SO WHAT

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Philosophers who defend the error theory usually go on to ask: 'Now what?' My response to the theory is different: instead of asking 'Now what?', I say 'So what'. In this chapter I will explain why. I will then discuss several objections to this response. I will end by describing a recent change of mind, which can be regarded as a new solution to the 'Now what?' problem.

1. Our inability to believe the error theory

Most error theorists limit their theory to moral judgements: they think that moral judgements are beliefs that ascribe moral properties, but that these properties do not exist.[1] But I think the theory should be extended to all normative judgements: not only moral judgements, but also, for example, instrumental normative judgements, judgements about rationality, and judgements about reasons.[2] The error theory then says that all such judgements are beliefs that ascribe normative properties, but that these properties do not exist. This entails that all normative judgements are false.

There are three main alternatives to the error theory: expressivism, which says that normative judgements are non-cognitive attitudes, reductive realism, which says that normative properties exist and are identical to descriptive properties, and robust realism, which says that normative properties exist but are not identical to descriptive properties. I

[1] See Mackie 1977, Joyce 2001, Olson 2014, and Kalf 2018.

[2] See Streumer 2017a. This section summarizes claims I defend in much more detail there.

have elsewhere given arguments against these three alternatives.[3] When I consider each of these arguments in isolation, its strikes me as sound. And these arguments together seem to show that the error theory is true.

Surprisingly, however, this did not make me believe the error theory. The argument against expressivism made me believe that normative judgements are beliefs that ascribe normative properties, but only while implicitly taking a version of realism to be true. The argument against reductive realism made me believe that normative properties are not identical to descriptive properties, but only while implicitly taking either expressivism or robust realism to be true. And the argument against robust realism made me believe that normative properties are identical to descriptive properties, but only while implicitly taking either expressivism or reductive realism to be true. I never managed to put these arguments together and form a belief in the error theory.[4]

Why not? I think the explanation is as follows. When we engage in philosophical reflection, we are trying to form full beliefs with contents that we understand.[5] In other words, we are trying to form beliefs that meet the following two conditions:

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

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

I have argued elsewhere that any belief that meets conditions (B1) and (B2) must also meet the following two conditions:

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

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

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[3] See Streumer 2017a, pp. 9-91. I there call robust realism 'non-reductive realism' and expressivism 'non-cognitivism'. I also argue that all apparent further alternatives to the theory are in effect versions of these views (pp. 92-101).

[4] See Streumer 2017a, pp. 130-2, 153-4.

[5] Moreover, as I say in Streumer 2017a, p. 130, I take these beliefs to be explicit (rather than merely implicit) and occurrent (rather than merely dispositional).

I think this explains why I never managed to put my own arguments together and come to believe the error theory. 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 theory. And anyone who understands the theory well enough to believe it knows that it entails this. Given (B3), this means that anyone who believes the error theory believes that there is no reason to believe the theory. But given (B4), that is impossible. This means that we cannot believe the error theory in a way that meets conditions (B1) and (B2).[6]

I do think, however, that we can come close to believing the error theory. One way in which we can do this is by believing different parts of the theory at different times: at one time the argument against expressivism can make us believe that normative judgements are beliefs that ascribe normative properties, while at a different time the arguments against reductive and robust realism can make us believe that these properties do not exist. What enables us to do this is that we can adjust our implicit beliefs in the way I described above.[7] Another 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 theory is true. This belief is somewhat similar to the beliefs we have when appearances are deceptive: for example, when we put a stick in the water, this stick seems bent, but we do not believe that it is actually bent. In a similar way, when I consider my arguments against the alternatives to the error theory, these arguments together seem to show that the theory is true, but I do not believe that they actually show this. But instead of failing to believe this because I take these arguments to be unsound, I fail to believe it because I cannot believe what these arguments seem to show.[8] And yet another way in which we can come close to believing the error theory is by forming a partial belief in the theory: a belief that does not meet condition (B1).

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[6] See Streumer 2017a, pp. 132-46.

[7] These implicit beliefs are, of course, incompatible with the error theory. But there are three reasons why I nevertheless take this to be a way to come close to believing the error theory: first, because the explicit beliefs we are forming are all part of the theory; second, because only these explicit beliefs are formed on the basis of arguments; and third, because we know that what makes us temporarily give up one of these explicit beliefs is that this is the only way in which we can form the other explicit belief. See Streumer 2017a, p. 154.

[8] The belief that there are *sound* arguments that together *seem* to show that the error theory is true therefore differs from the belief that there are *seemingly sound* arguments for the theory. See Streumer 2017a, p. 153.

For such a belief does not have to meet conditions (B3) and (B4) either.[9]

Our inability to believe the error theory may seem to be a problem for the theory. But I do not think it is. For just as a theory can be true if we *do not* believe it, a theory can also be true if we *cannot* believe it. Moreover, I think this inability instead makes the error theory more likely to be true. For I have argued elsewhere that it makes it harder to reject my arguments for the theory, that it undermines revisionary alternatives to the theory, and that it helps to undermine objections to the theory.[10] For example, one popular objection is what we can call

> *The objection from self-defeat or toothlessness*. Either error theorists say that there are reasons to believe the theory, or they say that there is no reason to believe the theory. If they say that there are reasons to believe the theory, their view is self-defeating. For the property of being a reason is a normative property that does not exist if the error theory is true. But if they say that there is no reason to believe the theory, their view is polemically toothless. For then it is not a rational mistake to reject the error theory.[11]

I agree that there is no reason to believe the error theory, but not because the property of being a reason does not exist if the theory is true. For that only shows that

(1) If the error theory is true, there is no reason to believe the theory.

And the belief that (1) is true will only make us believe that there is no reason to believe the error theory if we already believe the theory, which I think we cannot do. Instead, I think there is no reason for us to believe the error theory because we cannot believe the theory and

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[9] See Streumer 2017a, pp. 152-4. As I say there, there is also a fourth way to come close to believing the error theory: by failing to adequately understand the theory and thereby failing to meet condition (B2).

[10] See Streumer 2017a, pp. 170-88.

[11] See in particular Cuneo 2007, pp. 117-8. Those who make this objection usually start by arguing that the moral error theory generalizes to all normative judgements. I agree with this part of their objection. My discussion below follows Streumer 2017a, pp. 170-2.

because I have argued elsewhere that

(RB) There can be a reason for a person to have a belief only if this person can have this belief.[12]

But this does not make the error theory polemically toothless. For we can come close to believing the theory in the three ways I have described above, which means that there can be reasons for us to come close to believing the theory in these ways and that it can be a rational mistake if we do not come close to believing the theory in these ways.

You may object that since there are no reasons if the error theory is true, there is also no reason to come close to believing the error theory if the theory is true. But as before, this only shows that

(2) If the error theory is true, there is no reason to come close to believing the theory.

And the belief that (2) is true will only make us believe that there is no reason to come close to believing the error theory if we already believe the theory, which I think we cannot do. I therefore think that this objection fails.

