group showed the highest number of facts recalled, but the lowest level of conceptual understanding—in the rush to memorize, they had given little time to reflection. The second group scored in the middle on both counts. Importantly, however, when asked questions eight days later, the second, "directed," group showed the highest level of retention, and the third, "controlled," group showed the greatest loss of understanding. It seems that when the focus of the task was placed not on the material at hand, but on a test, the students not only showed low levels of critical understanding, but also failed to integrate the material very well into their memory and attention.[25]

The third study, conducted by Thane Pittman, Joel Emery, and Ann Boggiano, focused on the notion of rewarding performance. Two groups of children were given sets of shape-matching games ranging in complexity from simple, to intermediate, to complex. One group was told that they would be rewarded for solving puzzles. The other group was simply told to play them as "games." The rewarded group over-whelmingly went for the simplest games available, spending the vast majority of their time with them, considerably less with the intermediate games and even less again with the most complex. The unrewarded group, however, gravitated toward the intermediate games, spending scarcely any time at all with the simple ones and slightly more time with complex games than did the rewarded group.[26] If one of our goals as educators is to create a desire in our students for learning (especially of the "life long" sort), this study indicates that a poor way of going about such a task is to stress the potential rewards and punishments of performing. Rewards, by splitting the attention of the learner, focus the student on completing the simplest possible task, rather than challenging oneself to do something new or to creatively accomplish all that one can.

In each of these cases, we can see evidence that an emphasis upon external rewards and punishments—motivational factors external to the task at hand—actually acts as detriment to learning. As Mead explains, when an individual confronts a problematic situation, that person's attention is focused on the task at hand, that is, the resolution of this problem. When a student, however, is given only a contrived and relatively interest-free task (say, for instance, the memorization of large quantities of information) and an external motivation for accomplishing that task (through, for instance, a testing procedure), that student actually has two problems—the fact that she must assimilate this information, on the one hand, and the impeding threat of failure, on the other. The student is then divided. Again, I stress, that this is not simply a problem of a lack of concern about the task at hand. For Mead, it cuts much deeper. The psyche of the student, the active consciousness of the self, is split, unfocused, and scattered. As we see

from these studies, the results of this splitting are a separation of the student from the desire to learn, and a long-term detriment to that student's ability to learn.

Accountability and Testing

A key buzzword in the education plan of President Bush is "accountability." Schools, we are told, need to be held to standards and rewarded or punished according to their performance. The way to ensure this accountability is to test every student every year from the third through the eighth grades in math and reading.[27] When schools fail to meet certain standards for a period of three years, they are to have their federal funding pulled. This would probably result in students affected by this school closing to receive vouchers to attend other schools.[28] Now, while I think there are a multitude of problems with this plan, I want to focus on just one—that is, the very act of testing every student every year for six years under the possible threat of closure of their school.

If Mead is correct in his understanding of psychical consciousness as a function arising only internal to problematic situations, then in any situation in which there are a multitude of problems, consciousness will be multitudinous and unfocused. When a student is told to learn so that she may pass a test, her attention, her psyche, will always be split between the matter at hand (the subject matter of the course, for instance) and the reason for being interested in the matter at hand (the eventual testing). This problem is compounded by the fact that the student, according to the Bush plan, can expect that if her student does not perform well over a number of years, then her school will be shut down. With the consequent dislocations, including a loss of friends, teachers, and other acquaintances, the student is faced with the real danger of genuine loss in her life. But, again, all of this stress is not upon the material at hand—it does not work to focus the learning process. Rather, the student's attention is drawn toward a goal extrinsic to the learning—that is, preserving her relations to others and making sure that she is able to continue with her school.

An additional problem related to this testing program is the situation faced by the teachers. Again, their attention will be split between the act of teaching and making sure that the act of teaching can continue. A teacher must be worried about losing her job—if students do not perform well, the school will eventually be closed. And so a teacher's performance must be compromised as she seeks to accomplish two things at once. Furthermore, in some states, teachers are awarded monetarily for their student's performances.[29] In this case, not only is the teacher's attention split in a more egregious way—she is concerned with both positive and negative possible outcomes—but she is in the danger of falling into the trap borne out by the previously mentioned psychological study involving rewards and different levels of task difficulty. If there is an extrinsic

reward, or extrinsic punishment, we should expect to see performance in which minimally difficult tasks are accomplished and more complex tasks avoided.

