

Determined by Reasons: A Competence Account of Acting for a Normative Reason, by Susanne Mantel. New York and London: Routledge, 2018. Pp. xiii + 190.

People do all kinds of things for reasons. Sometimes, if we're lucky, they do things for good reasons. But what is it to do something for a good reason? And what are these reasons that move us to act? In her excellent first monograph, Susanne Mantel seeks to answer these questions. In the course of doing so, she offers a novel theory of what it is to act for a good reason and challenges some popular assumptions about the ontology of reasons. These assumptions, she thinks, stand in the way of a proper understanding of the ontology of motivating reasons. In this review, I shall discuss the two parts of her book and then raise some general questions about her proposals and about the place of reasons in our normative theories. Let me say at the outset that there is much to like about this book. Her discussion is packed with arguments. Her proposals are original and insightful. I think that her account of basing should shed light on a number of outstanding problems in epistemology, the philosophy of action, and ethical theory. I can recommend this unreservedly to anyone with interests in these areas.

Let's start at the beginning. When Agnes does something for a reason, it isn't unnatural to think the following things. First, there is a reason. Second, this reason is the reason that Agnes acts for. It is Agnes's reason. Third, when Agnes does something for a *good* reason, this reason was a good one for doing what she did. We (i.e., the people speaking about Agnes and her reasons) need to have some normative knowledge to know whether Agnes's reason was a good one or a bad one, but provided that the reason was a good one, the general account of doing things for reasons should tell us everything we need to explain what it is for Agnes to have acted for a good reason, a reason that happened to be a good one. Agnes might not have our knowledge or understanding, but if her reasons were good ones (whether she really 'gets this' or not), she did something for a good reason. She did something for a reason and it was a good one.

As natural as these thoughts might first seem, they don't square well with Mantel's take on things. To start, she wants to do something more ambitious than offer an account of what it is for someone to do something for a reason that happens to be good. What she wants is some story about how the goodness of the relevant reason is part of what guides the agent in doing what she does so that the action manifests a kind of normative competence. The aim is to tell us when an agent does things *in the way* the virtuous person would. An agent can do what a virtuous agent would without doing things in this in the sense that they might be moved to do what the virtuous would be moved to do without being moved by that which moves the virtuous. When this happens, the agent's actions might not call for correction, but they wouldn't manifest competence. Why does that matter? Perhaps because we're interested in what it takes for an action to 'reflect well' on the agent (3) and actions that are, by some sort of accident, the ones that the virtuous agent performs might not reflect well on an agent at all. Thus, in her sense, acting for a good reason isn't equivalent to acting for a reason that just happens to have been a good one.

Moreover, she rejects the idea that the good reasons there are to do things might be the very same thing as the agent's reason for doing something. So, she wouldn't say what I said above—when someone acts for a good reason, there is a good reason for the agent to so act and *it* was the agent's reason for so acting. The agent's reason and the good reason can be related, but they aren't identical. Her account tells us how they might be related and why we shouldn't think of this relation as identity.

According to Mantel's proposal, an agent like Agnes who performs some action (e.g., buttering the toast) only does so for the normative reason (e.g., that she promised to make breakfast) iff these conditions are met. She butters the toast. There is an entity, that she

promised, and it is a normative reason for her to butter the toast. A believes that she so promised. This action is the manifestation of Agnes's competence to do what the normative reasons of a certain family (including the fact that she made the promise) favour. This competence includes three sub-competences. The belief has to be the manifestation of an epistemic competence to form correct or accurate descriptive representations. The motivation must be the manifestation of a competence to be moved to do what the relevant reasons favour. The action must manifest a further executional competence to perform the action when motivated to do what is favoured by these reasons (43-44). When all these conditions are met, we can see in her buttering the things that would make us think well of Agnes. She manifests the dispositions that the virtuous agent would when we admire them for keeping promises, say.

