

EPISTEMOLOGIA, LINGUAGEM E METAFÍSICA

# Unreasonable Selflessness

## *Altruísmo Irrracional*

\* Rodrigo Borges

\*\* Felipe Castelo Branco Medeiros

**Abstract:** According to Jennifer Lackey (2007), one should assert that p only if (i) it is reasonable for one to believe that p and (ii) if one asserted that p, one would assert that p at least in part because it is reasonable for one to believe that p. As data for this norm of assertion Lackey appeals to the intuition that in cases of 'selfless assertion' agents assert with epistemic propriety something they don't believe. If that norm of assertion was true, then it would explain why selfless assertions are epistemically proper. In this paper we offer a *reductio ad absurdum* of this view. The result is that selfless assertions are *not* epistemically appropriate.

**Keywords:** Jennifer Lackey. Reasonable to Believe Norm of Assertion. Moore's Paradox. Selfless assertion.

**Resumo:** De acordo com Jennifer Lackey (2007), deve-se asserir que p somente se (i) é razoável acreditar que p e (ii) se alguém asseriu que p, afirmaria que p pelo menos em parte porque é razoável acreditar que p. Como dados para essa norma de asserção, Lackey apela à intuição de que, nos casos de afirmação altruísta, os agentes afirmam com propriedade epistêmica algo que não acreditam. Se essa norma de afirmação fosse verdadeira, então ela explicaria por que as afirmações altruístas são epistemicamente apropriadas. Neste trabalho, oferecemos uma *reductio ad absurdum* desse ponto de vista. O resultado é que os asserções altruístas não são epistemicamente apropriados.

**Palavras-chave:** Jennifer Lackey. Razoável para Acreditar Norma de Asserção. Paradoxo de Moore. Asserção altruísta.

\* Professor no Programa de Pós Graduação em Filosofia da Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio Grande do Sul – PUCRS. <[rodrigo.borges@pucrs.br](mailto:rodrigo.borges@pucrs.br)>.

\*\* Doutorando no Programa de Pós Graduação em Filosofia da Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio Grande do Sul – PUCRS. <[felipe\\_mdrs@yahoo.com](mailto:felipe_mdrs@yahoo.com)>..



Consider the following case presented by Jennifer Lackey (2007, p. 599):

Stella is a devoutly Christian fourth-grade teacher, and her religious beliefs are grounded in a deep faith that she has had since she was a very young child. Part of this faith includes a belief in the truth of creationism and, accordingly, a belief in the falsity of evolutionary theory. Despite this, Stella fully recognizes that there is an overwhelming amount of scientific evidence against both of these beliefs. Indeed, she readily admits that she is not basing her own commitment to creationism on evidence at all but, rather, on the personal faith that she has in an all-powerful Creator. Because of this, Stella does not think that religion is something that she should impose on those around her, and this is especially true with respect to her fourth-grade students. Instead, she regards her duty as a teacher to include presenting material that is best supported by the available evidence, which clearly includes the truth of evolutionary theory. As a result, while presenting her biology lesson today, Stella asserts to her students, 'Modern day Homo sapiens evolved from Homo Erectus,' though she herself neither believes nor knows this proposition.

Lackey says that Stella selflessly asserted 'Modern day Homo sapiens evolved from Homo Erectus.' Her assertion is selfless because she does not believe what she asserted (in fact, she believes the opposite), but regards as her duty as a teacher to present material supported by evidence, regardless of what she personally believes.

The general recipe for generating cases of selfless assertion is the following: S selflessly asserts that x if and only if:

- (i) It is reasonable for S to believe that x is true;
- (ii) S asserts that x because it is reasonable for her to believe that x is true;
- (iii) S withholds belief in x for purely non-epistemic reasons;
- (iv) S is aware that it is reasonable for her to believe that x is true.

