

## Denying Doxastic Reasons

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1. Tom has mounting evidence that he has incurable cancer, but he also believes that he would be happier, regardless of the truth, were he to believe that he is healthy.

W.K.Clifford, who famously claimed, “It is wrong, always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence,” would, depending upon the strength of Tom’s evidence, direct him to believe that he has incurable cancer, no matter the results for his happiness. The pragmatist William James, on the other hand, might deem this one of those situations in which it is permissible to follow one’s passions, and therefore might advise Tom to trust in his health in the face of the evidence that he is unwell.

What makes the debate between evidentialists and pragmatists so vexing is the difficulty of finding neutral ground upon which to adjudicate it. Evidentialists and pragmatists simply seem to have different philosophical conceptions of what could count as a legitimate reason for belief, and it is difficult to see what could count in favor of or against their competing normative commitments. Consequently, most arguments for one particular side are dialectically ineffective because they start from assumptions that the other side does not accept.

In previous work I have attempted to break this impasse.<sup>1</sup> I noticed that the philosophical debate between evidentialists and pragmatists about the legitimate *grounds* for belief is mirrored in the conflicting mechanisms by which beliefs are *caused*. These uncontroversial psychological facts about the causes of belief, I argued, provide the clue to a resolution of this long-standing philosophical debate.

No one denies that there are many, often competing, psychological mechanisms implicated in belief-formation. Surely those who think that evidence *never* influences belief are mistaken, but it *is* entrenched in commonsense that evidence does not always have decisive influence on belief. Accusations that preferences influence belief either directly or indirectly—by blocking an agent from seeing evidence contrary to his preferred views or by making him susceptible to a fallacious line of reasoning—are common. Recent debates about how intelligence and poverty are related and about whether human sexual behavior is biologically determined are rife with such accusations on both sides, and while individual charges of prejudice might be disputed, the legitimacy of this type of criticism is taken for granted by all sides.

At the same time, it is an equally obvious fact that when we consciously attempt to figure out what to believe—i.e., when we *deliberate*—we invariably focus our attention on the evidence. If I want to determine whether to *believe* that Obama will win the election, as opposed to deciding whether to fantasize about Obama winning the election, I don't ask myself whether I or anyone else would be better off if Obama were president.

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<sup>1</sup> Nishi Shah, 'A New Argument for Evidentialism,' *Philosophical Quarterly* 56:225, 481-498 (2006)

Instead, when I am attempting to figure out what to believe, I feel compelled to look for evidence in support of or contrary to the proposition that Obama will win the election: I open the newspaper, turn on the news, or conduct polls. Similarly, when Tom *deliberates* about whether to believe that he has cancer, he recognizes immediately that this question is to be answered by, and only by, evidence whether he does have cancer. While he may realize that it would make him happy to believe that he is healthy, when he actually attempts to form a belief about the matter, he finds himself restricted to thinking about what is true, not what would make him happy. Were William James to advise Tom that he would be better off believing that he is healthy, he would be offering him advice that Tom could not, as a matter of fact, follow.

While both of the above facts are widely accepted, it has not been appreciated how difficult it is to construct an account of belief that accommodates both of them. I believe that the best explanation for these psychological facts decides the debate in favor of the evidentialists. Unlike other belief-forming processes such as sensory perception, in which, for example, one comes to believe that it is snowing outside solely on the basis of seeing that it is snowing it is outside, deliberation involves the subject's application of the concept of belief. And the concept of belief, I argue, contains within it the normative standard that a belief is correct if and only if it is true. Thus when one deliberates whether to have an attitude conceived as a *belief*, one deliberates about an attitude to which one applies this standard, and so, as Clifford insisted, one is committed to considering it with an eye exclusively to whether it is true. In contrast to other accounts of deliberation, my account acknowledges the indisputable fact that beliefs can be influenced by non-

evidential considerations, because my view entails only that one is forced to apply belief's standard of correctness in situations in which one exercises the concept of belief. Not all belief-forming processes require the subject to deploy the concept of belief, so the normative standard of truth that controls deliberation needn't causally control other processes, such as wishful thinking. My account thus explains the exclusive role that truth plays in governing deliberation while allowing for the fact that our passions sometimes influence belief.<sup>2</sup> Since the debate between evidentialists and pragmatists is not about the causes of belief, but instead about what normative standard to apply in determining what to believe, we have no choice but to accept the evidentialist standard. Whether one explicitly recognizes it or not, one is committed to evidentialism just in virtue of asking what to *believe*.

