

## Book Reviews

Marcus, Eric. *Rational Causation*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012.

We customarily explain people's behavior by appeal to their capacity to act for reasons. For example, Peter's picking up his umbrella before leaving home is explained by his belief that it is raining along with his intention to keep dry, which both play a role in an inference that brings about the action of picking up the umbrella. One of the main concerns of philosophy of mind has been to describe rational explanations of this sort in a way compatible with our scientific worldview, in particular with respect to how psychological states could be part of the physical causal order. The orthodox view on this matter—which Marcus calls “psychologism”—is that mental states can be causes of behavior in virtue of being realized in some sense by physical states of the brain.

In his ambitious and provocative book *Rational Causation*, Eric Marcus challenges this orthodox view. He denies that mental states have to be realized by physical states, and supports his claim by developing a kind of mental causation that is different from the “efficient” causation standardly described in scientific explanations. He calls it “rational causation,” which consists, briefly, in the manifestation of a mental ability self-consciously to represent rational inferences holding between propositions (and sometimes actions). His view ends up being the antithesis of psychologism, and is broadly anti-physicalist.

The first two chapters of *Rational Causation* are devoted to introducing Marcus's account of rational explanations, for the case of explaining belief (e.g., “believes *q* because of *p*”) and action (e.g., “does *X* because of *p*”). He claims that believing and acting for a reason consist in the exercise of a rational ability, which he characterizes in terms of a disposition. This allows him to account for the normative dimension of rational explanations, given that dispositions do not always manifest themselves as they are supposed to, and in this way can be assessed as successful or not. Marcus defines believing-for-a-reason as the disposition to acquire knowledge from known facts, and acting-for-a-reason as the disposition to perform certain action because something else is being done.

As the previous paragraph suggests, reasoning abilities are defined in terms of their successful cases, namely, those in which the world happens to be like the fact or action represented by the inference's premise. This is the case, for example, when the reasoning “it's raining outside, so the streets are wet,” successfully leads to the true conclusion that “the streets are wet” due to the fact that it is raining outside. On the other hand, if it turns out that it is not

raining, the reasoning would be unsuccessful since it would not lead to knowledge. On the basis that unsuccessful cases are always dependent on successful ones, Marcus contends that the ability to reason “is purely factual at its core” (p. 46) in the sense that rational explanations that cite the world (i.e., facts or actions) are more fundamental than explanations that just cite the mind (i.e., beliefs, intentions, etc.). This idea that exercises of reasoning are essentially world-citing, is used by Marcus for weakening psychologism, which typically takes mind-citing explanations as central.

Another attack on psychologism targets the third-person character of its explanations. Marcus claims that exercises of the ability to reason are self-conscious in the sense that a person can always self-attribute her reasons for believing or acting. Moreover, he sees as a requirement for being a reasoner the subject’s capacity to (consciously) express what is the rational basis of her beliefs or acts. Given that this self-attribution is supposed to be justified by first-person authority, it does not need to appeal to observable behavior or further evidence. According to Marcus, this implies that rational explanations are essentially tied to a first-person point of view, to the extent that “appeal to the third-person in rational explanation, properly understood, implicitly makes reference to the first-person” (p. 64). This alleged primacy of the first-person character of rational explanation is put forward by Marcus as an argument against psychologism, which normally assumes a third-personal approach to explanation as paradigmatic.

In chapter 3, Marcus claims that the capacity to consciously self-attribute our reasons for believing or acting is also something that sets us apart from other animals. He concedes to (non-human) animals the ability to respond to reasons, but insofar as they are unable to engage in self-conscious reflection over them, they cannot be said to believe or do things for reasons. According to Marcus, this is due to animals’ lack of the (meta-cognitive) ability to take attitudes toward their perceptual contents, which also renders them incapable of conceptual thought. Even though this view is supposed to encompass most animals, he does not rule out the possibility of there being non-human animal species that possess the ability to take attitudes over articulate perceptual contents, and thus reach what we (provisionally) regard as the distinctively human ability to reason.

In chapter 4, Marcus discusses his notion of rational causation. With respect to Donald Davidson’s views, Marcus submits that reasons can be causes of the actions they rationalize, and that those reasons are not governed by natural laws. But he takes issue with Davidson’s assumption that the notion of causation at stake in rational explanations has to be the same as the one used by the physical sciences (which Marcus calls “efficient causation”). On the contrary, Marcus contends that rational explanations make use of a different kind of cause, one that in no way depends on the efficient kind of causation or the postulation of natural laws. They describe rational causes, which Marcus defines as the exercise of rational abilities involved in believing (or acting) on the basis of something else being believed (or done). And as mentioned above, they correspond to self-conscious exercise of those abilities,

to the extent that the “rational-causal tie between S’s believing that p and S’s believing that q is just as much a matter of S’s perspective as the beliefs themselves, as it consists in S’s representing an inferential connection between q and p” (p. 170).

Given Marcus’s admittedly *sui generis* notion of rational causation, clarification of its metaphysical nature is in order. He undergoes this task in the last two chapters (6 and 7), where he again criticizes psychologism, this time challenging its assumption that mental causes are somehow identical to physical causes (in the brain). First, he argues that mental states cannot be token identical to physical states given that states are not particulars, that is, instances of a particular that has principles of identity and individuation. When it comes to mental events, even though Marcus recognizes them as particulars, he contends that there cannot be any sort of identity between mental and physical events because each is the manifestation of a different kind of causation: rational and efficient causation, respectively. Returning to our previous example, the act of picking up an umbrella would be explained in terms of rational causes, which would be distinct from the physical causes used to explain the bodily movements involved in this behavior. A consequence of this two-fold approach to causation is that Marcus’s proposal becomes broadly anti-physicalist, where mental properties are “neither identical to nor realized by physical properties” (p. 252). However, he remarks that his view is not dualistic insofar as it respects “basic global supervenience,” according to which “any world which is a minimal duplicate of our world is a duplicate simpliciter” (p. 253).

By formulating an alternative account of causation Marcus avoids problems traditionally associated with views that attempt to naturalize mental causes and events. However, his attempt to explain behavior by appeal to mental events that are not realized in physical events of the brain is deeply unsatisfactory, for they raise the same concerns as those raised by a Cartesian conception of the mind: if mental events are not part of the physical causal order, where do they come from? If mental and physical events exert different kinds of causation, how do both interact to generate behavior? These questions are left unanswered, and Marcus’s appeal to basic global supervenience does not help much to clarify how mental events relate to physical events.

Another worry about Marcus’s view is methodological. He singles out rational causes by appeal to our conscious experience of them, or at least our capacity to consciously report them as reasons for our doings. But it has been largely questioned whether conscious introspection is a reliable source of evidence about the mind, or whether a fruitful research program can be built on its basis. According to most cognitive scientists, conscious reports are, at best, partial accounts of what goes on inside our heads. Indeed, it is customary in cognitive science to postulate mental causes of behavior that happen well below conscious awareness, and it is at least controversial to rule them out—in a principled way—as part of the reasons that explain behavior.

Overall, *Rational Causation* is a very well written book that develops an unorthodox account of mental causation, offering a fresh perspective on the nature of psychological explanation. At times, the discussion gets rather technical and assumes considerable background on the reader's part. It might be tough going for non-philosophical readers, but philosophers familiar with current issues in philosophy of mind and psychology should find the book rewarding. *Rational Causation* provides an informed and original discussion of many of the most important issues in the field, and manages to work out a global account of the nature of the mind and psychological explanation. Even the reader who does not agree with the main theses of the book will find many challenging arguments in it that deserve serious consideration.

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