

THE PHILOSOPHY OF THE ACT

By

GEORGE HERBERT MEAD

Late Professor of Philosophy, The University of Chicago

EDITED, WITH INTRODUCTION, BY

CHARLES W. MORRIS

Associate Professor of Philosophy, The University of Chicago

IN COLLABORATION WITH

JOHN M. BREWSTER, PH.D.

United States Department of Agriculture, Washington, D.C.

ALBERT M. DUNHAM, PH.D.

Formerly Instructor in Philosophy, Howard University

DAVID L. MILLER, PH.D.

Assistant Professor of Philosophy, University of Texas

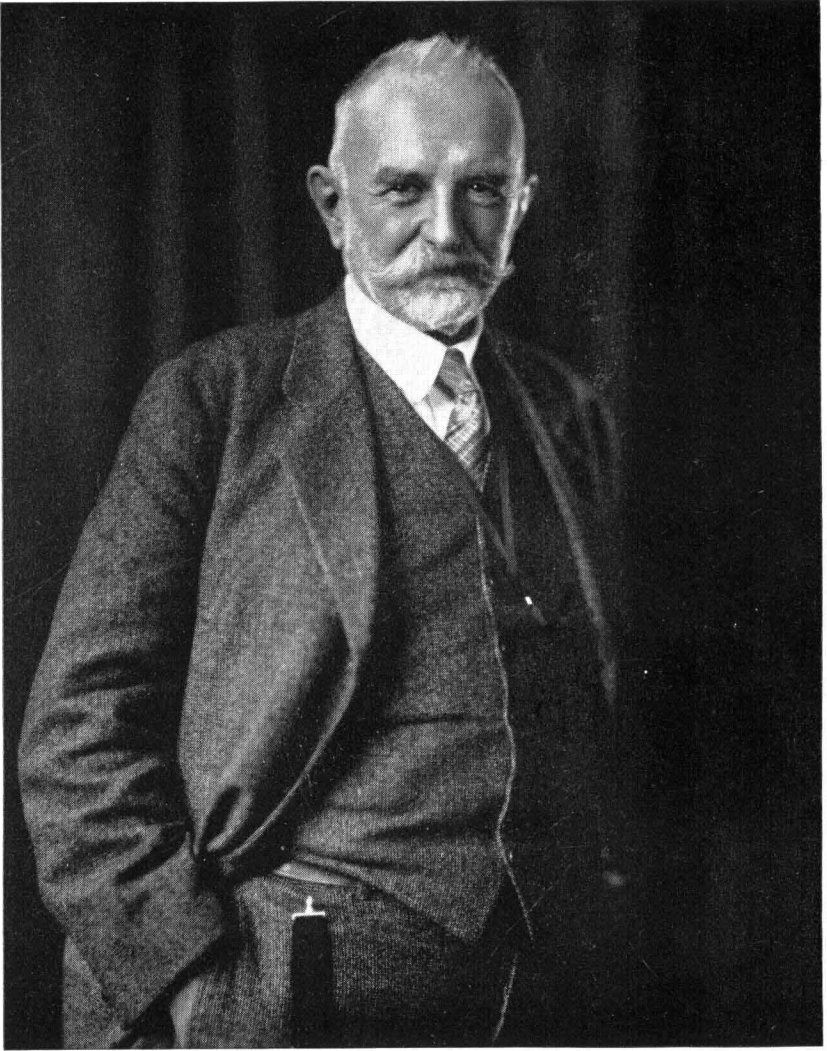


THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS
CHICAGO • ILLINOIS

COPYRIGHT 1938 BY THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. PUBLISHED MAY 1938

* * *

COMPOSED AND PRINTED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS
CHICAGO, ILLINOIS, U.S.A.



