PRACTICES AS 'ACTUAL' SOURCES OF GOODNESS OF ACTIONS

BY

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C hapters Ten and Eleven in Michael Thompson's *Life and Action* discuss practices and dispositions as sources of individual actions, and as sources of the goodness of the individual actions.[1] Thompson illustrates his views with "acts of fidelity". His special focus

> is on what I will call the *act of fidelity* and its normative and evaluative standing. An agent X's doing A for another agent Y is an act of fidelity where we can affirm, in a certain familiar sense, that *X did A for Y because she promised Y she would*—that is, 'precisely because' or 'just because' she promised this. We distinguish such acts of promise-keeping from those in which, as we say, an 'ulterior motive' is at work. The Prichardian conception of a promise as potentially exhausting the agent's ground in the keeping of it is an intuitive conception, one fitted to the everyday enterprise of action explanation (151).

In many cases the thing promised would be worth doing independently of the promise. On the other hand, there are cases where the thing promised has so dire consequences, that one should not do it. But relevantly for the practice of promising, there are also "tight-corner" cases where one should act as promised:

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[1] M. Thompson, *Life and Action: Elementary Structures of Practice and Practical Thought* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press 2008). Page numbers in the text refer to this book.

the goods and evils to be pursued and avoided in the tight-corner context are such as would make the faithful person's conduct either morally blameworthy or imprudent if it were performed by a similarly situated person, but one who had not made a promise (153).

In what follows, I will first discuss the nature of actuality, then the distinction between acting on a first-order consideration and a second-order consideration, and the possibly related distinction between expressing a practice and merely simulating it, and then I turn to varieties of goodness.

I

Actuality

One angle to Michael Thompson's book is that it breathes new life, from a Fregean-Aristotelean perspective, into the Hegelian distinction between moral considerations or principles, that tell us what one ought to do, and ethical practices constitutive of ethical life – the distinction between *Moralität* and *Sittlichkeit*.[2]

Practices are "actual" in a way that moral principles are not: one aspect of the difference between moral principles and ethical practices is that the former have the character of "ought" (*Sollen*)

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[2] One can note in passing that Hegel's theory of action must by Hegelian lights seem limited by its context: it is located within the confines of *Moralität*, and is about realizing one's intentions, about translating something "inner" into something "outer". It is clear that Hegel thinks that a fuller account of action should be given in the context of established practices, in the context of *Sittlichkeit*. Perhaps what Thompson writes would be along the lines that would fit: first of all, Thompson's simple theory of action nicely accounts for how something "outer", what one does, and not merely the "inner" (intentions, desires) can stand in the explanatory relations to something else that one does. And secondly, Thompson articulates what it is for a shared practice to be a source of one's actions.

and may lack any other existence, whereas in ethical practices "what is" and "what ought to be" coincide. In them, what ought to be, *is actualized*. By contrast, moral principles merely articulate how things ought to be.

Second, in ethical practices *something that ought to be*, is actualized. This distinguishes what is truly actual from what merely exists—not everything that exists is a manifestation of something good or rational, thought Hegel. Thompson draws a similar contrast. Ethical practices differ e.g. from games of different sorts in that they are good in some such sense that they can transfer to individual actions.[3] Thus, concrete practices differ from abstract principles on the one hand, and from various institutionalized regularities of action which do not possess any particular worth on the other hand.

There seems to be a third point as well, which serves to distinguish between moral principles that have been realized, and practices in which something morally good or rational has been realized. So, interestingly, Thompson seems to suggest that practices can be said to differ from principles in that the latter have no causal power. Thus, the third point concerns causal efficacy of some sort—what is actual is not merely something "actualized", it is also something that has causal power, that is *act*ual as it were. While in their realizations (realizations of agents' intentions which are in line with what they ought to do) moral principles are actualized and thus do not remain mere "oughts",

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[3] As has been often noted to make the Hegelian thesis that "everything that is actual is rational" slightly less counter-intuitive: not everything that "exists" is "actual" in the Hegelian sense—not everything is a manifestation of a rational essence.

they nonetheless do not have causal power. By contrast, practices are causes of events in the world.[4]

> [T]he character of realist relations of fitness or deontological 'principles' can be summed up in Hegel's ironic formula: they are "something far too excellent to have actuality, or something too impotent to procure it for themselves." Such things could, for example, only 'act' through an agent's granting them significance— that is, in a way in which even non-existent relations of fitness and false or imaginary principles could (160).

So the idea is that principles can lead to action only if the agent understands their validity, and then act on them. Practices, it seems, can in some sense be action-guiding independently of any reflective endorsement: a person who has been brought up to keeping one's word may do so in tight corners while perhaps regretting that it makes no sense to do so, as some other course of action would have more beneficial consequences. And even when not regretting that, the person may simply not care whether it is right or wrong.

