

Evolution, agency, and objects: Re-discovering classical pragmatism

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Introduction

Historically, the influence of American pragmatism on archaeology and archaeological theory has been limited. Until recently, archaeologists have shown little interest in pragmatism (Preucel & Mrozowski 2010). In what follows we will provide a plausible explanation for this omission and, more importantly, an outline of why and how the lacuna can be filled. Whilst this chapter centres mainly around classical pragmatism, in particular G.H. Mead's (1863-1931) work, we would like to begin with a few words on the significance of neo-pragmatism for archaeology.

As we have discussed elsewhere, there are significant affinities between neo-pragmatism and recent developments in archaeology. Neo-pragmatist philosophy of social science distances itself from any attempt to search for the universal foundations or essence of science on the grounds that empirical research into the practice of both the natural and social sciences shows a remarkable methodological heterogeneity within each academic discipline (Baert 2005; Baert & Silva 2010). Any attempt to establish the purported nature of scientific activity risks being either at odds with successful existing research, or so general as to prove unfruitful. Rather than providing an elusive 'scientific' yardstick to judge existing social research, neo-pragmatism promotes research aimed at self-referential knowledge acquisition, that is enabling reflection, on the presuppositions that underpin the research. This type of research is compatible with some of the concerns of post-processual archaeologists, reflecting as they do on how deep-seated assumptions have unwittingly been imposed on empirical material. Aware of the theory-laden nature of observations, both neo-pragmatist philosophers of social science, and post-processual archaeologists are unwilling, as if theories could be tested straightforwardly, to see research as an empirical court of arbitration. Instead, they treat empirical research as an opportunity to reflect on previously held presuppositions and to conceive of new theoretical and socio-political scenarios. Research is, then, judged not so much in terms of empirical corroboration, but in terms of how much it brings about this reflexivity.

Yet, despite the commonalities between neo-pragmatism and post-processual archaeologies, the fact remains that the influence of pragmatist ideas on archaeology remains limited at best. In this chapter we propose an explanation for the lack of interest amongst archaeologists in pragmatism, and we show that archaeological theory can benefit from further engagement not simply with neo-pragmatism, but with classical pragmatism. We will focus particularly on the relevance of the work of G.H. Mead.

The selective appropriation of Mead and pragmatism

This section deals with mechanisms of diffusion and reception within the academy. Whereas most sociologists of intellectuals have been interested in mechanisms of successful diffusion (e.g. Lamont 1987, Baert 2011), we seek to provide an explanation as to why, within the discipline of archaeology, pragmatism has practically *never* been discussed,¹ let alone adopted. Why have archaeologists until now paid so little attention to pragmatism? How can we explain this blind spot?

There are two obvious explanations which we seek to reject. The first account would be that American pragmatism is of little use to the discipline of archaeology. This explanation is problematic because pragmatism has always been a broad church, and there are a variety of pragmatisms (e.g. Shook & Margolis 2009), some of which are in line with the concerns of archaeologists. We will show that a particular reading of Mead – quite different from the dominant one – can be very fruitful indeed. A second possible explanation would be that other theoretical or philosophical orientations gained prominence in archaeology and have made it difficult for alternatives such as pragmatism to make an inroad. Important as the inner dynamics within archaeology may be, this explanation is limited, not least because archaeology and archaeological theory have, especially more recently, been receptive to a wide variety of theoretical perspectives (e.g. Johnson 2010). There is no methodological or theoretical consensus; and archaeologists have cultivated a broad interest.

Rather than focusing on developments within archaeology and archaeological theory, we make a more counter-intuitive claim by looking at the history of the reception of pragmatism within the humanities and social sciences. More precisely, we will argue that certain sociologists and social theorists managed to impose a very particular, and in some respects distorted, version of classical pragmatism, that this specific reading became relatively dominant in the humanities and social sciences, and that it omitted aspects of pragmatism that would have been more appealing to the discipline of archaeology. Accordingly, we argue that a rereading of classical pragmatism can prove fruitful for archaeology.

In the course of the twentieth century, social theory has become the main vehicle through which innovations or new perspectives are introduced in the humanities and social sciences, and travel from one discipline to another (Baert 2006). Since the 1980s, the discipline of archaeology has paid increasing attention to developments in social theory and sociology, and has incorporated a plethora of perspectives, ranging from structuration theory to genealogical history. Whilst pragmatism, and in particular Mead's version of it, has developed a significant presence in social theory and sociology, archaeologists have shown little interest in it. We argue that the selective appropriation of pragmatism within social theory and sociology partly accounts for this omission.

