G. H. Mead
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Acknowledgments

This book has been almost two years in the making, and during that time I have inevitably incurred more debts of gratitude than I could hope to acknowledge here. I would like to begin by expressing my indebtedness to Emma Longstaff, my editor at Polity, for many important suggestions and invaluable advice, as well as for her consistent interest in the project. To Sue Birley, who has proofread my work and checked my English since my PhD days, I owe my sincerest thanks. I would also like to mention Teresa Sousa Fernandes, whose intellectual generosity is a shining example to all those who are lucky enough to cross her path. I owe special appreciation to Mónica Brito Vieira, a model of how academic and personal excellence can meet; our discussions of assorted arguments have gone on for several years now. Most of all, however, I thank Sofia Aboim, whose unrivalled support and forbearance, especially throughout the last stages of the manuscript, will never be fully repaid; and my family – Beatriz, Lourdes, Leila, and most especially my father, to whom this book is dedicated. Finally it remains to thank my friends and staff in Wolfson College, Cambridge, for all their affection during the summers of 2005 and 2006.

Cambridge
Introduction and General Overview

A century has passed since George Herbert Mead (1863–1931) started working on the social theory that would grant him a place in the sociological canon, and yet his writings have lost none of their appeal. The reason why Mead’s ideas are after all these years still so engaging is, I argue, that the last two fins de siècle share certain structural similarities. Very much as in Mead’s time, Western modernity is experiencing today a sense of profound crisis, which follows a relatively long period of confidence in the rational mastery of social problems. In such epochs of crisis, the best theoretical instruments are those able to the utmost degree to deal with change, uncertainty and hybridism. From this perspective, I think we have a lot to learn from Mead, perhaps the sociological classic who (with Simmel) best responded to the conceptual challenges posed by the first crisis of Western modernity. Rejecting the pessimism one can find in other classics’ writings (just recall Weber’s theses on bureaucratization or on the disenchantment of the modern world), Mead was confident that science and democracy could be reconciled in the form of a naturalistic and evolutionary social science, which conceives of the human mind as an ‘emergent’ from – that is, an entity resulting from – symbolic interaction.

Among the sociological classics, Mead occupies a special position. Although he lived in the same epoch as all the other ‘founding fathers’ of sociology (he was five years younger than Durkheim and one year older than Weber), he is not only the only American to figure in that canonical gallery, but also one of the few to have exerted a profound and lasting influence on a discipline other than his own. In fact, Mead was not a sociologist; he was, by training, a philosopher with a strong interest in social psychology. The brilliance of his ideas on the social nature of the human self, however, ensured that in disciplines such as sociology and social psychology Mead is still seen today as one of the
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predecessors of their greatest practitioners. Unlike Marx, Weber, or Durkheim, Mead was not a prolific writer. It was in the classroom, thinking aloud in the silent presence of his students, that Mead was at his best. This personal preference for the spoken word is very much in accord with the always ‘in-the-making’ nature of his intellectual edifice. Far from being a rigid, all-encompassing philosophical system, Mead’s thinking is best described as a system in a state of flux.

Western modernity, the self, the scientific method and democratic politics are the conceptual reference points to which Mead returned time and time again, from his early short paper on ‘The Working Hypothesis on Social Reform’ (1899) or the important but neglected ‘The Definition of the Psychical’ (1903) to his last written work, the 1930 Carus Lectures, published posthumously in The Philosophy of the Present (1932). Like many others of his generation, Mead crossed the Atlantic to study in Germany, the most reputed academic milieu of the epoch. After a brief period at Ann Arbor, he was eventually offered a position at the University of Chicago, where he arrived in 1894 and would remain until the end of his career. In several ways, Mead was in the right place at the right time. At the turn of the century, the city of Chicago was a great laboratory of social experiences, ranging from large-scale processes of urbanization, industrialization and migration to many other pressing social issues on a smaller scale. Intellectually speaking, Mead could not have wished for a better place to be in than the University of Chicago – this was at the time when the famous ‘Chicago school’ of sociology was created by his colleagues from the sociology department, just a few doors down the corridor. In more general terms, Mead lived in an age of rapid change and growing uncertainty, an epoch of great optimism regarding the possibilities of human reason, yet one of profound distrust concerning the naïve positivistic belief in progress. Such an intellectual atmosphere proved to be the perfect environment in which to develop a theoretical solution for a problem that has haunted social thinkers since the dawn of Western modernity – how to reconcile the seemingly intractable tension between an ever more individualistic self and an increasingly universalistic social order. Mead’s answer to this question, which will be discussed in detail later, still ranks today among the most valuable elements of what could be called ‘the heritage of sociology’.

