

Self-Defeating Beliefs and Misleading Reasons*

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(5990 words)

Abstract: We have no reason to believe that reasons do not exist. Contra Bart Streumer (2017), this has nothing to do with our incapacity to believe this error theory. Rather, it is because if we know that *if a proposition is true, we have no reason to believe it*, then we have no reason to believe this proposition. From a different angle: if we know that we have at best misleading reasons to believe a proposition, then we have no reason to believe it. This has two consequences. Firstly, coming close to believing the error theory is idle. Secondly, philosophers who argue that believing sweeping theories like determinism or physicalism is self-defeating because they are either false or believed for no reason pursue a worthwhile argumentative strategy.

1. Introduction

Do we have reasons to believe propositions and to perform actions? Some error theories, of the *sweeping* kind, say ‘no’ (see e.g. Streumer 2017). More *modest* error theories accept that there are such reasons, but deny their ‘objectivity’ or ‘authority’. These modest error theories usually claim that reasons depend, for instance, on our desires (see e.g. Mackie 1977, 27-28), or on what we take to be important practical problems (see e.g. Husi 2013, 432).

Whatever the merit of modest error theories, it is tempting to conclude that we have no reason to believe the error theory of the sweeping kind (henceforth ‘the error theory’). For if the error theory is true, there are no normative properties, including reasons to believe the error theory – call this ‘The Basic Argument’. Not so quick, says Bart Streumer:

this argument does not show that there is no reason to believe the error theory. All it shows is that

(1) *If the error theory is true*, there is no reason to believe this theory.

And the belief that (1) is true can only make us believe there is no reason to believe the error theory if we already believe the error theory [...]. (Streumer 2017, 155)

This response is partly right. The mere fact that <if the error theory is true, we have no reason to believe it> does not imply that we have no reason to believe the error theory. Nor does it explain why we have no reason to believe it. In this sense, *The Basic Argument* is lacking.

But this response is partly wrong. For not only is it true that <if the error theory is true, we have no reason to believe it>, but we *know* that this is the case. Yet, this epistemic fact implies that we have no reason to believe the error

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theory. It also explains why we have no reason to believe the error theory. So, the spirit of *The Basic Argument* is correct.

My central claim is thus that we have no reason to believe the error theory because we know that we have no reason to believe the error theory if it is true. This explanatory claim has two consequences. The first concerns the error theory. Streumer has argued in favour of *coming close to believing the error theory*. Like me, he thinks that we have no reason to believe the error theory, but unlike me, he thinks that this is because of a *psychological fact*, namely that we cannot believe it (Streumer 2017, 171)¹. But, he also argues, if we have no reason to believe the error theory merely because we cannot, we should still try to come close to believing it. Several have already criticised Streumer's approach by arguing that we *can* believe the error theory.² Yet this sort of response is unnecessary. For, if I am right, we have no reason to believe the error theory *whether this is psychologically possible or not*. Thus, it seems idle to come close to believing the error theory.

There is a second and philosophically more important consequence of my central claim. My central claim is correct because *in general* we have no (epistemic³) reason to believe propositions that we know we have no reason to believe if they are true. For instance, since I know that <if I am a plant, then I have no reason to believe that I am a plant>, I have no reason to believe that I am a plant. Now, this general fact is crucial for many philosophical debates. Several philosophers since Epicurus (*On Nature*, XXV, 34)⁴ have criticised sweeping doctrines like physicalism, scepticism, and determinism on the basis that we can only have reasons to believe them if they are false. My paper vindicates this argumentative strategy. To believe propositions which we know to be either false or unsupported by reasons is *self-defeating*.

Here is the game plan. §2 defends my central claim by salvaging *The Basic Argument*. §3 defends the most contentious premise of my reconstruction. §4 responds to three objections and makes a modest concession. §5 discusses the two consequences I have briefly outlined. §6 shows that these results sit well with a plausible account of self-defeat.

2. Salvaging the Basic Argument

Consider again *The Basic Argument*:

If the error theory is true, there are no normative properties.

The property of being a reason for belief is a normative property.

¹ Streumer argues forcefully that we have no reason to believe what we cannot believe just like we have no reason to do what we cannot do.

² See, for instance, Ganapini (2016), Lillehammer and Möller (2015), and Olson (2016). For responses, see Forcehimes and Talisse (2016) and Streumer (2016).

