

## *Justifying circumstances and Moore-paradoxical beliefs: a response to Brueckner*

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In 2004, I explained the absurdity of Moore-paradoxical belief via the syllogism (Williams 2004):

- (1) All circumstances that justify me in believing that  $p$  are circumstances that tend to make me believe that  $p$ .
- (2) All circumstances that tend to make me believe that  $p$  are circumstances that justify me in believing that I believe that  $p$ .
- (3) All circumstances that justify me in believing that  $p$  are circumstances that justify me in believing that I believe that  $p$ .

I then took (3) to mean

- (EP) Whatever justifies me in believing that  $p$  justifies me in believing that I believe that  $p$ .<sup>1</sup>

Now suppose that I am justified in believing anything of the omissive Moore-paradoxical form:

- (Om)  $p$  and I do not believe that  $p$ .

Then I am justified in believing the first conjunct. So by (EP) I am justified in believing that I believe that  $p$ . But since I am also justified in believing the second conjunct, I am justified in believing that I do *not* believe that  $p$ . I claimed that this is impossible, because anything that justifies me in believing that something is the case renders me unjustified in believing that it is not the case.

This syllogism is plausible from an externalist view of justification, according to which circumstances such as seeming to see rain under normal perceptual conditions, justify me in believing that it is raining. In support of (1), if my apparent perceptions of rain are reliably connected with rain, so as to justify me in thinking that it is raining, they also tend to make me believe that it is raining. In support of (2), my apparent perceptions of rain are also reliably connected with my coming to believe that it is raining.

However, Anthony Brueckner (2006) argues that (1) and (EP) are both false once justification is thought of evidentially. Against (EP), he claims that my evidence that  $p$  is not evidence that I believe that  $p$  unless I *possess* the evidence, in the sense that I believe it and were I to believe that  $p$  on its basis,

1 'EP' stood for 'Evans's Principle', suggested by '... whenever you are in a position to assert that  $p$ , you are *ipso facto* in a position to assert "I believe that  $p$ "' (Evans 1982: 225–6).

my belief would be justified. But suppose that I believe that there will be a third world war on the basis of coming to know that

- (e) North Korea is planning a surprise attack on rival countries also possessing nuclear arms.<sup>2</sup>

Brueckner points out that this is not evidence that I believe that there will be a third world war, because ‘The sorts of propositions that lend evidential support to propositions about my beliefs are propositions about my behaviour and my other mental states’ (2006: 265). Brueckner’s second objection is that (1) is not generally true once evidence is construed evidentially; a person who possesses evidence that justifies her in believing that  $p$  might not tend to believe that  $p$ .<sup>3</sup>

I concede both of these objections. My response is to restrict the syllogism to rational believers and dispense with (EP). Then the syllogism will explain the impossibility of being justified in holding Moore-paradoxical beliefs, whether justification is construed externally or evidentially, in a way that evades Brueckner’s objections – so I will argue.

The stipulation that the syllogism is restricted to rational believers evades Brueckner’s objection against (1). Suppose that I am in circumstances in which I come to know or justifiably believe something like (e), which would justify my belief that there will be a third world war, should I form that belief on its basis. If I am rational, then I will tend to believe that there will be a third world war. Indeed, it would be irrational of me *not* to tend to believe what my possession of evidence justifies me in believing.

Typical circumstances in which I am externally justified in believing that it is raining are those in which I stand in the pouring rain with normal sensory apparatus. In these circumstances, I will tend to believe that it is raining, whether or not I am rational.

Now take (2). Suppose that I am in circumstances in which I tend to believe that there will be a third world war. Since we are *also* supposing that (1) is true in order to deduce (3),<sup>4</sup> these are circumstances in which I am justified in believing that there will be a third world war, because I possess evidence (e).

2 Brueckner’s own example (2006: 265) of (e) is ‘The emperor of Narnia is planning a surprise attack on three rival kingdoms also possessing nuclear arms’, which allows the objection that I could not know or justifiably believe (e) because Narnia is a fiction.

