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The Completeness of the Pragmatic Solution to Moore's Paradox in Belief: A Reply to Chan

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Abstract

Moore's paradox in belief is the fact that beliefs of the form 'p and I do not believe that p' are 'absurd' yet possibly true. Writers on the paradox have nearly all taken the absurdity to be a form of irrationality. These include those who give what Timothy Chan calls the 'pragmatic solution' to the paradox. This solution turns on the fact that having the Moorean belief falsifies its content. Chan, who also takes the absurdity to be a form of irrationality, objects to this solution by arguing that it is circular and thus incomplete. This is because it must explain why Moorean beliefs are irrational yet, according to Chan, their grammatical third-person transpositions are not, even though the same proposition is believed. But the solution can only explain this asymmetry by relying on a formulation of the ground of the irrationality of Moorean beliefs that presupposes precisely such asymmetry. I reply that it is neither necessary nor sufficient for the irrationality that the contents of Moorean beliefs be restricted to the grammatical first-person. What has to be explained is rather that such grammatical non-first-person transpositions sometimes, but not always, result in the disappearance of irrationality. Describing this phenomenon requires the grammatical first-person/non-first person distinction. The pragmatic solution explains the phenomenon once it is formulated in de se terms. But the grammatical first-person/non-first-person distinction is independent of, and a fortiori, different from, the de se/non-de se distinction presupposed by pragmatic solution, although both involve the first person broadly construed. Therefore the pragmatic solution is not circular. Building on the work of Green and Williams I also distinguish between the irrationality of Moorean beliefs and their absurdity. I argue that while all irrational Moorean beliefs are absurd, some Moorean beliefs are absurd but not irrational. I explain this absurdity in a way that is not circular either.

Keywords: G.E. Moore, Moore's paradox, Self-falsification, Self-refutation, Circularity, Explanation, Belief, Absurdity, Irrationality, First-person, First-person/second-person asymmetry, De se, De se/non-de se asymmetry, Asymmetry

1 Introduction

G.E. Moore observed that assertions such as

>   (1) It is raining but I do not believe that it is raining

are 'absurd' (1942, p. 543).[1] He remarks that it is a 'paradox' that this absurdity is present despite the fact that the assertion might be true (1993, p. 209). I seem no less absurd if I silently believe (1). Now the paradox becomes the fact that my belief is absurd despite its possible truth. So solving this paradox in belief involves giving an adequate explanation of this fact. Writers on the paradox have nearly all taken the absurdity in belief to be a form of irrationality (see Green and Williams 2007, pp. 11–29 for a survey). These include those who give what Chan (2010) calls the 'pragmatic solution' to the paradox (notably Williams 1994, 1996, 1998, 2006). The pragmatic solution appeals to the fact that such a belief is self-refuting—believing it falsifies its content. Chan, who also takes the absurdity to be a form of irrationality, objects to this solution by arguing that it is circular and thus incomplete.

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[1] Moore's own example is 'I went to the pictures last Tuesday but I don't believe that I did' (1942, p. 543).

This is because it must explain why Moorean beliefs are irrational yet, according to Chan, their third-person transpositions are not, even though the same proposition is believed. But the solution can only explain this asymmetry by relying on a formulation of the ground of the irrationality of Moorean beliefs that presupposes precisely such asymmetry.

I reply that once this ground is modified to accommodate an important point made by Chan, there is no such circularity, so the pragmatic solution, conceived as an explanation of the irrationality of Moorean beliefs, is still satisfactory.

Building on Green and Williams (2010) I also distinguish between the irrationality of Moorean beliefs and their absurdity. This is surely important, since Moore himself thinks of his paradox in terms of absurdity. I argue that while all irrational Moorean beliefs are absurd, some Moorean beliefs are absurd but not irrational. I explain this absurdity in a way that is not circular either.

Chan sees Moore's paradox as the challenge of explaining why beliefs expressed by sentences of forms such as 'p &I do not believe that p' (What Chan calls 'Moorean beliefs') are 'absurd' in the sense of being 'patently unreasonable' (2010, p. 216) even though they '(i) are contingent and often true' (2010, p. 211), and (ii) 'their third-person…transpositions are rationally believeable' (2010, p. 216). The pragmatic solution turns upon the fact that believing a Moorean proposition falsifies its content. If I believe that (p &I do not believe that p), then since believing a conjunction involves believing its conjuncts, I believe that p, which falsifies the content of my belief that (p & I do not believe that p). Let us follow Chan in saying that such a belief is 'self-refuting'.

He argues that in contrast, if the belief is transposed into the grammatical third person, such as (2) It is raining but he does not believe that it is raining then it is not self-refuting. If I believe (2) then again I believe that p, but this is consistent with the fact that he does not believe that p. However, it would be more accurate to say that the transposed belief is not necessarily self-refuting, because it is indeed self-refuting if he is me, a point to which I will return in Sect. 5.

Let us call this asymmetry the 'first-person/non-first person asymmetry of irrationality'. It is formulated in terms of the 'grammatical first-person/non-first person distinction'; substitutions of grammatical personal pronouns such as 'he' for 'I' or vice versa into an indicative sentence uttered in the same context may change the truth-value of the proposition that the sentence expresses. I will say more about this distinction in Sect. 6.

Chan does not attempt to define 'Moorean belief' and he recognizes that the syntax of (1) is not needed for a belief to be Moorean, because a belief of the form 'p but no one believes that p' is also irrational in the same way as (1). He claims instead that 'beliefs that obviously and immediately imply [(1)] should also no doubt be included under any plausible definition of Moorean beliefs' (2010, p. 216).

Chan makes the important point that the fact that holding a Moorean belief falsifies it is not enough to make the believer irrational (and in his sense, 'absurd'). What is needed is that the believer can be reasonably expected to know that holding it falsifies it. He argues that more precise formulations of this ground of Moorean irrationality are either too weak in making non-Moorean beliefs count as irrational or too strong in not making Moorean beliefs count as irrational. He concludes that the only formulation that is neither too weak nor too strong has to be couched in first-person terms, "making an essential use of 'I'" (2010, p. 211).

