



Schroeder on reasons, experience, and evidence

Susanna Schellenberg¹ · Juan Comesaña¹

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1 Introduction

Reasons First offers a comprehensive account of reasons and beliefs. Schroeder's penetrating arguments take lessons from the role of reasons in ethics to develop a sophisticated account of their relation to rationality, knowledge, and justification. Along the way, Schroeder develops many subtle distinctions and considerations. The book is a tour de force, written with Schroeder's characteristic skill and verve. It will be a significant resource for epistemologists for years to come.

In these short comments, we can address only bits and pieces of Schroeder's rich view. As is our job, we aim to find weak spots. We start by asking what is at stake in saying that something is fundamental. We then move to Schroeder's view of evidence and its possession: the apparent factive content view. We have two main worries about this view. First, it runs into trouble for cases of perception in which we do not represent sensory modes. Second, Schroeder's argument for it, based on the phenomenon of perceptual defeat, does not in fact discriminate between his current view and others (including Schroeder's own old view, the non-factive content view).

2 What is fundamental?

Contrary to what the book's title suggests, Schroeder does not argue that reasons are first. Instead, he takes the idea that reasons are fundamental from ethics and explores to what extent that idea is useful in epistemology. It will be helpful to contrast the

✉ Susanna Schellenberg
susanna.schellenberg@rutgers.edu

Juan Comesaña
juan.comesana@rutgers.edu

¹ Rutgers University, New Brunswick, USA

idea that reasons are first with recent alternatives: Dogmatism treats conscious mental states as explanatorily basic and posits a particular rule for justification, namely, that if it perceptually seems that p , then one has *prima facie* justification for p (Conee & Feldman, 1985; Huemer, 2007; Pollock, 1974; Pryor, 2000, among others)¹. The knowledge-first view treats knowledge as explanatorily basic and analyzes justification and reasons in terms of knowledge (McDowell, 1984, Williamson, 2000, Millar, 2008, Nagel, 2013, Byrne, 2014, and Littlejohn, 2017 among others). The rationality-first view treats justification or rationality as explanatorily basic and treats knowledge, evidence and other epistemic concepts as derivative (Comesaña, 2020a, 2020b). Reliabilism treats the reliability of the perceptual or cognitive system as explanatorily basic and analyzes evidence and justification as a product of this reliable system—be it in virtue of a reliable indicator or a reliable process (Goldman, 1979, 1986; Lyons, 2009 among others). Capacity views treat capacities as explanatorily basic and analyze evidence, justification, and knowledge as a product of the capacities employed (Bergmann, 2006; Burge, 2003; Graham, 2011; Greco, 2001, 2010; Schellenberg, 2013, 2018; Sosa, 1991, 2006, 2007; Zagzebski, 1996).² So on the first cluster of views, conscious mental states are explanatorily basic, on the second cluster knowledge, on the third justification, on the fourth reliability, and on the fifth capacities.³

Our first set of questions concerns to what extent treating reasons as explanatorily fundamental is to be favored over the alternative views. If the goal is to ground epistemic terms in something non-epistemic, then the capacity view is to be favored. Indeed, if that is the goal, then the reasons-first, knowledge-first, rationality-first views are all equally unattractive. But if the goal is not to ground epistemic terms in something non-epistemic, then why not say that justification, knowledge, evidence, and reasons come as a cluster? Why say that one of these terms is more primitive than the other three? What is the advantage of saying that one of those epistemic terms is more primitive than the others? Finally, what is at stake in reasons rather than justification or rationality being fundamental?

¹ Feldman and Conee's evidentialism is only officially committed to the thesis that justification supervenes on evidence, but their larger epistemological commitments do align them with the view in question.

² Among capacity views there is a distinction to be drawn between normative capacity views, on which mental capacities are understood as virtues or in other normative ways (Zagzebski 1996, Sosa 1991, 2006, 2007, Greco 2001, 2010, Bergmann 2006), and capacity views that forego normative terms (Schellenberg 2013, 2014, 2016). Moreover, there is a distinction to be drawn between reliabilist capacity views, on which mental capacities provide mental states with epistemic force in virtue of their reliability (Sosa 1991, 2006, 2007, Greco 2001, 2010, Burge 2003, Bergmann 2006, Graham 2011), and capacity views that are not grounded in the reliability of mental capacities (Schellenberg 2013, 2014, 2016).