2. My concern here is not to re-argue my case against pragmatism, but to confront a more radical opponent of evidentialism. The opponent I have in mind is an *error-theorist* about doxastic reasons. He rejects evidentialism not because he thinks there are pragmatic reasons for belief, but because he thinks that there are no reasons for belief at all. He claims that our practice of reason-attributions is defective in the same way that the practice of witch-attributions is defective. Just as no persons have the property of being a witch, so there are no facts or states of affairs that have the property of being a reason for belief. Any judgment that attributes to something the property of being a reason for belief is, therefore, false.

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<sup>2</sup> This is just a brief summary of an argument I give elsewhere. See Nishi Shah, 'How Truth Governs Belief,' *Philosophical Review*, 112:4, 447-82 (2003).

The error-theorist may accept the following conditional:

If there are reasons for belief, then they are constituted by evidence.

What he denies is the antecedent of the conditional. In the debate between evidentialists and pragmatists, both sides accept that there are reasons for belief. Arguing for evidentialism in this context thus does not require arguing for the antecedent of the conditional, and most defenses of evidentialism in fact do not attempt to do so. The error-theorist may be happy to grant that the evidentialist is correct about what reasons for belief would be if there were any. But this concession does not move him any distance towards accepting evidentialism, just as conceding that if God exists God is omniscient does not move an atheist any distance towards believing in God. Addressed to the error-theorist, arguments favoring evidentialism over pragmatism merely beg the question.

The error-theorist, though, goes beyond merely denying that there are reasons for belief. He claims that there is a practice that we engage in which commits us to judgments about doxastic reasons, but this practice is based on an error because there are no doxastic reasons. This involves more than the assertion that propositions attributing reasons for belief are all false. Think of a topic about which we are all error-theorists, witch-discourse. We think that people who believed (or continue to believe) that certain people are witches were mistaken. To arrive at this claim, we must be able to attribute these beliefs to certain people. Unless we are able to identify practices in which some people held such beliefs, there would be no sense to be made of our claim that anyone has

ever been *mistaken* about the existence of witches. At a minimum, to arrive at an error-theory about reasons for belief, those who accept the conditional above must argue for the following two claims:

1. There is a practice of making judgments of the form ‘S possesses evidence that gives S a reason to believe that p’.
2. Judgments of the form ‘S possesses evidence that gives S a reason to believe that p’ are systematically false.

There are two ways that an error-theorist can argue for the second claim. One is to argue that although evidence that p is a reason to believe that p, we can never be in possession of such evidence for any of our beliefs. Thus any judgments we make that someone has a reason for believing some proposition are false. The other way to argue for the second claim is to leave unchallenged claims that we possess evidence for the truth of some propositions, but to deny that the possession of that evidence gives us a reason to believe those propositions on the grounds that there are no normative properties. If there are no normative properties, then evidence fails to have the normative property of rationalizing belief.

Once one seriously considers the scope of the error-theorist’s thesis, it is easy to see that arguments of the first type are self-defeating. The error-theorist is claiming not merely that there is some class of propositions (e.g. about the external world) that we are

evidentially unwarranted in believing, nor is he merely claiming that we are unwarranted in believing all the propositions that we in fact do believe; he is claiming that there are no possible propositions that we could be evidentially warranted in believing. Any argument for this very general thesis is self-defeating on its face. There could not be good evidence that no possible beliefs could be evidentially justified, since if there were, then there would be good evidence for at least one possible belief, namely, the belief that all beliefs are evidentially unwarranted. If there really is a problem about how there can be good evidence for belief, it is a problem for the error-theorist as much as anyone else.

What about the second type of argument for an error-theory of reasons for belief, which purports to reject the claim that there are reasons for belief on the basis of an argument that there are no normative truths about what one ought to believe, which itself is likely part of a larger argument that there are no normative truths about anything? This will be the focus of the rest of the paper. In what follows I argue that my previous defense of evidentialism can be used to undermine error-theories that are based on this type of argument. I conclude by discussing whether my refutation of the error-theorist is an illegitimate form of transcendental argument.