Mead’s confessed difficulties in putting his thoughts into writing also helps to explain why several generations of social scientists were introduced to his ideas through Mind, Self, and Society, an anthology of transcripts of his lectures on social psychology. Although this book provides an enjoyable and accessible entrée to Mead’s ideas, its editorial quality is questionable and creates an excessively partial image of Mead’s contributions. Of course, one can avoid these difficulties by reading other books by Mead, as well as the best available
secondary literature (I am thinking about the books by Joas and Cook, whose merits will be discussed later), even though in this case the non-specialist reader might find them too difficult and overly focused on Mead's intellectual biography. While writing the present book I kept this double challenge in mind. I have thus tried to write a critical introduction to Mead's ideas that is accessible enough for students and the general public, but which is at the same time able to provide food for thought for professional social scientists. I would suggest to the first category that they pay particular attention to chapters 3 to 5, where I discuss Mead's social psychology in detail; to those already acquainted with Mead's ideas, I hope the last portion of the book makes a contribution to current debates on the condition of our age, as it clarifies Mead's contributions to the resolution of the conceptual challenges we currently face.

There are several notions that social practitioners have become accustomed to associate with Mead – the gesture and the significant symbol, the I–me distinction and the 'generalized other', or the concept of 'taking the role of the other' – but to my mind none encapsulates better the very rationale of his communicative social theory than the idea of dialogue. From thinking, conceived by Mead as a sort of 'inner conversation', to the resolution of international conflicts, Mead consistently favoured a dialogical perspective. Of course, this is not to say that he gave every research area the same degree of attention. As I will show, Mead's version of intersubjectivism is especially developed as far as the inner structure of the human self is concerned – Mead's account of the social and communicative nature of the self is rightly considered to be his chief contribution to today's social sciences. Along with figures such as John Dewey, Martin Buber, Mikhail Bakhtin, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Jürgen Habermas and Richard Rorty, Mead produced one of the most important dialogical social theories of the twentieth century.

**A summary of Mead's ideas**

A substantial part of this book (chapters 2 to 5) will be spent clarifying and detailing the ideas that make up Mead's system of thinking. The first of Mead's key ideas is the notion of 'taking the role of the other'. However, unlike authors like Erving Goffman (whose dramaturgical approach, developed in seminal works such as *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* [1959], is one of the most sophisticated models to be developed within the symbolic interactionist paradigm), Mead does not wish to explore the theatrical dimensions of this concept. For this reason, I will use 'role' and 'attitude' interchangeably. By 'taking the attitude of the other' Mead wishes to convey the idea that individuals...
are able to import into their conduct a *behavioural disposition* to respond in a similar way to other individuals responding to a given type of stimulus. Consider the example Mead chooses to explain this notion to his students: when a child plays with a friend, he ‘is calling out in him the corresponding activities of the other person involved’; the attitude that the child imports into his conduct, say, paying out money, is also the response that this attitude calls out in the other: the child is stimulated by the response he is calling out in his friend. Although this example refers to the simplest form of role-taking, it is not difficult to grasp some of the functions it performs in Mead’s social psychology. Two of these functions should be emphasized at this point. Firstly, the concept of ‘taking the role of the other’ helps Mead to explain thinking as a kind of ‘inner conversation’: by importing the attitudes of others into their conduct, individuals acquire the ability to see the world from the perspective of these others; this sort of reflective intelligence is exactly what distinguishes human thinking. Moreover, since such a reflective intelligence emerges ‘through the internalization by the individual of social processes of experience and behavior’, that is, through adopting the attitude of other individuals, Mead finds himself in a position from which he can conceive of thinking as a social process. Secondly, and related to the next key idea I wish to present, the concept of ‘taking the role of the other’ helps Mead to clarify the behavioural origins of ‘significant symbols’. It is this particular behavioural mechanism, he argues, that allows the emergence of the consciousness of meaning. In order to understand the implications of the concept of ‘taking the role of the other’, let us now turn to the next central element of Mead’s social psychology, namely the notions of meaning and of the significant symbol.

In brief, what is at stake here is the transformation of a vocal gesture (a sound) into an element of a natural language (a word). Vocal gestures become significant or meaningful, Mead argues, only in the context of a social interaction. In particular, a significant symbol emerges when its carrier provokes, both in the individual uttering it and in the individual listening to it, a stimulus that is simultaneously a response. What does Mead mean by this? Imagine two friends saying farewell at an airport. One of them makes a gesture (let us say he waves), which elicits in the other individual a certain response (she waves back at him). By responding to the gesture of the first individual, the second interprets that gesture – her response brings out the meaning of his gesture. For Mead, the meaning of an object – say, a gesture – is not something intrinsic to it (its ‘essence’); rather, it is an emergent of social interaction – it is an objective element in the behavioural structure that connects organisms to the surrounding environment.