GEORGE HERBERT MEAD IN 1927

1863-1931

PREFACE

THIS volume consists almost entirely of unpublished papers which George H. Mead left at his death in 1931. The papers were in varying stages of completeness and differed greatly in importance. There is no evidence that Mr. Mead would have published any of them in the form in which they now stand, and the reader will want to keep this fact in mind. They do, however, represent Mr. Mead's thought in the last ten or fifteen years of his life, and they are extensive enough to allow the partial construction of his largely unwritten philosophical system. They furnish the necessary supplementation for the full understanding of his condensed lectures published under the title of *The Philosophy of the Present* (Chicago: Open Court Publishing Co., 1932). Such considerations account for the present attempt to assemble the unpublished writings in a somewhat systematic form.

The reader who wishes to deal only with the best may be recommended to read in order Essays II, III, IV, VII, XV, XVI, XX, XXI, and XXVIII. There is obviously much repetition in the volume as a whole and much that Mr. Mead would have omitted or changed, but it was felt that the discerning reader would prefer in the main to make his own selection and would be able to temper his evaluations in terms of the varying degrees of excellency of the material itself. Essays II, III, IV, and XXX (Sec. F) are consecutive chapters of an unfinished book, while Essay XXI (called by Mr. Mead "Mind and Body") seems to have been the beginning of a systematic presentation of his views. All titles, including that of the volume itself, are due to the editors, with the single exception of the title of Essay XXVII. Footnotes have been added by the editors. Except for a large body of student notes, which contain much of interest on Mr. Mead's interpretation of the history of ideas,

often signalized by a contrast of physical and psychological environment, since from the point of view of physics organisms are simply among the physical objects in the world, while from the point of view of the organism the world is that which stands over against it as the object of its action. The relation between these two points of view is a central problem of the present volume.

In the 1900 article Mead seeks to determine the nature and interrelations of the philosophical disciplines when seen from the focus of the act. Although in the article Mead states many of his most characteristic positions, and even though its conception of the dialectic of the act provides the key to the present organization of his hitherto unpublished writings, the organization as there outlined has not been closely adhered to in the following pages. And this for many reasons: Mead's whole intellectual life was an amplification of the suggestions there made; the article is couched in a terminology that Mead gradually and in part relinquished; it has only the barest hint of the social conception of the act which was to result from his pioneer work in social psychology;¹ and it does not include the elaborate statement of scientific cosmology and categorial analysis which he later developed. In a sense Mead had returned in the later years of his life to an intensive development of the task set at the beginning of the century—a return made richer by the intervening elaboration of his novel and profound social psychology and his constant contact with diverse fields of scientific thought. The present volume aims to reconstruct out of Mead's unpublished writings this amplified version of the philosophy of the act.

Mead came early in the course of his development to the conviction that the basic act is a social act, that is, an act that involves "the co-operation of more than one individual, and whose object as defined by the act . . . is a social object. I mean by a social object one that answers to all parts of the com-

¹ This social psychology is found in the volume *Mind, Self, and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934).

plex act, though these parts are found in the conduct of different individuals."² The act of an individual organism is an abstracted fragment of such a social act, though, of course, a legitimate object of study. Mead's social psychology shows the method by which the individual members of human society are able through communication to take over into themselves the social act in which they play a part—a part which they themselves can control in terms of their now understood relation to the whole. Mind, as involving the symbolic internalization of the complete or social act, and the self, as an object that has itself for an object, are on this view seen as social emergents made possible through the process of linguistic communication within the social act—a position which Mead has elaborated in the greatest detail in *Mind, Self, and Society*.

Whether the social act be considered or the action of any component organism, certain general stages of the act are discernible: the stages of impulse, perception, manipulation, and consummation. The hungry animal has an impulse to eat; this impulse in turn determines what stands out as a distant stimulus to guide the ongoing action; the object that is approached is clawed, bitten, downed; with eating the impulse reaches its consummation. And similar examples could be chosen at the level of complex social organisms.

