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## MOOREAN ABSURDITIES AND THE NATURE OF ASSERTION

John N. Williams

### I. The Problem

Over fifty years ago, G.E. Moore pointed out that to say, 'I went to the pictures last Tuesday but I don't believe that I did' [11, p. 543] or 'I believe that he has gone out, but he has not' [12, p. 204] would be 'absurd' [11, p. 543; 12, p. 204]. The importance of this discovery of a class of possibly true yet absurd assertions was first recognised by Wittgenstein, who once said that it was the only work of Moore's that greatly impressed him [9, p. 56].

Moore's own account of the absurdity, that my assertion that *p* 'implies' my lack of belief that not-*p* [12, p. 204], was the starting point for early explanations, notably: that Moorean propositions are falsified by their own utterance [3, pp. 85-87]; that they cannot be asserted [2, pp. 28-31; 10, pp. 215-218]; that they are always pointless utterances [28, pp. 24-25]; that they cannot be believed [6, p. 67]; and that they cannot be used to express a belief [32, p. 119]. Recent explanations include Sorensen's claim that Moorean sentences are particular kinds of 'blindspots', namely possible truths on which certain epistemic attitudes cannot (given background constraints) get a grip [15, pp. 52-53], an important consequence of which is that truth cannot be explained in terms of belief. A completely different approach is current in rival explanations of the absurdity in terms of self-defeating intentions on the part of the speaker [1, p. 228; 7, p. 185; 20, pp. 237-238]. Wittgenstein's account, that a statement of belief that *p* is itself a kind of assertion that *p* [29, § 478; 31, p. 177], has been lately defended by Linville and Ring [8, p. 296], Heal [5, p. 21] and recently modified by Goldstein [4, pp. 94-95].

This diversity of explanations, as well as their vulnerability to criticism (see [15, ch. 1] and [24, pp. 38-46]), shows that the topic deserves respect if only because of its recalcitrance. A major fault of most of the early explanations is that they fail to recognise that Moore's examples typify two different forms of Moorean propositions, namely (a) '*p* and I don't believe that *p*' and (b) '*p* and I believe that not-*p*' (first recognised in my [21, pp. 141-142]). A second continuing fault is the failure to recognise that the absurdity of Moorean *belief* needs to be explained, as well as the absurdity of Moorean *assertion*.

Wittgenstein correctly attributes the importance of Moorean propositions to the fact that the absurdity is 'similar to a contradiction, though it isn't one' and credits Moore with having 'said something about the logic of assertion' [31, p. 177]. The study of the particular 'nonsense' involved in Moorean assertion can shed light on the difficult idea of assertion itself.

I recently argued (in [27, pp. 160-166]) that the absurdity of assertions of the forms (a) and (b) cannot be explained in terms of the speaker's intentions, because there is no intentional structure common to all types of assertion. For example, my intention may be to let you know or make you believe what I say, or let you know or make you believe

that I believe or know it. Such differences are partly reflected in descriptions of my assertion as informing or misinforming, lying or avowing.

By contrast, there is a feature shared by any describable type of hearing (whether ignoring, overhearing, listening to, or eavesdropping on what I say): in all cases, the assertor offers the hearer (and affords secondary eavesdroppers) the *prima facie* justification to believe him, in other words, to believe that he is sincerely telling the truth. The offer turns out to be worthless when the assertion is Moorean. Just as Moorean propositions cannot be rationally believed, so their assertors cannot be rationally believed or cannot be believed to be rational.

I will now develop this analysis and extend it from *Moore's* propositions to *Moorean* propositions such as *God knows I am an atheist* or *I believe that this proposition is false*, in order to show that any proposition correctly defined as Moorean is absurd in one of two different but related ways, as exhibited by the paradigm cases of (a) and (b). This extended analysis also explains why Moorean sentences can sometimes be used without absurdity. Having thus examined what goes wrong and what goes right in assertion, I will defend an account of assertion itself.

## II. The Absurdities Of Moore's Propositions

There can be cases in which I insincerely (untruthfully) tell the truth. I might pretend to let you know something which in fact is just a lucky guess. My attempt to deceive you with a lie may be defeated by the fact that my belief in the falsehood of my assertion is mistaken. But unless you recognise such rare cases for what they are, your justification for thinking that I'm telling the truth, includes the justification for thinking me sincere.

