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Publisher Routledge

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## Australasian Journal of Philosophy

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713659165>

### Moore's paradox

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**To cite this Article** Lawlor, Krista and Perry, John(2008) 'Moore's paradox', Australasian Journal of Philosophy, 86: 3, 421 – 427

**To link to this Article:** DOI: 10.1080/00048400802001970

**URL:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00048400802001970>

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# MOORE'S PARADOX

Krista Lawlor and John Perry

G. E. Moore famously noted that saying 'I went to the movies, but I don't believe it' is absurd, while saying 'I went to the movies, but he doesn't believe it' is not in the least absurd. The problem is to explain this fact without supposing that the semantic contribution of 'believes' changes across first-person and third-person uses, and without making the absurdity out to be merely pragmatic. We offer a new solution to the paradox. Our solution is that the truth conditions of any Moorean utterance contradict its accuracy conditions. Thus we diagnose a contradiction in how the Moorean utterance represents things as being; so we can do justice to the intuition that a Moore-paradoxical utterance is in some way senseless, even if we know what proposition it expresses.

## I. Introduction

In 'Reply to My Critics' G. E. Moore [1952] noted that

- (1) S but I don't believe that S

sounds contradictory, but isn't.<sup>1</sup> For example, suppose Kay says

- (2) It's raining in Palo Alto, but I don't believe that it's raining in Palo Alto.

The first conjunct is true if it's raining in Palo Alto, and says nothing at all about Kay. The second conjunct is true if Kay has a certain belief, no matter what the weather is like in Palo Alto. So there is no contradiction. Indeed, (2), as uttered by Kay, seems to say just what (3) does, as uttered by John:

- (3) It's raining in Palo Alto, but Kay doesn't believe it's raining in Palo Alto.

(3) doesn't seem to be the least bit self-contradictory. So what's wrong with (1)? What's the difference between assertions of form (1) and assertions of form (4)?

- (4) S but N doesn't believe that S.

<sup>1</sup>As he says, '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' [Moore 1952: 543].

## II. Our Solution

Our solution is that the truth conditions of any assertion of form (1) contradict its conditions of accuracy. This is not true of assertions of form (4). We need to explain the relevant concepts of truth conditions and accuracy conditions, and the concept, of an assertion expressing a belief, that is used in the latter explanation.

### *A. Truth Conditions*

An utterance *u* of form (1) is true iff the following conditions are met:

There exists a proposition *P* and a person *x* such that

- i. *x* is the speaker of *u*;
- ii. *x*'s utterance of *S* in *u* expresses *P*;
- iii. *P* is true;
- iv. *x* does not believe *P*.

These are reflexive or utterance-bound truth conditions. That is, they are conditions on the utterance *u*, rather than on the subject matter of *u*. The utterance-bound truth conditions of an assertion of form (1) differ from those of an assertion of form (4), even if the proposition expressed or counterfactual truth conditions or incremental truth conditions or subject-matter truth conditions of the two utterances are the same.<sup>2</sup>

Any utterance *u* of form (4) is true iff the following conditions are met:

There exists a proposition *P* and a person *x* such that

- v. *x* is the referent of 'N' in *u*;
- vi. *S* in *u* expresses *P*;
- vii. *P* is true;
- viii. *x* does not believe *P*.

### *B. Sincerity and Accuracy Conditions*

It is by now familiar to identify *sincerity conditions* on utterances. For instance, if *u* is an assertion by *x*, *u* is sincere only if

- i. *x* has a belief *b* such that *u* expresses *b*.

<sup>2</sup>For the concepts of reflexive truth conditions and incremental truth conditions, see Perry [2001].

In addition, we note that there are better and worse expressions of belief: some utterances are accurate expressions of the underlying belief, and some utterances are inaccurate. Simple mistakes of articulation, for instance, produce inaccurate utterances. So, in addition to sincerity conditions, we can also identify accuracy conditions on utterances. If  $u$  is an assertion by  $x$ ,  $u$  is accurate only if

- ii. the content of  $b$  is the same as the content of  $u$ .