Another popular objection is what we can call

The normative objection. The error theory has deeply implausible normative implications. For example, it entails that torturing children for fun is not wrong. But the claim that torturing children for fun is wrong is much more plausible than any philosophical theory could ever be. This shows that we should reject the error theory.[13]

[12] See Streumer 2017a, pp. 156-69.

[13] See Dworkin 1996, pp. 117-8, and, more cautiously, Nagel 1997, p. 115. For a different response to Dworkin and Nagel's objection, see Olson 2014, pp. 141-8. This objection is usually made to the moral error theory, but if it works it applies with equal force to an error theory about all normative judgements. My discussion below follows Streumer 2017a, pp. 173-7.

This objection assumes that

(3) If a claim C and a philosophical theory T cannot both be true, and if C is much more plausible than T, this shows that we should reject T.

When we call a claim 'plausible', we may mean that we are confident that it is true. If so, (3) is equivalent to the following claim:

(3′) If a claim C and a philosophical theory T cannot both be true, and if we are much more confident that C is true than that T is true, this shows that we should reject T.

But I think (3′) is false when C is a particular normative claim and T is the error theory. For in that case, what explains why we are much more confident that C is true than that T is true is not that C is *actually* true, but is instead that we cannot believe T.[14] This shows neither that T is false nor that we should reject T.

Alternatively, when we call a claim 'plausible', we may mean that there is reason to believe it. If so, (3) is equivalent to the following claim:

(3″) If a claim C and a philosophical theory T cannot both be true, and if there is much more reason to believe C than there is to believe T, this shows that we should reject T.

But I think (3″) is also false when C is a particular normative claim and T is the error theory. For in that case, what explains why there is much more reason to believe C than to believe T is not that C is more likely to be *true* than T, but is instead that we cannot believe T and that there is therefore no reason for us to believe T.[15] As before, this shows neither that T is false

[14] I here assume that being unable to believe that *p* prevents us from being very confident that *p*. This goes beyond what (B1) says, since (B1) only takes being very confident that *p* to be a necessary condition for believing that *p*.

[15] You may object that if the error theory is true, there is likewise no reason to believe C. But since

nor that we should reject T.

Finally, when we call a claim 'plausible', we may mean that there is evidence for it. If so, (3) is equivalent to the following claim:

(3‴) If a claim C and a philosophical theory T cannot both be true, and if there is much stronger evidence that C is true than there is that T is true, this shows that we should reject T.

This claim is clearly true.[16] But I think my arguments against the alternatives to the error theory together constitute strong evidence that the theory is true. Is there stronger evidence that any particular normative claim is true? Only, I think, if we assume that

(4) Our confidence that a certain claim is true is *itself* evidence that this claim is true.

Some philosophers defend a version of (4).[17] But I think we cannot reject T by relying on the conjunction of (3‴) and (4) when C is a particular normative claim and T is the error theory. For in that case, part of what explains our confidence that C is true is that we cannot believe T: if we had been able to believe T, we would have been much less confident that C is true. I therefore think that this objection fails as well.[18]

Moral error theorists need to answer a much-discussed question: what should we do with our moral judgements when we have come to believe the moral error theory? This is known as the 'Now what?' problem. They have proposed different solutions to this problem: abolitionism, according to which we should give up our moral judgements, conservationism, according to which we should keep them, revisionary expressivism, according to which we

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we cannot believe the error theory, we cannot come to believe in this way that there is no reason to believe C.

[16] At least, if we can reject T. But it is clear that we can reject the error theory.

[17] See, for example, Chisholm 1989, p. 63. Almost all philosophers who endorse a version of (4), including Chisholm, weaken this claim in various ways.

[18] Moreover, I argue in Streumer 2017a, pp. 170-80, that our inability to believe the error also helps to undermine several other objections.

should replace them with non-cognitive attitudes, revisionary reductive realism, according to which we should replace them with beliefs that ascribe descriptive properties, and fictionalism, according to which we should make-believe moral propositions.[19] But if I am right that we cannot believe an error theory about all normative judgements, this question does not arise for the error theory that I defend. I therefore regard the error theory as a benign view that does not force us to give up or change our normative judgements.[20] That is why my response to the theory is 'So what' rather than 'Now what?'.

Many philosophers have objected to this response. I have already replied to a number of objections elsewhere.[21] I will now also reply to several other objections. These objections concern a rival explanation of our inability to believe the error theory, my assumptions about belief, my assumptions about reasons for belief, our ability to believe the moral error theory, coming close to believing the error theory, and my ability to defend the error theory.

2. Evidence and explanation

My evidence that I cannot believe the error theory is that I am convinced by each of my arguments against the alternatives to the error theory when I consider it in isolation, but that this does not make me believe the theory. And since I am one of the few people who are convinced by each argument when I consider it in isolation, I think I am in a better position to come to believe the theory then almost anyone else. I therefore also take this to be evidence that *we* cannot believe the error theory.

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[19] See, among others, Joyce 2001, pp. 175-231, Garner 2007, Olson 2014, pp. 178-98, Köhler and Ridge 2013, Lutz 2014, Ingram 2015, Jaquet and Naar 2016, Svoboda 2017, Kalf 2018, pp. 159-240, and forthcoming, Jaquet 2020 and 2021, Gerritsen 2022, Zhao 2023, and O'Gara 2025.

[20] With one exception: I argue in Streumer 2017a, pp. 189-90, that coming close to believing the error theory will decrease our confidence in our normative judgements somewhat relative to their negations (but not relative to their contraries). This will neither make us give up any of our normative judgements nor affect which normative judgements we make, since it will affect our confidence in all possible normative judgements in the same way.

[21] The objections I have already replied to are made by Hyun and Sampson 2014, Olson 2014, pp. 169-72, Lillehammer and Möller 2015, Bergamaschi Ganapini 2016, and Forcehimes and Talisse 2016. For my replies, see Streumer 2016a, 2016b, and 2017a, pp. 122-3, 138-50, 176-7; I collate these replies in Streumer 2017b.

John Alton Christmann challenges this evidence by noting that it appeals to introspection, which can be unreliable.[22] But my evidence is not merely what happens to me when I consider these arguments. It is the contrast between what happens to me in this case and what has happened to me in other cases with a similar structure: in all other cases in which I was convinced by the arguments against the alternatives to a theory when I considered each argument in isolation, I have come to believe this theory. I think introspection is sufficiently reliable to reveal this contrast.

The explanation I outlined in §1 is my best attempt to explain why we cannot believe the error theory. N. G. Laskowski proposes a different explanation: he suggests that what explains why we cannot believe the error theory is that my arguments against the alternatives to the theory are too weak to make us believe the theory.[23] Of course, I do not regard my own arguments as weak.[24] And since my arguments are versions of arguments that many others have also given, I think it is true of each argument that a majority of philosophers does not regard it as weak.[25] But suppose Laskowski was right that my arguments are weak. If so, this could explain why he regards my arguments as weak, and his regarding these arguments as weak could help to explain why he does not come to believe the error theory. But it could not explain why *I* do not come to believe the error theory, since I do not regard my own arguments as weak. More generally, it could not explain why people who are convinced by each argument when they consider it in isolation do not come to believe the error theory. That is my evidence that we cannot believe the error theory. Since Laskowski's proposed explanation does not fit with this evidence, it fails to explain why we cannot believe the error theory.

