

CAN WE BELIEVE THE ERROR THEORY?

Bart Streumer

b.streumer@reading.ac.uk

Draft, 21 October 2010

Forthcoming (with revisions) in the *Journal of Philosophy*

Abstract:

According to the error theory, normative judgements are beliefs that ascribe normative properties, even though such properties do not exist. In this paper, I argue that we cannot believe the error theory, and that this means that there is no reason for us to believe this theory. It may be thought that this is a problem for the error theory, but I argue that it is not. Instead, I argue, our inability to believe the error theory undermines many objections that have been made to this theory.

CAN WE BELIEVE THE ERROR THEORY?

According to the error theory,

- (1) Normative judgements are beliefs that ascribe normative properties,

even though

- (2) There are no normative properties.¹

Most error theorists only defend this theory about moral judgements,² but I have argued elsewhere that (1) and (2) seem to be true of all normative judgements.³ In this paper, I shall argue that we cannot believe the error theory, and that this means that there is no reason for us to believe this theory. It may be thought that this is a problem for the error theory, but I shall argue that it is not. Instead, I shall argue, our inability to believe the error theory

¹ I use the term ‘property’ to cover both properties and relations. Those who think that some normative judgements do not ascribe properties can replace the term ‘normative judgement’ throughout this paper with ‘property-ascribing normative judgement’.

² See, for example, Mackie 1977, Hinckfuss 1987, Garner 1994, Joyce 2001 and 2006, and Burgess 2007. Olson forthcoming 1 and 2 defends an error theory about normative judgements that presuppose the existence of categorical reasons, which may include certain non-moral normative judgements.

³ In Streumer forthcoming 2, I argue that (1) is true. In Streumer 2008 and forthcoming 1, I argue for two claims that together entail (2). (1) and (2) cover all normative properties and judgements about which the following claims are true: (a) these normative properties supervene on descriptive properties; (b) we do not think that which objects have these normative properties is wholly determined by people’s use of these predicates under descriptively specified conditions; and (c) when two of these normative judgements conflict, we think there is normally a fact of the matter about which of these judgements is correct. Those who think that (a), (b) and (c) are not true of all normative judgements and properties can throughout this paper replace the terms ‘normative property’ and ‘normative judgement’ with ‘normative property of which (a) and (b) are true’ and ‘normative judgement of which (c) is true’.

undermines many objections that have been made to this theory.

This matters even if my arguments for (1) and (2) fail. For one objection to an error theory about moral judgements is that the arguments for this theory actually support an error theory about all normative judgements, and that this is a reason to reject such a theory about moral judgements.⁴ Error theorists about moral judgements can defend themselves against this objection by endorsing what I say in this paper.

This paper consists of six sections. In section 1, I argue that we cannot believe the error theory. In section 2, I argue that this means that there is no reason for us to believe the error theory. In sections 3 and 4, I argue that, instead of being a problem for the error theory, our inability to believe the error theory undermines many objections that have been made to this theory. In sections 5 and 6, I discuss three objections to my arguments, and I show that a common reaction to the error theory supports my view.

1. Why we cannot believe the error theory

Before I can show why we cannot believe the error theory, I need to defend two claims about belief. I shall begin by arguing that

- (3) We cannot fail to believe what we believe to be entailed by a small number of our own beliefs.

Many philosophers make a distinction between *full* beliefs and *partial* beliefs.⁵ We fully believe that *p* if we are wholly confident that *p*, and we partly believe that *p* if we are fairly but not wholly confident that *p*. In what follows, I shall use the term ‘belief’ to mean full belief.

To see that (3) is true, consider a claim of the following form:

⁴ For an objection along these lines, see Cuneo 2007.

⁵ See, for example, Christensen 2004, pp. 12-32, and the essays in Huber and Schmidt-Petri 2009.

I believe that p , that q , and that p and q entail r , but I do not believe that r .

For example, suppose that someone says: “I believe that penguins are birds, that all birds have feathers, and that this entails that penguins have feathers, but I do not believe that penguins have feathers.” If ‘belief’ means full belief, you will surely think that this person does not really believe what he says he believes.⁶ For if he was wholly confident that penguins are birds, that all birds have feathers, and that this entails that penguins have feathers, how could he fail to be just as confident that penguins have feathers? And if this is true of someone else in this situation, it must also be true of you in a similar situation. This shows that (3) is true.⁷

I shall next argue that

- (4) We cannot have a belief while believing that there is no reason to have this belief.

Though the term ‘reason for belief’ is often used to mean evidence for a belief, I shall use this term to mean a consideration that counts in favour of having a belief.⁸ Evidence for a belief normally counts in favour of having this belief, but a consideration’s being evidence for a belief is not the same thing as its counting in favour of having this belief. For considerations that are not evidence for a belief can also count in favour of having this belief.

(4) is weaker than the following two claims:

⁶ Here and in what follows, I use ‘he’ to mean he or she.

⁷ Of course, this does not show that (3) is true if ‘belief’ means partial belief. I shall come back to this in section 5. There can perhaps be a short period of time in which a person believes that p , that q , and that p and q entail r , but is making up his mind about whether r . However, that does not affect my arguments in what follows.

⁸ I use the term ‘consideration’ to remain neutral on whether reasons for belief are facts, propositions, or beliefs. My use of the term ‘reason for belief’ is deontic in the same sense in which reasons for action are deontic. For a similar use of the term ‘reason for action’, see, for example, Parfit 1997, Scanlon 1998, and Dancy 2004. For discussion of whether epistemic justification is deontic, see, for example, Alston 1988, Feldman 2000, and Shah 2002.

- (4*) We cannot have a belief while believing that there is *insufficient* reason to have this belief.⁹
- (4**) We cannot have a belief *without* believing that there is *a* reason to have this belief.

Though (4*) may be true, (4**) is clearly false. To show why we cannot believe the error theory, however, I only need to defend (4).

To see that (4) is true, consider a claim of the following form:

p, but there is no reason to believe that *p*.