Selfless assertions are, according to Lackey, epistemically irreproachable – they are epistemically proper. According to her, this is so because conditions i and ii are the only epistemic conditions governing assertion and those conditions are satisfied in cases of selfless assertion. She captures the idea of epistemic propriety in an epistemic norm she calls the Reasonable to Believe Norm of Assertion:

(RTBNA) One should assert that p only if (i) it is reasonable for one to believe that p and (ii) if one asserted that p, one would assert that p at least in part because it is reasonable for one to believe that p.

Lackey characterizes 'reasonable to believe' in RTBNA thus:

(RB) If it is reasonable for S to believe x on evidence E, then S would justifiedly believe x, were she to believe x on E. (LACKEY, 2007, p. 611).

(RB) effectively makes whether it is reasonable for S to believe that x in her actual situation dependent on whether it is justified for S to believe x in most or all counterfactual situations that are similar enough to her (actual) situation.

Of course, 'justifiedly believing' is in as much need of clarification as is 'reasonable to believe' and Lackey qualifies this notion in two ways: first, justifiedly believing is not sufficient for knowledge (even when the belief is true), and, second, the epistemic support available to the agent has to make her belief likely to be true in the actual world, 'as a matter of objective fact,' in order for one to justifiedly believe that p (LACKEY, 2007, p. 610-611). So, from this second constraint on justifiedly believing and (RB), it follows that:

(RB+) If it is reasonable for S to believe that x on evidence E, then it is a matter of objective fact that E makes x likely to be true in the actual world.

We will now argue that selfless assertions are not epistemic proper. And that is because, by RTBNA's own lights, it is not reasonable for speakers in those scenarios to believe what they assert. The argument (call it Reductio) is a reductio ad absurdum of the idea that selfless assertions are epistemically proper. (For ease of exposition we will present Reductio using Stella's case, but the argument applies to all cases of selfless assertion.)

1. It is epistemically proper for Stella to assert (p) 'Modern day Homo Sapiens evolved from Homo Erectus.' [assume for a *reductio ad absurdum*]
2. If it is epistemically proper for Stella to assert p and if it is epistemically proper for Stella to assert ( $\sim Bp$ ) 'I don't believe that p,' then it is epistemically appropriate for her to assert (p &  $\sim Bp$ ) [assumption]
3. It is epistemically proper for Stella to assert (p &  $\sim Bp$ ) [from 1,2 by *modus ponens*]
4.  $\square$ If it is epistemically proper for Stella to assert (p &  $\sim Bp$ ), then she would be justified in believing (p &  $\sim Bp$ ) were she to believe it on her evidence. [from (RB)]
5. Stella would be justified in believing (p &  $\sim Bp$ ) were she to believe it on her evidence. [from 3,4 by *modus ponens*]

6. It is not the case that Stella would be justified in believing  $(p \ \& \ \sim Bp)$  were she to believe it on her evidence. [from (RB+)]

Since 5 and 6 entail a contradiction, we may infer the negation of our hypothesis:

7. It is not epistemically appropriate for Stella to assert that  $p$ .

Reductio is clearly valid. But is it sound? We take it that, with the exception of 2, 4 and 6, all steps in Reductio are uncontroversial. We will now argue that Lackey is committed to 2, 4 and 6.

Consider step 2. This is a particular instance of the following general principle:

- (!)  $(x)(y)$ [If it is epistemically proper for  $S$  to assert  $x$  and if it is epistemically proper for  $S$  to assert  $y$ , then it is epistemically proper for  $S$  to assert  $(x \ \& \ y)$ ]

Because step 2 is an instance of a general principle, there are precisely three ways in which one could resist it. Firstly, one could reject the idea that it is epistemically proper for Stella to assert  $p$ . Secondly, one could reject the idea that it is epistemically proper for Stella to assert  $\sim Bp$ . Thirdly, one could reject that it is appropriate for Stella to assert the conjunction,  $(p \ \& \ \sim Bp)$ . Would any of these strategies justify the selfless assertion proponent's denial of step 2? The contention here is that they would not. Let's take a look at why that is the case.

