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We Can Believe the Error Theory

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Abstract

Bart Streumer argues that it is not possible for us to believe the error theory, where by ‘error theory’ he means the claim that our normative beliefs are committed to the existence of normative properties even though such properties do not exist. In this paper, we argue that it is indeed possible to believe the error theory. First, we suggest a critical improvement to Streumer’s argument. As it stands, one crucial premise of that argument—that we cannot have a belief while believing that there is no reason to have it—is implausibly strong. We argue that for his purposes, Streumer’s argument only requires a weaker premise, namely that we cannot *rationally* have a belief while believing that there is no reason to have it. Secondly, we go on to refute the improved argument. Even in its weaker form, Streumer’s argument is either invalid or the crucial premise should be rejected.

In his paper ‘Can We Believe the Error Theory?’ (Streumer 2013), Bart Streumer argues that it is not possible for us to believe the error theory (where by ‘error theory’ he means the claim that our normative beliefs are committed to the existence of normative properties which do not exist).¹ Streumer also argues for several follow-up claims to this thesis, such as that we can come close to believing the error theory by believing parts of it at different times, and that far from being a problem for the error theory, our inability to believe it actually undermines many objections to it. These ingenious follow-up arguments are interesting in their own right, but we shall not address them here. Instead, we concentrate on Streumer’s core claim and show that he has given us no good reason – normative or otherwise – to doubt that we can believe the error theory.

¹ Throughout, page numbers within parentheses refer to this paper.

Whether we should do so or not is a separate question. We take no view either way in this paper.

The paper has three parts. In the first part, we lay out Streumer's central claims. In the second part, we suggest a critical improvement to Streumer's argument. As it stands, one crucial premise of that argument – that we cannot have a belief while believing there is no reason to have it – is implausibly strong. We argue that for his purposes, Streumer's argument only requires a weaker premise, namely that we cannot *rationally* have a belief while believing that there is no reason to have it. In the third part, we go on to refute the improved argument. Even in its weaker form, Streumer's argument is either invalid, or the crucial premise should be rejected.

1. The claim

The error theory at issue in Streumer's paper is a 'global' error theory. On his use of the term, an 'error theory' is a theory claiming that "normative judgments are beliefs that ascribe normative properties, even though such properties do not exist." (p. 194)

In other words, Streumer's error theory is not restricted to substantively moral properties and relations (as in John Mackie's infamous 'moral error theory'), but is meant to apply to *all* normative properties and relations. In particular, if the so-called 'reason relation' (i.e. the relation of some fact in the world favouring a

certain response on our part, whether that response is a belief, attitude or action) is a normative relation, then all its putative instances fall within the scope of the error theory.

Streumer's argument goes as follows. If the error theory is true, there are no reasons. If there are no reasons, there is no reason to believe the error theory. According to Streumer, we cannot fail to believe what we believe to be entailed by our own beliefs. But if we believe the error theory, we must believe that there is no reason to have that belief. Yet, according to Streumer, we cannot have a belief while believing there is no reason to have that belief. So we cannot believe the error theory.

For our purposes, the crucial premise of Streumer's argument is the following (p. 196):

(BELIEF) We cannot have a belief while believing that there is no reason for this belief.

In BELIEF, Streumer tells us, 'belief' should be read as 'full belief', which in turn is explicated in terms of confidence: "We *fully* believe that *p* if we are wholly confident that *p*, and we *partly* believe that *p* if we are fairly but not wholly confident that *p*." (p. 195) Apart from when we explicitly want to stress the adjective, we will follow Streumer's convention and use 'belief' as short for 'full

belief'. Streumer argues that a consequence of the error theory is that there is no reason to believe it (p. 197):

The property of being a reason for belief, in the sense of a consideration that counts in favor of a belief, is a normative property. If the error theory is true, this property does not exist. The error theory therefore entails that there is no reason to believe the error theory.

Given that, according to BELIEF, we cannot have a belief while believing that there is no reason to have it, Streumer concludes that we cannot believe the error theory.

2. The premise

We first take issue with BELIEF. This premise of Streumer's argument is implausibly strong.

Belief is a psychological state. We believe that p if we are wholly confident that p. But if so, whether someone can have a belief while believing there is no reason to have this belief is partly an empirical question. Streumer argues for BELIEF by appealing to intuitions about what we may plausibly assert (p. 196):

[S]uppose that someone says: “Socrates was mortal, but there is no reason to believe that Socrates was mortal.” [T]his person may be insincere, or may fail to understand what he is saying, or may be considering whether to give up one of these beliefs. If so, he does not fully believe what he says he believes. Alternatively, he may be sincere, may understand what he is saying, and may not be considering whether to give up one of these beliefs. But if so, he is too confused to fully believe what he says he believes.

