

THE MANIFOLDNESS OF MEAD'S ACTION THEORY

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ABSTRACT: The work of George Herbert Mead has been influential in sociology. One of the aspects of his theory that has been widely received is his approach towards action, especially his description of the “social act” as well as of gestures (as part of what was later termed Symbolic Interactionism). However, Mead’s descriptions are not very systematic and contemporary literature on Mead lacks a systematic overview of his manifold concepts of act and action. This essay is concerned with a theory-internal exploration of what “act” or “action” means for Mead. It does so by focusing on the wider pragmatist model of action, which is most commonly known through its contemporary re-reading by Hans Joas, as well as Mead’s “social act” and his concept of gestures. The development of the latter two concepts is traced from about 1910 to the mid-1920s. Furthermore, the connection of these concepts in Mead’s theory and, going beyond Mead, their possible mutual integration is discussed.

Keywords: George Herbert Mead, action, social act, gesture, habitual action

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1 Introduction

Conduct, act, action, interaction (Mead 1909, 406), “social acts” (Mead 1909, 403), “syncopated acts” (Mead 1909, 406), “truncated acts” (Mead 1909, 407) – these are but a few notions of act and action we can find in the writings of George Herbert Mead. Furthermore, there are at least as many different interpretations of these concepts by scholars working with Mead’s writings and thoughts. The “social act” has been described as an institutionalized social interaction (Gillespie 2005, 27), it is a “larger system” comprising different “subsystems”

(Athens 2002, 30), it can be “primitive” or it can include the “manipulatory phase” (Miller 1973, 31). The central Meadian concept of action has been presented as a larger model comprising different phases – phases of routinized and non-reflexive acting as well as phases of reflexive and experimental acting (Joas 2012[1992]). Others describe it as a “stream of action” (Strübing 2017, 43; my translation) in the sense of an “ongoing activity” (Strübing 2017, 43; with reference to Mead 1925, 256) or a “continuous flow of activity”, fluctuating between routinized actions and reflexive problem solving (Hirschauer 2016, 47; my translation). The multitude of notions of act and action in Mead and in Mead scholarship might be accounted to the extraordinary standing that these concepts enjoy in his thought as well as in pragmatist thought in general. Even if pragmatist philosophy, the philosophical tradition Mead can (mainly) be attributed to, touches on numerous issues, it does so by relating them to action. Therefore, one plausible reading of pragmatist philosophy could be that it is a philosophy always aiming at a reconstruction of the concept of action (Dorstewitz 2018, 44). But because of the centrality of act and action in pragmatism it seems even more important to work towards a clarification, conceptualization, and systematization of these concepts; an endeavor this essay wants to contribute to. In the following I, *first*, provide an overview of the different concepts of action which can be found in Mead’s writings and, *second*, I show how these concepts are linked and how they might be integrated. In this essay, I focus on those forms of action that take place in social contexts or are highly important in social contexts. The essay therefore excludes those forms of action which are directed towards objects and their manipulation. Although, I acknowledge that action, which consists of a manipulation of objects, was highly relevant for Mead too (Honneth and Joas 1980, 64; Joas 2012[1980], chapter 7). To a large extent in this essay I restrain from specifications of Mead’s concepts of act and action that are external to his theory or to pragmatist philosophy in general. I do not discuss differences to other pragmatists or to other philosophical and sociological traditions; rather it is concerned

with an internal exploration of what act or action means for Mead. This is of importance, because (1) it highlights the different aspects of act and action which scholars can draw on, (2) it helps to clarify why there are different readings of some of the Meadian notions of act and action.

A project like the present one is confronted with at least three difficulties: (1) Mead's own publishing activity was rather low (Dewey 1931, 311), and what he published were mainly relatively short essays, some of which were initially manuscripts for talks he gave (e.g. Mead 1912). Mead did not publish any book; the books on his thoughts which can nowadays be found in libraries have been published posthumously, based on manuscripts of Mead and on his students notes (Huebner 2014; Joas 2015[1934], x). Not only the scarcity of his writings, but also the origin of the arguments and descriptions in these books, particularly of *Mind, Self, and Society*, is problematic.¹ Unfortunately, their editors did not make clear how exactly the books were composed. Therefore, what has been taken to be Mead's ideas, terms, and concepts, are in parts interpretations by his students and colleagues. The scarcity of Mead's own publications is closely related to the second issue. (2) Unfortunately, Mead did not develop nor describe his concepts and terms in a very precise manner (Nungesser and Ofner 2013, 2). As can be read in John Dewey's² speech at

Mead's funeral, the communication of his philosophical insights was a serious challenge for Mead:

He experienced great difficulty in finding adequate verbal expression for his philosophical ideas. His philosophy often found utterance in technical form. In the early years especially it was often not easy to follow his thought; he gained clarity of verbal expression of his philosophy gradually and through constant effort. (Dewey 1931, 310)

His difficulties to find adequate expression for his ideas, suggest that the manifoldness of his concepts is not systematic, but rather in need of a differentiation and systematization. (3) The issues are further complicated by the fact that there are not only different concepts of action to be discovered in Mead's writings, but these different concepts were developed further and extended by him over the years; thus, their meaning changed over time. According to Dewey, Mead constantly kept on developing his ideas and concepts and was never satisfied with their current state of development (Dewey 1931, 311). The main aim of this paper is to clarify the concepts of act and action and thus contribute to overcome the challenges three (that the concepts changed over time) and two (that Mead did not describe his concepts very precisely and not always adequately). It also addresses challenge one, by focusing on Mead's own publications (instead of the books edited by his former students and colleagues) and trying to follow *his* line of argument.

Mead himself did not only *not* provide a (systematic) overview of his different concepts of action, but he might have even perceived such a project in parts as artificial distinction of concepts that are experienced as one whole in an individual's everyday solution of problems (this concerns the "social act" and gestures in particular). However, if we are to continue working with Mead's concepts, it is important to know what he meant by the different aspects of action and to be aware of the other aspects that one might not touch upon in a particular project.

¹ *Mind, Self, and Society* was edited by Mead's student Charles W. Morris after Mead's death. It is based on the notes of several students who attended Mead's regular lecture on social psychology in different years. Therefore, this book is problematic in several aspects, for example because it initially remained unclear which parts of the book were written based on which sources, or because it is unclear which parts of the transcripts are recordings of what Mead said and which parts result from student reflection. Nevertheless, it is Mead's best-known book. Some of these previously unknown details of the composition of this book are now better comprehensible, thanks to Daniel Huebner. On the complex process of creating *Mind, Self, and Society* as well as on the reception of this book see Huebner (2014) as well as the preface by Hans Joas and the appendix by Huebner in the so-called "Definitive Edition" of *Mind, Self, and Society* (2015[1934]).

² John Dewey offered Mead a position at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor in 1891. When Dewey was offered the position of a professor at the newly founded University of Chicago in 1894, he arranged to bring Mead as his assistant to Chicago. While Dewey went on to Columbia University in 1904,

Mead remained in Chicago until 1930. Mead and Dewey, however, remained friends until Mead's death in 1931 (Huebner 2015, 831–32; Joas 2012[1980], 26–27).

2 Mead's concepts of act and action

Not all founders of pragmatism were equally interested in social aspects (in general and of action in particular). It were mainly John Dewey and George Herbert Mead who developed a pragmatist social theory (Joas 2015, 808). Classical pragmatist theories influenced sociology lastingly; it has been foremost the thinking of Mead that had an impact on sociology. There are historical reasons for the intense reception of Mead's work in sociology (cf. Huebner 2014); still this reception is mainly related to Mead's own theoretical focus. Mead developed the pragmatist theory of action towards a social theory of action, meaning towards a theory of action with others and towards an ontogenetic and evolutionary theory of the social development of the human capacity to act (Nungesser and Ofner 2013, 2). This essay is concerned with those forms of act and action that take place in social contexts or are relevant in these settings. On the following pages, I will first describe the three forms of action – (1) the wider model of act and action, (2) the "social act" and (3) gestures – separately. In doing so I do not neglect that Mead's concepts are strongly interconnected, thus every separate description artificially separates them from the others (cf. Blumer 2004, 15). This partly applies to the interconnection of the different concepts of act and action, but even more so to their relation to other concepts of Mead, foremost to his understanding of the development of the self and of consciousness.³ Concerning the second and the third concept of action again two forms – one that Mead developed around 1910 and one he developed in the 1920s – will be distinguished.⁴ These two different forms represent two different stages of development. Howev-

³ Mead does not understand action through mechanisms of consciousness, but consciousness through (social) action. Insightful discussions of the relation of consciousness and action can be found also, but by far not exclusively, in his articles published between 1909 and 1913.

