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**Beyond the Social Mind: New Perspectives on the Philosophy of George Herbert Mead**

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Panelists:

**Roman Madzia**

**Guido Baggio**

**Filipe Carreira da Silva**

**Lenart Škof**

**GENERAL ABSTRACT**

George Herbert Mead is, arguably, one of the most underappreciated American philosophers of the last century. Along with Peirce, James, and Dewey – Mead belongs to the canon of American pragmatism, especially due to his work in social psychology and theory of symbolic communication. In his philosophy and social psychology, Mead tried to come up with a naturalist account of how human beings acquire minds (and selfhood) in the process of bodily gestural communication. Since Mead’s death in 1931, his works deeply influenced the research in disciplines as diverse as psychology, sociology, symbolic anthropology and behavioral sciences. During his lifetime, Mead (similarly to Peirce) had not published any philosophical monograph. What we have from his legacy is a number of journal articles, an unfinished book (*Philosophy of the Present*) and students‘ notes from the university lectures that he gave (most notably *Mind, Self, and Society*). Because of its novelty, depth and, at the same time, openness for different interpretations – Mead’s intellectual legacy has been developed in the abovementioned disciplines in multiple creative ways (e.g. symbolic interactionism in sociology, development of the sense of self in social psychology, etc.). Since, as mentioned above, many of these once novel approaches, have made it to the standard conceptual apparatus of the individual disciplines, the panelists do not want to focus on those, but, to the contrary – they would like to offer *new, fruitful perspectives* and areas of research in which Mead’s work can be creatively applied. Thus, remaining firmly anchored in the conceptual landscape of Mead’s philosophy, the panelists are going to present innovative ways of applying Mead in fields as diverse as philosophy of mind, economics, moral theory, and sociology of material culture.

In this regard, the presentation of **Roman Madzia** is going to focus on the relevance of Mead’s naturalist ‚philosophy of the act‘ to the contemporary debate in cognitive sciences (embodied cognition). In his paper, Madzia will use Mead’s theory of the emergence of language in embodied social activities (supported by latest developments in cognitive science), to debunk the neo-pragmatist intellectualist contention according to which the world is cognitively accessible only as mediated by means of language. In effect, Madzia’s discussion of the abovementioned subject-matters will be an empirically-informed pragmatist critique of neo-pragmatism.

Empirical research in cognitive sciences (and the new credibility it gives to numerous Mead’s theories) will also be one of the central point of interest of **Guido Baggio**’s presentation – this time over, in the area emerging field of the so-called ‚neuroeconomics‘. Baggio’s primary interest will be challenging the classical intellectualist (rationality-based and individual-oriented) concept of economic behavior in favor of a model, which necessarily always takes into account others in making its reflective decisions. On a host of examples, Baggio will venture to demonstrate the extent to which current empirical research into real economic behavior of socially-situated agents accords with Mead’s theories pertaining to the nature of social behavior and cooperation of human beings. Thus, Mead’s concept of empathy will become a general theoretical underpinning, explaining the empirical data we have been obtaining in the area of neuro-economics.

In **Filipe da Silva**’s paper, his previous extensive work on Mead will be used to deal with the problem of canon-creation in sociology. In his treatment of canon-creation, da Silva will refuse to follow the classical path focusing either on abstract concepts (e.g. ‘class‘, etc.), theoretical constructions (functionalist sociology), or external historical and economic factors influencing the work of sociologists. Central to the practice of theorizing, as he will argue, will be the documents in which the concepts and theories are inscribed and made publicly available. In sociology, the central documents tend not to be short-lived journal articles, but certain research monographs. Da Silva is going to propose to address the sociological canon as a sort of inverted utopia, a projection into the past of the discipline of each generation’s future aspirations. This process will be demonstrated on the example of Mead’s *Mind, Self, and Society* (ed. by Ch. W. Morris). On that note and from the point of view of Mead-studies, Da Silva’s presentation, is of high actuality as a new critical edition of *Mind, Self, and Society* is currently being prepared by Hans Joas and Daniel Huebner (on Mead and material culture, see also Huebner’s *Becoming Mead: The Social Process of Academic Knowledge*, Chicago University Press 2014).