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[22] Christmann 2022, p. 641.

[23] Laskowski 2018, pp. 770, 773, 775. Schroeder 2018, pp. 319-20, also suggests this.

[24] For my arguments, see Streumer 2017a, pp. 9-91, and for my replies to objections to these arguments, see Streumer 2018, 2019, and 2024a. Laskowski regards his responses to my arguments as "challenges rather than as decisive objections" (p. 770) which show that I have "failed to provide air-tight objections to every single possible rival to [my] own view" (p. 773); in his footnotes he mentions several replies I could give.

[25] See Streumer 2017a, p. 132. As Joyce 2016, pp. 4-5, writes, "the error theorist could get by without developing any novel argument of her own, simply by purloining all her arguments from other metaethical positions", which means that "at each step, taken in isolation, one should expect to find many non-error-theorists nodding enthusiastically and offering their own arguments in support."

3. Belief

There are different correct ways to use the term 'belief'. As I said in §1, I think that in philosophical reflection we are trying to form beliefs that meet the following two conditions:

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

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

But we can also use the term 'belief' to refer to mental states that do not meet these conditions. I therefore take (B1) and (B2) to be partly stipulative: I take them to pick out *a* correct way to use the term 'belief', not *the* correct way.[26]

This has aroused suspicion. Yili Zhou and Rhys Borchert think that my explanation only works if I can "show that [my] stipulated sense of belief actually aligns with the ordinary sense of belief".[27] And John Alton Christmann similarly says that if my explanation "is to have any force, it must … purport to be based upon our ordinary conception of belief, otherwise we could always say that we cannot Streumer-believe the [error theory] but we can *believe* it".[28] But I reject the assumption that there is single ordinary conception of belief. I instead take the different correct ways to use the term 'belief' to correspond to different ordinary conceptions of belief, one of which I take (B1) and (B2) to pick out. That is why I take (B1) and (B2) to be only *partly* stipulative. I therefore do not use the term 'belief' as what Zhou and Borchert call "a technical term or a philosopher's creation".[29]

Zhou and Borchert give several examples in which we can say that someone believes that *p* even though (B1) or (B2) is not met: for instance, someone may believe that it will rain tomorrow without being very confident that it will rain tomorrow, and someone may believe that electrons can entangle with each other without really understanding quantum entanglement.[30] But these examples are irrelevant, since I agree that we can say that someone believes that *p* when (B1) or (B2) is not met. They also give examples in which we

[26] Streumer 2017a, p. 130.

[27] Zhou and Borchert 2023, p. 232.

[28] Christmann 2022, p. 641.

[29] Zhou and Borchert 2023, p. 232.

[30] Zhou and Borchert 2023, p. 232-3.

can say that someone believes that *p* even though the following conditions are not met:

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

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

For instance, the Sorites paradox may make someone believe that a billionth of a second both does and does not make the difference between being old or not being old, and the Agrippan trilemma may make someone believe that they have no reason to believe what they believe.[31] But these examples are irrelevant too. For I agree that we can say that someone believes that *p* when (B3) or (B4) are not met, but I have argued elsewhere that such beliefs do not meet (B1) and (B2).[32] Genuine counterexamples would have involve beliefs that *meet* (B1) and (B2) but *fail* to meet (B3) or (B4). That is not the case in Zhou and Borchert's examples.

The real issue, I think, is whether my use of the term 'belief' undermines my explanation of our inability to believe the error theory or my claim that this inability makes the theory more likely to be true. And I do not think it does. For what needs to be explained is why we cannot form the kind of belief in the error theory that we try to form in philosophical reflection, which is a belief that meets (B1) and (B2). And our inability to form this kind of belief in the error theory suffices to make the theory more likely to be true in the ways I mentioned in §1: it suffices to make it harder to reject my arguments for the theory, to undermine revisionary alternatives to the theory, and to help undermine objections to the theory. My answer to the objection from self-defeat or toothlessness even appeals to our ability to believe the error theory in a way that fails to meet (B1): as I explained in §1, one way to come close to believing the error theory is by forming a partial belief in the error

[31] Zhou and Borchert 2023, p. 233-4.

[32] See Streumer 2017a, pp. 132-46. I therefore do not take (B3) and (B4) to be *additional* stipulations, contrary to what is suggested by Zhou and Borchert 2023, pp 231-2, and Christmann 2022, pp. 638-9. I now regret labelling the first two conditions '(B1)' and '(B2)' in Streumer 2017a, since this may suggest that (B3) and (B4) have the same status as (B1) and (B2). In Streumer 2013 I did not do this and instead labelled (B3) and (B4) '(B1)' and '(B2)'.

theory, which is a belief that fails to meet (B1). I therefore think that Zhou and Borchert's and Christmann's objections to my use of the term 'belief' miss the mark.

Christmann also makes a different objection.[33] He contrasts the so-called *Cartesian* account of belief fixation, according to which we can understand *p* without believing that *p*, with the *Spinozan* account of belief fixation, according to which coming to understand *p* involves at least briefly coming to believe that *p*, though we may subsequently suspend judgement about *p* or come to believe the negation of *p*. He points out that there is some empirical evidence for the Spinozan account.[34] And he argues that my explanation is incompatible with this account in two ways. The first is that the claim that

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

only gives a necessary condition for believing that *p*. As Christmann points out, if the Spinozan account is correct, understanding *p* is not only necessary but also sufficient for believing that *p*. The second is that it is clear that many philosophers understand the error theory. If the Spinozan account is correct, these philosophers must at least briefly have believed the theory: as Christmann nicely puts it, the Spinozan account entails that anyone "who reads and comprehends Streumer's book will believe [the error theory]".[35]

But just as there are different correct ways to use the term 'belief', I think there are also different correct ways to use the term 'understanding'. If we set the bar low, understanding *p* merely requires knowing how *p* is related to a sufficient number of other propositions: for example, in the case of the error theory, it may require knowing how the theory is related to robust realism, to reductive realism, to expressivism, and to the arguments for and against these views. If we set the bar higher, the Spinozan account becomes more plausible: understanding *p* may then require seeing what the world looks like

[33] See Christmann 2022.

[34] See Gilbert 1991 and Mandelbaum 2014. Mandelbaum takes the Spinozan account to be about what he calls 'tokening' *p*, and takes understanding *p* to be a form of tokening it; see Mandelbaum 2014, p. 61 n. 19. See also Peters 2017, who argues that the empirical evidence is consistent with the Cartesian account and that philosophers may use the term 'belief' to refer not to what Gilbert and Mandelbaum call 'belief', but to what they call 'endorsement'.