For example, suppose that someone says: “Penguins have feathers, but there is no reason to believe that penguins have feathers.” If ‘belief’ means full belief, you will surely think that this person does not really believe what he says he believes. For if he was wholly confident that there is no reason to believe that penguins have feathers, how could he be just as confident that penguins do have feathers? And if this is true of someone else in this situation, it must also be true of you in a similar situation. This shows that (4) is true.¹⁰

It may be objected that, instead of showing that (4) is true, this only shows that

- (4***) We cannot have a belief while believing that there is no *evidence* for this belief.

However, consider next a claim of the following form:

⁹ Adler 2002 may seem to be defending this claim, but since Adler uses the term ‘reason for belief’ to mean evidence for this belief, he is really defending the claim that we cannot have a belief while believing that there is insufficient evidence for this belief.

¹⁰ As before, this does not show that (4) is true if ‘belief’ means partial belief. I shall come back to this in section 5. Beliefs for which a believer does not need evidence, such as the belief that he exists or the belief that he is in pain, can perhaps be used to construct counterexamples to (4). However, it would not affect my arguments in what follows if (4) was amended to exclude such beliefs.

p , but there is no evidence for p .

For example, suppose that someone says: “God exists, but there is no evidence that God exists.” This probably will not make you think that this person does not really believe what he says he believes. For instead of basing his belief that God exists on evidence, he may base it on some other consideration, such as faith. This shows that (4***) is false.

It may also be objected that (4) is shown to be false by claims of the following form:

p , and there is evidence for p , but there is no reason to believe that p .

For example, suppose that someone says: “Penguins have feathers, and there is evidence that penguins have feathers, but there is no reason to believe that penguins have feathers.” This will probably make you think that this person does not really believe what he says he believes. But suppose that you then find out that this person is an error theorist about the relation of counting in favour, who claims to base his beliefs on evidence without taking this evidence to count in favour of these beliefs. You may then change your mind. This may be thought to show that (4) is false.

However, we cannot base a belief on evidence without taking this evidence to be a reason for this belief in the sense of counting in favour of having this belief. For basing a belief on evidence involves taking this evidence to *justify* having this belief, and the claim that a consideration justifies having a belief is equivalent to the claim that this consideration counts more strongly in favour of having this belief than other considerations count against having this belief. Of course, many philosophers are reductive realists about reasons for belief in this sense: they claim that, when the relations of justification and counting in favour hold between evidence and a belief, these relations are identical to descriptive relations. But reductive realists do not deny that the relations of justification and counting in favour exist. Therefore, if this error theorist endorsed reductive realism about reasons for belief in this sense, he could no longer plausibly claim to base his beliefs on evidence without taking this evidence to count in favour of having these beliefs. And therefore, this objection fails.

I can now show why we cannot believe the error theory. As I have said, according to the error theory,

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

even though

(2) There are no normative properties.

Since the relation of counting in favour is a normative relation, the property of being a reason for belief, in the sense of a consideration that counts in favour of having a belief, is a normative property. This means that the error theory entails that there are no reasons for belief in this sense.¹¹

Anyone who understands the error theory well enough to be in a position to believe it knows that the error theory entails this. Therefore, given that

(3) We cannot fail to believe what we believe to be entailed by a small number of our own beliefs,

anyone who believes the error theory believes that there are no reasons for belief in this sense. But I have just argued that

(4) We cannot have a belief while believing that there is no reason to have this belief,

and, in arguing for (4), I used the term ‘reason for belief’ to mean a consideration that counts

¹¹ It may be thought that reasons for belief are instrumental reasons, and that the error theory does not cover instrumental reasons. However, as I said in note 3, (1) and (2) cover all normative properties and judgements about which the following claims are true: (a) these normative properties supervene on descriptive properties; (b) we do not think that which objects have these normative properties is wholly determined by people’s use of these predicates under descriptively specified conditions; and (c) when two of these normative judgements conflict, we think there is normally a fact of the matter about which of these judgements is correct. I think that (a), (b) and (c) are true of reasons for belief and judgements about reason for belief, whether or not these reasons are instrumental reasons.

in favour of a having a belief. This means that we can only believe the error theory if we do not have any beliefs at all. And this means, of course, that we cannot believe the error theory.¹²

2. Why there is no reason for us to believe the error theory

I have often heard the following argument about the relation between the error theory and reasons for belief:

If the error theory is true, there are no normative properties. The property of being a reason is a normative property. Therefore, there is no reason to believe the error theory.¹³

However, instead of showing that there is no reason to believe the error theory, this argument only shows that

(5) *If the error theory is true, there is no reason to believe the error theory.*

And the belief that (5) is true will only make us believe that there is no reason to believe the error theory if we already believe the error theory, which I have just argued we cannot do.¹⁴

¹² It may be thought that we could come to believe the error theory if, before coming to believe it, we changed our judgements about reasons for belief from beliefs into non-cognitive attitudes. I doubt that we can do this, and I shall come back to this in section 5. However, if we could do this, it would not enable us to believe an error theory about *all* normative judgements, but only about *some* of our present normative judgements, about our *earlier* normative judgements, and about *other people's* normative judgements.

¹³ This argument is usually presented as part of an objection to the error theory, which I shall discuss in section 4. See Stratton-Lake 2002, p. xxv, and Cuneo 2007, pp. 117-8.

¹⁴ It may be objected that this argument can make us believe that there is no reason to believe the error theory if it is also true that (5†) if the error theory is false, there is no reason to believe the error theory. However, (5†) is not true, since there can be reasons to believe a theory that is, as a matter of

I shall therefore give a different argument to show that there is no reason for us to believe the error theory. I have elsewhere defended the following claim:

- (6) There cannot be a reason for someone to perform an action if this person cannot perform this action.¹⁵

I gave three arguments for this claim. The first was that (6) is the simplest and least *ad hoc* explanation of the non-existence of what I called ‘crazy reasons’, such as reasons to travel back in time to prevent the crusades, slavery and the two world wars. The second was that (6) is the simplest and least *ad hoc* explanation of the fact that inanimate objects like tables and chairs do not have reasons. And the third was that (6) is a consequence of the fact that rational deliberation should not result in someone pointlessly trying to do what he cannot do.