A third central idea put forth by Mead refers to his conception of the structure of the self. Very much as in the case of the previous two ideas,
Mead favours here a socially constituted and objectively defined notion. The fact that in this case the notion in question is the very one most closely associated with subjectivity only reaffirms the naturalistic and experimental character of Mead’s ‘scientific social psychology’. It is also, and fundamentally, a processual view of reality that is espoused by Mead (as opposed to a Cartesian, mechanistic and rationalistic one). There are two main components to Mead’s treatment of the self.

On the one hand, Mead discusses it from the perspective of childhood development. In particular, the genesis of the self is explained by means of two developmental stages. The first is the stage of ‘play’, during which children learn how to put themselves in the place of another individual: it is at this time that children acquire a self – they do that by learning to take the role of other individuals. The second developmental stage is that of ‘game’, a more elaborate and demanding social experience. Here children have to take the role not only of a single individual, but of all the individuals involved in the game; moreover, children have to learn how to coordinate their actions according to the rules of the game. Only at this stage do children acquire a fully developed self. The generalized character specific to adult selves is thus the outcome of a two-step developmental process, the success of which depends on the nature of the social experiences we are all exposed to during our childhood. At this juncture, Mead introduces one of his best-known concepts, the notion of the ‘generalized other’. Through this notion he wishes to convey the idea of an internalized set of social attitudes: by learning how to take the role of the ‘generalized other’, children acquire the ability to import the attitudes of the social group into their own selves. They thus begin to see themselves from the perspective of everyone else. One of Mead’s favoured examples to explain the ‘generalized other’ is the baseball game. Each player has to incorporate, besides the rules of the game, the perspectives of everyone else into her own performance: she has to see the game as everyone else sees it. Only in this way will she be able to play baseball, or any other collective game or activity, for that matter – and this is Mead’s point exactly. Cooperative activities such as games are, so to speak, the prelude to social life. By learning how to take the attitude of the ‘generalized other’ while playing baseball children gradually acquire a socio-psychological ability of central importance. This said, it is not difficult to see why Mead grants so crucial an importance to educational matters (even if it is in Dewey rather than Mead that we find the most elaborate classical pragmatist statement on education).

On the other hand, Mead analyses the self from the viewpoint of its internal structure. Following the insights of his fellow pragmatists William James and John Dewey, he conceives of the self as an ongoing social process with two distinct phases: the ‘I’, which is described as the spontaneous response of the individual to the social situation, and
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the ‘me’, a socially structured, conscious self-image that we build by seeing ourselves through the eyes of the others. The I–me distinction can best be understood by reference to the memory image we have of ourselves. Imagine yourself having breakfast this morning: you can see yourself having milk and cereals, talking to your parents and so on. What I wish to emphasize is the distinction between you, now in the present, remembering yourself this morning having breakfast, and your remembered self-image, located in the past. Mead calls these two aspects (or facets) of the self the ‘T’ and the ‘me’ – the ‘T’ is that phase of the self that remembers while the ‘me’ is the remembered self-image.

As we shall see, from this very simple and intuitive beginning, Mead developed a sophisticated account of the inner workings of the human mind. In short, for Mead, the ‘T’ is a source of novelty and creativity, indispensable for the assertion of individuality, while the ‘me’ refers to the set of organized social attitudes within one’s self. The rigid distinction between inner, subjective life and external, objective reality is thus ruled out by Mead; on the contrary, he conceives of the self as a process through which social experiences are permanently being incorporated into the self (through the ‘me’) and reconstructed by the ‘T’. Selves are thus natural, evolving social products.

Mead’s vision of the relation between the individual and society makes it thoroughly naturalistic, evolutionary (though not to be confused with social Darwinism) and cooperative. It also makes it, and fundamentally, a process. The ‘T’ and the ‘me’ are but phases of a larger process, the self, which in turn is but a phase of an even larger process, society. Each phase can only be fully understood by reference not only to the process in which it is located, but also to the larger process in which the former takes place: general changes in societal values and norms can thus be seen to influence transformations at the level of individual consciousness and vice versa. This is why Mead sees religious or intellectual geniuses, such as Jesus or Socrates, as individuals whose ‘Is’ were exceptionally innovative and powerful: the course of history can be profoundly changed by the least probable element, the unconscious and unpredictable ‘T’.