The first option quite clearly provides no help to someone who wishes to resist step 2. The reason for that is quite obvious: if one wished to deny step 2 by rejecting the left-hand side of the conjunction, one would have already agreed with the conclusion that the argument is trying to make<sup>1</sup>.

The second option is also problematic. After all, cases of selfless assertion are, by force of stipulation, cases in which the subject does *not* believe that  $p$ . Since that is the case, how could it be epistemically inappropriate for Stella to assert that she does not believe that  $p$ ? If Stella asserted that  $\sim Bp$ , she would be describing a fact about her own mental life. More to the point, she would be describing a fact she *knows* obtains<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> This point should be fairly clear. Denying step 2 by denying the left side of the conjunction is tantamount to giving up on selfless assertions because the argument *just is a reductio ad absurdum* in which the conclusion is the negation of step 1.

<sup>2</sup> Even though it is not explicitly built into the case that Stella knows this, suggesting that she does is not a stretch. To see why this is so, notice that it is in the very nature of the case that in order to assert something different from what she believes, Stella has to be aware of her belief and that it disagrees with what she perceives as the best available evidence.

So, as it stands, it seems that all necessary conditions for the fulfillment of RTBNA<sup>3</sup> have been satisfied with respect to  $\sim Bp$ . But, if that is the case, why should we accept Reductio's conclusion that it is not epistemically appropriate for Stella to assert that  $\sim Bp$ ?

Here is why. First, remember that the point of RTBNA is that one should only assert what is reasonable to believe. But asserting something one knows to be incompatible with one's evidence amounts to asserting something one knows to be unreasonable<sup>4</sup>. This suggests a plausible *sufficient* condition on meta-assertions (i.e., assertions whose content is about one's own mental states):

UBNA (Unreasonable Belief Norm of Assertion): One should *not* assert that  $p$  if one knows it is not reasonable for one to believe that  $p$ .

A norm like UBNA seems *prima facie* plausible and it appears to do justice to the intuition we expressed a couple of paragraphs ago. If something like UBNA is correct, then the proponent of selfless assertions could deny step 2 by denying that it is reasonable for Stella to assert the second conjunct in  $(p \ \& \ \sim Bp)$ . But there are other problems with (!).

Suppose you are looking at a long list of confirmed guests for a party you are throwing.<sup>5</sup> There are 150 names on the list. You have put the list together yourself. Now, with respect to each individual guest on this list, it is reasonable for you to believe that he or she will come to the party (they have all RSVP'd). Furthermore, since it is epistemically reasonable for you to believe, with respect to each individual guest, that he/she will come, it is epistemically proper for you to assert 'x will come to the party,'<sup>1</sup> for each particular guest x. Multiple applications of (!)<sup>6</sup> deliver the result that it is epistemically proper for you to assert 'All 150 people on the list will come to my party.' Intuitively, however, it is not reasonable for you to believe 'All 150 people on the list will come to my party.' Guests do catch colds, their relatives do die unexpectedly and so on. It seems like

<sup>3</sup> As a matter of fact, we could require even more here, for it appears to be the case that the requirements of even stronger norms of assertion (e.g., the knowledge norm of assertion) have been fulfilled.

<sup>4</sup> As we remarked in footnote 2, the fact that this belief is contrary to her evidence is stipulated by the example.

<sup>5</sup> This example is adapted from Hawthorne (2004, p. 48-9).

<sup>6</sup> That is, if it is appropriate for you to believe that guest A will come to the party and if it is appropriate for you to believe that guest B will come to the party, then it is appropriate for you to believe that both guests A and B will come to party. But, if it is appropriate for you to believe that both guests A and B will come to the party and if it is appropriate for you to believe that guest C will come to the party, then it is appropriate for you to believe that both guests A and B will come to the party and that guest C will come to the party; and so on and so forth until the conjunction includes all 150 guests.

you should take those possibilities into consideration. But, if this is right, then, intuitively, it is not the case that it is reasonable for you to believe 'All 150 people on the list will come to my party,' and, *a fortiori*, it is not epistemically appropriate for you to assert it.

