WHY WE REALLY CANNOT BELIEVE THE ERROR THEORY

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1. Introduction

According to the error theory, normative judgments are beliefs that ascribe normative properties, but these properties do not exist. I have argued elsewhere that we cannot believe this theory. Several philosophers have replied to this argument. In this chapter, I will reply to their replies.[1]

This may seem tedious, but I think it matters. For I have also argued that our inability to believe the error theory makes this theory more likely to be true, by undermining objections to the theory, by making it harder to reject my arguments for the theory, and by undermining revisionary alternatives to the theory (Streumer 2013a; 2016a; 2017: §§72–74). And it matters whether the error theory is true.

The error theory I defend applies to all normative judgments. But my replies are also relevant to moral error theorists. For it is often suggested that the arguments for a moral error theory actually support an error theory about all normative judgments, and this is often taken to be an objection to moral error theories (see, for example, Cuneo 2007). Moral error theorists can answer this objection by endorsing what I say in this chapter.

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[1] This chapter consolidates my replies to these replies in one place. It will therefore repeat some claims I made in Streumer (2016a, 2016b). It also draws on parts of chapter IX of Streumer (2017), by kind permission of Oxford University Press.

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2. Why we cannot believe the error theory

I will first repeat my argument.[2] If you are already familiar with it, you can skip this section and continue with §3.

I use the term 'belief' in such a way that at least two conditions have to be met for a person to believe that p. The first is that

(B1)　A person believes that p only if this person is very confident that p.

We can distinguish *full* from *partial* belief: we fully believe that p if we are very confident that p, and we partly believe that p if we are only somewhat confident that p. I will use the term 'belief' to mean full belief.[3]

The second condition is that

(B2)　A person believes that p only if this person adequately understands p.

Suppose I do not understand the general theory of relativity. If (B2) is true, I then do not believe this theory. Suppose next that a physicist tells me that the general theory of relativity is true. I may then come to believe that this theory is true. But if (B2) is true, I do not thereby come to believe the theory itself. I only come to believe the theory itself if I adequately understand it. On the other hand, if I *do* adequately understand the general theory of relativity, I cannot come to believe that this theory is true without thereby coming to believe the theory itself. [4]

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[2] I first gave this argument in Streumer (2013a). For a more elaborate version of the argument, see Streumer (2017: §§56–57).

[3] I am neutral about whether beliefs are binary or come in degrees: if they are binary, I use the term 'belief' simply to mean belief, and if they come in degrees, I use the term 'belief' to mean a high degree of belief.

[4] You may think that (B2) sets the bar for believing that p too high. But note that (B2) is particularly plausible if p is the name of a theory or thesis, such as 'the general theory of relativity', 'Goldbach's conjecture', or 'the error theory'. A version of (B2) that is restricted to such cases would

We can also distinguish *explicit* from *implicit* belief: we explicitly believe that *p* if we currently think that *p*, and we implicitly believe that *p* if our current thoughts commit us to *p*, for example, by presupposing or entailing *p*. And we can distinguish *occurrent* from *dispositional* belief: we have an occurrent belief that *p* if we currently think that *p*, and we have a dispositional belief that *p* if we are disposed to think that *p* in certain circumstances, for example, when someone asks us whether it is the case that *p*.[5] I use the term 'belief' to mean explicit and occurrent full belief.

Since our concept of a belief is not entirely precise, there are different correct ways to use the term 'belief'.[6] If we want to set the bar low, we can say that a person believes that *p* even if this person is only somewhat confident that *p* or does not adequately understand *p*. If we want to set the bar higher, we can say that a person believes that *p* only if conditions (B1) and (B2) are met. And if we want to set the bar even higher, we can add further conditions: for example, we can say that a person believes that *p* only if this belief is stable and influences his or her actions. As I have said, I will set the bar at meeting conditions (B1) and (B2). But I take (B1) and (B2) to be partly stipulative: I take these conditions to pick out *a* correct way to use the term 'belief', not *the* correct way.

I think that if we use the term 'belief' in accordance with (B1) and (B2), two further conditions also have to be met for a person to believe that *p*.[7] The first of these is that

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be enough for my arguments to go through.

[5] For these distinctions, see e.g. Harman (1986: 13–14). I here take explicit belief to be identical to occurrent belief, but Harman does not: he writes that "one believes something explicitly if one's belief in that thing involves an explicit mental representation whose content is the content of that belief" (1986: 13), and that "a belief is occurrent if it is either currently before one's consciousness or in some other way currently operative in guiding what one is thinking or doing" (1986: 14).

[6] As Stevenson (2002: 106) writes, our concept of a belief "may well be vague in certain respects," and "may even be a family resemblance concept … with some of its extension left indeterminate by preceding usage." Stevenson (2002: 116–117, 120) distinguishes six different ways to use the term 'belief'; mine corresponds most closely to what he calls "linguistic reasoned beliefs."

[7] In Streumer (2013a), I called these further conditions '(B1)' and '(B2)'. I here call them '(B3)' and '(B4)'.

(B3)   A person believes that *p* only if this person believes what he or she believes to be entailed by *p*.