In turn, **Lenart Škof**’s presentation takes a novel perspective on Mead from the point of view of contemporary ethics and politics. His presentation titled “Space, Epistemology, Touch: Three Meadian Meditations”, Skof is going to creatively confront different facets of Mead’s philosophy with phenomenological conceptions of intersubjectivity by thinkers like Louis Chrétien and Watsuji Tetsurō. Further, he is going to build on these reflections by analyzing Mead’s accentuation of the importance of haptic experience for the construction of an intersubjective space, in which humans, as embodied beings, interact with one another. From this common ground, Skof is going to present interesting points of intersection between the Western and the Eastern conceptions of ethical intersubjectivity based on the concept of touch.

*The panel, as a whole, has the common aim of presenting new perspectives on Mead’s philosophy and psychology in very diverse areas of research. Taking a firm stance in Mead’s naturalist philosophy of action and meaning creation, it takes Mead’s seminal ideas in very different directions and shows the immense and, thus far, undiscovered potential which Mead’s unfinished work can bear for dealing with the problems of our present.*

**Individual abstracts:**

**Words and Worlds: Revisiting the Relation between Language and Experience**

Dr. Roman Madzia

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In his essay ‘Retrieving Realism’ (2013), Charles Taylor criticizes a picture of knowledge which ‘holds captive’ the entire Western philosophical tradition at least since the times of Descartes. According to this picture, our knowledge of, or access to, the world comes about only through some features of the mind. To attain the knowledge of the world we always necessarily employ some pre-existing propositionally articulable *structure* (ideas, mental representations, conceptual schemes, etc.). Taylor calls the epistemology, based on this sort of paradigmatic approach, ‘mediational epistemology’. According to the mediational epistemology (which also seems to be advocated in the work of neo-pragmatists like Rorty and Brandom), not only is the world accessible only through certain faculties of the ‘mind’, but (as neo-pragmatists like Brandom, or McDowell hold) all our knowledge can be made explicit, which is to say – it can be articulated into clearly defined, linguistic propositions. Although Taylor himself does not refer to neo-pragmatists as adherents of ‘mediational epistemology’, the proposed paper is going to demonstrate, that it is exactly the linguistically enchanted neo-pragmatism that could be the paradigm case of ‘mediational epistemology’ and hence also, of Cartesian intellectualism when it comes to the question of knowledge.

In the second part, the paper is going to introduce an empirically informed concept of knowledge which does not fall prey to the intellectualist fallacies of mediational epistemology. Here, intellectual sources as diverse as the Mead’s philosophy of the act, existential phenomenology and embodied cognitive science are going to be used. Mead’s pragmatism, as well as certain currents in phenomenology (Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, etc.) and cognitive science (Thompson, Noë, etc.) does not agree with the contention that our primary relation towards the world is *theoretical* (linguistic, propositional). Rather, for all these schools of thought and empirical inquiry, it is the bodily skillful action of the cognitive agent (together with its volitions and emotions), which is primarily non-reflective, that should stand in the foreground of our interest if we want to investigate the ways in which we intelligently engage the world.

According to Mead as well as the aforementioned thinkers, most of our experience and everyday strategies of skillful coping with the environment is ‘contentless’, i.e., devoid of mental representation, intentionality, or cognitive mediation. Mead, existential phenomenologists, as well as certain cognitive scientists’ claim that there is no distance between subject and object with respect to the basic mode of human experience. By means of our bodily skills and strategies the world shows up (is present) to us as an unproblematically given field of practical bodily action without the need for mediation through linguistically structured content.

On the background of the abovementioned analysis, in its final part, the paper is going to analyze anew the place and role of language in experience – as seen from the perspective of empirically informed pragmatist thought. To this end, it is going to elaborate on G. H. Mead’s inquiries into the origins of language and symbolic communication (again, in relation to theories of embodied cognitive science). According to Mead, the emergence of contentful thinking (including the dichotomy between subject and object, and the phenomenon of intentionality) in human cognitive architecture is a late evolutionary phenomenon which is derived from our ability to use symbols as intersubjectively shareable ‘cognitive shortcuts’ standing for the possibilities for action, offered by the environment. The paper will creatively advance these ideas in the direction of finally proposing a new, more balanced model of understanding the role of language in experience which does not fall prey to the intellectualist traps of some recent versions of neo-pragmatism.

In effect, the paper is going to point to new promising directions in which Mead’s pragmatism can engage in fruitful discussions with other philosophical schools (existential phenomenology) and life-sciences (situated cognition).

