The Varieties of Agential Powers

Christos Douskos

Forthcoming in the *European Journal of Philosophy*

**Abstract**

The domain of agential powers is marked by a contrast that does not arise in the case of dispositions of inanimate objects: the contrast between propensities or tendencies on the one hand, and capacities or abilities on the other. According to Ryle (1949), this contrast plays an important role in the ‘logical geography’ of the dispositional concepts used in the explanation and assessment of action. However, most subsequent philosophers use the terms of art ‘power’ or ‘disposition’ indiscriminately in formulating central metaphysical claims about human agency, assuming that an adequate account of inanimate dispositions can safely be used for such purposes. As a result, the distinctive features of propensities and capacities drop out of view. This is bound to obscure distinctions of crucial importance to the understanding of human agency. In order to show this, I undertake to articulate some central differences between propensities and capacities. Propensities and capacities have a different relation to value, as well as a concomitant difference in their metaphysical structure. The argument points to an explanation of why the distinction between propensities and capacities does not arise in the case of non-agential powers. This explanation takes us back to questions about the nature of human agency.

Keywords: propensities; capacities; habit; ability; skill

I. Anyone would acknowledge that terms such as ‘capacity’ or ‘ability’ on the one hand, and ‘propensity’, or ‘tendency’ on the other, mean quite different things: ‘can do’ differs from ‘tends to do’. However, in the large literature on dispositions one hardly finds any echo of Ryle’s (1949) concern to classify the associated concepts into different categories. This has a ready explanation. This literature largely focuses on dispositions of inanimate objects, such as fragility, elasticity, and the like. But is there a substantial difference between the claim that an elastic stick has a propensity or tendency to bend in certain circumstances, and the claim that it has the capacity to bend—that it can bend in certain circumstances? Perhaps the former claim suggests that the stick bends more easily, or in a greater range of circumstances. This, however, is merely a difference in degree, not in kind. In the words of Stephen Mumford (2011: 1) ‘[t]erms such as causal power, capacity, ability, propensity, and others, can be used to convey the same idea’.

Just as with ‘can do’ and ‘tends to do’, the difference between ‘can bend’ and the corresponding habitual sentence is not marked in ascriptions of dispositions to inanimate objects. Consider Fara’s (2005) analysis of disposition ascriptions such as ‘This stick is elastic’ in terms of a habitual sentence: ‘This stick bends (in c)’. Consider also Vetter’s (2015: 63-65) suggestion that ‘This stick is elastic’ is most naturally paraphrased by an ascription figuring the modal auxiliary ‘can’: ‘This stick can bend’. These proposals imply very different commitments regarding the semantics of disposition ascriptions. It ought to be surprising then that, at least in the usual range of examples, there does not seem to be a big difference between the alternative analyses: is there much to choose between ‘This stick bends easily’ and ‘This stick can bend easily’?
Things are very different when we move to the realm of human agency. It is clear that one may have the ability to drive while having developed an aversion to driving. Ability is clearly distinct from the corresponding tendency. Similarly, the claim that John can cook meals for his family and the claim that he cooks family meals are evidently different claims. The former ascribes an ability, which John may exercise quite rarely if at all these days, while the latter is a habitual sentence, which pertains to what John does fairly regularly. Habitual sentences often ascribe human habits to agents. A capacity ascription does not entail or otherwise convey the corresponding habitual sentence, though the converse inference is warranted if we grant that the truth of a habitual sentence requires repeated actualization, which in turn guarantees ability.

The point is not about linguistic use, which is not fully and cross-linguistically consistent in this respect. ‘Do you speak Finnish?’ typically asks whether one can do this, for instance. The point is rather that we can easily make sense of the difference between an agent’s having a capacity, skill or ability to do something on the one hand, and her propensity, proneness or tendency to do it on the other. By contrast, it does not seem possible to make sense of a corresponding difference in the case of inanimate dispositions. Depending on the case, it might seem more natural to use either capacity or tendency expressions when ascribing powers to inanimate objects. But what would it be for an object to have both a capacity and a tendency to bend, stretch or break, as distinct properties? Even if there is a subtle difference in the modal content of the relevant expressions, it is not the categorial difference we find in the case of human agency. Clearly, the power terms at issue undergo a considerable shift in meaning when they are used in sentences ascribing agential powers.1

This raises interesting questions. Why does this shift occur? Does the possibility of making an intelligible distinction between capacities and propensities reveal something important about the nature of agency? Another question concerns the common practice of attempting to illuminate agential notions such as ability, skill or knowing-how by appealing to one’s preferred analysis of the dispositions of inanimate objects. One example I shall comment on is the dispositional analysis of ability, but there are many more. Is this practice bound to obscure what is distinctively agential about such powers? It is reasonable to suppose that such questions can only be addressed once we have a firm grip on the differences between the varieties of agential powers. My objective is to formulate some central aspects of this distinction.

Another important reason to inquire into the differences between propensities and capacities is that they seem to affect the articulation of some central claims in action theory. In contrast to the event-causal approaches to the nature of agency that have dominated the action theory literature over the last decades, recent work has placed increasing emphasis on the idea that action is best understood as the actualization of an agential power (Steward 2012; Alvarez 2013; Hyman 2015 inter alia). This work, however, has focused on capacities or abilities, and one tends to get the impression that

---
1 Kenny 1989: 66 observes that ‘Natural powers, unlike rational powers, are also tendencies to act in certain manner’. But he assumes that only agential capacities are rational powers. (Kern 2017: ch.5 criticizes Kenny’s account of rational powers, but she adopts this assumption). By contrast, the view I shall sketch here allows that the distinction between propensities and capacities arises within the realm of ‘rational’ powers. Hacker 2007: 119 says that the term ‘disposition’ acquires a different meaning when ‘associated with human beings’, but for quite a different reason: only human dispositions require regular manifestation. Hacker uses ‘(human) dispositions’ for certain kinds of tendency. So this is quite a different claim.
this is the only kind of agential power at issue. For instance, Hyman (2015: 45) claims that ‘Action in general is simply the exercise of an active causal power—i.e. the power or ability to cause some kind of change […]’. Yet if agential propensities are a distinct variety of causal power, such claims will need to be suitably reformulated. So it is clear that on such an approach to agency—indeed, on any approach—the question of whether there are different varieties of agential powers, and if so, how these are to be distinguished, is of paramount importance. Inevitably, I cannot provide a comprehensive answer within the confines of this paper. I shall be selective with respect to the distinguishing marks between propensities and capacities, as well as with respect to their different sub-varieties.

Let me start, then, by delimiting the scope of the discussion. First, I shall largely be concerned with propensities and capacities manifested in overt acts. The domain of agential powers is not restricted to such cases. But I think that the distinction ought first to be formulated with respect to cases that are undisputedly agential, before extending it to powers that involve further complications. Second, powers are usually thought to be intrinsic properties of their bearers. Accordingly, I shall take agential powers to be relatively stable or robust properties of agents that can be actualized on various occasions. Third, and relatedly, paradigm cases of agential powers are acquired powers (some of them at a very young age and as part of natural maturation), and can only be acquired by repeatedly doing something intentionally. This does not mean that agential powers cannot be manifested unintentionally on occasion. Nor does it mean that these series of intentional acts are done in order to acquire the power in question—that is, by way of practicing or some other kind of reflective habituation. Some agential powers are not developed on purpose, and the agent may not have realized she has acquired them. These restrictions rule out ‘specific’ ability, an ability to do something on a given occasion, which partly depends on how things stand beyond the agent. They also rule out fleeting powers, such as motives and emotions, perceptual and purely cognitive capacities, as well as cognitive propensities such as implicit bias.

The agential powers that meet these restrictions are still quite diverse: they include simple abilities such as the ability to raise one’s hand or to grasp a cup, knowing-how to drive or to play the guitar, and various kinds of skills, ranging from simple bodily skills to sophisticated ones amounting to practical expertise in some domain. The paradigm case of an agential propensity is human habit, as we ordinarily use the term ‘habit’: the habit of going for a beer on Sunday evenings, or of taking a certain route when driving home from work. But agential propensities that meet the restrictions above also include some kinds of obsessive behavior, compulsions and addictions.

---

2 This is also asserted in Hacker 2007: 90; 102, and implied in Kenny 1989: 66-73, as well as in Alvarez 2013: 108. While these authors are alert to the differences between the varieties of agential powers, they do not seem to think that these matter in the formulation of their basic metaphysical claims. This is related to another claim often made in this kind of approach: ‘agency’ and ‘action’ have more or less the same sense when used in relation to humans and to inanimate substances. Some considerations adduced in this paper bear against this claim as well.

3 I examine other distinguishing marks of agential powers in [Douskos forthcoming; 2017; 2018], focusing on the differences between habit and skill.

