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Moore's Paradox and the Priority of Belief Thesis

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Abstract

Moore's paradox is the fact that assertions or beliefs such as

Bangkok is the capital of Thailand but I do not believe that Bangkok is the capital of Thailand

or

Bangkok is the capital of Thailand but I believe that Bangkok is not the capital of Thailand

are 'absurd' yet possibly true. The current orthodoxy is that an explanation of the absurdity should first start with belief, on the assumption that once the absurdity in belief has been explained then this will translate into an explanation of the absurdity in assertion. This assumption gives explanatory priority to belief over assertion. I show that the translation involved is much trickier than might at first appear. It is simplistic to think that Moorean absurdity in assertion is always a subsidiary product of the absurdity in belief, even when the absurdity is conceived as irrationality. Instead we should aim for explanations of Moorean absurdity in assertion and in belief that are independent even if related, while bearing in mind that some forms of irrationality may be forms of absurdity even if not conversely.

1 Introduction

In two different works G.E. Moore gave the following examples of assertions:

'I went to the pictures last Tuesday but I don't believe that I did' (1942, 543)

and

'I believe that he has gone out, but he has not' (1944, 204).

Moore says of these utterances that '[i]t is a paradox that it should be perfectly absurd to utter assertively words of which the meaning is something which might well be true—is not a contradiction' (Baldwin 1993, 209).

Since these assertions are of different possible truths as not believed or disbelieved, let us neutralise this difference with a common possible truth, to give us

> (1) Bangkok is the capital of Thailand but I do not believe that Bangkok is the capital of Thailand

> that is of the 'omissive' form

> p & I do not believe that p

so called because I assert that I fail to believe a specific truth, and

> (2) Bangkok is the capital of Thailand but I believe that Bangkok is not the capital of Thailand

> that is of the 'commissive' form

> p & I believe that not-p

so called because I assert that I commit a specific mistake in belief.[1] Later on, it will be natural to switch to other examples. Solving the paradox involves explaining the absurdity of such assertions.

Early writers on the paradox, including Moore himself (Green and Williams 2007, 4–6) considered it only as occurring in speech. Then the focus was upon the pragmatic absurdity of a speech-act. Many of their writings are faulted by a failure to distinguish omissive from commissive cases (Green and Williams 2007, Introduction). With Roy Sorensen's Blindspots (1988) came the recognition that the paradox occurs in thought as well; if I silently believe (1) or (2) then I seem no less absurd, yet what I believe might be true.

Then came attempts to explain the absurdity in belief. Salient among these remains Sydney Shoemaker's (1995). Many of these again fell afoul of the difference between omissive and commissive cases (Green and Williams 2007, Introduction). Since then the orthodoxy has been that an explanation of the absurdity should first start with belief, on the assumption that once the absurdity in belief has been explained then this will translate into an explanation of the absurdity in assertion. This assumption gives explanatory priority to belief over assertion.

I will show that the translation involved is much trickier than might at first appear. This is worth knowing, since although we should aim to explain the absurdity both in thought and in speech, we should also be wary of false economy in doing so.

2 The priority of belief thesis, related background and objectives

Moore was correct to suggest that the paradoxical utterances are absurd only if they are assertions.[2] To see this, suppose that you ask me whether the capital of Thailand is Bangkok or Saigon. If I am a contestant in your quiz in which we both know that all that it takes to win is to utter the correct

answer, then you hear no absurdity if I answer, 'The capital of Thailand is Bangkok', and then add, 'but actually I have no beliefs about this either way'. Thus my utterance, recognised as a sheer guess in the first conjunct, evinces no absurdity. My overt guess is not an assertion because it does not purport to express my belief in what I utter.[3]

My silent belief in (1) is likewise absurd although its content might be true. Let us call such beliefs 'Moorean'. Let us also call 'Moorean' assertions that have the same contents as Moorean beliefs. These assertions need not be sincere in order to be absurd because if you learn that I am lying to you when I assert (1) then you will still hear absurdity. This point has been overlooked. The point is important because the possibility of a Moorean lie shows that any explanation of the absurdity of Moorean assertion that presumes the sincerity of the speaker is incomplete.

The absurdity of Moorean beliefs is commonly argued to be a form of irrationality.[4] However, recently Green and Williams (2011) distinguish absurdity from irrationality when dealing with Moorean assertions and beliefs. In particular, they hold that one may be absurd without being irrational. I will return to this distinction in Sect. 11.

An explanation of the absurdity of Moorean assertion in terms of the absurdity of Moorean belief looks attractively economical. The most parsimonious explanation conforms to what might be called the priority of belief thesis:

> (3) An explanation of the absurdity of Moorean belief will thereby explain the absurdity of Moorean assertion.

An influential variant of this that has been championed by Sydney Shoemaker takes the absurdity as a form of irrationality, namely 'incoherence':

> (4) If you have an explanation of why a putative content could not be coherently believed, you thereby have an explanation of why it cannot be coherently asserted. (1995, 227, fn 1)

Shoemaker assumes that we are talking of rational subjects. He claims that given an explanation of why it is impossible for a rational person to have Moore-paradoxical beliefs then '… an explanation of why one cannot assert a Moore-paradoxical sentence will come along for free, via the principle that what one can believe constrains what one can assert' (1995, 213). So we must read (4) as

> (5) An explanation of the irrationality of Moorean belief will thereby explain the irrationality of Moorean assertion.

(5) is arguably narrower than (3), since irrational beliefs or assertions are absurd, but—according to Green and Williams (2011)—not necessarily conversely. (5) and a fortiori (4), presuppose

> (6) If one's Moorean belief that p is irrational, then so is one's assertion that p.

