

Action-Theoretical Cultural Psychology and the Decentred Subject



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1 Brief Reminder, First Outlook

Among the most ambitious, well-developed approaches in cultural psychology are action-theoretical conceptions and research programs. Ernst Boesch's (e.g., 1991, 2021) or Jerome Bruner's (1990, 2002) works owe equally to a development in the course of which the authors moved from action-theoretical thinking to an interpretive cultural psychology (cf. Marsico, 2015; Straub et al., 2020). Boesch was already lecturing on action theory in the 1950s. Bruner took a closer look at the acts of meaning that increasingly interested him soon after the only half-hearted "cognitive turn" of the 1960s. Henceforth, he moved them to the centre of his psychology. Thus, action-theoretical thinking gradually led both authors to a decidedly cultural-psychological conception. This was – as alternative fates of action theory in psychology show – by no means necessary or inevitable. But it was obvious and consistent. Whoever says "action" must say "culture" – vice versa. These basic theoretical concepts are interdependent and inter-definable. They can only be adequately defined and explained in the light of each other.

From the very beginning, a decisive argument for the happy marriage between action theory and cultural psychology that continues to this day has been that the countless and constantly changing meanings that people associate with their material, social, and subjective world are, of course, by no means owed solely to their individual thoughts and actions. Even if individuals may associate subjective meaning with their actions and everything they encounter in the world – as Max Weber already formulated (Miebach, 2013; Bonß et al., 2020; Straub, 1999a: 63–75) – and in this way they always also live as unique selves in their personal world,

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meaningful realities never emerge solely as creations of distinctive and creative individuals. People always see themselves and their world with eyes that they have learned to use within the framework of a changing, historical, social and cultural practice. We all perceive precisely that which we have been taught to see and look at in living together with others. This is true not only for seeing and sensory perception in general but for all complex psychic functions, i.e., also for thinking, feeling, wishing, willing and – of course – for acting: Psyche is socioculturally mediated.

Jaana Valsiner's cultural psychology of semiotic dynamics shares this basic view, even if it models the emergence of meanings in and between persons in a different way than action-theoretical, interpretative or hermeneutic approaches (cf. Valsiner, 2007, 2014, 2017). Nevertheless, the similarities are considerable and include the important position of the concept of action: the so-called higher mental functions, as Valsiner put it, "entail intentionality, goal-directedness, and flexibility in adjusting to the world – and adjusting the world to oneself. Their world is made into a socio-moral world through their actions" (Valsiner, 2014:17). In the following, we argue for a broader definition of the concept of action than theoretical references to the "intentionality" or "goal-directedness" of our actions allow. A complex typology of actions and explanations of actions differentiates not only our ideas of the practical-symbolic production, reproduction and transformation of meanings but also our theoretical idea of a "subject" capable of action.

The theoretically and methodologically focus of cultural psychology (no matter how it intends and undertakes this in detail) is thus on the symbolically and practically constituted or mediated meanings that explicitly or implicitly orient individual and social lives. In relation to this, it has presented overwhelming, highly diverse findings in the course of the last decades, which today are also compiled in voluminous, informative handbooks and textbooks of cultural and cross-cultural psychology (e.g., Cole, 1996, Cohen & Kitayama, 2019; Kim et al., 2006; Matsumoto, 2001; Matsumoto & Juang, 2013; Trommsdorff & Kornadt, 2007a, 2007b; Valsiner, 2012; Valsiner & Rosa, 2007).

