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Review of "Life and Action"

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*Life and Action*; Michael Thompson; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008; 223 pages; $44 hardcover; 978-0-674-01670-5.

In her 1958 essay “Modern Moral Philosophy,” G.E.M. Anscombe argued that it was “not profitable” at the time “to do moral philosophy” – in the sense of elucidating a secular notion of *moral requirement and prohibition*, and/or of giving any non-circular account of why exactly “an unjust man is a bad man, or an unjust action a bad one.” This was not because she thought it must always remain unprofitable to do ethics. She meant that the requisite groundwork – including especially a proper conception of *intention, wanting*, and *action* – was, at the time, lacking. Although this essay is often conceived as the catalyst of the mid-twentieth century revival of interest in virtue ethics among Anglophone philosophers, she is explicit in expressing skepticism about this option as well: there is “philosophically a huge gap which needs to be filled by an account of human nature, human action, the type of characteristic a virtue is [and “how it relates to actions in which it is instanced”], and above all of human ‘flourishing.’” Can we describe what *human life* is well enough to serve as a basis for elucidating *human flourishing*, without importing some notion of the latter into the former? (And what is the connection between life and flourishing more generally?) What is it about a *human being* or an *action* that makes an unjust person, or unjust action, a bad specimen of *specifically those things?* Anscombe asks that we “banish ethics totally from our minds,” but only until we are better equipped than she thinks we are to give clear and non-circular answers to these questions, and in a way that satisfactorily captures the relevant aspects of reality.

Michael Thompson’s provocative and difficult book *Life and Action* is meant to make a start in meeting these challenges, and to do so, as he says, “from below” – that is, by way of a roughly Aristotelian naturalism that begins with an analysis of *life* and vital activity,
within which human life and intentional action can be located and further elaborated, which
in turn may serve as a basis for a conception of the “type of characteristic” a virtue is
(namely a disposition to do certain things intentionally). Thompson does not quite arrive
here at an answer to the above ethical questions, but this is because he takes seriously
Anscombe’s admonition to avoid leaping to such answers without having provided a very
thorough analysis of the more basic-level concepts.

Thus what we do have is a meticulous philosophical unpacking of the concepts life, (intentional) action, practical disposition, and social practice. The first two form the
subjects of the first two parts, respectively, and the last two are discussed in the third part. I
choose the term “philosophical unpacking” deliberately: the concept of philosophy itself
does important work here. For one thing, he is interested in showing that thought about
living things, intentional actions, and practices is not necessarily to be given over entirely to
(respectively) biology, psychology, and sociology. He sets out to analyze the concepts that
he thinks are brought to, and shape, empirical experience and judgments (e.g. of particular
living things) more than they are derived from these. His focus on the forms of judgment
and predication in which such concepts are articulated is not primarily a concern with what
is usually said, but about what it makes sense to say, what is involved in making certain
kinds of judgment intelligibly, and what this indicates about what there is. This work, in
other words, itself engages in a kind of logico-metaphysical conceptual analysis that owes a
debt to Kant and Frege, one guided by the thought that this is a peculiarly philosophical, and
not merely empirical-scientific, activity. (For more on the anti-empiricism in this
methodology, see his “Apprehending Human Form” in O’Hear [ed.], Modern Moral
Philosophy [Cambridge UP, 2004].)

Further, this is an incredibly dense and difficult book that, like Anscombe’s work, demands
not only very attentive reading, but also a kind of active engagement on the part of the
reader. It is not one that tries to absolve its reader of the need to do much philosophical
thinking of her own. I cannot therefore hope to give an exhaustive summary of it, much less
a well-founded evaluation of it, in a short space; I will instead try to outline its main points,
in the hope that others may be inspired to spend some time with it themselves and carry
further, positively and/or critically, the discussion it opens up.

