

E. Marcus, *Rational Causation*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 266 pages. ISBN: 9780674059900 (hbk.). £ 33.95.

This is an excellent book that deserves careful attention from anyone whose work touches on issues in the philosophy of mind and action. In it, Marcus challenges the dominant philosophical conception of the mind's place in nature, according to which mentalistic explanations hold true only when mental states or events cause things to happen in the same way as physical states and events do. Against this conception, Marcus argues that mental causation is utterly dissimilar to most of the causation we find in the physical realm, and that psychological achievements like believing and acting for reasons should be understood as manifestations of the rational ability self-consciously to represent good-making relations as holding between propositions and actions.

Let me begin with the case of belief. According to the orthodox account, to believe something for a reason is to be in a belief-state that is caused in a certain way by another belief-state. Explicating the nature of this 'certain way', in order to distinguish it from ways that beliefs can cause other beliefs *without* being the reasons for which they are held, is a main focus of the literature on the so-called 'basing relation' in epistemology: many philosophers assume that 'basing' is a species of the genus 'causing', and so seek to identify what special features it has.

Marcus agrees that identifying the reasons for a person's belief requires saying something about that belief's causes. What he denies, however, is that the kind of causing involved here is *efficient* causation, or a kind of causation in which events or states bring one another about in virtue of law-like connections between them. Instead, Marcus holds that believing things for reasons manifests 'a self-conscious ability to know facts on the basis of other known facts' (p. 14): for the belief that q to be one's reason for believing p is for one to represent 'p as <to be believed on the grounds that q is to be believed>' (p. 15). But this is not a matter of having the belief that q 'cause' one's belief that p in the way that, say, the impact of a ball might break a window, or a table support a vase: 'believing-for-a-reason is not a mongrel state that includes someone's believing that p and a bit of her psychological history' (p. 28). Instead, a person believes something for a certain reason in virtue of something that is true of that person at that very time, namely, that she represents the to-be-believedness of one thing as following from the to-be-believedness of another.

One advantage of this view is the way it enables Marcus to explain first-personal authority concerning what one believes and why: since believing that p because q manifests a self-conscious ability to represent a rational relation between these propositions, it follows that a person will always be in a privileged position concerning the reasons for her beliefs, whereas this might not be true if explaining one's beliefs involved citing an element from one's psychological history. (Of course this raises questions concerning cases where people *don't* speak authoritatively concerning their beliefs or the reasons for them, but Marcus deals ably with these.) And another advantage is the way it inverts the usual emphasis on the phenomenon of *believing* something on the basis of another *belief*, instead making primary the case where a person comes to *know* something on the basis of her other *knowledge*: for Marcus argues that rational explanations are intelligible in virtue of our understanding of the fully successful exercise of the abilities they involve, and that the ability involved in believing something for a reason is fundamentally the ability to gain inferential knowledge.

In the domain of action, the orthodox view treats acting for a reason as a matter of a person's behavior being caused by her intentions or other mental states, and thus faces the well-

known difficulty of distinguishing the kind of causation that underwrites rational action-explanations from causation of other, 'deviant' sorts. By contrast, on Marcus's account the 'rational causation' involved in instrumental action is teleological: to act for a reason is 'to represent the to-be-done-ness of an action as following from the to-be-done-ness of another action' (p. 7). This means that the *explanans* accounts for the *explanandum*, not in virtue of an efficient-causal relationship between them, but because the former is an unfolding event-whole that causes the concurrent unfolding of its parts.

This view faces some difficulties, however. How it be that 'actions just are agents' representings of to-be-doneness' (p. 72), when (bodily) action involves not just being in a given mental state, but also moving one's body, and bringing things about in the surrounding world? Marcus responds by denying, correctly in my view, that intentional actions can be 'factored' into separate mental and physical components, but this does not resolve the difficulty: as he says, explaining one action in terms of the unfolding of another 'presupposes a degree of practical success, since an agent might represent, say, swimming to the moon as to-be-done, when no such action is in progress' (p. 8). Thus in contrast to the case of belief, where except in cases of psychological breakdown there is nothing more to a person's believing that p than her self-consciously representing p as to-be-believed, there can be perfectly ordinary cases in which a person self-consciously represents something as to-be-done but nevertheless is not *doing* it, simply because she has failed in the execution.

Another way Marcus has of addressing this challenge is with the distinction between *doing* something and *having done* it. The thesis in question concerns only the former: it says what it is to *be doing* something for a reason, but not everyone a person *is doing* must be something that person eventually *does*. (For example, someone may *be chopping* down a tree that he does not ever *chop* down, say if something happens that keeps him from finishing the job.) Appealing to this distinction, Marcus writes that 'you could inform me that I was *succeeding* in performing [a] relevant action, that, e.g., the tree looked ready to fall. But to be informed of this presupposes that I am already in the process of chopping down the tree. If this is a typical case, then I was doing it even before I was certain that I would succeed' (p. 70). However, not all actions fit this model. For example, if I am out for some exercise and decide to walk west on Main Street, then as soon as I *am walking* in the way I intend I will already *have walked* west on Main, though of course I may still walk some more. But I cannot be walking west on Main unless my body is traveling a certain sort of path through space. And this is not just a matter of what I represent as to-be-done.

In other places, Marcus develops his position in a way that seems to involve denying that a judgment of the form 'I am ϕ -ing' makes any claim at all about one's bodily movements. Such a judgment, he says, 'is not the agent's attempt to describe the world—it is not an assertion, which expresses belief' (p. 71). Instead, to judge 'I am ϕ -ing' can be to 'express one [*sic*] stand on the question of whether ϕ -ing is to-be-done', and so the authority with which a person makes such a judgment 'is grounded not in his exclusive access to a justification for believing a certain description of reality but rather in his ability to decide for himself what the thing to do is' (p. 72). But such an account seems not always to fit the phenomena. For example: 'What are you doing?' 'I'm walking west on Main Street.' (Or again: 'Is anyone walking west on Main?' 'I am!') In such a case, my judgment that I am ϕ -ing is clearly meant to inform someone about what reality is like, and not just what I think is the thing to do. Yet asserting such a thing responsibly requires being justified in believing it. And if the content of this assertion is not purely psychological – i.e., if its truth hinges partly on facts about the movement of my body – then the mere fact that I

represent walking west on Main as *to-be-done* may not justify my asserting that I *am* doing it: for I may simply have made a wrong turn.

These difficulties with Marcus's view suggest that he has gone too far in attempting to craft an account of instrumental action that parallels his very plausible account of inferential belief. They do not, however, mean that the framework of *Rational Causation* could not be modified to underwrite a theory of action that avoids these problems. Without question, future work in these areas ought to take account of Marcus's compelling arguments and detailed, provocative views.

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