

# CAN WE BELIEVE THE ERROR THEORY?

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## *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?<sup>1</sup>

According to the error theory, normative judgements are beliefs that ascribe normative properties, even though such properties do not exist.<sup>2</sup> This theory is normally only defended about moral judgements, but I have argued elsewhere that it seems to be true of all normative judgements.<sup>3</sup> In this paper, I shall argue that we cannot believe the error theory, and that this

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<sup>1</sup> For helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper, I am grateful to audiences at the University of Reading, the University of Southampton, Lund University, Stockholm University, Tilburg University, the British Society for Ethical Theory conference at the University of Nottingham, the Annual Dutch Practical Philosophy Conference at the University of Groningen, and Mark Kalderon and Anthony Price's Reasons for Action seminar at the University of London. For additional helpful comments, I am grateful to Matt Bedke, Jonathan Dancy, Jamie Dreier, Brian Feltham, Max de Gaynesford, Alex Gregory, Brad Hooker, David Hunter, David Liggins, Hallvard Lillehammer, Jonas Olson, Derek Parfit, Debbie Roberts, Jussi Suikkanen, Michael Smith, Philip Stratton-Lake, Jonathan Way, Daniel Whiting, and the editors of this journal.

<sup>2</sup> I use the term 'property' to cover both properties and relations. If you think that some normative judgements do not ascribe properties, you can replace the term 'normative judgement' throughout this paper with 'property-ascribing normative judgement'.

<sup>3</sup> For defences of an error theory about moral judgements, see, for example, J. L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), and Richard Joyce, *The Myth of Morality* (New York: Cambridge, 2001) and *The Evolution of Morality* (Cambridge: MIT, 2006). Jonas Olson, "In Defence of Moral Error Theory," in Michael Brady, ed., *New Waves in Metaethics* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), defends an error theory about normative judgements that presuppose the existence of categorical reasons, which may include many non-moral normative judgements. I argue that normative judgements are beliefs that ascribe normative properties in "Do Normative Judgements Aim to Represent the World?" (available at <http://www.reading.ac.uk/~lds05bs>). I argue for two claims that together entail that normative properties do not exist in "Are there Irreducibly Normative Properties?" *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* LXXXVI (2008): 537-561 and "Are Normative Properties Descriptive Properties?", *Philosophical Studies* CLIV (2011): 325-348. These arguments seem to show that the error theory is true of all normative properties and judgements about which the following claims are true: (1) these normative properties supervene on descriptive properties; (2) we do not think that which objects have these normative properties is determined by people's use of normative predicates under descriptively specified conditions; and (3) we think that when these normative judgements conflict, at least one of

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 undermines many objections that have been made to this theory.

This matters even if my arguments for the error theory fail. For it is often suggested that the arguments for an error theory about moral judgements actually support an error theory about all normative judgements, and this is often taken to be an objection to an error theory about moral judgements.<sup>4</sup> Error theorists about moral judgements can answer this objection by endorsing what I say in this paper.

This paper consists of six sections. In section I, I argue that we cannot believe the error theory. In section II, I argue that this means that there is no reason for us to believe this theory. In sections III and IV, 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 V and VI, I discuss three objections to my arguments, and I show that a common reaction to the error theory supports my view.

## **I. Why we cannot believe the error theory**

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

(B1) We cannot fail to believe what we believe to be entailed by our own beliefs.

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*.<sup>5</sup> I shall use the term ‘belief’ to mean full belief. I

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them must be incorrect. If you think that (1), (2) and (3) are not true of all normative judgements and properties, you can replace the terms ‘normative property’ and ‘normative judgement’ throughout this paper with ‘normative property of which (1) and (2) are true’ and ‘normative judgement of which (3) is true’.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Terence Cuneo, *The Normative Web* (New York: Oxford, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> For the distinction between full and partial belief, see, for example, David Christensen, *Putting*

shall assume that when we are considering whether to give up the belief that  $p$ , we no longer fully believe that  $p$ , but at most partly believe that  $p$ .

