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Pollock and Sturgeon on defeaters

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Abstract

Scott Sturgeon has recently challenged Pollock’s account of undercutting defeaters. The challenge involves three primary contentions: (1) the account is both too strong and too weak, (2) undercutting defeaters exercise their power to defeat only in conjunction with higher-order beliefs about the basis of the lower-order beliefs whose justification they target, and (3) since rebutting defeaters exercise their power to defeat in isolation, rebutting and undercutting defeaters work in fundamentally different ways. My goal is to reject each of these contentions. I maintain that (1) Sturgeon fails to show that Pollock’s account of undercutting defeaters is either too strong or too weak, (2) his own account of how undercutting defeaters exercise their power to defeat is both too strong and too weak, and (3) his claim that rebutting and undercutting defeaters work in fundamentally different ways is mistaken.

Keywords: Pollock, Sturgeon, Defeater, Rebutting, Undercutting, Higher-order belief

No writer has contributed more to our understanding of defeaters than John Pollock. Pollock grappled with issues pertaining to defeaters throughout his long and distinguished career. His earliest account appeared in his 1970 paper “The Structure of Epistemic Justification” and, upon his death in 2009, he left a number of unpublished papers, including “Defeasible Reasoning and Degrees of Justification.”

Central to Pollock’s epistemology is an account of justification in terms of reasons, which fall into two broad categories: conclusive

and nonconclusive. The most important feature of nonconclusive reasons is that they are defeasible. Defeaters fall into two broad categories: rebutting and undercutting. Pollock regarded the identification of undercutting defeaters as one of his most important epistemological contributions and much of his work focused on articulating the nature and scope of such defeaters.

Sturgeon (2014) has recently challenged Pollock's account of undercutting defeaters. The challenge involves three primary contentions. First, the account is both too strong and too weak. Second, undercutting defeaters exercise their power to defeat only in conjunction with higher-order beliefs about the basis of the lower-order beliefs whose justification they target. Third, since rebutting defeaters exercise their power to defeat in isolation, rebutting and undercutting defeaters work in fundamentally different ways.

My goal is to reject each of these contentions. I maintain that (1) Sturgeon fails to show that Pollock's account of undercutting defeaters is either too strong or too weak, (2) his own account of how undercutting defeaters exercise their power to defeat is both too strong and too weak, and (3) his claim that rebutting and undercutting defeaters work in fundamentally different ways is mistaken.

Sturgeon attacks Pollock's account of undercutting defeaters exclusively by counterexamples. I contend that the counterexample in support of the claim that the account is too strong rests on the assumption that an unjustified belief can be a defeater, an assumption that I reject. I grant that the counterexamples in support of the claim that the account is too weak have intuitive force. Sturgeon takes their intuitive force as sufficient to show that the account is too weak and to support adding to it a higher-order belief requirement. I maintain that the resulting account is both too strong and too weak. Finally, I go on to argue that an adequate account of undercutting defeaters requires addressing the issue of strength of justification, which leads to two surprising results. First, the alleged difference between undercutting and rebutting defeaters articulated by Sturgeon evaporates. Second, a division among approaches to defeaters emerges that parallels the division between internalist and externalist approaches to justification. These results motivate a reconsideration of taking the intuitive force of Sturgeon's counterexamples as sufficient to show that Pollock's account is too weak.

1 | Pollock's account

Pollock (1987, p. 484) offers an account of justification in terms of reasons:

- (2.1) Being in states M_1, \dots, M_n is a reason for S to believe Q if and only if it is logically possible for S to be justified in believing Q on the basis of being in states M_1, \dots, M_n .

Reasons, for Pollock, include both beliefs and nondoxastic states, such as *being appeared to as if P* and *recalling P*. Moreover, reasons fall into two broad categories: defeasible and nondefeasible (or conclusive). Nondefeasible reasons logically entail their conclusions; defeasible reasons do not. Pollock (1987, p. 484) calls the latter “prima facie reasons,” which he defines as

- (2.2) P is a prima facie reason for S to believe Q if and only if P is a reason for S to believe Q and there is an R such that R is logically consistent with P but (P & R) is not a reason for S to believe Q.

The R's that destroy (or defeat) the reason connection are called “defeaters,” which Pollock (1987, p. 484) defines as

- (2.3) R is a defeater for P as a prima facie reason for Q if and only if P is a reason for S to believe Q and R is logically consistent with P but (P & R) is not a reason for S to believe Q.

