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Citation

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Abstract

G. E. Moore famously observed that to assert 'I went to the pictures last Tuesday but I do not believe that I did' would be 'absurd'. Moore calls it a 'paradox' that this absurdity persists despite the fact that what I say about myself might be true. Krista Lawlor and John Perry have proposed an explanation of the absurdity that confines itself to semantic notions while eschewing pragmatic ones. We argue that this explanation faces four objections. We give a better explanation of the absurdity both in assertion and in belief that avoids our four objections.

Keywords

Moore Paradox Assertion Belief Pragmatic Semantic

G. E. Moore famously observed (*1942*, 543) that to assert 'I went to the pictures last Tuesday but I do not believe that I did' would be 'absurd'. Moore calls it a 'paradox' that this absurdity persists despite the fact that what I say about myself might be true. What is the explanation of the persisting absurdity? Krista Lawlor and John Perry (*2008*) have proposed an explanation that confines itself to semantic notions while eschewing pragmatic ones. After an overview of this explanation in §1 we argue in §2 that it faces four objections: (1) it predicts absurdity in non-assertoric utterances in which no absurdity occurs, (2) it fails to predict the absurdity of utterances its authors do not consider, but where it nevertheless occurs, (3) it incorrectly predicts that the third-person form of Moorean assertions is absurd, in a special case in which contrary to her belief, the assertor is the person named in the utterance, and (4) it fails to account for what is absurd about 'Moorean belief', namely belief in a proposition the expression of which in a speech act would generate Moorean absurdity. In the course of arguing this, we give an explanation of the absurdity of Moorean belief. In §3 we give a superior explanation of the absurdity of Moorean assertion. In §4 we show that our complete account avoids our four objections to Lawlor and Perry.

1 Lawlor and Perry's Account of Moorean Utterance

Lawlor and Perry claim that an adequate explanation of Moorean absurdity must explain why saying something of the form

    (1) '*p* but I do not believe that *p*'

        is absurd while saying something of the form

    (2) '*p* but *N* does not believe that *p*'

is not absurd, without supposing that 'believes' makes different semantic contributions in these cases. They also claim that an adequate explanation of Moorean absurdity must be maximally semantic and maximally non-pragmatic. In light of this, they aim to explain Moorean absurdity using only the semantic notions of truth and what they call 'accuracy', while avoiding the paradigmatically pragmatic notion of a Searlean speech act, that is, an act that can be performed by saying that one is doing so (Green *2007b*).

Lawlor and Perry's explanation of the absurdity of a Moorean utterance is that its truth conditions contradict its accuracy conditions. They first give an analysis of what they call 'utterance-bound' truth conditions.[1] They then elucidate the accuracy conditions of an utterance by distinguishing them from its sincerity conditions. They hold that a necessary condition of sincerity in assertion is:

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[1] Lawlor and Perry define (2008, 422) an utterance u of the form (1) as true if there exists a proposition P and a person x such that

i   x is the speaker of u
ii   x's utterance of P in u expresses P
iii   P is true
iv   x does not believe P
       So my utterance 'It is raining but I do not believe that it is raining' is true if there is a proposition< It is raining>and a person, i.e. myself, such that
i   I am the speaker of 'It is raining but I do not believe that it is raining'
ii   My utterance of 'It is raining' in 'It is raining but I do not believe that it is raining' expresses the proposition
             <It is raining>
iii   <It is raining> is true
iv   I do not believe <It is raining>
       An utterance u of the form (2) is true if there exists a proposition P and a person x such that
v   x is the referent of 'N' in u

> If u is an assertion by x, u is sincere only if x has a belief b such that u expresses b
> (*2008*, 422).

So, for example, if my utterance 'It is raining' is an assertion then if my utterance is sincere, I have a belief, namely that it is raining, such that 'It is raining' expresses this belief. My utterance 'It is raining' expresses the proposition that it is raining, which is the content of my belief. Here 'express' is the purely semantic notion of a proposition as the meaning of an utterance.

