



SCHROEDER ON THE WRONG KIND OF REASONS PROBLEM FOR ATTITUDES

BY NATHANIEL SHARADIN

JOURNAL OF ETHICS & SOCIAL PHILOSOPHY

VOL. 7, No. 3 | AUGUST 2013

URL: WWW.JESP.ORG

COPYRIGHT © NATHANIEL SHARADIN 2013

Schroeder on the Wrong Kind of Reasons Problem for Attitudes

Nathaniel Sharadin

HERE IS A WIDELY ACCEPTED principle about reasons:

Counts-in-Favor: F is a reason to ϕ iff F counts in favor of ϕ -ing.

Suppose you have a normal, well-shuffled, 52-card deck. Consider the proposition:

Spade: The next card drawn will be a spade.

Now consider:

R_B : The next card drawn will be black.

W_B : Terrorists will torture my family unless I believe that the next card drawn will be a spade.

Intuitively, both R_B and W_B count in favor of believing S . So, by Counts-in-Favor, both R_B and W_B are reasons to believe S . But there is a clear difference between R_B and W_B . That difference can be marked by saying that R_B is the right whereas W_B is the wrong kind of reason to believe S . The Wrong Kind of Reasons Problem for Belief is the problem of giving an account of the right and wrong kind of reasons for belief.

A similar problem arises for other attitudes. Consider:

R_A : N is courageous and kind.

W_A : N 's benefactor will pay me to admire her.

Intuitively, both R_A and W_A count in favor of admiring N . So, by Counts-in-Favor, both R_A and W_A are reasons to admire N . But there is a clear difference between R_A and W_A . That difference can be marked by saying that R_A is the right whereas W_A is the wrong kind of reason to admire N . The Wrong Kind of Reasons Problem for Admiration is the problem of giving an account of the right and the wrong kind of reasons for admiration.

The problem is not limited to admiration and belief. The same problem arises whenever we think there can be reasons for an attitude; the problems with admiration and belief are merely symptomatic of a more general problem: The Wrong Kind of Reasons Problem for Attitudes is the problem of giving a general account of the right and the wrong kind of reasons for ϕ_{mind} -ing, where ϕ_{mind} is any attitude for which we think there can be reasons.

The generality of the problem does not rule out a piecemeal approach to a solution, but it strongly suggests that it is misguided. Mark Schroeder has

recently attempted a general solution to the problem.¹ In this paper, I will argue that his solution does not work.

1. Schroeder's Account

According to Schroeder, the clue to solving the Wrong Kind of Reasons Problem for Attitudes lies in noticing that the wrong kind of reasons all seem to be *idiosyncratic*.²

For instance, W_B is a reason for *you* to believe S , but not necessarily a reason for *me* – or anyone else, for that matter – to believe S . So we need a principle for identifying the right kind of reasons that excludes idiosyncratic reasons. According to Schroeder:

Right Kind of Reason (RKR): Relative to the attitude of ϕ_{mind} -ing, R is the right kind of reason to ψ_{mind} iff R is a reason shared by necessarily anyone engaged in ϕ_{mind} -ing and just because they are so engaged.³

Intuitively, RKR rules out idiosyncratic reasons like W_B and W_A . That is because, while W_B and W_A are reasons to believe and admire, respectively, they are not reasons shared by necessarily anyone engaged in believing or admiring.

In order to be a successful solution to the problem, RKR requires (i) that there is a set of reasons shared by necessarily anyone engaged in ϕ_{mind} -ing and just because they are so engaged and (ii) that this set of reasons is coextensive with the set of the right kind of reasons. Schroeder tries out two independent strategies to establish (i) and (ii): the *background facts* strategy and the *alethic* strategy. I will argue that neither of these two strategies can establish both (i) and (ii), so RKR fails as a solution to the problem. Briefly: The problem with the background facts strategy is that it cannot establish (i), and the problem with the alethic strategy is that it cannot establish (ii). I will address each strategy in turn.