Finally, Pollock (1987, p. 485) draws his classic distinction between rebutting and undercutting defeaters:

- (2.4) R is a rebutting defeater for P as a prima facie reason for Q if and only if R is a defeater and R is a reason for believing $\sim Q$.
- (2.5) R is an undercutting defeater for P as a prima facie reason for S to believe Q if and only if R is a defeater and R is a reason for denying that P wouldn't be true unless Q were true.

Pollock's pioneering work on defeaters centered on the latter. His account of undercutting defeaters is also the target of Sturgeon's counterexamples.

2 | Sturgeon's counterexamples

Sturgeon (2014, pp. 114–115) offers two counterexamples in support of the claim that Pollock's account of undercutting defeaters is too weak. Since the second, dubbed *The Misinformed Milk Taster*, is a variation of the first, dubbed *The Milk Taster*, my focus will be on the first:

Subject S tastes a bit of milk to see if it's gone off. Being a normal milk taster, S is unaware that her view of the milk is based on smell as much as taste. Indeed she believes her view of the milk is *not* based on smell, not even in part. When she tastes the milk, however, S has a certain complex gustatory and olfactory experience; and she comes to believe on its basis that the milk is o.k. But S is unaware that she is basing her view of the milk on smell. We may even suppose that S would deny this is true were she to consider the matter. Suppose the milk taster is then told, by someone she trusts, that her nose is bunged up, that she is subject to random olfactory hallucination. This leads her, after a bit of reflection, to deny that she wouldn't have had her overall gustatory and olfactory experience of the milk unless the milk were o.k. After all, she realises that her overall gustatory and olfactory experience of the milk includes the olfactory part of that experience; and she believes herself to be subject to random olfactory hallucination. Nevertheless, her new information does not, and should not, lead her to change her view of the milk. She continues rationally to believe that the milk is o.k. on the basis of her complex gustatory and olfactory experience.

Sturgeon (2014, p. 116) offers a single counterexample, dubbed *The Presupposer*, in support of the claim that the account is too strong:

Subject S is a normal person who begins with belief in the complex negation said by Pollock to be evidentially supported by undercutting defeaters. Let her start out with closed eyes, a desire to know if a red thing is before her, and a firm *presupposition* that it is not the case that it wouldn't look to her as if a red thing were before her unless a red thing were before her. She opens her eyes, it looks as if a red thing is before her, and she comes to believe, on that basis, that a red thing is before her.

She should not have formed the belief. She has undercutting defeat for her visual experience as a reason for her belief. But she does not have an undercutting defeater in Pollock's sense; for she does not accept the complex negation by appeal to something which supports it. She presupposes the complex negation is true. But it is clear that that alone is sufficient for undercutting defeat.

3 | Response to the Presupposer case

I begin with the claim that the account is too strong. Sturgeon targets Pollock's contention that R is an undercutting defeater for P as a *prima facie* reason for believing Q only if R is a *reason* for denying that P wouldn't be true unless Q were true. He argues that (1) the presupposer believes that it is not the case that it wouldn't look to her as if a red thing were before her unless a red thing were before her, but not on the basis of some reason; and (2) she should not believe that a red object is before her on the basis of her visual experience since the belief in (1) is an undercutting defeater for her visual experience as a reason for her belief. Since the presupposer did not base that belief on a reason, her belief does not satisfy Pollock's definition of undercutting defeat. The argument is not compelling since (2) is a restatement of the conclusion that the case is alleged to support.¹

1. Bergmann (2006) defends the view that unsupported beliefs can be defeaters. I do not consider his arguments in this paper, but his position is open to the objection that I present against Sturgeon.

There are independent considerations that cast doubt on the view that an unsupported belief in a defeater is sufficient for defeat. To see this, consider a variant of Sturgeon's Presupposer case, called *The Optimistic Cognizer*:

S starts out with closed eyes, a desire to know if a red thing is before her and a firm presupposition that visual perception is reliable in her circumstances. She opens her eyes, it looks as if there is a red thing before her and she comes to believe on that basis that there is a red thing before her. She is then told that the object before her is being illuminated by red light. She should *not* form the belief that it is not the case that it would not look to her as if a red object were before her unless a red thing were before her. She has a rebutting defeater for that belief.

What is the upshot? The Presupposer case is alleged to show that an unsupported belief in an undercutting defeater blocks justification. The Optimistic Cognizer case shows that if that contention is correct then an unsupported belief in the negation of an undercutting defeater (i.e., a belief that the source of the belief in question is reliable) blocks defeat. So, if Sturgeon's contention is correct, S can resist any belief to the effect that her visual perception is unreliable in present circumstances, no matter how well supported it is. She has a defeater-defeater and, as a consequence, her belief remains justified. More generally, if S presupposes that others are unreliable, she frees herself from having to consider any evidence from sources other than herself. She has a rebutting defeater for any belief whose source is testimony. Hence, accepting the view that unjustified beliefs retain their power to defeat results in implausibly low standards for justified beliefs. In effect, *prima facie* reasons can be transformed into virtually indefeasible reasons merely by believing the appropriate defeater-defeaters.

