

MARIA ALVAREZ. 2010. *Kinds of Reasons. An Essay in the Philosophy of Action*. Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press.

In this lucid, thought-provoking book, Maria Alvarez develops a novel and provocative approach to reasons. Alvarez's target is mainly the Davidsonian perspective, according to which reasons are essentially pairs of beliefs and desires, i.e., mental states. Though not as popular as it used to be, this perspective is still the received, orthodox position nowadays. In her rejection of this orthodoxy, Alvarez sides with what she calls the "minority view", which includes such thinkers as Jonathan Dancy, Joseph Raz, and others. It is important to point out that Alvarez does not intend to address the question whether Davidson was right in taking reasons to be causes of the actions they explain; this central aspect of the Davidsonian approach is not dealt with in this monograph.

The book's most significant claims can be stated as follows. All reasons are facts, understood as truths or true propositions; they are not mental states, such as beliefs or desires. The temptation to think of reasons as mental states comes partly from the ambiguity of the term "belief", which is used to refer sometimes to the act or state of believing and sometimes to its object, i.e., what is believed. It is not the former, but the latter, provided that it is true, i.e., a fact, that is the reason. So, my reason for going to the hospital is not my *believing* that my friend is there, but *that* my friend is there. All reasons belong then to the same ontological category, namely facts or true propositions; the distinction among kinds of reasons is not ontological; it is a distinction among the different roles that reasons can play in different contexts. There are three main such roles, namely justifying, motivating, and explaining. Reasons justify actions by presenting desirability aspects of the action and being premises of (actual or potential) practical reasoning. The distinction between motivating reasons ("reasons for") and explanatory reasons ("reasons why") is especially important for the book's line of argument. Though one and the same reason can both motivate someone to act and explain why she acts that way (and even justify her in so acting), this need not be so: the reason that motivates the agent to act need not be the reason that explains her action. Motivating and explaining reasons have tended to be conflated in the Humean/Davidsonian tradition that Alvarez opposes to. Not only reasons can motivate and explain; desires, emotions, purposes and other mental states, including beliefs, can as well; however, they cannot justify the action, which is an essential role of reasons; only true propositions (facts) can do so, and only they can be reasons.

Alvarez displays an impressive battery of arguments in favour of her views, thereby meeting several objections that those views can (too) easily raise. Her distinctions among ways in which different factors can motivate and explain, and among different kinds of action explanations are highly valuable and illuminating. The book is full of subtle and acute remarks about the complex field it deals with. However, I am less than fully convinced of the truth of some of its main claims. In the rest of this review I will try to justify my worries.

As we have seen, a central statement of the book is that all reasons are facts; reasons do not belong to different ontological categories, such as facts and mental states. Alvarez offers two considerations in favour of this view. The first is that "one and the



same reason can play a variety of roles – the same reason can justify in one context and explain in another, without becoming a different reason, or acquiring any special feature” (p. 32). The second is that “it is implausible that the same reason should change ontological category depending on what role it happens to play in a particular context” (p. 33). Suppose, however, that some reasons are mental states, e.g. belief/desire pairs, and that some reasons are facts. This ontological variety is fully consistent with those two considerations. A reason that is a belief/desire pair can play different roles in different contexts; and the same holds for a reason that is a fact. The mental state continues to be what it is while playing these roles, and the same holds for the fact. So, these considerations do not establish the thesis of the ontological unity of reasons.

One important argument against the view that all reasons are facts is that sometimes we act on the basis of false beliefs, to which no facts correspond, but which can be reasons for us to act in certain ways. In response, Alvarez holds that false beliefs provide only apparent reasons, not real or genuine ones (cf. pp. 38, 140). Since what is believed is not a fact, it cannot motivate or explain, let alone justify the action. False beliefs do not have normative force; they cannot play the justifying role that is constitutive of reasons and so are not reasons: “... a false belief cannot be a reason for anybody (...) it cannot make any action right, appropriate, etc.” (p. 139). In these cases, then, the action has no reason explanation; it is, however, motivated and explained (though not justified) by a *psychological fact*, namely *that* the agent believes that p. In cases of true beliefs, instead, what motivates and justifies the action is what is believed, namely that p, which is a fact, but not the belief as a mental state, for “it is wholly implausible to say that mental states have normative force” (48).

