

RESPONSE TO JACKSON, STRATTON-LAKE, AND SCHROEDER

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International Journal for the Study of Skepticism 8 (2018): 322-341

Published version available here:

https://brill.com/view/journals/skep/8/4/article-p322_322.xml

1. Introduction

Frank Jackson, Philip Stratton-Lake, and Mark Schroeder are not convinced by my arguments for the error theory. Neither am I.¹ But I will argue that their objections to my arguments fail. I think my arguments for the error theory are unconvincing merely because we cannot believe the theory.

2. Jackson's objection to the false guarantee objection

Jackson and I agree about many things. But he objects to my argument against reductive realism.² His objection focuses on the claim that

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

¹ At least, not when I consider all of my arguments for the error theory together. As I explained in the Précis, unlike Jackson, Stratton-Lake, and Schroeder, I am convinced by each argument when I consider it in isolation.

² For my own summaries of this argument and my other arguments, see the Précis.

As I said in the Précis, I take (G) to be a central thought about normative judgements, in the sense that I take it to reflect the nature of these judgements.

Jackson limits (G) to moral judgements and calls the result '(H)'. He claims that (H) can be read in the following three ways:

- (H_N) There are no descriptively specified conditions that necessitate the truth of moral judgements.
- (H_{AP}) There are no descriptively specified conditions that *a priori* necessitate the truth of moral judgements.
- (H_{NC}) There are no descriptively specified conditions that non-controversially and definitively settle the truth of moral judgements.

He then argues that (H_N) and (H_{AP}) are no threat to reductive realism because these claims are not central thoughts about moral judgements, and that (H_{NC}) is no threat to reductive realism because reductive realism is compatible with (H_{NC}).

I agree with Jackson that reductive realism is compatible with (H_{NC}). I also agree with him that (H_N) is not a central thought about moral judgements. For as he says, almost all philosophers think that

- (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.

Since the conjunction of (S) with realism entails the negation of (H_N), this commits many philosophers to rejecting (H_N).³

I also agree with Jackson that (H_{AP}) is not a central thought about moral judgements.

³ Jackson suggests that the conjunction of (S) with *cognitivism* entails the negation of (H_N). That is not quite right: the conjunction of (S) with the error theory, which is a version of cognitivism, does not entail the negation of (H_N). Since error theorists deny that there are normative properties, they can say that (S) and (H_N) are both true.

For as I say in the book (2017: 34), many philosophers take there to be fundamental normative truths of the following form:

If certain objects have descriptive properties P_1, \dots, P_n , then a certain object has normative property X.

Most of these philosophers take such truths to be necessary truths.⁴ And as Jackson notes, many of them think that we can come to know such truths via *a priori* reflection.⁵ This commits them to rejecting (H_{AP}).

But I think that the reason why these philosophers are committed to rejecting (H_N) and (H_{AP}) is that these claims can be read either normatively or descriptively. If (H_N) and (H_{AP}) are read normatively, the necessitation that they refer to obtains in virtue of fundamental normative truths, and the *a priori* knowledge that (H_{AP}) refers to includes knowledge of these fundamental normative truths. It is only when (H_N) and (H_{AP}) are read normatively that many philosophers are committed to rejecting these claims. But philosophers who reject these claims if they are read normatively are not committed to rejecting (G): they are not committed to thinking that there are descriptively specified conditions in which people's normative judgements are guaranteed to be correct.

To show that (G) is not a central thought about normative judgements, Jackson must therefore read (H_N) and (H_{AP}) descriptively: he must read these claims in such a way that the necessitation that they refer to does *not* obtain in virtue of fundamental normative truths, and that the *a priori* knowledge that (H_{AP}) refers to does *not* include knowledge of these fundamental normative truths. But if (H_N) and (H_{AP}) are read descriptively, then rejecting these claims commits us to thinking that

- (1) If people would make certain moral judgements while having a complete set

⁴ Moreover, I argue that if (S) is true, these fundamental moral truths *must* be necessary truths (2017: 35).

