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Critical Notice

Reductivism, Nonreductivism, and Incredulity about Streumer's Error Theory

Bart Streumer, *Unbelievable Errors: An Error Theory about All Normative Judgments*. Oxford University Press, 2017, 256 pp, \$60.00, ISBN 9780198785897.

Abstract In *Unbelievable Errors*, Bart Streumer argues via elimination for a global error theory, according to which all normative judgments ascribe properties that do not exist. Streumer also argues that it is not possible to believe his view, which is a claim he uses in defending his view against several objections. I argue that reductivists and nonreductivists have compelling responses to Streumer's elimination argument – responses constituting strong reason to reject Streumer's diagnosis of any alleged incredulity about his error theory.

Introduction

Bart Streumer's *Unbelievable Errors: An Error Theory About All Normative Judgements* takes its reader on a whirlwind tour of various packages of theses concerning the metaphysics, semantics, psychology, and epistemology of normativity. By my count, Streumer argues against a dozen or so varieties of Nonreductive Realism, Reductive Realism, and Noncognitivism. As the book's subtitle indicates, Streumer's error-theoretic view that all normative judgments ascribe properties

that do not exist is said to be the only one left standing. But as the book's title suggests, Streumer also argues that it is not a view that anyone can believe fully. Recognizing that error theories are often tough pills to swallow, Streumer flips the incredulity that many of us are likely to experience in response to his arguments on its head. He argues that such incredulity is exactly what we should expect if his error theory were true. Philosophical gems like this move can be found throughout the book. It's bold stuff that will have philosophers talking.

Nevertheless, I argue that Streumer's objections to Reductive and Nonreductive Realist families of views aren't difficult to resist. Because resisting his objections requires little in the way of philosophical machinery, as we'll see, I take this to suggest that Streumer mislocates the source of whatever incredulity we might experience in response to his error theory. In Section 1, I outline the structure of the dilemma Streumer poses to Reductive Realists, arguing that Reductivists may grab either horn of it. In Section 2, I argue that Streumer's most original of his many objections to Nonreductive Realism conflicts with a plausible way to understand what we're up to when we're doing substantive normative theorizing.

1. Reductive Realism

1.1 Dilemmas Upon Dilemmas

One of the many virtues of *Unbelievable Errors* is that it is chock full of arguments. Few packages of theses concerning the subject matter of normativity taken seriously by philosophers working primarily in the Western, Analytic tradition escape Streumer's critical attention. This includes Reductive Realism ("reductivism"), which he characterizes initially as the view that there are

normative properties that are identical to descriptive¹ properties – properties that are individuated by the normative *predicates*² with which it is possible for us to ascribe them. (p.42, 66) Understanding reductivism in this *linguistic* kind of way makes it natural to think, as Streumer seems to think, that reductivism is not a complete package of theses concerning the subject matter of normativity unless it also includes a thesis explaining how it is possible for normative words to be about properties, or have properties as their content.

But, according to Streumer, offering such an explanation is a no-win scenario for reductivists, as they face the False Guarantee Objection if they give one of the allegedly available answers and the Regress Objection if they give the other. Thus, Streumer concludes, either way we should reject reductivism. Call this the *metasemantic dilemma* against *linguistic reductivism*.

If Streumer is right that characterizing reductivism linguistically gets the metasemantic dilemma going in the first place, then it might occur to reductivists to provide a *non-linguistic* characterization of their view to avoid it. Indeed, Streumer takes up this reaction in Section 29 of Chapter V, entitled “Can Reductive Realists Say That the Difference Between Normative and Descriptive Properties is a Difference in *the Nature of These Properties?*.” (p.65, emphasis mine) Unfortunately for reductivists, Streumer thinks the answer to this section’s titular question is ‘No’. And *that* gets his master objection to reductivism going.

Streumer is arguing ultimately that reductivists can define their view linguistically or non-linguistically. If reductivists define it linguistically then they face the metasemantic dilemma above, but if they define it non-linguistically then they face another world of trouble that I’ll

¹ I am following Streumer in distinguishing the normative from the descriptive.

