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Eliminativism, Dialetheism and Moore's Paradox

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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 claim different possible truths to be not believed or disbelieved, let us neutralise this difference with a common possible truth, to give us

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

and

(2)   It is raining but I believe that it is not raining.[1]

Now (1) 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) is of the 'commissive' form

p & I believe that not-*p*

so called because I assert that I commit a specific mistake in belief.[2] It would be no less absurd of one to silently believe (1) or (2) and now the paradox becomes the fact that this

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[1] We may formalize 'I went to the pictures last Tuesday but I do not believe that I did' as '*p* & I do not believe that *p*' and 'I believe that he has gone out, but he has not' as 'I believe that *p* & not-*p*'. This latter form commutes to 'not-*p* & I believe that *p*', which may be instantiated as '*p* & I believe that not-*p*'.

absurdity persists despite the possible truth of the contents of these beliefs. Solving the paradox involves explaining the absurdity of the assertion or belief.[3] Let us call such assertions or beliefs 'Moore-paradoxical'.

John Turri (2010) has given an interesting example that he thinks refutes 'the consensus evaluation of such assertions as inherently absurd' (2010, 36). Ellie is an eliminativist who, impressed by arguments given by philosophers such as Paul Churchland, holds that there are no contentful mental states such as beliefs. She joins our table for lunch and rehearses these arguments to us. Although we are not persuaded, we do not thereby judge her irrational. Ellie now makes assertions of the form of (1).

Turri thinks that Ellie's assertions are 'perfectly reasonable' (2010, 38) and even claims that 'No one thinks them absurd, because they aren't absurd' (2010, 38). He concludes that this example refutes what he takes to be 'G.E. Moore's view' that omissive assertions of the form of (1) are 'inherently "absurd"' (2010, 35).

I conjecture that some of us at least will find Ellie's assertions 'absurd' in some sense or other. But it does seem that she is not irrational in making it. Turri makes the important point that 'the correct response to Moore's Paradox must allow for this, and preferably help us understand why such exceptions exist' (2010, 36). Nor does Ellie seem irrational if the sincerity of her assertion is taken folk-psychologically, or as we might prefer to put it, commonsensically, as requiring her to believe its content. In that case we will judge her to unwittingly have a mistaken but not irrational belief in (1). Or at least we will not judge her unwitting belief to be irrational in the same way that a non-eliminativist is irrational in

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[2] These useful terms are coined by Roy Sorensen (1988, 16).

[3] As Timothy Chan notes (2010, 213), at first sight Moore's use of 'paradox' does not appear to fit Mark Sainsbury's orthodox definition of a paradox as an argument with 'an apparently unacceptable conclusion, which is derived by apparently acceptable reasoning from apparently acceptable premises' (1995, 1). But Moore may be seen as suggesting that assertions of possible truths are not absurd (in a way that involves some contradiction-like phenomenon) and his examples are assertions of possible truths, so these assertions are not absurd (in a way that involves some contradiction-like phenomenon). In the same spirit one might argue that beliefs of possible truths are not absurd (in a way that involves some contradiction-like phenomenon) and the beliefs in question are beliefs of possible truths, so they are not absurd (in a way that involves some contradiction-like phenomenon).

believing the same thing. Perhaps Turri would find no absurdity in Ellie's belief either, although again I conjecture that some of us will detect some kind of absurdity.

Obviously Ellie is in no position to make the commissive assertion of (2). That would commit her to the existence of beliefs and consequently to a rejection of eliminativism. Is there a commissive assertion or belief that is likewise not irrational—and perhaps not even absurd? Here is one candidate. Suppose that Di now joins our table for lunch. Di is a kind of dialetheist who, impressed by arguments given by philosophers such as Graham Priest, holds that some, but not all, propositions—*dialethias*—are both true and false, for example

(3)   The set of all sets that do not include themselves, includes itself

or equivalently, and for ease of subsequent exposition

(4)   The Russell set includes itself.

Di now rehearses the arguments for dialetheism to us. Although we are not persuaded, we do not thereby judge her irrational. Di now asserts

(5)   The Russell set includes itself but I believe that it is not the case that the Russell set includes itself.

