WHY JONAS OLSON CANNOT BELIEVE
THE ERROR THEORY EITHER

Bart Streumer

b.streumer@rug.nl

Jonas Olson writes that "a plausible moral error theory must be an error theory about all irreducible normativity".[1] I agree. But unlike Olson, I think we cannot believe this error theory. I will argue that Olson cannot believe it either.

I will first argue that Olson should say that reasons for belief are irreducibly normative. I will then argue that if reasons for belief are irreducibly normative, we cannot believe an error theory about all irreducible normativity. I will then explain why I think Olson's objections to this argument fail. I will end by showing that Olson cannot defend his view as a partly revisionary alternative to an error theory about all irreducible normativity.

1. Why Olson should say that reasons for belief are irreducibly normative

Olson's defence of his error theory focuses mostly on moral judgements, such as the judgement that

      (1)   Agent A morally ought to do X.

---

[1] Olson 2014, p. 3.

Olson thinks that (1) entails that there is a normative reason for A to X: it entails that there is a consideration that favours A's doing X. And he thinks that the favouring relation is "irreducibly normative": it is "not reducible, for example, to facts about what would promote the satisfaction of A's desires, or to facts about A's roles or engagement in rule-governed activities".[2] In other words, he thinks that (1) entails that

> (2)   There is a consideration that stands in an irreducibly normative favouring relation to A's doing X.

But Olson argues that irreducible normativity is "queer" and "metaphysically mysterious", and that this irreducibly normative favouring relation therefore does not exist.[3] If so, (2) is false. If (1) entails (2), this means that (1) is false as well. And since Olson thinks that all moral judgements entail that there are irreducibly normative reasons, he concludes that all moral judgements are false.

Olson argues that (1) entails (2) partly by attacking Stephen Finlay's end-relational theory about moral judgements.[4] Finlay thinks, roughly, that (1) is equivalent to the descriptive claim that

> (3)   Agent A's doing X promotes end E,

where end E is one of the speaker's ends, and where uttering (1) pragmatically conveys either the assumption or the demand that the audience share this end.[5] Finlay therefore denies that (1) entails (2). But Olson argues that Finlay's view has four implications that ordinary speakers reject: it entails that there are no absolutely correct fundamental moral standards,

---

[2] Olson 2014, p. 122. Presumably, what Olson means here is that facts that involve the favouring relation are not reducible to these other facts.

[3] Olson 2014, pp. 123-4, 136.

[4] Olson 2014, pp. 126-35.

[5] See Finlay 2014; Olson's attack focuses on Finlay 2008. I here ignore many important details of Finlay's view. For example, Finlay thinks that whereas uttering (1) pragmatically conveys this assumption or demand, making end E explicit by uttering (3) does not.

that there are no incorrect fundamental moral standards, that we cannot really disagree about fundamental moral standards, and that fundamental moral claims are uninformative.[6] According to Olson, the fact that ordinary speakers reject these implications shows that moral judgements are not what Finlay thinks they are, but are instead beliefs that entail that there are irreducibly normative reasons.[7]

Olson also discusses judgements about reasons for belief. Since he takes the favouring relation to be irreducibly normative, you may expect him to take the claim that

(4)   There is a reason to believe that *p*

to be equivalent to the claim that

(5)   There is a consideration that stands in an irreducibly normative favouring relation to believing that *p*.

To some extent he does. He writes:

I shall grant to opponents of error theory the premise that epistemic reasons are facts that count in favour of certain beliefs, where the favouring relation is irreducibly normative.[8]

But Olson does not think that all reasons for belief are irreducibly normative. For he continues that error theorists can

---

[6] Olson 2014, pp. 127-35. Olson formulates these implications in terms of standards, but they can also be formulated in terms of ends.

[7] You may think that the fact that ordinary speakers reject these implications also shows that the error theory is false, since the error theory has similar implications. But Olson thinks that the fact that ordinary speakers reject these implications only shows something about the nature of normative judgements, and does not show that irreducibly normative reasons actually exist (2014, pp. 134-5).