In the early decades of the twentieth century pragmatism reigned supreme in a number of key American philosophy departments (e.g. Gross 2007). Pragmatism flourished particularly in the newly formed University of Chicago where it developed into a unifying intellectual perspective not only in the philosophy department but also amongst sociologists. Of all the American pragmatists, the Chicago-based philosopher George Herbert Mead was particularly

¹ There are, of course, exceptions to this. Archaeologists that have made use of Mead include: Richardson (1989), Gardner (2003, 2012) and Sillar (2009). Preucel (2006) has made extensive use of Peirce. Richard Rorty's work has served as inspiration to McDavid (2000). On pragmatism and archaeology more generally, see Saitta (2003). We thank the editors for this information.

sensitive to more sociological concerns and arguments (e.g. Joas 1993). Influenced by a long spell in Germany, he advocated a social concept of the self in which reflexivity is intertwined with the individual's ability to take up the perspectives of other individuals and, indeed, of the whole community. Mead's concept of the generalized other captures this commonality, referring as it does to a set of meanings and normative regulations that are shared by members of a similar community.

After Mead's death, Herbert Blumer, a former student, portrayed him as the precursor of his own proposal for a sociological research programme that was meant to provide an alternative to the growing hegemony of structural functionalism (Blumer [1969] 1986). This alternative research programme was 'symbolic interactionism', a term coined by Blumer himself in the 1930s (Blumer 1937). Blumer always emphasized the American roots of this approach, from classical American philosophical pragmatism (Tucker 1988) to the Chicago-style sociology in which he had been educated. But more important to our present concerns is the pivotal role played by Blumer's image of Mead in this narrative. Mead's ideas, and especially Mead's social psychology as presented in *Mind, Self, and Society*, were systematically presented as a crucial legitimating element of Blumer's version of symbolic interactionism. Blumer quoted extensively from this book and presented it as the chief intellectual reference of the 'Chicago school of sociology'. Besides signalling the beginning of Blumer's long intellectual career, the biographical circumstance by which he saw himself as Mead's 'appointed successor' had an important consequence for his reading of *Mind, Self, and Society*. The fact that this book had been assembled from notes from the very same course which made him Mead's intellectual heir helps explain why Blumer never seriously addressed any of the many editorial issues that plague the book.² Instead, he was more interested in controlling its interpretation, with the additional ambition of governing a certain tradition of scientific inquiry. In what surely is one of sociology's greatest ironies, Blumer, the creator of one of sociology's earliest and most accomplished social constructionist approaches, failed to adequately address the constructed nature of his view of the discipline's past.

Indeed, Blumer's account of his early Chicago days, despite contributing greatly to Mead's canonization, often amounted to little more than a self-serving mythology – a blind spot in his otherwise brilliant analysis that cost him greatly for it did not pass unnoticed by his critics (e.g. Mills 1942), all too aware of the rhetorical spin Blumer placed upon the construction of the disciplinary controversies he was involved in. These limitations came under attack in the 1970s as a new generation of more historically-minded sociologists proposed a revised interpretation of Mead's influence upon symbolic interactionism. Clark McPhail and Cynthia Rexroat, who emphasized that their arguments were based 'primarily upon Mead's articles' rather than on 'student lecture notes, e.g., 1934 [i.e. *Mind, Self, and Society*]' (1979: 450), were among the first to move beyond Morris's volume and to seriously question Blumer's 'Mead'. In the wake of this historicist revival, subsequent decades would witness a complete revolution in Mead scholarship, with the publication of numerous articles and books offering rigorous historical reconstructions of Mead's life and work (e.g. Joas, [1980] 1985). Partly due to path-dependency effects and partly due to the lack of an alternative collection of

2 On the troubled history of *Mind, Self, and Society*, see Silva & Vieira 2011; Huebner 2012.

Mead's writings,³ however, this was not enough to displace *Mind, Self, and Society* as the chief source on which major commentators, such as Jürgen Habermas and Axel Honneth, relied to judge Mead's views well into the 1980s and 1990s (Habermas [1981] 1984; Honneth [1992] 1996). Yet the longer *Mind, Self, and Society* has remained the key entry-point to Mead's work, the longer it has taken to supersede the limited one-sided view of what he has to offer social sciences.

