Maureen Sie, Marc Slors and Bert van den Brink (eds.), *Reasons of One’s Own* (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2004), 210 pp. ISBN 0754640639 (hbk). Hardback/Paperback: £45.00/–.

This is an interesting and diverse collection dedicated to the topic of non-universal reasons for action, or as the authors call them, ‘reasons of one’s own’. The authors of the essays ask whether there are reasons of one’s own and how we should construe such reasons.

What are reasons of one’s own? Consider how John, a non-vegetarian, regards the reasons that Lisa, who is a vegetarian, has for not eating meat. Lisa, John thinks, is a well-educated and rational adult. She is as aware as he is of the conditions under which animals are raised and as aware as he is of the different implications that eating meat has on the environment and on the economies of poor and rich countries alike. She values not eating meat. John can clearly see how, given her values, not eating meat is rational for her. We can express John’s thought as follows: Lisa has subjective reasons for not eating meat. Does John also think that Lisa has objective reasons for not eating meat? John does not share Lisa’s values. Her arguments for vegetarianism do not convince him. He thinks that he has good reasons for not being a vegetarian. But he doesn’t have a knock-down argument to convince her that eating animals is morally acceptable. So, he tells himself, if he were her, he would have good reasons for being a vegetarian. Lisa and I are different people who see the world differently, he says to himself, with different mental attitudes and thus different reasons for action. John thinks that Lisa has reasons of her own for not eating meat. John’s case is an example of the circumstances under which people come to believe in the existence of reasons of one’s own. Whether John is right or not, many of us treat others and talk as if such reasons existed.

The collection is comprised of an introduction, three papers discussing the theoretical framework necessary for accommodating the notion of reasons of one’s own, three papers discussing the relation between democracy, the philosophy of education and personal identity and reasons of one’s own and four papers discussing reasons of one’s own as motivating reasons. Proponents of desire-based views of reasons, on the one hand, and Kantians, on the other, have been discussing for a long time some of the issues covered in these articles but, if memory serves, a collection dedicated to this topic has never been published. The topic has certainly been due for an in-depth exploration and this collection is a welcome step in this direction. The quality of the articles vary, but as a whole the articles included in it do a good job of highlighting the prevalence of the phenomenon; that is, the behaviour and discourse that at least seemingly acknowledge the existence of reasons of one’s own. The articles
delineate some of the major theoretical options for understanding this phenomenon and they offer some original insights into its nature.

In the remainder of this review I focus on the first paper in this collection, ‘Reasons of One’s Own: A Problem? A First Exploration’, written by Kirsten Endres and Mauren Sie. The paper tries to characterize the phenomenon of reasons of one’s own and to draw a logical space within which it could be located. It does not purport to provide a conclusive argument for any single understanding of this phenomenon. The authors do, however, have a preference for one way of construing it: reasons of one’s own, they say, are best understood as reasons one has because of one’s set of values or one’s ‘evaluative perspective’. Different people have different sets of values. We can think of the idea of having a set of values either in cognitive or in conative terms: we can think of having a value as having certain beliefs or as having certain desires or intentions or emotions. But either way having a set of values does not commit us to thinking that other rational and fully informed agents will have a similar set of values. Some of our reasons are grounded in our values, and since different people who are fully informed and rational may have different values, it is possible for us to have reasons that others do not have even in the same circumstances.

The two alternative understandings of reasons of one’s own offered by the authors are an error theory and a neo-Humean understanding. An error theorist about reasons of one’s own thinks that strictly speaking all justifying reasons are universal. The fact that we sometimes talk as if there were reasons of one’s own misleads us to think that such reasons exist when in fact they do not. Reasons of one’s own talk is best explained by our epistemic limitation and our restricted rationality. We want to hold to all of our values even while failing to find conclusive arguments for all of them. So we talk as if there is more than one legitimate set of values; as if different people can have different reasons in similar circumstances. (It is important not to conflate the claim that there may exist reasons of one’s own with the claim that it may be rational for people to act on the reasons they believe they have even when these are in fact not reasons. An error theorist may acknowledge the later claim while denying the former.)

The neo-Humean alternative explains reasons of one’s own as grounded in one’s conative mental attitudes. On that view some (or all) of our reasons are grounded in mental states such as desires, intentions, preferences and the like. Since different people have different conative mental states then different people have different reasons for action even in the same circumstances. (On this view conative mental states give us reasons for action directly, without the mediation of what the authors call ‘evaluative perspectives’.)

Endres and Sie offer arguments against both alternatives. I want to focus on their argument against error theory. The authors do not try to prove that an error theory is false. They merely aim to show that an error theory about reasons of one’s own is at least prima facie less plausible than the alternative views. It seems to me that the argument fails even in this modest task.

The authors argue against an error theory by invoking the phenomenon of pluralism. They claim that pluralism has to be taken seriously and that opting for an error theory fails to do so. What is pluralism?

In today’s society, there are many disagreements about the way we should live our lives. Furthermore, these disagreements are not restricted to superficial