⁵ As Jackson puts it, "the passage from the descriptive to the ethical is not a matter for experiment," which "is to say that it is *a priori* (in one good sense of that term)."

of true descriptive beliefs, these judgements are guaranteed to be correct.

And I think few philosophers would endorse (1): almost all philosophers would say, I think, that making correct moral judgements requires more than just having true descriptive beliefs. This means that few philosophers are committed to rejecting (H_N) and (H_{AP}) if these claims are read descriptively. I therefore think that Jackson's objection fails to show that (G) is not a central thought about normative judgements.

Of course, Jackson himself does reject (G). But I argue in the book that this makes his version of reductive realism revisionary: it is not a view about what normative judgements *currently* are and about the properties they *currently* ascribe, but a view about what normative judgements should *become* and about the properties they should *start* to ascribe (2017: 53–54). That does not by itself mean that Jackson's view is false. But it does mean that we should accept his view only if there is no defensible non-revisionary view about normative judgements and properties that is compatible with our central thoughts about them. And I argue in the book that there is such a view: the error theory.

3. Stratton-Lake's objections to the reduction argument

Stratton-Lake and I also agree about many things. But he objects to my argument against non-reductive realism. He grants that if

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

then the predicate 'is right' and predicate D* in my first version of the reduction argument ascribe the same property. But since Stratton-Lake endorses a pluralist first-order normative view, he denies that there is a descriptive similarity between the objects that have the property that predicate D* ascribes. And since he thinks that

A property is descriptive if and only if there is a descriptive similarity between the objects that have it,

he denies that this property is descriptive.

Why does Stratton-Lake think that there is no descriptive similarity between the objects that have the property that predicate D^* ascribes? His evidence for this seems to be that if a pluralist first-order normative view is correct, there is no non-disjunctive descriptive predicate that these objects all satisfy. He therefore seems to assume that there is a descriptive similarity between objects only if these objects all satisfy the same non-disjunctive descriptive predicate. But if (N) is correct, whether a predicate is disjunctive or non-disjunctive does not tell us whether it ascribes a property. If properties are similarities between objects, as Stratton-Lake takes them to be, whether a predicate is disjunctive or non-disjunctive therefore does not tell us whether it picks out a similarity between objects. So why should we think that whether a descriptive predicate is disjunctive or non-disjunctive tells us whether the similarity it picks out is descriptive?

Moreover, suppose that Stratton-Lake was right that the property that predicate D^* ascribes is not descriptive. In that case, my first version of the reduction argument would no longer show that

If there are normative properties, these properties are identical to descriptive properties.

But Stratton-Lake agrees that if (N) is correct, predicate D^* ascribes the same property as the predicate 'is right'. So he must agree that this version of the reduction argument would still show that

(1) If there are normative properties, these properties can be ascribed with descriptive predicates.

Suppose next that in the false guarantee and regress objections, I replaced every occurrence of the term 'descriptive property' with the term 'property that can be ascribed with a descriptive predicate'. These objections would then show that

(2) If there are normative properties, these properties cannot be ascribed with

descriptive predicates.⁶

And (1) and (2) together entail that there are no normative properties. This means that even if Stratton-Lake was right that predicate D* does not ascribe a descriptive property, this would not undermine my overall argument for the error theory. What matters to this overall argument is only that predicate D* ascribes the same property as the predicate ‘is right’. I therefore think that Stratton-Lake’s objection to my first version of the reduction argument fails.

In response, Stratton-Lake could reject (N). But the doubts he voices about (N) are unconvincing. He says that (N) is “controversial” because it “seems vulnerable to counterexamples.” But I argue in the book that what (N) says about these purported counterexamples is in fact exactly right (2017: 13–19). He also suggests that if (N) together with our central thoughts about normative judgements and properties supports the error theory, it is legitimate to reject (N) on the basis of “some moral proposition that we can claim, without arrogance, to know.” But I argue in the book that this is not legitimate: our inability to believe the error theory may merely make it *seem* legitimate, since this inability may make us think that there is no defensible view about normative judgements and properties that is compatible with our central thoughts about them (2017: 181–184). Stratton-Lake does not respond to these arguments.