3. Someone who argues that there are no true judgments ascribing reasons for belief on the basis of a general rejection of normative facts does not deny that we can ever get evidence for any propositions; in fact, he claims to have evidence that there are no true normative propositions about what one ought to believe. Instead, he rejects the inference from

e is evidence for p

to

e is a reason to believe that p.

The first claim describes a non-normative relation that one proposition, if true, bears to another proposition; the second is a normative claim that endorses having a disposition to believe some proposition on the basis of some other (true) proposition. This type of error-theorist accepts claims of the first type, but argues that the inference is invalid because all normative claims of the latter type are false. The fact that the error-theorist's argument for the former claim is itself based on evidence thus does not contradict anything he asserts, since he does not deny that we can have evidence for our beliefs. Nonetheless, I think there is an incoherence lurking in any such argument.

In order for there to even be an inference to be blocked, the claims must be distinguishable. If the concept of evidence is identical to the concept of a reason for belief, then the claim that e is evidence for p is not distinct from the claim that e is a reason to believe that p, and the error-theorist cannot even begin his argument. Those who think evidence is defined in terms of subjective probability, and that subjective probability is defined in terms of rational credence, will deny the error-theorist the ground on which to begin his argument. But I believe that evidence is a non-normative relation between propositions, so I am willing to grant the error-theorist the claim that an



inference is needed to arrive at claims about reasons for belief from claims about evidence.

Our error-theorist must attribute judgments about reasons for belief and demonstrate that these beliefs are systematically false. The question is whether these two conditions can be jointly fulfilled. Let us focus on a particular type of such judgment:

That it visually appears to one that p (under conditions C) is a reason to believe that p.

What is one doing in making this judgment? Non-cognitivists say that one is expressing a conative (non-cognitive) state that motivates one to believe that p when it appears to one that p, whereas cognitivists say that one is expressing a belief whose propositional content is that the fact that it visually appears to one that p is a reason to believe that p. If one claims that the judgment is a non-cognitive state, then the question of its truth or falsity doesn't arise, and claiming that it is false makes no sense. If all judgments about reasons for belief were classified as non-cognitive states, an error-theory thus would be unreachable. If one claims instead that the judgment expresses a belief that the fact that it visually appears to one that p is a reason to believe that p, one must fulfill all the conditions required to make such a belief-ascription. So let us focus then on such a judgment:

John believes that visual appearances are reasons for belief.

What is involved in making this judgment? According to the argument I have given against pragmatism, ascriptions of belief require making normative judgments: to ascribe a belief one must judge, implicitly at least, that the mental state so classified is *correct* if and only if it is true.<sup>3</sup> Judging that John believes that the fact that it visually appears to him that p is a reason for him to believe that p thus entails a commitment to the following normative judgment:

John's belief that visual appearances are reasons for belief is correct iff its content is true.

This is not equivalent to the claim that John's belief that visual appearances are reasons for belief is true iff it is true. 'Correct' does not mean 'true'. Strictly speaking, propositions, not beliefs, are true or false; beliefs are psychological states whose contents are true or false but are themselves neither true nor false. The claim above states that beliefs are normatively assessable as correct or incorrect in virtue of the non-normative property that their propositional contents have of being true or false.

How are we to understand this commitment to a norm of correctness implicit in the ascription to John of the belief that visual appearances are reasons for belief? If we interpret it as a non-cognitive state, then, as before, the possibility of an error-theory cannot arise with respect to the normative judgment expressed by it. To judge that John believes that visual appearances are reasons for belief would not itself be a belief, and

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<sup>3</sup> My purpose here is not to defend my previous argument against pragmatism, but to demonstrate that, if correct, it defeats the error-theorist as well.

thus would be incapable of being true or false. Suppose that the commitment to the norm of correctness is a belief whose content is that the belief one has ascribed has the normative property of being correct if and only if its content is true. Thus, judging that John believes that visual appearances are reasons for belief would require believing the following normative proposition:

John's belief that visual appearances are reasons for belief is correct if and only if visual appearances are reasons for belief.

