

Knowledge is *Not* Belief for Sufficient (Objective and Subjective) Reason

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This paper is to appear in *Logos & Episteme*. Please refer to the published version: <http://logos-and-episteme.acadiasi.ro/>

Abstract

Mark Schroeder has recently proposed a new analysis of *knowledge*. I examine that analysis and show that it fails. More specifically, I show that it faces a problem all too familiar from the post-Gettier literature, namely, that it delivers the wrong verdict in fake barn cases.

Keywords

knowledge; analysis; luck; Gettier; objective and subjective reasons; rationality

1. Introduction

Here is a familiar narrative. We used to think that knowledge is justified true belief. Then Edmund Gettier presented counterexamples to this view which appeared to refute it.¹ Then philosophers spent years, decades even, trying to modify or supplement the view only to see their revised versions face further counterexamples. Then we gave up trying to say what knowledge is.

Whether this narrative is faithful to the actual course of events is not my present concern. It is certainly true that a growing trend in epistemology is to abandon the search for a non-circular account which specifies the necessary and sufficient conditions

¹ Edmund Gettier, "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge," *Analysis* 23 (1963): 121-123.

under which a person knows a proposition, and to take the notion of knowledge, or that which it picks out, as primitive.²

In a recent paper, Mark Schroeder seeks to resist this trend.³ He presents a new analysis of knowledge, one which aims to be informative and non-circular. While his proposal is intriguing and original, my aim here is to show that it is false. More specifically, I hope to show that it fails for reasons all too familiar from the above narrative – it is subject to Gettier-style counterexamples.

2. The analysis

To introduce Schroeder's analysis, I will briefly explain three distinctions he appeals to. First, there is a distinction between *objective* reasons and *subjective* reasons.⁴ Objective reasons are facts which favour some act or attitude. Subjective reasons are apparent objective reasons. Suppose that, having read the film-listings, checked online, etc., Sophie believes that her favourite movie is showing at the cinema. She turns up at the cinema to find that the screening was cancelled without notification. In this case, while there is no objective reason for Sophie to go to the cinema, what she believes is a subjective reason for doing so.

It is important to note that, in some cases, a subjective reason *is* an objective reason – when the relevant apparent fact *is* a fact (in the above case, had what Sophie believed been true).

² See Timothy Williamson, *Knowledge and its Limits* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

³ 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.

⁴ Schroeder, "Knowledge is Belief," 236-238. For recent discussion of this distinction, see Kurt Sylvan, "What Apparent Reasons Appear to Be," *Philosophical Studies* 172 (2015): 587-606; Daniel Whiting, "Keep Things in Perspective: Reasons, Rationality, and the A Priori," *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy* 8 (2014): 1-22.

Second, there is a distinction between the objective reasons which a person *possesses* and those which she does not possess. To say that a person possesses a reason is to say that she is in a position to act or hold an attitude on the basis of or for that reason. Suppose that, unbeknownst to her, Sophie's favourite film is showing on TV. In that case, there is an objective reason for her to watch TV but, as Sophie is unaware of this, she does not possess that reason (in the relevant sense).

What does it take to have a reason, so understood? I will not try to resolve that question here but it presumably involves standing in some doxastic or epistemic relation to the consideration which provides it.⁵

With Schroeder, I assume that all subjective reasons are possessed. That is, if there is a subjective reason for a person to ϕ , she is in a position to ϕ for that reason, hence, she has that reason. Nothing turns on this assumption.

Third, there is a distinction between the reasons a person possesses for ϕ ing and the reasons *for which* or *on the basis of which* she ϕ s.⁶ In the above example, Sophie might go to the cinema and have a reason for doing so, namely, that her favourite film is showing, but not go for that reason. Perhaps she goes for some other reason or for no reason at all.

In light of this, consider the reason for which a person holds a certain belief.⁷ That reason is one of her subjective reasons. According to Schroeder, if the subjective reason for which a person believes is weightier than any of her subjective reasons

⁵ Schroeder, "Knowledge is Belief," 237-238. For recent discussion, see Juan Comesaña and Matthew McGrath, "Having False Reasons," in *Epistemic Norms*, ed. Clayton Littlejohn and John Turri (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 59-80; Mark Schroeder, "What Does it Take to 'Have' a Reason?," in *Reasons for Belief*, ed. Andrew Reisner and Asbjørn Steglich-Petersen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 201-222. In "How Knowledge Works," *Philosophical Quarterly* 49 (1999): 433-451, John Hyman argues that a person possesses that p as an objective reason for ϕ ing just in case she knows that p . If that is right, Schroeder's account of knowledge might be open to a charge of circularity. I will not pursue the issue here.