To see that (B1) is true, consider a claim of the following form:

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 Socrates was a human being, that all human beings are mortal, and that this entails that Socrates was mortal, but I do not believe that Socrates was mortal.” This person may be insincere, or may fail to understand what he is saying, or may be considering whether to give up one of these beliefs.<sup>6</sup> If so, he does not fully believe what he says he believes. Alternatively, he may be sincere, may understand what he is saying, and may not be considering whether to give up one of these beliefs. But if so, he is too confused to fully believe what he says he believes.<sup>7</sup>

If we doubt that (B1) is true, this may be because we fail to distinguish (B1) from certain other claims. (B1) does not say that we cannot fail to believe what is *actually* entailed by our own beliefs, or that we cannot fail to believe what we *partly* believe to be entailed by our own *partial* beliefs, or that we cannot have beliefs that we believe to be *inconsistent*.<sup>8</sup> What (B1) says is that we cannot fail to believe what *we ourselves fully believe* to be entailed by our own *full* beliefs. (B1) is therefore much harder to deny than these other claims.

I shall next argue that

(B2) We cannot have a belief while believing that there is no reason for this belief.

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*Logic in its Place* (New York: Oxford, 2004), pp. 12-32.

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

<sup>7</sup> He may not be too confused to *partly* believe what he says he believes, which means that (B1) is not true of partial beliefs. I shall come back to this in section V.

<sup>8</sup> It may be thought that (B1) entails that we cannot have beliefs that we believe to be inconsistent, since inconsistent beliefs entail everything, and since we cannot believe everything. But people who believe that their own beliefs are inconsistent may not believe that these beliefs entail everything. They may accept a paraconsistent logic.

I shall use the term ‘reason for belief’ to mean a consideration that counts in favour of this belief.<sup>9</sup> If this term is used in this way, the belief that there is a reason for a belief is a normative judgement. While defending (B2), I shall not assume that the error theory is true. I shall instead be neutral between different accounts of the nature of normative judgements.<sup>10</sup>

To see that (B2) 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: “Socrates was mortal, but there is no reason to believe that Socrates was mortal.” As before, this person may be insincere, or may fail to understand what he is saying, or may be considering whether to give up one of these beliefs. If so, he does not fully believe what he says he believes. Alternatively, he may be sincere, may understand what he is saying, and may not be considering whether to give up one of these beliefs. But if so, he is too confused to fully believe what he says he believes.<sup>11</sup>

As before, if we doubt that (B2) is true, this may be because we fail to distinguish (B2) from certain other claims. (B2) does not say that we can *only* have a belief while believing that there *is* a reason for this belief, or that we cannot have a belief while believing that there is *insufficient* reason for this belief, or that we cannot have a *partial* belief while *partly* believing that there is no reason for this belief, or that we cannot have a belief while believing that there is no *evidence* for this belief. What (B2) says is that we cannot have a *full* belief while *fully believing* that there is *no reason at all* for this belief. (B2) is therefore much harder to deny than these other claims.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> I use the term ‘consideration’ to remain neutral on whether reasons for belief are facts, propositions, or beliefs.

<sup>10</sup> While defending (B2), I shall use the term ‘belief’ in a minimalist sense. If this term is used in this sense, the thought that there is a reason for a belief can be called a ‘belief’ even if it is a non-cognitive attitude.

<sup>11</sup> As before, he may not be too confused to *partly* believing what he says he believes, which means that (B2) is not true of partial beliefs. I shall come back to this in section V.

<sup>12</sup> In *Delusions and Other Irrational Beliefs* (New York: Oxford, 2010), Lisa Bortolotti describes patients with delusions who may seem to believe that there is no reason for their deluded beliefs. But these patients either have abnormal experiences that they take to be best explained by the contents

It may be objected that (B2) is not true of compulsive beliefs. Suppose that someone says: “I will die tomorrow, but I know that there is no reason to believe that I will die tomorrow.” If this person’s belief that he will die tomorrow is compulsive, we may think that he can fully believe what he says he believes. But if so, (B2) can be revised to:

(B2\*) We cannot have a non-compulsive belief while believing that there is no reason for this belief.

In what follows, I shall ignore this revision, since none of the beliefs that I shall discuss is compulsive.