4 For this claim with respect to ability, Kenny 1989: 68-69; Clarke 2009: 333-339; Vetter 2013: 6; Vihvelin 2013: 11, 175. There is no reason why things should be different with respect to other acquired powers.

5 Habits are commonly characterized as dispositions: Ryle 1949: 43; Brett 1981: 363; Alvarez 2010: 187.
There are no clear-cut boundaries between the aforementioned sub-varieties of propensities and capacities. Is the capacity to swim more aptly characterized as an ability, a skill, or a case of knowing-how? Is the propensity to smoke a habit or an addiction? There can be no clear answer to such questions. The various kinds of propensities lie on a continuum from the simple to the very sophisticated, and something similar holds for capacities. What I shall argue, however, is that these continua lie in different dimensions: there is a categorial distinction between the various sorts of propensities and capacities. In what follows I shall seek to articulate some central aspects of this distinction. I take these to differentiate between all the sub-varieties of propensities on the one hand, and all the sub-varieties of capacities on the other, no matter how similar or different the sub-varieties of each variety may be in other respects.6

The main difference between agential propensities and capacities I shall consider in this paper concerns their relation to value. In section II I start by identifying a semantic contrast between propensity and capacity ascriptions to agents: only the latter entail a value judgment. In section III I argue that there is a corresponding contrast in sentences that report the actualization of these two varieties of agential powers. I take the explanation of these semantic contrasts to be a central requirement for an account of the differences between propensities and capacities. In the sections that follow I venture to offer an explanation. In section IV I turn to the metaphysics of propensities and capacities, and argue that capacities exhibit variability in performance, which is not to be found in propensities. In section V I argue that this metaphysical difference naturally accommodates the semantic contrasts identified in sections II and III, and that this reveals another central distinguishing feature between propensities and capacities. In section VI I use the conclusions of the previous sections to explain why the distinction between propensities and capacities is a mark of the agential domain. This explanation implies that attempts to illuminate agential modalities by appealing to the metaphysics of inanimate dispositions are misguided.7

---

6 I have implied that the differences between propensities and capacities are not sufficiently appreciated. In Douskos forthcoming and 2017 I document this point more extensively by appealing to the way the idea of habit is used in philosophy and psychology. It is commonly used in a broad sense that includes both habits (as we ordinarily use this term) and capacities, such as bodily skills. (William James [1981: ch.8], and more recently Brett [1981] and Pollard [2008] are some examples, but the list is very long.) Ryle (1949) famously argues against the ‘common assumption’ that habits exhaust second nature. Some aspects of Ryle’s discussion will be central in what follows, but there are also important differences. More recently, Annas (2011) and Kern (2017) articulate various differences between habits and skills, but their views differ in various respects from the one presented here. I have also benefited from unpublished work by Matthias Haase.

7 I will not be able to explore important ramifications of the distinction between propensities and capacities. First, whereas I will not have much to say about the classification of character traits with respect to this distinction (see Zagzebski 1996: 106-125 and references therein), this controversial question provides an important motivation for the present inquiry. Second, Ryle (1949: 133-134) draws several analogies between capacities and tendencies on the one hand, and knowledge and belief on the other. See Hyman 2015: ch.7 and Kremer 2017 for discussion. These issues deserve a separate treatment.
II. Evaluative gradability

In this section I argue that the semantics of capacity and propensity ascriptions to agents differ with respect to a key feature: evaluative gradability. Let me explain what this means, starting with gradability.

The most salient characteristics of gradable predicates are that they admit degree modifiers and comparative forms: ‘Kate is very tall’; ‘Kate is taller than John’. In the mainstream semantics (Kennedy 2007, inter alia), a gradable predicate is associated with a scale. A scale is comprised of set of degrees totally ordered with respect to each other along some dimension (such as height, etc.). The core idea is that sentences featuring gradable predicates assert that their objects are located at some point or interval on the associated scale. This semantics applies most straightforwardly to comparative ascriptions. ‘Kate is taller than John’ asserts that Kate is located at some point on the associated scale which is higher than the point at which John is located. A non-comparative ascription, such as ‘Kate is (very) tall’, involves a similar structure: it asserts that Kate is located at some point that is higher than (or equal to) a threshold point on the associated scale. This threshold point, below which the objects do not fall under the extension of the predicate, is contextually determined, whence the context sensitivity of such ascriptions. (Degree modifiers such as ‘very’ raise the threshold point in a given context.) So roughly speaking, ‘Kate is tall’ is to be unpacked as ‘Kate is taller than $d$’, where degree $d$ is supplied by the context. Hence non-comparative ascriptions are implicitly comparative, for they involve comparison to a contextually determined standard. This standard is set on the basis of a contextually salient class of entities: Kate may be said to be tall in relation to her classmates, but not in relation to her basketball teammates. Thus focusing on comparative ascriptions allows us to avoid problems of context sensitivity: whether Kate is tall is largely a matter of context, but whether Kate is taller than John is not.

Adjectives such as ‘tall’ rank objects along a single scale. But so-called multi-dimensional adjectives, such as ‘intelligent’, combine multiple scales. There are more than one respects (dimensions) in which one can be intelligent, and our judgments about intelligence can be controversial because they require us to weigh the relative importance of different dimensions (see Sassoon 2013 for discussion, and Stanley and Williamson 2016 for a related point regarding skill).

It is beyond dispute that capacity and propensity ascriptions to agents are gradable.8

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gradability Type</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ability Degree</td>
<td>S is a very able $a$-er.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability Comparative</td>
<td>$S_1$ is (a) more able $a$-er/better able at $a$-ing than $S_2$.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Know-how Degree</td>
<td>S knows how to $a$ very well.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Know-how Comparative</td>
<td>$S_1$ knows how to $a$ better than $S_2$.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skill Degree</td>
<td>S is (a) very skilled $a$-er/at $a$-ing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skill Comparative</td>
<td>$S_1$ is (a) more skilled $a$-er/better skilled at $a$-ing than $S_2$.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Habit Degree</td>
<td>S is very much in the habit of $a$-ing (in c).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Habit Comparative</td>
<td>$S_1$ is more in the habit of $a$-ing (in c) than $S_2$.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

I come now to the second feature: evaluative. Multi-dimensional adjectives are sometimes called ‘evaluative’ in the semantics literature. I use ‘evaluative’ in a stronger sense, which is more familiar in philosophy: an evaluative predicate is invariably used to express a value judgment. So, for instance, if ‘is skilled in a-ing’ is evaluative, then ‘S is skilled in a-ing’ entails ‘S is good at a-ing’. I need to import two qualifications at the outset. First, given the rampant context sensitivity of ‘good’ and the power predicates at issue, the entailments in question are best validated by using comparative forms. Evidently, to say that S is able to a is not, as such, to say that S is good at a-ing. But this might be only because there are contexts which set the threshold point for what counts as being able to a lower than the threshold point for what counts as being good at a-ing. (I shall provide examples below.) As I have explained, however, we can avoid these complications by using comparative forms: in order to demonstrate the evaluative character of capacities, it suffices to show that getting more capable at a-ing entails getting better at a-ing.9 Second, given that ‘good’ is highly multi-dimensional, we should not require that—say—‘S is skilled at a-ing’ entails ‘S is good at a-ing’ tout court. A highly skilled surgeon might not be judged a good surgeon, but only because being a good surgeon plausibly depends on factors not directly related to skill in surgery (e.g. not carrying out unnecessary operations just for the money). If so, skill in surgery is not the only respect in which a surgeon may be said to be good. However, our question here is only whether being a skilled surgeon entails being good as a surgeon. So in order to attest the evaluative character of a power predicate it suffices that ‘S has the [power term] to a’ entail ‘S is good at a-ing (at least) in some respect.10

The combination of these qualifications allows us to formulate a sufficient condition for the evaluative character of an agential power predicate. If the following entailment holds, the agential power predicate at issue is evaluative:

\[
\text{[EG.Agent]} \text{ ‘S}_1 \text{ is more [power term] at a-ing than S}_2 \text{’ entails ‘S}_1 \text{ is better at a-ing than S}_2 \text{ (at least) in some respect’}. \]

Our first question is whether capacity ascriptions are evaluative in this sense. I shall start with skill.