If one were an error-theorist about normativity in general—believing amongst other things that there is no normative property of wrongness and thus no true propositions attributing this property to anything—one therefore would be committed to believing the following two inconsistent claims:

There are no true normative propositions.

John's belief that visual appearances are reasons for belief is incorrect.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The inconsistency can be made more transparent if we frame the two claims the error-theorist is committed to in terms of properties. Here are the two claims reformulated:

There are no normative properties.

The belief that lying is wrong has the normative property of being incorrect.

Those whose metaphysical scruples cause them to recoil at talk of the existence of properties obviously will reject this formulation of the error-theorist's commitments.

The second claim is itself a normative proposition that must be false if the first claim is true. And this case obviously generalizes to attributions of all normative beliefs.

Attributing normative beliefs to others commits one to believing normative propositions oneself.

Even someone who attempts to argue for an error-theory about doxastic reasons without committing himself to a more general error theory about normativity is in trouble. Unlike an error-theorist about normative judgments in general, the error-theorist I have in mind does not reject all reason attributions, he only rejects attributions of reasons for belief. Nonetheless, he will have to attribute beliefs about doxastic reasons to others; otherwise he will have no subject matter about which to be an error-theorist. In order to attribute the beliefs that he rejects, he must commit himself to the judgment that such beliefs would be correct if their contents were true. Attributing beliefs of any kind, including beliefs about doxastic reasons, thus commits him to the following general claim:

If S possesses evidence that p, then S possesses information that indicates that believing p would be correct.

A reason for a belief just is a consideration that indicates that the belief would be correct, therefore the above claim entails that:

If S possesses evidence that p, S has a reason to believe that p.

But this just is the type of claim that the error-theorist about doxastic reasons sought to deny. Unlike the error-theorist about evidence, he is not an error-theorist about judgments such as ‘S possesses evidence that p’. Instead, he denies that evidence constitutes a reason for belief, which is just to deny that if someone possesses evidence for a proposition then the person possesses a reason to believe that proposition. By attributing beliefs about doxastic reasons, the error-theorist about doxastic reasons thus commits himself to the falsity of his own view.

The error-theorist about doxastic reasons faces a dilemma. He claims that all normative judgments attributing doxastic reasons are false, that there are no normative truths that would make some of our normative judgments about reasons for belief true. He must decide whether these normative judgments express beliefs or not. If he decides that they do not, then he must admit that normative statements about doxastic reasons, contrary to surface appearances, do not express propositions. If normative statements about reasons for belief do not express propositions, then it is not the case that they are false, contrary to the error-theorist’s central contention. But if the error-theorist decides that normative judgments about doxastic reasons express beliefs, and attributing a belief entails making a normative judgment, he cannot consistently claim that there are no reasons for belief.

4. The preceding argument against an error-theory about doxastic reasons depends on the claim that ascriptions of belief involve a commitment to truth as the standard of correctness for belief: to ascribe the belief that *p* entails a commitment to the judgment that the belief is correct if and only if *p*. My argument for this claim is an inference to the best explanation: the best explanation of the fact that deliberating whether to believe that *p* requires determining whether *p* is that one applies the norm of truth to one's reasoning in exercising the concept of belief.

It might appear that this argument, even if correct, only yields the conclusion that first-personal deliberation about what to believe involves an application of the norm of truth; it does not yield the further claim that third-personal ascriptions of belief entail any such normative commitment. After all, the phenomenon I sought to explain is essentially first-personal—our experience of what it is like to deliberate about what to believe. Why should the explanation of it have implications for the contents of the third-personal point of view taken up by the error-theorist in ascribing beliefs?

This objection is of a piece with objections to Kantian strategies that seek to ground the objectivity of ethical norms in features that are constitutive of the first-personal experience of being an agent. Even if Kant's claim that one cannot be a practical agent—someone who experiences his choices as free—unless one accepts the Categorical Imperative (CI) is true, it does not follow that we ought to follow the CI or that the propositions about what we have practical reason to do that are derivable from the CI are true. To show that a certain normative judgment is inescapable from the first-person point

of view is not tantamount to showing that it is true. Our experience of freedom may just be an illusion built into the very fabric of our agency.