I can now show why we cannot believe the error theory. As I have said, according to the error theory, normative judgements are beliefs that ascribe normative properties, even though such properties do not exist. The property of being a reason for belief, in the sense of a consideration that counts in favour of this belief, is a normative property. If the error theory is true, this property does not exist. The error theory therefore entails that there is no reason to believe the error theory.

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

(B1) We cannot fail to believe what we believe to be entailed by our own beliefs,

anyone who believes the error theory believes that there is no reason to believe the error theory. But I have just argued that

(B2) We cannot have a belief while believing that there is no reason for this belief.

This means that we cannot believe the error theory.

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of their deluded beliefs (see p. 120), or they take considerations that are clearly not reasons for their deluded beliefs to be reasons for these beliefs (see p. 122). They therefore do not believe that there is no reason at all for their deluded beliefs.

It may be objected that the belief that there is a reason for a belief is not a normative judgement, but is instead the belief that there is evidence for this belief. But 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 judgement. Suppose that I base my belief that Socrates was mortal on evidence about human beings' mortality. In that case, I cannot see this evidence as merely causing me to have this belief, or as merely explaining why I have this belief. I must also make at least an implicit normative judgement about the relation between this evidence and this belief: I must take this evidence to support, or to justify, or to count in favour of this belief.<sup>13</sup>

It may also be objected that we can believe the error theory if we take the normative judgement that there is a reason for a belief to be a non-cognitive attitude, or if we take the relation of counting in favour to be identical to a descriptive relation. But this misunderstands my argument. *While defending (B2)*, I was neutral between different accounts of the nature of normative judgements. But when I argued that we cannot believe the error theory, I was *not* neutral between these different accounts. Instead, I construed the normative judgement that there is a reason for a belief the way the error theory construes it: as a belief that ascribes a normative property. Those who reject this construal do not believe an error theory about all normative judgements, but instead believe a more limited error theory.

Finally, it may be objected that we can believe the error theory because if we came to believe that there are no reasons for belief, we could continue to base our beliefs on certain considerations while no longer taking these considerations to stand in a normative relation to our beliefs. It may be thought, for example, that I could continue to base my belief that Socrates was mortal on evidence about human beings' mortality while no longer taking this

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<sup>13</sup> A related objection is that reasons for belief are instrumental, and that the error theory does not cover instrumental reasons. As I said in note 3, however, the error theory covers all normative properties and judgements about which the following claims are true: (1) these normative properties supervene on descriptive properties; (2) we do not think that which objects have these normative properties is determined by people's use of normative predicates under descriptively specified conditions; and (3) we think that when these normative judgements conflict, at least one of them must be incorrect. I think that (1), (2) and (3) are true of reasons for belief and judgements about reason for belief, whether or not these reasons are instrumental.

evidence to count in favour of this belief. But as I have said, we cannot base a belief on a consideration without making at least an implicit normative judgement. If normative judgements are beliefs, therefore, we cannot base a belief on a consideration without at least implicitly taking this consideration to stand in a normative relation to this belief. It does not matter whether we call this relation ‘supporting’, or ‘justifying’, or ‘counting in favour’. As long as it is normative, we cannot believe the error theory.<sup>14</sup>

## II. 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 for belief is a normative property. Therefore, there is no reason to believe the error theory.<sup>15</sup>

But this argument does not show that there is no reason to believe the error theory. Instead, it only shows that *if the error theory is true*, there is no reason to believe the error theory. And the belief that this conditional claim 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.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> In what follows, I shall not distinguish between believing the error theory and believing that the error theory is true. If we do make a distinction here, people who do not understand the error theory can perhaps believe that the error theory is true without thereby believing the error theory.

<sup>15</sup> This argument is usually presented as part of an objection to the error theory, which I shall discuss in section IV. See Philip Stratton-Lake, “Introduction,” in W. D. Ross, *The Right and the Good* (New York: Oxford, 2002), p. xxv, and Cuneo, *The Normative Web*, pp. 117-8.

<sup>16</sup> 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 *if the error theory is false*, there is no reason to believe the error theory. But this conditional claim is not true, since there can be reasons to believe a theory that is actually false.