¹ In fact, Schroeder's solution is supposed to be even more general: He attempts to solve the problem as it arises for *activities* as well as for attitudes. See n. 3, below, as well as Schroeder (2010) and (2007b, ch. 7). But the problem with Schroeder's solution is that it cannot solve the problem for attitudes, so I am going to limit my attention to attitudes. See also Schroeder (2012) for an argument against a competing account of the problem when it comes to attitudes.

² Schroeder (2010: 35-36).

³ Schroeder (2010, p. 37). Two remarks are in order. First, this principle leaves open the possibility that, relative to, say, believing, there can be the right kind of reasons for attitudes other than belief. Second, as I noted above, Schroeder's account is actually designed to apply more generally. Officially, his view is that, relative to an *activity* A , R is the right kind of reason to ϕ iff R is a reason shared by necessarily anyone engaged in A and just because they are so engaged. But, restricting our attention just to his solution as it applies to the Wrong Kind of Reasons Problem for Attitudes, Schroeder's account is as I have it.

2. The Background Facts Strategy

Schroeder's first strategy appeals to background facts about attitudes.⁴ For example, here is Schroeder discussing background facts about admiration:

One such fact is that [admiration] is the kind of state to motivate you to emulate the people that you admire. That fact is a reason to be such that if you admire anyone, you only admire people who it would not be a bad idea to emulate. Moreover, this is a reason that you have, whether you admire anyone or not. ... On this picture, these reasons [only to admire people who it would not be a bad idea to emulate] are derivative reasons which are triggered by the fact that you are engaged in admiring in the first place. So they are shared by anyone who is engaged in admiring, and hence are the right kind of reasons for admiration.⁵

The idea is that (i) is true for admiration because there is a shared set of reasons for emulation, and emulation naturally follows admiration: The shared set of reasons for emulation derivatively yields the shared set of reasons for admiration. Let's grant Schroeder that there is a shared set of reasons for emulation.⁶ This will still not do the trick to establish (i). For it is not enough to point out, as Schroeder does, that emulation (typically, normally) follows admiration because of the kind of attitude admiration is. In order to establish (i), we would have to think that anyone engaged in admiring is *necessarily* engaged in emulating. But this is false. For instance, I might admire people who devote themselves full time to reducing suffering and death from lack of food, shelter and medical care without in any way even attempting to emulate those people.

This problem with the background facts strategy generalizes. In general, there is not a *necessary* connection between someone's attitudinizing in a certain way (e.g., admiring) and that person's engaging in an intentional activity with an aim (e.g., emulation) for which, admittedly, there might be a shared set of reasons. In other words, while there might be certain activities or actions *typical* for people with certain attitudes, most attitudes – including those liable to the Wrong Kind of Reasons Problem – do not come with a *necessary* connection to any actions, and so do not come with a shared set of reasons.⁷ So the background facts strategy does not work because it cannot establish (i).

⁴ Schroeder (2010: 42).

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Schroeder's reason for thinking that there is a set of reasons shared by necessarily anyone engaged in emulating is presumably that, first, one does not even count as engaged in emulating unless one also aims at emulating those it would not be a bad idea to emulate, and that, second, having an aim of this sort guarantees the presence of certain reasons. See Schroeder (2007b, ch. 7, esp. 135 and following).

⁷ Thanks to Derek Baker for this way of putting the point.

3. The Alethic Strategy

Schroeder's second strategy is the *alethic* strategy. Here he is explaining it:

If admiration is an attitude which represents its objects as being in a certain way, and if there is a standing reason not to have false mental representations of a certain kind – including the kind involved in belief, but also whatever kind is involved in admiration – then we could take the view that having the attitude of admiration triggers these reasons to not have false representations, by giving you reasons to not admire people who lack the feature that admiration represents people as having ...⁸

The problem with the alethic strategy is that it cannot establish (ii): that the shared set of reasons there is relative to an attitude is coextensive with the set of the right kind of reasons for the attitude. Consider first the case of admiration: The reasons there are to not admire people who lack whatever features admiration represents people as having clearly do not exhaust the right kind of reasons with respect to admiration. That is because they are only *negative* reasons: reasons *against* admiring people who lack certain features. But, intuitively at least, some of the right kind of reasons for admiration are reasons for admiring certain people, not just reasons *against* admiring others. For instance: Suppose N is *not* courageous and kind. The alethic strategy reveals why this fact is the right kind of reason to *not* admire N. But suppose N is courageous and kind. The alethic strategy does not reveal why this fact is the right kind of reason actually to admire N.