A necessary condition of accuracy in assertion is:

> If u is an assertion by x then u is accurate only if the content of the belief b therein expressed is the same as the content of u (*2008*, 423).

So, for example, if my utterance 'It is raining' is an assertion then my utterance is accurate only if the content of my belief that it is raining is the same as the content of my utterance 'It is raining'. More simply, if my assertion is accurate in this technical sense, then I believe that it is raining.

It may be difficult to see how sincerity conditions and accuracy conditions can come apart. What Lawlor and Perry call 'accuracy' seems to be what many of us call 'sincerity'. However they give cases in which the conditions are supposed to come apart. A sincere but inaccurate 'expression of belief' occurs when

> ... Kay slips up, and says 'Elwood is a fool' when she meant to say 'Alphonse is a fool'. That's a sincere, but inaccurate expression of belief. The belief played the appropriate motivational role, so the sincerity condition is satisfied, but the content requirement for accuracy is not met (*2008*, 423).

An insincere but accurate expression of belief occurs when

> ... Kay has belief b that Elwood is a fool, but it is not part of her motivation for saying 'Elwood is a fool'. Whoever John asked about, Kay would have said that that person is a fool, whether she believed it or not. This is not a sincere expression of belief, however accurate a representation of x's state of mind it might happen to be (2003, 423).

In the first scenario, the authors tell us that Kay has sincerely expressed her belief (that Alphonse is a fool) by saying that Elwood is a fool. If we construe 'express' in the thin, semantic sense in which a sentence expresses a proposition, then given Lawlor and Perry's aforementioned necessary condition on sincere expression of belief, this implies that Kay believes that Elwood is a fool. For her utterance is sincere, and it (semantically) expresses that Elwood is a fool, not that Alphonse is a fool. To avoid this result, Lawlor and Perry should make clear that 'u expresses b' is not the semantic notion of an utterance expressing a proposition. It is the pragmatic notion of someone making an utterance in order to express her belief. So construed, I express my belief that *p* to you just in case I behave in a way designed to manifest that belief.[2] Lawlor and Perry would also need to replace the above necessary condition on assertion in sincerity with the following:

> If u is an assertion by x, u is sincere only if x asserts u partly because x has a belief b that x intends to express by u.

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vi   P in u expresses P
vii   P is true
viii   x does not believe P
So my utterance 'It is raining but N doesn't believe that it is raining' is true because there is a proposition P, namely <It is raining> and a person, e.g. N, such that
v   N is the referent of 'N' in the utterance 'It is raining but N doesn't believe that It is raining'
vi   'It is raining' in 'It is raining but N doesn't believe that it is raining' expresses <It is raining>
vii   <It is raining> is true
viii   N does not believe <It is raining>.

[2] Green (2007c) provides a fuller treatment.

Here 'sincerity' might be more aptly called 'motivational sincerity'. Lawlor and Perry are now in a position to explain the absurdity of the *'omissive'* Moore-paradoxical assertion

(1) '*p* but I do not believe that *p*',

so-labelled because (1) reports the omission of a belief. Their explanation is as follows: if x utters (1) sincerely or not, accuracy demands that x believe *that p and I do not believe that p*. Since, as is widely accepted, believing a conjunction entails believing both conjuncts, accuracy demands that *x believe that p*. But this contradicts the truth condition that *x does not believe that p*. As a result, the utterance cannot be both accurate and true. Lawlor and Perry claim that no such contradiction arises for

(2) '*p* but N does not believe that *p*'.

If x utters this, sincerely or not, accuracy demands that x believe *that p and N does not believe that p*. Since believing a conjunction entails believing both conjuncts, accuracy demands that *x believe p*. But this, Lawlor and Perry tell us, does not contradict the truth condition that *N does not believe that p*.

They add that

> ... both the truth and accuracy conditions of an utterance are derived semantically ... Our solution applies, for example, to Moore's uttering [(1)] alone in his study. In this sense, our solution is semantic and not pragmatic (*2008*, 423, *fn* 4).