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:

(R1) There cannot be a reason for someone to do X if this person cannot do X.<sup>17</sup>

I gave three arguments for this claim. The first was that (R1) 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 (R1) 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 (R1) is a consequence of the fact that rational deliberation should not result in someone pointlessly trying to do what he cannot do.

I think that if these arguments show that (R1) is true, they also show that

(R2) There cannot be a reason for someone to believe that *p* if this person cannot believe that *p*.

For if (R1) is the simplest and least *ad hoc* explanation of the non-existence of crazy reasons for action, (R2) 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 (R1) is the simplest and least *ad hoc* explanation of the fact that inanimate objects do not have reasons for action, (R2) is likewise the simplest and least *ad hoc* explanation of the fact that inanimate objects do not have reasons for belief. And if (R1) is a consequence of the fact that rational practical deliberation should not result in someone pointlessly trying to do what he cannot do, (R2) is likewise a consequence of the

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<sup>17</sup> See my “Reasons and Impossibility,” *Philosophical Studies* CXXXVI (2007): 351-384. Clayton Littlejohn, “‘Ought’, ‘Can’, and Practical Reasons,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* XLVI (2009): 363-72, and Ulrike Heuer, “Reasons and Impossibility,” *Philosophical Studies* CXLVII (2010): 235-246, object to (R1) and to my arguments for this claim. I respond to Heuer in “Reasons, Impossibility and Efficient Steps: Reply to Heuer,” *Philosophical Studies* CLI (2010): 79-86. See also Peter Vranas, “I Ought, Therefore I Can,” *Philosophical Studies* CXXXVI (2007): 167-216, who defends the claim that ‘ought’ implies ‘can’ partly by appealing to (R1).

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 (R1) cannot show that (R2) 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 we cannot have this belief. But just as (R1) uses the term ‘reason for action’ to mean a consideration that counts in favour of an action, (R2) uses the term ‘reason for belief’ to mean a consideration that counts in favour of a belief. Evidence for a belief normally counts in favour of this belief. But if (R2) is true, a consideration that is evidence for a belief need not always count in favour of this belief. It does not do so if we cannot have this belief.

It may also be objected that the sense in which (R2) uses the term ‘cannot’ is 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

(B1) We cannot fail to believe what we believe to be entailed by our own beliefs

and that

(B2) We cannot have a belief while believing that there is no reason for this belief.

If (B1) and (B2) are true, these claims are necessary truths that hold in virtue of the nature of belief. If that is so, there is no possible world in which we believe the error theory. In my defence of (R1), I used the term ‘this person cannot do X’ to mean that there is no historically and nomologically accessible possible world in which this person will X. And if there is no possible world in which we believe the error theory, there is no historically and nomologically accessible possible world in which we believe this theory.

If my arguments show that (R1) is true, therefore, they also show that (R2) is true. And if that is so, there is no reason for us to believe the error theory.

### III. 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 not a 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.<sup>18</sup> Of course, if we cannot believe a theory, 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 it is false.

Moreover, though we cannot believe the error theory, we can come close to believing this theory. 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 normative judgements are beliefs that ascribe normative properties, while at the same time believing that such properties exist. And we can at a different time believe that normative properties do not exist, 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 the error theory uses the term ‘property’.<sup>19</sup>

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 the claim that normative judgements are beliefs that ascribe normative properties, I find myself temporarily forming the belief that normative properties exist, and temporarily ignoring the arguments against the existence of such properties.<sup>20</sup> What happens

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<sup>18</sup> It may be objected that if we cannot believe a set of claims, these claims are not really a theory. But that is merely a terminological point: it is merely the point that if we cannot believe these claims, they cannot correctly be *called* a ‘theory’. That does nothing to show that these claims are false.

<sup>19</sup> I say “in the sense in which the error theory uses the term ‘property’” because many non-cognitivists accept that normative judgements are beliefs that ascribe normative properties, but give a minimalist account of these beliefs and these properties. See, for example, Simon Blackburn, *Essays in Quasi-Realism* (New York: Oxford, 1993) and *Ruling Passions* (New York: Oxford, 1998), and Allan Gibbard, *Thinking How To Live* (Cambridge: Harvard, 2003). I argue against this view in “Do Normative Judgements Aim to Represent the World?”.

