

Maria Alvarez

Kinds of Reasons: An Essay in the Philosophy of Action.

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The sub-title of this book is somewhat misleading. One will be disappointed if expecting a work that covers a broad range of issues in philosophy of action. But the narrow focus of this work, concentrating as it does on the nature of reasons, makes it worthy of the attention not only of philosophers who are working in philosophy of action, but also those working in moral philosophy, philosophy of mind, and even epistemology.

Regarding the nature of reasons, Alvarez claims that *all* reasons are facts. On her view, facts are ‘truths which are expressed propositionally, and which can be premises in reasoning, both theoretical and practical’ (152). This is controversial. Many philosophers would insist that facts are the truthmakers for truthbearers (statements, propositions). Alvarez offers almost no defense of her claim about the nature of facts in her book. It may be thought that this is unimportant given that this is a book about the nature of reasons and not about facts. But providing an ontology of facts and a defense of it is important given the centrality of the claim that reasons are facts to her project. More elaboration and defense of this thesis would have been most welcome.

I expect that Alvarez’s position will leave some wondering how facts can make a causal difference in the world. This is not insignificant. Alvarez remains silent about whether reasons are causes of action (and what sort of causes) until the very end of the book. And she devotes exactly two paragraphs to the question, leaving the debate over causalism about reasons for action and reason explanations of action to be considered elsewhere. But—and Alvarez seems sensitive to this—what facts *are* matters for whether or not any tenable version of causalism can be formulated. So one can *only* hope that any future work she does on causalism about reason explanations will include a more robust account of the ontology of facts.

That she takes reasons to be facts provides Alvarez with some license for rejecting the common distinction between normative and motivating reasons. She asserts that something must tie together the various uses of ‘reason’, and it is the normative force of reasons that is common. So a reason for *A*-ing is a fact that makes doing *A* the (at least *pro tanto*) right thing to do in some situation (26). Reasons can ‘motivate, guide, justify, or explain’ (7). There are not different *kinds* of reasons, according to Alvarez. There are different roles in which we may put reasons to use. So the same reason *R* that an agent *S* has may be justifying, motivating, or explanatory—depending upon the use to which it has been put (37).

Contra Alvarez, it is not obvious that normative considerations are common to all discourse about reasons. Sometimes, we are simply interested in what sorts of considerations make some action intelligible. This seems to be what many philosophers of action have in mind when they make the distinction between motivating and normative reasons. While the latter may be facts or truths, the former are psychological states that we take into account when trying to explain *why* someone did *A* rather than something else—and these are typically taken to be belief and pro-attitude pairs. So, taking *R* to be some false proposition, we may say that the reason *R* for which *S* thought *A* was worth doing was *not* a *good* reason or not a justifying reason *at all*. But many would contend that the relevant psychological states of *S* that are directed at *R* still motivated and explain *S*'s *A*-ing. And in those cases we regard the psychological states as motivating reasons for *S*'s *A*-ing. (Consider 'R was no reason for S to A, but S A-ed because S thought R was worth pursuing and wanted it, anyhow.') Alvarez's response would be to reject the idea that we are offering a *reason* explanation when we offer an explanation of an agent's actions in terms of psychological states of the agent that motivated her to act. Such psychological explanations she refers to as 'Humean explanations'. She allows that such explanations can be closely related to reason explanations. But actual reason explanation occurs when the reason *for which* *S* A-ed (which is a fact with the appropriate normative force) is also the reason *why* *S* A-ed (197).

On the relationship between desire and motivation, and desire and motivating reasons, Alvarez denies that desires are motivating reasons. She admits that they are often, but not always, a source of motivation. There are other sources of motivation that incline us to act in different ways. To be motivated to do something for a reason is 'being inclined to do that thing for a reason one (believes one) has; a reason that makes the relevant action worth doing in one's eyes' (56). Alvarez admits that an agent's taking herself to have a reason for *A*-ing is closely connected to the agent's being motivated and desiring to *A* (56). But they are not always the same since one may be motivated to do what one has no reason to do or less reason to do. Still, she contends that if an agent takes herself to have reason to *A*, she is, at least, *pro tanto*, motivated to *A*. So when an agent's motivation is a function of her desiring to *A*, strictly speaking, it does not follow that either the mental state of desiring or what is desired is a motivating reason, according to Alvarez. What is desired may be the goal for the sake of which we act, but this is not a reason.

Many will find Alvarez's claims about desires and motivating reasons objectionable. They would insist that if I am hungry and I desire to satisfy my hunger, my desiring to satisfy my hunger is a motivating reason for which I get up and go to the refrigerator. Alvarez would counter that the fact that satisfying my hunger is desired is only a motivating reason for which I act if it 'is something that in my eyes makes it right for me to act in that way, and in the light of which I act' (92). I take it that Alvarez would hold that rather than my desiring to satisfy my hunger being the motivating reason for my going to the refrigerator, my motivating reason is that the refrigerator has food in it and

that is a good thing. As Alvarez notes, ‘it is not what I desire that speaks in favor of acting but the fact that acting in that way is a means of getting what I desire’ (93). Here I cannot help but wonder why Alvarez’s interlocutor cannot simply argue that going to the refrigerator is desired under the guise of the good. Moreover, it is desired as an intrinsic good (or at least it is a further extrinsic good that would be satisfied by going to the refrigerator). And for that reason, the desire and what it aims at serve as a motivating reason (albeit a non-instrumental reason). Alvarez, unfortunately, says nothing about intrinsic goods and extrinsic goods or about instrumental versus non-instrumental reasons and the importance of these distinctions for thinking about reasons for action.

If it is true that whatever is desired is desired under the guise of the good, then whatever an agent desires would seem to be a motivating reason. It is something an agent may believe to be good. But since reasons are facts, it will matter on Alvarez’s view whether or not what is believed is true (or made true by some facts). Alvarez denies that beliefs *qua* mental states are reasons for which agents act. Rather, the factual intentional objects of our beliefs are motivating reasons for action. False beliefs are not reasons. So if I want to satisfy my hunger and I believe that the refrigerator has food, but the refrigerator was emptied of its contents prior to my coming home, my belief that the refrigerator has food is not a reason for which I go to the refrigerator. If it actually has food, then it is a reason for which I go to the refrigerator. My false belief may motivate me. But, if Alvarez is right, it is not a motivating reason unless it is true. Error cases like this have been taken by some as counting in favor of psychological theories of reasons for action. Alvarez addresses some different objections from error cases. I suspect that defenders of psychological theories will not be satisfied with her responses or they will formulate further arguments from error cases in favor of the psychological view. I suspect this problem will be the source of an on-going debate between those like Alvarez who reject psychological theories and the advocates of psychological theories. For this reason, Alvarez’s contribution to this debate should not be missed.

Alvarez’s book is packed with many rich layers of arguments and analyses, perhaps more than one would expect in a shorter volume. Her book warrants the close attention of anyone interested in the nature of reasons for action, and reasons generally.

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