

Virtue, Action, and Reason: A Conference in Honor of Anselm Müller *University of Chicago – 2-3 aprile 2011*

Philosophers in the Chicago area recently had the good fortune to be able to attend a conference in honor of Anselm Müller, held at the University of Chicago. Though Müller, a student of Elizabeth Anscombe and Anthony Kenny, has published on a remarkable variety of topics throughout his career, the papers given at the conference focused primarily on his contributions to ethics, action theory, and the theory of rationality, with the views of Aristotle and of Anscombe – and, of course, Müller’s own interpretations and criticisms of them – looming particularly large in the discussions of all three topics.

Michael Thompson, of the University of Pittsburgh, began the conference with a talk entitled “You and I: Some Puzzles About Mutual Recognition”. In this ambitious talk (somewhat too ambitious, perhaps, as he made it through only about three-quarters of his slides), Thompson began the task of introducing what, if he is successful, will be a general method of representing thoughts and actions. A central component of this project is the introduction of the notion of a *propositional relation*. That notion can, in the first instance, be understood as a generalization of the notion of a propositional attitude, with the difference that what is characterized propositionally is not the state (“attitude”) of a single thinker, but the relation between two thinkers. Thus, whereas the general form of a propositional attitude is ‘ $x \Phi$ s that p ’ (e.g., ‘John believes that it is raining’), the general form of a propositional relation is ‘ $x \Phi$ s y that p ’ (e.g., ‘John tells Mary that it is raining’, ‘John promises Mary that he will attend her recital’). Thompson’s thesis was that statements of propositional *relation* about two thinkers are irreducible to any construction, however complex, out of statements of propositional *attitude* about the same two thinkers. Any such reduction, Thompson argued, can be seen to turn on illicit quantification over variables appearing both within and without propositional attitude contexts, something of which no one has yet provided a satisfactory account. The argument, if it works, would of course show that the act of promising, for example, cannot be understood simply in terms of antecedently (relatively) clear notions like belief and desire. But (unlike some of the philosophers he was attacking, perhaps) it is no part of Thompson’s aim, if I understand him, to provide an understanding of such things as promising, in all their particularity. Rather, I take it, the idea is that understanding the general form of promising – a form which it shares with telling, and perhaps even with marrying (a favorite example of Thompson’s) – will help us to understand what it is for two thinkers to think *together*, where thinking together is not, as the reductionist theories would have it,

merely thinking, as it were *side by side*, thoughts with appropriately harmonious content. Thinking together – and so, too, acting together – is to be recognized as a phenomenon in its own right, worthy of independent treatment by philosophers of mind and action.

Thompson was followed by Matthias Haase, from the University of Basel, who gave a paper entitled “How Theoretical is Practical Knowledge?” Haase’s conclusion about practical knowledge was meant to parallel a conclusion of Müller’s (in his paper “How Theoretical is Practical Reasoning?”) about practical reasoning: in both cases, the practical variety of the phenomenon is misunderstood because it is assumed to be too much like the theoretical variety. The puzzle Haase faced was that it can be hard to see, as he put it, how a state can be both *practical* and one of *knowing*. What the state’s being practical requires is that it be productive of the reality of its object. But the state’s counting as a state of knowing requires that there be a possibility of error. (Haase did not question this Wittgensteinian assumption about knowledge). And that possibility of error can seem to vanish when the state in question is assumed to be productive of the reality of its object. So the puzzle is that practical knowledge, being practical, would seem to be infallible, in which case it cannot be knowledge. Haase’s solution was to offer a different way of understanding practical error. Practical error is not, as one might be led to think by taking theoretical error as a model, failure to know what one is doing. Rather, it is a failure to know how *well* one is doing what one is intentionally, and therefore knowingly, doing. For example, if I tell you that I am painting the wall yellow, and you point out that the paint I am using is not yellow, but pink – something I had failed to notice (no matter how) – that failure of mine does not necessarily undermine my claim to be (intentionally and therefore knowingly) painting the wall yellow. What it shows is only that the fact that I *am* painting the wall yellow requires that I go out and buy a new can of paint – unless, of course, I choose to give up and do something else instead, say, paint the wall pink. My knowledge of what I am doing (here, painting the wall yellow) determines what (else) I ought to do (stop using the pink paint, go out and buy a can of yellow paint, and so on). As Haase nicely put it, “knowledge of what I’m doing is the condition of the possibility of practical error”. That makes sense, of course, only if practical error is not failure to know what one is doing. But Haase provided us with at least the beginnings of precisely just such an account of practical error: practical error, on his account, consists in a deficiency in the *way* in which one is doing what one is, knowingly, doing.