³ One could make the case that insofar as on some of the views categorized as capacity views it is essential that the capacities in play are reliable, those views would better be classified as reliabilist views.

3 Do we represent sensory modes in perception?

We sympathize with many aspects of Schroeder's view. In particular, we agree with Schroeder in thinking that our beliefs can be justified not only by true evidence, but also by evidence that is false or at the very least misleading.⁴ In this section, we will take issue with the specific way in which Schroeder understands evidence. He argues for what he calls the apparent factive attitude view, that is the view that when it seems to us that we have an apparent factive attitude Ψ whose content is that p , our evidence is that we Ψ that p .

Seeing that there is a bird on a tree is a factive attitude. After all, if you see a bird, there must be a bird that you see. By contrast, it seeming to you as if there is a bird on a tree is a non-factive attitude: it does not entail that there is a bird on a tree. Not only can it seem to you that there is a bird on a tree, it can *seem* to you that you *see* that there is a bird on a tree. It seeming to you that you see a bird on a tree is an apparent factive attitude, and such apparent factive attitudes are at the core of Schroeder's account.

What reasons do you have when you see a bird on a tree, and in virtue of what do you have those reasons? For the sake of argument, let's follow Schroeder in assuming that whenever you see that p it also seems to you that p *and* it seems to you that you see that p . Given this assumption, we can distinguish three different views of reasons and their possession. First, there is the phenomenal view, according to which your reason is that it seems to you that there is a bird on a tree, and you have this reason in virtue of its being true that it so seems to you. Second, the non-factive content view, according to which your reason is that there is a bird on a tree, and you have this reason in virtue of its seeming to you as if there is a bird on a tree. Third, there is Schroeder's own view, according to which your reason is that there is a bird on a tree, but you have this reason in virtue of its seeming to you that you see that there is a bird on a tree. We will discuss these views in more detail in Sect. 3. For now the important point is that according to Schroeder, perceptual reasons must include information about the sensory mode via which you (it seems to you that you) gained information about your environment.

Schroeder considers several ways in which the appearance relation could be understood. One is to understand it as a kind of "conscious access." Schroeder argues:

"There are different ways of developing this strategy, but what they have in common is that they grant that it may be possible to see that P without it appearing to you that you see that P , but contend that non-apparent seeings do not provide perceptual evidence that can rationalize belief. For example, we might say that the *appearing* is phenomenal consciousness. Given that in the vast majority of cases, if you see that there is a barn in front of you, this is a phenomenally conscious visual experience, it follows from this view that in the vast majority of cases, people who see that P do in fact satisfy the condition of it appearing to them that they see that P , and so they have excellent evidence about the world" (p. 112).

⁴ See Comesaña and McGrath (2014, 2016), Comesaña (2020a, b), and Schellenberg (2013, 2014).

In discussing this passage, we will focus on the fact that Schroeder seems to believe that on any such conscious access strategy if a subject has a phenomenally conscious visual experience it follows that it must appear to her that she is seeing that *p*. But this is not true. If one has a phenomenally conscious visual experience as of *p*, it follows only that one is phenomenally conscious as of *p*. One can have a phenomenally conscious visual experience as of a bird on a tree without any awareness of the sensory modality by means of which one experiences the bird on the tree. The same holds for access consciousness.

Now while Schroeder is open to different ways of understanding the appearance relation, he endorses an interpretation on which it is “impossible to see that *P* without it appearing to you that you see that *P*” (p. 113). As Schroeder acknowledges this self-presenting way of analyzing perceptual content stems from Searle (see his 1983). Searle (1983) aims to account for particularity within the framework of existentially quantified contents by building causal conditions into the existential contents. In short, the idea is that a descriptive condition picks out an object as the cause of the experience. By doing so, Searle builds the causal relation to particular objects into the phenomenal character of perception. This approach faces several well-known problems. One is that arguing that the causal relation to a particular object to which the subject is causally related is reflected in phenomenal character has the counterintuitive consequence that perceptual experiences of numerically distinct but qualitatively indistinguishable objects differ with regard to their phenomenal character.⁵

A more immediate problem for Schroeder’s view is that in perception (even consciously accessible perception) we do not necessarily represent the sensory mode via which we gain information about our environment.

