

NO, WE CANNOT

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According to the error theory, normative judgements are beliefs that ascribe normative properties, but these properties do not exist. I have argued that we cannot believe this theory.¹ In her interesting response, Marianna Bergamaschi Ganapini argues that we can. I will explain why I still think we cannot.²

1. Implicit and explicit belief

To show that we cannot believe the error theory, I defended the following claims about belief:

- (B1) We cannot fail to believe what we believe to be entailed by one of our own beliefs.
- (B2) We cannot have a belief while believing that there is no reason for this belief.

I then argued as follows. Since the property of being a reason for belief is a normative

¹ See Streumer 2013a. By ‘the error theory’, I mean an error theory about all normative judgements, not just moral judgements.

² Several others have also responded to my argument: see Olson 2014, pp. 169-72, Hyun and Sampson 2014, Lillehammer and Moller 2015, and Forcehimes and Talisse forthcoming. I respond to Olson in Streumer 2016. I discuss the other responses in Streumer forthcoming.

property, the error theory entails that there are no reasons for belief. Anyone who understands the error theory well enough to be in a position to believe it knows that this theory entails this. Given (B1), this means that anyone who believes the error theory believes that there is no reason to believe this theory. But given (B2), that is impossible. I therefore concluded that we cannot believe the error theory. I then argued that this is not a problem for the error theory, but that it instead helps to answer many objections that philosophers have made to this theory.³

We can distinguish *full* from *partial* belief: we fully believe that *p* if we are very confident that *p*, and we partly believe that *p* if we are only somewhat confident that *p*. I used the term ‘belief’ in this argument to mean full belief. But we can also make further distinctions. One of these is between *explicit* and *implicit* belief: we explicitly believe that *p* if we currently think that *p*, and we implicitly believe that *p* if our current thoughts commit us to *p*, for example, by presupposing or entailing *p*.⁴ Though I did not say this, I meant to use the term ‘belief’ to mean explicit belief. In other words, I meant to interpret (B1) and (B2) as follows:

- (B1*) We cannot fail to fully and explicitly believe what we fully and explicitly believe to be entailed by one of our own full and explicit beliefs.
- (B2*) We cannot have a full and explicit belief while fully and explicitly believing that there is no reason for this belief.

By contrast, Bergamaschi Ganapini interprets (B1) as follows:

- (B1**) We cannot fail to (at least) *implicitly* believe what we *implicitly* believe to

³ Streumer 2013a. I give a more elaborate version of this argument in Streumer forthcoming.

⁴ Another is between *occurrent* and *dispositional* belief: we have an *occurrent* belief that *p* if we currently think that *p*, and we have a *dispositional* belief that *p* if we are disposed to think that *p* in certain circumstances, for example, if someone asks us whether it is the case that *p*. For these distinctions, see, for example, Harman 1986, pp. 13-4. I here take explicit belief to be identical to *occurrent* belief, and Bergamaschi Ganapini calls both *implicit* and *dispositional* belief ‘*implicit* belief’. This does not matter here.

be entailed by one of our own beliefs.

She then argues that if we interpret (B1) as (B1**), my argument fails. I agree. For given (B1**), someone who believes the error theory may only implicitly believe that there is no reason to believe this theory. And given (B2*), this is possible. But if we interpret (B1) as (B1*), as I meant to do, I think my argument stands.⁵

2. Exceptions to (B2)?

Bergamaschi Ganapini also attacks (B2). She first suggests that (B2) is false of beliefs in what Wittgenstein calls ‘hinge propositions’ and of the beliefs that foundationalists take to be basic. I agree that we can have such beliefs without believing that there are reasons for them. But (B2) only says that we cannot have a belief *while* believing that there is *no* reason for this belief. I think this is true even of beliefs in hinge propositions and basic beliefs: I think we cannot believe, for example, that

I have hands, but there is no reason to believe that I have hands,

or that

$1+1=2$, but there is no reason to believe that $1+1=2$.

When Wittgenstein calls certain propositions ‘hinge propositions’ and foundationalists take certain beliefs to be basic, I do not think they mean that we can have such beliefs while believing that there are no reasons for them. They only mean that we can be justified in having such beliefs without basing them on other beliefs.

Bergamaschi Ganapini next suggests that (B2) is false of compulsive beliefs. But if so, I could revise (B2) to:

⁵ In what follows, I will continue to interpret (B1) and (B2) as (B1*) and (B2*).

