

**Book Review**

**Reasons First**  
(By Mark Schroeder)

A Review By  
Theptawee Chokvasin\*

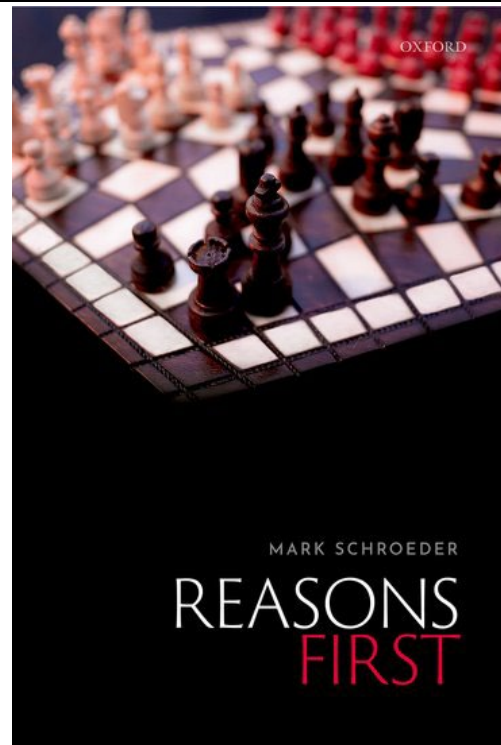
*Department of Philosophy and Religion, Faculty of Humanities, Kasetsart University, Thailand*

---

**Title:** Reasons First  
**Series:** -  
**Author:** Mark Schroeder  
**Publisher:** Oxford University Press  
**Year:** 2021  
**No. of pages:** 274 pages  
**ISBN:** 9780198868224 Hardcover \$43.31.

*Front Cover*

*Source:* <https://global.oup.com/academic/product/reasons-first-9780198868224?q=reasons%20first&lang=en&cc=us>



In ethical theories, the use of practical reason is rather obvious and more with the trait of raising examples of moral situations for the theorists to provide their arguments. It could be considered here in terms of ‘reasons for action.’ However, there is another trait of reasoning more often found in epistemological theorists, and it is about the reasons provided procedurally for belief justifications. The other one could here be considered as ‘reasons to believe.’ It can be considered that this one word of ‘reason’ is containing to a certain extent different connotations. Could it be better for philosophers to talk about normativity both in normative ethics and normative epistemology on the same explanatory ground? Mark Schroeder’s latest book answers positively to the question. The key concept for that sort of explanatory ground is related with the thing which is called “reasons-first” approach. Nevertheless, what is this new approach to normativity, and why do philosophers need it?

The concept of ‘reasons first’ here is analyzed as a normative concept. Abby’s story, illustrated at the beginning of the book’s opening introduction, tells us of a girl who is deciding whether she should choose to pursue a graduate degree in philosophy or work as a startup in a computer organization. This story discusses reasoning in the sense that what she wants to do has advantages that other option does not. Abby’s reasoning is further characterized

---

\*Corresponding Author +66 2579 6525 ext. 109  
E-mail Address: [jhumtwc@ku.ac.th](mailto:jhumtwc@ku.ac.th)

by that, with her previous study of philosophy, she applies it to find answers. Yet she finds that each reasoning of the philosophers quoted is not as relevant as it should be to her disturbing problem. The point here is not what Abby ultimately makes, but this is an early example of what Schroeder calls "the phenomenology of *reasons*", leading Abby to look at it in a way of "different reasons pulling in different directions." The reasoning Abby is doing is figuring out what she "ought" to do for a reason, which seems as though she is figuring out what is best to do with that reason. Schroeder points out that this is a relation of the role of reason with "both *analytic* and *explanatory priority*" (pp. 3-4).

Moreover, the thesis of priority of reasons is defended here not only on the ground that reasons are with the main role to explain ethical reasoning of what one ought to do, but also on the other ground that they are prior to all normative properties and relations. They are "the *most fundamental*" (p. 5). However, the thesis of reasons first must be challenged by two difficulties. Firstly, it is difficult to know for sure that the reasons provided can successfully explain knowledge. If it is suggested that there must be some other chunk of knowledge to assure that those reasons are the right ones, it means that the reasons are not exactly the most fundamental. This first difficulty is called "the *problem of unjustified belief*" (pp. 17-19). Secondly, it is possible for one to encounter the problem of choosing between two equally rational beliefs because of equal weight of epistemic evidence between the two. For one to decide on just one belief to be chosen may require other criteria of what should be the sufficient ground. The second difficulty is called "the *problem of sufficiency*" (pp. 19-20). These two can be considered the very difficulties in the case of Abby as mentioned above.

Nevertheless, Schroeder points out that they can be solved. The first difficulty is stemmed from the problematic explication of subjective reasons as factive phenomena that must be relevant with one's knowledge of the truths. Schroeder rejects that it is not necessary for the subjective reasons to be factive (pp. 77-81). When one does not know the truth of something, it does not necessarily entail that one is irrational when one exercises subjective reasons about that thing (pp. 92-99). The way of solving this kind of problem derives from John F. Horty's analysis of reason first in ethics which shows that in dealing with moral conflicts one depends on "the logic of default reasoning" (Horty, 2012: 6). The second difficulty is more easily refuted by explaining that sometimes evidence is not necessary for being the reason that is important for the rationality of belief (p.128) especially when the evidence of believing that P is tied with believing that not-P. The very situation of weighing the evidence when it is tied is to emphasize that reasons are the prior ones that do their work without the need to appeal to other explanation from any criteria of sufficiency (pp. 141-143).

Finally, the thesis of reasons first is strengthened by a combination of Kantian Theory of knowledge and Pragmatic Intellectualism. The Kantian Theory of knowledge would require us not to be worried at all by the truths of things-in-themselves. This is because such truths are not available for us, and, therefore, not for us to depend on them as the sources of rational justification of beliefs. Pragmatic Intellectualism would prompt us to be satisfied with the possible provision of evidence that is acquired for us to make a judgment of rational belief. The phenomenology of reason is with this priority of what ought to be called the human pursuit of knowledge. So, the thesis of reason first is defended (pp. 244-254).

It is worth to notice that Schroeder's overall defense of his thesis of epistemology as a normative discipline is good for him to offer his reason first thesis for the applications both in epistemology and ethics. This is not in a similar vein of Richard Rowland's thesis of priority of reasons in account of values, especially the nature of

value and goodness. Rowland's reason first is to be applied with the practical normativity (Rowland, 2019). The two stances of reasons first are not to be confused with each other.

Nevertheless, at least it can be considered that the thesis of reasons first is gradually gaining its popularity in today's world of philosophical analysis of normativity. It might be from the reason that philosophers are curious about the nature of human understanding of normativity. There are questions like why we can conceptualize about norms, and if there are any of them, why we are obligated to do things in accordance with them. These are truly necessary questions for us as moral agents who are very often in competitions of options of what ought to be done and what ought to be accepted.

In my opinion, Schroeder's book is well-written with a high standard of philosophical writings. The book showcases his talents of connecting the relevant points of theories in contemporary epistemology. It should be considered indispensable for attaining the knowledge of philosophical debates on normativity and rationality.

## References

- Horty, J. F. (2012). **Reasons as Defaults**. Oxford: Oxford University Press.  
<https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199744077.001.0001>
- Rowland, R. (2019). **The Normative and the Evaluative: The Buck-Passing Account of Value**. Oxford: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198833611.001.0001>