Stratton-Lake also objects to my second version of the reduction argument. His objections to this version focus on the claim that

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

As I said in the Précis, (W) seems true because whether normative properties are identical to descriptive properties seems to depend on the nature of these properties rather than on which

⁶ For these objections would then show that if there are normative properties, these properties are not identical to properties that can be ascribed with descriptive predicates. This claim is equivalent to (2).

first-order normative view is correct.

Stratton-Lake makes three objections to (W). The first is that we can defend a first-order normative theory by making a claim about the nature of a normative property: for example, Moore tried to defend consequentialism by claiming that right acts are unique in respect of value. But this does not undermine (W), since it does not show that we can defend a first-order normative theory by claiming that normative properties are or are not identical to descriptive properties. His second objection is that (N) enables us to find out *which* descriptive property a certain normative property is identical to by appealing to the correct first-order normative theory. But this does not undermine (W) either, since it does not show that (N) enables us to find out *whether* normative properties are identical to descriptive properties by appealing to the correct first-order normative theory. His third objection is that there is a tension between (W) and (N): he thinks that if (N) is correct, then whether normative properties are identical to descriptive properties does not depend on the nature of these properties, but instead depends on whether normative predicates are necessarily coextensive with certain descriptive predicates. But (N) thereby reveals something about the nature of these properties: as I say in the book, it reveals that the difference between normative and descriptive properties is a difference in language that is not matched by a difference in the nature of these properties (2017: 42–43, 65–67).⁷ I therefore think that Stratton-Lake’s objections to my second version of the reduction argument fail as well.

4. Schroeder’s objections to the reduction argument

Schroeder and I agree the least: he objects both to my arguments for the error theory and to my formulation of the theory. I will need four sections to discuss his objections. I start with his objections to my argument against non-reductive realism.

I say in a footnote in the book (2017: 11 n. 6) that I take (N) to be equivalent to

⁷ I therefore reject Stratton-Lake’s claim, in his discussion of the first version of the argument, that the fact that “the predicates ‘is right’ and predicate D* ... are names for the same thing only tells us something about the English language.”

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

Schroeder objects that this enables non-reductive realists to escape the first version of the reduction argument by denying that predicate D* ascribes a property.⁸ But non-reductive realists cannot deny that this predicate ascribes a property without explaining *why* it does not ascribe a property. I argue in the book that they cannot explain this by saying that predicate D* cannot be formulated in a natural language, or that there are no disjunctive properties, or that predicate D* does not carve out a convex region of a quality space, or that predicate D* does not ascribe a descriptive property, or that a sentence that applies predicate D* to an object expresses a normative judgement (2017: 26–29). Schroeder does not propose an alternative explanation. I therefore do not think that reductive realists can escape the argument in this way.

Schroeder suggests that instead of taking (N) to be equivalent to (N*), I should take (N) to be equivalent to:

(N&) If a predicate ascribes a property, any other predicate that is necessarily coextensive with it ascribes the same property.⁹

He takes this to show that predicate D* is not joint-carving, since he takes it to show that predicate D* ascribes a property only because the predicate ‘is right’ ascribes a property.¹⁰ This would perhaps have been a problem for me if I had wanted to defend reductive realism. But it does not matter to my overall argument for the error theory whether predicate D* is joint-carving. All that matters is that this predicate ascribes the same property as the predicate

⁸ This is what I take Schroeder to mean when he says that just because there is “a way of constructing a complex descriptive predicate that is necessarily coextensive with any given normative predicate, it doesn’t follow that if the normative predicate ascribes a property the descriptive predicate does, too.”

⁹ I have slightly simplified Schroeder’s formulation of (N&).

¹⁰ At least, if we assume the negation of the claim Schroeder calls ‘existence’: that is, if we assume that it is not the case there is a property for every set of objects.

‘is right’.