To see this, suppose that Bob says:

> I believe that Socrates was a man, and I believe that this entails that Socrates was a human being, but I do not believe that Socrates was a human being.

Bob may then be insincere, or may be considering whether to give up one of these beliefs, or may fail to adequately understand what he is saying. If he is insincere, he does not believe what he says he believes. If he is considering whether to give up one of these beliefs, he is no longer very confident about at least one of the things he says he believes, which means that he fails to meet condition (B1). But he may also be neither insincere nor considering whether to give up one of these beliefs. In that case, however, he is too confused to adequately understand what he is saying, which means that he fails to meet condition (B2). In none of these cases does Bob believe what he says he believes. This suggests that if we use the term 'belief' in accordance with conditions (B1) and (B2), condition (B3) has to be met as well.

If you doubt this, this may be because you conflate (B3) with a different claim, such as:

(1)   A person *partly* or *implicitly* or *dispositionally* believes that *p* only if this person believes what he or she believes to be entailed by *p*.

(2)   A person believes that *p* only if this person believes what he or she *partly* or *implicitly* or *dispositionally* believes to be entailed by *p*.

(3)   A person believes that *p* only if this person believes what is *actually* entailed by *p*.

(4)   A person believes that p_1, that p_2, . . . and that p_n only if this person believes what he or she believes to be entailed by the conjunction of p_1, p_2, . . . and p_n.

But (B3) is a weaker claim than (1) to (4). Even if (1) to (4) are false, therefore, (B3) can be true. That is what I think is the case.[8]

The second further condition that I think has to be met if we use the term 'belief' in accordance with (B1) and (B2) is that

(B4)   A person believes that *p* only if this person does not believe that there is no reason to believe that *p*.

To see this, suppose that Bob says:

I believe that Socrates was a man, but I believe that there is no reason to believe this.

As before, Bob may then be insincere, or may be considering whether to give up one of these beliefs, or may fail to adequately understand what he is saying. If he is considering whether to give up one of these beliefs, he is no longer very confident about at least one of the things he says he believes, which means that he fails to meet condition (B1). But he may also be neither insincere nor considering whether to give up one of these beliefs. In that case, however, he is too confused to adequately understand what he is saying, which means that he fails to meet condition (B2). In none of these cases does Bob believe what he says he believes. This suggests that if we use the term 'belief' in accordance with conditions (B1) and (B2), condition (B4) has to be met as well.

As before, if you doubt this, this may be because you conflate (B4) with a different claim, such as:

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[8] For further discussion, see Streumer (2017: §57). Partly because in Streumer (2013a) I did not make it clear that I used the term 'belief' to mean explicit belief, Bergamaschi Ganapini (2016) interprets (B3) as a claim about implicit beliefs. She argues that if we interpret (B3) in this way, my argument for the unbelievability of the error theory fails. As I said in Streumer (2016b), I agree. But I think that if we interpret (B3) as a claim about explicit beliefs, as I meant to do, my argument is sound.

(5)   A person *partly* or *implicitly* or *dispositionally* believes that *p* only if this person does not believe that there is no reason to believe that *p*.

(6)   A person believes that *p* only if this person does not even *partly* or *implicitly* or *dispositionally* believe that there is no reason to believe that *p*.

(7)   A person believes that *p* only if this person knows *what* reason there is to believe that *p*.

(8)   A person believes that *p* only if this person believes that *there is* a reason to believe that *p*.

(9)   A person believes that *p* only if this person does not believe that there is no consideration that stands in an *irreducibly normative favoring relation* to this belief.

(10)   A person *accepts* that *p* only if this person does not believe that there is no reason to believe that *p*.

(11)   A person believes that *p* only if this person does not believe that there is no *evidence* that *p*.[9]

But as before, (B4) is a weaker claim than (5) to (11). Even if (5) to (11) are false, therefore, (B4) can be true. As before, that is what I think is the case.[10]

Suppose I am right that if we use the term 'belief' in accordance with (B1) and (B2), conditions (B3) and (B4) also have to be met for a person to believe that *p*. I think it follows from this that we cannot believe the error theory. As I have said, according to the error theory, normative judgments are beliefs that ascribe normative properties, but normative properties do not exist. And I have argued elsewhere that the property of being a reason for belief is a normative property (see Streumer 2016a; 2017: §51). The error theory therefore

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[9] I use the term 'evidence' to mean what Kelly (2006: §3) calls 'indicator evidence': I use this term to mean a consideration that indicates that a belief is true, either by logically implying the content of this belief or by making it more likely that this content is true. By contrast, I use the term 'reason for belief' to mean a consideration that counts in favor of having this belief. We often take indicator evidence to be a reason for a belief, but I think that reasons for belief are not the same thing as indicator evidence (see Streumer 2017: §51).

