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Citation

WILLIAMS, John N., "Moorean Absurdities and Iterated Beliefs" (2003). *Research Collection School of Social Sciences*. Paper 5.

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Moorean Absurdities And Iterated Beliefs

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October 2003

Paper No. 3-2003

Moorean absurdities and iterated beliefs

1. *The problem*

G. E. Moore famously observed that to say,

(OM) I went to the pictures last Tuesday but I don't believe that I did

(1942: 543)

or

(COM) I believe that he has gone out, but he has not

(1944: 204)

would be 'absurd' (1942: 543; 1944: 204). Why is it absurd to believe or say something about myself that might be true of me? Why do Moore's propositions sound like contradictions when they aren't? Moore's examples typify two different forms of proposition, namely the omissive

(om) $p \ \& \ \sim Bp$

and the commissive

(com) $p \ \& \ B\sim p$.

where 'Bp' stands for 'I believe that p'. This semantic difference is inherited from the genuine difference between agnostics and atheists. The result is the difference between the omission of specific true belief and the commission of a specific mistake in belief¹. But Sorensen (2000: 30) has produced these examples:

God exists but I don't believe that I'm a theist

and

God exists but I believe that I'm an atheist

that contain iterated belief operators, as represented by

$$(om^1) p \& \sim BBp$$

and

$$(com^1) p \& BB\sim p$$

where the superscript denotes the order of iteration. Sorensen observes (2000: 29) that as iteration increases, omissive absurdity decreases, while commissive type absurdity does not.

Thus with four iterations

$$(om^4) p \& \sim BBBBBp$$

seems less absurd to believe or assert than om^1 , whereas the absurdity of believing or asserting

$$(com^4) p \& BBBBB\sim p$$

is undiminished. And om^1 or com^1 seem less absurd to believe or assert than om or com . What is the explanation of this?

2. *The absurdity of Moorean belief*

All commentators who explain the absurdity of Moorean belief appeal to the principle that belief

distributes over conjunction:

$$(B\&) B(p \& q) \rightarrow (Bp \& Bq)$$

Moreover it is hard to see how the absurdity of Moorean belief could be explained without it.

Moreover it seems to follow from the very concept of belief. So if I believe that $(p \& \sim Bp)$, then

Bp . But then 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. Although what I believe might be

might be true of me and although I might believe it, it cannot be true of me *if* I believe it. In

other words, it is logically impossible for me to truly believe it. By contrast I *can* truly believe Moore's commissive example. For if I believe that $(p \ \& \ B\sim p)$ then again Bp , which is consistent with the second conjunct of what I believe, but only if I hold contradictory beliefs about whether p . Moreover, discerning this fact, as we just saw, requires a minimum of reflection². So it is not difficult to see why I am irrational in continuing to hold such a belief.

In believing Moore's omissive proposition I have a self-falsifying belief. In believing Moore's commissive proposition, I escape this irrationality only by the irrationality of holding contradictory beliefs. Thus both beliefs are equally absurd because these two failures of theoretical rationality are equally severe. For both types of belief are equally useless as guides to the truth. Any evidence that (absurdly) justifies me in believing the omissive proposition would justify me in believing what is then false. Likewise any evidence for my belief that p is ipso facto evidence against my belief that $\sim p$ and conversely. Nonetheless the two irrationalities are distinct, as we should expect from the clear difference between an instance of lack of true belief and an instance of mistaken belief.

3. Defining Moorean absurdity

Now we know the exact way in which it is irrational to believe Moore's examples, we may say that

(MP) Any proposition is Moorean just in case it is a possible truth that self-reports no irrationality but a belief in it is self-falsifying on pain of contradictory beliefs.

One virtue of this definition is that it allows that there is nothing absurd in my believing or asserting

At least one of my present beliefs is mistaken

The reason why this proposition fails to be Moorean is that it fails to self-report a *specific* instance of mistaken belief, even under the assumption that I believe it. To believe it would be a perfectly reasonable belief in my own infallibility that is has most probably been long true of me. Thus no deep contradiction-like flaw in me is revealed.

Of course, my belief in my own disclaimer guarantees that I have at least one false belief. For by *reductio*, if my belief that I have at least one mistaken belief is mistaken then none of my beliefs are mistaken, including my belief in this disclaimer. On the one hand this means I have *inconsistent beliefs*, namely a set of beliefs that cannot all be true. But on the other hand, it also means that my belief in my own mistakenness is infallible. Since I was most likely mistaken in some of my beliefs anyway, such a tight grasp of the truth that I am indeed mistaken represents a useful heuristic for finding out the truth about *which* specific mistaken beliefs I hold by looking again at the quality of evidence.

