

Rationally Held 'P, but I Fully Believe ~P and I am not Equivocating''

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One of Moore's Paradoxical sentence types is 'P, but I believe ~P'. Mooreans have assumed that all tokens of that sentence type are absurd in some way: epistemically, pragmatically, semantically, or assertively. And then they proceed to debate what the absurdity really is. I argue that if one has the appropriate philosophical views, then one can rationally assert tokens of that sentence type, and one can be epistemically reasonable in the corresponding belief as well.

Virtually every philosopher who has thought about *omissive* Moorean utterances such as 'Snow is white, but I don't believe that snow is white' (or more careful variants such as 'Snow is positively, definitely white, but I myself currently do not believe it') has agreed that there is something absurd in such utterances. There are many different theories regarding the alleged absurdity. Some say that one who believes the content of the sentence is epistemically irrational. Others claim that when one asserts an omissive Moorean sentence one violates norms of assertion that one is well aware of. There is a great variety of theories regarding the nature of Moorean absurdity.¹

Then there are the *commissive* Moorean utterances such as 'Snow is white, but I believe that snow isn't white' (or, more careful variants such as 'Snow is definitely white, but I myself currently believe that snow isn't white'). Instead of '*p* but I don't believe *p*' now we have '*p* but I believe ~*p*'. Philosophers tend to have similar "absurdity" theories about those utterances.

I have never bought this consensus, and since the consensus isn't going away, I would like to explain why. I hold that one can assert Moorean sentences, both commissive and omissive, in a fully sincere and epistemically rational manner. My main focus will be the commissive ones, since I as well as others have already treated the omissive ones. I will close with a few brief remarks about the latter.

The commissive half of Moore's Paradox lies with sentences of the form '*p*, but I believe ~*p*'. Or, more carefully, sentences such as 'I myself currently believe that snow is white, but snow isn't white at all—and I'm not equivocating here!' Many philosophers think they are genuinely absurd in some logical or semantic or epistemic or assertion-rule sense.

¹ For references, search 'Moore's Paradox' in PhilPapers, at <http://philpapers.org>.

I hold that there are sentence tokens of that form that suffer from no absurdities at all. Suppose Jan is a compositional nihilist: she thinks there are no trees, as there are no composite objects and trees would have to be composite if they existed. Her metaphysical view is arrived at via philosophical reflection on part/whole, various puzzle cases, and contemporary physics. Her philosophical belief isn't at all nuanced so as to not conflict with the truth of common sense; she doesn't insist on anything like 'There are no trees but when people say they have trees, their beliefs and assertions are true because they have some complicated semantics'. No, she thinks virtually all positive first-order tree beliefs and assertions about composite objects are just plain false, period. She thinks that the tie between truth and practical utility is weak, so she rejects the truth but not practical utility of commonsensical ideas. Say what you want about this view, it's rational among metaphysicians and philosophers of physics who have spent a lot of time thinking about the physics and metaphysics of material objects. Nowadays it may well be the "position to beat" in that area. You may scoff at it, but that's probably due to unfamiliarity or an implicit conviction that there is a tight connection between near-universal common sense and truth, one that many competent philosophers dispute.

An initial question about this type of case is this: how much control do we have over our belief-forming mechanisms? It won't matter to our purposes what the answer is: all we need is the premise that a compositional nihilist could *reasonably believe* that she can't help herself from having many positive first-order beliefs about trees. She holds that these beliefs are formed via perception, in an immediate fashion, and she can't stop the immediate cognitive process any more than she can stop her digestive processes. She would *like* to get rid of all her offending composite object beliefs, but she thinks she can't manage it any more than she can erase a million of her desires or other mental states.

Hence, it seems she has two philosophical beliefs: 'There are no trees' (this is her ontology belief) and 'I believe that I believe that there are trees in my backyard' (this is her philosophy of mind belief). Hence, she might well say, with complete sincerity and rationality, 'There are no trees at all, but unfortunately I believe that I have trees in my backyard—and I won't be able to stop believing it!'

Is she being *rational* in uttering the odd sentence just mentioned? Under the circumstances I think she is doing about as well, cognitively and epistemically, as humans *can* do. In fact, she might (counterfactually) be Ted Sider or David Lewis or Kit Fine: a truly formidable metaphysician who also has a certain philosophical view regarding immediate perceptual beliefs.

You might object that the nihilist's oddly retained commonsensical beliefs in trees would not be "full" beliefs in some important sense. After all, upon certain kinds of reflection she will adamantly deny their contents and refuse to assert their contents—at least, she will do so in hyper-reflective philosophical contexts, although she will not do so in ordinary contexts. In many areas of life people will confidently say '*p*' but when challenged 'Do you *really* think *p* is true? Are you sure—are you *philosophically* sure?' they will often refuse to say they believe it. But in the nihilist case they will actively deny it, which is a more extreme case. In addition, when the nihilist says 'I still believe I have trees in my backyard' (that's the second part of the alleged commissive Moorean utterance) she is merely *reporting* a belief, akin to a

third-person case, whereas ordinarily with such sentences we are not so much reporting as *expressing* a belief, in a first-person manner.