[8] Olson 2014, p. 156.

maintain that there are *other* senses of 'reason' in which it may well be true that there are reasons for some agents to believe certain propositions.[9]

He distinguishes two of these senses. The first is what he calls "hypothetical reasons for belief". If the term 'reason' is used in this sense, he thinks, (4) is equivalent to the descriptive claim that

(6)   Agent A has a desire that would be fulfilled, or is likely to be fulfilled, if A believes that p.[10]

The second is what he calls "reasons reducible to correctness norms". If the term 'reason' is used in this sense, he thinks, (4) is equivalent to the descriptive claim that

(7)   According to the standard of being a responsible believer, it is correct to believe that p.[11]

But for (7) to be a descriptive claim, it must not use the phrase 'responsible believer' in a normative way. To make it clear how (7) uses this phrase, Olson compares (7) to the claim that

(8)   According to the standard of being a responsible Mafioso, it is correct to punish squealers.[12]

Olson thinks that (8) is a descriptive claim because "to call someone a responsible Mafioso is

---

[9] Olson 2014, p. 158.

[10] Olson 2014, p. 158.

[11] Olson 2014, pp. 158-9, 164. Olson seems to think that when the term 'reason' is used in one of these ways, (4) has the same meaning as (6) or (7). Alternatively, you may think that when the term 'reason' is used in one of these ways, (4) has the same truthmaker as (6) or (7) without having the same meaning as (6) or (7). My objection below also applies to this view.

[12] Olson 2014, p. 165.

not necessarily to commend his behaviour".[13] He therefore suggests that we should take (7) to use the phrase 'responsible believer' the way (8) uses the phrase 'responsible Mafioso': we should take (7) to use this phrase in such a way that "to call someone an irresponsible believer is not necessarily to reproach her for failing to comply with epistemic reasons".[14]

But I think these are odd moves for an error theorist to make. If claims about reasons for belief can be equivalent to descriptive claims like (6) or (7), why can moral claims not also be equivalent to descriptive claims? Why can (1) not be equivalent to the descriptive claim that

(9)   Agent A has a desire that would be fulfilled, or is likely to be fulfilled, if A does X,

or the descriptive claim that

(10)   According to the standard of being a moral person, it is correct for A to do X,

where (10) uses the phrase 'moral person' in a descriptive way, just as (7) and (8) use the phrases 'responsible believer' and 'responsible Mafioso' in descriptive ways? If so, contrary to what Olson claims, moral judgements need not entail that there are irreducibly normative

---

[13] Olson 2014, p. 165.

[14] Olson 2014, p. 165. You may think that Olson could also take (4) to be equivalent to the descriptive claim that there is evidence that *p*. But for this claim to be descriptive, it must use the term 'evidence' to mean what Thomas Kelly calls 'indicator evidence': we must use it to mean a consideration that indicates that *p* is true, either by logically implying *p* or by raising the probability that *p* is true (see Kelly 2006, §3, and 2007, p. 470, and Olson 2014, pp. 160-4). And (4) is not equivalent to the claim that there is a consideration that either logically implies *p* or raises the probability that *p* is true. For a consideration can be a reason to believe a necessary truth without either logically implying this truth or making this truth more likely to hold. There is indicator evidence for a very large number of trivial beliefs that there is no reason to have, since forming these beliefs would be a waste of your cognitive resources (see Harman 1986, p. 12). And there can perhaps also be instrumental reasons to have a belief for which there is no indicator evidence (though this is, of course, controversial).

reasons.

Olson could reply that his attack on Finlay's end-relational theory shows that moral claims cannot be equivalent to descriptive claims like (9) or (10).[15] But in that case, why does this attack not similarly show that claims about reasons for belief cannot be equivalent to claims like (6) or (7)? For if claims about reasons for belief are equivalent to (6) or (7), this similarly entails that there are no absolutely correct fundamental standards that apply to reasons for belief, that there are no incorrect fundamental standards that apply to reasons for belief, that we cannot really disagree about fundamental standards that apply to reasons for belief, and that fundamental claims about reasons for belief are uninformative. If Olson is right that ordinary speakers reject such claims about all moral judgements, why would they not similarly reject them about all judgements about reasons for belief? And if Olson is right that this shows that moral claims are never equivalent to descriptive claims like (9) or (10), why does it not similarly show that claims about reasons for belief are never equivalent to descriptive claims like (6) or (7)?