**Sympathy and Empathy. Mead and the pragmatist basis of Neuroeconomics**

Dr. Guido Baggio

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Mead’s social psychology (Mead 1934; 1964; 2001) proposes a complex idea of Self as the result of mental and non-mental behavioral attitudes. Individuals take the general attitude toward the various aspects of the common social activity and social undertakings in which they are engaged. Behind the common social activity there is a set of social primitive instincts by the nature of which the distinction between the ‘me’ and the ‘other’ is given (Mead 2001: 3-8). The instincts are social in the sense that the individual's gestural and vocal responses arise as indications of various movements of other individuals belonging to the group. The early stages of these activities lead to what is nowadays called humans' *prosocial emotions*, namely psycho-physiological reactions to the movements of the other members of the group, which induce agents to engage in cooperative behavior (cf. Bowles & Gintis 2011). The bio-social mechanism is in fact at the basis of human feeling of *sympathy*, which consists, according to Mead, in taking a self-conscious “social attitude toward another individual […] by taking his attitude toward, and his role in, the given social situation, and by thus responding to that situation implicitly as he does or is about to do explicitly.” (Mead 1934: 300). Sympathetic identification is here depicted as a natural process presenting both cognitive and affective aspects, for its referring to both the capacity to represent other's intentions and beliefs (attitudes) and to share her feelings. Mead's notion of sympathy is in some sense rooted in Hume's *A Treatise of Human Nature* and, indirectly, in Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. According to Hume, in fact, (1740: Bk II, Part II, sec. V) sympathy is a disposition to share sentiments, to participate in the emotional life of others and to form general rules to pursue. Smith, who further elaborated Hume's use of sympathy to explain economic phenomena, considers sympathy as individual's “fellow-feeling with any passion whatever” which may arise from “the view of a certain emotion in another person”, but not “from the view of the passion, as from that of the situation which excites it” through the imagination (Smith 1759: Part 1, Sec. 1, ch. 1). However Mead's concept of sympathy may have a more fecund parallel with nowadays neuroscientific and neurophenomenological hypothesis on “empathy” with respect to the recent studies on mirror neurons. Empathy is generally depicted as a pre-reflexive embodied mechanism that plays a role in understanding intentional actions of others, by ascribing meaning to their unreflexive facial expressions and being able to ‘read’ in their emotionally-laden bodily attitudes.

Now, it is worth noting that Mead's theory of gestural conversation as the expression of innate social dimension of humans is undergoing a new revival among neuroscientists (see among others Iacoboni et al. 2004; McNeill 2005; Rizzolatti & Sinigaglia 2006; Franks 2010 and 2013). Rizzolatti and Sinigaglia (2006: 48-9; 148-9), for instance, explicitly refer to Mead's works as supporting the hypothesis according to which the human language has arised from a neural mechanism linked to a preconscious understanding mechanism of others' gestural attitudes. In this respect, McNeill (2005: 30-31) refers to what he called “Mead’s loop theory” as to «a capacity, not present in other primate brains, for the mirror neuron circuit to respond to one's own gestures as if they belonged to someone else».

A parallel between Mead and neurosciences will therefore contribute to shed light on some topical economic issues concerning people's social attitudes. In particular it will contribute to elucidate two main issues current neuroeconomics is concerned with (Kirman & Teschl 2010). The first issue is epistemological, i.e., understanding the process by which people take the role of the others will help to clarify what knowledge people can reasonably have about other people's beliefs, intentions and motives. The second issue is motivational: that is, if empathic identification leads not only to a better understanding of the other person's intentions and behavioral attitudes, this may well undermine purely self-interested choices, and instead promote other-regarding behavior. If this were the case, it would again provide a good reason for reconsidering the paradigm of the economic agent as a self-interested individual. To examine in depth the bio-social basis of empathy would permit us to link the bio-psychological approach to human economic behavior to the ethical approach to it.