Chan thinks that this means that the pragmatic solution presupposes the very same first-person/non-first-person asymmetry. Since the asymmetry is a crucial feature of the paradox, the pragmatic solution is incomplete, because it fails give a non-circular explanation of (ii)—why Moorean beliefs cease to be irrational when their contents are presented other than in the grammatical first-person.

Chan has made an important contribution to our understanding of the paradox—that the irrationality is present only if we may reasonably expect the believer to see that his belief is self-refuting. This means that the believer must conceive of himself as himself, or as Chan puts it, conceive of himself in first-personal terms. Let us call this the 'de se/non-de se asymmetry'. It springs from the fact that substitutions of reflexive personal pronouns such as 'I myself' and 'He himself' for their non-reflexive counterparts such as 'I' and 'He' into an indicative sentence that ascribes a propositional attitude may change the truth-value of the proposition that the sentence expresses. I will say more about this in Sect. 6.

Nonetheless Chan's objection to the pragmatic solution fails. It is neither necessary nor sufficient for the irrationality that the contents of Moorean beliefs be restricted to the grammatical first-person, so contrary to Chan, there is no grammatical first-person/ non-first-person asymmetry of irrationality to be explained. What has to be explained is rather that such grammatical non-first-person transpositions sometimes, but not always, result in the disappearance of irrationality. Describing this phenomenon requires the grammatical first-person/non-first person distinction. The pragmatic solution explains the phenomenon once it is formulated in de se terms. But the grammatical first-person/non-first-person distinction is independent of, and a fortiori, different from, the de se/non-de se distinction presupposed by pragmatic solution, although both involve the first person broadly construed. Therefore the pragmatic solution is not circular.

Moreover, the irrationality of a belief may be seen as a different phenomenon from its absurdity. Following Green and Williams (2010) I will argue that while all Moorean beliefs are absurd, they may be absurd without being irrational, although—as we might expect—if they are irrational in their own distinctive way then they are thereby absurd. The ground of this absurdity is plausibly conceived as the believer being in a position to see, with no further empirical investigation, that the belief is false. There is no circularity here either.

2 Chan's objection

Let us now trace the steps in Chan's argument. He starts by comparing Moorean belief with beliefs in necessary falsehoods. He observes that believing a necessary falsehood is not enough to make one irrational (de Almeida 2001, pp. 39–43, 2007, pp. 53–56). For example, mathematicians before Gödel were not irrational in believing that arithmetic is decidable, because they could not have been expected to know that it is necessarily false that arithmetic is decidable. Analogously, the fact that one's belief is self-refuting is not sufficient for one to be irrational, because one might not be reasonably expected to know that it is self-refuting. For example, one is not irrational in believing that

> (3) The atheism of my mother's nieceless brother's only nephew angers God if one
> reasonably fails to see that it entails

(4) God exists but I don't believe that God exists.[2]

In order to accommodate this point, the pragmatic solution must define the ground of the irrationality of Moorean beliefs as follows:

> If an agent could be expected to know that necessarily (if q is believed, then $\sim q$), then it would be absurd for him to believe that q.

Chan assumes that the irrationality is the same phenomenon as absurdity, and so calls this the 'ground of the absurdity of Moorean beliefs', labeling it with the acronym 'GAM'. Since this assumption may be challenged, it is more charitable to Chan to call it the 'ground of the irrationality of Moorean beliefs' and to substitute 'irrational' for 'absurd'. This gives us (GIM) If an agent could be expected to know that necessarily (if q is believed, then $\sim q$), then it would be irrational for him to believe that q.

I will rename and modify other principles that Chan employs accordingly.

Of course (GIM) is open to alternative interpretations. Chan points out that one of these, when formalized is:

$$\forall x(Kx\square\ (Bxq \rightarrow \sim q) \rightarrow ABxq)$$

where 'x' ranges over possible agents, 'Kxq' abbreviates 'x could be expected to know that q', meaning it would be very unreasonable for x not to know that q; and '$ABxq$' abbreviates 'it would be absurd for x to believe that q'. Since Chan means 'irrational' by 'absurd', let us substitute '$IBxq$' for '$ABxq$' as an abbreviation of 'it would be irrational for x to believe that q'. Then (GIM) may be formalized (hence the 'f ') as

> (GIM f.1) $\forall x(Kx\square\ (Bxq \rightarrow \sim q) \rightarrow IBxq)$.

Chan translates this as

> It would be irrational [he actually says 'absurd'] for an agent to believe that q, if he could be expected to know that necessarily he could not truly believe that q.

Chan points out that this is too weak. Gordon Brown could be expected to know that Gordon Brown cannot truly believe that (Labour will lose the election but Gordon Brown does not believe it), but if Gordon Brown does not know that he is Gordon Brown (say, because he is suffering from amnesia) then he is not irrational in believing that (Labour will lose the election but Gordon Brown does not believe it).

This suggests to Chan that we need to single out those propositions that are obviously necessarily false-if-believed-by-x independently of x's knowledge of who he is (2010, p. 221). One way of trying to do this is:

> (GIM f.2) $\forall x(Kx\square(\forall y(Byq \rightarrow \sim q)) \rightarrow IBxq)$.

Chan translates this as

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[2] Example (3) is given by Sorensen (1988, p. 28).

It would be irrational [he actually says 'absurd'] for an agent to believe that q, if he could be expected to know that no one could truly believe that q.

He observes that this is too strong. To see this, suppose that 'q' represents 'p and I do not believe that p' and let us instantiate 'x' as a, to give:

K$a\square\forall y$(By(p and I do not believe that p)→∼ (p and I do not believe that p))→

IBa(p and I do not believe that p).

Chan provides no translation. One that is consistent with those of his above would be:

If a could be expected to know that no one could truly believe that (p and I do not believe that p) then a is irrational in believing that (p and I do not believe that p).

He observes that the antecedent of this conditional must be false.[3] This is because someone other than me might truly believe that (p and I do not believe that p), if his belief is about me and not about himself. Therefore it is false that no one could truly believe that (p and I do not believe that p). Since nobody can be expected to know what is false, it is false that a could be expected to know that no one could truly believe that (p and I do not believe that p). Chan concludes that because its antecedent must be false, (GIM f.2) is now too strong.