Competences and dispositions figure prominently in Mantel's account because she is sceptical of (alternative) causal accounts that don't make use of dispositions, their manifestations, and the concept of a competence. Part of her concern is that she wants to avoid problems having to do with deviant causal chains. We learn from Davidson that a climber might be so unnerved by the thought that they could kill someone by releasing the rope that they release the rope as a result of being startled by this very thought. Mantel thinks that releasing the rope doesn't manifest the right dispositions. It's an interesting question whether an appeal to disposition manifestation and competence wholly solves the problem of deviant causal chains, but the thing that I want to note is that solving the problem of deviant causal chains doesn't begin to address the difficult question—when do the agent's actions speak well of her? We wouldn't have thought well of Davidson's climber had the climber released the rope for the reason that doing so would mean that they could finally get their hands on an inheritance. It is here that Mantel's *normative* competencies earn their keep.

The role of normative competencies on Mantel's account is to close the gap between doing what there is good reason to do and being moved by these reasons in such a way that your action speaks well of you. A disposition to do what normative reasons require cannot do the trick on its own because such a disposition might be grounded in the wrong kinds of things. It might be grounded in shabby desires that should earn you no credit (e.g., a desire for reward and some knowledge of what you will be rewarded for) or in a defective grasp of how the reasons bear on the situation (e.g., a fallacious inference to a conclusion that is logically entailed by premises where the entailment isn't something grasped). A competence to sort out what the reasons favour might be just the thing to address some of these problems cases where the agent's actions only accidentally coincide with the actions of the virtuous agent. But how does an appeal to competence address problems of ultimate motivation? Does Kant's shopkeeper have and manifest a kind of normative competence when he reliably does what is right in the knowledge that what is done is right?

On one variant of the shopkeeper case, we might imagine a shopkeeper so concerned with keeping up the appearance of virtue that he develops a 'disposition to be motivated to do what the represented normative reasons favour' (30), so it's not clear how appealing to such dispositions address the worry that manifesting this disposition might not be sufficient for something like moral worth. In Chapter 4, Mantel proposes that there are two ways that we can act for a good normative reason. One way is comparatively more reflective and runs through the agent's normative beliefs. In some such cases, an agent will believe, having reflected on the reasons, that she ought to do something. The other way is less reflective. The agent's actions are not controlled by her normative beliefs. The agent's desires could lead her to act for good reasons even if she lacks beliefs about the goodness of the reasons that she has in mind. Thus, her account seems to be well designed to accommodate the right intuitions about some of the examples that Arpaly (2003) uses to motivate her spare conativist view. So, for example, we might have an agent like Huck who has bad beliefs about what he ought to do who nevertheless manages to do things for good reasons. In spite of the presence of bad normative

beliefs, he can be moved by the plight of another to do the right thing for a good reason. And good reason, too. Some of us think that this is an important data point for thinking about things like moral worth, credit, and the like.

Mantel's book transitions to a discussion of the ontology of reasons. She seeks to defend a kind of hybrid view that has fallen out of favour thanks in no small part to some arguments that we find in Dancy's discussion of reasons. Dancy, recall, raised this worry about views that located motivating and normative reasons in different ontological categories:

[A] motivating reason, that in the light of which one acts, must be the sort of thing that is capable of being among the reasons in favour of so acting; it must, in this sense, be possible to act for a good reason (Dancy 2000, p. 103).

Since states of mind cannot be facts, views that identify motivating reasons with states of mind imply that it is impossible for any agent's reason to be a good one. But, it seems that it is possible for an agent to do things for reasons that *are* good reasons to do those things. So, it seems that such views must be mistaken. And since, as Mantel agrees, normative reasons are facts, not states of mind or the contents of such states, shouldn't she agree that motivating reasons are (often) the very facts that we have in mind when we decide to do something?