The insight into the primary sociality of man, which has always been widespread in sociology, is thus also shared by cultural psychology based on action theory (and Valsiner's cultural psychology of semiotic dynamics). It does so even if it stands up for the irreducible individuality of the person and rejects any "social determinism" that summarily turns persons into "cultural dopes" (as Harold Garfinkel, of all people, said, the astute founder of ethnomethodology, which, as is well known, placed rules in the form of social norms at the centre of research interest). The social and the cultural help determine what we should understand by the concept of the psychic but do not make the individually psychic or the unmistakable individual disappear. In general, the subject should not be hastily dismissed but at most theoretically differentiated and decentred. One can still hold on to this today and continue to work on it (after the post/structuralist exaggerations have lost their appeal). In the action-theoretical foundation of cultural psychology, all the points of view mentioned so far are duly brought to bear – if only the theory of action claimed is sufficiently developed.

In the following, I would first like to present basic features of a typologically differentiated theory of action, which is at the same time a theory of variable forms of understanding explanation of action. This theory has been developed in detail elsewhere (Straub, 1999a, 2021a, 2021b). It stands in a tradition represented above only by two exemplary, admittedly outstanding, approaches. As with Boesch and Bruner, the line of thought taken in the Erlangen working group around Hans Werbik – in which I was privileged to participate in my younger years – led from action theory to cultural psychology (Werbik, 1978, 1985, Kaiser & Werbik, 2012). To this day, I myself feel a close affinity to a psychological approach whose proximity to certain varieties of (hermeneutic and analytic) philosophy is as unmistakable as its kinship with some empirical neighbouring disciplines, such as interpretive sociology (e.g., of pragmatist provenance or in the guise of symbolic interactionism). In general, the inter- and transdisciplinary orientation is a hallmark of this approach (cf. Chakkarath & Weidemann, 2018; Kölbl & Sieben, 2018; Straub & Chakkarath, 2019, Straub & Werbik 1999). For example, the areas in which the conception advocated here has taken the form of a “narrative psychology” (Straub, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c, 2021a) could not be understood without considering the obvious borrowings from historical scholarship, specifically from the philosophical theory of history and historical thought. And current efforts to extend this initially language-theoretical and textual approach into the field of interpretive, iconological psychology, which finally also increasingly attends to the meaning of images in our psychosocial practice, would certainly not have come about without in-depth engagement with advanced approaches to art or image studies (Straub, Przyborski & Plontke, 2021; Plontke, Przyborski & Straub, 2021).

The interdisciplinary orientation of the psychology of action and culture that I represent is probably also clearly expressed in what follows. There, we deal with topics that have always been important for an action-theoretical cultural psychology and are still highly relevant (cf. also Miller, 1997). Without sophisticated action and subject theory, cultural psychology suffers. It would, one could say, not be completely with itself. It would be deprived of central pillars on which its thinking and research rest. The two pillars are connected with each other: The conception of a decentred subject or the idea of decentred autonomy interwoven with it is perfectly compatible with a theoretical typology of action that goes beyond the narrow limits of the intentionalist rational model commonly used in psychology. It saves action theory from rationalistic “illusions of autonomy” (Meyer-Drawe, 1990). Indeed, a typologically differentiated theory of action addresses action in its multiple dependencies and contingencies. In contrast to some postmodern critiques of the “autonomous subject of reason”, however, it does not say goodbye to “autonomy”, “reason” or the “subject” but provides arguments for a complexity-increasing revision of these terms.

The acting subject is commonly conceived in psychology as intentional, i.e., (usually) as an agent acting in a conscious and controlled way, at any rate intentionally, goal-oriented or purposeful, and thereby rational at least according to subjective judgment. This coupling of the concept of action to a “strong” and at the same time rather special conception of autonomy is by no means inevitable. It can be left

behind as soon as alternative, complementary conceptualizations are placed alongside the intentionalist model. Thus, the claim is made to do more justice to the reality of action in a phenomenological-descriptive perspective and, on top of that, to open up fruitful perspectives for the scientific analysis and understanding explanation of actions. At the same time, these action-typological differentiations lead to a welcome decentring of merely partially autonomous subjects. The linking of action-theoretical considerations with subject- or identity-theoretical reflections towards the end of the paper highlights a factual affinity between two sets of topics that are usually dealt with separately in psychology. Our conceptual-theoretical determination of an “action” touches the question of “who we are, have become and would like to be”. Theories of action and identity express how we might reasonably understand and treat ourselves as persons.