[35] Christman 2022, p. 640.

to those who believe that *p*, which may involve at least briefly coming to believe that *p* yourself. But this does not threaten my explanation of why we cannot believe the error theory. For the understanding that philosophers display of the theory merely seems to involve knowing how the theory is related to robust realism, to reductive realism, to expressivism, and to the arguments for and against these views. And it also does not undermine my appeal to (B2), since the Spinozan account does not conflict with (B2). More generally, if the Spinozan account is correct, my explanation entails that we cannot understand the error theory in the sense of seeing what the world looks like to those who believe the theory. And that may well be true.

4. Reasons for belief

My explanation of why we cannot believe the error theory only works if I am right that the theory applies to reasons for belief. Several philosophers deny that the error theory applies to these reasons.[36] But I have argued elsewhere that it does.[37] I also agree with Zhou and Borchert's arguments for the same conclusion.[38]

There are two further objections to what I assume about reasons for belief that I need to discuss. The first is made by G. F. Schueler.[39] Schueler agrees that if we cannot believe the error theory, nothing can be *our* reason to believe the theory. But he thinks that a fact that makes the theory likely to be true can then still be *a* reason to believe the theory.[40] He therefore rejects my claim that

(RB) There can be a reason for a person to have a belief only if this person can have this belief.

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[36] See Olson 2018 (and also 2014, pp. 155-66), and Cowie 2019.

[37] See Streumer 2017a, pp. 114-8, 122-3, and also 2016a.

[38] See Zhou and Borchert 2023, pp. 222-9. Kiesewetter 2022 argues more generally, and to my mind convincingly, that those who deny that epistemic reasons are normative in the relevant sense face a heavy burden of proof.

[39] See Schueler 2025.

[40] Schueler 2025, pp. 642-3. Since Schueler finds my arguments against the alternatives to the theory "pretty plausible" (p. 644), he thinks there may be such facts.

I agree, of course, that there are facts that make the error theory likely to be true: I take my arguments against the alternatives to the theory to identify such facts. But I use the term 'reason for belief' to refer to a fact that stands in a normative relation to this belief, just as the term 'reason for action' refers to a fact that stands in a normative relation to an action.[41] And I think that our inability to have a belief prevents facts that make this belief likely to be true from standing in this normative relation to this belief, just our inability to perform an action prevents facts from standing in this normative relation to an action.[42] In such cases these facts are normatively idle. Perhaps Schueler agrees with this, in which case we merely use the term 'reason for belief' in different ways. Or perhaps he thinks that facts that make a belief likely to be true are never normatively idle. But he does not argue for that claim. And many philosophers reject it on independent grounds: not because of (RB), but because it seems false of trivial beliefs.[43]

The second objection is made by Gerald Harrison.[44] Harrison argues that holism about reasons, according to which a consideration that is a reason for X in one context may be no reason for X or even a reason against X in a different context, gives rise to counterexamples to my claim that

(B4) A person believes that *p* only if this person does not believe that there is no reason to believe that *p*.[45]

In Harrison's first example, Ted believes holism and believes that

(5) If the error theory were true, there would be no reason to believe the theory.

When Ted wakes up one morning believing the error theory, he comes to believe on the basis of (5) that there is no reason to believe the theory. In the second example, Ted believes holism and believes that

[41] See also Harrison 2022, pp. 209-11.

[42] See Streumer 2017a, pp. 155-69.

[43] See, for example, Harman 1986, p. 12.

[44] See Harrison 2022.

[45] Harrison 2022, pp. 216-9.

(6) There are countless true propositions that there is no reason for us to believe, both because we cannot believe all of these propositions at the same time and because many of these propositions are too complex for us to believe.[46]

When Ted wakes up one morning with a vast number of true beliefs that are so numerous and complex that according to (6) there is no reason for us to have them, he comes to believe on the basis of (6) that there is no reason for him to have these beliefs.

Since we never simply wake up with such beliefs, I think these examples have limited probative force. Moreover, to the extent that they do have probative force, I can revise (B4) to:

(B4′) A person cannot *form* the belief that *p* if this person believes that there is no reason to believe that *p*,

where I use the term 'form' to refer to our normal belief-forming processes. My explanation can then appeal to (B4′) rather than to (B4), in which case it shows why we cannot *form* a belief in the error theory. This suffices to explain why we cannot believe the theory in a way that fits with my evidence for this inability.[47]

In Harrison's third example, Ted believes holism and believes that

(7) There are many true propositions that there is no reason for us to believe because of their triviality.

When Ted comes across evidence for a trivial proposition, he forms a belief in this proposition: more specifically, Ted "starts to think that David Cameron has eight thousand

[46] This is actually Harrison's third example. Harrison's second example is one in which Ted's believing that there is no reason for a belief does prevent him from having this belief, but in which Harrison takes this to be explained by (B3) rather than by (B4). That is strictly speaking not a counterexample to (B4). Moreover, Harrison says that in this example Ted does not "really understand the proposition" (2022, p. 217), which means that Ted fails to meet (B2).

[47] This resembles my amendment of (B4) to deal with compulsive beliefs (Streumer 2017a, p.140), which Harrison agrees is a good way to deal with such beliefs (2022, p. 220).

hairs on his left arm, perhaps because he overheard Cameron's doctor say so".[48] And he then comes to believe on the basis of (7) that there is no reason for him to have this belief.

But when Ted forms this belief on the basis of overhearing Cameron's doctor saying this, he is treating the doctor's saying it as a reason for belief. For if we asked Ted what reason there is to believe this, he surely would not reply that there is no reason to believe it, but would instead mention that he overheard Cameron's doctor saying it. This may indicate that Ted is confused, which would rob the example of its probative force. But it may also indicate that he does not really believe (7): perhaps what he believes is instead that

(7′) There are many true propositions that there is no reason for us to believe because of their triviality, *unless we are attending to evidence for these propositions*,

which has a much better chance of being true than (7).[49] And then the example would no longer threaten (B4).

In Harrison's fourth example, Ted believes holism and believes that

(8) Practical reasons can prevent the truth of a proposition from generating an epistemic reason to believe this proposition.

More specifically, Ted believes that there are practical reasons for him to believe that his love for his partner will last a lifetime, and he believes that these practical reasons prevent statistical evidence from generating an epistemic reason for him to believe that this love is unlikely to last this long. When Ted's awareness of this statistical evidence *does* make him believe that his love for his partner is unlikely to last this long, he comes to believe on the basis of (8) that there is no reason for him to believe this.

But suppose that during an argument with his partner Ted blurts out that his love for her is unlikely to last a lifetime. When she angrily asks him what reason there is to believe

[48] Harrison 2022, p. 218. This example of a trivial proposition is taken from Whiting 2012, p. 283.

