

PHILOSOPHY IN THE LIGHT OF SCIENCE

Prof. G. H. Mead's "Philosophy of the Present"

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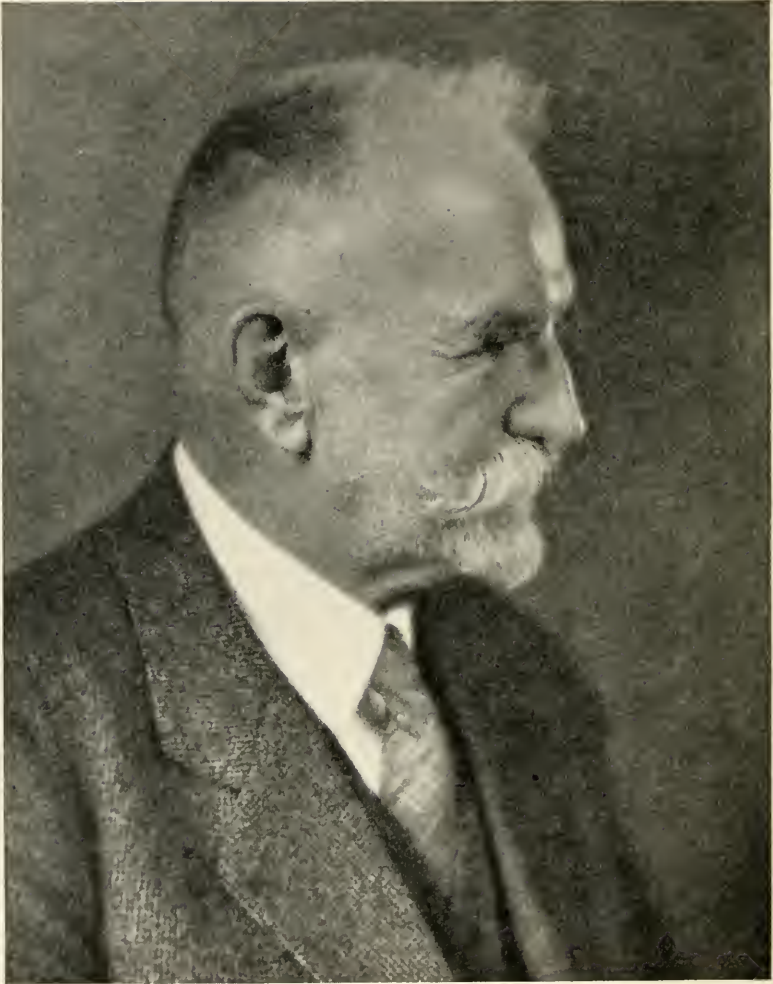
THERE are philosophers and philosophers. The late Professor George Herbert Mead—whom, by the way, the writer knew intimately for over thirty years—was a philosopher and an effective and inspiring professor of philosophy, but he was also a metaphysician and a life-long student of the exact sciences. His position in American philosophy was quite unique, therefore, and his sudden death last year was a real tragedy in the realm of American thought and speculation.

It is fortunate, however, that Prof. Mead, who was an extremely modest man, with an overdeveloped faculty for self-criticism, was invited to deliver the third series of lectures on the Paul Carus Foundation. The volume comprising these lectures, as well as some additional essays, now published by The Open Court Publishing Company, under the title "The Philosophy of the Present" gives the public interested in philosophy, ethics and social psychology a fair and adequate summary of some fundamental and fruitful aspects of Prof. Mead's total contribution to American philosophy.

To understand and appreciate the importance of this volume, it is necessary to bear in mind the interesting fact that Mr. Mead was profoundly impressed and influenced by modern science and modern metaphysics, and felt that the moral and social implications and bearings of such revolutionary ideas as Relativity, the Quantum theory, Indeterminism, Emergent Evolution, ought to be traced and elucidated for the benefit of philosophy and progressive thought and action.

Prof. Mead did not agree with Huxley that there was an irreconcilable conflict between Nature and civilized Humanity. He was certain that any notable advance in the interpretation of nature, or reality, must find reflection in the interpretation of human phenomena.

It cannot be truthfully said that Prof. Mead succeeded in constructing a synthetic philosophical system based on modern science and modern metaphysics. He made no such claim, and perhaps the time has not yet come for so stupendous and ambitious an attempt. We must not overlook the collapse of Spencer's Synthetic Philosophy.



GEORGE HERBERT MEAD

Prof. Mead assured the writer that Spencer was right in contending that philosophy today had no function or mission other than that of co-ordinating, fusing and building up a synthesis resting on and fashioned by the established truths and generalizations of all the sciences. But Spencer was hasty and premature, and Prof. Mead profited by the mistakes, crudities and arbitrary, illogical conclusions of that thinker. What we have in "The Philosophy of the Present"—the Carus lectures and supplementary chapters or fragments—is a valuable, seminal series of propositions, hints and suggestions that challenge attention and demand further study and elaboration. In other words, Prof. Mead has left us a number of arresting, well-defined problems, together with pregnant conceptions, intimations and a definite point of view.