Schroeder also says that my claim that

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

is “far too weak to be interesting.” As before, this would perhaps have been a problem for me if I had wanted to defend reductive realism. But what matters to my overall argument for the error theory is only that I can establish both that

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

and that

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

For (1) and (2) together entail that there are no normative properties even if their consequents are not by themselves interesting versions of reductive or non-reductive realism.

Schroeder also notes that I briefly consider a ‘Lagadonian’ language in which objects and properties that are not named by a natural language are their own names instead (2017: 26). He objects that this makes it “too easy to construct a descriptive predicate corresponding to any set of possible individuals.” But I only need to appeal to a Lagadonian language to cover properties that are not named by any actual *or possible* natural language. And if a property is descriptive, how could there fail to be a *possible* language that ascribes this property with a descriptive predicate? I therefore do not think that I actually need to appeal to a Lagadonian language. This is even clearer in my second and third versions of the reduction argument, since these versions do not make use of predicate D* (2017: 30–35).

Finally, Schroeder says that if m is a normative property and o_m is the first occasion on which this property was entertained in thought, the normative predicate ‘is m ’ is necessarily coextensive with the descriptive predicate ‘has the property actually entertained on occasion o_m ’, which makes it too easy to refute non-reductive realism. But he overlooks

that I say in the book that

A property is descriptive if and only if can *non-accidentally* be ascribed with a descriptive predicate,

where a predicate non-accidentally ascribes a property if and only if, holding fixed its meaning, it ascribes this property in every context of utterance (2017: 5).¹¹ This stops us from refuting reductive realism too easily. I therefore think that Schroeder's objections to the reduction argument fail.

5. Schroeder's objections to the false guarantee and regress objections

I now turn to Schroeder's objections to my argument against reductive realism. We agree that reductive realists must answer the following question:

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

As I said in the Précis, 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

¹¹ As I say in the book, I here follow Dunaway (2015). I now reject what I said about this issue in Streumer (2008).

predicate to objects that have this property.

Schroeder and I agree that if reductive realists endorse (P3), this leads them back to the choice between (P1) and (P2).¹² But he objects that (P1) and (P2) do not exhaust the answers to (Q) that reductive realists can give.

His first reason for thinking this is that (P1) and (P2) both have a subjunctive form. But this does not prevent them from having a categorical content. For example, in the version of (P1) that I discuss that is suggested by Richard Boyd's view, the descriptively specified conditions are the conditions that users *are actually in* (2017: 46–47; see also Boyd 1988).¹³ Schroeder's second reason for thinking that (P1) and (P2) do not exhaust reductive realists' answers to (Q) is that these answers both appeal to how users apply predicates.¹⁴ But this does not matter. (P1) and (P2) could be reformulated as follows:

- (P1*) What makes it the case that the normative predicate 'is X' ascribes a certain descriptive property is that, in certain descriptively specified conditions, people would take objects that have this descriptive property to be X.
- (P2*) What makes it the case that the normative predicate 'is X' ascribes a certain descriptive property is that, in certain normatively specified conditions, people would take objects that have this descriptive property to be X.

Since (P1*) and (P2*) are equivalent to (P1) and (P2), reductive realists who endorse one of these answers still face either the false guarantee objection or the regress objection. Similarly, (P3) could be reformulated as follows:

- (P3*) What makes it the case that the normative predicate 'is X' ascribes a certain descriptive property is that objects that have this descriptive property are

¹² As Schroeder says in a footnote, his objections to (P3) are in essence "Streumer's own reasons for rejecting the third possibility, and we differ only over whether it is a possibility worth taking seriously." I therefore set aside his objections to (P3).

¹³ I say "suggested by" because Boyd is himself a naturalist realist rather than a reductive realist.

¹⁴ Or as he puts it, "not all subjunctive accounts are accounts about subjunctive conditions of *use*."

actually X.

