

# The absurdities of Moore's paradoxes\*

by

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## I

I ARGUED ELSEWHERE that 'Moore's Paradox' is in fact one of two different paradoxes. ([14]).

The paradox is either that of saying

(i) ' $p \& \sim Ibp$ '<sup>1</sup> e.g. 'I went to the pictures last Tuesday but I don't believe that I did' (see [9], p. 543)

or that of saying

(ii) ' $p \& Ib \sim p$ ' e.g. 'I believe that he has gone out but has not' (see [10], p. 204).

The absurdity of (i) and (ii) arises because asserting ' $p$ ' normally expresses a belief that  $p$ . Normally, when (i) is asserted, what is conjointly expressed and asserted, i.e. a belief that  $p$  and a lack of belief that  $p$ , is *logically impossible*, whereas normally, when (ii) is asserted, it is differently absurd, since what is conjointly expressed and asserted, i.e. a belief that  $p$  and a belief that  $\sim p$ , is logically possible, but *inconsistent*.

A possible source of confusion between 'impossible' and 'inconsistent' is the fact that a proposition which is inconsistent *tout court* is always self-contradictory and hence necessarily false, unlike one which is inconsistent with other propositions.

Whereas the proposition  $Ibp \& \sim Ibp$  is inconsistent, the proposition  $IBp \& IB \sim p$  is not. I cannot hold a belief which I lack, but I can

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<sup>1</sup> I shall use the notation ' $Ibp$ ' for 'I believe that  $p$ ', ' $\sim Ibp$ ' for 'It is not the case that I believe that  $p$ ', ' $AbAb \sim p$ ' for 'A believes that A believes that it is not the case that  $p$ ', ' $Akp \supset Abp$ ' for 'If A knows that  $p$  then A believes that  $p$ ' and so on.

hold inconsistent beliefs. And while the proposition  $Ibp \& Ib \sim p$  is itself consistent, its truth betrays the inconsistency of my beliefs, i.e. that they cannot all be correct, since the proposition  $p \& \sim p$  is inconsistent.

Making an absurd assertion always betrays some irrationality. Often this comes from the perspicuous inconsistency or self-contradictoriness of the assertion itself. Yet it may have another source. Indeed, as is generally recognised, the absurdity of 'Moore's Paradox' cannot arise from the self-contradictoriness of *what* is asserted, for the non-existence of correct beliefs is as much a logical possibility as the existence of incorrect ones. Hence, the puzzle of assertions such as (i) or (ii) is how the asserting party can demonstrate irrationality by asserting a possible truth.

I shall now show how failing to distinguish (i) and (ii) vitiates past analyses of 'the paradox'. I shall then outline further differences between the two paradoxes and will show that my analysis explains both the absurdities and the difference in absurdity, in various contexts of utterance.

## II

Moore's own solution to 'the paradox' explains the absurdity of (ii) only by failing to explain that of (i). He maintains that 'I believe he has gone out but he has not' is 'absurd, because by saying "he has not gone out" we *imply* that we do *not* believe that he has gone out' ([10], p. 204). Moore's solution is that by saying ' $p$ ' I imply that  $\sim Ib \sim p$ . Hence by saying (ii) I conjointly imply and say that  $Ib \sim p$  &  $\sim Ib \sim p$ , which is logically impossible.

But this fails for (i). If by saying ' $p$ ' I imply that  $\sim Ib \sim p$  then in saying (i), I conjointly imply and say that  $\sim Ibp$  &  $\sim Ib \sim p$ , which is neither logically impossible nor inconsistent. One might hold no beliefs either way about whether  $p$  and moreover cogently express one's total lack of opinion.

Wolgast commented recently that

... truth is related to belief ... And the issue of the "truth" of Moore's sentence cannot arise, because that sentence cannot express a belief. It is self-vitiating. ([16], p. 119)

The relation alluded to is that the truth of  $p$  entails the correctness of a belief that  $p$ . Indeed she says

To ask whether something is true is to raise the question whether such a belief would be true. ([16], p. 110)

But not only is it both possibly true that  $p \ \& \ \sim Ibp$  and possibly true that  $p \ \& \ Ib\sim p$ , but moreover a belief of either may be correct unless I *myself* believe the former. In this case, since it follows that  $Ibp \ \& \ Ib \sim Ibp$ , my belief that  $\sim Ibp$  is incorrect.