We would not judge Di's assertion to be irrational. Nor would we judge her belief in its content to be irrational. Or at least we would not judge it to be irrational in the same way that it is irrational for anyone (including Di) to believe (2).[4] Should we judge her assertion or belief to be absurd?

Of course, given that she is not an eliminativist, Di is in no position to make corresponding omissive assertions such as

(6)   The Russell set includes itself but I do not believe that the Russell set includes itself.

Nor will she hold a belief in (6). She does believe that (4) is true—but also believes that it is false.

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[4] For ease of exposition I ignore the case in which one judges 'It is raining' to express a *dialethia* because one refers to a borderline case of rain.

In these respects Di may be seen as the commissive counterpart of Ellie. Since any adequate explanation of Moore's paradox must handle commissive assertions and beliefs as well as omissive ones, it must deal with the case of Di the dialetheist as well as engage that of Ellie the eliminativist.

I will give such an explanation. Moore does not explicate the sense of 'absurd' he uses. There is a long tradition (surveyed by Mitchell Green and John Williams 2007, 11–29) which Turri seems to follow, of taking it as a rough synonym of 'irrational'. But Green (2007, 191-194) distinguishes absurdity from irrationality. More recently we elaborate this distinction when dealing with Moore-paradoxical assertions and beliefs (Green and Williams 2011). In particular, we hold that one may be absurd without being irrational. I agree with Turri that one should withhold the judgement that Ellie's assertion is irrational. Nor is her belief in what she asserts irrational. However I will argue that we should judge that both her assertion and her belief are absurd. Di emerges as more congenial. She is not irrational in her assertion or in her belief in what she asserts, but in contrast to Ellie we should not judge either her assertion or her belief to be absurd.[5]

2. A normative explanation of the epistemic irrationality of omissive Moore-paradoxical belief

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 'epistemic' rationality of belief is the property

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[5] Turri also claims (2010, 35–36) that the case of Ellie refutes Gareth Evans's principle (1982, 225–226) that

> If one has justification to assert that p then one has justification to assert that one believes that p

as well as my principle (Williams 2004, 349–350; Williams 2009; Williams 2010, 226–233) that

> If one has justification to believe that p then one has justification to believe that one believes that p.

Evaluating this claim would have to occupy another paper.

needed for a true, non-Gettierized belief to be knowledge. In contrast, the rationality of one's speech-act of assertion is the 'practical' rationality of action.[6]

One explanation of the epistemic irrationality of Moore-paradoxical beliefs 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 believe that (*p* and I do not believe that *p*) then I believe that *p*. But then my second-order 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.

Timothy 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 recognize 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 recognize that it is self-falsifying. To adapt an example from Sorensen (1988, 28), I am not epistemically irrational in believing

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

if I reasonably fail to recognize that I am necessarily my mother's nieceless brother's only nephew. Yet my belief is self-falsifying. My mother's nieceless brother's only nephew can only be me.[7] So if (7) is true then I am not a theist and thus I do not believe that God exists. But once I believe (7) then I *do* believe that God exists.

Here is a normative explanation of why my belief in (1) is epistemically irrational

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[6] 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. See Williams 2012 section 3 for further discussion of this. This sense of 'rational belief' is not germane to my purposes here.

[7] Of course it is possible that I was never born but that some other male child was, but then that person could not be *my* mother's nieceless brother's only nephew.

while my belief in (7) 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 recognize is your very own false belief.[8]

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 recognize is your very own self-falsifying belief.

These are norms of epistemically rational belief in being imperatives of belief-formation and maintenance that would be endorsed by a community of epistemically rational believers. From our perspective as members of such a community, someone who violates these norms is thereby epistemically irrational, even if she does not recognize that she has done so, or even if she does not acknowledge them as norms. Analogously, from our perspective as members of a community that endorses norms of polite behaviour, someone who violates these norms is thereby impolite, even if she does not recognize that she has done so, or even if she does not acknowledge them as norms.

Complying with these two norms is necessary but not sufficient for one to be epistemically rational, since someone who complies with them may violate other norms of epistemically rational belief, such as not to form a belief in the absence of any evidence.