Since (P3*) is equivalent to (P3), reductive realists who endorse this answer are still led back to the choice between (P1) and (P2). More generally, reductive realists must give either a descriptive or a normative answer to (Q). If they give a descriptive answer, I think they will face a version of the false guarantee objection, and if they give a normative answer, I think they will face a version of the regress objection.¹⁵

As I explain in the book (2017: 58–60), the reason why endorsing (P3) leads reductive realists back to the choice between (P1) and (P2) is that reductive realism entails that

- (1) The difference between normative and descriptive properties is a difference in language that is not matched by a difference in the nature of these properties.

Since many versions of realism do not entail (1), many realists can endorse (P3) without being led back to the choice between (P1) and (P2).¹⁶ This may give us the impression that (P1) and (P2) do not exhaust the answers to (Q) that reductive realists can give. But all realists must say either that

- (2) Normative properties are identical to descriptive properties

¹⁵ Schroeder suggested in correspondence that reductive realists could try to answer (Q) by appealing to an inferentialist view of the kind defended by Wedgwood (2007) or an interpretivist view of the kind defended by Williams (2018). But these views both appeal to normative truths: Wedgwood's view appeals to truths about the basic rules of rationality and Williams's view appeals to truths about normative reasons. If reductive realists tried to answer (Q) by appealing to one of these views, their answer would therefore be normative. And I think they would then face a version of the regress objection: they would have to apply a second version of this answer to their first answer, they would have to apply a third version of this answer to their second answer, and so on.

¹⁶ Moreover, not all of these realists are non-naturalist realists: some of them, such as Sturgeon (2005), are naturalist realists. My distinction between reductive and non-reductive realism therefore does not neatly map on to the distinction between naturalist and non-naturalist realism (2017: 5, 67–68).

or that

- (3) Normative properties are not identical to descriptive properties.

If they endorse (2), their view entails (1) and they therefore face the false guarantee and regress objections. And if they endorse (3), their view does not entail (1), but in that case their view is a version of non-reductive realism and they therefore face the reduction argument instead. I do not think there is a way around this.

Schroeder also denies that reductive realists who endorse (P2) face the regress objection.¹⁷ He agrees that the version of (P2) that I discuss in the book entails that “whether the sentence ‘A is right’ is true depends on whether the judgment that A is right is such that we would make it after maximum rational reflection.” But he objects that this version of (P2) “says that *which proposition [the sentence ‘A is right’] expresses* depends on what we would apply ‘right’ to after maximum rational reflection, but ... does not say that *whether that proposition is true* depends on this.”

The regress objection is, in effect, that if reductive realists try to answer (Q) by endorsing a version of (P2), they will have to apply a second version of (P2) to the normative term or terms that their first version of (P2) employs, they will have to apply a third version of (P2) to the normative term or terms that their second version of (P2) employs, and so on. As I explained in the précis, this makes it indeterminate which descriptive properties normative predicates ascribe. Schroeder is right that if (P2) is true,

Whether the proposition that we express when we apply a normative predicate is true does not depend on which objects we would apply this predicate to in certain normatively specified conditions. But he agrees that if (P2) is true,

¹⁷ He does this partly by rejecting the absurd view that when we think that X is wrong, we think that X has the property that we would ascribe with the predicate ‘is wrong’ if we were in certain normatively specified conditions. This is not a view that I defend or even discuss in the book. The same applies to the absurd view about the referent of the term ‘use’ that Schroeder says is “a bit like” the regress objection.

Which proposition we express when we apply a normative predicate

does depend on which objects we would apply this predicate to in these conditions. He must therefore agree that if reductive realists endorse (P2), they embark on a regress that makes it indeterminate which proposition we express when we use a normative predicate. And this regress thereby also makes it indeterminate which descriptive property this normative predicate ascribes.

Finally, Schroeder writes:

If there is any reasonable answer as to what properties normative predicates ascribe, it is hard to see how there could not be a theory of content determination according to which they ascribe those properties. On the contrary, the fact that any theory of content determination fails to explain why normative terms ascribe that property would be evidence against that theory of content determination.

