PRÉCIS OF UNBELIEVABLE ERRORS

Bart Streumer

b.streumer@rug.nl

1. Introduction

In *Unbelievable Errors*, I defend an error theory about all normative judgements: not only moral judgements, but also judgements about reasons for action, judgements about reasons for belief, and instrumental normative judgements. This theory says that these judgements are beliefs that ascribe normative properties, but that these properties do not exist. It therefore entails that all normative judgements are false. I also argue, however, that we cannot believe this error theory. This may seem to be a problem for the theory, but I argue that it is not. Instead, I argue, our inability to believe the theory makes it more likely to be true.

In this Précis, I will give a brief overview of some of the arguments I give in the book. Whether these arguments are sound depends on details and further arguments that I cannot discuss here.

My arguments for the error theory assume that

A property is *normative* if and only if it can be ascribed with a normative predicate,

and that

A property is *descriptive* if and only if it can be ascribed with a descriptive predicate.

These claims give a necessary and sufficient condition for a property's being normative or

descriptive. I argue in the book that they are compatible with different views about what *makes* a property normative or descriptive (Streumer 2017: 101–103).

Cognitivists think that normative judgements represent the world: they take these judgements to be beliefs that ascribe normative properties. Most cognitivists are *realists*, who think that normative properties exist. *Non-reductive* realists take there to be irreducibly normative properties: they take there to be normative properties that are not identical to descriptive properties. *Reductive* realists take normative properties to be identical to descriptive properties. *Non-cognitivists* think that normative judgements do not represent the world: they often take these judgements to be non-cognitive attitudes, such as attitudes of approval or disapproval. And the error theory says that normative judgements do represent the world, but that the properties that these judgements ascribe do not exist.

I defend the error theory in the book by giving arguments against the three main alternatives to the error theory: non-reductive realism, reductive realism, and non-cognitivism (2017: 9–91). I then argue that other alternatives to the error theory also face versions of these arguments (2017: 92–103).

2. The reduction argument

My argument against non-reductive realism is what I call the *reduction argument*. I will outline two versions of this argument.[1]

The first is as follows (2017: 9–11). Consider an action A_1 that has a certain normative property, such as the property of being right. Since anything that has normative properties also has descriptive properties, action A_1 also has descriptive properties, which we can call P_{A1-1}, P_{A1-2}, … And the objects O_1, O_2, … that are part of the same possible world as action A_1 have descriptive properties as well, which for each object O_x we can call P_{Ox-1}, P_{Ox-2}, … Action A_1 therefore satisfies the following predicate, which we can call predicate D_1:

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[1] As I say in the book, the first version of the reduction argument was first given by Jackson (1998), inspired by a more general argument given by Kim (1993).

'has descriptive properties $P_{A1\text{-}1}$, $P_{A1\text{-}2}$, …, and is such that O_1 has descriptive properties $P_{O1\text{-}1}$, $P_{O1\text{-}2}$, …, O_2 has descriptive properties $P_{O2\text{-}1}$, $P_{O2\text{-}2}$, …, …'.

Since a predicate that wholly consists of descriptive predicates is itself descriptive, predicate D_1 is a descriptive predicate.

Suppose next that actions A_1, A_2, … are all the right actions there are in all possible worlds. Just as action A_1 satisfies predicate D_1, actions A_2, A_3, … satisfy similarly constructed predicates D_2, D_3, … These actions therefore all satisfy the following predicate, which we can call predicate D*:

'satisfies either predicate D1, or predicate D2, or …'.

As before, since a predicate that wholly consists of descriptive predicates is itself descriptive, predicate D* is a descriptive predicate.

I take the following claim to be what I call a *central thought* about normative properties, in the sense that I take it to reflect the nature of these properties:

(S)   For all possible worlds W and W*, if the instantiation of descriptive properties in W and W* is exactly the same, then the instantiation of normative properties in W and W* is also exactly the same.