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 recognize 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. As a

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[8] The reference to *specific* beliefs avoids the objection that epistemic rationality does not require *all* of one's beliefs to be true. For example, some claim the preface paradox to be a case in which epistemic 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 broad norm is surely 'Form—and continue to have—at least some beliefs', a welcome norm, not only for any apprentice of practical wisdom but for anyone who accepts the overarching norm 'Seek truth'. This of course is not to say that that there is any normative requirement to form beliefs about all and sundry, such as the number of bicycles in Timbuktu.

seeker of truth I have shot myself in the foot, purely as a result of my belief, something I may be expected to recognize. This is why my belief in (1) is epistemically irrational.

In contrast, although a perfectly rational agent will recognize that my mother's nieceless brother's only nephew can only be me, my own failure to recognize this is reasonable since it is difficult to work through the web of relevant familial relationships. So I may 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 recognize that my belief is self-falsifying, with the result that I do not violate the norm of avoiding specific recognizably self-falsifying beliefs. So unlike my belief in (1), my belief in (7) need not be epistemically irrational.[9] This is because I reasonably fail to recognize myself under a description that necessarily refers to me. Nonetheless there does seem to be something pre-theoretically 'absurd' in my belief.

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 because of poor vision, yet reasoning that someone who is aware of bad posture would correct it, I form the belief that

(8)   He has bad posture but he does not believe that he has bad posture.

Is my belief self-falsifying? In believing (8) I believe that he has bad posture. Since the person I pick out as 'he' can only be me, that is what he believes as well, but only in the sense that he believes *of himself* that he has bad posture. He does not believe that *he himself* has bad posture, for although I believe of myself that I have bad posture, I do not believe that *I myself* have bad posture. If I did, I would correct it. So if we give (8) the most natural *de se* reading as

(8′)   He has bad posture but he does not believe that he himself has bad posture

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[9] This allows the possibility that my belief is epistemically irrational for other reasons. I might have no evidence at all for it, or my total evidence might be the trustworthy testimony that my mother's nieceless brother's only nephew is a theist.

then my belief of this is not self-falsifying. On the other hand, if we give (8) the *de re* reading

(8´´) He has bad posture but he does not believe of himself that he has bad posture

then my belief of this is indeed self-falsifying. Nonetheless I still do not violate the norm of avoiding specific recognizably self-falsifying beliefs because I cannot be reasonably expected to recognize that my belief of (8´´) is self-falsifying, since I reasonably fail to recognize that I am him.

In these two cases irrationality may be avoided because my beliefs are not *de se*. In believing (7) or (8) I think a thought *about* myself without realising that I am thinking *of* myself. In this sense I do not conceive of myself in first-personal terms.

We are now in a position to explain why Ellie's unwitting belief in (1) need not be irrational. Her belief is self-falsifying to be sure, and the semantic meaning of 'I' in the content of her belief ensures that she realizes that she is thinking of herself, but she cannot be reasonably expected to recognize that her very own *belief* is self-refuting or even false, being convinced mistakenly—even if justifiably—that there are no beliefs at all. She has not violated the norm of avoiding specific recognizably self-falsifying beliefs. This is why Ellie need not be irrational in the way a non-eliminativist is bound to be irrational in believing the same thing.

There are important differences between me and Ellie with respect to the norm. Unlike Ellie I am able to recognize my belief as my own when presented as 'my belief', and I am generally responsive to the norm. Unlike me, Ellie will deny that there is a coherent concept of belief, and so will refuse to acknowledge the norm, or indeed any norm of belief. But this does not mean that Ellie is bound to be irrational in *all* of her unwitting beliefs. She may still have beliefs that do not violate any of the norms of epistemic rationality that we would endorse, despite the fact that she does not acknowledge them as norms.

3. A normative explanation of the epistemic irrationality of commissive Moore-paradoxical belief

Why is the commissive belief in (2) usually irrational? If I believe that (*p* and I believe that not-*p*), then I believe that *p*. But then my second-order 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—broadly stated as above—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 recognize that this is so. I may only escape violating the norm of avoiding specific recognizably self-falsifying beliefs by violating this norm. As a seeker of truth I have shot myself in one of two feet, purely because of my belief. This is why my belief in (2) is epistemically irrational.

Now let us reconsider Di. (5) may be read as

(5´)   The Russell set includes itself but I believe that it is not true that the Russell set includes itself

or as

(5´´)   The Russell set includes itself but I believe that it is false that the Russell set includes itself.