⁴ With regards to the "social act" and gestures, in this essay I am concerned with the conceptual development over time. However, here I neither discuss other developments (for example Mead's biographical development) nor their potential interlinkage with the development of Mead's concepts.

er, due to some more substantial differences and because of the fact that for some scholars it might be more useful to refer to the earlier versions, I prefer to speak of two forms (rather than of two stages of development). Later I will show how these concepts are linked and/ or how they might be integrated.

The terminology of different forms of action that is used in this essay should not be understood as a typology of action, e.g. in the Weberian sense.⁵ Rather, these forms are different approaches towards action or different perspectives on action that can be linked to each other and often vary in their social (one individual, more individuals) and/ or temporal (narrow or extended) scope.

2.1 A wider model of act and action

Action is central to pragmatist thinking in general – not solely for Mead. Nevertheless, the common use of the term "pragmatic" in everyday language and in academic writing suggests that pragmatism were a philosophy of "muddling through" (Joas 2015, 808). This, however, is not an appropriate description of the classical pragmatist philosophy; the early pragmatist thought of action as being based on habitual doings and as dealing with real doubt that acting individuals are experiencing. The first concept of action that is to be discussed here is this more general pragmatist approach to action. Therefore, the present exploration of the concept starts more widely with the pragmatist concept and the more recent literature, before coming back to Mead. Classical pragmatists sought to overcome traditional philosophical dualisms, like the one of subject and object, of body and soul or individual and society. They did so by relating basic philosophic concepts to action and thereby reconstructed the term of action itself (Dorstewitz 2018, 44). Whereas most classical action theories sharply distinguish between action and behavior, the classical prag-

⁵ Max Weber developed a typology of action, distinguishing the ideal-types of rational-purposeful action, value-rational action, affective action and traditional action. Everyday actions often fall in different types at the same time; however, the types themselves are seen to be disjoint (Weber 1984[1921], 44–46).

matists do not (Dorstewitz 2018, 48). Pragmatists conceive action as being embedded in a physical and social world and their theories consider active as well as passive moments of action, more and less conscious doings as well as more and less habitualized activities (Joas 1996[1992]). With Mead we often find terms like act, action, behavior, conduct and activity used synonymously and interchangeably. This can be seen from the following example:

The important character of social organization of *conduct* or *behavior* through instincts is not that one form in a social group does what the others do, but that the *conduct* of one form is a stimulus to another to a certain *act*, and that this *act* again becomes a stimulus to first to a certain reaction, and so on in ceaseless interaction. The likeness of the *actions* is of minimal importance compared with the fact that the *actions* of one form have the implicit meaning of a certain response to another form. (Mead 1909, 406; my italics)

The meaning of this quotation will be discussed later. For now, it is important to keep in mind, that the terms act and action are used interchangeably by Mead as well as in this essay. By using different terms for doings throughout this essay, it is not intended to suggest any strong differences between action and behavior.

Dewey was the one who described the pragmatist model of action most precisely and extensively. The fundamental ideas on this concept of action can already be found in his article *The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology* from 1896. In those days, the reflex arc concept was an increasingly prominent psychological concept aimed at explaining human behavior (Hildebrand 2018, n.p.). In this article Dewey acknowledges that the reflex arc concept is an attempt to overcome the old dualisms of sensation and idea as well as of body and soul. However, it does not go far enough for Dewey, especially since it replaces old dualisms by new dualisms. Most importantly, it involves a dualism of stimulus and response (Dewey 1896, 357–58). Stimulus and response are artificially separated (Hildebrand 2018, n.p.). After all, “the reflex arc is not a comprehensive, or organic unity, but a patchwork of disjointed parts, a mechanical conjunction of

unallied processes.” (Dewey 1896, 358) Within this model, the sensory stimulus, the idea or central activity and the doing are seen as three separate elements. For Dewey, however, they are not separate entities, but different moments of one whole; their relation is not one of succession, but of “coördination” (Dewey 1896, 358). Now, this entity and the “coördination” is not limited to a – however defined – single act. Referring back to William James’ well known example of a child who sees the flame of a candle, grasps the flame and burns its hands (cf. James 1890, 25-26, 72-80), Dewey argues that the act of seeing stimulates the act of grasping the flame, because these two acts (the seeing and the grasping) have often happened together in the child’s life before and because they are part of a larger “coördination” (Dewey 1896, 358–59). The experience of burning ones fingers, changes the seeing, which is no longer just seeing, but “seeing-of-a-light-that-means-pain-when-contact-occurs” (Dewey 1896, 360). So, for Dewey (1) moments that have previously been seen as separate entities (e.g. the seeing and the grasping) are part of one larger whole and (2) learning (e.g. that grasping a flame means pain) shows that previous activities are not to be understood totally apart from future activities. Rather, the experienced pain influences the way the child now and in future sees the candle and how it behaves towards the candle. The arc “is virtually a circuit, a continual reconstitution” (Dewey 1896, 360). The idea that earlier events impact later activities, not in the sense of succession, but by shifting our scope of action, was later refined by Dewey (Nungesser 2016a, 177). This idea is central to current readings of the pragmatist conception of action. Hans Joas, for example, described the pragmatist model of action as a cyclical model:⁶

⁶ In *The Philosophy of the Act* (Mead 1938) Mead’s concept of action is described as a model comprising four phases, namely the stages of an impulse to act, of perception, of manipulation and of the fulfilment or consumption. Even if this model might correspond to Mead’s intentions, it was comprised by the editors of that book (Joas 2012[1980], 146; Gillespie 2005, 34). This model is found in Joas’ description of Mead’s theory of the perception of objects and is compatible with the model described below, but the two models each have a different focus.

According to this model, all perception of the world and all action in the world is anchored in an unreflected belief in self-evident given facts and successful habits. However, this belief, and the routines of action based upon it, are repeatedly shattered; what has previously been a habitual, apparently automatic procedure of action is interrupted. The world reveals itself to have shattered our unreflected expectations; our habitual actions meet with resistance from the world and rebound back on us. This is the phase of real doubt. And the only way out of this phase is a reconstruction of the interrupted context. Our perception must come to terms with new or different aspects of reality; action must be applied to different points of the world, or must restructure itself. This reconstruction is a creative achievement on the part of the actor. (Joas 1996[1992], 128–29)⁷

According to this model, the basis for our everyday actions are routines. Routinized, non-reflective acts can be interrupted by unusual events or circumstances that seem problematic for the continuation of the current act. The action has to be adapted to the circumstances and, if necessary, new solutions need to be experimented with. Over time, new routines can emerge from a successful solution. This model reflects much of what was said above about James' example of the child and the candle. The child had learned in the past that something that is shining is something to play with. This experience is part of her perception of the candle and the unreflected grasping of the flame. Now, the child touches the flame, feels pain and burns her fingers. She learns that not everything that is shining is something that can be touched and played with, but that the flame of a candle causes pain when touched. In addition to what has been said before, it can be added now, that the pain of burning her fingers makes the child realize that the

Mead's four-phase model can proceed routinely (impulse and perception correspond to "unreflected belief in self-evident given facts and successful habits", habitual "manipulation") or as "shattering our unreflected expectations" (an unusual impulse, a "problematic" perception, a "creative" "manipulation") (Joas 1996[1992], 128–29).

