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Belief and the Error Theory

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Abstract A new kind of debate about the normative error theory has emerged. Whereas longstanding debates have fixed on the error theory's plausibility, this new debate concerns the theory's *believability*. Bart Streumer (2013) is the chief proponent of the error theory's unbelievability. In this brief essay, we argue that Streumer's argument prevails against extant critiques, and then press a criticism of our own.

Keywords Error Theory · Bart Streumer · Reasons · Belief Formation · Belief Maintenance

1 Introduction

A new kind of debate about the normative error theory has emerged. Whereas longstanding debates have fixed on the error theory's plausibility, this new debate concerns the theory's *believability*.

Bart Streumer (2013) is the chief proponent of the error theory's unbelievability. His *unbelievability argument* is swift and tidy. It begins with two plausible premises about belief: We cannot hold a belief while believing that there is no reason at all to hold it, and we cannot fail to believe what we believe to be entailed by one of our own beliefs. Streumer then applies these premises to the special case of the error theory: Anyone who understands the error theory well enough to be in a position to believe it knows that it entails that there are no normative properties; as "being a reason for belief" is a normative property, the error theory entails that there could be no reason to believe the error theory. Therefore, the conclusion runs, no one can believe the error theory. Interestingly, Streumer holds that this argument threatens no defeat for the theory; surely there could be truths that cannot be believed (2013: 201). He argues that the

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unbelievability of the error theory reveals that the leading objections to the theory fail (2013: 203–212). After all, these objections presuppose the believability of the error theory. If the error theory is unbelievable, those objections dissolve.

We will not examine here Streumer's opposition to the leading objections to the error theory. Instead, we attend to the unbelievability argument. Understandably, Streumer's critics have been swift to attack the unbelievability argument. Thus far, the critical heat has focused on the premise that one cannot hold a belief while believing that there is no reason at all to hold it. The critics contend that this premise is easily overcome by counterexamples. However, we think that the alleged counterexamples are unsuccessful. Streumer's argument prevails against these critiques. In this brief paper we first argue that extant criticisms are unsuccessful, and then press a criticism of our own.

2 The Unbelievability Argument

A precise statement of Streumer's thesis is that no one can *fully* believe the error theory. The error theory, he claims, holds that "normative judgments are beliefs that ascribe normative properties, even though such properties do not exist" (2013: 194). It is important to note that on Streumer's account, the error theory presents a thesis about normative judgments in *any* domain (moral, epistemic, aesthetic, and so on); it is, in this sense, a *global* theory. As for *full belief*, Streumer claims that "We *fully* believe that *p* if we are wholly confident that *p*, and we *partly* believe that *p* if we are fairly but not wholly confident that *p*" (2013: 195). With these terms fixed, the unbelievability argument can be stated:

1. We cannot have a full belief while fully believing that there is no reason at all for this belief.
2. We cannot fail to believe what we ourselves fully believe to be entailed by one of our own full beliefs.
3. Anyone who understands the error theory well enough to be in a position to fully believe the error theory knows that the error theory entails there is no reason to believe the error theory.
4. Therefore, no one can fully believe the error theory.

Streumer's argument advances in two parts. The first focuses on conceptual issues concerning the nature of belief. The first premise is the *reasons requirement*: Being fully confident that we have no reason to believe *p* undermines our belief that *p*.[1] And this is plausible. As Streumer notes, it is hard to imagine a person sincerely asserting, "Socrates was mortal, but there is no reason to believe that Socrates was mortal" (2013: 196). The second premise states the *belief entailment requirement*: If we are fully confident that *p*, and fully confident that *p* implies *q*, then we cannot help but believe that *q*. This also is plausible. Imagine a person who asserts: "I believe that Socrates was a man, and I believe that this entails that Socrates was a human being, but I do not believe that Socrates was a human being" (2013: 195).