I therefore think that Olson should not say that claims about reasons for belief can be equivalent to descriptive claims like (6) or (7). He should instead say that all reasons for belief are irreducibly normative.

2. Why we cannot believe an error theory about all irreducible normativity

I have argued elsewhere that we cannot believe an error theory about all normative judgements. I think this argument also shows that if reasons for belief are irreducibly normative, we cannot believe an error theory about all irreducible normativity. Since my discussion of Olson's view in what follows will make use of this argument, I will now briefly repeat it.[16]

---

[15] Finlay takes moral claims to be equivalent to descriptive claims about *the speaker's* ends rather than about *the agent's* desires. But Olson's attack on Finlay's view also applies to a view that takes moral claims to be equivalent to descriptive claims about the agent's desires.

[16] Streumer 2013. In what follows, I summarise a longer version of this argument that I give in Streumer forthcoming. Unlike Olson, I do not think that claims about instrumental reasons can be

I use the term 'belief' in such a way that at least two conditions have to be met for a person to believe that *p*. The first is that

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

We can distinguish *full* from *partial* belief: we fully believe that *p* if we are very confident that *p*, and we partly believe that *p* if we are somewhat but not very confident that *p*. I use the term 'belief' to mean full belief.[17]

The second condition is that

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

Suppose I do not understand the general theory of relativity. If (B2) is true, I then do not believe this theory.[18] Suppose next that a physicist tells me that the general theory of relativity is true. I may then come to believe that this theory is true. But if (B2) is true, I do not thereby come to believe the theory itself. I only come to believe the theory itself if I understand this theory.[19] On the other hand, if I *do* understand the general theory of relativity,

---

equivalent to descriptive claims about what will promote the fulfilment of the agent's desires, and I do not apply the term 'normative judgement' to beliefs about standards such as (7) or (8). I therefore take the error theory I defend to be an error theory about all normative judgements rather than about all irreducible normativity.

   [17] I remain neutral on whether beliefs are binary or come in degrees: if beliefs are binary I use the term 'belief' simply to mean belief, and if they come in degrees I use the term 'belief' to mean a high degree of belief (which I call 'full belief').

   [18] Sorensen 1988, p. 29, doubts that (B2) is true: he writes that "people certainly seem to believe many things they do not understand" and that "most people with casual contact with physics believe $e = mc^2$ and believe that space is curved". As I say below, I think this depends on how high we want to set the bar for applying the term 'belief'.

   [19] In other words, I think there is a distinction here between believing *that a theory is true* and believing the theory *itself*. If we do not understand a theory, we can believe that this theory is true, but we do not thereby believe this theory itself. Note also that I am not saying that we *disbelieve* a theory only if we understand this theory, or that we believe that a theory is *false* only if we understand this theory.

I cannot come to believe that this theory is true without thereby coming to believe the theory itself.

Since our concept of a belief is not entirely precise, there are different correct ways to use the term 'belief'. If we want to set the bar low, we can say that a person can believe that p even if this person is only somewhat confident that p or does not understand p. If want to set the bar higher, we can say that a person believes that p only if conditions (B1) and (B2) are met. And if we want to set the bar even higher, we can add further conditions: we can say, for example, that a person believes that p only if this belief is stable or only if this belief influences this person's actions. It does not matter where we set this bar, as long as we are clear about where we set it. As I have said, I will set it at meeting conditions (B1) and (B2).[20]

I think that if conditions (B1) and (B2) have to be met for a person to believe that p, two further conditions have to be met as well. The first of these is that

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

To see this, suppose that Bob says:

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.

