SOME CONSEQUENCES OF MICHAEL THOMPSON'S *LIFE AND ACTION* FOR SOCIAL PHILOSOPHY

BY

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I
Disposition and Practice

In part three of his book *Life and Action,* Michael Thompson offers us a compelling new account of the notions of 'disposition' and 'social practice.'[1] Thompson's thesis is developed indirectly through a sort of "immanent criticism" (156) on the one side of dispositional accounts of the rationality of morality (mainly David Gauthier's *Morals by Agreement*[2] and Philippa Foot's "Moral Beliefs"[3]), and on the other side of practice versions of utilitarianism (which Thompson addresses indirectly through a reading of John Rawls' "Two Concepts of Rules"[4]). This makes it somehow rather difficult to identify the positive argument underlying Thompson's strategy. Here is an attempt at a rational reconstruction of it. According to Thompson, the positions under scrutiny could not eventually justify their own presuppositions—mainly the 'transparency or

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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.

[2] D. Gauthier, *Morals by Agreement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1986).

[3] P. Foot, "Moral Beliefs," in *Virtues and Vices* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1977).

[4] J. Rawls "Two Concepts of Rules," in *Collected Papers* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press).

transfer principle' (168) on which they are implicitly based, and according to which the goodness of a disposition and the rationality of a practice are transferred to individual action. This would be due to the fact that such positions are based on too wide an understanding of the very notions of disposition and practice they respectively appeal to. Hence, they could not demarcate respectively a philosophical from a merely psychological notion of disposition—the latter understood as an inner source of individual acts of an individual agent—and a philosophical from a mere sociological understanding of practice—the latter understood as a statistical regularity (149-152). Thompson's conceptual strategy is rather to develop a narrower and specifically practical notion of disposition and practice. If we could succeed in this, then practical disposition and social practice could be understood as central features of practical philosophy. Thompson's main argument here is that both disposition and practice would be linked to the logical and metaphysical role a certain sort of practical generality plays within practical philosophy, and which is a species of a wider genus of generality, namely the sort of generality, introduced in part one of the book, which is proper to life's descriptions and the natural historical judgments which express them. This means first of all that the notions of 'disposition' and 'social practice' would play a 'mediating' role in practical judgments analogous to the role that in natural historical judgments is played by the notion of 'life-form or species.' Secondly, practical descriptions, being a species of the genus of life descriptions, would themselves be mediated by 'life-form', that is, are themselves to be understood as instances/manifestations/expressions of vital processes.

As 'mediating' elements which pertain to the same genus—practical generality—disposition and practice would have two main common features: 'generality' and 'actuality.' As for the first feature, this means that disposition and practice do not come to a

limit in any action or event, but that they are one and the same, unexhausted, through a potentially unlimited series of individual acts that fall together under a single concept through which the disposition or the practice are described (158). This is a species of the sort of generality exhibited by 'life-forms' in the peculiar Aristotelian use of the term Thompson adopts, and which must be distinguished from the sort of generality of 'types' (understood as general concepts under which individuals fall). As for actuality, this means that the disposition or the practice bears some kind of actuality in, or among, the agents whose individual acts it is supposed to accredit (160): for instance, a practice—let's say the practice of promising—exists only insofar as it is actualized in individuals who act and are disposed to act according to that practice. While establishing that disposition and practice are constitutive of practical descriptions, Thompson introduces a second argument. If we follow a practical philosophical account, then we should give priority to the notion of practice over the notion of disposition. Just as to describe the individual organism before us as 'eating', we must refer to it as to a bearer of a certain life-form (in a different life-form, the same material process could amount to something entirely different), to describe an individual act as an act of fidelity we need to describe it as bearing an appropriate relation to the appropriate practice (the practice of promising). In view of this, Thompson makes the (as we'll see, problematic) suggestion that dispositions, if we understand them as the ultimate source and inner basis of the acts of fidelity of an individual, are "simply identical with the larger practice of promising, and not at all psychological" (208). Please note that such a priority is not only a matter of logical individuation, but also of ontological individuation of individual acts: according to Thompson, dispositions "cannot exist apart from" the practice to which they bear an appropriate relation (209).