If Kantian arguments can at best achieve conclusions limited to claims about what must be accepted within the first-person point of view, these conclusions will be vulnerable to error-theories. Error-theories spring from doubts that arise when we attempt to take up an impersonal point of view on the universe, including that part of the universe that includes creatures with subjective points of view. From the impersonal point of view, our normative judgments can appear to be of a piece with judgments about unicorns or witches, judgments that have no chance of being true. Claims about what must be accepted within the subjective point of view that we inhabit as doxastic and practical agents cannot undermine these doubts. Those who are gripped by such doubts will not see these Kantian claims as a vindication of our moral or epistemic practice; they will see these conclusions as condemning us to inescapable error.

Transcendental arguments seek to vindicate the objective validity of our fundamental normative judgments by bridging the gap between the first- and third-personal points of view. They aim to establish results about how things are on the basis of claims about what we must believe either to be doxastic or practical agents. I, like most philosophers, am skeptical that any such argument can be made to work. Once the Kantian makes the bifurcation between the first and third points of view, no argument can bring them back together. Psychological claims about what people believe, even if they state necessary

truths about agents, do not imply conclusions about the truth of the contents of those beliefs.

As long as the results of Kantian arguments are confined to claims about what norms must be accepted from the first-personal point of view, error-theories about those norms appear to be left open. But the long history of failed transcendental arguments is strong evidence that attempts to go beyond these results to prove the “objective validity” of these norms are hopeless. So how can I claim to have refuted an error-theory about doxastic reasons on the basis of claims about what one must accept to engage in deliberation about what to believe, which is an essentially first-personal phenomenon?

I reject the claim that my argument is limited to conclusions about the first-personal point of view. On the other hand, I don't think that my argument establishes, as transcendental arguments attempt to do, any substantive normative results. Let me explain.

Why think the best explanation of first-personal *deliberation* about what to believe commits us to claims about the third-personal *attribution* of beliefs? The answer lies in recognizing that while deliberation about what to believe requires deliberating about what is true, other kinds of deliberation, such as deliberation about what to imagine or suppose, do not require deliberating about what is true. When a mystery writer deliberates about whether to imagine that the butler did it, he obviously does not ask himself whether the butler really did it; he asks whether portraying the butler as the guilty party would be the



most satisfying resolution of the plot. This difference between doxastic and other kinds of deliberation requires explanation. If we accept that the best explanation of why deliberating whether to believe that *p* gives way to deliberation whether *p* is that in asking the former question one applies the norm of truth, then the question becomes why we apply this norm when we ask what to believe but not when we ask what to imagine or suppose.

Once the question is posed in this way, it answers itself. What distinguishes deliberation about what to believe from deliberation about what to imagine or suppose is that it is deliberation about what to *believe*; that is, asking the question that frames doxastic deliberation as opposed to other kinds of deliberation, requires exercising the concept of belief. The source of the application of the norm of truth thus must lie here, in the exercise of that concept. It is because the concept of belief includes the norm of truth that when we exercise this concept we apply this norm. But if the norm is contained in the concept of belief, then we are committed to applying this norm whenever we exercise the concept—in first-personal deliberation about what to believe and third-personal attributions of belief alike. To claim that we are committed to applying the norm only in first-personal deliberation is to deny that the norm is included in the concept of belief; and to deny this is to leave it a mystery why one specific kind of deliberation—deliberation about what to believe—and not deliberation about what to imagine or suppose—involves the application of this norm.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> For an alternative explanation of the truth-directed nature of doxastic deliberation see Asborn Steglich Petersen, "No Norm Needed: on the Aim of Belief", *Philosophical Quarterly* 56:225, 499-516 (2006).

But haven't I just made a transcendental argument, moving from a claim about what one must accept to be an epistemic agent to a conclusion about the correctness of what one accepts? From the claim that one must accept truth as the standard of correctness for belief when one engages in doxastic deliberation haven't I claimed to establish the result that truth is the standard of correctness for belief?