<sup>20</sup> I give this argument in “Do Normative Judgements Aim to Represent the World?”.

when I think about the existence of normative properties is more complicated, since what I take to be the strongest argument for the claim that normative properties do not exist consists of two separate sub-arguments. The first sub-argument shows that

- (1) If normative properties exist, these properties are identical to descriptive properties,

and the second sub-argument shows that

- (2) If normative properties exist, these properties are not identical to descriptive properties.<sup>21</sup>

When I consider the argument for (1), 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 (1) is true, and temporarily ignoring the argument for (1). I therefore find it difficult to form the belief that normative properties do not exist. 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 reminding myself that this is not how the error theory uses the term ‘property’.

Of course, we do not normally come close to believing a theory by temporarily ignoring sound arguments and giving up true beliefs. But this is because we normally can believe the theory we come close to believing. The reason why I am temporarily ignoring these arguments and giving up these beliefs is not that I am convinced that these arguments are unsound and that these beliefs are untrue, but is instead that this is the only way in which I can form certain *other* true beliefs on the basis of *other* sound arguments. Since I know that this is why I am doing this, I think that my state of mind can accurately be described as

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<sup>21</sup> I give these arguments in “Are there Irreducibly Normative Properties?” and “Are Normative Properties Descriptive Properties?”.

coming close to believing the error theory, though admittedly in an unusual way.<sup>22</sup>

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 the error theory. It may be thought that, instead of believing that these arguments *seem* to show that the error theory is true, I should believe that these arguments *show* that this theory is true. But since I cannot fail to have a belief that I believe to be entailed by my own beliefs, and since I cannot believe the error theory, I cannot believe that there are sound arguments that *show* that this theory is true. I do believe that there are sound arguments that *seem* to show this, however, and I think this can also accurately be described as coming close to believing the error theory.

#### **IV. 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 this 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 error theorists 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.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> This way of coming close to believing the error theory is not the same as partial belief in the error theory as defined in section I. I shall come back to this in section V.

<sup>23</sup> See Cuneo, *The Normative Web*, pp. 117-8. Before making this objection, Cuneo argues that an error theory cannot be limited to moral judgements, and must also apply to epistemic judgements. The first part of this objection is also made by Stratton-Lake, "Introduction," in W. D. Ross, *The Right and the Good*, p. xxv. A similar objection is made by Derek Parfit, *On What Matters, Volume Two* (New

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. For as I have said, that only shows that *if the error theory is true*, there is no reason to believe the error theory. And the belief that this conditional claim 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 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 it in these ways, and it can be a rational mistake if we do not come close to believing it 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. As before, however, though Cuneo and I both believe that

- (1) *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 this conditional claim.

Cuneo could also reply that, since I believe both (1) and the negation of the consequent of (1), I should believe the negation of the antecedent of (1): in other words, I should believe that the error theory is false. But what makes it the case that I believe both (1) and the negation of the consequent of (1) is not that the error theory is *actually* false, but is

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York: Oxford, 2011), pp. 293, 522, 619. Gibbard, *Thinking How To Live*, p. 195, also 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.”

instead that my inability to believe the error theory enables me to believe claims that are incompatible with this theory, such as the negation of the consequent of (1). That shows neither that the error theory is false nor that I should believe that it is false. If my arguments are sound, therefore, it is not the error theory but Cuneo's objection to it that is polemically toothless.<sup>24</sup>

A second objection to the error theory, which is suggested by Nishi Shah's work, 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 if and only if

- (2) There is a reason for us to have M if and only 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 (2) 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.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Cuneo also claims that, if the error theory is true, there cannot be arguments for anything, since "the premises of an argument are offered in support of its conclusion in the sense of . . . being offered as a *reason* for accepting that conclusion" (*The Normative Web*, p. 121). But premises can be evidence that a conclusion is true without being reasons to believe this conclusion in the sense of counting in favour of believing it. See also Jonas Olson, "Error Theory and Reasons for Belief," in Andrew Reisner and Asbjørn Steglich-Petersen, eds., *Reasons for Belief* (New York: Cambridge, 2011).

