

Moore's paradox and Crimmins's case

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Moore's paradox occurs with sentences, such as

- (1) It's raining and I don't think it's raining.

which are self-defeating in a way that prevents one from making an assertion with them.¹ But Mark Crimmins has given us a case of a sentence that is syntactically just like (1) but is nonetheless assertible. Suppose I know somebody, and know or have excellent reason to believe that I know that very person under some other guise. I do not know what that other guise is, though I do know that I believe that the person I know under that other guise is an idiot.

Call that other guise, under which I believe the person is an idiot, *guise 2*. And suppose I do not believe that the person I know under *guise 1* is an idiot. Addressing that person under guise 1, then, I can sensibly assert

- (2) I falsely believe that you are an idiot.

But this is equivalent to

- (3) You are not an idiot and I believe you are an idiot.

which is syntactically just like (1). How should we diagnose this kind of case, in which something that looks like Moore's paradox is nonetheless assertible?

Alan Hájek and Daniel Stoljar (2001) have recently argued that (2) resembles

- (4) I frequently falsely believe that you are an idiot.

There is no problem about asserting (4), since 'frequently' need not cover the time of assertion. And, if somebody who says (4) does not at that time believe that the person being addressed is an idiot, no difficulty arises. So, as Hájek and Stoljar note, in saying (4) one would report a belief one frequently has but would not actually express that belief.

They think (2) is similar because, if I assert (2) in the circumstances Crimmins envisages, I do not at that time 'truly endorse' the belief that the person I address is an idiot. So Hájek and Stoljar maintain that (2) and (4) are both cases 'in which it is appropriate to report one's belief without expressing it' (2001: 212). The sentences are assertible because they only

¹ Cases also occur in which some non-assertoric illocutionary act cannot be performed, as with 'Thank you but I feel no gratitude' and 'Please open the door, but I don't want you to'. See e.g., Black 1954: 118–9 and Rosenthal 1986: 154.

report, and do not also express, one's belief that the person addressed is an idiot.

Hájek and Stoljar urge that this same consideration also shows how (2) and (4) both differ from (1) and other genuine cases of Moore's paradox. Because they take saying 'I believe it's raining' to express one's belief that it is raining, they maintain that saying (1) expresses both one's belief that it is raining and one's belief that it is not raining. Moore's paradox cannot be asserted because the two conjuncts express incompatible beliefs.

There are two difficulties with this diagnosis. For one thing, saying 'I believe that it's not raining' does not express a belief that it is not raining. Rather, it reports one's belief that it is not raining, and thereby expresses one's higher-order belief that one believes that it is not raining. This is clear from consideration of the unusual case in which somebody wrongly denies that one believes something, say, that it is not raining; to correct that person one must say 'I believe that it's not raining'. Because 'I believe that it's not raining' has roughly the same conditions of assertibility – informally, the same use – as 'It's not raining', it is tempting to assimilate the two. But they plainly differ in their truth conditions, and those semantic properties in part determine the belief a speech act expresses.

So (1) does not express contradictory beliefs. In addition, if Hájek and Stoljar were right in thinking that it did, we would be unable to explain Moore's paradox. On their view, the reason (1) is not assertible is that its two conjuncts express incompatible beliefs, and we presumably cannot assert manifest contradictions.

But sentences that reflect Moore's paradox are not contradictory. Although (1) cannot be asserted, it can readily be true; it often happens that it is raining even when I do not believe that it is. What is puzzling about such sentences is why they cannot be asserted given that they can be true. We cannot explain Moore's paradox on the hypothesis that the two conjuncts express incompatible beliefs.

The foregoing remarks about the expressing and reporting of intentional states point the way, however, to a satisfactory explanation. Saying 'I believe that it's not raining' reports one's belief that it is not raining and expresses, instead, the thought that one believes it is not raining. Seeing this will allow us not only to explain Moore's paradox, but also to see how Crimmins's case differs from genuine examples of Moore's paradox.

The first conjunct of (1) purports to express the speaker's thought that it is raining. But the second conjunct does not say that it is not raining; rather, it says only that the speaker does not have the thought that it is raining. The second conjunct denies that the speaker has the thought that the first conjunct purports to express. So the two conjuncts and the thoughts they express can both be true at once; one says that it is raining and the other says something about the speaker's thoughts.

This explains not only why (1) can be true, but also why it cannot be asserted. It is central to our folk-psychological views about speaking and thinking that speech acts express corresponding intentional states. If one utters something but does not actually have the thought that one's utterance purports to express, that utterance cannot figure in the performing of a genuine illocutionary act.