The lesson to be drawn from this is that Moorean belief is not to be analysed in terms of inconsistent beliefs but rather in terms of contradictory beliefs. For self-contradictory or contradictory beliefs are inconsistent but not conversely. Inconsistency in my beliefs does not necessarily undermine my justification in the way my self-contradictory or contradictory beliefs do. Any evidence for my belief that p is ipso facto evidence against my belief that not-p and conversely. Thus any evidence for the truth of my self-contradictory belief that (p & not-p) is evidence for its falsehood. By contrast, evidence for my belief in my occasional mistakenness need not count against any of my other beliefs, nor visa versa. I would now have inconsistent beliefs, but not contradictory ones. My correct belief in my occasional mistakenness does not entail beliefs that contradict each other, since we may consistently

suppose that I don't believe that all of my beliefs are true. So unlike a Moorean belief, one that is self-falsifying on pain of contradictory beliefs, my belief that some of my beliefs are mistaken is not Moorean, for by contrast, such commitment to the necessity of at least one false belief is benign³. Since the mere truth of a Moorean proposition does not constitute any theoretical irrationality on my part,

It is raining but I believe that it is raining without the least justification is also excluded from the extension of Moore's examples (compare Alder 1999 267-68).

Also excluded is

I am asserting nothing now

After all, I could quietly believe in my continuing obedience to a Trappist vow of silence in a perfectly sensible way⁴.

4. The absurdity of Moorean assertion

In attempting to let you know that p, I intend to get you to know that p. When I lie to you that p, I intend to get you to mistakenly believe that p. In any such case I intend to get you to believe my words. But I cannot succeed in this attempt unless I also get you to think that I am sincere in making the assertion. For if you think that I'm play-acting or recognise that I'm lying then you have no reason to accept my words, so my attempt to impart knowledge or lie to you will fail. Since I should see with minimal reflection that this is so, my full intention must be to *get you to believe my words by getting you to think me sincere* in uttering them. It follows that I must intend to get you to believe that I am *sincerely telling the truth*. In other words, I aim to make you believe *me*. When the assertion is Moorean, the offer is worthless. For if you think

me sincere in asserting the first conjunct, you believe Bp . But if you believe my words then you must believe $\sim Bp$ (in om) and you must believe $B\sim p$ (in com). So if you believe me, you must have contradictory beliefs in the first case (conclusive grounds for you to refuse to believe me), and you must think *I* have them in the second (conclusive grounds for believing me irrational, which if you are charitable, will force you to again refuse to believe me). So I should recognise that that you cannot believe me unless you are theoretically irrational or judge me to be so. Accordingly I should revise my plans. If I don't then I'm practically irrational.

5. A non-Moorean absurdity as well

MP shows that om^1 and com^1 are not Moorean. Admittedly, they are possible truths that self-report no irrationality. As a case of om^1 , if I have no way of discovering the truth that it's raining (because I have been incarcerated in a sealed room), I might reasonably withhold the belief that it's raining (by suspending judgement either way) without (mistakenly) thinking I believe it's raining. Likewise I might be perfectly justified, not only in (mistakenly) believing that it's not raining (when my captors fool me with the illusion of dry weather), but also in recognising this belief, so the bare truth of com^1 constitutes no irrationality in me either. But such beliefs are not self-falsifying on pain of contradictory beliefs. If I hold a true belief in either then by $B\&$, Bp . But this does not contradict the second conjunct of om^1 , namely $\sim BBp$. Moreover it is consistent with the second conjunct of com^1 , namely $BB\sim p$, in a way that allows me to avoid holding a pair of contradictory beliefs. Nonetheless I seem to be absurd in some sense to believe either. What is the explanation of this non-Moorean but related absurdity?

The very same resource, namely B&, helps explain the related absurdity: in believing om or com , I am not only guilty of the major failing that my belief is self-falsifying or entails contradictory beliefs but am guilty of a minor failing (of introspective non-omniscience or fallibility) as well. When the Moorean belief is iterated, the major failing is expunged but the minor failing remains. And as iterations increase, the minor failing of omissive belief diminishes, unlike that of commissive belief. For if I believe om then by B&), $Bp \ \& \ B\sim Bp$. In other words, I mistakenly think I lack a belief.

Psychologically plausible cases of this include self-deception. For example, my assertion that I don't believe that women are inferior may be sincere because I am blind to the way I treat them. You may be in a better position to recognise that my boorish behaviour is the manifestation of the existing belief that I sincerely deny having. In the same circumstances I might also sincerely avow a belief that women are *not* inferior, although you can see that I believe they are. That would be a case in which $Bp \ \& \ BB\sim p$. In other words, what I really believe contradicts what I think I believe. Given B&, this is precisely what is true of me if I believe com . Yet again in the same example, although I may sincerely disavow the belief that women are inferior, you might recognise that I hold it. So this is a case in which $Bp \ \& \ \sim BBp$. In other words, I hold a belief that that I fail to recognise.