He draws the moral that we need to use the context-dependence of the semantic value of indexicals such as 'I'; what (GIM f.2) really means to say is that whoever utters a token of a Moorean sentence, and thus whatever proposition it expresses, that proposition could not be truly believed by the utterer. This means that (GIM) should not be formulated in terms of the relation

Bxq iff$_{\text{def}}$ x believes that q

which holds between the agent x and the proposition that q, but rather in terms of a relation between an agent and a sentence:

B$_s$$x$'$q$' iff$_{\text{def}}$ x holds a belief which x would express by (assertively) uttering the sentence 'q' in x's current context, if he wished to express it.

This is more fine-grained than

B$_{\text{ps}}$$x$'$q$' iff$_{\text{def}}$ x believes that the proposition expressed by 'q' in x's mouth in x's current context is true

which holds between an agent and the proposition expressed by a sentence. Accordingly we may formulate (GIM) as

(GIM f.3) $\forall x$(K$x\square(\forall y$(B$_{\text{ps}}$ y'q' → 'q' is false)) → IB$_s$$x$'$q$').

Chan translates this as

It would be irrational [he actually says 'absurd'] for an agent to hold a belief which he would express by assertively uttering 'q', if he could be expected to know that 'q' could not express a true belief in anybody's mouth in any context.

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[3] An exception is when it is necessarily false that p, but then the belief is not Moorean.

He gives an ingenious example that shows that this is too weak. Suppose that I am having a debate with John Smith on MSN Messenger, trying to convince him that the Earth is well over 5,000 years old. My screen is divided into halves, labelled with my name and his. After a while I notice that whatever I type appears on his upper half. Thinking that Smith is mimicking my words, I try to catch him out by typing

> (5) The person actually typing these very words now here on the upper half of my screen does not believe that the Earth is well over 5,000 years old, but of course it is.

These words then appear on John Smith's screen. But unknown to me, I am the person typing the words on his screen, because the system is malfunctioning. There is no irrationality in my belief in (5). But Chan argues that (GIM f.3) predicts that my belief in (5) is irrational, and so is too weak. He says:

> Now I knew that whoever is referred to by 'the person actually typing …' be he John or myself or anyone else, the token of [(5)] that I was looking at on the top half of my screen as I typed must be false if its producer believed the proposition it expressed in his current context. I did believe the proposition it expressed in my context, and it was (unknown to me) I who was producing it, so it could not have been true. (2010, pp. 224–225)

My belief is not irrational because it is not irrational for me to fail to know, when I produce the sentence token on the upper half of my screen, that its producer is myself. Thus using 'i' to abbreviate 'I', and employing the stipulative definition

> $K_s x$ 'q' iff$_{def}$ x knows what x would express by (assertively) uttering the sentence 'q' in x's current context, if he wished to express it

we need

> (GIM f.4) $\forall x(K_s x \square (B_{ps} i$ 'q' $\rightarrow$ 'q' is false)" $\rightarrow IB_s x$'q')

Chan translates this as

> It would be irrational [he actually says 'absurd'] for an agent to hold a belief which he would express by assertively uttering 'q', if he could be expected to know, "I could not truly believe the proposition expressed by 'q' in my mouth in my current context."

He observes that this is equivalent to

> (GIM f.4*) $\forall x(K_s x \square (B_{ps} x * $ 'q' $\rightarrow$ 'q' is false) $\rightarrow IB_s x$'q')

in which '$x*$' abbreviates 'x believes that x himself'. This is an extension of Castañeda's (1966, 1968) quasi-indicator notation, according to which 'x believes that $x* \Phi$ may be read as 'x believes that he himself Φ where '$x*\Phi$ falls within the scope of a propositional attitude attributed to x, as in 'x believes that $x*$ is walking with a stoop' or 'x fears that $x*$ is unattractive to women'.[4]

Chan translates (GIM f.4*) as

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[4] Not all uses of the reflexive pronouns 'himself' and 'myself', can be parsed as '$x*$', for example, 'He cut himself accidentally' and 'I disqualified myself on purpose'.

It would be irrational [he actually says 'absurd'] for an agent to hold a belief which he would express by assertively uttering 'q', if he could be expected to know that he* could not truly believe the proposition expressed by 'q' in his* mouth in his* current context.[5]

This is neither too weak nor too strong. But (GIM f.4) requires that x would express his knowledge by uttering,"… I believe the proposition expressed by 'q'…" Likewise (GIM f.4*) requires that x conceives of himself in first-personal terms. The formulations exhibit first-/third-person asymmetry. If we replace 'i' in (GIM f.4) with any other co-referring, non-first-person expression, or in other words delete '*' from (GIM f.4*), we get

(GIM f.5) $\forall x(Kx\square(B_{ps}x\text{'}q\text{'} \rightarrow \text{'}q\text{' is false}) \rightarrow IB_{s}x\text{'}q\text{'})$

which Chan translates as

It would be absurd [he actually says 'absurd'] for an agent to hold a belief which he would express by assertively uttering 'q', if he could be expected to know that he could not truly believe the proposition expressed by 'q' in his mouth in his current context.

Chan points out that the same example that shows (GIM f.1) to be too weak, namely that of the amnesiac Gordon Brown, also shows this to be too weak as well. Gordon Brown could be expected to know that Gordon Brown could not truly believe the proposition expressed by 'Labour will lose the election but Gordon Brown does not believe it' in his mouth in his current context. But if Gordon Brown cannot be expected to know that he is Gordon Brown, then there is no irrationality in his holding a belief which he would express by assertively uttering 'Labour will lose the election but Gordon Brown does not believe it'.

We might try strengthening the condition defined by (GIM f.5) to give

(GIM f.6) $\forall x(Kx\square(\forall y(B_{ps}\,y\text{'}q\text{'} \rightarrow \text{'}q\text{' is false})) \rightarrow IB_{s}x\text{'}q\text{'})$.

Chan translates this as

It would be irrational [he actually says 'absurd'] for an agent to hold a belief which he would express by assertively uttering 'q', if he could be expected to know that 'q' could not express a true belief in anybody's mouth in any context.

