
George Herbert Mead and How to Reconstruct "Timeless Time"

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Abstract

George Herbert Mead's *The Philosophy of the Present* (PP) is both problematic and notoriously difficult. Specifically, PP is problematic because the published version was based on Mead's Carus Lectures. While Arthur Murphy did an impressive job editing Mead's notes, the unfinished and hurried nature of the source helps explain why many Mead scholars shy away from it. This is then compounded by the fact that Mead's approach to the subject matter, is difficult to begin with, as can be seen from articles he published in his lifetime on the subject like "The Nature of the Past." These qualifications made, this part of Mead's work remains a vital, if underappreciated, exploration of the relationship between time, history and pragmatism.

This paper attempts to demonstrate the continued significance of PP and related writings by demonstrating how it provides a way to reconstruct the contemporary experience of time and history. Following the work of Manuel Castells, I will refer to this experience as "timeless time." Coming out of the work of Castells, Luciano Floridi and David Harvey, the contemporary experience of time and history possess several distinct features including: 1) the rise of nonlinear experiences of history (time loses its assumed "natural" sequence); 2) the concept that history ended (for example: that no further socio-political developments are possible); 3) the expectation of continued progress (specifically technological). This experience is problematic in that reifies a particular social order, a social order which many classical pragmatists like Mead would find troubling. The difficulty with this experience of time and history is not merely cultural but, following Castells and Floridi, also a result of a society's reliance on Information and Communication Technologies. Given that the material and technological practices involved here, it is necessary to reconstruct how such technologies are used (rather than denouncing this sort of experience of time and history).

While these writings of Mead largely emphasize the metaphysical dimensions of temporality, I use PP and associated works more as a framework for interpreting human relationships to past, present and future. The paper will remain agnostic about the validity of Mead's metaphysics (thus sidestepping a number of issues). Instead, I develop a reading of Mead that emphasizing the heuristic value of his philosophy of temporality. When interpreted this way, Mead provides a set of concepts that allow of a more productive understanding of time and history in light of the contemporary material and technological practices.

The paper begins with a brief overview of the most vital features of the contemporary experience of time and history, highlighting the way in which it effectively reifies the present social order. I then turn to reconstructing Mead's philosophy in such a way that it can reorient this contemporary experience. First is Mead's concept that reality exists only in the specious

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present. On the one hand, this concept aligns itself with certain aspects of "timeless time," inasmuch as both take the present as the center around which past and future are interpreted. On the other, in conjunction with Mead's other key concepts like sociality and emergence, he opens up ways to reconstruct the present. Central to emergence is his concept of novelty, that something unexpected can come out of the intersection of different perspectives (what Mead refers to as "sociality"). This element of novelty is repressed in "timeless time" because of its nonlinearity and presumptions of being at the end of history. Mead's philosophy points to how spaces can be created for novelty through the social and democratic process of reconstructing past and future. The paper concludes by indicating several ways that this approach can be integrated into the material practices involving information technologies.

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