

Creativity in George Herbert Mead

Edited by Pete A.Y. Gunter

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George Herbert Mead was undoubtedly one of America's most creative social theorists, and his emphasis on temporality, emergence, process, and novelty place creativity at the core of his perspective. Thus, the 1969 symposium that this volume resulted from adopted a fitting standpoint from which to address Mead's social philosophy. The introduction by Gunter, the featured essay by Miller, and the subsequent responses to Miller's discussion which constitute nearly one-half of the volume ambitiously attempt to explicate the place of creativity in the work of Mead.

Due to the complexity and density of Mead's legacy, it is often difficult for the novice to apprehend concepts and positions that are fundamental to an adequate understanding of Mead's work. Segments of this volume provide succinct discussions of some difficult concepts and as a consequence could aid the comprehension of more intricate primary material and its interpretations. Gunter's introductory statement provides a clear summary of the social nature of symbols, the relational and processual nature of mind and self, and the importance of role taking. The discussion of social behaviorism, as Mead used it, also has merit. A point in favor of that particular discussion is that it distinguishes Mead's behavioristic standpoint from the "Off with their heads" behaviorism advocated by Watson. This is commendable in that the two positions are often equated, despite the fact that Mead explicitly rejected Watson's psychological reductionism.

Miller's essay, which is the nucleus of the volume, also provides a compact and succinct discussion of central but intricate and complicated features of Mead's work. In the beginning of his essay, he addresses the centrality of the social act. His discussion of the principle of sociality, which is an essential part of Mead's theory, is particularly well stated and could serve as a foundation for grasping more elaborated and complete discussions of this focal concept.

Although his ambitious attempt to explicate Mead's theory of the physical object is commendable, there are two flaws in the discussion. First, it is ambiguous and obscure at points. Second, the claim is made that "no one has discussed Mead's theory of the physical object" (p. 15). This is not the case. The claim is perhaps excusable in Miller's essay, since the symposium was held in 1969. However, there has been extensive treatment of this in the years between the symposium and the publication of the book. The editor should have addressed this in his introductory comments about Miller's treatment of the nature of physical objects.

An additional editing feature that detracts from the general quality of the volume is the absence of connective discussions linking the comments and final questions and answers to one another, to the featured essay, and to the central theme of creativity. The second half of the volume which consists of comments and a question and answer period has a disjointed quality due to the transcript format. This is particularly problematic in the final few pages of the book which consists of questions and answers. There is little of substance in that segment and some comments are not only irrelevant, but useless. For example, in one series of exchanges between two participants, one announces that his head aches. Some issues are raised in that segment, but, the editor provides no discussion that relates them to the theme of creativity. Instead, the transcript provides one line exchanges among those that attended the session of the type that often characterize the final phases of sessions. The theme of creativity disappears, as does coherence.

The prepared and lengthier comments that respond directly to the featured essay by Miller do raise some useful points. Comments offered by Morris, Reck, Boyer, and Weinstein specifically address the theme of creativity. Reck, Boyer, and Weinstein develop points about creativity provided by Miller and contribute provocative conceptualizations of their own. Morris addresses the issue of creativity and critiques Miller for inadequately clarifying the term "creativity."

Morris, perhaps, identifies the most serious flaw in this volume. Neither Gunter nor Miller specify the meaning of creativity. As Morris notes, Miller seems to associate creativity with temporality, process, and emergence, but the relationships remain unspecified. Related to this vagueness is the lack of centrality of what the title indicates as the central theme of the volume. At times the issue of creativity is tangential to the discussion; at other points it disappears completely.

In summary, then, while this volume has some merit in that it provides some succinct summaries of complex concepts in Mead's work that may assist those interested in perusing primary materials, it does not achieve the specified goal of elaborating the place of creativity in the work of G.H. Mead. The effort, however, is commendable and will hopefully inspire further investigation.