The difference between these stems from the difference between believing that it is not true that *p* and believing that it is false that *p*. These will not come apart for us as non-dialethists, unless we regard the proposition that *p* as an instance of a truth-gap, one that is neither true nor false. But they do come apart for Di, who holds that the correct attitude to (4) is to believe that it is true and also to believe that it is false. If Di were to believe (5') then her

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belief would be irrational for the same reasons already given in the last section. But that is not what she believes. She believes (5´´). More accurately still, what she believes is

> (5´´´) It is true (and false) that the Russell set includes itself but I believe that it is false (and true) that the Russell set includes itself.

Since her belief in this distributes over conjunction, she believes that it is true (and false) that the Russell set includes itself. This is not incompatible with the truth of (5´´´)'s second conjunct—that she believes that it is false (and true) that the Russell set includes itself. Indeed what she believes in believing the first conjunct of (5´´´) is the very *same* belief as the one she has if its second conjunct is true. So Di's belief in (5)—more accurately read as (5´´´)—is not self-falsifying, with the result that she has not violated the the norm of avoiding specific recognizably self-falsifying beliefs.

Of course in believing the first conjunct of (5´´´) Di believes that it is true that the Russell set includes itself and also believes that it is false that the Russell set includes itself. Has she violated the norm of avoiding overtly contradictory beliefs? Not if—as Di would insist—one has overtly contradictory beliefs only if one believes that it is true that p and also believes that it is not true that p. But although Di believes that it is true that (4) she does not believe that it is not true that (4). Instead she believes that it is false that (4). This is why Di is not irrational in the way anyone (including her) would be irrational in believing (2) and not irrational in the way someone who is neither a dialetheist nor a truth-gap theorist would be irrational in believing (5). We might insist that the norm of avoiding overtly contradictory beliefs is to be read as not only including

> Do not form—or continue to hold—the belief that it is true that p as well as the belief that it is not true that p

but also as including

> Do not form—or continue to hold—the belief that it is true that p as well as the belief that it is false that p.

This reading would be accepted within our community of rational non-dialethists. But of course it would not be accepted within the community of Di's fellow dialethists. Pressure to accept or resist this understanding of the norm will come from both sides. In sum, the right verdict seems to be that Di's belief in (5) is not epistemically irrational.

4. A normative explanation of the absurdity of omissive Moore-paradoxical belief

None of this is to say that Ellie and Di are not irrational for other reasons. We might think that Di's belief in (5) is irrational insofar as it is motivated by a more general belief in dialetheism that is itself irrational. However, making a case for the irrationality of dialethism against proponents such as Priest looks difficult indeed. It is certainly not one I wish to try to make here.

Likewise we might take the view that Ellie's unwitting belief in (1) is irrational insofar as it is motivated by a more general belief in eliminativism that is itself irrational. We might, for example, follow Lynne Baker in thinking that eliminativism is 'pragmatically incoherent'.[10] Of course Ellie will disagree, and Turri's example includes his stipulation that she is justified in her mistaken belief that eliminativism is true (2010, 37). Given the calibre of its proponents such as Paul Churchland, this is not the place for me to attempt to settle the question of whether belief in eliminativism is irrational.

Suppose for the sake of argument that it is. In that case Ellie's belief in (1) is epistemically irrational, not because it violates the norm of avoiding specific recognizably

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[10] 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' (1988, 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-falsification. Moreover, suppose for *reductio* that 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, so non-eliminativists are not in error. Thus non-eliminativists are and are not in error. Therefore eliminativism is not true.

self-falsifying beliefs, but because it violates a different norm of epistemically rational belief, namely not to base a belief upon another irrational belief. The irrationality of Ellie's belief would not be that normally found in a Moore-paradoxical belief. It would be more akin to the irrationality present in the case in which I believe that I will soon be rich because I believe that tomorrow I will win first prize in a billion-dollar lottery, this latter belief being formed solely as a product of wishful thinking.

But putting the question of the rationality of belief in eliminativism aside isn't there some sense or other in which Ellie is 'absurd' in believing (1)? Unknown to herself, she has a self-falsifying belief. She has shot herself in the foot. Although she is not epistemically blameworthy for having done so, some of us may still discern something absurd in her predicament. Likewise we have already noted that my belief in (7), although not epistemically irrational, still seems 'absurd' in some sense. Interestingly, all the cases of epistemically irrational Moore-paradoxical belief that we have considered seem to also be absurd. In fact the right thing to say seems to be that they are absurd *because* they are epistemically irrational.