³ There might be practical or all-things-considered reasons to maintain these beliefs (see e.g. James 1912, Rinard 2017).

⁴ See, for instance, Bailey (1926); Popper (1972, 223–24); Long (1992); Dworkin (2011, 225); Slagle (2016); Lockie (2018).

Therefore, there is no reason to believe the error theory.

Streumer is right to protest against this argument (2017, 155), for it is invalid. What deductively follows from the argument is:

(1) If the error theory is true, there is no reason to believe this theory.

Streumer accepts the two premises of *The Basic Argument* and so he also accepts (1).⁵ I will follow him in accepting these principles.

But might *The Basic Argument* just be *enthymematic*? Streumer asks whether the missing premise could be:

(2) If a theory is false, there is no reason to believe this theory.

Streumer rightly doubts (2). Aristotelian physics is false, but until Galileo, scholars had good reasons to accept it. This seems true of many claims of various kinds – not just theories. For instance, during the Olympics of Lake Placid in 1980, viewers had good reasons to believe that the Olympic Russian team would wipe the floor with the American team. But the Russian team lost. Therefore, we might sometimes have good reasons to believe a falsehood.⁶

I think that *The Basic Argument* is enthymematic, though (2) is *not* the missing premise. When we come to know that (1) is true, we realise that the error theory is either false or unsupported by reasons. And it follows from this that we have no reason to believe the error theory. For this argument to work, though, we need to slightly weaken the conclusion of our argument by limiting the scope of the conclusion to those who have followed the arguments of this paper ('we'). This is mainly because not everyone knows that <either the error theory is false or there is no reason to believe it>. This amendment is unproblematic for our purpose.

The revised argument has two steps, the first of which Streumer accepts:

First step

If the error theory is true, there are no normative properties.

The property of being a reason for belief is a normative property.

(1) If the error theory is true, there is no reason to believe this theory.

Now we come to know (1).⁷ This takes us to the second step:

Second step

We know that < If there are reasons to believe the error theory, it is false.>

⁵ See Streumer (2017, chap. VIII), where he explicitly endorses both premises.

⁶ If (2) is true, that is if *having a reason* is factive, *The Basic Argument* is salvaged. This might tempt those who believe that *being justified* is factive (e.g. Williamson 2000).

⁷ Streumer can admit this because he accepts the existence of knowledge (2017, 105). All we need here is something like **Closure**: If *S* knows that *p*, *S* knows that <*p* entails *q*> and *S* competently deduces *q* from *p*; then, *S* knows that *q*.

(3) If we know that <If there are reasons to believe the error theory, it is false.>, then we have no reason to believe the error theory.

(C) We have no reason to believe the error theory.

We will refer to this argument as *The Two-Step Argument*. Once we accept this argument, we can explain why we have no reason to believe the error theory. We have no reason to believe the error theory because we know that *if it is true, there is no reason to believe it*.

3. Reasons and Misleading reasons

(3), the most crucial premise of *The Two-Step Argument*, is true because it instantiates the following:

No Reason: If we know that <If there are reasons to believe p , p is false.>, then we have no reason to believe p .

No Reason is the cornerstone of this paper. (You might be worried that we virtually never have *no* reason to believe a proposition. This could be an acceptable hyperbole. After all, we do say things like ‘you have no reason to worry’ all the time, meaning perhaps ‘your reasons to worry are negligible’. Anyhow, I will show in §4 that we can qualify the principle at no cost.)

No Reason already looks good as it stands, and you might find it more appealing than any argument that could be given in its support. You know that the proposition p is either false or unsupported by reasons. If p is false and you believe it, you will believe falsely; if p is unsupported by reasons and you believe it, you will believe it for no reason. Why bother believing? Here is an analogy. On a visit to an English pub, you know the beer you are considering is either tepid or weak. If the beer is tepid, it will be unrefreshing; if the beer is weak, it will be tasteless. Why bother drinking?