Comparative ascriptions do not serve only to compare the capacities of different agents. We commonly compare the skills of an agent at different stages of her career. Now it is fairly uncontroversial that skill development entails improvement in performance.12 Skills are developed by practice, and the aim of practice is improvement. To the extent that one develops one’s skills in a-ing, one improves or gets better in a-ing, at least in some respect. This is clearly the case with activities that consist mainly in the

---

9 I shall not use explicitly comparative ascriptions throughout, however. The comparative counterparts of certain ascriptions considered below are quite complex, and this complexity is not necessary when the connection to value is sufficiently exposed in the non-comparative form.
10 Capacity predicates, or at least some of them, are themselves multi-dimensional. The point is that ‘good’ often imports additional dimensions of evaluation, such as purely ethical ones.
11 (EG.Agent) can be suitably rephrased to take account of the slightly different syntactic form of the different propensity and capacity ascriptions considered in this section.
12 This is more often assumed than explicitly stated, but see Stanley & Williamson (2017: 6); Annas (2011: ch.3).
exercise of a bodily skill, such as swimming. But even with activities excellence in which (let us suppose) requires more than whatever comes under the domain of skill, acquiring the relevant skills surely involves improving in some respect. It may be that Kate is a more skilled driver that John, but John is a better driver overall than Kate; perhaps John is more cautious, and safety is what matters most. But even in such a case, there is a respect in which Kate is a better driver than John, a respect in which she can further improve by developing her driving skills. So the fact that Kate is a more skilled driver than John entails that, at least in some respect, Kate is better at driving. Generally, if \( S_1 \) is more skilled at \( a \)-ing than \( S_2 \), \( S_1 \) is better at \( a \)-ing than \( S_2 \), at least in some respect.\(^{13}\)

The points above hold for knowing-how. It is clear that in developing practical knowledge regarding \( a \)-ing, that is, in learning (how) to \( a \), one gradually gets better at \( a \)-ing, at least in some respect. If Kate knows how to play the guitar better than John, she is better at playing the guitar than John.\(^{14}\) Indeed, the adverbial modifiers of knowing-how ascriptions are explicitly evaluative: well, better. The claim that John knows how to \( a \) better than Kate but he is not better at \( a \)-ing than Kate in any respect is contradictory.\(^{15}\)

There is no relevant difference in the case of ability ascriptions. If Kate is a more able negotiator than John, then she is a better negotiator than John, at least in some respect. Generally, if \( S_1 \) is a more able \( a \)-er than \( S_2 \) then \( S_1 \) is a better \( a \)-er than \( S_2 \), at least in some respect. And the more able an agent becomes at \( a \)-ing, the better one becomes at \( a \)-ing, other respects being equal. Indeed, when the modal auxiliary ‘can’ is used in comparative ascriptions, the evaluative character of ability comes to the surface. For one has to use ‘better’ (as an adverb now) instead of ‘more’. There is not much to choose between saying that Kate is a more able player than John, and saying that she can (generally) play better than John. The claim that John is a more able player than Kate but Kate is a better player (in all respects) is no less contradictory than the claim that John can play better than Kate but Kate is a better player than John.

There are two sorts of objection that might be raised to these entailment claims. First, it is not contradictory to say that one has the (general) ability to do something one is not good at doing. John is not a good swimmer, but he is surely able to swim. The answer is that this can be explained by the context sensitivity of the predicates involved. The contextually set threshold at or above which one falls under the extension of ‘is a good swimmer’ is usually set higher than that of ‘is able to swim’. For the same reason, it is not contradictory to assert that John is not an able swimmer but he can swim nonetheless. Since the contextually set threshold may be different even in sentences featuring two different ability predicates, it is only natural to expect that, in many contexts, the standard for counting as a good \( a \)-er will be more demanding than that for counting as having the ability to \( a \). This is why I have insisted we fix on the comparative forms. These

\(^{13}\) For Stanley and Williamson (2017), skill is not directly manifested in action but is only a ‘disposition’ to acquire action-guiding knowledge. But even in this view, developing one’s skill in \( a \)-ing entails that one gets better at \( a \)-ing in some respect: namely, in acquiring action-guiding knowledge regarding \( a \)-ing.

\(^{14}\) Here we must fix on the practical knowledge reading of the ascription: the first-personal capacity reading. The other readings are ruled out by the restrictions introduced in section [I].

\(^{15}\) Pavese (2017) distinguishes between quantitative and qualitative gradability in knowing-how ascriptions. While the latter is clearly evaluative (Pavese 2017: 373), the former is not obviously so. Roughly speaking, quantitative gradability has to do with the extent of one’s knowing-how with respect to the parts comprising a composite action kind. But notice that the action-parts are also things one may know-how to do well or less well. It is always possible to formulate a qualitatively gradable claim with respect to them.
considerations apply to skill and knowing-how, though, especially in the case of skill, the contextually set threshold is usually set sufficiently high; so this issue is less likely to arise.

Second, we ascribe a capacity to a even when it does not seem appropriate to say that one is good, bad, or improving at a-ing: tying one’s shoelaces, or raising one’s hand. Again, the answer is that this depends on the context. ‘John is improving at raising his hand’ is pragmatically odd because this is not the sort of performance we are usually interested in comparing and evaluating. But if John is recovering from paralysis, the physiotherapist may appropriately say that John can raise his hand better now than he could last week. And once John has recovered, he would say ‘John can raise his hand very well now’ (i.e. normally). Similarly, as young children develop the ability to tie their shoelaces, they gradually get better. We should not be misled by the fact that simple capacities do not call for improvement beyond the point where the agent can reliably do the thing in question. Indeed, this is typically the case for far more sophisticated capacities, such as driving or linguistic skills. The context sensitivity of the relevant expressions should not be allowed to obscure the relationship between capacities and value. To have a capacity is to be good at doing something to some sufficient degree, though in many cases what counts as sufficiently good is just consistently managing to do the thing in question, which is often part of physical or social maturation.

I have suggested that capacity ascriptions are unified by their connection to value: they all satisfy [EG.Agent]. I shall now argue that propensity ascriptions do not.

To say that one gets more and more into the habit of a-ing (in c) does not entail, or otherwise convey, that one gets better at a-ing (in some respect). To say that John is more in the habit of driving to work or cooking for the family than Kate does not entail, or otherwise convey, that he is a better driver or a better cook. Kate might be far more skilled in those activities, but fail to exercise these skills for lack of enthusiasm or opportunity. Similarly, the fact that a habit of a-ing (in c) is far more deeply entrenched in John’s life now than it used to be does not as such entail that he has improved at a-ing. Habitual propensities can become stronger or weaker, but the strengthening of a propensity to a does not as such constitute improvement in a-ing (though it may be conducive to improvement, since sophisticated skills are best developed and maintained by regular practice). The point holds for propensities generally. A compulsive hand-washer does not necessary wash his hands better than other people. Getting more addicted to heroin does not mean that one gets better at shooting up. Nor is it the case that if John is more inclined to sing in the bathroom than Kate, he is thereby a better singer. Propensity ascriptions are not evaluative in the sense specified by [EG.Agent].

I conclude that capacity ascriptions to agents are evaluative, whereas propensity ascriptions are not. This semantic contrast raises the following question:

(1) **Agent Evaluative gradability**: Why is it the case that capacity ascriptions to agents are evaluative whereas propensity ascriptions are not?

---

16 Annas (2011) distinguishes between skill and routine, partly on the grounds that in contrast to routine, agents aim to continuously improve on their skills. She thereby claims that tying one’s shoelaces sides with routine (2011: 18fn.3). The considerations above, as well as in the sections that follow, bear against the way Annas draws the distinction.
In section [V] we shall see that the answer to this question reveals key differences between propensities and capacities. But before proceeding to that, I shall identify a corresponding contrast between sentences that report the *actualization* of propensities and capacities.

III. Evaluative gradability and the actualization of agential powers

Let us call the episodic sentences that report the actualization of agential powers on some occasion *actualization-sentences*. In this section I argue that capacity actualization-sentences exhibit evaluative gradability, whereas propensity actualization-sentences do not.

III.1 Evaluative Gradability and the Simple Account

The following are instances of very common constructions of actualization-sentences.\(^{17}\)

[Capacity Manner]       Kate played the guitar (very) skillfully/ably.
[Propensity Sentential] John locked the door out of habit (when he left for work).

These sentences are more dissimilar than they might initially appear to be. In [Capacity Manner] constructions, ‘skillfully’ and ‘ably’ are manner adverbs: they function as predicate modifiers to indicate the qualities of the performance. To *a* skillfully is to *a* in a skillful way, just as to *a* elegantly is to *a* in an elegant way. Manner adverbs are apt to feature in answers to ‘How?’ questions, the same sort of question the answer to which may feature an adverbial prepositional phrase specifying a means or way of doing something: ‘by *w*-ing’.