One explanation of this absurdity is provided by Green (2007, 191-194) and later elaborated by Green and Williams (2011). We are informed by Thomas 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 as follows:

> … 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, we propose that absurdity consists in a severe violation of a system of norms such as those of belief, etiquette and conversation (Green and Williams 2011). One way to violate a system of norms severely is to *be in a position to recognize*, without further empirical investigation, that one is doing so. However, one need not be epistemically

irrational, since that violation may be *very difficult to recognize*. One may be in a position to recognize the violation without further empirical investigation, yet fail to actually recognize it, even if one is a genius. In contrast, one's irrationality indicates one's failure to live up to a humanly achievable standard. We hold that one norm of belief—as opposed to a norm of rational belief—is the *norm of avoiding false beliefs*:

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

This 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, our position explains why irrational Moore-paradoxical beliefs are absurd, but not necessarily conversely. If one may be reasonably expected to recognize that one has a belief that is self-falsifying then one is in a position to recognize, without further empirical investigation, that one has a belief that is false. So irrational Moore-paradoxical beliefs are absurd. But one may be in a position to recognize, without further empirical investigation, that one has a belief that is false without it being reasonable to expect one to recognize that one has a belief that is self-falsifying, or for that matter, false. One might believe a necessary falsehood. And one may be in a position to recognize, without further empirical investigation, that one's belief is false without it being reasonable to expect one to recognize this. So absurd beliefs need not be irrational.

This explains why my belief in (7) is absurd. Knowing that my mother's nieceless brother's only nephew can only be me, what is conspicuous to you is the discrepancy between my belief, 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

recognize, without 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 recognize that my belief is self-falsifying, I am thereby in a position to recognize, without further empirical investigation, that my belief is false.

In contrast, I am not absurd in believing that Hesperus is shining but Phosphorous is not, if I need further empirical investigation to discover that Hesperus is Phosphorous (Green 2007, 192).[11] I must violate the norm of avoiding false beliefs, but not in a way that I could in principle discern without further empirical investigation.

This is also why Ellie's belief in (1) strikes us as absurd. She is in a position to recognize, without further empirical investigation, that a belief (one she holds) in (1) is self-falsifying, and thus false. This is so despite the fact that she is in no position to recognize that she has that belief. What is conspicuous to us is the discrepancy between her unwitting belief that she does not have the belief that it is raining, and the reality (on our assumption that she is folk-psychologically sincere in what she tells us) that she does have it. As in the case in which I believe (7), her predicament is rather like someone who is found through no fault of his own with his trousers down. So we are correct to judge her belief to be absurd.

In contrast, my belief in (8) is not absurd in the same way. In fact (8) may well be true. Since I have bad posture but don't believe that I myself do, he also has bad posture but doesn't believe that he himself does—since he is me. We should admit that my plight does have an absurd dimension. But it might be said that this is because of the different residual absurdity of thinking a thought about myself without realising that I am thinking of myself.

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[11] I intend to make Green's point in terms of *de dicto* belief, but it seems to hold even if my belief is *de re*. Suppose that Hesperus (or if you like, Phosphorous) is such that it is believed by me to be shining and also such that it is believed by me to be not shining. If this is so because I need further empirical investigation to discover that Hesperus is Phosphorous, then this still does not make me absurd.

5. A normative explanation of the absurdity of commissive Moore-paradoxical belief

We saw in section 3 that if I believe that (*p* and I believe that not-*p*), then I believe that *p*. So my second-order belief is self-falsifying unless I have overtly contradictory beliefs about whether *p*. I may be reasonably expected to recognize this, at least in the sense that I may be reasonably expected on careful consideration to correctly answer the question of whether this is so. Since I may be reasonably expected to recognize that my belief is self-falsifying unless I have overtly contradictory beliefs, I am *ipso facto* in a position to recognize this, with no further empirical investigation. If I avoid the self-falsification of my second-order belief by having a pair of overtly contradictory beliefs, then since the contradiction in my beliefs is *overt*, I remain in a position to recognize, 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.