Responding to this is not easy. It sometimes looks like Streumer (see 2017, 171) is trying to free-ride on the possibility that the error theory be false for the belief in it to be reasonable; and to free-ride on the possibility that the belief in the error theory be unreasonable for the belief to be true. When forming her belief, the error theorist hopes to be a reasonable false-believer; when she considers her belief content, she hopes to be an unreasonable true-believer. But this looks like a bad trick. If I know that A or B is true, that I know that A implies something unacceptable (e.g. falsehood; tepidness) and that B implies something unacceptable (e.g. unreasonableness; weakness), then I know that A or B implies something unacceptable (e.g. falsehood or unreasonableness; tepidness or weakness).

Well, beliefs are not beers: while ‘weak or tepid’ is an undesirable quality for a beer, ‘false or unsupported by reason’ might not be an undesirable quality for a belief. In fact, it is an undesirable quality, and I can explain why by showing how *having no reason to believe* and *believing falsely* can be captured by a common property. This will explain why *No Reason* is true.

The train of thought starts from the idea that reasons to believe false propositions are all *misleading*. More precisely:

Misleadingness: If p is false, and S has a reason r to believe p , r is a misleading reason for S to believe p .

Suppose that Alexis is nauseous because he is ill. Given his symptoms, his being nauseous is also a reason for thinking that he had food poisoning, albeit a misleading one. But Natalia, who has the same symptoms but whose doctor told her she has a stomach flu, has no reason to believe that she had food poisoning, and thus no misleading reason.

The train of thought continues as follows: if a subject knows that any reason to believe a proposition is at best misleading, she has no reason to believe that proposition. More precisely:

Reasonableness: If we know that \langle for all x , if x is a reason to believe p , x is misleading \rangle , then we have no reason to believe p .⁸

Why should we accept *Reasonableness*? Consider the following analogy: I tell you that you have to perform a certain manual labour; say, unscrewing a slotted screw. We both know that this labour requires a certain tool, i.e. a slotted screwdriver. But I tell you that you will either have access to an inadequate tool for the purpose, e.g. a crosshead screwdriver, or you will have no tool at all. Then, it would be unreasonable for us to expect you to succeed. It is not likely that the screw will budge. Similarly, suppose that I tell you that you have to perform a cognitive labour; say, forming a true belief about p . We both know that this cognitive labour requires a certain tool, e.g. a reason. But now, I tell you that you will either have access to a malfunctioning tool, e.g. a misleading reason, or no tool at all, i.e. no reason. Then it would be unreasonable for us to expect you to succeed. You are not likely to believe truly. If you form a true belief about p , it would merely be by lucky guess. It would in fact be just as lucky as if, dismissing your useless crosshead screwdriver, you unscrewed the *luckily loose* slotted screw with your finger nail.

Misleading reasons are malfunctioning tools in the sense that they do not fulfil their function, namely guiding us to truths.⁹ In fact, reasons to believe a proposition are reasons to believe *that this proposition is true*. But if I know that a reason is misleading, I know that it does not guide me to a truth. So, if I know that my reasons for p are at best misleading and yet believe p , I do not do any better than the person who believes a proposition by flipping a coin. In neither case am I *guided* to a truth. Identifying that a reason is at best misleading is a bit like realising that an informant is either working for the enemy (the informant is

⁸ *Reasonableness* does not mention the possibility of the inexistence of reasons, because doing so would be useless. \langle For all x , if x is a reason to believe, x is misleading \rangle is logically equivalent to \langle For all x , if x exists and is a reason to believe, x is misleading \rangle . One way of knowing this proposition is to know that there are no reasons. Another is to know that either there are no reasons, or they are misleading.

⁹ This is not to oppose the view that knowledge is the aim of belief, as Hyman demonstrates (2015, ch. 7, 8).

misleading) or uninformative (the informant is not really an informant). Listening to him is to accept being misguided, which is of course unreasonable.

In fact, *Reasonableness* captures what reasonable people do when they realise that their reasons are misleading. Take the following example. Charlotte's father asks her why she looks stressed. Charlotte responds that she misunderstands the basic rules of French grammar and that she will therefore fail her exam. Her father then shows Charlotte that in fact she understands the *basic* rules; what Charlotte misunderstood were *advanced rules* of French grammar, which she could ignore for the exam (she was unaware of this fact). Now Charlotte's father says: 'see, Charlotte, you had no reason to worry'. Charlotte is subtle: 'well, I don't have any reason to worry *anymore*.' This seems right.¹⁰ And Charlotte is right to relax now. *Reasonableness* also captures what would be wrong if Charlotte said: 'Alright dad, my reason to believe I would fail was misleading (if it exists). But I still believe I will fail the exam.' This would be a case study in *unreasonableness*: Charlotte would knowingly believe something for no reason.