But this is no help, because (GIM f.6) is identical to (GIM f.3), which Chan thinks is too weak. So the '*' in (GIM f.4*) is essential for its truth. He infers that the use of the first person in the formulation of (GIM), a principle needed by the pragmatic solution, is not reducible to the third person. Chan concludes that the pragmatic solution cannot provide a non-circular explanation of why Moorean beliefs cease to be irrational when their contents are presented in the third person.

3 Preliminary clarification

My rebuttal of Chan's objection requires a preliminary clarification. This is that his translations are not quite accurate. Recall that he translates

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[5] A more perspicuous translation of (GIM f.4*) is: It would be irrational for an agent to hold a belief which he would express by assertively uttering 'q', if he could be expected to know that he himself could not truly believe the proposition expressed by 'q' in his very own mouth in his very own current context.

(GIM f.1) $\forall x(Kx\square(Bxq \rightarrow\sim q) \rightarrow IBxq)$

as

> It would be irrational [Chan actually says 'absurd'] for an agent to believe that q, if he could be expected to know that necessarily he could not truly believe that q.

But the fact that someone cannot truly believe that q, is entailed by, but does not entail, the fact that this person's holding the belief must thereby falsify it. It is this second fact that is central to the irrationality, since unlike beliefs in necessary falsehoods, Moorean beliefs might be true. Thus the translation must be amended to

> It would be irrational for an agent to believe that q, if he could be expected to know that his belief is self-refuting

where a belief is 'self-refuting' just in case its content is necessarily falsified by the believer believing it. This clarification is needed, given the importance of Chan's point that the irrationality is present only if we may reasonably expect the believer to see that his belief is self-refuting. The same point applies to the other formulations of (GIM) that Chan considers. In particular it applies to

(GIM f.3) $\forall x(Kx\square(\forall y(B_{ps} y\,'q' \rightarrow 'q'$ is false$)) \rightarrow IB_s x\,'q')$.

We might be tempted to translate this as

> It would be irrational for an agent to hold a belief which he would express by assertively uttering 'q', if he could be expected to know that 'q' expresses a self-refuting belief in anybody's mouth in any context.

If this is how (GIM f.3) should be understood, then it is vulnerable to the following objection. Suppose that I am dictating

> (5) The person actually typing these very words now here on the upper half of my screen does not believe that the Earth is well over 5,000 years old, but of course it is

to Dick, a fundamental Christian who is now typing the sentence (5) on the upper half of my screen. I might hold a belief that I would express by asserting the sentence (5). That belief would be that Dick (the person now typing the very words of (5) here on the upper half of my screen) does not believe that the Earth is well over 5,000 years old, but it is. In my mouth in this context, I believe that proposition. Moreover the proposition might be true. Thus it is false that the sentence (5) expresses a self-refuting belief in anybody's mouth in any context. It is false that I can be expected to know what is false. So the antecedent of (GIM f.3) is false. Thus (GIM f.3) does not predict absurdity where there is none, with the result that contrary to Chan, it is not too weak. It is not too strong either. It presupposes no asymmetry between first-and non-first-person contents of Moorean beliefs. So it is a satisfactory ground of the irrationality.

However, this objection is misplaced because the translation above is not accurate in the light of Chan's discussion. This is because of the crucial phrase "'q' expresses a self-refuting belief in anybody's mouth in any context", which translates "$\forall y(B_{ps} y\,'q' \rightarrow 'q'$ is false$)$". In (GIM f.3), the antecedent is phrased in terms of "$B_{ps}x\,'q'$", a relation between a person and the proposition expressed by a sentence, while the consequent is phrased in terms of "$B_s x\,'q'$", a relation between a person and a sentence he would use to express the belief. Thus the translation of (GIM f.3) must be

It would be irrational for an agent to hold a belief which he would express by assertively uttering 'q', if he could be expected to know that 'q' could not express a true proposition in anybody's mouth in any context if the utterer in that context believes this proposition.

This translation does not explicitly mention 'self-refuting belief', but this is no problem for it because it clearly encapsulates the same idea. Once (GIM f.3) is understood in this more accurate way, the case of Dick does not falsify its antecedent. This is because in the context of the example, I am not the utterer—or rather, producer—of the sentence (5), but Dick, and if Dick believes the proposition expressed by the sentence (5), then that proposition cannot be true, because his believing it falsifies it. To put this point another way, the antecedent of (GIM f.3) claims that any token of the sentence (5), whoever its utterer—or producer—and context of utterance, always expresses a proposition that is necessarily falsified by the same utterer—or producer—believing it. This claim is consistent with cases such as that of Dick.[6]

I conclude that Chan is correct to claim that the pragmatic solution to the paradox—formulated as an explanation of why Moorean beliefs are true yet irrational—must appeal to the fact that the believer conceives of himself as himself. Even the apparently innocuous ground of the irrationality of Moorean belief,

> (GIM 1) If one could be reasonably expected to see that one's belief is self-refuting then one is irrational in having this belief

must be amended to

> (GAM 1*) If one could be reasonably expected to see that one's very own belief is self-refuting then one is irrational in having this belief

as shown by the case of the amnesiac Gordon Brown. However this also shows, contrary to Chan, that the pragmatic explanation need not make an essential use of 'I'. It might be couched in terms of 'one' as above, provided 'one' is read as 'one*'.

4 It is neither necessary nor sufficient for the irrationality of a Moorean belief that its content is in the first-person

Moreover it is not necessary for the same type of irrationality to occur in a belief that its content be restricted to the grammatical first-person. Suppose that I am looking at myself in a mirror. If I know that I am looking at myself, the same irrationality is found in my belief (as I stare at my reflection) that

> (6) It is raining but *you* do not believe that it is raining

or in my belief that

> (2) It is raining but *he* does not believe that it is raining.

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[6] I am grateful to a referee for suggesting this response.

Nor is it sufficient for the irrationality that the content of the belief is restricted to the first-person. Suppose that I am an eliminativist who denies the existence of contentful mental states such as beliefs. I assert with apparent sincerity, that

(1) It is raining but I do not believe that it is raining.