Since I have given these arguments elsewhere, I shall not repeat them here. Instead, I shall argue that if these arguments show that (6) is true, they also show that

- (6*) There cannot be a reason for someone to have a belief if this person cannot have this belief.

For if (6) is the simplest and least *ad hoc* explanation of the non-existence of crazy reasons for action, (6*) is likewise the simplest and least *ad hoc* explanation of the non-existence of crazy reasons for belief, such as reasons for people with limited mathematical abilities to believe complex mathematical theorems. If (6) is the simplest and least *ad hoc* explanation of

fact, false. Here and in what follows, I do not distinguish between believing the error theory and believing that the error theory is true. People who do not understand the error theory can perhaps believe that the error theory is true without thereby believing the error theory, but this does not affect my arguments.

¹⁵ See Streumer 2007a. Littlejohn 2009 and Heuer 2010 present several objections to (6) and to my arguments for this claim. I respond to Heuer in Streumer 2010. For discussion of both Heuer’s arguments and my arguments, see Brownlee forthcoming. Many philosophers defend the claim that ‘ought’ implies ‘can’, which is entailed by (6). See, for example, Feldman 1986, Zimmerman 1996, Howard-Snyder 2006, and Vranas 2007 (who defends the claim that ‘ought’ implies ‘can’ partly by appealing to (6)).

the fact that inanimate objects do not have reasons for action, (6*) is likewise the simplest and least *ad hoc* explanation of the fact that inanimate objects do not have reasons for belief. And if (6) is a consequence of the fact that rational practical deliberation should not result in someone pointlessly trying to do what he cannot do, (6*) is likewise a consequence of the fact that rational epistemic deliberation should not result in someone pointlessly trying to believe what he cannot believe.

It may be objected that my arguments for (6) cannot show that (6*) is true because we do not have the kind of voluntary control over our beliefs that we have over our actions.¹⁶ However, my arguments for (6) did not use the phrase ‘this person cannot perform this action’ to mean that this person does not have voluntary control over this action. Instead, they used this phrase to mean that there is no nomologically and historically accessible possible world in which this person will perform this action.¹⁷ We should therefore interpret (6*) as saying that there cannot be a reason for someone to have a belief if there is no nomologically and historically accessible possible world in which this person will have this belief, and not as saying that there cannot be a reason for someone to have a belief if this person lacks voluntary control over this belief.

It may also be objected that my arguments for (6) cannot show that (6*) is true because reasons for belief are considerations that are evidence for a belief, and because a consideration can be evidence for a belief even if no one can have this belief. However, just as (6) uses the term ‘reason for action’ to mean a consideration that counts in favour of performing an action, (6*) uses the term ‘reason for belief’ to mean a consideration that counts in favour of a having a belief. As I have said, though evidence for a belief normally counts in favour of having this belief, a consideration’s being evidence for a belief is not the same thing as its counting in favour of having this belief. For considerations that are not evidence for a belief can also count in favour of having a belief.

Finally, it may be objected that the sense in which (6*) uses the term ‘cannot’ is

¹⁶ For discussion of whether we have voluntary control over our beliefs, see, for example, Williams 1970, Alston 1988, Bennett 1990, Feldman 2000, Shah 2002, and Adler 2002.

¹⁷ See Streumer 2007a, p. 357. I actually used the phrase ‘it is impossible for this person to perform this action’ rather than ‘this person cannot perform this action’, but this affects neither my arguments for (6) nor what I say here.

different from the sense in which we cannot believe the error theory. However, if my arguments are sound, what makes it the case that we cannot believe the error theory is that

- (3) We cannot fail to believe what we believe to be entailed by a small number of our own beliefs

and that

- (4) We cannot have a belief while believing that there is no reason to have this belief.

If (3) and (4) are true, these claims are necessary truths that hold in virtue of the nature of belief, entailment and reasons for belief. If that is so, there is no possible world in which we believe the error theory, which means, of course, that there is no historically and nomologically accessible possible world in which we will believe this theory either.

I therefore conclude that if my arguments for (6) show that (6) is true, these arguments also show that (6*) is true. And if (6*) is true and we cannot believe the error theory, it follows that there is no reason for us to believe the error theory.

3. Why this is not a problem for the error theory

It may be thought that our inability to believe the error theory is a problem for this theory. But I do not think it is.

It is clearly no problem for a theory if we *do not* believe it. So why should it be a problem for a theory if we *cannot* believe it? Just as a theory can be true if we do not believe it, a theory can also be true if we cannot believe it.¹⁸ Of course, if we cannot believe a theory,

¹⁸ It may be objected that, if we cannot believe a set of claims, this set of claims is not really a *theory*. But that is merely a terminological point: it is merely the point that, if we cannot believe this set of claims, this set of claims does not deserve to be called a 'theory'. That does nothing to show

we cannot sincerely say that this theory is true. But our inability to sincerely say that a theory is true does nothing to show that this theory is false.

Moreover, we can come close to believing and sincerely saying that the error theory is true. One way in which we can do this is by believing different parts of the error theory at different times, while adjusting some of our other beliefs. For example, we can believe that

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

while at the same time believing that there *are* such properties. And we can at a different time believe that

(2) There are no normative properties,

while believing at this time that normative judgements are non-cognitive attitudes rather than beliefs, or that normative judgements are beliefs that do not ascribe properties in the sense in which (1) and (2) use the term ‘property’.¹⁹

My own state of mind when I think about the nature of normative judgements and properties can, I think, be described as follows. When I consider what I take to be the strongest argument for (1), I find myself temporarily forming the belief that there are normative properties, and temporarily ignoring the arguments against the existence of such properties.²⁰ What happens when I think about the existence of normative properties is more complicated, since what I take to be the strongest argument for (2) consists of two separate sub-arguments.²¹ The first sub-argument shows that

that these claims are not true.

¹⁹ I say “in the sense in which (1) and (2) use the term ‘property’” because many non-cognitivists accept that normative judgements are beliefs that ascribe normative properties, but try to give a minimalist account of these beliefs and these properties. See, for example, Blackburn 1993 and 1998 and Gibbard 2003. In Streumer forthcoming 2, where I defend (1), I argue that we cannot give a minimalist account of these beliefs and these properties.