To better see the interdependence between *No Reason* and *Reasonableness*, consider the following argument:

1. We know that <If there are reasons to believe p , p is false.>
(By hypothesis.)
2. If there are reasons to believe p , p is false. (By factivity of knowledge & 1.)
3. If there are reasons to believe p , they are misleading. (By *Misleadingness* & 2.)

Since we competently made this inference (still assuming our hypothesis), we get:

4. We know that <If there are reasons to believe p , they are misleading.>
5. We have no reason to believe p . (By *Reasonableness* & 4.)

No Reason: If we know that <If there are reasons to believe p , p is false.>, then we have no reason to believe p . (By discharging 1.)

You might think that *Reasonableness* and *No Reason* are equally controversial and thus that introducing *Reasonableness* fails to provide support for *No Reason*. But this would be to misunderstand its role: to *explain* why *No Reason* is true. It 'cooks' our raw intuition by explaining why we lack reasons to believe certain propositions in terms of misleading reasons.

Let us take stock. My central claim is that we have no reason to believe the error theory because we know that we have no reason to believe the error theory

¹⁰ On the background of what Charlotte knew (or rationally believed), the fact that she misunderstands the advanced rules made it more probable that she would fail her exam.

if it is true. To support this claim, I vindicated the spirit of *The Basic Argument* in the form of *The Two-Step Argument*. To do so, I used a principle I called *Reasonableness*. I now turn to three objections to *Reasonableness* (§4) and to two consequences of my central claim (§5).

4. Three Objections

I want to consider three objections to *Reasonableness* (which could also be cast as objections to *No Reason*). First, some might be tempted to identify a counterexample to *Reasonableness* which exploits the fact that sometimes we know without knowing that we know.¹¹ Thus, Sarah might know deep down that her reasons to believe she has been unfairly treated are misleading. But, until she becomes aware of this, she might still have reasons to believe that she has been unfairly treated.

I believe this first objection is a diversion: so far, our discussion has only concerned *transparent* knowledge, i.e. knowledge that we know we have. The proposition that we focus on is the sweeping error theory, and we not only know that it is at best supported by misleading reasons: *we know that we know* that it is at best supported by misleading reasons. Restricting *Reasonableness* to cases of transparent knowledge would therefore have no impact on the principle's usefulness in reconstructing *The Two-Step Argument*.

Second, some might worry that *Reasonableness* warrants epistemic dogmatism. *Epistemic dogmatism*¹² claims that if a subject knows a proposition, then she is justified in disregarding any future evidence against it, for she knows that such evidence is misleading.¹³ This looks like *Reasonableness* put in terms of evidence. Since epistemic dogmatism is highly controversial and raises worries that I clearly have not tackled¹⁴, this could be a problem. Yet *Reasonableness* is much weaker than epistemic dogmatism, for it does not warrant epistemic subjects *disregarding* misleading reasons. It only indicates that so long as the subject knows that any reason to believe *p* is misleading, this subject has no reason to believe *p*. This leaves open the possibility that the initial piece of knowledge (the knowledge that any reason to believe *p* is misleading) be defeated.

The third, and more serious, objection is as follows: *Reasonableness* overstates the consequence of coming to know that our reasons are at best misleading. Consider the following example to see the motivation for this worry. It is not raining (in Hackney), but Mike sees in the Daily Mail the headline 'HACKNEY FLOODED AGAIN'. Mike acquires a misleading reason to believe that it is raining. He then looks up the BBC website, which reports sunny weather. Mike comes to know that it is not raining. The BBC is after all very reliable and website predictions are normally better since they are updated constantly (much more

¹¹ On cases of non-transparent knowledge, see Williamson (2000, ch. 4).

¹² Kripke presented this thesis in 1972 as a paradox.

¹³ This exact principle is defended in Lasonen-Aarnio (2014b).