If (S) is true, any action that satisfies predicate D* also satisfies the predicate 'is right'. For otherwise there would be two possible worlds W and W* that have exactly the same instantiation of descriptive properties but that do not have the same instantiation of normative properties, which would contradict (S). And any action that satisfies the predicate 'is right' also satisfies predicate D*. For actions A_1, A_2, … are all the right actions there are in all possible worlds, and these actions satisfy predicates D_1, D_2, …, which means that they satisfy predicate D*. This shows that the predicate 'is right' and predicate D* are necessarily coextensive.

I argue in the book that since non-reductive realists must take properties to be ways objects can be, they must endorse the following criterion of property identity (2017: 11–24):

(N)   Two predicates ascribe the same property if and only if they are necessarily coextensive.

If (N) is correct, the predicate 'is right' and predicate D* ascribe the same property. This means that the normative property of being right is identical to a descriptive property. And this argument can be repeated for any other normative predicate. It therefore shows that if (S) is true and (N) is correct, non-reductive realism is false. Many philosophers have made objections to this argument, but I argue in the book that these objections fail (2017: 11–41).

My second version of the reduction argument is as follows (2017: 30–34). Suppose that the correct first-order view about rightness is a simple version of utilitarianism, which says that

Necessarily, an action is right if and only if it maximizes happiness.

If this view is correct, the predicate 'is right' is necessarily coextensive with the descriptive predicate 'maximizes happiness'. If (N) is correct, this means that these predicates ascribe the same property. It therefore means that the property of being right is identical to a descriptive property. Suppose next that equally simple first-order views are correct about all other normative properties. These views may say, for example, that

Necessarily, a consideration is a reason for a belief if and only if it increases the probability that this belief is true.
Necessarily, a state of affairs is intrinsically good to the extent that it contains happiness.
… and so on.

If such simple first-order views are correct, all other normative predicates are also necessarily coextensive with descriptive predicates. If (N) is correct, this means that all other normative properties are also identical to descriptive properties. This shows that

(1)   If simple first-order normative views are correct, normative properties are identical to descriptive properties.

I argue in the book that

> (W)   Whether normative properties are identical to descriptive properties cannot depend on which first-order normative view is correct.

For whether normative properties are identical to descriptive properties seems to depend on the nature of these properties rather than on which first-order normative view is correct.

Now suppose that normative properties would be identical to descriptive properties if simple first-order normative views were correct, but not if more complicated first-order normative views were correct. In that case, whether normative properties are identical to descriptive properties would depend on which first-order normative view is correct, which would contradict (W). This means that if (W) and (1) are true, normative properties are identical to descriptive properties *whether or not* simple first-order normative views are correct. In other words, it means that if (W) and (1) are true, non-reductive realism is false.

3. The false guarantee and regress objections

I now turn to my argument against reductive realism. I argue in the book that reductive realists need to answer the following question (2017: 42–44):

> (Q)   What makes it the case that a certain normative predicate ascribes a certain descriptive property?

I consider three kinds of answer to this question:

> (P1)   What makes it the case that a certain normative predicate ascribes a certain descriptive property is that, in certain *descriptively* specified conditions, users of this predicate would apply it to objects that have this property.
>
> (P2)   What makes it the case that a certain normative predicate ascribes a certain descriptive property is that, in certain *normatively* specified conditions, users of this predicate would apply it to objects that have this property.
>
> (P3)   What makes it the case that a certain normative predicate ascribes a certain

descriptive property is that the correct first-order normative view applies this predicate to objects that have this property.

I argue in the book that if reductive realists endorse a version of (P1) they face what I call the *false guarantee objection*, that if they endorse a version of (P2) they face what I call the *regress objection*, and that endorsing (P3) leads them back to the choice between (P1) and (P2).