The upshot of the objection is that 'believe' is equivocal. In the first-person use of the first conjunct of the nihilist's pronouncement 'There are no trees at all, but unfortunately I believe that I have trees in my backyard—and I won't be able to stop believing it!' we find expression of the "full" belief, the one that survives reflection on her part. In the second conjunct we find reference to a something other than a full belief. Thus, although we may have a sincere and rational utterance, we don't have a genuine commissive Moorean utterance.

However, this objection entirely misconstrues the situation. It doesn't matter whether the nihilist has the *ordinary* belief that there are trees. The important point is that she *thinks*, on the basis of long philosophical reflection, that she has that ordinary belief, and she thinks she has it fully. We are trying to see if she is reasonable in having two *philosophical* beliefs, one first-order and the other second-order: (a) the philosophical belief 'There are no trees' and (b) the philosophical belief 'I have the ordinary belief that there are trees in my backyard'. I don't think there is any reason to doubt that she has (a), as she has thought about it, insisted on it, and argued for it for years. Similarly, she might have thought about the nature of belief for a long time as well, and thereby come to the philosophical view about perceptual belief noted above, which would make her have (b). According to her philosophical theory of perceptual belief, she *fully* believes that there are trees in her backyard. What gives us (b) is the same thing that gives us (a): her asserting it over many years in many contexts as a result of her philosophical investigation. Of course, it doesn't matter whether the beliefs (a) and (b) are true—in particular, it doesn't matter whether her view about perceptual belief is true. All we require is that she have the two philosophical beliefs and have them reasonably. You could argue that her philosophy of mind view is false, but if we tell the story appropriately about how she acquired it—via the right kind of testimony, flawed but persuasive arguments, etc.—then it's not difficult to see how her view could be reasonable.

I use compositional nihilism merely for illustration. Alternatively, we can imagine a radical skeptic insisting that she can't stop having all sorts of positive first-order "knowledge" beliefs such as 'Mom knows you bought that motorcycle'. This skeptic ends up saying things like 'No one knows that the Earth exists [that's her epistemological view about knowledge], but I believe that I know that the Earth exists [that's her philosophy of mind view about belief]'. Or, we can imagine a truth-is-inconsistent philosopher of logic holding that she can't stop having all sorts of beliefs similar to 'There were three truths in his speech'. Or a moral error theorist insisting no one, including moral error theorists, can avoid beliefs such as 'Murdering innocent children is morally wrong': she ends up saying 'Murdering innocent children isn't morally wrong, but I fully believe that it is morally wrong!' Examples can be multiplied.

Therefore, there can be rational commissive Moorean assertions. It's much easier to see that omissive Moorean assertions can be epistemically rational. Eliminative materialism is the view that we don't have beliefs but instead have all sorts of rich cognitive processes that don't satisfy the conditions for beliefs even though they do a significant portion of the functional work that beliefs are thought to do. Say what you like about various time-slices of Patricia Churchland, Paul Churchland, Quine, Paul Feyerabend,

Stephen Stich and other philosophers: you don't get to say that they are fools regarding the ontology of beliefs and truth conditions for belief sentences (see references below). We can simply reject out of hand the idea that they are *irrational* in their view, even if their view is false: their endorsement and defense of their view shows considerable intelligence, creativity, insight, etc.

Any decent eliminative materialist will say that snow is white but no one believes it. It's a small step to asserting 'Snow is white, but I don't believe that snow is white' or even 'Snow is positively, definitely white, but I myself currently do not believe it—in fact, in the history of the world no one has ever believed it'. I know of no tension between their view that snow is white and their eliminative materialism. One can utter Moorean sentences with perfect sincerity and literalness and in so doing make full-blooded, truth-valued, *and rational* assertions—which is not to say that such utterances will be true ones; that depends on the truth of eliminative materialism itself. Even if eliminative materialism is *completely false*, the Moorean assertions in question are still rational and sincere.

Both John Turri (2010) and I (2005) have argued this key point that eliminativists can be as rational as you like in their assertion/belief 'No one believes that snow is white'. I will not repeat the arguments here.

One need not be an eliminative materialist in order to sincerely and rationally make the omissive Moorean utterances. For instance, one could just sincerely and rationally hold that (a) in order for 'S believes *p*' to be true S has to have 100% confidence in *p*, and yet (b) we usually don't have that much confidence in any claims and rationally assert "opinions" that don't amount to beliefs. If you have that pair of views—once again, it doesn't matter whether they are true!—then you could well say in all sincerity 'Snow is white but I don't believe it', although you would not say 'Snow is positively, definitely white but I don't believe it'.

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