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Normative Error Theory and No Self-Defeat: A Reply to Case

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Abstract

Many philosophers have claimed that normative error theorists are committed to the claim ‘Error theory is true, but I have no reason to believe it’, which to some appears paradoxical. Case (2019) has claimed that the normative error theorist cannot avoid this paradox. In this paper, we argue that there is no paradox in the first place, that is once we clear up the ambiguity of the word ‘reason’, both on the error theorist’s side and those that claim that there is a self-defeat problem. Upon clarification, we also raise scepticism to what exactly the nature of self-defeat is meant to be.

Keywords Epistemic normativity · self-defeat · Nihilism · Error theory

1 Introduction

Normative error theory is the view that ‘normative judgments attribute properties that are never instantiated’ (Case, 2019). So, this view applies to all types of normativity, but in this paper, we are specifically concerned with moral normativity. If we are to index this to moral normativity, what we have embedded is a semantic claim and a metaphysical one. The semantic claim is that moral judgements have propositional content, and the metaphysical one is that there are no moral facts that can make the content of these judgements true (Booth, 2020). The normative error theorist is presented with a so-called self-defeat objection, since the normative error theorist is

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committed to the claim that ‘normative error theory is true, but I have no reason to believe it’. Some error theorists such as Cowie (2015) distinguish normative reasons from a different type of reason, such as epistemic reasons. Recently, Case (2019) has argued that a strategy like that fails, and that if we understand epistemic reasons as purely descriptive, the paradox rises again. We are not convinced of that. In Sect. 2, we will illustrate what exactly his argument is, and then in Sect. 3 we present an interpretation of how to read the first premise, however it comes out as false. In Sect. 4, we propose another interpretation of how to read the first premise, however, there then arises lack of clarity as to what self-defeat even means. We even take up the burden of trying to provide an account, but by doing so, leaves a core premise of the argument unmotivated. In Sect. 5, we conclude that the normative error theorist doesn’t seem to be scathed by Case’s (2019) argument, and until we reach further clarity, there doesn’t seem to be any kind of self-defeat the normative error theorist cannot avoid.

2 The Self-Defeat Argument

Before beginning with Case’s (2019) argument, we have to point out that he does not claim that normative error theory and normative scepticism are supposed to be logically contradictory. This is an issue that will be made clear later. For now, all we know is that the notion of self-defeat he has in mind is that it has the same structure of ‘Moore’s paradox’ which are sentences such as ‘It’s raining, but I don’t believe that it’s raining’ (Case, 2019). Nevertheless, the argument formally goes like this:

- (1) The error theorist is committed to the self-defeating proposition, ‘Error theory is true, but I have no reason to believe that.’
- (2) If adopting any philosophical position commits us to a self-defeating proposition, then we should reject that position.
- (3) We should reject error theory.
- (4) If we should reject error theory, then error theory is false.
- (5) Therefore, error theory is false. (Case, 2019).

The crucial premise we will be focusing on is (1). In the next section we will go over the different ways we can read (1) and that once we gain further clarity, we simultaneously lack what exactly the self-defeat is supposed to be.

3 Reason as Descriptive?

So, the first premise of the self-defeat argument says that the error theorist is committed to the claim ‘Error theory is true, but I have no reason to believe that’. If by reason there we mean something purely descriptive and non-normative, such as “S has a reason to do A if doing A is consistent with S’s desires” or at least something along these lines, then the premise is outrightly false. Case (2019) claims that this move is not available to the error theorist given what their view of normativity is:

To say that As are reducible to Bs is to affirm the existence of As as Bs. An eliminative materialist about minds, in the mould of Paul S. and Patricia M. Churchland [1998] who maintain that there are no minds or folk psychological states, must reject the view that the mind is reducible to the brain and that folk psychological states are reducible to brain states. That is because reductionism about the mind and about folk psychological states leaves these things in the picture instead of eliminating them. The error theorist must reject the view that normativity is reducible to convention-based norms for the same reason.

However, the error theorist does not have to *reduce* the concept of a categorical reason down to a constancy relation between means and ends. The error theorist can simply *eliminate* reasons that are *in the normative sense*, and then use the term reason to refer to the *descriptive* aforementioned consistency relation. The point we would, then, like to hammer down is this; if the word reason there refers to a purely descriptive, non-normative one, then (1) is not true, since the normative error theorist is not committed to the claim that they have no non-normative reason to believe error theory. In sum, we are eliminating only normative reasons, but reducing descriptive reasons to consistency relations.¹

4 Reason as Normative?

Another way we may be able to read (1) is that if ‘reason’ means categorical, normative reason. Let us recall what (1) reads as currently:

(1) The error theorist is committed to the self-defeating proposition, ‘Error theory is true, but I have no reason to believe that.’

Once we transform the word reason into the categorical, normative notion of reason, then we just see that the proposition is just an entailment of normative error theory. That is to say, it is embedded into the thesis of normative error theory that no one, ever, has any reason (in the normative sense) to do anything. So, then (1) reads as:

(1*) The error theorist is committed to self-defeating proposition, ‘Error theory is true, but I have no normative reason to believe that.’