So in asserting that *p*, I normally *express* a belief that *p* in the sense that I afford you the *prima facie* justification for thinking me sincere, by affording you the *prima facie* justification for thinking me a truth-teller.

What justifies this ascription of truth? Not Moore's claim [11, pp. 542-543] that lying is *vastly* exceptional, nor against my strengthened version of it [27, p. 164] that insincerity and falsehood are *necessarily* exceptional, both of which invite challenge by sceptical brains-in-vats or evil demon scenarios.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, the rational thing to do is to take appearances at face-value, unless keen observation indicates otherwise. So what entitles you to take me as sincere and truthful is the experientially undefeated presumption that insincerity and falsehood *are* exceptional. When asking for directions in a strange town, it is a better bet to err on the side of gullibility than paranoia, even if (for once) the paranoid prejudice is correct and all the natives *are* out to get you. Note that this account allows for lying assertions, since a successful liar expresses a belief that he doesn't have.

So when I assert that *p*, I express a belief that *p*. I also assert (in (a)) a lack of belief that *p* or (in (b)) a belief that not-*p*. So the conjunction of what I assert and what I express is a logical impossibility in (a) and contradictory beliefs in (b). This is precisely what *you* must believe if you *believe me* – a logical impossibility or that I have contradictory beliefs.

<sup>1</sup> I owe this point to Roy Sorensen.

By making an assertion I offer you the justification to believe me, in other words, to believe that I am sincerely telling the truth. The sincerity condition is needed, since if you know that I am inadvertently telling the truth in a failed attempt to deceive you, you will believe what I *say*, but you won't believe *me*. But when the assertion is Moorean, the offer is worthless. In fact it provides a justification for *not* believing me (in the case of (a)) or for not believing me on the charitable assumption that I am minimally rational in not holding contradictory beliefs (in the case of (b)). To see this, suppose that you *do* believe me. Since you think me sincere in asserting the first conjunct, *you believe that I believe that p*. And since you believe what I say in the second conjunct, *you believe that I don't believe that p* (in (a)) and *you believe that I believe that not-p* (in (b)). If you are to believe me, you must have contradictory beliefs in the first case (conclusive grounds for disbelieving me, which will therefore force any rational person to withhold belief), and you must think *I* have them in the second (conclusive grounds for believing me irrational). So you cannot believe me unless you are irrational or judge me to be so.

But there is more to Moore's absurdities than absurd assertion, since (a) and (b) remain absurd if I do not *assert*, but merely *believe* them. Indeed, the belief is intuitively more absurd than the assertion. Such a believer is irrational because his *belief* (as opposed to *what* he believes) is necessarily false or entails contradictory beliefs (and not as I claimed in [27, p. 165] because he has inconsistent ones, as I argue in §V). On a highly plausible 'conjunction principle' that believing a conjunction entails believing its conjuncts, if I believe (a), then I believe that p. But then (a) is false, since its second conjunct is false. It is therefore a mistake to think that because the content of a belief could be true, it would be possible to believe-it-correctly. For (a) is a possible truth about me and can be believed by me, but it cannot be true of me *if* it is believed by me. By contrast, I *can* correctly believe (b),<sup>2</sup> since my belief that p is consistent with its second conjunct if I hold contradictory beliefs, one of which must therefore be incorrect.

Alternatively put, my *believing* either (a) or (b), entails (by applying the conjunction principle to its first conjunct) that *I believe that p*. But the *correctness* of what I believe entails that *I don't believe that p*, in (a), or that *I believe that not-p*, in (b). So my believing-correctly entails a contradiction (in the case of (a)) and contradictory beliefs (in the case of (b)), although (a) and (b) themselves might be true, and might be believed.

Thus the explanation of the absurdity is that a Moorean *assertor* either cannot be rationally believed, or cannot be believed to be rational; and a Moorean *believer* is irrational either because his belief cannot be correct, or because it entails contradictory beliefs. We also have a desirable fit between the explanations of Moorean belief and of Moorean assertion, since the contradiction-like phenomena entailed by Moorean correctly-believing is identical to that entailed by believing Moorean assertors.

### III. Moorean Propositions

Consider the following propositions which intuitively display the paradigmatic oddity of Moore's examples (cf. [15, pp. 17, 45]). Their labels denote their types:

<sup>2</sup> I avoid the expression, 'true belief' which is doubly ambiguous between a belief in something true and a belief that is sincerely professed or, more dangerously, a true ascription of belief. So 'correct belief' is true belief in the first sense.

