

COMMENTS AND CRITICISM

ON BELIEVING THE ERROR THEORY*

In his recent article entitled “Can We Believe the Error Theory?,” Bart Streumer argues that it is impossible (for anyone, anywhere) to believe the error theory.¹ This might sound like a problem for the error theory, but Streumer argues that it is not. He argues that the unbelievability of the error theory offers a way for error theorists to respond to several objections commonly made against the view. In this paper, we respond to Streumer’s arguments. In particular, in sections II–IV, we offer several objections to Streumer’s argument for the claim that we cannot believe the error theory. In section V, we argue that even if Streumer establishes that we cannot believe the error theory, this conclusion is not as helpful for error theorists as he takes it to be.

I. STREUMER’S CENTRAL ARGUMENT

Why think that the error theory—the view that “normative judgments are beliefs that ascribe normative properties, even though such properties do not exist”—is literally unbelievable?²

We understand Streumer’s argument to take the following form:

- (1) Anyone who believes the error theory believes that the error theory entails that there is no reason to believe the error theory.
- (2) We cannot fail to believe what we believe to be entailed by our own beliefs.
- (3) So, anyone who believes the error theory believes that there is no reason to believe the error theory.
- (4) We cannot have a belief while believing that there is no reason for this belief.
- (5) So, nobody can believe the error theory.

In this argument, Streumer uses “believes” and “belief” to mean “fully believes” and “full belief.” To fully believe that p is to be wholly confident that p ; a full belief is the mental state of having complete

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¹Bart Streumer, “Can We Believe the Error Theory?,” this JOURNAL, CX, 4 (April 2013): 194–212.

²*Ibid.*, p. 194.

confidence in a proposition. We will follow Streumer in using “believes” and its cognates in this way.

Streumer defends (2) by considering claims like the following: “I believe that p , and I believe that p entails q , but I do not believe that q ,” or, more concretely, “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.”³ Streumer thinks that such claims can be uttered only by someone who either does not understand what she is saying, is insincere, or is considering whether to give up one of these beliefs. In any case, such a person cannot (fully) believe what she says she believes.

Streumer defends (4) by considering claims like the following: “ p , but there is no reason to believe that p ,” or more concretely, “Socrates was mortal, but there is no reason to believe that Socrates was mortal.”⁴ Once again, Streumer thinks that such claims can be uttered only by someone who either does not understand what she is saying, is insincere, or is considering whether to give up one of these beliefs. In any case, such a person cannot (fully) believe what she says she believes.

Streumer thinks that (1) is true because he thinks that (A) is true:

- (A) Anyone who understands the error theory well enough to be in a position to believe it knows that the error theory entails that there is no reason to believe the error theory.⁵

(A) entails (1), but Streumer never explains why we should accept (A). A natural thought is that we should accept (A) because it is entailed by the plausible claim that in order to understand p well enough to be in a position to believe that p , we must grasp p 's obvious entailments. We will develop and critically evaluate this natural thought in section IV.

In the next section, we offer reasons for thinking that Streumer's conclusion (5) is false and that the argument must therefore go wrong somewhere, even if it is not yet clear where exactly it goes wrong.

II. A MOOREAN ARGUMENT AGAINST (5)

We offer the following Moorean argument against (5), the claim that nobody can believe the error theory:⁶

- (i) If no one can believe the error theory, then there is no possible world in which someone believes or believed the error theory.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 195.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 196.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 197.

⁶ In his paper, Streumer argues specifically against Moorean arguments for the conclusion that *the error theory is false*—not against Moorean arguments generally. But since

- (ii) But there is a possible world in which someone believes or believed the error theory.
- (iii) Therefore, it is not the case that no one can believe the error theory.

Consider this support for (ii). It seems plausible that there is a possible world, in many ways like our own, inhabited by all and only passionate error theorists. 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. Suppose further that there are millions of people in this world, all of whom undergo this sort of immersion in error-theoretic thought. In order for Streumer's argument to be successful, he needs it to be the case that no person in this world fully believes the error theory—no one is wholly confident of its truth. Indeed, if he is correct, we could not possibly arrange a world in such a way that a person fully believes the error theory. But it seems more likely to us that we could arrange such a world, that such immersion in error-theoretic thought would certainly be successful in causing at least some people to be wholly confident in the error theory. If this is right, then it is possible for us to believe the error theory, and (5) in Streumer's central argument is false.