The first day of the conference concluded with Anton Ford’s enjoyable paper, “Practical Reasoning and Perception”. Ford began by expressing sympathy with an Aristotelian view held by both Anscombe and Müller, the view that practical reasoning concludes in action. But he questioned their right to this view, given what they say about practical reasoning. His criticism turned on a distinction between what he called *specification* and what he called *particularization*, each a kind of act of practical reasoning. Specification is an act of practical reasoning from a premise, “Do A”, to a conclusion, “Do B”, by means of a minor premise of the form “To do A, do B”. But if that is the only form that practical reasoning can take, Ford said, it

is mysterious how the conclusion of practical reasoning can ever be an action. For specification merely takes us from something general to something general, albeit the latter is *less* general, more specific. Reasoning that the best way to travel to school would be to ride a bike, and so deciding to ride a bike to school, is of course a sort of progress; but it still leaves me with the task of finding a bike I can actually ride there. What is needed, Ford argued, is an act of particularization, an act that takes me from a general premise, “Do A”, not merely to a more specific conclusion, “Do B”, but to a completely *particular* one: “Do *this*”. That act obviously requires a different sort of minor premise: we need something of the form “To do A, do *this*” (or, in Ford’s more general formulation: “To do A, do A *vis-a-vis* this”, “this” being, perhaps, an instance of A-ing). Making sense of this sort of minor premise will allow us to make sense of the thesis that the conclusion of practical reasoning is an action, since the particularity of the conclusion “Do *this*” is precisely that of a particular, concrete, action. But, Ford stressed, to make sense of this sort of premise – to reach an understanding of particularization as an act of practical reasoning – philosophers of action will need to consider the role that *perception* plays in practical reasoning, a topic which, though of central importance to Aristotle, appears to have no significant place in contemporary debates. The rest of Ford’s paper was devoted to giving a sense of the shape that must be taken by a theory of action that gives that topic the significance it deserves. This was done, moreover, in such a way as to give support to another controversial Aristotelian claim endorsed by Müller (but, this time, not by Anscombe), the claim that the minor premise of practical reasoning is genuinely *practical*. According to Ford, only by recognizing the role of a certain kind of practically guided perception – the sort of perception involved in looking for opportunities for action and looking out for obstacles to it – can we come to see how such a claim could be defended.

Gavin Lawrence, who was scheduled to give the first talk of the second day of the conference, was unable to make the trip to Chicago, so the day began, later than planned, with a talk by Jennifer Frey, a graduate student at the University of Pittsburgh (and a student of Müller). In her contribution, entitled “Involuntary Rationality?”, she took issue with an objection Müller has posed for Anscombe. According to Müller, Anscombe holds that an action is intentional if and only if it is done for a reason; but there are counterexamples, actions that are done for a reason but are not done intentionally (e.g., “unknowingly frown[ing] in response to a student’s argument in class,” or “spontaneously burst[ing] into tears when [one] is told [that one] has failed an important exam”); so the right-to-left direction of the biconditional fails, and Anscombe’s view must be abandoned. In opposition to Müller, Frey put forth four claims. First, she argued that the purported counterexamples to Anscombe’s view do not meet Anscombe’s own conditions for the application of the “special sense” of the question “Why?”, and hence are not examples of intentional actions. For example, acts like frowning and crying admit of no contrast between perfective and imperfective aspect, one important criterion for the applicability of the question “Why?” in its special sense. Second, she claimed that there is a tight connection between intentional action and practical knowledge, which Müller leaves out of account: specifically,