Standing on the shoulders of giants

These are the contributions that earned Mead his place in the sociological canon. Of course, to paraphrase Newton, Mead is able to see further only because he is standing on the shoulders of giants. In what follows, I examine the sources from which Mead draws throughout his career. His originality and current relevance are, I argue, better appreciated against the backdrop of the figures that most directly influenced his thought. In fact, Mead’s intellectual context can offer an unparalleled
opportunity to grasp the logical structure of his social and political thinking. By reconstructing the dialogues in which Mead engages throughout his career I wish to do justice to the dialogical nature of his system of thought. The engagements between Mead and Immanuel Kant, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Charles Darwin, Josiah Royce, John Dewey, William James, Wilhelm Wundt, John B. Watson, Henri Bergson and Alfred North Whitehead can enlighten an important aspect of Mead’s theoretical strategy, namely the appropriation of other authors’ concepts and theories according to his own agenda and interests. Again, the relevant context is not necessarily the most immediate one. As such, some of the dialogues in which Mead can be said to have taken part are with authors who are not his contemporaries.

Kant and Hegel are two examples of authors from a different era with whom Mead engages in dialogue on several occasions. I would like to call my readers’ attention to the fact that this particular dialogue does not make easy reading, especially for an undergraduate audience. It is, however, of crucial importance to understand the extent to which German idealism, in particular the writings of Kant and Hegel, is one of the most enduring philosophical influences over Mead’s thinking. To begin with, Mead’s (never completed) doctoral dissertation revolved around the empiricist conception of space, which was supposed to be criticized with the aid of Kant. Mead, however, intended to go beyond Kant with the aid of physiological psychology: space would thus not be seen, as suggested by Kant, as a form of intuition but as the product of the cooperation between eye and hand. I will return to this important issue in my discussion of Mead’s intellectual biography. Of course, Kant’s influence over Mead extends well beyond the latter’s doctoral project. Indeed, Kant’s influence can be detected in all the authors who came to be associated with pragmatism. From the adaptation of Kant’s theories by Peirce, there emerged the distinctively pragmatist ‘treatment of the cognitive subject by reference to the concepts of experience, habits, novelty, language, community, inquiry and evolution’. This can be seen throughout Mead’s career: from Kantian ethics to his transcendental logic, there are numerous instances where one can see Mead, time and again, critically engaging ‘the philosopher of the revolution’, the title Mead used to qualify Kant in his 1928 lectures Movements of Thought in the Nineteenth Century. Mead’s engagement with Kant’s moral philosophy is of particular relevance. Regarding Kant’s categorical imperative – ‘Act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it would become a universal law’ – Mead subscribes to its universalist character but criticizes its inadequacy to deal with the resolution of concrete moral problems. Mead’s alternative points to the need for a creative moral reconstruction, in which the moral agent must take into account all of the relevant conflicting interests. In other words, while retaining Kant’s orientation to universalism,
Mead rejects Kant’s transcendental subject in favour of a concrete communicative community.

Let us now turn to Hegel. From several of Mead’s early philosophical writings down to his aforementioned lectures on *Movements of Thought in the Nineteenth Century*, where Hegel is shown as a precursor to evolutionist theories whose dialectical method was at odds with the experimental method favoured by science, Hegel can certainly be said to be a privileged interlocutor who helped in shaping Mead’s intellectual position. This holds true especially for some of Mead’s earliest book reviews, where he explicitly asserted his indebtedness to Hegel.

Both in the attempt by Gustav Class to combine Hegel’s ‘objective spirit’ and Schleiermacher’s ‘personal individuality’ and in Charles D’Arcy’s proposal to reconcile Hegel and Berkeley, Mead emphasizes the same point. Hegel’s dialectic method, responsible for transforming philosophy into a ‘method of thought rather than a search for fundamental entities’, constitutes the method ‘by which the self in its full cognitive and social content meets and solves its difficulties’, i.e. it reveals the fundamental continuity between the ‘method of intelligence’ and human consciousness itself. This said, however, the evolution of Mead’s system of thought explains how, from this almost enthusiastic endorsement of Hegel’s philosophy in the 1890s and early 1900s, he came in the 1920s to adopt an increasingly critical position on Hegel’s dialectic method.

The evolutionary framework in which Mead is operating derives from Darwin’s theory of the origin of the species. By putting Hegel in dialogue with Darwin, Mead is able to suggest that Hegel’s ‘philosophy of evolution’ is a speculative precursor to Darwin’s scientific breakthrough, and one which enabled philosophy to overcome the dichotomy between mechanistic and teleological theories of evolution. From his conversation with Darwin, Mead took the naturalistic outlook that would accompany him during the rest of his career.