The net effect of Sturgeon's contention is that both defeat and ultimate justification are virtually completely unconstrained. One can ensure that any *prima facie* source of justification *never* produces justified beliefs merely by believing that it is unreliable. Moreover, one can ensure that any *prima facie* source of justification *virtually always* produces justified beliefs merely by believing that it is reliable in present circumstances, believing that others

are unreliable and refraining from believing the negation of any belief that it produces.²

Unless one embraces the view that defeat and ultimate justification are virtually unconstrained, one must deny that unjustified beliefs can be defeaters. It follows that S's belief that p is a defeater only if it is justified or supported by some reason. This condition has both a weak and a strong reading. The weak reading requires only that S have some justification or supporting reason for the belief that p. The strong reading requires, in addition, that S base the belief that p on that justification or supporting reason. The question of which is the correct reading will be addressed in Section 4.

4 | Response to the Misinformed Milk Taster case

I now turn to the claim that the account is too weak. Sturgeon supports this claim by appeal to the Milk Taster case. He claims that (1) the Milk Taster's belief that the milk is o.k. is based on a complex gustatory and olfactory experience, and (2) the Milk Taster has reason to deny that she would not have had her overall gustatory and olfactory experience of the milk unless the milk were o.k., and (3) that reason should not lead her to change her belief about the taste of the milk. Hence, having a reason to believe that a source is unreliable is not sufficient to defeat justification of a belief based on that source. But what more is required?

Sturgeon maintains that a belief about the basis of the undercut belief is also necessary. Suppose that you believe Φ and U is the claim that source S is untrustworthy about whether Φ is true. Sturgeon (2014, 117) maintains that

There is a very tight connection between circumstances in which belief is undercut by a defeater and those in which higher-order belief exists concerning the way in which the undercut belief is itself based. . . . Belief in U undercuts belief in Φ exactly when you are committed to their being a strong link between your belief in Φ and source of information S.

2. The exception is the case of a source that produces both the belief that p and the belief that not-p. Both are not justified.

So Sturgeon is committed to the following biconditional:

- (S1) Your belief that source S is untrustworthy about whether Φ is true undercuts your belief that Φ iff you believe that Φ is based on source S.

The argument of Section 3 establishes that (S1) is too weak. Your unsupported belief that source S is untrustworthy about whether Φ is true is not an undercutting defeater. Your belief is a defeater only if it is justified or supported by some reason. Hence, (S1) must be replaced by (S2):

- (S2) Your justified belief that source S is untrustworthy about whether Φ is true undercuts your belief that Φ iff you believe that Φ is based on source S.

(S2), however, is also problematic.

Sturgeon offers no defense of the claim that an unsupported belief that Φ is based on source S is sufficient to undercut belief that Φ . Moreover, that claim has an implausible consequence. Consider case 1 of *The Visualist*:

Subject S is a normal person who begins with the belief that all her beliefs are based on sight. Let her start out with blocked ears, a desire to know whether there is a dog in her vicinity, and a firm presupposition that all her beliefs are based on sight. She unblocks her ears, it sounds as if there is a dog barking and she comes to believe, on that basis, that there is a dog in the vicinity. She is then told that sight is unreliable in present circumstances.

(S2) has the consequence that, in case 1, the Visualist's belief that there is a dog in the vicinity is defeated provided that she continues to believe that sight is the source of all her beliefs and refrains from believing that her belief about the dog is based on hearing.

Consider case 2 of *The Visualist*:

Subject S is a normal person who begins with the belief that all her beliefs are based on sight. Let her start out

with blocked ears, a desire to know whether there is a dog in her vicinity, and a firm presupposition that all her beliefs are based on sight. She unblocks her ears, it sounds as if there is a dog barking and she comes to believe, on that basis, that there is a dog in the vicinity. She is then told that hearing is unreliable in present circumstances.

(S2) has the consequence that, in case 2, the Visualist's belief that there is a dog in the vicinity remains justified provided that she continues to believe that sight is the source of all her beliefs and refrains from believing that her belief about the dog is based on hearing.

The two Visualist cases establish that (S2) has an implausible consequence. Since (S2) imposes no constraints on the subject's beliefs about the source of justification of her beliefs, it has the consequence that defeat and ultimate justification are unconstrained by undercutting defeaters. If one has a justified belief that some source *S* is unreliable, one can reject any other belief merely by believing that it is based on source *S*. Conversely, one can insulate one's beliefs from undercutting defeaters to the effect that some source *S* is unreliable merely by refraining from believing that any of one's beliefs are based on source *S*.