I agree, of course, that if reductive realism is true, there is an answer to (Q). But I argue in the book that reductive realists cannot answer (Q) and that this means that reductive realism is false. Perhaps I have overlooked a defensible answer to (Q) that reductive realists can give. But merely claiming that there must be such an answer does not show that there is one. I therefore think that Schroeder's objections to the false guarantee and regress objections fail.

6. Schroeder's objection to the symmetry objection

I now turn to Schroeder's objection to my argument against non-cognitivism. We agree that non-cognitivists need to explain how their view is compatible with the claim that

- (A) When two people make conflicting normative judgements, at most one of these judgements is correct.

Unlike me, however, Schroeder thinks there is an easy explanation. He thinks that non-cognitivists can explain this by appealing to the following two claims:

- (1) “The judgement that p is correct” entails “ p ”.
- (2) It is irrational to believe logical contradictions.

For suppose that Fred thinks euthanasia is permissible but Susan thinks it is impermissible. If (1) is true, the sentence “Fred and Susan’s judgements are both correct” entails that euthanasia is both permissible and impermissible. Since ‘impermissible’ entails ‘not permissible’, this is a logical contradiction. This means that if (2) is true, it is irrational to believe that Fred and Susan’s judgements are both correct.¹⁸

In the book I discuss a similar way in which non-cognitivists could try to explain how their view is compatible with (A) (2017: 75–76). According to this explanation, we endorse (A) because

- (3) A single person cannot knowingly both approve and disapprove of a single thing.

Is this why we endorse (A)? Suppose that Bob likes peanut butter but Kate dislikes it. And suppose that Bob and Kate belong to a community in which people take a like or dislike to be correct if and only if they have this like or dislike themselves. If (3) is true, it also seems true that a single person cannot knowingly both like and dislike a single thing.¹⁹ Suppose that everyone in this community therefore endorses the claim 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

¹⁸ Schroeder assumes that I reject (1). But I do not reject this claim, and I do not think I say anything in the book that commits me to rejecting it.

¹⁹ Of course, a single person *can* knowingly both like and dislike a single thing *in different respects*. Perhaps we should therefore add ‘in a single respect’ to this claim. But then I think we should similarly add ‘in a single respect’ to (3) (2017: 75 n. 17).

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 we do not endorse (A) because (3) is true.

Contrary to what Schroeder suggests, this objection does not assume that the fact that (A) is true but (L) is false is itself evidence against non-cognitivism, or that non-cognitivism must treat normative judgements and likes and dislikes in the same way, or that non-cognitivism is incompatible with (1).²⁰ Instead, it assumes that when non-cognitivists propose an explanation of how their view is compatible with (A), we can test this explanation by imagining a community that endorses (L) in exactly the same way in which this explanation says we endorse (A). And it assumes that if we feel that something about the way we endorse (A) is missing from the way this community endorses (L), this is evidence that we do not endorse (A) in this way. As I say in the book, non-cognitivists can challenge this evidence by making quasi-realist moves. But that is not what Schroeder thinks they should do. Moreover, I argue in the book that if they challenge this evidence in this way, they end up facing my arguments against realism instead (2017: 77–81).

I think that Schroeder’s explanation of how non-cognitivism is compatible with (A) faces the same problem as this explanation. For people who endorse (1) will take an attitude to be correct if they have this attitude themselves, and (2) is, in effect, a normative version of (3) that is limited to logically contradictory attitudes. And his explanation also faces an additional problem: since (2) is a normative claim, non-cognitivists who appeal to (2) need to explain what attitude this claim expresses.²¹ Moreover, I argue in the book that non-cognitivists cannot avoid the symmetry objection merely by taking normative judgements to be beliefs (2017: 92): to avoid the objection we must endorse cognitivism and say that normative judgements represent the world.²² I therefore think that Schroeder’s objection to the symmetry objection fails.

²⁰ The reason why I do not “actually tell us very clearly what is wrong” with (1) is that I do not think there is anything wrong with it.

²¹ Schroeder actually slides between a normative and a descriptive version of (2). He first says that “we do not, at least rationally, believe logical contradictions.” But he then takes himself to have established that “we will not think that both judgments are correct.”