⁶ Schroeder, "Belief is Knowledge," 240-241.

⁷ Typically, a person holds a belief on the basis of more than one reason. For ease of presentation, I set this aside.

against believing – that is, for disbelieving or withholding with respect to the relevant proposition – her reason for believing is *subjectively sufficient*. If a person believes for sufficient subjective reason, her belief is *rational* or *justified*.⁸

The reason for which a person holds a belief might also be a possessed objective reason. According to Schroeder, if the objective reason for which she believes is weightier than any of the objective reasons against believing, her reason for believing is *objectively sufficient*. If a person believes for sufficient objective reason, her belief is *correct* – in which case, Schroeder points out, it is true.

It is important that, on Schroeder's view, an objective reason for believing is sufficient when it is weightier than *all* objective reasons against believing, not just when it is weightier than *all possessed* objective reasons against believing.

Suppose that the reason for which a person believes is both objectively and subjectively sufficient. In that case, Schroeder says, she has knowledge. So, the proposed analysis is:

A person knows that *p* if and only if she believes that *p* for sufficient (objective and subjective) reason.⁹

3. The counterexample

I will suggest that Schroeder's analysis of knowledge is open to Gettier-style counterexamples, more specifically, that it delivers the wrong verdict in fake barn cases.¹⁰

⁸ Schroeder uses these terms interchangeably.

⁹ Schroeder, "Belief is Knowledge," 242.

¹⁰ See Alvin Goldman, "Discrimination and Perceptual Knowledge," *Journal of Philosophy* 73 (1976): 771-791.

Suppose that Sophie knows what barns look like and is driving through the countryside. She passes many structures which look like barns. Sophie stops in a field before one such structure and, on the basis of its appearance, forms the belief: that's a barn. Unbeknownst to Sophie, she is travelling through fake-barn county. She just happened to stop at the one genuine barn in the area. According to orthodoxy, and to Schroeder,¹¹ Sophie has a rational (justified) true belief but lacks knowledge that it's a barn.¹²

Schroeder thinks that his analysis of knowledge is not only consistent with this verdict but explains it. According to Schroeder, Sophie lacks knowledge because the reason for which she believes – namely, that it looks like a barn – is *objectively insufficient*.¹³ It is insufficient due to the obtaining of an objective defeater, namely, the fact that Sophie is in fake-barn county. That fact, on Schroeder's view, undercuts (reduces in weight) Sophie's reason for believing that it's a barn. As Schroeder puts it, when Sophie is in fake barn county, "visual evidence of a barn is not such a great reason to believe [s]he is seeing a barn" (2015: 247). Given that Sophie is in fake-barn county, her reason for believing is insufficient, not good or weighty enough, to outweigh all the objective reasons for disbelieving this or withholding with respect to it. As a result, Sophie lacks knowledge.¹⁴

According to Schroeder, that Sophie is in fake-barn county objectively undercuts the reason for which she believes that it's a barn, namely, that it looks like one. Surely,

¹¹ Schroeder, "Belief is Knowledge," 229.

¹² Ernest Sosa is one of the minority who maintains that subjects in fake barn cases *do* enjoy knowledge. See Ernest Sosa, *A Virtue Epistemology: Apt Belief and Reflective Knowledge, Volume 1* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). I cannot engage here with that view, which Schroeder does not share. I note only that it is highly controversial. For critical discussion, see Christoph Kelp, "Unreflective Epistemology," *Episteme* 11 (2014): 411-422.

¹³ As Schroeder describes the case, the objective reason for which the subject in fake barn county believes is *that the relevant structure looks like a barn*. You might wonder if her reason could be the (apparent fact) *that it is a barn*. I set this issue aside.

¹⁴ Just to be clear: that Sophie is in fake-barn county is supposed to make the set of objective reasons *for which she believes* insufficient, not the set of all objective reasons.

however, that undercutting defeater will itself be defeated. After all, while Sophie is in fake-barn county, she is in no-fake-barn field (that is, an environment without fake barns). And, to adapt Schroeder's words, the fact that something looks like a barn is a great reason to believe that it is a barn, if you are in no-fake-barn field. Since the defeater for the reason for which Sophie believes is defeated in turn, that reason remains objectively sufficient. So, Schroeder's account wrongly predicts that Sophie knows that it's a barn.

One might revise the case so that there are fake-barns in the field, that is, so that Sophie is in fake-barn field. That fact, one might think, undercuts the reason for which she believes that it's a barn, namely, that it looks like one. So, according to Schroeder's analysis, Sophie does *not* know that it's a barn. And that is the right verdict.