² Streumer (p.1) characterizes normative and descriptive predicates ostensively, writing that “Normative predicates include, for example, ‘is right’, ‘is wrong’, ‘is good’, ‘is bad’, and ‘is a reason’ (if this is equivalent to ‘counts in favour’). Descriptive predicates include, for example, ‘is a desk’, ‘is white’, and ‘is made of wood and steel’.

discuss in the sub-section immediately following this one. Thus, we should reject reductivism either way. Call this the *formulation dilemma*. With it on the table, I will turn my attention to evaluating its details.

1.2 Metaphysical Reductivism

In the previous sub-section, I offered an interpretation of Streumer's argumentative strategy against reductivism in which reductivists face a dilemma formulating their view. Reductivists who define their view linguistically face the metasemantic dilemma, which I'll discuss in the next sub-section. In this sub-section, I discuss the problems that allegedly accrue to reductivists who define their view non-linguistically.

What might reductivism look like when it is understood non-linguistically? Streumer starts with a highly natural sounding idea. Reductivists, he says, could deny "that if their view is true, the difference between normative and descriptive properties is a difference in language that is not matched by a difference in *the nature of these properties*." (p.65, my emphasis) Streumer seems to be suggesting that reductivists can make claims about normative language – for example, that a normative word like 'wrong' corefers with descriptive words like 'failing to maximize pleasure'. But he also seems to be suggesting that reductivists could make the further claim that the descriptive properties to which normative properties are identical are in some sense distinguished from other, run-of-the-mill descriptive properties by their natures. In other words, reductivists might understand their view, first-and-foremost, as a *metaphysical* thesis concerning the nature of normative properties. Call such reductivists *metaphysical reductivists*.

Immediately after putting this natural characterization of metaphysical reductivism forward, Streumer raises two concerns about it, the first one of which can be dismissed quickly. First, he unpacks this characterization of metaphysical reductivism more fully, suggesting that we understand it in the following way:

“(1) Descriptive properties that are identical to normative properties have a normative dimension that other descriptive properties lack.” (p.66)

He then unpacks (1) further:

“(2) Descriptive properties that are identical to normative properties can be ascribed with normative *predicates*, but other descriptive properties cannot.” (p.66, my emphasis)

Streumer then dismisses (2) and hence (1) for the reason that “it would not enable reductivists to say that the difference between normative and descriptive properties is a difference in the nature of these properties.” (p.67) This is correct but not news. Streumer told us he was going to provide a *metaphysical* characterization of reductivism. It is no surprise, then, that the *linguistic* reading of (1) that (2) provides does not help us understand the *metaphysical* reductivist’s claim that normative properties are distinguished by their *metaphysical* natures, not by their relationships to normative words.

The second concern with metaphysical reductivism that Streumer raises begins with his suggestion that we take (1) to mean either

“(3) Descriptive properties that are identical to normative properties have a certain second-order normative property that other descriptive properties lack,” (p.67)

or

“(4) Descriptive properties that are identical to normative properties have a normative part that other descriptive properties lack.” (p.67)

Streumer rejects both proposals. His problem with the reading of (1) that (3) provides is that metaphysical reductivists would have to say that “this second-order normative property must also be identical to a descriptive property.” (p.67) Similarly, Streumer’s problem with the reading of (1) that (4) provides is that metaphysical reductivists would have to say that “The normative parts of these descriptive properties are...normative properties. And as before...these normative properties must also be identical to descriptive properties.” (p.67)

Though Streumer doesn’t say explicitly what is problematic about these commitments that metaphysical reductivists allegedly incur, he seems to be thinking that the problem is that these commitments generate *regresses*. To illustrate with a concrete version of metaphysical reductivism of type (3), suppose I claim that the normative property of being wrong is identical to the descriptive property of failing to maximize pleasure, which itself has the higher-order normative property of being something that a virtuous person would not do. Now, according to Streumer, my view forces me to say that the higher-order normative property of being something a virtuous person would not do is identical to a descriptive property. Suppose I answer accordingly, claiming that the higher-order normative property of being something a virtuous person would not do is identical to the descriptive property of being something the Buddha would not do. But at this point, on this kind of view, I have to say that the descriptive property of being something the Buddha would not do itself has a further higher-order normative property, which is identical to a further higher-order descriptive property, which is...and so on.

