

MOORE'S MANY PARADOXES

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abstract:

Over the last two decades J.N. Williams has developed an account of the absurdity of such utterances as “It’s raining but I don’t believe it” that is both intuitively plausible and applicable to a wide variety of forms that this so-called Moorean absurdity can take. His approach is also noteworthy for making only minimal appeal to principles of epistemic or doxastic logic in its account of such absurdity. We first show that Williams places undue emphasis upon assertion and belief: It is similarly absurd for a person to accept a proposition P as a supposition for the sake of argument while denying that her state of mind is one of supposing P, yet Williams has no account of this. Williams’ approach is then modified to account for such a case. That modification employs a principle of doxastic logic that is at least plausible as the one on which Williams relies, while being unlike his principle in applying to cases other than belief.

I. The distinctive absurdity of Moore's "It's raining, but I don't believe it" is realized in many forms, and one great challenge to understanding the absurdity of Moore-type cases is in keeping these various forms in view.¹ In an outstanding series of articles culminating in his 28 [see also 25, 26, 27, 29], J.N. Williams has developed an approach to the paradoxical nature of Moore-type cases that either accounts for, or is consistent with, each of the following data, which *inter alia* capture some of the varieties of Moorean absurdity:

1. Moorean absurdity is not self-contradiction: There is no incompatibility between, say, its raining and a person's not believing that it is. [13, 14 deny this; 29 rebuts them]
2. In addition to the better known "P but I don't believe it", an analogous paradox is to be found in "P but I believe that not-P". The two kinds of sentence (call them *a-type* and *b-type* sentences, respectively) nevertheless merit separate treatment. [11, 21, 25]
3. Moorean absurdity need not be expressed in the form of a conjunctive sentence, as shown by such examples as 'God knows that I am an atheist'. [21, 29]
4. Moorean absurdity appears in the absence of a speech act but in which a person *thinks* a thought whose utterance would create Moorean absurdity. [10, 19, 29; missed by 1, 12, 21] (Call this *Moorean thought*; in light of datum #2, it can be either of an a- or b-type.)
5. Unlike, *e.g.*, 'I am not now uttering any words', sentences evincing Moorean absurdity can be uttered in such a way that their user says something true. Further, unlike 'I am not entertaining any thoughts', one can entertain a thought whose acceptance would create a case of Moorean thought, without entertaining a thought that is false. [3]
6. Some utterances of a- or b-type sentences do not seem absurd, as in Wittgenstein's example of the railroad announcer who, convinced of the tardiness of the train but still trying to do his job says, "Train no... will arrive at...o'clock. Personally I don't believe it."

[30, §486; 12, 28]

Williams propounds a general diagnosis of Moorean absurdity on which one who asserts a Moorean proposition either cannot rationally be believed, or cannot (rationally) be believed to be rational; and on which one who believes a Moorean proposition is either necessarily incorrect, or is committed to having contradictory beliefs. One virtue of Williams' approach is that in accounting for the above data it also strives to adhere to the following desideratum:

7. An account of Moorean absurdity should eschew, or at least minimize, appeal to principles of epistemic or doxastic logic. (See [11] and [21]; [1] fails on this count)

Williams assumes, for his account of the absurdity of Moorean thought, only that belief distributes over conjunction ('A believes (P&Q)' implies 'A believes P & A believes Q' ; call this *belief-distribution*.)²

My first object is to show that the above six data do not exhaust the variety of forms of Moorean absurdity. It has been suggested that Moorean absurdity arises for, e.g., commands and interrogatives and not just for assertions [15; 17]. This contention is, in fact, more controversial than is often recognized [as argued in 10], and I will not depend upon it. (I shall, however, assume that it is *coherent* to ask whether Moorean absurdity arises for sentences put forth with other than assertoric force.) Rather, I will argue that Moorean absurdity emerges in cases in which one *supposes* a proposition for the sake of argument rather than asserting it or judging it true, while at the same time asserting or judging that one's state of mind is not one of entertaining such a supposition. Belief-distribution cannot account for the absurdity of such cases, and Williams' approach may seem

to require another distribution rule to do so. However, my second object is to formulate a distribution rule that applies both to Moorean cases involving supposition and to those involving assertion and belief, and that can be independently motivated by principles similar in certain respects to those that justify the uncontroversial principle that assertion distributes over conjunction. The scope of Williams' approach will thereby be widened while its grounding in doxastic logic made no less secure.

