Moorean Arguments Against the Error Theory: A Defense

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Abstract: Moorean arguments are a popular and powerful way to engage highly revisionary philosophical views such as nihilism about motion, time, truth, consciousness, causation, and various kinds of skepticism (e.g., external world, other minds, inductive, global). They take, as a premise, a highly plausible first-order claim (e.g., cars *move*, I ate breakfast *before* lunch, it's *true* that some fish have gills) and conclude from it the falsity of the highly revisionary philosophical thesis. Moorean arguments can be used against nihilists in ethics (error theorists), too. Recently, error theorists have recognized Moorean arguments as a powerful challenge and have tried to meet it. They've argued that moral Moorean premises *seem* highly credible to us, but aren't, by offering various debunking explanations. These explanations all appeal to higher-order evidence—evidence of error in our reasoning. I argue that drawing attention to higher-order evidence is a welcome contribution from error theorists, but that the higher-order evidence actually counts further *against* error theoretic arguments—including their debunking explanations—and further in favor of Moorean arguments and the commonsense views they support. Along the way I answer a few prominent objections to Moorean arguments: that they are objectionably question-begging, rely on categorizing some facts as "Moorean Facts", and that reports of one's *credence* in a proposition bears no interesting relation to that proposition's *credibility*.

1. Introduction

Zeno's most famous argument for nihilism about motion went something like this:

No Motion

1.   If anything moves, then it performs an infinite number of tasks (e.g., moving across an infinite number of finite stretches of space).
2.   Nothing can perform an infinite number of tasks.
3.   Therefore, nothing moves.

I don't know where *exactly* this argument goes wrong. I bet you don't either. But we still believe in motion. Are we irrationally dogmatic about the existence of motion? No. We're smart. We know that it's much more probable (or credible, or plausible) that one of the fairly abstract premises in Zeno's argument—(1) or (2)—is false than that both of them are true and literally nothing moves. In other words, we accept, even if implicitly, a Moorean argument against Zeno's argument for nihilism about motion. It's something like this:

4. If I move (or cars move, or animals move, etc.), then something moves (and either (1) or (2) is false).
5. I move (or cars move, or animals move, etc.)!
6. Therefore, something moves (and either (1) or (2) is false).[1]

When we survey these arguments side-by-side, and consider their premises' relative plausibility, we see that (4) and (5) win the plausibility standoff against (1) and (2) and it's not close. Many of us perform the same kind of plausibility comparisons when we consider arguments for other highly revisionary views in philosophy, such as nihilism about time, truth, consciousness, causation, linguistic meaning, and various types of skepticism (e.g., external world, other-minds, inductive, global skepticism). Unless we're especially intellectually curious, we usually don't stick around to find out where *exactly* these arguments go wrong. Life is short.

Over the last forty years, error theorists have advanced a host of arguments for nihilism about ethics or (in Bart Streumer's and Jonas Olson's cases) irreducible normativity in general. And just as Zeno's arguments for nihilism about motion involved appeals to abstract philosophical principles as premises, so error theorists invariably employ abstract philosophical principles in their arguments for nihilism about their target domain. Recent arguments for the error theory have appealed to claims about the nature of property identity (Streumer 2017), the metaphysical source of normative practical reasons (Kalf 2018, Joyce 2001), the presuppositions or conceptual entailments of our moral discourse (Kalf 2018, Olson 2014, Joyce 2001, Mackie 1977), and the queerness of moral facts (Olson 2014, Mackie 1977), just to name a few. If any of those arguments are sound, almost everyone is radically mistaken about how things are, morally speaking. We *think* that there are moral reasons to keep our promises, avoid plowing into pedestrians with our cars, and to do all the standard moral stuff. But

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[1] The argument is "Moorean" because it draws inspiration from Moore (1939). When confronted with arguments for idealism and external world skepticism, Moore motioned with his hands and proclaimed "Here is a hand, and here is another." The idea—at least the best version of it, which is more modest than the "proof" Moore intended—was that Moore was (justifiably) far more confident that he (knew he) had hands than he was in the conjunction of the premises in the arguments for idealism and external world skepticism.

none of those beliefs are true. The error theory is therefore a highly revisionary philosophical view. So, error-theoretic arguments are, like all arguments for highly revisionary views in philosophy, vulnerable to Moorean arguments. Here's how one such argument against moral (and *a fortiori* normative) error theory would go:

A Standard Moorean Argument Against the Error Theory

7. If it is pro tanto wrong to burn someone alive for the reading light it provides, then there is at least one moral truth.
8. It is pro tanto wrong to burn someone alive for the reading light it provides.
9. So, there is at least one moral truth.
10. If there is at least one moral truth, then both the moral and normative error theories are false.
11. Therefore, both the moral and normative error theories are false.

The only substantive premise here is (8), and boy does it look plausible. Even error theorists admit that. (And we could replace (8) with all kinds of other exceedingly plausible moral or more generally normative claims.) (8) looks far more plausible than any claim about the nature of property identity, the source of normative practical reasons, the alleged queerness of moral facts and the philosophical implications of that queerness, and so on. How, then, can error theorists coherently deny the Moorean argument's conclusion—namely, that the error theory is false—when the argument depends on *one* exceedingly plausible claim, while error-theoretic arguments depend on *several* highly abstract, highly controversial, philosophical claims?