Figure 1.

Formulation Dilemma to Reductivism



Metasemantic Dilemma to Linguistic Reductivism

Regress Objection to Metaphysical Reductivism

False Guarantee Objection

Regress Objection

One reaction to Streumer's regress objection is to point out that it's not obviously problematic to be committed to a regress of properties. Indeed, few seem to bat an eye at the apparent fact that every property has the property of being a property, which has the property of being a property, which has the property of being a property, and so on. Perhaps Streumer is thinking there aren't enough properties to go around, or perhaps he's thinking there are but that the resulting view fails to be sufficiently explanatory. In any case, it seems fair for metaphysical reductivists of the kind Streumer is imagining not to worry about his regress until he tells them exactly why it's a problem.

Another reaction is to point out that a whole family of metaphysical reductivists look like they escape Streumer's regress objection, entirely. For example, suppose, to continue with our concrete metaphysical reductivist view, that the normative property of being wrong is identical to the descriptive property of failing to maximize pleasure. But suppose we add to this that while we can express our view using identity statements, it's not the identity statements that makes our view reductive. Rather, it's that these statements are underwritten by metaphysical analyses, e.g. *wrongness* is metaphysically explained by, constituted by, or made up out of *failing to maximize pleasure*, which itself is metaphysically explained by, constituted by, etc. *failing, maximizing*, and

pleasure.³ These views don't seem to fit Streumer's molds, so they aren't vulnerable in any obvious way to his objections.⁴

In fact, we don't even have to look outside the family of the sort of identity views Streumer discusses to find ones that escape his regress objection. Continue to suppose that wrongness is failing to maximize pleasure. Now suppose that we're metaphysical reductivists who hold a slightly different version of type (3). But instead of making the regress-generating claim that failing to maximize pleasure has a higher-order *normative* property, we claim that failing to maximize pleasure is distinguished by possessing a higher-order *descriptive* property, e.g. the property of being something that the Buddha would not do. This is another version of metaphysical reductivism that doesn't have the form to be set off on Streumer's regress.⁵

These replies are put forward as challenges, not decisive objections. There are responses available to Streumer, several of which are described briefly in various notes of this paper. Nevertheless, I conclude that these objections constitute strong reason to doubt Streumer's regress objection to metaphysical reductivism. Before moving on to discuss his objections on the other side of the formulation dilemma, I will close this sub-section with an observation concerning my argumentative strategy thus far – an observation that should make us suspicious of some of the positive moves Streumer makes in the second half of his book.

³ See Schroeder (2007)

⁴ In response, Streumer could claim that such views are still ordinary identity-based views in disguise. Such views would have the right form to escape his regress objection, perhaps, only if notions like “metaphysical explanation” are *worldly metaphysical* notions. But, Streumer could argue, “explanation” sounds a lot like *unworldly conceptual* ideology, no matter how loudly we insist that we're talking about metaphysics. See Byrne and Thompson (manuscript).

⁵ Streumer might offer the following response: These views locate the distinctness of metaphysical reductive views in claims about language, not metaphysics, since reductivism would simply be the view that two phrases, e.g. ‘wrongness’ and ‘failing to maximize pleasure’ – pick out the same property (e.g. the property of failing to maximize happiness, which has the higher-order property of being something the Buddha would not do). Thus, Streumer might conclude, such views are vulnerable to his objections to linguistic reductivism, which I turn to in the next section.