II. Assume with Williams that *believing someone*, as opposed merely to believing *what* she asserts, requires both believing her to be sincere and believing the content of her assertion to be true. Assume further that (1) one who asserts a conjunction asserts each conjunct (*assertion-distribution*)³, and (2) an assertion is sincere only if the speaker believes the content of her assertion. We then account for the paradoxical nature of assertion of the a-type sentence "P but I don't believe it" as follows: By asserting this the speaker asserts each conjunct (by 1). Her assertion of the first conjunct is sincere only if she does believe that P (by 2). Thus if the speaker is sincere, her second assertion "I don't believe that P" cannot be correct, and so an auditor who takes her to be sincere cannot believe her second conjunct without falling into inconsistency. Hence an auditor cannot consistently believe the speaker.⁴

If Moorean absurdity can be discerned in cases other than assertion of P conjoined with disavowal of belief that P, it may be hoped that Williams' approach will account for such cases as well. If, for instance, it could be established that certain utterances of "Where is John, though I don't wonder where he is", share the distinctive paradoxicality of the cases that exercised Moore (a question on which I shall remain neutral--but see note 9), an account of that absurdity might commence with the hypothesis that the putting of an interrogative has as its sincerity condition that

the speaker be in the intentional state of wondering. We may then suggest that even this speaker cannot consistently be believed, since doing so involves taking her question to be sincere while accepting her assertion about her state of mind to be true. The apparent absence of Moorean absurdity for interrogatives in which the negation is within the scope of ‘wonder’ rather than outside it will not undercut this account, since the a-type case would still call for explanation.⁵

The point also applies to non-assertoric utterances of indicative sentences. Even off stage, one can utter an indicative sentence with other than assertoric force by, for instance, forwarding a proposition merely as something to be entertained, as a supposition for the sake of argument, or as a conjecture. Taking, for brevity, only the case of supposition for the sake of argument (which hereafter I shall just refer to as supposition), it *prima facie* seems we can intelligibly inquire whether a speech act of supposing is sincere no less than we can inquire into the sincerity of a compliment, an assertion, an apology, or a promise.⁶ A supposition’s sincerity does not require that speaker believe what she has proffered as a supposition. Rather, it is at least sufficient for her sincerity that the speaker perform such a mental act of supposing as one might do in one’s unspoken hypothetical deliberations. (I doubt that such a mental act is required for the speaker to be sincere, but the question whether it is need not be settled here.) The result of such a mental act is that the speaker is in the intentional state of supposing, occupancy of which I shall take to be at least a necessary condition for her speech act of supposing to be sincere.

That a speech act of supposing can be assessed for sincerity might be obscured by the fact that it is not pragmatically deviant to assert or believe

P, though my state of mind is not one of supposing that P.

One can also suppose this sentence (or its content) by imagining a case in which: P holds but one refrains from supposing P. Further, one can assert or believe without oddity

P, though my state of mind is one of supposing that not-P.


One can also suppose it, thereby supposing both P and the proposition that her state of mind is one of supposing not-P. No paradox need result.⁷ On the other hand, as exemplified by the relevance of sentences involving interrogatives to the question what it is for an interrogative to be sincere, we need not restrict our inquiry to examples in which the two conjuncts of either of the sentences just displayed are put forth with the same illocutionary force, or are held under the same propositional attitude. Accordingly, consider a situation in which a speaker inscribes P under the scope of a supposition sign of the sort used in natural deduction systems. That sign indicates without asserting that P is put forth with the force of supposition, and will also show that all reasoning carried out to its right and below P are within P's scope. Assume further that the speaker is using the sign of supposition to guide her informal reasoning rather than to aid her in the use of a formal system, and that she appends to her inscription of P the parenthetical remark that her state of mind is not one of supposing P. Such a parenthetical remark would normally be read not as within the scope of the supposition sign but rather as being put forth assertorically, and thus would behave analogously to the parenthetical that occurs in

If (as is indeed the case) snow is white, then grass is green.

