

UNBELIEVABLE ERRORS

Bart Streumer

INTRODUCTION

You cannot believe the view I will defend in this book. I therefore will not be able to convince you that this view is true.

We all make normative judgements: we all think from time to time that an action is right or wrong, that a state of affairs is good or bad, or that a consideration is a reason for or against a belief or an action. I will defend an error theory about such judgements. This theory says that normative judgements are beliefs that ascribe normative properties, but that normative properties do not exist. It therefore entails that all normative judgements are false. I will also argue, however, that we cannot believe the error theory. You may take this to be a problem for the theory, but I will argue that it is not. Instead, I will argue, it makes the theory more likely to be true.

This book is organised as follows. In chapter I, I describe the four main views about normative judgements and properties: non-reductive realism, reductive realism, non-cognitivism, and the error theory. In chapters II to VII, I give arguments against the first three views. These arguments together support the error theory. In chapter VIII, I explain in more detail to which judgements the error theory applies. In chapters IX and X, I argue that we cannot believe the error theory and that there is therefore no reason for us to believe this theory. In chapter XI, I argue that this makes the error theory more likely to be true, since it undermines objections to the theory, it makes it harder to reject my arguments, and it undermines revisionary alternatives to the theory. In chapter XII, I explain how my arguments may help us to make broader philosophical progress.

Plato made a sharp distinction between philosophy and rhetoric: whereas philosophy is the art of giving sound arguments for true conclusions, rhetoric is the art of convincing others with arguments, irrespectively of whether these arguments are sound and of whether their conclusions are true. Philosophers rightly care most about whether an argument is sound, not about whether it convinces others. But they do tend to assume that a sound

argument *can* convince others, at least if these others are sufficiently rational. I think we should give up this assumption. There may be sound arguments that cannot convince anyone, since we cannot believe their conclusions.

You may think that an error theory about all normative judgements is so obviously false that this book is not worth reading. But if I am right that you cannot believe the error theory, you should think again. For in that case, the best explanation of your belief that this theory is false may not be that the theory is actually false, but may instead be that you cannot believe the theory. If so, this book is worth reading. It cannot make you believe the truth about normative judgements and properties. But it may convince you that the truth about these judgements and properties is literally unbelievable.

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