From the point of view of archaeology, two features of this selective appropriation stand out. Firstly, by overplaying Mead's commentary on face-to-face interaction between individuals, there is little attention to his elaborate reflections on physical objects. It is as if pragmatists only deal with people's interactions but have remarkably little to say about the material artefacts which are so central to the work of a professional archaeologist. Secondly, by overemphasizing the significance of Mead's work for dealing with social psychological issues, there is hardly any discussion of Mead's broader evolutionary perspective. It is as if pragmatism is incompatible with a diachronic view and has little to offer a discipline like archaeology which covers longer temporal spans.

Other omissions could be added, but these two features of the history of the reception and dissemination of Mead's ideas provide particularly good illustrations of what we have in mind. Although Mead's published writings offer unmistakable evidence as to the central place that both evolutionary theory and objects play in his thinking, the micro-sociological, interpretive reading suggested by symbolic interactionists has been so dominant that one is led to believe that such a reading encapsulates the core of Mead's contributions to contemporary social theory. Our claim is that it does not. Mead has much else to offer besides his well-known theory of the self, including an elaborate theory of temporality (Baert 1992), a radical democratic theory of ethics and democratic deliberation (Silva 2007), and a thoroughly intersubjective model of action and rationality (Gillespie 2005). Both features give a misguided view of Mead and, indeed, of pragmatism. In what follows we will show that if we study closely other aspects of Mead's corpus, we arrive at a more nuanced picture of his social theory, one which is more amenable to the concerns of archaeology.

An alternative reading of Mead

Supporting our alternative reading is a recent collection of Mead's own writings (Mead 2011), which we privilege over *Mind, Self, and Society*. The highlights of this alternative reading of Mead are his conception of agency, his theory of meaning, and the peculiar way in which he conceives of objects. But first let us briefly discuss the general traits of Mead's thinking, which are often underplayed by those who rely on *Mind, Self, and Society* as the main entry-point to his work.

3 With the notable exception of Andrew Reck's 1964 collection of twenty-five of Mead's journal articles. See Mead (1964).

One of the most distinctive features of Mead's social theory lies in its evolutionary outlook (e.g. Cook 1993). Living in an epoch when American academia was separating itself from the religious influence that had dominated it since its inception, Mead saw in Darwin's natural selection theory the most accomplished scientific answer to the theological doctrine of the permanent species (e.g. Mead 2011, chap. 12). Yet it must be emphasized that Mead never subscribed to social Darwinism, according to which social life is nothing more than the competitive struggle among the fittest. On the contrary, Mead's regulatory ideal is that of social cooperation through symbolic means, with a particular preoccupation towards the least advantaged members of society (women, workers, and immigrants were amongst those groups Mead assisted through his numerous voluntary activities). Despite rejecting social Darwinism, Mead believed in social reconstruction just as he believed in scientific reconstruction.⁴ There was no insurmountable gap between theory and practice, between 'head and hand' because, as Darwin had shown, mental operations were but embedded bodily functions of an organism trying to adapt to the surrounding environment. This is the cardinal principle, derived directly from Darwin, of Mead's functionalist approach to social psychology. Hence it is as a pragmatist that Mead incorporates Darwinism into his system of thinking. This incorporation goes hand-in-hand with Mead's interpretation of Hegel's 'philosophy of evolution' as a speculative precursor of Darwin's theory of the origin of species. According to Mead, this is a particularly productive encounter insofar as it enabled philosophy to overcome the dichotomy between mechanistic and teleological theories of evolution (Silva 2007: 8). As Mead asserts in his 1909 address on the occasion of Darwin's centenary, the: 'statement of Hegel is from within the analysis of the process of reason. The statement of Darwin is from without the study of animal and vegetable nature (...)' Mead then points out the insight to be drawn from the pragmatist synthesis of Hegel and Darwin: 'In a word, both recognized that the process of experience could create the form, or the type, or the species' (2011: 120). Such an insight, as we shall see, would prove decisive for Mead's theory of objects.