We might naturally accept (6) because we accept the more general claim that

> (7) If one's belief that p is irrational then so is one's assertion that p.

If we think of irrationality as absurdity then (6) becomes

(8) If one's Moorean belief that p is absurd, then so is one's assertion that p.

We might naturally accept (8) because we accept the more general claim that

(9) If one's belief that p is absurd then so is one's assertion that p.

The plausibility of (7) makes it easy to think that Moorean assertions are irrational because they purport to express irrational beliefs. We might think this because we accept the general claim that

(10) If one's belief that p is irrational then so is one's purported expression of belief that p

or because we accept the more particular claim that

(11) If one's Moorean belief that p is irrational then so is one's purported expression of belief that p.

I will show that none of (3)–(11) need be non-vacuously true.

In the next section I distinguish the 'epistemic' rationality of belief or assertion from its 'practical rationality'. The practical rationality of belief is a peripheral matter for the priority thesis. The epistemic rationality of assertion turns out to be trivially parasitic upon that of belief with the result that once read as a claim about the epistemic rationality of assertion the priority thesis is empty. Accordingly we must read it as the thesis that an explanation of the epistemic irrationality of Moorean belief will thereby explain the practical irrationality of Moorean assertion. We might be led to accept this because we think that one's purported expression of an epistemically irrational belief is practically irrational. I show in Sect. 4 that this need not be true, in the process rejecting (3)–(5). In Sect. 5 I give an account of two ways of expressing belief via assertion, either by asserting the content of the belief or by reporting that one has it. This coheres with an account of believing the assertor, in other words, believing that she is sincerely telling the truth. I give this account in Sect. 6. In Sect. 7 I show against (10) how this helps to explain why it may be practically rational to express an epistemically irrational belief, dealing first with a non-Moorean belief. In Sect. 8 I explain why an omissive Moorean assertion is normally practically irrational. In Sect. 9 I show against (11) that although one cannot sensibly express an omissive Moorean belief by asserting its content, one may sensibly express it by reporting that one has it. In Sect. 10 I show against (6) and (7) that a commissive Moorean assertion is normally but not always practically irrational. In Sect. 11 I return to absurdity. There I give a normative explanation of the epistemic irrationality of omissive Moorean belief. Building on Green and Williams' (2011) normative account of absurdity I argue that the irrationality involves absurdity but not always conversely. In Sect. 12 I show why commissive Moorean belief is epistemically irrational and thereby absurd. In Sect. 13 I argue that omissive Moorean assertion is absurd although it need not be practically irrational. In Sect. 14 I argue against (8) and (9) that commissive Moorean assertion need not be practically irrational or absurd. In Sect. 15 I conclude that it is simplistic to think that Moorean absurdity in assertion is always a subsidiary product of the absurdity in belief, even when the absurdity is conceived as irrationality. I also indicate other assertions and beliefs that that my own account of Moorean absurdity should be able to handle. Some seem to share the same absurdity as Moore's own examples although their

contents have a different syntax, while others do not exhibit absurdity although their contents have the same syntax.

3 Two senses of 'rational' belief and two senses of 'rational' assertion

In correspondence, Claudio de Almeida makes the valuable point that the sense in which a belief may be said to be 'rational' need not be the sense in which an assertion may be said to be 'rational'. The rationality of one's belief may be seen as that property of one's acquiring or continuing to have it that turns the belief, if true and not Gettierized, into knowledge. Let us call this the 'epistemic' rationality of belief. In contrast, the rationality of one's speech-act of assertion is the rationality of action.

Consistently with de Almeida's point, the rationality of one's action may be seen, roughly, as one's acting in a way that an epistemically rational believer, similarly placed, would believe best promotes one's interests by satisfying one's desires and fulfilling one's intentions. For example, going to a shop to buy bread in the knowledge that it is shut is irrational in this sense. So is attempting to cross the Sahara desert on foot without water. Let us call this the 'practical' rationality of action. Examples of assertions that are practically irrational might include, in the right circumstances, attempting to compliment a woman by telling her that she is ugly or confiding the details of one's sexual history to one's employer in the hope of promotion.

Is there anything like the 'practical' rationality of belief or the 'epistemic' rationality of assertion? The practical rationality of one's belief would be a matter of how well one's acquisition or maintenance of it best promotes one's interests—as would be judged by an epistemically rational believer, similarly placed—by satisfying one's desires and fulfilling one's intentions. When in a strange town it might be rational in this sense to believe that there is at least one stranger who may be trusted, whatever the evidence. In other cases the chance that the content of a belief is true, something that would benefit one, is raised by one's acquiring or maintaining it. For example, when faced with a would-be mugger, my belief that he will not take my wallet might partly constitute my successful resistance to him taking it. On the other side of the coin, it might be practically irrational of me to believe that any decision I make will turn out for the worse, despite excellent inductive evidence for this, because I should recognize that clinging to this belief robs me of the ability to make any decision at all, a worse outcome than making generally bad ones. Clearly this is not the type of irrationality in belief that concerns Shoemaker. Accordingly I will set this complication aside.5

There also seems to be a sense in which an assertion might be said to be 'epistemically rational'. If you tell me that it will snow in Singapore I may reply that this is a silly thing to say, but I do not judge it silly for the same kind of reason that I would judge it silly of you to try to compliment an ugly woman by telling her that she is ugly. Rather, I judge you irrational insofar as I take you to have an epistemically irrational belief, under the assumption that you are sincere. Applying this sense of 'irrational assertion' to (7) yields

> (7▯) If one's belief that p is epistemically irrational then one's assertion that p is irrational in the sense that one's belief that p is epistemically irrational, under the assumption that one is sincere.