[10] As before, for further discussion, see Streumer (2017: §57).

entails that there is no reason to believe this theory. And anyone who understands the theory well enough to believe it knows that it entails this. Therefore, given that

> (B3)   A person believes that *p* only if this person believes what he or she believes to be entailed by *p*,

anyone who believes the error theory believes that there is no reason to believe this theory. But given that

> (B4)   A person believes that *p* only if this person does not believe that there is no reason to believe that *p*,

that is impossible. This means that we cannot believe the error theory.[11]

3. Are (B3) and (B4) only true of rational beliefs?

As I have said, several philosophers have replied to this argument. A first reply, which is given by Hallvard Lillehammer and Niklas Möller, is that (B4) is only true of rational beliefs (Lillehammer & Möller 2015: 456). A similar claim could be made about (B3).
I agree that if a belief meets conditions (B3) and (B4), this belief is rational in a certain sense: it is closed under believed entailment, since the person who has this belief believes what he or she believes to be entailed by this belief, and it is not believed to be unsupported, since the person who has this belief does not believe that there is no reason for this belief. But that is no objection to my argument. For as Lillehammer and Möller say, being closed under believed entailment and not being believed to be unsupported are descriptive properties,

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[11] You may think that our inability to believe the error theory is a problem for this theory. But as I argue in Streumer (2013a; 2017: §62), it is not. Just as a theory can be true if we do not believe it, a theory can also be true if we cannot believe it. Of course, if we cannot believe a theory, we cannot sincerely say that this theory is true. But that does not show that this theory is false.

which means that being rational in this sense is also a descriptive property.[12] Since I think that if we use the term 'belief' in accordance with (B1) and (B2), conditions (B3) and (B4) also have to be met, I take this descriptive property to be partly constitutive of the mental state that this use of the term 'belief' picks out. If you deny that this descriptive property is partly constitutive of belief, I think you are setting the bar for believing that p lower than I have done: you may think, for example, that a person can believe that p even if he or she is only somewhat confident that p, or even if he or she does not understand p. I agree that if we set this bar lower, we can believe the error theory (see Streumer 2017: §63).

4. Are there counterexamples to (B4)?

Another reply to my argument is that there are counterexamples to (B4). One purported counterexample is constituted by religious beliefs. Suppose that Susan says:

I believe that God exists, but I believe that there is no evidence for this belief.

She can then perhaps believe what she says she believes. But she may take there to be other reasons to believe that God exists: she may think that she will be denied entry to heaven if God exists but she fails to believe this, as Pascal thought, or that believing that God exists enables her to become her true self, as Kierkegaard seems to have thought.[13] For this example to be a counterexample to (B4), Susan should instead say:

I believe that God exists, but I believe that there is no reason to believe this.

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[12] I take a property to be descriptive if and only if it can be ascribed with a descriptive predicate. As I explain in Streumer (2017: §45), this claim is compatible with different views about what *makes* a property normative or descriptive.

[13] Alternatively, she may use the term 'evidence' to mean scientific evidence, and she may believe that there is non-scientific evidence for her belief that God exists (such as, perhaps, personal religious experience).

She may then seem to believe what she says he believes. But I think that if we use the term 'belief' in accordance with (B1) and (B2), Susan does not really believe this. She may instead use the term 'reason for belief' to mean evidence, or she may use the term 'belief' to mean acceptance, or she may merely mean to say that she does not know what reason there is to believe that God exists.

Lillehammer and Möller disagree. They write:

> 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. (Lillehammer & Möller 2015: 455)

But I do not deny this. I only claim that we cannot be *very confident* in a religious proposition while believing that there is *no reason whatsoever* to believe it. They continue:

> 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. (Lillehammer & Möller 2015: 455)

But I do not deny this either. I only claim that we cannot believe that God exists while at the same time believing that *there is* no reason to believe that he exists, not even a reason that he has not revealed to us. If Susan thinks that God has not revealed such a reason to us, she does not believe that there is no reason to believe that God exists, but only that we do not know what this reason is.

A second purported counterexample to (B4) is constituted by self-evident beliefs. Suppose that Susan takes it to be self-evident that 1 + 1 = 2, and suppose that she says:

> I believe that 1 + 1 = 2, but I believe that there is no reason to believe this.

She may then also seem to believe what she says he believes. But p is self-evident if and only if adequately understanding p gives us sufficient reason to believe that p. This means that if Susan takes it to be self-evident that 1 + 1 = 2, she does not really believe that there is no

reason to believe that $1 + 1 = 2$.[14]

Marianna Bergamaschi Ganapini (2016: 528) similarly suggests that basic beliefs and beliefs in what Wittgenstein calls "hinge propositions" are counterexamples to (B4). I agree that we can have such beliefs without believing that there are reasons for them. But (B4) only says that we cannot have a belief *while* believing that there is *no* reason for it. And when foundationalists call certain beliefs "basic" and Wittgenstein calls certain propositions "hinge propositions," they do not mean that we can have such beliefs while believing that there are no reasons for them. They only mean that we can be justified in having such beliefs without basing them on other beliefs.

A third purported counterexample to (B4) is constituted by compulsive or deluded beliefs (Streumer 2013a: 197; Bergamaschi Ganapini 2016: 528). Suppose that Susan suffers from the Capgras delusion, which makes her think that her family members have been replaced by robots, and suppose that she says:

> I believe that my husband has been replaced by a robot, but I believe that there is no reason to believe this.