I will explain the false guarantee objection (2017: 44–55) by focusing on Frank Jackson's version of reductive realism (see Jackson 1998).[2] I argue in the book that if we extend this view to all normative properties, it assumes that

> What makes it the case that a certain normative predicate ascribes a certain descriptive property is that, after maximum reflection, users of this predicate would apply it to objects that have this property.

What is maximum reflection? Reductive realists who endorse a version of (P1) must give a descriptive answer to this question. They could say, for example, that people have reflected maximally if and only if they have considered all relevant descriptive information. In that case, Jackson's view assumes that

> What makes it the case that a certain normative predicate ascribes a certain descriptive property is that, after considering all relevant descriptive information, users of this predicate would apply it to objects that have this property.

If this version of (P1) is true, the judgements about rightness that people would make after considering all relevant descriptive information determine which descriptive property the predicate 'is right' ascribes. These judgements are then guaranteed to be true. More generally, this version of (P1) entails that

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[2] As I say in the book, the false guarantee objection resembles Horgan and Timmons's Moral Twin Earth argument: see, for example, Horgan and Timmons (1991) and (2009).

(1)   If people would make certain normative judgements after considering all relevant descriptive information, these judgements are guaranteed to be true.

But suppose that Fred is a deeply depraved person. And suppose that, after considering all relevant descriptive information, Fred would apply the predicate 'is right' to actions that have the property of maximizing other people's suffering. Is his judgement that it is right to maximize other people's suffering then guaranteed to be true? Or suppose that it is impossible to maximize both equality and freedom, and suppose that, after considering all relevant descriptive information, liberals would apply the predicate 'is just' to institutions that have the property of maximizing equality and conservatives would apply the predicate 'is just' to institutions that have the property of maximizing freedom. Are liberals' and conservatives' conflicting judgements about justice then both guaranteed to be true?

      I think our answer to these questions is 'No'. This shows that instead of endorsing (1), we think that

(~1)   If people would make certain normative judgements after considering all relevant descriptive information, these judgements are *not* guaranteed to be true.

More generally, I argue in the book that the following claim is a central thought about normative judgements, in the sense that it reflects the nature of these judgements:

(G)   There are no descriptively specified conditions in which people's normative judgements are guaranteed to be correct.

And I argue that versions of reductive realism that assume that a version of (P1) is true are incompatible with (G) (2017: 53–55).

      I now turn to the regress objection (2017: 55–57), which I will again explain by focusing on Jackson's view. Instead of giving a descriptive answer to the question what maximum reflection is, reductive realists could also equate reflection with *rational* reflection. In that case they would endorse a version of (P2). But then Jackson's view would entail that whether

Action A is right

depends on whether

The judgement that action A is right is such that we would make it after maximum
rational reflection.

Since 'is such that we would make it after maximum rational reflection' is a normative
predicate, the property of being such that we would make it after maximum rational reflection
is a normative property. If reductive realists equated reflection with rational reflection,
Jackson's view would therefore entail that whether

The judgement that action A is right is such that we would make it after maximum
rational reflection

depends on whether

The judgement *that the judgement that action A is right is such that we would make it
after maximum rational reflection* is such that we would make it after maximum
rational reflection,

which, in turn, depends on whether

The judgement *that the judgement* that the judgement that action A is right is such
that we would make it after maximum rational reflection *is such that we would make
it after maximum rational reflection* is such that we would make it after maximum
reflection,

and so on. This is the start of an infinite regress. The direction of determination in this regress
is from the last judgement to the first: the truth of the last normative judgement makes the
next-to-last normative judgement true, the truth of the next-to-last normative judgement
makes the second-to-last normative judgement true, and so on. But the infinity of the regress

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ensures that there is no last normative judgement. This means that the regress makes it indeterminate whether any of these judgements are true. Similar claims apply to other versions of (P2).

If the false guarantee and regress objections are sound, they together show that reductive realists cannot answer (Q). I argue in the book that this means that reductive realism is false (2017: 60–61).