2 Four Objections

First Objection Lawlor and Perry's account predicts absurdity in non-assertoric utterances in which no absurdity occurs. Whether or not a Moorean utterance is an assertion, the fact remains that it cannot be both true and accurate. So Lawlor and Perry's account predicts that non-assertoric Moorean utterances are absurd. But as Wittgenstein intimates, utterances of (1) are absurd only when they are assertions.[3] We hear no absurdity if we know that someone is uttering, 'It is raining but I do not believe it' in order to test a microphone or give a philosophical example. If she recites these words as lines in a play, we would attribute absurdity to the character the actor depicts, but not to the actor herself. And that is because we naturally imagine that fictional person as making an assertion, and so as a person who purports to be sincere and to have the appropriate communicative intentions. Or suppose that you ask me whether the capital of Thailand is Bangkok or Saigon. If I am a geographically ignorant contestant in your quiz in which success is understood to be the mere utterance of the correct answer rather than the manifestation of knowledge, you hear no absurdity if I answer, 'The capital of Thailand is Bangkok', and then add, 'but actually I have no beliefs about this either way'.[4] Thus (1), put forth as a sheer guess, evinces no absurdity.

Second Objection Lawlor and Perry's account fails to predict absurdity where there is absurdity. As Moore points out, there is also absurdity in assertions of the form

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[3] Wittgenstein observes that 'under unusual circumstances', the sentence, 'It's raining but I don't believe it' could be 'given a clear sense' (1980b, §290). Indeed he gives two consecutive examples of non-absurd uses of such sentences. The first is when delighted by the imminent arrival of a friend, I exclaim in excited amazement, 'He's coming but I still can't believe it!' (1980a, §485). The second is of a dispassionate railway announcer who is convinced that a train will not arrive. Under orders, he announces its arrival and adds, 'Personally I don't believe it' (1980a, §§486-87). Wittgenstein's point is that the appearance of the absurdity in speech is not guaranteed by a mere utterance of a sentence of Moore's forms, as opposed to its assertion. For further discussion of this point, see Green and Williams (2007, Introduction).

[4] Another such case arises when I sarcastically repeat your claim that the pubs are closed and add, 'I don't think!' No absurdity arises because we both know that I am not asserting both halves of the content of my utterance but only quoting your assertion in order to deny it.

(3) '*p* but I believe that not-*p*'.[5]

Such sayings may be labeled '*commissive*', inasmuch as they report the commission of a specific mistake in belief. The truth-conditions of my utterance of the form of (3) demand that I believe that not-*p*, while accuracy demands that I believe that *p*. But these two demands can be met so long as I have contradictory beliefs. Lawlor and Perry's solution is similarly incomplete for commissive assertions such as 'God knows that I am an atheist'. These examples, as well as the omissive 'God knows that we are not theists' and 'I have no beliefs' also fail to fit Lawlor and Perry's model. Since examples like these originate from Roy Sorensen, let us call these '*Sorensen's cases*' (*1988*, 17).

In each of Sorensen's cases, I seem to be just as absurd as I am when I assert the commissive 'It is raining but I believe that it is not raining' or the omissive 'It is raining but I do not believe that it is raining'. The reason is that these utterances share the essential features of Moore's examples. Firstly, as in Moore's examples, what I assert might be true.[6] Secondly, as in Moore's examples, if what I assert is true, this fact alone does not impugn my rationality or make me absurd. The fact that I am ignorant of rain no more impugns my rationality than the fact that good evidence leads me to a mistaken belief about the weather. God's knowledge that I am an atheist, or that you and I are agnostics, makes me unenlightened, but not absurd. And my total lack of belief means that I hold no irrational or absurd beliefs. Thirdly, as in Moore's examples, there is something absurd about my refraining from making the assertion but instead silently believing its content. Fourthly, as in Moore's examples, the absurdity disappears once these assertions are cast in other than the first person or other than in the present tense. Just as 'It was raining but I believed that it was not raining' or 'It is raining but you do not believe that it is raining' may be sensible assertions, so may be 'God knows that she is an atheist', 'God knew that we were not theists' and 'I will have no beliefs'.[7] Fifthly, no absurdity is present once these utterances are made the antecedent of a conditional assertion, as in 'If God knows that I am an atheist, then I will feel His anger'. No absurdity is found in the corresponding conditional belief either.