3 Brueckner (2006: 265) puts this as the point that ‘when my evidence justifies me in believing that  $\varphi$ , I tend to believe that  $\varphi$ ’ is not true of every believer.

4 To make this point explicit, the syllogism may be recast as the valid, non-question begging:

(1’) All circumstances in which I am justified in believing that  $p$  are circumstances in which I am justified in believing that  $p$  and are circumstances in which I tend to believe that  $p$ .

(2’) All circumstances in which I am justified in believing that  $p$  and are circumstances in which I tend to believe that  $p$  are circumstances in which I am justified in believing that I believe that  $p$ .

So in sum, I am a rational agent in circumstances in which I believe (e) and in which were I to form the belief that there will be a third world war on that basis, as indeed I tend to do, my belief would be justified. This description of my circumstances is itself a justification for thinking that I believe that there will be a third world war. Admittedly, I might not actually describe these circumstances as such. Nonetheless, if someone asks me why I think I believe that there will be a third world war, I am in a position to reply sensibly, ‘That’s what any rational person would think who knows something like (e)’.

Circumstances in which I tend to believe that it is raining and in which I am externally justified in believing this, such as seeming to see rain, are those which, if I am rational, inductively justify me in thinking that I believe that it is raining. I do not have to think, ‘Whenever I seem to see rain, I usually believe that it is raining. I seem to see rain. So I probably believe that it is raining’. Nonetheless, if I am rational and someone asks me why I think I believe that it is raining, I am in a position to reply sensibly, ‘That’s nearly always what I think when I seem to see rain’.

I was mistaken to take (3) as meaning (EP). (EP), unlike (3), claims that my justification for believing that  $p$  is always *identical* to my justification for believing that I believe that  $p$ . Brueckner is correct that this need not be true if the justification is evidential. In contrast (3) is true of Brueckner’s example. In circumstances of coming to know (e) as a rational agent, I am justified in thinking that I believe that there will be a third world war, since that is precisely what a rational agent would believe in these circumstances. This fact is consistent with Brueckner’s claim that (e) is not *evidence* that I believe that there will be a third world war. This evades his other objection.

(3) will do just as well as (EP) in explaining the absurdity of believing (Om). Suppose that I am rational and that there are circumstances in which I am justified in believing (Om). In these circumstances I am justified in believing the first conjunct. By (3), these are circumstances in which I am justified in believing that I believe that  $p$ . But in these circumstances, I am also justified in believing the second conjunct and so I am justified in believing that I do *not* believe that  $p$ . This is impossible, because circumstances in which I am justified in believing that something is the case are circumstances in which I am not justified in believing that it is not the case.<sup>5</sup> So unless I am

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(3) All circumstances in which I am justified in believing that  $p$  are circumstances in which I am justified in believing that I believe that  $p$ .

5 Kripke’s puzzle does not threaten this claim. The circumstances in which Pierre is justified in sincerely assenting to ‘Londres est jolie’ are not those in which he is justified in sincerely assenting to ‘London is not pretty’. In any case, it might be argued that since Pierre attaches different Fregean senses to ‘Londres’ and ‘London’, he does not hold contradictory beliefs. Another putative counter-example: suppose that Frege was justified in believing the axioms of naive set theory. Since these axioms imply some  $p$  and some  $\text{not-}p$ , he has justification for believing  $p$  (though he does not believe that  $p$ ), and he

irrational, there can be no circumstance in which I am justified in believing (Om).

The absurdity of believing anything of the commissive Moore-paradoxical form:

(Com)  $p$  & I believe that not- $p$

is explained by that fact that, supposing that I am rational,

(3') All circumstances in which I am justified in believing that  $p$  are circumstances in which I am justified in believing that I do not believe that not- $p$ .

Suppose that I am rational and that there are circumstances in which I am justified in believing (Com). In these circumstances, I am justified in believing the first conjunct. By (3') these circumstances are those in which I am justified in believing that I *do not* believe that not- $p$ . But in these circumstances I am also justified in believing the second conjunct and so I am justified in believing that I *do* believe that not- $p$ . So unless I am irrational, there can be no circumstance in which I am justified in believing (Com).