Neuroeconomics is a recent branch of *behavioral economics*, a significant field of economic research focusing on the emotional and non-rational human attitudes in economic subject’s behavior (Mullainathan and Thaler 2000). Intersecting economics and psychology, the BE contributed to highlight and overcome the theoretical as well as the empirical limits of the neoclassic economics paradigm, which presupposes a *rational* subject that is able to act and make economic choices on the basis of the criterion of rational utility. However, despite the intersecting of economics and psychology is improving and refining the researches into human economic behavior, economic inquiries still has not succeeded in overcoming the individualistic approach that characterized orthodox economics, not considering the bio-social variables which co-determine human conduct (and hence her choices and goals), reflecting a self-identity related to the empathetic identification with others. More recently neuroeconomics is taking the research in social economic behavior further, by studying the biological basis of the economic behavior of human being. And on this field of research, Mead-informed neuro-approaches would offer some interesting insights to adequately highlight the organic relation of interdependency between the ‘self’ and others generally attributed to empathic attitude. In particular, a Meadian approach to empathic attitude would reckon with Kirman & Teschl's (2010: 314) hypothesis according to which empathy can be modulated by a number of social-cognitive factors such as emotion regulation and selective attention, as well as the kind of experiences individuals have lived through and their closeness to certain people. “This would suggest that empathy is situation-specific or at least context dependent” (Kirman & Teschl 2010: 314).

The Meadian approach to empathetic identification would therefore contribute to sketch an integrated account of human economic behavior which would prevent the reductionist approach of neuroeconomics overtaking at the same time the tension between self-interest preference and other-regarding preferences in conduct. The basic idea of such an account would take steps from Mead's ideas that each individual, since her birth, make experiences of the others through gestural and vocal mimetic interactions that stimulate his innate biological apparatus (Mead 1934: 138n).

**Exploring the materiality of meaning production: The case of G.H. Mead’s *Mind, Self, and Society***

Dr. Filipe Carreira da Silva

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Traditional approaches to sociological thought tend to focus either on abstract concepts (e.g. “social order/change”, “division of labour”, “class”), on the seminal contributions of sociological classics (e.g. Durkheim as the founding father of functionalist sociology), or on the impact of external historical or socioeconomic factors upon these thinkers (e.g. the extent to which classical sociology is a scientific response to the “social question” raised by the Industrial Revolution). I do not claim that these approaches are inappropriate and should be discarded. Rather, my claim is that we have much to gain if we enrich our methodological palette with a pragmatic perspective. A pragmatic approach focuses not so much on theories (nor on particular concepts or “central problems”), or theorists (nor in the conditions under which they work), as on theorizing. Central to the practice of theorizing are the documents in which it is inscribed and made publicly available. In sociology, the central documents tend not to be short-lived journal articles (with a few notable exceptions, such as Merton’s 1938 “Social Structure and Anomie” or Granovetter’s 1973 “The Strength of Weak Ties”), but certain research monographs. These iconic books travel through time and space, transmuting into different editions and languages, performing such diverse functions as knowledge transmission, disciplinary identity or exemplary research, and thus giving coherence to the sociological enterprise. Tracing the iterative career of the restricted canon of “sociological classics” promises to unveil the crucial mechanisms, institutions and actors of each of the main variants of sociological thought that together make sociology the discipline we know today. This is no mere antiquarian exercise, however. First, only by examining all of the main sociological traditions – and not only symbolic interactionism, the one stemming more directly from American philosophical pragmatism – can one aspire to build a synthesis of sociological theorizing regarding moral beliefs such as the human rights utopia. Second, the hiatus between history and theory is superseded insofar as this exercise will show the extent to which canon-building is as much about the discipline’s past as it is about current options and projected futures. In particular, we propose to address the sociological canon as a sort of inverted utopia, a projection into the past of the discipline of each generation’s future aspirations. Our choice of sociological classics, and how to approach them, is thus as much about the past of sociology as it is about our goal of building a novel sociological approach.

If focusing on books to study sociological thought is an innovative methodology within sociology, it is less so from the perspective of other disciplines. Indeed such a focus on books as key objects of study for those interested in examining the circulation and impact of ideas is a well-trodden terrain, ensuring the project’s feasibility. It has close affinities with a number of other well-proven approaches, including book history (Darnton 1982), intellectual history (Skinner 1969), conceptual history (Koselleck [1979] 2004, 2002), cultural anthropology (Geertz 1983), sociology of texts (McKenzie 1999), and social studies of science (Latour and Woolgar 1979). More important, this paper builds upon my previous work on the history of *Mind, Self and Society*, a posthumously published book by G.H. Mead, published in 2011 in the *Journal of Classical Sociology* (see Silva and Vieira 2011). Here, however, I go beyond that paper in exploring the materiality of meaning production by reference not only to Mead’s own work, but also to D.F. McKenzie’s pragmatist bibliography. I complement these pragmatic approaches with a genealogical focus as to expose disciplinary power struggles over the control of meaning production. The outcome is a better appreciation and understanding of the relative agency of non-human entities (in this case, a book) in their entanglements with human agents in the production of the social.