Here the speaker asserts the conditional, 'If snow is white, then grass is green' while also putting

forth ‘snow is white’ assertorically even though grammatically speaking the parenthetical clause occurs in the antecedent.⁸ Likewise, in

P (though my state of mind is not one of supposing P for the sake of argument)



the content of the parenthetical clause will normally be read as being put forth assertorically rather than as part of what is being supposed. In addition, the content P and the content expressed in the parentheses can be conjoined to form a logically consistent proposition. Nevertheless, if someone were to write the above display on a chalkboard addressing an audience familiar with the conventions of natural deduction, their audience may have no choice but to find the performance absurd. A first, charitable response to this performance might be to construe the parenthetical remark as retracting the supposition of P, but just as we may be unable to construe one who says, “P but I don’t believe it” as expressing a mid-utterance change of mind, so too this interpretation may be unavailable if, for instance, the speaker goes on publicly to infer things from P. A second charitable response is that the speaker is dissociating herself from her supposition of P, perhaps because her commitment to not-P is so deeply entrenched that she cannot bring herself to reason as if P is true. This construal will also be ruled out by the speaker’s going on to reason under P’s scope with adequate facility. A third charitable response might be to construe the speaker as signaling that

her state of mind is not merely one of supposing P, but is instead one of accepting P in a way that may seem stronger than supposition (*i.e.*, belief or conjecture). This interpretation, too, may be ruled out by contextual factors, and would have been explicitly ruled out had the speaker instead inscribed “P (though my state of mind is not one of accepting P in any way at all)”, within the scope of the supposition line. Attempts at charitable interpretation might, in the end, meet with failure, with the result that the audience would have no choice but to find the speaker’s performance absurd. Such a case would be an analogue for supposition of the absurdity to be found in certain utterances of “P but I don’t believe it”.⁹

The absurdity of the foregoing case may be explained along Williams’ lines. One asserting P is sincere only if she believes that P, and as we have suggested one performing a speech act of supposing P is sincere only if she is in the intentional state of supposing P. (Recall that this state of mind may, but for all we have said need not, be arrived at by performance of a mental act of supposing P.) Further, although the speaker in the above example did not assert a conjunction, she apparently forwarded a conjunction, albeit the first conjunct of which was forwarded as a supposition and the second as an assertion. Evidently she therefore forwarded the first conjunct with the force of supposition and the second with the force of assertion.¹⁰ If the speaker is sincerely putting forth P as a supposition, then, his state of mind is one of supposing P, whence what he says about himself in his parenthetical remark cannot be correct. Thus although we can take the speaker to be sincere, or believe what the speaker asserts, we cannot do both without contradicting ourselves. Recalling Williams’ account of what it is to believe someone, this is to say that we cannot believe the speaker without contradicting ourselves, just as we cannot consistently believe one who asserts, “P but I don’t believe it.”¹¹

III. In accounting for the absurdity of Moorean thought (datum #4), Williams uses belief-distribution to argue that one who believes, “P but I don’t believe it” believes P while believing that she does not believe that P. Because the content of the latter belief is made false by the existence of the former, her belief whose content is *P but I don’t believe it* must put her in error even though that content could be true. A suppositional analogue may be found for this case as well in which, for instance, a person pursuing a line of reasoning stipulates that the next thought she entertains will be a supposition. She then thinks, “P (though I’m not actually supposing P),” where, like the parenthetical comment of the earlier case, the second conjunct expresses a belief and not a supposition. Here too we find an absurdity analogous to that for the case of belief, but since a person cannot believe a proposition *as* a supposition (as opposed to believing what is *in fact* a supposition), it is not one whose absurdity is to be accounted for in light of the consequences of a person’s believing the aforementioned proposition.

A serviceable notion is, however, that of assent, for it does make sense to speak of assenting to a proposition *as* a supposition, *as* a conjecture, or *as* a belief.¹² Following [19, p. 78], we may distinguish between the linguistic performance of assent to a proposition, such as is achieved by one making an assertion or answering a question in the affirmative, and *mental assent* (hereafter *m-assent*), which can occur without any linguistic performance. M-assent is an episode, not a state, often taking place in response to a thought that occurs to one, although I shall also follow [19] in holding that m-assent must be sincere. Thus one who, *i.e.*, m-assents to P as a belief, believes that P.