Wolgast's reason for contending that I cannot express a belief that (i) or (ii) seems the same as Black's reason for contending that I cannot assert (i), namely that in no circumstances could one understand what the speaker was trying to say. ([3], p. 29). Willis suggests likewise in alleging that the utterance 'Mushrooms are poisonous but I don't believe it', 'would in all circumstances be pointless, even though it might be true or false' ([15], p. 25).

Three objections defeat this view.

First, one may make an assertion in a manner such that knowledge is claimed rather than merely expressing belief. In such circumstances, asserting (ii) is absurd, yet not pointless. One can understand *why* a patient asserts 'People aren't persecuting me but I can't help believing they are', i.e. to reassure his psychiatrist that he is *au fait* both with the world and his delusive belief. Yet his remark is absurd for he inconsistently asserts a belief of the contradictory of what he claims to know.

Second, since the absurdity of (i) or (ii) arises from a clash between what is asserted and what is done by asserting, it is mistaken to identify the absurdity either with what is asserted or, like those above, with the making of the assertion. Wolgast's assumption that the identification must be made, is typical:

... we want to say it must be meaningful because it might be true, and on the other hand we want to say it is not only 'absurd' but meaningless ([16], p. 92)

The tension in this thought arises from failing to distinguish asserting something from what is thereby asserted. What one asserts in asserting (i) or (ii) is intelligible but this should not be confused with

the fact that in both cases one normally could understand neither why it was asserted, nor the asserting party.

Third, even when asserting (i) or (ii) is absurd, it follows neither that one does not assert it, nor that one does not express a belief of it. Reasons for either view to the contrary might be the alleged impossibility of making contradictory assertions or of expressing contradictory beliefs. But these latter theses are only relevant to (i), since the absurdity of asserting (ii) is unrelated to anything jointly self-contradictory. Even were these theses correct it follows neither that one cannot assert (i), nor that one cannot express a belief of it, for what is in contradiction when absurdity arises is neither assertion with assertion, nor expression with expression, but rather assertion with expression.

Hintikka's explanation is different:

... the gist of Moore's paradox may be said ... to lie in the fact that {(i)} is necessarily unbelievable by the speaker. ([8]. p. 67)

Hintikka argues that (i) is 'defensible', i.e. not self-contradictory, whereas 'I believe that the case is as follows:  $p$  but I do not believe that  $p$ ' is 'indefensible' i.e. self-contradictory. His reason for thinking this is the view that  $Abp \supset AbAbp$ , for of  $Abp$  &  $\sim AbAbp$  he says

... in the case of an individual a failure of this kind may be taken as impossible. ([8], p. 29)

But it does not follow that it is impossible that  $Ib(p \ \& \ \sim Ib p)$ . For if I believe all of this then  $Ib p \ \& \ Ib \sim Ib p$ . On Hintikka's view this becomes a case in which  $Ib Ib p \ \& \ Ib \sim Ib p$ , which is merely a sophisticated case of inconsistent beliefs, and hence is possible.

Nor will Hintikka's view that  $Abp \supset AbAbp$  support the same explanation of the absurdity of (ii), i.e. that it is impossible that  $Ib(p \ \& \ Ib \sim p)$ . For it follows that  $Ib p \ \& \ Ib Ib \sim p$ . On Hintikka's view this becomes a case in which  $Ib Ib p \ \& \ Ib Ib \sim p$ , which again is possible. One may become convinced of contradiction in one's beliefs, e.g. when they are sincerely held premises, whether this conviction constitutes recognition or merely neurotic misjudgment.