A second feature of Mead's social psychology refers to its relation to behaviourism (e.g. Mead 2011, chaps. 2 and 7). Writing at a time when behaviourism was already the predominant orientation in American psychology, Mead had no choice but to inscribe his own proposals within that paradigm. Yet Mead's social psychology is much more than a mere variation of John Watson's orthodox behaviourism. There are at least four fundamental differences that distinguish Mead from Watson. First, Mead rejects the latter's behaviourism in favour of a functional and naturalistic analysis of mental phenomena. Second, Mead is critical of Watson's neglect of the internal field of the human act (Mead's aim is to approach the 'inner' experience in a way no less objective than that proposed by Watsonian behaviourism). Third, the importance devoted to language in Mead's social psychology has no parallel in Watson's behaviourism. Fourth, contrary to Watson's behaviourism, Mead rejects the dualism between body and psyche, the so-called psychological parallelism. Admittedly, this is not an original insight by Mead, as Hegel and then Dewey had already similarly suggested action should be interpreted as an organic whole. Mead brings a novel dimension to this organic or functionalist (as opposed to mechanistic) perspective when he suggests that the organic model of action can be reconciled with behaviourism to the extent to

⁴ The theme of 'intelligent social reconstruction', far from exclusive to Mead, is in fact a classic pragmatist theme. For instance, John Dewey made it a centrepiece of his moral philosophy. See Dewey (1976).

which both rule out introspectionism. As a result, Mead's behaviourism is not a mere socially-minded variant of Watsonian behaviourism; rather, Mead's behaviourism is to be conceived of as thoroughly *social* and *intersubjective*.

The third characteristic of Mead's social psychology refers to its scientific character (e.g. Silva 2008, chaps. 5-8). Mead believes that the social and human sciences deserve scientific status no less than do any other of the so-called natural or physical sciences. In the social and natural sciences alike, given the experimental and problem-solving nature of their activity, scientists are interested in particulars insofar as they emerge as exceptions to universals. Mead's attempt at reconstructing the social origins and nature of human consciousness, which we discuss in further detail below, should thus be seen as the application of the principles of the scientific method to this particular problem. In the case of Mead's 'scientific social psychology', the standpoint to be adopted should be one that lies at the intersection of all differing perspectives on the object so that it can disclose the self's uniformities, which can serve as data for scientific experimentation while at the same time retaining their particular content. A similarly impartial, objective standpoint can be seen operating in other areas of Mead's system of thinking, which suggests this scientific trait to be a constitutive feature of his thinking, not just something characteristic of his social psychology. With these general characteristics in mind, let us now proceed with an analysis of Mead's views on agency and objects.

Mead on agency

In our view, the recent post-processual embrace of agency and practice in archaeology (e.g. Dobres 2000; Pauketat 2001) has much to gain from a closer engagement with Mead's ideas, in particular his conception of the psychical and four-phased model of action, the 'theory of the act'. We begin with Mead's definition of the psychical (2011, chap. 1). As hinted above, Mead wishes to avoid the psychological doctrine that suggests that there is a gulf separating the 'objective' world of external behaviour from the 'subjective' states of consciousness. Mead's aim is to be able to account for subjectivity in terms of its role in action. Following Dewey's functionalist analysis, Mead suggests that when action is interrupted so is the world of objects surrounding us. In the face of such cases of practical conflict, there is the need to reconstruct the problematic objects. When we do so, Mead argues, we are able to see the stream of thought as an organic whole. For Mead, then, the natural location of the psychical is in those situations where conduct has been interrupted by problems, forcing us to reconstruct the whole situation, including ourselves. Mead's naturalist, pragmatist conception of the psychical is closely related to his model of action, to which we now turn.

Mead's starting point is relational, not individual. The 'act' refers to the relation between organism and environment, an: 'ongoing event that consists of stimulation and response and the results of the response' (Mead 1938: 362). Such an act is Mead's basic unit of conduct. It should be seen as an organic whole, as something going on with a number of phases that can be analytically separated, but that cannot be understood except by reference to the whole act. As hinted above, Mead conceives of the act as comprehending four stages, the first of which is the impulse to action. At the beginning of any act there is a physiological predisposition of the organism to respond to a given stimulus. Perception is the next phase. In this second

stage, the organism perceives either an object or a part of the surrounding environment. The third phase of action is manipulation. The organism, after perceiving a distant object, will move either towards or away from the object. In most cases, the perceptual phase of the act leads to the manipulation of the object, either physically (e.g. an apple) or intellectually (e.g. a past event). As Mead emphasizes in *'On social consciousness and social science'*, a manuscript only recently published, manipulation is a very important phase of human conduct, for: '[t]o see an object as distant or hard is to adjust our process of movements of approach and manipulation' (Mead 2011: 185). Mead considers perception and manipulation to be the intermediate phases of the ongoing act; the fourth and final phase occurs when the organism attributes a certain value to the object in question, thereby consummating the act. Consummation, therefore, completes the act.