We offer these considerations in a Moorean spirit, not as a decisive refutation of Streumer's view. We are asking which is more likely: that no individual in our world who claims to believe the theory, indeed no one in any possible world that we can construct, fully believes the error theory, or that Streumer's argument is unsound—that either (1), (2), or (4) is false? The latter seems far more likely. But if that is so, then it is more likely than not that one of Streumer's premises is false. Of course, it would be nice to know which premise that is. In the next two sections, we attempt to show that premises (1) and (4) of Streumer's argument are the weak links.

our Moorean argument is one for a quite different conclusion, namely, that *it is false that we cannot believe the error theory*, our argument is immune to the specific criticisms Streumer levels against the Moorean arguments in his paper. Thus, if Streumer is to answer our arguments, he cannot simply reproduce the arguments that appear in his paper.

III. COUNTEREXAMPLES TO (4)

Streumer's fourth premise says: we cannot have a full belief while fully believing that there is no reason for this belief. Streumer is right to note that some utterances that conflict with this premise sound confused. For example, "Socrates was mortal, but there is no reason to believe Socrates was mortal" sounds confused. But there are sentences of this form that sound perfectly coherent. Consider the following passage from Thomas Reid:

The sceptic asks me, Why do you believe the existence of the external object which you perceive? This belief, Sir, is none of my manufacture; it came from the mint of Nature; it bears her image and superscription; and, if it is not right, the fault is not mine: I even took it upon trust, and without suspicion. Reason, says the sceptic, is the only judge of truth, and you ought to throw off every opinion and every belief that is not grounded on reason. Why, Sir, should I believe the faculty of reason more than that of perception; they came both out of the same shop, and were made by the same artist; and if he puts one piece of false ware into my hands, what should hinder him from putting another?⁷

Reid seems to think that there is nothing odd or confused about saying, "I believe that my senses are reliable, but there is no reason to believe that my senses are reliable." Reid argues that we must take the reliability of reason and the senses as starting points. We cannot, or need not, offer reasons in their defense. Whether this interpretation of Reid's passage is on target is not our primary concern. What is important for present purposes is that it is perfectly possible for a person to believe that p while also believing that there is no reason that confers credibility on p . Such a person may be convinced by skeptical arguments that she has no reason to believe that her 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.

Now, the numbered parts of the previous sentence are all reasons for her belief, but none of them are *justificatory reasons*. They are *explanatory reasons*. Streumer's claim is that no one can hold a belief while also believing that there is no justificatory reason for holding it. But there are counterexamples:

- (i) "My senses are reliable."
- (ii) "My reason is reliable."

⁷ Thomas Reid, *Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*, ed. Derek R. Brookes (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), pp. 168–69.

- (iii) “I am not a brain in a vat.”
- (iv) “There are other minds.”
- (v) “My inductive reasoning is reliable.”

These are all beliefs that we can, and sometimes do, hold while also believing that we have no justificatory reason(s) for holding them. We might think that there is no way to have justificatory reasons for believing these propositions because either they are our starting points, or we cannot help but believe them, or our lives will go better if we believe them. Whatever the case may be, we see no reason to think that it is impossible to believe these propositions while believing that we have no justificatory reasons for them. Importantly, it does not matter whether our belief in the absence of justificatory reasons is true or false. All that we need to establish is the possibility of the co-existence of two beliefs—one in p , and the other in the absence of a justificatory reason for believing that p . As far as we can tell, the Reidian view we have sketched is perfectly coherent.

IV. AN OBJECTION TO (1)

Recall that the first premise of Streumer’s central argument says that

- (1) Anyone who believes the error theory believes that the error theory entails that there is no reason to believe the error theory.

(1) is supposed to be highly plausible because it is entailed by (A):

- (A) Anyone who understands the error theory well enough to be in a position to believe it knows that the error theory entails that there is no reason to believe the error theory.

But Streumer offers no reason in support of (A). We surmise that Streumer accepts (A) on the following grounds:

- (B) The error theory obviously entails that there is no reason to believe the error theory.
- (C) For all p and q such that p obviously entails q , anyone who understands p well enough to be in a position to believe it knows that p entails q .

(B) and (C) entail (A). But (C) is problematic because of the following sort of counterexample. 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. Yet, there is a clear sense in

which “there are no animals in the room” obviously entails “there are no falcons in the room.” So, (C) is false.

Here is another counterexample to (C). A person might fully believe that Socrates is a man and that all men are mortal, 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 Socrates is mortal. Perhaps she never reflects sufficiently on the entailments of her beliefs to form the latter belief, or perhaps she is very bad at Aristotelian logic. Yet, there is a clear sense in which “Socrates is a man and all men are mortal” obviously entails “Socrates is mortal.” So again, we see that (C) is false.

