

COMMENTARY AND DEBATE

Comment on the Blumer-Bales Dialogue concerning the Interpretation of Mead's Thought

The brief debate between Professors Blumer and Bales in the March, 1966, "Commentary and Debate" is interesting and instructive to those with a penchant for symbolic interactionist thought, particularly because it illustrates some of the difficulties which have kept this school of thought from being as theoretically useful to sociology as it might be. Blumer says that Bales is "ill-informed and misinformed on the *nature* of Mead's thought" (emphasis mine). Presumably, Blumer means that Bales misunderstands what Mead "really meant."

But elsewhere, in his discussion of what Mead meant by "objects," Blumer says:

... for Mead, objects are human constructs and not self-existing entities with intrinsic *natures*. Their *nature* is dependent on the orientation and action of people toward them. [Emphasis mine.]

He goes further to specify what may be objects:

For Mead, an object is anything that can be designated or referred to. It may be physical as a chair . . . or vague as a philosophical doctrine.

What Mead said is clearly a philosophical doctrine, and, as such, constitutes an

object. As such, according to Blumer's interpretation of Mead, it has no "intrinsic nature"; its "Nature is dependent on the orientation and action of people toward [it]." Consequently, it makes no sense at all to try to discover what Mead "really said" or "really meant." Blumer's article itself, then, which is an attempt to lay out the nature of Mead's thought, as well as his criticism of Bales for failing to understand that nature, is logically absurd according to Blumer's own reasoning.

Professor Bales is engaged in empirical research. If the nature of a philosophical doctrine is dependent on the orientation and action of people toward it, then obviously Bales's interpretation will reflect these empirical concerns; he will find in Mead what is useful to what he is doing, and he is doing empirical research.

I would suggest that this is the proper approach to Mead's work. Perhaps we should be less concerned with "getting it right," with finding out what Mead "really said," and pay more attention to what he could have said and should have said using the concepts he developed, or something like them.

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Further Comment on the Blumer-Bales Dialogue concerning the Implications of the Thought of George Herbert Mead

At the risk of being appreciated as presumptuous by one who one of us has always regarded as a mentor in the symbolic interactionist perspective of social psychology, we wish humbly to observe that neither Professor Blumer nor Professor Bales has penetrated to that core of Mead's thought that may hopefully generate a relevant methodology (*AJS*, March, 1966). What is lacking in Blumer's presentation

is a firm grasp and explicated statement of the significant symbol as a *universal*—its meaning fundamentally established, transformed, and re-established in an on-going universe of discourse or on-going conversation. Indeed, sociology is perhaps best conceived as such a discourse or conversation. "Today's truth is tomorrow's error," as Durkheim observed in his final epistemological struggle—with, of course, prag-