By conceiving of the 'social act' as the bodily organism's gesture as a physical thing in relation to the surrounding environment, Mead wishes to combine a naturalistic explanation of human perception with the insight that rational individuals owe their rationality and individuality to the social experience in which they take part and of which they are products (on Mead's model of the ontogenesis of human agency, see Martin & Gillespie 2010). Mead's conception of agency, which posits a mutually constitutive relationship between things and human beings, is thus an apt supplement to contemporary approaches that emphasize the partial agency of things. A case in point is Alfred Gell, whose influential theory of the agency of art objects is concerned not with what a thing is, but where it stands in a network of social relations (Gell 1998). One of Gell's central claims is that physical objects can become 'social agents' as long as there are persons in their vicinity, an idea, as we shall see next, that is remarkably consonant with Mead's concept of object.⁵

Mead on objects

Objects, for Mead, are the products of social experience. But Mead's social pragmatism is no mere social constructionism, if by that one means that objects are contingent upon social and historical experience (think of 'gender' as a social construct), and it certainly does not reduce meaning and behaviour to the effects of linguistic or textual practices, as poststructuralists tend to do (Wiley 1994). Instead, Mead conceives of objects as being socially constituted in a more radical, specific sense. Consider a physical object such as a chair. The chair exists as such – as an object with particular characteristics such as weight, resistance, colour, odour, etc. – insofar as it gives rise in the individual not only to an organic response but also a response to himself as an object calling out this response. What Mead means is that objects arise as objects as they become *embodied* in the responses of the individual manipulating them. It is this 'embodiment of the object' in the responses of the individual that is 'the essential factor in the emergence of the physical thing' (1932: 125), as Mead asserts in *'The Physical Thing'*, a collection of two different manuscripts published for the first time in 1932, as a supplementary essay to *The Philosophy of the Present* ([1932] 2002). Mead concludes this text, one of the most relevant for those interested in his conception of objects, with the

⁵ On the agency of things, see also Olsen 2003; Gosden 2005; Knappett 2012; Morphy 2009; on some of these developments in archaeology, see Gardner 2011; on sociology and agency, see Emirbayer and Mische 1998; and on 'Meadian' agency and objects, see McCarthy 1984. We thank our editors for this information.

observation that one of the conclusions to be drawn from his analysis is: ‘the relatively late abstraction of the physical object from the social object and the necessity that the organism take the attitude of the other in order to become an object to himself’ ([1932] 2002: 138). This conclusion, however, raises as many questions as it answers: How does Mead distinguish between physical and social objects? What does he mean by a ‘relatively late abstraction’ of physical objects over social ones? And what function does the attitude of self-objectification perform in his theory?

To adequately respond to these questions, we need to turn our attention to yet another manuscript which has been brought to the attention of the public only recently, ‘*On the Self and Teleological Behavior*’ (Mead 2011: 20-44). A true archaeological find, this manuscript emerged from archival work undertaken at the Mead Papers Archive at the University of Chicago in the early-2000s (Silva 2011). It offers us a detailed account of Mead’s evolutionary, social pragmatist account of the origins, nature and implications of objects – including the individual as an object to himself, a ‘self-objectifying’ attitude Mead sees as a condition for the emergence of rational self-consciousness, which he analyses from both the perspective of the history of the human species (phylogenesis) and from the perspective of the process of human individual development (ontogenesis).