[49] See Kelly 2007, p. 468. Harrison 2022, p. 215, points out that (7) is believable. But the issue here is whether Ted is best interpreted as believing (7) or as believing (7′).

this, he surely will not think that there is no reason to believe this. He will instead think of the statistical evidence, even if he wisely refrains from making matters worse by mentioning this evidence to his partner. This may indicate that Ted is confused, which would rob the example of its probative force. But it may also indicate that Ted does not really believe (8), in which case the example would no longer threaten (B4). I therefore think that Harrison's examples fail to undermine (B4).

5. The moral error theory

As I said in §1, I take the normative objection to assume that

> (3) If a claim C and a philosophical theory T cannot both be true, and if C is much more plausible than T, this shows that we should reject T.

My reply to the objection is that (3) is false if we cannot believe T. Daniele Bruno and Eric Sampson both argue that this reply is undermined by the fact that the error theory that I defend entails the moral error theory.[50]

For suppose that we restrict the normative objection to the moral error theory. This gives us

> *The moral objection*. The moral error theory has deeply implausible moral implications. For example, it entails that torturing children for fun is not wrong. But the claim that torturing children for fun is wrong is much more plausible than any philosophical theory could ever be. This shows that we should reject the moral error theory.

Since we can believe the moral error theory, Bruno and Sampson think that my reply to the normative objection does not work against the moral objection. They therefore take the moral objection to show that we should reject the moral error theory. And since the error theory that I defend entails the moral error theory, if the moral objection shows that we

[50] See Bruno 2020 and Sampson 2023.

should reject the moral error theory, it also shows that we should reject the error theory that I defend.[51]

Does it show this? Suppose first that (3) is equivalent to the following claim:

(3′) If a claim C and a philosophical theory T cannot both be true, and if we are much more confident that C is true than that T is true, this shows that we should reject T.

I think (3′) is false when C is a particular moral claim and T is the moral error theory. For if we could believe the error theory that I defend, considering my arguments against the alternatives to this theory would undermine our confidence that C is true. What explains why we are much more confident that C is true than that T is true is therefore not that C is *actually* true, but is instead that we cannot believe a more general theory that entails T. This shows neither that T is false nor that we should reject T.

Suppose next that (3) is equivalent to the following claim:

(3″) If a claim C and a philosophical theory T cannot both be true, and if there is much more reason to believe C than there is to believe T, this shows that we should reject T.

I think (3″) is also false when C is a particular moral claim and T is the moral error theory. For if we could believe the error theory that I defend, my arguments against the alternatives to this theory would provide weighty reasons to believe T and against believing C. What explains why there is much more reason to believe C than to believe T is therefore not that C is more likely to be *true* than T, but is instead that we cannot believe a more general theory

[51] This is the conclusion drawn by Sampson; see Sampson 2023, p. 212. Bruno's objection (which he calls the 'undermining normative objection') is more complicated: Bruno first claims that we can restrict my arguments against the alternatives to the error theory to moral judgements; he then claims that if the moral objection shows that we should reject the moral error theory, it shows that at least one of these restricted arguments must be unsound; and he concludes that since my arguments have the same form as these restricted arguments, at least one of my arguments must be unsound as well. My reply below also applies to Bruno's objection.

that entails T. As before, this shows neither that T is false nor that we should reject this T.

Finally, suppose that (3) is equivalent to the following claim:

(3‴) If a claim C and a philosophical theory T cannot both be true, and if there is much stronger evidence that C is true than there is that T is true, this shows that we should reject T.

I think my arguments against the alternatives to the error theory that I defend together constitute strong evidence that this theory is true. As I said in §1, for there to be stronger evidence that a particular moral claim is true, it must be the case that

(4) Our confidence that a certain claim is true is *itself* evidence that this claim is true.

But I think we cannot reject T by relying on the conjunction of (3‴) and (4) when C is a particular moral claim and T is the moral error theory. For as before, part of what explains our confidence that C is true is that we cannot believe a more general theory that entails T: if we could believe the error theory that I defend, considering my arguments against the alternatives to this theory would undermine our confidence that C is true.

I think there is a broader lesson here. Normally, when a more general theory entails a more specific theory, we can refute this more general theory with an objection that only targets the more specific theory. But my response to Bruno and Sampson shows that we cannot do this when the objection has a Moorean form, as the normative objection and the moral objection do.[52] I think this is because the plausibility comparisons that Moorean objections involve should focus on whole theories and whole arguments, not on parts of these theories or parts of these arguments. That is what I take to be the deeper reason why Bruno and Sampson's response fails to undermine my reply to the normative objection.[53]

[52] Such objections are called 'Moorean' because their form derives from Moore 1925 and 1939.

[53] I therefore reject Sampson's claim that I "will need to endorse some other debunking explanation for the apparent plausibility" of the moral claim that the restricted argument relies on (2023, p. 212; see also Bruno 2020, p. 226). In Streumer 2017a, pp. 174, 175, I said of two versions

Bruno comes close to acknowledging this: he writes that his response may not work for "people like Streumer himself, who also believe the premises of the argument for the [more general] error theory".[54] But my response does not turn on my belief in these premises. It instead turns on the claim that

> If we could believe the error theory that I defend, considering my arguments against the alternatives to this theory would undermine our confidence that C is true,

and the claim that

> If we could believe the error theory that I defend, my arguments against the alternatives to this theory would provide weighty reasons to believe T and against believing C.

These claims can be true even if we do not currently believe the premises of my arguments.

Sampson also makes three further points. He writes about one of my arguments against the alternatives to the error theory that

> Streumer has plenty to say in defense of this argument. But it involves appealing to *lots* of other philosophical claims … And the philosophical claims used to defend this argument themselves require extensive defense against objections (which Streumer dutifully provides, about as well as anyone could, across a handful of *chapters* of dense philosophical reasoning).[55]

He then uses my diligence against me by suggesting that the conjunction of the premises of this dense philosophical reasoning will never be more plausible than the claim that torturing

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of (3) that they may be true when C is a particular moral claim and T is the moral error theory. I now think this was a mistake: I think (3) is also false when T is the moral error theory, for the reasons I gave above.

[54] Bruno 2020, p. 225.

[55] Sampson 2023, p. 208.

children for fun is wrong.[56] But my response remains the same: this plausibility comparison is distorted by our inability to believe the error theory. That remains the case no matter how dense Sampson takes my reasoning to be.

Sampson also points out that my explanation of why we cannot believe the error theory relies on controversial claims such as (B3) and (B4).[57] But my evidence for our inability to believe the error theory is independent of (B3) and (B4): as I said in §2, my evidence is that I am convinced by each argument against the alternatives to the error theory when I consider it in isolation, but that this does not make me believe the theory. Moreover, (B3) and (B4) do not conflict with any claim about belief that is anywhere near as plausible as the claim that torturing children for fun is wrong. These claims therefore cannot be rejected on the basis of another Moorean objection.[58]

Finally, Sampson notes that our inability to believe the error theory does not by itself explain why we take the claim that torturing children for fun is wrong to be so plausible.[59] I agree, but I do not take this to be a problem. What our inability to believe the error theory does, I think, is *help* to explain that we take this claim to be so plausible, by enabling us to believe claims that contradict the theory. That is all I need to respond to Bruno and Sampson's objection. Why we do in fact take this claim to be so plausible is a further and largely empirical question.