Suppose further that my apparent sincerity is genuine. What follows on our common-sense understanding of sincerity is that unbeknownst to me, I believe what I assert, so eliminativism is false. Knowing all this, you will hear no irrationality in my assertion, nor will you detect it in my corresponding belief—or at the very least, you will not judge my belief in (1) to be irrational *in the same Moorean way* as when I believe it as a non-eliminativist. You may of course think that eliminativism is false, but that just means that my belief is mistaken, not irrational. Showing that eliminativism is irrational might well be a big task. But even if it is an irrational position, what follows is that my belief in (1) is irrational because my reasons for that belief are irrational, not that the belief is irrational because it is self-refuting.

These examples show that contrary to Chan, there is no grammatical first-person/non-first-person asymmetry of irrationality to be explained. What has to be explained is rather that such grammatical non-first-person transpositions sometimes, but not always, result in the disappearance of irrationality. They also show that the irrationality of Moorean belief cannot be defined in terms of syntax, because there are circumstances in which it is irrational of me to believe (1) or (2) and circumstances in which it is not. Nor is it true that a satisfactory definition of irrational Moorean beliefs—those that are possibly true yet irrational in the way my belief in (1) is normally irrational—must include those whose contents obviously and immediately imply (1), since (1) obviously and immediately implies itself.

5 The explanation of irrationality or lack of it

(GIM 1*) explains the irrationality or lack of it in all the beliefs we have considered. As a rational agent I am bound by *the norm of avoiding specific recognizably false beliefs*:

Do not form—or continue to have—a specific belief that you can be reasonably expected to see is one's very own false belief.[7]

Thus I am also bound by the *norm of avoiding specific recognizably self-refuting beliefs*:

Do not form—or continue to have—a specific belief that you can be reasonably expected to see is one's very own self-refuting belief.

Both norms are norms of *rational* belief. Certainly they would be endorsed by a community of rational believers. In the case in which I believe

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[7] The reference to specific beliefs avoids the objection that rationality does not require all one's beliefs to be true. For example, some claim the preface paradox to be a case in which rationality demands that one has inconsistent beliefs. It might be objected that it is too easy to comply with this norm. Just form no beliefs! But another norm is surely 'Form beliefs' a welcome norm, not only for any apprentice of practical wisdom but for anyone who accepts the overarching norm 'Seek truth'.

(1) It is raining but I do not believe that it is raining.

as a non-eliminativist, I violate both norms. In particular, I violate the *norm of avoiding specific recognizably self-refuting beliefs* because I may be reasonably expected to see that my very own belief is self-refuting. Just as a violation of a norm of polite behaviour is an instance of impoliteness, at least from the perspective of that norm, so a violation of a norm of rationality is an instance of irrationality, at least from the perspective of that norm. Moreover, any evidence I have that warrants me in forming the belief—or continuing to have it—is evidence that warrants me in arriving inescapably at falsehood. I have shot myself in the foot, purely as a result of my belief, something I can be reasonably expected to see. This is why my belief in (1), as a non-eliminativist, is irrational.

It might be objected that seeing that a belief in (1) is self-refuting is not easy (de Almeida 2001, p. 43, 2007, p. 56). Symbolising 'I believe that p' as 'Bp', I have to use belief-distribution on $B(p \& \sim Bp)$ to derive $Bp \& B \sim Bp$, followed by & elimination to derive Bp, followed by the rule that a conjunction is false if one of its conjuncts is, to derive $\sim(p \& \sim Bp)$—no mean feat.[8]

I reply that although the self-refuting nature of the belief is not obvious, we should not make too much of this fact. To see this, consider the case in which I believe that it is both raining and not raining. To see that what I believe is necessarily false I might reason 'If it is true both that it is raining and not raining then it is true that it is raining. But then it is false that it is not raining. And that means that it is false that it is both raining and not raining. So if it is true both that it is raining and not raining then it is false both that it is raining and not raining. So it must be false both that it is raining and not raining'. In other words I must use &-elimination, followed by double-negation, followed by the rule that a conjunction is false if one of its conjuncts is, followed by the rule that anything that is false if true, is necessarily false. If the first case is no mean feat, so is this. It is plausible that any other piece of reasoning to the same conclusion will be of similar complexity.

Chan also makes the nice reply to de Almeida that 'what is required for a Moorean belief to satisfy [the ground of Moorean irrationality] is merely that an agent can answer the question whether it is necessarily false-if-believed if he were to consider it' (2010, p. 219, fn 17). This is plausible. It is more plausible still if we weaken the requirement to the *reasonable expectation* that the agent can, on careful consideration, correctly answer the question of whether his very own belief is self-refuting.

It is an intuitive result that my belief in (1) as a non-eliminativist is irrational. Also intuitive is that there is a pre-theoretical sense in which my belief is 'absurd'. Indeed the right thing to say seems to be that there is a sense in which it is absurd precisely because it is irrational. I will postpone a full discussion of these matters until the section after next, although during the rest of this section I will indicate possible intuitions of absurd belief.

By contrast, as we saw, my belief in (1) does not seem irrational if I believe it as an eliminativist. My belief is self-refuting. Moreover the semantic meaning of 'I' in the content of my belief ensures that I conceive of myself as myself. But I cannot reasonably be expected to see that my very own *belief* is

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[8] Chan represents the required reasoning differently as follows. I suppose that $p \& \sim Bp \& B(p \& \sim Bp)$ and then apply belief-distribution to derive $p \& \sim Bp \& Bp \& B \sim Bp$, followed by &-elimination to derive the contradiction $\sim Bp \& Bp$. He thinks that this 'takes only two elementary steps' (2010, p. 218) and claims that '[g]iven the persuasiveness and simplicity of this *reductio* argument, it's plausible to suppose that it represents the logical structure of the informal reasoning which underlies the typical rational agent's judgement that Moorean beliefs are absurd [by which he means 'irrational'] (2010, pp. 218–219). However I need the extra step of applying the rule of *reductio* that a supposition that implies a contradiction must be false, and if the supposition is counted as an initial step, then at least four steps are needed.

self-refuting or even false, being convinced mistakenly—whether or not justifiably—that there are no beliefs at all. (GIM 1*) does not predict that my unwitting belief is irrational. My belief does not violate the norm of avoiding specific recognizably self-refuting beliefs. This is why my belief in (1), held as an eliminativist, need not be irrational.

However, there does seem to be a sense in which I am 'absurd'. There is something comic about my having epistemically shot myself in the foot, despite the fact that I am not epistemically culpable for doing so. In this respect my predicament is rather like someone who is found through no fault of his own with his pants down.