One can now glimpse at the truly dialogical nature of Mead’s system of thought. In making Hegel join in his conversations with Royce and Dewey, Mead let himself be introduced to German idealism and to the functionalist social psychology that he would advocate until the 1910s. In the debate with Royce (Mead, 1909), Mead was particularly interested in criticizing his theory of the social character of linguistic meaning and human reflection. While Royce advocated that altruistic other-consciousness and egoistic self-consciousness were mutually implied in each other, since one can be conscious of oneself only in relation to a real or ideal fellow, Mead retorted that

> [s]ocial consciousness is the presupposition of imitation, and when Professor Royce... makes imitation the means of getting the meaning of what others and we ourselves are doing, he seems to be either putting...
the cart before the horse, or else to be saying that the ideas which we have of the actions of the others are ideo-motor in their character, but this does not make out of imitation the means of their becoming ideo-motor'.

But it was with Dewey that Mead had the most lasting and significant dialogue. This dialogue, which eventually evolved into a friendship, started under the influence of the writings on psychology of another thinker associated with American pragmatism, William James. Mead met Dewey at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, shortly after his return from Germany, at a moment when Dewey was engaged in an active exchange of letters with James concerning the latter’s *Principles of Psychology* (1890). The outcome of this exchange of arguments and ideas was, on Dewey’s part, the criticism of the social–psychological ‘reflex arc’ model and the development of the alternative ‘organic circuit’ conception of action, according to which human thinking proceeds by solving problems in specific contexts. The voice of Charles Sanders Peirce can also be heard in this argument; Mead made it his own, in order to engage, again, in a dialogue with Hegel. In ‘Suggestions Towards a Theory of the Philosophical Disciplines’ (1900), Mead uses Dewey’s article on the ‘reflex arc’ as a foundation for his groundwork on a new logic, understood in the Hegelian sense of a theory of intelligent action. For my purposes, however, the most relevant topic of discussion between Mead and Dewey is their shared conception of radical democracy, in the formation of which the ideological setting of turbulent 1890s Chicago played a significant role. Symptomatically, while debating what would be the best form of democratic government, both Mead and Dewey draw on the scientific ideal of the free exchange of rational arguments, to reach a conception of radical democracy in which rational experimentation and civic participation are different sides of the same coin.

It is around a different topic, though, that the dialogue between Mead, James and Wilhelm Wundt evolves. It is a debate concerning the nature of the object of psychology, in which Mead adopts a critical stance against the so-called mentalistic psychology of consciousness in favour of a notion of consciousness that privileges a functional conception of the psychical. In a consciously dialogical way, Mead starts by convoking all the proponents of competing doctrines of the psychical. Wundt, Külpe, Bradley, Bosanquet, Ward and Stout, James – all are invited to join in the debate on the definition of the psychical. From the exchange with Wundt, Mead learns three things. Firstly, he appropriates Wundt’s concept of ‘gesture’, to supplement his own socio-linguistic explanation of the genesis of the mind. As we will see in detail later on, this notion of gesture plays a pivotal role in Mead’s social psychology. Secondly, he comes to the view that a correspondence theory of
truth should be rejected in favour of the pragmatist epistemological stance suggested by Dewey. Thirdly, he adopts the position that the solution to overcoming the dualism between body and psyche cannot lie in a double structure of the object of psychology; rather, it can be reached only if subjectivity is submitted to the same kind of analysis as the objective elements of human consciousness. Mead is advocating here the unity of consciousness; but this is precisely what James had achieved through his notion of ‘stream of consciousness’, ‘by all odds the richest statement of the psychical consciousness that philosophic literature has yet presented’.15

Yet, having said this, it must be admitted that Mead had some reservations concerning the methodological strategy employed by James. In his view, once an adequate concept of the psychical is defined, we will be able to reconstruct the otherwise useful Jamesian notion of ‘stream of consciousness’ in order to identify its origins and functions. Indeed, with Mead’s definition of the psychical one can see, not only James’s distinction between ‘I’ and ‘me’ being appropriated for the first time, but also the way Mead tries to respond to the challenges of overcoming the body-psyche dualism, of providing a non-individualist conception of the individual, and of developing a reconstructive definition of individual cognition:

For this functional psychology an explicit definition of its subject-matter seems highly important. That suggested in this paper is as follows: that phase of experience within which we are immediately conscious of conflicting impulses which rob the object of its character as object-stimulus, leaving us in so far in an attitude of subjectivity; but during which a new object-stimulus appears due to the reconstructive activity which is identified with the subject ‘I’ as distinct from the object ‘me’.16

With this definition Mead concluded what can be considered to be his ‘most significant work prior to the development of his fundamental premises for a theory of interaction and a social psychology’.17 At this point, it is instructive to discuss the relationship between Mead and John B. Watson, a former student of his. Due to its strategic character, the Mead-Watson dialogue allows us to address two important issues: the clarification of the nature of Mead’s behaviourism in opposition to Watson’s proposals and the terminological problems associated with the labelling of Mead’s social psychological thought.