Given that ‘belief’ in BELIEF means ‘full belief’, Streumer might be right that someone who doubts, or is not sincere, or does not understand what she is saying would not count as fully believing what she says. But given that a sincere speaker who understands the content of *p* only needs to be fully confident that *p* in order to fully believe that *p*, the issue of rationality (the speaker being ‘too confused’) is irrelevant to the question of what the speaker actually believes with respect to the individual proposition *p* (the case could be different with respect to the very different question of whether the speaker has any beliefs at all). Hence, Streumer has not provided a convincing case for BELIEF. So should we believe in BELIEF? What we need is a case where someone could, as a matter of fact, have full confidence in a proposition while also having full confidence in the proposition that there are no reasons in favour of it (we take it as granted on both sides that a belief that *P* is not in itself considered as a reason for *P* (at least not in this case)). We can think of at least two possible candidates for this role. The first involves religious belief. The second involves beliefs about the future.

First, consider a religiously devout person, Soren, who is confident that there is a God, but is also firmly committed to the claims of natural science. Soren is fully confident that the supernatural properties of God (His being able to do at least whatever is logically possible; His knowing all things future and present; His being infinitely benevolent, and all the rest of it) are not compatible with what he takes to be the implications of natural science. Hence, he concludes, and has full confidence in the conclusion, that there is no reason to believe in God's existence. Even so, Soren has absolute faith in God's existence. Streumer denies this possibility. Perhaps he could object that faith is not belief. But all that is required on Streumer's view for someone to have a belief is that her attitude is one of full confidence, and that is exactly what Soren has in the existence of God. Given some of the things that are at stake in matters of faith it is hardly surprising that someone's level of confidence in a religious proposition can vary independently of reasons they take to exist in favour of its truth. To think otherwise is to confuse the (hopeful) belief that God exists with the belief that He has provided us with reasons to believe in His existence. Whether He either could or should provide us with such reasons is a matter of theological dispute. It is not an independently accessible 'datum' that we can use to determine whether or not it is possible to self-consciously hold a groundless belief in God's existence.

Second, consider a philosophy student who has just spent a week reading Hume on the problem of induction. As a result, he has become fully convinced that there is no reason to believe that the sun will rise tomorrow; that the future will resemble the past, and all the rest of it. Yet, just like Hume, when he leaves the

study he finds himself surprisingly confident in all the beliefs that his philosophical efforts have convinced him are entirely groundless. (Or perhaps he has been reading Nietzsche on the genealogy of morals and has become fully convinced that there is no reason to believe in the conceptually articulated products of resentment, 'slave morality', or the will to power. Yet once he leaves his study, he can't help feeling confident that justice will meet with its reward; that everything will be all right in the end; that the strong will be victorious, and all the rest of it.) Irrational though it may be, we think it is possible for him to be fully confident in at least some of these beliefs, while on reflection being willing to admit that they are beliefs for which he has, and for which there either are, or can be, no 'good', 'genuine', or 'normative' reasons.

In sum, we think there are several plausible violations of BELIEF. Depending on contingent facts about our psychology, we may or may not be able to entertain some strange combinations of beliefs (like the ones above), not only at different times and in different circumstances (as Streumer might insist is the case with the inductive skeptic), but also simultaneously and in the same circumstances (as in the case of someone contemplating the existence of a Higher Being). Placing all the weight on the premise that human psychology is such that we are never able to believe that p once we judge that there is no reason to believe that p is a bad bet for a defender of Streumer's argument.

This problem can be overcome. We can replace BELIEF in Streumer's original argument by the slightly weaker premise, BELIEF*:

(BELIEF*) We cannot rationally have a belief while believing that there is no reason for this belief.

For our purposes in this paper, we interpret ‘rationality’ as a content neutral notion that implies consistency (including instrumental consistency) among an agent’s attitudes and any formal relations of coherence that obtain between them. To say that something is rational in this sense is not to attribute a normative property to it in Streumer’s sense. The fact that an agent cannot consistently entertain two or more attitudes does not settle which among the offending attitudes the agent ought to give up.