This implausible consequence strongly suggests that (S2) be revised to require that your belief that Φ is based on source *S* undercuts your belief that Φ only if that belief is justified. This result parallels our earlier result concerning the status of unjustified defeaters and leads to the following revision of (S2):

(S3) Your justified belief that source *S* is untrustworthy about whether Φ is true undercuts your belief that Φ iff your belief that Φ is based on source *S* is justified or supported by some reason.

The revised condition (*i.e.*, the right condition) has both a weak and a strong reading. The weak reading requires only that one have some justification or supporting reason for the belief that Φ is based on source *S*. The strong reading requires, in addition, that one's belief that Φ is based on source *S* is based on that justification or supporting reason.

The strong reading of the right condition faces a problem. It has the consequence that one can insulate one's beliefs from defeat by undercutters merely by refraining from forming beliefs about the sources of one's beliefs. Consider the case of *The Unreflective Cognizer*:

Suppose that S is a normal cognizer who has a wide range of prima facie justified beliefs based on diverse sources such as visual perception, auditory perception and memory. S, however, is unreflective about the sources of his beliefs and, as a consequence, forms no beliefs about the source of his beliefs.

The strong reading of the revised condition in (S3) has the consequence that none of S's beliefs are open to defeat by undercutters. That consequence is implausible since it allows one to arbitrarily lower the standards for the ultimate justification of one's prima facie justified beliefs by refraining from forming beliefs about the source of one's beliefs. The following weak reading of (S3) avoids that implausible consequence:

(S4) Your justified belief that S is untrustworthy about whether Φ is true undercuts your belief that Φ iff you have some justification or reason to believe that Φ is based on source S.

The two Visualist cases also suggest that the correct reading of the left condition is the weak reading. So we now have:

(S5) Your having some justification or reason to believe that S is untrustworthy about whether Φ is true undercuts your belief that Φ iff you have some justification or reason to believe that Φ is based on source S.

(S5) leaves in place a higher-order requirement for the operation of undercutting defeaters, which is sufficient to support Sturgeon's primary contention that undercutting and rebutting defeaters work in fundamentally different ways *provided that* he is correct in maintaining that rebutting defeaters work in splendid isolation.

5 | Do rebutting defeaters work in isolation?

Sturgeon's contention that rebutters and undercutters work in different ways is supported by two claims: (1) undercutters do their work in tandem with higher-order commitments, and (2) rebutters do their work in splendid isolation. However, as I will now argue, (2) is false. The argument proceeds in two steps. The first draws from our earlier discussion of Sturgeon's Presupposer case. There I rejected the view that an unjustified belief that not-P is a rebutting defeater for a justified belief that P on the grounds that it has the consequence that both defeat and ultimate justification are unconstrained.

The second draws out the consequences of rejecting unjustified rebutting defeaters. If an unjustified belief that not-P is not a defeater for a justified belief that P, it follows that a belief that not-P is a rebutting defeater for the justified belief that P only if it is justified.³ We are now faced with the question: To what degree must a belief that not-P be justified in order to defeat a belief that P justified to degree d ? Pollock addressed this issue only late in his career. He offers his most comprehensive treatment of the issue in his 1995 book *Cognitive Carpentry*. There he argues that a belief that not-P defeats a belief that P justified to degree d only if it is justified to at least degree d . Since nothing turns on the correct answer to this question for purposes of my argument, I will adopt Pollock's answer in order to make my argument more concrete.

Consider a cognizer A. Suppose that source S_1 justifies A's belief that P to degree d_1 , that source S_2 justifies A's belief that not-P to degree d_2 , and that $d_1 = d_2$. (S_1 and S_2 need not be different sources). Is this sufficient for A's belief that not-P to defeat A's justification for the belief that P? There are three possible responses:

1. Weak Internalist: No, A must *believe* that $d_1 = d_2$.
2. Strong Internalist: No, A must believe that $d_1 = d_2$ and that belief must be *justified*.
3. Externalist: Yes.

I will examine each in turn.

3. Throughout this section, I assume the weak reading of 'p is justified' and similar expressions.

If one endorses the Weak Internalist response, then higher-order beliefs play a role in rebutting defeat. In order for not-P to rebut P, the cognizer must have (at a minimum) the following beliefs: (1) P is justified to degree d_1 ; and (2) not-P is justified to degree d_2 . These beliefs are not the same type of higher-order beliefs implicated in Sturgeon's account of undercutting defeat since they don't make reference to the source of justification but they are, nevertheless, higher-order beliefs. Moreover, their necessity is sufficient to reject Sturgeon's claim that rebutters do their work in splendid isolation.