As the title, *Unbelievable Errors*, suggests, a big part of the book concerns why it is allegedly not possible to believe Streumer's error theory. Because Streumer's arguments against versions of reductivism, nonreductivism, and noncognitivism strike him and anyone else like him as clearly correct, Streumer and anyone else like him are stuck with the truth of his error-theoretic claim that all normative judgments are false, including the normative judgment that we have reason to believe his error theoretic claim. But this claim doesn't seem to be one that Streumer and anyone else like him can bring themselves to believe. That, Streumer thinks, cries out for explanation. And the explanation he lands on is that it not possible to believe what one believes that there is no reason to believe, which is the situation that Streumer and anyone else like him, i.e. those who competently reflect on his arguments against different versions of reductivism, nonreductivism, and noncognitivism, find themselves in.

Notice, however, that my argument against the non-linguistic side of Streumer's formulation dilemma above wasn't really much of one. All I did was point out that his objections do not target every version of metaphysical reductivism. As soon as I made this observation, however, I was led to doubt one half of Streumer's master objection to reductivism. This is telling. The fact that I was so quickly skeptical should make us suspicious of whether there is really any mystery as to why Streumer's version of the error theory is hard to believe: His objections to reductivism aren't as compelling as they might seem initially.⁶

1.3 Linguistic Reductivism

⁶ Schroeder (manuscript) makes a similar observation.

In the previous sub-section, I argued that some reductivists who define their view as a non-linguistic metaphysical view, thereby grabbing the second horn of the formulation dilemma, have little to worry about from Streumer. In this sub-section, I'll argue that reductivists who follow Streumer in defining their view linguistically, as the view that there are normative properties that are identical to descriptive properties – properties that are individuated by the normative predicates with which it is possible for us to ascribe them, are in a similar boat. In other words, the linguistic side of the formulation dilemma against reductivism need not worry *linguistic reductivists*, as we might call them.

According to Streumer, it is incumbent upon linguistic reductivists to explain how normative words ascribe normative properties or come to have the content that they do. Reductivists can say that the explanation of how normative predicates ascribe normative properties either (i) doesn't in any sense invoke the true theory from substantive ethical theorizing or (ii) it does.⁷ If reductivists give the first kind of answer then they face the *false guarantee objection* and if they give the second then the *regress objection* rears its head, both of which I'll start to unpack momentarily. Either way, Streumer concludes, it is not possible for linguistic reductivists to tell a satisfactory metasemantic story about how normative predicates ascribe normative properties, and hence we should reject linguistic reductivism on this basis. This is the metasemantic dilemma against linguistic reductivism.

Focus on the false guarantee objection that allegedly threatens linguistic reductivists who opt for (i). Streumer discusses linguistic reductivists who might defend a kind of view that borrows from Richard Boyd (1988), according to which what makes it the case that a normative predicate

⁷ For (i), see (p.42). For (ii), see (p.43).

such as ‘right’ ascribes a descriptive property is that the property causally regulates the use of the predicate. (p.49) According to Streumer, if we were to apply ‘right’ to an action that has this property, then the corresponding judgment expressed by our use of this predicate would then be guaranteed to be true. But, Streumer says, this result is vulnerable to counterexamples.

Imagine, for example, that Fred belongs to a deeply depraved community, such that his use of ‘right’ is causally regulated by the descriptive property of maximizing suffering. According to Streumer, Boyd’s view predicts that the judgments expressed by Fred’s uses of ‘right’ are guaranteed to be true when applied to actions that have this property, even when Fred predicates ‘right’ of an intuitively abhorrent action like an act of recreational torture. Because Boydian linguistic reductivism falsely implies that Fred’s judgment *that recreational torture is right* is guaranteed to be true, Streumer says, we should reject Boydian linguistic reductivism. Moreover, Streumer suggests that this supports the conclusion that *no* version of Boydian linguistic reductivism could avoid this implication. This is the false guarantee objection.⁸

Notice, however, that even if we grant Streumer’s claim that this version of Boydian linguistic reductivism falsely implies that Fred’s judgment that recreational torture is right is true, it is hard to see how this licenses his claim that *no* version of Boydian linguistic reductivism could be true. For all it takes is a *single* view that doesn’t fall prey to his Fred-style counterexample to see this.⁹ Consider, then, the view that part of *what it is* to *use* the normative concept RIGHT that is constitutive of those judgments containing it expressed by sentences containing the English word

⁸ Streumer (p.55) acknowledges that this objection owes a lot to Horgan’s and Timmons’s (1991) *Moral Twin Earth* case, but insists that his version of the objection is different because it “does not derive a claim about meaning from a claim about disagreement.”