Each of these three beliefs are grounds for the minor epistemic criticism that I do not always recognise whether I have a belief or that I am sometimes mistaken about whether I have it. In other words I fail a principle of introspective omniscience,

$$(IO) \quad (Bp \rightarrow BBp) \ \& \ (\sim Bp \rightarrow B\sim Bp)$$

or fail a principle of introspective infallibility,

$$(II) \quad (BBp \rightarrow Bp) \ \& \ (B\sim Bp \rightarrow \sim Bp).$$

If $Bp \ \& \ B\sim Bp$, I fail the second conjunct of II. But this failure is comparatively mild. If $Bp \ \& \ BB\sim p$, I either fail the first conjunct of II or hold contradictory beliefs about whether p . And if $Bp \ \& \ \sim BBp$ I fail the first conjunct of IO. This failure also seems comparatively mild. This explains why a belief in om^1 is less absurd than a belief in om . In believing om I commit the major failing of falsifying that belief and also fail to be introspectively infallible. But in believing om^1 , I avoid the major failing by failing to be introspectively omniscient. Thus I am less irrational. Note that even if failing IO or II were an failure of rationality of equal severity as that of self-falsifying belief or contradictory beliefs, this conclusion would still stand, since any failure of rationality becomes bigger if it contains any other. Similarly, in believing com I must either falsify that belief or hold contradictory beliefs. But in believing com^1 , I may avoid both major faults by failing to be introspectively infallible.

6. The differential decrease of related absurdity in belief

The supplement of one other intuitive principle explains why subsequent iterations only decrease omissive absurdity. If I hold the true belief that

$$(om^2) \ p \ \& \ \sim BBBp$$

then Bp (because of $B\&$) and $\sim BBBp$ (because the second conjunct of what I believe is true).

This might be the case. But if it is then I fail to be introspectively omniscient, since double application of the first conjunct of IO to the fact that Bp results in the contradiction that I both have and lack the belief that BBp .

This minor failing is mitigated by the increased complexity of what I fail to believe. The mitigation follows from the apparent requirement that

If I believe that p then I have the ability to think the thought that p.

Your question, ‘do eels eat glass?’ may make me newly conscious of my long-held belief that they don’t, but although I have never had thoughts of glass-eating eels before, I have long had the ability to have them. This requirement explains why although we may intuitively suppose that a dog has rudimentary beliefs about the food in its bowl (which helps us explain its behaviour as it strains at its leash), we hesitate to attribute it the belief that it will be beaten in Lent. Clearly it does not have the concept of Lent and so lacks the ability to think thoughts of Lent. The requirement also explains our difficulty in characterising the beliefs of other species in any fine-grained way, since it is difficult to specify, using the linguistic expressions of *our* thoughts, exactly what concepts (or derivatively, thoughts) are available to those with radically different linguistic capacities and ways of behaving⁵.

As my beliefs are iterated in a series, there occurs eventually an iteration complex enough to defeat human understanding. In other words, complexity of thought will eventually defeat the first conjunct of IO, not because I lack the concepts embodied in that iteration, nor because I lack the concept of belief or of myself, but simply because the iterated thought is too complex for me to entertain. Since only God can think thoughts of one-millionth iterated beliefs, my failure to obey IO to the same extent shows only that I am less than God-like and thus ceases to be much of a failure of rationality at all. Thus the supposition that $Bp \ \& \ \sim BB \dots Bp$ (one that must be true if I am to avoid self-falsifying belief) includes the supposition that I *lack* an iterated belief. As iterations increase, the lack becomes excusable enough to cease to count as failure of rationality at all. By contrast, if I truly believe

$(om^2)p \ \& \ BBB\sim p$

then Bp (because of $B\&$) and $BB\sim p$ (because the second conjunct of what I believe is true). In other words, my belief in om^2 avoids self-falsification only if I really have a belief that contradicts the belief that I think I believe I have. Here the required ability of thought affords no mitigation with further iteration, since what is iterated (my belief that $BB\sim p$) is a belief that I *have* rather than *lack*. So the supposition that I truly believe ($b^{1,000,000}$) already includes the supposition that I have the God-like ability of thought required by a one-millionth iterated belief. But for any iteration of om^1 , I am guilty of the same failing, namely that I can hold beliefs all of which are true only if I hold contradictory beliefs. The truth of my n^{th} -iterated belief entails the existence of my belief $n-1$, the truth of which entails the existence of my belief $n-2$... and so on back down the series until I hold contradictory beliefs. So I can only avoid both self-falsification and contradictory beliefs in believing om^1 by mistakenly believing I hold a belief (thus failing II and yet still having the ability to have thoughts of the content of that mistaken belief). Thus further iteration of om^1 does not diminish absurdity.