She may then also seem to believe what she says she believes. But I think that if we use the term 'belief' in accordance with (B1) and (B2), even people with a compulsive or deluded belief probably do not believe that there is no reason whatsoever for this belief. For example, patients who suffer from the Capgras delusion have brain damage that gives them certain abnormal experiences, and they mistakenly assume that the best explanation for these experiences is that their family members have been replaced by robots (Bortolotti 2010: 120). They therefore do seem to take there to be reasons for their deluded beliefs. Moreover, if some people with compulsive or deluded beliefs believe that there are no reasons for these beliefs, I could revise (B4) to:

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[14] You may object that a reason to believe that p must be distinct from p itself. But on this conception of self-evidence, it is: what gives us sufficient reason to believe that p is not p itself, but our adequate understanding of p.

(B4*) A person believes that *p* only if this person does not believe that there is no reason to believe that *p*, unless the belief that *p* is compulsive or deluded.

Since a belief in the error theory is not compulsive or deluded in the relevant sense, this revision would not undermine my argument.

A fourth purported counterexample to (B4) is constituted by certain philosophical beliefs. Suppose that a lecture on skepticism convinces Susan that there is no reason to believe that her senses are reliable, and suppose that she says:

I believe that my senses are reliable, but I believe that there is no reason to believe this.[15]

She may then also seem to believe what she says she believes. But I think that if we use the term 'belief' in accordance with (B1) and (B2), Susan does not really believe this. As before, she may instead use the term 'reason for belief' to mean evidence, or she may use the term 'belief' to mean acceptance, or she may merely mean to say that she does not know what reason there is to believe that her senses are reliable. Alternatively, she may have different beliefs at different times: during the lecture she may be very confident that there is no reason to believe that her senses are reliable while being only somewhat confident that her senses are reliable, and after the lecture she may again be very confident that her senses are reliable while being only somewhat confident that there is no reason to believe this (see also Lillehammer and Möller 2015: 456; Forcehimes & Talisse 2016: 851).

Alexander Hyun and Eric Sampson disagree. They think that Susan

may be convinced by skeptical arguments that she has no reason to believe that her

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[15] See Hyun & Sampson (2014: 634–635). They also list several other philosophical beliefs that they take to be counterexamples to (B4): the belief that my reason is reliable, the belief that I am not a brain in a vat, the belief that there are other minds, and the belief that my inductive reasoning is reliable. Lillehammer and Möller (2015: 455–456) give the last example as well. My claims about the belief that my senses are reliable also apply to these other purported counterexamples.

senses are reliable and, at the same time, believe that they are, either because (i) nature has constituted her so that she cannot help but believe that they are reliable; (ii) she thinks that she could not possibly give reasons in their defense; (iii) she is convinced that her life will go much better if she believes that they are reliable; or (iv) all of the above. (Hyun & Sampson 2014: 634)

But suppose first that (i) is true: suppose that Susan cannot help but believe that her senses are reliable. In that case, her belief that her senses are reliable is, in effect, compulsive. As I have said, if compulsive beliefs are a counterexample to (B4), I can revise (B4) to (B4*) without thereby undermining my argument (see also Forcehimes & Talisse 2016: 851–852). Suppose next that (ii) is true: suppose that Susan thinks she could not possibly give reasons to believe that her senses are reliable. In that case, Susan does not really believe that *there is* no reason to believe that her senses are reliable, but only that she cannot say what reason there is to believe this. And (B4) only says that we cannot have a belief while believing that there is no reason for this belief, not that we cannot have a belief while being unable to say what reason there is for it. Finally, suppose that (iii) is true: suppose that Susan is convinced that her life will go much better if she believes that her senses are reliable. She then does seem to take there to be a reason to believe that her senses are reliable: namely, that her life will go much better if she believes this.[16] I therefore think that these examples fail to undermine (B4).

5. Is a belief in the error theory itself a counterexample to (B4)?

Some philosophers think, however, that a belief in the error theory itself constitutes a counterexample to (B4). They think that since someone who believes the error theory

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[16] Hyun and Sampson (2014: 634) take this reason to be 'explanatory' rather than 'justificatory': they take it to be a consideration that explains Susan's belief but that does not count in favor of her belief. But if Susan *herself* does not take this reason to be justificatory, and if she also believes that there is no other justificatory reason for her belief that her senses are reliable, then I think she does not really believe that her senses are reliable.

believes that there are no reasons at all, such a person can have a belief while believing that there is no reason for this belief. This sounds suggestive, but I am not sure what to make of it. Of course, it is true that

(1)   If we believed the error theory, (B4) would be false of us.

But the mere fact that (B4) *would* be false of us *if* we believed the error theory does not show that (B4) is *actually* false of us. Merely pointing out that (1) is true is therefore not enough to show that we can believe the error theory.[17]
It is also true that

(2)   We can believe that there are no considerations that stand in an irreducibly normative relation to our beliefs.