6. Coming close to believing the error theory

My claim that there can be reasons for us to get close to believing the error theory has also aroused suspicion. Simon-Pierre Chevarie-Cossette challenges it as follows. He first argues that

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[56] Sampson 2023, p. 209.

[57] Sampson 2023, pp. 210-11.

[58] O'Gara 2026 argues that the debunking explanations that error theorists give in response to Moorean arguments are defensive rather than offensive, which means that they face a lower burden of proof than the offensive debunking explanations that some philosophers give in order to reject robust realism. As O'Gara puts it, defensive debunking explanations "do not need to be proven in order to act as defeaters … but instead merely need to be plausible" (p. 2217). This is another reason why Sampson cannot simply point out that (B3) and (B4) are controversial.

[59] Sampson 2023, p. 211.

(9) If we know that <if there are reasons to believe that *p*, then *p* is false>, then there is no reason for us to believe that *p*.

For in such cases, Chevarie-Cossette writes, "you know that the proposition *p* is either false or unsupported by reasons. If *p* is false and you believe it, you will believe falsely; if *p* is unsupported by reasons and you believe it, you will believe for no reason". These reasons are then what he calls "at best misleading".[60]

The error theory entails that there are no reasons. This means that if we understand the theory, we thereby come to know that

(1′) If there are reasons to believe the error theory, then the error theory is false.[61]

And it therefore means that if (9) is true, there is no reason to believe the error theory.

So far this merely provides additional support for my claim that there is no reason for us to believe the error theory.[62] But Chevarie-Cossette continues that if we understand the error theory, we thereby also come to know that

(2′) If there are reasons to come close to believing the error theory, then the error theory is false.[63]

And he takes this to show that there is no reason to come close to believing the error theory either. If so, this undermines my reply to the objection from self-defeat or toothlessness.

Does (2′) show this? Only if in addition to (9), it is also true that

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[60] Chevarie-Cossette 2019, pp. 60-61.

[61] This is a reformulation of (1) that makes it fit more closely with Chevarie-Cossette's argument.

[62] Chevarie-Cossette suggests that this additional support is incompatible with my appeal to (RB): he suggests that if it is true both that I cannot believe that *p* and that it would be irrational to believe that *p*, what explains why there is no reason for me to believe that *p* is that this would be irrational rather than that I cannot believe that *p* (2019, p. 66). But I do not see why this could not be overdetermined.

[63] As before, this is a reformulation of (2) that makes it fit more closely with Chevarie-Cossette's argument.

(10) If we know that <if there are reasons to come close to believing *p*, then *p* is false>, then there is no reason to come close to believing *p*.[64]

But I do not think (10) is true. Suppose we come close to believing the error theory in the first way I described in §1: suppose we believe different parts of the theory at different times. Can there be reasons for us to believe the first part of the error theory: that normative judgements are beliefs that ascribe normative properties? For all Chevarie-Cossette says, there can be such reasons, as long as we do not at the same time believe that normative properties do not exist. And can there be reasons to believe that the second part of the error theory: that normative properties do not exist? For all Chevarie-Cossette says, there can be such reasons, as long as we do not at the same time believe that normative judgements are beliefs that ascribe normative properties. I therefore think that there can be reason to come close to believing the error theory in this way.

Suppose next that we come close to believing the error theory in the second way I described in §1: suppose we believe that there are sound arguments that together seem to show that the error theory is true. When I noticed that the arguments against the alternatives to the error theory made me believe different parts of the theory at different times, I formed the belief that there are sound arguments that together seem to show that the theory is true. I did not form this belief for no reason. Instead, the reason on the basis of which I formed this belief was the fact that these arguments made me believe different parts of the theory at different times. I therefore think that there can also be reason to come close to believing the error theory in this way.

Finally, suppose we come close to believing the error theory in the third way I described in §1: suppose we form a partial belief in the error theory by being somewhat but not very confident that the error theory is true. When I formed the belief that there are sound arguments that together seem to show that the theory is true, this made me form a partial belief in the theory. As before, I did not form this partial belief for no reason. Instead, the

[64] Cheverie-Cossette does not appeal to (10), but it hard to see how his argument can work without it. What he does say is that if there is no reason to believe the error theory because of (9) rather than because we cannot believe the error theory, "it seems idle or pointless to come close to believing the error theory" (2019, p. 58).

reason on the basis of which I formed this partial belief was the fact that there are sound arguments that that together seem to show that the theory is true. I therefore think that there can be reason to come close to believing the error theory in this way as well.

Chevarie-Cossette may reply that reasons of which (10) is true are just as "misleading" as reasons of which (9) is true. But what makes a reason to believe that *p* misleading is normally that the evidence for *p* is misleading.[65] That is not what happens in the case of the error theory: reasons to believe this theory are "at best misleading" *not* because the evidence for the theory is misleading, but because if these reasons existed the belief they would be reasons for would be false. That is compatible with the existence of non-misleading evidence for the error theory, which is what I take my arguments against the alternatives to the theory to provide. And it is also compatible with treating this non-misleading evidence as giving us reason to come close to believing the theory in the ways I have described.

James Lenman makes an objection that resembles Chevarie-Cossette's: he writes that

> [e]ither the error theory is true or it is false. If it is true it is not the case that we should aim to come close to believing it because if it is true it is not the case that we should do anything. If it is false it is not the case that we should aim to come close to believing it because, hey, it is false.[66]

Vilma Venesmaa and Teemu Toppinen refine Lenman's objection by distinguishing what we *subjectively* should believe, which depends our evidence, from what we *objectively* should believe, which depends on what is actually the case.[67] They note that

> We know that <if the error theory is true, it is not the case that we objectively should come close to believing the theory>,

[65] I here use the term 'evidence' in a non-normative sense, to mean what Kelly 2008, §3, calls 'indicator evidence'; see also Kelly 2007, p. 470.

[66] Lenman 2024, p. 13.

[67] Venesmaa and Toppinen forthcoming, pp. 7-9. Lenman calls this "a helpfully patched-up version of my argument" (forthcoming, p. 4).

and that

> We know that <if the error theory is false, it is not the case that we objectively should come close to believing the error theory>.

These claims together entail that we know that it is not the case that we objectively should come close to believing the error theory. They then argue that if we know that it is not the case that we objectively should come close to believing the error theory, it follows that it is also not the case that we subjectively should come close to believing the error theory. And they therefore conclude that it is not the case that we subjectively should come close to believing the error theory either.

But my response remains the same. My arguments against the alternatives to the error theory give us reason to come close to believing the error theory in the three ways I have described: they give us reason to believe different parts of the theory at different times, they give us reason to believe that there are sound arguments that seem to show that the theory is true, and they give us reason to form a partial belief in the theory. Since our inability to believe the error theory prevents us from believing that there is nothing we should do, this inability enables us to believe that we should come close to believing the theory in these ways, both objectively and subjectively.