¹⁴ Opponents of epistemic dogmatism include Wright (2007) and Baumann (2012).

than the paper version of the Daily Mail, which Mike affectionately calls the ‘Daily Fail’). Mike thus comes to know that his initial reason was misleading. Now *Reasonableness* says that Mike has *no reason* to believe that it is raining. Yet some might be reluctant to go this far. They might prefer to say that Mike’s reasons to believe it is raining have been *weakened* or *outweighed*, but not *erased*. According to this line of thought, Mike has an *insufficient reason* to believe that it is raining rather than *no reason* to believe.

This qualification might be important, especially if we want to say that Mike’s reason could become sufficient again. Suppose that Mike later learns that the BBC website team has just been caught taking hallucinogenic drugs. Then, Mike might once again have sufficient reasons to believe that it is raining (the Daily Mail headline). In technical terms, Mike’s *defeater* (the BBC announcement) could be *defeated* and thus his initial reason would be *undefeated*. Or suppose that Mike’s neighbour waters his plants so much that Mike acquires the impression that it is raining. Then, you might want to say that Mike’s overall set of reasons will now be sufficient for believing that it is raining, thus outweighing the BBC’s claim. (Whether you think that Mike’s reason *is* sufficient depends on whether you think knowledge can ever be defeated. I take no stance on this issue.¹⁵)

In summary, the third objection goes as follows. There is a difference between having *no reason* and having *insufficient* reasons to believe; further, a reason which is known to be (at best) misleading is merely *insufficient*, but not *inexistent*.

If this third objection is correct, then we should qualify *Reasonableness*:

Reasonableness*: If we know that <for all x , if x is a reason to believe p , x is misleading>, then we have *insufficient* reason to believe p .

The disadvantage of this amendment is that it forces us to adjust the conclusion of the *Two-Step Argument* to read as follows: we have *insufficient reason* to believe the error theory.

However, this disadvantage is inconsequential because Streumer and I are in the same boat. If I should talk in terms of sufficient reasons, so should he. If *Reasonableness* must be weakened, then so should his principle according to which we have no reason to believe what we know we psychologically cannot believe. What matters is that we speak on the same level.

Still, I believe it is informative to press the objection. My original conclusion was supposed to be an indictment of the error theory. How much less of a bad thing is the new conclusion? To answer this question, we need to see what insufficient reasons are *insufficient for*.

Believing for no reason or believing for insufficient reason can neither be *rational* nor *reasonable*, at least when we believe p despite knowing that our reasons

¹⁵ See for instance Lasonen-Aarnio (2014a).

for p are at best misleading. This is a point that we discussed in §3: the only reasonable or rational thing to do when we realise that our reasons for believing are at best misleading is to refrain from believing.¹⁶ Of course, believing for insufficient reasons in this sense might be *more rational* or *more reasonable* than believing for no reason. But to believe for insufficient reason in this sense is to remain under the threshold of reasonableness or rationality. And it is this threshold that matters. Note that there might be other epistemic statuses which are incompatible with believing for insufficient reasons. However, I will leave this stone unturned.¹⁷

The gap between believing for no reason and believing for insufficient reasons narrows further once we focus on reasons which, like the reasons in favour of the error theory, *could never be sufficient*. It's fair to be careful with the concept of 'sufficient reasons' because of the phenomenon of defeat. But could our reasons be defeated here? So long as we know that our reasons to believe the error theory are at best misleading, then we know they will necessarily remain insufficient. However many powerful arguments the error theorist could muster, there is no reason why we should change our mind: we still *know* that we will at best be given more misleading reasons. As we have seen in §3, this follows almost directly from what misleading reason is and from what the sweeping error theory is. The error theorist can put up a good intellectual fight, but it is doomed to failure.

In summary, the first two objections fail straightforwardly. The third objection, if it is correct, asks Streumer and I to revise our conclusion, but in a way that favours neither of us. For simplicity's sake, I will leave aside the suggested revision for the rest of the paper.

5. Two Consequences

By defending *The Two-Step Argument*, I have vindicated my *central claim*: we have no reason to believe the error theory because we know that if the error theory is true, reasons do not exist. Let me now turn to the two consequences of this claim.

The first is that it undermines Streumer's project to convince us to come close to believing the error theory. Consider the following:

I argued in chapter X [i.e. in the passage quoted in §1] that there is no reason to believe the error theory, but not because the property of being a reason does not exist if the error theory is true. [*contra The Basic Argument*] As I have said, that only shows that

(1) *If the error theory is true, there is no reason to believe this theory,*

and the belief that (1) is true can only make us believe that there is no reason to believe the error theory if we already believe this theory,

¹⁶ This is true regardless of whether rationality is a formal requirement or a substantial requirement.