Now, it is not clear to me why a fully justified belief that p, which nevertheless, with no fault on the agent’s part, happens to be false, lacks normative force, cannot justify the action and is therefore not a reason. Someone who acts on such a belief acts as fully rationally as if the belief were actually true. One can deny this by holding that only facts can be reasons, but this view, as I have tried to show, has not been sufficiently supported. And the thesis that false beliefs lack normative, justifying force has quite implausible consequences. Assume, for example, a scenario of global scepticism (Descartes’ s Evil Demon, brains-in-vats, etc.) Since in it most of people’s beliefs are false, it follows from Alvarez’s view that nobody there acts for reasons or is rationally justified in acting; but it seems that the distinction between rationally justified and unjustified actions can be legitimately drawn in such a scenario no less than in a normal one. For beliefs to justify actions it is enough that they are justified themselves; truth, even if desirable, is not also required. Now if, in addition to motivate and explain actions, as Alvarez acknowledges, false beliefs can also justify them, they play all the roles Alvarez assigns to reasons, and there seems to be no obstacle to think of them as genuine reasons.

Though Alvarez holds that the reason that motivates us to act is *what* we believe (provided it is true), and not our *believing* it, she understandably writes: “... [I]n order for p to motivate me to act, I must believe (or know, suspect, etc.) that p” (133). This is certainly correct. A fact that I am fully unaware of cannot motivate me to act. And

she goes on: “[B]ut it is a mistake to infer from this that the reason that motivates me to act is my believing that p; rather the reason that motivates me is that p, which I believe” (133). So, her position seems to be that the psychological attitude of believing is a background condition for someone to be motivated by what she believes; but what actually motivates him is the latter, not the former. I am a bit uneasy about this sharp distinction. If we accept it, the following advice looks reasonable: “In acting, abstract from your *believing* that p and act only on the basis of p”. But this is not a reasonable advice, for belief comes in degrees, and having these degrees into account is certainly important in deciding how to act. It would also be unreasonable to act on the basis of p and abstract from the attitude (belief, suspicion, hope, etc.) towards p. I therefore tend to think that what motivates is the union of the attitude *and* its content. It seems to me that believing is not merely a background condition for the proposition believed to motivate the agent; it rather looks like a constitutive part of the motivation itself. It is true that quite often we give reasons explanations of the form “S A-ed because p”, instead of “S A-ed because she believed that p”, but it seems that, even in the former case, we assume belief. For consider the following statement, where the assumption is cancelled: “He left the theatre because the concert had finished, but he did not believe that it had finished”. Maybe we can imagine some rather special circumstances in which this strange explanation makes sense. But even if we could it would not be a reasons explanation. That the concert had finished could not be his *reason* for leaving if he did not *believe* that it had. Believing seems then to be a constitutive part of the motivating reason, not a mere background condition thereof.

The preceding critical remarks do not detract from my overall highly positive assessment of this book, which nobody seriously interested in the philosophy of action should ignore. It certainly merits a longer and more detailed treatment than I can afford to devote to it in this short review.

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H. W. DE REGT, S. LEONELLI & K. EIGNER, eds. 2009. *Scientific Understanding: Philosophical Perspectives*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.

“Understanding scientific understanding” is the declared aim of this edited volume, which derives from a conference held at VU University of Amsterdam in 2005. The editors and contributors have made an admirable effort in interlinking the essays and providing them with an overall narrative, which is not always present in collective books. This results in a strongly cohesive and comprehensive approach to what scientists mean by understanding the phenomena on which they work. The three parts in which the volume is divided address a) the relationship between understanding, explanation and intelligibility; b) the role of mathematical and computational models in understanding, and c) how distinct disciplinary settings affect understanding in a particular scientific field. The authors share a strong philosophical perspective on the topic,