By contrast, [Propensity Sentential] is at home in answering a ‘Why?’ question, the same sort of question the answer to which specifies a reason or motive. If someone asks *why* John locked the door, we might answer either by pointing to his reason, or just say that he did it ‘out of habit’.\(^{18}\) Accordingly, the ‘out of/from habit’ locutions are paraphrased using the propositional connective ‘because’. [Propensity Sentential] above is more or less equivalent to ‘John locked the door (when he left for work) *because* he is in the habit of doing so (in these circumstances)’. It follows that ‘*S* is in the habit of *a*-ing (in *c*)’ can function as a causal-explanatory claim. As is commonly assumed, a habit ascription can explain why an agent came to do something on some occasion.\(^{19}\)

---

\(^{17}\) Throughout this paper I intend sentences in the simple past, as well as sentences in the progressive, to be read episodically, that is, as reporting an event-particular or ongoing process. This is their most natural reading.

\(^{18}\) I do not take into account the adverb ‘habitually’, because it is quite a different beast. Syntactically, it is widely assumed to be an adverb of quantification (Q-Adverb) with no manner readings (Ernst 2002: 327 inter alia). Semantically, it has important similarities to ‘generally’ and ‘usually’, hence it is commonly assumed to lexicalise the quantifier already implicit in habitual sentences (the generic quantifier, according to Krifka et al. 1995). These assumptions imply that ‘habitually’ cannot felicitously feature in an episodic sentence. Indeed, ‘On that occasion, John locked the door (very) habitually’, or ‘This time, Kate went to the Church more habitually than John’, sound rather awkward.

\(^{19}\) For a discussion of habit explanations featuring the ‘because of habit’ and ‘out of habit’ constructions, as well as of the similarities and differences between action-explanations featuring the ‘out of’ locution (‘out of jealously’) and reason-explanations featuring ‘because’, see Alvarez 2011: 185-190.
These differences between [Capacity Manner] and [Propensity Sentential] dovetail with a widespread view regarding the differences between propensities and capacities generally—which I call the Simple Account. Propensities explain why an agent came to do something: the propensity to a in c explains why one set out to a on some occasion where c obtained. By contrast, capacities do not explain why an agent came to engage in some agential process. We do not set out to do things just because we can. Capacities explain how one goes about when a-ing (or trying to a), an explanation which assumes that one is already engaged in a process of a-ing, or about to. Thus the exercise of capacities resolves a how question, the same question addressed in means-ends deliberation. And since success in a-ing largely depends on the way one goes about when a-ing (or trying to a), capacities are commonly assumed to account for success or failure. In a nutshell, the Simple Account claims that propensities explain only why one comes to engage in an agential process of a-ing; capacities explain only instrumental acts, the component and/or lower-level acts that comprise the process of a-ing.

The Simple Account brings an important point into focus. The acts comprising the structure of action are flanked by different explanatory relations, specified in the answers to the ‘Why?’ and ‘How?’ questions respectively: S a-ed because c; S is a-ed by w-ing. It follows that propensities and capacities may be involved in the explanation of the same act (i.e. thing done on occasion), and hence that an act can be both the manifestation of a propensity and the exercise of a capacity at the same time. Kate picks up the phone when it rings. Kate’s propensity to reach for the phone when it rings explains why she tries to reach for the headset. Her bodily capacities explain how she succeeds or manages to do so—her making the suitable bodily movements. A propensity to a in c elicits an act-process of a-ing in response to c; a capacity to a elicits ways of a-ing when one is a-ing (or trying to a).

Let us now consider whether [Capacity Manner] and [Propensity Sentential] differ with respect to their relation to value. Keeping in mind the considerations that underlie the formulation of [EG.Agent] in section II, we can formulate a sufficient condition for the evaluative character of [Capacity Manner] actualization-sentences:

[EG.Act Manner] ‘S₁ a-ed more skillfully/ably than S₂’ entails ‘S₁ a-ed better than S₂, at least in some respect’.

It is clear that if Kate juggled the balls more skillfully than John, her performance on the occasion was better, at least in some respect. The same holds when the ascription concerns multiple acts: if John plays for his basketball team more skillfully this season than in the previous season, John has improved on his playing, at least in some respect. Things are no different with respect to ability. ‘Kate argued the case more ably than John’

---

20 The Simple Account is more often assumed than explicitly stated. However, Pollard (2008: 61) and Brett (1981) endorse it explicitly. Moreover, the Simple Account underlies some objections to the analogy between skill and virtue. See Zagzebski 1996: 106-116 for discussion.

21 A comprehensive habit explanation would mention both a habit and the fact that the eliciting circumstances obtained. However, this fact may be contextually salient, or included in the explanatory question, in which case it might not be mentioned in the answer. Accordingly, I do not always mention both.

22 Notice that in order to express the present points succinctly I use ‘instrumental’ as including lower-lever (sub-basic) acts, that is, ways that are not plausibly means specified in deliberation.
entails that Kate argued better (i.e. in a better way), at least in some respect. Generally, to say that S₁ has \(a\)-ed more capably than S₂ is to say that S₁ has \(a\)-ed in a way which is better, at least in some respect. The same goes for ascriptions that are not explicitly comparative. To say that Kate argued the case very ably is tantamount to saying that she argued (sufficiently) well. To \(a\) capably is to \(a\) sufficiently \textit{well} (at least in some respect), that is, in a way which is located at or above a threshold point on the relevant scale, a point which is determined by an implicit comparison to contextually salient alternative ways of \(a\)-ing. (The infinitival predicate ‘knows-how to \(a\)’ does not have corresponding adverbial forms, nor does it appear in episodic sentences in some other guise).

It is evident that [Propensity Sentential] sentences are not evaluative in the relevant sense.\textsuperscript{23} To \(a\) out of habit does not entail, or otherwise convey, that one \(a\)-ed well, in any respect. The Simple Account readily explains this: since such actualization-sentences address a ‘Why?’ question, they do not speak to the qualities of the performance at all.

Thus the proponent of the Simple Account need not dispute this contrast between [Capacity Manner] and [Propensity Sentential]. But she might question its significance. If propensities explain why one set out to \(a\), whereas capacities explain only instrumental acts, they can simply be distinguished in terms of their different explanatory roles. Why, then, should we need to appeal to their different relation to value? The appeal to evaluative gradability might reveal an \textit{additional} distinguishing feature, but it is by no means \textit{necessary} to draw the distinction. The answer is that the Simple Account fails in a wide range of cases. In sub-section III.2 we shall see that habit also explains instrumental acts. In such cases, the distinction between propensities and capacities can only be articulated by appealing to their different relation to value.\textsuperscript{24}

\[\text{III.2] Habitual Routines}\]

Habit does not merely explain an act as a response to environmental contingencies, or generally why an agent comes to engage in some agential process. Habits also account for the agent’s taking certain means or steps: driving to work by taking a certain route, making a cup of tea by using the old ceramic tea pot. This means that the notion of eliciting circumstances should be broadly construed, to include the agent’s objectives: what one is doing or trying to do. Driving to work is the circumstances where Kate takes that route; making tea is the circumstances in which she reaches for the teapot. We may call such habits \textit{habitual routines}. The Simple Account does not take into consideration the fact that the elicitor is very often a more encompassing act the a gent is already engaged in, to which the habitual act is instrumental.

So routine habits and capacities likewise explain instrumental acts. In both cases the agent is \(a\)-ing by \(w\)-ing, and the power elicits a way of \(a\)-ing when the agent is engaged in a process of \(a\)-ing (or trying to \(a\)). Since the relationship between \(a\)-ing and \(w\) is instrumental, the ‘Why?’ and ‘How?’ questions correspond to each other, in the sense that the relation specified in the answer is the same: \(a\)-ing by \(w\)-ing (Anscombe 1963

\textsuperscript{23} Notice that [EG.Act Manner] cannot felicitously feature propensity terms. As I explain below, ‘out of/from habit’ are not gradable.

\textsuperscript{24} Appealing to different explanatory roles might also point to an explanation of why propensity ascriptions to agents are not evaluative. But it cannot serve to explain why capacity ascriptions to agents are so. Thus it cannot offer a comprehensive answer to question (1).
§26). So to the extent that capacities and routine propensities likewise explain *how* one is \(a\)-ing, they explain by the same token *why* one is \(w\)-ing. To the extent that Kate’s habit of taking that route when going to work explains *why* she takes that route now that she is going to work, it explains by the same token *how* she is going to work: her taking that route as opposed to some other. In either case, the explanation assumes that Kate manifests her habit of \(w\)-ing when \(a\)-ing. Similarly with capacities. Suppose that when conducting a basketball attack, a point guard opts to pass the ball to the power forward. To the extent that her tactical skills explain *how* she conducted the attack (by opting to pass to the power forward), they explain by the same token *why* she opted to pass the ball to the power forward, as opposed to doing something else.\(^{25}\) In either case, the explanation assumes that \(w\)-ing is an actualization of her skill in \(a\)-ing. (The fact that skill addresses a ‘Why?’ question here is not a problem for the Simple Account, since the player’s passing the ball is an instrumental act).