⁷ According to Joas and the pragmatists, creativity is a form of creativity "situated" in actions. In a situation in which an action takes place, a problem arises which requires not a routine – but instead a creative – approach to a solution. Creativity that is understood in this sense is not a characteristic of individuals that is more pronounced in some people and less in others (Joas, Sennet, and Gimmler 2006, 11).

flame is something that will cause pain. And, as already mentioned before, this experience makes her routinely perceive flames of candles as something that causes pain when touched. Much of what is summarized by Joas in this model was already worked out by Dewey in his early article on the reflex arc. However, much has been presented by Dewey in more details in his later work and Joas' model is not only based on Dewey's philosophy, but it is more generally the pragmatist model of action.⁸

Dewey's essay on the reflex arc concept, just as his collaboration with Dewey in general, was formative for Mead (and it seems that the collaboration had been equally formative for Dewey) (Nungesser and Wöhrle 2013). For this reason, it is not surprising that this idea of action is also reflected in Mead's work. It can be seen as early as in the second half of the 1890s – just after Dewey's article was published – for example in the short article *The Working Hypothesis in Social Reform* (1899). There Mead already discusses the role or "function" of reflective consciousness in action. Action is not driven by the outline of a future world designed by consciousness, rather, the conception of a different world comes only after the individual faces a particular problem in the present world (for Joas this is the moment when situated creativity occurs). This moment, when the acting individual puts her efforts into finding a way to overcome the problem and identifies with these efforts, is where reflective consciousness comes in. It "reaches its highest expression in the scientific statement of the problem, and the recognition and use of scientific method and control." (Mead 1899, 371) Mead further develops his version of the pragmatist action model in *The Definition of the Psychological* (1903), where he explicitly refers to Dewey's essay on the reflex arc concept.⁹ Mead repeats

⁸ Joas' interpretation of the pragmatist model of action has been widely acknowledged. Some critics, however, argue that Joas draws too strong a line between habitual action and creative action (cf. Dalton 2004). This critique, unfortunately, cannot be discussed in detail here.

⁹ Even if Mead intended to advance Dewey's effort from *The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology* (1896), Dewey was rather perplexed about Mead's article (Joas 2012[1980], 67). Mead himself was later also rather critical about the manner in which

parts of Dewey's critique, but he is then, as it was already the case in *The Working Hypothesis in Social Reform*, particularly interested in the moments of disintegration (the moment when a problem occurs) and reconstruction (the process of finding an adequate manner how to act in this situation and in similar situations in the future). However, now he specifies further that reconstruction is not only required if the problem faced is a major problem, but also in the case of minor or every-day issues. Referring to James and his concept of the "stream of consciousness", he describes the facing of a problem as the "[K]aleidoscopic flash of suggestion, and intrusion of the inapt, the unceasing flow of odds and ends of possible objects that will not fit" (Mead 1903, 101). A description of a problematic situation can for instance be found in *Mind, Self, and Society* (Mead 2015[1934])¹⁰ where Mead reflects the pragmatist action model too. Mead describes the situation of a person walking through the country. Suddenly she finds herself in front of a chasm that makes it impossible to simply move on, even if she wants to. Before the path was suddenly interrupted, this person saw the path in front of her and constantly looked for its further course, but without being aware of this seeing and searching. Now that the person is standing in front of the chasm, she becomes aware of moments in her environment that she has not noticed before. The person is not simply looking around to see how and where the path continues, she also realizes, for example, that the chasm seems to be narrowing to one side, she sees objects in her environment that might be helpful in overcoming the chasm (such as a tree that could serve as a bridge), and tries different possible options that may arise in the situation. Mead introduces this example to show that people are not simply conditioned to react to certain stimuli in a certain way. If people were simply conditioned, they

would not be able to consider different options and try different solutions (Mead 2015[1934], 122–24).

With regards to the pragmatist conception of action, this example can be read as follows: Mead first describes a routine and an unproblematic course of the action, i.e. an unproblematic walk. Then the world – or rather the situation – turns out to pose a problem and simply continuing the walk is not possible. This is followed by a more or less intense search for a solution to the problem in order to be able to continue the action (see the reflexive consciousness in Mead's earlier writings). Mead here does not go into the problem of how a new routine can emerge after former routines failed. However, it is rather unlikely that a routine of overcoming a chasm will arise, except if the acting person in the example is one who regularly hikes through rugged terrain. We can assume that this could, however, change the overall routinely perception of the world, by the person who experienced these troubles (e.g. that for her the world is now something that can inhibit simply walking on without hindrances). The establishment of new routines can, furthermore, be found in Mead's writings. The idea is integrated in his description of the ontogenetic development of the human self. Mead understands the self as something that can only develop in social contexts and that continually changes through social interactions and problems that arise in the situation in which an action takes place. Thus, when a problem occurs, the previous organization of habits that constitutes the self, disintegrates. In the course of successful problem solving, the self reintegrates itself in a new way (Mead 1913, 378).¹¹

In *The Definition of the Psychological* a similar example can be found, even though it is described less at length. In this text, Mead is particularly interested in the moment of becoming conscious. A "man who hesitates before a ditch, which he is not sure that he can jump, is conscious of inhibited activity." (Mead 1903, 103) In his further discus-

he expressed his thoughts in this essay. He mentions that he developed his thoughts on the subject of psychology "somewhat obscurely and ineffectually, I am afraid." (Mead 1910b, 175).

¹⁰ On the problematic editorial status of *Mind, Self, and Society* see Footnote 1.

¹¹ This can be further discussed by drawing on Mead's distinction of the "I" ("a 'source' of both spontaneity and creativity" (Aboulafia 2008, n.p.)) and the "me" (the objectified) (cf. Adloff and Jörke 2013, 31–35). For a discussion of the "I" and the "me" in new and habitual situations of action see Aboulafia (2008).

sion of disintegration and reconstruction in this early article, however, Mead no longer refers to the example of a person walking alone through the country, but to the example of two people acting together; a situation where “we are forced to reconstruct our ideas of the character of our acquaintances.” (Mead 1903, 106) The character depends on the social activity a person is currently engaged in and the social context. If in a particular situation one person does something that does not seem to go in line with her usual “nature” or attitudes as the other has known her, “the immediate result would be that [the other; my annotation] would be nonplused and quite unable to act with reference to [her; my annotation] for the time being.” (Mead 1903, 107) The (seemingly) contradictory attitudes constitute a problem, because it becomes unclear what the real nature and attitudes of that person are. But this problem extends to the person perceiving the contradictory attitudes. Not only is she experiencing the problem, but for her there is the uncertainty if she had judged the other person wrong in the past. This example is instructive because it shows that there can be routinized manners of how another person is perceived and that the unusual behavior of another person can present a problem to a person she is interacting with, in the same way as a chasm can present a problem to the hiker. The chasm and the unusual behavior can disintegrate the routinized action of a person and in both cases the person, who can now reflectively become conscious of the problem, will be required to reorganize or reintegrate her actions. This is a first important step towards Mead's theoretical innovation that is to be seen primarily in his social turn of pragmatist action theory (Nungesser and Wöhrle 2013, 61). Even if the wider action model is the central model of action in classical pragmatism, it was formative for Mead's approach to the phenomenon of action and he did already develop it towards a social theory, Mead further elaborates his social theory of action in what he calls the “social act”. This social action is the second concept of action that will be discussed now.

2.2 The “social act”

Mead terms an action, in which at least two individuals of the same species are involved, a “social act”. The behavior of the two individuals is coordinated, not because they imitate each other, but because it is possible for them to react to each other's actions (Mead 1909, 406). First, an individual behaves in a certain situation in the presence of another. The action of this individual becomes the stimulus for a reaction of the other. This reaction of the second individual can in turn become a stimulus for another reaction of the first individual and so on (Mead 1909, 1910a, 1910b, 1912, 1925, 1926). Individuals also behave towards their material environment, but this cannot create the same form of concatenation of stimulus and reaction. Mead demonstrates this by the example of the weather: humans can behave towards the weather, similar to their behaving towards the actions of other individuals. But, their behavior towards the weather does not (normally¹²) influence the weather *per se* and human behavior does not become a stimulus for a reaction by the weather (Mead 1910a, 403). However, between individuals a mutual interplay of stimulus and reaction can develop.¹³

The “social act” can be found in both, the earlier and the later works of Mead. Nevertheless, Mead's understanding of it changed in one essential aspect over the course of time. I will now first discuss the earlier of the two forms of the “social act”, which Mead developed

¹² The term “normally” refers to people in general, excluding hailstorm control pilots and persons in similar professions.