It is also unclear how Lawlor and Perry's account may be extended to explain partly non-verbal Moorean assertions, for example when you ask me if the pub is open and I nod my head in emphatic affirmation while saying, 'I don't believe so'.[8] Nodding is not uttering. So it is difficult to see how the absurdity can be explained in terms of the kind of utterance-bound truth conditions that Lawlor and Perry stipulate as conditions on the utterance itself, rather than on its subject matter (*2008*, 422).

Third Objection Lawlor and Perry's account falsely predicts that the third-person form of Moorean assertions remain absurd, in special cases in which the assertor is, unbeknownst to herself, the person named in her utterance. To see this, first suppose that I am N, but I make an assertion of (2). Lawlor and Perry argue that no absurdity results, because

> ... accuracy demands sameness of content, narrowly individuated. Consequently, even in cases where 'N' and 'I' corefer, the content *that p, but N doesn't believe that p*, differs from the content *that p, but I don't believe that p* (*2008*, 424–423, fn 5).

This is true, but irrelevant. Accuracy still demands that I believe the narrowly individuated content of my assertion, namely *that p but N doesn't believe that p*, in which case belief-distribution over conjunction ensures that I believe that *p*. But a condition of the truth of my assertion is that N does not believe

[5] Moore not only observes that to say, 'I went to the pictures last Tuesday but I don't believe that I did' would be 'absurd' (1942, 543), he makes the same point for 'I believe that he has gone out, but he has not' (1944, 204).

[6] For the sake of simplicity of exposition, we assume that the existence of God is logically possible. To avoid this assumption we could say instead that the assertion is possibly true by the assertor's lights.

[7] 'God will know that I am an atheist' might appear absurd until we stipulate that I assert it in the knowledge that I am about to take a pill, perhaps under duress, that will reverse my religious beliefs. 'I will have no beliefs' might be part of my sensible avowal of my own mortality.

[8] Perhaps Moore has such a case in mind in explicitly distinguishing between the uttering of words assertively and making an assertion (Baldwin 1993, 207).

that *p*. This is impossible, because proper names are rigid. Moreover, it is impossible for a person to be other than the person she actually is. So since I am N, necessarily, I am N. Thus I cannot believe that *p*. Therefore the truth-conditions of my assertion contradict its accuracy conditions. Thus Perry and Lawlor's account predicts that my assertion is absurd.

But now suppose that I fail to realise I am N, due to amnesia so severe that I cannot remember my name. Then I see someone with bad posture wearing 'N' on his name-tag on a closed-circuit television. Failing to recognise him as myself, and reasoning that someone who is aware of his bad posture would correct it, I assert truthfully 'N has bad posture but N doesn't believe that he has bad posture.' Knowing all of this, you will rightly judge my assertion benighted, but not absurd.[9] Thus Lawlor and Perry's solution fails their own criterion of adequacy.

Fourth Objection Lawlor and Perry's account fails to explain what is absurd about Moorean belief. We have already observed that I am no less absurd if instead of asserting 'It is raining but I do not believe that it is raining' I silently believe that it is both raining and also that I do not believe that it is raining. To the extent that the assertion is absurd, so is the corresponding belief. Or so it seems to many of us. Arguments for the absurdity of the omissive belief include arguments that it is impossible to be held justifiably (de Almeida *2007*; Williams *2004* and Williams *2010*), that there can be no non-overridden evidence for it (de Almeida *2001*), that holding it is a severe violation of norms of theoretical rationality (Green *2007a*) and that holding it consciously entails a pair of contradictory beliefs (Shoemaker *1995*).