Of course this is true, but only trivially so. This may explain the initial plausibility of (7) because in considering the assertion we might be thinking of the belief implicated by the assumption—which might be false—that it is sincere. (5) now becomes

(5ʹ) An explanation of the epistemic irrationality of Moorean belief will thereby explain the epistemic irrationality of Moorean assertion.

This makes (5) entirely empty of content.

Accordingly, I will read (3)–(11) as claims about epistemically irrational belief and practically irrational assertions or expressions of belief.

4 Rational expression of irrational belief

Let us now again consider

(3) An explanation of the absurdity of Moorean belief will thereby explain the absurdity of Moorean assertion.

Even when the belief and its corresponding assertion are both absurd, this does not mean that once we have explained the absurdity in the belief, we have ipso facto explained the absurdity in the assertion. We will still have to explain why it is absurd to assert what is absurd to believe—assuming that what we are trying to explain is true to begin with. Let us first concentrate upon irrationality. We will return to absurdity in Sects. 11–14.

(5) is now to be read as

(5ʹʹ) An explanation of the epistemic irrationality of Moorean belief will thereby explain the practical irrationality of Moorean assertion.

This presupposes that Moorean assertion is always practically irrational. I will show in Sects. 13 and 14 that this is false. But even if the belief is epistemically irrational and its corresponding assertion is practically irrational, we will still have to explain why it is practically irrational to assert what is epistemically irrational to believe.

We now have reason to reject (3) and (5). We also have reason to reject (4), since (4) is to be read as (5).

We might think that

(7ʹʹ) If one's belief that p is epistemically irrational then one's assertion that p is practically irrational

because one's purported expression of an epistemically irrational belief is practically irrational. But against (10) and (11), it need not be practically irrational of me to purport to express an epistemically irrational belief—including one that is Moorean. I might purport to express to you an

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epistemically irrational belief that I do not have, as part of an attempt into deceiving you into thinking mistakenly that I am mad. If I have a good practical reason for this attempt, such as avoiding legal culpability, purporting to express the irrational belief is practically rational.

Alternatively I might express—and ipso facto, purport to express—to you an epistemically irrational belief that I really do have. Although I recognize that I have the belief, still I cannot rid myself of it, and so I express it to you in order to inform you that I have it, as part of an attempt to get psychiatric or legal help from you. If I have a good practical reason for this attempt, such as seeking cure or compensation, expressing the irrational belief is again practically rational.

5 Two ways of expressing belief via assertion

To more fully appreciate these sorts of cases, it will prove helpful to elucidate the notion of expressing belief. I will use 'express' in the 'factive' sense in which it is impossible to express what one does not have. This sense is true to its root as 'press out' as in 'He expressed the oil of the hop'. Expressing a belief always involves ostensibly manifesting it, but not conversely. Carrying an umbrella may manifest my belief that it will rain without expressing it, because carrying the umbrella only affords you a reason to think that I believe that it is raining. Since I have manifested my belief I have ipso facto ostensibly manifested it. However the converse does not hold because knowing that you are watching me, I might carry the umbrella in order to deceive you into thinking that I believe that it will rain. In contrast, if you contradict my forecast of rain, I may express my belief that it will rain by defiantly shaking the umbrella in your face, because then I deliberately offer you a reason to think that I believe that it will rain. If I am sincere then I have manifested my belief that it will rain, otherwise I have only ostensibly manifested it. In the light of all this, it is plausible that

I purport to express to you a belief that p just in case I offer you defeasible reason to think that I believe that p

and

I express to you a belief that p just in case I really do believe that p and I offer you defeasible reason to think that I believe that p.

This pair of definitions accommodates the fact that I may purport to express a belief without expressing it. My offer of a reason to think that I believe what I assert is defeasible because you may have grounds for thinking that I am insincere.

Turning to verbal expressions of belief, a prime way to purport to express a belief is to assert its content, since in making an assertion I present it as evidence that I believe what I have asserted. This is because sincerity is necessarily a norm of assertion. Otherwise the practice of insincerity could not succeed, because liars and other practitioners of deception present themselves as sincere. To succeed in such insincerity there must be a general presumption of sincerity, one we would not hold if sincerity were not general. This holds even in a community of those who practice deception more widely. Thus when I make an assertion to you it is practically rational of you to assume that I am sincere unless observation suggests otherwise.

An analysis of the term 'assert' may now be given in terms of expression of belief:

I assert that p just in case I purport to express a belief that p with the intention of changing the beliefs or knowledge of my interlocutor—or of an actual or potential audience—in a relevant way.

The mention of purported expression accommodates lies, which are surely genuine assertions.6 The change in your beliefs or knowledge that I intend to bring about depends upon the type of assertion I make. Thus the change I intend to bring about is 'relevant' in the sense that the proposition I assert forms the core of the description of that change. For example, in informing you that p I intend to impart to you my knowledge that p. When I protest that I am innocent of a crime yet know that I cannot convince you of my innocence, I might sensibly aim to make you think that I am convinced of my own innocence. In lying to you that p I intend to make you mistakenly believe that p. This is part of the concept of a lie, despite the fact that there seem to be two concepts of a lie in ordinary speech.[7] In the first sense I lie to you that p just in case I assert the falsehood that p to you with the intention of deceiving you into mistakenly believing that p. This fits Collins which defines lying as 'to speak untruthfully with intent to mislead or deceive'. Let us call this the strong sense of 'lie'. Moore objects to this definition saying that 'it is not clearly self-contradictory to say: "What he said happened to be true, but nevertheless he was lying when he said it, for he fully believed it to be false and yet wished to persuade others that it was true"'(1962, 381). This fits the sense of 'lie' in which I lie to you that p just in case I assert that p to you with the intention of deceiving you into mistakenly believing that p. Let us call this the weak sense of 'lie', since it is included by, but does not include, the strong sense. In either sense I am insincere in my assertion because I cannot aim to make you mistakenly believe that p via my assertion that p unless I myself believe that not-p. I will return to this point in Sect. 10.

