Streumer, Bart. *Unbelievable Errors: An Error Theory About All Normative Judgements*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. Pp. xvii+223. £45.00 (cloth).

Bart Streumer's *Unbelievable Errors* is an outstanding defence of the error theory—the theory that all normative judgements are false. It is exceptionally well-written and thorough, and breaks new ground in its argument that our inability to believe the error theory makes the theory more likely to be true. Those interested in the error theory and meta-normative debate more generally cannot afford to miss this book. I will offer comments and criticism after summarising the book's twelve chapters.

Unbelievable Errors can be divided into two parts. The first part presents a sustained argument for the error theory that runs as follows. Chapters II–III argue that if there are normative properties, these properties are identical to descriptive properties (that is, that non-reductive realism is false). Streumer offers the following reduction argument.

(1)   If there are normative properties, these properties are necessarily coextensive with descriptive properties.

(2)   Necessarily coextensive properties are identical.

(3)   So, if there are normative properties, these properties are identical to descriptive properties.

Premise (1) is said to follow from standard claims about supervenience and infinitely disjunctive descriptive properties, but also from independent claims in first-order normative theory. Premise (2) is said to be true because the following criterion of property identity is true: (N) two predicates ascribe the same property if and only if they are necessarily

coextensive. Streumer argues that rival criteria of property identity either make too many or too few distinctions between properties, and that putative counterexamples to (N) fail.

Chapters IV–V argue that if there are normative properties, these properties are not identical to descriptive properties (that is, that reductive realism is false). The argument offered here is that if reductive realism is true, there must be something that makes it the case that *this* normative predicate ascribes *this* descriptive property. But there is nothing that makes this the case. So reductive realism is false. Streumer considers various reference-fixing explanations of what makes it the case that a certain normative predicate ascribes a certain descriptive property. There are two main candidates.

(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.

Streumer argues that reductive realists can't accept (P1) because (P1) guarantees the truth of obviously false normative judgements, and that reductive realists can't accept (P2) because (P2) leads to a vicious infinite regress. Streumer's conclusion is that reductive and non-reductive realism are false, and so realism is false: there are no normative properties.

Chapter VI maintains that normative judgements are beliefs that ascribe normative properties (that is, that cognitivism is true). Streumer argues that cognitivism is true because it is the only view that is compatible with the following claim: (A) when two people make conflicting normative judgements, at most one of these judgements is correct. Cognitivism is

said to be compatible with (A) because it holds that normative judgements represent the world, and when two people have mental states that represent the world in incompatible ways, at most one of these mental states is correct. The rest of the chapter is devoted to showing that non-cognitivism and hybrid views are incompatible with (A). Chapter VII completes Streumer's sustained argument for the error theory by arguing that all other alternatives to realism, non-cognitivism and hybrid views are vulnerable to Streumer's objections: the conclusion is that normative judgements are beliefs that ascribe normative properties, but that these properties do not exist, so the error theory is true.

The second part of Streumer's book elucidates and defends the error theory. Chapter VIII outlines Streumer's conception of normativity according to which moral judgements, judgements about reason for action, judgements about reasons for belief, and instrumental normative judgements all count as normative judgements. After discussing the moral error theories of Mackie, Joyce and Olson, and arguing that their arguments generalise beyond the moral to the normative, Streumer outlines what he takes the error theory to entail.

Chapters IX–XII contain Streumer's most important contributions to the metanormative literature. In chapter IX, Streumer argues that we cannot believe the error theory because the error theory entails that there is no reason to believe anything (including the error theory itself), and it is impossible to believe something if we believe there is no reason to believe it. Streumer claims, however, that despite our inability to believe the error theory, there are five ways in which we can come close to believing the error theory: we can (i) fail to adequately understand the theory, (ii) be somewhat but not very confident that the error theory is true, (iii) believe a more limited error theory like the moral error theory, (iv) believe that there are sound arguments for the error theory that together seem to show that the error theory is true, and (v) believe different parts of the error theory at different times.

After arguing in chapter X that because we cannot believe the error theory, there is no reason to believe the theory, Streumer argues in chapter XI that our inability to believe the error theory makes the theory more likely to be true. First, he argues that our inability to believe the error theory makes the theory more likely to be true by undermining objections to the theory. Streumer considers various objections to the error theory and shows how our inability to believe the theory opens up promising avenues of response to these objections. For example, the theory's unbelievability provides us with an interesting debunking explanation of why we feel that the error theory is false: we have this feeling not because the theory is false, but because we cannot believe the theory. Second, Streumer argues that our inability to believe the error theory makes the theory more likely to be true by undermining revisionary alternatives to the theory. Streumer argues that all revisionary alternatives rely on a version of the following argument: if the error theory is true, normative judgements are false beliefs; since we should give up our false beliefs, we should give up our normative judgements; but normative judgements are too useful to give up, so we should replace these judgements with non-cognitive attitudes or true beliefs that ascribe existent properties. Streumer then argues that this argument fails because it requires one to believe that the error theory is true, and it makes normative claims that are false if the error theory is true.

Chapter XII concludes the second part of the book by showing how Streumer's arguments can pave the way for broader philosophical progress. First, Streumer shows how other philosophical views can be defended in similar ways by arguing that we cannot believe them. Streumer considers Galen Strawson's views about moral non-responsibility, eliminativism about propositional attitudes, and Nietzsche's views about truth. Streumer then ends by showing how the philosophical method of reflective equilibrium should be modified if there can be true yet unbelievable theories.