<sup>25</sup> See Nishi Shah, "The Limits of Normative Detachment," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* CX (2010): 347-71, pp. 363-5, and "Can Reasons for Belief be Debunked?", in Reisner and Steglich-Petersen, eds., *Reasons for Belief*, and Matthew Evans and Nishi Shah, "Mental Agency and Metaethics," *Oxford Studies in Metaethics* VII (2012). Shah endorses a different version of (2), but this does not affect my reply. This objection is also mentioned by Cuneo, *The Normative Web*, pp. 121-2, and discussed by Olson, "Error Theory and Reasons for Belief."

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

- (3) *We take there to be* a reason for us to have M if and only if *we take there to be* evidence that the content of M is true.<sup>26</sup>

The error theory can then say that normative judgements are quasi-beliefs that ascribe normative properties. If it is reformulated in this way, the theory does not contradict itself, since it does not entail that there are no quasi-beliefs.

Of course, it then remains the case that 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 this conditional claim is true. Moreover, we cannot even notice the difference between beliefs and quasi-beliefs, since whenever (3) is true of a mental state M, *we take* (2) to be true of this mental state.<sup>27</sup> Since we cannot notice this difference, if my arguments show that we cannot believe an error theory according to which normative judgements are beliefs, they also show that we cannot believe an error theory according to which normative judgements are quasi-beliefs.

A third objection to the error theory, which been made in most detail 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 much more plausible than the error theory. Therefore, instead of accepting these counterintuitive normative implications, we should reject the error theory.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> In (3), our *taking* there to be a reason and our *taking* there to be evidence are themselves quasi-beliefs. It may be objected that this makes (3) circular. But (3) is not a definition of quasi-beliefs; (3) merely gives a necessary and sufficient condition for a mental state's being a quasi-belief.

<sup>27</sup> As before, in this paragraph, our *thinking* that the antecedent of this conditional claim is true and our *taking* (2) to be true are themselves quasi-beliefs.

<sup>28</sup> Dworkin and Nagel make this objection to an error theory about moral judgements. See Ronald



This objection assumes that

- (4) If a claim C and a philosophical theory T cannot both be true, and if C is much more plausible than T, we should reject T.<sup>29</sup>

When we call a claim ‘plausible’, we may mean that it *seems true*. If so, (4) is equivalent to the following claim:

- (5) 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.

But (5) 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 much more clearly true than T is not that C actually *is* true, but is instead that we cannot believe T.<sup>30</sup> That shows neither that

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Dworkin, “Objectivity and Truth: You’d Better Believe It,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* XXV (1996): 87-139, pp. 117-8, and, more cautiously, Thomas Nagel, *The Last Word* (New York: Oxford, 1997), p. 115. Gibbard, *Thinking How To Live*, p. 195, and Michael Huemer, *Ethical Intuitionism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 115-7, make similar claims. Parfit, *On What Matters, Volume Two*, p. 522, makes a similar objection to scepticism about reasons for belief.

<sup>29</sup> (4) is closely related to the claim that if a claim C is much more plausible than the premises of an argument that aims to show that C is false, we should not give up our belief in C in response to this argument. This claim is suggested by remarks in G. E. Moore, “A Defence of Common Sense” and “Proof of an External World,” reprinted in his *Philosophical Papers* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1959), and a version of it is endorsed by Dworkin, “Objectivity and Truth: You’d Better Believe It,” p. 117. For discussion of different versions of these claims, see Thomas Kelly, “Moorean Facts and Belief Revision, or Can the Sceptic Win?” *Philosophical Perspectives* XIX (2005): 179-209. For discussion of arguments against the error theory that rely on such claims, see Tristram McPherson, “Moorean Arguments and Moral Revisionism,” *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy* (<http://www.jesp.org>) III, 2 (2009).

<sup>30</sup> 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” (“Objectivity and Truth: You’d Better Believe It,” p. 118). This ignores

T is false nor that we should reject T.

Alternatively, when we call a claim plausible, we may mean that *there is reason to believe it*. If so, (4) is equivalent to the following claim:

- (6) If a claim C and a philosophical theory T cannot both be true, and if there is much more reason to believe C than there is to believe T, we should reject T.<sup>31</sup>

But, as before, (6) 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 there is much 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.<sup>32</sup> As before, that shows neither that T is false nor that we should reject T.

