4.3C: Mead

For Mead, the self arises out of the social act of communication, which is the basis for socialization.

Learning Objectives

• Discuss Mead’s theory of social psychology in terms of two concepts – pragmatism and social behaviorism

Key Points

• George Herbert Mead was an American philosopher, sociologist, and psychologist and one of several distinguished pragmatists.
• The two most important roots of Mead’s work are the philosophy of pragmatism and social behaviorism.
• Pragmatism is a wide-ranging philosophical position that states that people define the social and physical “objects” they encounter in the world according to their use for them.
• One of his most influential ideas was the emergence of mind and self from the communication process between organisms, discussed in the book, *Mind, Self and Society*, also known as social behaviorism.

Key Terms

• **symbolic interactionism**: Symbolic interactionism is the study of the patterns of communication, interpretation, and adjustment between individuals.
• **social behaviorism**: Discussed in the book, *Mind, Self and Society*, social behaviorism refers to the emergence of mind and self from the communication process between organisms.
• **pragmatism**: The theory that problems should be met with practical solutions rather than ideological ones; a
George Herbert Mead was an American philosopher, sociologist, and psychologist, primarily affiliated with the University of Chicago, where he was one of several distinguished pragmatists. He is regarded as one of the founders of social psychology and the American sociological tradition in general.

The two most important roots of Mead’s work, and of symbolic interactionism in general, are the philosophy of pragmatism and social behaviorism. Pragmatism is a wide ranging philosophical position from which several aspects of Mead’s influences can be identified. There are four main tenets of pragmatism: First, to pragmatists true reality does not exist “out there” in the real world, it “is actively created as we act in and toward the world. Second, people remember and base their knowledge of the world on what has been useful to them and are likely to alter what no longer “works. ” Third, people define the social and physical “objects” they encounter in the world according to their use for them. Lastly, if we want to understand actors, we must base that understanding on what people actually do. In Pragmatism nothing practical or useful is held to be necessarily true, nor is anything which helps to survive merely in the short term. For example, to believe my cheating spouse is faithful may help me feel better now, but it is certainly not useful from a more long-term perspective because it doesn’t align with the facts (and is therefore not true).

George Herbert Mead: George Herbert Mead (1863–1931) was an American philosopher, sociologist, and psychologist, primarily affiliated with the University of Chicago, where he was one of several distinguished pragmatists. He is regarded as one of the founders of social psychology and the American sociological tradition in general.

Mead was a very important figure in twentieth century social philosophy. One of his most influential ideas was the emergence of mind and self from the communication process between organisms, discussed in the book, *Mind, Self and Society*, also known as social behaviorism. For Mead, mind arises out of the social act of communication. Mead’s concept of the social act is relevant, not only to his theory of mind, but also to all facets of his social philosophy. His theory of “mind, self, and society” is, in effect, a philosophy of the act from the standpoint of a social process involving
the interaction of many individuals, just as his theory of knowledge and value is a philosophy of the act from the standpoint of the experiencing individual in interaction with an environment.

Mead is a major American philosopher by virtue of being, along with John Dewey, Charles Peirce, and William James, one of the founders of pragmatism. He also made significant contributions to the philosophies of nature, science, and history, to philosophical anthropology, and to process philosophy. Dewey and Alfred North Whitehead considered Mead a thinker of the first rank. He is a classic example of a social theorist whose work does not fit easily within conventional disciplinary boundaries.