It is implied in Mead's account that the act may take place at either a reflective or an unreflective level. The pragmatic thesis that thought is a problem solving activity—that all thinking is instrumental to the consummation of an interest or impulse—is accepted. It is further implied that only man—and he through society—has developed the mechanism by which a blocked impulse can be dealt with reflectively. In man, through the emergence of mind as the operation of language symbols, the

² "The Genesis of the Self and Social Control," *International Journal of Ethics*, XXXV (1924-25), 263 and 264. Mead writes of Dewey: "In the *Outlines of Ethics* we find the will, the idea, and the consequences all placed inside of the act, and the act itself placed only within the larger activity of the individual in society" ("The Philosophies of Royce, James, and Dewey in Their American Setting," *ibid.*, XL [1930], 227, reprinted in *John Dewey: The Man and His Philosophy* [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1930], p. 100).

checked impulse is liberated by the individual indicating to himself the possible causes of the trouble, by setting up possible hypotheses to guide action, and by the testing of these hypotheses through action. It is in terms of the social dimension of communication that Mead traces in detail the process by which the enduring thing, the categories, and the cosmos implicated by science arise within the act. Here for the first time is sketched an elaborated pragmatic philosophy of science and the cosmology which results when the scientific world at an instant is seen as an instrumental abstraction in relation to the developing act. In man, animal impulse becomes enormously elaborated and intelligently guided, sensitivity to stimuli becomes the perception of enduring objects, manipulation is elaborated into the physical world of science, and consummation shares in the elaboration of impulse and its illumination through reason. Animals live in a world of events; man lives in a world of common meanings—and meaning for Mead is socially generated and sustained.

It is not difficult to see how the various branches of philosophy could be fitted into this pattern of the act. Philosophy itself "is concerned with the import . . . of the presence in the universe of human reflective intelligence."³ Logic becomes the analysis of the reflective act, deduction involving the confrontation of experience with an elaboration of existent meanings, induction involving the building-up of new meanings where old ones are not adequate; epistemology is transformed into an empirical study of the way knowing proceeds; the history of philosophy is interpreted—as is all history—in terms of the way thought extends memory for the guidance of the present; the philosophy of mind arises through a consideration of the manner in which the symbolical and the subjective arise as a stage in the reconstruction of the act; the philosophy of science is concerned with the genesis of scientific categories within the act and the relation of the world as presented by science to the world of common perception and the demands of action; metaphysics—

³ This volume, Essay XXVIII, p. 517.

when not used in the deprecatory sense of the artificial banishment of a problem by denying the reality of one member of the conflict and exalting the other—can be only the most general description of the world as it reveals itself in increasingly comprehensive social acts; axiology is grounded on a consideration of the consummatory or value phase of the act, the aesthetic being the penetration of consummation into early stages of the act, while the moral is the endeavor to achieve the maximum of value at the level of the social; education philosophically considered is seen as the process of internalizing the social act within the separate individuals and creating in them social interests; the philosophy of history is revealed as a consideration of the methods by which societies have sought to control themselves and their environments in the service of their basic needs and impulses; and the philosophy of religion is transformed into an empirical investigation of the nature of religious objects and the function they perform in the value system of society.

It is in some such way that Mead is able to find a place within the structure of the social act for all major philosophical interests. Though the details are not all worked out, it is difficult to see what more could be done in general in the way of indicating within the sociobiological framework of pragmatic thought the systematic interrelations of the perceptual, the conceptual, and the axiological. It constitutes a major achievement within the pragmatic movement and exhibits Mead as a thinker of the magnitude of Peirce, James, and Dewey.

2. In the volume, *Movements of Thought in the Nineteenth Century*, Mead stresses two of the circumstances leading to the appearance of pragmatism as a movement: one, the study of animal behavior which resulted from Darwin's work; the other, the acceptance of the empirical method of science.⁴ Combining these two points of view, pragmatism can be regarded as a biological (or biosocial) empiricism. It is an amplified empiricism which has become aware of the category of action and the relation of thought to behavior. It is, on the one hand, the

⁴ Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1936, p. 351.

philosophical generalization of Darwinism and, on the other, the acceptance of the method of science as the method of philosophy.

