

# SCHROEDER AND WHITING ON KNOWLEDGE AND DEFEAT

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ABSTRACT: Daniel Whiting has argued, in this journal, that Mark Schroeder's analysis of knowledge in terms of subjectively and objectively sufficient reasons for belief makes wrong predictions in fake barn cases. Schroeder has replied that this problem may be avoided if one adopts a suitable account of perceptual reasons. I argue that Schroeder's reply fails to deal with the general worry underlying Whiting's purported counterexample, because one can construct analogous potential counterexamples that do not involve perceptual reasons at all. Nevertheless, I claim that it is possible to overcome Whiting's objection, by showing that it rests on an inadequate characterization of how defeat works in the examples in question.

KEYWORDS: knowledge, reasons, defeaters, fake barn cases, Mark Schroeder,  
Daniel Whiting

Mark Schroeder has recently proposed analyzing knowledge as belief for objectively and subjectively sufficient reasons.<sup>1</sup> This proposal has been challenged by Daniel Whiting,<sup>2</sup> who argues that it makes wrong predictions in fake barn cases. Schroeder has acknowledged the force of Whiting's objection, but he claims that it can be avoided if one adopts a suitable view of perceptual reasons (a view that he takes to be plausible for independent reasons).<sup>3</sup>

In this paper, I argue that Schroeder's reply fails to address Whiting's objection in its full extent. The reason for this is that it is easy to construct counterexamples that are analogous to the one given by Whiting but that do not involve perceptual beliefs. After presenting some counterexamples of this sort, I will suggest that a general reply to Whiting's objection, which does not rely on a specific account of perceptual reasons, is available to Schroeder.

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Schroeder, "Knowledge is Belief for Sufficient (Objective and Subjective) Reason," in *Oxford Studies in Epistemology: Volume 5*, ed. Tamar Szabó Gendler and John Hawthorne (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 226-252.

<sup>2</sup> Daniel Whiting, "Knowledge is *Not* Belief for Sufficient (Objective and Subjective) Reason," *Logos & Episteme* 6 (2015): 237-243.

<sup>3</sup> Mark Schroeder, "In Defense of the Kantian Account of Knowledge: Reply to Whiting," *Logos & Episteme* 6 (2015): 371-382.

### Schroeder's Proposal and Whiting's Objection

According to both Schroeder and Whiting, objective reasons are facts that count in favor of some action or attitude.<sup>4</sup> Subjective reasons, meanwhile, are apparent objective reasons (that is, apparent facts). Some, but not all, subjective reasons are also objective. Moreover, the reasons *for which* a subject adopts an attitude are those apparent facts on the basis of which the subject adopts the attitude. These reasons are among the subject's subjective reasons and may (but need not) be also objective reasons in favor of that attitude.

Schroeder's proposed analysis of knowledge is as follows:

A subject knows that  $p$  if and only if the reasons for which she believes  $p$  are both subjectively and objectively sufficient.<sup>5</sup>

According to Schroeder, the reasons for which an agent believes  $p$  are *subjectively* sufficient only if they are at least as weighty as the subject's subjective reasons in favor of alternative attitudes – more specifically, in favor of believing *not*  $p$  or of withholding belief. In turn, the reasons for which a subject believes  $p$  are *objectively* sufficient only if they are at least as weighty as all existing objective reasons in favor of alternatives (including those objective reasons that are beyond the agent's epistemic ken).

Whiting argues that fake barn cases are counterexamples to Schroeder's analysis. In fake barn scenarios, a subject – call her Sophie – does not know that she is in fake-barn county, where fake barns are frequent (and where, therefore, her perceptual recognition of barns is unreliable). Out of luck, Sophie stops in a field with one the few real barns in the county. She looks at it and forms the belief that she is facing a barn. According to the orthodox interpretation of these cases (accepted by both Schroeder and Whiting), Sophie does not count as knowing that she is facing a barn (although her belief is rational).