In the first part, “The Representation of Life,” Thompson argues that judgments about living
organisms occupy a sui generis logical-conceptual category, that organisms are not simply
some among the many things that judgments can be about, marked off by certain
empirically identifiable characteristics or traits. In order to isolate the specific sense in
which any such characteristics – being highly internally organized, for example – apply to
all and only living things, Thompson argues, we will need to presuppose the very concepts,
that of life and living, supposedly being defined by them: by “organization” we mean the organization that living things have, etc. The concepts Thompson emphasizes – “vital operation” (things a living thing does), “vital organization,” “vital process” (growth, feeding, reproduction) – form “a sort of solid block” that must be understood together (47), and which nexus of concepts is called into play to some degree in any representation of a living thing. To correctly judge that a certain marine animal, chomping away and swallowing some stuff, is eating, requires something more than simply seeing it chomp on some occasion. It presupposes that what we see adds up to eating for this kind of thing – and not instead, say, to a process of storing chewed-up “food” in order to spew it at predators in self-defense (55-7). For Thompson, judgments about living things trade on a “wider context,” most importantly, a conception of life-form or species of which we can identify particular modes of vital process and operation. “This episode is one of eating,” that is, insofar as this is an instance of how, more generally, this kind of thing eats, and thus subsists. A living thing, that is, is something that can be classed as a member of some species or other, and is thus something about which a “natural-historical judgment” (e.g. “The S subsists by/takes in nutrients by X-ing”) applies. Such judgments are logically peculiar, so he argues, reinforcing his claim that thought about life and living things is its own “logical category” – they are made in the present tense despite not necessarily applying to what may be seen here and now, and they are not replaceable by universally quantified judgments. (“The mayfly breeds shortly before dying” does not, thankfully, entail that each does this, nor even that most do.)

The second part, “Naïve Action Theory,” concerns intentional action, and especially its “rationalization” or explanation in terms of reasons. Thompson begins by opposing what he calls “naïve” explanation, where an action is explained by reference to another action of which it is a means or part (“Why are you pulling that cord?” “I am starting the engine”) – to “sophisticated” explanation, where the explanans is instead something like a state of wanting or intending, e.g., to start the engine, and argues that the former is more basic in that it more straightforwardly appeals to the connection between the two actions undertaken: A-ing in order to B. Much like representations of living things call into play a “nexus” of judgments about life-forms and characteristic vital processes, explanations of particular actions, for Thompson, call into play the connection(s) that action has to whatever else the agent is doing in doing this. This is a point we are likely to miss if we conceive actions as discrete, atomic units, brought into being by a prior psychological state. An act of political assassination, for example, can easily be thought to boil down to the movement of a finger that pulls the trigger, along with the mental goings-on that immediately precede this, “rather than its equally … likely resolution into reaching for, aiming and firing a gun, to say nothing of checking to see if the victim is done for and repeating as necessary” (91).

Thompson, like Anscombe, holds that this “A in order to B” structure is basic to action
explanation, even in its sophisticated variety. He develops this point by exploring, in one of the most difficult passages in the book, the grammatical connections linking “N is A-ing,” “N was A-ing,” and “N A’ed” as representations of a single unfolding process – connections that rationalization via psychological states like wanting-to-A, but not naïve forms of rationalization, so he argues, will have a difficult time accounting for.

In the last part of the book, “Two Forms of Practical Generality,” Thompson turns to the concepts of practical disposition and practice. The specific theme Thompson develops here relates to the previous section: what is at issue are these things considered as sources of actions that instantiate them. It is on this basis that we might go on, as the remarks above from Anscombe indicate, to conceive how the goodness or rightness of a particular disposition (e.g. a virtue) or practice (e.g. promise-making and keeping) transfers, so to speak, to actions in which they are instanced. Two aspects of these “forms of generality” are especially relevant. First, they are, as the term suggests, “general.” A given disposition applies, not only to this action (as the consideration “I’m making an omelet” might), but to a range of actions across some stretch of time. Likewise, “a social practice must be something … exhibited in indefinitely many acts of indefinitely many agents.” Second, they bear “some kind of actuality in, or among, the agents whose individual actions [they] are supposed to accredit” (159-60). (Thus far, after all, we have been discussing things that clearly obtain in the actual world: living things, their doings, natural histories, intentional actions and wantings, etc.) Nevertheless, this part of the book is unlike the others in articulating a skeptical worry. Thompson argues against the possibility of rendering dispositions and practices as a) being both general and actual (or real), and this b) well enough to be able to count intelligibly as the source of particular actions undertaken by individuals, by reference to which those actions can thus be explained or rationalized.

Though the foregoing cannot hope to give much support to such a claim, this is a philosophical work of the highest order, one that is thought-provokingly at angles with vast tracts of contemporary Anglophone practical philosophy. Whether one finds it to be a very promising basis for further work in this field (as I do), something to be entirely rejected on principle, or a work that falls somewhere in between, it is as deserving as any philosophical book can be of close attention and engagement.