

Bart Streumer, *Unbelievable Errors*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. ISBN 9780198785897. Pp. 223. £45.00 Hbk.

In *The Philosophy of Logical Atomism*, Bertrand Russell wrote that the point of philosophy is to start with something so simple as not to be worth stating only to end up with something so paradoxical that no one will believe it. In his aptly named *Unbelievable Errors*, Bart Streumer has produced an exemplary case of philosophy so described. Although like many of the memorable things that Russell wrote about philosophy and philosophers the above observation may have been made partly in jest, it is nevertheless worth being reminded that the art of generating paradox is nothing new in our discipline. There could in principle be as much to learn from studying Streumer's argument for what he claims to be an unbelievable error theory as there was to learn, in Russell's time, from studying such apparently paradoxical arguments as McTaggart's proof of the unreality of time. Having said that, Streumer's efforts to present his view as the inevitable consequence of undeniable premises do sometimes border on the disingenuous. There are just too many tendentious claims ingeniously defended in this book to leave even a sympathetic reader with a serious worry that an unbelievable error theory is our unavoidable destination, as opposed to the result of having been captured in a cunningly set trap. This is not to say that we cannot admire the rigour and learning that has gone into its construction. *Unbelievable Errors* is a work that deserves to be taken seriously.

The central argument of the book can be summarized as follows. There are no normative properties, either irreducibly normative or reductively descriptive. This antirealist conclusion is secured by means of a pincer movement in which each of two exhaustive alternatives are

rejected on logically independent grounds. Yet normative judgements are cognitive states that purport to represent ontologically substantive properties and facts, including facts about reasons for action, reasons for attitudes, and – crucially for Streumer’s purposes - reasons for belief. Given that there are no such properties or facts, all normative judgements are false. This completes the error-theoretic part of the book, the central thesis of which may not be entirely original to its author, but the route to which undoubtedly is.

If this was all we had to ‘get our teeth into’, *Unbelievable Errors* would be a sophisticated defence of an unusual if somewhat extreme view, but one that would not stretch the boundaries of conventional analytical metaphysics as practiced in its currently ascendant and coercive paradigm. What stretches these boundaries are three further claims defended in the second part of the book, namely that: i) we cannot believe an error theory about all normative judgements; ii) we have no reason to believe such a theory (regardless of its truth) because in order to do so we would have to be able to believe it; and iii) the fact that we are unable to believe the error theory actually makes this theory more likely to be true because the hypothesis of its unbelievability serves to debunk the standard arguments against it. Streumer shores up his case for these claims by responding to both published and unpublished objections to his arguments, and by issuing a warning against the mistake of thinking that our inability to believe a philosophical theory should be regarded as conclusive evidence against it (as it demonstrably has by some of his illustrious predecessors).

As with all intellectual products advertised at this level of ambition, it is necessary to read the small print of Streumer’s book quite carefully in order to establish exactly what is on offer. In particular, and initial appearances to the contrary, the implications of Streumer’s argument

are not – by his own cheerful admission – quite as radical as they look. Two examples will serve to make the point. First, Streumer denies that his argument for a universal normative error theory has any tendency to undermine our confidence in our normative (including our moral and epistemic) beliefs, insofar as we are incapable both of believing this theory and of rationally assigning a sufficiently high probability to potentially defeating normative claims as a result (pp. 189-91). Hence, accepting Streumer’s argument for his unbelievable theory would seem to leave everything that ‘matters’ almost exactly as it was. Second, Streumer agrees that we can *come close to believe* the error theory, e.g. by *not fully understanding* the theory; by being *somewhat but not very confident* that the theory is true; by *believing a restricted* (e.g. morally specific) *version* of the theory; by believing that there are *strong arguments that seem to show* that the theory is true; or by *believing different parts* of the theory at different times, while implicitly changing some of our other beliefs (pp. 152-154). In fact, Streumer allows that we can actually *come to believe* the error theory, provided our belief in the theory is either *compulsive* or *deluded* (p. 140). Hence it turns out that we can, after all, believe the error-theory, if only at the cost of our beliefs no longer hanging together in a pattern of perfect rational harmony. The extent that Streumer thinks the central insight provided by his book is one we are able to recognize is therefore partly a function of how rational he thinks we either are, or should aspire to be. And he arguably needs to be quite prescriptive in this respect. For otherwise, what is to stand in the way of my compulsive love of the truth obstructing my desire to only believe things rationally?

The arguments in *Unbelievable Errors* are structurally quite harmonious, but not perfectly so. Had he been aiming for perfect structural harmony, I think Streumer might have been tempted to give the argument of his book a somewhat different, and even more radical, shape. For the conventional choice between cognitivism and non-cognitivism on which his argument

for a cognitivist error theory is premised is arguably neither more nor less vulnerable to a sceptical pincer movement than the choice between descriptive and non-descriptive normative properties that Streumer rejects in the early parts of the book. Given the infamous ‘two-faced’ appearance of moral judgements as ‘belief-like’ on the one hand and ‘desire-like’ on the other, it would surely not be beyond the reach of someone with Streumer’s considerable dialectical talents to produce just as intriguing a case for the claim that *there are really no normative judgements* as he has already produced for the claim that *there are really no normative properties*. Of course, the implication of doing this would be that we would have to reject the very terms in which Streumer’s discussion of the metaphysics of normativity takes place in this book. Yet as Russell reminded us, this is not to say that no interesting philosophical insights would be generated as a result. Perhaps the most generous thing to do, therefore, is to recommend this task to the next generation of aspiring philosophers looking for a hitherto unoccupied position in logical space. In the meantime we are left to ponder, along with Streumer and his critics, if it is really that sensible to let the claim that all ‘genuinely’ normative thought and practice is premised on a fundamental error be supported by partly stipulative claims like the following (pp. 132ff; 180): (B) It is constitutive of belief both that beliefs are closed under believed entailment and that no-one can have a belief about something while also believing that there is no reason for this belief. (Streumer: it is impossible to ‘genuinely’ believe that *p* without ‘adequately understanding’ that belief.); (A) When two people make conflicting normative judgements, at most one of these judgements is correct. (Streumer: there can be no ‘genuine’ normative conflict in the absence of perspectival-independent normative facts to decide between them); (N) Two predicates ascribe the same property if and only if they are necessarily coextensive. (Streumer: there are no ‘genuine’ properties our commitment to which is explained by such non-extensional features as their place in explanation or justification). And on it goes. So

powerful can the deceptively neutral definitions of analytical metaphysics become that, somewhat like the Inquisition, they fail to allow any logical space for interpretational variation or flexibility. Fortunately, the former movement is likely to cause less lasting damage beyond the narrow confines of the philosopher's study than did the latter.

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