

DISCUSSION

Rational Causation

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Summary

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The goal of *Rational Causation* is to understand the ‘because’ connection that figures in rational explanations of action and belief, explanations in which a reason is given in order to say why someone has performed a certain action or holds a certain belief. Most everyone thinks the relevant connection is *causal*. Although it is also said that the action performed for a reason must be *caused in the right way*, it is not thought that the *causation* that links rational causes and effects is somehow different from that which links non-rational causes and effects. Thus, since most take causation in general to be rooted in natural laws, causalism about reasons has consolidated a consensus that the mind is physically realized. *Rational Causation* poses a challenge to physicalism through an analysis of rational explanations according to which they postulate a different sort of causation, one that is non-naturalistic without being supernaturalistic.

To believe or act for a reason is, I argue, to represent the believed proposition or the performed action as inheriting a good-making status from another proposition or action. The basic elements of theoretical reasoning, propositions, are potential bearers of the status ‘to be believed’; the basic elements of practical reasoning, actions, are potential bearers of the status ‘to be done’. Whereas theoretical rationality (at least the part I treat) is the ability to believe what is to be believed on the basis of something else that is to be believed, practical rationality (at least the part I treat) is the ability to do what is to be done on the basis of something else that is to be done. Notwithstanding this contrast, there is, at a higher level of abstraction, an overarching similarity: successful exercises of each are the making of theoretical or practical inferences that preserve the relevant good-making status. To believe that *p* because *q*, then, is to represent the to-be-believed-ness of *p* as following from the to-be-believed-ness of *q*. To do *X* because one is doing

Y is to represent the to-be-done-ness of X-ing as following from the to-be-done-ness of Y-ing. So when I say you believe p because you believe q, I am attributing a thought to you of the form ‘q is to be believed, so p is to be believed’. When I say you are X-ing because you’re Y-ing, I am attributing a thought to you of the form ‘Y-ing is to be done, so X-ing is to be done’. The ‘because’ connection that figures in rational explanations consists in the representing of an inferential nexus – between propositions in the theoretical case and between actions in the practical case.

To identify believing- and acting-for-a-reason with subjects representing inferential connections is to understand the rational tie as essentially self-conscious. For example, Ryle’s believing that tomorrow is Tuesday because today is Monday is expressible by Ryle in something like this way: ‘Today is Monday, so tomorrow is Tuesday.’ But one cannot, on pain of Moorean absurdity, think this and yet disavow the thought underlying ‘I believe tomorrow is Tuesday because I believe that today is Monday’. Notwithstanding the difference in truth-conditions, these are just two ways of expressing the same state, much as (I would argue) ‘today is Monday’ and ‘I believe that today is Monday’ can express the same belief. Ryle represents the to-be-believed-ness of tomorrow’s being Tuesday as following from the to-be-believed-ness of today’s being Monday. Because this representing is a way of thinking about the propositions and the relation between them, it is expressible in a statement of the form ‘q, so p’. Because it is also a recognition of one’s being bound by a specific doxastic requirement, it is expressible as a rational explanation of his own belief: ‘I believe p because I believe q.’ The inextricability of these two aspects helps to account for the ‘transparency’ of believing-for-a-reason. A story along these lines also helps to explain how we can say, authoritatively but not on the basis of observation or evidence, why we are acting as we are.

If one views believing- and acting-for-a-reason inferentially and one recognizes the tie between ground and grounded as essentially self-conscious, one will thereby give the first-person perspective priority over the third-person perspective in understanding the character of rational explanations. Since inferences about what to believe or do (typically) concern the world and not the mind of the reasoner, rational explanations are not primarily psychological. One can approach the point this way: When all goes well, theoretical inference amounts to knowing one fact on the basis of another. In such cases, we can explain why S believes that p by citing q itself. If a thinker does not know the relevant q, one is limited to giving explanations that explicitly cite the subject’s mind, using forms of words such as ‘S believes that p because S believes that q’, which does not entail that S knows that q. The difference between this mind-citing explanation and the corresponding world-citing one (‘S believes that p because q’) is typically just a difference in how far the explainer thinks S deviates from the epistemic ideal. The psychological guise of the explanation corresponds to less perfect manifestations – manifestations

that are, as such, less revelatory – of the underlying ability. (No one would focus on stumbling in order to understand the ability to walk.) An analogous argument shows the same for the practical case: it is the non-psychological guises of rational explanations that are central. One crucial mistake of contemporary philosophy of mind and action is an overemphasis on the psychological forms of rational explanation, which has had the effect of obscuring the fundamentally inferential character of rational causation. The main thing, it will seem, is not the conferring of the belief- or performance-worthiness of one proposition or action upon another, but rather one psychological state prompting another or some combination of psychological states prompting a body to move. Mechanistic conceptions of rationality have their source partly in this misconception.

Any challenge to physicalism must contend, of course, with the many arguments that philosophers take to establish it in one form or another, arguments based on, among other things, causal analyses of mental concepts, the Nomological Character of Causality, the causal closure of the physical realm and the supervenience of the mental on the physical. I reply to these, for the most part, as follows. There are, on the one hand, the considerations that have persuaded many to think of rational explanations as causal, thereby linking causation to the mental. Then there are, on the other hand, putatively general causal principles and theories of causation that link it to the physical. I argue that the features of rational explanation that provide the evidence for the first link are, just to the extent that they provide such evidence, also grounds for thinking that the putatively general principles and theories are not after all fully general. The second link fails for rational causation.

The popularity of physicalist or more broadly naturalist approaches to the mind is due in part to arguments in their favour, but perhaps in larger part to the absence of a perceived alternative – one that isn't a form of dualism, epiphenomenalism or eliminativism. *Rational Causation* aims to provide one.

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