- (1b) God knows that I am an atheist.
- (2a) God knows that I am a non-believer.
- (3a) Although you disagree with me about everything, you are always right.
- (4a) I have no beliefs now.
- (5b) Everything I believe is false.
- (6b) I believe that this proposition is false.

Sorensen defines Moorean *sentences* as ‘those which are vulnerable to belief-based criticism but are immune to direct criticism’ [15, p. 39]. The speaker cannot be criticised in terms of a direct appeal to *what* he says, but can be criticised rather on the assumption that he believes what he says. This is essentially correct, but to avoid restricting the definition to *sentences* and hence to *assertion*, I prefer to rephrase it as:

- (MP) Any proposition is Moorean iff it is consistent and any assertor of it can be justifiably criticised as irrational, but only on the assumption that he believes it.

The first condition is pretty obvious. Although they sound like self-contradictions, Moore’s propositions are possible truths. In fact the first condition is subsumed by the second, for if a proposition is inconsistent then its *assertor or believer* can be directly criticised solely in terms of it. Thus, for example,

Although *we* disagree about everything, *we* are always right

is non-Moorean, because it is inconsistent.

On this definition, an assertor need not believe what he asserts in order for him to be justifiably criticised as irrational. The criticism is justified, because a critic is justified in thinking (rightly or wrongly) that this is what the assertor believes. This explains why Moorean assertion seems less absurd than Moorean belief. A Moorean assertor expresses Moorean beliefs, which are conclusive signs of irrationality. But a Moorean assertor can express Moorean beliefs which in fact he doesn’t have, and it is arguably a lesser sin to license the criticism of irrationality than to be guilty of it.

The definition accounts for the fact that not every way of thinking Moore’s propositions is absurd, as Wittgenstein recognised. In [30, § 280, his italics] he asks:

But what does this mean: ‘It’s raining and I don’t believe it’ makes sense if I *mean* it as a hypothesis, and does not make sense if I mean it as an assertion, or a report?

Neither (a) nor (b) is an absurd thing to *suppose*. That I fail to believe a particular truth, or that a particular belief of mine is false, are both perfectly rational suppositions. This explains why Moorean propositions can be the antecedents of non-Moorean subjunctive conditionals such as

- (SCa) If I were to fail to believe the truth that it’s raining, then I would be surprised to discover that the streets are wet

and

(SCb) If I were incorrectly to believe that it's not raining, then I would be (even more) surprised to discover that the streets are wet

because their antecedents are supposed, not asserted. One important negative consequence of their non-absurdity is the inapplicability of Stalnaker's Ramseyan test [16, p. 102] for the truth of subjunctive conditionals:

First, add the antecedent (hypothetically) to your stock of beliefs; second, make whatever adjustments are required to maintain consistency . . . finally consider whether or not the consequent is then true.

The problem is that although I can suppose that a Moorean antecedent is true, I cannot sensibly believe it or even sensibly suppose that I believe it. To suppose that I believe it is to suppose that I have a belief which is necessarily incorrect or which entails contradictory beliefs, which I will therefore abandon in order to maintain consistency. Nonetheless, (SCa) and (SCb) report possible truths which I could sensibly believe. So although it is absurd to think that Moore's propositions are true, thoughts of them are not necessarily absurd.

The definition also correctly excludes propositions that are straightforwardly odd or absurd *in themselves*. As Sorensen argues, [15, pp. 26-27],

I believe that it is raining and I believe that it is not

is not Moorean. Other non-Moorean propositions include:

I believe that it is both raining and not raining

and

It is raining but I have no reason at all for believing that it is.

Although these would be consistent yet absurd assertions, in no case need we assume that an assertor believes his assertion in order to criticise him of irrationality, for he can be so criticised solely by appealing to the putative fact which is asserted. In each case he asserts something straightforwardly irrational about himself; that he holds contradictory beliefs or one which is self-contradictory, or that he holds a straightforwardly factual<sup>3</sup> belief for no reason.

To what *kind* of belief-based criticism, are Moorean propositions vulnerable? Sorensen's answer is that ' . . . the Moorean speaker has . . . contradicted himself through a commitment to directly opposed beliefs' [15, p. 39]. This is where Sorensen goes wrong. A (b)-type assertor expresses a *commitment* to *directly opposed* beliefs. But an

<sup>3</sup> It might be argued that there is no irrationality in holding a groundless belief in, say, induction or the existence of other minds.