Recently, error theorists have recognized this as a challenge for their view and have attempted to meet it. They have not argued, as you might expect, that there is something problematic about Moorean arguments *in general*. After all, the Moorean response to Zeno's argument sketched above seems (far from problematic) like plain ole good sense—philosophical wisdom, not folly. Same for Moorean responses to other highly revisionary views in philosophy. (Do you really have a ready-to-hand refutation of all the arguments for nihilism about time, truth, consciousness, causation, linguistic

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meaning, and the many types of skepticism?) So instead of attacking Moorean arguments in general, error theorists have attacked Moorean arguments *against the error theory in particular*. Their strategy has been to debunk the key moral or normative Moorean premise. In other words, they've sought to explain why the substantive moral or normative claim figuring in the Moorean argument against the error theory *seems* highly credible to us, even though it's not. For instance, Streumer (2017) argues that any normative claim figuring in a Moorean argument will seem highly credible to us compared to the normative error theory because the normative error theory is literally unbelievable and the normative Moorean premise is not. Olson (2014) argues that any normative claim figuring in a Moorean argument will be vulnerable to evolutionary debunking. On his view, the Moorean premise will *appear* credible to us because of the causal (and distorting) influence of evolutionary pressures, not because the Moorean premise is genuinely credible. And while Kalf (2018) gives fairly short shrift to Moorean arguments, he suggests that Moorean arguments seem credible to many people because those people have a bias in favor of views that are more familiar and comforting to them. We could fill in the details by adding that most people (including philosophers) would be very upset if they became convinced that the error theory was true because they would likely feel pressure to give up their deeply held moral convictions. And that's unpleasant. The point of these debunking explanations is to undermine our justification for believing the Moorean premises by explaining those premises' *appearance* of credibility to us without reference to their *genuine* credibility (or truth). And notice that, for each of these debunking strategies, if they're correct, they would successfully debunk virtually *all* Moorean premises figuring in arguments against the error theory but would leave Moorean arguments in general completely intact—precisely the result error theorists want.

What these debunking strategies have in common is an appeal to higher-order evidence—evidence about how well we've assessed our first-order metaethical evidence. None of them appeal to first-order evidence counting directly for or against the error theory. Drawing our attention to higher-

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order evidence is a welcome contribution from error theorists, since what our total evidence supports concerning metaethics is partly a function of what our higher-order evidence supports. But I'll argue that attention to higher-order evidence actually counts further *against* error theoretic arguments—including their debunking explanations—and further in favor of Moorean arguments against the error theory. Indeed, attending to the higher-order evidence serves only to clarify why Moorean arguments against the error theory are so powerful. If I'm correct, then, despite the host of recent arguments to the contrary, and despite their obvious lack of philosophical flash (even boringness), Moorean arguments against the error theory continue to rank high among the most compelling arguments in philosophy.

Of course, error theorists could always accept this conclusion and retreat, arguing that *all* Moorean arguments are problematic. A full defense of Moorean arguments is work for another day,[2] but I'll answer a few prominent objections to them: that Moorean arguments are objectionably question-begging, rely on categorizing some facts as "Moorean Facts", and that reports of one's *credence* in a proposition bears no interesting relation to that proposition's *credibility*.

2. How Moral Moorean Arguments Work

I'll begin by clearing up a few common misconceptions about Moorean arguments and how they work.[3] This will help us see how Moorean arguments derive their evidential force and how error theorists' debunking explanations are meant to blunt it.

Moorean arguments, wherever they're found in philosophy, have a common form. If "R" stands for a highly revisionary philosophical thesis and "M" stands for the Moorean premise—the highly credible first-order claim that, if true, would undermine the revisionary thesis—then Moorean arguments tend to look like this.

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[2] But see Lycan (2019) for an excellent start.
[3] Many of these misconceptions are encouraged by Moore's own less-than-stellar presentation of the argument.

The Moorean Schema

12.   If M, then ~R.
13.   M
14.   Therefore, ~R.[4]

Here's how it looks with particular Moorean arguments in philosophy generally and metaethics specifically.

Moorean Argument against Other-Minds Skepticism

15.   If I know that my sister has a mind, then other-minds skepticism—the view that I do not, or cannot, know whether there are minds other than my own—is false.
16.   I know that my sister has a mind.
17.   Therefore, other-minds skepticism is false.

Moorean Argument against Nihilism about Consciousness

18. If I am conscious, then nihilism about consciousness—i.e., the view that nothing has conscious experiences—is false.
19. I am conscious!
20. Therefore, nihilism about consciousness is false.

And in the context that interests us

A Standard Moorean (Epistemic) Argument against the Normative Error Theory

21.   If my vivid memory of having toast for breakfast is a reason to believe that I had toast for breakfast, then there is at least one normative truth and the normative error theory is false.
22.   My vivid memory of having toast for breakfast is a reason to believe that I had toast for breakfast.
23.   Therefore, there is at least one normative truth and the normative error theory is false.

We could carry on in the same way stating obvious claims about time (e.g., WWII occurred after WWI), causation (i.e., my flipping the light switched caused the light to turn on), and other domains about which nihilism has been defended. We could then, by trivial entailment, derive the conclusion that nihilism about that domain is false, just as we did in the moral Moorean argument sketched above.

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[4] This schema is drawn from McPherson (2009).

I hear the complaints now: these arguments beg the question! After all, the second premise in each of the Moorean arguments I've discussed has been a first-order claim that can be true *only if* the revisionary thesis the argument is meant to overturn is false. But this question-begging charge misunderstands what Moorean arguments are (or should be) up to. A Moorean argument is an invitation for others to make a plausibility comparison: the plausibility of the premises in the argument for the revisionary view, on the one hand, against the premises in the Moorean argument on the other. After all, the proponent of the revisionary thesis is asking us to accept their view *on the basis of their argument(s)*. But an argument is only as strong as its premises. So, the revisionists' premises had better be *either* highly intuitively plausible—more plausible than the Moorean's premises—*or* well-supported by still other arguments (or both). And since it can't be arguments all the way down—each premise in each argument being supported by further arguments with more premises, and so on, forever—at some point we have to begin with premises whose only support is their intuitive plausibility. Call these premises—the one's whose only support is their intuitive plausibility—"basic premises". The Moorean understands this insight (or platitude) about the nature of arguments and says "Let's look at my basic premises and let's look at yours. Note that I've selected *one* especially plausible, relatively uncontroversial, basic premise, followed by a trivial entailment. You, by contrast, have selected *several* fairly abstract, controversial, not-especially-intuitively-plausible philosophical premises. Wouldn't it be foolish of me, then, to abandon my view for yours on the basis of your comparatively weakly-supported premises?" Whatever objections you may have to this method, the point for now is that it's a *fundamentally comparative* method. There is therefore no question to be begged. The whole point of advancing a Moorean argument is to invite a plausibility comparison between the premises in the arguments for the competing views, and this can be done only if we have both arguments in view at the same time without supposing that one has some advantage in virtue of being advanced first in the dialectic.