Next let us look again at my belief that

>(2) It is raining but he does not believe that it is raining.

(GIM 1*) accommodates the fact that my belief need not be irrational in circumstances in which I know that he is not me. This is because in those circumstances my belief is straightforwardly non-self-refuting. The truth of (2) entails that he does not believe that it is raining, but this is consistent with my belief that it is raining, because he is not me, since this is something I know. So I have not violated the norm of avoiding specific recognizably self-refuting beliefs.

Next let us consider my belief that

>(3) The atheism of my mother's nieceless brother's only nephew angers God

held when I fail to realize that I am necessarily my mother's nieceless brother's only nephew. My belief is self-refuting. If I believe (3) then I believe that God exists, but if (3) is true then because I am necessarily my mother's nieceless brother's only nephew, I am an atheist and so I do not believe that God exists. Although a perfectly rational agent will see a priori that I am necessarily my mother's nieceless brother's only nephew, my own failure to see this is reasonable since it is difficult to work through the web of relevant familial relationships. As a result I may well be forgiven for conceiving of my mother's nieceless brother's only nephew as an existing relative other than myself. In that case I cannot be reasonably expected to see that my very own belief is self-refuting, with the result that it might not be irrational, as allowed by (GIM 1*). The irrationality is dispelled by the fact that I fail to recognize myself under a description that necessarily refers to me, with the result that I do not violate the norm of avoiding specific recognizably self-refuting beliefs.

Moreover I might have evidence for my belief, for example the testimony of a trustworthy and reliable priest who knows my family yet has understandably confused me with another relative, and in so doing, has involved me in the same confusion. Of course, this evidence warrants me in arriving inescapably at falsehood, but I might be excused in not seeing this. At least I have what I understandably think is good evidence.

However, if we accept that there is an element of comic absurdity in the eliminativist case, then we should find it here as well.

Next let us reconsider my belief that

>(5) The person actually typing these very words now here on the upper half of my screen does not believe that the Earth is well over 5,000 years old, but of course it is

in circumstances in which I do not realise that the person typing these very words now is not John Smith but myself. Our intuition was that my belief is not irrational. This is because it is not self-refuting. Since I believe (5), I believe that the Earth is well over 5,000 years old, but this is consistent with the truth of (5), because although (5) entails that the person actually typing these very words now here on the upper half of my screen does not believe that the Earth is well over 5,000 years old, it is not necessary that I am this person. My belief in (5) merely happens to be false, because unbeknownst to me, I am the person actually typing these very words now here on the upper half of my screen, and I happen to believe that the Earth is well over 5,000 years old.

Now let us revisit the case in which recognising that I am looking at myself in the mirror, I believe that

> (6) It is raining but *you* do not believe that it is raining.

My belief is self-refuting. In believing (6) I believe that it is raining. But the truth of (6) entails that the person I pick out as 'you' does not believe that it is raining, and since that person is necessarily me, it follows that I do not believe that it is raining.

Since I know that I am the person I think of as 'you', I may be reasonably expected to see that my very own belief in (6) is self-refuting. In the same example the same treatment applies to

> (2) It is raining but *he* does not believe that it is raining.[9]

These cases show that it is misguided to try to 'single out those propositions that are obviously necessarily false-if-believed-by-*x* independently of *x*'s knowledge of who he is' (Chan 2010, p. 221) since the believer's knowledge of who he is, is essential to the irrationality.

6 The non-circularity of the explanation of the irrationality

Recall that what Chan thought was to be explained is the grammatical first-person/non-first person asymmetry of irrationality, namely that the irrationality of Moorean beliefs disappears when they are transposed into the grammatical non-first person. We saw in Sect. 4 that this is not always so. What has to be explained is rather that such grammatical non-first-person transpositions sometimes, but not always, result in the disappearance of irrationality. In Sect. 5 we saw that this phenomenon is explained by the *de se*

> (GIM 1*) If one could be reasonably expected to see that one's *very own* belief is self-refuting then one is irrational in having this belief

as opposed to the non-*de se*

> (GIM 1) If one could be reasonably expected to see that one's belief is self-refuting then one is irrational in having this belief.

Now the *explanandum* is formulated partly in terms of the grammatical first-person/ non-first person distinction and the *explanans* presupposes the *de se*/non-*de se* distinction. Does this mean that the

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[9] In the MSN Messenger case of (5) and the mirror cases of (2) and (6) the irrationality is expunged if I unwittingly believe them as an eliminativist, as explained above in the case of (1).

explanation is circular? No, for two reasons. First, the *explanans* involves the notion of self-refutation, which does not appear in the *explanandum*.

Second, the two distinctions are independent of each other. The first is constituted by the fact that substitutions of grammatical personal pronouns such as 'he' for 'I' or vice versa into an indicative sentence may change the truth-value of the proposition that the sentence expresses in the same context. Thus where 'Φ' stands for a verb-phrase, sentences of the forms 'I Φ' and 'He Φ', may express different propositions when uttered in the same context, one true and the other false, for example 'I drink beer', and 'He drinks beer' or 'I believe that I will be awarded a prize' and 'He believes that I will be awarded a prize'.

On the other hand the *de se*/non-*de se* distinction is constituted by the fact that substitutions of reflexive personal pronouns such as 'I myself' and 'He himself' for their non-reflexive counterparts such as 'I' and 'He' into an indicative sentence that ascribes a propositional attitude may change the truth-value of the proposition that the sentence expresses. Thus where 'Φ' stands for a verb-phrase, sentences of the forms

'I believe that I Φ' and 'I believe that I myself Φ' or 'He fears that he Φ' and 'He fears that he himself Φ', may express different propositions, one true and the other false, for example 'I believe that I will be awarded a prize' and 'I believe that I myself will be awarded a prize' or 'He fears that he will be arrested' and 'He fears that he himself will be arrested'.