(a)-type assertor expresses a *commitment and the lack of it to the same belief*. The difference is analogous to the difference between expressing an interest in two logically incompatible activities, as when I say, 'I'd really like to go out tonight but I'd love to stay in' and expressing an interest and a lack of it in the same activity, as when I say, 'I'd really like to go out tonight but the prospect of going out leaves me cold'. And anyone who believes an (a)-type assertor, is *committed to having* 'opposed' or contradictory beliefs, as against being *committed to ascribing* them to a (b)-type assertor.

Unlike Sorensen's, my analysis also explains the absurdity of Moorean propositions when they are unasserted but believed. But this requires the conjunction principle and Sorensen claims that any analysis of Moorean sentences should avoid commitments to doxastic logic [15, pp. 19-22] unless as a hypothetical test on which to base criticism [15, p. 43]. I agree that doxastic principles are generally dubious. Belief seems neither to collect nor distribute over disjunction. Nor does belief seem to *collect* over conjunction (see [22, pp. 600-601; 26, pp. 125-131]). However, my analysis does not need a full-blown 'doxastic logic', but only the sole principle that belief *distributes* over conjunction. And although it may be reasonable to avoid the appeal to doxastic principles when explaining Moorean *assertion*, it seems much less reasonable when explaining Moorean *belief*. It seems perfectly in order for an explanation to appeal to a true principle which is about what it explains.

Note that although this conjunction principle is a consequence of the principle that we always believe the entailments of what we believe, I reject [23, p. 85] the 'entailment principle', yet consistently accept the conjunction principle. Accepting it commits me merely to accepting the entailment principle in the special case in which the entailment is from a conjunction to its conjuncts. I admit that I can provide no reason for the conjunction principle, possibly because its truth is so fundamental that no reason would be appropriate. Nonetheless, I accept it in the light of its plausibility and the absence of counter-examples.

So any adequate analysis of Moorean absurdity must define Moorean propositions and explain the absurdity both of *asserting* and of *believing* them in a way that preserves the crucial difference in absurdity. Of course, the crucial difference between (a) and (b), which is disguised by Moore's examples, exists only if there is a difference between not believing that p and believing that not-p. That difference is now uncontroversial, but since I am unaware of any demonstration of it, a quick knock-down proof seems in order:

If believing that not-p entailed a lack of belief that p then contradictory beliefs would be impossible (unwelcome for reasons given in [25, pp. 279-285; 15, p. 27]), since if I believe that p and believe that not-p, then it would follow that I believe and don't believe that p. And the converse entailment proscribes agnosticism, since if I neither believe that p nor believe that not-p, then it would follow that I believe and don't believe that not-p.

#### IV. Presupposition And Expressing Belief

Take

- (1b) God knows that I am an atheist.

A difficult question now looms of the relation of (1b) to

(1b') God exists.

Russell, of course, held that the correct analysis of a statement whose grammatical subject is a definite description, such as,

(S) The king of France is bald

includes the statement that there exists one thing which fits the description [13, p. 490]. So, for Russell, (S) entails

(P) The king of France exists<sup>4</sup>

and asserting (S) entails asserting (P). Similarly, since the grammatical subject of (1b) is an ordinary proper name, which is itself a disguised description, (1b) entails (1b') and asserting (1b) entails asserting (1b'). Strawson famously denies this [17, p. 331]. Rather, an assertion of (S) *implies* [17, p. 330] or *presupposes* [18, p. 216] (P), in the sense that the presupposing statement lacks a truth-value if its presupposition is false. Sellars denies this, but claims that I can *correctly assert* such a statement only if I believe both that its presupposition is true and that my hearer believes it too. And I can only correctly assert that the presupposing statement is true or false if I believe its presupposition [14, p. 206]. Presumably Sellars agrees with Russell that (S) is false given that (P) is false, but thinks it would be misleading to say so. In his reply to Sellars, Strawson claims that one can correctly and sincerely assert (S) iff one believes that the conditions for the truth of (S), (including the truth of (P)) obtain [19, p. 217]. A possible case now arises in which I assert (S) with the intention of deceiving you into believing (P). In order to avoid the consequence that such lies are never falsehoods, Strawson adds the caveat that in such cases I may be said to have made a false statement [19, p. 225].