It is important to take seriously that perception is a faculty that we share with animals who do not have our self-reflective capacities. They see without it appearing them that they are seeing. So it cannot be right that it is “impossible to see that *P* without it appearing to you that you see that *P*” (p. 113). Schroeder could save his position by arguing that such animals may see a bird sitting on a tree but they cannot see that the bird is sitting on a branch. This is questionable strategy. After all, seeing a bird on a branch provides the animal with evidence that may prompt her to act, for example, jump on the tree with the branch with the aim of catching the bird. It would be artificial to say that one can only get evidence about one’s environment if one sees facts, but cannot gain such evidence if one sees objects and events.

The more important point is that to see that the bird is sitting on the branch we do not need any kind of introspective awareness of the sensory mode by means of which we gain this information. In fact, there is evidence that in many—and perhaps even most cases of perception—information about sensory modes is not represented. Of course, there are cases such as color perception in which it would not be possible to gain the information at hand other than via one specific sensory mode—in this case, vision. But even if that is the case, there is no reason to think that the fact that

⁵ See Schellenberg 2010 for discussion.

the information was acquired via vision implies that this fact is represented in the content of perception.

Most cases of perception are multimodal. For example, when we see and hear a car approaching, we gain information about the location of the car both via vision and audition. Olfaction and gustation are famously intertwined. Much of what is thought to be gustation is in fact retronasal olfaction. In all these cases, the norm is that the perceiver gains information about her environment via one or more sensory modes without representing the sensory mode via which she gains this information. What she represents is simply the information gained.

How does Schroeder's view accommodate these empirical facts? Would it be possible to reformulate Schroeder's view such that it does not depend on the empirical contentious idea that information about sensory modalities is represented in perception?

4 How does perceptual experience provide us with evidence?

But now let's assume for the sake of argument that it would be unproblematic to analyze perceptual content as being self-presenting. Schroeder helpfully distinguishes a number of views about how perceptual experience provides us with evidence about the external world:

- **The phenomenal view:** when we have an experience with the content that p , our evidence is that we have an experience with the content that p .
- **The factive content view:** when we have a factive attitude Ψ whose content is that p , our evidence is that p .
- **The factive attitude view:** when we have a factive attitude Ψ whose content is that p , our evidence is that we Ψ that p .
- **The non-factive content view:** when we have a non-factive attitude Φ whose content is that p , our evidence is that p .
- **The apparent factive attitude view:** when it seems to us that we have an apparent factive attitude Ψ whose content is that p , our evidence is that we Ψ that p .

Schroeder used to hold a non-factive content view but now holds an apparent factive attitude view. In Chapter 5, Schroeder explains why he made the switch. His argument is that the non-factive content view has a problem with defeaters that the apparent attitude view solves. We will question whether Schroeder's apparent attitude view is in better shape regarding the defeasibility of justification than the alternative views he considers. We will argue that Schroeder underestimates the scope of the problem that the defeasibility of justification raises for views about the evidence provided by perceptual experience, and that once the scope of that problem is

properly appreciated his argument for the apparent factive attitude view loses much of its appeal.

Start with an ordinary case of defeat.⁶ You look at the barn in front of you and as a result you come to be justified in believing (and, let's say, know) that there is a barn in front of you. Moments later, a reliable informant tells you that you are in fake barn country. Your justification for believing that there is a barn in front of you has been defeated, and as a result you are no longer justified in that belief (and you no longer know it). The diachronic aspect of the case is not essential. It may be that you are reliably told that you are in fake barn country before you open your eyes, and so in opening them you do not gain justification for believing that there is a barn in front of you.

How do the different theories of perceptual evidence account for this ordinary case of defeat? The phenomenal view can easily account for it by claiming that your evidence for believing that there is a barn in front of you is something like the fact that it *seems* to you that there is a barn in front of you. But whereas it is rational to believe that there is a barn in front of you on the basis of this initial evidence, once your evidence also contains the proposition that you are in fake barn country, it is no longer rational to believe that there is a barn in front of you. The factive content view, the factive attitude view, and the non-factive content view, however, do not seem to be able to account for this ordinary case of defeat. Start with the factive content view. According to this view, whether you see that there is a barn in front of you depends on whether you actually are in fake barn country, not on whether you are justified in believing that you are. Given this, you can be justified (and even know) that there is a barn in front of you even if you are reliably told that you are in fake barn country. Analogously, the factive attitude view has it that your evidence is that you see that there is a barn in front of you as long as you are not in fake barn country, regardless of whether you believe that you are. Therefore, even when you believe that you are in fake barn country, you may be justified in believing (and you may know) that there is a barn in front of you. As for the non-factive content view, your evidence upon opening your eyes is that there is a barn in front of you. And adding to this bit of evidence that you are in fake barn country does not at all diminish your justification for believing that there is a barn in front of you. After all, that there is a real barn in front of you is not at all incompatible with you being in fake barn country. This problem for the non-factive content view is best appreciated in contrast with how the phenomenal view handled the case. According to the phenomenal view, your evidence is that it seems to you that there is a barn in front of you. The conjunction of its seeming to you that there is a barn in front of you with the information that the you are in fake barn country no longer makes it rational to believe that there is a barn in front of you. But if your evidence is (as the non-factive content view would have it) that there is a barn in front of you, the conjunction of this evidence with the information that you are in fake barn country still makes it rational to believe that there is a barn in front of you.