The clause 'or of a potential audience' is needed to accommodate cases such as the following. Suppose that I am brought before a judge who happens to know me very well. Under oath I assert 'I live on Carter Street'. I know that the judge already knows that I believe that I live on Carter Street. So I need have no intention to change the judge's beliefs in any way via my assertion.8 But a central point of an oath is to make an assertion that is put on public record so that any interested party may witness my testimony. My intention is surely that such a person will believe that I live on Carter Street or at least that such a person will think that I believe it. Likewise if I wear a billboard proclaiming 'The end of the world is at hand' that counts as an assertion even in an empty street because I intend to change the epistemic cognition of anyone who cares to take notice.

This definition of assertion explains why my guess, recognized as such by us both, is not an assertion since making it does not ostensibly offer you any reason—defeasible or not—to think that I believe what I guess. In other words my guess does not purport to express my belief in what I guess. On this analysis, intention is doubly involved in assertion, first in expressing belief, and second in the overall aim of the assertion.

A second more direct way to express a belief via assertion is to assert or report that one has the belief. In other words I may purport to express to you a belief that p by telling you that I believe that p. We have already seen that in making an assertion I offer you a defeasible reason to think that I am sincere. We should both recognize that I am the best authority on what mental states I have. So in offering you a defeasible reason to think that I believe that I have the belief that p, I am in effect

offering you a defeasible reason to think that I indeed have it. Thus if you ask me if it is raining I may express my belief that it is by simply answering 'I believe so'.

Rosenthal (1995, 199) denies the conclusion of this simple argument. He holds that by asserting that p I express the belief that p, but in reporting that I believe that p, I do not express this belief (2002, 168). Rosenthal assumes that since my report of belief 'I believe that p' expresses my higher-order belief that I believe that p, then it cannot also express my belief that p as well. This is because he also assumes that if it did, then there would be no difference between reporting a belief by 'I believe that p' and expressing a belief by 'p'. On my account both assumptions are false. For my assertion 'I believe that p' both expresses my belief that I believe that p and also expresses my belief that p, a result arrived at for different reasons and in a different sense of 'expresses' by Bar-On (2004). But this does not mean that there is no difference between reporting a belief by 'I believe that p' and expressing a belief by 'p'. The difference is that in making the plain assertion 'p' I do not express a belief that I believe that p.

In a later paper (2010) Rosenthal argues against Bar-On that her position gives the wrong diagnosis of what goes wrong with commissive Moorean assertion; if I assert 'p & I believe that not-p' then I assert that p and so I express belief that p, but I also assert that I believe that not-p and so I express belief that not-p. Rosenthal objects that '...if such sentences expressed incompatible thoughts, the sentences should carry some sense of literal and explicit contradiction' (Rosenthal 2010, 27) so that 'Moore's paradox would be contradictory rather than just pragmatically incoherent' (2010, 31).

But the sense of contradiction is correctly predicted by the two ways of expressing belief via assertion. When confronted with the Moorean assertion an interlocutor will indeed detect contradiction, but since she cannot locate it in the content of what is asserted, she will be puzzled. So a satisfactory explanation of the absurdity of the assertion will identify a contradiction, or something like a contradiction, but not with what is asserted. This is why Wittgenstein notes that the absurdity is 'in fact similar to a contradiction, though it isn't one' (1974, 177). Bar-On's diagnosis of the absurdity does not locate the contradiction with the content of the assertion, since 'p' and 'I believe that not-p' have independent truth-conditions. Instead it locates the contradiction as arising from what is expressed by making the assertion, namely contradictory beliefs. It is not that the sentence used to make the assertion expresses this, but rather that the making of the assertion does. On my account, the expression involved is indeed a pragmatic phenomenon as opposed to the sense in which an indicative sentence expresses a proposition.

Indeed why would I assert 'I believe that p' if doing so could not express my belief that p? Rosenthal's answer is that 'p' and 'I believe that p' 'have the same conditions for the appropriate performance of speech acts that use those sentences' (2010, 28) so much so that it is 'second nature' to use the two interchangeably, subject to the qualification that 'I believe that p' may indicate hesitation not indicated by 'p' (2010, 28).

This answer is implausible. What my wife wants to hear me say is 'I love you', not 'I think I love you'. That is because she recognizes that the two assertions have different truth-conditions; in both cases she may think that I am sincerely telling the truth, but what she wants to believe is that I love her (and believe I do), not that I think I do (and believe I think I do), since I might be mistaken in believing that I love her. She would be even more discomforted if she knew that I was insensitive enough to use the two assertions interchangeably without a second thought. There is no shortage of

similar examples, such as 'I believe I'll pay you on Friday' in lieu of 'I'll pay you on Friday' or 'I think I've now turned to port, Sir' in place of 'I've now turned to port, Sir'. Even if both assertions in each pair are equally unhesitant, you may well want to believe me—in other words, want to believe that I am sincerely telling the truth—in one case rather than the other, and with good reason.

6 Believing the assertor

This brings us to the locution 'believe me'. In making an assertion one normally offers a reason to be thought sincere as part of an attempt to make one's interlocutor accept the truth of one's assertion.9 This gives us an account of assertion from the standpoint of the interlocutor in terms of believing the assertor, as opposed to merely believing what she asserts. In most cases an insincere assertor does not tell the truth. Yes, there are cases in which I insincerely tell the truth by asserting what I have luckily guessed or by getting my facts backwards in an attempt to lie. But given that you are not in a position to suspect that this is one of these rare cases, my assertion gives you no reason to accept the truth of my assertion unless you think that I believe it myself. Accepting that I am sincere in what I tell you grants me the minimal authority you need to accept my testimony. Thus believing my assertion requires that you 'believe me', in the sense that you believe that I am sincerely telling the truth. One could just stipulate this sense of 'believe me'. But it does seem to be used this way. If a parrot utters 'I am a parrot', what you believe is not the parrot.