Firstly, by the time Mead published his ‘The Definition of the Psychical’, behaviourism was far from enjoying a dominant position in American social psychology: it was only in 1913, a decade after the publication of Mead’s paper, that Watson published ‘Psychology as the Behaviorist Views It’, the article that put behaviourism at the centre of the social-psychological agenda. There is thus no factual basis to support the
long-held thesis that Mead’s strand of behaviourism represents a kind of a retort to Watson’s proposals. On the contrary, there are good reasons to suggest that Mead’s behaviourism is actually a version completely independent from Watsonian behaviourism. This can be seen, for instance, in the first sections of *Mind, Self, and Society*, where Mead defines his own position by contrasting his views with those espoused by the ‘behaviorist of the Watsonian type’. What distinguishes the latter’s behaviourism? To begin with, Watson suggests that psychology should focus on human conduct ‘as it is observable by others’; this, of course, entails that human consciousness should also be explained in terms of external behaviour. For instance, human thinking, according to Watson, can be studied in terms of language symbols: ‘these symbols were not necessarily uttered loudly enough to be heard by others, and often only involved the muscles of the throat without leading to audible speech. That was all there was to thought’, Mead critically observes.

As we shall see in detail later on, there are good reasons for Mead to criticize the reductionistic character of Watson’s strand of behaviourism. It is not merely a question of Mead’s behaviourism being more sensitive to non-observable phenomena and to the social context than that of Watson is. Rather, Mead’s social psychology is, as Joas rightly puts it, ‘an independent conception radically different from Watson’s behaviourism’. In fact, as Mead makes abundantly clear, his behaviourism, far from ignoring consciousness, tries to analyse it ‘functionally, and as a natural rather than a transcendental phenomenon’. Mead’s naturalistic and functionalistic perspective evolves, so to speak, between Scylla and Charybdis: it tries to avoid both introspectionism (as displayed in the Wundtian-inspired study of states of consciousness) and Watsonian behaviourism (which simply rules out the existence of anything like consciousness), treating them as two equally undesirable alternatives. Mead’s proposal points, on the one hand, to a study of consciousness no less objective than Watson’s behaviourism (if anything, even more so), and, on the other hand, to one that is no less sensitive than Wundtian structuralism to the complexity and subtleness of the issue at hand.

However – and this is the second issue I would like to address – I must once more call my readers’ attention to the poor editorial quality of *Mind, Self, and Society*. In this particular case, the implications of Morris’ creative editorial work are not trivial. Contrary to what is widely assumed, Mead never refers to his version of behaviourism as ‘social behaviourism’; when Mead allegedly says ‘[o]ur behaviorism is a social behaviorism’, one of the two passages in *Mind, Self, and Society* where one can find Mead using this expression is actually an insertion by Morris. To suggest, as Morris does, that Mead’s behaviourism is a *social* behaviourism, in contrast to Watsonian behaviourism, seems to
indicate that what separates their social psychological thought is only a question of the degree to which social affairs are taken into consideration. On the contrary, as I have just tried to explain, while Watson’s behaviourism subsumes consciousness to the realm of external, observable phenomena, Mead’s behaviourism not only accepts the existence of an inner psychic life but proposes to study it as an integral part of the natural world: as such, thought processes (imagination, reflection, etc) are no less amenable to scientific scrutiny than any other kind of human activity.