It now slowly starts to become unclear where the self-defeat is supposed to be. We have already established, in the previous section, that the normative error theorist could have descriptive, non-normative reasons to believe in error theory. Case (2019) himself believes this as he states it in terms of ‘compelling indications’.

If we understand that it’s an entailment of error theory (1*) can be read as follows:

¹ This reduction of descriptive reasons to a consistency relation simply means that when we use the term reason in any given context, we are just referring to a means-ends consistency relation. We are not making any view as to what the nature of all reasons are, just providing a semantics in which one can engage in ‘reason discourse’ without appealing to normativity, which is already being denied.

(1**) The error theorist is committed to self-defeating proposition, ‘Error theory is true, but some part of error theory is true.’

Now it is even more unclear where the self-defeat lies. In Sect. 2, I alluded to the fact that Case (2019) points out that he is not claiming the self-defeat is one of a contradiction, but one in terms of Moore’s paradox. That helps us a little bit, but if that is all self-defeat means, then (1) may not need to be what we should focus on, but (2) becomes unmotivated. Because the Self-Defeat argument becomes:

(L1) The error theorist is committed to the Moorean paradox, ‘Error theory is true, but I have no reason to believe that.’

(L2) If adopting any philosophical position commits us to a Moorean paradox, then we should reject that position.

(L3) We should reject error theory.

(L4) If we should reject error theory, then error theory is false.

(L5) Therefore, error theory is false. (Case, 2019).

With the above argument, we have three worries to bring up. The first is the question of what exactly the Moorean paradox is. If we are to understand it in terms of ‘P, but I *do not believe* P’, we are to find no such thing that the normative error theorist is committed to. We simply have ‘There are no categorical reasons (P), so I *do not have categorical reasons* to believe (P)’. We can clearly distinguish what paradigmatic Moorean paradoxes are from what we may call illusory Moorean paradoxes; in the paradigmatic Moorean paradoxes we have the assertion ‘P’, then asserting that we do not believe ‘P’. However, what the error theorist is committed to is not the assertion ‘P’, and then asserting that they don’t believe ‘P’. It is the *entailment* of ‘P’. The entailment of there being no categorical reasons, is that no one has categorical reasons. So, we levy our question again, what exactly is the form of the paradox such that we can say the normative error theorist is committed to it?

The second worry is that if we are not given the form, we can generalise this argument to almost any philosophical position. Case (2019) does bring up this objection, but we are sceptical with regards to how he addresses it. Case (2019) states:

If the Self-Defeat Argument overgeneralizes so as to impugn other apparently reasonable views however, then we might have grounds to be suspicious of it.

Let us discuss eliminativism regarding folk psychology, as he does, and how he thinks that view gets around Moore-paradoxicality. He states that the eliminativist regarding folk psychology could say ‘Eliminativism is true, and although I do not believe it is true, there is some sense, a sense that neuroscience will eventually uncover, in which I affirm it to be true’ (Case, 2019). However, why can the symmetry not be made for the error theorist? The error theorist could say ‘Error theory is true, and although there are not categorical reasons I take to believe it true, there are ‘epistemic indicators’ which lead me to believe it’. This seems a clear symmetry to us. But, *even* if this symmetry is to be rejected, we may take Case’s worry about overgeneralization to the maximum:

Consider the argument (L1) – (L5) again, but instead of putting the normative error theorist under (L1), we have the ‘God error theorist’. This is just a view that says there are no *reasons from God*. Let’s make the symmetry clear before we put the God error theorist under the argument. So, the error theorist is committed to:

E1: Error theory is true, but I have no categorical reason to believe that.

The God error theorist is committed to:

G1: God error theory is true, but I have no reasons from God to believe that.

Now, let’s see where putting G1 under the argument leads us:

(L1*) The God error theorist is committed to the Moorean paradox, ‘God Error theory is true, but I have no reason *from God* to believe that.’

(L2*) If adopting any philosophical position commits us to a Moorean paradox, then we should reject that position.

(L3*) We should reject God error theory.

(L4*) If we should reject God error theory, then God error theory is false.

(L5*) Therefore, God error theory is false. (Case, 2019).

Lastly, our third worry is, assume we have been given some structure of the sort of Moorean paradox Case is getting at, that also does not succumb to the overgeneralisation problem. Work needs to be done on motivating (L2), which Case does not present. We cannot speak much regarding this problem, but it allows for fresh, new inquiry into what views that could be rejected on the basis of being committed to this structure.

5 Conclusion

In conclusion, then, we have discussed the Self-Defeat argument against normative error theory and explained how on the different ways we can read the argument, it does not pose any problem for the error theorist. We have shown that if the word ‘reason’ in the argument is a purely descriptive, non-normative one, then the premise comes out false. On the other hand, if the word ‘reason’ refers to a normative one, it’s just an entailment of error theory that no one has any normative reasons. This is what leads us to put into question what exactly the self-defeat is supposed to be.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest We as the authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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