The case against the alethic strategy is even clearer when it comes to the attitude of belief: The reasons there are to not believe false propositions clearly do not exhaust the right kind of reasons with respect to belief. That is because they are only *negative* reasons: reasons *against* believing propositions that are false. But, intuitively at least, some of the right kind of reasons for belief are reasons *for* believing certain propositions, not just reasons against believing others. For instance: Suppose the next card drawn will be *red*. The alethic strategy reveals *why* this fact is the right kind of reason to *not* believe the next card drawn will be a spade. But suppose the next card drawn will be black. The alethic strategy does not reveal why this fact is the right kind of reason actually to believe the next card drawn will be a spade.

The general problem with the alethic strategy is that the reasons it countenances are only reasons *against* having *false* mental representations. So you could try to rehabilitate the alethic strategy by extending it to include standing reasons not just *against* having *false* mental representations, but also standing reasons *for* having *true* mental representations. But that will not work either. That is because it is overwhelmingly implausible that there is such a reason. If there were a standing reason to have true mental representations, then there would be in particular a standing reason to have *beliefs* in *true* proposi-

⁸ (2010: 42).

tions, for these would be instances of true mental representations, i.e., representations whose objects are how they are represented to be. Then there would be a standing reason to have a belief in *any old* true proposition, no matter how trivial; there would be a reason, for instance, to have true beliefs about all the names and numbers in the phonebook. But there is no such reason. So there is not any standing reason to have true mental representations, and appealing to such a reason cannot rehabilitate the alethic strategy. So the alethic strategy does not work because it cannot establish (ii).

At this point, the fan of the alethic strategy might try to reply by discrediting our negative existential intuitions about reasons.⁹ Elsewhere, Schroeder has tried to do precisely this.¹⁰ His suggestion, briefly, that “there is a reason to ϕ_{mind} ” is usually elliptical for “there is a particularly weighty reason to ϕ_{mind} ”¹¹ Without going into details, this means that our negative intuitions about the existence of particularly weak reasons cannot be trusted, because it will strike us as unintuitive or false that there is a reason to ϕ_{mind} whenever the reasons for ϕ_{mind} ing are sufficiently weak.¹² In the present context, then, the suggestion would be that the negative intuitions I appealed to above, e.g., that there is no reason to have true beliefs about all the names and numbers in the phonebook, cannot be trusted. Instead, there is a standing reason to have true mental representations, including the kind involved in admiration and belief, but it is a relatively weak reason: That is why it seemed unintuitive that such a reason existed.

The alethic strategy that replies in this way still faces two problems. First, this reply would seem to entail that the right kind of reasons to ϕ_{mind} are all relatively weak reasons. To see this, recall that on the current proposal the right kind of reasons to ϕ_{mind} are all supposed to be “triggered” by the reasons there are to have true mental representations. For instance, the right kind of reasons to admire N, such as that she is courageous and kind, are triggered by the reasons there are to have true mental representations of the kind involved in admiration, presumably representations to the effect that N is courageous and kind. We just said that the reason there is to have true mental representations about N is a relatively weak reason. That is what was supposed to explain our negative intuition about the existence of such a reason. But then, on the plausible assumption that facilitative connections between reasons do not contribute to the strength of a reason,¹³ the reasons there are to admire N that are triggered by the reason to have true mental representa-

⁹ Thanks to an anonymous referee for this suggestion on behalf of the alethic strategy.