Now is Di absurd in believing (5)? Intuitions might be labile. She might strike us as absurd insofar as she is in a position to recognize, with no further empirical investigation, that she is in violation of the norm of avoiding false beliefs. But of course Di's community of fellow dialethists will reject this norm when applied to propositions such as (4) that they hold to be both true and false. Di's community discerns no absurdity in her belief in (5). And insofar as its rejection of the norm seems reasonable to us, Di's belief does not seem absurd. This is especially so once we consider the fact that if we assign a truth-value to (4) then as non-dialetheists we must violate the very same norm in a way that we may recognize with no further empirical investigation—and hence are absurd by our *own* lights. This is why we hesitate to form any belief about the truth of (4). On balance then, the right verdict seems to be that Di's belief is not absurd.

6. *A normative explanation of the practical irrationality of omissive Moore-paradoxical assertion*

Following Sydney Shoemaker (1995), there is also a long tradition that holds that once the absurdity in Moore-paradoxical belief has been explained then this will translate into an explanation of the absurdity in assertion. However the translation involved is much trickier than might first appear (see Williams 2012). Accordingly I will now give an independent explanation of the irrationality of Moore-paradoxical assertion.

Assertion is a speech-act and thus an action. 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 friend by telling him that he is stupid or confiding the details of one's sexual history to one's employer in the hope of promotion.

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 a friend by telling him that he is stupid. Rather, I judge you irrational insofar as I take you to have an epistemically irrational belief, under the presumption—which might be false—that you are sincere.

In making an assertion one normally offers a reason to be thought to be sincere as part of an attempt to make one's interlocutor accept the truth of one's assertion.[12] This gives

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[12] There are exceptions. In Williams (2007, 154–155) I give cases of assertion in which one does not try to

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.

In the case in which I assert (1) to you, 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 believe that *p*. But if you also think that I am telling the truth in asserting my second conjunct—that I do not believe that *p*—then you believe that I *do not* believe that *p*. So you must have overtly contradictory beliefs if you believe me. When attempting to communicate with you I have the default and charitable presumption that you are epistemically rational. Given this presumption I am in a position to recognize 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 recognize will not succeed.

This also explains why, as epistemically rational interlocutors, we cannot believe Ellie when she asserts (1) to us. But this does not mean that she is practically irrational in her assertion. Just as we will judge that she does believe what she asserts but does not recognize

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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.

that she does, so we will judge that she is trying to make us believe her—in other words trying to make us believe that she is sincerely telling the truth—but does not recognize that this is what she is doing. After all, she cannot consistently conceive of herself as trying to make us believe her, given that she holds that there are no such things as beliefs. Nor can she consistently conceive of herself as trying to do anything, since intentions are contentful mental states. So although she is trying to do what cannot succeed, we cannot reasonably expect her to *recognize* that she is trying to do what cannot succeed. Thus we should not judge her practically irrational in making her assertion in the same way that a non-eliminativist would be practically irrational in making it.

Nor should we judge her to be irrational in performing a speech act that is unintelligible to us. Given that we reject eliminativism yet wish to make sense of her assertion, we will understand it in folk-psychological terms as the attempt to make us believe that she is sincerely telling the truth, despite the fact that Ellie herself cannot conceive of it in these terms. In sum, we should withhold the judgement that she is practically irrational in her assertion.

This is not to say that she is *epistemically* rational in her assertion, which since we are assuming that she is sincere, merely boils down to the judgement that her belief in (1) is epistemically rational. Turri may have had this sense of sense of 'rational' or 'reasonable' in mind in claiming that her assertion is 'perfectly reasonable'.

7. *A normative explanation of the practical irrationality of commissive Moore-paradoxical assertion*

Why is it usually irrational to make a commissive More-paradoxical assertion? If I assert something of the form *p & I believe that not-p* to you, then 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 *I* have overtly 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. [13]

But we do not face the same obstacle to believing Di when she asserts (5‴) to us. In thinking her to be sincere in asserting the first conjunct, we believe that she believes that it is true (and false) that the Russell set includes itself. And in thinking that she is telling the truth in asserting the second conjunct, then we believe that she believes that it is false (and true) that the Russell set includes itself. The belief that we have in virtue of thinking her to be sincere is *identical* to the belief that we have in virtue of thinking her to be telling the truth. So it would not be epistemically irrational to believe her.