²⁰ I give this argument for (1) in Streumer forthcoming 2. Others have also defended this claim, using different arguments.

²¹ I give these separate sub-arguments in Streumer 2008 and Streumer forthcoming 1. Again, others

(2*) If there are normative properties, these properties are identical to descriptive properties,

and the second sub-argument shows that

(2**) If there are normative properties, these properties are not identical to descriptive properties.

When I consider the argument for (2*), I find myself temporarily giving up my belief that (2**) is true, and temporarily ignoring the argument for (2**). Similarly, when I consider the argument for (2**), I find myself temporarily giving up my belief that (2*) is true, and temporarily ignoring the argument for (2*). I therefore find it difficult to form the belief that there are no normative properties. But I can come close to forming this belief by thinking about the arguments for non-cognitivism, or by trying to accept a minimalist account of normative properties while at the same time reminding myself that this is not how (1) and (2) use the term ‘property’.

Since what I believe about the nature of normative judgements and properties depends on which arguments I consider at a particular time, my state of mind cannot accurately be described as belief in the error theory. But I think it can accurately be described as belief in different parts of the error theory at different times, and therefore as coming close to believing the error theory.²²

A second way in which 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. This is what I believe about the arguments I have elsewhere given for (1), (2*) and (2**). It may be thought that, instead of believing that these arguments together *seem* to show this, I should believe that these arguments together *show* this. However, I know that this

have also defended these claims, using different arguments.

²² This way of coming close to believing the error theory is not the same as partial belief in the error theory in the sense defined in section 1. I shall come back to partial belief in the error theory in section 5.

entails that the error theory is true. Since I cannot fail to have a belief that I believe to be entailed by a small number of my own beliefs, and since I cannot believe that the error theory is true, I cannot believe that there are sound arguments that together *show* that the error theory is true. But I do believe that there are sound arguments that together *seem* to show this, and I think this can accurately be described as coming close to believing the error theory.

4. How this undermines objections to the error theory

I shall now argue that our inability to believe the error theory undermines many objections that have been made to this theory. I shall discuss six of these objections. The first, which has been made in most detail by Terence Cuneo, is what I shall call

The objection from self-defeat or toothlessness. Either error theorists say that there are reasons to believe the error theory, or they say that there is no reason to believe the error theory. If they say that there are reasons to believe the error theory, their view is self-defeating. For the property of being a reason is a normative property, which does not exist if the error theory is true. But if they say that there is no reason to believe the error theory, their view is polemically toothless. For if there is no reason to believe the error theory, it is not a rational mistake to reject this theory.²³

I agree, of course, that there is no reason for us to believe the error theory, but not because there are no normative properties if the error theory is true. As I have said, that only shows that

(5) *If the error theory is true, there is no reason to believe the error theory,*

²³ See Cuneo 2007, pp. 117-8. The first part of this objection is also made by Stratton-Lake 2002, p. xxv. Gibbard 2003, p. 195, similarly writes that if we “shed all our normative concepts, we’d no longer even be equipped to judge that we ought not to embrace them; that itself would be a normative judgment”. Before making this objection, Cuneo 2007 argues that an error theory cannot plausibly be limited to moral judgements, and must also apply to epistemic judgements.

and the belief that (5) is true will only make us believe that there is no reason to believe the error theory if we already believe the error theory, which I have argued we cannot do. Instead, I think that there is no reason for us to believe the error theory because we cannot believe this theory.

But that does not make the error theory polemically toothless. For as I have just shown, we can come close to believing the error theory by believing different parts of this theory at different times, and by believing that there are sound arguments that together seem to show that this theory is true. Since we can come close to believing the error theory in these ways, there can be reasons for us to come close to believing this theory in these ways, and it can be a rational mistake if we do not come close to believing this theory in these ways.

Cuneo could reply that, since there are no reasons if the error theory is true, there is no reason to come close to believing the error theory if this theory is true either. However, as before, though Cuneo and I both believe that

(5*) *If the error theory is true, there is no reason to come close to believing the error theory,*

this cannot make us believe that there is no reason to come close to believing the error theory. For if my arguments are sound, neither of us can believe the antecedent of (5*). Therefore, if my arguments are sound, it is not the error theory but Cuneo's objection to it that is polemically toothless.²⁴

Cuneo could also reply that, since I believe both (5*) and the negation of the consequent of (5*), I should also believe the negation of the antecedent of (5*). In other

²⁴ Cuneo also claims that, if the error theory is true, there cannot be arguments for anything (2007, p. 121). However, as Olson forthcoming 1 points out, the premises of an argument can be reasons for believing the conclusion of this argument in the sense that they are evidence that this conclusion is true, but they need not be reasons for believing this conclusion in the sense that they count in favour of believing this conclusion. For it to be true that there are sound arguments that show that the error theory is true, it is enough if the premises of these arguments are reasons for believing these arguments' conclusions in the first sense, and their being reasons for believing these conclusions in this sense is compatible with the truth of the error theory. For further discussion of the relation between arguments and reasons for belief, see Streumer 2007b.

words, he could say that I should believe that the error theory is not true. However, what makes this the case is not that the error theory is *actually* not true, but is instead that my inability to believe the error theory makes it possible for me to believe claims that are incompatible with this theory. That does nothing to show that the error theory is not true, let alone that it is false.

A second objection to the error theory, which Cuneo briefly mentions and which I have often heard, is what I shall call

The objection from the normativity of belief. Beliefs are normative, in the sense that a mental state M is a belief only if

- (7) There is a reason for us to have M if there is evidence that the content of M is true.

If the error theory is true, there are no reasons, which means that there are no mental states of which (7) is true. This means that, if the error theory is true, there are no beliefs. The error theory therefore contradicts itself, since it claims that normative judgements are beliefs.²⁵

I doubt that beliefs are normative in this sense. But if they are, I can get around this objection by reformulating the error theory. Call a mental state M a ‘quasi-belief’ only if

- (7*) *We take there to be* a reason for us to have M if there is evidence that the content of M is true.

I can then reformulate (1) as:

²⁵ See Cuneo 2007, pp. 121-2. This objection is also discussed by Olson forthcoming 1. For defences of the claim that belief is normative, see, for example, Shah 2003, Boghossian 2003, and Wedgwood 2002 and 2007, pp. 153-73. These philosophers defend different versions of this claim.