But that does not show that (B4) is false, since (B4) does not say that a person believes that *p* only if this person accepts non-reductive realism about reasons for belief. Of course, to believe an error theory about all normative judgments, we must believe that judgments about reasons for belief ascribe a normative relation, since otherwise there would be normative judgments about which we would not believe the error theory. But we do not need to believe that this relation is *irreducibly* normative. Moreover, we do not need to believe that judgments about reasons for belief ascribe a normative relation for (B4) to be true of us, but only for it to be true that we believe the error theory.

Jonas Olson gives a more specific version of this example. He writes:

I can … base my belief that the error theory is true on the argument from queerness,

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[17] Forcehimes and Talisse argue that if we believed the error theory, (B3) would also be false of us: they think that anyone "who fully believes entailments lack any reason-giving force can fail to believe what she fully believes to be entailed by one of her full beliefs" (2016: 854). But I do not think that (B3) is true of us because we believe that entailments have reason-giving force. Instead, I take (B3) to be true in virtue of what it is to believe that *p*, and in virtue of what it is to believe that *p* entails *q*.

without judging that this argument favours my attitude of believing that the error theory is true. I can thus maintain that while there are arguments on which I base my belief that the error theory is true, there are no irreducibly normative reasons for the attitude of believing that the error theory is true. Hence we can indeed believe the error theory. (Olson 2014: 171–172)[18]

Olson is here replying to my earlier defense of (B4), in which I wrote that "reasons for belief are considerations that we *base* our beliefs on, and we cannot base a belief on a consideration without making at least an implicit normative judgment" (Streumer 2013a: 198). In response, he points out that children and non-human animals form beliefs on the basis of perception "although they presumably lack the relevant normative thoughts" (Olson 2014: 171). I agree. I therefore withdraw my earlier claim that basing a belief on a consideration involves making an implicit normative judgment.[19]

But that does not undermine my argument. For though Olson is right that

(3)   A person can base a belief on a consideration *without* believing that this consideration is *a* reason for this belief,

this does not mean that

(4)   A person can base a belief on a consideration *while* believing that this

[18] Lillehammer and Möller (2015: 457–458) and Bergamaschi Ganapini (2016: 529–530) make similar claims. You may think Olson is himself a counterexample to (B4), since he may seem to believe the error theory while believing that there are no reasons for belief. But Olson actually does not believe that there are no reasons for belief: he thinks that judgments about reasons for belief can be judgments about instrumental reasons or judgments about what he calls 'the standard of being a responsible believer', in which case he thinks that his error theory does not apply to them. I discuss Olson's view in more detail in Streumer (2016a).

[19] Even to young children, however, which beliefs they form on the basis of their perceptual inputs will not seem arbitrary. This may indicate that they do make implicit normative judgments when basing their beliefs on these inputs.

consideration is *no* reason for this belief.

If I perceive that the desk at which I wrote this chapter is white, I will normally form the belief that this desk is white on the basis of this perceptual input without making a normative judgment. But suppose I believe that I have taken a powerful drug that makes red objects look white to me. In that case, my perceptual input will not change: the desk at which I wrote this chapter will still look white to me. But I will now believe that this input is no reason to believe that this desk is white. And if I believe that this perceptual input is no reason for this belief, I will be unable to form the belief that this desk is white on the basis of this input.[20]

Similar claims apply to any other consideration that we can base our beliefs on. Suppose I believe that men are not human beings. I will then be unable to form the belief that Socrates is a human being on the basis of the consideration that Socrates is a man, since I will then believe that this consideration is no reason for this belief. Or suppose I believe that only evidence can be a reason for a belief. I will then be unable to form the belief that God exists on the basis of the consideration that I will be denied entry to heaven if God exists, since I will then believe that this consideration is no reason for this belief. Even if Olson is right that (3) is true, therefore, this does not mean that (4) is true.[21]

Bergamaschi Ganapini disagrees. To support (4), she gives the following example:

Imagine a professor on a job committee examining the dossiers of two job applicants:

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[20] Owens (2000: 13) writes that "responsiveness to reasons does not require actual reflection on reasons: I can form a rational belief in *p* based on evidence *e* without forming either the belief that I have that evidence, or the belief that *e* suffices to justify *p*." But he also suggests that forming a belief that *p* based on evidence *e does* require *not* positively believing that I do *not* have this evidence. I think it similarly requires not positively believing that *e* is no reason to believe *p*.

[21] You may object that if I do not believe that a consideration is a reason for a belief, I may nevertheless think that this consideration stands in some other positive normative relation to this belief: for example, that it justifies this belief, that it supports this belief, or that it makes it the case that I ought to have this belief. This shows that (4) should be generalized to: we can base a belief on a consideration *while* believing that this consideration *stands in no positive normative relation* to this belief. Since the error theory entails that these other positive normative relations also do not exist, this does not affect my argument.