¹⁰ See (2007c: 121-24), (2007b, esp. chs. 5 and 7) and (2007a).

¹¹ Again, Schroeder’s account is meant to apply to reasons for *action* as well as reasons for *attitudes*. But my focus here is solely on the latter.

¹² (2007c: 123).

¹³ For reasons of space, I will not argue for this principle here. For some intuitive support in its favor, notice that, if it were false, then there could be an overwhelmingly strong reason to perform an action that is a means to performing an action there is an underwhelmingly weak reason to perform. Intuitively, at least, this is the wrong result.

tions about N are correspondingly weak. And that seems like a mistake. The fact that N is courageous and kind is, in addition to being the right kind of reason to admire N, a relatively *strong* reason to admire N.

In any event, the alethic strategy faces a second, worse problem. Suppose there is a standing reason to have true mental representations, including the kind of representations involved in admiration, and that these reasons are suitably strong. The problem is that the reasons there are to have the true mental representations involved in admiring N do not correspond to the right kind of reasons to admire N. That is because some of the mental representations involved in admiring N do not have anything to do with whether N is admirable, in the sense of deserving admiration, but rather have to do with whether N is admirable in the sense of being a suitable possible object of admiration. And only reasons for the former and not the latter sort of mental representation are the right kind of reasons to admire N. For example, suppose one of the mental representations involved in admiring N is the representation of N as a responsible agent. That is, you would not count as admiring N unless you had the mental representation of N as a responsible agent. Then, according to the account on offer, being engaged in admiration triggers reasons to have *true* mental representations about whether N is a responsible agent. It would follow, then, that the reasons there are to believe truly that N is a responsible agent are the right kind of reasons to admire N, since these would be reasons shared by necessarily anyone engaged in admiring N and just because they are so engaged.

But the reasons there are for thinking that N is a responsible agent are not *per se* reasons (let alone reasons of the right kind) for admiring N.¹⁴ For instance, the fact that N is a human adult is (at least some) reason for believing that N is a responsible agent; but the fact that N is a human adult is not by itself a reason for admiring N, let alone a reason of the right kind for doing so. In general, the problem can be put like this: If the current suggestion is correct, the reasons there are to correctly represent the world in all the ways involved in ϕ_{mind} -ing are all the right kind of reasons to ϕ_{mind} . But that is false. For, as we have just seen, not all ways ϕ_{mind} -ing represents the world to be are ways that are relevant to whether ϕ_{mind} -ing is merited, in the sense of deserved. And thus not all reasons for correctly representing the world in the way involved in ϕ_{mind} -ing are the right kind of reasons to ϕ_{mind} . So the alethic strategy still cannot establish (ii): that the shared set of reasons there is relative to an attitude is coextensive with the right kind of reasons for the attitude.

¹⁴ I'm grateful to an anonymous referee for this way of putting the problem for the alethic strategy.

4. Conclusion

Schroeder points out that the Wrong Kind of Reasons Problem for Attitudes is everyone's problem, and so everyone will need some solution to it. I think he is right about that. I have argued here that Schroeder's solution will not do the trick. At the very least, it needs to be supplemented by an account of how (i) and (ii) are true for attitudes like belief and admiration.¹⁵

Nathaniel Sharadin
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
Department of Philosophy
sharadin@unc.edu

¹⁵ Thanks to Derek Baker, Geoffrey Sayre-McCord and an anonymous reviewer for *JESP* for their feedback.

References

- Schroeder, M. (2012) "The Ubiquity of State-Given Reasons," *Ethics* 122(2): 457-88.
- ____ (2010) "Value and the Right Kind of Reason," in R. Shafer-Landau, ed., *Oxford Studies in Metaethics* 5, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 25-55.
- ____ (2007a) "The Negative Reason Existential Fallacy," unpublished manuscript.
- ____ (2007b) *Slaves of the Passions*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- ____ (2007c) "Weighting for a Plausible Humean Theory of Reasons," *Nous* 41(1): 110-32.