Lottery and preface scenarios also falsify (!). It seems reasonable for you to believe, of each ticket in a large and fair lottery that it is a loser. So, according to RTBNA, it is appropriate for you to assert, of each ticket in the lottery, that it is a loser. But, multiple applications of (!) would entail that it is epistemically appropriate for you to assert 'All tickets in the lottery are losers.' But this contradicts what you know to be true: that there is exactly one winner. After finishing your book, it seems that it is reasonable for you to believe, of each claim you make in the book, that it is true. Again, multiple applications of (!) would deliver the result that it is epistemically appropriate for you to assert 'All claims in my book are true.' This result contradicts what seems very likely given your total evidence: that at least one claim in my book is false.

We believe that, when taken together, the considerations above make a very strong case against step 2 in Reductio. In particular, they highlight the fact that RTBNA is in tension with the plausible UBNA and (!) leads to paradox --- after all,  $(p \ \& \ \sim Bp)$  is a *Moorean paradoxical* conjunction and for that reason never properly asserted (cf. Moore:1993). Surprisingly, however, Lackey does not take any of this to be a good enough reason to reject 2. Quite the opposite, she argues that it is epistemically proper for Stella to assert  $(p \ \& \ \sim Bp)$ , because it satisfies RTBNA.<sup>7</sup> So, while rejecting step 2 of Reductio is a move that is available to others, it is not available to philosophers who accept *both* RTBNA *and* that selfless assertions are epistemically proper. The price one pays for this theoretical package includes accepting a deeply flawed principle, (!), accepting that asserting Moorean conjunctions of the form  $(p \ \& \ \sim Bp)$  is sometimes epistemically proper (i.e., when one is the speaker in a case of selfless assertion).

Lackey does try to explain the oddity of asserting Moorean conjunctions, however. Even though she is committed to saying that it is *epistemically proper* to assert those conjunctions in cases of selfless assertions, she thinks asserting Moorean conjunctions is always *conversationally odd* or improper. We come back to this issue below and suggest that this account of Moorean conjunctions does not work.

Step 4 says that, if it is epistemically proper for Stella to assert  $(p \ \& \ \sim Bp)$ , then she would be justified in believing that conjunction were

<sup>7</sup> This is the relevant passage (the emphasis is Lackey's): '... there are some Moorean paradoxes that clearly do satisfy RTBNA on my view: namely cases involving selfless assertions' (LACKEY, 2007, p. 613).

she to believe it on her evidence. This step is a direct consequence of RB above. Step 4 simply applies RB to cases of selfless assertion.

This brings us to step 6 and to the main reason why it is not epistemically proper for subjects in cases of selfless assertion to assert. From step 2 we get that it is reasonable for Stella to believe  $(p \ \& \ \sim Bp)$ . But, given  $(RB+)$ , if it is reasonable for Stella to believe  $(p \ \& \ \sim Bp)$ , then her evidence makes  $(p \ \& \ \sim Bp)$  likely to be true in the actual world. The problem is that subjects in selfless assertion cases not only withhold belief in what they assert, but they also believe in the denial of what they assert. For example, given Stella's denial of evolution, her evidence set includes not only  $\sim Bp$  but also  $\sim p$ . This means that Stella's evidence set includes  $\sim p$ . But, given this, the objective likelihood of  $p$ , conditional on her evidence is 0 (zero), for the truth of  $\sim p$  entails that  $p$  is false. And since the probability of a conjunction is the product of the probability of its conjuncts, the likelihood of  $(p \ \& \ \sim Bp)$  being true given Stella's evidence is also 0 (zero). As selfless as Stella may be, her selflessness comes with the price of being unreasonable.