But while not presupposing reflective endorsement (like principles), practices presuppose that the participants are aware of the relevant concepts, and that they regard relevant considerations as reasons. So in some sense, the practices, too, function via the "agents' granting them significance."[5] And the false or imaginary principles have a counterpart in worthless practices, which could falsely be thought to be worthwhile. Yet, the relation of the individuals to the practices can perhaps better be called "embodiment" than "reflective endorsement."

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[4] Perhaps it is helpful to think of them as self-reproducing in some sense, but at least they stand in a special relation to actions.

[5] Thompson does not discuss sanctioning mechanisms via which the practices could have 'external' causal power but focuses on the dispositions of participants who are as they ought to be.

II

"Simulating a practice" and acting reflectively on a practice: reasons and second-order considerations

The consideration for which X acts is "I promised Y I would do A", not accompanied with any selfish, altruistic, or malevolent ulterior motives. It is rather clear that such ulterior motives could ruin the praiseworthiness of the act. It is less clear whether Thompson suggests that reflective second-order considerations would do the same.

Call the consideration for which X acts, "I promised Y I would do A", a first-order consideration. That could in principle be accompanied with second-order considerations "that I promised Y I would do A is a normative reason for me to do A" or "I ought to do A because I promised Y I would" or "the principle that promises ought to be kept demands that I do A" or "the practice of promising requires that I do A like I promised Y I would".

At first look, there's nothing wrong with such reflectivity, which is not unusual for humans. Being consciously aware of what one does and why (say, that one is painting a wall because it needed painting; and that one is acting for a good reason; and that one is acting as one ought to) need not change the nature of the activity. Thompson seems to allow for harmless reflection as well: "a practice is something of which its bearers are or can become *conscious* in an emphatic sense; articulate knowledge of it can come to them by *reflection*" (198).

So what could be wrong with the second-order considerations? Of course, some kind of self-consciousness about one's good deeds might be detrimental to the virtue of modesty,

and some practical tasks may be more fluent when one does not pay attention to them, but those sorts of worries do not seem to be at issue here. Thompson distinguishes sharply cases, where one acts as a participant of a practice, "within" a practice as it were, manifesting or expressing that practice, and cases, where one follows a principle citing the practice, in which case one is "externally" related to the practice, simulating that practice.

The issue is not merely that one is or is not a participant in a practice—after all, there are no injunctions for a non-participant to follow, so there is nothing even to simulate. Thompson writes of middle Rawls's and Scanlon's accounts that in them

> the ideally respectable agent is plainly to be depicted as *responding to* the practice and its merits an external element of the situation in which she is operating. In this respect, she is related to the practices under which she lives as a faithful agent is related, on any view, to the past promises she has made. Rawls's and Scanlon's hero acts *by reference to* the practice she faces, in consideration of its merits, but the practice itself in no sense governs her operation: her action is at best governed by the Principle of Fairness or of Established Practices, taken now as a principle of action that she has internalized (174).

Referring to the "transfer principles" according to which the goodness of acts of fidelity is derived from the goodness of the practice, Thompson further writes:

> If an agent were somehow to 'act on' one of *our* transfer principles—and thus *in view of* the merits of one of the practices or dispositions she herself bears, considered as a mere circumstance of her action—then her action would surely merely *simulate* action that genuinely instances *that* practice or disposition (174).

It is not entirely clear why it would be bad kind of reflectivity to "act in view of the merits". [6] There could be benign cases of second-order considerations accompanying the first-order consideration. Say, knowing that the practice of promising has merits should be just fine.

In the context of the "transfer principles", the crucial difference between the real thing and the simulation seems to be this: there is the consideration, and then the explanatory (or causal) connection between the consideration and action. Thompson warns us that thoughts about the explanatory connection should not be mistaken for the considerations that are the reasons.

The idea is perhaps that it is harmless to take "I promised" as a reason, accompanied with the thought "I am such that I keep my promises" or "the practice is to keep one's promises" or by an endorsement of the practice of promising as a valuable practice (these need not be cases of "one thought too many"). What is harmful is to raise the considerations "I am such that I keep my promises" or "the practice is to keep one's promises" to be reasons of one's action—then one is perhaps merely simulating.

By contrast, suppose Jack is not motivated by "I promised", but needs to think about the value of the practices of promising (in general) before is motivated to act. That perhaps is a situation where Jack is promoting the practice of promising; not expressing, but merely "simulating" it.

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[6] Take a case where one has come to realize one has unwanted racist tendencies, and acts cautiously *in view of* those tendencies (making sure one does not *act on* them). There at least one is well-advised to act in view of those tendencies without manifesting the tendencies.

But consider what goes on in such "simulation": there is a transfer of the normative and motivational force from "keeping one's promises is good" via "I promised Y to A" to "I do A". The transfer works, so at one point in the chain of transfer "I promised to" does function as a reason. It is not clear what the difference is to the practice of promising.