It is worth pointing out that the dialogical nature of Mead’s theorizing can be traced throughout the entire course of his career, up to the last phase, when Whitehead and Bergson came to be his main intellectual interlocutors. Actually, Mead’s engagement with Bergson began in 1907, with the publication of the latter’s book *L’Evolution Créatrice*. In opposition to the mechanistic conception of the world, Bergson proposes a conception marked by freedom, novelty and change. In a review of this book, Mead subscribes to Bergson’s reservations concerning scientism but rejects the irrationalist implications of his proposal. In the conclusion of that book review, Mead expresses his surprise that Bergson failed to recognize the ‘creative power of consciousness in the construction of the very scientific world and its matter which for him stands opposed to thought and life. It seems to be only in the unconscious creations of perceptions and the unreflective phases of voluntary processes that he can perceive the creative fiat which is identical in consciousness and nature’. In the early twenties, Mead returned to Bergson’s texts in order to revive this previous encounter and to gather relevant insights for tackling the problem at the centre of his attention at the time: a functional analysis of perception. In the summer of 1927, Mead delivered a course on Bergson’s philosophy: a portion of the student notes taken on that occasion was later included in *Movements of Thought in the Nineteenth Century*. In these lectures, one can see Mead restating his earlier criticism that Bergson failed to offer an objective statement of categories such as ‘the flow, the freedom, the novelty, the interpenetration, the creativity, upon which he sets such great store’, relegating these to the sphere of subjective consciousness. The required correction of Bergson’s approach was to be found in Whitehead’s philosophy of nature. Human subjectivity can be objectively analysed insofar as its natural character is emphasized. That mind is a natural event is the point upon which Mead wishes to found his scientific social psychology. In fact, while discussing with Whitehead the philosophy of nature and cosmology, Mead invokes Darwin in order to give a natural basis to human sociality. When Mead discusses, in ‘The Objective Reality of Perspectives’ (1926), the relatedness of two unconnected movements that share the same emphasis on the ‘objectivity of perspectives’, the naturalistic and developmental logic of his social
psychology is combined with the relativist perspective associated with Whitehead. In particular, what Mead wishes to pick out from his dialogue with Whitehead is the latter’s ‘conception of nature as an organization of perspectives, which are there in nature’.

The dialogical nature of Mead’s system of thought emerges from this series of conversations as one of its central features. My goal has been not so much to provide a systematic account of every encounter he experienced during his career as to demonstrate the dialogical character of Mead’s theoretical strategy. Drawing on Dewey’s remark that Mead’s philosophical thinking ‘springs from his own intimate experiences, from things deeply felt’, one can perhaps go as far as to suggest that Mead actually ‘takes the role of the other’ every time he engages in a rational exchange of arguments with his interlocutors. To conceive of the mind as an internal ‘forum of conversation’ is but the logical corollary of Mead’s dialogical theoretical strategy.

The structure of the book

As these intellectual engagements show, Mead’s chief research interest is the scientific analysis of the origins and development of human consciousness. His was a thoroughly social approach to the problem of the mind – it proceeded, so to speak, from the outside in, not from the inside out. Human subjectivity is thus seen by Mead as a natural, social, evolving process. It emerges out of cooperative social life, through the exchange of linguistic signs. Society first, and then mind and the self: contrary to the order of priority suggested by the title of the book through which generations got to know Mead’s ideas, *Mind, Self, and Society*, Mead’s social psychology explains the part in terms of the whole, not the whole in terms of its parts. Mead’s individuals are social agents as much as they are biological organisms. The naturalism of Mead’s social psychology can hardly be overemphasized. But his perspective is naturalistic as much as evolutionary and socially oriented.

At a time of increasing disciplinary specialization such as ours, Mead’s work regains relevance. His early groundbreaking attempt at a bio-social explanation of human consciousness remains today a seminal and inspiring account of the crucial importance of human communication for the social order. Sociologists, social psychologists and other social scientists can thus find in Mead’s thinking the outline of a communicative social theory the implications of which are yet to be fully explored. The present book aims at offering an account of Mead’s ideas such that the current generation of social practitioners may learn from Mead’s proposals and eventually make use of them in their future work. Of course, one should not ask Mead a question he did not
consider—namely why it is so important for us to take into account the social and intellectual context that frames his work. This is not to say, however, that we cannot learn from Mead how to solve the problems that we face today; it only means that the resolution of contemporary problems requires more than our predecessors can give us (and that they can give us a lot is exemplified by Mead’s case). Mead did not simply rest upon the shoulders of giants—he used them to see further, and this was his achievement. This is what we, too, should try to do. In brief, it is this book’s goal that we may all come to see further after engaging in a meaningful and enriching conversation with Mead.