If our examples suffice to undermine (C), then the line of reasoning in support of (A) that we tentatively ascribe to Streumer is flawed. And it is not clear to us how Streumer can defend (A) in a more promising way. We conclude that (A)—and hence, (1)—is highly questionable.

Streumer might try to make use of the notion of a dispositional belief to respond to these putative counterexamples to (C). Perhaps one who fully believes that there are no animals in the room might not have an *occurrent belief* that her belief entails that there are no falcons in the room: falcons need not be at the forefront of her mind in the way it must be for her to have this occurrent belief. But Streumer might argue that such a person must have the *dispositional belief* that her belief that there are no animals in the room entails that there are no falcons in the room. Absent such a belief, she cannot really believe that there are no animals in the room.

Whether this response succeeds depends on the details of the adopted dispositional account of belief, but here we want to point to a serious difficulty that any such response must overcome. Streumer gets into trouble if he is too liberal in ascribing to people dispositional beliefs, for then it will be easier to come up with plausible counterexamples to the thesis that we cannot believe the error theory. It seems that we can easily conceive of somebody who is disposed to believe in each part of the error theory upon reflecting on the arguments in its favor. Indeed, Streumer may be an example of such a person.⁸ If being disposed to accept a proposition upon reflection is sufficient to have a dispositional belief in that proposition, then we can conceive of somebody who has dispositional beliefs in each part of the error theory at the same time. This would suggest that we can believe the error theory, after all. So Streumer must avoid being too liberal in ascribing dispositional beliefs to people.

⁸Streumer, *op. cit.*, p. 202.

But if Streumer is too conservative in ascribing dispositional beliefs to people, he faces a different problem. The more conservative he is in ascribing dispositional beliefs, the less likely it will be that the people in our examples have the dispositional beliefs that Streumer would want to ascribe them. In order to vindicate (C) by appealing to dispositional beliefs, Streumer would have to tread a fine line between being too conservative and being too liberal in the ascription of dispositional beliefs, and it is unclear to us whether this is possible. We think that this difficulty is sufficient to make the appeal to dispositional beliefs unattractive as a response to our counterexamples to (C). If we are correct, then it remains unclear whether there is any way for Streumer to vindicate his first premise in light of our criticisms.

V. THE LIMITED USEFULNESS OF STREUMER'S CONCLUSION

Suppose that everything we have said so far is mistaken and that Streumer actually succeeds in showing that we cannot believe the error theory. Streumer thinks that this conclusion helps error theorists rebut six objections that have been raised against their view. In the remainder of this paper, we argue that the conclusion that we cannot believe the error theory is not as helpful to error theorists as Streumer supposes.

V.1. The Normative Objection. First, consider Streumer's response to "the normative objection," which is a standard Moorean argument against the error theory. He construes this argument as follows:

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 much more plausible than the error theory. Therefore, instead of accepting these counterintuitive normative implications, we should reject the error theory.⁹

Streumer claims that this argument depends on the following principle:

Moorean Principle: If a claim *C* and a philosophical theory *T* cannot both be true, and if *C* seems much more clearly true than *T*, we should reject *T*.

According to Streumer, the Moorean Principle is "false when *C* is a particular normative claim and *T* is the error theory." This is because in this type of case, "what explains why *C* seems much more clearly true than *T* is not that *C* actually *is* true, but is instead that we cannot believe *T*."¹⁰

We do not think that Streumer's criticism of the normative objection succeeds. If the fact that we cannot believe the error theory explains

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 206.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 207.

why it seems much more clearly true that it is wrong to torture children than that the error theory is true, it presumably explains this by explaining why the error theory does not seem very clearly true to us. But we have reason to deny that the mere fact that we cannot believe the error theory is sufficient to explain why the error theory does not seem very clearly true to us. To see why, consider the following intuitive thought. If p and $\sim q$ are both true, then

Explanation: If it is possible that $p \& q$, then the mere fact that p is not sufficient to explain why $\sim q$.

Explanation accounts for the fact that a common strategy for undermining the claim that p fully explains why $\sim q$ is to point out that it is possible that $p \& q$. If I suggest that the fact that Jack is late fully explains why Jill is not happy, you might reasonably challenge this purported explanation by pointing out that Jill is normally very patient with Jack's tardiness, and thus that it is entirely possible for Jack to be late while Jill is happy.