Of course, a Moorean argument succeeds only to the extent that its key premise *is in fact* more credible than the conjunction of the revisionists' premises. So you may think that Mooreans owe us a general theory of credibility or plausibility—one that ranks propositions from most to least plausible. And you might think, moreover, that that theory must meet two conditions: it had better (1) itself be a plausible theory and (2) rank the Moorean premises higher on the plausibility scale than the revisionists' premises. But the Moorean owes no such general theory for the following reason. If the Moorean has selected their premises correctly, then *any* plausible theory of plausibility will rank the Moorean premise higher than the revisionists' premises.

To see this, return to Zeno. Zeno has just hit you with his argument:

No Motion

1. If anything moves, then it performs an infinite number of tasks (e.g., moving across an infinite number of finite stretches of space).
2. Nothing can perform an infinite number of tasks.
3. Therefore, nothing moves.

You respond, "But, Zeno, *I* move! That car is moving! And look at those flying birds! So your view is false, your argument unsound, and at least one of your premises is false." Now I ask you: Do you really owe Zeno a general theory of plausibility that ranks propositions from most- to least-plausible before you can reasonably assert (or be justified in believing) that "cars move" is more credible (i.e., more worthy of belief and credence) than the conjunction of "If anything moves, then it performs an infinite number of tasks" and "Nothing can perform an infinite number of tasks"? I hope you'll agree that you don't. That's because *any* plausible theory of plausibility will rank your claim higher than the conjunction of Zeno's. Here's why: any theory of plausibility will need to draw on paradigmatic examples of highly plausible propositions to formulate general principles about plausibility. And surely propositions like "I move" and "Cars move" will be paradigmatic examples—relatively fixed points— of plausible propositions from which more general principles will be derived, and against which those principles will be checked. For instance, if, in the course of developing your theory of plausibility, you

discover that one of your general principles implies that the claim "cars move" is not especially plausible, that will count significantly against that principle, rather than against the judgment that "cars move" is a highly plausible claim. Of course, it may be that, in the course of reaching reflective equilibrium, the claim that "cars move" is highly plausible must be revised. But it's highly unlikely, given its status as a relatively fixed point—a datum about plausibility that serves as a starting point for theorizing about plausibility. If what I've said is correct, then we do not need to wait for a general theory of plausibility to be developed before we can justifiably believe and assert that Moorean commonsensical claims such as "cars move" and "it's morally wrong to burn people alive for the reading light it provides" are more plausible than the abstract philosophical claims figuring in arguments for highly revisionary philosophical theses, including the moral and normative error theories.

The preceding paragraph will also help correct the misunderstanding—encouraged by some of Moore's own work—that Moorean arguments derive their evidential force from facts about one's high *credence* (i.e., descriptive confidence) in the key premise rather than that premise's high *credibility* (i.e., worthiness of confidence). The Moorean argument against nihilism about motion sketched above is successful, not because we *are* more confident in the claim that cars move than we are in Zeno's premises. It's because we *ought* to be, or *are justified* in being, more confident that cars move than we are in Zeno's premises. Of course, we *are* more confident that cars move than we are in Zeno's premises, but that's because we ought to be, not vice-versa.[5]

Last misconception. It's sometimes thought that Moorean arguments depend for their success on granting to some facts (but not others) the exalted status of "Moorean Fact"—a kind of fact or

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[5] There is a subtle and indirect way of getting from one's confidence in a proposition to justification for confidence in that proposition. If an agent thinks, as many justifiably do, that they're generally reliable in forming beliefs, then they may justifiably conclude that, since they usually believe things for good reasons, and they believe that *p*, then they probably believe that *p* for good reason, too. But this is, at best, a minor way that Moorean arguments derive their evidential force. See McPherson (2009) for a discussion of this strategy.

proposition that must not be doubted, or challenged, on pain of decapitation or something.[6] But notice that no such status has been granted to any proposition. The comparisons are everywhere piecemeal and nothing is settled from the get-go. All that's being claimed about the key premise in a Moorean argument is that it's highly plausible—much more plausible than the conjunction of the premises in the argument for the revisionary thesis. That plausibility is not grounded in the status of the Moorean premise as a Moorean Fact or Common Sense (in some technical sense), but rather something else (e.g., its self-evidence, the clarity and force of the intuition that it's true). There's no guarantee—at least none that I've given here, nor one that I know of—that *every* revisionary thesis can be overturned by a Moorean argument. For someone to make such a guarantee, they'd need some in principle reason (that I certainly don't have) to think that *no* revisionary thesis could *possibly* be supported by an argument whose premises are more plausible than the first-order commonsense claims in that domain. Or they'd need to have seen all the arguments for all the revisionary theses and all the Moorean arguments against them and made all the relevant plausibility comparisons. (And I'm pretty sure no one has done that.) Moorean arguments always involve piecemeal comparisons of premises and their plausibility—not on one premise's being a regular proposition while the other is a super-proposition called a "Moorean Fact" or "Common Sense" (capital "C", capital "S").

So we've seen that Moorean arguments have a common form (sketched above), a common class of targets (highly revisionary philosophical theses), and are supported by a common suspicion supported by induction (that commonsense claims will prevail in a plausibility standoff against the kind of philosophical claims that feature in arguments for revisionary views). I haven't claimed that it's an everywhere-successful strategy. I do, however, claim that it's a *commonly* successful strategy and that it succeeds against the moral and normative error theories in metaethics, as I'll now demonstrate.

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[6] As far as I know, Lewis coined this term and suggests that such facts are beyond question (or pretty close to it).

3. Making the Plausibility Comparisons: Olson's Argument from Queerness and Evolutionary Debunking Strategy

In this section and the next, I'll apply the Moorean methodology to the error theory by laying out the premises in the arguments for the error theory, on the one hand, laying out the premises in the Moorean arguments against the error theory on the other, and making the plausibility comparisons. Obviously, we don't have space to consider every extant error-theoretic argument and every Moorean argument against the view it supports, but I'll demonstrate the general Moorean strategy by considering some recent and especially prominent arguments for the error theory. My aim is not merely to rebut the arguments for the error theory I discuss and their accompanying debunking arguments—though I certainly mean to do that. I also aim to demonstrate a general strategy for engaging arguments for the error theory and their accompanying debunking strategies wherever they're found.