7. Defending the error theory

Lenman and Venesmaa and Toppinen also take my inability to believe the error theory to be in tension with my defence of the theory. They try to identify this tension in several different ways. Lenman writes that

> Streumer makes an argument for the view that there are no reasons but he does not think his argument provides us with any reason to believe the error theory. For the error theory says there are no reasons and hence no reasons to believe anything. … So to be persuaded by this argument would mean being at once unpersuaded by it.[68]

[68] Lenman 2024, p. 10.

But as I said in §1, I defend the error theory by giving arguments against the alternatives to the theory. Though we cannot be persuaded by all of these arguments at the same time, we can be persuaded by at most two of these arguments without being at once unpersuaded by them. This is what enables us to come close to believing the error theory in the first way I described in §1.[69]

Lenman notes that I think this, but replies that

> Streumer does not, he says, believe the error theory is true. So why would he think he or anyone should aim to come as close as possible to believing it? The principle that we should come as close as possible to believing things that are true will rationally dispose someone to come as close as possible to believing a given theory only if they believe the theory in question is true and Streumer keeps telling us that he does not believe that.[70]

But as Venesmaa and Toppinen note, I do not think that we should come close to believing the error theory *because the theory is true*.[71] Instead, I think we should do this in response to my arguments against the alternatives to the theory. For these arguments give us reason to believe different parts of the theory at different times, to believe that there are sound arguments that seem to show that the error theory is true, and to form a partial belief in the error theory.[72]

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[69] Lenman also writes: "What would it mean to reject all alternatives to a view and not accept the view? … for Streumer to reject all the alternatives to the error theory would be for him to believe the error theory" (2024, p. 13). This ignores the fact that I reject these alternatives *at different times*, never all at the same time.

[70] Lenman 2024, p. 12.

[71] Venesmaa and Toppinen forthcoming, pp. 6-7.

[72] Lenman makes three further points. The first is that I do not specify how weak partial beliefs need to be for (B3) and (B4) to be false of them (2024, pp. 14-15). But I do not need to specify this to make my point that all normative judgements will be affected by a partial belief in the error theory in the same way, which means that the error theory cannot affect which normative judgements we make. His second point is that the costs of my attitude towards the error theory (which he somewhat misleadingly calls 'believing that the error theory is true*') are so high that we should instead reject one of the central thoughts that my arguments rely on (2024, pp. 15-20). But I think our inability to

Venesmaa and Toppinen suggest that I instead make a different assumption: they write that

> Streumer's claim that we should come close to believing the error theory… relies on the assumption that we should accept, on the basis of his arguments against the alternatives to the error theory, that they are all false.[73]

But I also do not think that we should come close to believing the error theory *because all alternatives to the theory are false*. For I know that this entails that the error theory is true, which means that (B3) prevents me from believing it. Instead, I think that my arguments against the alternatives to the error theory give us reasons to believe different alternatives to the theory at different times, which will also make us implicitly take different alternatives to be false at different times.

Venesmaa and Toppinen remain suspicious. Like Chevarie-Cossette, they point out that the claim that there are reasons to come close to believing the error theory assumes that the theory is false.[74] And they write that

> if one is *both* attempting to provide reasons, not for accepting *p*, but for something else instead, *and* in so doing relying on the assumption that not-*p*, it becomes difficult to see how what one does could be construed even as sort of defending *p*. For we then seem to be moving rather far away from the idea of defending the claim

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believe the error theory ensures that these costs are much lower than Lenman assumes. His third point is that I cannot reject expressivism simply by saying that "[i]t is hard not to feel that something about the way we endorse (A) is missing" from quasi-realist attempts to accommodate (A), where (A) is the claim that when two people make conflicting normative judgements at most one of these judgements is correct. But this ignores my comparison between these quasi-realist attempts and similarly structured claims about likes and dislikes, which is meant to support this feeling; see Streumer 2017a, pp. 72-7. I support this feeling in a different (and, I now think, better) way in Streumer 2024b, pp. 930-3.

[73] Venesmaa and Toppinen forthcoming, p. 8.

[74] Venesmaa and Toppinen forthcoming, pp. 8, 9; this follows from (2′). They take this to be "doublethink" since they take it to clash with the assumption that all alternatives to the error theory are false (forthcoming, p. 9); but as I have just explained, I do not make this assumption.

that p.[75]

But I do give arguments for the error theory. Arguments can clearly be sound even if we cannot believe their conclusion. If (RB) is true, they can therefore also be sound even if they do not give us reason to believe their conclusion. Venesmaa and Toppinen suggest that arguments can then at most "cause us to have certain attitudes rather than rationally persuade us", which makes it "difficult to see why crafting and presenting them should count as defending anything in any familiar sense".[76] But I think they can instead give us reason to come close to believing their conclusion. I agree that my defence of the error theory is unusual, but an unusual defence is still a defence.

8. A new solution to the 'Now what?' problem

I conclude that these objections fail. My response to the error theory therefore remains 'So what'. But I must admit that this response used to mask a certain unease, since coming close to believing the error theory put me in a somewhat unstable state of mind that did not feel right. Fortunately, I have recently found a way to reduce this unease: I have come to think that trying to endorse the best versions of expressivism and reductive realism will make us believe robust realism, and I have argued elsewhere that this yields a transcendental argument for robust realism.[77] This argument can also be regarded as a new solution to the 'Now what?' problem.

The argument's first premise is a claim I have defended against objections in this paper: the claim that

(P1) We cannot believe the error theory.

Its second premise is that

[75] Venesmaa and Toppinen forthcoming, p. 10.

[76] Venesmaa and Toppinen forthcoming, p. 11. Lenman similarly asks: "If epistemic rationality is all a big mistake what could it even mean to argue for anything?" (2024, p. 10).

[77] See Streumer 2024b, 2025, and 2026b. This section summarizes claims that I defend in more detail in Streumer 2026b.

(P2) There are three alternatives to the error theory: expressivism, reductive realism, and robust realism.

Some philosophers reject (P2): for example, Kantian constitutivists regard their view as a further alternative to the error theory. But I have argued elsewhere that all apparent further alternatives to the theory are in effect versions of expressivism, reductive realism, or robust realism.[78]

The argument's third premise is that

(P3) Trying to endorse the best version of expressivism makes us believe robust realism.

Since I have defended this premise elsewhere, I will not defend it here. The thought behind (P3) is that the best version of expressivism makes quasi-realist moves in response to any claim that robust realists may make about what they take to be missing from expressivism. This results in a version of expressivism that I call *super-quasi-realism*: a version that takes all such claims to express non-cognitive attitudes, including the claim that these claims themselves do not express non-cognitive attitudes. Super-quasi-realism does not have the same truth-conditions as robust realism and therefore does not collapse into robust realism, but trying to endorse super-quasi-realism will make us endorse every claim that robust realists endorse and reject every claim that robust realists reject. This will turn us into robust realists, even if the underlying truth remains expressivist.[79]

The argument's fourth premise is that

(P4) Trying to endorse the best version of reductive realism makes us believe robust realism.