7 Rational expression of irrational non-Moorean belief

This account of expressing belief and of believing the assertor helps explain why it may be practically rational to express an epistemically irrational belief. Let us first consider an epistemically irrational non-Moorean belief. Suppose that I have the long-standing belief that people are following me. As my therapist, you bring me to the recognition that my belief is epistemically irrational, because I have no reason for it. Nonetheless I find myself unable to discard the epistemically irrational belief. So I try to inform you that I still have it for no reason, with the larger aim of getting you to rid me of it. I could try telling you 'People are still following me', adding 'although I have no reason to believe this'. Since my addition is an admission that I have no reason for the belief rather than a claim that I don't have the belief, there is nothing to stop you from accepting the sincerity of my first assertion. The problem however is that I should see that I cannot hope to make you accept that my assertion is true. I can hardly provide you with a reason to believe my assertion because I have gone on to tell you that I have no reason to believe it myself. So I cannot sensibly aim to make you believe me.

I am better off reporting the belief to you by asserting 'I still believe that people are following me, although I have no reason to believe this' thereby purporting to express the belief that people are following me via my assertion of the first conjunct, while at the same time telling you in the second conjunct that the belief is irrational. In virtue of thinking me truthful in asserting the first conjunct, you must think that I believe that people are still following me. And in virtue of thinking that I am telling the truth in asserting the second conjunct, you must think that I have no reason for my belief. The result is that you should think that I have the irrational belief that people are still following me. Since my aim is getting you to think this, I am practically rational in making the assertion.

This explains why it need not be true that

(10″) If one's belief that p is epistemically irrational, then one's purported expression of belief that p is practically irrational.

However, we do not yet have a reason to reject

(7‴) If one's belief that p is epistemically irrational, then one's assertion that p is practically irrational.

8 Omissive Moorean assertion

We are now in a position to turn to omissive Moorean assertion. When I make an assertion of the form p & I do not believe that p to you, I also assert that p, because asserting a conjunction involves asserting its conjuncts. So I purport to express belief that p. But I have also told you that I do not have the belief that I have purported to express. So you have no reason to accept my assertion that p, since I have told you that I am insincere in making it.

Moreover, you cannot believe me if you are epistemically rational. If you think that I am sincere in asserting that p, then you believe that I do believe that p. But if you also think that I am telling the truth in asserting that I do not believe that p, then you believe that I do not believe that p. So you must have contradictory beliefs if you believe me. On my charitable presumption that you are epistemically rational, I am in a position to see that you cannot believe me. Getting you to believe me is normally my aim in making the assertion. In these cases I am practically irrational because I am trying to do what I should see will not succeed. However there are other cases in which this is not my aim. I might sensibly aim to get you to refuse to believe me, a point to which we will return in Sect. 13.

9 Expressing omissive Moorean belief

What does this tell us about a case in which I am trying to sensibly inform you that I have an irrational omissive Moorean belief? Suppose that I discover—perhaps as the result of a blow to the head—that I have the strange belief that I fail to believe the truth that people have stopped following me. This Moorean belief is both epistemically irrational and absurd, as will be explained in Sect. 11. But how may I communicate the fact that I have the belief to you? I might try telling you 'People have stopped following me but I don't believe that they have'. We have already seen that this attempt at communication is problematic. In asserting the first conjunct of what I tell you, I purport to express belief that people have stopped following me. In other words, I offer you a reason to think that I believe that people have stopped following me. But this reason is worthless, because in asserting the second conjunct, I have also told you that I do not believe this. So my attempt to express belief in the first conjunct of what I assert is bound to fail, with the result that I fail to express my belief in the conjunction.

Moreover, you cannot believe me if you are epistemically rational. If you think that I am sincere in asserting the first conjunct then you must think that I do believe that people have stopped following me, but if you accept the truth of the second conjunct then you must think that I do not believe this.

A better strategy for me to inform you of my epistemically irrational Moorean belief is to report it to you by telling you 'I can't help believing both that people have stopped following me and also that I don't believe that they have'. Accepting the truth of what I have told you does not undermine my expression of belief. Moreover, believing me does not require you to acquire contradictory beliefs. Formalizing 'People have stopped following me' as p, in accepting the truth of my report you must think that I believe both that (p & I do not believe that p). This commits you to thinking that I believe that p and also to thinking that I believe that I do not believe that p. This does not impugn your rationality. And in accepting the sincerity of my report, you must think that I believe that I believe that (p & I do not believe that p). Your beliefs are consistent. Of course the Moorean belief I report to you is epistemically irrational—for reasons to be given in Sect. 11—so in the name of charity you may be reluctant to believe me. But if I persevere in repeating the report to you with every outward sign of sincerity, you may be forced to think that the best explanation of my repeated assertion is that it is both sincere and true.

So I may succeed in my sensible aim of making you believe me in order to express my Moorean belief to you. This explains why it need not be true that

> (11□) If one's Moorean belief that p is epistemically irrational, then one's expression of belief that p is practically irrational.

10 Commissive Moorean assertion

So far we have not seen a reason to reject

> (7□□) If one's belief that p is epistemically irrational, then one's assertion that p is practically irrational.