Mead’s starting point is the relation between the environment and the individual as one of ‘mutual determination’ (2011: 27). As he points out, a central theme of modern evolutionary science has been the influence of the environment upon the individual. What has been overlooked, however, is that individuals exercise a definite influence upon the environment. It is such a ‘mutual interrelationship of the individuals and their environments’ that accounts for the characteristics that define objects. Mead writes that ‘[E]dible, movable, warm, injurious, brittle, tough, composite, bending, and resisting objects exist as such because of the nature of the individuals that find them within their experience’, concluding that: ‘characters are real because of this relation of the individuals and their environments. Without this relation these characters would not obtain’ (2011: 27). The same is true of individuals; the relationship between the organism and the environment determines the latter as definitely as it does the former. By identifying the dialectical nature of this ‘mutual determination’ between individuals and the environment, Mead is able to capture its generative, creative nature. He writes that, from this dialectical relation arises a: ‘coordination in the structure of the organism of the individual which is also new – as new as the object’ (2011: 38). In other words, from the tension between individuals and objects arise *new individuals* as well as *new objects*.

New individuals arise as the self readjusts to the emergence of a new object. Modern individuals, for example, have emerged as new scientific, political and social objects gradually came about. Illustrating this thesis with the Copernican revolution, the ‘earlier objects were the earth at the center of the world’ whereas the ‘later objects were the sun at the center of a system of planets’ (2011: 41) – Mead argues that, from the standpoint of ‘religion, politics, education, and art there was a new world and a new society that had not existed before’ (2011: 40-41). It would be a mistake, however, to infer from this that Mead is suggesting that change occurs only at special historical junctures such as the Renaissance period. On the contrary, for Mead, there is constant change as a result of the continuous

interaction between individuals and objects, as well as between individuals and themselves as objects. We discuss these two types of interaction in turn.

Individuals are in constant interaction with the surrounding environment and the objects that compose it. But which objects are these? One possibility, based on the assumption of the body-psyche dualism, would be to suggest that some objects are immediately present, whereas others exist only in memory or imagination. For example, a tree as a physical thing and our childhood memories of a tree. For Mead, however, this distinction is not categorical, but one of degree: ‘the actual relation between the organism and the object, though it is no longer present, is not in essence different from that lying between the object, which is present, and the organism. The difference is only that of degree’ (2011: 25). But what exactly is Mead’s understanding of an object? To better appreciate Mead’s highly original concept of object one needs to distinguish between his theories of ontology and of meaning (and, more generally, of Mead’s symbolic theory of the evolution of mind).⁶ It is within Mead’s theory of ontology that one finds his detailed discussions of what physical objects are, their properties, and the functions they perform in social experience. For Mead, however, social objects are an entirely different category of phenomena, which requires an altogether distinct analytical perspective – a theory of meaning. Social objects, from this perspective, include whatever has a common meaning to the participant in the social act. As such, social objects include not only physical objects, but also other selves and even complex social institutions and organizations, such as language, rights, money, or political parties.⁷

According to Mead, then, the criterion of something being an object lies in the possibility of taking action in respect of it (1938: 430). Mead’s proposed distinction is thus closely related to his four-phased theory of the act and is based upon the thesis that we form social objects before physical objects; the social consciousness precedes the consciousness of physical objects. At first, human organisms interact socially with the surrounding environment and the objects of which it is composed. The immediate response of an organism towards an inanimate physical object is the same as the response of that organism towards another organism. For instance, she loves the pen she usually works with yet hates her mobile phone when its battery runs out. But after a while, individuals abstract from that type of immediate response because of what we come to know of such objects. There are, then, two different moments when we deal with physical objects; our immediate response is social while our later reaction is abstract and rational. What explains the passage from one moment to the other is the human hand. In a sense, physical things are the product of the human hand. By perceiving and manipulating things we respond to them as physical objects, surpassing the initial immediate social response, but prior to consummating the act. As perception and manipulation are the intermediate phases of the act, so physical objects (created by the human hand) come betwixt and between the beginning of the act and its consummation.

Let us now consider the interaction of individuals with themselves *qua* objects. Mead’s thesis is straightforward: individuals see themselves as objects insofar as they act as a stimulus upon

⁶ One of the most exciting areas of evolutionary research today focuses on the evolution of symbolic thought (for works by archaeologists or influenced by archaeology, see Donald 1991; Mithen 1996).