This connection between saying something and thinking it helps us understand why some utterances fail to result in the performing of any illocutionary act. The case of actors' reciting lines in a play is an instructive example. Actors seldom if ever think things whose content and mental attitude correspond to the meaning and illocutionary force of their lines. Because they do not think those things, they do not, in uttering those lines, perform any actual illocutionary acts; rather, they simply pretend to perform those acts. The same considerations explain why insincere utterances do not involve the performing of genuine illocutionary acts. For an illocutionary act to occur, the utterance must express a concurrent intentional state.²

That is why (1) cannot be asserted. Uttering (1) would assert something only if each conjunct asserted something. But the first conjunct cannot assert anything unless the speaker has the thought that it is raining, and the second conjunct denies that the speaker has that very thought. So the uttering of (1) could not involve asserting anything unless the second conjunct was false. But part of what it is to assert something is that assertions express corresponding intentional states. So, if the first conjunct did make an assertion, anybody who understands what it is to assert would see that the second conjunct was false. And then the uttering of (1) would still not assert anything, since one cannot assert manifestly false things.³

(1) expresses the thought that it is raining and denies that the speaker has that thought. But that is exactly how Hájek and Stoljar describe (2). As

² Cf. Austin's claim that if I insincerely say 'I promise' I do not strictly speaking promise, but merely say I do (1979: 101–103, 1961: 69–71). See also Black 1954: 116–17, Rosenthal 1986: §V, and Rosenthal 1989: 341–344.

This connection holds not only for assertoric speech acts and intentional states, but for all illocutionary acts and mental acts that correspond to them. (For a useful discussion, see Vendler 1972, ch. 3.) This allows for an explanation of non-assertoric versions of Moore's paradox as well (see n. 1).

³ One's grasp of what it is to assert something can reflect the requirement that every illocutionary act expresses a corresponding intentional state without one's having the explicit thought that this connection holds; our thinking often reflects generalizations that we do not explicitly formulate. I am grateful to Douglas Meehan for pressing me about the issues raised in this paragraph.

For more on this account of Moore's paradox, see Rosenthal 1986: §II and Rosenthal 1995.

they note, somebody who says (2) under the relevant circumstances would not 'truly endorse' the belief that the person being addressed is an idiot. They conclude that the speaker reports that belief without expressing it.

The difficulty with their conclusion arises most vividly in connection with a variant of (1):

(1') I think it's raining but it isn't.

Like (1), (1') can be true and indeed often is, but it cannot be asserted. The best explanation is that the second conjunct purports to express a thought manifestly incompatible with the thought that the first conjunct reports the speaker as having. The first conjunct by implication denies the occurrence of the thought that the second conjunct purports to express. So (1') reports, but does not express, the thought that it is raining, which is exactly parallel to what Hájek and Stoljar say about (2) and (3).

How, then, can we explain the difference between (1) and (2)? Asserting something requires not just that one have at some time or other a belief with that content; one must, at the time of assertion, have an occurrent thought with that content. Indeed, this is clear from Hájek and Stoljar's (4), which is unproblematic if the speaker does not hold the belief reported at the time of utterance. So Moore's paradox is not assertible because one conjunct denies the occurrence at that time of the occurrent intentional state required for the other conjunct to perform a genuine illocutionary act.

Hájek and Stoljar note that (2) does not express the thought that you are an idiot, since somebody saying it would not, at the time of utterance, 'truly endorse' that thought. But, given the need for a roughly simultaneous occurrent thought, it turns out that (2) does not even *report* any relevant thought.

If, in the circumstances Crimmins describes, I say

(3) You are not an idiot and I believe you are an idiot.

the first conjunct expresses my current thought that you are not an idiot. But the intentional state I report with the second conjunct has no bearing on the thought I express with the first. The intentional state a genuine illocutionary act expresses must be roughly simultaneous, occurrent, and non-dispositional. The belief the second conjunct of (3) reports is, by contrast, not occurrent at the time of assertion; it is merely something I am disposed to mentally affirm under other circumstances. The second conjunct does not deny that I have the occurrent thought required for the first conjunct to make a genuine assertion.

One could also argue that, if one thinks about somebody in a way that is relative to some guise under which one knows that person, that guise affects the content of one's thought. So perhaps the first conjunct of (3)

expresses a thought whose content is cast in terms of the guise under which I think you are not an idiot, whereas the second conjunct reports a belief whose content is cast in terms of the guise under which I think you are. The belief the second conjunct reports would then not conflict with the thought the first conjunct expresses.

But this line of argument is controversial, since one could also urge that the use of the indexical 'you' cancels in these cases any relevance guises may have to content. Even so, (3), and hence (2), report no occurrent intentional state relevant to the assertion one can make with the first conjunct of (3). And that prevents (2) from being a case of Moore's paradox. For a sentence to run afoul of Moore's paradox, it must deny the occurrence of the intentional state that it also purports to express. And (2) does not do that.

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