¹³ The terminological similarity of Mead's “social act” and classical (European) sociological conceptions of action, foremost Max Weber's “social action”, might be misleading and should not be taken as an indicator for conceptual similarities. For Weber “social action” is a form of action that is oriented in a meaningful way to the past, present or future action of other individuals (Weber 1984[1921], 41). Not only does Mead's focus on the interplay of two or more individuals show that for him a “social act” is “social” in a more comprehensive way than “social action” in the sense of Max Weber, but also does the sociality of action in the Meadian sense reach beyond his idea of the “social act”. The individuals' ability to act (in immediately social or not immediately social situation) is social (see “Primary Sociality”, (Joas 1996[1992], 184–95); “Intrinsic Sociality”, (Nungesser 2016a)). Even if the “social act” is one aspect of Mead's idea of action, it is not a type of action (see footnote 5) and the sociality of action is not limited to this aspect.

primarily in a series of essays published between 1909 and 1913. Afterwards I will look at how Mead comprehended the “social act” in the 1920s.¹⁴

(a) The “social act” around 1910

In the middle period of Mead’s works (here especially from 1909 to 1913) he wrote a series of articles in which he primarily dealt with the development of symbolic interaction.¹⁵ Mead describes the mutual adaptation of the behavior of two interacting individuals for example as follows:

If selfconscious conduct arises out of controlled and organized impulse, and impulses arise out of social instincts, and the responses to these social stimulations become stimuli to *corresponding social acts* on the part of others, it is evident that human conduct was from the beginning of its development in a social medium. (Mead 1909, 403–4; my italics)

A few pages later he states:

“[T]he conduct of one form is a stimulus to another to a certain act, and [...] this act again becomes a stimulus to first to a certain reaction, and so on in ceaseless interaction.” (Mead 1909, 406)

Mead sometimes describes this process as mutual action and reaction and sometimes he refers to this process as adaptation “on the part of each form to the action of the other” (Mead 1910a, 397). These quotations exemplarily show two essential characteristics of Mead’s early understanding of the “social act”: (1) Around 1910 Mead defines the “social act” as an action of an individual, which results

from the stimulus of another individual and can in turn become the stimulus for an action of the other individual. Mead thus does not understand the “social act” as an atomistic individual action, but rather as an action that is embedded in a series of “social acts”, which are carried out alternately by at least two individuals. The “social act” is not only directed towards another individual, but it is “social” in the stronger sense of being brought about by both, the other individual (whose actions become a stimulus) and the acting individual herself. (2) It becomes apparent that in this earlier phase of his work, Mead speaks of an action that was brought about by an action of another individual and can itself become a stimulus for another action. To distinguish the earlier version of the “social act” from the later one, this series of acts can be described as a *chain*. Every link of the chain is a “social act” and the different links are carried out alternately by at least two individuals.¹⁶ ‘Misusing’ an example given by Herbert Blumer,¹⁷ this version of the “social act” could be illustrated by the example of a “a game of chess, in which one player makes a move and then waits for a responding move by his or her opponent before undertaking another move.” (Blumer 2004, 18) Each move would be a “social act”, however, it would not be a game of chess if there were no other moves preceding and following this move and in their interlinkage forming a chain of acts.¹⁸ Blumer would reject this reading of Mead’s “social act” even

¹⁴ Further quotes that support this way of reading Mead’s early descriptions of the “social act” can be found in Mead 1909, 403–4, 1910a, 403.

¹⁷ Herbert Blumer, one of Mead’s students, continued to work with Mead’s thoughts and concepts. He developed it further to what he called Symbolic Interactionism (see footnote 15) and thereby made it more receptive for sociology and empirical social research. However, he was not interested in a systematic and comprehensive presentation of Mead’s work, rather his reception is “fragmentary” and “one-sided” (Joas 2012[1980], IX; see also Huebner 2014, especially chapter 7).

¹⁸ Blumer introduces this example to show that interaction is not merely “an interlinking of completed acts, in the sense that one organism engages in an action that the other organism perceives and responds to by an action of its own” (Blumer 2004, 18). By this example Blumer intends to show what Mead’s “social act” is *not*. If we consider that the “social acts” which are forming a chain are so closely interlinked that they could not be by themselves (because they are motivated by a stimulus from the other and themselves become stimuli to the other even if this is not intended) then this example, still, suits Mead’s early “social act”.

¹⁴ For possible counterexamples and ambivalences of this interpretation see section 3. The distinction of the two “social acts” does not correspond to Miller’s categories of the “primitive social act” and the “social act that includes the manipulatory phase” (Miller 1973, 31).

¹⁵ In the literature on Mead, those interactions of individuals that are based on symbols are usually referred to as *symbolic interaction*. Symbols are usually vocal gestures. One of their characteristics is that they represent something that is not part of the gesture (e.g. the term “table” refers to a table, but the table itself is not part of the vocal gesture). Symbols presuppose a common “universe of discourse” within which they have the same meaning for all members (Mead 2015[1934], 89). For Mead, vocal gestures are “special” in their effect, because it is primarily this type of gesture, that is not only understood by the interaction partner, but by the acting individual too and indicate (possible) further action to both of them (Mead 1912).

For a detailed reconstruction of this series of articles see Joas (2012[1980], chapter 5).

though it is not too far from Blumer's own reading. For Blumer interaction in the sense of Mead is not merely an interconnection of completed individual acts. "Instead, organisms in interaction are observing each other's ongoing activity, with each using portions of the developing action of the other as pivots for the redirection of his or her own action." (Blumer 2004, 18) Thus, for him the chess game seems a problematic example, if it is understood as a chain of (separate) completed acts without any interaction or interference between them. However, it not necessarily is; consider the interaction of an experienced chess player and a beginner. The expert expresses her concerns or support while the beginner is trying to perform an appropriate move. This chain of interconnected social act would not contradict Blumer's reading of Mead, however, for him the acts of the individuals seem to be still more integrated, which is in line with the later version of the "social act".

(b) The "social act" of the 1920s

The second version of the "social act", too, is characterized by the concatenation of the actions of at least two individuals – of one individual whose action becomes a stimulus for the reaction of another individual, and whose reaction in turn affects the first individual. Mead describes it about 15 years after the previously quoted passages, in his essay *The Genesis of the Self and Social Control*, as follows:

A social act may be defined as one in which the occasion or stimulus which sets free an impulse is found in the character or conduct of a living form that belongs to the proper environment of the living form whose impulse it is. I wish, however, to restrict the social act to the class of acts which involve the cooperation of more than one individual (Mead 1925, 263–64).

In a social act, however, the act is distributed among a number of individuals. (Mead 1925, 274)

A similar description can be found in his essay *The Objective Reality of Perspectives*, published in 1926:

Communication is a social process whose natural history shows that it arises out of cooperative activities, such as those involved in sex, parent-

hood, fighting, herding, and the like, in which some phase of the act of one form, which may be called a gesture, acts as a stimulus to others to carry on their parts of the social act. (Mead 1926, 79)

Contrary to the first version, the "social act" for Mead is now an action that involves several individuals of the same species; the interplay of stimulus and reaction is now part of this one complex action. In the "social act", the doing (e.g. the gesture) of one individual "serves as a stimulus to other forms involved in the same social act." (Mead 2015[1934], 42) Mead also describes this later form of "social act" as "cooperative activities" (Mead 1926, 79), "common act" (Mead 1925, 262) or "complex act" (Mead 1926, 83). According to the later Mead, each individual performs a part or phase of the action, the situation that results from the realization of this part of the action is then the stimulus for the part of action of the other (Mead 1925, 264–65) – one could say that the chain has now become a collaborative complex. Joas too interprets the "social act" in this wider sense. According to him, Mead's "social act" means a "complex group activity" (Joas 1996[1992], 189, 2012[1980], 11; similarly Gillespie 2005, 30).¹⁹ Even if the first version of the "social act" is limited to the action of *one* individual, neither of the two forms of the "social act" is individualistic, since the effect of the other and the retroactive effect on the other necessarily belong to the "social act". Blumer, whom I already cited above, describes the social act as an act "in which each of the participating organisms uses the presented portion of the ongoing act of another as a guide to the formation of its own developing act." (Blumer 2004, 101) To the "portions" he refers as "gestures". Gestures are the concept of action that I am discussing in the next section.