The problem for Thompson is that, if we were to give a

practical explanatory role in action theory and moral theory to the notion of disposition, understanding it as a sort of personal basis of individual acts, then we would come to hypostatize it, understanding it not only as a sort of 'antecedent causal role' but also as a sort of ontological 'state.' On the contrary, for Thompson all the practical explanatory role available must be given to the notion of practice, which furnishes us with a more ultimate account of what the different personal bases "were supposed to account for" (209). Hence, good dispositions are "the practice under another name, and the same for everyone" (210). The notion of disposition will play a *real* explanatory role only in the case of vice, that is, of an individual act which is defective (as for instance, an act of infidelity by an individual who does not keep their promises): here we need to mention special facts about an individual, that is, we do need to appeal to dispositions understood as private sources of action.

Such an account of the priority of the notion of practice over the notion of disposition is clearly based on the idea that the relation that subsists between a practice and the individual acts of its individual bearers is analogous to the relation that subsists between a life-form and its individual bearers, in that it follows the logic of practical generalities which has been identified in part two of the book. This thesis is articulated by Thompson in a section of his book entitled "Excursus for Purposes of Analogy" (199-207) through an immanent criticism of Rawls's "Two Concepts of Rules". According to Thompson, the notion of practice shares some fundamental features with the notion of "life-form": like a life-form, a practice can be represented through generic judgments of a particular type (which are actual and general); like a life-form, a practice is related to an aspect of the "manifest" image of the world; like a life-form, a practice is an interpretative structure in much of what we say and think about its individual bearers. Like a life-form, a practice is not something

to which the individual bearer is *externally* related, but is in some sense present from within in every individual bearer; like a life-form, a practice is associated with a standard or measure of good and bad in the individual operations of the agents who bear it. Like a life-form, a practice is something that can provide a common account, shared by all the individuals that are its bearers, of what is reckoned as good according to that standard. The specific difference which distinguishes a practice from a life-form is here the fact that it is in the nature of a social practice to be somehow (even implicitly) represented by its bearers, whereas the constitution of a life-form does not necessarily need to be conceived by its bearers (200). But this last feature does not play a role in the argument which leads Thompson to give priority to practice over disposition – and eventually to identify disposition with practice – and which seems to be entirely based on the satisfaction by the notion of practice of the same features which hold for life-form.

II

Criticism of Anti-Naturalism, Normativism, and Constitutive Rules Approaches to Social Practices.

Apart from technicalities, the culminating thesis which closes *Life and Action* can be summarized as follows. Human social practice is a specific trait of our natural life-form. In other words, it's a manifestation of our life-form, that is of our first nature, that we have a social practice which develops into historical practices, that is, into second natures.[5] This is a sort of generic, formal Aristotelianism, since it does not depend on any local

[5] M. Thompson, "Forms of Nature: 'first', 'second', 'living', 'rational', and 'phronetic', in G. Hindrichs, A. Honneth (eds.), Freiheit. StuttgarterHegel-Kongreß 2011 (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann 2013).

claim on the specific political character of human social practice nor on any moral substantive claim on natural goodness[6].

Let me first evaluate the relevant contribution which the philosophical picture of practical thought articulated by Thompson could offer to contemporary social philosophy for the understanding of social phenomena. Since part three of *Life and Action* does not directly and affirmatively argue in favor of a particular philosophical thesis, but rather proceeds through an immanent criticism of alternative positions, this is maybe the textual portion which presents more interpretative problems and that needs a rational reconstruction to be made intelligible. Since Thompson may not want to draw for himself all the conclusions that to my mind are implied by some results of his work, what follows could be otherwise understood as Thompson's social philosophical assumptions made explicit, or else as a list of theses inspired by Thompson which I would endorse.

First, if my reconstruction is sound, then Thompson's overall strategy furnishes us with a conceptual framework to argue against bald anti-naturalism in social philosophy. Thompson offers us a convincing conceptual framework to argue that the notion of social practice, which is often taken to be an anti-naturalist one, is internally linked to that of life-form and thus requires some sort of naturalistic account. Furthermore, Thompson's conceptual strategy would be useful to argue against anti-historicist versions of naturalism: in line with thinkers such as Marx in his Parish Manuscripts, Thompson deploys a version of social naturalism which is compatible with historicism, insofar as it understands human social practice as such that it structurally

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[6] Such a distinction between "formal" or logic, "local", and "substantive" Aristotelianism is modeled on the distinction between different levels of "Footianism" which Thompson traces in his *Three Degrees of Natural Goodness*, "Tre Gradi di Bontà Naturale," *Iride* vol. 38, (April 2003), pp.191-197.

develops into historical practices. Moreover, Thompson's framework could enlarge the understanding of contemporary 'liberal' or 'mild' naturalism, insofar as his account is not unilaterally based on a notion of second nature already historically conceived—as happens in the most sophisticated version of mild naturalism which has had an audience nowadays in social philosophy, that is McDowell's[7]—but argues in favor of the idea that a notion of living first nature as life-form should be included in the manifest image of our practices in order for us to understand the grammar of second natures.