Fortunately, I do not have to take sides here. A consequence of *all three* theories is that an assertion is expressive of belief in its presuppositions.

On Russell's theory, if I assert (S) then I assert (P). Since assertion is expressive of belief, I express a belief in (P), in asserting (S). On Strawson's qualified theory, if I *sincerely* assert (S) then I believe (P) and it follows from this that if I believe (S) then I believe (P), i.e.:

(PS<sup>Bel</sup>) If p presupposes q then it is impossible to believe p without believing that q.

In his early theory [17, p. 332] Strawson points out that if you are justified in thinking that I am correctly using the expression which is the subject term of my assertion that (S) – which of course you normally are – then you are justified in thinking that I believe that the subject term has a genuine reference. In short, you are justified in thinking that I believe (P). Sellars' claim that I can 'correctly assert' something only if I believe both

<sup>4</sup> Russell would not put it like this, since the analysis aims at eliminating the definite article, but the entailment is nonetheless a consequence of the analysis.



that its presupposition is true and that my hearer believes it too, seems to stand or fall with the plausible claim that you can justifiably think that my assertion is 'correct' (presumably not a misuse of language or a piece of deceit) only if you think I believe its presupposition. It follows that if you are justified in thinking that I am not deceitful and know what I am saying, then you are justified in ascribing the belief in the presupposition to me. So it follows that:

(PSE<sup>Exp</sup>) If *p* presupposes *q* then it is impossible to express a belief that *p* without expressing a belief that *q*.

(PS<sup>Bel</sup>), itself a plausible condition of presupposition, entails (PSE<sup>Exp</sup>). For if I can't believe that *p* without believing that *q*, then your justification for thinking that I believe that *p*, includes the justification for thinking that I believe that *q*.

So by (PSE<sup>Exp</sup>), in asserting that

(1b) God knows that I am an atheist

I express the belief that God exists. But if what I assert is true then I believe God does *not* exist. If *you* believe me then *you believe (1b)* and *you believe that I believe (1b)*. If your first belief is correct then I believe that God does not exist (because I am indeed an atheist if God knows that I'm one). And if your second belief is correct then by (PS<sup>Bel</sup>), I believe that God *does* exist. So if you believe me then you are justified in ascribing contradictory beliefs to me. If *I* believe (1b), then, if my belief is correct, I believe that God does not exist. But then, by (PS<sup>Bel</sup>), I also believe that God *does* exist. My belief in (1b) can be correct, but only at the price of contradictory beliefs.

Compare (1b) with:

(2a) God knows that I am a non-believer.

By (PSE<sup>Exp</sup>), in asserting this, I express the belief that God exists. But if what I assert is true then I *don't* believe that God exists. If you believe me then *you believe (2a)* and *you believe that I believe (2a)*. If your first belief is correct then I *don't* believe that God exists. And if your second belief is correct then, by (PS<sup>Bel</sup>), I *do* believe that God exists. So if you believe me then you have contradictory beliefs. If *I* believe (2a) then by (PS<sup>Bel</sup>), I believe that God exists, but then (2a) is false. So I can't correctly believe it.

Of course, the difference between (1b) and (2a) is unsurprising. The difference between atheists and non-believers is precisely the difference between the external and the internal negation of a belief that God exists. Of more interest is the fact that any atheist who does not hold contradictory beliefs about the existence of God is a non-believer. So if I assert (1b), then if you take me to be minimally rational, you must take me to assert (2a) as well. But, as we have seen, this means that you cannot believe me unless you believe me to be irrational. And if you believe me when I assert that

God knows that *we* are atheists

then the irrationality spreads to include us both. For then you have the same contradictory beliefs which you must ascribe to me.

## V. Self-Referential Moorean Propositions

Consider

(3a) Although you disagree with me about everything, you are always right.

If I assert this then I express a belief in it. But if the belief expressed is correct, then you rightly disagree with me about (3a), so (3a) is false. So, my assertion that (3a) is true, contradicts the belief that the assertion itself expresses. If you believe me when I assert it then *you believe that (3a) is true*. But if your belief is correct and (3a) is true then *you believe that it is false* (because you disagree with it). So the only way your belief can be correct is if you hold contradictory beliefs about the truth-value of (3a). At this point Moorean assertion (on the part of the speaker) and Moorean belief (on the part of the hearer) merge. If you believe me when I make this Moorean assertion then *you* are a Moorean believer. If you are rational, you can't believe me.