[78] See Streumer 2017a, pp. 92-101.

[79] There is, of course, much more to say about this. I do so in Streumer 2024b and 2026b. Streumer 2026a gives additional reasons for expressivists to endorse super-quasi-realism, and Streumer 2026c uses super-quasi-realism to defend Berkeley's idealism.

Since I have defended this premise elsewhere as well, I will not defend it here either. The thought behind (P4) is that the best version of reductive realism is a relativist view that mimics expressivists' quasi-realist moves, which I call *quasi-quasi-realism*. If this version continues to make such moves in response to any claim that robust realists may make about what they take to be missing from reductive realism, this results in a view I call *super-quasi-quasi-realism*. As before, super-quasi-quasi-realism does not have the same truth-conditions as robust realism and therefore does not collapse into robust realism, but trying to endorse super-quasi-quasi-realism will make us endorse every claim that robust realists endorse and will make us reject every claim that robust realists reject. This will turn us into robust realists, even if the underlying truth remains relativist.[80]

The argument's fifth premise is that

(P5) Trying to endorse the best version of robust realism makes us believe robust realism.

And these premises together support the intermediate conclusion that

(C1) Trying to endorse the best version of any alternative to the error theory makes us believe robust realism.

I then add the following premise:

(P6) We should try to endorse the best versions of the views we endorse.

This premise should not be taken to imply that the mere fact that we endorse a view makes it the case that we should try to endorse it. I intend it to say only that we should avoid the following combination: endorsing a view and failing to try to endorse the best version of this view. If this is what (P6) says, I think it is true. And I think (C1) and (P6) together allow us to conclude that

[80] As before, there is much more to say about this. I do so in Streumer 2025 and 2026b.

(C2) We should believe robust realism.[81]

You may object that if we should φ, and if φ-ing makes us ψ, it does not follow that we should ψ. I agree that this does not follow if 'φ-ing makes us ψ' means 'φ-ing causes us to ψ': if I should take the plane, and if taking the plane causes me to become anxious, it does not follow that I should become anxious. But trying to endorse super-quasi-realism or super-quasi-quasi-realism and coming to believe robust realism *constitutes* coming to believe robust realism. And I think (C1) and (P6) do support (C2) if 'φ-ing makes us ψ' means 'φ-ing constitutes ψ-ing': if I should take the train, and if taking the train constitutes taking public transport, it does follow that I should take public transport.

You may also object that instead of coming to believe robust realism, we should suspend judgement between the error theory, super-quasi-realism, super-quasi-quasi-realism, and robust realism. But if we suspend judgement between these views while thinking through what endorsing them would amount to, we will realize that we cannot believe the error theory and that trying to endorse super-quasi-realism, super-quasi-quasi-realism, or robust realism will make us believe robust realism. We will therefore realize that we are in effect suspending judgement between robust realism, robust realism, and robust realism. This state of mind is hard to distinguish from believing robust realism. To stop ourselves from coming to believe robust realism, we would have to avoid thinking through what endorsing super-quasi-realism and super-quasi-quasi-realism would amount to. That would hardly be a rational response to my arguments for (P2) and (P3).

I therefore think that (C1) and (P6) do support (C2). Of course, the premises of my argument do not entail that

(C3) Robust realism is true.

But I think the argument supports (C3) in a different way: it shows that those who are trying to form a view about the nature of normativity in accordance with (P6) cannot avoid endorsing (C3). The argument therefore supports robust realism not by showing that the view is true, but by showing that endorsing the view is inevitable for thinkers who have a

[81] I discuss some complications, in addition to the ones I mention below, in Streumer 2026b.

certain aim and who are rational in a certain way. That is why I take it to be a transcendental argument.

If you do not like such arguments, you can instead stop at (C2) and regard my argument as a new solution to the 'Now what?' problem. This solution is close to Jonas Olson's conservationism, according to which we should keep our moral judgements.[82] But whereas Olson takes our current moral judgements to ascribe *irreducibly* normative properties, I merely take our current normative judgements to ascribe *normative* properties.[83] My solution to the 'Now what?' problem is therefore that we should *start to regard* these judgements as ascribing irreducibly normative properties. If we are able to replace our normative judgements with mental states of a different kind, as those who try to solve the 'Now what?' problem often assume, this means that

(C4) We should replace our current normative judgements with beliefs that ascribe irreducibly normative properties.[84]

This solution to the 'Now what?' problem then amounts to a view we can call *revisionary robust realism*. And if I am right that the best versions of expressivism and reductive realism are super-quasi-realism and super-quasi-quasi-realism, my solution may also be available to those who defend revisionary expressivism or revisionary reductive realism. For the best versions of these other solutions to the 'Now what?' problem may then collapse into revisionary robust realism.[85]

My transcendental argument has reduced my unease by making my state of mind more stable. But some unease nevertheless remains. Schueler touches on the source of this

[82] See Olson 2014, pp. 178-98. Christmann 2022, p. 643, argues that conservationism is the best solution to the 'Now what?' problem if the Spinozan account of belief fixation is correct.

[83] For I think that for the properties that these beliefs currently ascribe to exist, they would have to be both irreducibly normative and reducible to descriptive properties. That is how I argue that these properties do not exist; see Streumer 2017a, p. 68.

[84] I should add, however, that I doubt that we can easily replace mental states of a certain kind with mental states of a different kind.

[85] I say 'may' because this depends on whether the best versions of expressivism and reductive realism are also the best versions of *revisionary* expressivism and reductive realism. For doubts about this, see O'Gara 2025.

remaining unease when he says about his own rejection of the error theory that it "has nothing at all to do with anything outside 'the workings of our own minds'", but is instead

> really just an artifact of what it is to deliberate. Given what deliberation is (a search for reasons) and given what the error theory says (that there are no reasons), there is *no chance* that deliberation about the error theory, *if it reaches any conclusion at all*, will find any other conclusion than that the error theory is false.[86]

Schueler admits that this "does not answer normative skepticism any more than the fact that things always look colored answers skepticism about the external reality of color".[87] I suspect that something similar is true of my transcendental argument for robust realism. But perhaps this is inevitable. For perhaps no argument of this kind can completely dispel the feeling that it does not quite give us what we would like to have.

9. Conclusion

My response to the error theory remains 'So what'. The transcendental argument for robust realism that I have outlined has reduced the unease behind this response, but it has not completely removed it. My newfound realism is therefore not completely robust. It is merely, to echo Miles Davis, kind of robust.

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[86] Schueler 2025, p. 645.

[87] Schueler 2025, p. 646. As Schueler notes, this is an instance what Stroud 2011 calls 'metaphysical dissatisfaction'.

chapter will be part of a book I am writing. I welcome comments or objections, which can be emailed to b.streumer@rug.nl.

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