¹⁹ The title of Joas' early monograph on Mead is *Praktische Intersubjektivität* (Joas 2012[1980]), which translates literally as "Practical Intersubjectivity" (published in English as *George Herbert Mead: A Contemporary Re-examination of His Thought* Cambridge: MIT Press/Polity Press 1985). In this book Joas argues that Mead's theory of intersubjectivity is based on the idea of "a structure that arises and takes form in joint activity of human subjects to achieve ends set by their life needs, a structure into which the corporeality of these subjects and external nature readily enter." (Joas 1997[1985/1980], 14)

2.3 The gesture

Similar to Mead's conception of the "social act", his concept of non-verbal gestures too changed over time. In the case of gestures an earlier and a later version can be distinguished as well. First, I will describe these two conceptions of gestures and second, I will explain in which regard Mead's conception of gesture is a conception of action.

(a) Gestures around 1910

Mead's early understanding of gestures is difficult to grasp. It is mainly developed in the series of articles published between 1909 and 1913. Two developments can be observed here: Mead's intellectual development and the evolutionary development of gestures. Thus, Mead's thoughts developed, and he increasingly started to see the development from what gestures evolutionary were once to what they are now. He develops the core of his notion of gesture with reference to Wilhelm Wundt, whose theory he initially received rather uncritically (especially in Mead 1904; cf. Joas 2012[1980], 95). For the early Mead in earlier stages of evolution there were "natural gestures" that were "the expression of an emotional activity" (Mead 1904, 380; similarly Mead 1909, 406).²⁰ This emotional content was the core for a further development of gestures (Mead 1904, 380-381). Mead describes this further in 1909 where he states that "the gesture itself is a syncopated act, one that has been cut short, a torso which conveys the emotional import of the act." (Mead 1909, 406) To highlight the character of the gesture as something that has been shortened, Mead used the descriptions "syncopated act" as well as "truncated act" for gestures (Mead 1909, 407). By the "emotional import of the act" Mead refers to the fact that the "cutting short" or truncation of acts involves a "checking of the acts" (Mead 1910a, 398) and this requires that an initiated action is stopped and readjusted to the new circumstances (cf. Joas 2012[1980], 101). This

²⁰ Mead's early reflections on emotions started from his reading of Charles Darwin's *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (Darwin 1872).

process of stopping and readjusting an action "inevitably" evokes emotions. In the interaction, the emotions are revealed to the other through gestures. However, as individuals refer to other individuals of the same species with their gestures and these react to them, the emotional dimension of the gestures has slowly lost its former importance and gestures have increasingly acquired a communicative or "intellectual signification". What was once a "mere outflow of nervous excitement" has gained meaning in the sense of "the value of the act for the other individual and his response to the expression of the emotion" (Mead 1909, 406-7).

The terms truncation and syncopation refer to a process whereby what was once a full act has been cut short. So far, we only learned that this process of cutting the act short gives rise to emotions, the mechanism still needs to be clarified. Mead himself is not very clear about that, but from his 1909 text we can see that the truncation is not merely a coincidental cutting short of an act caused by a given situation. As Mead's thinking was in general "strongly influenced by evolutionary theory" (Baldwin 1988, 953), gestures too can be understood before the background of evolutionary developments. Mead comprehends gestures as "evolutionary truncated social actions, which replace the former – sometimes violent – forms of behavior and thus enable a fluent, rapid and efficient coordination of group processes in the form of a conversation of gestures." (Nungesser 2017, 88; my translation; see also Nungesser 2016b, 255-56)²¹ This can be seen most clearly in animals; there are for example spiders that lift their

²¹ With Mead's 1909 article in mind, the description of gestures as "evolutionary truncated social actions" is most adequate. However, because of the development of Mead's concept of gestures (as described in what follows), some contemporary authors seem to have later moments of Mead's theory in mind when drawing on his description of gestures. Roman Madzia, for example, describes Mead's concept of gestures as follows: "Gestures are attitudes, or goal-directed bodily movements, which are being responded to by others. Mead sometimes referred to gestures as truncated acts which inform other participants of the social act about the result of a certain action of which a gesture is an initial phase." (Madzia 2016, 305-6) This could be read in line with Mead's early understanding of gestures and accordingly with Nungesser's description. More likely, however, Madzia seems to link the idea of gestures as "truncated acts" to Mead's later idea of a mutual social inhibition (see below).

front leg pair, a move that was once part of an attack but now suffices to signify an attack (Nungesser 2016a, 237). Thus, where there once was an entire act, now only a truncated part is left that replaces the formerly larger act. Mead describes this as "the birth of the symbol" (Mead 1909, 407), because the "truncated act" has become a symbol for the larger act. That at this stage of the development of Mead's theory his concept of gesture is mostly limited to biologically functional and relatively fixed acts that can be observed in an entire species can be seen from Mead's description of the reactions to gestures: The acts that have been cut short "could have meanings when they called out definite reactions which call out still other appropriate responses" (Mead 1909, 407). This does not only apply to non-human animals, but to humans too. The "human nature is endowed with and organized by social instincts and impulses" (Mead 1909, 403). A "social instinct" is, however, not deterministic in a strong sense, but it is a "well defined tendency" (Mead 1909, 403) and implies that a stimulus is followed by "certain types of response" (Mead 1909, 404). Even though Mead rejects the explanation of human conduct through imitation, in "animals and young children or primitive peoples" social instinct often leads to observable behavior that seems as if it would be an imitation of the behavior of another individual (Mead 1909, 405).

In a text published the year after, biological examples and explanations remain prevalent (Mead 1910a, 398). That Mead does not restrict this evolutionary perspective on gestures to gestures of non-human animals can, moreover, be seen from his brief remarks on vocal gestures by that time. For Mead vocal gestures (a translation of Wundt's "Lautgebärden") are not systematically distinct from gestures; rather, they are a type of gestures (Mead 1909, 406, 1910a, 404). As it is the case with other gestures, the emergence of vocal gestures is closely related to emotions too. Cries and other sounds were initially "the external parts of emotional acts" (Mead 1904, 383, 1912, 402–3). That for Mead, vocal gestures have originally emerged in biological-evolutionary processes is instructive, because in the further

development of his theory vocal gestures become particularly important for his understanding of specifically human forms of communications and their effects, e.g. the development of a social self (this will, however, not be discussed further in this essay). He indicates the specific effects of language on the self and consciousness at the end of one of his 1910 text, but does not discuss them there any further (Mead 1910a, 404–5). Thus, at least at some stage of evolution, human (vocal and non-vocal) gestures were evolutionary truncated acts. However, Mead himself mentions some restrictions of these descriptions: (1) by stating that "speech belongs in its beginnings, at least, to this same field of gesture" Mead (1912, 402) suggests that this is no longer the case, but that language developed to something beyond that. And (2) as already mentioned, Mead notes that social instincts can be observed in non-human animals, children and "primitive peoples" (Mead 1909, 405) and thereby suggests that they cannot equally be observed in most adults. This concept of gestures as evolutionary "truncated acts" seems little suitable for the description of human gestures at the current stage of evolutionary development. Still, at this stage of the development of his theory Mead does not provide any other description of gestures than the one as "truncated acts" and no other mechanism of the "truncation" than evolutionary developments. Even if Mead successively opens up his theory for other forms of gestures during the following years, he always "avoided taking an extreme position in the nature/nurture debate." (Baldwin 1988, 954) Thus, certain evolutionary and biological moments were always part of his concepts.²²

Even if emotions were necessarily brought about by the truncation of acts, this display of emotions is not the function of gestures (Mead 1910a, 398). Mead describes the function of the evolutionary later form of gestures

²² Even if Mead later describes forms of gestures that are only observable in humans, for him the sociality and gestures of humans need to be seen in a certain continuity to those of non-human animals and not as totally different from them (cf. Nungesser 2016a, 235). With regards to habits, a description of these gradual differences can be found in Baldwin (1988, 954).