One emerges when one's belief is commissively Moorean. In a standard case in which I make an assertion of the form p & I believe that not-p to you, I also assert that p. I thereby express belief that p. I have also told you that I believe that not-p. In most cases you will thereby have some degree of evidence that I am lying in my assertion that p because from your point of view, given that you have no clue of my overall intention in making the assertion, I have satisfied one of the conditions needed for a lie that was discussed in Sect. 5, namely that I believe that what I have told you is false.10 So you will have no reason to accept my assertion that p.

Moreover, you cannot believe me if you think that I am epistemically rational. If you think that I am sincere in asserting that p, then you believe that I believe that p. But if you also think that I am telling the truth in asserting my second conjunct, then you believe that I believe that not-p. So if you believe me this time, you must think that it is me that has contradictory beliefs. Thus you must think that I am epistemically irrational. In most cases I will not want you to think that I am epistemically irrational if I am practically rational myself.

However, we have already noted that there are exceptions, such as when I have a sensible motive for informing you, or deceiving you into mistakenly thinking, that I have epistemically irrational beliefs. Let us first deal with the case in which I wish to inform you that I have a commissive Moorean belief. This time let us suppose that I have the belief that people are following me. Recognising that my belief is epistemically irrational yet still unable to rid myself of it I again visit you, my therapist. Now you bring me to the understanding that the belief is false, yet still I find myself unable to discard it. Then I realize that I have the strange belief that I believe mistakenly that people are following me. In other words I realize that I believe both that people are not following me and also that I believe that they are. This commissive Moorean belief is both epistemically irrational and absurd—as will be explained in Sect. 12. But unlike the omissive case, I may sensibly communicate the fact that I have the belief to you by asserting its content. In other words I tell you 'People are not following me but I believe that they are'. In asserting the first conjunct of what I tell you, I purport to express my belief that people are not following me. In other words, I offer you a reason to think that I believe that people are not following me. And in asserting the second conjunct, I have also reported to you my belief that people are following me. So I have also purported to express my belief that people are following me. I have purportedly expressed contradictory beliefs.

But I may well have the contradictory beliefs that I purport to express. I might know that I have contradictory beliefs, yet still find I can't shake either of them off. In fact I might even know, and so believe, that people are not following me, yet still be unable to stop believing that they are. So I might make the stronger assertion to you 'I jolly well know that people aren't following me, but still I can't help thinking that they are!' In the context of the therapy, we both take each other to acknowledge that people are not following me. So even after you accept that I believe that this is false, you have no reason to take my assertion 'People are not following me' as a lie because you have no reason to think that I have the intention of making you believe that people are following me. Since we both know that I have epistemically irrational beliefs, you are able to take my purported expressions of belief at face value. Because my attempt to express belief in the first conjunct of what I assert may succeed, there is nothing to stop me from expressing my belief in the conjunction that I assert.

Moreover, there is nothing to prevent you from being epistemically rational in believing me. If you think that I am sincere in asserting the first conjunct then you must think that I believe that people are not following me, and if you accept the truth of the second conjunct then you must think that I believe that people are following me. All that is required of you is to think that it is me who has contradictory beliefs. I might have them. I might be prepared to admit that I have them in order to communicate to you the fact that I have the strange belief that I believe mistakenly that people are following me. So I may succeed in my sensible aim of making you believe me.

We now have a reason to reject

> (7⿣⿣) If one's belief that p is epistemically irrational, then one's assertion that p is practically irrational.

Since the belief in question is Moorean, we have also falsified

> (6⿣) If one's Moorean belief that p is epistemically irrational, then one's assertion that p is practically irrational.

11 Irrationality, absurdity and omissive Moorean belief

So far I have assumed that Moorean beliefs are epistemically irrational. Indeed they appear to be so. And they also seem 'absurd' in some sense. In fact the right thing to say seems to be that they are 'absurd' because they are epistemically irrational. One explanation of their epistemic irrationality starts with the observation that the omissive belief is self-falsifying (Williams 1994, 165). Given, as is highly plausible, that believing a conjunction involves believing each of its conjuncts, if I first believe that (p and I do not believe that p) then I believe that p. But now my original belief is false, since its second conjunct is false. Although my belief is not a belief in a necessary falsehood, it is self-falsifying in the sense that although what I believe might be true of me and although I might believe it, it cannot be true of me if I believe it.

Chan (2010, 214–216) observes that believing a necessary falsehood is not enough to make one irrational (see also de Almeida 2001, 39–43, 2007, 53–56). For example, mathematicians before Gödel were not irrational in believing that arithmetic is decidable, because they could not have been expected to see that it is necessarily false that arithmetic is decidable. Analogously, one is not epistemically irrational in having a self-falsifying belief if one may not be reasonably expected to see that it is self-falsifying. To adapt an example from Sorensen (1988, 28), I am not epistemically irrational in believing

> (12) The non-theism of my mother's nieceless brother's only nephew angers God

if I reasonably fail to see that I am necessarily my mother's nieceless brother's only nephew. Yet my belief is self-falsifying. If I believe (12) then I believe that God exists, but if (12) is true then because I am necessarily my mother's nieceless brother's only nephew, I am not a theist and so I do not believe that God exists. Nonetheless there does seem to be something pre-theoretically 'absurd', even comic, about my belief.

Here is a normative explanation of why my belief in (1) is epistemically irrational while my belief in (12) is not. As a rational thinker 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 false.[11]

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

Do not form—or continue to have—a specific belief that you can be reasonably expected to see is self-falsifying.

Both negative imperatives are norms of epistemically rational belief. Certainly they would be endorsed by a community of epistemically rational believers. In believing (1) I violate both norms. In particular I violate the norm of avoiding specific recognizably self-falsifying beliefs because I may be reasonably expected to see that my belief is self-falsifying, at least in the sense that I may be reasonably expected on careful consideration to correctly answer the question of whether it is. In other words I may be reasonably expected to see that I have shot myself in the foot. This is why my belief in (1) is epistemically irrational.