Begin with the argument in Jonas Olson's (2014) book-length defense of the error theory. Olson offers a version of the argument from queerness against normative non-naturalism. That argument proceeds as follows.

Olson's Argument from Queerness

24.   If moral facts are queer, then moral facts do not exist.
25.   Moral facts are queer.
26.   Therefore, moral facts do not exist.

By "queer" Olson means that moral facts (relations, properties, etc.) are "ontologically suspicious" (2014: 84)—the kinds of things we ought to eliminate from, or never allow into, our ontology. In defense of (25) Olson offers what he calls a "queerness argument"—an argument meant to establish *that* moral facts are queer. He distinguishes queerness arguments from the argument from queerness (sketched immediately above) which is meant to show that moral facts do not exist.

27.   Moral facts entail that there are facts that favour certain courses of behavior, where the favouring relation is irreducibly normative.
28.   Irreducibly normative favouring relations are queer.
29.   Hence, moral facts entail queer relations.
30.   If moral facts entail queer relations, moral facts are queer.
31.   Hence, moral facts are queer. (2014: 123-24)

There are two key premises here. The first, (27), is a claim about the commitments of moral thought and talk. It says that moral discourse is committed to the existence of a fairly robust kind of relation—a favoring between facts and courses of behavior without reference to any agent's desires, aims, goals, or the rules of some institution. The second key premise is (28). Olson doesn't offer an extensive defense of (28). Indeed, he says that no such defense is *possible*, since (28) is "metaphysical bedrock" (2014: 136). In other words, he can't give an argument for (28); you've just got to "see" that favoring relations are very strange. He thinks that this strangeness should lead us to believe that these relations are ontologically suspicious and that we therefore ought to deny their existence. He later argues that there's nothing especially suspicious about irreducibly normative favoring relations between facts and *courses of behavior*. Irreducibly normative favoring relations between facts and doxastic attitudes (e.g., beliefs, credences) are equally queer. So, we ought to deny their existence, too. We thus ought to reject *all* irreducible normativity (2014: 156).

Of course, that conclusion conflicts with a host of eminently plausible claims, any of which could serve as a key premise in a Moorean argument against Olson's (irreducibly) normative error theory:

i.   It's pro tanto morally wrong to stab someone for interrupting you,
ii.   It's pro tanto good to save a friend from drowning,
iii. It's pro tanto (practically) irrational to jab sharp objects into your eyes,
iv.   I am pro tanto epistemically justified in believing that I exist,
v.   It's pro tanto (epistemically) irrational to believe contradictions, and
vi.   A policy is pro tanto unjust if it would drastically increase suffering for the vast majority of people while moderately benefiting only a small number of people who made the policy.

From each of these claims we can derive the conclusion that there is at least one normative truth and that the normative error theory is therefore false. But let's use (i) as our Moorean premise since it's truth would refute both the moral and normative error theories. Ask which is more plausible: that it's morally wrong to stab someone for interrupting you *or* that moral discourse is committed to irreducibly normative favoring relations *and* these relations are queer in the sense that they are ontologically suspicious and ought to be rejected? You might find all three claims plausible. Many people do. But I hope you'll agree that the Moorean premise is far *more* plausible than the conjunction of the premises figuring in the error-theoretic argument. (Remember, we're engaged in a comparative enterprise here.) But, if you don't, let me try to convince you.

First, the intuition for the Moorean claim that it's morally wrong to stab someone for interrupting you is, for the overwhelming majority of people at least, far clearer and far more forceful than the conjunction of premises in the error-theoretic argument—even after careful reflection. Perhaps there's a debunking explanation that will entirely remove the evidential force of that intuition, but it is nonetheless uncontroversial that such an intuition is widely and powerfully had. Second, the Moorean claim is far less controversial. Virtually everyone accepts the Moorean claim,[7] while both error-theoretic premises are highly controversial, not merely among ordinary people who may not even understand those claims, but also among philosophers who understand as well as anyone could what error theorists mean when they say that moral discourse is committed to irreducibly normative favoring relations and that these relations are "queer". Intuitions about metaphysical queerness and ontological suspiciousness are notoriously nebulous—far from vivid or stable—and controversial. Recall that Olson himself says that the judgment that irreducibly normative favoring relations are queer is "metaphysical bedrock". You either see it or you don't. And, as we know, many don't.

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[7] Every error theorist I've met has agreed that it's, initially at least, exceedingly plausible that it's wrong to torture, murder, etc. But they've thought that other considerations—e.g., considerations of moral metaphysics and epistemology—undermine those initial appearances so much that they ultimately reject their intuitive judgments.

Moreover, many normative naturalists, constructivists, and expressivists reject Olson's claim about the commitments of moral discourse—that moral discourse is committed to irreducibly normative favoring relations.

This level of disagreement about both error-theoretic claims (and the absence of it for the Moorean claim) is highly significant if, as almost everyone in the epistemology of disagreement literature thinks, overwhelming disagreement from both epistemic peers and others about a proposition ought to reduce your confidence in the relevant proposition *at least to some degree*. On most views, the depth and pervasiveness of disagreement about the disputed proposition plays a central role in determining *how much* you ought to reduce your confidence. The higher the proportion of people who disagree with you, the greater their intellectual excellence, and the less inclined they are to change their mind on reflection, the more you ought to reduce your confidence in the disputed proposition. In this case, the Moorean claims (i-vi) enjoy virtual consensus (and those in the consensus are highly confident in their view) while there is, *at best*, a fifty-fifty split about each of the error-theoretic premises (with few having especially high confidence in them) and almost universal rejection of the error-theoretic conclusion. Thus, consideration of both the first-order and higher-order evidence supports the conclusion that the Moorean premises win the plausibility standoff with the error-theoretic premises and it's not close.

We could run the same kind of plausibility comparison, with the same results, for the various interpretations of the premises in Mackie's (1977) argument from queerness. On one interpretation, Mackie's key claim is that moral discourse is committed to the existence of a *sui generis* faculty for detecting moral truths. On another, moral discourse is committed to the existence of inexplicable supervenience relations between moral and non-moral properties. On yet another, moral discourse is committed to the claim that recognition of moral truths is intrinsically motivating. None of these claims are nearly as intuitively compelling as the key Moorean premise in standard moral Moorean

arguments, and all of Mackie's premises are, as we know, highly controversial. The key premise in the Moorean argument, by contrast, is widely accepted and with great confidence.