7. The differential decrease of related absurdity in assertion

The account so far also explains why subsequent iterations only decrease omissive absurdity.

Suppose that you believe me when I assert

$$(om^1) \quad p \ \& \ \sim BBp.$$

Since you think me sincere in asserting the first conjunct, you believe that Bp . And since you believe what I say in the second conjunct, you believe that $\sim BBp$. So if you are to believe me, you must judge that I have a belief that I fail to recognise. Thus you may make only the minor criticism that I fail to be introspectively omniscient. Likewise if you believe me when I assert

(b¹) p & BB~p

then since you think me sincere in asserting the first conjunct, you believe that Bp. And since you believe what I say in the second conjunct, you believe that BB~p. So if you are to believe me, you must judge that I really hold a belief that p that contradicts what I think I believe (in other words, that I fail II unless I hold contradictory beliefs about whether p). Given your charity in withholding the judgement that I have contradictory beliefs, you may make only the minor criticism that I'm not introspectively infallible. In either case, you can only charitably believe me if you think I'm not introspectively omniscient or not introspectively infallible.

Nonetheless my iterated assertions are less absurd than their original counterparts. When I assert om to you, you can only believe me by sacrificing your own rationality in acquiring contradictory beliefs. But when I assert om¹ to you, you can consistently judge that I am aware that I have a specific belief that I fail to recognise. And the criticism you must make of me if you believe me when I assert com, namely that I have contradictory beliefs, is severer than that you may charitably make when I assert com¹, namely that I am aware that I hold a specific belief that contradicts what I think I believe. As omissive iteration increases, so the absurdity of my assertion decreases. That I fail to have a one-millionth-iterated belief in what I really do believe is perfectly credible, since neither you nor I can humanly hold such beliefs. My assertion becomes a truthful report of psychological limits.

By contrast, my credibility in making comissive assertions is not strengthened by further iteration. Your judgement that I have a belief that contradicts what I take myself (over a million iterations) to believe should be that I am still at fault to the same degree. My iterated belief still commits me to a belief that is iterated one order less, and so on back down the series until I am committed to contradictory beliefs. If you believe me when I assert (b^{1,00,000}),

you are still in a position to see that I can avoid contradictory beliefs only if, somewhere in the series, I take myself to have a belief that I don't in fact have.

Notes

1. It is still common to find analyses that fall afoul of this distinction. For example, Rosenthal's diagnosis (2002: 171) that a Moorean sentence denies the occurrence of the intentional state that it also purports to express, fails to explain the omissive assertion in which I deny nothing but rather affirm a belief. By contrast Hájeck and Stoljar's (2001: 209) diagnosis of the absurdity of omissive Moorean assertion, that I express contradictory beliefs (because I assert that p and so express a belief that p and also assert that I believe that not-p and so express a belief that not-p) does not apply to the commissive assertion.
2. Compare xxxx and xxxx. As De Almeida (2001: 42) notes, I need the minimal intelligence to present myself with such an argument for the absurdity. But this hardly constitutes an objection.
3. This is the moral of the so-called 'preface paradox'.
4. Against Rosenthal's claim (2002: 167) that 'Moore's paradox occurs with sentences... which are self-defeating in a way that prevents one from making an assertion with them'.
5. Admittedly, the required ability of thought is challenged by the fact that in one sense I can believe things on authority that I do not understand. For example, I may believe an authority on physics who assures me that entropy is increasing although I have no idea what entropy is. But believing that she has said something true is different from believing

what she says. Although I don't believe that entropy is increasing, I do believe that she has said something true (although I don't know what) since although I cannot think thoughts of entropy, I can think the thought that by using the word 'entropy', she has said something true. A different sort of counterexample arises when I seem to have only a partial grasp of the content of my belief. For example, mistakenly thinking that arthritis is an inflammation of bones as well as joints, I sincerely utter to you 'arthritis has spread to my thigh'.

Intuitively we feel that I mistakenly believe something to do with arthritis. It is consistent with this that although I don't believe that arthritis has spread to my thigh (because I can't think thoughts of arthritis, since my inability to reliably distinguish cases of arthritis from other ailments precludes my grasp of the concept of arthritis embedded in that would-be thought) I do believe (mistakenly) that inflammation of the joints and bones has spread to my thigh and believe (mistakenly) that what you call 'arthritis' has spread to my thigh.

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