One could think that Schroeder's proposal can capture this orthodox interpretation easily, because in fake-barn environments the reasons for which Sophie believes are objectively defeated. The idea is that Sophie's perceptual reasons for believing are undercut by the fact that she is in fake-barn county, where her perceptual recognition of barns is unreliable. This fact would reduce the objective weight of the reasons for which Sophie believes, which as a result would become objectively insufficient: they would be outweighed by the existing reasons for alternative attitudes – in particular, for withholding belief. Therefore,

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<sup>4</sup> Schroeder, "Knowledge is Belief," 236-238, Whiting, "Knowledge is *Not* Belief," 238-239.

<sup>5</sup> Schroeder, "Knowledge is Belief," 242.

Schroeder's proposal would correctly predict that Sophie does not know that she is facing a barn.

Whiting, however, claims that this account of defeat in fake barn cases is mistaken. He argues that the defeater that Sophie is in fake-barn county is itself defeated by the further fact that Sophie is in real-barn field (that is, in a field with only real barns). According to Whiting, the defeating power of the first fact (in relation to Sophie's reasons for belief) is undermined by this second fact. Consequently, Sophie's perceptual reasons for belief retain their weight and are objectively (and subjectively) sufficient. If this is so, Schroeder should grant that Sophie counts as knowing – contrary to the orthodox reading of the case.

### Schroeder's Reply

Schroeder acknowledges that Whiting's objection is successful against his original proposal, but only, he claims, because this proposal rested on an inadequate account of perceptual reasons – according to which Sophie's reason for believing that she is facing a barn is that *it looks like a barn*.<sup>6</sup> Schroeder argues that Whiting's objection can be avoided if a suitable account of perceptual reasons (motivated by independent considerations) is adopted. On this alternative view, the perceptual reason for which Sophie believes is that *she sees that it is a barn*. Schroeder argues that when Sophie is in fake-barn county, she does not actually see that that is a barn (due to the unfavorable environment). Therefore, Sophie's subjective reason is not a fact, which means that it is not an objective reason for believing. Sophie does not believe for objectively sufficient reasons because she does not believe for objective reasons at all.

Schroeder's account of perceptual reasons is attractive and I will grant that it manages to overcome the specific counterexample posed by Whiting. However, Schroeder's strategy fails to offer a satisfactory response to the underlying worry behind Whiting's objection. The problem is that Whiting's objection generalizes beyond fake barn cases involving perceptual beliefs. One can find alternative examples that are structurally analogous to the one discussed by Whiting and that yet do not involve perceptual beliefs, but rather beliefs acquired via testimony or inference. In these examples, it is not plausible to claim that the reasons for which the subject believes are not facts and therefore not objective reasons. Thus, Schroeder's reply is ineffectual against this sort of potential counterexample. Nonetheless, such counterexamples are as seemingly threatening to Schroeder's

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<sup>6</sup> Schroeder, "In Defense," 376-381.

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proposal as Whiting's one. Schroeder's proposal, therefore, remains under pressure.

### Counterexamples without Perceptual Belief

Consider first an example involving testimony:

**April Fool's day:** Sophie picks up randomly one among several local newspapers (generally very reliable). She reads that last evening's match was won by the local team, and accordingly she believes that this was the case. However, it is April Fool's day, a day in which most newspapers in town publish false stories. Sophie is not aware of this. She is not aware, either, of the lucky fact that the newspaper she happened to read is one of the few that does not follow the April Fool's tradition: it is as reliable as any other day.

This example seems analogous to the fake barn case. Sophie is basing her belief on a type of evidence that is reliable in most cases, but she does not know that she happens to be in a peculiar environment where this sort of evidence is generally unreliable. She is also unaware of the fact that, out of luck, she occupies one of the few positions in such an environment where forming a belief based on that type of evidence will lead her to believe something true. In the same way that intuitively Sophie lacks knowledge in fake barn cases, it seems that she lacks knowledge here.

Now, if one thinks that in fake barn cases the fact that Sophie is in real-barn field defeats the potentially defeating fact that she is in fake-barn county, then it seems that one should also think that the fact that the newspaper picked by Sophie does not adhere to the April Fool's tradition defeats the fact that it is April Fool's day. If this is so, the reasons for which Sophie believes would be undefeated.