(1*) Normative judgements are *quasi-beliefs* that ascribe normative properties.

If (1) is reformulated in this way, the error theory does not contradict itself, since it does not entail that there are no quasi-beliefs. Of course, it then remains true that

(8) If the error theory is true, there are no beliefs.

But if my arguments are sound, this cannot make us think that there are no beliefs, since we cannot think that the antecedent of (8) is true. Moreover, we cannot even notice the difference between beliefs and quasi-beliefs, since whenever (7*) is true of a mental state M, we *take* (7) to be true of this mental state.²⁶ Since we cannot notice this difference, if my arguments show that we cannot believe an error theory that consists of (1) and (2), they also show that we cannot believe an error theory that consists of (1*) and (2).

A third objection to the error theory, which been made by Ronald Dworkin and Thomas Nagel, is what I shall call

The normative objection. The error theory has deeply counterintuitive normative implications. For example, it entails that torturing innocent children for fun is not wrong. But the claim that torturing innocent children for fun is wrong is clearly much more plausible than the error theory. Therefore, instead of accepting these counterintuitive normative implications, we should reject the error theory.²⁷

This objection assumes that

(9) If a claim C and a philosophical theory T cannot both be true, and if C is more

²⁶ In this paragraph, our *thinking* that there are no beliefs and our *taking* (7) to be true are themselves quasi-beliefs, though we cannot tell that they are quasi-beliefs rather than beliefs.

²⁷ Dworkin and Nagel make this objection to an error theory about moral judgements. See Dworkin 1996, pp. 117-8, and, more cautiously, Nagel 1997, p. 115. Gibbard 2003, p. 195, and Huemer 2005, pp. 115-7, make similar claims. Dworkin's arguments, of which this objection is only one part, are discussed by Blackburn 1996, Leiter 2001, Dreier 2002, Pigden 2007, and McPherson 2008 and 2009.

plausible than T, we should reject T.²⁸

When we call a claim ‘plausible’, we may mean that it *seems true*. If so, (9) is equivalent to the following claim:

(9*) If a claim C and a philosophical theory T cannot both be true, and if C seems more clearly true than T, we should reject T.

But (9*) is false when C is a particular normative claim and T is the error theory. For in that case, if my arguments are sound, what explains why C seems more clearly true than T is not that C actually *is* true, but is instead that we cannot believe T.²⁹ That does nothing to show that T is false, and it therefore does nothing to show that we should reject T.

Alternatively, when we call a claim plausible, we may mean that *there is reason to believe it*. If so, (9) is equivalent to the following claim:

(9**) If a claim C and a philosophical theory T cannot both be true, and if there is more reason to believe C than there is to believe T, we should reject T.³⁰

²⁸ (9) is closely related to the following claim: (9†) if a claim C is more plausible than the premises of a philosophical argument that purports to show that C is false, then we should not give up our belief in C in response to this philosophical argument. (9†) is suggested by remarks in Moore 1925 and 1939, and a version of (9†) is endorsed by Dworkin 1996, p. 117. For discussion of different versions of (9) and (9†), see Kelly 2005. For discussion of the plausibility of arguments against the error theory that rely on claims like (9) and (9†), see McPherson 2009.

²⁹ Dworkin writes: “Of course I do not mean that our convictions are right just because we find them irresistible, or that our inability to think anything else is a reason or ground or argument supporting our judgment. . . . I mean that . . . we can do no better for any claim, including the most sophisticated skeptical argument or thesis, than to see whether, after the best thought we find appropriate, we think it so” (1996, p. 118). This ignores the possibility that what explains why C seems more clearly true to us than T is not that C actually *is* true, but is instead that we cannot believe T.

³⁰ A closely related claim is endorsed by Kelly 2005, p. 194. Kelly does not take this claim to be a version of (9), but instead puts it forward as an alternative to (9), since he thinks that when we call a claim plausible we mean that it seems true (2005, p. 189).

But, as before, (9**) is false when C is a particular normative claim and T is the error theory.³¹ For in that case, if my arguments are sound, what explains why there is more reason to believe C than to believe T is not that C is more likely to be *true* than T, but is instead that, since we cannot believe T, there is no reason for us to believe T.³² As before, that does nothing to show that T is false, and it therefore does nothing to show that we should reject T.

It may be thought I am here ignoring the deeper worry behind Dworkin and Nagel's objection. This deeper worry seems to be that the error theory is a malignant view that threatens to undermine all our normative judgements, including our most important moral convictions.³³ However, if we cannot believe the error theory, this theory cannot undermine any of our normative judgements at all, let alone our most important moral convictions. In other words, if we cannot believe the error theory, this theory is benign rather than malignant.³⁴

A fourth objection to the error theory, which has been made by Crispin Wright and Simon Blackburn, is what I shall call

The objection from bad faith. Since the error theory says that normative judgements are beliefs that ascribe non-existent properties, it entails that all normative judgements are either false or have false presuppositions. Normally, when we believe that one of our own beliefs is false or has false presuppositions, we give it up. But error theorists do not give up all of their normative judgements. This makes them guilty of a form of bad faith.³⁵

³¹ The same goes for (9†) if calling a claim plausible means that it seems true and if the philosophical argument that purports to show that C is false is the conjunction of the arguments for (1) and (2) that I have offered in Streumer 2008, forthcoming 1 and forthcoming 2.

³² It may be objected that, if the error theory is true, there is likewise no reason to believe C. However, as I explained at the start of section 2, since we cannot believe that the error theory is true, we cannot come to believe in this way that there is no reason to believe C.

³³ The way Dworkin and Nagel introduce their objection suggests that this is at least one thought behind it. See Dworkin 1996, pp. 87-8, and Nagel 1997, pp. 5-6.

³⁴ It may be objected that, if we can partly believe the error theory, this theory can weaken our confidence in our most important moral convictions. I discuss this objection in section 5.