In addition to being applicable to forms of assent other than belief, the notion of m-assent provides firm ground on which a distribution rule may stand. Recall that in explaining the paradoxical nature of Moorean assertion, assertion-distribution was taken as uncontroversial. This rule holds *not* because assertion is closed under deduction; even if one is committed to the

consequences of what one asserts, it neither follows nor seems to be true that one has asserted all those consequences. Rather, assertion-distribution holds because nothing is lost by taking one who asserts a conjunction to be making a series, or at least a set, of assertions.¹³ Suppose a speaker to assert some proposition R having P as a conjunct, and then to demur from P. Rather than see this as a challenge to assertion-distribution or as indicating a change of mind or a divided mind, our natural response will simply be to construe her as now retracting R and to be asserting instead some proposition like R but not implying P. We may impute to her such a change in avowed position without imputing a departure from sincerity since one may, with no such departure, retract a proposition that one believes if one lacks evidence that would convince others.¹⁴

(In contrast to assertion, we are less free to take belief as mercurial, since unlike what we assert, we cannot cancel or retract our beliefs at will. Consequently, defending belief-distribution against potential counterexamples requires further theoretical commitments than does defending assertion-distribution against challenges. One who asserts and apparently believes a very large conjunctive sentence whose content is: John, Mary, Fred, Anne, ...all attended the party, might nevertheless fail to think of Mary as disposed to celebration when he thinks of her in isolation from her co-workers. Consequently, he might seem to withhold belief from the proposition that Mary attended the party. Has he changed his mind? Is his mind divided? These are hypotheses that might be proffered and found to have some independent basis; but without any such basis they are *ad hoc*, and if invoked with no restraint would also permit a facile proof that belief is closed under the relation of deductive consequence generally. By contrast, the hypothesis that a speaker is vacillating in his *contentions* on an issue will always be more plausible than the hypothesis that he is asserting a conjunction but refraining from asserting one of its conjuncts.)

M-assert is like assertion and unlike belief in being episodic, and, *prima facie*, like assertion an

episode of m-assenting to a conjunction may be reconstrued as a series, or at least as a set, of m-assents. Unlike assertion, m-assent often takes the form of a particular mode of assent, such as supposition, conjecture, or assent to a proposition as a belief, so this point may be made more precise:

M-ASSENT-DISTRIBUTION: If A m-assents to P&Q under attitudinal mode a, then A m-assents to P under attitudinal mode a and m-assents to Q under attitudinal mode a.

M-assent also differs from assertion in being by definition sincere, and this may seem to reveal a vulnerability in m-assent-distribution. Suppose, for a potential counterexample, a cogitative analogue of the last case involving thought of Mary and her co-workers, in which one m-assents to a conjunctive proposition R (John, Mary, Fred, ..., all attended the party), and then appears to go on to withhold m-assent from one of its conjuncts P (Mary attended the party). In neutralizing this challenge we cannot appeal to the possibility that the subject has revised his m-assent without changing his beliefs on account of not wishing to m-assent to what he cannot defend. However, aside from the hypotheses that he has changed his mind or has a divided mind, a third and frequently correct explanation will be that the belief that R persists but has ceased to be consciously available to the subject.¹⁵ If this explanans is correct, then the present case will not be one of m-assenting to a conjunction without m-assenting to one of its conjuncts because conscious availability is a necessary condition for m-assent. Challenges to m-assent distribution may, accordingly, be deflected in one of three ways: change of mind, divided mind, or the unavailable-but-present-intentional-state strategy. Further, I suggest that the third strategy involves an hypothesis inherently more plausible than that the subject has m-assented to a conjunction while withholding m-assent

from one of its conjuncts.

Suppose now that a person m-assents to “P but I don’t believe P” as a belief. By m-assent-distribution, she must have m-assented to P as a belief and to “I don’t believe P” as a belief. Because m-assent must be sincere, the content of the latter assent must put her in error given the occurrence of the former. Hence if she m-assents to “P but I don’t believe P” as a belief, she must be in error. Thus, as with Williams’ original diagnosis of Moorean thought, this person’s assent necessarily puts her in error even though it is to a proposition that could be true, and it is assent to a proposition that she can entertain without entertaining something that is false.¹⁶

While m-assent-distribution does not apply to cases in which the two conjuncts of an m-assented to conjunction present themselves as candidates for assent under different attitudinal modes, the following generalization does, while also applying to cases of Moorean belief:

M-ASSENT-DISTRIBUTION*: If A m-assents to P&Q, where P is a candidate for assent under attitudinal mode a_1 and Q a candidate for assent under attitudinal mode a_2 , then A m-assents to P under attitudinal mode a_1 and m-assents to Q under attitudinal mode a_2 .