⁹ My reply is in the spirit of a kind of defense of reductivism that Finlay (2014) champions.

‘right’ is to desire to avoid maximizing suffering. This means that desiring to avoid maximizing suffering is a necessary condition on using RIGHT.

The availability of such a view allows a kind of Boydian linguistic reductivist to provide a crisp reply to Streumer’s Fred-style counterexample: Fred isn’t using the graphemes ‘r’, ‘i’, ‘g’, ‘h’, ‘t’ to express a judgment that is constituted by the normative concept RIGHT. So, Fred is expressing a judgment that isn’t about rightness. It is not, then, an intuitively unacceptable implication of at least one version of Boydian linguistic reductivism that Fred’s judgment that *recreational torture is right_{FRED}* is guaranteed to be true.^{10, 11}

In response, Streumer might object that such a view makes the putative substantive normative truth that rightness is maximal suffering avoidance into a “conceptual truth,” and that’s a problem.¹² Replying to this objection in full would take us too far afield. But it’s worth gesturing at one quick line of reply, because it’s an objection that underestimates the explanatory resources available to Boydian linguistic reductivists, and linguistic reductivists more generally, in a way that is common in ethics.

Continue to suppose that desiring to avoid maximizing suffering is a necessary condition on using RIGHT. Add to this supposition another: that part of what it is use RIGHT is to use an *unanalyzable cognitive concept* to think about the property of not maximizing suffering, such that

¹⁰ Remember, Streumer’s argument “does not derive a claim about meaning from a claim about disagreement.” So, he cannot reply to my objection with the claim, as proponents of Moral Twin Earth might, that this version of Boydian linguistic reductivism implies falsely that Fred could not use ‘right’ to disagree with us.

¹¹ This view handles Streumer’s related political case (p.50) similarly, where the property of maximizing equality causally regulates the use of ‘just’ in a “liberal” community and the property of maximizing freedom causally regulates the use of ‘just’ in a “conservative” community. Boydian linguistic reductivists can say that these communities are using ‘just’ to express different concepts, such that their “conflicting judgments” about some institution can both be true. This sort of picture on which there is such diversity in concept deployment in ordinary discourse finds support from Ludlow (2017), and in academic discourse among ethicists in particular from Finlay (forthcoming).

¹² Streumer, along with many others, has offered this kind of reply in correspondence.

using this unanalyzable cognitive concept *while* desiring to avoid maximizing suffering is necessary and sufficient for using RIGHT.¹³ Now, there are different accounts we could give to explain *how* such a concept is unanalyzable, including one on which the unanalyzable cognitive concept is a *demonstrative concept*¹⁴ or one on which it is *picture-like* or *map-like*.¹⁵ The point is simply that there accounts available on which normative concepts do not have the right kind of structure to be analyzable, and hence accounts on which the truths associated with normative concepts are not “conceptual” in any standard sense.

As attractive as I happen to find these kind of views to be, it’s true that I don’t know whether or not they’re true. But neither does Streumer. And that’s the point. Whatever evidence Streumer is able to enlist from his Fred-style counterexample to a single version of Boydian linguistic reductivism does *not* put him in an epistemic position to conclude that *no* version of such a view could be true. It seems that reductivists who define their view linguistically also don’t have much to worry about from Streumer’s formulation dilemma.

Taking a step back, notice, too, that my reply to Streumer’s false guarantee objection wasn’t terribly advanced. It didn’t depend on developing any philosophical power tools, just the availability of a single view that Streumer didn’t consider. That it was easy to doubt another component of Streumer’s core objection to reductivism is more evidence, however, that we don’t need a sophisticated kind of explanation of why it is difficult to believe his version of the error theory. All we need is the very simple explanation that Streumer has failed to provide air-tight

¹³ See Laskowski (forthcoming) for an elaboration of this kind of hybrid view of normative concept use. Incidentally, this kind of picture also allows us to resist Streumer’s view that “A mental state is a normative judgement if and only if it can be expressed with a sentence that conceptually entails that something satisfies a normative predicate.” (p.2)

¹⁴ In clarifying some of his earlier commitments from his (2014), Ridge (2015) appears to endorse a view of this sort.