³⁵ Wright 1995 and Blackburn 1993 both make this objection to Mackie's error theory about moral

However, if my arguments are sound, no one can believe the error theory, not even those who defend this theory. If that is so, defenders of the error theory can continue to make normative judgements without being in bad faith. And if they come close to believing this theory in the ways I have described, they are as far from being in bad faith as it is possible to be. For to be in bad faith is to close one's eyes to the truth, not because one *cannot* believe it, but because one does not *want* to believe it.

Wright and Blackburn both use the objection from bad faith as a starting point for further objections. Wright's further objection is what I shall call

The objection from compliance with a different norm. Even if the belief that murder is wrong and the belief that murder is permissible both ascribe a non-existent property to murder, the first of these beliefs is clearly more acceptable than the second. This shows that a normative judgement's acceptability does not depend on whether the object to which it ascribes a normative property really has this property. Instead, its acceptability depends on whether it complies with some other norm, such as a norm according to which it is acceptable if and only if it promotes social stability. We should therefore construe normative judgements' truth or falsity in terms of their compliance with this other norm rather than in terms of whether the objects to which they ascribe normative properties really have these properties.³⁶

judgements. Wright writes that Mackie's view "relegates moral discourse to bad faith. . . . [A]s soon as philosophy has taught us that the world is unsuited to confer truth on any of our claims about what is right, or wrong, or obligatory, and so on, the reasonable response ought surely to be to forgo making any such claims" (1995, p. 184; see also 1992, pp. 9-10, 86-7). Blackburn writes that "[i]f a vocabulary embodies an error, it would be better if it were replaced with one that avoid the error", and that there is "something fishy" about defending an error theory while continuing to make moral judgements (1993, pp. 149, 152). For a different response to Wright and Blackburn's objections, see Pigden 2007, pp. 446-50.

³⁶ See Wright 1995, p. 185, and 1992, pp. 10, 86-7. As before, Wright makes this objection to Mackie's error theory about moral judgements. For discussion, see Miller 2002 and 2003, pp. 118-23. Wright proposes that the truth of moral judgements is constituted by their *superassertibility*, where "a statement is superassertible if it is assertible in some state of information and then remains so no matter how that state of information is enlarged upon or improved" (1995, p. 193; see also Wright 1992, p. 48). If the assertibility (or the acceptability) of moral judgements depends on whether they

However, the belief that a normative judgement is acceptable is itself a normative judgement: it is not the belief that it is *possible* to accept this judgement, but the belief that it is *appropriate* to accept this judgement, or that we *should* accept this judgement.³⁷ This means that, if the error theory is true, beliefs about the acceptability of normative judgements are just as false as the normative judgements that they are about.³⁸ We therefore cannot construe the truth or falsity of normative judgements in terms of their acceptability.

Blackburn's further objection is what I shall call

The objection from revision. If the error theory is true, it must be possible to make changes to our normative practice that would make it free of error. Suppose first that error theorists fail to propose such changes. In that case, we should doubt that their theory is true. Suppose next that they do propose such changes, for example, by proposing that we replace our present normative judgements with non-cognitive attitudes. In that case, implementing these changes would make the error theory false and would make a form of non-cognitivism true. That should make us doubt that the error theory was true in the first place.³⁹

However, if my arguments are sound, we can only make our normative practice free of error

comply with a norm according to which they are assertible (or acceptable) if and only if they promote social stability, this effectively construes the truth of moral judgements in terms of these judgements' compliance with this norm.

³⁷ Given that Wright's notion of superassertibility is construed from assertibility (see note 36 above), and given that the judgement that a normative judgement is assertible is likewise a normative judgement, the same goes for the judgement that a normative judgement is superassertible.

³⁸ A similar point is made by Miller, who observes that error theorists can respond to Wright's argument by denying that there is a different norm in terms of which the assertibility of moral judgements can be construed (Miller 2002, p. 102, and 2003, p. 122).

³⁹ See Blackburn 1993, pp. 149-51, and 1999, p. 214. As before, Blackburn makes this objection to Mackie's error theory about moral judgements. A similar objection to the error theory could be made by revisionary reductive realists, such as Railton 1986, and this objection can be answered in a similar way. Joyce 2001, pp. 200-1, also claims that if we became fictionalists about moral judgements, a form of non-cognitivism would become true, though he does not take this to be an objection to fictionalism.

by giving up all beliefs. Since it is hard to see how we could give up all beliefs, it is equally hard to see why error theorists' failure to propose changes to our normative practice that would make it free of error should cast doubt on the truth of the error theory.

Blackburn could reply that we can make our normative practice free of error by changing certain higher-order beliefs that determine the nature of our normative judgements. For example, I have argued elsewhere that most people do not believe that the claim that

- (10) There is normally a fact of the matter about which of two conflicting normative judgements is correct

expresses an attitude that can be described as

- (10*) Disapproval of failing to adopt either an attitude of approval or an attitude of disapproval towards many of the objects that people have conflicting attitudes of approval or disapproval towards.⁴⁰

Blackburn could say that, if we came to believe that (10) *does* express the attitude described by (10*), and if we also changed some other higher-order beliefs that determine the nature of our normative judgements, we would turn these judgements from beliefs into non-cognitive attitudes.

However, I think that these higher-order beliefs *reflect* rather than determine the nature of our normative judgements. If that is so, changing these higher-order beliefs would not change the nature of these judgements. Instead, it would merely make us have false beliefs about the nature of these judgements. Rather than making the error theory false, it would merely make us falsely believe that the error theory is false.

⁴⁰ See Streumer forthcoming 2.

5. New objections

It may be thought that, even if my arguments undermine the objections to the error theory that I have discussed, they also give rise to new objections. I shall end by discussing three of these objections. The first is what I shall call

The objection from partial belief. Even if we cannot *fully* believe the error theory, we can *partly* believe this theory, by being fairly but not wholly confident that the error theory is true. Such partial belief in the error theory will lower our confidence in our normative judgements. It is therefore a threat to our normative judgements, including to our most important moral convictions.

It is true that my arguments leave open the possibility that we can partly believe the error theory, since (3) and (4) are not true if ‘belief’ means partial belief. However, consider again claims of the following form:

I believe that p , that q , and that p and q entail r , but I do not believe that r .
 p , but there is no reason to believe that p .