Mantel isn't moved by this. She insists that motivating reasons are 'part of our mental life' in the sense that they are the contents of our mental states. In Chapter 7, she argues against the idea that an agent's reason for ϕ -ing might be a normative reason that there was for her to ϕ on the grounds that motivating reasons are more fine-grained than normative reasons. She thinks, not unreasonably, that if normative reasons are typically or often facts about the agent's situation that the agent thinks about when trying to decide what to do, they will be more coarse-grained than the contents of the thoughts she has while thinking about these facts. On the other hand, she thinks that motivating reasons are comparatively more fine-grained. And this is sufficient to show that normative and motivating reasons belong to different ontological categories (112). Motivating and normative reasons are not, on her view, wholly unrelated. We can think of normative reasons as things that correspond to our beliefs about them and help make them true. Since motivating reasons will be the contents of our mental states, we can think of normative reasons as things that might correspond to motivating reasons.

Mantel's account is designed to show that there can be a non-accidental connection between the good normative reasons there were for an agent to ϕ and the agent's reasons for ϕ -ing even when normative and motivating reasons are not identical. This draws on her earlier work on normative competence and dispositional explanation. The book concludes with a discussion of the fit between Mantel's proposals and causal theories of action. Although her account doesn't require it, she argues that her account is compatible with causal accounts of action.

I will discuss two issues. Let's return to Mantel's account of what it is to act for a normative reason. One thing that seemed strange to me when I first started working through her discussion was this idea that there was more to acting for a good reason than acting for a reason where this reason happened to be a good one. It wasn't clear, for example, that there is more or different information packed into (2) than there was in (1):

1. Agnes acted for a reason and it was a good one.
2. Agnes acted for a good reason.

I understood perfectly well that there is a difference between doing something that is merely in accordance with some reason or some reasons and doing something out of respect of or in light of some reason in such a way that this is supposed to reveal something good about the agent, but I didn't quite see why we should look to an account of (2) to shed light on virtuous action, worth, or credit for doing the right thing. I didn't see (and still don't quite see) why we should think that (2) implies much of anything about worth, credit, or the virtues of the agent, but if

someone wishes to explore the connections between (2) and such things, I don't see any harm in it. Having said that, I do want to raise a question about the project. Authors like Mantel who want to read (2) in some more robust way than I do might believe some controversial things about (2) and (3):

3. Agnes deserves credit for what she did.

They might believe, as Mantel does, that (3) is true whenever (2) is true. They might also believe that when (2) is true, (3) is true *because* (2) is true. They might further believe that the truth of (3) is always explained in terms of (2). If they believed this last thing, they might propose that acting for good reasons is the key to understanding worth and credit.

Mantel does not defend these stronger claims about the connection between (2) and (3). She thinks that (2), on her preferred understanding, is sufficient for (3), but she doesn't think that (2) is necessary for (3), so she doesn't propose that (2) is essential to a proper understanding of how (3) could be true. Given everything that she says, it might well be that there are situations in which (3) is true, but (2) is false. Perhaps Agnes could deserve credit for what she did even if it wasn't the case that she acted for a good reason.

I think that it is a virtue of Mantel's discussion that she does not defend these stronger claims because I think the claim that (3) could be true only if (2) is must be mistaken. On Mantel's account, which I think is broadly correct, Agnes's decision, say, to go to the store to get milk could be an instance of doing something for a good reason if the good reason there was for her to go to the store corresponds with one of her beliefs. But Agnes might not need outright beliefs to get her out the door and heading to the store. And that suggests that if Mantel's account is right, it might be possible that Agnes heads to the store in a way that is creditworthy even if we cannot pair off her full beliefs with the good reasons there were for her to go. (She might have thought that there was a very slight chance that there would be milk at the store and she might have decided to go because her desire for milk was sufficiently strong that she would try even if the chances were slim to get the milk she desired.) Once we start to suspect that the connection between credit and worth on the one hand and reasons on the other is not particularly close, we might wonder whether a philosophically illuminating account of (2) will illuminate something else of philosophical interest that we struggle to understand. Does a good account of what it is to act for a good reason give us a good account of something else, such as moral worth, credit, or virtue? It must not if (3) can be true if (2) is false, but then we face the difficult question—what is a good theory of acting for good reasons good for? It is possible the difference between acting for good reasons (in the sense that is at issue in Mantel's discussion) and failing to doesn't correspond to any further normatively significant difference. If that is so, we should ask why it matters whether an agent is moved by good reasons.

