BOOK REVIEW


Although she never uses the term, the position Kirsten Endres advocates might appropriately be labelled *Cognitive Internalism*. Her claim is that a basic condition for attributing to an agent a reason for some action has been overlooked. She calls it the *accessibility condition*: for an agent to have a reason to $\phi$, it is necessary, yet not sufficient, that she can come to see that some consideration, that is the reason, speaks in favour of her $\phi$-ing. What this ‘can’ amounts to is clarified by way of examples. On a narrow understanding, a little child who fails to grasp the point of brushing its teeth cannot recognise that there is something that favours dental hygiene. Nevertheless, according to Endres, even now the child has a reason to brush its teeth because, given only a normal development, it will be accessible to the child in the future. Since, on the other hand, it takes a spiritual conversion to make Charles Dickens’s stingy Scrooge see his being more charitable in a favourable light, no reason for giving money is currently accessible to him. The relevant difference is thought to be that Scrooge’s change of values is neither the product of a rational process nor something that normally occurs in human growing-up.

In the bulk of the book, three paradigmatic theories of practical reasons are assessed by how they do justice to the accessibility condition. Endres considers the writings of Bernard Williams, John McDowell and Christine Korsgaard, each of them taken as a representative of one classical conception of practical reasons, viz. the Humean, the Aristotelian, and the Kantian. Even those not interested in the author’s specific argument will profitably read her well-informed, balanced, and well-structured discussion of prominent contemporary views on practical reasons. As to Endres’s particular agenda, I mention but two of her results. First, the widespread view that reason statements must say something specific about the person for whom some consideration is said to be a reason for action is not in itself an argument for *Motivational Internalism* à la Williams. Endres convincingly argues that subjective conditions for the attribution of reasons need not refer to agents’ desires, but can be about the cognitive states that are accessible to them. Second, as they stand, both Williams’s Humean and Korsgaard’s Kantian account allow in fact for inaccessible practical reasons, but in either case, modifications to remedy this fault are available. On
McDowell’s Aristotelianism, however, Endres’s verdict is different: since it is committed to the view that agents have reasons that only the virtuous person can see, it is to be rejected.

As is evident in the discussion of McDowell, Endres wants to separate questions about the reasons an agent has from questions about what is morally or prudentially right to do. McDowell and numerous others are said to be mistaken when, on the basis that for everybody $\phi$-ing is right, they think that everybody must have a reason to $\phi$. She insists that, contrary to a common assumption, moral realism does not commit one to a certain view about universal practical reasons. For several reasons, I find this line of argument of Endres’s problematic. First, the point against McDowell seems in tension with the author’s initial claim that “a moral theory can only be constructed on the basis of a convincing theory of practical reasons” (p. 14). For why should “a theory of practical reasons be of central importance for moral philosophy” (book-cover) if, as Endres wants it, judgements about agents’ reasons do not settle questions about their moral duties? Second, I wonder what the significance of being an internalist, be it cognitive or motivational, about reasons is, if in order to avoid implausible results, rightness has to be treated as a completely separate issue. As long as Endres allows that an agent’s $\phi$-ing is wrong and that he ought not to $\phi$ even if he can see nothing that favours refraining from $\phi$-ing, the impact of the debate about practical reasons seems rather limited.

Finally, there is a worry that our talk of reasons is too loose to sustain the kind of arbitration in which Endres engages. Consider for instance her argument why practical reasons can only be normative if they are accessible to agents. She first characterizes normative reasons as considerations that the agent could adduce to justify his way of acting. We are then asked to consider a parallel debate about internalism in epistemology: Endres finds it as implausible to think that actions could be justified solely by their rightness as to think that beliefs could be justified solely by their truth or the mere reliability of the method by which they are acquired. But this strikes me as relying on a rather lop-sided characterization of the normativity of reasons. On an alternative and no less legitimate understanding, normative reasons are the facts that make the action right, regardless of what the agent can come to think about them. According to this view, accessibility may be a plausible condition for an agent’s epistemic reasons concerning beliefs about his practical reasons. Such questions are relevant for assessing an agent’s rationality or blameworthiness. But, says this view, we should not let these issues confuse our thinking about normative reasons themselves, which imply rightness. My point is not that this alternative view of reasons is the correct one and that Endres is wrong. Rather, it seems to me that there are two fundamentally different approaches in our thinking about practical reasons. Roughly speaking, deliberationists hold that an agent’s