¹⁵ Taking inspiration from Camp (2007), I explore this idea in my dissertation and elsewhere (manuscript).

objections to every single possible rival to his own view, quite understandably given the wildly ambitious nature of such an undertaking.

2 Nonreductive Realism

2.1 Streumer's Objection from Utilitarianism

In the previous section, I argued that reductivists need not fear Streumer's formulation dilemma. Here I turn my attention to defending the nonreductive view that there are normative properties that are not identical to descriptive properties from one of his objections to it. This might sound like I am doing something of a one-eighty in defending families of views that are importantly at odds with one another. But I also take my responses on behalf of reductivists and nonreductivists to be unified, and not merely insofar as they are both defenses of realism about normativity. Rather, we'll continue to see that my responses are unified in that, at bottom, they concern getting the standards of evidence right in these debates.

Officially, Streumer's core objection to nonreductivism is not quite his own. Following Frank Jackson (1998) following Jaegwon Kim (1993), Streumer argues from the supervenience of normative properties on descriptive properties to their identity. His presentation of the argument is highly useful – it's lucid, contains several compelling and original rebuttals to a host of replies to the argument, and it's all in one convenient place. Since, however, the argument is also familiar to anyone who has been paying attention to recent mainstream debates in moral philosophy, I will instead discuss a version of this central objection to nonreductivism that is entirely Streumer's own.

The argument begins with the supposition that the “simple” utilitarian view that necessarily an action is right iff it maximizes happiness is correct. (p.30) If this view is correct, Streumer says, then the predicates ‘right’ and ‘maximizes happiness’ are necessarily coextensive. According to Streumer, two predicates ascribe the same property iff they are necessarily coextensive. Thus, ‘right’ and ‘maximizes happiness’ ascribe the same property. Thus, the property of being right is identical to a descriptive property. Thus, if the “simple first-order” utilitarian view concerning rightness is correct, then the normative property of being right is identical to a descriptive property. In other words, Streumer tells us, if this version of utilitarianism is true, then the nonreductive view that the normative property of being right is a sui generis property that is not identical to any descriptive property is false.

Streumer then attempts to generalize the argument, claiming that if “equally simple first-order views” of other normative properties like being a reason, being good, etc. are correct, then all normative properties are identical to descriptive properties. (p.30) To make my discussion of Streumer’s argument sharp, however, I will set aside this generalization step, by assuming that the property of being right is the only normative property across worlds.¹⁶ And to make my discussion even sharper, I will now argue that we can safely ignore a potentially distracting feature of Streumer’s argument.

Notice, Streumer invites us to suppose that a “simple” version of utilitarianism is correct. But Streumer doesn’t explain the distinction between “simple” and “more complicated” (p.31) first-

¹⁶ Incidentally, if you were able to imagine this, it seems to me that this is some evidence against the conceptual status of supervenience, which might be circumstantial evidence that Streumer shouldn’t lean so heavily on the idea that metaphysical supervenience is a “central thought” (p.6) about the subject matter of normativity in developing his objections.

order views. He seems to suggest that the utilitarian view above is “simple” in the sense that the right-hand side of the statement of the view only uses two *words*: ‘maximizes’ and ‘happiness’.

But the number of words we tend to use when we state utilitarian views like this is usually a matter of convenience, since such views typically aspire to tell us which actions are right for *any* action, and we could not know what such a view would say about the rightness of any action, unless we were painfully explicit about exactly what we mean by ‘maximizes’ and ‘happiness’. What, one might wonder otherwise, would it mean to ‘maximize happiness’ in a situation in which an agent has the option of doing something significantly pleasing now that restricts the options available to only low yielding options later on, or the option of doing something unpleasant now that makes several high yielding options available in the future? The “simple” utilitarian view that necessarily an action is right iff it maximizes happiness makes predictions about such a scenario, but it takes more than the words ‘maximizes’ and ‘happiness’ to say it.¹⁷ Since there is nothing obviously “simple” about utilitarianism, it is best to assume that the success of Streumer’s objection doesn’t hinge on it being so.