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

Since a belief in the error theory is not compulsive, this revision would not undermine my argument.⁶ Moreover, if Bergamaschi Ganapini were right that (B2) is false of beliefs in hinge propositions and of basic beliefs, I could further revise (B2†) to:

(B2††) We cannot have a non-compulsive non-basic belief in a non-hinge proposition while believing that there is no reason for this belief.

Since the error theory is not a hinge proposition and a belief in this theory is not basic, this revision would not undermine my argument either.

My point is not that (B2) needs to be revised in this way. I think (B2) is true even of beliefs in hinge propositions and basic beliefs, and I am inclined to think that even people with compulsive beliefs will not be able to fully and explicitly believe that there is no reason at all for these beliefs. My point is only that I could revise (B2) in this way without thereby undermining my argument.⁷

3. Can we believe the error theory *without* explicitly believing that there is no reason to believe this theory?

Bergamaschi Ganapini also suggests that there are two ways in which we can believe the error theory without explicitly believing that there is no reason to believe this theory. First, she thinks we can fail to realise that the error theory applies to judgements about reasons for belief: this can happen, for example, to an advanced graduate student “who has focused only

⁶ As I said in Streumer 2013a, p. 197.

⁷ Bergamaschi Ganapini objects that if I revised (B2) in such ways, (B1) and (B2) are no longer “necessary truths that hold in virtue of the nature of belief”. That may be true, but it does not matter. For (B2††) could instead be a necessary truth that holds in virtue of the nature of non-compulsive non-basic belief in non-hinge propositions. That is all that my argument requires.

on the practical side of the error theory and has developed interesting arguments in favor of the error theory but paid little attention to the effects the error theory has on belief”.⁸

But when I say that we cannot believe the error theory, I mean that we cannot explicitly believe an error theory about all normative judgements. And by ‘all normative judgements’, I mean all judgements that are *actually* normative, not all judgements that *we take* to be normative. If I am right that judgements about reasons for belief are normative, this student therefore only believes the error theory if he or she explicitly believes that

- (1) Judgements about reasons for belief are beliefs that ascribe the property of being a reason for belief, but this property does not exist.

Of course, this student can believe the error theory without explicitly believing everything that the theory entails. But this student only explicitly believes the error theory if he or she explicitly believes this theory about all judgements that are actually normative.

Second, Bergamaschi Ganapini thinks we can come to believe the error theory without explicitly believing that there is no reason to believe this theory “by temporarily ignoring that this is entailed by [our] belief about normative judgements in general”. But as I have just said, to believe the error theory, we must explicitly believe (1). And to believe (1), we must believe both of its conjuncts. We must therefore explicitly believe both that

- (2) Judgements about reasons for belief are beliefs that ascribe the property of being a reason for belief

and that

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

⁸ See also Hyun and Sampson 2014, p. 635-6, and Forcehimes and Talisse forthcoming, pp. 4-5, who make closely related points. My reply repeats some claims I make in Streumer 2016.

If (2) is true, explicitly believing (3) is equivalent to explicitly believing that

(4) There are no reasons for belief.

This means that in order to believe the error theory, we must explicitly believe (4). And, of course, (4) entails that

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

Now suppose that we are trying to form a belief in the error theory. Can we do this while temporarily ignoring the entailment from (4) to (5)? Perhaps we could if we were not explicitly thinking about the error theory. But when we are trying to form a belief in the error theory, we *are* explicitly thinking about this theory. I therefore think that we cannot come to believe the error theory while temporarily ignoring the entailment from (4) to (5). More generally, I think we cannot believe the error theory without explicitly believing that there is no reason to believe this theory.⁹

4. Can we believe the error theory *while* explicitly believing that there is no reason to believe this theory?

Bergamaschi Ganapini also suggests that we can believe the error theory while explicitly believing that there is no reason to believe this theory. Like Jonas Olson, she thinks we can do this because “it is possible to base a belief in the error theory on arguments in favor of the

⁹ I said in Streumer 2013a that “people who do not understand the error theory can perhaps believe that the error theory is true without thereby believing the error theory” (p. 199 n. 13). Bergamaschi Ganapini claims that this “may be enough to allow some of the objections against the error theory to go through”. But I do not think it is. If someone who does not understand the error theory believes that this theory is true, this person does not believe what the error theory says. That is enough to stop the objections to the error theory from going through. For example, this person’s belief that the error theory is true then will not undermine this person’s moral convictions, since this person will not even realise that the theory is incompatible with these convictions.

error theory even if we explicitly think that there is no reason for that belief”.¹⁰

As I have said elsewhere, it may be true that

- (1) We can base a belief on a consideration *without* even implicitly believing that this consideration is *a* reason for this belief.