The subject-matter of Prof. Mead's lectures, as Prof. Murphy, in his admirable and lucid introduction to the volume, points out, is divided as follows: First, there is a theory about the nature of time and emergence; second, there is a theory about Relativity and its social implications, and, thirdly, a theory of emergence as social and of sociality as a character of emergent evolution.

It may be stated at once that Prof. Mead's work has conferred new dignity upon and considerably enhanced the philosophical prestige of Pragmatism.

Take the following passage from the chapter on "The Implications of the Self":

"The functional boundaries of the present are those of its undertaking—of what we are doing. The pasts and futures indicated by such activity belong to the present. They arise out of it and are tested and criticised by it. The undertakings belong however, with varying degrees of intimacy, within larger activities, so that we seldom have the sense of a set of isolated presents. . . .

"For instance, the present history of the sun is relevant to the undertaking of unraveling the atom and, given another analysis of the atom, the sun will have another history and the universe will be launched into a new future. The pasts and the futures are implications of what is being undertaken and carried out in our laboratories."

Other writers have emphasized the dependence of the past upon the present in the sense that our *appraisal* of past events—laws, reforms, revolutions, inventions—undergoes changes and, there-

fore, our pictures of the past vary. Prof. Mead, plows deeper and considers the "functional" boundaries of the present.

But the extension of the present into the past and the past into the present does not preclude the idea of novelty and emergence. The past does not *fully* determine the present. "Because," says Prof. Mead, "an animal is both alive and a part of a physico-chemical world, that life is an emergent and extends its influence to the environment about it. It is because the conscious individual is both an animal and is also able to look before and after that consciousness emerges with the meanings and values with which it informs the world."

Perhaps Prof. Mead's most original and daring generalization concerns sociality as a principle. Under Newtonian relativity, he shows, sociality was confined to thought, but modern science tends to prove that there is sociality in nature—in this sense, that "the emergence of novelty requires that objects be at once both in the old system and in that which arises from the new," for "relativity reveals a situation within which the object must be contemporaneously in different systems to be what it is in either." And, clearly, if we postulate, on the one hand, sociality throughout nature and, on the other, emergent evolution, the claim is not too extravagant that the highest and finest product of the whole evolutionary process is the ideal of human solidarity, human co-operation, justice and altruism.

"The appearance of mind," says Prof. Mead "is only the culmination of that sociality which is found throughout the universe, its culmination lying in the fact that the organism, by occupying the attitudes of others, can occupy its own attitude in the rôle of another."

Prof. Mead continues the argument thus:

We human beings are members of societies, or systematic orders of individuals, and our activities are differentiated—perhaps excessively differentiated—under our present civilization. But the social structure is reflected in each of us. It is because of this structure that we can take the parts of others while taking our own respective parts. There results the part "of the generalized other." Thought, ideas, communication, imply individual realization and spontaneous, as well as deliberate, manifestation of generalized otherness.

Thus, according to Prof. Mead, there is no break in evolution. The science of social psychology continues and carries on the work of individual psychology, of animal psychology, of biology and of physics, mathematics and astro-physics. True, we must not overrate our human achievements. We still have long distances to traverse. But we know our goal, and we are justified in affirming that science and philosophy countenance that goal. "If we can bring people together," writes Prof. Mead, "so that they can enter into each other's lives, they will inevitably have a common object, which will control their common conduct."

Examples of the gratifying, if limited, success of the effort to bring people together and substitute beneficial co-operation for wasteful antagonism Prof. Mead finds in the league of nations, the world court, the Geneva arms conferences, and like developments.

Thus the metaphysician and the philosopher in Prof. Mead's rich personality find themselves in harmony with the humanitarian and pragmatist. It will not do to allege that Prof. Mead reached conclusions by the process of "wishful thinking," or that he knew in advance the results he was bound to reach. Those who knew him well never doubted his intellectual integrity or his interest in pure science. If his strictly scientific studies had led him to the pessimistic conclusion that moral progress, human brotherhood, true internationalism were idle dreams and illusions, he would not have hesitated to accept the painful truth. But Einstein, Minkowski, Planck, Whitehead, Bergson, Meyerson and other thinkers whose thought challenged his attention convinced him that a correct, profound interpretation of Nature in its totality, and of the actual relations between the present, in which we live and move, and the past and future, furnish adequate support for his theory of the emergence and growth of sociality—of the certainty that the human self, which is a social self, will increasingly identify itself with larger groups and will find itself completed and fulfilled in that larger self.

It is the duty of American thought to test, verify and expand Prof. Mead's stimulating contributions to philosophy and social psychology.