Bob may then be insincere, or may be considering whether to give up one of these beliefs, or may fail to understand what he is saying. If he is insincere, he does not believe what he says he believes. If he is considering whether to give up one of these beliefs, he is no longer very

---

[20] There are different views about what beliefs are: to believe that p may be to have in your mind a representation with the content that p (see, for example, Dretske 1988), or to have a mental state that stands in certain causal relations to your behaviour and to your other mental states (see, for example, Lewis 1980), or to have certain dispositions, such as a disposition to assert p in certain circumstances (see for example, Schwitzgebel 2002), or to be such that others can predict your behaviour by ascribing the belief that p to you, along with other beliefs and desires, and assuming that you are rational (see, for example, Dennett 1987). I will remain as neutral as possible between these views.

confident about at least one of the things he says he believes, which means that he fails to meet condition (B1). But he may also be neither insincere nor considering whether to give up one of these beliefs. In that case, however, he is too confused to understand what he is saying, which means that he fails to meet condition (B2). In none of these cases does Bob believe what he says he believes. I therefore think that if conditions (B1) and (B2) have to be met for a person to believe that *p*, condition (B3) has to be met as well.

If you doubt this, this may be because you conflate (B3) with a different claim, such as:

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

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

(3)   A person believes that *p* only if this person believes what is *actually* entailed by *p*.

(4)   A person believes that p_1, that p_2, . . . and that p_n only if this person believes what he or she believes to be entailed by the conjunction of $p_1, p_2, . . .$ and p_n.

But (B3) is a weaker claim than (1) to (4). Even if (1) to (4) are false, therefore, (B3) can be true. That is what I think is the case.[21]

The second further condition that I think has to be met is that

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

To see this, suppose that Kate says:

I believe that Socrates was a man, but I believe that there is no reason to believe this.

---

[21] There is, of course, more to be said here. I defend (B3) in more detail in Streumer forthcoming.

As before, Kate may then be insincere, or may be considering whether to give up one of these beliefs, or may fail to understand what she is saying. If she is considering whether to give up one of these beliefs, she is no longer very confident about at least one of the things she says she believes, which means that she fails to meet condition (B1). But she may also be neither insincere nor considering whether to give up one of these beliefs. In that case, however, she is too confused to understand what she is saying, which means that she fails to meet condition (B2). In none of these cases does Kate believe what she says she believes. I therefore think that if conditions (B1) and (B2) have to be met for a person to believe that *p*, condition (B4) has to be met as well.

As before, if you doubt this, this may be because you conflate (B4) with a different claim, such as:

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

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

(7)   A person believes that *p* only if this person knows *what* reason there is to believe that *p*.

(8)   A person believes that *p* only if this person believes *that there is* a reason to believe that *p*.

(9)   A person believes that *p* only if this person does not believe that there is no consideration that stands in an *irreducibly normative favouring relation* to this belief.

(10)   A person *accepts* that *p* only if this person does not believe that there is no reason to accept that *p*.

(11)   A person believes that *p* only if this person does not believe that there is no *evidence* that *p*.

But as before, (B4) is a weaker claim than (5) to (11). Even if (5) to (11) are false, therefore,

(B4) can be true. As before, that is what I think is the case.[22]

Suppose that I am right that if conditions (B1) and (B2) have to be met for a person to believe that *p*, conditions (B3) and (B4) have to be met as well. I think this means that if reasons for belief are irreducibly normative, we cannot believe an error theory about all irreducible normativity. For if reasons for belief are irreducibly normative, an error theory about all irreducible normativity entails that there are no reasons for belief. This error theory therefore entails that there is no reason to believe it. And anyone who understands this error theory well enough to be in a position to believe it knows that the theory entails this.[23] Therefore, given that

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

anyone who believes an error theory about all irreducible normativity believes that there is no reason to believe this theory. But given that

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

this is impossible. It follows that if reasons for belief are irreducibly normative, we cannot believe an error theory about all irreducible normativity.[24]

---

[22] As before, there is more to be said here. I defend (B4) in more detail in Streumer forthcoming, where I also discuss two possible reformulations of (B4) to deal with compulsive beliefs and with certain religious beliefs.

[23] You may object that we can explicitly believe this error theory while only implicitly believing that this theory entails that there is no reason to believe it. But I think this is possible only if we do not fully understand this theory: if we fail to understand, for example, that the theory applies to reasons for belief.