The book falls into two major parts. The first part concerns Mead’s ideas (chapters 2 to 5). The second part deals with the reception of these ideas by subsequent authors and analyses the contemporary relevance of Mead’s work (chapters 6 to 8). Some brief comments on the internal organization of each part are in order. Chapter 2 next offers a discussion of Mead’s personal and intellectual portrait. My aim is to provide, for readers without prior knowledge of Mead, a brief presentation of the major social and intellectual events that shaped Mead’s life, with particular attention to the influence exercised by the city of Chicago upon his intellectual and civic activities. Chapter 2 is thus the only chapter whose rationale is to revolve around a historical narrative, even though I discuss various elements of his work by reference to the historical context (Mead’s socio-psychological analysis of warfare as a response to World War I is a case in point); the remainder of the book follows an analytical perspective, discussing Mead’s key ideas from the viewpoint of their conceptual origins, relations and implications. One should always keep in mind, however, that there is a systematic relation uniting such otherwise disparate elements as Mead’s discussion of the notion of ‘conversation of gestures’ within ‘social acts’ and his account of the communicative nature of the social order, or his ethical theory.

The first of the three chapters devoted to the analysis of Mead’s ideas, chapter 3, begins with a detailed discussion of the concept of ‘taking the role of the other’. This crucially important notion will be shown to play a strategic role within Mead’s social psychology. The chapter unfolds by addressing other relevant conceptual elements such as the notions of ‘gesture’, of ‘meaning’ and of ‘significant symbol’, to arrive at the relation between linguistic communication and human consciousness. Chapter 4, in turn, deals with what is commonly considered to be Mead’s chief contribution to contemporary social theory, namely his account of the self as a social emergent. Human subjectivity, our sense of who we are, is explained by Mead as emerging out of social experience—the human psyche and collective life are, Mead suggests, but different sides of the same coin. My discussion will proceed in three different steps: firstly, I introduce Mead’s notions of ‘consciousness’,...
'reflective intelligence' and 'mind'; secondly, I analyse his account of the two-stage process of childhood development ('play' and 'game'); finally, I close my excursus on Mead's conception of the social self with a presentation of the I–me distinction. Chapter 5, the last one to dwell on Mead's ideas, is devoted to two different issues: on the one hand, I examine the sociological and political aspects of Mead's thinking; on the other hand, I discuss Mead's theory of the act. In the concluding section of that chapter I present three fundamental Meadian ideas; these correspond approximately to the issues discussed in chapters 3 to 5, thus paving the way for the second part of the book.

In the following three chapters, 6 to 8, I examine the history of the reception of Mead's ideas by a large and varied group of social thinkers, so that the contemporary relevance of his contributions can be established. In a word, I wish to answer the questions: 'How did Mead's work influence the subsequent generations of social scientists?' and 'Why should one read Mead today?'. I believe that, by providing an answer to this pair of questions, additional light can be shed upon Mead's achievement. In other words, by moving beyond the scope of the context of Mead's life and texts one can better appreciate the relevance of his work for our present purposes. Thus in chapter 6 I examine the appropriation of Mead's ideas by the only sociological current that claims to be in a direct line of intellectual descent from Mead: symbolic interactionism. Although exceptionally fruitful from the point of view of empirical research, symbolic interactionism, it will be suggested, clearly departed from Mead's work in certain key aspects. A subsidiary claim of mine refers to the fact that some of the criticisms levelled against symbolic interactionism could be countered, provided that renewed attention is given to those aspects of Mead's work which certain influential symbolic interactionists (notably Herbert Blumer) tended to neglect.

The reception of Mead's work by other twentieth-century social scientists is the topic around which chapter 7 revolves. I begin by discussing the work of Arnold Gehlen, the author who should take the credit for introducing Mead's ideas in post-war Germany. My argument unfolds through the interpretations of Mead's thinking propounded by Jürgen Habermas, Hans Joas and Axel Honneth. The chapter ends with a discussion of the current appropriations of Mead's work by leading American sociologists, namely Randall Collins and Jeffrey Alexander. The final chapter deals with the contemporary relevance of Mead's theories. It does so by critically addressing four of its dimensions: the biological self, science, language and radical democracy – which will be my guidelines in the first section of that chapter. This will be followed by a section whose aim is to guide the reader through primary and secondary sources (an up-to-date, comprehensive list of which is provided at the end of the book).
In sum, my aim in what follows is to introduce the current generation of social sciences students, as well as the general public, to the work of an author whose ‘mind was a forum of discussion with itself’, and whose work has inspired generations of thinkers across the globe. I see no better way of paying homage to Mead than to engage him in an imaginary conversation, through the writings he left us. Of course, such a dialogue, far from being apologetic, must be critical and demanding – after all, there are many instances in which Mead’s insights are either insufficiently developed or have been proven wrong by subsequent research. Still, Mead’s contribution to the understanding of the problem of the individual mind in relation to social life arguably ranks amongst the most valuable insights we have inherited from our classic predecessors. And now I wish to turn to the context in which this contribution has developed.