

SUPPLEMENTARY VOLUME  
LIFE AND ACTION IN ETHICS AND POLITICS



INTRODUCTION

BY

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# Introduction

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Since its first appearance in 2008, Michael Thompson's *Life and Action* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press 2008) has been welcomed as an original and profound new book. Thompson's aim is to shed a new light on the theoretical grounds of practical philosophy, combining insights from Aristoteles and Kant, Hegel and Marx, Aquinas and Anscombe, Frege and Wittgenstein. This makes *Life and Action* both an ambitious and a difficult, sometimes idiosyncratic work, demanding the reader to cope with multifarious philosophical backgrounds. Translated into German in 2011, the book is still earning attention and is bound to attract a lasting interest. Whence the idea of a Symposium, whose first step was a workshop at Luiss University in April 2013, to investigate the implication of Thompson's theoretical approach to practical, social and political philosophy.

*Life and Action* is a book on the metaphysics of ethics that advances a broad project indeed, that of grounding ethics in a general metaphysics of life, action, and practice. The connection is supported by a twofold claim. First, any practical philosophy must employ the concepts of life, action, and practice—or other concepts pertaining to the metaphysical regions they define. Second, investigating such concepts must be oriented to the problem of practical philosophy if one want to go past their empirical understanding. While the substantive views advanced are broadly Aristotelian in that they design a *scala naturae*

culminating in the *scala practica* of action and practice, the method is intended to be Fregean, as metaphysical conclusions are drawn from the general forms of judgment in which the concepts of life, action, and practice occur. The distinctions among these conceptual spheres are meant to be “logical”, not empirical, as each *a priori* captures a “category of beings” that shapes the thoughts we grasp in judging. The rationale for this expansion of the Fregean method to “contentful” concepts is in the authors’ intent to lay out «certain aspects of the “manifest image”, which Wilfrid Sellars familiarly contrasted with the “scientific image” to the alleged discredit of the former» (10).

The first part of the book focuses on the concept of “life”, understood as the most basic logical category that is implicitly involved to in practical thought. Thompson argues that “will” and “practical agency” can belong to individuals only as they bear a specific life-form (28). The “*a priori*” role of this concept is defended by arguing that empirical attempts to define life are bound to be circular, as any possible descriptions of individual vital events, parts, and processes will involve a notion of life-form or species that cannot be defined in empirical terms. Thompson thus individuates the logical form of “natural-historical judgment” as distinctively characterized by a sort of generality—practical generality—which makes for the elementary logical structure of practical thought.

Action theory is targeted in the second part of the book. The discussion turns largely on the temporal properties of action judgments, focusing in particular on the distinction between the predicative forms designed to express a state of affair and those designed to express an event or a process. The claim is that the progressive aspect of judgments like “I am walking down the street” cannot be expressed in the psychological vocabulary of propositional attitudes. Thompson argues that this is a sufficient

reason to dispense with the folk psychological accounts of action that take mental states like beliefs and desires to figure as *explanans*. Instead a “naïve theory of action” is advanced in which actions are rationalized by being located in a broader action pattern. According to this reading the proper answer to questions like “Why are you flipping that switch?” will sound like “because I am turning the light on”, rather than like “because I want to turn the light”, dispensing with the psychological vocabulary of mental states. Naïve theory thus does not provide us with something else—e. g. a set of mental states—by which actions are explained. Rather, it makes sense of actions by providing a whole-part structure where the explanatory role of mental states like wanting, intending, desiring is taken up by “the progress of the deed itself” (90-91).

Thompson’s aim in the third part is to develop a philosophical account of the notions of “disposition” and “practice.” The starting point is the immanent critique of both the psychological accounts of disposition and the sociological accounts of practice that underlay contemporary mainstream understandings of morality. Thompson’s main argument is that the logical and metaphysical role those notions play in practical judgments can only be understood by taking them as species of the genus “life-form” considered as a practical generality. This means that practical structures are to be understood as ontological manifestations of life processes that possess the logical form of *generality*—they do not come to a limit in any action or event—and *actuality*—practices only exist insofar as they are actualized in individuals who act accordingly (158-160). From this follows a second argument, according to which, in analogy with the relation between life-forms and their individual bearers, we should give priority to the notion of practice over the notion of individual disposition in understanding practical descriptions. Still, there is a difference between a social practice and a mere life-form: it is in

the nature of social practices to be somehow (even implicitly) represented by its individual bearers (200).

The symposium is organized according to the threefold partition of the book. As for part one, Paolo Costa focuses on the logical and metaphysical understanding of “life-form” and relates it to similar approaches in philosophical anthropology. As for part two, Constantine Sandis examines the role of simple past and progressive tenses in the naïve theory of action and contrasts it with alternative contemporary approaches in action theory. Matteo Bianchin questions Thompson’s rejection of folk psychological accounts by focusing on phenomenal intentionality and action planning. As for part three, Arto Laitinen considers Thompson’s understanding of practices as a source of goodness in the light of the Hegelian distinction between *Moralität* und *Sittlichkeit*. Italo Testa discusses Thompson’s anti-individualist account of dispositions and social practices, and assesses its relevance for social philosophy and social ontology. Ingrid Salvatore interrogates Thompson’s understanding of Rawls’s “Two concepts of Rule” and rule-like practices.

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