Olson acknowledges that nonnaturalist realists about normativity could respond to his argument from queerness by deploying a Moorean argument like the ones I've sketched. But Olson thinks that the fact that many find the Moorean premise much more plausible than any premise in his argument from queerness casts no doubt on that argument, since there is a plausible debunking explanation for the Moorean premise's widespread appearance of plausibility. According to Olson, evolutionary pressures make the key premise *seem* highly credible to us, even though it is not. He writes:

> The thought is in brief that natural selection has tended to favour certain patterns of behaviour, such as reciprocating favours; sticking to agreements; punishing perpetrators; parents looking out for their kin; and so on. These natural selection processes have played a part in shaping our current systems of norms; they account for why we tend to believe, e.g., that there are reasons to return favours, keep promises, hold perpetrators responsible for their misdeeds, and for parents to look after their kin. Human beings will of course sometimes be tempted to violate some of these norms. Breaking promises and omitting to return favours often make sense from a narrowly egoistic perspective. Moral thought and talk enter the picture as social devices that serve to enforce compliance with these norms. We judge that those who fail to return favours and keep their promises act morally wrongly; they are liable to moral blame, i.e., to attitudes of resentment and dislike (142).

And later he writes:

> Witnessing suffering in others tends to give rise to intense distress in most human beings and this is at least part of the explanation why most people are strongly motivated to enforce and comply with norms against harming innocents, such as animals and children. Reactive distress causally explains beliefs to the effect that violations of norms against harming are generalizably wrong (143).

By appealing to such debunking explanations, Olson thinks he can debunk virtually any moral Moorean premise an opponent might propose. If he is correct, this would cast doubt on moral Moorean arguments, no matter what moral Moorean premise is employed. It would therefore undermine any force those arguments previously had against the error theory.

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Olson's strategy here is to appeal to higher-order evidence—evidence about how well we've assessed our first-order evidence—to undermine our justification for believing the Moorean premise. This is a welcome contribution, since what our total evidence supports is partly a function of what our higher-order evidence supports. But, again, I'll argue that attention to the higher order evidence—specifically the pervasive disagreement about the success of evolutionary debunking arguments—actually shows us why his debunking strategy shouldn't significantly blunt the force of moral Moorean arguments.

As you likely know, the literature on evolutionary debunking arguments is quickly becoming overwhelmingly vast, with many philosophers arguing that they have a identified a fatal flaw with evolutionary debunking arguments.[8] Of course, many still defend them.[9] My sense is that this debate has reached a stalemate on the following issue: whether it's dialectically permissible for moral realists to presuppose the truth of some first-order moral claim in their explanation of how our moral beliefs could, despite the influence of evolution, track the stance-independent moral truths. If it is permissible to assume, for example, that survival is good,[10] or that pain is bad, or that human beings have rights,[11] then a plausible moral epistemology can be constructed. So long as humans begin with a fairly reliable set of starting points, they can use rational reflection to correct for any distortions caused by evolutionary influence. If, however, it is not dialectically appropriate for moral realists to assume some first-order moral claim, then the prospects for defending realism against evolutionary debunking arguments aren't nearly as bright. But the point for now is that the strength of evolutionary debunking arguments turns on this highly controversial, and far from intuitively obvious idea—namely, that it is *not* dialectically appropriate for realists to assume the truth of some first-order moral claim in meeting

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[8] See, e.g., Vavova (2020), Berker (2014), Fitzpatrick (2015), Kumar and May (2020), Enoch (2011), Shafer-Landau (2014), Kahane (2011), Wielenberg (2014).
[9] Street (2006), Joyce (2006), Lutz (2017), Morton (2016)
[10] Enoch 2011
[11] Wielenberg 2014

the evolutionary debunking challenge. Once we realize this, we see that evolutionary debunking arguments lose much of their debunking force, for they hang by such a thin thread. Whether they succeed or fail depends on this difficult, highly controversial question. So, even if evolutionary debunking arguments blunt *some* of the evidential force of Moorean arguments against the error theory, they won't be nearly enough to deliver the result that the error theory is all-things-considered best-supported by the evidence, since the Moorean argument began with such an enormous head start in terms of plausibility. Here we see that the higher-order evidence cuts *against* rather than *in favor of* the error theory because it casts more doubt on error-theoretic premises and debunking explanations than commonsensical moral Moorean premises.

It's also worth remembering (and this will further blunt the undermining force of Olson's evolutionary debunking argument) that, even if Olson's debunking explanation succeeds against moral Moorean arguments, it does nothing to undermine

A Standard Moorean (Epistemic) Argument against the Normative Error Theory

21.   If my vivid memory of having toast for breakfast is a reason to believe that I had toast for breakfast, then there is at least one normative truth and the normative error theory is false.
22.   My vivid memory of having toast for breakfast is a reason to believe that I had toast for breakfast.
23.   Therefore, there is at least one normative truth and the normative error theory is false.

(22) is the crucial premise here and it is much more resistant to evolutionary debunking explanations than moral Moorean premises—the target of Olson's original debunking explanation. Notice that, according to Olson's debunking explanation for the plausibility of moral Moorean premises, moral thought and talk enter the picture to keep us in line when we are tempted to promote our own interests at great cost to others. But there is no corresponding need for such an enforcement mechanism in the case of epistemic normativity. We are not often tempted, for instance, knowingly to resist believing in

proportion to our evidence.[12] So, it's not clear that it would be adaptive for evolutionary pressures to generate the illusion of irreducible normativity about what to believe. We face the "Why be moral?" question because acting morally often conflicts with our own interests. It thus makes sense that evolutionary pressures would generate an illusion of irreducible normativity about reasons for action. But there is no question corresponding to the "Why be moral?" question in epistemology. Virtually everyone is inclined to believe in accord with what they judge their evidence supports in most cases, and very few people are tempted to believe propositions that they believe are not supported by their evidence. There would thus be no (or very little) evolutionary advantage conferred on human beings if they were to believe *in addition* that there are irreducibly normative reasons to believe in accord with their evidence. So a debunking explanation of our epistemic discourse that parallels Olson's debunking explanation of our moral discourse is not nearly as plausible.