In contrast, 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. So 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 belief is self-falsifying. This is why my belief in (12) need not be epistemically irrational.

What then is the explanation of the absurdity of believing (12)? One answer is provided by Green and Williams (2011) who distinguish absurdity from irrationality. They are informed by Nagel's characterization of absurdity as including 'a conspicuous discrepancy between pretension and aspiration or reality' (1979, 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. (1979, 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 Moorean beliefs are absurd, but not necessarily conversely. This is because one may be reasonably expected to see that one's belief is self-falsifying 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-falsifying, or for that matter, false.

This explains why my belief in (12) is absurd. 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-falsifying, and thus false.

This is also why my belief in (1) is absurd. Since I may be reasonably expected to see that my belief is self-falsifying, I am thereby in a position to see, with no further empirical investigation, that it is false.

In contrast, I am not absurd in believing that Hesperus is shining but Phosphorous is not, if I need empirical investigation to discover that Hesperus is Phosphorous (Green 2007, 192). I am bound to violate the norm of avoiding false beliefs, but not in a way that I could in principle discern with no empirical investigation.

12 Irrationality, absurdity and commissive Moorean belief

Now we must deal with commissive Moorean beliefs such as

(2) Bangkok is the capital of Thailand but I believe that Bangkok is not the capital of Thailand.

If I first believe that (p and I believe that not-p), then I believe that p. But now my original belief is false, since its second conjunct—that I believe that not-p—is false, unless I hold overtly contradictory beliefs about whether p. In other words, my belief is self-falsifying unless I have overtly contradictory beliefs.

Another norm of epistemically rational belief is the norm of avoiding overtly contradictory beliefs:

Do not form—or continue to hold—a pair of overtly contradictory beliefs.

Certainly this norm would be endorsed by a community of rational believers. Since the pair of beliefs is in overt contradiction, someone who holds it can be reasonably expected to see that this is so. I may only escape violating the norm of avoiding specific recognizably self-falsifying beliefs by violating this norm. I have shot myself in one of two feet, purely because of my belief. This is why my belief in (2) is epistemically irrational.

Since I may be reasonably expected to see that my belief is self-falsifying unless I have overtly contradictory beliefs, I am ipso facto in a position to see this, with no further empirical investigation. Since one of a pair of overtly contradictory beliefs is bound to be false, I am in a position to see, with no further empirical investigation, that I am in violation of the norm of avoiding false beliefs. So the violation is severe and thus I am absurd.

13 Absurdity, irrationality and omissive Moorean assertion

Green and Williams (2011) hold that two norms of assertion are the norm of truth:

Do not assert what is not true

and the norm of sincerity:

Do not assert what you do not believe.

This seems correct. Both norms would be endorsed by a community of assertors. I must violate one or other of these norms in making an omissive Moorean assertion. Suppose that I assert something of the form p & I do not believe that p. I have asserted that p. I have also asserted that I do not believe that p. If my former assertion is insincere then I have violated the norm of sincerity. On the other hand, if it is sincere, then my latter assertion is false, so I have violated the norm of truth. I am in a position to see, with no further empirical investigation, that I have violated a norm of assertion. So my conjunctive assertion is absurd. In other words it is absurd because I am in a position to see, with no further empirical investigation, that the sincerity of my assertion falsifies it. I remain in this position even if I am insincere, which explains why you still hear absurdity after you learn that I am lying.

But this does not mean that the assertion is practically irrational. Since there are practically rational liars, truth and sincerity are norms of assertion, but not of practically rational assertion. Norms of practically rational assertion include the norm that one should not make an assertion if one should see that one cannot succeed in one's overall aim of making it. As we saw in Sect. 6, this will normally require getting one's interlocutor to believe one. Since I should see that I cannot comply with this norm in making an omissive Moorean assertion, such assertions are normally practically irrational. But on the other hand, if my aim is to make you refuse to believe me—in other words, to make you refuse to think that I am sincerely telling the truth—then making an omissive Moorean assertion to you is ideal, because then, as we saw in Sect. 8, you must saddle yourself with contradictory beliefs. Recall that if you think that I am sincere in asserting that p, then you believe that I do believe that p. But if you also think that I am telling the truth in asserting that I do not believe that p, you believe that I do not believe that p.

14 Absurdity, irrationality and commissive Moorean assertion

However, things are different with commissive Moorean assertions. Suppose that I assert something of the form p & I believe that not-p, to you, for example,

People are not following me but I believe that they are.

I have asserted that p. I have also asserted that I believe that not-p. If my former assertion is sincere then my conjunctive assertion is false unless I have contradictory beliefs about whether p. As Green and Williams (2011, 251) observe, 'Anyone who believes that p and also believes that not-p is in error'. In other words, my conjunctive assertion is falsified by its sincerity unless I have overtly contradictory beliefs—in this case the belief that people are not following me and also the belief that they are. If I am epistemically rational and so do not have this pair of contradictory beliefs, then my conjunctive assertion either violates the norm of truth or the norm of sincerity. Then I am in a position to see, with no further empirical investigation, that this is so, with the result that my assertion is absurd by my own lights—by my own lights, because you are not in this position since you cannot tell whether I have this pair of overtly contradictory beliefs.