It may be objected that this ignores the deeper worry behind Dworkin and Nagel's objection, which is that the error theory is a malignant view that threatens to undermine all of our normative judgements, including our deepest and most important moral convictions.<sup>33</sup> But 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. If my arguments are sound, therefore, the error theory is benign rather than malignant.<sup>34</sup>

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the possibility that what explains why C seems much more clearly true to us than T is not that C actually *is* true, but is instead that we cannot believe T.

<sup>31</sup> A closely related claim is endorsed by Kelly, "Moorean Facts and Belief Revision," p. 194. Kelly does not take this claim to be a version of (4), but instead puts it forward as an alternative to (4), since he thinks that when we call a claim plausible we mean that it seems true (p. 189).

<sup>32</sup> It may be objected that, if the error theory is true, there is likewise no reason to believe C. But as I explained at the start of section II, 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.

<sup>33</sup> The way Dworkin and Nagel introduce their objection suggests that this is at least one worry behind it. See Dworkin, "Objectivity and Truth: You'd Better Believe It," pp. 87-8, and Nagel, *The Last Word*, pp. 5-6.

<sup>34</sup> It may be objected that, if we can partly believe the error theory, this theory can weaken our confidence in our deepest and most important moral convictions. I discuss this objection in section V.

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 untrue. Normally, when we believe that one of our own beliefs is untrue, we give up this belief. But error theorists do not give up all of their normative judgements. This makes them guilty of a form of bad faith.<sup>35</sup>

If my arguments are sound, however, no one can believe the error theory, not even those who defend this theory. And 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. If defenders of the error theory come close to believing it in the ways I have described, they are as far from being in bad faith as it is possible to be.

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 right both ascribe a non-existent property to murder, the first of these beliefs is clearly more acceptable than the second. This

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<sup>35</sup> Crispin Wright, "Truth in Ethics," reprinted in his *Saving the Differences* (Cambridge: Harvard, 2003) and Blackburn, *Essays in Quasi-Realism*, both make this objection to Mackie's error theory about moral 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" ("Truth in Ethics," p. 184; see also Crispin Wright, *Truth and Objectivity* (Cambridge: Harvard, 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 avoids the error", and that there is "something fishy" about defending an error theory while continuing to make moral judgements (*Essays in Quasi-Realism*, pp. 149, 152). For a different response to Wright and Blackburn's objections, see Charles Pigden, "Nihilism, Nietzsche and the Doppelganger Problem," *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* X (2007): 441-56, pp. 446-50.

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, it depends on whether this judgement complies with some other norm, such as a norm according to which a normative judgement is acceptable if and only if it promotes social stability. We should therefore construe a normative judgement's truth in terms of its compliance with this other norm.<sup>36</sup>

The belief that a normative judgement is acceptable, however, is itself a normative judgement: it is not merely 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.<sup>37</sup> If the error theory is true, therefore, beliefs about the acceptability of normative judgements are just as false as the normative judgements that they are about.<sup>38</sup> This means that if my arguments are sound, we cannot construe a normative judgement's truth in terms of its acceptability.

Blackburn's further objection is what I shall call

*The objection from revision.* If we came to believe the error theory, we would need to change our use of normative vocabulary to make it free of error. We could, for example, stop using normative predicates to ascribe normative properties, and start

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<sup>36</sup> See Wright, "Truth in Ethics," p. 185, and *Truth and Objectivity*, pp. 10, 86-7. As before, Wright makes this objection to Mackie's error theory about moral judgements. For discussion, see Alexander Miller, "Wright's Argument against Error-Theories," *Analysis* LXII (2002): 98-103. 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" ("Truth in Ethics," p. 193; see also *Truth and Objectivity*, p. 48).

<sup>37</sup> Since Wright's notion of superassertibility is construed from assertibility (see note 36 above), and since 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.