Note also that in this example it seems that Sophie is believing for objective reasons. It remains a fact that the newspaper said that the match was won by the local team, and this fact is the reason for which Sophie formed her belief. Thus, Schroeder's reply does not apply here.

Similar examples can be devised for inferential knowledge:

**Platypus:** Sophie learns that her friend Jean's pet has laid an egg. She infers that Jean's pet is not a mammal. However, Jean lives in a peculiar town where most people's pets are platypuses – something Sophie is unaware of. Sophie is also unaware of the fact that Jean lives in a particular neighborhood where platypuses are not allowed (Jean's pet is actually a chicken).

Those convinced by Whiting's analysis of defeat in fake barn cases should also think, by parity, that the defeating fact that pet platypuses are frequent in Jean's town is defeated by the further fact that pet platypuses are not allowed in

Jean's neighborhood. Yet, Sophie is clearly believing for reasons that are objective, namely, the fact that Jean's pet has laid an egg.

These examples, I take it, are as problematic for Schroeder's proposal as fake barn cases. Nevertheless, perception does not play any interesting role in them. There are no apparent perceptual reasons that turn out to be non-factual: in these examples, the reasons for which Sophie believes are still facts. Thus, Schroeder's reply does not manage to block the general worry uncovered by Whiting's counterexample.

### Avoiding Whiting's Objection

Is there room for maneuver within the framework of Schroeder's proposal, in light of the generality of Whiting's objection? I think so. One may reject Whiting's contention that, in fake-barn county cases and the other examples considered, the defeaters for Sophie's reasons are themselves defeated. A correct account of defeat, I will argue, vindicates the view that, after all, Sophie's reasons for believing are objectively defeated in these cases.

For ease of exposition, I will focus on the fake-barn county example, assuming the view that Sophie's reason for believing that she is facing a barn is that it looks like a barn (nothing hangs on this; everything I will say is easily translatable to the other examples).

What facts could be seen as defeating Sophie's reasons in fake barn cases? Whiting follows Schroeder in thinking that the best candidate is the fact that Sophie is in fake-barn county (where her perceptual capacities are generally unreliable).<sup>7</sup> This picture, I submit, is incomplete. What defeats the reasons for which Sophie believes is the fact that she is in fake-barn county *plus the fact that she does not know that she is in real-barn field* – that is, plus the fact that she is not aware of being in a specific sub-section of fake-barn county where her perceptual capacities are actually reliable. These defeating facts are objective reasons for Sophie to doubt the reliability of her perceptual capacities, and as such, they reduce the weight of the perceptual reasons for which she believes. Moreover, by undermining Sophie's evidence as to whether she is facing a real barn, these reasons for doubting constitute objective reasons for Sophie to withhold belief.

The crucial point is that these objective reasons for Sophie to doubt are *not defeated* by the further fact that she is in real-barn field. Even if she is actually in real-barn field, given that Sophie is unaware of this fact (and that she is fake-barn

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<sup>7</sup> Whiting, "Knowledge is *Not* Belief," 240; Schroeder, "Knowledge is Belief," 247.

county, a generally unfavorable environment), there are still good objective reasons for Sophie to doubt whether she is facing a real barn. Of course, Sophie does not possess these reasons for doubting (they are not among her subjective reasons), as she is unaware of being in fake-barn county, a generally unfavorable environment. But these objective reasons for doubting exist, and this is all that is needed for them to defeat the objective reasons for which Sophie believes. Certainly, these reasons for doubting would disappear if Sophie learnt that she is in real-barn field; but we are assuming that she does not know that this is the case (the fact that she does not know it is part of the objective reasons for Sophie to doubt and withhold belief).