To illustrate this point, suppose that I know on the impeccable authority of the Singapore Sports Council that the only English philosopher to have cycled from Singapore to Thailand will be awarded a prize in honor of this feat. Since unbeknownst to me, I am the only person to fit this description, I believe that I will awarded a prize in the sense that it is the only English philosopher to have cycled from Singapore to Thailand, who is in fact me, that I believe will be awarded a prize. We might say that I believe *of myself* that I will be awarded a prize. But since I do not realize that I am the only English philosopher to have cycled from Singapore to Thailand, I do not believe that I will be awarded a prize in the sense that the thought of myself is part of the content of my belief. In other words I do not believe that I *myself* will be awarded a prize. If I did, then I might organize a celebration.[10]

Now

> (A) Substitutions of grammatical personal pronouns such as 'he' for 'I' or vice versa into an indicative sentence may change the truth-value of the proposition that the sentence expresses when uttered in the same context

does not entail

> (B) Substitutions of reflexive personal pronouns such as 'I myself' and 'He himself' for their non-reflexive counterparts such as 'I' and 'He' into an indicative sentence that ascribes a

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[10] Or suppose that Brendan is a corrupt policeman who learns that suspect X will be arrested for corruption. Mistakenly thinking that suspect X is his friend and partner-in-crime Joe, Brendan fears that suspect X will be arrested for corruption. Since unbeknownst to Brendan, he is in fact suspect X, he fears that he will be arrested in the sense that it is suspect X, who is in fact him, that he fears will be arrested. We might say that he fears *of himself* that he will be arrested. But since he does not realize that he is suspect X, he does not fear that he will be arrested in the sense that the thought of himself is part of the content of his fear. In other words he does not fear that *he himself* will be arrested. If he did, then he might consult a lawyer.

propositional attitude may change the truth-value of the proposition that the sentence expresses.

Nor does (B) entail (A).

Put another way, that sentences of the forms 'I believe that …' and 'He believes that …' when uttered in the same context may express different propositions, neither entails nor is entailed by the fact that sentences of the forms 'I believe that I Φ' and 'I believe that I myself Φ' or 'He believes that he Φ' and 'He believes that he himself Φ', may express different propositions. Thus the two distinctions are independent of each other and *a fortiori*, different.

Nonetheless the two distinctions are philosophically related given standard ways of elucidating the *de se*/non-*de se* distinction in terms of the grammatical first-person/non-first person distinction.[11] For example, following Castañeda (1966, p. 138) if Jack believes that he himself has bad posture, the only way that he may express this belief via an assertion, is to assert 'I have bad posture'. Following Perry (1979, pp. 15–16) only Jack can express this *de se* belief, because the indexical 'I' is an ineliminable part of the content of his belief. This is because only he may think the thought of himself as himself. In contrast, Jack may believe that he has bad posture, without believing that he himself has bad posture. Staring at someone with bad posture on a closed-circuit TV screen but failing to recognise this person as himself, Jack may believe that he has bad posture, in the sense that it is this person, who is in fact him, that he believes has bad posture. The content that he believes is determined by his thought of 'him', which is a different thought from a thought of himself. So Jack will not express his belief by asserting 'I have bad posture' but rather by asserting 'He has bad posture'. Others may have this belief, that they may express by 'He has bad posture' or 'Jack has bad posture'. Given that Jack does not want to have bad posture, his coming to believe that he has bad posture, as opposed to coming to believe that he himself has bad posture, will not make him adopt better posture.

It is this relation between the two distinctions that enables the explanation of Moorean irrationality. For irrationality to arise, the believer must conceive of himself as himself. This *de se* condition is in turn elucidated in terms of the grammatical 'I'. Thus both distinctions involve the first person broadly construed. Does this spell circularity for the explanation? No. Just because a phenomenon to be partly described in terms of one distinction is partly explained in terms of a different yet philosophically related distinction, does not make this explanation circular.

To appreciate this point, take the phenomenon that some true beliefs are not cases of knowledge. Describing this phenomenon requires the distinction between belief and knowledge. We might explain the phenomenon by claiming that knowledge is justified true belief. This explanation presupposes the distinction between justified and unjustified belief. The two distinctions are certainly different, yet philosophically related, because elucidating the notion of justified belief requires the notion of belief. But this does not make the explanation circular, although it is not one we should accept.

Likewise there is no circularity in the way (GIM 1*) explains the fact that the irrationality of Moorean beliefs sometimes but not always disappears when they are transposed into the grammatical non-first person. So the pragmatic explanation of Moorean irrationality is still in good shape.

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[11] I am grateful for a referee for pointing this out.

7 The explanation of absurdity or lack of it

In Sect. 5 we noted that all of the Moorean beliefs that are irrational seem to also be 'absurd' in some sense. We also noted that some Moorean beliefs seem absurd in the same way but are not irrational. One explanation of this is provided by Green and Williams (2010) who distinguish absurdity from irrationality. They are inspired by Nagel's characterization of absurdity as including 'a conspicuous discrepancy between pretension and aspiration or reality' (1979, p. 13). Nagel's examples of this phenomenon are comic:

> …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. (Nagel 1979, p. 13)

Based on this, Green and Williams propose that absurdity consists in a severe violation of a system of norms such as those of belief, etiquette and conversation. One way to violate a system of norms severely is to *be in a position to see*, with no further empirical investigation, that one is doing so. However, one need not be thereby irrational, since that violation may be *very difficult to see*. One may be in a position to see the violation without further empirical investigation, yet fail to actually see it, even if one is a genius. As a result, one can be absurd without knowing it, and without being culpable for being so. In contrast, one's irrationality indicates one's failure to live up to a humanly achievable standard.

Green and Williams hold that one norm of belief is the *norm of avoiding false beliefs*:

Do not form—or continue to have—false beliefs.

Green and Williams' position has three attractive features. First, it does seem to be a norm of belief that one should avoid false beliefs, because the community of believers sees such beliefs as something to be avoided. Second, the norm is not a norm of rationality, because the community of believers sees false beliefs as something to be avoided even if they are rational. Third, Green and Williams' position explains why irrational Moore-paradoxical beliefs are absurd, but not necessarily conversely. This is because one may be reasonably expected to see that one's very own belief is self-refuting only if one is in a position to see, with no further empirical investigation, that it is false. But one may be in a position to see, with no further empirical investigation, that it is false without being reasonably expected to see that it is self-refuting, or for that matter, false.