Paul and Gina. They are both good candidates, but Gina is more qualified than Paul based on some 'objective standards' (e.g. number of publications). Contrary to that, however, the professor believes that the right thing to do is to hire Paul. Suppose for now that his belief is – unbeknownst to him – in part based on his belief that Gina is a woman. Suppose further that he explicitly denies that being a woman is a reason for not hiring someone who is well qualified for the job. Now if this is a possible scenario – as I believe it is – we have a situation in which someone's belief is based on a consideration that he or she does not see as a reason for that belief. (Bergamaschi Ganapini 2016: 530)[22]

There are different views about what it is for a person's belief to be based on a consideration C: this may be, for example, that C caused this belief, or that this person is disposed to revise this belief if C does not obtain, or that this person at least implicitly takes C to be a reason for this belief.[23] If the first or second view is true, this example shows that

(5)   A person's belief can *be based* on C even though this person believes that C is no reason for this belief.

But there are two things the example does not show. First, it does not show that

(6)   A person can *base* a belief on C while believing that C is no reason for this belief.

If a person bases a belief on C, this is something that this person actively does rather than something that merely happens to him or her. A person who bases a belief on C must therefore realize that this belief is based on C. And if this professor realizes that his belief that Paul should be hired is based on the consideration that Gina is a woman, I think he cannot

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[22] A similar example is given by Evans (2013: 2946–2947).

[23] For discussion of these views, see, for example, Korcz (2000, 2015) and Evans (2013). Korcz defends a combination of the first and the last views, and Evans defends a version of the second view.

continue to have this belief while believing that this consideration is no reason for this belief. I therefore think that this example does not support (4).

Moreover, this professor surely does not believe that there is *no reason whatsoever* to believe that Paul should be hired. Instead, he presumably has certain false beliefs that he takes to be reasons for this belief: he may falsely believe, for example, that Paul's publications are better than Gina's, or that Paul is more impressive in discussion that Gina, or he may believe some other rationalization along these lines. Of course, this does not mean that Paul should actually be hired. But it does mean that this example does not undermine (B4).

6. Is there a way in which we can come to believe the error theory?

Another reply to my argument is that there are specific ways in which we can come to believe the error theory. One way in which we may seem able to do this is that

> (1)   We can believe that judgments about reasons for belief are not normative judgments, and we can then come to believe an error theory about all judgments that we take to be normative.

I agree that we can do what (1) describes. But if I am right that judgments about reasons for belief are normative judgments, we would then not believe an error theory about all judgments that are *actually* normative. Instead, we would merely believe an error theory about all judgments that *we take to be* normative. And when I say that we cannot believe the error theory, I mean that we cannot believe an error theory about all judgments that are actually normative.

A second way in which we may seem able to come to believe the error theory is that

> (2)   We can endorse a revisionary view about reasons for belief, and we can then replace our judgments about reasons for belief with certain descriptive beliefs, such as descriptive beliefs about evidence.

But if I am right that judgments about reasons for belief are normative judgments, we then

would not believe an error theory about all judgments that are *currently* normative. Instead, we would merely believe an error theory about all judgments that would *then* be normative: we would believe an error theory about all judgments that are normative after we have replaced some of our normative judgments with descriptive beliefs. And when I say that we cannot believe the error theory, I mean that we cannot believe an error theory about all judgments that are currently normative.

A third way in which it we may seem able to come to believe the error theory is that

(3)   We can come to believe the error theory without thereby coming to believe that there is no reason to believe this theory.

Hyun and Sampson think that we can do this, and so do Andrew Forcehimes and Robert Talisse. Both illustrate (3) with an example. Hyun and Sampson's example is as follows:

A person might fully believe that there are no animals in the room, and hence understand this claim well enough to be in a position to believe it, but fail to believe (and hence to know) that this claim entails that there are no falcons in the room. Perhaps her thoughts simply do not turn to falcons in a way that would give rise to beliefs about them. (Hyun & Sampson 2014: 635)

And Forcehimes and Talisse's example is as follows:

I am an arthritis-denier. I know what is typically claimed about arthritis – how it stiffens the joints, commonly occurs in wrists, fingers, and ankles, and so forth. But, because I think the elderly made up arthritis to trick the young into doing work for them, I hold that (i) when people make arthritis diagnoses they ascribe arthritis properties, and (ii) arthritis properties do not exist. Next suppose, on account of my red, swollen toe, I go to the doctor. She tells me that I have a bad case of gout. I believe her. When I arrive home, I give my partner the bad news. To my surprise, my

partner explains that gout is a form of arthritis. (Forcehimes & Talisse 2016: 852)[24]

I agree that we can believe that there are no animals in the room without believing that there are no falcons in the room, and I agree that we can believe that arthritis does not exist without believing that gout does not exist. But does this show that we can do what (3) describes? Suppose that Fred is trying to believe the error theory. In other words, suppose he is trying to believe that

> (4)   Normative judgments are beliefs that ascribe normative properties, but these properties do not exist.

As I have said, when I say that we cannot believe the error theory, I mean that we cannot believe an error theory about all judgments that are *actually* normative. If I am right that these judgments include judgments about reasons for belief, to come to believe the error theory, Fred must come to believe that

> (5)   Judgments about reasons for belief are beliefs that ascribe the property of being a reason for belief, but this property does not exist.

This means that he cannot come to believe the error theory the way Forcehimes and Talisse's example suggests: he cannot come to believe the error theory by failing to realize that this theory applies to judgments about reasons for belief.