Notice, moreover, that part of Olson's explanation for how the illusion of irreducible normativity arose is that we often witness the suffering of others. This causes us great distress and, as Olson says, "causally explains beliefs to the effect that violations of norms against harming are generalizably wrong" (143). But, again, there is no corresponding explanation in the case of irreducible normativity about epistemic reasons. Distress caused by witnessing the suffering of others would do nothing to explain why humans believe that there are irreducibly normative reasons to believe in accord with one's evidence, or irreducibly normative reasons not to believe contradictions.

The point, then, is this: the evolutionary debunking explanation Olson provides to undermine our Moorean moral beliefs does not easily extend to undermine our Moorean epistemic beliefs.[13]

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[12] Of course, we often fail to believe in proportion to our evidence, but this is often due to inattention, distraction, limited cognitive processing, limited memory, failures of probabilistic reasoning, etc. rather knowingly believing against what we regard as the best-supported proposition. In the moral case, we regularly judge that we ought to X and then *knowingly* do not-X.

[13] It might be suggested that error theorists could understand (19) in a way that does not entail any irreducibly normative favoring relations between facts and doxastic states. But this is not open to error theorists about our epistemic discourse. This is because, in order to be an error theorist about such a discourse, you must think normative epistemic judgments are beliefs that ascribe irreducibly normative properties.

Mooreans can therefore circumvent Olson's debunking explanation entirely by using an epistemic premise against the normative error theory. But this assumes that Olson's debunking explanation of our moral discourse succeeds, which is anything but a safe assumption. For that has long been the subject of deep, intractable disagreement among philosophers for a variety of reasons. One prominent reason is that it is notoriously difficult to sort out whether realists are dialectically permitted to answer evolutionary debunking challenges by assuming some first-order moral claims as starting points and then using rational reflection to proceed from there. If they are permitted to do this, then it is highly plausible that the evolutionary debunking challenge can be met. (That's why there is such vigorous debate on this point.) All this casts significant doubt on the undermining force of Olson's debunking explanation, which Olson needed to be overwhelmingly compelling since it was meant to make up the vast plausibility disparity between his argument from queerness and Moorean arguments against the error theory.

4. Making the Plausibility Comparisons: Streumer's Reduction Argument and Unbelievability Debunking Strategy

I'll turn now to another recent argument for the error theory and another strategy for debunking the key premise in Moorean arguments against the error theory. In a series of papers and his recent book, Bart Streumer has offered the following argument for the normative error theory:

Streumer's Argument for the Normative Error Theory

32. If there are normative properties, then they are identical to descriptive properties.
33. Normative properties are not identical to descriptive properties.
34. Therefore, there are no normative properties.[14]

First things first: note the intuitive plausibility of this argument's premises versus the intuitive plausibility of the premises of Moorean arguments against the error theory. A typical Moorean

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[14] See Streumer (2008, 2011, 2013, 2017).

argument begins with a claim like "it's wrong to burn someone alive for the reading light it provides." It then moves, by trivial entailment, to the claim that the moral error theory is false. Streumer's argument may, in the end, be comparably plausible, but it certainly doesn't wear its plausibility on its sleeve. We'll need to hear more. Luckily, Streumer has plenty to say in defense of this argument. But it involves appealing to *lots* of other philosophical claims—none of them, even by error theorists' lights, approaching the plausibility of the Moorean premises. And the philosophical claims used to defend this argument themselves require extensive defense against objections (which Streumer dutifully provides, about as well as anyone could, across a handful of *chapters* of dense philosophical reasoning). But the point for now is that *so much* has to go right for this argument to succeed. Let's see if it does.

If (32) is true, it rules out normative nonnaturalism. In support of (32), Streumer defends an argument first advanced by Frank Jackson.[15] This argument begins by noting that normative properties supervene on descriptive properties. So, for any normative property, P, there is some descriptive base upon which each instance of P supervenes. Thus, for any normative property P, P is necessarily coextensive with the disjunction of all the descriptive properties that result in each instance of P. If that is so, then every normative property will be necessarily coextensive with some (highly disjunctive) descriptive property. From here, Streumer invokes his favored criterion of property identity, which he labels:

> (N)   Two predicates ascribe the same property if and only if they are necessarily coextensive.

Streumer then offers an extensive defense of (N) against a host of proposed counterexamples (e.g., that tri-angularity and tri-laterality are necessarily coextensive but non-identical properties).

In support of (36), Streumer offers the following argument:

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15 See Jackson (1998).

35. If normative properties are identical to descriptive properties, then it is possible to say which descriptive properties normative properties are identical to.
36. But it is not possible to say which descriptive properties normative properties are identical to.
37. Therefore, normative properties are not identical to descriptive properties.

(35) is the crucial premise. Here Streumer engages another argument from Frank Jackson to the conclusion that it *is* possible to say which descriptive properties normative properties are identical to.[16] Streumer argues that Jackson's argument fails.

We don't have space to get into all the details, but hopefully you've noticed: Streumer's argument involves lots of complex philosophical moves (e.g., constructing a giant disjunctive property) and a highly abstract, controversial claim about property identity (i.e., (N)). It's therefore vulnerable to Moorean arguments. Faced with Streumer's argument for the error theory, we should ask which is more credible: that it's wrong to burn people alive for the reading light it provides (or that my vivid memory of eating toast is a reason to believe that I ate toast), *or* that each premise in Streumer's argument is true? Again, most are justifiably far more confident that at least one Moorean premise is true than that (N) is the correct criterion of property identity, *and* that Jackson's argument for the identity of normative and descriptive properties is sound, and that all of Streumer's other premises are true. So most would be justified in rejecting Streumer's argument and retaining their belief in at least one of the Moorean premises.

Now consider the higher-order evidence. The Moorean premises are far less controversial by comparison. For example, Moberger (2019) has an excellent discussion and defense of the *many* counterexamples to (N)—Streumer's preferred criterion of property identity—that have been proposed in the last fifty years. It is difficult to read Moberger's discussion without coming away with deep uncertainty about the truth of (N). The controversy over (N) has persisted for so long, with so

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[16] Jackson (1998).

many excellent philosophers opposing it, with so many excellent arguments, that one could not reasonably be anywhere close to as confident in (N) as the usual Moorean moral premises. This is not to say that (N) is false, just that it's deeply and notoriously controversial. So, the Moorean argument is again going to win the plausibility standoff by a wide margin.