I think that this is an interesting and important question about the theoretical role of reasons in our normative theories and it is one that I wish Mantel's discussion covered at greater length. I do believe that her account of acting for normative reasons probably is the best one on the market, but since she seems to acknowledge that worth and credit don't turn on whether an agent's action was an instance of acting for a good reason, I would have liked to have seen some further discussion of what the philosophical significance of acting for a good reason might be. I suppose that if the worst thing a critic can say about your book is that it could have been longer and contained more of the author's opinions, the critic should acknowledge that they think that it is a very good book.

The second issue to discuss concerns something from the second part of Mantel's discussion. I want to say something about her argument against identifying normative and motivating reasons. The crucial premise in the argument against locating motivating and normative reasons in the same ontological category is the one that says that motivating reasons are more fine-grained than normative reasons. The former reasons are more finely individuated than the latter are. Mantel thinks that motivating reasons are (at least) as finely individuated as

Fregean thoughts. Since the belief that there is water in the bottle and the belief that there is H₂O in the bottle have different Fregean contents, she thinks that they can provide us with different motivating reasons even if these contents correspond to the same relatively coarse-grained fact (113).

For the argument to work, we have to assume that there is nothing ‘worldly’ that could play the normative reason role that is as finely individuated as Fregean thoughts and that we need something as finely individuated as Fregean thoughts to play the role of motivating reasons. Neither assumption strikes me as immediately implausible, but duty requires me to find points of possible resistance. In that spirit, let me note one thing about the argument that strikes me as somewhat puzzling.

When we think about the agent’s reasons in trying to explain why she does something, it does seem that modes of presentation matter. These claims don’t appear to be equivalent:

4. Agnes’s reason for pouring it into the pot was that it was water.

5. Agnes’s reason for pouring it into the pot was that it was H₂O.

Were Agnes uncertain about whether H₂O was water, she might have been hesitant to pour the stuff into the pot if she were told that it was H₂O even if she wouldn’t have been hesitant to pour the stuff in if she believed it to be water. If motivating reasons are, *inter alia*, things that help us see what the agent saw or thought she saw in some prospective course of action, it seems plausible that they should be individuated in fine-grained way. And once we do this, Mantel thinks that we should grant that motivating reasons are themselves mental or psychological in some way that worldly facts are not (111).

My concern about this style of argument for identifying motivating reasons with something mental or psychological (e.g., the agent’s mental states or the contents of such states) appeals to intuitions about claims such as (4) or (5) and I fear that these intuitions might be untrustworthy. Let’s consider some further examples:

6. Perry White was never in any real danger because Clark Kent was Clark Kent.

7. Perry White was never in any real danger because Clark Kent was Superman.

8. Water boils at 100 degrees Celsius because it is water.

9. Water boils at 100 degrees Celsius because it is H₂O.

If your intuitions are like mine, you think there *might* be a difference in the acceptability of (6) and (7) or (8) and (9). When I reflect on these examples, I don’t want to draw any ontological conclusions from the fact, if it is one, that (6) and (7) or (8) and (9) might differ in truth value. I wouldn’t want to argue, for example, that the reason that explains why Perry White wasn’t in danger or why water boils at the temperature that it does is anything distinct from a worldly fact or that it is in any way mental or psychological. Because of this, I wonder whether we should draw any controversial ontological conclusions about the nature of Agnes’s reasons when we think about (4) and (5) and think that they might differ in truth value.

In summary, Mantel’s book presents a plausible new account of what it is to act for good reasons. It deserves careful study as her arguments might show that much of the recent work on the ontology of reasons has been on the wrong path. While there were points that I wish Mantel had discussed at greater length, this work should be studied carefully. It will hopefully generate considerable discussion.*

References

- Arpaly, Nomy 2003, *Unprincipled Virtue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press)
Dancy, Jonathan 2000, *Practical Reality*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press)

Clayton Littlejohn

King's College London
Clayton.littlejohn@kcl.ac.uk

* I am grateful to Susanne Mantel and an editor for helpful feedback on an earlier version of this review.