To believe (5), Fred must believe both of its conjuncts. He must therefore believe both that

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[24] Bergamaschi Ganapini (2016: 532) suggests that there are two related ways in which we can come to believe the error theory without believing that there is no reason to believe this theory: first, we may fail to realize "that the error theory entails that there are no reasons to believe it because [we have] never read or carefully analyzed this particular aspect of the error theory" (2016: 527), and second, we may "temporarily [ignore] that this is entailed by [our] belief about normative judgments in general" (2016: 532). My reply also applies to these suggestions.

(6)   Judgments about reasons for belief are beliefs that ascribe the property of being a reason for belief

and that

(7)   The property of being a reason for belief does not exist.

If (5) is true, believing (7) is equivalent to believing that

(8)   There are no reasons for belief.

This means that in order to believe the error theory, Fred must believe (8). And, of course, (8) entails that

(9)   There is no reason to believe the error theory.

Now suppose that Fred is trying to believe the error theory. Can he do this while temporarily ignoring the entailment from (8) to (9)? Perhaps he could if he was not explicitly thinking about the error theory. But since Fred is trying to believe the error theory, he *is* explicitly thinking about this theory. I therefore think that he also cannot come to believe the error theory the way Hyun and Sampson's example suggests: he also cannot come to believe the error theory by failing to connect (8) to the error theory.

    A fourth way in which we may seem able to come to believe the error theory, which is suggested by Bergamaschi Ganapini, is that

(10)   We can come to believe the error theory while taking the arguments for this theory to be reasons for this belief, and once we believe the error theory we can stop taking these arguments to be reasons for this belief. (Bergamaschi Ganapini 2016: 530)

But I think we cannot do this either. For as I have just explained, to believe the error theory, we must believe that

(8)   There are no reasons for belief.

And if while trying to believe the error theory we take the arguments for this theory to be reasons for this belief, this will prevent us from coming to believe (8). It will therefore prevent us from coming to believe the error theory.

Finally, Hyun and Sampson suggest that there must be *some* way in which we can come to believe the error theory, since there seems to be a possible world in which people believe this theory. As they describe it, in this world,

> the error theory is taught to school children from an early age. On Sunday mornings, everyone gathers in large buildings in their communities where they hear readings from *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, recite the error-theory creed, and sing hymns about J. L. Mackie. In this way, children and young adults are instructed with the teachings of the error theory. There is no opposition. No one has ever heard of a different meta-ethical theory. (Hyun & Sampson 2014: 633)[25]

But reciting the "error-theory creed" and singing hymns about Mackie is not enough to believe the error theory. Do these people make normative judgments the way we do? Are their judgments about reasons for belief normative the way ours are? And if we use the term 'belief' in accordance with (B1) and (B2), do these people then nevertheless believe the error theory? It is hard to say, but I think they do not. What Hyun and Sampson are describing, I think, is merely a world in which people *seem* to believe the error theory.

7. Can we come close to believing the error theory?

Though I think that we cannot believe the error theory, I have also argued elsewhere that we can come close to believing this theory. I think there are at least two ways in which we can do

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[25] They add that they "offer these considerations in a Moorean spirit, not as a decisive refutation of Streumer's view."

this (Streumer 2013a).[26] First, we can believe different parts of the error theory at different times, while implicitly changing some of our other beliefs. When we consider arguments for the claim that

(1)   Normative judgments are beliefs that ascribe normative properties,

we can believe (1), while at the same time failing to believe that

(2)   Normative properties do not exist

and instead implicitly believing that normative properties do exist. And when we consider arguments for (2), we can believe (2), while at this time failing to believe (1) and instead implicitly believing that normative judgments are non-cognitive attitudes rather than beliefs that ascribe normative properties. Something like this happens to me when I consider the arguments I have elsewhere given for (1) and (2).[27]

Bergamaschi Ganapini asks why this does not count as coming close to "believing that the error theory is false," since "that there are normative properties and that normative judgments are non-cognitive attitudes are supposed to be claims incompatible with the error theory" (Bergamaschi Ganapini 2016: 531). I have three answers to this question. First, whereas my belief in (1) and my belief in (2) are explicit, the other beliefs I form while coming to believe (1) or (2) are merely implicit. Second, whereas my belief in (1) and my belief in (2) are based on what I take to be sound arguments, the other beliefs I form while coming to believe (1) or (2) are not based on arguments. Instead, I form these other beliefs merely to enable myself to believe (1) or (2). Third, I know that the reason why I am temporarily giving up my belief in either (1) or (2) is not that I am convinced that this part of the error theory is false, but is instead that this is the only way in which I can come to believe the other part of the theory.

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[26] In Streumer (2017: §63), I outline three further ways in which we can do this.
[27] I give these arguments in Streumer (2008, 2011, 2013b, 2013c, 2017).