Given that you believe me, it also follows that *you believe that I believe that (3a) is true*. But if I *do* believe that it is true then I am correct in *this* belief only if (3a) is false (because then your disagreement with it is *right*). So if you believe me then the belief you must ascribe to me *cannot* be correct. In other words, if you believe me then you think that I am a Moorean believer. If you believe me then you should judge me to be irrational.

This shows that self-reference is the key to the absurdity of (3a). No absurdity arises if a particularly Confucian son believes of, or asserts to, his father, 'Although you *have* disagreed with me on everything, you are always right', thus excluding his *present* assertion from its sphere of reference.

In fact there is a sub-family of Moorean propositions which refer, at least in part, to the beliefs in those propositions. Examples include

(4a) I have no beliefs now

and

(5b) Everything I believe is false

as well as doxastic variants of Liar-type propositions such as

(6b) I believe that this proposition is false.

This sub-family can be defined as follows:

(SR) Any proposition is self-referentially Moorean iff it is Moorean and it refers, at least in part, to the belief that any assertor of it would have were he to believe it.

I do not want to include Liar-type propositions like

(L) This proposition is false

in this sub-family, since it is at least arguable that they are inconsistent and hence not Moorean. Consider

(4a) I have no beliefs now.

If I assert it then I express a belief in it and so conjointly express and assert a logical impossibility. And if you now believe me then *you believe that I have no beliefs now* and *you believe that I now believe that I have no beliefs now*. So if you believe me then you have contradictory beliefs.

The other (b)-type self-referential Moorean proposition is exemplified by

(5b) Everything I believe is false.

If my assertion of this is true then the belief I express is incorrect. If you believe me then *you believe that (i) everything I believe is false*, and *you believe that (ii) I believe that everything I believe is false*. But if (i) is true, then given that (ii) is true as well, it follows that (i) is false after all. So your beliefs contradict each other.

Some sentences can be read in two ways, only one of which is self-referentially Moorean. For example, the ambiguous reference of the demonstrative in

(6b) I believe that this proposition is false

makes it ambiguous between

(6b') I believe that (6b) is false

and

(6b'') I believe that (L) is true.

Given that (L) is inconsistent, (6b'') is absurd *in itself*, so a person who asserts it can be criticised on the basis of it alone. We need not assume that he believes it to make this criticism, so it is non-Moorean. Let us then take (6b) as (6b'). Suppose that I believe it, in other words, I believe that (6b') is true. If my belief is correct then (6b') is true, in which case I believe that it is false. So I have contradictory beliefs. And if I assert (6b'), I express a belief that it is *true*. But what I assert (as we have already seen) entails that I believe that it is *false*. So my assertion and resulting expression of belief commits me to contradictory beliefs. If you believe me then (i) *you believe that (6b') is true*. And if this belief is correct then, as we have just seen, I believe that (6b') is false. So if you believe me, rationality demands that you ascribe contradictory beliefs to me. Alternatively, if you believe me then (ii) *you believe that I believe that (6b') is true*. But an equivalent description of your belief as reported by (i), is that *you believe that I believe that (6b') is*

*false*. So again, if you believe me you must ascribe contradictory beliefs to me.

Not all doxastically self-referring propositions are Moorean. Consider a proposition which corresponds to the preface paradox,

(PP) I have at least one false belief.

(PP) is not Moorean. Asserting or believing it is a perfectly rational recognition of fallibility, which is likely to be true of any human being. And if I do assert my fallibility, you would be perfectly reasonable to believe me. Admittedly, believing it ensures that it is true, and thus ensures my fallibility. For if I do believe it, its falsehood ensures its truth. If it is false that even one of my beliefs, including my belief in (PP), is false, then none of my beliefs are false. So all of my beliefs, including my belief in (PP), are true, which contradicts (PP) itself. So (PP) *must* be true if I believe it. It follows that I now have *inconsistent* beliefs. What does *not* follow is that I have *contradictory* beliefs. My belief in (PP) is not *self-contradictory*, since its truth does not entail its falsehood. Nor does this belief entail beliefs which contradict each other, since we may suppose that none of my beliefs includes the belief that all of my beliefs are true. Therefore believing (PP) is not enough to make me a Moorean believer, since (as I argued in [22, pp. 600-602; 26, pp. 121-140]) *inconsistent* beliefs can sometimes be held rationally, as opposed to *contradictory* or *self-contradictory* ones. The minimal condition of rationality is the absence of contradictory beliefs, which, given the conjunction principle, includes the absence of self-contradictory ones. But the condition does not include the absence of inconsistent beliefs. Admittedly, a generalisation of the preface paradox arises if we supplement (PP) with the claim that all my beliefs are rational (for then I appear to have inconsistent beliefs each of which is rational). But whatever the solution is to the paradox (arguably that there is no paradox at all), it is not that the author's disclaimer in the preface is irrational, let alone Moorean.

