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Précis of Unbelievable Errors

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Abstract

In *Unbelievable Errors*, I defend an error theory about all normative judgments, I argue that we cannot believe this theory, and I argue that our inability to believe this theory makes the theory more likely to be true. This précis gives a brief overview of my arguments for the error theory.

Keywords

error theory – non-reductive realism – reductive realism – non-cognitivism

1 Introduction

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

In this précis, I will give a brief overview of some of the arguments I give in the book. Whether these arguments are sound depends on details and further arguments that I cannot discuss here.¹

My arguments for the error theory assume that

¹ This précis is a shortened version of Streumer (2018).

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

and that

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

These claims give a necessary and sufficient condition for a property's being normative or descriptive. I argue in the book that they are compatible with different views about what *makes* a property normative or descriptive (Streumer 2017: 101–103).

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

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

2 The Reduction Argument

My argument against non-reductive realism is what I call the *reduction argument*. I will outline the first version of this argument.²

Consider an action A_1 that has a certain normative property, such as the property of being right. Since anything that has normative properties also has

² As I say in the book, this version of the reduction argument was first given by Jackson (1998), inspired by a more general argument given by Kim (1993). In the book I also give two further versions of the argument (2017: 30–35).

descriptive properties, action A_1 also has descriptive properties, which we can call P_{A1-1} , P_{A1-2} , ... And the objects O_1 , O_2 , ... that are part of the same possible world as action A_1 have descriptive properties as well, which for each object O_x we can call P_{Ox-1} , P_{Ox-2} , ... Action A_1 therefore satisfies the following predicate, which we can call predicate D_1 :

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

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

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

'satisfies either predicate D_1 , or predicate D_2 , or ...'.

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

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

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

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

I argue in the book that non-reductive realists must take properties to be ways objects can be, since otherwise they do not disagree with reductive

realists. I then argue that if properties are ways objects can be, the following criterion of property identity is correct:

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

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

3 The False Guarantee and Regress Objections

I now turn to my argument against reductive realism. I argue in the book that reductive realists need to answer the following question:

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

I consider three kinds of answer to this question:

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

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

I will explain the false guarantee objection by focusing on Frank Jackson's version of reductive realism (Jackson 1998).³ I argue in the book that if we extend this view to all normative properties, it assumes that

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

predicate 'is just' to institutions that have the property of maximizing freedom. Are liberals' and conservatives' conflicting judgments about justice then both guaranteed to be true?

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

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

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

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

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

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

Action A is right

depends on whether

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

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

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

depends on whether

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

which, in turn, depends on whether

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

and so on. This is the start of an infinite regress. The direction of determination in this regress is from the last judgment to the first: the truth of the last judgment makes the next-to-last judgment true, the truth of the next-to-last judgment makes the second-to-last judgment true, and so on. But the infinity of the regress ensures that there is no last judgment. This means that the regress makes it indeterminate whether any of these judgments are true. Similar claims apply to other versions of (P₂).

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

4 The Symmetry Objection

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

Normative judgments do not represent the world. These judgments ascribe normative properties to objects in the world, but whether these objects have these properties does not wholly depend on what the world is like.

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

- (A) When two people make conflicting normative judgments, at most one of these judgments is correct.⁴

Suppose that Fred thinks that euthanasia is permissible but Susan thinks that it is impermissible. If cognitivism is true, these conflicting normative judgments represent the world in incompatible ways: Fred's judgment ascribes the property of being permissible to euthanasia and Susan's judgment ascribes the property of being impermissible to euthanasia. Since euthanasia cannot have both of these properties, these judgments then cannot both be correct. More generally, if cognitivism is true, (A) follows from the claim that

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

4 I also argue that (A) has to be qualified in certain ways that do not affect my argument (2017: 71).

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

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

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

itself expresses an attitude of approval or disapproval, such as

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

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

5 The Error Theory

The reduction argument shows that

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

The false guarantee and regress objections show that

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

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

- (3) Normative judgments are beliefs that ascribe normative properties.

My arguments against non-reductive realism, reductive realism, and non-cognitivism therefore together seem to show that the error theory is true.

As I explain in the book, however, considering these arguments does not make me believe the error theory. I argue that this is because we cannot believe the error theory (2017: 129–54). I also argue that our inability to believe the error theory makes the theory more likely to be true, by undermining objections to the theory, by making it harder to reject my arguments for the theory, and by undermining revisionary alternatives to the theory (2017: 170–188). Of course, there is much more to say about my arguments for the error theory, about our inability to believe the theory, and about why this inability makes the theory more likely to be true. I say more about it in the book.

Biographical Note

Bart Streumer is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Groningen, the Netherlands.

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