Various emphases on these two (empirical and biological) dimensions are possible, and it is plausible that many of the ambiguities of pragmatism have their explanation in this fact. Thus a predominantly empirical emphasis will point out that organisms are given in a world along with other things and are to be granted no privileged place in an empirical cosmology; while the predominantly biological emphasis will stress the fact that the world which appears for observation is a function of impulses seeking expression—and this point of view, carried to its extreme, would result in some sort of metaphysics of action, a biologized version of Leibniz and Hegel. On the first emphasis the organism is one unprivileged object in a world of objects; on the second, other objects appear only at stages in organic activity.

Both points of view are to be found in Mead, as they must be in any pragmatist, and Mead devotes his major effort to their reconciliation. Mead undoubtedly emphasized the biological pole more than the empirical. This is especially so in the *Mind, Self, and Society* volume; it is less true in the present volume, where the scales are kept more evenly balanced: here we see the world as it appears over against the social act, and it is within this world that science is interpreted. In any case, the reconciliation of the biological and empirical phases of pragmatic thought constitutes for Mead a central problem.

The distinction under consideration throws light on, and may be illustrated by, Mead's treatment of the concept of truth.⁵ Stress the empirical motif, and truth becomes an adjective descriptive of a meaning that has been verified by the appearance of what was meant; stress the biologism, and a meaning becomes true when it leads to the ongoing of the blocked conduct in whose service it is functioning. That Mead placed in the forefront the latter doctrine is evident from his article, "A

⁵ James's view of truth would be equally suitable.

Pragmatic Theory of Truth";⁶ that he wished also to insist on the confrontation of meanings by what is meant is clear from the present volume. The statement in *The Movements of Thought in the Nineteenth Century* that pragmatism brings its two historical causes together by recognizing that the verification which science demands is the ongoing of the blocked conduct⁷ indicates the direction of Mead's attempt to locate verification in the perceptual world and to interpret perception itself as a function of conduct.

It is to be noted that both of the factors which Mead mentions in the genesis of pragmatism are scientific—one based on scientific content, the other on scientific method. More than once in his lectures he remarked that "since Descartes science has determined the direction of philosophical speculation." Mead himself made noteworthy contributions to social psychology, and he followed without reservations the implications for philosophy of the acceptance of the method of science. His novel theory of the past as functioning in and being tested by the reconstruction of a present⁸ results from his attempt to apply literally his instrumentalism and the experimental method to the field of history. His own lectures abounded in original and subtle interpretations of the place of science in the history of Western thought, and something of this, the third (the historical) dimension of his thought—quite on a par with his work as social psychologist and as systematic philosopher—appears in the volume *Movements of Thought in the Nineteenth Century*.⁹ Many of the implications which Mead draws from the acceptance of the attitude and the results of science will be noticed elsewhere in the Introduction and in the text itself. Two may

⁶ *Studies in the Nature of Truth* ("University of California Publications in Philosophy," Vol. XI [Berkeley, 1929]), pp. 65-88.

⁷ "The testing in its [the idea's] working-out means the setting-free of inhibited acts and processes" (p. 351).

⁸ See *The Philosophy of the Present* (Chicago: Open Court Publ. Co., 1932), chap. i; "The Nature of the Past," in *Essays in Honor of John Dewey* (New York, 1929); and this volume, Essay VI.

⁹ See in this connection, "Scientific Method and Individual Thinker," in the co-operative volume, *Creative Intelligence* (New York, 1917).

be pointed out here, and the first—the implications for logic—only briefly.