¹⁷ It's not implausible to think that I cannot *know* what I believe for insufficient reasons, setting aside self-evident and perceptual beliefs.

which I have argued we cannot do. Instead, I argued that there is no reason for us to believe the error theory *because we cannot believe this theory*. But that does not make the error theory polemically toothless. For I showed [...] that we can come close to believing this theory [...]. (Streumer 2017, 171, emphasis is mine.)

Coming close to believing a theory could mean several things: having a low credence in it, a belief in different parts of it at different times, or a belief that there are sound arguments which together seemingly imply its truth (Streumer 2017, 152-154).

If *The Two-Step Argument* is sound, Streumer's strategy is idle. For, then, it is because *the property of being a reason does not exist if the error theory is true* that there is no reason to believe it. Or, more precisely, it is because we know this.

Might Streumer show that it is *also* because we cannot believe the error theory that we have no such reason? I somehow doubt this. Take a very complex physical theory, so complex that you cannot believe it. Now, imagine that you also know that believing it would be irrational. You would need, for instance, to completely disregard the scientific consensus against it. Why do you lack reasons to believe the theory? To me the answer seems obvious: 'because believing it would be irrational'; but certainly *not*, 'because you cannot believe it'. Again, take an immoral or irrational action which you cannot perform. Why do you lack reasons to perform this action? Because it is immoral or irrational, not because you cannot perform it.

Suppose, for the sake of argument, that I am wrong: it is *also* because we cannot believe the error theory that we have no reason to believe it. Even then, Streumer's project fails. What he needs is for us to have no reason to believe the error theory *solely* or *mainly* because we cannot believe it. Otherwise, it seems idle to try to come close to believing the error theory. Again, consider a proposition which you know you would have no reason to believe; or an action which you know you would be morally wrong to perform. Since you lack reasons to believe the first or to perform the second, you also lack reasons for *coming close to* believing the first or for *coming close to* performing the second. Whether you can or cannot believe the theory or perform the action is irrelevant.

Take a case where you have no reason to believe a proposition or perform an action *merely because* you are incapable of believing this proposition or performing this action. Say you are pathologically suspicious. You might then, because of this, have no reason to let your lovely neighbour in or to believe what she says – you simply cannot. But you could have reasons to come close to letting her in (talking to her through the window) or to come close to believing what she says (raising your credence in what she says as a result of hearing her testimony). By contrast, it is idle to come close to believing the error theory.

Now, to the second consequence of my central claim. To understand it, we need to see that my central claim is correct because *in general* we have no reason to believe propositions which we know we have no reason to believe if they are

true. For instance, since I know that <if I am a plant, I have no reason to believe it>, I have no reason to believe that I am a plant. This general fact is philosophically important: it vindicates an argumentative strategy which is used in several domains of philosophy.

Consider Karl Popper's argument:

For according to [physicalism]¹⁸, any theories [...] are held because of a certain physical structure of the holder [...]. Accordingly we are deceiving ourselves [...] whenever we believe that there are such things as arguments or reasons which make us accept [physicalism]. Or in other words, physical[ism] [...] is a theory which, if it is true, is not arguable, since it must explain all our reactions, including what appears to us as beliefs based on arguments, as due to purely physical conditions [...]. (Popper 1972, 223–24)

Popper concludes that physicalism (or believing it) is 'self-defeating'. This strategy is, like my strategy against the error theory, legitimate. (I also believe Popper's strategy is successful, but this is a different story.)

The same applies to Ronald Dworkin's strategy to discredit belief in pessimistic determinism:

If pessimistic determinism [(determinism is true and so we lack free will)] is true, no one could responsibly think that he had made a wise decision in believing it. He had no choice but to believe it. (Dworkin 2011, 225)

I disagree with Dworkin: I think that to believe responsibly does not require choosing. But if this *were* correct, then Dworkin's line of reasoning *would* be a challenge for the pessimistic determinist. Dworkin's premise might be false, but his strategy is legitimate.¹⁹

Streumer has explicitly argued for the opposite: he proposes that the pessimistic determinist admit Dworkin's principle and use it *in favour of pessimistic determinism* (2016, 192-193). In fact, Streumer suggests that the pessimistic determinist take the following three steps: first, show that it is impossible to believe pessimistic determinism²⁰; second, argue that it is because of this (and presumably because of this alone) that we have no reason to believe it; third, convince us to come close to believing pessimistic determinism. Again, if I am right, this is *not* a good strategy for the pessimistic determinist for the exact same reason that it is not a good strategy for the error theorist. The second step is unwarranted.