A simple argument for the absurdity of Moorean belief starts with the observation that the omissive beliefs are self-falsifying (Williams *1994*, 165). Assume, as is highly plausible, that believing a conjunction involves believing each of its conjuncts (i.e. belief distributes over conjunction). So if I believe that (*p* and I do not believe that *p*) then I believe that *p*. But now what I believe is false, since its second conjunct is false. Although my belief is not a belief in a necessary falsehood, it is *self-falsifying* in the sense that although what I believe might be true of me and although I might believe it, it cannot be true of me *if* I believe it. Similarly, if I believe that (*p*, but I believe that *not-p*), belief-distribution implies that I believe that *p*. But what I believe is true only if I believe that *not-p*. Thus what I believe is true only if I have contradictory beliefs about whether *p*, one of which must thus be mistaken.

de Almeida (*2001*, 39–43; 2007, 53–56) observes that the self-falsifying nature of Moorean belief does not itself explain its irrationality. Beliefs in necessary falsehoods are not necessarily irrational. Why should self-falsifying beliefs be any different in this respect? Our response begins by differentiating irrationality and absurdity. Absurdity consists in a severe violation of a set of norms.[10] That severe violation need not be something of which an agent is aware. As a result, one can harbour an absurd position without knowing it, and without being culpable for doing so. By contrast, a person's irrationality belies their failure to live up to a humanly achievable standard.

Among the sorts of norm that can be violated by those who are absurd are theoretical rationality, practical rationality, etiquette, and norms of conversation (such as those articulated in Grice's Cooperative Principle and maxims). One way to violate a system of norms severely is to be in a position such that one can with no further empirical investigation discern that one is doing so. This is why it is absurd of me to promise to count to the largest integer, and absurd of me to prefer wine to water, water to beer and beer to wine. It is also why it is absurd to believe either of (1) or (3) above. Some cognitive

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[9] For similar examples see Williams (2006, 237) and Pelczar (2007, 116). We are not committed to the claim that assertions of the form of (2) can never be absurd. You might be able to sensibly judge that my assertion is absurd if you justifiably believe or know that I justifiably believe or know that I am N.

[10] 'In ordinary life, a situation is absurd when it includes a conspicuous discrepancy between pretension and aspiration or reality: someone gives a complicated speech in support of a motion that has already been passed; a notorious criminal is made president of a major philanthropic foundation; you declare your love over the telephone to a recorded announcement; as you are being knighted, your pants fall down.' This characterization from Nagel (1979, 13) is more inclusive than the one we will give, but we will only need the less inclusive characterization in what follows.

sophistication may be needed to discern that either belief must put one in severe violation of theoretical rationality. However, a genius might hold a position that is absurd. She may just be rational, or at least not irrational, in doing so.

A minimal characterisation of theoretical rationality would include the constraint that one should only believe what is true. Thus if one can discern with no empirical investigation that one's belief must be false, that belief will be in severe violation of the norms of theoretical rationality, and thus absurd.[11] This is why it is absurd to believe a contradiction. It is also why it is absurd to hold a belief that is self-falsifying. As we have shown, an agent can discern with no empirical investigation that her ommisive Moorean belief is self-falsifying. So someone who has such a belief is in severe violation of a norm of belief and is thus absurd. We also have shown that one can discern with no empirical investigation that commissive Moorean beliefs are self-falsifying unless the believer has contradictory beliefs. So someone who has such a belief is in severe violation of norms of belief and is thus absurd as well.

We have explained why believing either (1) or (3) is absurd. Our account is still incomplete because we have not yet explained the absurdity of the corresponding assertions—although we will go on to do so. Lawlor and Perry's account is incomplete the other way around, because they have not explained the absurdity of Moorean belief. This is not to say that they cannot do so. Yet whereas a simple and economical explanation would be to generalise their account of the absurdity of Moorean assertion to the absurdity of Moorean belief, doing so would require that there be such things as accuracy conditions on belief. It is, however, doubtful that it makes sense to ascribe accuracy conditions to beliefs. A different problem for such a generalisation is that it would require the assumption that absurdity of a certain type found in the assertion will translate into absurdity of that same type to be found in the corresponding belief. But whatever the type, not everything absurd to assert is absurd to believe. I might silently believe, quite properly, that I am asserting nothing. I could be meditating in Church.