3. To the corpus of logical material, Mead makes no contributions, and the lack of a detailed analysis of logic and mathematics is perhaps the most noticeable gap in his systematic inquiries. Nevertheless, Mead's mode of thought is not without significance for the foundations of logic. He develops what few empiricists have done: a theory of the universal¹⁰ adequate to an explanation of logical and mathematical concepts, as well as to the objectivity and communicability of scientific knowledge in general. He thus does something toward the creation of a theory of symbolism upon which logic and mathematics can rest—though Peirce had, of course, done much more. At the same time, this theory of universality is set within a philosophy of becoming, so that the existence of logical structure is seen to be compatible with an emergent metaphysics. A logical structure is interpreted as the structure of events in so far as abstraction is made from their temporal dimension, that is, in so far as a timeless space is squeezed out from the space-time character of the moving world. Mead offers some suggestions as to the interpretation of implication, probability, possibility, and necessity in terms of the act. A view of logic as the general theory of the reflective act would seem to accord with his position. His analysis of the reflective act is essentially the same as Dewey's¹¹ description of the stages of the problem, the data, the hypothesis, deduction, and verification. Deduction is seen to function within the wider process of reflection, and no sharp line is set up between the abstract or formal sciences and the natural or empirical ones. The ground is laid for exhibiting the empirical and pragmatic context of the formal sciences,¹² but the survey is not in detail carried out.

¹⁰ *Mind, Self, and Society*, § 12, and Introduction, Sec. VI. Cf. this volume, Essay XX and Essay XXXI, G, 5.

¹¹ In *Essays in Experimental Logic* (Chicago, 1916) and *How We Think* (Boston 1910).

¹² See in this connection Dewey's article, "What Are Universals?" *Journal of Philosophy*, XXXIII (1936), 281 ff.

The epistemological implications of the methodology of science deserve fuller discussion. Mead is particularly impressed by the fact that the scientist, whose particular business is to know, has no generalized problem of knowledge. To know, for him, is not the general problem as to how to get from an uncertain world of effects produced in the individual to the world beyond, which is supposed to cause those effects, for science always has an unquestioned world of existence and of meaning within which its problems appear and are tested—though any part of this world may in turn become an object of the knowing process.

Further, the world within which science operates is a common or social world; even observations to be acceptable must be confirmed “in the mouths of two witnesses at least,” and it is into this common world that the solution of the problems which appear to and are tested by individuals must fit. To know for the scientist is not to have existences and meanings given but to initiate a process of inquiry concerning some portion of the common world when that portion is no longer a suitable cue to action, an inquiry which then proceeds through the formation of hypothetical objects and their testing in the unquestioned world of things which surrounds the problematic area. In the most subtle theorizing and testing, Mead insists, the instruments and laboratory and fellow-workers of the scientist are there as unproblematic, are there as a world of things in which all theories are put to the test. Knowledge is not contemplation of meaning or existence but discovery of the unknown through hypotheses put to test by action in an unquestioned world of things.

This position would be acceptable only if experience itself had a social dimension, and that this is so is one of Mead’s basic and most fruitful claims. He not only argues that observation never reveals the self of the observer on a different status than surrounding things or persons but concentrates his efforts on showing how the subjective or mental appears within the common

world as a stage of its reconstruction:¹³ it is the stage of hypothetical objects or meanings which must be brought to the bar of observation to test their right to membership in the common world.

The private, as opposed to the subjective, is that which belongs to the experience of the individual as such. The private is not subjective, since it belongs, as Mead says, to the world that is there, and, as a polar concept, the private has meaning only over against what is common. Just as Mead began his matured social psychology with the social rather than with the individual act, so his cosmology and epistemology begin with an unquestioned world within which the subjective or psychical is set off as the mental or symbolical phase of the act, and the private is interpreted as that portion of experience which belongs to the individual as individual in contrast to that which is common. The error shared by both the traditional rationalists and the empiricists resides in making ubiquitous the spheres of the private and the mental, to the neglect of the common and the unquestioned. When "experience" is used in Lewis' sense as including the given plus interpretation or meaning,¹⁴ the doctrine that experience has both individual and social dimensions implies that there are individual and social aspects of the given, of meaning, and of knowledge.