Imagine an alternative situation in which Sophie withholds belief because she knows that she is in fake-barn county and she is unaware of being in real-barn field. It seems clear that her reasons for withholding belief are subjectively undefeated – it is rational for her to withhold belief. I think that the reasons for which she withholds are also objectively sufficient: they are not defeated by her (unknowingly) being in real-barn field. If you remain unconvinced, consider the following piece of reasoning:

Sophie is looking at an apparent barn  
Sophie knows that she is in fake-barn county  
Sophie ignores whether she is in real-barn field  
Sophie actually is in real-barn field (she is facing a real barn)  

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Sophie may permissibly withhold belief

This is good reasoning, which means that the objective reasons for which Sophie withholds belief are not defeated by the fourth premise – by the fact that Sophie is in real-barn field. Accordingly, it seems that in the original case where Sophie ignores that she is in fake-barn county, there are actually sufficient objective (though not subjective) reasons for her to withhold belief. Thus, in the original case the reasons for which Sophie believes are not objectively sufficient and, on Schroeder's view, she would not count as knowing.

It is easy to overlook these considerations if one appraises the situation only from Sophie's first person perspective. From such a perspective, accepting the third and fourth premises (simultaneously) yields a Moorean sentence: "I am in real-barn field but I do not know it." In this way, one cannot rationally have as one's *subjective* reasons both that one is in real-barn field and that one does not know that this is so. But this Moorean flavor disappears when one considers Sophie's objective reasons from a third person perspective.

In sum, it does not seem that the fact that Sophie is (unknowingly) in real-barn field defeats her objective reasons to doubt – her reasons to withhold belief.

The crux of the matter is that among these objective reasons for withholding there are facts about Sophie's epistemic state, about the limitations of her evidence. These objective reasons are not defeated by the fact that Sophie is in real-barn field, because the limitations of Sophie's informational state remain unaffected by this fact (since she remains unaware of it). There can be sufficient (undefeated) objective reasons to withhold belief about whether  $p$  even when it is actually the case that  $p$ . Otherwise, there would never be objectively sufficient reasons to withhold belief about whether  $p$ ! (Such reasons would be defeated either by the fact that  $p$ , or by the fact that *not*  $p$ ).

It may be argued that the view I have presented imposes a too strong condition on knowledge: am I not saying that knowing what sort of environment one is in is a requirement even for having extremely mundane forms of knowledge (e.g. perceptual knowledge that I am facing a barn)? This would be unrealistic. In general, I do not need to have specific beliefs about my surroundings in order to, say, be in a position to know that I am facing a barn.

Fortunately, I am not committed to such an unpalatable view. This commitment can be avoided if one takes into account that our reasoning and knowledge acquisition are in general defeasible and reliant on default assumptions.<sup>8</sup>

Assume that Sophie lives in a world like ours, where apparent barns tend to be real barns. Moreover, this has been her past experience with barns. Plausibly, in this case she may expect 'by default' that apparent barns will be real barns – in other words, she may assume that she is in a real-barn county environment. She does not need to have specific evidence or knowledge about her current environment's being of this sort. If she possesses no reason to suspect that the environment is atypical (and it is not actually so), she may just treat it as normal.

It is only when Sophie actually is in an atypical environment (e.g. fake-barn county) – or when she possesses reasons to suspect that this is so – that things change. In these cases, she needs to know that she is in a sub-section of the environment where typical conditions are met (e.g. real-barn field), in order to be entitled to treat it as such. So, in fake-barn county, Sophie needs specific reasons to think that she is not facing fake barns.

Given the regularities of the world (most apparent barns are real) and our background experiences and knowledge, we are in general in a position to assume by default that we are in a real-barn county type of environment. This is why

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<sup>8</sup> See John Horty, *Reasons as Defaults* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), Michael Williams, *Problems of Knowledge: a Critical Introduction to Epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

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perceptual knowledge about barns is possible without specific knowledge or beliefs about the environment one happens to be in.

I think this is an attractive picture of defeasible reasoning and knowledge acquisition, although of course it needs to be developed and argued for in more detail. At least, it is an available, plausible view that offers Schroeder the resources to overcome Whiting's objection in all its generality.

### **Conclusion**

Schroeder's reply to Whiting's objection relies on adopting a specific account of perceptual reasons. However, this reply does not succeed in avoiding the core of Whiting's objection, since equally forceful counterexamples can be devised without involvement of perceptual reasons. In order to properly respond to Whiting's objection, one should challenge his analysis of defeat in fake barn cases and similar examples, as I have done here.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> I thank Jesús Vega Encabo and Daniel Whiting for their comments.