Suppose Kay asserts that 'Elwood is a fool', which expresses proposition  $P$ , and she is motivated to do so in part by a certain belief  $b$ , which also has the content  $P$ . That's a case of sincere and accurate expression of a belief by an assertion.

Suppose that Kay slips up, and says 'Alphonse is a fool', when she meant to say 'Elwood is a fool'. That's a sincere, but inaccurate expression of a belief. The belief played the appropriate motivational role, so the sincerity condition is satisfied, but the content requirement for accuracy is not met.

Suppose that Kay says 'Elwood is a fool' because she wants John to believe that Elwood is a fool, but she has no belief whose content is that Elwood is a fool. That's neither a sincere nor an accurate expression of a belief, because there is no belief that the utterance expresses.

Suppose that Kay has a belief  $b$  that Elwood is a fool, but it is not part of her motivation for saying 'Elwood is a fool'. Whoever John asked about, Kay would have said that that person is a fool, whether she believed it or not. This is not a sincere expression of  $b$ , however accurate a representation of  $x$ 's state of mind it might happen to be.<sup>3</sup>

With the relevant notions of truth, accuracy, and sincerity conditions in hand, we can re-state our solution in detail: If  $x$  makes the moorean utterance (1), sincerely or not, accuracy demands that  $x$  believes *that  $P$  and I don't believe  $P$* . Since believing a conjunction involves believing both conjuncts, accuracy demands *that  $x$  believes  $P$* . But this condition contradicts the reflexive truth condition *that  $x$  does not believe  $P$* .

We emphasize that the work in our solution is done by accuracy conditions.<sup>4</sup> Our solution is that the truth conditions of any assertion of (1) contradict its accuracy conditions.<sup>5</sup> Thus we diagnose a contradiction

<sup>3</sup>Note that accuracy demands sameness of content, *narrowly individuated*. Suppose that Kay has a belief  $b$  that Elwood is a fool, and Elwood happens also to be president of the bowling league. If Kay says 'The president of the bowling league is a fool' that is not an accurate expression of her belief  $b$ , although it may be an accurate expression of some other, closely related belief.

<sup>4</sup>That the work is done by accuracy and not sincerity conditions is crucial—this fact sets our solution apart from the solutions of speech act theorists such as Searle. See below. Note that both the truth and accuracy conditions of an utterance are derived semantically. No attention is paid to the conversational purposes of the agent, or the states of mind of his audience. Our solution applies, for example, to Moore's uttering (2) alone in his study. In this sense, our solution is semantic and not pragmatic.

<sup>5</sup>Moreover, note that this is not so for utterances of the form (4). If  $x$  makes the utterance (4), sincerely or not, accuracy demands that  $x$  believes *that  $p$  and  $N$  doesn't believe that  $p$* . There's no contradiction here with (4)'s reflexive truth conditions. A question here arises: what if it should happen that  $N$  is another name for the speaker,  $x$ —will there be in that case no way to satisfy both truth and accuracy conditions together? Were that so, our solution would overgeneralize to all cases where  $N$  is another name for the speaker. In response, we note that accuracy demands sameness of content, narrowly individuated. Consequently, even in cases

in how the moorean utterance *represents* things as being. The accuracy conditions of any moorean utterance demand that one thing be true of the utterer's state of mind, and the truth conditions demand the contrary be true of the utterer's state of mind.

### III. Comparison with Other Solutions

Wittgenstein calls moorean utterances *Unsätze*, or senseless.<sup>6</sup> The challenge moorean utterances pose is to explain how it can make no sense to say such a thing as, 'It's raining and I don't believe it is', while at the same time, 'I believe' says the same about oneself as 'She believes' in another's mouth, or 'I believed' in one's own mouth at some later time.