[24] You may think that believing this error theory involves having two separate beliefs: the belief that normative judgements are beliefs that ascribe irreducibly normative properties or relations, and the belief that such properties or relations do not exist. And you may object that my argument

11

You may think that this is a problem for such an error theory, but I think it is not. I have argued elsewhere that it makes an error theory about all normative judgements more likely to be true, since it makes this theory immune to many objections that philosophers have made to moral error theories.[25] I therefore think it also makes Olson' error theory about all irreducible normativity more likely to be true.

3. Olson's objections to this argument

One objection to this argument is that there seem to be two ways in which we can believe an error theory about all irreducible normativity. The first is that

(1)   We can believe that reasons for belief are not irreducibly normative, and we can then come to believe an error theory about all judgements that we take to ascribe irreducibly normative properties or relations.

I agree that we can do what (1) describes. But if reasons for belief are irreducibly normative, we will then not believe an error theory about all judgements that *actually* ascribe irreducibly normative properties or relations. Instead, we will merely believe an error theory about all judgements that *we take* to ascribe irreducibly normative properties or relations. And when I say that we cannot believe an error theory about all irreducible normativity, I mean that we cannot believe an error theory about all judgements that *actually* ascribe irreducibly normative properties or relations.

     Another is that

---

therefore cannot appeal to (B3), but should instead appeal to the claim that a person believes that p_1 and that p_2 only if this person believes what he believes to be entailed by the conjunction of p_1 and p_2. But we believe an error theory about all irreducible normativity only if we are very confident about the *conjunction* of the claim that normative judgements are beliefs that ascribe irreducibly normative properties or relations and the claim that such properties or relations do not exist. We do not believe this error theory if we are merely very confident about each of these claims individually without also being very confident about their conjunction. My argument can therefore appeal to (B3).

[25] Streumer 2013.

(2)   We can endorse a revisionary view about reasons for belief, and we can then replace our judgements about reasons for belief with certain descriptive beliefs, such as beliefs about the standard of being a responsible believer.

But as I will explain later, this is not as easy to do as it may seem. Moreover, if I am right that reasons for belief are irreducibly normative, we would then not believe an error theory about all judgements that *currently* ascribe irreducibly normative properties or relations. Instead, we would merely believe an error theory about all judgements that would *then* ascribe irreducibly normative properties or relations: we would believe an error theory about all judgements that ascribe such properties or relations after we have replaced some of our normative judgements with descriptive beliefs. And when I say that we cannot believe an error theory about all irreducible normativity, I mean that we cannot believe an error theory about all judgements that *currently* ascribe irreducibly normative properties or relations.

A second objection is that though (B4) is generally true, (B4) is false of people who believe an error theory about all irreducible normativity: since such people believe that there are no reasons for belief at all, they will be able to have a belief even if they believe that there is no reason for this belief. This objection sounds suggestive, but I am not sure what to make of it. Those who make this objection may merely think that

(3)   If we believed an error theory about all irreducible normativity, (B4) would be false of us.

That is true. But the mere fact that (B4) *would* be false of us *if* we believed such an error theory does not show that (B4) is *actually* false of us. Merely pointing out that (3) is true is therefore not enough to show that we can believe an error theory about all irreducible normativity. To show that we can believe such an error theory, those who make this objection should point to an actual example of someone who believes this error theory and who is therefore a counterexample to (B4).

Alternatively, those who make this objection may rightly reject the claim that

(4)   A person believes that *p* only if this person does not believe that there is no consideration that stands in an *irreducibly normative favouring relation* to this

13

belief.

But this does not show that (B4) is false, since (B4) does not say that a person believes that *p* only if this person accepts non-naturalism about reasons for belief. For all (B4) says, this person may accept a different view about the nature of reasons for belief, or may have no view at all about the nature of these reasons. Of course, if we believed an error theory about all irreducible normativity, we would believe that judgements about reasons for belief ascribe an irreducibly normative relation, since otherwise there would be judgements that ascribe an irreducibly normative relation but about which we would not believe this error theory. But that is required for it to be true that we believe this error theory. It is *not* required by (B4).