Streumer's book is inspiringly clear and well-organised. The chapters are tightly focused, offer valuable summations of existing literature, and are mostly written so that they can be read individually. Consequently, each chapter is very accessible and well-worth reading. Several sections seem overly condensed, however, and could have benefited from being expanded. For example, in chapter VI, Streumer considers whether moral judgement internalism supports non-cognitivism rather than the error theory. But Streumer devotes less than a single page to this important issue and fails, as a result, to do it justice. Streumer only considers the following versions of moral judgement internalism.

    (i)   Necessarily, if a person makes a moral judgement, this person is motivated to act accordingly.

    (ii)   Normally, if a person makes a moral judgement, this person is motivated to act accordingly.

    (iii)   Necessarily, if a person makes a moral judgement, either this person is motivated to act accordingly or this person is practically irrational.

Streumer argues that (i) is implausible because "people who are exhausted or depressed seem able to make moral judgements without being motivated to act accordingly" (90), and that (ii) and (iii) fail to support non-cognitivism because they "support only the claim that moral judgements are often accompanied by motivating states, not the claim that these judgements *are* motivating states" (90). But Streumer never considers the most promising version of moral judgement internalism, namely, that moral judgements *can* motivate. Consequently, Streumer doesn't consider the powerful, Humean motivational argument against cognitivism that runs as follows: beliefs can't motivate, moral judgements can motivate, so moral judgements aren't beliefs (Alex Gregory, "Are All Normative Judgements Desire-Like?"

If Streumer is to do moral

judgement internalism justice, he needs to discuss this version of the view. More generally, if

Streumer is to show that cognitivism is a defensible view, he needs to engage with the best

arguments against cognitivism, like the Humean motivational argument described above.

This leads us onto the part of *Unbelievable Errors* that I was least persuaded by:

Streumer's argument against, and treatment of, non-cognitivism. Streumer's argument, as

noted, is that non-cognitivism is implausible because it is incompatible with (A), the claim

that when two people make conflicting normative judgements, at most one of these

judgements is correct. But Streumer's argument is not entirely convincing. Streumer states

that non-cognitivists could try to explain how their view is compatible with (A) by saying

what attitude (A) expresses. Following Blackburn, they could say that (A) expresses the

following higher-order attitude.

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

Streumer states that if (A) expresses this attitude, then non-cognitivism is compatible with

(A). But Streumer denies that (A) expresses the attitude described by (A*). Suppose, he says,

that there is a community where everyone has the following higher-order attitude.

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

Suppose, moreover, 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.

Streumer writes: "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). This is

evidence that … (A) does not express the attitude described by (A*)" (74). But this is not

entirely convincing for three reasons. First, Streumer does not say *what* is supposed to be

missing, and so it's hard to assess Streumer's feeling that something about the way we

endorse (A) is missing from the way this community endorses (L). Second, that one feels that

something about the way we endorse (A) is missing from the way this community endorses

(L) does not show that the way we endorse (A) is *actually* different from the way this

community endorses (L). It only shows that *one thinks* that the way we endorse (A) is

different from the way this community endorses (L). Streumer recognises this and retorts that

non-cognitivists must explain why some mistakenly feel that something about the way we

endorse (A) is missing from the way this community endorses (L). One plausible explanation

of this is that we do not ordinarily say of likes and dislikes that they can be correct, and this

explains the mistaken feeling: the oddity of (L) is throwing some intuitions of the scent,

making some mistakenly feel that something about the way we endorse (A) is missing from

the way this community endorses (L). And third, that something about the way we endorse

(A) is missing from the way this community endorses (L) is not evidence that (A) does not

express the attitude described by (A*). Perhaps we endorse (A) by accepting the attitude

described by (A*), but also by doing something else. If that is true, then something about the

way we endorse (A) is missing from the way this community endorses (L), but (A)

nonetheless expresses the attitude described by (A*). Streumer offers no arguments against

this possibility, and so his argument fails to show that (A) does not express the attitude described by (A*).

One notable omission in Streumer's discussion of non-cognitivism is any mention of inferential commitment theories that try to say what attitudes normative sentences express by saying what properties those attitudes or states must have—for example, 'Stealing is wrong' expresses the state that is inconsistent to be in, if you are also in the state expressed by 'Stealing is not wrong' (for discussion and references see Mark Schroeder, *Non-Cognitivism in Ethics* [London: Routledge, 2010], 128–142). This omission is notable because most cotemporary non-cognitivists would appeal to inferential commitment theories to try to say what attitude (A) expresses, and thus explain how their view is compatible with (A). Consequently, Streumer needs to engage with the relevant literature on inferential commitment theories if his treatment of non-cognitivism is to be complete and representative of contemporary non-cognitivist views.

Despite these criticisms of Streumer's argument against non-cognitivism, *Unbelievable Errors* is an outstanding book that should be read by anyone interested in the error theory and metanormative debate more generally. The arguments are interesting and are largely persuasive. The contributions Streumer makes should be central to future debates about the error theory, and I expect them to be much discussed.

St.John Lambert

University of Southampton