2 An Aged Fixation of Action-Theoretical Thinking

In the following, I am, of course, not concerned with a deletion and replacement of the intentionalist rational model of human action but with its relativization and supplementation within the framework of a theoretical typology. This also concerns the (economic, game- and decision-theoretical) principle of utility maximization, which is claimed in many psychological theories of action. Even if intentionalist theories of action take into account the principal limitation and fallibility of subjective knowledge guiding action, they are closely linked to the notion of a decision and action subject, potentially taking into account all facts relevant to action, ideally just fully rational (e.g., Groeben, 1986; on this Straub & Weidemann, 2015). “Contextual” or “situational” aspects are as much part of the horizon of the intentional and rational actor as the consequences and side effects of the targeted action. In psychological theories, actions mostly function as supposedly expedient means of a subjectively rational actor who wants to achieve certain goals and has his reasons for doing or refraining from doing something specific.¹

Many aspects of the action-theoretical conception of man as a reflexive, proactive subject can be based on good reasons – this should not be forgotten especially in psychology. They played an essential role in the criticism of a psychological anthropology that wanted to see in man little more than a passive stimulus-response mechanism. Numerous creative innovations in twentieth century psychology owe much to action-theoretical rearrangements of the scientific vocabulary and the accompanying broadening of horizons and perspectives. However, a cognitivist, rationalist exaggeration of our practice and an (often subliminal) idealization of “egologically” and “cognitivistically” conceived, “rational subjects of action” quickly crept into these renewals (Zielke, 2004), unnecessarily narrowing action

¹Theories of action that take into account other aspects of an anthropologically understood faculty of reason besides purposive rationality are the exception in psychology (see, e.g., Aschenbach, 1984).

psychology research and, on top of that, tying it to questionable valorative and normative foundations. The lamentable narrowing of a practice conceptualized in terms of action theory is encountered primarily in the reduction of human action to a specific type, precisely the intentionalist or teleological model.

Especially since Georg H. von Wright's (1974) influential attempt to make Aristotle's scheme of practical syllogism fruitful as a formal explanatory scheme for the sciences of action, this model is considered to be groundbreaking and binding at least where hermeneutic-explanatory tasks of the subject, social and cultural sciences are concerned.² The teleological or intentionalist model does not only give the formal structure of (methodical-rational) explanations of action. First of all, it implies a specific concept of action, which prescribes how an action is to be understood and described in principle. Within the framework of this model, an action can in principle be represented as a mode of behaviour whose inner structure has two constitutive elements that are commonly summarized as a "motivational-cognitive" or "volitional-cognitive" complex. This means, on the one hand, every actor pursues certain intentions or purposes in and with his actions. He wants to achieve this or that. Second, he does this on the basis of a subjective system of knowledge, belief or opinion, which identifies the action in question as a (supposedly) appropriate, rational means for achieving the purpose pursued in each case.

Action is "goal-directed, planned behavior", writes Groeben (1986, 71). Boesch (1980, 107; cf. also Boesch, 1991; Werbik, 1978, 50; further examples in von Cranach & Harré, 1982) states that "goal anticipation is almost always the most important criterion of action. Productive or preventive actions are intended to influence something in the material or social world in a way that is as self-determined as possible. The actions of purposive subjects aim primarily at the instrumental and strategic control of the external (material, social) and the internal world. This view of our practice seems all too one-sided. It is not compatible with the scientific goal of a differentiated understanding and description of our practice of action. Moreover, this one-sidedness prevents us from explaining actions adequately and from relying on different explanatory models for this purpose.