a positive answer to Anscombe's question "Why?" must be an expression of practical knowledge. Frey also called into question Müller's assumption that the counterexamples he offers involve *reasons* – rather than, say, motives – at all. Third, Frey suggested that Müller's construal of the notion of the voluntary in terms of doing something unknowingly or losing control is mistaken; the voluntary ought instead to be understood in terms of something happening "in opposition to my will". Finally, she argued that Müller is mistaken even to represent Anscombe's view of intentional action as involving a biconditional – Anscombe was not after necessary and sufficient conditions that we could use to divide the intentional actions from others, but was, rather, aiming at "a general characterization of the logical form of representation of intentional action". In the course of defending these four claims, Frey also offered a series of criticisms of much contemporary philosophy of action, in particular of the views of philosophers who take their inspiration from Davidson, and presented a detailed and formidable interpretation of Anscombe's views on the nature of intentional action.

Anselm Müller himself gave the final talk of the conference, "The Teleology of the Virtuous Life: an Aristotelian Revision of Aristotle's Conception". In the talk, he raised a variety of problems for what he took to be Aristotle's account of the relation between *poiesis* (production) and *praxis* (action). Plausibly, the products of production can be used either as instruments for further production, or directly as instruments for action. In that case, it would seem that production must inherit its ethical significance from its role in producing instruments for action, since, as Aristotle claims, the *telos* of production lies not in production itself but in action – or, importantly and more precisely, in *virtuous* action, *eupraxia*. But, Müller suggested, we are left with no obvious way of defending Aristotle's claim, i.e., of showing that the *telos* of production is specifically virtuous action and not merely action in general, virtuous *or* vicious. Müller's solution turned on a suggestion that Aristotle combines, into one confused notion, two distinct notions of *praxis*. The first – which, following Müller, we can call *conduct* – is governed by a *non-intentional* teleology: that is, the *telos* of conduct is not something the agent *intends*. Rather, the *telos* of all conduct, simply as such, is *eupraxia*, good conduct. Recognizing that conduct in general has such a *telos* allows us, Müller suggested, to see certain acts of virtue aright: an act of generosity, for example, is not performed in order to be generous, but rather in order to benefit another person; an act of justice is not performed in order to be just, but in order to render someone his due. But generous or just conduct, being good conduct, satisfies (where selfish or unjust conduct fails to satisfy) the *telos* of conduct as such. The second kind of *praxis* – which we can simply call *action* – is governed by an *intentional* teleology: that is, the *telos* of action *is* something the agent intends. If I make dinner for a friend, the *telos* of that action is feeding my friend, bringing him pleasure, and so forth. The action satisfies its *telos* if it does what I intended it to do, has the results I meant it to have. Müller's distinction allows us to explain how production can be aimed at virtuous action, rather than simply at action in general. For production itself is a kind of conduct, and as such is evaluated as virtuous or vicious conduct. Production in the service of vicious *action*, then, is defective *qua* conduct, rather

than *qua* action (i.e., rather than *qua* for the purpose of producing an instrument of some particular action). In this way, as Müller put it, “whatever you do is – in some way not subject to your choice – done with a view to *eupraxia*”.

Many thanks are due to Agnes Callard and Jennifer Frey for organizing this conference. I am not myself a philosopher of action, but I found the conference to be exceptionally enjoyable and stimulating. If what I heard and saw at the conference was at all indicative of the caliber of philosophy that Müller’s writing inspires and incites, then he indeed deserved the honor of having a conference dedicated to his work.

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