⁷ We thank Roman Madzia for having brought this important point to the attention of one of the authors of this chapter (2011: 157).

themselves and insofar they respond to it. Behind this thesis lies the crucial distinction between body and self. Whereas bodies can only be objects, selves possess cognitive and moral capacity and are therefore capable of being both subjects *and* objects (Dunn 1997: 694). Within the dialectic structure of the self, Mead distinguishes between the ‘acting individual’ and the ‘individual as an object’ (i.e. the ‘I’ and the ‘me’). As we have seen above, the ‘social act’ places the individual in a social relation to himself and so makes a functional distinction between the ‘active self’ and the ‘object self’. In conversing with himself, a conversation that takes place by means of gestures and predominantly vocal gestures, one addresses the self which can be seen and felt, i.e. the self that belongs to the social community within which social conduct arises with its gestures. Mead points out that in the ‘reply, however, the object individual speaks from within, i.e. it is the active individual that speaks, but speaks in the role of the object individual’, concluding that this ‘is a role that is determined by the social situation’ (2011: 31). This is the reason why Mead claims physical objects are a ‘relatively late abstraction’ over social ones. Mead wishes to assert the logical and historical priority of social experience – first, there are social objects; only then do physical objects arise.

Furthermore, Mead holds this claim to be valid both from a phylogenetic and an ontogenetic point of view. From this latter perspective, the earliest self-conscious conduct of the child is that of play, i.e. when the child acts as an other with imaginary companions. It is only when these different roles are organized together in the child’s adjustments to the social environment that the self arises. Two conditions, therefore, are present in the emergence of the self. The first is the tendency to address one’s self in the gestural language of social conduct, a tendency that arises with the individual’s finding himself assuming the role of another. The second is the tendency to indicate to another individual some object (or character of an object) in a cooperative act. ‘Thinking then arises’, Mead concludes (2011: 32). From the perspective of the human species, Mead suggests that meaning was born when, at some point in evolution, the speaking primate learned how to respond to a vocal gesture in a similar way to its interlocutor. The consciousness of meaning emerged when primates learned how to take the role of the other; with reflective intelligence, primates began to perceive and manipulate the objects around them in a radically different way – they could now see the ‘inside’ of things, i.e. their abstract properties. Living in an empirical world inhabited by physical and social objects, primates become aware of this reflexive capacity via an individual other. Colin Renfrew’s influential ‘material engagement theory’ (2004), which similarly focuses on how things actively mediate social relations, is a good illustration of the extent to which Mead’s work is in tune with contemporary processualist archaeological approaches.⁸

We are now in a position to discuss the function performed by this attitude of self-objectification in Mead’s thinking. Let us begin by considering Mead’s theory of meaning. Meaning, according to Mead, has a triadic logical structure made of the gesture of the first organism, the responding gesture of the second organism, and the ‘resultant’ of the social act. The response of the second organism to the gesture of the first organism is the interpretation of that gesture – this response brings out the meaning. Meaning is thus implicit in the

⁸ Renfrew, one of the original ‘processualists’, designates his position as ‘cognitive processualism’ to acknowledge the importance of cognitive structures, which processual and post-processual archaeology largely ignores. Again, we thank our editors for this information.

structure of the social act; as such, meaning is to be found objectively in social conduct. In *Mind, Self, and Society*, Mead uses the example of a footprint of a bear to illustrate what he has in mind ([1934] 1967: 120-121; see also Silva 2007: 35-36). The footprint is the symbol of a bear. When we stumble upon such a footprint we associate that imprinted piece of mud with the passage of a bear at a certain prior moment. We might be afraid, not of the footprint but of what it means – the presence of a bear. So the footprint is the symbol, the bear is its meaning (i.e., the ‘resultant’ of the social act), and to be able to identify such a symbol as leading to such a meaning is the distinctive feature of human intelligence. Individuals thus create symbols to indicate, to themselves as well as to other members of the group, the implications of a certain object or gesture (see also Preucel 2006, whose work on semiotics draws on the pragmatism of Peirce). In a sense, then, symbolization creates objects. The piece of mud only becomes a ‘footprint’ when an individual looks at it and interprets it as meaning ‘bear’. Such an object could not have existed if it were not for the social context in which that process of symbolization occurs. There are at least two important implications that one can draw from Mead’s theory of symbolization. Firstly, as Mead puts it, language ‘makes possible the existence of the appearance of that situation or object, for it is a part of the mechanism whereby that situation or object is created’ ([1934] 1967: 78). Secondly, the meaning of a certain object or gesture exists prior to the consciousness of meaning. It exists in the behavioural structure that relates individuals to the environment in which they live. Human conduct structures this relation so that, according to Mead, meaning is neither linguistically constituted, nor is it a given datum. Again, we can see here the extent to which Mead’s pragmatism is in tune with current approaches in archaeology that posit a greater emphasis on issues of meaning, the individual, culture and history. Even though Mead would never subscribe to a position that would reduce physical things to text, thereby denying their materiality, we believe that his notion of object and theory of meaning can potentially be of great interest for post-positivist archaeologists. A case in point is the British archaeologist Ian Hodder, who argues that things are to be regarded as text, and that artefacts are silent only when they are ‘out of their texts’, i.e. the network of relations between the artefact, its locus of discovery, and other artefacts and features that constitute the field within which meaning can be read (Hodder 1984, 1986; see also Hodder 1989, Tilley 1991).⁹ This notion of meaning as an emergent from a symbolically saturated field of relations between agents and objects, we sustain, is very much in line with Mead’s thinking.

