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Moore-paradoxical Assertion, Fully Conscious Belief and the Transparency of Belief

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Abstract I offer a novel account of the absurdity of Moore-paradoxical assertion in terms of an interlocutor's fully conscious beliefs. This account starts with an original argument for the principle that fully conscious belief collects over conjunction. The argument is premised on the synchronic unity of consciousness and the transparency of belief.

Keywords Moore's paradox · Assertion · Consciousness · Transparency · Belief

Sidney Shoemaker (1995) has given an influential explanation of the absurdity of Moore-paradoxical belief in terms of conscious belief. Here I offer a novel account of the absurdity of Moore-paradoxical assertion in terms of an interlocutor's fully conscious beliefs. This account starts with an original argument for the principle that fully conscious belief collects over conjunction. The argument is premised on the synchronic unity of consciousness and the transparency of belief.

1 Fully Conscious Belief and Transparency: Fully Conscious Belief Collects as Well as Distributes over Conjunction

It is plausible that your fully conscious beliefs—beliefs that you are fully aware of having—distribute over conjunction:

(D) If you are fully conscious at t of believing that p and q, then you are fully conscious at t of believing that p and fully conscious at t of believing that q.

For illustration, suppose that in bad weather, you are fully conscious that you believe both that it is wet and that it is cold. At the same time you are fully conscious

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that you believe that it is wet. And at the same time you are fully conscious that you believe that it is cold.

The converse of this principle is also plausible—if you hold contemporaneous fully conscious beliefs, then you have a fully conscious belief of the conjunction of their contents. In other words, *fully conscious belief collects over conjunction*:

(C) If you are fully conscious at t of believing that p and fully conscious at t of believing that q, then you are fully conscious at t of believing that p and q.

For illustration, suppose that as you step out into inclement weather, you form the belief that it is wet and then form the belief that it is cold. Continuing to hold both beliefs, you then become fully conscious that you believe that it is wet at the same instant that you become fully conscious that you believe that it is cold. In becoming fully conscious of both beliefs, you become fully conscious of believing that it is both wet and cold.

Here is an argument for (C) from the synchronic unity of consciousness plus the transparency of belief. The *synchronic unity of consciousness* (Bayne 2008, 2010; Tye 2003) holds that

(UC) You are fully conscious at t of A and fully conscious at t of B just in case you are fully conscious at t of A-and-B.

For my purposes, the relevant sense of 'conscious' is synonymous with 'aware'. Consciousness or awareness comes in degrees. As you are sitting writing, you may be partially or completely aware of the barking of a dog. If you are completely conscious of it, then it has your full attention. To illustrate (UC), in becoming fully conscious of the barking at the same instant that you become fully conscious of the smell of smoke, you become fully conscious of the barking-and-the-smell. (UC) is neutral on the question of how the phenomenology of your contemporaneous full consciousness of A and of B is related to that of A-and-B. (UC) may be applied to your mental states. For illustration, in becoming fully conscious that you are frightened by a fierce barking dog at the same instant that you become fully conscious that you are angry at it, you become fully conscious that you are both frightened by it and angry at it. Applied to belief, (UC) entails that

(UB) You are fully conscious at t of believing that p and fully conscious at t of believing that q, just in case you are fully conscious at t of both believing that p and believing that q.

It is also plausible that your fully conscious beliefs are *transparent* in the sense that

(T) If you are fully conscious at t of believing that p, then from your point of view at t, p (Adler 2002, 196).

(C) follows from (UB) and (T), together with two plausible assumptions. First suppose the antecedent of (C), namely

(1) You are fully conscious at t of believing that p and fully conscious at t of believing that q.

From (1) and (T) it follows that

(2) At *t*, from your point of view, *p* and from your point of view, *q*.

It is plausible—although I will not try to demonstrate it—that (2) entails that

(3) At *t*, from your point of view, both *p* and *q*.

For illustration, if from your point of view, it is wet at the same instant that, from your point of view, it is cold, then at that instant, from your point of view, it is wet and cold.