A second relevant contribution to the field of social philosophy concerns the understanding of social processes. To my mind, one of the most interesting philosophical moves of Thompson, at least if we read him in a certain way, consists in extending the notion of agency beyond the limits of contemporary action theory. The notion of practical agency which Thompson elaborates, is co-extensive with that of life-form, and applies to all vital operations (43-44). It is true that on this basis Thompson elaborates a notion of action as intrinsically intentional, but please note that at its most basic level 'intentional' means here a vital process which can be expressively characterized in terms of 'parts-whole' causal dependency (which Thompson in part two of the book names 'naïve explanation' (106-119)). Most sophisticated action explanations, which make use of psychological verbs such as "intend", "want", "desire", can of course be applied to express some vital human processes, but this does not mean that we should consider these expressive characterizations as being more fundamental nor that we should model our understanding of social action on them. Now, it seems

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[7] J. McDowell, "Two Sorts of Naturalism," in R. Hursthouse, G. Lawrence, and W. Quinn (eds.), *Virtues and Reasons: Philippa Foot and Moral Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1996), pp. 149–79.

to me that this latter tendency is predominant in contemporary social philosophy and social ontology and in some sense leads to a peculiar, distorted propositional understanding of social processes and their causality: an understanding which Thompson contributes to freeing us from.

A third relevant contribution concerns the fact that Thompson's framework, as I read it, could help us to gain some distance from the obsession of 'normativism.' I do not want to claim here that Thompson himself argues in favor of 'anti-normativism' but rather that his conceptual strategy, once appropriated within a more pragmatist-inclined tendency, could be very helpful to put normativity in its proper place, and thus could be helpful to contrast that sort of unlimited expansion of the jargon of normativity which is one of the most striking aspects of contemporary practical philosophy. Here are two main lines of argument which could be reconstructed based on a reading of *Life and Action*. First, Thompson's analysis of practical generalities—which applies both to the understanding of life-form and social practice—leads to the conclusion that their logical and metaphysical structure is 'categorical' rather than normative—it expresses a state of things that 'are so and so', facts about how our practices are made—rather than 'oughts' (73-76).[8] Categorical judgments and the phenomena so expressed thus have priority over normative ones insofar as the latter can be analyzed in terms of the first and understood as a species of their genus. We could generalize this point by saying that 'normativity' cannot be conceived by itself, and so it is not a self-explicating

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[8] According to Thompson, categorical judgment is the typical form of the judgments about process events within life's forms, that are expressed in natural history about animal behavior (The S is (or has or does) X; for instance, cats have four legs), and in social science about social practices (Italians do x: they have the standing attitude, the habit to do X).

phenomenon, as contemporary boot-strapping theories of social normativity assume. Normativity cannot be accounted for just through normative justification. In order to make the logical form and the ontological constitution of normative phenomena intelligible, we need to understand them on the basis of a non-normative account of life's agency and its processes, which at their basic level are for Thompson categorical ones (consisting of life's, practices' description rather than of prescriptions) and then add on top of this some more determinate features, which would account for the oughtness which characterizes a species of categorical judgments.

This would have important consequences as for the sort of ontology of the social we should adopt. There is a widespread tendency in contemporary social ontology—see for example authors such as John Searle, Robert Brandom and Margaret Gilbert[9]—to understand social phenomena under the model of a deontic account of social norms—that is, as constituted through norms (understood as constitutive rules). Thompson's categorical account of the elementary structures of practice—which applies both to the first nature of 'life-form' and to the second natures of 'forms of life', that is of historical practices—is here an interesting point of departure for an alternative analysis of social phenomena. If we take Thompson's analysis seriously and radicalize it, then we should come to the conclusion that it is not in terms of norms, nor of constitutive rules that we could account for the logical and ontological structure of social practices but rather by appealing to the notion of 'form', whose categorical use

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[9] J. Searle, *Making the Social World. The Structure of Human Civilization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2010); R. Brandom, *Making It Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press 1994); M. Gilbert, *Joint Commitment: How We Make the Social World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2014).