(3') follows from (3). Suppose that there is a circumstance in which I am rational that is a circumstance in which I am justified in believing that  $p$ . By (3) I am justified in believing that I believe that  $p$ . Since I am rational, I recognize that this renders me unjustified in believing that not- $p$ . So I am justified in believing that I do not believe that not- $p$ .

The following objection might be made against my response. Suppose that I am in circumstances in which I am rational, I am evidentially justified in believing that  $p$ , and I tend to believe that  $p$ . I am not justified in believing that I believe that  $p$  unless I justifiably believe that I am in such circumstances. So against (2), it is not these circumstances that justify me in thinking that I believe that  $p$  but rather my justified belief that I am in these circumstances.

I have two replies. First, I see no reason to accept the claim that I am not justified in believing that I believe that  $p$  unless I justifiably believe that I am in such circumstances. We may as well accept weaker claims that what I need in order to be justified in thinking that I believe that  $p$  is that I am disposed

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has justification for believing not- $p$  (though he does not believe that not- $p$ ). So circumstances in which Frege is justified in believing the axioms are those in which he is justified in believing that  $p$  and in which he is justified in believing that not- $p$ . This example requires a closure principle: if  $S$  is justified in believing that  $p$  in virtue of being in circumstances  $C$ , and if  $p$  entails  $q$ , then  $S$  is justified in believing that  $q$  in virtue of being in circumstances  $C$ . This is false. A small child may be justified, in virtue of her basic knowledge of arithmetic, in believing that  $2 + 2 = 4$ . Surely it need not be true that she is justified in believing all the truths of mathematics in virtue of her knowledge of basic arithmetic.

to recognize that I am in such circumstances, or that I am in a position to cite my circumstances, or elements of them, such as my possession of evidence. Moreover, as a rational agent, I am so disposed and I am in such a position. Secondly, if the stronger claim is true, it is arguable that as a rational and therefore self-reflective agent, if I am in the relevant circumstances then I recognize that I am in them.

Suppose, however, that I am wrong and that the objection is correct. This suggests a different argument, this time for the impossibility of *justifiably holding* Moore-paradoxical beliefs when the justification is evidential or internal. On Brueckner's view of things, my evidence that  $p$  does not justify me in believing that  $p$  unless I possess the evidence, in the sense that I believe it and were I to believe that  $p$  on its basis, my belief would be justified. In other words I am evidentially justified in believing that  $p$  only if for some  $e$ , I believe that  $e$  and if I were to believe that  $p$  on the basis of believing that  $e$  then I would justifiably believe that  $p$ . On my view of things, I am justified in believing that  $p$  only if I could produce good justification for believing that  $p$ . In other words, I could cite a good reason for believing that  $p$ .

On either account it follows that:

- (A) if I believe that I do not believe that  $p$  then I am not justified in believing that  $p$   
 $B\sim Bp \rightarrow \sim B^J p$

Surely I cannot believe that  $p$  on the basis of my belief that  $e$ , as long as I think that I do not have the belief that  $p$ . Likewise I cannot produce a good justification for my belief that  $p$  as long as I think that I do not have that belief. This appears to be a necessary truth of psychology, rather than a necessary truth only of rational believers.

On either account, it is definitionally true that:

- (B) if I justifiably believe that  $p$  then I both believe that  $p$  and I am justified in believing that  $p$   
 $JBp \rightarrow (Bp \ \& \ B^J p)$

Lastly, it is very plausible that justified belief distributes over conjunction:

- (C) if I justifiably believe that  $(p \ \& \ q)$  then I justifiably believe that  $p$  and I justifiably believe that  $q$   
 $JBp \rightarrow (JBp \ \& \ JBq)$

To illustrate this principle, suppose that I justifiably believe that it is both the case that it is wet in London and that it is rainy in London. Then I justifiably believe that it is wet in London. And I also justifiably believe that it is rainy in London. Illustrations cannot prove a principle, but the fact that the principle

is immune to counter-example is good enough reason to think that it is not only true but indeed constitutive of justified belief.