Let us suppose, then, that Explanation is true. Explanation entails that if [we cannot believe the error theory and the error theory seems very clearly true to us] is possibly true, then the mere fact (supposing that it is a fact) that we cannot believe the error theory is not sufficient to explain why the error theory does not seem very clearly true to us. And we see no reason to deny that it is possible for the above conjunction to be true. After all, a claim can seem very clearly true to a person even while that person does not in fact believe that claim. A moral error theorist, for instance, might not believe that it is wrong to torture children despite the fact that she has the same moral intuitions as the rest of us. Since a claim can seem very clearly true to a person even when that person *does not* believe that claim, it is reasonable to believe that a claim can seem very clearly true to a person even when that person *cannot* believe that claim. Since this is so, we should think that [we cannot believe the error theory and the error theory seems very clearly true to us] is possibly true. And so, we should deny Streumer's claim that the fact that we cannot believe the error theory adequately explains why the error theory does not seem very clearly true to us.

Streumer might respond by conceding that the fact that we cannot believe the error theory does not all by itself fully explain the fact that the error theory does not seem very clearly true to us, but insist that this is at least part of the explanation for why it does not seem very clearly true to us. But even if this is so, this conclusion is compatible with the truth of the relevant normative claims also playing a role in the full explanation of why these normative

claims seem more clearly true to us than the error theory. If it does play such a role, then it remains plausible that the Moorean Principle is true even when *C* is a particular normative claim and *T* is the error theory.

We conclude that Streumer's conclusion that we cannot believe the error theory is not helpful in rebutting the normative objection. This is especially significant because something like the normative objection is the most common objection to the error theory.¹¹

V.2. *The Objections from Moral Malignancy and Polemical Toothlessness.* Two problems for the error theory that Streumer addresses are the problem of polemical toothlessness and the problem of moral malignancy. According to the first of these problems, the error theory is polemically toothless because there is no reason to believe it and (as a result) it cannot be a rational mistake to reject it.¹² According to the problem of moral malignancy, "the error theory is a malignant view that threatens to undermine all of our normative judgments, including our deepest and most important moral convictions."¹³ Streumer's responses to these objections conflict in such a way that at best he succeeds in undermining only one of them.

Consider first how Streumer rebuts the problem of polemical toothlessness. We have no reason to believe the error theory because we cannot believe the error theory. But although we cannot believe the error theory, we can come close to believing the error theory in a couple of ways. Specifically, "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."¹⁴ Since we can come close to believing the error theory, we can have reasons to come close to believing the error theory, and Streumer thinks that we do have such reasons. Because we have reasons to come close to believing the error theory, it can be a rational mistake if we do not come close to believing it. Streumer concludes that the error theory is not polemically toothless.

¹¹ As Streumer points out, versions of the normative objection against error theories about moral judgments are offered by Ronald Dworkin, "Objectivity and Truth: You'd Better Believe It," *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, xxv, 2 (April 1996): 87–139, at pp. 117–18; Thomas Nagel, *The Last Word* (New York: Oxford: 1997), p. 115; Allan Gibbard, *Thinking How to Live* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press: 2003); and Michael Huemer, *Ethical Intuitionism* (New York: Palgrave, 2005), p. 115. A version of the normative objection against error theory about epistemic judgments is offered by Richard Rowland, "Moral Error Theory and the Argument from Epistemic Reasons," *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy*, vii, 1 (January 2013): 1–24, at p. 16.

¹² Streumer, *op. cit.*, pp. 203–05.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 207.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 204.

But this reply to the problem of polemical toothlessness undermines Streumer's reply to the problem of moral malignancy. In response to the latter problem, Streumer argues that the error theory does not threaten to undermine our deepest and most important moral convictions because "if we cannot believe the error theory, this theory cannot undermine any of our normative judgements at all, let alone undermine our deepest and most important moral convictions."¹⁵ But although we cannot believe the error theory, we can come close to believing the error theory, and Streumer has argued that we have reason to do so. Streumer recognizes 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 indeed threatened.

In sum: either there are reasons to come close to believing the error theory, or there are not. If there are no reasons to come close to believing the error theory, then the error theory is polemically toothless after all. And if there are reasons to come close to believing the error theory, then the error theory threatens to undermine our deepest and most important moral convictions, in which case the error theory really is morally malignant. So, either the error theory is polemically toothless or it is morally malignant: at least one of the problems that Streumer addresses survives his criticisms.

VI. CONCLUSION

In "Can We Believe the Error Theory?" Streumer offers an ingenious defense of the error theory based on the surprising claim that we cannot believe the error theory. But we have argued that this defense fails. We should answer Streumer's title question in the affirmative. And even if we cannot believe the error theory, this does not provide the error theorist with a reply to the normative objection. So, although we can believe the error theory, we should not do so.

ALEXANDER HYUN

ERIC SAMPSON

University of Wisconsin–Madison

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 207–08.