## VI. The Disappearance Of Absurdity

Any adequate analysis of Moorean propositions must answer the following question: why are there circumstances in which Moorean sentences can be uttered without absurdity? A virtue of O.R. Jones' account of Moore's propositions (that asserting them frustrates an intention to impart knowledge) is that it attempts to answer this question. Jones gives two cases, one of the fundamentalist who declares in a theological examination, 'The story of Jonah and the whale is only an allegory' and another of a quiz contestant who intends her guess to be understood as such [7, p. 186]. No absurdity arises in either case, if the person adds, 'but I believe that it is not', either as a salve to conscience or as a 'mere "spoilsport" signalling that that answer was a guess' [7, p. 186]. Wittgenstein considers a similar example, namely a railway announcer who, perhaps groundlessly, is convinced that the train won't arrive and who therefore announces on schedule, "Train No. . . . will arrive at . . . o'clock. Personally I don't believe it" [29, § 486].

Jones' second example is dubious. Although the contestant's guess does not defeat

an intention to impart knowledge, isn't there still something absurd about it? If the contestant really *believes* that her answer is *wrong*, surely it is silly of her to choose it as a guess. It might be counterargued that *any* guess which she might make, is likewise believed by her to be wrong, so her actual guess cannot be put in a *worse* light, since all possible guesses are on a par. Whichever position is right, the reasonableness of the guess is not clear-cut. Had Jones focused less on (b)-type Moorean propositions, he might have side-stepped this doubt by making an (a)-type contestant add, 'but I *don't believe* it', for then the accusation of silliness cannot be made.

My account easily explains the non-absurdity of such cases. In each, the speaker fails to express a belief needed to generate the absurdity. We are *not* justified in thinking that the fundamentalist believes that the story of Jonah is allegorical, given that we know that he is salving his conscience, any more than we are justified in thinking that the contestant believes what we know to be a mere guess (in the sense that it is correct by accident, if at all). Similarly, no absurdity arises if we know that Wittgenstein's railway announcer is just under orders to parrot what is written in front of him, for then we are not justified in thinking him sincere.

A rather different case arises when, unsurprised at the familiar sight of a notoriously heavy drinker heading for the bar yet again, I attempt humour with the remark, 'He's ordering more beer, I don't believe it!'. Here the second part of the remark fails to justify judgement that I'm telling the (literal) truth. In the context of heavy irony I do not offer my fellow drinkers the justification for thinking that I lack the belief that he is ordering more beer.

Finally, suppose that we both overhear someone say of the heavy drinker, 'He's given up drinking for good this time' and I comment sarcastically, 'Oh yes, he's given up drinking, I *don't* think'. The first part of my comment doesn't justify judgements that I'm sincere or telling the literal truth. In fact it isn't a literal assertion at all, but rather the mentioning of someone else's assertion in order to assert its negation. None of the grammatically Moorean *utterances* in which the absurdity disappears, are genuine assertions, as I explain in the next section.

## VII. Expression Of Belief, Intention And The Nature Of Assertion

Asserting that p is not the only way of expressing belief that p. A more direct way for me to express the belief that p is simply to assert that I hold it. Here the justification to think that I am telling the truth is identical with the justification to think I'm sincere. For if you are justified in thinking that q, where q is my assertion that I believe that p, then you are justified in thinking that I believe that p. I might also express this belief by substituting my own name for the first-person pronoun. But then my assertion, 'Williams believes that p', is not as clearly expressive of my belief that p, as my assertion, 'I believe that p', because this third-person form of assertion leaves room for you to doubt that I am Williams or to doubt that I believe that I am Williams. Your degree of justifiable doubt proportionally diminishes the degree to which you are justified in thinking that I believe that p.