4. The symmetry objection

I now turn to my argument against non-cognitivism (2017: 69–91). Many non-cognitivists take normative judgements to be not only non-cognitive attitudes but also beliefs that ascribe normative properties, since they accept minimalism about these beliefs and these properties. I therefore initially take non-cognitivism to be the following view:

> Normative judgements do not represent the world. These judgements ascribe normative properties to objects in the world, but whether these objects have these properties does not wholly depend on what the world is like (2017: 69–70).

My argument against non-cognitivism is what I call the *symmetry objection*. I argue in the book that the following claim is a central thought about normative judgements, in the sense that it reflects the nature of these judgements (2017: 71–72):

> (A)   When two people make conflicting normative judgements, at most one of these judgements is correct.[3]

Suppose that Fred thinks euthanasia is permissible but Susan thinks it is impermissible. If cognitivism is true, these conflicting normative judgements represent the world in incompatible ways: Fred's judgement ascribes the property of being permissible to euthanasia

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[3] I also argue, however, that (A) has to be qualified in certain ways that do not affect my argument (2017: 71).

and Susan's judgement ascribes the property of being impermissible to euthanasia. Since euthanasia cannot have both of these properties, these judgements then cannot both be correct. More generally, if cognitivism is true, (A) follows from the claim that

(I)   When two people have mental states that represent the world in incompatible ways, at most one of these mental states is correct.

Of course, most non-cognitivists will want to say that their view is also compatible with (A). But since they think that normative judgements do not represent the world, they cannot explain how their view is compatible with (A) by appealing to (I). They will instead have to explain this in a different way. I argue in the book that the explanations they can try to give either fail or make them face my arguments against realism instead (2017: 72–86).

For example, non-cognitivists could say that (A) expresses the following attitude (2017: 73–74):

(A*)   Disapproval of two people approving and disapproving of a single thing.

If (A) expresses this attitude, non-cognitivism is clearly compatible with (A). But does (A) really express this attitude? Suppose that Bob likes peanut butter but Kate dislikes it. Suppose that Bob and Kate belong to a community in which everyone has the following attitude:

(L*)   A dislike of two people liking and disliking a single thing.

And suppose that, in this community's language, the attitude described by (L*) can be expressed by saying that

(L)   When two people have conflicting likes or dislikes, at most one of these likes or dislikes is correct.

This imagined community then endorses (L) in exactly the same way in which, according to this explanation, we endorse (A). But it is hard not to feel that *something* about the way we endorse (A) is missing from the way this community endorses (L). I take this to be evidence

that the way we endorse (A) is different from the way this imagined community endorses (L). In other words, I take it to be evidence that (A) does not express the attitude described by (A*). And I argue in the book that there is similar evidence against other ways in which non-cognitivists could try to explain how their view is compatible with (A) (2017: 75–77).

Non-cognitivists could challenge this evidence by making quasi-realist moves: they could say, for example, that the claim that

> (1)   The way we endorse (A) is different from the way Bob and Kate's community endorses (L)

itself expresses an attitude of approval or disapproval, such as:

> (1*)   Disapproval of thinking that (A) expresses the attitude described by (A*).

Alternatively, they could appeal to minimalism about representation or they could reject my initial description of their view. But I argue in the book that they will then have to keep making such moves in response to further evidence against these initial moves. They will then end up agreeing with cognitivists that normative judgements represent the world, they will end up agreeing with realists that there are normative properties, and they will end up agreeing with everyone that (S), (G), and (N) are true. And I argue that they will then face my arguments against realism instead (2017: 77–81). I therefore conclude that non-cognitivism is false (2017: 86–90).

5. Our inability to believe the error theory

The reduction argument shows that

> (1)   If there are normative properties, these properties are identical to descriptive properties.

The false guarantee and regress objections show that

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

These claims together entail that there are no normative properties. And the symmetry objection shows that

(3)   Normative judgements are beliefs that ascribe normative properties.