In response to the objection that their account is incomplete in failing to explain the absurdity of Moorean belief, Lawlor and Perry argue as follows:

> ... suppose a rational well-functioning person might have Moorean beliefs. In that case, her Moorean utterances would still have a paradoxical character. On the other hand, suppose ... a rational well-functioning agent cannot have Moorean beliefs. It's not clear that this fact, were it true, would *in itself* explain what's paradoxical about (1). Consider a belief whose content would be expressed by 'I am not myself'. A rational well-functioning agent will not have a belief with this content, either. The assertion is clearly false, and puzzling in a way that might lead us to assume the speaker is not being literal. But it does not have the oddity that is characteristic of (1) (*2008*, 425–426, our italics).

As will soon become apparent, we agree with much of this passage. Yet we fail to see how it gets Lawlor and Perry off the hook when faced with the objection that an explanation of the absurdity of Moorean belief would be more complete. First, consider Lawlor and Perry's claim that if a rational, well-functioning person were to have a Moorean belief, then the corresponding assertion would be absurd. We have shown that this conditional has an impossible antecedent, because anyone who has a Moorean belief severely contravenes norms of belief and so is not well-functioning. Thus the claim is only vacuously true. Next, consider their examples. My assertion, 'I am not myself' exhibits non-Moorean absurdity because its content is not a possible truth. My belief that I am not myself, likewise exhibits non-Moorean absurdity for the same reason. This suggests the claim that absurdity of a certain type found in a belief will translate into absurdity of that same type to be found in the corresponding assertion. Now, it is one thing to say that absurdity of a certain type found in a belief will translate into

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[11] Following Richard Foley (1979) it might be objected that epistemic rationality does not require that one's beliefs all be true. For example, some claim the preface paradox to be case in which rationality demands inconsistent beliefs. That claim is controversial. To avoid this controversy, we could say instead that a norm of theoretical rationality is that one should not hold a self-falsifying belief. Thus if one can discern with no empirical investigation that one's belief is self-falsifying then that belief will be in severe violation of the norms of theoretical rationality, and thus absurd.

absurdity of that same type to be found in the corresponding assertion. It is another thing to say—as Sidney Shoemaker appears to—that once we have explained the absurdity in the belief, we have *ipso facto* explained the absurdity in the assertion:

If you have an explanation of why a putative content could not be coherently believed, you thereby have an explanation of why it cannot be coherently asserted (*1995*, 227, *fn* 1).

Shoemaker also claims that once an explanation of why it is impossible for a rational person to believe Moore-paradoxical sentences is at hand, ' ... an explanation of why one cannot assert a Moore-paradoxical sentence will come along for free' (*1995*, 213).

Surely it is an exaggeration to say that the explanation of the irrationality of the assertion comes 'free' with that of the corresponding belief. For once we have explained why the belief is irrational we will also have to explain why this makes the corresponding assertion irrational. Consequently we agree with Lawlor and Perry that '... there is a residue of paradoxicality about a Moorean assertion that needs further explanation' (*2008*, 426, *fn* 13) or in other words that explaining the absurdity of Moorean belief will not 'in itself' explain the absurdity of the corresponding assertion (*2008*, 425). But it does not follow that we should not explain the absurdity of Moorean belief. Nor does it follow that this explanation will not *help* to explain the absurdity of the corresponding assertion.

Whether it will help is unclear. Perhaps the most popular explanation of why the irrationality of a belief carries over into the corresponding assertion is that an assertor is irrational if she 'expresses' an irrational belief. Adopting this '*expressivist*' approach means in turn that the notion of expressing belief will need elucidation—a need that is seldom met in the literature.[12] But it will also need to be explained why, on this elucidation, expressing an irrational belief is itself irrational. Here lies the weakness of the expressivist approach, for it is not clear why it must be irrational to express an irrational belief. Suppose that I have just undergone botched neurosurgery with the result that I believe both that Luang Prabang is in Laos and also that I don't believe that Luang Prabang is in Laos. On regaining consciousness I introspect to find this strange belief. I may sensibly express it to my lawyer in order to get her to help me to sue the neurosurgeon for malpractice.