Of course we will still not believe her, but that is because we will not believe her to be telling the truth in asserting the second conjunct, since we do not accept that there are *dialethias*. On the other hand, if Di persuades us to join her community of dialetheists, then we shall face no obstacle to believing her, having accepted the reading of the norm of avoiding overtly contradictory beliefs that includes

> Do not form—or continue to hold—the belief that it is true that *p* as well as the belief that it is not true that *p*

but that excludes

> Do not form—or continue to hold—the belief that it is true that *p* as well as the belief that it is false that *p*.

So she is not practically irrational in aiming to get us to believe her via her assertion of (5).

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[13] There are other cases in which I might sensibly aim to get you to refuse to believe me. For example I might make an insincere omissive Moore-paradoxical assertion to you as part of an attempt into deceiving you into thinking mistakenly that I am mad because I wish to avoid legal culpability. See Williams 2012, especially section 4, for fuller discussion of such cases.

8. A normative explanation of the absurdity of omissive Moore-paradoxical 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 for us ordinary folk. Both norms would be endorsed by our community of assertors as well as by Di's community of fellow dialethists. On the other hand, members of Ellie's community will reject the norm of sincerity as it stands and will endorse the norm of truth only insofar as they can give an account of assertion that involves no contentful mental states such as beliefs and intentions.

I must violate one or other of these norms in making an omissive Moore-paradoxical 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 recognize, 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 recognize, 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.

This also explains why we would certainly find Ellie's assertion of (1) absurd before we learn what an eliminativist is and that she is one of them. We would think that she cannot be both sincere and truthful, something she is a position to recognize with no further empirical investigation. After she has carefully explained the case for eliminativism, we

might still find her absurd, and indeed irrational, because we judge that her motivating belief in eliminativism is absurd, and indeed irrational. Even if we do not judge eliminativism to be irrational but merely false, we might still find Ellie's assertion of (1) absurd because she is in a position to recognize, with no further empirical investigation, that she has violated *our* own norms of assertion. To continue to engage her in further conversation, and hence further assertions from both sides, we would have to ask her what conversational norms are to be adopted within her community. Perhaps we would even need to agree upon a set of meta-norms that govern discussion of how our norms are to be compared with eliminativist norms—as it might be, between tables.

Here a different kind of absurdity emerges. In the absence of such clarification and perhaps agreement, there is something absurd in Ellie's inability to put her case to us in a way that we can understand. Ellie cannot reassure us that her assertion is 'sincere' in our sense of the term, which requires her to believe the content of her assertion. Moreover, whatever else expressing belief amounts to, it is something that is done deliberately, which distinguishes it from manifesting belief. Carrying an umbrella while you are secretly watching me only manifests to you my belief that it will rain. But if you contradict my forecast of rain, I may express my belief that it will rain by defiantly shaking the umbrella in your face, for then I *deliberately* manifest to you that belief. But Ellie has no intention of manifesting to us mental states that, from her point of view, do not exist. It seems that she cannot express belief. Nor then can she describe her utterance of (1) as an assertion in our sense of the term 'assertion' which requires her utterance to express belief in its content. Thus she could not conceive of our norm of truth in the way that we do.

She could retreat to the request that we evaluate the truth of eliminativism, leaving assertions out of the picture. But that would not help her for three reasons. First, this request will not count as *her putting a case* for eliminativism. Second, we might legitimately

demand reassurance that her request is sincere, in other words that she *desires* that it be the case that we evaluate the truth of eliminativism. But given that desires are propositional attitudes (Platts 1981, 74–77; Smith 1994, 107; Williams 2013, section 3) Ellie can make no sense of our demand because from her point of view, there are no such attitudes. Lastly, she cannot understand the request in the way that we understand it, because we will see an evaluation of the truth of eliminativism as a judgment, even if it is a judgment that it is incoherent or that there is no fact of the matter of its truth. But from her point of view, there are no judgments. If we pressed her, communication would soon break down, at least on our table. In sum, Ellie's assertion is absurd.