Let us now apply this idea to the beliefs we have considered. In the case in which I believe

(1) It is raining but I do not believe that it is raining

as a non-eliminativist, I am in a position to see, with no further empirical investigation, that my belief is false, because I may be reasonably expected to correctly answer the question of whether my very own belief is self-refuting on careful consideration.

When looking at myself in a mirror, and recognizing myself as myself, I believe

(6) It is raining but you do not believe that it is raining

or

(2) It is raining but he does not believe that it is raining

my beliefs are likewise absurd because they are irrational in the same way.

In the case in which I unwittingly believe

(1) It is raining but I do not believe that it is raining

as an eliminativist, my belief, although not irrational, is still absurd. There is a comic discrepancy conspicuous to you the reader, between my pretention to lack the belief that it is raining and the reality that I have it. Moreover I am in a position to see, with no further empirical investigation, that a belief in (1)—one I unwittingly have—is self-refuting and thus false, although I am in no position to see that I have the belief.

This is consistent with the claim that eliminativism itself is 'absurd' in some other sense. Rudder Baker (1988) argues that eliminativism is 'pragmatically incoherent' since if it is true then there can be no language in which to formulate it, because it is a platitude that 'language can be meaningful only if it is possible that someone mean something' (Rudder Baker 1988, p. 14) and eliminativism denies the existence of contentful mental states such as intentions. Thus eliminativism is falsified by its assertibility—something faintly reminiscent of doxastic self-refutation. Moreover, if eliminativism is true then everyone except eliminativists are in gross cognitive error, in other words, the commonsense conception of the mental appears to be true when it is not. But if eliminativism is true then there are no contentful mental states of something appearing or seeming to be a certain way. Thus if eliminativism is true then non-eliminativists are and are not in error.

Whether or not these arguments succeed, it is clear that if the eliminativist allows us to say that he asserts his thesis then he needs an account of assertion that makes no mention of belief or intention, just as he needs an account of language and error that makes no mention of contentful mental states quite generally. Either such an account can be produced or it cannot. If it can, then the eliminativist is simply mistaken in denying that he believes (1). In that case, my unwitting belief in (1) exhibits Moorean absurdity rather than pragmatic incoherence. On the other hand if there is no such account to be produced, then what follows is that my unwitting belief in (1) is understandably *motivated* by a pragmatically incoherent position, namely eliminativism itself, not that my unwitting belief is pragmatically incoherent. So even if Baker's diagnosis of eliminativism is correct, my unwitting belief in (1) is still 'absurd' in the original, Moorean sense.

Next let us consider my belief that

(3) The atheism of my mother's nieceless brother's only nephew angers God

held when I fail to realize that I am necessarily my mother's nieceless brother's only nephew. My belief is not irrational, yet again there is something comic in my situation. Knowing that I am necessarily my mother's nieceless brother's only nephew, what is conspicuous to you is the discrepancy between my profession, in effect that I do not believe in God, something that angers Him, and the reality of my commitment to His existence. My belief is absurd because I am in a position to see, with no further empirical investigation, that my belief is self-refuting, and thus false.

Lastly let us consider my belief that

(5) The person actually typing these very words now here on the upper half of my screen does not believe that the Earth is well over 5,000 years old, but of course it is

in circumstances in which I do not realise that the person typing these very words now is not John Smith but myself. My belief is not irrational. Nor is it absurd in the relevant sense, because I need further empirical investigation in order to be in a position to see that my belief is false. This is because I need further empirical investigation to discover that I am in fact the person actually typing these very words now here on the upper half of my screen. We should admit that my plight does have a comic dimension. But it might be said that this is because there is a different residual absurdity in thinking a thought *about* myself without realising that I am thinking *of* myself.

There is no circularity in this explanation of Moorean absurdity. Recall that what threatened circularity in the explanation of Moorean irrationality was the fact that its ground requires the believer to conceive of his belief as his very own belief. No such threat arises here, since the ground of Moorean absurdity is merely that the believer is in a position to see, with no further empirical investigation, that the belief is false.

8 Defining Moorean belief, irrationality and absurdity

It might be properly objected that this ground of absurdity is too broad, since it is also true of non-Moorean beliefs in necessary falsehoods. To avoid this objection we may first define Moorean belief and then define Moorean absurdity in terms of Moorean belief:

One has a *Moorean belief* just in case it might be true, yet it is self-refuting.

One has an *absurd* Moorean belief just in case it is Moorean and one is in a position to see, with no further empirical investigation, that it is false.

The definition of Moorean belief correctly avoids relying upon the syntax of beliefs. It excludes beliefs in necessary falsehoods as well as 'hybrid' cases such as one's belief that

(7) 2 + 2 = 5 but I do not believe that 2 + 2 = 5.

It also excludes irrational beliefs that are unlike beliefs in (1) such as my belief that (8) I believe that it is raining but I have no justification for believing that it is raining since believing (8) does not falsify it. My belief in (5) is likewise excluded. On this pair of definitions all Moorean beliefs are absurd. Having established the non-circularity of the explanation of Moorean irrationality, we are now free to incorporate it into a definition of irrational Moorean belief:

One has an *irrational* Moorean belief just in case it is Moorean and one may be reasonably expected to see that one's very own belief is self-refuting.

These definitions correctly predict that all irrational Moorean beliefs are absurd, but not always conversely.[12]

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[12] I have followed Chan throughout in restricting 'Moorean belief' to 'omissive' beliefs such (1), so-called because (1) reports the omission of a specific true belief. To accommodate 'commissive' Moorean beliefs such as (9) It is raining but I believe that it is not raining so-called because (9) reports the commission of a specific mistake in belief, the definitions would have to be modified to

One has a Moorean belief just in case it might be true yet it is self-refuting—or is self-refuting unless one has contradictory beliefs.

Acknowledgments

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One has an absurd Moorean belief just in case it is Moorean and one is in a position to see, with no further empirical investigation, that it is false—or is false unless one has contradictory beliefs.
One has an irrational Moorean belief just in case it is Moorean and one may be reasonably expected to see that one's very own belief is self-refuting—or is false unless one has contradictory beliefs.
To support this last definition it might be argued that another norm of rational belief is the norm of avoiding overtly contradictory beliefs:
Do not form—or continue to hold—a pair of overtly contradictory beliefs.