One more example: suppose Jack has recently come aware of the sexism of some of our practices, and now wonders whether keeping one's promises is a sexist practice. He comes to the conclusion that it is not. He continues to be governed by the practice, not blindly, but in a self-reflective way, on guard so that if he will come to the conclusion that the practice is not morally ok he will try not to be governed by it anymore. The situation can be described as Jack expressing the practice, but also acting in light of the merits of the practice. This, I suppose, cannot be described as Jack merely simulating the practice.

So I take it that having both "I promised to" and "keeping one's promises is good" in one's motivational field is expressing the practice of promising, whereas having merely "keeping one's promises is good" in one's motivational field might be simulating the practice.

III

Goodness

It is less clear whether the practice-based and the principle-based approaches that Thompson distinguishes differ in their account of the normative or evaluative features at stake—that is, whether they disagree on how and why keeping one's promises is good and right. The difference between *Moralität* and *Sittlichkeit* might lie somewhere else—both can for example demand

keeping one's promises in the tight-corner situations. My suspicion is that for many senses of "good", the distinction between expressing a practice and acting on a principle does not make a difference. The distinction may concern only the way in which practices are the sources of individual actions (the etiology of actions) not the way in which practices are the sources of the goodness of individual actions (the evaluative and normative standing of actions).

Thompson writes about "normative and evaluative standing" (151) in a deliberately loose way. Let us ask however what varieties of "goodness" of actions are at stake in the transfer principle stating that an action is good if it expresses, manifests, instances or exemplifies (executes, falls under, realizes, accords with, is part of) a good practice. Goodness comes in many varieties, here are some main ones. Officially, Thompson does not care which evaluative or normative quality is at stake (he is interested in the transfer from the practice to the acts), but it may be more plausible concerning some senses of "good". Further, each of these senses of goodness seems to be ruled out by something Thompson says, but then again, each of them may be among the intended meanings.

First, something can be not merely of instrumental value, but of intrinsic or final value, when it is worth pursuing for its own sake, or when its realization or existence is worth hoping for – perhaps happiness, or friendship, or knowledge are such (typically this kind of value is attributed to states of affairs). Final value is non-instrumental value that makes things that have the value worth desiring, hoping for, loving, appreciating, engaging with, realizing and respecting.

This is *prima facie* a strong candidate for being the relevant sense of goodness: if so, the transfer principle states that an action can be of final value, be good in itself and not merely

instrumentally, when it expresses, manifests or instances a practice, which also is of final value, or good in itself. The goodness of the practice transfers final value to the action that manifests the practice.

There is however some reason to think that it is not such "final value" that Thompson is interested in. This category of value is what consequentialism tells us to maximize – in classical utilitarianism happiness is sole such value, but different versions of consequentialism will have different lists. Consequentialism tells us that actions are morally right if they maximize value in this pre-moral but morally relevant sense of final value. However, deontological theories may deny that rightness of actions depends on value in this sense at all, but can be e.g. a matter of formal universalizability of the way of acting. Given that the "transfer principle" Thompson is interested in can be plugged into deontological or consequentialist "standards of appraisal" it seems that this kind of pre-moral final or intrinsic value is *not* at stake. Thompson grants that some such standard of appraisal is right, he does not here care which, and he focuses on the transfer of goodness from practices to actions.

Notwithstanding this interpretive problem, this sense of goodness can well be the kind of goodness transferred from the practice of promising to individual deeds.

Second, the moral "goodness" of an action may in fact stand for the moral "soundness" or *rightness* of action, the opposite of its wrongness or impermissibility. That some action maximizes pre-moral value can be a right/good-making feature, and moral goodness in the sense of rightness is the feature thus "made".

There is a further consideration that suggests that "rightness" is in fact at stake. Remember how promised deeds come in three categories: first, there are cases where the promised deed would

be worth doing even when not a token of keeping one's promise, second, tight corner cases where it would be wrong to do the deed, if it were not for the fact that it is a case of keeping one's promise, and third, cases where it would be wrong to do the deed despite the fact that it was a case of keeping one's promise.

Thompson is interested in the tight corner cases. In those cases, the act is right and worth doing only thanks to its being an instance of a general practice – and the value and worthwhileness of the general practice tranfers its "goodness" to the individual action. What is so created is strictly speaking rightness.

Further, Thompson explicitly allows that this sense of rightness may be at stake—he speaks about "evaluative and normative quality" (168) in a deliberately loose sense and lists a number of possible alternatives ("rationality, moral goodness, moral rightness, fairness, reasonableness, or any number of other things"). However, given that goodness and rightness are mentioned here separately, it suggests Thompson does not mean rightness with goodness. So let us continue to search for the sense of "goodness" at stake, but agree that indeed moral rightness is among the features that acts of fidelity can have, in virtue of having the right expressive relation to the practice.