(those with “intellectual signification”) in 1910 as follows: “The first function of the gesture is the mutual adjustment of changing social response to changing social stimulation, when stimulation and response are to be found in the first overt phases of the social acts.” (Mead 1910a, 398–99) So, in his article *Social Consciousness and the Consciousness of Meaning* (1910a) Mead goes beyond his former description of gestures that was in line with Wundt’s theory (Joas 2012[1980], 101); however, Mead did not fully revoke his previous description of the gesture as something that communicates emotions. Rather, he started to see his former description of gestures as an earlier phase in the evolutionary development of gestures and social interaction. This quotation, furthermore, indicates the first phase of “social acts” becomes increasingly important for Mead in his development of the concept of gestures. Mead understands gestures as something that is to be found in the early phase of “social acts” or that they are themselves these beginnings (Mead 1910a, 397). Nevertheless, Mead maintains his description of the gesture as a “truncated act” (Mead 1910a, 398). Gestures serve as stimulus for the conduct of another individual. In order to react to the behavior of the other in an appropriate manner, it is important for each individual to be sensitive to the earliest indications of an upcoming act of the other (Mead 1910b, 177). Gestures may now be (1) “beginnings of the outgoing act itself” or (2) “only indications of the attitude and nervous tension which these acts involve” (Mead 1910b, 177). However, both types of gestures have the previously mentioned effect of stimulating the other individual to react to the gesture (Mead 1910b, 177).

Mead argues that because of the importance of the early phase of “social acts”, humans, but non-human animals too, are particularly sensitive to these early signs of incipient actions. He links the meaning of the early phase of actions with the description of the gesture as a “truncated act”. For it is only the social relevance of the beginning of an action that explains why some elements of this phase persist, while the rest of the action has either disappeared or lost its original value – in other words, a truncation has occurred. Mead makes this very

clear when he writes: “early indications of an incipient act have persisted, while the rest of the act has been largely suppressed or has lost its original value” (Mead 1912, 402). These truncations are much more frequent and stronger in humans than in non-human animals (Mead 1910b, 177–78). Mead argues that it is in this early phase that the “most socially relevant stimuli” (Mead 1912, 402) are found, which affect other individuals so that they can react accordingly in their actions. In his articles from 1910 to 1912 Mead is still very vague with regards to the mechanism that causes the truncation (apart from the biological-evolutionary mechanism that might rarely be observable in human gestures). Mead’s references to habituations (especially in Mead 1910a) suggest that this mechanism is social, i.e. that certain indications have become so common and institutionalized that there is no longer a need to perform the rest of the act. The early moments of the act have become a symbol (cf. Mead 1909, 407). However, it would be too much of a simplification to equate these habituations with the routines and habituations mentioned in the context of the wider action model, as the habituations described here are individual and not collective (as symbols are).

The effect gestures have on other individuals leads us back to an aspect already mentioned in the description of the wider model of action. In 1910 Mead writes: “The fundamental importance of gesture lies in the development of the consciousness of meaning – in reflective consciousness.” (Mead 1910b, 178) Nevertheless, individuals are not always conscious of the meaning of their gestures. This is comparable to the case of two growling dogs circling each other, none of them attacks the other, none runs away, but they simply indicate their readiness to attack the other (Mead 1910b, 178). For Mead, the “meaning is defined in terms of the responses that gestures elicit.” (Aboulafia 2001, 10) Thus, the individual becomes conscious of the meaning of her gesture once “an image arises of the response, which the gesture [...] will bring out in another” (Mead 1910b, 178) individual. When the gesture is part of what Mead

describes as “convers of gestures” (Mead 1910b, 178), the consciousness of the attitude of the individual herself comes with the consciousness of the meaning of the gesture too. If a cry is not merely an instinctive cry but a cry for help, this “cry is part of the attitude of flight. The cry calls out the image of a friendly individual. This image is not merely a stimulus to run toward the friend, but is merged in the consciousness of inhibited flight.” (Mead 1910b, 178)²³

To describe gestures as the beginning of a “social act” allows Mead to interpret the term in a wider sense. From 1912 onwards, at the latest, Mead understands gestures as signs of impending actions that have not been truncated (Mead 1912, 402–3). In addition to “truncated acts” there are other forms of gestures:

It is an error [...] to overlook the relation which these truncated acts have assumed toward other forms of reactions which complete them as really as the original acts, or to forget that they occupy but a small part of the whole field of gestures by means of which we are apprised of the reactions of others toward ourselves. (Mead 1912, 402)

In Mead's descriptions of gestures around that time, at least two different forms can be identified: (1) “truncated acts”, meaning at first primarily evolutionary “truncated acts” but later also other beginnings of acts, that can symbolize something to someone and that need not to be carried out any further. (2) Other expressions (of the face or generally the body) that provide one individual with some information about the reaction of another individual to the first individual's acts. The latter form of gestures can be beginnings of acts that have simply not been completed yet, because they are interrupted before they come to their end. That gestures can be both and that it is not always clear which form of gesture an individual performs (but that they might be the same stimulus) can be shown with the example of aggressive behavior: If a person clenches her fist, then this gesture can be an indication of an aggression that she will not

carry out any further, but (for the time being) only shows through her gesture and thereby communicates her aggression to the other person. But it could be the beginning of a punch with her fist. Mead's well-known example of the boxer proves that, for him, gestures are not only and always “truncated acts”, but that the other type of gestures is of high importance for Mead as well. The boxer generally carries out her punch. It is true, that often she will not be able to complete her act, because the other boxer protects herself, a certain punch will not be possible and she will sometimes feign a punch (Mead addresses the feint of the boxer in 2015[1934], 43). This, however, is not a counterexample to Mead's conception of gestures in general nor to my reading of Mead indicating gestures are often the beginning of acts that were to be carried out in full. If our boxer does not carry out her punch, because of the acts of the other, this is a prime example for gestures of the second form – the act has not been completed yet, because it was inhibited by the other and will either be continued as it were very soon or it will be continued in a different way (e.g. as a different punch), because the boxer adapts herself to the changed situation (e.g. the other boxer who now protected a certain part of her body). The fact that the boxer can possibly feign a punch is only feasible because there is initially no difference to a punch that is carried out in full. The beginning of a “social act” indicates to the other what is about to happen, she expects that this is going to happen and she reacts to this, making feigning possible.

(b) Gestures in the 1920s

In Mead's later work, an even more general description of gestures can be found. Mead describes them as “that part of the act or attitude of one individual engaged in a social act which serves as the stimulus to another individual to carry out his part of the whole act.” (Mead 1925, 270; a similar description can be found in Mead 1926, 79–80) Examples for gestures can be found in situations like the following:

²³ From 1912 onwards Mead was particularly interested in vocal gestures, because they indicate the meaning of the act not only to the other individual, but also to the acting individual (see footnote 15).

[A]ttitudes and movements of others to which we respond in passing them in a crowd, in the turning of the head toward the glance of another's eye, in the hostile attitude assumed over against a threatening gesture, in the thousand and one different attitudes which we assume toward different modulations of the human voice, or in the attitudes and suggestions of movements in boxers or fencers, to which responses are so nicely adjusted. (Mead 1925, 270–71)

Gestures can involve bodily attitudes, vocal sounds and much more. Most gestures are found in the early phase of an act, because the mutual adjustments²⁴ of the acting individuals are best possible in this first phase of "social acts" (Mead 1925, 271). The description of gestures as "truncated acts" is in principle compatible with this conception of gestures, but such a description can no longer be found in Mead's articles from the 1920s onwards (at least not in the ones dealt with here). However, a different form of inhibition of acts appears in Mead's later writings: a form of inhibition within the wider "social act". There are different forms of how an action can be completed and these "conflicting ways of completing the act check the expression of any one way" (Mead 1926, 81).²⁵ The individuals mutually interrupt each other in their doings and have to adapt to each

other. As a result a different way of completing the act might be taken (by the one individual and/ or the other). What remains important is that in its behavior the individual (mainly unconsciously) foresees the reaction of the other individual. So, the behavior of the individual is to (or has the meaning to) call out an unconsciously foreseen reaction by the other individual.