One wishes that Mead had been the type of mind to elaborate more methodically his conception of social experience, the detailed bearing of his analysis on logical topics, the relation of ongoing behavior and perceptual verification in his concept of truth, and the relation of the individual and social factors in knowledge, but all of those who wish an empiricism richer and more adequate than the truncated empiricism of philosophical tradition will be grateful for the many positive suggestions

¹³ This theory of the mental as the stage of the hypothetical reconstruction of the act is found in "The Definition of the Psychical," *University of Chicago Decennial Publications*, III (1903), 77-112, except that the concept of the act as social has not yet been developed.

¹⁴ *Mind and the World-Order* (New York, 1929).

which Mead's writings offer. It is not to be expected that the new empiricism should immediately stand out for inspection with the clear lines of a classic temple.

II. SCIENCE AND EXPERIENCE

4. There seem to be two types of concepts and corresponding objects. One type refers to perceptual objects, the other to scientific objects. Perceptual objects answer to a complete response (e.g., food-seeking activity) whose phases include locomotion under the control of the distance qualities of an object, manipulation under the added control of the inertial phase of an object, and consummation under the stimulation of those qualities which complete the response in question. On the whole the existence of such perceptual objects is never questioned.¹⁵

Over against the perceptual things of direct experience there are the scientific objects encountered only as objects of thought. Broadly speaking, scientific objects constitute that class of things which only appear as entities of thought. But this is not a complete classification of scientific objects, inasmuch as some perceptual things may never be encountered except as objects of inference. Such, for example, are the other side of the moon and Caesar's crossing of the Rubicon. The objects in these ex-

¹⁵ Some particular sensible feature of perceptual things may become dissociated from a complete object. Such, e.g., is a certain visual shape seen through the mist, so that one is undecided whether this appearance is a man, a stump, or a cow. The dark-gray appearance for the moment exists for the organism not as the quality of an object, for one cannot say this appearance exists as an attribute of a perceptual thing. Obviously under these conditions the visual appearance exists only in relation to the organism; here *esse est percipi*. Only under these circumstances, i.e., when a sensible quality elicits conflicting modes of behavior (as does this appearance, which may be a post-object or man-object), does any perceptual quality become psychical. Most philosophers agree that a sensible quality has a "mental" status only when there is no demonstrable ground for supposing that it exists in relation to any thing except the sensing organism—or, in an older terminology, the "perceiving mind." At any rate, Mead holds that such is the behavioristic condition under which sensible characters of things do become psychical or subjective. Whether Mead has explicitly said so or not it follows that his behavioristic identification of the psychical must reject (1) any form of idealism which maintains that the whole of our sensible world exists only in relation to the perceiving mind; (2) Locke's *type* of distinction between primary and secondary qualities, because this distinction is based on the intrinsic nature of qualities instead of upon their mediating or stimulating function in the complete response to things; and (3) realism in so far as it denies that sensible parts of things are ever psychical.

amples are regarded as perceptual things because if one were at the object in question, one would perceive it. The fact that one cannot traverse the space or time between one's self and an object means that the object can only be inferred, but it does not make such an object a scientific object. Objects which are capable of controlling overt responses if an organism were at the objects, even though the organism can never directly confront them, are still regarded as perceptual objects.

Scientific objects seem to be of two main types. First, there are those entities of thought whose actual existence would involve a contradiction. Such, for example, is a perfect gas as described by Boyle's Law. This law presupposes the existence of bodies which lose no motion as a result of impact, i.e., bodies which are both perfectly elastic and absolutely rigid—which is a manifest contradiction. Also, the existence of free-falling bodies involves a contradiction since all bodies offer friction when in contact and attraction when at a distance from one another. Again, a perfect lever presupposes the absence of friction between the arms and the fulcrum, but for bodies to exist without frictional resistance is contrary to the nature of bodies. There is, then, a class of scientific objects whose nature simply consists of their being formal or logical entities of thought, because the assumption of their actual existence involves a self-contradiction which renders them unthinkable.