3 A Superior Account of the Absurdity of Moorean Assertion

Assertions purport to show beliefs. If they are sincere, they do show those beliefs. This is not because they make beliefs perceptible (that doesn't seem to make sense), nor because they show how a belief feels (beliefs don't seem to feel like much of anything). Rather, an assertion presents itself as (*inter alia*) strong evidence that the speaker believes what is asserted. That is why the sincerity of an assertion shows that you believe what you have asserted.[13] Now suppose you show a belief or other attitude that you also deny having. Then since 'show' is a success verb, that denial must be in error. On the other hand, if you show a belief (or other attitude) and then go on to describe yourself as believing its contradictory, then whether or not this latter statement is true, you are in error. If, by contrast, you purport to show a belief (or other attitude) that you do not in fact have, then you are not sincere.

Suppose then that you assert (1). On the assumption that assertion distributes over conjunction, you have asserted that *p* and have asserted that you don't believe that *p*. The former assertion is either sincere or not. Suppose that it is sincere. In that case, it shows your belief that *p*. But then your other assertion, that you don't believe that *p*, is in error. In that case you're in violation of the norm that assertions

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[12] No elucidation of the term is given by Wittgenstein (1980a, §472), Heal (1994, 22), Hájek and Stoljar (2001) or Rosenthal (1995a, 197, 199 and 1995b, 317–319), all of whom follow the 'expressivist' approach described above. Green (2007c) offers an elucidation.

[13] The claim that assertions show beliefs needs more defense than we can give here. See Green (2009, 2007a, and 2007c) for elaboration and defense.

should be true. On the other hand suppose that your assertion that *p* is not sincere. Once again you are in violation of a norm of assertion, namely to assert only those things you believe. So either your assertion of (1) is sincere or it is not; but in either case you may infer with no further empirical investigation that you are in violation of a norm of assertion. Hence with no further empirical investigation we may conclude of someone who asserts, '*p* but I don't believe it', that she is in violation of a norm of assertion. It is, however, a *severe* violation of a system of norms to transgress them in such a way that one could discern with no empirical investigation that one is doing so. From our original contention that absurdity consists in a severe violation of a system of norms, we may infer that assertion of '*p* but I don't believe it' is absurd.

So too, suppose you assert (3). By assertion-distribution we may infer that you have asserted that *p* and have asserted that you believe that *not-p*. Your first assertion is either sincere or it is not. Suppose that it is sincere. Then your second assertion, that you believe that *not-p*, is either correct or incorrect. In the former case, you are in error: for your first assertion, being sincere, shows your belief that *p*, whence you believe that *p*, while the correctness of your second assertion implies that you believe that *not-p*. Anyone who both believes that *p* and also believes that not-*p* is in error. On the other hand, if your second assertion, that you believe that not-*p*, is incorrect, then you are in violation of a norm of assertion. Likewise and as before, if your first assertion, namely that *p*, is not sincere, you still violate a norm of assertion. It follows that if you assert '*p* but I believe that *not-p*', then we may conclude with no further empirical investigation that you are in violation of some norm of assertion. It is a severe violation of a system of norms to be in a position of which it can in principle be known with no further empirical investigation that it will violate those norms. From our original contention that absurdity consists in a severe violation of a system of norms, we may infer that assertion of '*p* but I believe that *not-p*' is absurd.

4 Why Our Account Avoids the Objections that Afflict Lawlor and Perry's

Our account of Moorean absurdity avoids the four objections we raised against Lawlor and Perry. Concerning the first: our account of Moorean absurdity in speech takes Moorean assertion as its *explanandum*, thus avoiding predicting the absurdity in non-assertoric utterances. One who, for instance, utters (1) while testing a microphone is not purporting to show any beliefs.