Our solution has the advantage of explaining how a moorean utterance is *senseless* in this sense: we explain the problem with the utterance entirely in terms of a contradiction in how it represents things to be. Moreover, we do so without claiming that the meaning of 'believes' changes in first-person and third-person utterances.<sup>7</sup>

Being able to explain what makes a moorean utterance senseless marks an advantage of our solution over purely pragmatic solutions. Pragmatic solutions identify a conflict at the level of linguistic activity, not at the level of semantics.<sup>8</sup> Consider for example Searle's pragmatic solution: It's a sincerity condition on assertion that one believe the proposition one asserts. And it's a general condition on the performance of a speech act that one expresses the psychological state that is the speech act's sincerity condition. (This is so, whether or not one is sincere, or whether one has the relevant psychological state. A promise expresses an intention, a question expresses a wondering, and an assertion expresses a belief, whether or not one actually has the intention, wondering, or belief.) So in asserting a proposition, one also expresses a belief in the proposition. Now, in the moorean utterance, one expresses the belief *that P and I don't believe P*, thereby expressing the belief *that P*. But one goes on to deny that one has that very belief by asserting the second conjunct, 'I don't believe P'. Consequently, according to Searle, one cannot even make an assertion with a moorean utterance.<sup>9</sup> A condition on one's performing the speech act is (spectacularly) not met, so one fails even to make an assertion.<sup>10</sup>

where N and 'I' corefer, the content *that p, but N doesn't believe that p*, differs from the content *that p, but I don't believe that p*. Thanks to an anonymous referee for raising this issue.

<sup>6</sup>In fact Wittgenstein [1953] in the *Investigations* IIx speaks only of the sentence 'It may be raining, but it isn't' as an *Unsatz*, but he does so in the context of discussion of moorean assertion more generally.

<sup>7</sup>Some approaches try hard to capture semantic senselessness, but in the effort abandon the idea that 'believes' means the same throughout. See Malcolm [1991].

<sup>8</sup>Where and how to draw a line distinguishing semantic and pragmatic features of language is of course disputed. Fortunately, we don't have to try for current purposes.

<sup>9</sup>Searle writes: 'This law, incidentally, provides the solution to Moore's paradox: the paradox that I *cannot assert* both that *p* and that I do not believe *p*, even though the proposition that *p* is not inconsistent with the proposition that I do not believe *p*' [Searle 1970: 65 n. 1 (emphasis added)].

<sup>10</sup>It's worth stressing how pragmatic accounts differ from our proposal: on a pragmatic, or speech act approach, resolving the paradox involves identifying a conflict at the level of linguistic activity, not at the level of semantics. On our approach, resolving the paradox involves identifying a conflict at the level of semantics or representation. Accuracy conditions are not conditions on a speech act's being successful, but are conditions on a representation's being correct. Thus our approach also differs from accounts that focus

Pragmatic solutions do not speak to the idea that the moorean utterance is paradoxical because senseless. Pragmatic solutions diagnose inconsistency in the moorean utterance of a practical kind: one starts out to perform an action and then gets in the way of its successful performance. But a practical inconsistency doesn't explain the fact that the moorean utterance is senseless. If someone utters the sentence 'It's raining, but I don't believe it', our reaction is not, *You clumsy fool, that's hardly the way to get me to think it's raining*. Our reaction is more like, *What? Come again?*<sup>11</sup>

The challenge is to do justice to this (admittedly strong) characterization of what's paradoxical in an moorean utterance, without disastrous consequences for the semantics of 'believes'. The virtue of our solution over purely pragmatic solutions is that an outright contradiction in truth and accuracy conditions does explain how the moorean utterance is senseless. If the accuracy conditions of one's utterance demand that something be true of one's state of mind, and the truth conditions demand the contrary be true of one's state of mind, that's the sort of thing that leaves one's hearer scratching her head about what exactly it is one is saying.

#### IV. Moorean Belief

Our solution faces an objection. A moorean *utterance* takes the form (1). A moorean *belief* is a belief of *x*'s whose content would be accurately expressed with (1). The objection is this: You've given us an account of what's wrong with moorean utterance but not what's wrong with moorean belief, so you haven't given an adequate solution to the paradox.<sup>12</sup>