The second part of the argument concerns the believability of the error theory. It states that were the error theory true, no normative properties would exist, and hence there could be no reasons for belief (recall: "being a reason for the belief that *p*" is a normative property), and

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[1] "Requirement" here should be understood strictly descriptively – a failure results in a *cannot*, not an *ought not.*

thus no reason to believe the error theory. Hence a dilemma: Either one adequately understands the error theory or one does not. If one does not adequately understand the error theory, one cannot fully believe the error theory.[2] Alternatively, if one does adequately understand the error theory, one must hold that there are no reasons to believe the error theory. Thus, via the reasons and belief entailment requirements, one who adequately understands the error theory cannot fully believe the error theory. Thus no one can fully believe the error theory.

Though the unbelievability argument is fascinating and ingenious, it carries the scent of the illicit. The task is to identify where it goes wrong. Two criticisms have targeted the reasons requirement.

3 Resisting the Reasons Requirement

Lillehammer and Möller (2015) and Hyun and Sampson (2014) attack the reasons requirement by way of supposed counterexample. Lillehammer and Möller (2015: 455) provide an example of a philosophy student who has spent the week reading Hume on induction, and comes to fully believe that there is no reason to believe the sun will rise tomorrow. Nevertheless, the student fully believes the sun will rise tomorrow. Hyun and Sampson (2014: 634), drawing on Reid, argue that one may come to fully believe that there is no reason to believe in the reliability of her senses but nevertheless fully believe in their reliability.

We begin with Lillehammer and Möller. It is not enough that the student "has become fully convinced that there is no reason to believe that the sun will rise tomorrow; that the future will resemble the past, and all the rest of it. Yet, just like Hume, *when he leaves the study* he finds himself surprisingly confident in all the beliefs that his philosophical efforts have convinced him are entirely groundless" (2015: 455; emphasis added). In order for the student to pose a counterexample, he needs to hold two full beliefs *concurrently*, namely that (i) the sun will rise tomorrow, and (ii) there is no reason to believe the sun will rise tomorrow. Like Hume in the famous passage, the student is brought by philosophical reflection to the view that there is no reason to believe that the sun will rise tomorrow, but then, *later*, he is returned by force of habit to his pre-philosophical beliefs. Lillehammer and Möller's student poses no counterexample to the reasons requirement.

Cases can, however, be made to involve concurrent beliefs, as Hyun and Sampson show. Reid, they maintain, was convinced by skeptical arguments that he has no reason to believe that his senses are reliable. Yet, at the same time, he could not help but believe that they are reliable because nature had so constituted him (2014: 634). Hyun and Sampson argue compellingly that here Reid's reasons for believing that the senses are reliable are *explanatory*, not justificatory. And explanatory reasons are not subject to the reasons requirement. We agree. However, we find it difficult to imagine Reid (or a Reidian counterpart) maintaining *full* confidence in the reliability of the senses while also fully confident that there is no reason for believing so. The full (second-order) belief in the lack of reasons seems to make it difficult, if not impossible, for rational agents to maintain full confidence in the (first-order) belief.

Perhaps we have reached an intuitional stalemate. No matter. Even if the possibility of such concurrent beliefs is granted, Streumer is willing to modify the reasons requirement to accommodate the possibility of *compulsive* but full belief. He revises the requirement thusly:

[2] Elsewhere, in support of this claim, Streumer argues that "A person believes that *p* only if this person understands *p*" (2015: 8).

"we cannot have a noncompulsive belief while believing that there is no reason for this belief" (2013: 197). Streumer's willingness to modify the reasons requirement indicates that he does not intend the requirement to hold universally. That is, the reasons requirement is meant to apply to only a subset of beliefs. Compulsive beliefs, which are a paradigmatic case of beliefs held for explanatory reasons, are excluded from this set, whereas a belief in the error theory is not. Streumer's revision thus defangs the Hyun and Sampson counterexample.

4 The Unmaintenability Argument

The reasons requirement is sturdier than critics have supposed. Nevertheless, Streumer's Premise (3) is vulnerable. Consider:

> *Overly Orderly Olson*: There is a (perhaps nearby) possible world where Jonas Olson works on the error theory in an orderly—some might say myopic—way. He thinks about each premise in favor of the error theory, one by one. He does not move to another premise unless he fully believes the one preceding it. Indeed, he is so orderly he does not think of the entailments of a premise until he has reached a verdict about it.