From (1) and (UB) it follows that

(4) You are fully conscious at *t* of both believing that *p* and believing that *q*.

The conjunction of (3) and (4) is

(5) At *t*, from your point of view, both *p* and *q*, and you are fully conscious of both believing that *p* and believing that *q*.

It is plausible—although I again will not try to demonstrate it—that (5) entails that

(6) At *t,* you are fully conscious of believing that both *p* and *q*.

For illustration, suppose that you are fully conscious (in other words, fully aware) of believing that it is wet at the same instant that you are fully conscious of believing that it is cold. And from your point of view, it is both wet and cold. Then you are fully conscious of believing that it is both wet and cold. (6) is the consequent of (C), which we have derived from its antecedent, (1). So we have established (C).

But does (C) not entail a vicious regress? An argument that it does is as follows. Let 'I am fully conscious of believing that *p*'=$B^{C}p$. Applying (C) to $B^{C}p$ & $B^{C}q$ yields $B^{C}(p \,\&\, q)$. Applying (C) again to these three beliefs yields $B^{C}[p \,\&\, q \,\&\, (p \,\&\, q)]$. Applying (C) to these four beliefs yields $B^{C}\{p \,\&\, q \,\&\, (p \,\&\, q) \,\&\, [p \,\&\, q \,\&\, (p \,\&\, q)]\}$ … *ad infinitum*.

However this regress does not get off the ground because the unity of consciousness really is a unity; at the instant that you become fully conscious of your beliefs they are agglomerated into just *one* fully conscious belief, with the result that there is nothing to collect. The mistake in the argument for regress is in the application of (C) to 'these three beliefs'. There is only one.

2 Believing Me and Fully Conscious Belief

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 that we would not hold if sincerity were not general. Thus, the rational thing for you to do when I make an assertion to you is to assume that I am sincere unless observation suggests otherwise.

Moreover in most cases an insincere assertor does not tell the truth. True, 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. Granting 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.

Now suppose that you believe that I am sincerely telling the truth when I make an omissive Moore-paradoxical assertion of the form (Om) *p* and I do not believe that *p*.

Because you think that I am sincere, you believe that I believe that *p*. In the same instant, because you think that I am telling the truth, you believe that I do not believe that *p*. As a rational and self-reflective thinker who has just formed the belief in the sincerity of my assertion contemporaneously with the belief in its truth, you are in a position to be fully conscious of each of these beliefs. Indeed I would expect you to be fully conscious of each belief. After all, I cannot sensibly aim to make you accept either the truth of my assertion or my sincerity in making it on the assumption that you are asleep or not fully concentrating on my assertion. If you are indeed fully conscious of each belief then by (C) you are fully conscious of believing that I both do and do not believe that *p*. In other words, you are now *fully aware of believing a self-contradiction*. As a rational interlocutor, you have an excellent reason for refusing to believe me, because you are aware of the dreadful epistemic position in which doing so puts you. I am in a position to see your predicament for myself. On my charitable assumption that you are rational, I should see that you will not believe me. Since making you believe me is normally my aim, I am irrational in attempting the assertion.[1]

Things are different for commissive Moore-paradoxical assertions of the form (Com) *p* and I believe that not-*p*.

If you think that I am sincere, then you believe that I believe that *p*. If at the same time you think that I am telling the truth, then you believe that I believe that not-*p*. If you are fully conscious of these beliefs then by (C) you are fully conscious of believing that *I* have contradictory beliefs. You cannot believe me if you think me rational. In most cases, I will not want you to think that I am irrational, if I am rational myself. One exception is when I have a motive for deceiving you into thinking that I am mad. Any satisfactory account of Moore-paradoxical assertion will allow for such exceptions.

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[1] There are deviant assertions in which I do not aim to make you think I am sincerely telling the truth. But once Moore-paradoxical, these assertions are pointless for other reasons. See Williams 2007, 110–112.