I therefore withdraw my earlier claim that “we cannot base a belief on a consideration without making at least an implicit normative judgement”.¹¹ But that does not mean that

- (2) We can base a belief on a consideration *while* explicitly believing that this consideration is *no* reason for this belief.

If I perceive that the desk at which I wrote this paragraph is white, I can perhaps base the belief that this desk is white on this perceptual input without making even an implicit normative judgement. But suppose I believe I have taken a powerful drug that makes red objects look white to me. In that case, my perceptual input will not change: the desk at which I wrote this paragraph will still look white to me. But I will now believe that this input is no reason to believe that this desk is white. And I think that if I explicitly believe that this perceptual input is no reason for this belief, I will be unable to base the belief that this desk is white on this input. This suggests that (2) is false.¹²

Bergamaschi Ganapini disagrees. To support (2), she gives the following example:

¹⁰ See also Olson 2014, pp. 171-2.

¹¹ Streumer 2013a, p. 198. Here and in the next paragraph, I repeat claims I make in Streumer 2016.

¹² You may object that if I believe that a consideration is no reason for a belief, I may nevertheless think that this consideration stands in some other positive normative relation to this belief: for example, that it justifies this belief, that it supports this belief, or that it makes it the case that I ought to have this belief. This shows that (2) should be generalised to: (2*) We can base a belief on a consideration *while* believing that this consideration *stands in no positive normative relation* to this belief. This does not matter to my arguments, since the error theory entails that these other positive normative relations do not exist either.

Imagine a professor on a job committee examining the dossiers of two job applicants: Paul and Gina. They are both good candidates, but Gina is more qualified than Paul based on some ‘objective standards’ (e.g. number of publications). Contrary to that, however, the professor believes that the right thing to do is to hire Paul. Suppose for now that his belief is – unbeknownst to him – in part based on his belief that Gina is a woman. Suppose further that he explicitly denies that being a woman is a reason for not hiring someone who is well qualified for the job. Now if this is a possible scenario – as I believe it is – we have a situation in which someone’s belief is based on a consideration that he or she does not see as a reason for that belief.¹³

There are different views about what it is for a person’s belief to be based on X: this may be, for example, that X caused this belief, or that this person is disposed to revise this belief if X does not obtain, or that this person at least implicitly takes X to be a reason for this belief.¹⁴ If the first or second view is true, this example shows that

- (3) A person’s belief can be based on X even though this person explicitly believes that X is no reason for this belief.

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

- (4) A person can *him- or herself* base a belief on X while explicitly believing that X is no reason for this belief.

For it to be true that the professor *himself* bases his belief that Paul should be hired on the fact that Gina is a woman, he must at the very least realise that this belief is based on this fact: he must realise, for example, that this fact caused this belief, or that he is disposed to revise this belief if this fact does not obtain. And I think that if he realises that this belief is based on this

¹³ A similar example is given by Evans 2013, pp. 2946-7.

¹⁴ For discussion of these views, see, for example, Korcz 2000 and 2015 and Evans 2013. Korcz defends a combination of the first and the last view, and Evans defends a version of the second view.

fact in one of these ways, he cannot continue to have this this belief while fully and explicitly believing that this fact is no reason for this belief. I therefore think that this example does not support (2).

Moreover, I think the example does not refute (B2) either. For the professor in this example surely will not fully and explicitly believe that there is *no reason at all* to believe that Paul should be hired. Instead, he will presumably have certain false beliefs that he at least implicitly takes to be reasons for this belief: he may falsely believe, for example, that Paul's publications are better than Gina's, or that Paul is more impressive in discussion than Gina, or he may believe some other rationalisation along these lines. Since these beliefs are false, this does not mean that Paul should actually be hired. But it does mean that this professor does not fully and explicitly believe that there is no reason at all to believe that Paul should be hired.