Assume now that a person m-assents to “P, though I’m not actually supposing this for the sake of argument,” the former conjunct a candidate for supposition and the latter a candidate for belief. By m-assent-distribution*, he must also be m-assenting to P as a supposition and to “My state of mind is not one of supposing P” as a belief. Because the former assent must be sincere, its very occurrence makes false the content of the latter assent, and since that latter assent is to a proposition as a belief, the thinker is in error. Hence one who m-assents to “P, though I’m not actually supposing this for the sake of argument,” under the appropriate attitudinal modes must be in error

even though that sentence expresses a possible truth, and indeed a proposition she can entertain without entertaining something that is false. (To apply m-assent-distribution* to Moorean belief, we need only assume that if A m-assents to P&Q under attitudinal mode a_1 , then A m-assents to P&Q, with P a candidate for assent under attitudinal mode a_1 , and Q a candidate for assent under attitudinal mode a_1 .)

IV. Our discussion has unearthed another datum that any treatment of Moorean absurdity must not contradict, and that a general such account must explain:

8. Moorean absurdity arises with (a) supposition conjoined with assertion of the absence of the mental state that supposition purports to express, as well as with (b) m-assent to a proposition as a supposition conjoined with m-assent to the denial of the presence of that supposition.

We have also modified Williams' approach to Moorean absurdity in order to account for this datum. In the course of that modification, we showed how accounting for #8 motivates an improvement on the explanans used in Williams' account of data ##1-6. For that explanans employs belief-distribution, whereas our own approach, using m-assent-distribution*, invokes a principle that can do all the work relevant to accounting for the absurdity of Moorean belief that is done by the cognate rule for belief, but is also of more general utility as a result of helping to account for datum #8. At the same time m-assent-distribution* is at least as plausible as belief-distribution, providing a strictly larger range of strategies for neutralizing potential counterexamples, with one of those strategies in particular (unavailable-but-present-intentional-state strategy) seeming of quite general

utility. Instead of requiring a proliferation of distribution rules, accounting for a wider range of data than does Williams allows us to do at least as well as he in satisfying desideratum #7.