We take this revision of BELIEF to be friendly to Streumer’s project. Indeed, Streumer himself explicitly entertains the idea that BELIEF may not be true of compulsive beliefs, and even suggests that we may have to restrict BELIEF to non-compulsive beliefs only (he correctly points out that belief in the error theory is non-compulsive). We suggest that a better formulation of this (and related) caveats is captured by our BELIEF*.

If Streumer accepts our weaker premise, his argument does not fail as soon as someone manages to produce an example of a person who is able to entertain the sets of beliefs that BELIEF forbids, and he can still pursue – with the same degree of plausibility, it seems to us – analogous follow-up arguments to the

effect that we can coherently believe different parts of the error theory at different times, and that the inability to rationally believe the error theory undermines several arguments against it. Indeed, if we cannot rationally believe the error theory, this could provide an explanation of why it is so hard for philosophers to accept it, an explanation that would be analogous to more familiar explanations of why it is so hard for philosophers to accept other apparently paradoxical positions, such as inductive skepticism. In our view, this would be a more convincing account of the data than the implausibly strong view that we simply *cannot* believe these apparently paradoxical claims.

At this point it might be objected that *of course* our religious believer and inductive skeptic take themselves to have reasons to have their beliefs, only not epistemic reasons to believe the relevant propositions, but rather practical reasons to make themselves believe them (or some alternative that falls short of taking there to be reasons in favour of the content of the relevant belief). If so, our examples are not relevantly analogous to that of an error theorist, who would have to believe that he has no reasons, epistemic or practical, to believe the error theory.

We agree that people can form beliefs in ways that are unrelated to the truth of those beliefs, as a result of wishful thinking, sheer stubbornness, or the desire to win a philosophical argument, for example. Yet we don't see the case for insisting that the resulting beliefs could never be accompanied by a further belief that really these beliefs are ones the agent has no genuine reason to hold. Of course,

such people would be rationally divided against themselves and to that extent be less than fully rational. But that is just to say that we should replace BELIEF by BELIEF*, which is what we have suggested above.

With BELIEF replaced by BELIEF*, Streumer's argument is less implausible. Yet it is still very implausible, as we will now show.

3. The argument

In its modified version, Streumer's argument goes like this: because the error theorist denies that there are any normative properties and relations, and because the existence of reasons implies the existence of normative properties, she must deny that there are any reasons. Consequently, she must deny that there is any reason to believe the error theory, and, according to BELIEF*, she then cannot rationally believe the error theory.

By evaluating BELIEF* from the perspective of the error theorist, we will now demonstrate that Streumer's argument faces a dilemma. Either BELIEF* (suitably interpreted) is true. Yet in that case it does not prevent the error theorist from believing the error theory. Alternatively, BELIEF* (suitably interpreted) would prevent the error theorist from believing the error theory. Yet in that case, any sensible error theorist will deny it.

The dilemma stems from an equivocation on Streumer's part concerning the term 'reason for belief'. It is used by Streumer to mean "a consideration that counts in favour of a belief." (p. 196) In arguing for his conclusion, Streumer fails to show that the terms 'reason for belief' and 'counting in favour of' can be coherently understood in a way required both for the premise to remain plausible and the argument to go through.

On the first horn of the dilemma, Streumer's characterisation of a reason for belief in BELIEF* is interpreted as expressing the commonsense idea that something is a reason for p when it counts in favour of p. On this interpretation, it seems that evidence can count as reasons (e.g. in the form of data making a hypothesis more probable or philosophical arguments entailing a conclusion). It is also on this interpretation that BELIEF* is most plausible. Yet on this interpretation, BELIEF* does not prevent the error theorist from believing the error theory. For while the error theorist must deny that there are any normative properties and relations, she is not thereby forced to deny that there is good evidence in favour of the error theory. What we can do, on her account, is take the relevant evidence to count in favour of the error theory but deny that the existence of this evidence implies the further existence of the normative properties and relations the error theory denies. (The question if we really need these further entities to make sense of our beliefs is one we return to below.) On the first horn of the dilemma, therefore, the error theorist can rationally believe the error theory.