In this possible world, Olson first fully believes that (a) reasons are irreducibly normative favoring relations. He then fully believes that (b) irreducibly normative favoring relations are queer (Olson 2014: 123–124). He next fully believes that queer relations do not exist. That is, (a) and (b) lead him to accept that (c) normative judgments are beliefs that ascribe normative properties, and (d) normative properties do not exist. His orderliness, however, has kept him from recognizing what this entails. Remember: Olson does not think about entailments until after he reaches a verdict about what to fully believe. At this point, Olson has arrived at a full belief in the error theory.

If Premise (3) of the unbelievability argument is true, Overly Orderly Olson is impossible. That is an implausibly bold claim. Note the features of the case that make it a counterexample. All that is required is that someone *arrives* at a full belief in the error theory, without recognizing the crucial entailment that there are no reasons for belief. In addition, this case, unlike those from Section 2, has two virtues: the belief in question is non-compulsive, and the belief is manifestly a belief in the error theory. The counterexample thus directly calls into question the soundness of Streumer's argument.

But how might Olson believe (c) and (d) without recognizing that he has no reason to believe (c) and (d)? Consider

> *Arthritis*. I am an arthritis-denier. I know what is typically claimed about arthritis – how it stiffens the joints, commonly occurs in wrists, fingers, and ankles, and so forth. But, because I think the elderly made up arthritis to trick the young into doing work for them, I hold that (e) when people make arthritis diagnoses they ascribe arthritis properties, and (f) arthritis properties do not exist. Next suppose, on account of my red, swollen toe, I go to the doctor. She tells me that I have a bad case of gout. I believe her. When I arrive home, I give my partner the bad news. To my surprise, my partner explains that gout is a form of arthritis.[3]

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[3] Inspired by Burge (1979).

What *Arthritis* shows is that there is a further inference from (e) and (f) to a claim about a specific kind of arthritis. As in *Arthritis*, one could be an error theorist about arthritis talk, while failing to recognize that gout talk fell within this purview.

We can imagine Olson similarly. Olson might arrive at a belief in the error theory without recognizing the implication such a global view would have for reasons for belief. Indeed, even once his orderly mind turns to such reasons he might waffle or be surprised that such reasons fall within the purview of (c) and (d). Premise (3) is, accordingly, false.

However, Streumer might respond: "In order to believe the error theory (in my global sense, i.e. an error theory about all normative judgments) we must believe the conjunction of (c) and (d) about all judgments that are *in fact* normative, not just about all judgments that *we take to be* normative. Since judgments about reasons for belief are normative, I think that we do not believe the error theory (in my global sense) if we do not believe (c) and (d) about judgments about reason for belief."[4] The idea here seems to be that unless one believes *all* of the entailments of one's belief that *p*, one does not understand one's belief, and hence cannot qualify as a full believer in *p*. Call this the *robust understanding requirement*. So, for example, in *Arthritis*, I am not, in fact, a true denier. For, or so Streumer might maintain, to be a true denier one must understand completely what one is denying.[5] And this involves recognizing and believing all of the belief's entailments – not just what I *take to be* instances of arthritis. If correct, in order to believe in the error theory, Olson must believe (c) and (d) about all claims that are normative, not just about those he, at present, takes to be normative.

The robustness of this requirement stems from the thought that, unless one believes all entailments, one might have a full belief but this would be no guarantee that the crucial entailment is one of them. That is, the robustness of the robust understanding requirement ensures that a would-be believer in the error theory recognizes the theory's implication for reasons for beliefs.

The robust understanding requirement strikes us as too robust. If to fully believe *p* we must recognize and believe *p's* entailments, then most (if not all) of our belief ascriptions are literally false. You, for example, would not fully believe that you have only two hands, since, presumably, you have not recognized and believed all of the entailments of this belief. It is implausible that we speak falsely so often. I can believe (e) and (f) without being aware of every species of arthritis. Likewise, Olson can believe (c) and (d) without having arrived at a verdict concerning the existence of reasons for belief.