Hintikka could stipulate that  $Abp \supset \sim Ab \sim Abp$  independently of the view that  $Abp \supset AbAbp$ . But this new stipulation would not entail the impossibility of my believing (ii). For, because  $AbAb \sim p \not\supset Ab \sim Abp$ , it may be the case that  $IbIb \sim p$  and yet not be the case that  $Ib \sim Ib p$ .

Moreover, there seems no reason to accept that  $Abp \supset AbAbp$ . It is surely possible that  $Abp$  &  $\sim AbAbp$  (see [4]) just as it is possible that  $Abp$  &  $Ab \sim Abp$  or even that  $Abp$  &  $AbAb \sim p$ . All these are possibilities which may be realised separately yet which may well occur together, as when one's belief is a prejudice of which one is unaware. One who evinces his belief that Asians are untrustworthy, namely by distrusting them, but who sincerely professes openmindedness might not believe he believes this, believe he doesn't, or even believe that he believes that Asians are trustworthy.

Deutscher's analyses fail to differentiate the absurdities in (i) and (ii). His original analysis is that:

What is wrong with 'p but I believe that not p' is this. If the speaker is correct then what he says is false. That is to say, only if what he says is false may he be correct. ([5], p. 54)

By 'is correct' Deutscher means 'correctly believes'. This accurate insight cannot explain the absurdity in (i). When I assert ' $p$  &  $\sim Ib p$ ' I may have *no* beliefs regarding whether  $p$  and hence I may assert something true. For I may assert this in a manner or context such that it claims knowledge, without expressing belief, of (i). I shall argue that neither does knowing that  $p$  entail believing that  $p$  nor does a claim to know that  $p$  entail expressing a belief that  $p$ . But in such a case, since the correctness of my beliefs is irrelevant, it is mistaken to describe me as an incorrect believer.

Deutscher's modified analysis that

... if the speaker believes all that he says when he utters 'p but I don't believe that p', then it is logically impossible for him to hold any correct beliefs. ([6], p. 184)

is equally true of one who utters (ii) but fails to account for the different absurdities in (i) and (ii). For unlike (i), I can correctly believe (ii).

If I believe (i) then  $Ibp$ . But since my belief of (i) is correct, then  $p$  &  $\sim Ibp$ . Hence my belief that  $\sim Ibp$  and *a fortiori* my belief of (i), is incorrect.

Alternatively, I *can* correctly believe (ii) although it's correctness would entail further incorrect beliefs. If I correctly believe (ii) then  $p$  &  $Ib\sim p$ . As Deutscher rightly shows, ([6], p. 184), if  $\sim Ab\sim p$  then A's belief that  $Ab\sim p$  is incorrect. But if, as is possible,  $Ibp$  &  $Ib\sim p$  (admittedly entailing an incorrect belief) my belief of (ii) is correct.

### III

Analysing (i) and (ii) in terms of conflict between what is asserted and what is done by asserting (i.e. expressing a belief of it) explains why both (i) and (ii) are absurd and points to a difference in absurdity.

Further differences surface when (i) or (ii) is asserted in a way such as to claim knowledge of it.

When one asserts (i) like this, e.g. stridently, this assertion becomes sensible, whereas when one asserts (ii) like this, the absurdity remains, for what is conjointly claimed and asserted, i.e. knowledge that  $p$  and belief that  $\sim p$ , is inconsistent (regarding this see [7]).

Consider the woman, shocked by reliable accounts of her husband's death, who says 'He's dead – I don't believe it!'. In these circumstances saying this seems entirely sensible. This is because by asserting it like this she voices a claim to know it. These circumstances differ e.g. from those in which the assertion serves to repudiate the veracity of a mere clue of the death. In these *latter* circumstances one could record the widow's words as 'He is dead? – I don't believe it' i.e. expressing scepticism, rather than 'He *is* dead – I don't believe it' i.e. expressing shock and lack of belief in response to the recognised facts. Moreover it is implausible to re-interpret her assertion as expressing refusal to be reconciled with the fact of her husband's death, i.e. a refusal to allow the belief that he is dead to figure in her practical reasoning, rather than as a claim to know she lacks this belief. For knowing she lacks this belief is itself good reason for excluding it from her practical reasoning. The widow

could quite plausibly arrange a funeral while repeating in horror 'He *is* dead – I don't believe it'. Consequently she asserts that he's dead, asserts that she doesn't believe it, claims to know it and claims to know that she doesn't believe it. The conjunction of all this is both logically possible and consistent given, as has been well argued ([2], [11], [12], [13]),  $Akp \not\vdash Abp$ .