²Von Wright's view departs from the scheme of the deterministic or probabilistic explanatory model. His model shears from the framework of nomological thinking (classically, Hempel & Oppenheim, 1948). Rather, it is a specification of a particular type of understanding, the understanding or interpretive explanation of actions. For a formalization or schematization of this and all models of action explanation distinguished below, see Straub (1999a) at length. In a perspective tailored to social and especially cultural studies, Andreas Reckwitz (2000, 91ff.) also offers explanatory theoretical considerations. While I share his basic intention of differentiating and pluralizing explanatory models, I consider his proposal of an independent, specifically cultural studies model of action explanation "underdetermined". His "model" is far from the level of precision of the schematized, formalized alternatives against which Reckwitz demarcates his explanatory attempt. It remains unclear whether this model of cultural studies explanation ("kulturwissenschaftliche Erklärung") of action can actually be conceived as an independent variant.

3 The Model of Rule-Guided Action

In a reply to his critics, von Wright admitted that it is “certainly true that in EV (Erklären und Verstehen, J.S.) and in other earlier publications I have greatly overestimated the relevance of this particular [intentionalist, J.S.] model of explanation for the human sciences” (von Wright, 1978, 266). In contrast, it is now said that “there are several important patterns or schemes for explanations of action that should not be called dispositional - for the very reason, among others, that they are sharply different from types of explanation that can be unconditionally assigned this term” (ibid., 301).

The concept of rule-governed action goes beyond the framework of subjectivistic, “egological” approaches that are still widespread in psychology. It transcends the psychology of action in the direction of a decidedly social- and culture-theoretically oriented science. The model of rule-governed action, as already developed by Peter Winch (1966) following Ludwig Wittgenstein’s analysis of rule-following and recommended to the social sciences for adoption (on this in detail: Straub, 1999a, 113ff.), can be regarded as independent and not reducible to another model. Not every action has to be connected with subjective intentions, purposes, goals, or even plans. Not every action needs to be related to “teleological backgrounds” in order to be adequately identified, described, or explained as an action. Wright’s “later” also speaks of the possible action-constituting, action-regulating or action-guiding function of rules. An action such as greeting (or the formal act of marriage) is identified and also understood and explained in a specific way by being subsumed under a “societal institution”, i.e., a social rule or norm. Here, the reference to a rule is not an (additional) aspect of goal-oriented, purposeful action. It is decisive and determining for what we can identify, describe and analyse as this or that concrete action. Many linguistic and practical actions can only be described, understood or explained “by conceiving of them as actions of a particular genre, and by knowing the conventions, rules, and institutions that constitute that genre” (von Wright, 1978, 301; see also Waldenfels, 1985b, 79). From constitutive rules – think of rules of play that make a game like chess or soccer possible in the first place – regulative rules can be distinguished with John Searle. These merely regulate how an action – possible independently of the existence of the rule – is to be performed; one thinks, for example, of a speed rule in road traffic or of the request not to kiss intimately in St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome (for further differentiations of the concept of rule, Straub, 1999a, 127ff.).

The hermeneutic and explanatory analysis or the understanding explanation of actions is in many cases to be seen as a methodical reconstruction of rules constituting, defining or regulating actions. Not statistically ascertainable regularities or regularities in behavior, but the regular actions of actors, who orient and align their actions (often implicitly, empirically) to certain rules, form the object of social and cultural theory-based action sciences. Actors follow rules that are incorporated into their actions and language, as it were. Rule knowledge is often implicit, practical, habitualized knowledge. It is often not immediately available to the actors. They

follow countless rules “blindly”, so to speak. “Following a rule” then requires a habitualized skill that is acquired empirically, not explicit knowledge (Renn, 1999; Schneider, 2000). Accordingly, appropriate descriptions, understandings or explanations of actions presuppose the ability of social scientists to participate in a language game, to participate at least virtually in the way of life of those who act. Understanding linguistic, bodily and practical expressions ultimately requires being able to act in a certain way, i.e., to act according to rules that can be stated, or to continue actions according to the rule in question, to “respond” to previous events or actions according to rules (Waldenfels, 1999).