NOTES

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2. It has also been suggested as a desideratum by, for instance, [11], that an account of Moorean absurdity must view it as of a conceptual sort, rather than, e.g., being construed as extremely unusual. [15] has challenged this, arguing that another possible explanation would begin from deeply entrenched features of our folk psychology, and I lay down no desideratum pertaining to this issue.
3. [9] and [29] acknowledge this assumption although [28] does not.
4. Because it is not germane to my purposes here, I won't recapitulate Williams' account of the absurdity of b-type cases.
5. [16] offers the example 'Ouch!, but I am not in pain' as a case of Moorean absurdity that is not an assertion of P conjoined with disavowal of belief that P.
6. In its use as part of a verb phrase of the form 'A supposes' taking complements of the form 'that P', 'suppose' is often used to impute beliefs, sometimes with the suggestion that the believer is in error. I shall nevertheless consider only its use to refer to the acceptance of a premise for the sake of argument. This usage of 'suppose' is thus also to be distinguished from uses of 'assume' to refer to a person's commitment, often unacknowledged, to the truth of a proposition. ('Assume' is however used at other times to refer to the use of a premise for the sake of argument, as are 'say', 'pretend' and 'imagine', and what is said below will apply to all these uses.) For further discussion see [23].
7. [21, pp. 62-4] argues along similar lines that there are no imagination blindspots, and I take it that he would say the same for supposition. We are about to see that these points may be granted without its following that there is no analogue for the case of supposition of the Moore paradox.
8. This perspective on parentheticals is defended in [7].
9. Some authors ([16], [17], [21]) have suggested analogues of the Moore paradox involving neither belief nor assertion without developing the possibility of such a paradox for the case of supposition. However, not all of these authors keep sight of the fact that a speech act can generate Moorean absurdity only if it characteristically expresses an intentional state. As [10] argues, although a speech act such as an imperative might seem to generate Moorean absurdity, as in 'Shut the door, but I don't want you to shut the door', this appearance is probably deceptive. The reason is that imperatives are not speech acts one of whose roles is the expression of an intentional state, and it is for this reason not the case that imperatives are speech acts that characteristically express an intentional state. One performing an imperative might provide her addressee with evidence of her intentional state (perhaps a desire), but it does not follow from this that the imperator expresses any such state. Further, one performing an imperative might *adventitiously* express such an intentional state as a desire, but this fact is of little interest to the study of Moorean absurdity. If the argument of the text is correct, then just as one of the roles of assertion is the expression of belief, one of the roles of the speech act of supposition is the expression of the intentional state of supposition.
10. If pressed to formulate the distribution rule on which this inference relies we might offer the following:
 If A utters 'P&Q', forwarding 'P' with force f_1 and 'Q' with force f_2 , then A utters 'P' with force f_1 and 'Q' with force f_2 .
 The near triviality of this principle should not be held against it. Observe that it will also apply to utterances of conjunctions not all conjuncts of which are indicative sentences, as in 'I'll come to the party, but will you be there?' Also, it might be said that the example employing supposition, rather than involving utterance of a conjunction, is merely a series of utterances so that no distribution rule is required. This approach to the present example can only simplify our task of accounting for its absurdity.
11. Inscription of "P (though my state of mind is one of supposing not-P)" within the scope of a supposition sign is, though puzzling, not Moore-paradoxical. Unlike belief, supposition is not constrained by the requirement of fit with the world, so that supposing contradictory contents need not make one liable to the charge of incoherence. Next, it may be that supposition is a form of pretence in which one who supposes P is to make as if P is true for the sake of determining what follows from it. Such a view of supposition would evidently apply equally to suppositions realized in speech acts and to those made in the absence of any linguistic performance, and would therefore be compatible with the view defended in the text of what it is for a supposition to be sincere. I therefore need not take a stand on whether supposition is best viewed as a species of pretence. Further, in light of note 9 it appears that examples analogous to the

one given in the text may be constructed for other utterances of declarative sentences with non-assertoric force, for instance for presumption and for what [2] terms “acceptance in a context”. Both cases are importantly different from belief and assertion, and both may be used in the construction of cases evincing Moorean absurdity, but I will not take the space to develop the point here.

12. Perhaps also one can assent to a question, as in “Why, indeed?”, thereby endorsing the question’s aptness.

13. The qualification is aimed at accommodating such cases as a person indicating her assent to a conjunction by drawing a line around it. Here it seems arbitrary to construe her as making a series of assents, whereas I see no ground for doubting that she has made a set of assents.

14. [8] employs Gricean conversational maxims to explain the possibility of retracting a proposition one believes with no departure from sincerity.

15. [4] imagines a person puts his watch in his pocket before washing the dishes, forming the belief that the watch is in his pocket. Later, unable to recall its whereabouts, he ransacks his house in search of the watch. The thought that the watch is in his pocket might even occur to him, but he may find reasons for ruling out that possibility without actually checking his pockets. Crimmins’ appears to be a case in which the agent believes that the watch is in his pocket but does not m-assent to that thought even when it occurs to him, and Crimmins describes this belief as one that the subject has in spite of its not being available, or immediately available, to his consciousness. We note that this strategy of invoking an unavailable but present belief will be of little use in defense of belief-distribution against potential counterexamples involving beliefs to which the question of assent does not arise.

16. The application to b-type cases of Moorean belief is routine. Also, although cases of Moorean belief are most naturally construed as episodic, I cannot prove that they must be so construed. (But the contention has some basis: If it is not asserted or assented to, it is difficult to see what would justify ascription of belief in such a conjunction as “P and I don’t believe it”, rather than ascription merely of a pair of beliefs, one for each conjunct. If there is still paradox to be explained, belief-distribution will still not be required.) However, countenancing non-episodic cases of Moorean belief does not require reversion to belief-distribution. We could equally well account for what is paradoxical about such cases—if paradox there be—by holding that if such beliefs were to be m-assented to the assentor would necessarily be in error.

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