We find the robust understanding requirement implausible, but we will here grant it. But we take Streumer to want to avoid the implication that you do not believe that you have only two hands. So we need a way of blocking the implication for this belief (and many others that are similarly innocuous). The most plausible way to accomplish this is by relying on the distinction between occurrent and dispositional beliefs. You occurrently believe that you have only two hands, and you dispositionally believe, say, that you do not have 345 hands.

Yet, if the distinction between occurrent and dispositional beliefs is introduced, we can respond in kind for Olson. In light of (c) and (d) Olson dispositionally believes that reasons for belief do not exist. That is, because of his orderliness, he has yet to consider epistemic reasons, and hence has never had the occurrent belief that such reasons do not exists. Nonetheless he, in one sense, believes. He believes in the exact same way that you believe that, since you have only two hands, you do not have 345 hands. And this allows us to say that Olson meets the

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[4] We thank a (somewhat) anonymous referee for pressing us to address this response.
[5] See, for example, Streumer (2015: 11fn20).

robust understanding requirement. For, were he so prompted, he would believe that, like all other normative claims, no epistemic reasons exist. But, as described above, he's yet to have the occurrent belief that the error theory entails there is no reason to believe the error theory.

This discussion might elicit a different reply: Even if Olson could *arrive* at full, occurrent belief in the error theory, he could not *maintain* it.[6] For, as was argued against the other supposed counterexamples, once Olson notices the implication that the error theory renders his reasons for believing the error theory merely apparent, his confidence in the error theory will be destroyed. This rejoinder looks promising. Call it the *unmaintenability argument*.

Adding the revisions from the previous section, the unmaintenability argument can be stated as follows:

1. We cannot maintain a (noncompulsive) full belief while fully believing that there is no reason for this belief.
2. We cannot fail to believe what we ourselves fully believe to be entailed by one of our own full beliefs.
3. Anyone who forms a full belief in the error theory (eventually) believes that the error theory entails there is no reason to believe the error theory.
4. Therefore, no one can maintain a full belief in the error theory.

By recasting the argument in terms of whether we can *maintain* belief in the error theory, Streumer may still get his desired result – disarming the leading objections to the error theory – while relying on a far more modest third premise. However, with this revision Streumer relinquishes much of what made his initial thesis so striking. The unmaintainability argument concedes the *believability* of the error theory, settling instead for the claim that belief in the error theory is intrinsically *unstable*.

But trouble remains. Though the unmaintenability argument is superior to the unbelievability argument, it is unsound. Premise (3), combined with a very plausible claim, undercuts Premise (2) – the belief entailment requirement. The very plausible claim is this: Anyone who fully believes entailments lack any reason-giving force can fail to believe what she fully believes to be entailed by one of her own full beliefs. Call this the *forceless entailments thesis*. If true, this thesis implies that anyone who believes that there are no reasons – e.g., a believer in the error theory – can fail to believe what she fully believes to be entailed by one of her own full beliefs. In short, the forceless entailments thesis in combination with a belief in the error theory falsifies the belief entailment requirement.

But why think that the forceless entailments thesis is true? Because there is an important gap between the recognition of logical entailment and doxastic uptake. For normal, rational believers, this gap is filled by the recognition that logical entailments provide weighty reasons to believe. As noted above, the belief entailment requirement is plausible; we normally cannot help believing what we believe is entailed by our beliefs. Most of us, however, do not think that there are no reasons for belief. When most of us notice an entailment of one of our full beliefs, the formation of a new belief is almost instantaneous, as if a single act. This is due, we believe, to our taking as given (from a young age) the reason-giving force of entailments. Nevertheless, as Frege has taught us (1984: 355–356), recognition and formation can come apart.

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[6] For ease of exposition, from here on we will not make the occurrent/dispositional distinction explicit.