It is obvious that a theoretical perspective that understands human action as following rules (often implicitly) is a gateway for social and cultural psychological power analyses. Assuming that no one makes and voluntarily acknowledges all rules, especially the social norms he or she follows in acting, of his or her own free will, it is obvious that the social and cultural psychological analysis of constitutive and regulative rules of action can go hand in hand with the analysis of sociocultural power structures and power practices. Cultural psychology can and should adopt this perspective.

4 Interim Résumé

On closer inspection, the alternative between the intentionalist model and the concept of rule-governed action still proves to be inadequate. Two aspects necessarily remain underexposed in these perspectives. On the one hand, it remains outside the field of vision that an action can be understood as a component of a temporal order and in its own temporal structure. On the other hand, a psychology of action that situates actions only in orders according to the intentionalist or rule-based model fails to recognize that actions can change orders creatively and innovatively (Waldenfels, 1987, 1990a). As can be shown, both of these aspects, i.e., the (doubly understood) temporality and creativity of action (Joas, 1992; Waldenfels, 1990d, 1999), are equally well accommodated in the narrative model of action (cf. Straub, 1999a, 141ff.; summarized in several chapters in Straub, 2021a; as a concrete example: 2019d). This has not least to do with the fact that both time-theoretical and creativity-theoretical considerations revolve around the notion of contingency and are equally sensitive to the dynamics of action. The intentionalist and rule-governed models of action, on the other hand, refrain from doing just that. They only know action that is conceived either as following pre-existing intentions or as following pre-existing rules. How intentions and rules arise or are modified in the execution of temporally structured, dynamic and creative action cannot be addressed within the framework of these models. For this purpose, the psychology of action is also dependent on the narrative model and thus on the speech act of narration and is thus to be conceived as narrative psychology.

5 The Narrative Model

The specific linguistic form of storytelling alone preserves contingency as such and makes it intelligible by integrating it into a narratively constituted context of meaning. Storytelling fulfils a descriptive and autoexplanatory function without eliminating contingency: Narratives sometimes provide descriptions and explanations (also) of actions that are not reducible to or replaceable by any other form of description and explanation. All sciences dealing with temporally complex phenomena as well as with the creativity of action rely on narratives (Danto, 1980; Straub, 1999a, 141ff.).

The visualization of temporally structured contexts of meaning, which because of the unique temporal structure of narrative sentence systems must take the form of a narrated story, first of all makes it possible to bring up “historical”, i.e., biographical or historical, reasons for actions. Already, this direction of view and analysis focus again on the dependencies of human action and on the limits of the autonomy of the subject. If actions are conceived as (provisional) end points of a tellable story, then what is true for every possible end of a narrative applies to them: The end of a story is linked to its beginning and its middle in such a way that it becomes clear that the action in question is a component of a story that is not within the power of disposal of the persons involved in this story. Even as something proper, willed and intended by the actor, the action placed in the horizon of a history that is unavailable as a whole also appears as something partially accidental, contingent, which means as something that could have come differently, “which is not fixed to a single being-so” (Makropoulos, 1989, 26). The unavailability of everything historically constituted also characterizes action. Contingency is a characteristic of both collective history and the life history of individuals. Reinhart Koselleck (1985) aptly describes chance as the motivational residue of historiography. This insight can be adopted by all action sciences interested in temporally complex realities. The concept of coincidence saves every “history” from the claim of its total planability and producibility. History and biography and the actions embedded in these temporal processes, not least the temporally structured collective and personal identities that emerge, change and pass away in stories, are inevitably permeated by coincidences (Sommer, 1988, 162ff.). Living with chance is a necessity.