No. I have argued that in order to be an epistemic agent or to attribute beliefs one must accept the norm of truth. But I have not argued that these normative commitments are true beliefs about an independent normative realm, because I have not argued that any attributions of belief are true. What I have argued is that one cannot coherently judge that people have beliefs about the norm of truth or reasons for belief and reject the norm of truth or deny that there are reasons for belief. From this nothing follows about whether anyone has ever believed anything or whether it is even possible for anyone to believe anything; thus nothing follows about whether anyone has ever or could ever have a reason for belief.

Is there a way to underwrite an inference from the fact that we commit ourselves to normative judgments in attributing beliefs to the truth of those judgments? Well, if normative truths were themselves metaphysically constituted by our normative judgments, as constructivists contend, this inference would be warranted. Metaethical constructivism, in its most general form, takes the following form:

**Metaethical Constructivism:**

The property of being F, where 'F' stands for a normative predicate, is such that for any x, if x is F, then x is F because S would *believe* that x is F (under non-normative conditions C).

If the requisite non-normative conditions are fulfilled, someone's judging that they believe that p and thus that they are in a state of mind that is correct iff p makes it the case that they are in a state with a correctness condition. If constructivism is true, mere attributions of belief are sufficient to refute the error-theorist.

Whether the error-theorist can be refuted in this way depends on whether constructivism really can be combined with the claim that it is constitutive of being a belief that it is correct iff its content is true. Unfortunately, trying to combine these two views leads to a vicious regress.

If the normative property of being correct if and only if its content is true is what distinguishes belief from other attitudes, then being a belief is a normative property and the constructivist owes us an account of it. That is, the constructivist owes us an account of the property of being a belief. The constructivist schema as applied to beliefs would have the following structure:

**Belief Constructivism:**

The property of believing that  $p$  is such that, for any subject R, if R believes that  $p$ , it is the case that R believes that  $p$  because S would *believe* that R believes that  $p$  (under conditions C).

Since belief facts are themselves normative facts, in order to complete this account, the constructivist needs to provide an account of the fact that S believes that R believes that  $p$ . The fact that S believes that R believes that  $p$  therefore itself must be constructed out of further belief facts if a fully general constructivism about normativity is correct. The account thus has the following structure:

The fact that S believes that  $p$  is constituted out of the fact that T would believe that S believes that  $p$  (under conditions C), which is itself constituted out of the fact that U would believe that T believes that S believes that  $p$  (under conditions C), etc...

We end up with a regress, with belief facts being constructed out of further belief facts, which in turn must be constituted out of further belief facts, and so on *ad infinitum*. The problem with such a regress is that it prevents the constructivist from establishing that the normative judgments involved in belief-attributions are metaphysically prior to the beliefs that they attribute. Such a regressive formula at best describes a necessary connection between belief-attributions and beliefs. Such a necessary connection, though, is what constructivism was meant to underwrite, not merely to re-state. If this regressive formula is the most the constructivist can provide, then he cannot justify inferring the existence of any beliefs from the fact that we attribute beliefs.

Defeating the error-theorist, though, does not require achieving such a strong result. The error-theorist attempts to take an impersonal, detached perspective on human beings, and from this perspective he attempts to pass judgment on our normative judgments about doxastic reasons. This, I claim, he cannot coherently do. In order to attribute judgments to us that he can then condemn as false, the error-theorist must think of them as beliefs. Conceiving of them as beliefs, though, requires applying the norm of truth to them. Given that our error-theorist is not skeptical about evidence, he will be committed to the existence of reasons for at least some of our beliefs. He thus cannot coherently find us to be systematically in error in our attributions of reasons for belief or in our normative judgments in general.

Attributing beliefs about anything, including beliefs about doxastic reasons, is inconsistent with the complete denial of doxastic reasons. But this is just what the error-theorist attempts to do. The error-theorist does not just assert that there are no reasons for belief; he goes further and claims that our practice of making judgments about reasons for belief is therefore defective. Unless our practice commits us to believing that there are doxastic reasons, the former claim does not entail the latter claim. To reach his conclusion, the error-theorist thus must attribute beliefs about doxastic reasons to us, but, as I have argued, this very attribution commits him to the existence of doxastic reasons. The error-theorist cannot reach his threatening conclusion that our practice of making normative judgments about beliefs is defective without denying the claim on which this

conclusion is based. By attributing beliefs to us, the error-theorist must abandon his normatively detached point of view and accept the existence of reasons for belief.