My arguments against non-reductive realism, reductive realism, and non-cognitivism therefore together seem to show that the error theory is true. But as I explain in the book (2017: 129–132), considering these arguments does not make me believe the error theory.

When I consider the arguments for (1) and (2), I find myself forming the belief that normative judgements do not ascribe normative properties but are instead non-cognitive attitudes. This belief is not fully explicit, but I am committed to it by my own normative judgements in combination with the belief that normative properties do not exist. By contrast, when I consider the argument for (3), I find myself forming the belief that normative properties do exist. As before, this belief is not fully explicit, but I am committed to it by my own normative judgements in combination with the belief that these judgements are beliefs that ascribe normative properties.

If anyone is in a good position to come to believe the error theory, I am. I fully understand the theory, I have carefully considered the arguments for (1), (2), and (3), and when I consider each argument individually I am convinced that it is sound. But no matter how hard I try, I do not come to believe the error theory. I think this is evidence that I cannot believe the theory. More generally, since I am in a better position to come to believe the theory than anyone I know, I think it is evidence that *we* cannot believe the theory.

But this evidence does not explain *why* we cannot believe the error theory. In the book I propose a general explanation of this inability (2017: 132–150). In this explanation I use the term 'belief' in such a way that two conditions have to be met for a person to believe that *p*: the first is that

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

and the second is that

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

Since our concept of a belief is not entirely precise, there are different correct ways to use the term 'belief'. (B1) and (B2) are therefore partly stipulative: they pick out *a* correct way to use the term 'belief', not *the* correct way. But I think they pick out the kind of belief that we would like to have as a result of philosophical reflection.

I argue in the book that if we use the term 'belief' in this way, two further conditions also have to be met for a person to believe that *p* (2017: 132–146). The first is that

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

For suppose that Bob says:

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

Bob may then be insincere, or may be considering whether to give up one of these beliefs, or may fail to adequately understand what he is saying. If he is insincere, he does not believe what he says he believes. If he is considering whether to give up one of these beliefs, he is no longer very confident about at least one of the things he says he believes, which means that he fails to meet condition (B1). But he may also be neither insincere nor considering whether to give up one of these beliefs. In that case, however, he is too confused to adequately understand what he is saying, which means that he fails to meet condition (B2). In none of these cases does Bob believe what he says he believes.

The second further condition is that

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

For suppose that Bob says:

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

As before, Bob may then be insincere, or may be considering whether to give up one of these beliefs, or may fail to adequately understand what he is saying. If he is insincere, he does not believe what he says he believes. If he is considering whether to give up one of these beliefs, he is no longer very confident about at least one of the things he says he believes, which means that he fails to meet condition (B1). But he may also be neither insincere nor considering whether to give up one of these beliefs. In that case, however, he is too confused to adequately understand what he is saying, which means that he fails to meet condition (B2). In none of these cases does Bob believe what he says he believes.

I argue in the book that if (B3) and (B4) are true, this explains why we cannot believe the error theory (2017: 137–138). For the error theory says that normative judgements are beliefs that ascribe normative properties, but that normative properties do not exist. Since the property of being a reason for belief is a normative property, the error theory entails that there is no reason to believe the error theory. And anyone who understands the theory well enough to believe it knows that it entails this. Therefore, given that (B3) is true, anyone who believes the error theory believes that there is no reason to believe the error theory. But given that (B4) is true, this is impossible.

After proposing this explanation of why we cannot believe the error theory, I argue in the book that our inability to believe the error theory makes the theory more likely to be true, by undermining objections to the theory, by making it harder to reject my arguments for the theory, and by undermining revisionary alternatives to the theory (2017: 170–188). Of course, there is much more to say about my arguments for the error theory, about our inability to believe the theory, and about why this inability makes the theory more likely to be true. I say more about it in the book.

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