Hyun and Sampson suggest that coming close to believing the error theory in this way may make us believe a moral error theory. They write that

> a way to come close to believing the error theory is to believe those theses that are parts of the error theory, and surely *moral error theory* is a part of the error theory. So if there are reasons to come close to believing the error theory, then there are reasons to believe moral error theory, and as a result our deepest and most important moral convictions are … threatened. (Hyun & Sampson 2014: 640)

But my arguments for (1) and (2) will only make us believe a moral error theory if we mistakenly think that these arguments fail to apply to judgments about reasons for belief. To make sure that coming close to believing the error theory in this way does not make us believe a moral error theory, we should therefore keep in mind that these arguments do in fact apply to judgments about reasons for belief.[28]

A second way in which I think we can come close to believing the error theory is by believing that there are sound arguments that together seem to show that the error theory is true. What does this mean? It does not mean believing that

(3)   There are *seemingly* sound arguments for the error theory.

In other words, it does not mean believing that there are arguments for the error theory that are *prima facie* sound, but that may on closer inspection turn out to be unsound. Instead, it means believing that

(4)   There are *sound* arguments that together *seem* to show that the error theory is true.

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[28] Of course, we can come to believe a moral error theory on the basis of, for example, Mackie's or Joyce's arguments for this theory. My claim is only that if we adequately understand my arguments for an error theory about all normative judgments, we cannot come to believe a moral error theory on the basis of these arguments.

My belief in (4) is in one way similar to the beliefs we have when appearances are deceptive. When we put a stick in the water, this stick seems bent, but we do not believe that it is actually bent. When we are traveling in the desert, there may seem to be an oasis in the distance, but we may not believe that there is actually an oasis in the distance. In a similar way, when I consider my arguments for (1) and (2), these arguments together seem to show that the error theory is true, but I do not believe that they actually show this. Instead of failing to believe this because I take that these arguments to be unsound, however, I fail to believe this because I cannot believe what these arguments seem to show.[29]

Bergamaschi Ganapini replies that if (B3) and (B4) are true, the following claims also seem true:

(B5)   A person cannot believe that p entails q and that there are sound arguments that together seem to show that p without believing that there are sound arguments that together seem to show that q.

(B6)   A person cannot believe that there are sound arguments that together seem to show that p while believing that there are sound arguments that together seem to show that there is no reason to believe that p. (Bergamaschi Ganapini 2016: 532)[30]

If (B5) is true, and if anyone who understands the error theory well enough to be in a position

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[29] As I said in Streumer (2013a: 203), you may think that if I really believed that these arguments are sound, I would believe that they *show* that the error theory is true. But I know that the claim that there are sound arguments that show that the error theory is true entails that the error theory is true. Given (B1), this means that I cannot believe that there are sound arguments that *show* that the error theory is true. But I can believe that there are sound arguments that *seem* to show this.

[30] Since she is here objecting to the second way in which I think we can come close to believing the error theory, I have substituted the phrase "believe that there are sound arguments that together seem to show that p" for Bergamaschi Ganapini's phrases "come close to believing p" and "come close to having full confidence in the truth of a proposition." The latter phrase seems to equate coming close to believing the error theory with having a strong partial belief in the error theory. I do not think we can come close to believing the error theory in this way, since I think that any partial belief in the error theory must be very weak (see Streumer 2013a: 210; 2017: §63).

to believe it knows that this theory entails that there are no reason to believe it, then anyone who believes (4) also believes that

(5) There are sound arguments that together seem to show that there are no reasons for belief.

Moreover, it seems that we cannot come to believe (5) on the basis of (4) without thereby coming to believe that

(6) There are sound arguments that together seem to show that there is no reason to believe the error theory.

If so, and if (B6) is true, it follows that we cannot believe both (4) and (5) at the same time.[31] Bergamaschi Ganapini therefore denies that we can come close to believing the error theory in this second way.

I think, however, that (B6) is false. Just as believing (4) cannot give rise to a belief in the error theory because we cannot believe the error theory, believing (5) also cannot give rise to the belief that there are no reasons for belief because we cannot believe that there are no reasons for belief. For the fundamental reason why we cannot believe the error theory is that we cannot believe that there are no reasons for belief. Since believing (4) and believing (5) cannot give rise to these beliefs, I think we can believe both (4) and (5) at the same time. This would be like believing that our sense perception seems to show that there is an oasis in the distance, while at the same time believing that our map seems to show that there is no reason to believe this.

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[31] At least, if we assume that we cannot believe (5) on the basis of (4) without thereby coming to believe that there is no reason to believe the error theory.

8. Conclusion

I conclude that the replies that I have discussed fail to undermine my argument.[32] The argument may still seem to have what Forcehimes and Talisse (2016: 851) call "the scent of the illicit." But I think that what gives it this scent is not that it is unsound. Instead, I think it has this scent because it is hard to believe that there are philosophical theories that we cannot believe. Fortunately, we can believe that we cannot believe the error theory. I believe this. And if I can believe it, so can you.[33]

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[32] Have I reached this conclusion by clarifying the original argument or by slightly revising the argument? I think this does not matter. What matters is that the argument as I have formulated it here is sound, and that it makes the error theory more likely to be true in the ways I have outlined elsewhere (Streumer 2013a; Streumer 2017: §§72–74).

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