9. A normative explanation of the absurdity of commissive Moore-paradoxical assertion

Why is it usually absurd of someone to make a commissive assertion such as (2)? Suppose that I assert something of the form *p & I believe that not-p* to you. I have asserted that *p*. I have also asserted that I believe that not-*p*. If my assertion that *p* is sincere then my conjunctive assertion is false unless I have overtly contradictory beliefs about whether *p*. If I am epistemically rational and so do not have this pair of overtly contradictory beliefs, then my conjunctive assertion either violates the norm of truth or the norm of sincerity. I am in a position to recognize, 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. So when I make the assertion to you, you should detect absurdity, because you are in a position to recognize that unless my assertion is absurd by my own lights, then I am absurd, and indeed epistemically irrational, in what I believe.[14]

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[14] This leaves open the possibility that I am indeed epistemically irrational in my belief, but am sensibly trying to communicate this fact to you, my therapist, as a form of damage control. See Williams (2012, especially sections 7, 9 and 10) for further discussion of this point.

Now is Di absurd in asserting (5) to us? We would certainly think so before we learn what a dialetheist is and that she is one of them. We would think that her conjunctive assertion is falsified by its sincerity unless she has overtly contradictory beliefs, something she is a position to recognize with no further empirical investigation. After she has carefully explained the case for dialetheism, we might still find her absurd, and indeed irrational, because we judge that her motivating belief in dialetheism is absurd in the sense of being epistemically irrational. That however is a judgement that looks difficult to support. Suppose that we charitably withhold this judgement and come to appreciate that the content of Di's assertion is (5‴). Then we should recognize that her her conjunctive assertion is not falsified by its sincerity. If she is sincere in asserting its first conjunct then she believes that it is true (and false) that the Russell set includes itself, and if its second conjunct is true then she believes that it is false (and true) that the Russell set includes itself. This is one and the same belief.

Moreover from our point of view Di has not violated the norm of sincerity. She does believe the content of her assertion. Has she violated the norm of truth? Not from her perspective, according to which it *is* true (and false) that the Russell set includes itself. Now we might find her absurd to the extent that in asserting (5″) she is in a position to recognize, with no further empirical investigation, that she is bound to violate the *norm of falsehood*:

Do not assert what is false.

In asserting the first conjunct of (5″) she asserts that the Russell set includes itself, and Di will hold that this is bound to be false. The norm of falsehood will not come apart from the norm of truth for us as non-dialethists, unless we are truth-gap theorists. But the two norms will come apart for Di, who will endorse the norm of truth without qualification but not the norm of falsehood as it applies to propositions such as (4) which she holds to be true as well as false.

Knowing all this we might still judge her to be absurd by *our* norms of assertion, but then we are left in a predicament when deciding what to assert about the truth-value of (4). If we assert that it is true then we have asserted what is false—and by our lights not true. If we assert that it is false then we have asserted what is true, so by our lights our assertion that it is false is not true. This is something that we are in a position to recognize with no further empirical investigation. So if we make either assertion then we are absurd by *our own* norms of assertion. This is why we hesitate to make any assertion about the truth-value of (4). So all in all, the right verdict seems to be that Di's assertion of (5) is not absurd.

10. Concluding remarks

Turri may have misrepresented Moore in claiming that he held that omissive assertions are *inherently* absurd (2010, 35). There is no textual evidence of this. Moore merely remarks that 'to say such a thing as "I went to the pictures last Tuesday but I don't believe that I did" is a perfectly absurd thing to say …' (1942, 543). And so it is, even if Ellie asserts it. Nor did Moore claim that all assertions of the form of (1) are inherently *irrational*. I agree with Turri that not all of them are. I have given an explanation of the absurdity of Moore-paradoxical assertions and beliefs as well as their irrationally or its absence. I have argued that we should withhold the judgement that Ellie's assertion is irrational. Nor is her belief in what she asserts irrational. However we should judge that both her assertion and her belief are absurd. Likewise Di is not irrational in her assertion or in her belief in what she asserts, but in contrast to Ellie we should not judge either her assertion or her belief to be absurd.

One important lesson is that not all Moore-paradoxical assertions or beliefs—those that have possibly true contents yet are absurd in the way Moore exemplifies—are irrational. Another is that the syntax of Moore's examples is not sufficient for Moorean absurdity.

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