Claims of this form are only coherent if they express weak partial beliefs: the person making these claims must be *far* from confident that the conjunction of p , q , and the claim that p and q entail r is true, and must be *far* from confident that p and that there is no reason to believe that p . This means that any partial belief in the error theory must also be weak.⁴¹ Though such weak partial belief in the error theory may lower our confidence in our normative judgements, it will not make us give up any of our normative judgements. And since it will lower our confidence in all possible normative judgements to the same extent, it will not

⁴¹ Of course, this person’s being far from confident about the conjunction of p , q , and the claim that p and q entail r is compatible with his being fairly confident about each of its conjuncts. But to fully believe the error theory we must be *wholly* confident about the conjunction of (1) and (2), not just fairly confident about (1) and fairly confident about (2) when we consider these claims in isolation.

change *which* normative judgements we make.

A second objection to my arguments is what I shall call

The Moorean paradox objection. If we defend the error theory while claiming that we cannot believe this theory and that there is no reason for us to believe this theory, we have to assert the following claims:

- (11) The error theory is true, but I do not believe that it is true.
- (12) The error theory is true, but there is no reason for me to believe that it is true.

Such claims are Moore-paradoxical: just as no one can sincerely say ‘*p*, but I do not believe that *p*’, no one can sincerely assert (11) or (12). This shows that we cannot defend the error theory in this way.⁴²

I agree, of course, that we cannot sincerely assert (11) or (12). But I think that we can defend the error theory in this way without asserting either of these claims. We can instead assert different parts of the error theory at different times, and assert that there are sound philosophical arguments that together seem to show that the error theory is true.

It may be thought that defending the error theory in this way nevertheless involves making assertions that *entail* or *presuppose* (11) or (12). But I do not think I have said anything that entails or presupposes (11) or (12). I have not said, for example, that there are sound philosophical arguments that together *show* that the error theory is true. And if some of my claims did entail or presuppose (11) or (12), I was, to this extent, insincere. Instead of showing that the error theory is false or that my arguments are unsound, this would merely

⁴² Cuneo 2007, p. 119, raises a version of this objection, though he claims that claims like (11) and (12) do “not even rise to the level of paradox” if there are no reasons. Hájek 2007 makes a version of this objection to several philosophical views, such as eliminativism about belief, scepticism about higher-order beliefs, and relativism about truth, though he does not take it to be a decisive refutation of these views. What are now known as Moore-paradoxical claims were first mentioned by Moore 1942, p. 543; his fullest discussion is Moore 1993. For further discussion, see the essays in Green and Williams 2007.

show that I have insincerely spoken the truth and insincerely put forward sound arguments.

A third objection to my arguments is what I shall call

The objection from reflective equilibrium. Philosophy should bring our beliefs into reflective equilibrium. If we cannot believe a philosophical theory, or if we waver between believing different parts of this theory at different times, our beliefs are not yet in reflective equilibrium. We should therefore not defend philosophical theories that we ourselves cannot believe.⁴³

David Lewis expresses the thought behind this objection in a forceful way when he writes:

If our official theories disagree with what we cannot help thinking outside the philosophy room, then no real equilibrium has been reached. Unless we are doubleplusgood doublethinkers, it will not last. And it should not last, for it is safe to say that in such a case we will believe a great deal that is false.⁴⁴

And he also writes that we should endorse

a simple maxim of honesty: never put forward a philosophical theory that you yourself cannot believe in your least philosophical and most commonsensical moments.⁴⁵

These claims may seem sensible, but I think they are false. There is no reason why the truth could not be beyond our grasp, and if it is, we should not believe falsehoods for the sake of reaching reflective equilibrium. Instead, we should try to come as close as possible to believing the truth. It would be dishonest to try to do anything else.

⁴³ For discussion of objections from reflective equilibrium to error theories about moral judgements, see McPherson 2009, pp. 17-21. For discussion of objections from reflective equilibrium to error theories in general, see Daly and Liggins forthcoming.

⁴⁴ Lewis 1983, p. x.

⁴⁵ Lewis 1986, p. 135.

6. Conclusion

As I said at the start of this paper, I have elsewhere given arguments that together seem to show that the error theory is true. I have not repeated or defended these arguments here. Instead, I have argued that we cannot believe the error theory, and that this means that there is no reason for us to believe this theory. And I have argued that, rather than being a problem for the error theory, our inability to believe the error theory undermines many objections that have been made to this theory.

When I tell other philosophers that I defend an error theory about all normative judgements, they often react with disbelief. Many of them think that such an error theory is deeply wrongheaded, and that a view like this simply *cannot* be true. I used to be worried about these reactions, since I used to think that they showed that there was probably something wrong with my arguments. But I now feel encouraged by such reactions. For they are exactly the kinds of reactions that I should expect if my arguments are sound, and if we cannot believe the error theory.

References

- Adler, Jonathan. 2002. *Belief's Own Ethics*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
- Alston, William. 1988. "The Deontological Conception of Epistemic Justification". *Philosophical Perspectives* 2: 257-99.
- Bennett, Jonathan. 1990. "Why Is Belief Involuntary?" *Analysis* 50: 87-107
- Blackburn, Simon. 1993. *Essays in Quasi-Realism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Blackburn, Simon. 1996. "Blackburn Reviews Dworkin". *Brown Electronic Article Review Service* (<http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Philosophy/bears/9611blac.html>).
- Blackburn, Simon. 1998. *Ruling Passions*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Blackburn, Simon. 1999. "Is Objective Moral Justification Possible on a Quasi-Realist Foundation?" *Inquiry* 42: 213-28.
- Boghossian, Paul. 2003. "The Normativity of Content". *Philosophical Issues* 13: 31-45.
- Brownlee, Kimberley. Forthcoming. "Reasons and Ideals". To appear in *Philosophical Studies* (<http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s11098-009-9462-y>).