⁶ We deal here with what Schroeder calls "subjective defeat". What he calls "objective defeat" is something whose existence is more controversial, and we need not take a stand on it here.

So far, this standard case of defeat makes trouble for three of the five views of perceptual evidence. What about Schroeder's own view, the apparent factive attitude view? According to Schroeder, the apparent factive attitude view can deal with standard cases of defeat perfectly well. But his explanation for why this is so raises some questions. Here's what Schroeder says:

If you believe that you are in fake barn country, and it appears to you that you see a barn, then according to the apparent factive attitude view, your evidence is inconsistent. It includes both the proposition that you are in fake barn country and the proposition that you see that there is a barn, but those cannot both be true. But it will plausibly never be the case that a single set of evidence rationalizes believing each of inconsistent things. So either this inconsistent set of evidence will make it rational for you to believe that you are in fake barn country but *not* rational to believe, in the absence of further evidence, that there is a barn in front of you, or it will make it rational for you to believe that there is a barn in front of you, but *not* rational to believe that you are in fake barn country. If the former, then your perceptual evidence is subjectively defeated, and if the latter, then you don't satisfy the conditions for subjective perceptual defeat—only a *rational* belief that you are in fake barn country can undermine the rationality of trusting your eyes—not an irrational belief that you are in fake barn country. (pp. 109-10)

The first sentence of this passage is remarkable. It claims that the key to understanding how the apparent factive attitude view deals with defeaters is by having it that in those perfectly ordinary cases *your evidence is inconsistent*. Schroeder may well be correct in going on to say that plausibly evidence cannot rationalize belief in inconsistent propositions. But just as plausible is the claim that you are justified in believing every proposition that is part of your evidence. If those claims are true, then Schroeder's view about how the apparent factive attitude view handles defeaters cannot be right.

But set that aside, and suppose that Schroeder is right that the apparent factive attitude view can handle ordinary defeaters. What follows? Well, according to Schroeder it follows that this gives us a great reason to prefer the apparent factive attitude view to the other views, because only it and the phenomenal view can account for ordinary defeaters, and there are independent reasons to reject the phenomenal view.

But things are more complicated. We want to distinguish between two kinds of defeaters: endogenous and exogenous. The very same case can constitute an endogenous defeater for one sort of view but an exogenous defeater for a different sort of view. We will argue that this indeed what is going on with the views and cases that Schroeder discuss. The very same case, the case of the barn and fake barn country, constitutes an endogenous defeater for the phenomenal view and the apparent factive attitude view, but it constitutes an exogenous defeater for the other three views. Now, even if Schroeder agrees with us regarding the distinction between endogenous and exogenous defeaters, isn't it a mark against the phenomenal view and the non-factive attitude view that they cannot deal with the case, regardless of whether it constitutes an endogenous or an exogenous defeater? It may well be that it is a mark against

them, but once we accept the distinction between endogenous and exogenous defeaters, we can construct cases of exogenous defeaters for both the phenomenal view and, more to the point, for the apparent factive attitude view. And although there may be ways for these views to deal with these exogenous defeaters, the phenomenal view and the non-factive content view will be able to deal in an analogous way with their own exogenous defeaters (including the case of the barn and fake barn country). The result is that the apparent factive attitude view does not have the advantage over the non-factive content view that Schroeder claims.