Under the aspect of its creativity, action appears again but in a different way than under the aspect of its historicity and inner temporal structure, as partially contingent, as something that eludes the gapless power of disposal of reflexive, rational actors. As in the case of historically determined action, from the perspective of a theory of the creativity of action (Joas, 1992; Waldenfels, 1990d), actions can only be adequately identified, described and explained in an understanding way within the framework of the narrative model. Only narratives preserve contingency experiences as such by speaking of what still, as it were, happens to and befalls actors even when they – spontaneously and creatively – take an acting stance on the world and on themselves.

Whoever acts creatively disregards one or the other time-honoured rule, and always this action takes place without exact intention and perfect foresight of the result and its consequences. A certain degree of spontaneity is constitutive of creativity. In creative action, which “always has something of a negotiation” (Waldenfels, 1985c, 132), the rules possibly followed and goals pursued are at best formed in the course of action, and existing rules and goals are modified in unpredictable ways. Creative action not only follows logos but it also “creates its own logos” (Waldenfels, 1980, 265; 1990d, 84). In this regard, Waldenfels speaks of a poietic function of practice and always places the “logos of the practical world” also under the sign of creativity or productivity.

Viewed also from the aspect of its creativity, action appears partially withdrawn from the determining control of the intentional, reflexive, rational, autonomous subject. Human practice and the individual actions of individual actors now possess a peculiarly anonymous trait. To be sure, creativity is, on the one hand, an important aspect of human self-determination and self-realization since it is precisely creative acts that can produce not only changes in the world but changes in the world and in the self. On the other hand, creative processes of self-determination and self-realization are not processes that subjects could completely dominate and control. Analysed under the aspect of creativity, action acquires an impersonal note. Like the history in which it is embedded and which it perpetuates, it now appears as something in which the actor is involved without having intentionally produced it and being able to control it.

The boundaries between subject and world are no longer completely sharp in this theoretical view. Action acquires an “event-like” moment, and the well-rehearsed dividing lines between inside and outside, between activity and passivity, between action and passion, and between agent and patient become questionable as soon as the concept of creative action deals with an intermediate area in which the centres of action just distinguished can no longer be completely kept apart. The theory of the creativity of action, like already the narrative-theoretical approach to a temporally mediated and in turn temporally structured action, bids farewell to the notion of the intentional, reflexive, and rational subject as an undisturbed centre of unbroken autonomy and auto-practice. For the psychology of action and culture represented here, this insight is indispensable and central.

6 Where Is the Subject, and What Kind of Subject?

The above weakening of the autonomous subject of reason and action also pervades a good part of the works of Bernhard Waldenfels (e.g., 1987, 46ff., 155ff.). However, this author is far from a mere swan song to the subject. Waldenfels’ weakening of the subject is concerned with an understanding of the principally limited possibilities of “rational consciousness” to control practice and even its own actions. In contrast to the rationalist vision of a total control of action, he emphasizes, well phenomenologically, its corporeality (“Leiblichkeit”), which contributes

considerably to the unpredictability of the rational subject of action, but also a kind of say in the situation in which action is taken. This right to a say is so radically conceived that the situation does not merely appear as something that the actor (reasonably) has to take into account. Rather, in Waldenfels' thinking, the situation becomes a centre of action that cannot be fully controlled and yet plays into action (see also Joas, 1992, 236). The same can be said of the things we find in this or that situation: They too – even in their mere materiality – participate in an often imperceptible way in the consummation of our action. This also seems to me the rational core of Bruno Latour's (2008) "symmetrical anthropology", which admittedly should not lead to an untenable, metaphorical-anthropomorphic endowment of things with "agency".

Actions can themselves descend into the anonymity of a more or less masterless event: Their corporeality, the "inner foreign country" (Sigmund Freud), the voices of social others, the materiality of things, linguistic and sociocultural structures, institutions and practices, in short "the multiplicity of references and contexts into which it (action, J.S.) enters" (Waldenfels, 1990c, 74; cf. also 1999), rob the subject of the status of an unassailable, entirely self-sufficient and autonomous act-centre. All these aspects become thematic and accessible for scientific analysis not least in (self-)stories that a person tells.