In response, a couple of points are worth noting. A number of philosophers (notably Shoemaker [1995]) claim that a rational well-functioning agent cannot have moorean beliefs. This may or may not be true, and our explanation of what's paradoxical about moorean utterance does not depend on its being true. Suppose it weren't true—that is, suppose a rational well-functioning person might have moorean beliefs. In that case, her moorean utterances would still have a paradoxical character. On the other hand, suppose the claim is true, and a rational well-functioning agent cannot have moorean beliefs. It's not clear that this fact, were it true, would in itself explain what's paradoxical about (1). Consider a belief whose content would be expressed by 'I am not myself'. A rational well-functioning agent will not have a belief with this content, either. The assertion is clearly false, and puzzling in a way that might lead us to assume the speaker is not being literal. But it does not have the oddity that is characteristic of

on warranted assertibility conditions (for example, Koethe [1978]). Assertibility conditions are conditions under which an assertion is appropriate or justified. Accuracy conditions are conditions under which a token utterance correctly represents a state of mind. The two conditions may in some circumstances be extensionally equivalent, but the concepts of accuracy and assertibility are very different. Thanks to an anonymous referee for raising this issue.

<sup>11</sup>Albritton [1995] nicely motivates understanding the paradox this way.

<sup>12</sup>Many adequacy conditions on a proper solution have been suggested (see Sorensen [1988] for a discussion of adequacy conditions on a solution); here we take up just the idea that an adequate solution must address 'Moore-paradoxical belief', as most pressing for our account.

(1).<sup>13</sup> At the very least, then, more needs to be said to explain the oddity of moorean assertion, above and beyond the fact that a rational well-functioning agent will not have the moorean belief.

In the light of these points, we believe that a conservative approach to Moore's paradox is advisable: the conservative approach is to examine both moorean assertion and moorean belief, so as to develop the best account of each, without prejudice to either account, should it not generalize to the other. Put another way: we think there's a lot to be learned from examining puzzles generated by moorean assertions and moorean beliefs, and it would be a shame if in trying to observe an a priori demand that whatever is said about the one, must be said about the other, we prevented ourselves from learning interesting lessons. In this spirit, we offer an explanation of the paradoxicality of moorean utterance without demanding that the explanation rest on features of moorean belief.

Some will respond by claiming that coherent belief constrains coherent assertion, so the problem must trace back to moorean belief. But this is a debatable claim [Shoemaker 1995; Albritton 1995]. Others take it as simply obvious that it is something about *belief* that gives rise to the paradox [Heal 1994].

On this point, we're happy to agree. We too think that the paradox arises because belief is involved. But that doesn't mean that the paradoxicality of the assertion must be owing to something paradoxical about moorean belief. Instead, paradoxicality of the assertion might be owing to the fact that *assertions about one's belief create the possibility of a clash in truth and accuracy conditions*. When one makes an assertion, one has to have the relevant belief for the assertion to be *accurate*. When one makes an assertion about one's belief, one has to have the relevant belief for the assertion to be *true*. So when one makes an assertion about one's belief, truth and accuracy demands are placed on the same subject matter—namely, one's beliefs. This creates the possibility of conflict. In the moorean utterance, the possibility for conflict is exploited.<sup>14</sup> Accuracy demands *that x believes P* and truth demands *that x does not believe p*. What's paradoxical about the assertion needn't be the underlying moorean belief, then, but the way an otherwise well-formed assertion can make contradictory demands on how things are.

## V. Conclusion

Given the many attempts that have been made on Moore's paradox, we think some humility is recommended, in offering a new solution. We do think there is much to be said for our solution. Most importantly, we

<sup>13</sup>Shoemaker [1995: n 1] suggests as a general principle, 'If you have an explanation of why a putative content could not be coherently believed, you thereby have an explanation of why it cannot be coherently asserted'. Shoemaker's principle may be correct, but, as our example shows, there is a residue of paradoxicality about a moorean assertion that needs further explanation.

<sup>14</sup>Notice that in utterances that report one's desires, for instance, no such possibility for conflict opens up. When one asserts one's belief about one's desire, 'I want ice cream', what accuracy demands of one's assertion is one thing, namely, that one have the relevant belief, and what truth demands is another, namely, that one have the relevant desire.

discover an outright contradiction in how one's utterance represents things as being; so we can do justice to the intuition that a Moore-paradoxical utterance is in some way senseless, even if we know what proposition it expresses.

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Received: November 2006

Revised: March 2007

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