- Burgess, John. 2007. "Against Ethics". *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 10: 427-39.
- Christensen, David. 2004. *Putting Logic in its Place*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Cuneo, Terence. 2007. *The Normative Web*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Daly, Chris, and David Liggins. Forthcoming. "In Defence of Error Theory". To appear in *Philosophical Studies* (<http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s11098-009-9346-1>).
- Dancy, Jonathan. 2004. *Ethics Without Principles*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Dreier, James. 2002. "Meta-Ethics and Normative Commitment". *Philosophical Issues* 12: 241-63.
- Dworkin, Ronald. 1996. "Objectivity and Truth: You'd Better Believe It". *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 25: 87-139.
- Feldman, Fred. 1986. *Doing the Best We Can*. Dordrecht: Reidel.
- Feldman, Richard. 2000. "The Ethics of Belief". *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 60: 667-95.
- Garner, Richard. 1994. *Beyond Morality*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Garner, Richard. 2007. "Abolishing Morality". *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 10: 499-513.
- Gibbard, Allan. 2003. *Thinking How To Live*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Green, Mitchell, and John N. Williams, eds. 2007. *Moore's Paradox*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Hájek, Alan. 2007. "My Philosophical Position Says 'p' and I Don't Believe 'p'". In Green and Williams 2007.
- Heuer, Ulrike. 2010. "Reasons and Impossibility". *Philosophical Studies* 147: 235-246.
- Hinckfuss, Ian. 1987. *The Moral Society: Its Structure and Effects*. Canberra: Australian National University (<http://www.uq.edu.au/~pdwgreys/web/morsoc/>).
- Howard-Snyder, Frances. 2006. "'Cannot' Implies 'Not Ought'". *Philosophical Studies* 130: 233-246.
- Huber, Franz, and Christoph Schmidt-Petri, eds. 2009. *Degrees of Belief*. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Huemer, Michael. 2005. *Ethical Intuitionism*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Joyce, Richard. 2001. *The Myth of Morality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Joyce, Richard. 2006. *The Evolution of Morality*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
- Kelly, Thomas. 2005. "Moorean Facts and Belief Revision, or Can the Skeptic Win?"

- Philosophical Perspectives* 19: 179-209.
- Leiter, Brian. 2001. "Objectivity, Morality, and Adjudication". In Brian Leiter, ed., *Objectivity in Law and Morals*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lewis, David. 1983. *Philosophical Papers, Volume I*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lewis, David. 1986. *On the Plurality of Worlds*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Littlejohn, Clayton. 2009. "'Ought', 'Can', and Practical Reasons". *American Philosophical Quarterly* 46: 363-72.
- Mackie, J. L. 1977. *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- McPherson, Tristram. 2008. "Metaethics and the Autonomy of Morality". *Philosophers' Imprint* (<http://www.philosophersimprint.org>), vol. 8, no. 6.
- McPherson, Tristram. 2009. "Moorean Arguments and Moral Revisionism". *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy* (<http://www.jesp.org>), vol. 3, no. 2.
- Miller, Alexander. 2002. "Wright's Argument against Error-Theories". *Analysis* 62: 98-103.
- Miller, Alexander. 2003. *An Introduction to Contemporary Metaethics*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Moore, G. E. 1925. "A Defence of Common Sense". Reprinted in his *Philosophical Papers*. London: George Allen and Unwin, 1959.
- Moore, G. E. 1939. "Proof of an External World". Reprinted in his *Philosophical Papers*. London: George Allen and Unwin, 1959.
- Moore, G. E. 1942. "A Reply to My Critics". In Paul Arthur Schilpp, ed., *The Philosophy of G. E. Moore*. Evanston: Northwestern University.
- Moore, G. E. 1993. "Moore's Paradox". In Thomas Baldwin, ed., *G. E. Moore: Selected Writings*. London: Routledge.
- Nagel, Thomas. 1997. *The Last Word*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Olson, Jonas. Forthcoming 1. "Error Theory and Reasons for Belief". To appear in Andrew Reisner and Asbjørn Steglich-Petersen, eds., *Reasons for Belief*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Olson, Jonas. Forthcoming 2. "In Defence of Moral Error Theory". To appear in Michael Brady (ed.), *New Waves in Metaethics*. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Parfit, Derek. 1997. "Reasons and Motivation". *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, supplementary volume 71: 99-130.
- Pigden, Charles. 2007. "Nihilism, Nietzsche and the Doppelgänger Problem". *Ethical Theory*

- and Moral Practice* 10: 441-56.
- Railton, Peter. 1986. "Moral Realism". *Philosophical Review* 95: 163-207.
- Scanlon, T. M. 1998. *What We Owe To Each Other*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Shah, Nishi. 2002. "Clearing Space for Doxastic Voluntarism". *The Monist* 85: 436-45.
- Shah, Nishi. 2003. "How Truth Governs Belief". *Philosophical Review* 112: 447-82.
- Stratton-Lake, Philip. 2002. "Introduction". In W. D. Ross, *The Right and the Good*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Streumer, Bart. 2007a. "Reasons and Impossibility". *Philosophical Studies* 136: 351-384.
- Streumer, Bart. 2007b. "Reasons and Entailment". *Erkenntnis* 66: 353-374.
- Streumer, Bart. 2008. "Are there Irreducibly Normative Properties?" *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 86: 537-561.
- Streumer, Bart. 2010. "Reasons, Impossibility and Efficient Steps: Reply to Heuer". *Philosophical Studies* 151: 79-86.
- Streumer, Bart. Forthcoming 1. "Are Normative Properties Descriptive Properties?" To appear in *Philosophical Studies* (<http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s11098-010-9534-z>).
- Streumer, Bart. Forthcoming 2. "Are Normative Judgements Non-Cognitive Attitudes?"
- Vranas, Peter. 2007. "I Ought, Therefore I Can". *Philosophical Studies* 136: 167-216.
- Wedgwood, Ralph. 2002. "The Aim of Belief". *Philosophical Perspectives* 16: 267-97.
- Wedgwood, Ralph. 2007. *The Nature of Normativity*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Williams, Bernard. 1970. "Deciding to Believe". Reprinted in his *Problems of the Self*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973.
- Wright, Crispin. 1992. *Truth and Objectivity*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Wright, Crispin. 1995. "Truth in Ethics". Reprinted in his *Saving the Differences*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003.
- Zimmerman, Michael. 1996. *The Concept of Moral Obligation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.