Second, there are scientific objects, such as absolute space and time and the space-time of relativity physics, whose actual existence involves no self-contradiction but would contradict the existence of perceptual things as being material things and not mental states.

5. The question arises as to what is the relation between scientific objects and perceptual things. The solution of this problem solely by means of a logical criterion is rendered difficult if not impossible by the fact that any given type of scientific object (e.g., Newtonian concepts of mass, space, and time, and mathematical space-time) may give rise to alternative interpretations of nature each of which may be logically consistent.

Consequently, reason cannot offer grounds as to why one assumption should be accepted rather than another. Hence, the criterion of selection is nonrational. That is, our ground for selecting some alternative is to be found in what our overt behavior accepts as real. We accept as real the conditions which control our responses. Mead, as we shall see, refuses to assume any existence whose reality implies the unreality of perceived things, since these very things control not only overt measurements of the scientist but every scientific decision, such as the acceptance or rejection of any hypothesis, and the identification of what the scientist calls "exceptions."

When reason is dealing with our behavior toward things, all its problems arise in the realm of perceptual things. Our behavior to such things accepts them without question as the ultimate test of reality because we do not admit any scientific concepts as valid which do not express the uniform order of perceived events. Mead starts with the recognition that this is the nature of reason in practice, i.e., the research method of science. Consequently, his interest in this question of the relation of scientific objects and perceptual objects is twofold. On the one hand, he refuses to accept as the sole characteristics of existence the properties specified by scientific objects (e.g., mathematical space, time, space-time, or matter) if the result of this is to deny that experienced qualities (both primary and secondary) are properties of natural (physical) things. On the positive side, this presupposition of the reality of perceptual things requires that the most general characteristics of existence must be consistently interpreted as characteristics of both perceptual objects and scientific things. Mead thought himself to have made this position intelligible because he believed that his analysis showed that in the broadest sense both scientific things and scientific objects (such as space-time of relativity theory) are spatiotemporal.¹⁶

The objects of Newtonian science involved an identification of

¹⁶ A thing is spatiotemporal if all its properties vary from the standpoint of different observers.

existence with a material content (resistance) whose spatial form was invariant for all observers. Thus reality was defined in spatial terms only. This means that the reality of things is independent of their relations to various systems of reference. Relativity metaphysics has tended to identify real existence with the logical structure of space-time to the exclusion of all material content, particularly the resistant contact of our measuring rods. Mead, as we shall see, holds that if we assume the sociality of perceptual things, then the spatial features of all things, in their own reference frame (consentient set), have all the permanence of Newtonian things, but the same features vary (i.e., become temporal) from the standpoint of another reference frame. Accordingly, the conceptualized universe is continuous both in material content and in form with the most general features of perceptual objects. Such is Mead's general position on the relation of scientific objects and experienced (perceptual) things. A fuller exposition of his position must, however, bear in mind his own unique description of the behavioristic form of perceived things.

The following are the main points to be surveyed: (1) why existence, defined by the properties of Newtonian things, is incompatible with the physical existence of perceptual things; (2) Mead's analysis of the behavioristic form of perceptual objects (i.e., of experience); (3) how this description partially reconciles the metaphysical separation of scientific objects and perceptual objects; (4) how relativity physics invalidates the existence of spatial objects which are not also temporal; (5) a statement of the metaphysical position which defines existence simply as the logical structure of space-time, relegating all material content of perceived things to the subjective experiences of different observers; (6) why Mead rejects this doctrine; and (7), finally, a statement of his own position.

6. Newtonian physics defined the most general characteristic of existence as resistant matter whose spatial form was invariant under all conditions; the important presupposition being that the dimensions of matter were unaffected by the