However, this move does not help. Even if Schroeder's account delivers the right verdict in this revised case, it still does not deliver the right verdict in the original case. So, it remains extensionally inadequate. Moreover, the revision only postpones the problem. Suppose that Sophie is in fake-barn field. Still, she is in in no-fake-barn sub-field. And the fact that something looks like a barn is a good reason to believe that it's a barn, if you are in no-fake-barn sub-field.

To bolster the claim that in the original case the fact that Sophie is in no-fake-barn field is a defeater-defeater, consider the following chains of reasoning:

(1) That looks like a barn. So, it's a barn.

(2) That looks like a barn. And I'm in fake-barn county. So, it's a barn.

(3) That looks like a barn. And I'm in fake-barn county. But I'm in no-fake-barn field. So, it's a barn.

(1) seems like good reasoning, which confirms the thought that the fact something looks like a barn is a (defeasible) reason for thinking that it's a barn. (2), in contrast, seems

like bad reasoning, which confirms the thought that the fact that the subject is in fake-barn county defeats (specifically, undercuts) the reason provided by the fact that it looks to her like a barn. (3), in contrast, seems like good reasoning again, which confirms the thought that the fact that the subject is in no-fake-barn field defeats the aforementioned defeater.

4. Weighing reasons

In presenting the counterexample to Schroeder's analysis of knowledge, I made some claims about defeat. You might suspect that those claims rest on a controversial theory of defeat, one Schroeder might object to. To show that this is not so, I will develop the objection by appeal to the analysis of defeat which Schroeder himself advances.¹⁵

Schroeder accounts for the weights of reasons in terms of the activity of weighing reasons. On his view, very roughly, for a reason to have a certain weight is for there to be sufficient objective reason – that is, for it to be correct – to place that weight on it in deliberation. An undercutting consideration reduces the weight of a reason (in some cases to zero) by providing a reason to place less (in some cases no) weight on that reason when deliberating. To illustrate, suppose that Mike promised to meet Sophie at the cinema. This is a fairly weighty reason for going to the cinema, which is to say that it is correct for Mike to place a fair amount of weight on that consideration when deciding what to do this evening. If Sophie releases Mike from this promise, that is a reason for Mike to place less (perhaps no) weight on his promise when deliberating further. Hence, the fact that Sophie releases Mike from his promise undercuts his reason for going to the cinema, namely, that he promised to do so.

¹⁵ Mark Schroeder, *Slaves of the Passions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), chapter 7.

This is a rough sketch of Schroeder's theory. There are more details to provide and questions to ask but it suffices for present purposes. I will now return in light of it to the fake barn case.

Consider only the fact that the structure looks to Sophie like a barn. This is, let us suppose, a weighty reason for her to believe that it's a barn, which is to say that there is sufficient reason for Sophie to place a lot of weight on the fact that it looks like a barn when deliberating as to whether to believe that it's a barn. Now add that Sophie is in fake-barn county. According to Schroeder, this consideration objectively defeats – more specifically, undercuts – Sophie's reason for believing that it's a barn, which is to say that it is a reason for her to place less weight on the fact that it looks like a barn when deliberating as to whether to believe that it's a barn. Now add that Sophie is in no-fake-barn field. This consideration objectively defeats the aforementioned defeater, which is to say that it is a reason for Sophie to return to placing a lot of weight on the fact that it looks like a barn when deliberating as to whether to believe that it's a barn.¹⁶

According to Schroeder, a subject lacks knowledge in a fake barn case because the reason for which she believes is defeated by a fact about her environment. In the previous section, I claimed that that defeating consideration will itself be defeated in fake barn cases. In which case, Schroeder's analysis of knowledge predicts that the relevant subject possesses knowledge. In this section, I have shown that Schroeder's account of undercutting defeat is consistent with – indeed, vindicates – these points.

5. Conclusion

¹⁶ More fully, that Sophie is in no-fake-barn field is a reason for her not to place any weight on the fact that she is in fake-barn county when deliberating as to whether to place weight on the fact that it looks like a barn when deliberating as to whether to believe that it's a barn.

According to Schroeder, knowledge is belief for sufficient (objective and subjective) reason. Fake barn cases are Gettier-style counterexamples to this. Believing for sufficient (objective and subjective) reason is insufficient for knowledge.¹⁷

¹⁷ Thanks to Conor McHugh and Mark Schroeder for comments on an earlier version of this material. Thanks also to the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AH/K008188/1) for funding in support of this research.