Olson makes a more specific version of this objection. He writes:

> I can . . . base my belief that the error theory is true on the argument from queerness, without judging that this argument favours my attitude of believing that the error theory is true. I can thus maintain that while there are arguments on which I base my belief that the error theory is true, there are no irreducibly normative reasons for the attitude of believing that the error theory is true. Hence we can indeed believe the error theory.[26]

Olson is here replying to my earlier defence of (B4), in which I wrote that "reasons for belief are considerations that we *base* our beliefs on, and we cannot base a belief on a consideration without making at least an implicit normative judgement".[27] In response, he points out that children and non-human animals form beliefs on the basis of perception "although they presumably lack the relevant normative thoughts".[28] I agree. I therefore withdraw my earlier claim that basing a belief on a consideration involves making an implicit normative judgement.[29]

---

[26] Olson 2014, pp. 171-2.

[27] Streumer 2013, p. 198. I there called this claim '(B2)'.

[28] Olson 2014, p. 171.

[29] Even to young children, however, which beliefs they form on the basis of their perceptual inputs

But that does not undermine my argument. For though Olson is right that

(5)   We can base a belief on a consideration *without* believing that this consideration is *a* reason for this belief,

this does not mean that

(6)   We can base a belief on a consideration *while* believing that this consideration is *no* reason for this belief.

To see that (6) is false, we should distinguish perceptual input from the beliefs we form on the basis of this input, which we can call 'perceptual beliefs'. If I perceive that the desk at which I wrote this paragraph is white, I will normally form the belief that this desk is white on the basis of this perceptual input without making a normative judgement. But suppose that I believe that I have taken a powerful drug that makes red objects look white to me. In that case, my perceptual input will not change: the desk at which I wrote this paragraph will still look white to me. But I will now believe that this input is no reason to believe that this desk is white. And if I believe that this perceptual input is no reason for this belief, I will be unable to form the belief that this desk is white on the basis of this input.[30]

       Similar claims apply to any other consideration that we can base our beliefs on. Suppose that I believe that men are not human beings. I will then be unable to form the belief that Socrates was a human being on the basis of the consideration that Socrates was a man,

---

will not seem arbitrary. This may show that they do make implicit normative judgements when basing their beliefs on these inputs.

   [30] David Owens writes that "responsiveness to reasons does not require actual reflection on reasons: I can form a rational belief in *p* based on evidence *e* without forming either the belief that I have that evidence, or the belief that *e* suffices to justify *p*." (2000, p. 13). But he then suggests that forming a belief that *p* based on evidence *e does* require *not* positively believing that I do *not* have this evidence. It may therefore similarly require not positively believing that *e* does not suffice to justify *p*. And the claim I make is weaker: I merely claim that it requires not positively believing that *e* is *no reason at all* to believe *p*.

since I will then believe that this consideration is no reason for this belief. Or suppose that I believe that only evidence can be a reason for a belief. I will then be unable to form the belief that God exists on the basis of the consideration that I will be denied entry to heaven if I fail to believe this, since I will then believe that this consideration is no reason for this belief. Finally, suppose that I am deeply religious, and that I believe that evidence against God's existence can never be a reason to believe that God does not exist. I will then be unable to form the belief that God does not exist on the basis of such evidence, since I will then believe that such evidence is no reason for this belief. Even if Olson is right that we can base a belief on a consideration *without* believing that this consideration is *a* reason for this belief, therefore, this does not mean that we can base a belief on a consideration *while* believing that this consideration is *no* reason for this belief. It therefore does not show that (B4) is false of people who believe an error theory about all irreducible normativity.[31]

You may think that Olson is himself a counterexample to (B4), since he may seem to believe an error theory about all irreducible normativity while believing that there are no reasons for belief. But as should be clear by now, Olson does not believe that there are no reasons for belief. Instead, he thinks that claims about reasons for belief can be equivalent to descriptive claims about the promotion of desires or about the standard of being a responsible believer, in which case he thinks the error theory does not apply to these claims. I have argued that Olson should instead say that all reasons for belief are irreducibly normative. But that does not matter here: if Olson thinks that reasons for belief need not be irreducibly normative, and if he thinks that the error theory therefore does not apply to certain judgements about reasons for belief, then he does *not* believe that there are no reasons for belief. As I have said, (B4) does not say that a person believes that *p* only if this person accepts non-naturalism about reasons for belief: for all (B4) says, this person may think, as

---

[31] You may object that if I do not believe that a consideration is a reason for belief, I may nevertheless think that this consideration stands in some other positive normative relation to this belief: for example, that it justifies this belief, that it supports this belief, or that it makes it the case that I ought to have this belief. This shows that (6) should be generalised to: (6*) We can base a belief on a consideration *while* believing that this consideration *stands in no positive normative relation* to this belief. This does not matter to my arguments, since the error theory entails that these other positive normative relations do not exist either.