Since (A), (B) and (C) are necessary truths, it follows that it is impossible to hold a justified omissive Moore-paradoxical belief:

- |     |                                      |                                   |
|-----|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 1.  | $JB(p \ \& \ \sim Bp)$               | Suppose for RAA                   |
| 2.  | $JBp \ \& \ JB\sim Bp$               | 1, C                              |
| 3.  | $JBp$                                | 2, $\&$ -elim                     |
| 4.  | $JB\sim Bp$                          | 2, $\&$ -elim                     |
| 5.  | $B\sim Bp \ \& \ B^J\sim Bp$         | 4, B                              |
| 6.  | $B\sim Bp$                           | 5, $\&$ -elim                     |
| 7.  | $\sim B^Jp$                          | 6, A                              |
| 8.  | $Bp \ \& \ B^Jp$                     | 3, B                              |
| 9.  | $B^Jp$                               | 8, $\&$ -elim                     |
| 10. | $B^Jp \ \& \ \sim B^Jp$              | 7, 9, $\&$ -intro. Contradiction. |
| 11. | $\sim \diamond JB(p \ \& \ \sim Bp)$ | 1, 10, RAA                        |

In order to prove that it is impossible to hold a justified commissive Moore-paradoxical belief, we need an analogue of (A):

- (A') if I believe that I believe that not- $p$  then I am not justified in believing that  $p$   
 $BB\sim p \rightarrow \sim B^Jp$

Surely I cannot believe that  $p$  on the basis of my belief that  $e$ , as long as I think that I believe that not- $p$ . Likewise I cannot produce a justification for my belief that  $p$  as long as I think that I believe that not- $p$ . Given that (A') is also a necessary truth, this yields a proof parallel to that above:

- |     |                                      |                                   |
|-----|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 1.  | $JB(p \ \& \ B\sim p)$               | Suppose for RAA                   |
| 2.  | $JBp \ \& \ JBB\sim p$               | 1, C                              |
| 3.  | $JBp$                                | 2, $\&$ -elim                     |
| 4.  | $JBB\sim p$                          | 2, $\&$ -elim                     |
| 5.  | $BB\sim p \ \& \ B^JB\sim p$         | 4, B                              |
| 6.  | $BB\sim p$                           | 5, $\&$ -elim                     |
| 7.  | $\sim B^Jp$                          | 6, A'                             |
| 8.  | $Bp \ \& \ B^Jp$                     | 3, B                              |
| 9.  | $B^Jp$                               | 8, $\&$ -elim                     |
| 10. | $B^Jp \ \& \ \sim B^Jp$              | 7, 9, $\&$ -intro. Contradiction. |
| 11. | $\sim \diamond JB(p \ \& \ B\sim p)$ | 1, 10, RAA                        |

I have just shown that it is impossible to hold a Moore-paradoxical belief that is internally justified. My syllogism for the impossibility of being externally justified in holding Moore-paradoxical beliefs remains sound. By (B) it follows that it is impossible to hold a Moore-paradoxical belief that is

externally justified. Therefore, it is impossible to hold a justified Moore-paradoxical belief in any sense of justification.<sup>6,7</sup>

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### *References*

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<sup>6</sup> It might be objected that there are beliefs that cannot in principle be justified that are not absurd. For example, Hobbes believed that there is a method of constructing, with compass and straightedge, a square that is guaranteed to have the same area as that of a given circle. This is necessarily false, so it is impossible to justify this belief. But Hobbes's belief was not absurd. My reply is to deny that Hobbes could have had no justification for his belief. Brueckner's account of justification does not prohibit justification to Hobbes. There could be some proposition (e) that entails there is a method of squaring the circle and Hobbes could have believed this on the basis of justifiably believing (e). My account of justification does not prohibit it either. For all we know, Hobbes could have cited (e) as good reason for his belief. Another objection might be that (A) and (A') are necessary truths only of a *rational* believer. If this is correct, then it is impossible to rationally hold a Moore-paradoxical belief that is internally justified. Therefore, it is impossible to rationally hold a justified Moore-paradoxical belief in any sense of justification.

<sup>7</sup> This work was supported by a project [08-C242-SMU-009] from the Office of Research, Singapore Management University.