Moreover, just as with capacities, in habitual routines the objective to \(a\) may be elicited without deliberation by another propensity, but it can also be set by a decision. Kate may decide to go to work on a Sunday evening, which she is not in the habit of doing. Still, her habit of going to work by taking that route explains how she proceeds. Similarly, when Kate reaches for the phone, the exercise of her bodily capacities may be elicited either by her habit of reaching for the phone when it rings, or by a decision.

The point here is that the exercise of a capacity and the manifestation of a routine are *structurally analogous*: in both cases a way of \(a\)-ing is elicited in response to one’s being engaged in a process of \(a\)-ing or trying to \(a\); and in both cases, the objective to \(a\) might be set by a decision, or elicited without deliberation by another power. Thus the Simple Account ends up assimilating capacities to routine propensities: a capacity to \(a\) (in some way) is nothing but a propensity to \(a\) (in some way) when one is \(a\)-ing (or trying to \(a\)).

In the following sections I argue that this assimilation overlooks cardinal differences between the two cases. In the next sub-section I shall take the first step: I shall argue that the assimilation of capacities to routine propensities is at odds with the semantics of their corresponding actualization-sentences: only the former entail a value judgment.

### [III.3] Evaluative Gradability and Habitual Routines

In order to check whether capacity and routine propensity actualization-sentences contrast with respect to their relation to value, we should start by formulating pairs of actualization-sentences for capacities and routine propensities that reflect their structural analogy: sentences that address the same explanatory question.

It does not seem possible to obtain habit ascriptions which address a ‘How?’ question, since it is hard to obtain a reading in which ‘because of/from/out of habit’ function as predicate modifiers. It is important to note, however, that this is not at odds with the fact that habit can explain instrumental acts. For when a habit of \(a\)-ing by \(w\)-ing explains *how* one \(a\)-ed, it explains by the same token *why* one \(w\)-ed. And we saw that in habitual routines it is \(w\) which is the habitual act; \(a\)-ing is the elicitor. Accordingly, in the

---

\(^{25}\) ‘To the extent’, because that which explains why one \(a\)-ed in the first place might also be relevant in explaining why one \(w\)-ed. The point is that *given* one’s objective to \(a\) (and one’s having registered the obtaining circumstances), capacities and routine propensities likewise explain why one opted to \(a\) in some way as opposed to some other. I shall drop this qualification in what follows.
following routine actualization-sentence, the habitual act is taking this route, which is Kate’s way of going to work:

[Propensity Sentential] Kate took this route out of habit (when going to work).

Now even if we cannot obtain actualization-sentences where propensity terms function as predicate modifiers, it is uncontroversial that ‘skillfully’ is not a pure manner adverb, but has a sentential reading. The sentential reading is best illustrated in sentences featuring two adverbs that are contrary or otherwise at odds with each other. John is an experienced dissident activist interrogated by the police. He does not want to give anything away, while appearing to be cooperative. In such a case, it might be apposite to say ‘Skillfully/cleverly, John answered the question stupidly’ (Adapted from Cinque 1999: 19). The way John answered cannot be skillful and stupid at the same time. On its most prominent reading, the sentence asserts that it was (very) skillful of John to answer the question in a stupid way.26

Now recall the basketball example above. The player’s tactical skills explain how she conducted the attack, namely by opting to pass to the power forward, and by the same token they explain why she did the latter. In either case, the explanation assumes that the player’s opting to act as she did is an actualization of her tactical skill. So both sentences below are apposite:

[Capacity Manner] S conducted the attack skillfully (by passing to the power forward).
[Capacity Sentential] Skillfully, S passed to the power forward (when conducting the attack).

This brings [Capacity sentential] in line with [Propensity Sentential] above: ‘Kate took this route out of habit (when going to work)’ likewise asserts that Kate’s habit explains why she took that route. A schematic representation of the two cases makes their structural analogy perspicuous:

[Capacity Sentential] Skillfully, S w-ed when a-ing.
[Propensity Sentential] Out of habit, S w-ed when a-ing.

We can now formulate a common sufficient condition for the evaluative character of [Capacity Sentential] and routine [Propensity Sentential]. However, this condition cannot be formulated in an explicitly comparative form, if only because ‘out of/from/because of habit’ are not gradable. Even though habits are formed and attenuate gradually, an act (i.e. a thing done on a specific occasion, reported by an episodic sentence) cannot be said

26 If S a-ed skillfully, and she a-ed by w-ing, then ‘Skillfully, S w-ed’. It is standard to paraphrase the sentential reading as ‘It was skillful of S to w’ (Cinque 1998: 19; Frey 2003; Schäfer 2008 inter alia). Similarly, if S a-ed well, and she a-ed by w-ing, then it was good of S to w. These paraphrases will be important in the formulation of [EG.Act Sentential] below. Notice that I do not need to assume that in the example above, as well in [Capacity Sentential] sentences generally, ‘skillfully’ has only a sentential reading. In order to bring them in line with [Propensity Sentential], it suffices that the sentential reading is available. Indeed, this is the most prominent reading of [Capacity Sentential] sentences.

27 ‘Out of habit’ has moved to the head of the sentence here. Semantically, this does not make any difference.
to be done very or more because of/out of/from habit than another. The following formulation will do for present purposes:

[EG.Act Sentential] ‘Skillfully/out of habit, S w-ed when a-ing’ entails that it was good of S to w when a-ing (in comparison to contextually salient alternative ways of a-ing), at least in some respect.

Now ‘Skillfully, S w-ed when a-ing’ is paraphrased as ‘It was skillful of S to w when a-ing’. And if it was skillful of S to w when a-ing, then S a-ed skillfully (in virtue of w-ing). Now we saw that ‘S a-ed skillfully’ entails ‘S a-ed well’, i.e. in a good way. And if S a-ed in a good way, and she a-ed by w-ing, then it was good of S to w when a-ing. So ‘It was skillful of S to w when a-ing’ entails ‘It was good of S to w when a-ing’. And since ‘It was skillful of S to w when a-ing’ paraphrases the [Capacity Sentential] ‘Skillfully, S w-ed when a-ing’, the latter likewise entails ‘It was good of S to w when a-ing’ (in comparison to contextually salient alternative ways of a-ing), at least in some respect. This is precisely the entailment articulated in [EG.Act Sentential].

It seems hard to obtain a sentential reading for ‘ably’. But the correspondence between the ‘Why?’ and ‘How?’ questions allows us to apply the reasoning above to capacities in general. If in w-ing S actualizes her ability to a, then it is both the case that ‘S a-ed ably (in virtue of w-ing)’ and that ‘Ably, S w-ed when a-ing’ (recall the basketball example above). Now we saw that ‘S a-ed ably’ entails that S a-ed well, which is to say that it was good of S to w when a-ing. So ‘Ably, S w-ed when a-ing’ also entails that it was good of S to w (in comparison to salient alternative ways of a-ing), at least in some respect. This is precisely the entailment articulated in [EG.Act Sentential].

Routine propensity actualization-sentences do not exhibit the entailment articulated in [EG.Act Sentential], for two quite different reasons. First, consider habitual act slips, a hallmark feature of habitual agency. The usual route Kate takes when going to work is closed down for maintenance. Kate knew this, and had earlier decided to take an alternative route. Still, in the event the force of habit led her to take the usual route. The idea of habit can explain how acting against one’s intention is possible, and it is precisely in such explanations that the ‘out of habit’ locution is commonly used. But since habitual act slips are acts that run against one’s intentions and objectives, they can hardly be instrumentally good, in comparison to salient alternatives (acting on one’s intention—taking the alternative route). Thus ‘Out of habit, Kate took this route when going to work’ does not entail that it was good of her to take this route. (Of course, Kate’s taking that route might still be good in some respect or other. But it is clear that the sentence does not entail this.) Second, there are routine habits the manifestations of which are generally not a good way to reach one’s objective. ‘Kate is in the habit of taking that route when going to work’ does not even entail that this is generally a good way of going to work, in comparison to salient alternatives. Perhaps there are better itineraries, but Kate does not know about them. Or perhaps she knows of better alternatives, but sticks with her habit—as is quite common.

Notice that these two points do not apply only to routine propensities. First, consider habitual slips. John has earlier decided to leave the door unlocked, so that his guests can go out. Still, he has locked the door ‘out of habit’, leaving his guests locked inside. Thus ‘John locked the door out of habit’ does not entail that it was good of him to do so, for it
may be inimical to his objectives on the occasion. Second, we commonly speak of ‘bad’ habits, that is, habits the manifestations of which are generally inimical to one’s objectives and standing concerns (e.g. unhealthy habits). And in explaining an act as the manifestation of a ‘bad’ habit we do not imply that it is good of one to do the thing in question. This is even clearer with other kinds of propensities, such as addictions and compulsions.