is not further analyzable in terms of deontic norms (but rather the other way round). This seems to be also the rationale of one of the most complicated discussions to be found in *Life and Action,* that is, Thompson's immanent criticism of Rawls' "Two Concepts of Rules". Although Thompson doesn't draw such a conclusion himself, one can infer that the rationale underlying this very subtle analysis is exactly that one cannot understand social practices under the model of linguistic games defined by constitutive rules. Thompson's analysis implies that you do not need the notion of a rule to define what a social practice is ("the notion of a 'rule' fits poorly with the idea of a practice in the sense that interests us" (189, fn. 84)). Moreover, unlike games, social practices are not distinguished from one another by means of specific rules. Both arguments are not confined to a close discussion of Rawls' paper but have a more general relevance which I take to be consistent with the rationale of Thompson's form analysis, since the latter implies that in order to define social practice and distinguish different social practices, we need instead a categorical analysis.

III

Some problems with Thompson's Anti-Individualism

Now that I have made explicit some aspects of the relevance of Thompson's framework for social philosophy, I would like to concentrate on a major problem that arises within this understanding of social practice, a problem which the conceptual tools developed in *Life and Action* do not seem able to deal with. Such a problem is the consequence of an over-extension of Thompson's anti-individualist approach to life and action, which leads him to underestimate the role that individuality plays in human practice.

3.1. *The logic of re-descriptions*

All throughout part one and part two of *Life and Action* Thompson develops a very refined criticism of individualist approaches to life and action, arguing that both vital operations of individual animal organism and individual actions of human agents cannot be determined without implicitly appealing to the life-form and practice individuals are bearers of and which they instantiate/manifest/express. And this is not only a matter of logical identification of such activities, but also a matter of their ontological individuation. Now the anti-individualist idea that it is life-form which determines a class of individuals, if applied indiscriminately to both life-form and practice, is at risk of losing sight of some important features of the latter, and may drive Thompson to underestimate the (logical and ontological) role of individuality in social practice. Thompson's approach to life's descriptions seems to presuppose that here the mediating categories (life-form, practice) define the catalogue of the descriptions. But this does not seem to wholly account for the phenomenon of re-descriptions, that is the fact that the actualization of the mediating categories in some individual activities may lead to a novel description of them. We could express this by saying that in some life-forms—namely, those life-forms which develop into social practice—the mediating categories are themselves structurally mediated: and it is individuality which plays this mediating role. This is not something that happens by chance but is a specific feature of the interpretative structure of social practice: such an interpretative structure by Thompson seems to run in only one direction (from general to particular) and doesn't seem to account for the fact that in social practice the inverse direction (from particular to general) is a logical operator of re-description.

If this holds, the marks of generality and actuality which for Thompson are proper to the elementary structures of practice, must be further specified when it comes to social practice, since here the actualization of the form in the individual act is not just an instantiation/manifestation/embodiment of the form, but is also a structural medium of the individuation of the form itself. It must be conceded to Thompson that the notions of life-form and practice are introduced by him at a logical level and thus *de jure* put only a formal constraint on the life-descriptions that are articulated within them. But if the structural role of individuality isn't clearly spelled out, then such a constraint is at risk of becoming *de facto* a substantive one. In order to preserve the general character of practice, that is the fact that practice is not a limited whole which can be completed in any event, but rather something which is unexhausted through a potentially unlimited series of individual acts, "all of them sharing a common description" (153), it must be acknowledged that a social practice is not only exhibited/manifested/instanced in any such act. The concept under which the practice is described is itself being re-described through such an instantiation. As such, practice is not exhausted through such instances and cannot be supposed to be "one and the same, unchanged" (159)—as Thompson seems to assume—since it is exactly through such an instantiation through indefinitely many acts of indefinitely many agents that practice is being descriptively transformed. If this weren't the case, then the common description shared by those acts would be conceived of not formally but as something which puts some substantive limits on the re-descriptive development of the practice.[10] A further