Note that this line of reasoning in support of step 6 exploits the *doxastic* oddity of Moorean conjunctions (i.e., the fact that *believing* Moorean conjunctions is irrational) and cannot, therefore, be blocked by an account of the *conversational* oddity of asserting those conjunctions (i.e., the fact that asserting Moorean conjunctions is *practically* irrational). In her treatment of Moorean conjunctions, Lackey unfortunately gives us only a treatment of their conversational oddity, leaving the irrationality of believing those conjunctions untouched. Still, there's good reason to believe that not even her explanation of the conversational oddity succeeds.

Lackey (2007, p. 616-617) suggests we account for the conversational oddity of Moorean conjunctions with a version of Paul Grice's maxim of quantity<sup>8</sup>, the Not Misleading Norm of Assertion:

(NMNA) S should assert that  $p$  in context  $C$  only if it is not reasonable for S to believe that the assertion that  $p$  will be misleading in  $C$  relative to the purposes of the exchange in question.

The idea is that, given NMNA, it is reasonable for Stella to believe that asserting 'Modern day Homo Sapiens evolved from Homo Erectus, but I do not believe they did' would mislead her audience. Her audience would be misled either because Stella's assertion offered more information than

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<sup>8</sup> The maxim of quantity says that one should make one's contribution as informative as it is required for the current purposes of the conversation one is in. See Grice (1991, p. 30-31).

it was required by the purpose of the conversation or because it offered less information than it was required by the purpose of the conversation. By asserting that she does not believe that modern day Homo Sapiens evolved from Homo Erectus, Stella is imparting *more* information than her audience needs, because the purpose of her conversation is one of informing students about the evolutionary history of Homo Sapiens according to the prevailing evolutionary biology, not one of informing students about her views on evolutionary biology. What is more, since it is reasonable for Stella to believe that asserting the Moorean conjunction would mislead her audience in this way, NMNA seems to deliver the result that Stella should refrain from asserting 'Homo Sapiens evolved from Homo Erectus, but I don't believe they did'. On the other hand, even if the purpose of the conversation included Stella's views on evolutionary biology, she would still impart *less* information than required by the purpose of her conversation because students could not plausibly be expected to see the relevance of what she asserted, for they know nothing about her peculiar situation as a creationist teacher having to teach evolution.

Appealing to NMNA in this way in order to explain what is conversationally odd with Moorean conjunctions will not suffice, however. Moorean conjunctions clash with our linguistic intuitions in a way that is similar to the way in which contradictions clash with our linguistic intuitions.<sup>9</sup> When asserted, Moorean conjunctions and contradictions cause the type of dissonance in one's audience that forces them to conclude that the speaker is either trying to implicate something (as when one says 'Yes and no' to implicate that one does not care for the question that is on the table) or that she has opted out of the conversation. But this is not what NMNA says. According to NMNA, Stella's assertion of the Moorean conjunction 'Homo Sapiens evolved from Homo Erectus, but I don't believe they did' would be merely conversationally confusing or awkward, rather than what it seems to actually be – borderline nonsensical. Hence, even if true, NMNA explains, *at most*, why asserting 'p, but I don't believe that p' misleads one's audience in a way that is similar to the way in which assertions in a foreign language that are not accompanied by translation also mislead.<sup>10</sup> The result is that it is far from clear that NMNA explains the conversational oddity of asserting Moorean conjunctions. But, if not NMNA, what explain the relevant phenomena?

<sup>9</sup> This way of putting what makes Moorean conjunctions conversationally odd is Keith DeRose's (2009: 96 fn. 19; 203 fn. 17). See also Benton (2013) for further discussion of this point.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Doven (2006: 475).



We believe that the most promising explanation of the relevant phenomena appeals to the fact that speakers represent themselves as knowing what they assert, and that in most contexts a speaker who asserts a Moorean conjunction of the form 'p & ~Bp' asserts something her audience knows the speaker cannot possibly know.<sup>11</sup> In order to know (p & ~Bp) one needs to know both p and ~Bp. But, if knowledge requires belief, then one knows p only if Bp is true. The problem, of course, is that Bp and ~Bp cannot both be true, and, hence, whoever asserts that (p & ~Bp) asserts something they cannot possibly know. The dissonance hearers experience is thus explained by the fact that the speaker is representing herself as doing something she couldn't possibly do -- knowing (p & ~Bp). What is more, this explanation of what is conversationally odd about asserting Moorean conjunctions of the form (p & ~Bp) is exactly the same as the explanation of what is conversationally odd about asserting contradictions (which is the result we wanted): whoever asserts that (p & ~p) represents herself as doing something that she could not possibly do – knowing (p & ~p). This explanation of the relevant conversational phenomena is much more promising than the one based on NMNA.