In what follows I shall focus on articulating the differences between capacities and routines, since their structural analogy makes it harder to discern these differences. I will suppose that the Simple Account can distinguish between capacities and non-routine propensities. But it is important to bear in mind that the claim that the explanation of an act by appeal to a propensity does not entail or otherwise convey that the act is conducive to one’s (broader) objectives is not restricted to habitual routines. In other words, habits explain both instrumental and non-instrumental acts, but in neither case does the relevant actualization-sentence entail an evaluative judgment. By contrast, capacities explain only instrumental acts, and the relevant actualization-sentence does entail an evaluative judgment. So the contrast between capacities and routines with respect to their connection to value applies generally.

The conclusions of this section raise the following question:

(2) Act Evaluative gradability: Why are capacity actualization-sentences evaluative whereas propensity actualization-sentences are not? Why are the latter not even gradable?

In the next section I shall identify a contrast in the metaphysics of propensities and capacities. It is essential to a capacity that it can be exercised in various ways. By contrast, in habitual routines the way one acts provides the habit’s identity, and hence a given habit can be manifested in only one way. This contrast will be used in section V to provide the answer to questions (2) and (1).

IV. Habitual routines, capacities and variability

Consider, first, sophisticated capacities such as those involved in driving or in a basketball offensive. It is evident that one does sequences of very different things on different occasions. There is no specific way one conducts such activities, if only because the suitable course of action will depend on the circumstances one is confronted with, which vary widely from one occasion to another. Things are not that different with respect to simple bodily capacities, such as the ability to reach for an object or catch a flying ball. Even the simplest bodily capacities are necessarily exercised in some way or other, though this way might only be specifiable in terms of detailed bodily trajectories. But even here, the initial configuration of the spatial relationships between bodily parts and the objects of interaction is hardly ever the same. So the lower level acts by way of which one is a-ing will vary across different occasions.

In the cases above, the variability in the ways one acts is required by the variability of the circumstances of exercise. There are some capacities, however, which are exercised in relatively fixed settings; say shooting a free throw in basketball or throwing a dart. The optimal exercise of such capacities consists in managing to act in a quite specific way, over and over again. Of course, human agents cannot achieve this beyond some level of
detail—even the best players often miss. So variability here is a consequence of human limitations. However, the key point is that one counts as exercising a capacity to a whether or not she is a-ing optimally or not (i.e. in the best possible way). One still exercises her shooting skills even if she misses the shot. Capacities are fallible, and success or failure depends on the way one acts, say the details in the bodily movements by which one shoots. So it is essential to a capacity that it may be exercised in more than one way.

Thus a capacity to a is a capacity to a by w-ing, where w is a variable the value of which is only determined on occasion. Let us call this feature the variability of capacities. I shall now argue that routine propensities do not have this feature.

Consider Kate’s habit of taking that route when going to work. Kate is in the habit of w-ing when a-ing, where a are the eliciting circumstances (going to work). The point here is that as long as Kate manifests this habit, she necessarily acts in the same way: she is w-ing, i.e. taking that route. If Kate were to take an alternative route, she would simply not manifest this habit—the habit of going to work by taking that route. (This does not mean that what Kate does at the lower level when manifesting this habit will not vary. Kate is a-ing by w-ing. Her habit explains how she is a-ing or why she is w-ing. But the different question of how she is w-ing would be resolved by her driving skills. As I have explained in III.1, the actualization of agential powers determines relations between acts in action structure, and an act is typically flanked by different explanatory relations.)

This indicates a contrast in the identity conditions of routine propensities and capacities. In the case of capacities, the elicitor is the proximal objective that provides the capacity’s identity (what one is doing or trying to do), and the way one acts varies from occasion to occasion. By contrast, in the case of routine propensities it is the way one acts which provides (at least partly) the propensity’s identity.28 So when one exercises a capacity to a, the way one is a-ing may, and typically would, vary across occasions. By contrast, when one manifests a routine propensity to w when a-ing, one necessarily acts in the same way: by w-ing. It is essential to a capacity that it may be exercised in various ways, whereas it is essential to a routine that it may only be manifested in one way.

---

28 ‘At least partly’, because it is common to assume that the specification of a habit has a tripartite structure: a propensity to w when a-ing (or to a in c). (Ryle: 1949: 43, 110; von Wright 1963: 142; Brett 1981: 363; Pollard 2008: ch.3). In the tripartite view, it is both the elicitor and the way that provide for a habit’s identity. The problem with this view is that habit ascriptions do not always mention elicitors: ‘Kate is in the habit of taking that route’ is perfectly intelligible. One may argue that this is precisely because Kate’s habit has multiple elicitors. She takes that route when driving to different places. I need not rely on the tripartite view here, for the following contrast suffices to distinguish between the two cases: capacities are exercised in various ways but the elicitor is invariably what one is doing or trying to do: the kind of action that provides the capacity’s identity. By contrast, in the case of routines it is the elicitor that varies (if it does), and the way one acts provides the habit’s identity. An issue related to the problems of the tripartite view arises in the literature on dispositions (Vetter 2016: ch.3) and their relation to abilities (Maier 2013: 124; Clarke 2015: 898).
V. The metaphysics of evaluative gradability

In sections II and III I have argued that in contrast to propensity ascriptions, capacity ascriptions exhibit evaluative gradability. I have suggested that this should be explained by answering questions (1) and (2). In this section I show how these questions can be addressed on the basis of the points made in section IV.

Let us start with a very simple case. One’s throwing of a dart is a fairly simple action, which has nevertheless an internal structure: one throws a dart by making a movement with specific physical properties. The accuracy of the throw largely depends on the properties of the bodily movement: the way one throws a dart. (I set aside considerations of external interference.) Now the gradable predicate ‘is accurate’ is associated with a scale, which is comprised of a set of degrees totally ordered on the dimension of accuracy. The point on that scale at which a dart throw will be located will depend on which of the multiple possible ways open to the agent is the way by which she actually throws the dart. And ‘It was an accurate throw’ will be true (in context) just in case, in virtue of the way it was actually performed, the throw is located at or above a contextually set threshold. Now to simplify things, suppose that a dart throw is skillfully or ably performed largely to the extent that it is accurate. It follows that the point at which a dart throw will be located will likewise depend on the way it is actually performed. And ‘It was a skillful throw’ will be true (in context) just in case, in virtue of the way it was actually performed, the throw is located at or above a contextually set threshold.

Similarly, the gradability of ‘S a-ed skillfully/ably’ implies that this judgment is implicitly comparative: it locates a-ing at or above some point on a scale where other possible acts of a-ing are thus located. And these possible a-ings are located at different points in virtue of the different ways in which they would have been performed. So the gradability of the claim that a-ing is skillfully or ably performed presupposes (A) Variability: there are multiple possible ways of a-ing. Moreover, ‘a-ed more skillfully/ably’ entails ‘a-ed better (in some respect)’. So the extent to which one a’s well also (largely) depends on the way one a’s. The act of a-ing is thereby located on a scale comprised of a set of degrees totally ordered on an evaluative dimension. Thus the claim that a-ing is skillfully or ably performed also presupposes (B) Value-ranking: the possible ways of a-ing are ranked on a dimension of value.

The factors involved in the evaluation of capacity exercises are usually far more complex. In the case of capacities exercised in variable settings, we take into account the extent to which some way is suitable given the circumstances obtaining on the occasion. So the ranking of ways is occasion-specific, at least to a large extent. Moreover, whereas in the example above I have supposed that only one dimension (accuracy) is taken into account, capacity predicates are often multi-dimensional, which requires us to combine different scales in evaluation. A musical or dance performance might be judged on both its technical and emotional qualities, for instance. Such judgments are typically controversial, if only because the relative weight of each dimension in the overall

---

29 In some cases there may be two or more ways of a-ing that do not make a difference with respect to its evaluative qualities. These locate a-ing at the same point on the relevant scale.
evaluation is often a matter of dispute. Further, composite acts involve the exercise of component capacities, each of which imports distinct standards of excellence. Acts of creation involve further complications. So the layers of complexity pile up. The more complex a capacity is, the more room there will be for variability, and hence for crucial differences in performance to be taken into account in evaluation.

Now consider routine propensity ascriptions. Habitual routines are habits of acting in a certain way. Yet ‘Kate took that route out of habit when going to work’ is not evaluative: it does not entail this was a good (or bad, for that matter) way of going to work. We can now explain this. Evaluation presupposes that the act could have been performed in different ways. But we saw that in the case of habitual routines the way one acts provides the habit’s identity. As long as Kate manifests that habit, she necessarily acts in the same way: by taking that route. There are no multiple ways of manifesting that habit to be ranked on a dimension of value, in virtue of which Kate might have manifested it more or less well.