Recall, for example, Lewis Carroll's (1895) Tortoise. By the end of the dialogue, the Tortoise claims that he accepts the premises and recognizes the entailment, but refuses to believe the conclusion. In response, Achilles notes that such obtuseness is phenomenal but still possible. Such obtuseness is phenomenal, to be sure. But, again, most of us are not fully confident in the error theory. An error theorist can, like Carroll's Tortoise, deny that entailments provide reasons for belief, since all purported reasons, even those provided by entailments, are seen as merely apparent. The error theorist can thus fully believe that p implies q and fully believe p, but nonetheless fail to believe q. Full confidence in the lack of the reason-giving force of entailments makes one immune to the belief entailment requirement. Reasons fail to fill the gap between the belief in a logical entailment and doxastic uptake. Here the belief entailment requirement fails to hold. Hence, Premise (2) of the unmaintainability argument is false.

Streumer might here respond that what explains why we cannot fail to believe what we ourselves believe to be entailed by our own beliefs is not a product of the reason-giving force of entailments. Rather, he might argue that to believe that p is to hold that p is true, and to take p to entail q is to believe it to be necessary that if p is true, then q is true. The requirement, on this reading, thus holds as a matter of conceptual necessity, as a product of what it is to believe p and what it is to believe p entails q.[7]

If this reply is correct, the forceless entailments thesis would be mistaken on conceptual grounds. That, unqualified, is an implausibly strong claim. It might be true of fully rational agents that the belief entailment requirement holds as a matter of conceptual necessity. But, for the imperfectly rational and the arational, it seems perfectly possible to believe p and believe that p implies q without believing q.[8] It is worth remembering that most doxastic logics are logics for ideal, rational believers (cf. Girle 2014: 138). Believers in (c) and (d) – i.e., believers in the error theory – are paradigmatic cases of arationality. Those who have formed a belief in the error theory are, via the forceless entailments thesis, thus prime candidates for showing the falsity of the belief entailment requirement.

Consequently, the dilemma posed by Streumer (in Section 1) fails. Recall he contends that the belief entailment requirement will empty the class of persons who could believe the error theory. But once one has *formed* a belief in the error theory, one can *maintain* that belief, because, when it comes to the arational, the belief entailment requirement is false.[9] Once one believes the error theory, that is, all reasons are regarded as merely apparent. And merely apparent reasons have no force: no force to compel one to believe a recognized entailment of one's beliefs, nor force to compel one to stop believing what one recognizes she has no reason to believe. In short, fully believing the error theory brings with it complete doxastic confidence, full stop. For, once one believes the error theory, nothing looks like a mistake.

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[7] We again thank a (somewhat) anonymous referee for pressing us to address this response.
[8] Moreover, a powerful demon could keep me from believing q, while allowing me to fully believe that p and fully believe p implies q.
[9] Addressing a related matter, Terence Cuneo puts the point nicely: "A person's accepting the claim that there is no reason to believe epistemic nihilism cannot undercut her justification for accepting epistemic nihilism. [For such a person] a claim such as ['epistemic nihilism is true, but there is no reason to believe it'] cannot even rise to the level of paradox" (2007: 118).

5 Conclusion

In summary, after disposing of two supposed counterexamples to the reasons requirement, we argued by way of our Overly Orderly Olsen example that one could *form* a belief in the error theory. The question then becomes whether one could *maintain* such a belief. We considered a strategy open to Streumer for holding that the error theory is *unmaintainable*. This argument turns on accepting the belief entailment requirement. But that requirement presupposes that recognized formal entailments indeed provide reasons for belief. However, the property of being a reason for belief is a normative property; therefore the error theorist can deny that the entailments of her beliefs have reason-providing force. Once this is acknowledged, it is not clear what could be said in order to compel one who has formed a belief in the error theory to adopt a belief she fully believes to be entailed by one of her full beliefs. The belief entailment requirement fails to apply, and the forceless entailments thesis holds. The trouble is that once one believes the error theory, one can believe anything at all.

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