In both cases, the students and the teachers, the heavy stress placed upon testing will serve to bifurcate the selves involved. The moving of a motivation to a place outside the task places a premium upon this external goal. The learning itself is minimized, and we should expect to see more of what empirical tests have already shown. Namely, students' desires to learn, to investigate, and to question will be truncated under the weight of the pressure to do something other than what is at hand, to attend to the not-yet-present. The students will learn the virtues only of short-term gains, of doing whatever it takes, but only whatever it takes, to hurdle the bar before them. And, as learning is tied to something outside the process, to an external goal and good, we should expect to see less recollection and less critical insight into subject matters as lessons are learned simply to be forgotten as soon as the external pressure is removed.

These insights are located in the work of George Herbert Mead, whose psychological work gives us the tools to understand the workings of many educational processes, especially involving consciousness and attention. Taking these understandings, especially when coupled with the work done in contemporary educational psychology, we can see some of the difficulties and troubles faced by an "accountability" plan in which students and teachers are constantly removed by forces, threats, and motivations extrinsic to the actual process of learning.

NOTES

1. George Herbert Mead, "The Definition of the Psychical," in *Selected Writings*, edited by Andrew J. Reck (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1964), 27.

2. Ibid., 29.

3. Ibid., 30. Later, in *Mind, Self, and Society*, Mead will write that "reasoning conduct appears when impulsive conduct breaks down." George Herbert Mead, *Mind Self, and Society*, edited by Charles W. Morris (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1934), 348.

4. Mead, "Psychical," 45.

5. "But is not reflective experience coterminous with life, is life not a continuous solution of problems?" George Herbert Mead, "A Pragmatic Theory of Truth," in *Selected Writings*, 331.

6. Mead, "Psychical," 44.

7. Ibid., 55. Later, in *Movements of Thought in the Nineteenth Century*, Mead writes that this moment of thought "arises only when our impulses lead us into conflict—conflict that must be solved before conduct can go on effectively." George Herbert Mead,

Movements of Thought in the Nineteenth Century, edited by Merritt H. Moore (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1936), 321.

8.   George Herbert Mead, "The Social Self," in *Selected Writings*, 149.

9.   For more on this, refer to Mead's work on the gesture and the social construction of meaning.

10.   George Herbert Mead, "Industrial Education, the Working-man, and the School," *Elementary School Teacher* 9, (19081909), 375.

11.   Ibid., 377–378.

12.   George Herbert Mead, "The Teaching of Science in College," in *Selected Writings*, 62.

13.   George Herbert Mead, "The Psychology of Social Consciousness Implied in Instruction," in *Selected Writings*, 118.

14.   Ibid., 120-121.

15.   George H. Wood, *Schools that Work* (New York: Dutton, 1992), 12–14.

16.   George Herbert Mead, "The Relation of Play to Education," *University Record* 1, no. 8 (1896), 143.

17.   Ibid., 144.

18.   Ibid., 145.

19.   Mead, "Psychology of Social Consciousness," 122.

20.   Kennon M. Sheldon and Bruce J. Biddle, "Standards, Accountability, and School Reform: Perils and Pitfalls," *Teachers College Record*, Volume 100, Number 1, Fall 1998, 164–180.

21.   Ibid., 169.

22.   Ibid.

23.   Ibid., 169–170.

24.   Ibid., 170.

25.   Ibid., 171–172.

26.   Ibid., 172–173.

27.   David E. Sanger, "Bush Pushes Ambitious Education Plan," *The New York Times On the Web,* www.nytimes.com, January 24, 2001.

28.   Ibid.

29.   Richard Rothstein, "Lessons: Flaws in Annual Testing," *The New York Times on the Web*, www.nytimes.com, January 24, 2001.