Olson does, that claims about reasons for belief can be equivalent to descriptive claims about the promotion of desires or about the standard of being a responsible believer.

Moreover, when considering the view that beliefs themselves are normative, Olson writes that

> someone who believes that *p* although she does not take *p* to be sufficiently supported by evidence, or even in the face of strong contrary evidence, might fail to meet the standards of being a responsible believer (with respect to *p*). We see now that an agent who clings to the belief that *p* in the face of strong evidence that not-*p* might not only fail to meet the standards of being a responsible believer (with respect to *p*), but also of believing that *p* in the first place. She might rather be engaged in wishfully thinking that *p*.[32]

If claims about reasons for belief are equivalent to descriptive claims about the standard of being a responsible believer, as Olson thinks they can be, then what he says here amounts to an endorsement of (B4). I therefore conclude that Olson's objections do not undermine my argument for the claim that we cannot believe an error theory about all normative judgements.

4. Can Olson defend his view as a partly revisionary alternative to the error theory?

Olson defends a view he calls "conservationism", according to which we should keep making moral judgements even if we realise that all such judgements are false.[33] If he agreed that reasons for belief are irreducibly normative, he could defend a similar view about reasons for belief: he could say that we should keep making judgements about such reasons even if we realise that all such judgements are false. But this would not enable us to believe an error theory about all irreducible normativity. Instead, if (B3) is true, it would prevent us from

---

[32] Olson 2014, p. 168.
[33] Olson 2014, pp. 190-6.

believing this error theory, since it would make us fail to believe something that we believe to be entailed by this theory.

You may think that if Olson agreed that all reasons for belief are irreducibly normative, he could also defend his view as a partly revisionary alternative to an error theory about all irreducible normativity. Olson himself does not want to do this. He writes:

> I do not suggest anything in the way of conceptual revision or reform. My claim is that the term 'reason (for belief)' as used in ordinary discourse is ambiguous in that it can signify either epistemic reasons for belief (of which there are none, according to error theorists) or reducible reasons for belief (of which there are plenty, according to error theorists).[34]

You may think, however, that Olson could nevertheless defend his view in this way: you may think that he could combine an error theory about almost all irreducible normativity with a form of revisionary reductive realism about reasons for belief, according to which we should replace our judgements about reasons for belief with descriptive beliefs about the promotion of desires or about the standard of being a responsible believer.

But I think he cannot. Revisionary alternatives to the error theory, including this combination of the error theory with a form of revisionary reductive realism about reasons for belief, all rely on a version of the following argument:

> If the error theory is true, normative judgements are false beliefs. Since we should give up false beliefs, we should then give up all of our normative judgements. But normative judgements are too useful for us to simply give them all up. We should therefore replace these judgements with non-cognitive attitudes or descriptive beliefs.

If we cannot believe the error theory, this argument is problematic. For its first premise is that

---

[34] Olson 2014, p. 158 n. 20. By 'reducible' reasons for belief, Olson means hypothetical reasons for belief or reasons that are reducible to correctness norms.

(1)   If the error theory is true, normative judgements are false beliefs.

And if we cannot believe the error theory, we cannot believe the antecedent of (1). This argument therefore has no force for us: since we cannot believe the antecedent of (1), we cannot move through the argument's premises to reach its conclusion.

Defenders of revisionary alternatives to the error theory could reply that we can *partly* believe the antecedent of (1), by being somewhat but not very confident that the error theory is true. They could say that this partial belief is enough to make us move through the argument's premises and reach a partial belief in its conclusion. And they could say that this partial belief in its conclusion is enough to make us replace our normative judgements with non-cognitive attitudes or descriptive beliefs.