Turning directly now to Streumer’s objection, we can begin to see the trouble with it by following him in supposing the truth of the utilitarian view that necessarily, an action is right iff it maximizes happiness. We can suppose, too, that Streumer’s view of property individuation is true, such that necessarily coextensive predicates ascribe the same property. It follows from these suppositions, Streumer claims, that necessarily the normative property of being right is identical to the descriptive property of maximizing happiness. This seems to imply that necessarily utilitarianism is a *reductive* view about the nature of rightness. Indeed, it seems to further imply

¹⁷ See Laskowski (2018). See also Sinnott-Armstrong (2015), who points out that even the “simplest” of classical utilitarian views have at least 11 different substantive theses built into them.

that all the nonreductive utilitarians among us are not just mistaken but also confused. But it's a mistake to think that the nonreductive utilitarians among us are confused. Thus, we should reject Streumer's view of property individuation and his objection to nonreductivism along with it.

To make the point vivid, one of the most influential utilitarians of all time, Henry Sidgwick, is widely thought to have held a nonreductive version of utilitarianism.¹⁸ He accepts that an action is right iff it maximizes happiness. But he also *rejects* the view that necessarily an action is right iff *and because* it maximizes happiness. Because Streumer individuates properties only in terms of relations of covariation between the extensions of properties across possible worlds, Streumer's view of property individuation doesn't allow us to make sense of the versions of utilitarianism that Sidgwick accepts and rejects. Throughout the book, Streumer is clearly concerned not to make properties *too* fine-grained, (p.12) but his concern not to make properties the "shadows of concepts" seems to have carried him too far in the other direction.¹⁹

In reply, Streumer could pick up on an earlier suggestion that we made on his behalf in note four of Section 1.2. Streumer could reject the view that identities are underwritten by notions such as *metaphysical explanation*, *analysis*, and the like – notions that are perhaps more popularly known under the label of "grounding," which we seem to express with locutions like 'because'. Streumer could attempt to make good on this suggestion, by arguing that none of these notions track anything *in the world*. This might allow him to defend the implication that nonreductive utilitarians like Sidgwick are confused.

But it's not so clear that this move is available in the overall dialectical context of *Unbelievable Errors*. Recall, Streumer thinks we need to explain why we do not believe the error theory, in light

¹⁸ See especially Book 1, Chapter 3, Section 3 of Sidgwick (1907).

¹⁹ See Parfit (2017). See Laskowski (2018) for a discussion of the issue.

of the fact that all of his objections to all other rivals to it are so convincing. However, as soon as Streumer sets out to explain away any unintuitive implications of his objections, such as the implication that Sidgwick was confused, Streumer thereby concedes that such an implication is thereby hard to accept. But then he ends up with a straightforward rival explanation of why he and anyone else like him doesn't believe the error theory: It's because his objections to alternative views aren't convincing, and they aren't convincing because they carry commitments that are hard to accept.

Conclusion

Unbelievable Errors is a rewarding book. Reductivists, nonreductivists, or anyone else who wrestles with Streumer's bold objections will come away with a sharper perspective on the commitments of their own views, or different views entirely if they don't stay on their toes while engaging with them. Streumer packs an impressive number of arguments into 223 pages. He also implicitly challenges widespread views of what it is to be a responsible scholar in the 21st century with his impressive rate of engagement of the philosophical literature. Streumer's book sets a number of bars. This isn't to say that the book is perfect. In this paper, I argued that Streumer's objections to reductivists and nonreductivists don't live up to his ambitions. Moreover, I argued that these objections too easily come up short for us to go in for anything like Streumer's story about why we cannot believe the error theory. Both are believable kinds of errors.

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