Within Mead's conception of gestures two major developments can be observed: (1) Mead's focus of attention changed – from the focus on the emotional aspect of gestures and the evolutionary (and soon "intellectual" or social) truncation of acts, to the functions and value of the first phase of "social acts" and, last, to the mutual adjustment of individuals acting together; (2) Mead's conception of gestures started off with a narrow focus and became wider and more open over time. This has a further implication: Whereas in the beginning it would have potentially been possible to create a register of all gestures that emerged in the evolutionary process of being cut short (in a manner similar to the one of trying to capture a particular language in a dictionary), for the later Mead almost any behavior could be a gesture, always if it led to some reaction of the other individual, irrespectively if it was a clear sign or not. My reading of this development in Mead's conception that I want to provide here, is that in his early works the focus was on the evolutionary (and partly on social) development of particular signs that were an acknowledged expression or symbol for something, whereas in his later works his focus moved towards the *situation*, in which the interaction of individuals took place and gestures were made. For example, even if the bodily attitude of a boxer might be the same when she lifts her arm at the beginning of a fight and when, in a very different *situation*, she tries to reach a cup from her upper kitchen shelf, it can be a gesture in the one case and not in the other. Even if it would be a gesture in both cases (e.g. if her intent to reach the cup, indicates to her taller partner that she needs help), it is definitely not the same gesture.

²⁴ The fact that Mead describes the interchanging stimulations and responses of two individuals as "nicely adjusted" should not lead to a harmonistic interpretation of his theory. His selection of examples – boxing, fencing, a dog-fight – already indicates that adjustment means something different than a positive rapprochement. It seems appropriate to understand adjustment in the context of the later Mead's concept of "role taking" (for example Mead 1925, 268): one takes the role and attitude of the other towards her own doings and gets ready to react to likely doings of the other (whether she is a caring friend or a boxer taking part in a competitive tough fight). That adjustment is mainly taking place at the beginning of a complex "social act" simply means that often individuals need a moment to get ready for the other before the two individuals continue a rather "unproblematic" mutual exchange of stimuli and reactions. However, it is not limited to the first phase of a "social act", meaning that extensive adjustment might become necessary again later (the opposing boxer might change her strategy, the caring friend might get annoyed and so on). According to this interpretation, the opposite of being "nicely adjusted" would be a constant breaking out of patterns (e.g. a boxer who keeps on changing her strategy or seems to have no strategy at all) (for a critical discussion on domination and power in Mead see Athens 2002; Pettenkofer 2013; Nungesser 2017).

²⁵ Mead's description of inhibition in 1910 could already be read that way (Mead 1910b, 178–79).

This wider Meadian conception of gestures can be found in Herbert Blumer's writings too. According to his reading of Mead a "gesture is any part or aspect of an ongoing action that signifies the larger act of which it is a part – for example, the shaking of a fist as an indication of a possible attack, or the declaration of war by a nation as an indication of a posture and line of action of that nation." (Blumer 1969, 9) In the case of the shaking of a fist it remains unclear (at least in this brief example) whether a blow is indicated or executed, but the declaration of war is a clear step in the direction of war and usually not an interrupted action.

Before moving on to the possible integration of Mead's concepts, it remains to be made explicit in which regard Mead's concept of gesture is a concept of action. This results from the interconnection of gestures with Mead's early "social act". If one understands "social acts" as a chain as I did earlier, then every element of the chain is an action of one individual. This action of an individual is characterized by the fact that it triggers a reaction of another individual. This is exactly what constitutes a gesture for Mead. A link in the chain of "social acts" is therefore an action that is usually a gesture, i.e. for the early Mead a "truncated act".

3 Connection and Integration of the Concepts

So far it has been shown that at least three different concepts of action can be discovered in Mead's work and that two of them were adapted substantially over time, so that broadly speaking, two versions can be distinguished. The shift of Mead's "social act" and of his concept of gestures can be described as a development or as two versions of one concept. Even if a development has happened (Mead continuously developed his concept and did not radically break with his earlier ideas), and Mead himself does not clearly introduce these distinction of versions, it seems preferable to speak of two version of the concept, because there are significant differences between them. By differentiating two versions of the concept of the "social act" and of gestures, it

should be underlined that in some instances it is possible and legitimate to work with earlier versions of concepts that Mead himself later left behind. Whereas the distinction of the three different concepts seems to be relatively clear in his writings (although they partly overlap), the shift of the concepts of gestures and of the "social act" remains implicit. However, he is not always consistent in his arguments and in some passages a different reading would be possible. In *Mind, Self, and Society* for example, we can find the description of the mutual stimulus and response of more than one individual "involved in the same act". As a few lines later referring to the dog-fight, we find that "[t]he act of each dog becomes the stimulus to the other dog for his response." (Mead 2015[1934], 42) Here, the "social act" is one complex act involving more than one individual; however, the behavior of each of the individuals (dogs) is an act too. This behavior of each one of the dogs could be described as a gesture (cf. Abouafia 2001, 10) and therefore as a third form of an act. Ambivalent passages can be found in Mead's articles too, foremost in the earlier ones. In 1909, for example Mead once mentions a "common content of the act" that "is reflected by the different parts played by individuals, through gestures – truncated acts." (Mead 1909, 407) Out of context this could be read as a description of the later "complex social act". For those working with Mead, one of the issues seems to be that it seems possible to find aspects of his later concepts in the earlier Mead when the earlier works are read through the lens of the later Mead and *vice versa*. The advantage, as it could be said, of the absence of the distinction of the concepts in Mead's writings is that he presents them in a unity and thereby outlines the integration of the different concepts. For Mead, "social acts" and gestures are closely related concepts. Gestures are something that people employ in their interactions with other people. Depending on which Meadian definition one draws on, in non-social situations the application of gestures is either meaningless or impossible; impossible, since some gestures are by definition reserved for social interactions. "Social acts" consist of actions and reac-

tions of individuals, these actions and reactions are essentially gestures.

Over the years Mead's concept of gestures has constantly shifted in focus, as did his understanding of the "social act". Nevertheless, the relation between gestures and the "social act" remains coherent. For the early Mead, "social acts" are individual actions that were caused by "social acts" of others and that can become a stimulus for further "social acts". As I have shown by referring to Blumer's example of the chess-players, the chain of acts should not be understood as a row of at first separated and in themselves closed acts. Rather, they are (already by their mutual stimulation and response) more closely interconnected. Gestures are early indications of an action that has been truncated to this early phase. Later, Mead describes gestures not only as "truncated acts", but also as early indications of an action whether truncated or not. In their development from the direct expression of emotions to the function of mutual adjustment in interactions, gestures as "truncated acts" have acquired a communicative or "intellectual" meaning (Mead 1909, 406–7). The evolutionary truncation of acts is nothing that is unique to human action. Rather, human and non-human animals know "truncated acts". In humans, however, the truncation of actions and thus also the development of these meanings occur more often and more strongly. Humans can also develop an idea of the possible reactions of the other individual and thus gain an awareness of the meaning of their own gestures (Mead 1910b, 178). Nevertheless, this understanding of gestures remains very narrow. It can explain the emergence of some gestures of humans and non-human animals, but not the abundance of (institutionalized and not institutionalized) communicative signs that humans can use and grasp. Even if the truncation of acts might describe the original development of (vocal and not-vocal) human gestures, presently it might be more suitable for the understanding of the gestures of non-human animals.

The later Mead considers the "social act" to be a "complex act" comprising the actions and reactions of

several individuals. Gestures are then these various actions and reactions, especially those that take place at the beginning of a "social act". It is possible to integrate Mead's early concept of gesture into his later "social act" – the actions and reactions can be "truncated acts" or not. However, Mead's later concept of gesture cannot be brought in line with the early "social act" in a meaningful way, above all because for the later Mead gestures are by definition part of a complex common act.