Does the concept of action and subject still make sense under these conditions? The narrative model of action description and action explanation, which is open to the thematization of contingency and the manifold references that enter into and co-determine the symbolic, situated action of a bodily subject, seems to transform action theory unawares into a theory of anonymous structures and processes, which has banished the intentional, reflexive, rational and autonomous subject from its once so comfortable position and in the end has said goodbye to it completely. This danger cannot be overlooked. However, it can be countered in a subtle, not merely defensive way. The complete slide into a completely anonymous "it speaks" or "it acts" can be prevented by considering actions "as dosed mixtures of doing, happening and re-experiencing, of one's own and foreign. This mixture could no longer be dealt with by disjunctive, but by accentuating conceptualizations" (Waldenfels, 1990b, 55; also 1990c, 76). Everything that "makes our linguistic and practical actions possible by constraining them, and constrains them by making them possible, eludes the alternative of a self- or foreign legislation" (Waldenfels, 1990c, 78; see also Meyer-Drawe, 1990).

7 A Final Look at the Decentred Subject and a Theory of Personal Identity

The action typology outlined opposes the notion of a subject "strong" by virtue of intentionality, reflexivity, rationality, and its own will. It brings into play the concept of an autonomy that is always constrained, limited and thwarted by contingency and

heteronomy (Meyer-Drawe, 1990). With Honneth (1993, 151), this partial autonomy can be described as decentred, implying a form of subjectivity and identity structured in such a way that “intersubjective” powers function (developmentally) psychologically as constitutional conditions of subject formation and autonomy development: “The personal freedom or self-determination of individuals is understood here in such a way that it appears not as an opposition to but rather as a particular form of organization of contingent forces beyond any individual control”. Honneth determines his intersubjectivity-theoretical concept of decentred autonomy in particular following George H. Mead as well as psychoanalytic models such as that of Donald Winnicott. First of all, the author distinguishes the socio-psychological meaning of the concept of autonomy besides the moral-philosophical as well as the legal-theoretical meaning. The latter means “in a normative sense, the empirical ability of concrete subjects [...] to determine their lives as a whole freely and without constraint” (ibid., 154). “Autonomy” here denotes a “degree of psychological maturity” that is supposed to be associated in particular with two kinds of abilities or characteristics: The autonomous subject in the traditional, “strong” sense knows his or her personal needs and is aware of the meaning attached to his or her acts. In short, he or she acts on the basis of “transparency of needs and intentionality of meaning” (ibid.). It is precisely these preconditions that are doubted by the critique of the “autonomous (action) subject”, which is also so important for Honneth and which has been in vogue at least since Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalytic disillusionments as well as the language-theoretical critique of the concept of meaning intentionality by Ludwig Wittgenstein, for example. (Certainly, Friedrich Nietzsche has also contributed his mite). Precisely, these presuppositions are thus revised as soon as there is talk of “decentred autonomy”, “decentred subject”, “decentred identity” and a theory of action compatible with such notions.

Specifically, Honneth argues for a theoretical decentring of autonomy that encompasses the three “dimensions of the individual’s relationship to inner nature, to one’s own life as a whole, and finally to the social world; unconstrained and free self-determination [...] then requires special abilities with regard to dealing with drive nature, with the organization of one’s own life, and with the moral demands of the environment” (ibid., 157f.). This means that the criteria of the “classical” conception of a “strong” subject are replaced or supplemented by criteria of a decentred autonomy. This involves three things:

1. “The classical goal of needs transparency must [...] be replaced by the notion of linguistic articulateness” (ibid., 158), which means that the “creative but always incomplete tapping of the unconscious” (ibid.) is just as important as a relationship as free of fear as possible to impulses for action that cannot be controlled and can at best be symbolized and reflected upon in retrospect.
2. “The idea of biographical consistency should be replaced by the notion of a narrative coherence of life”, which means that one refrains from subordinating one’s life to a “single reference of meaning” (ibid., 159) but rather represents and reflects on it in the course of a narrative synthesis of the heterogeneous (Paul

Ricœur, 1988, 1996) – again and again anew and in new ways. Accordingly, Paul Ricœur speaks of “oneself as another”.