[10] One of the reasons why Thompson's framework could be at risk of not getting right the novel character of every individual act, and the transformative force of some individual acts, may be due to his peculiar practical, social disjunctivism, according to which common, uncontroversial activities of the practice are those activities which manifest its standards, whereas 'deviant'

aspect to be noted in Thompson's understanding of practice, is that he doesn't seem to connect closely such a logic of practice's re-description through its instantiation in individual acts to what he acknowledges to be a specific feature of social practice—which makes it a determinate form of the more abstract category of "life-form"—that is, the fact that practice is represented or conceptualized by its bearers ("by those whose practical lives it informs" (200)). But, if this is the case, then such individual bearers are structurally endowed with a power of re-description of the form which informs them. Hence, such acts are not just individuated by such a form, but contribute to individuate it through their 'individual style' of instantiation (if we want to use Merlau Ponty's notion). As such, individuals and their individual acts are to be supposed to exert some sort of individual causality sui generis. And this is not only a logical condition of social re-descriptions but also an ontological one, since through individual instantiation the practice is being transformed in its social being. This is an aspect which in modern social practice is increasingly institutionalized. Individuals themselves become institutions of the modern social space and as such are both instituted by the social practice which informs them and instituting it. Thinkers such as Hegel called this the 'right' or the 'principle of Subjectivity'[11] and understood it as a structural feature of modern social practice—and as a feature which can't be captured if we do

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cases will consist in this, "that the latter do not exhibit the practice exhibited in the former" (188) . Uncontroversial and deviant activities do not exhibit the self-same practice. But here the standards of the practice are implicitly understood again as constitutive meta-rules of a game. This leads us to assume that the activities which do not conform to such rules are not a manifestation of the game itself (but rather of another game), and consequently leads us to exclude from the manifestation of the practice the transformative actions which re-describe the game.

[11] G. W. F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. H.B. Nisbet, ed. Allen Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1991).

not transform the Aristotelian notion of ethical form in a peculiar way: an operation Thompson's Formal Aristotelianism doesn't so far seem to have undertaken.

3.2. *Are disposition and practice simply identical?*

The thread of individuality leads us back also to the question of the identification of disposition and practice in Thompson's framework. Thompson's conclusion that disposition and practice are in the end "simply identical", disposition being a practice under a different description, seems to be based on the problematic assumption of the analogy between the relation that subsists between disposition and its individual bearer, and the relation that subsists between practice and its individual bearers. Whereas the relation between a disposition and the individual whose individual acts manifest it is an internal one—it is a relation of identity: the disposition does not exist outside the individual but is the individual under another name—the relation between a practice and the individual bearers whose individual acts manifest it is both an internal and an external one: such individuals really exist outside the practice—at least because they are members of other practices—even though some of their acts are internal to the practice, that is, are ontologically constituted by the practice. Now Thompson succeeds in assimilating disposition to practice because he models the latter on the ontological structure of the first, that is, he thinks of the relation between practice and its individual bearers as an internal relation, as if individuals were simply manifestations of the practice. Then, given the logical priority of the notion of form/practice, he can swallow up disposition into practice. But if one acknowledges the asymmetry in the ontological relation between disposition and individual acts and practice and individual acts respectively, then one should preserve some kind of difference between the notion

of disposition and the notion of practice.

Moreover, one should note that even the logical priority of practice over disposition—in order to identify a certain act as a manifestation of a certain disposition of an individual (for instance, as an act of fidelity), we need to relate it to the appropriate practice—cannot be conceived without appealing to some notion of "hexis" or "habitus", that is, without appealing to some habitualization process. This may not be a problem for Thompson since he wants to claim that disposition and practice are the same: and the fact that they are both based on "hexis" would be another feature of this identity. But one should prove here that processes of habitualization can be understood without appealing to individual dispositions. Thompson himself conceives human practice as a specific "second nature" life-form (208), that is, as a life-form whose specific features are identified by its being the result of historical and social processes of habitualization. In this sense I suspect one cannot define practice without appealing to disposition (a practical disposition is a hexis, a habitus, of which individual acts of an individual agent are instances, or express, or manifest), that is, without appealing to subjective second nature and its psychological structure. And since disposition is the individual under another name, this means that in practical explanation we will need to attribute some causal role to individuals.

In the end, we can't assume that disposition and practice are simply identical. This implies that even the notion of disposition will continue to play a practical explanatory role of some sort, and not only in the case of vice. Thompson's argument was that we do not need to appeal to disposition as an anterior state which plays a causal role in explaining, for instance, the series of acts of fidelity of an individual person, since we just need to appeal to the notion of practice, which provides a more ultimate account of

what dispositions were supposed to account for. But this cannot account for the logic of re-descriptions, whose explanation again requires the notion of individual disposition.