Compared with the early concept of gestures, the later concept has the advantage, and at the same time the disadvantage, of being wide and open. At first this is a *disadvantage*, because it seems to be almost impossible to restrict. It includes communicative signs in the narrower sense, but also all other gestures which in an interaction become a stimulus for a reaction of another individual. But this offers the chance (*advantage*) to integrate further forms of linguistic and non-linguistic communication into Mead's theory. Habitualizations seem to be of particular importance in this context. As the wider concept of action indicates, habitualizations are an essential part of the pragmatist understanding of action. Even though Mead already mentions habits and habitualizations in his earlier writings (especially in Mead 1910a),²⁶ he does not connect habits with gestures. Rather, he seems to contrast gestures with habitualizations there, especially with regards to their respective effects on becoming conscious of problems and of forms of behavior. If gestures are understood as evolutionary "truncated acts", then there seems to be no feasible solution for the integration of habitualization with Mead's early concept of gestures and, further, with the "social act". Only at a very abstract level one could argue that they are the beginning of "social acts" that have become so commonly under-

²⁶ It has to be noted, when Mead refers to habitual behavior in 1910 his description differs from most of our current interpretations of habitualizations or routines in the pragmatist sense (every-day routines like the way how we prepare our coffee in the morning). Mead refers to the previously mentioned Jamesian example of the child and the candle (Mead 1910a, 400–401). The child's habitualized behavior of not touching the candle in order not to burn her fingers is learned behavior, still it is strongly related to biological conditions.

stood (at the *level of an entire species*) as indication of the oncoming act, that it was no longer necessary to conduct the entire act. If habituation means that certain actions have become so common to an individual (*individual level*) that they can be conducted pre-reflectively (irrespectively if they result from the individual solution of a "problem" or if they are learned from others and understood by others), they cannot be (evolutionary) "truncated acts". Contrary to that, gestures in the later sense can indeed be individual or collective habituated actions.

Considering the shifts of Mead's concepts and the difficulties to integrate habituated acts in Mead's early concept of gestures, it seems no coincidence that, for example, Stefan Hirschauer (2016) and Jörg Strübing (2017), who have recently written about the potential integration of theories of practice and pragmatism, refer exclusively to Mead's later work in their respective contributions. While Mead's earlier conceptions show similar developments in humans and non-human animals, at least to the degree that for both gestures originally emerged from evolutionary "truncated acts", his later conceptions move human social behavior further away from non-human animals. An essential aspect of difference is the ability of humans to acquire practices (Mead 1925).

In both "social acts" mutual adjustment is a central moment and this adjustment is taking place through gestures. Even if the overall meaning of the process of adjustment or adaptation remains the same, the degree of freedom seems to increase (consider the rather deterministic character of the early concept of gestures). In both cases adjustment can be understood as a two-way process, the early concept of gestures and of the "social act" seem to allow a one-sided adjustment too (e.g. if the sudden flight of one individual serves as a stimulus for another to do the same). In the later works of Mead the adjustment truly becomes a two-way process, as it has also been described by David Miller (Miller 1973, 30).

The concepts of the "social act" and gesture of the later Mead can together be integrated with the pragmatist action model. One can see the actions of an individual in "social acts" themselves in terms of this model of action.

However, this model is individual, thus a "social act" means that several individuals who have their respective routines and can be torn out of their routines by different stimuli and circumstances interact with each other. In routine "social acts", the actions and reactions of an individual remain on a routinized and unreflected level. In everyday life many "social acts" remain on this "unproblematic" level. Problems that require a solution can be brought about by the objective as well as by the social world. Problems that are brought about by the social world can be seen, for example, in the fact that the behavior of interaction partners does not harmonize at the beginning of a "social act". At least this is how one could interpret Mead's description that gestures are to be found primarily at the beginning of a complex "social act", since that is where the most extensive adaptation of the interacting individuals is possible and necessary. Even if the action model is a model of an individual, problematic situations can be solved together. Routines of one individual can be adopted by another without them being imitated in a strict sense. Mead's description of the wider pragmatist action model (cf. Mead 1903) adds a further aspect that needs to be considered. In this example, the action is not inhibited by the objective world, which does not allow that the action is pursued as usual, but by the unusual behavior of the other individual. Furthermore, the habituations themselves seem to be routines of how to act with this particular other individual (what her attitudes are and her "nature" is and how to respond to them).²⁷

Mead's different concepts of act and action can be distinguished with regards to their social and temporal scope: from a single action or gesture that is performed by one individual (even though motivated by another individual) and temporarily not very extended, to the socially extended concept of both concepts of the "social act" (the chain and the complex) that involves the doings of at least

²⁷ As Mead later grapples with the distinction between an issue brought about by the condition of the world and its effect on habituations on the one side and with problematic social situation and the role of gestures in them on the other side (Mead 1910a), this example would be an interesting case for a separate in-depth study.

two individuals, to the temporally much wider concept of the pragmatist action model, which contains phases of routinized doings and of problem solving, but that is only performed by one individual. Gestures are social (they might have been learned from others and they are directed towards others), but they are performed by one individual at a time. Therefore, from a social perspective they are narrower than "social acts" that involve more than one individual (regardless of it being a chain of acts or one complex). Since the "social act" comprises the doings of more than one individual, it is more extended temporarily too. The temporal scope of gestures is limited (it is limited to the time that it takes to make a gesture). The action model, which involves the repeated doings of one individual can in some cases be extended over nearly the entire life-course of an individual and is therefore the temporarily most extended model. As the action model is individual its social scope is limited.

4 Conclusion

The aim of this essay was to show and discuss the diverse concepts of act and action that can be discovered in Mead's writings. It did not aim at contrasting it with other theories or to specify aspects of Mead's theory by referring extensively to traditions of the interpretation of Mead, such as Symbolic Interactionism or Neo-Pragmatism. But already within Mead's theory there would be numerous possibilities to discuss the relation of the different concepts of act and action with other concepts. Especially some of the concepts of his social theory that he also started to develop between 1909 and 1913, like the significant symbols, the self or "role-taking" would seem prime candidates for a venture like that. However, this has to be postponed to a later publication.

Nevertheless, some closing remarks should be made on the interpretations of some of the authors cited throughout the text. *First*, I discussed the wider action model. Even if I largely restrained from explaining concepts through the lens of a particular tradition, my reading of the wider action model has been influenced by the

interpretation of Hans Joas which, however, goes in line with my own interpretation. *Second*, I described the "social act". Concerning the "social act" my reading is that this is a concept which is very open to different settings. For both forms of the "social act" (the chain of acts and the complex act) the common criterium is that it is social in the sense that one individual is involved and that there is some form of (mutual) adjustment, mainly through the interconnection of stimuli and responses and in the later version through mutual inhibition. This distinguishes my interpretation from those of some other scholars. Alex Gillespie, for example, gives the following description: "A social act refers to a social interaction that has become an institution, with established positions (i.e., buyer/seller, teacher/student, parent/child, boss/subordinate) which are stable over time." (Gillespie 2005, 27) Even if these stable modes of interaction would suit Mead's early understanding of gestures as calling about equally stable responses by the other, this is not Mead's description of human conduct at the current stage of evolution. I do not want to neglect that "social acts" can take place in institutionalized settings as these, but I do not see why they should be restricted to these settings. *Third*, I followed Mead's development of gestures. Because of the development of Mead's theory throughout his life, accompanied by his reference to different stages of evolution and his not very substantial descriptions, the different forms of gestures encountered in Mead remain rather vague. With regards to the interpretation of the early conception of the evolutionary "truncated act" I am in accord with Nungesser (particularly 2016a). To a certain degree, and with regards to an application of Mead's concept of gestures in sociology, I would support the interpretation of Herbert Blumer. Even if he does not consider the evolutionary nature of the truncation of acts, he does consider the process of the cutting short of an action. His descriptions pose these gestures at the ambivalent stage between a (habitually) "truncated act" and an act that is for the moment socially inhibited (but that might be further pursued later) (Blumer 2004, 19). This seems to

be a useful mediation between some aspects of the earlier concept and the later concept of gestures in Mead (even though it does not sufficiently consider the richness of Mead's theory).

In the literature on Mead that has been considered in this essay different "Meads" (different concepts of act and action as well as the different forms of these concepts) can be found. It would be insightful, to further investigate whether there are any systematic differences between those theories that primarily build on Mead's early writings and those that build on his later writings or between the insights of those scholars who approached Mead's theory from his later writings and those who studied it chronologically.

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