Turning to the second objection, we have already explained how assertion of (3) is absurd; what of Sorensen's cases? 'God knows that I am an atheist' entails the commissive 'God exists, but I believe that God does not exist', because God must exist in order to know anything, yet whatever He knows is true. Beliefs are not closed under entailment, so even if I believe what I assert when I say 'God knows that I am an atheist', it does not follow that I believe that 'God exists, but I believe that God does not exist'. However, if I assert the former sentence, then I am *committed* to the content expressed by the latter, which shares its logical form with (3). My assertion shows my commitment to (3) whether or not I am aware that it does. And unlike beliefs, the relation of showing one's commitment to a content is closed under entailment: if I show my commitment to *p*, and *p* entails *q*, then I show my commitment to *q*. Hence my assertion shows my commitment both to *p* and to *I believe that not-p*. This pair of propositions is perfectly consistent. However, in being committed to this pair, I am also committed to assenting to each of them if queried under appropriate conditions.[14] But in so assenting, I would violate norms in the way we have described above for the assertion of (1) and (3). This is why Sorensen's cases are tractable in the present analysis as well, since 'God knows that we are not theists' straightforwardly entails 'God knows that I am not a theist' and 'I have no beliefs' entails 'I have no beliefs and I do not believe that I have no beliefs'.

Partly non-verbal Moorean assertions are likewise manageable on our analysis. If you ask me whether the pub is open and I nod my head in forceful affirmation, then I show my commitment to *The pub is open*.

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[14] Appropriate conditions involve exclusion of such considerations as time constraints and processing effort.

So if I contemporaneously assert 'I don't believe so', then I show my commitment to *The pub is open* and to *I do not believe that the pub is open*.

Concerning our third objection to Lawlor and Perry, our account does not predict that the third-person form of Moorean assertion remains absurd in the case in which the assertor blamelessly fails to realise that she is the person named in her utterance. Someone who asserts '*p*, but N doesn't believe it' in a situation in which he is in fact N, asserts something that could be both true and sincere. There I am, in front of the closed-circuit TV, benightedly not realising that I am watching myself. I am N. So whatever is true of me is true of N and conversely. I indeed have bad posture, because he does. I don't realise that I have bad posture. My assertion is true. Clearly it could also be sincere. In that case I believe both that N has bad posture and that he doesn't think that he does. And that is what N believes as well—because he is me. But I do not both believe that *I* have bad posture and that *I* don't think that *I* do. The existence of my belief that N has bad posture is compatible with the fact that he does not believe that he has bad posture. It is also compatible with the fact that I do not believe that I have bad posture. On the other hand my belief that I have bad posture is not compatible with the fact that I do not believe that I have bad posture —but I do not have the belief that *I* have bad posture. The absurdity is dissipated by opacity of reference in belief.[15] I am still sincere, because I believe my own assertion, although I do not realise—through no fault of my own—that it is true of me. As a result I am not in severe violation of any norms of theoretical rationality, nor is it plausible that I am in severe violation of any other norms. As a result, our position does not predict that my assertion is absurd.

Concerning the fourth objection, in §3 we explained the absurdity of Moorean belief, both for the omissive and commissive cases.

5 Conclusion

We conclude that our account resists the objections we have made to Lawlor and Perry's. Our more general moral is that the prospects of giving an adequate account of Moorean absurdity in purely semantic terms are dim. Assertion is an essentially pragmatic phenomenon and any adequate account of Moorean absurdity must explain Moorean assertion, as opposed to Moorean utterance.[16]

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[15] Opacity of reference in belief also occurs in Crimmin's case, (1992) as discussed by Hájek and Stoljar (2001). For example, Superman informs me that I'm acquainted with him when he is disguised as some other person, whom I think idiotic. However, he does not tell me who this other person is. Moreover, I accept his words on the strength of his reliability and intelligence. I now seem compelled to acknowledge my acceptance of his news with the reply, 'I mistakenly believe that you are an idiot'. Williams (2006, §10) argues in a similar way to Rosenthal (2002) that the appearance of absurdity is an illusion.

[16] We thank the referee for detailed and insightful criticism.

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