If one endorses the Strong Internalist response, then Sturgeon-type higher-order beliefs also come into play. According to the Strong Internalist response, one must have (at a minimum) justified beliefs that (1) P is justified to degree d_1 ; and (2) not-P is justified to degree d_2 . It is hard to see how one could have such justified beliefs without taking into account the source of justification. After all, differences in degree of justification are not a function solely of the content of a belief since two beliefs with the same content can be justified to different degrees. The differences in degree of justification are due, in the first instance, to the *source* of justification and, in the second, to the *conditions* (both internal and external to the cognizer) in which the source is operating. So, on the Strong Internalist response, the cognizer must have (in addition) justified beliefs of the form: (1*) P is justified by source S_1 , and (2*) not-P is justified by source S_2 , where S_1 and S_2 , respectively, are the sources of the justification of the belief that P and the belief that not-P. Hence, on the Strong Internalist account, Sturgeon's contention that undercutting defeaters, but not rebutting defeaters, exercise their potential to defeat only in conjunction with Sturgeon-type higher-order beliefs is false.

Sturgeon can defend the view that rebutting defeaters work in splendid isolation by adopting the Externalist response. According to that response, the fact that $d_1 = d_2$ is sufficient for A's belief that not-P to defeat the justification of A's belief that P. However, there is a corresponding externalist position with respect to undercutting defeaters. Suppose that A believes that P, P is based on source S and A believes that S is untrustworthy with respect to the truth of P. Is this sufficient for the latter belief to be an undercutting defeater for the former? There are three possible responses:

1. Weak Internalist: No, A must *believe* that S is the source of the belief that P.
2. Strong Internalist: No, A must believe S is the source of the belief that P and that belief must be *justified*.
3. Externalist: Yes.

So, if Sturgeon endorses the Externalist response in the case of rebutting defeaters, he must explain why that response fails in the case of undercutting defeaters. If he cannot do so then, although his contention that rebutters work in splendid isolation is correct, that contention fails to support his leading claim that rebutters and undercutters work in fundamentally different ways. I doubt that he can do so. Moreover, if one thinks that the Externalist response is correct in the case of rebutting defeaters, as Sturgeon does, than one also has reason to reject the intuition that supports his conclusion that Pollock's account of undercutting defeaters is too weak. That intuition leads to an implausible consequence in the case of rebutting defeat.

The only defense that Sturgeon offers in support of the Weak Internalist response in the case of undercutting defeaters is the case of the Milk Taster. Boiled down to its essential features, the case turns on the following intuition (or claim):

Suppose that A's belief that P is justified by source S. Pollock claims that having a reason to believe that source S is untrustworthy with respect to the truth of P is a defeater for that justification. Sturgeon's intuition (or claim) is that if A does not believe that source S is the source of the belief that P, then it is rational for A to continue to believe that P.

There is, however, a parallel intuition (or claim) that can be offered for rebutters:

Suppose that A's belief that P is justified to degree d by source S. Pollock claims that having a belief that not-P justified to at least degree d is a defeater for that justification. The parallel intuition (or claim) is that if A does not believe that his justification for the belief that not-P is

greater than or equal to his justification for the belief that P, then it is rational for A to continue to believe that P.

It is hard to see a difference between the two cases. Both specify a *condition* that a defeater must satisfy. Both involve *ignorance* on the part of the cognizer that the condition is satisfied. One involves ignorance of the *source* of justification; the other involves ignorance of the *degree* of justification. There appears to be no relevant difference between the two.

6 | Conclusion

Sturgeon's primary contention is that rebutting defeaters and undercutting defeaters work in fundamentally different ways. That contention is supported by two claims: (1) undercutters do their work in tandem with higher-order commitments, and (2) rebutters do their work in splendid isolation. Sturgeon supports the first by appeal to the Milk Taster case but offers no support for the second. I have argued that the considerations that he offers in support of his first claim apply with equal force to rebutting defeaters. Hence, it follows that either both rebutting and undercutting defeaters do their work in tandem with higher-order commitments or neither does so. Consequently, it is false that rebutting and undercutting defeaters work in fundamentally different ways.⁴

4. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Workshop on Defeaters, Higher Order Evidence and the Limits of Defeat, University of Cologne, June 2015. Thanks to Thomas Grundmann for organizing the workshop and inviting me to participate, and to the workshop participants for their valuable feedback and comments.

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