But I have argued elsewhere we can only form a weak partial belief in the error theory.[35] If we reach a partial belief in the argument's conclusion in this way, therefore, I think this partial belief will be too weak to make us replace our normative judgements with non-cognitive attitudes or descriptive beliefs. Moreover, the argument's next premise is that

(2)   Since we should give up false beliefs, we should give up all of our normative judgements.

And the antecedent of (2) is a normative claim that is false if the error theory is true. To the extent that we form a partial belief in the consequent of (1), we will therefore form a partial belief in the *negation* of the antecedent of (2). This means that even if a weak partial belief in the conclusion of the argument were enough to make us replace our normative judgements with non-cognitive attitudes or descriptive beliefs, we *still* could not move through the argument's premises to reach its conclusion. Instead of getting stuck with (1), we would now get stuck with (2).

Defenders of revisionary alternatives to the error theory may reply that this does not matter. What matters, they may say, is whether the conclusion of the argument is supported

---

[35] Streumer 2013.

19

by its premises, not whether we can move through the argument's premises to reach its conclusion. But as we have just seen, the antecedent of (2) is a normative claim that is false if the error theory is true. This means that the conclusion of the argument is in fact *not* supported by its premises. More generally, if the error theory is true, it cannot be true that

> (3)   We should replace our normative judgements with non-cognitive attitudes or descriptive beliefs.

For (3) is a normative claim that is false if the error theory is true.

Defenders of revisionary alternatives to the error theory could reply that *after* we have replaced our normative judgements with non-cognitive attitudes or descriptive beliefs, it will be true that we *should have made* make this change. For we will then have changed the nature of our normative judgements in such a way that non-cognitivism or reductive realism has become true. But for (3) to play the role it plays in this argument, (3) must say that it is *currently* true that we should replace our normative judgements with non-cognitive attitudes or descriptive beliefs. Defenders of revisionary alternatives may now say that the change they recommend cannot be rationally assessed: they could compare it to Kierkegaard's "qualitative transition of the leap from unbeliever to believer", disregarding "probabilities and guarantees".[36] But if a change cannot be rationally assessed, it also cannot be rationally defended. I therefore think that if we cannot believe an error theory about all irreducible normativity, Olson cannot defend his view as a partly revisionary alternative to this error theory.

Is this a problem for Olson? I think it is not. As I have said, I have argued elsewhere that our inability to believe an error theory about all normative judgements makes this theory more likely to be true, since it makes this theory immune to many objections that philosophers have made to moral error theories. I think similar claims apply to Olson's error theory about all irreducible normativity. I therefore hope that Olson will not regard what I have said as a criticism of his view, but will instead regard it as a friendly amendment.

---

[36] Kierkegaard 1846, p. 13.

References

Davidson, Donald. 1980. *Essays on Actions and Events*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Dennett, Daniel. 1987. *The Intentional Stance*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.

Dretske, Fred. 1988. *Explaining Behavior*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.

Finlay, Stephen. 2008. "The Error in the Error Theory". *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 86: 347-369.

Finlay, Stephen. 2014. *Confusion of Tongues*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Harman, Gilbert. 1986. *Change in View*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.

Kelly, Thomas. 2006. "Evidence". *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2008 edition), http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2008/entries/evidence/.

Kelly, Thomas. 2007. "Evidence and Normativity: Reply to Leite". *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 75: 465-74.

Kierkegaard, Søren. 1846. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. Edited by Alastair Hannay. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

Lewis, David. 1980. "Mad Pain and Martian Pain". Reprinted in Lewis 1983.

Olson, Jonas. 2014. *Moral Error Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Owens, David. 2000. *Reason without Freedom*. London: Routledge.

Schwitzgebel, Eric. 2002. "A Phenomenal, Dispositional Account of Belief". *Noûs* 36: 249-75.

Sorensen, Roy. 1988. *Blindspots*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Streumer, Bart. 2013. "Can We Believe the Error Theory?" *Journal of Philosophy* 110: 194-212.

Streumer, Bart. Forthcoming. *Unbelievable Errors*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.