3. “The idea of principle orientation [should] finally be supplemented by the criterion of moral context sensitivity” (ibid., 158). Thus, decentred autonomy includes the ability of persons to “relate in a reflective way to the moral claims of the environment” without rigidly orienting themselves to universalizable principles of morality. Rather, such persons are able to “apply these principles responsibly with affective sympathy and sensitivity to the concrete circumstances of the individual case” (ibid., 161).

All three points mark clear shifts in the meaning of “autonomy”. No matter how one further defines the concept of decentred autonomy, the following can be stated according to the action-theoretical arguments presented: In the perspective outlined, the acting subject is pretty much always beyond total autonomy and overwhelming heteronomy. The acting subject is placed between total dependence and total autonomy. It is weakened even before we bring into the field the concept of “Widerfahrnis” (experience/happening/affect) as a contrastive counter-concept to the concept of action. The cultural-psychological study of our practice, of course, can by no means do without an in-depth analysis of “Widerfahrnisse”. Last but not least, the painful dark sides of our lives, which are linked to adversities, are part of human existence (Straub, 1999a, 41ff.). In addition to adverse circumstances and events, happy ones naturally also fall under the concept of the “Widerfahrnis”.

Modern identity theories in psychology and sociology are aware of the facts outlined (Bamberg et al., 2021). In my view, the differential theory of action outlined fits seamlessly with the outlines of modern theories of personal identity (Straub, 2016, 139–166, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c). If one visualizes the contours of the “modern” concept of identity, developed in its basic features in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, especially in American pragmatism and in psychoanalysis, and differentiated in the twentieth century within the framework of these and other theoretical currents, one becomes acquainted with a concept that is by no means determined in a substantialist or essentialist way. It also does not offer food for criticism that “identity” is necessarily linked to irreversible determinations and immovably stable orders, orientations and practices. It resists the notion of all too persistent structural solidifications and hardenings of a person, which no longer knows the experience of difference, ambivalence, ambiguity, alterity, alienity, temporality, historicity, contingency and dynamics that are constitutive for modern subjects and even suppresses them. Nor can there be any question of the concept of personal identity defended here promoting, on top of everything else, a relationship to the self and the world that tends to be shaped by violence. Nor does the harmonistic image of personalities who are at peace with themselves, always self-confident and therefore empowered to make decisions, who know what they want and can do in every situation and for this very reason attain a kind of “perpetual autonomy of action”, fit at all with the thinking to which the important conceptions of personal identity in modern subject, social and cultural studies owe their origin.

With metaphors that emphatically refer to the “openness” or “liquefaction of identity”, or with references to hitherto allegedly repressed “dependencies” or the inescapable “relationality” of the subject, in my opinion, nothing really new can be said today, at least hardly anything that has not already been considered in the discourse on identity theory for a good century – and which can be specified in the context of the modern theory of personal identity, not least in an action-theoretical perspective. Reflections on the concept of action on the one hand and on the concept of identity on the other hand are connected not least by the following: If we have reasonably elaborated theoretical concepts in mind, we will admittedly still want to refine and improve some things. However, I do not see any justified reasons for throwing the available, richly complex concepts of action and identity overboard without further ado, nor do I see anything completely new on the horizon of an emerging future. Of course, this is not so tragic as long as we keep in mind what we have known for a long time, namely, that there is no action and no identity that does not show more or less clear traces of contingency and heteronomy. We are never fully with ourselves, not even when we think we are acting independently, autonomously and self-determined. For a contemporary action-theoretical cultural psychology, this insight is central.

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