**Space, Epistemology, Touch: Three Meadian Meditations**

Dr. Lenart Škof

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Some recent developments in the scholarship devoted to G.H. Mead’s philosophy have raised his thought to the equal standing regarding other key philosophers not only of the American pragmatism but also in the context of Western philosophical tradition. Apart from the undisputed role that Mead’s thought had in social sciences, it is clear that his philosophy has much to offer to some key contemporary epistemological and ethical problems. Erkki Kilpinen, for example, has recently convincingly argued that Mead would need to be recognized as the forerunner of Lakoff’s and Johnson’s philosophical project (*Philosophy in the Flesh*, 1999) and called Mead an empirically responsible philosopher. With this and other similar attempts Mead’s philosophy became a part of the epistemological tradition dealing with the embodied mind. Still others have read Mead in an intercultural key or discussed some interesting comparative possibilities on the attunement of the body or the mind–body problem (e.g. Steve Odin’s paper on Mead from *Philosophy of East and West*, 1992, or the usages of Shigenori Nagatomo’s thought for his philosophy). But the most important contribution of Mead in philosophy is undoubtedly his theory of intersubjectivity. In our presentation I wish to offer three epistemological meditations on this Meadian theme.

In one of my previous analyzes of Mead (*Breath of Proximity: Intersubjectivity, Ethics, and Peace,* 2014) I offered an interpretation of the ethical temporality in Mead. I elaborated on the temporality of gesture and tried to approach the problem of intersubjectivity by relating Mead’s philosophy to Kierkegaard’s and Derrida’s concepts of subjectivity and time. I argued that only by reflecting upon the inner logic of ethical temporality we can balance the inner structure of his thought which can be done precisely by securing the ethical interval of *interiority* as a philosophical core of Mead’s philosophy versus the role that *exteriority* and social self played in various psychological or sociological interpretations of his thought. Now, in this attempt, I wish to develop this argument further by introducing the topics of *space* and *touch* into the discussion of Mead’s philosophy of intersubjectivity. For this purpose I will offer three Meadian meditations by reading Ludwig Feuerbach’s, Jean-Louis Chrétien’s and Watsuji Tetsurō’s texts and by relating them to Mead’s original inception of the philosophy of intersubjectivity.

Similar to the role of Mead in the tradition of philosophy, also Ludwig Feuerbach was long considered to be a transitional philosopher, to whom many authors ascribe significance for the later development of certain philosophical topics such as criticism of religion, materialism, sensibility, etc., but who nevertheless remains a thinker to whom the Western tradition did not wish to award a place of honor along with other philosophical giants of the West. But with the epistemological preeminence of *skin* and *touch* and his original philosophy of sensibility, Feuerbach paved the way towards the first Western theory of intersubjectivity. In this analysis I will delineate the epistemological space of sensitivity in Feuerbach and compare it with Mead’s genesis of an intersubjective self – in terms of gestures and as based on a primacy of the “contact experience” in Mead. In his “phenomenology” of gesture Mead ascribes great importance to hand, which also opens interesting possibilities of interpreting him as a “haptic philosopher” (a remark by his student David L. Miller; note also an elaboration of a “hand” in Heidegger – as a gesture, carrying out the bodily felt dimensions of meaning, as David Kleinberg-Levin asserts). On the other hand, we have Jean-Louis Chrétien, who in his *Call and Response* (1992) deals precisely with the bodily scheme as already proposed by some interprets of Mead. Chrétien’s epistemological credo (“I never start by saying ‘I’, I start by being ‘thou-ed’ by the world”), together with his rehabilitation of the touch (and space) is what I find as a most interesting possibility today for extending both Feuerbachian and Meadian concepts of self to contemporary philosophy of intersubjectivity. But Chrétien, in the ethical line of his argument, also mentions a related ‘nothingness’ of self as a possibility of negating the old Biblical saying “I am, and there is no one besides me” (Isaiah 47:10). Here, both in his concept of touch as well as nothingness of the self, interesting intercultural possibilities open and it is through Watsuji Tetsurō’s thought that I intend, finally, to show the importance of the concept of *aidagara* (“relatedness”, “betweeness”) understood both as space *and* touch/contact for the understanding of Mead’s philosophy.