Things might be different, however, if Streumer could successfully debunk our belief in the Moorean premises. If he could plausibly explain why the Moorean premises strike us as highly credible, even though they are not, then the Moorean arguments would lose much of their force. Streumer's preferred debunking explanation is that the error theory is literally unbelievable. He argues for that claim in the following way.

Unbelievable

38. Anyone who believes the error theory believes that the error theory entails that there is no reason to believe the error theory.
39. We cannot fail to believe what we believe to be entailed by our own beliefs.
40. So, anyone who believes the error theory believes that there is no reason to believe the error theory.
41. We cannot have a belief while believing that there is no reason for this belief.
42. So, nobody can believe the error theory.[17]

If this argument is sound, then no one can believe the error theory. Streumer thinks that this conclusion helps error theorists defend against Moorean arguments. Again, this debunking strategy works by appealing to higher-order evidence. On Streumer's view, it's not that Moorean arguments *really are* highly plausible. Rather, it's that one view—that there are normative properties—is believable, while the other view—that there are no normative properties—is not. It's the unbelievability of the error theory, not the plausibility of Moorean arguments, that explains why Mooeran arguments *appear* to be so plausible.

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[17] Streumer (2013).

As with Olson's debunking explanation, one can respond to Streumer by meeting his debunking explanation head on and arguing that we can, in fact, believe the error theory. I've done this elsewhere.[18] For now, however, I'd just like to play the error theorists' own game by drawing attention to the higher-order evidence, again in the form of disagreement. There is a burgeoning literature—so far all of it critical—about whether Streumer's debunking argument is successful.[19] The disagreement is about two separate issues. The first is whether it's true that, as Streumer argues, we cannot believe the error theory. The second is whether it's true that, supposing we cannot believe the error theory, that helps error theorists blunt the force of Moorean arguments. Again, according to virtually any theory of the epistemic significance of disagreement this should cause us to reduce our confidence in Streumer's debunking explanation and its success in blunting the force of Moorean arguments against the error theory. And there are still other issues associated with Streumer's debunking explanation that blunt its force.

It's crucial for Streumer's defense against Moorean arguments that the unbelievability of the error theory explains why we find Moorean arguments plausible. But there is reason to doubt this. If the error theory is unbelievable, then that would explain why we *don't* believe the proposition that the error theory is true. But it wouldn't explain why we *do* have a high degree of confidence toward other propositions. For example, it's not clear why our inability to believe the error theory would make us *very confident* that it's pro tanto wrong to burn someone for reading light or that I'm justified in believing that that I ate toast for breakfast when I have a vivid memory of doing so. After all, it's entirely possible that I don't believe the error theory (because I couldn't possibly believe it) but that I also don't believe that it's wrong to burn someone for reading light or that I'm justified in believing I ate toast when I seem to remember doing so. I could either disbelieve those propositions or suspend judgment about

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[18] See Hyun and Sampson (2014).
[19] Forcehimes and Talisse (2016), Olson (2014), Lillehammer, Hyun and Sampson (2014), Ganapini (2016)

them. But since it's possible for me to refrain from believing the error theory and yet have other attitudes besides a high degree of confidence in the Moorean propositions, we don't yet have an explanation for why I *do* find the Moorean propositions highly plausible. All we have is an explanation for why I *don't* believe the error theory. Thus, even if Streumer's argument that the error theory is unbelievable is sound, it wouldn't provide an explanation for why we do find Moorean arguments plausible. (And notice that the very simple hypothesis that Moorean arguments *really are* highly credible explains *both* why people find them highly credible and why people find it very difficult to believe the error theory.) He therefore hasn't debunked our high degree of confidence in the Moorean premises.

But suppose, for the sake of argument, that Streumer *has* adequately explained why we find Moorean arguments against the normative error theory plausible—it's that the normative error theory is unbelievable. Even so, we can, as with Olson, easily formulate a new Moorean-like (though importantly not Moorean) argument against the normative error theory to circumvent entirely Streumer's debunking explanation. That argument begins with a Moorean argument against *moral* error theory—a theory that, even by Streumer's lights, we *can* believe—and moves to the negation of the normative error theory. Such an argument would proceed as follows:

A Moral Moorean Argument

43. If it's pro tanto wrong to burn someone alive for reading light, then there is at least one moral truth.
44. It is pro tanto wrong to burn someone alive for reading light.
45. So, there is at least one moral truth.

(44) is the Moorean premise here and it will remain un-debunked by Streumer's unbelievability thesis, since that debunking explanation holds only in the context of Moorean arguments against the normative error theory. But no such argument has been offered so far. All we've done is argued against the moral error theory, which Streumer agrees we can believe.

But notice that if (45) is true, then that entails that the normative error theory is false. So, once we've established the truth of (45), we can proceed as follows.

Argument Against Normative Error Theory

46. The moral error theory is false.
47. If the moral error theory is false, then the normative error theory is false.
48. Therefore, the normative error theory is false.

This is an argument against the normative error theory, but it's not a Moorean one. There is no Moorean premise here. So, this argument cannot be rebutted by Streumer's debunking explanation. Thus, even if Streumer's argument for the unbelievability of the normative error theory is sound, it won't protect him from the argument above. He will need to endorse some *other* debunking explanation for the apparent plausibility of the moral Moorean premise—namely, (44)—in this two-step argument against the normative error theory. Perhaps Streumer would like to endorse an evolutionary debunking explanation for the apparent plausibility of (44), but that strategy faces all the problems I discussed for Olson's attempt to debunk epistemic Moorean premises.

To sum up, then: Streumer's argument for the error theory depends on two premises.