But suppose that I am not epistemically rational because I really do have overtly contradictory beliefs. Then, unlike the omissive case, my conjunctive assertion may be both sincere and true. No norms of assertion have been violated, with the result that my assertion is not absurd. But isn't

there still absurdity in the fact that I have overtly contradictory beliefs? Yes, but that is because I have violated a norm of rational belief, not because I have violated a norm of assertion. Green and Williams (2011) do not notice this. Given that I have beliefs that are overtly contradictory, I am in a position to see, with no further empirical investigation, that this is so, with the result that I am absurd. So when I make the assertion to you, you should detect absurdity, because you are in a position to see that unless my assertion is absurd by my own lights, then I am absurd, and indeed epistemically irrational, in what I believe. However, this leaves open the possibility that I am indeed epistemically irrational in belief, but am sensibly trying to communicate this fact to you, as a form of damage control.

In that case my assertion—insofar as it may be considered an attempt to alleviate my epistemic irrationality in belief—is practically rational. I may succeed in the overall aim of my assertion, namely to inform you that I believe exactly what I say, as part of my general plan to inform you that something has gone wrong with the rationality of my beliefs. Sensibly informing you of this requires that I get you to believe me. We already saw in Sect. 10 that I might succeed in meeting this requirement.

We saw in Sect. 12 that a commissive Moorean belief is absurd because of the way in which it is epistemically irrational. Yet we have just seen that my assertion to you 'People are not following me but I believe that they are' need not be absurd. So we now have a reason to reject both

   (8) If one's Moorean belief that p is absurd, then so is one's assertion that p

and

   (9) If one's belief that p is absurd, then so is one's assertion that p.

15 Concluding remarks

The priority thesis and the claims that surround and support it, collapse under scrutiny. It is simplistic to think that Moorean absurdity in assertion is always a subsidiary product of the absurdity in belief, even when the absurdity is conceived as irrationality. Instead we should aim for explanations of Moorean absurdity in assertion and in belief that are independent even if related, while bearing in mind that some forms of irrationality may be forms of absurdity, even if not conversely.

Such explanations should deal adequately with both omissive and commissive Moorean beliefs and assertions. They should also handle other assertions and beliefs that seem to share the same absurdity as Moore's own examples despite the fact that their contents have a different syntax. These include

   I have no beliefs

and Sorensen's (1988, 17):

Although you do not agree with me about anything, you are always right

as well as others that might be related, such as:

I believe that it is raining but I have no justification for believing that it is raining

and

It is raining but I do not know that it is raining.

There are also 'self-referential' cases such as:

I do not believe that the proposition expressed by this sentence is true

and

I believe that the proposition expressed by this sentence is false.

In another case, knowing that I am looking at myself in a mirror, I assert or believe (as I stare at my reflection) that

It is raining but he does not believe that it is raining.

Compare this with a case in which I enter a shopping mall and spot someone with bad posture on a closed-circuit TV screen. Failing to recognize this person as myself, and reasoning that someone who is aware of bad posture would correct it, I sensibly assert or believe

He has bad posture but he does not believe that he has bad posture.

An explanation of Moorean absurdity should also show why beliefs or assertions of contents that share the syntax of Moore's examples need not share the same absurdity. Turri (2010) has recently given such a case. Suppose that I am an eliminativist who holds justifiably yet falsely that there are no contentful mental states such as beliefs. Looking at rain falling outside my window I sensibly and sincerely assert

It is raining but I do not believe that it is raining.

An extension of my account of Moorean absurdity should provide a satisfactory treatment of all these cases. But that is best left as a separate task.

Acknowledgments

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Footnotes

1   Formalizing 'I went to the pictures last Tuesday but I do not believe that I did' as 'p & I do not believe that p' turns 'I believe that he has gone out, but he has not' into 'I believe that p & not-p'. This commutes to 'not-p & I believe that p', which may be instantiated as 'p & I believe that not-p'.

2   There is also an air of Moore-paradoxicality in partly non-assertoric utterances of non-indicative sentences such as my request-cum-report of lack of desire 'Please close the window, but I don't want you to close it' (cf. Shoemaker 1988, 204). Cases like these are discussed in Williams (2006, 245).

3   There are other utterances of the forms 'p & I do not believe that p' or 'p & I believe that not-p' that are not absurd because they are not assertions. See Green and Williams (2007, 8).

4   See Green and Williams (2007, 11–29) for a survey.

5   It is worth noting that it might be practically rational to assert what is practically irrational to believe, since I might sensibly tell you that any decision I make will turn out for the worse if I have the sensible aim of deceiving you into thinking that I am bad at making decisions, say to avoid the burden of leadership.

6   Rosenthal claims that lies are not genuine assertions but are rather bits of play-acting (1995, fn 15, 208) and that insincere speech is 'pretend speech' (2010, 25). But then it would follow that I could refute the accusation that I have told you a lie by merely admitting that I was lying, for then I could not have told you anything. In contrast, a genuine case of pretending to speak arises when I utter nonsense that vaguely sounds like Russian in order to make you laugh.

7   I owe this suggestion to Claudio de Almeida.

8   I owe this sort of example to Claudio de Almeida.

9   There are exceptions. Williams (2007, 154–155) gives cases of assertion in which one does not try to make one's interlocutor accept its truth. In one case I aim to 'wind you up'. I know that you think highly of Obama's competence, an opinion I in fact share. Nonetheless I insincerely

state that Obama is incompetent in order to 'rattle your cage'. The second case is a double-bluff. Learning that you have just discovered that I am a habitual liar, I decide to tell you the truth for once. So when you ask me if the pubs are still open, I tell you the truth that they are, in order to deceive you into mistakenly thinking that they are not. The first case is not a lie because I do not intend to make you have the mistaken belief—or even the belief—that Obama is incompetent. The second case is not a lie because I do not intend to make you think that my assertion that the pubs are still open is true.

10   There is at least one other condition, namely the intention to deceive.

11   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'. Both of these practical norms aim at epistemic and practical benefit.