Some assertions are non-linguistic. If you scoff at my forecast of rain and I respond by picking up my umbrella and shaking it at you with a defiant grin on my face, it seems

correct to say that I *asserted* that it will rain and so expressed a belief that it will.

I can intend to express a belief but fail, and I can express a belief without intending to. For example, if I attempt to inform you of something, or tell you a lie, I will normally fail to express a belief if I am too drunk to make the utterance intelligible. I try to express myself but fail, because I do not justify you in thinking that I have the relevant belief. I try to make an assertion but fail, because what I offer you is no justification at all. Conversely, I might express a belief that it will rain by carrying an umbrella (as opposed to shaking it defiantly). Carrying it is expressive of belief in the sense that it justifies an audience in thinking that I believe that it will rain. But I could not make an assertion if I had *no intention at all* to do with the epistemology of a hearer, but was merely walking down the street with the umbrella, day-dreaming of sunny weather. By contrast, shaking the umbrella defiantly counts as an informing, misinforming, contending or denying assertion, depending on how I intend to change your mind, even if the change is merely intended to be your recognition of mistaken belief in our divided opinion, as when I make an insincere avowal to 'wind you up'.

So although there are different types of intentions in different types of assertion, there is always *some* intention or other to change the way the audience thinks. For example, I *avow* to you that p iff I express the belief that p with the intention of making you think that I believe that p. I *lie* to you that p iff I express the belief that p (in the sense that I offer you the justification for thinking that I have a belief which in fact I don't) with the intention of making you believe incorrectly that p (in the sense of aiming to make you believe something in the knowledge or belief that it is false). And I *inform* you that p iff I express a belief that p with the successful intention of letting you know that p. So when I assert that p, I express a belief that p with the intention of causing epistemic change in the cognition of my audience. The change I aim for is relevant to my assertion in the sense that the proposition which I assert forms the core of the description of the intended change in your knowledge or beliefs, as in making you believe that I believe that p, making you believe incorrectly that p or letting you know that p. In addition, I might intend the intended change to bring about further secondary cognitive changes, particularly emotive ones, which are not relevant in *this* sense to my assertion. For example, I might lie, or inform you, that my salary is greater than yours, as a warning, boast or insult.

So assertion can be defined as follows:

- (A) Anyone asserts that p iff that person expresses a belief that p with the intention of causing relevant epistemic change in the cognition of an actual or potential audience.

This definition even accommodates the case of the man who repeatedly, sincerely and truthfully declares his innocence to interrogators who mistakenly try to extract a sincere confession from him. Even if he knows that the interrogators will never believe him, his declarations still count as assertions. The innocent man tries (perhaps irrationally) to make himself believed although he knows he will not, in fact, succeed. Promises are kinds of assertions, since my promise that I'll be punctual aims to convince you that I will, by expressing my conviction or knowledge that I will.

The definition also explains why assertions fail. The first kind of non-assertion lacks

both the expression of belief and the relevant intentions. A parrot which utters the truth, 'I can fly', neither expresses a belief nor has intentions to bring about relevant cognitive change. Similarly, the transparent and self-admitted guesses of a contestant in a quiz are not assertions, since they are neither expressions of belief, nor are they intended to convince his questioner that he knows the answer (as they would be in the case of a genuine examination).

The second kind of non-assertion occurs when we have the right kind of intention without the expression of belief. An anonymous letter to an employer falsely accusing a colleague would contain an assertion, because it entitles a belief to be ascribed to the writer, but fabricating evidence in order to convince the authorities of his guilt, is deception, but not a lie. My suggestion that you reconsider your verdict, is not an assertion, even if I aim to make you change your mind. Neither is an incantation designed to enchant you into thinking that I am omniscient.

The third kind of non-assertion occurs when the expression of belief lacks the necessary intentions. Wearing a green tie on St. Patrick's Day as a convention to avow British tyranny is an assertion of my political beliefs, but muttering about the government in my sleep is not.

Finally, the reference to a potential audience is needed to accommodate cases in which I wish to change the epistemic cognition of anyone who cares to take notice. If I wear a billboard proclaiming the end of the world, that would certainly be a (telling or avowing) assertion, even in an empty street.<sup>5</sup>

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