So, what does the distinction between endogenous and exogenous defeaters come down to? We take the distinction from Weisberg (2009, 2015). Endogenous defeaters are the sorts of defeaters we are familiar with from the work of Pollock (1986). These are defeaters *of some piece of evidence as evidence for a proposition (or doxastic attitude)*. Consider again how the phenomenal view and the apparent factive attitude view deal with the barn case. For the phenomenal view: *that you are in fake barn country* (F) is a defeater for the evidence that *you are having an experience as of a barn in front of you* (EB) provides for the proposition that *there is a barn in front of you* (B). For the apparent factive attitude view: *that you are in fake barn country* (F) is a defeater for the evidence that *I see a barn in front of me* (SB) provides for the proposition that *there is a barn in front of me* (B). The phenomenal view and the apparent factive attitude view differ regarding what they take to be the evidence in question: EB for the phenomenal view, SB for the apparent factive attitude view. But in both cases what the defeater defeats is the evidence that either EB or SB provide for B. That is how endogenous defeaters work.

By contrast, the very same case does not represent an endogenous defeater for the other three views that Schroeder considers. We exemplify this with the non-factive content view. According to that view, my evidence is B itself. And F is not a defeater of B for believing anything else. F is a defeater of EB and SB as reasons to believe B, but once B is part of your evidence, F itself is irrelevant to what B is evidence for. But, we can hear Schroeder ask, isn't this exactly the problem? Isn't it a data point that if you know that there is a barn in front of you by looking at it, then if you find out that you are in fake barn country then your justification for believing that there is a barn in front of you is defeated?

There is room to give a negative answer to that question. Suppose, for instance, that it is possible to come to know that there is a barn in front of one without realizing that one is looking at it. Or make the even stronger supposition that it is possible to come to know that there is a barn in front of one by looking at it while believing (perhaps justifiably) that one did not acquire that knowledge by looking. If those cases are possible, then there is room to say that you can know that there is a barn in front of you by looking at it, but that being informed that you are in fake barn country need not defeat your knowledge or justification because you don't know that your belief is based on vision.

But set aside that line of reasoning, and suppose that it is indeed a data point that if you know that there is a barn in front of you by looking at it, then if you find out that you are in fake barn country then your justification for believing that there is a barn in front of you is defeated. So the non-factive content view has to somehow deal with exogenous defeaters. But so does every other view.

It is actually easier to see how Schroeder's own apparent factive attitude view has to deal with exogenous defeaters than to see how the phenomenal view has to do it, because Schroeder's view has the virtue of clearly distinguishing between evidence and its possession, and the phenomenal view does not. So we exemplify the issue with the apparent factive attitude view.

Notice first how exactly the problem of exogenous defeaters arises for the non-factive content view. According to that view, one possesses a proposition as evidence just in case that proposition is the content of some non-factive attitude one has. So, in our example, you have a non-factive attitude (for instance, an experience) with the content that there is a barn in front of you, and in virtue of that you have as evidence the proposition that there is a barn in front of you. The information that the you are in fake barn country does not defeat your evidence as evidence for other propositions, but rather attacks your possession of the evidence to being with. When you acquire the justified belief that you are in fake barn country, it's not that you still have some evidence in your possession but it loses its justificatory power. Rather, you no longer have the proposition that there is a barn in front of you as evidence.

We can construct exogenous defeaters for the apparent factive attitude view by following that same template. Thus, according to the apparent factive attitude view, it seems to you that you see that there is a barn in front of you, and in virtue of this you have as evidence the proposition that you see that there is a barn in front of you. Now suppose that the results come back from the cognitive psychology lab, and they tell you that you are a very bad judge of how things seem to you (J). This claim J (that you are very bad at judging how things seem to you) is to the apparent factive attitude view what the claim that the you are in fake barn country is to the non factive content view. For notice, first, that it functions as a defeater: after you receive that information, you are no longer justified in believing that there is a barn in front of you. And, second, it is no ordinary defeater. The information that you are a bad judge of how things seem to you is completely irrelevant to whether you see that there is a barn in front of you. So, given that according to the apparent factive attitude view your evidence is that you see that there is a barn in front of you, it is perfectly rational for you to continue believing that you see that there is a barn in front of you (and, therefore, also that there is a barn in front of you) even after you become justified in believing that you are bad at judging how things seem to you.

How should we deal with the problem of exogenous defeaters? That question is beyond the scope of this paper, but see Comesaña (2020a, 2020c) for discussion. What matters in this context is that the problem of exogenous defeaters is perfectly general, applying to Schroeder's new view as much as to his old one. Given that this problem is, in effect, Schroeder's main reason for switching views, perhaps he shouldn't have done so.

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