

**Julia Tanney.** *Rules, Reason, and Self-Knowledge*. Harvard University Press 2013. 384 pp. \$49.95 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780674067080).

Contemporary philosophers have tied themselves into knots trying to make sense of the mind. This collection of essays represents Tanney's roughly twenty-year effort at trying to untie some of those knots. The book is organized into four thematic sections, which fit together to support a general thesis about how to approach questions of the mind. Each section contains four essays bound together by a shared thread of argument. I am going to look at representative examples of each thread, say something about how they fit together to support Tanney's overall thesis, and provide three critical comments.

Human agents govern their actions by reasons, which means that they justify, correct, and measure the things they do against their own better judgment. This fact seems peculiar to human agents, and, consequently, calls for explanation. One way to do this is to find causes of action that can rationalize the things we do. By locating features of the mind that serve to rationalize the immediate impetuses of action, we might explain both what causes actions and how they are justified, corrected, and measured. This, roughly, is Donald Davidson's idea ("How Is Weakness of Will Possible?", *Essays on Actions and Events*, 1969, 21-42). By locating a higher order pro-attitude that operates on the immediate causes of action, Davidson hoped to explain both acting in accord and contrary to one's better judgment. This mode of explanation, however, will not do, and Tanney sets out to show why.

Davidson isn't her only target in the opening chapters, but the argument against him in the first chapter sets the tone for the rest of the section. So let's look there. On Davidson's view, agents reveal a type of internal inconsistency when they act against their own better judgment and, consequently, may be described as irrational on that basis. But what does it mean to tie irrationality to an agent's better judgment? For Davidson, it means tying what moves an agent to act to a higher order desire to do only what she judges to be best. If the agent is moved by a desire to act against that higher order desire, she acts irrationally; if not, she acts rationally. The attempt to tie rationality to an individual's desire to act on the basis of what she thinks best, however, can't do the work Davidson needs it to do, or so Tanney argues. The problem is that acting on the strength of a desire, even if that desire is of a higher order, can't explain our justificatory and rationalizing practices. Why? Because the strength of a desire has nothing to do with rationality. If my desire to act on what I judge to be best causes me to act in harmony with that judgment, rational considerations play no role in my action. Instead, the strength of my desire plays the only role that matters. Consequently, the attempt to explain the rational basis of my action goes unexplained. If Tanney is right about this, considerations of rationality are explanatorily independent of an agent's desire to conform to principles of rationality.

In section two, Tanney deals with the relation between the things we do and our manner of explanation. Her aim is to resist the idea that explanations of action must ultimately bottom out in causal stories that appeal to matters of fact. Put differently, Tanney aims to show that the concepts we use to explain the things we do needn't bottom out in facts about the causes of action. When we give reasons for the things we do, we engage in an explanatory practice different from the one we engage in when identifying the causes of our actions. But why? We find several answers to that question in section two, but I want to focus on the one provided by the argument of chapter eight.

The temptation to believe that explaining the things we do requires appealing to causal matters of fact is strong. Partly, this is due to broadly shared intuitions, but it is also partly due to persuasive arguments. For example, Putnam argued that the meaning of disease concepts like ‘polio’ need to point to causal matters of fact in order to do their explanatory work. This is in contrast to using such concepts to point to mere effects. (‘Polio’ was historically understood in terms of its effects, but once we discovered its causal basis, our understanding deepened.) The lesson we’re to draw from Putnam’s argument is that explanations are best when they are tied to causal matters of fact. In the case of polio, that was a virus.

A similar point applies to reason-explanation concepts like pride, pain, desire, belief, intention, and so on. There is a temptation to think that these concepts haven’t been properly explained until we can point to the causal matters of fact to which they are tied. But Tanney argues that such a view is mistaken, since it rests on the false belief that explanatory concepts are all alike. According to Tanney, the type of explanation typical of reason-explanation concepts does not appeal to causal matters of fact at all. Rather, the explanations collect behavioral patterns and thereby reveal the conceptual cartography of such concepts. In this way, ‘pride’ is explained through a novel like *Pride and Prejudice* by helping us become familiar with the landscape of its use.

The third section of Tanney’s book deals with similar themes, but her attention broadens slightly to deal with the influential idea that theories of mind can be naturalized. This shift in focus is especially evident in Chapter 11, where a nice historical essay argues that theories that aim to naturalize mental content can’t get off the ground without presupposing a grasp of mental concepts. The reason is that naturalizing content is an attempt to explain two seemingly disparate features of conceptual understanding. The first is the repository of knowledge required for the correct application of mental concepts and the second is the rules governing the application of that knowledge. To put the point differently, if we assume that concepts about the mental—e.g., belief, desire, think, wish, and so on—function to pick out mental states, those states must serve to explain both what the individual knows and how he knows what to do with it. But on a naturalized theory of content that leads to problems. Why? Well, to naturalize content, one must explain its use by ordinary people in ascribing and explaining their thoughts and actions. Presumably, a naturalized explanation will bottom out in the physical mechanisms that serve to store and deploy the information required for correct use. Saying what that comes to, however, presupposes a grasp of the very concepts the naturalized theory is meant to explain. You can only say what the content and correct use of a belief state comes to if you already know what a belief is.

The final section isn’t quite as thematically unified as the others, but its chapters tend to focus on features of self-knowledge. One issue in particular recurs, which is that knowing ourselves requires ascribing properties to ourselves that serve to make sense of who we are. This process of acquiring self-knowledge has both a descriptive and creative aspect, and in both we can go wrong. The fact that we can go wrong indicates that self-ascription is a rule-governed activity, which means that, like most of the rule-governed activities she focuses on throughout her book, knowing ourselves isn’t merely subjective: it is something at which we can be better or worse. Knowing oneself is a practice that requires being steeped in the conceptual resources and explanatory practices characteristic of creatures engaged in a shared form of life.

The sections stand together as a challenge to a widely held and very influential view of the mind, one that bears a lot of weight in the philosophical literature. Indeed, Tanney’s book should make us wonder whether this largely presupposed view can do such heavy lifting. In particular, we

should worry about whether it can support the weight of issues having to do with normative aspects of the mind. My own sense is that it can't, and to this end the case Tanney makes is persuasive. Even so, there are a couple of critical comments with which I'd like to conclude. First, although the case Tanney makes is persuasive, her making it required adopting some rather technical language. This fact makes the prose challenging to those unfamiliar with contemporary jargon, and makes the book seem intended for professional colleagues or advanced graduate students. Second, the thematic nature of the book's sections makes the thread of argument shared by each a bit mechanical. The arguments are of course applied to different issues within sections, but once you see the gears of the argument at work, fighting through the details of each issue can be more taxing than enlightening. Finally, I'm not sure Tanney ever actually does what she recommends doing. Although she is quite good at showing problems with the currently dominant tradition, I'm not sure we ever see a compelling avenue for moving away from it.

Those critical comments to the side, I learned a lot reading through this collection of essays and I'm certain many others would too.

**Matthew Mosdell**, Florida International University