<sup>38</sup> 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 ("Wright's Argument against Error-Theories," p. 102).

using these predicates to express non-cognitive attitudes. But this change would not make any difference to our normative practice. Our normative practice therefore does not commit us to the truth of the error theory.<sup>39</sup>

As Blackburn acknowledges, his claim that this change would not make any difference to our normative practice assumes that quasi-realism is true.<sup>40</sup> But if the arguments I have elsewhere given for the error theory are sound, quasi-realism is false.<sup>41</sup> Starting to use normative predicates to express non-cognitive attitudes therefore would make a difference to our normative practice. If my arguments are sound, however, we cannot believe the error theory, which means that we do not need to make this change.

## V. New objections

It may be thought that even if my arguments undermine many objections to the error theory, 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.* Though 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 deepest and most important moral convictions.

It is true that my arguments leave open the possibility that we can partly believe the error theory, since (B1) and (B2) are not true of partial beliefs. But consider again claims of the

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<sup>39</sup> See Blackburn, *Essays in Quasi-Realism*, pp. 149-52, and “Is Objective Moral Justification Possible on a Quasi-Realist Foundation?” *Inquiry* XLII (1999): 213-28, p. 214. As before, Blackburn makes this objection to Mackie’s error theory about moral judgements.

<sup>40</sup> Blackburn, *Essays in Quasi-Realism*, pp. 151-2.

<sup>41</sup> See “Do Normative Judgements Aim to Represent the World?”

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: someone 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 be correspondingly weak.<sup>42</sup> Though such weak partial belief in the error theory may lower our confidence in our normative judgements, it will not make us give up these judgements. Moreover, it will not affect *which* normative judgements we make, since it will lower our confidence in all possible normative judgements to the same extent. It is therefore no threat to our deepest and most important moral convictions.

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:

- (1) The error theory is true, but I do not believe that it is true.
- (2) 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 (1) or (2). This shows that we cannot

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<sup>42</sup> Of course, someone’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 the claim that normative judgements are beliefs that ascribe normative properties and the claim that normative properties do not exist, not just fairly confident about each of these claims.

defend the error theory in this way.<sup>43</sup>

I agree, of course, that we cannot sincerely assert (1) or (2). But I think 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 arguments that together seem to show that the error theory is true.

It may be thought that defending the error theory in this way does involve making assertions that entail or presuppose (1) or (2). But I do not think I have said anything that entails or presupposes these claims. I have not said, for example, that there are sound arguments that together *show* that the error theory is true. And if some of my claims did entail or presuppose (1) or (2), I was, to this extent, insincere. Instead of showing that my arguments are unsound or that the error theory is false, this would merely show that I have insincerely put forward sound arguments and have insincerely told you the truth.

A third objection 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 a theory at different times, we have not yet reached such equilibrium. We therefore should not defend philosophical theories that we cannot believe.<sup>44</sup>

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

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<sup>43</sup> Cuneo, *The Normative Web*, p. 119, raises a version of this objection, though he says that these Moore-paradoxical claims do “not even rise to the level of paradox” if there are no reasons. Alan Hájek, “My Philosophical Position Says ‘*p*’ and I Don’t Believe ‘*p*’”, in Mitchell Green and John N. Williams, eds., *Moore’s Paradox* (New York: Oxford, 2007), presents 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.

<sup>44</sup> For discussion of objections from reflective equilibrium to error theories about moral judgements, see McPherson, “Moorean Arguments and Moral Revisionism,” pp. 17-21. For discussion of objections from reflective equilibrium to error theories in general, see Chris Daly and David Liggins, “In Defence of Error Theory,” *Philosophical Studies* CXLIX (2010): 209-230.

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.<sup>45</sup>

And Lewis 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.<sup>46</sup>

These claims may seem sensible, but I think they are false. There is no reason why the truth could not be beyond our grasp. 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.

## VI. Conclusion

As I said at the start of this paper, I have elsewhere given arguments that 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. I have argued that this is not a problem for the error theory, and that it instead 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 a theory is deeply wrongheaded, and that a view like this simply *cannot* be true. I used to worry about these reactions, since I used to think that they showed that there was probably something wrong

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<sup>45</sup> David Lewis, *Philosophical Papers, Volume I* (New York: Oxford, 1983), p. x.

<sup>46</sup> David Lewis, *On the Plurality of Worlds* (Malden: Blackwell, 1986), p. 135.



with my arguments. But I now feel encouraged by these 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.