Mead’s conception of society and social cooperation cannot be understood without reference to significant symbols. Complex, large-scale social life is possible only because human beings developed significant language. Mead’s principle of social integration rests upon the human ability to symbolize, so that understanding a significant language is of first importance. This sharing of the responses of others is what distinguishes the unconscious conversation of gestures from conscious communication. Self-stimulation is barely present in the former, while it plays a decisive role in the latter. Anticipating recent work in the neurosciences that associates the emergence of language with this ‘self-objectifying’

⁹ This said, in his more recent work Hodder has moved away from ‘things as text’ to stress the distinctiveness of things. See Hodder (2012).

attitude,¹⁰ Mead argues that this is a distinctive feature of the human self. Indeed, Mead goes as far as to suggest that this ‘self-objectifying’ attitude is a condition of human rationality – one is rational to the extent to which one is able to take an impersonal, objective attitude towards oneself. The centrality of this self-objectifying attitude and, indeed, of the concept of ‘object’ more generally to Mead’s system of thinking, should be clear by now. Together with its evolutionary outlook, they are key contributions to contemporary archaeologies interested in issues of meaning and agency. Their relative neglect by archaeologists can only be explained, we believe, by the unfortunate history of the reception of Mead’s ideas within the humanities and the social sciences. In this chapter, we have suggested one way of correcting this situation. Our proposed solution took the form of a critical re-examination of the history of the reception of Mead’s ideas. This exercise was undertaken within the pragmatic spirit that contemporary archaeology seems increasingly to be adopting (Baert 2005), and aimed at recovering a forgotten contribution from the past, as well as gaining critical distance from our beliefs. Quentin Skinner, one of the senior members of the so-called ‘Cambridge school’, speaks of these same aims in the language of archaeology (Lane 2012: 73-74). Critical distance from our beliefs, Skinner tell us, is gained as the result of ‘excavations’ practiced by historians or ethnographers, whereas the ‘fruit’ of intellectual history can be described as a ‘buried treasure’ (2002: 126). This choice of language by Skinner, for whom an intellectual historian is a ‘kind of archaeologist’ (1998: 112), is a suggestive indication that the connections between intellectual history, pragmatism, and archaeology run deep.

Concluding comments

In this paper we discussed classical pragmatism, notably G.H. Mead’s version, and its possible significance for archaeology and archaeological theory. We showed first that Mead’s evolutionary and naturalist perspective was not simply a study of how cultural systems adapt to their environments. On the contrary, Mead actively pursued what could be called a post-naturalist agenda, in the sense of a concern with the meanings people attribute to their worlds (Baert 2005). This, in turn, led us to consider Mead’s understanding of agency and his original conception of objects. As we have suggested, there are numerous connections between Mead’s symbolic account of the material world and how current, post-processual archaeologists are approaching artefacts and physical objects. From Gell’s theory of art objects as social agents and Renfrew’s material engagement theory to Hodder’s relational understanding of the meaning of artefacts and the developing dialogue between post-processual and evolutionary archaeologies (Cochrane & Gardner 2011, esp. Introduction), we have tried to identify significant intersections between G.H. Mead’s work and current archaeological theory that has adopted a pragmatic spirit .

¹⁰ We refer to the suggestion by evolutionary psychologists that mirror neurons, i.e. neurons that fire both when an animal acts and when the animal observes the same action performed by another, are behind the emergence of language (e.g. Ramachandran 2010).

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