One might object that nonetheless whenever asserting '*p*' claims knowledge that *p*, it also expresses a belief that *p*. Granted this, then when asserted emphatically so as to claim knowledge, *both* (i) and (ii) would be differently absurd, parallel to their absurdities when the assertion merely expresses belief. But granted this one must maintain the implausible view that the 'shocked widow' cases are absurd.

Again the main reason for making this objection would be that  $Akp \supset Abp$ . But even were this correct, it does not follow that a claim to know is always an expression of belief. When asserting '*p*' claims knowledge that *p* it is likely to also express a belief that *p*. But this is a psychological, not a logical point. When a fanatical sportsman's wife exclaims 'He's not at the match – I don't believe it!' we have no reason to doubt that she has spoken truthfully, in which case she lacks a belief that he isn't at the match. With the fact that she asserts this forcefully enough to claim knowledge of it, this gives us good reason to suppose that she claims to know *without* expressing a belief of what she claims to know.

Alternatively it *does* seem absurd to exclaim 'He *is* dead – I believe he isn't!', (or 'He's *not* at the match but I believe he is'). This is because asserting (ii) emphatically, claims knowledge of it. Hence were I to exclaim this I would conjointly claim and assert that I know that he's dead and that I believe that he isn't. And although this is logically possible it is surely inconsistent. While different from the inconsistency of holding contradictory beliefs, it is nonetheless inconsistent to believe the contradictory of what one knows, for in both cases an incorrect belief must necessarily result from one's own cognition.

A further difference between (i) and (ii) now emerges. For unlike (i), there is no reason to deny that in claiming knowledge of (ii), asserting it does not also express belief of it.

But the absurdity of asserting (ii) thus emphatically is at least two-fold, for now one also conjointly expresses and asserts a belief, e.g. that he is dead and a belief that he isn't, which is likewise, but differently, inconsistent.

Finally, my analysis needs further complication. For merely observing that one normally expresses a belief that  $p$  by asserting ' $p$ ' neglects the status of the assertion ' $Ibp$ '.

Admittedly, it seems odd to insist that I do not normally express a belief that  $Ibp$  in asserting ' $Ibp$ ' (see [1], p. 5). For asserting ' $Ibp$ ' is a sophisticated case of asserting ' $q$ ', and asserting ' $q$ ' normally expresses a belief that  $q$ . But it would be equally mistaken to say that one does not normally express a belief that  $p$  in asserting ' $Ibp$ '.

It would be odd, to say the least, if one could not express a belief by asserting that one holds it, as well as by asserting the thing believed.

Seeing this is obscured by the practice of representing A's assertion ' $p$  &  $Ib\sim p$ ' as A asserting ' $p$  &  $Ab\sim p$ '. The assertion ' $Ab\sim p$ ', even by A himself, is not clearly expressive of a belief that  $\sim p$  held by the asserting party, unlike ' $Ib\sim p$ '.

Obviously this is relevant only to the analysis of (ii). For only in asserting (ii) does the asserting party assert that he believes. In asserting ' $\sim Ibp$ ' I normally only express a belief that  $\sim Ibp$ , whereas in asserting ' $Ib\sim p$ ' I express a belief that  $Ib\sim p$  and express a belief that  $p$ .

Consequently, when one asserts (ii) in a way merely expressive of one's belief of it, what one expresses *simpliciter* is also inconsistent, since one expresses both a belief that  $p$  and a belief that  $\sim p$ . Hence, unlike (i), the absurdity in (ii) normally arises from a double source.

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