32. If there are normative properties, then they are identical to descriptive properties.
33. Normative properties are not identical to descriptive properties.
34. Therefore, there are no normative properties.[20]

But, unlike the premises in Moorean arguments, each premise in Streumer's argument enjoys little initial intuitive plausibility. So it requires further defense. That defense immediately plunges us deep into controversy about the nature of property identity, the nature of normative and descriptive properties, the conceptual commitments of normative discourse, and so on. So each premise depends for its support on a host of *other* philosophical claims, each of them similar in their (lack of) intuitive

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[20] See Streumer (2008, 2011, 2013, 2017).

plausibility, abstractness, and controversy. This puts Streumer's argument at a significant comparative disadvantage. When we move to the debunking explanation, meant to win back the plausibility of Streumer's argument compared to the Moorean argument, we find that we're met with still *more* less-than-compelling, abstract, controversial philosophical claims. And, like Olson's debunking explanation, even if all those debunking claims were true, we could side-step the debunking explanation entirely and still get an argument against the moral (and therefore normative) error theory. In other words, when we take the error theorists' suggestion and dig further into the higher-order evidence, we find that Moorean arguments enjoy a plausibility *boost*, rather than the plausibility *hit* error theorists promised us.

5. The Psychological Discomfort Debunking Strategy

At this point, it should be clear how the Moorean method can be applied to still other arguments for the error theory not discussed here (e.g., Joyce 2001, Kalf 2018, Cowie 2020). Line up the error-theoretic premises on one side, the Moorean premises on the other, and make the plausibility comparisons. If the error-theoretic argument is paired with a debunking strategy, consider how numerous, abstract, controversial, and intuitively plausible those premises are and see how the debunking strategy fares. Then make the all-things-considered judgment. My strong suspicion (based on lots of inductive evidence both in metaethics and philosophy more generally) is that things will not go well for the error-theoretic argument and the associated debunking strategy. But since my space is limited, I'll have to leave this as an exercise for the reader.

In the remaining space, I'll consider one other strategy error theorists might employ to debunk Moorean premises against their view by appeal to higher-order evidence. Though I've not seen this debunking strategy worked out in detail, it has long been "in the air" among philosophers.[21] I call it

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[21] Though there are ways of reading Leiter (2015) and Huemer (2015) as going some distance toward pursuing this strategy.

the "psychological discomfort strategy". The idea is that Moorean premises *appear* credible to us, even though they are not, because it would be psychologically uncomfortable or distressing to give up on the usual sorts of judgments figuring in Moorean arguments. There are many ways we could fill in the details here. Perhaps people would think badly of themselves if they *didn't* judge that it's wrong to burn people for the reading right it provides. It would damage their self-image as a good, empathetic person. Or maybe they're afraid of what the world would be like if there really were no such thing as moral right and wrong. That would mean that no one is rightly criticized for perpetrating heinous murders, kidnappings, and so on. And they just couldn't bear the thought. Or maybe it's just too much intellectual work, or too boring, to think deeply about the possibility that what one has always been taught about morality is false. And so on. Again, tons of ways to fill in the details. But the common thread is that those who find Moorean arguments significantly more credible than error-theoretic arguments do so, not because Moorean arguments *really are* more credible, but because it would be deeply psychologically uncomfortable, or unpleasant, to believe that the error-theoretic argument is more credible and deeply comforting to deny that it is. Here again the claim is that there are distorting influences working on our moral or metaethical beliefs and that, once we become aware of this, we ought to significantly reduce our confidence in the soundness of the Moorean argument.

There is surely something right about this debunking explanation. It surely *is* true that many of us would be disturbed if we came to believe the error theory, or if we came to believe that it is not wrong to burn people alive for the reading light it provides. It surely is true that many of us would begin to lose our grip on who we are, and what we stand for, if we were to come to believe the error theory. We *would* find this uncomfortable, even distressing. But this does not confer a significant advantage on the error theory, because this debunking explanation cuts both ways and to an equal degree.

As Michael Huemer (2020) has recently argued, many people find it unpleasant to believe in the existence of moral obligations and find it far more pleasant to believe in the error theory (and similarly revisionary views in philosophy). For instance, many have, as a core part of their identity, a commitment to a kind of no-nonsense metaphysics that rules out the existence of moral truths. Some think that moral realism smacks of religion and have a strong desire to dissociate from it and similar views for that reason.[22] Others have a somewhat exaggerated allegiance to the natural sciences and think that those sciences rule out the possibility of moral truths. After all, how often do physicists appeal to moral properties to explain the workings of the universe? Some philosophers enjoy the intellectual simplicity of nihilistic views, since it relieves them of the difficult task of theorizing that domain. Some philosophers have an abnormal fear of being duped and wish to avoid it by refusing to countenance moral truths. Some enjoy the sense of cleverness associated with debunking cherished views. Some enjoy arguing for (and maybe even believing) skeptical views because such views are, in virtue of their novelty, rewarded by the philosophy profession. And some find it more pleasant to believe the error theory because morality, if it existed, would be onerous and it would be quite a relief to think that we have no such obligations to others after all (e.g., obligations to give away large sums of one's excess wealth). In any case, the psychological discomfort debunking explanation would not confer a significant advantage on error-theoretic arguments vis-à-vis Moorean arguments because these considerations apply equally to proponents of each argument. Plausibly, proponents of each view have psychological comforts to enjoy and discomforts to avoid by believing their respective views. The psychological discomfort explanation is therefore yet another dead end for error theorists hoping to appeal to higher-order evidence to undermine the plausibility of Moorean arguments.

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[22] David Killoren (2016) argues that robust moral realism *is* a religion.

6. Conclusion

Proponents of Moorean arguments against the error theory think that error theorists make a classic philosophical mistake. It's one made by proponents of highly revisionary views all over philosophy: they put more confidence in their many, abstract, highly controversial, far-less-intuitively-compelling philosophical premises than their concrete, uncontroversial (even boring), intuitively compelling ordinary judgments. Error theorists insist that they've made no such mistake. If we look closer at the origin of our intuitive judgments, they say, we'll see that we were never warranted in putting so much confidence in those judgments to begin with. For they were always the products of distorting influences (e.g., evolutionary pressures, the unbelievability of the error theory, wishful thinking). But I've argued that, when we take the error theorists up on this proposal and go look further at the evidence, we see that things just get worse for them.

Moorean arguments are boring. Revisionary arguments are far more flashy, clever, mind-expanding, and journal-worthy. In short, they're way more interesting. But philosophical interesting-ness and truth come apart. And error theorists and their opponents have always agreed on this much: we're here for the truth.

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