Bergamaschi Ganapini also suggests that we could initially base a belief in the error theory on the arguments for this theory while taking these arguments to be reasons for this belief, and that once we believe the error theory we could stop believing that these arguments are reasons for this belief. But I do not think this can happen. For as I have said, to believe the error theory, we must explicitly believe that

(5) There are no reasons for belief.

If while trying to form a belief in the error theory we take the arguments for this theory to be reasons for this belief, this will prevent us from forming an explicit belief in (5). It will therefore prevent us from forming a belief in the error theory.

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

When I argued that we cannot believe the error theory, I also argued that there are two ways in which we can come close to believing this theory.¹⁵ First, we can believe different parts of

¹⁵ See Streumer 2013a, pp. 202-3. In Streumer forthcoming I discuss three further ways in which

the error theory at different times, while implicitly changing some of our other beliefs. When we consider arguments for the claim that

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

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

(2) Normative properties do not exist

and instead implicitly believing that normative properties do exist. And when we consider arguments for (2), we can believe (2), while at this time failing to believe (1) and instead implicitly believing that normative judgements are non-cognitive attitudes rather than beliefs that ascribe normative properties. Something like this happens to me when I consider the arguments I have elsewhere given for (1) and (2).¹⁶

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

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

we can come close to believing the error theory.

¹⁶ I give these arguments in Streumer 2008, 2011, 2013b, 2013c, and forthcoming.

true. What does this mean? It does not mean believing that

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

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

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

My belief in (4) is in one way similar to the beliefs we have when appearances are deceptive. When we put a stick in the water, this stick seems bent, but we do not believe that it is actually bent. When we are travelling in a desert, there may seem to be an oasis in the distance, but we may not believe that there is actually an oasis in the distance. In a similar way, when I consider my arguments for (1) and (2), these arguments together seem to show that the error theory is true, but I do not believe that they actually show this. The difference is, of course, that I do not fail to believe this because I believe that these arguments are unsound, but instead because I cannot believe what they seem to show.¹⁷

Bergamaschi Ganapini objects that if (B1) and (B2) are true, the following claims also seem true:

- (C1) If we believe that p entails q , we cannot believe that there are sound arguments that together seem to show that p without believing that there are sound arguments that together seem to show that q .

¹⁷ As I said in Streumer 2013a, p. 203, you may think that if I really believed that these arguments are sound, I would believe that they *show* that the error theory is true. But I know that the claim that there are sound arguments that show that the error theory is true entails that the error theory is true. Given (B1), this means that I cannot believe that there are sound arguments that *show* that the error theory is true. But I can believe that there are sound arguments that *seem* to show this.

- (C2) We cannot believe that there are sound arguments that together seem to show that p while believing that there are sound arguments that together seem to show that there is no reason to believe that p .¹⁸

If (C1) is true, and if anyone who understands the error theory well enough to be in a position to believe it knows that this theory entails that there are no reasons for belief, then anyone who believes (4) also believes that

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

And if (C2) is true, we cannot believe both (4) and (5) at the same time. Bergamaschi Ganapini therefore thinks that cannot come close to believing the error theory in this way.

I think, however, that (C2) is false. Just as believing (4) cannot give rise to a full and explicit belief in the error theory because we cannot believe the error theory, believing (5) also cannot give rise to a full and explicit belief that there are no reasons for belief because we cannot believe that there are no reasons for belief. For the fundamental reason why we cannot believe the error theory is that we cannot believe that there are no reasons for belief. Since believing (4) and believing (5) cannot give rise to these full and explicit beliefs, I think we can believe both (4) and (5) at the same time. This would be like believing that our sense perception seems to show that there is an oasis in the distance, while at the same time believing that the map seems to show that there is no reason to believe this.

¹⁸ Since Bergamaschi Ganapini is here objecting to the second way in which I think we can come close to believing the error theory, I have substituted the phrase ‘believe that there are sound arguments that together seem to show that p ’ for Bergamaschi Ganapini’s phrases ‘come close to believing p ’ and ‘come close to having full confidence in the truth of a proposition’. The latter phrase seems to equate coming close to believing the error theory with having a strong partial belief in the error theory. I do not think we can come close to believing the error theory in this way: as I explain in Streumer 2013a, p. 210, I think any partial belief in the error theory must be weak.

6. Conclusion

Can we believe the error theory? Bergamaschi Ganapini's answer to this question is: Yes, we can. But my answer remains: No, we cannot.

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