²² And we must then also reject minimalism about representation (2017: 78–80).

7. Schroeder's objections to my formulation of the error theory

Schroeder also objects to my formulation of the error theory. He wonders why I take the theory to say that

Normative properties do not exist,

rather than that

Normative properties do exist but are all identical to the property of being a round square.

My answer is that the theory uses the term 'property' in the sense of a way objects can be (2017: 12–13), and that being a round square is not a property in this sense. Schroeder takes properties to be what objects have in common rather than ways objects can be. But this does not matter: just as being a round square is not a way any object can be, being a round square is also not what any set of objects has in common.²³

Schroeder also suggests that the error theory is incompatible with the claim that

(D) At least one normative property is not identical to the property of being a round square,

which he takes to be more compelling than the central thoughts about normative judgements and properties that my arguments for the error theory appeal to. But since the theory uses the term 'property' in the sense of a way objects can be, and since being a round square is not a way any object can be, (D) is equivalent to

²³ I therefore also reject Schroeder's claim, in his discussion of the reduction argument, that the error theory I defend "is provably wrong, because if necessarily nothing is wrong, then 'wrong' is equivalent to 'round square', and hence both express the null property." If properties are ways objects can be, the 'null property' is not a property.

(D*) At least one normative property exists.

I agree that (D*) may seem more compelling than the central thoughts that my arguments appeal to, just as the claim that

(C) Some normative judgements are correct

may seem more compelling than these central thoughts. But I argue in the book that if (A) is a central thought about normative judgements, the symmetry objection shows that these judgements represent the world. And I argue that if normative judgements represent the world, (C) does not reflect the nature of these judgements and is therefore not a central thought about these judgements in the relevant sense (2017: 88–89). I therefore think that we cannot reject the error theory by appealing to (C). And I think that for the same reason we cannot reject the theory by appealing to (D*).

Schroeder also wonders why I take the error theory to entail that negations of normative sentences, such as

Stealing is not wrong,

are true rather than false.²⁴ My answer is that the error theory says that the property of being wrong does not exist. The theory therefore entails that stealing does not have the property of being wrong. Whatever the correct view of predication is, I think this view should say that a sentence like

Mary is not a witch

is true if Mary does not have the property of being a witch, and that a sentence like

²⁴ Schroeder says that *I think* that it is true that stealing is not wrong. But, of course, I do not think this, since like everyone else I cannot believe the error theory.

This figure is not a round square

is true if this figure does not have the property of being a round square. It should therefore similarly say that a sentence like “Stealing is not wrong” is true if stealing does not have the property of being wrong.²⁵

Does this mean that “ordinary, apparently simple, predication in natural language in fact needs to be understood in terms of higher-order quantification over properties,” as Schroeder suggests?²⁶ It does not. All it requires is that

- (1) The relevant subject-predicate sentences are made true or false by the relevant object having or not having a property,

and that

- (2) If a property does not exist, no object has this property.

Neither (1) nor (2) forces us to understand predication in terms of higher-order quantification over properties. And what explains why (2) is true is simply that a non-existent property is not a way any object can be, which means that no object is this way.

Finally, Schroeder suggests that it is unclear why I do not treat sentences like “Stealing is wrong” the way we treat sentences that apply a meaningless predicate, such as

Stealing is mughenheh.

²⁵ In the book, I argue that the error theory entails that the sentence “Stealing is wrong” is false rather than neither true nor false (2017: 123–124). This argument also shows that the sentence “Stealing is not wrong” is true.

²⁶ One reason why Schroeder suggests this is that I say in the book that a belief “ascribes a property if and only if it conceptually entails that something has this property” (2017: 107). But I say this merely to make it easier to state which judgements the error theory applies to. I could instead have said that the error theory applies to all beliefs that are true only if something has a normative property.

My answer is that the error theory does not say or entail that predicates like ‘is wrong’ are meaningless. It only says that these predicates ascribe properties that do not exist.