¹⁸ Popper uses the term 'physical determinism' to refer to physicalism (see e.g. 1983, 103).

¹⁹ A striking example of this strategy can also be found in Malcom (1968, 70).

²⁰ Dworkin agrees (2011, 204).

6. Self-Defeat

Before I conclude, I want to show that what we have said so far sits well with a simple account of self-defeat. I do not mean to say that this account gives us an additional reason for rejecting the error theory. But it gives us a more general tool to avoid similarly problematic theories.

First, ‘self-defeat’ is a property of propositional attitudes like beliefs and inferences. It is not a property of propositions and arguments. If you think otherwise, you probably have in mind propositions like <No universal proposition is true.> or arguments like <No interesting argument is sound. This argument is interesting. Therefore, this argument is unsound.>. I think that we do better to follow the philosophical tradition in calling these examples ‘self-refuting’.²¹ A proposition or argument is self-refuting just when it is contradictory or unsound because it is self-referential. Clearly, the error theory, physicalism, and pessimistic determinism are *not* self-refuting.

There are two ways for a belief to be self-defeating.²² First, imagine that Tommy believes that he has no beliefs. The fact that he believes this proposition implies (and even *ensures*) that it is false. Tommy’s belief is ‘self-defeating in the sense that the *believing* (the attitude) defeats *what is believed* (the content).

Second, imagine that Tommy acquires the belief that he will have acquired no adequate (perhaps justified, reasonable, or rational) belief by the end of the day. This might in principle be true; still, his belief is self-defeating. This is because the presumed truth of Tommy’s belief implies that he does not believe it adequately. Tommy’s belief is ‘self-defeating in the sense that the truth of *what is believed* (the content) precludes the *believing* (the attitude) from being adequate.

Thus, self-defeat is a property which, when it applies to beliefs, plays on an act/object ambiguity. Nothing here really defeats *itself* – it is either the *attitude of believing* which implies that the *belief content* is false or, alternatively, it is the alleged truth of the *belief content* which implies that the *attitude of believing* is inadequate.

The following definition captures our remarks:

S s believing that p is self-defeating =_{df}

either

(Act Defeats Content) The fact that S believes that p ensures that p is false;

or

(Content Defeats Act) The presumed truth of p ensures that S believes that p inadequately.

²¹ This is the account presented in Mackie (1964); White (1989, 75); Page (1992, 423). Churchland and Popper also made use of it (Churchland 1981, Popper 1983).

²² Authors normally only focus on the second way (see e.g. Slagle 2016, 41–43).

In my definition, I use ‘ensures that’ instead of ‘implies’ to avoid the strange consequence that believing any necessary falsehood is self-defeating. There is much more to be said, but I leave it for another day.

This account allows us to maintain that it is self-defeating for us to believe the error theory, just like it is self-defeating for me to believe that I am a plant. *Content Defeats Act* is clearly instantiated in each case.²³ Similarly, if either Popper or Dworkin was right, it would follow that believing physicalism or pessimistic determinism is self-defeating respectively.

7. Conclusion

Bart Streumer accepted that:

- (1) *If the error theory is true*, there is no reason to believe this theory.

It follows from (1) and other plausible principles that we have no (sufficient) reason to believe the error theory and thus that it would be irrational or unreasonable to believe it. *Contra* Streumer, this has nothing to do with our incapacity to believe the error theory. Similarly for ‘coming close to’ believing the error theory: we lack reasons to do this as well. This conclusion generalises to any proposition that *we know* is as follows: if it is true, we have no reason to believe it. Believing these propositions is self-defeating. This has significant consequences for debates over physicalism, determinism, scepticism, and other sweeping doctrines. Believing each of them could be self-defeating, just as believing the error theory is.

8. References

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²³ This claim is true given that believing a metaethical theory for no reason is inadequate.

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