Third, the goodness of action can be more densely not merely a matter of doing the right thing, but doing it for the right motives or reasons—here the moral worth or praiseworthy quality of the will with which one acts is at stake. Doing the right thing for a wrong reason might be devoid of moral or praiseworthiness. Suppose that keeping one's promise also slightly harms to one's neighbour one does not like so much, and one is malevolently motivated by that consideration to keep one's promise. It is still the right thing to do to keep one's promise, but the act is devoid of any moral goodness.

By contrast, acts of fidelity without ulterior motives seem to have precisely this kind of moral value, goodness or praiseworthiness. It is harder to see whether and how such moral praiseworthiness can be a quality of a practice—so perhaps it is not the same kind of goodness that "actions" and "practices" have. So this third sense of goodness cannot be something transferred from the practices, as practices arguably cannot instantiate this sense of goodness.

It seems however that moral goodness or praiseworthiness of this sort is meant to be had by the acts of fidelity, cases of doing the promised deed just because one had promised to. And it is precisely goodness or praiseworthiness in this sense that is threatened by ulterior motives or perhaps the wrong kinds of second-order considerations.

Fourth, something can be good for me, beneficial for me, if it furthers my well-being or my "good".[7] This goes with the prudential value of my actions—are they good for me? Thompson, following Gauthier and Foot, discusses this sense of goodness as the "rationality" of actions, so this is not the sense of "goodness" he has in mind in discussing the transfer principle. So let us keep searching for the relevant sense of goodness, but agree that prudential rationality of this sort is also at stake in the acts of fidelity, and in the transfer of evaluative and normative status from practices to actions.

Fifth, something is a good, excellent, non-defective K, if it functions as a K ought. A watch ought to show time, and a heart ought to pump blood, for example. A participant in a practice of

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[7] Note that my well-being cannot be good for my well-being, so it does not make sense to say that my well-being is good for me; or if it does, then effects to my "well-being" are not what determines whether something is beneficial for me.

promising ought to be such that he or she keeps his or her promises. This kind of normativity of the defective and the non-defective items is relevant for the analogue between biological life-forms and social practices, central to Thompson's project.

The problem with sticking to this sense of "goodness" is that it is trivial, and there is hardly any room for either denying or affirming the "transfer". If rules of the game tell us to do X when in C, then a non-defective player does X when in C. If goodness was meant to distinguish practices from mere games, this sense of goodness cannot do it, as there is the possibility of defects in any game.

Further, it is not clear that the practice can instantiate this kind of goodness at all (can a practice be as it ought to be?). And if it can what is the broader context that gives the practice its value? Perhaps the functions of human nature?

Thompson distinguishes between games, that have constitutive rules, and genuine practices. The key seems to be that the practices have the relevant of goodness to be transferred to the actions. What is transferred, then, must be more than mere non-defectiveness—that would not distinguish games and such practices as promise-keeping.[8]

So the fifth sense of goodness is not the main sense of goodness. But nonetheless, the relevant kind of non-defectiveness, goodness as a K, is *also* meant here: acts of fidelity are good tokens of the practice. And what distinguishes promise-keeping from tic-tac-toe is that promise-keeping as a practice is

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[8] Compare to how Alasdair MacIntyre defined a practice in *After Virtue* as something that has goods internal to practices, and standards of excellence, and suggested that something really counts as a practice if it adds to the variety of human flourishing, and it can do so only if it is of final, non-instrumental value. Trivial games such as tic-tac-toe do not meet that criterion.

good (as having final value, as transferring morally rightness or praiseworthiness to the deeds, as being beneficial to human flourishing and one's true self-interest—or possibly, as being itself a non-defective token in the type "practices that realize the human function").

So ultimately, it looks like we did not find the sense of "goodness" at stake, but that goodness in all the five senses can be had by actions. Promise-keeping arguably *is* good in many ways so it may not matter that Thompson also seems to have had in mind different ways in which promise-keeping is good in different passages. Nonetheless, it would clarify things if the nature of the goodness transferred from practices to actions were made clearer.

Let us end by asking which of the senses of "good" are relevant for drawing the distinction between practices as a source of goodness, and goodness that the actions may have independently. Acts of keeping one's promise might be (i) of final, non-instrumental value, (ii) morally right, (iii) morally praiseworthy and (iv) prudential even though their goodness would derive from some other source than the practice. Similarly, the nature of promising might enable us to define defective promisors in terms of individual actions and principles; so (v) the idea of defectiveness of actions need not be derived from the practice either.

If that is right, then it seems that the difference between "Moralität" and "Sittlichkeit" is not in the evaluative or normative status of the good, rational actions, but rather in their 'actuality' in the relevant sense.