

*Kinds of Reasons*. By MARIA ALVAREZ. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.)

Alvarez' bright and breezy book is about action, reasons, motivation and explanation. The heroes are Aristotle, Anscombe and Kenny, the villains Davidson, Michael Smith and other shadowy Humeans. The principal plot is the quest to explode Humean myths about the nature of reasons. As with most explosions, the results are messy. But Alvarez hopes that her complex taxonomy is an accurate reflection of our usage of the concept of a reason. On the way, intriguing subplots emerge, such as a dangerous act/object ambiguity and the recurring case of motivation by false belief.

Alvarez holds that there are three basic kinds of reason. Justifying or normative reasons make an action 'at least pro tanto right' (p. 39). Motivating or operative reasons are those that an agent takes 'to make his  $\phi$ -ing right and hence to speak in favour of his  $\phi$ -ing' (p. 35). Explanatory reasons are those that explain *why* an action occurred (*ibid.*)

Alvarez then defends the following claims. First, that the 'widespread view' that assimilates motivating and explanatory reasons is false (pp. 33-9). Second, that the 'commonly held view' – according to which motivating reasons are mental states but normative reasons are facts – is false, because all reasons are facts (pp. 40-51). Third, that the 'Humean view of motivation' – according to which motivating reasons are constituted by pairs of beliefs and desires – is false (pp. 62-130). Fourth, that a non-psychological account of motivating reasons – according to which they are 'true beliefs' – is true (pp. 131-64). Finally, that the Humean account of explanatory reasons is only partly true, since we can explain actions by citing things other than belief/desire pairs, such as emotions, habits or goals (pp. 165-200). I here discuss the first, third and fourth claims.

The first seems unproblematic. As Alvarez notes: 'The reason that explains why Fred gave...to charity may be that he's a generous man; but that he's a generous man is not the

reason that motivated Fred' (p. 36). This highlights that, for Alvarez, an agent's motivating reasons are those facts 'in [positive] light of which an agent acts' (p. 35).

**Comment [IS1]:** The view of reasons as 'the light in which one acts' comes from Dancy *Practical Reality* pp.128-9.

Regarding the third claim, the strategy is to divide and conquer. The view that motivating reasons are beliefs and desires suffers an act/object ambiguity (pp. 87-8). It could mean that motivating reasons are 'believings' and 'desirings' or it could mean that motivating reasons are 'what is believed' and 'what is desired', i.e. contents. A nice example brings out the distinction: 'a teenage boy may desire to own a limited edition Ferrari: what he desires is rare, but his desiring it may not be' (p. 87). Alvarez argues against both disambiguations. Neither my desirings nor my believings seem good candidates for the light in which I act (pp. 100-1, 131-32). For example, when I want to invest money in an account, the good that I see in this action is neither my desire to invest nor any of my beliefs, but simply the promised rate of return. Further, 'what I desire' seems to be of the wrong form to provide a motivating reason: 'For suppose that I want to have a pint of bitter and go to the pub in order to do so. It is not what I desire, namely, to have a pint of bitter, that I take to be the good of my going to the pub. Rather, for me, the good of going to the pub is the fact that they serve bitter' (pp. 92-3). Alvarez adds that the content of desires can be involved in motivation, but as goals or purposes rather than as motivating reasons (pp. 93-9).

This leaves the view that my motivating reasons are 'what I believe'. With an important caveat, this is Alvarez' view. The caveat is that what I believe must be true, hence motivating reasons are 'true beliefs' or 'things that we believe that are true' or 'facts' (pp. 4, 131, 163; Alvarez claims, on p. 152, that these locutions are different ways of referring to the same non-psychological thing). The motivation for this caveat is as follows: there is an implicit contradiction in claims of the form: 'Fred's motivating reason was that p, but not p' and 'this suggests that [the content of] the false belief that p might motivate but it cannot be

one's [motivating] *reason*' (p. 138). I'm not sure opponents would share Alvarez linguistic intuition here.

Since it claims that only true beliefs can be motivating reasons, Alvarez' view needs to say something about motivation by false belief, as when one goes to the pub for bitter but they have none. The claim is that in such cases there is no motivating reason (pp. 135-47), although there is still some (false) content that 'appeared to the agent to be a reason, but was...really not one' and this is the agent's 'apparent reason' (p. 140). Apparent reasons, apparently, do not count as 'the light in which one acts' and hence are not motivating reasons. This last claim might be doubted: it is easy to extend the metaphor to suppose that some of the ways in which we light up the world are misleading or deceptive.

This book is a useful antidote to Humean dogma in the philosophy of action, a feature it shares with Bittner's *Doing Things for Reasons* (Oxford UP, 2001), which is sadly not discussed in detail here. The book is let down by inadequate citation, with many 'widely' or 'commonly' held views going unattributed (e.g. on pp. 33, 39, 125). Worryingly, the principal references for the Humean view of motivating reasons are to opponents of that view and to Davidson, who is admitted to be primarily interested in explanatory reasons (p. 63 n.7). There is thus a serious risk that this is a straw-man. But regardless of what actual Humeans say, Alvarez is persuasive in her case to distinguish those facts that explain action from those (putative?) facts in light of which agents act. This book is an excellent starting point for understanding the latter.

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