This provides the answer to question (2): Why are capacity actualization-sentences evaluative whereas propensity actualization-sentences are not? Why are the latter not even gradable? We saw that the most poignant form of this question concerns pairs of actualization-sentences which display the structural analogy between capacities and routines: why does [Capacity Sentential] entail ‘S a-ed (very) well (in some respect)’, that it was good of S to w, whereas [Propensity Sentential] does not?

[Capacity Sentential] Skillfully, S w-ed when a-ing.
[Propensity Sentential] Out of habit, S w-ed when a-ing.

The answer is this. ‘S a-ed well (in a good way)’ locates the act on a scale that involves a dimension of value, where other possible acts of a-ing are thus located. But since an act is thus located in virtue of the way it is performed, such claims presuppose (A) Variability in ways of a-ing, (B) Value-ranking of these ways. We saw that (A) and (B) are met when a-ing is the exercise of a capacity. By contrast, (A) and (B) are not met when w-ing is one’s habitual way of a-ing, since there is no other way of a-ing while manifesting that habit. This is why the claim that on some occasion one a-ed in the way she is in the habit of doing is non-gradable and a fortiori non-evaluative. The metaphysical claims of section IV are required to accommodate this semantic contrast.

I turn now to ascriptions of propensities and capacities to agents. These are likewise gradable, but we saw that only capacity ascriptions are evaluative. I shall argue that the distinctive features of capacities I have insisted on, (A) Variability and (B) Value Ranking, are also required to make sense of the evaluative gradability of capacity.

---

30 See Stanley and Williamson 2017 for discussion with respect to ascription of skill to agents. However, since for Stanley and Williamson skill is a disposition to know, it is only appraised on the basis of the acquisition of knowledge that guides overt acts, as opposed to the properties of the acts themselves.

31 (A) and (B) are also required to accommodate a common observation: one can intentionally exercise a skill non-optimally, or even intentionally fail, and this does not count against her having the skill in question. This is because one can intentionally opt for a way which she knows is not the best one. But this is possible only if there are various ways of a-ing ranked on a dimension of value. By contrast, if Kate takes some different route (when going to work) she is not manifesting her habit of taking this route at all. And failing to manifest a habit in the relevant circumstances bears against having that habit. The point was originally meant to distinguish between skills and virtues, but virtues side with propensities in this respect.
ascriptions to agents. Since these are not features of propensities, this will provide a natural answer to question (1).

Consider a feature shared by most current analyses of capacities, such as various versions of the conditional and dispositional analyses of ability, as well as Hawley’s (2003) account of knowing-how: whether an agent is able or knows-how to a depends on whether the agent a’s on a suitable range of counterfactual scenarios where the agent tries (decides, intends, etc.) to a. Similarly, on the dispositional analysis of ability, whether an agent has the ability to a is a question of whether she has the disposition to a when she tries. Notice that the question of whether the agent a-ed on some occasion has only two possible answers: yes or no. In the former case, the agent succeeded or managed to a; in the latter she failed to. Success or manifestation is an all-or-nothing matter.

This already makes room for at least two dimensions of gradability. First, capacities are fallible and different agents have different success rates on a given range of counterfactual scenarios. Second, capacities exercised in variable circumstances provide another dimension: success rates in scenarios involving progressively more adverse circumstances. Moreover, when two agents differ with respect to one and/or the other dimension, it plausibly follows that one is better able than the other (though the aforementioned analyses tend to neglect this). It might seem, then, that we can account for the evaluative gradability of capacity ascriptions to agents without appealing to the two features I have insisted on: (A) Variability and (B) Value Ranking.

However, these two dimensions already presuppose (A) Variability: for success in a-ing in variable and more adverse circumstances depends on whether one manages to a in a/the way the peculiarities of each occasion require. But variability is also required to make sense of different success rates in capacities exercised in fixed settings: for if these do not exhibit some degree of variability, then one would always succeed or always fail as long as one has done anything at all. And since success depends on the way one acts, these dimensions also require (B) Value-Ranking of possible ways of acting. So the two success-based dimensions of gradability already presuppose (A) and (B).

Moreover, capacities (or at least some of them) involve a purely qualitative dimension of evaluative gradability, which cannot be captured by success-based accounts. Consider two fellow dancers, Elvira and Maya, who dance side by side on the same range of occasions and in otherwise similar circumstances. If judgments of ability take into account only the two dimensions above, it is simply impossible for either dancer to be better than the other. Now it is not just that this is evidently wrong, but also that in such cases the two dimensions above do not have much weight. We just focus on the qualities of the dancing performances, when these take place. Then we evaluate these on the lines sketched out above: a performance is located at some point on a scale depending on the way(s) one dances. Accordingly, if Elvira regularly dances in better ways than Maya, she will be judged a better dancer. So this qualitative dimension of gradability can only

32 For a recent formulation of this sort of analysis see Vihvelin 2013: ch.3.
33 The second dimension is discussed in Maier 2015: 125-130. The first is implied by most current accounts of (general) ability. See Small 2017 for discussion.
34 Small 2017 forcefully argues this point. See also Vetter, forthcoming, and Ryle 1949: 28; 130.
35 Hence the aforementioned accounts cannot make sense of adjectival and adverbial modification in comparative ascriptions, such as ‘This time, S1 a-ed more skilfully/ably than S2’. ‘This performance was more skilful/able than that’. These ascriptions presuppose that in both cases the agents a-ed—i.e. success or manifestation. What, then, is the difference asserted?
be accounted for by (A) Variability and (B) Value-ranking. And since these are required by the other dimensions as well, it is (A) and (B) which underlie the evaluative gradability of capacities, not the idea of managing to a (success or manifestation) as such.36

Contrast with propensity ascriptions. These are likewise gradable, and there are at least two factors that might affect the claim that S1 is more in the habit of a-ing than S2. First, S1 might be a-ing more regularly (in c) than S2, presumably because S1’s propensity is stronger. Second, since a habit ascription entails past repetition (Pollard 2008: 49-55: 207), the agent’s record may also affect our judgments.37 These factors provide dimensions of gradability, but none of these dimensions is evaluative: getting more in the habit of a-ing (in c) does not entail that one gets better at a-ing. This much can be explained by the Simple Account: since an ascription of a habit of a-ing to an agent explains why the agent sets out to a, it does not address the qualities of the performance.

In the case of routines the elicitor is specified as another action kind or objective. But this does not make any difference to the present point. The judgment ‘Kate is more in the habit of taking that route when going to work than John’ is sensitive to the same two factors. Yet neither of these factors is suitably related to value. ‘S1 is more in the habit of w-ing when a-ing than S2’ does not entail ‘S1 is better at a-ing than S2’. This is because a routine of a-ing by w-ing can only be manifested in one way, and hence the prerequisites of evaluative gradability, (A) Variability and (B) Value-ranking, are not satisfied.

Let us return to question (1): why is the claim that an agent is (very) capable at a-ing evaluative, whereas the claim that an agent is (very much) in the habit of a-ing in c/by b-ing is not? Evaluative gradability presupposes two features: (A) Variability and (B) Value-ranking. These are essential features of capacities, which allows room for comparative evaluation of different agents and improvement in performance. By contrast, a habitual routine can only be manifested in one way, hence (A) and a fortiori (B) are excluded. In non-routine habits, the ascription does not speak to the qualities of the performance at all.

VI. Agential powers and inanimate dispositions

I have argued that the semantic contrast between propensity and capacity ascriptions with respect to evaluative gradability echoes a difference in the metaphysics of these two varieties of agential powers. In this section I return to the questions at the beginning of this paper: Why is there no corresponding contrast in the case of inanimate dispositions?

---

36 Since the two success-based dimensions already presuppose (A) and (B), I do not need to argue that this qualitative dimension is involved in all capacities. I do think that this is the case, however. Recall the example of the physiotherapist, who asserts that a patient can now raise her hand better than she could last week. He does not thereby imply that the patient could not raise her hand at all last week, and that now she manages (succeeds) to do so. He means that the ways one raises one’s hand now (the spatiotemporal properties of the movement) approximate the relevant standard, which is provided by the ways healthy people raise their hands. This suggests that for simple capacities the relevant standard might not be very demanding, which is why, in contrast to dancing, raising one’s hand is not something at which the agent can always get better. Thus (A) and (B) do not require that one may always get better at doing the thing in question. They only require that there are various ways of a-ing, and that depending on the way one a’s, the act approximates to a different degree the relevant standard. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for inviting me to clarify this point.

37 If some habits have multiple elicitors, the multiplicity of elicitors might also affect the judgment.
What does this imply for attempts to illuminate the nature of agential powers by appealing to the metaphysics of inanimate dispositions? A proper treatment of these questions would require another paper, but it is worth pointing to some ramifications of the arguments above.