One might object that our explanation is not fully satisfactory, for it does not seem well suited to explain the conversational oddity in asserting conjunctions of the form (p & B~p), which some take to be another form of Moorean conjunction.<sup>12</sup> While no one both believes that p and fail to believe that p (which explains why asserting (p & ~Bp) is conversationally odd), it might be the case that some believe that p and believe that ~p. This latter fact would seem to prevent us from explaining the conversational oddity of asserting conjunctions of the form (p & B~p) because they may sometimes be known (as when one comes to know one is gullible). In which case, sometimes speakers who assert that (p & B~p) would represent themselves truthfully. Our reply to this objection challenges the assumption that asserting (p & B~p) is as conversationally odd as asserting (p & ~Bp). While one will not be able to produce a case where it is appropriate to assert that (p & B~p),

<sup>11</sup> See Unger (1975) for a discussion of the idea that asserting that p causes the speaker to represent herself as knowing that p. Williamson (2000), and others, argue for the stronger view that one should assert only what one knows. We are sympathetic to the Williamsonian suggestion not least because, if it is true, it would explain the more obvious fact that one represents oneself as knowing that p whenever one asserts that p (because asserting that p imparts the information that one satisfies the norm of assertion, which requires knowledge). However, since the weaker claim that one represents oneself as knowing p by asserting p is all we need in order to explain the conversational oddity of Moorean conjunctions, we choose to remain agnostic on whether the stronger view is true or not.

<sup>12</sup> For example, Sorensen (1998).

examples in which asserting  $(p \ \& \ B \sim p)$  is felicitous are not that hard to find. Here is quite possibly one such case.<sup>13</sup>

John and Mary are very good friends who know each other for over thirty years. They enjoy the same things and, in particular, they enjoy discussing their personal lives with each other. One day, after telling John about her brother-in-law and the weekend they spent together with their respective partners in a cabin in the woods, John starts suspecting that Mary is in love with her brother-in-law, but that she doesn't believe she is. John thinks Mary is in love with her brother-in-law because she is really excited about everything he does and it is always very happy when she talks about the time they spend together. Plus, John knows Mary well and he has seen the same signs of infatuation when she was getting to know her current husband. John thinks Mary doesn't believe she loves her brother-in-law because she sincerely tells him she loves only her husband. A few weeks after their conversation about Mary's weekend, John decides to confront Mary with her own feelings for her brother-in-law. He explains to her how she seems excited every time she talks about her brother-in-law, while insisting that she loves only her husband. After listening attentively to John's heartfelt and honest description, Mary is surprised with herself. After thinking for a few seconds, she turns to John and says 'Yes, I love my brother-in-law, but I believe I don't.'

We think that what Mary said is perfectly fine in the context of her conversation. But this should not be the case if the objection we are considering were on the right track. It is important to note that the non-oddity of this assertion is in sharp contrast with the clear oddity of Mary's assertion of 'I love my brother-in-law, but I don't believe I do'. As our account based on knowledge representation predicted, the latter but not the former assertion clashes with our linguistic intuitions.

This concludes our case against the view that selfless assertions are epistemic proper.

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<sup>13</sup> This case is adapted from de Almeida (2001). de Almeida extracts a moral from this case that is different from the one we extract, however.

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**Endereço postal:**

Programa de Pós-Graduação em Filosofia – PUCRS  
Av. Ipiranga, 6681 – Prédio 5  
Porto Alegre, RS, Brasil

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