It might be objected that in making this claim we are missing the target. For at this point in his argument, Streumer explicitly assumes that “the normative judgment that there is a reason for a belief...” is “a belief that ascribes a normative property”, from which he claims it follows that those who come to believe the error theory on the basis of the evidence (as we suggest) “do not believe an error theory about all normative judgments, but instead believe a more limited error theory” (p. 198). We think this inference is too quick. Naturally, if the notion of a 'normative judgment' is understood broadly enough to include the formation of beliefs in a way that does not imply the existence of normative properties, then Streumer could be right. Yet the disputed question, as we see it, is not about normative judgments thus broadly construed, but rather about normative judgments construed as implying the existence of normative properties. Thus construed, we are unable to agree with Streumer. This is because we are inclined to reject his assumption that in coming to believe the error theory we are thereby necessarily 'ascribing a normative property', and thereby coming to believe in the existence of normative properties. (What we are doing is forming a second order belief, on the basis of the evidence, that normative judgements imply a commitment to the existence of normative properties, and that such properties do not exist.) If we are right about this, the objection fails. If we are not, then we are forced on to the second horn of the dilemma, to which we now turn.

On the second horn of the dilemma, the reason relation in BELIEF* should be understood as a normative relation. On this interpretation, the question is whether the error theorist can rationally believe the error theory while also

believing that there are no normative relations favouring that belief. Adopting this interpretation undermines the improved version of Streumer's argument. According to the error theorist, there are no such relations. According to Streumer's argument, we cannot rationally believe that there are no such relations if the error theory is true. Yet the sense in which we cannot rationally believe this is not the broad sense, according to which evidence is allowed to count in favour of a belief. Instead, we are supposed to be unable to rationally believe that there are no such relations in the specific sense described in BELIEF**:

(BELIEF**) We cannot rationally have a belief while believing that there is no consideration with *a* normative property of counting in favour for that belief.

Thus interpreted, Streumer's argument crumbles. For BELIEF** is a claim that any sensible error theorist will deny. Any sensible error theorist will insist that we can absolutely believe something when there is good evidence for that thing, and that good evidence (in the form of philosophical arguments) is exactly what we have for the error theory. If we are convinced that there are no normative relations counting in favour of belief in the error theory, then we obviously do not believe in them. Yet all that shows is that we can believe the error theory on the basis of the evidence, not on the basis of an erroneous belief in properties and relations that do not exist.

Our initial conclusion is therefore that BELIEF* is only plausible if we read the counting in favour of relation (and thus the reason relation) in a broad and ecumenical way. If we do so, BELIEF* does not prohibit the error theorist from rationally believing the error theory. Yet if we do not, and we interpret BELIEF* as BELIEF**, any sensible error theorist will deny its truth. So either way, it is possible to rationally believe the error theory (which is not to say that we should).

At this point, it might be objected that to form a belief on the basis of evidence for it (or any other consideration for that matter), according to the error theorist, *just is* to form a belief on the basis of taking there to be a normative counting-in-favour-of relation between the relevant evidence (or any other consideration for that matter) and that belief. This is arguably the response that Streumer has in mind when he writes that “we cannot base a belief on a consideration without making at least an implicit normative judgment” (p. 199), and that he cannot see the evidence for a belief as “merely causing”, or “merely explaining” why he has a belief (p. 198). Although we doubt whether it is plausible to describe the theoretical options here in terms of an exhaustive dichotomy, let us assume for the sake of argument that the available theoretical options are either 'mere' causation or 'mere' explanation on the one hand, or the existence of normative properties on the other. Once we do, our original route to the conclusion that we can rationally believe the error theory would seem to be blocked.

In response, we offer a slightly weaker version of the original argument. To contemplate the truth of the error theory on the assumption that to form a belief on the basis of evidence for it just is to form a belief on the basis of taking there to be reasons in its favour is to contemplate the possibility that all reflective belief formation implies a commitment to normative properties that don't exist. Now this kind of error theory about reflective belief formation might or might not be true (we make no claims either way in this paper). Yet whichever way it is, there is nothing to stop someone from being fully confident in its truth on the basis of a philosophical argument. By hypothesis, a person who were thus confident would be rationally divided against him or herself. To that extent, his or her beliefs would not be fully rational. Yet (as we argued in Section 2), the fact that I cannot rationally hold a belief does not entail that I cannot hold that belief. So even if to form a belief on the basis of evidence just is to form a belief on the basis of taking there to be reasons in its favour, we can still believe the error theory, only now at the cost of our beliefs not being fully rational.

Our alternative conclusion is therefore as follows. If reflective belief formation does not imply a commitment to the existence of normative properties, then we can rationally believe the error theory. If reflective belief formation does imply a commitment to the existence of normative properties, then we can believe the error theory, but only at the cost of our beliefs not being fully rational. Either way, we can believe the error theory (which, once more, is not to say that we should).

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