It became clear to me in correspondence that one reason why Schroeder and I disagree about these issues is that he takes meanings of predicates to be properties. I reject this view, since it is hard to square with the existence of meaningful predicates that ascribe non-existent properties.²⁷ He also thinks that for any two properties that can be had by the same kind of object, there is the property of having both of these properties. I reject this view as well, since some combinations of properties are not ways any object can be. But these disagreements are too large to pursue here.

8. The importance of our inability to believe the error theory

Jackson, Stratton-Lake, and Schroeder do not pay much attention to my claim that we cannot believe the error theory. But I think that if I am right that we cannot believe the error theory, this should affect our assessment of the arguments for the theory.

As I explained in the *Précis*, I am convinced by my arguments against the alternatives to the error theory when I consider each argument in isolation. When I consider the reduction argument, I am convinced that it shows that

If there are normative properties, these properties are identical to descriptive properties.

When I consider the false guarantee and regress objections, I am convinced that they show that

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

²⁷ This problem is similar to the problem that direct reference views have with empty names. For discussion, see, for example, Sainsbury (2005).

And when I consider the symmetry objection, I am convinced that it shows that

Normative judgements are beliefs that ascribe normative properties.

But I am unable to put these arguments together and thereby come to believe the error theory. Whenever I am convinced by two of these arguments, this stops me from being convinced by the remaining argument.

Contrary to what Schroeder suggests, my explanation of why this happens is not meant to show “why we don’t all come to believe Streumer’s conclusion when presented with his arguments.” I am trying to explain something more unusual: I am not trying to explain why not everyone is convinced by my arguments, but why someone *who is convinced by my arguments when he or she considers each argument in isolation* is nevertheless unable to come to believe the conclusion that the arguments together support. That is the situation I find myself in. I think it is also the situation you will find yourself in if you are convinced by my arguments when you consider each argument in isolation.

Why should our inability to believe the error theory affect our assessment of these arguments? Suppose that you are inclined to be convinced by my arguments for the error theory when you consider each argument in isolation. But suppose that these arguments do not make you believe the error theory. What will you then do? If you do not realise that you cannot believe the error theory, you will probably think that there must be a flaw in at least one of the arguments. And the more strongly you are inclined to reject the theory, the lower you will probably set the bar for thinking that you have found the crucial flaw. But if I am right that you cannot believe the error theory, what explains why my arguments do not make you believe the theory may not be that there is in fact a flaw in one of the arguments, but may instead be that you cannot believe the conclusion that the arguments together support.

Philosophers often assume that arguments for the error theory need to be much stronger than arguments for the alternatives to the theory. For example, Michael Ridge seems to assume this when he writes that

an ‘error-theoretic’ conclusion should in my opinion be a view of last resort.

Normative thought and judgment are so essential to a recognizably human life that any argument for such an error theory would have to be incredible powerful before

we could reasonably accept it. (2014: 3)²⁸

If I am right that we cannot believe the error theory, we should stop making this assumption. We should stop setting the bar for successfully defending the error theory higher than we set it for successfully defending an alternative to the theory. And I think we will then find that the arguments for the error theory are in fact stronger than the arguments for the alternatives to the theory.

An unbelievable philosophical theory is like a black hole that we cannot see but that distorts our assessment of the relevant arguments. It is hard not to let it do this. But we should try. And if we try, we may be surprised by what we find.

9. Conclusion

I am very grateful to Frank Jackson, Philip Stratton-Lake, and Mark Schroeder for their thorough and insightful responses to my book. I do not expect to have convinced them that the error theory is true. But I hope to have convinced them that this would be too much to ask for.²⁹

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²⁸ This assumption may be behind Stratton-Lake's claim that even though Jackson takes there to be a strong reason to accept (N), if he saw that (N) leads "to the sort of paradoxical error theory Streumer proposes, he would regard this strong reason as overridden." It may also be behind Jackson's claim that "Streumer's claim is that cognitivism leads via reductionism to big trouble; that's the key to his case for an error theory."

²⁹ I am also very grateful for their comments on a draft of this reply, and to Diego Machuca for organising this symposium.

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