An outstanding feature of human agency is its instrumental structure: we do certain things by doing others, and so on. The idea of instrumental structure imports a normative dimension: some acts (ways) are more suitable or conducive to one’s objectives than others, hence it makes sense to ask whether in \( w \)-ing one is \( a \)-ing well. I will suggest that the distinction between propensities and capacities is at bottom a distinction between those agential powers in exercising which one is essentially sensitive or responsive to this normative requirement and those in which this is not the case. This will point to a natural answer to the questions above.

It is essential to the exercise of a capacity that the agent opt for one among the various ways of acting available. But one cannot opt for a suitable way (save by accident) unless one is responsive to the question of which ways of acting are suitable and which are not. This requires one to take the circumstances into account. Of course, capacities may be exercised more, or less, well. The point is that, other things being equal, the more responsive one is to what counts as a good way of \( a \)-ing, the better one exercises a capacity to \( a \). And in the complete absence of such responsiveness, one does not exercise a capacity at all. Evidently, one cannot be exercising a sophisticated capacity, such as conducting a basketball offensive, unless one is taking into account the position of teammates and opponents on the court, and opts for some way to conduct the attack upon considering the options available in these circumstances. But the same holds for simple capacities, such as the capacity to catch a flying ball. If one is completely indifferent to whether the configuration of one’s bodily parts is suitable given the trajectory of the ball (hands down and looking away from the ball, say), one would hardly count as even trying to catch the ball. Some degree of ongoing sensitivity to whether one is on the right track is required for the exercise of capacities, if only because it is required for the ongoing guidance of the bodily movement. One exercises a capacity to \( a \) only as long as one is responsive to the normative requirements imported by \( a \)-ing, that is, to whether one is \( a \)-ing well.

There is a striking contrast with propensities here. Kate knows that the usual route she takes when going to work is closed down for maintenance and has therefore decided to take an alternative route, but in the event takes the usual route ‘out of habit’. Habitual act slips are a hallmark of habitual agency, and indicate that the agent need not be responsive

\[38\] An anonymous reviewer has pointed out that the normativity inherent in the idea of a (rational) capacity exercise is somewhat stronger than the normativity implied by the idea of instrumental structure as such. In the case of capacities, evaluation relies on standards that are distinctive of the capacity itself, such as the standards of excellence pertaining to some domain of expertise. These have no equivalent in the assessment of any odd instrumental relationship. I do not dispute the importance of this point in articulating the evaluative character of capacities. The reason I distinguish between propensities and capacities in terms of (essential) sensitivity to the requirements of instrumental normativity in this section is that manifestations of inanimate dispositions do not exhibit instrumental structure, which will allow me to explain why the distinction is not found in the non-agential domain.

\[39\] The claims in this paragraph are developed in Douskos, forthcoming. However, pretty much everyone acknowledges that skilled activity requires some form of sensitivity to whether one is on the right track, though there are disagreements on how to characterize it (e.g. whether it is a conceptually imbued responsiveness to reasons).
to the question of whether the way she is currently acting is suitable to reach her objective. Exhibiting sensitivity to what counts as acting well is not essential to the manifestation of a habit.

Of course, Kate may realize this before it’s too late, and adjust her course of action accordingly. But notice that once her course of action is so adjusted, Kate will be no longer manifesting the habit in question. She will be going to work via the alternative route, acting on her intention. So the point is not that in manifesting a habit one is necessarily indifferent to what counts as acting well. It is rather that when one is not acting well (or about to), increasing sensitivity to this question would lead one to refrain from manifesting a habit. By contrast, in the case of capacities it leads to adjustments in their exercise, for a capacity can be exercised in various ways. Increasing sensitivity to what counts as acting well may inhibit the manifestation of a habit, but it improves the exercise of a capacity.40

These points do not apply only to routine propensities. John has earlier decided to leave the door unlocked, so that his guests can go out. Still, he has locked the door ‘out of habit’, leaving his guests locked inside. In doing so he is not sufficiently sensitive to what counts as acting well, for what he did is not conducive to his objectives on the occasion. Moreover, we commonly speak of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ habits. But on what grounds is a habit characterized as ‘good’ or ‘bad’? Human acts are usually embedded in the context of broader endeavors, so most acts can be assessed as being more or less conducive to certain objectives, as long as these include standing concerns, policies, or the adherence to certain principles and values. A habit of eating dinner just before going to bed is not conducive to one’s health concerns. A habit of hanging out on social media platforms all morning is inimical to one’s professional objectives. Habits are commonly said to be ‘good’ or ‘bad’ on such grounds. And when one manifests a ‘bad’ habit, one typically acts against her best judgment. So one is not responsive to what counts as acting well, even by one’s own lights. Thus, whereas non-routine habits are not permeated with instrumental structure (they do not explain why one a-ed by w-ing), their manifestations are typically embedded in the context of broader endeavors, in view of which it makes sense to ask whether one is acting well. In this sense, habitual act slips, manifestations of ‘bad’ habits as well as of addictions, compulsions and the like, are likewise failures to be sufficiently responsive to the normative requirements emanating from the broader instrumental framework of human agency.

I have suggested that the distinction between capacities and propensities is fundamentally a distinction between the agential powers in the actualization of which the agent is essentially responsive to the normative requirements arising from the idea of instrumental structure and the powers in the actualization of which one is not essentially responsive to these requirements. Evidently, this contrast arises only in the case of processes which are permeated with and/or embedded in a broader instrumental structure, in virtue of which it makes sense to ask whether in actualizing a power one is acting well. However, the manifestations of inanimate dispositions are not permeated with or

---

40 Again, this claim is defended at length in Douskos, forthcoming. For related considerations, see Owens 2017. This should be distinguished from the stronger claim that ‘insensitivity to current goals’ is a defining feature of habit, which is common in psychology (Wood and Runger 2016: 292). The present account does not imply that in manifesting a habit one is invariably insensitive to the relevant normative requirements, but it accommodates the fact that this can, and does, happen.
embedded as such in an instrumental structure (unless the object is used as an instrument or tool), and hence the question of sensitivity to such normative requirements does not arise. This points to an answer to the first question at the beginning of this paper: why does the distinction between propensities and capacities not arise in the case of non-agential powers? The question of whether in acting in a certain way one exercises a capacity or manifests a propensity is a question about whether one is essentially responsive to certain normative requirements. Since these requirements emanate from the instrumental structure of human agency, this question suffers from a failure of presupposition in the case of non-agential processes. Note that this explanation supports the view that instrumental structure is constitutive of human agency (Anscombe 1963), for this view on the nature of agency is particularly well suited to explain why the distinction between propensities and capacities is a mark of the agential domain.

The arguments above have implications for the second issue raised at the beginning of this paper: they seem to have detrimental consequences for approaches that seek to illuminate the metaphysics of agential powers by appealing to the metaphysics of inanimate dispositions. One example is the dispositional analysis of ability, in which an agent has the ability to \( a \) just in case she has the disposition to \( a \) when she tries (intends, decides, etc.) to \( a \). Proponents of the dispositional analysis undertake to analyze ability on the basis of the properties of inanimate dispositions.\(^{41}\) Now a habit is a power to \( a \) when in \( c \). If all agential powers are likewise dispositions, it would follow that an agent has a habit of \( a \)-ing when in \( c \) just in case she has the disposition to \( a \) when in \( c \). This implies that propensities and capacities are not different varieties of agential powers, but differ only with respect to their kinds of elicitors. Worse, even this difference is not always present: for routine propensities are also powers to \( a \) (in some way) when one tries (intends, decides, etc.) to \( a \). Capacities are thereby assimilated to routine propensities, an outcome against which I have argued at length. In either case, one loses sight of the distinctively normative character of capacity exercise, as well as the concomitant evaluative dimension of capacity ascriptions. Of course, more would need to be said to turn the points above into an argument against the various specific formulations of the dispositional analysis. But they already point to an explanation of why successive analyses of ability over the last decades have overlooked one of its most distinctive features: its evaluative character.

Propensities and capacities are fundamentally different varieties of agential power. I have not articulated a comprehensive account of this distinction, nor have I explored its various applications. But I hope to have shown that this is important for an account of human agency that makes essential appeal to the idea of agential powers, and that it holds the promise of illuminating to illuminate several related areas.

Works Cited


\(^{41}\) This is how both Fara 2008 and Vihlelein 2013 proceed, for instance. But the view that abilities are a kind of disposition is far more widespread.


Douskos, C. (Forthcoming). The Spontaneousness of Skill and the Impulsivity of Habit. Synthese. [https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-017-1658-7](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-017-1658-7)


