*This is a penultimate draft of a paper forthcoming in Acta Analytica. Please cite the final version.*

**Moorean assertions and their normative function**

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**Abstract:** G. E. Moore famously pointed out that all sincere assertions of the form ‘*p*, but I don’t believe that *p*’ are inherently absurd. John Turri strongly disagrees with the consensus evaluation of such assertions as inherently absurd and offers a counterexample according to which it is possible to say ‘Eliminativism is true, but of course I don’t believe it’s true’ sincerely and without any absurdity. I argue in this paper that Turri’s attempt misses the point entirely, for the most natural interpretations of his counterexample are either absurd or do not represent genuinely Moorean assertions. The critical analysis of Turri’s counterexample will enable me to reach the general conclusion that precludes the possibility of omissive Moorean assertions that are inherently non-absurd (regardless of their content), at least if we hold that our assertions ought to have some normative function.

**Keywords**: Moorean assertions, absurdity, knowledge-transmission, eliminativism, propositional attitudes.

**1. Moorean assertions[[1]](#footnote-1)**

On G. E. Moore’s canonical view, there is something inherently absurd involved in any sincere assertion of a sentence that has one of the following syntactic forms:

1. ‘*p*, but I don’t believe that *p*’
2. ‘*p*, but I believe that non-*p*’

Let us call the assertions that have the same form (or syntax) as these, *Moorean assertions*. It is widely accepted in the relevant philosophical literature to use Sorensen’s (1988: 15) nomenclature and call the assertions of the form (a) ‘omissive’ (for they report a specific *omission* of the belief that is implied by the assertion) and the assertions of the form (b) ‘commissive’ (for they report the *commission* of a specific mistake in belief).[[2]](#footnote-2) Of course, although much more could be said about the distinction between these two forms of assertions, this should be enough for my purposes, for I will confine my attention entirely to the omissive form of Moorean assertions.

But before doing so, I should like to provide a preliminary explanation of the absurdity involved in Moorean assertions. Intuitively, there appears to be a clear sense in which assertions of the form ‘*p*, but I don’t believe that *p*’ are absurd. But it is much more difficult to elucidate the source of this absurdity, especially given the fact that there is a large body of literature on this matter. Thus, whereas Moore’s own explanation of this absurdity is that in asserting *p* we *imply* that we believe *p*, despite the fact that in asserting *p* we neither assert that we believe *p* nor is our believing *p* entailed by our asserting *p* (Moore 1944: 203–204), other authors have claimed, for one reason or another, that Moorean assertions are falsified by their own utterance (Cohen 1950: 85–87); that they are irrational (De Almeida 2007; Hintikka 1962: 67); that they cannot be asserted (Black 1952: 28–31; Martinich 1980: 215–218); that they are always pointless assertions (Willis 1953: 24–25); that they cannot be justified (De Almeida 2001; Williams, 2004); that the truth conditions of any Moorean assertion contradict its accuracy conditions (Lawlor & Perry 2008); that they cannot be known(Williamson 2000: 253–4); or that they are logically odd or pragmatically self-contradictory (Woods 2014: 2). Of course, this list is not intended to be exhaustive, and I will make no attempt to survey in detail even the most prominent analyses of Moorean absurdity proposed in recent decades, for many other authors have already done that adequately.[[3]](#footnote-3) But even on the basis of this limited survey, one might easily come to the conclusion that virtually all philosophers agree that there is something absurd or, at the very least, exceedingly odd with Moorean assertions.

Yet, it would be a mistake to think that the philosophical consensus about this matter is warranted, for numerous philosophers have recently attempted to provide examples of what they take to be Moorean assertions that appear not to suffer from any absurdities.[[4]](#footnote-4) My focus in this paper is on a particularly interesting example of a (purportedly) non-absurd omissive Moorean assertion that comes from John Turri (2010). Namely, Turri presents a scenario in which Ellie—a bright and well-educated person who enjoys reading cutting-edge work in philosophy in her spare time—endorses the eliminativist view, according to which there are no propositional attitudes such as beliefs. When asked by one of her friends whether she believes that eliminativism is true, Ellie responds as follows:

1. Eliminativism is true, but *of course* I don’t believe it’s true.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Although Turri makes it clear that eliminativism does not represent a plausible and viable position about propositional attitudes, he nonetheless maintains that:

Ellie’s sincere, unambiguous, forthright assertions are not only *felicitous*, but *perfectly reasonable*. No one is befuddled. *No one thinks them absurd*, because they *aren’t absurd*. And yet they fit the standard Moorean mould. Moorean assertion is not inherently absurd. (Turri 2010: 38, emphasis added)

Turri thus concludes that this example successfully refutes the thesis that all sincere (omissive) Moorean assertions are inherently absurd (2010: 35).[[6]](#footnote-6) While I reluctantly agree with Turri that Ellie’s acceptance of eliminativism can be justified—since *ex hypothesi* Ellie’s total body of evidence supports the view that there are no propositional attitudes (2010: 37)—I strongly disagree with his claim that Ellie’s assertion ‘Eliminativism is true, but of course I don’t believe it’s true’ is not absurd. What complicates my attempt to critically assess this claim, however, is the fact that Turri does not explicate the sense of ‘absurd’ he uses. Now, if we take it, along with Moore, that an adequate explanation of the absurdity involved in the assertion of the form ‘*p*, but I do not believe that *p*’ is that in asserting *p* the speaker *implies* that she believes *p*, then Turri’s example is hardly convincing. For if the speaker’s assertion that there are no beliefs implies her *belief* that there are no beliefs, then (1), indeed, represents a paradigmatic instance of an inherently absurd assertion.

But it is possible to question the assumption that our sincere assertions imply beliefs. Perhaps the most compelling way to do so is to endorse the popular view that the central normative function of assertions is not to transmit beliefs, but rather to transmit *knowledge* (see Turri 2016a, 2016b, 2017).[[7]](#footnote-7) Thus, according to Turri, by making the assertion, the speaker represents herself as *knowing*, and not as *believing* (2016b: 294). That this is so is shown by the fact that we can and often do preface assertions with ‘just so you know’ or other expressions implicating knowledge—e.g. ‘Just so you know, *x* is *p*’. On the other hand, it would be extremely odd and unusual to say, ‘Just so you *believe* this, *x* is *p*’, ‘Just so you’re *certain*, *x* is *p*’, or ‘Just so you have (some) *evidence*, *x* is *p*’ (2016a: 131). In Turri’s view, the unusual and atypical character of such prefaces strongly supports the view that the central normative function of assertion is knowledge-transmission (2016a: 134).[[8]](#footnote-8) Now, although this view is not entirely unproblematic, let us assume, at least for the sake of argument, that it is correct. Observe that, under this assumption, it becomes natural to preface (1) as follows:

1. [Just so you know] Eliminativism is true, but *of course* I don’t believe it’s true.

In order to see how (2) is intended to be understood, several important remarks are required. First, even though Turri—or, as far as I am aware, any other author—does not take (2) into consideration, note that (2) fits perfectly with his view about the central normative function of assertions, according to which it is always possible to preface our assertions with expressions implicating knowledge (Turri 2016a: 131). The second point to note is that the preface ‘Just so you know’ does not change the recognizably Moorean character of (2); that is to say, (2) still represents a Moorean assertion of the form ‘*p*, but I don’t believe that *p*’. Third, and most importantly, note that if the normative function of the speaker’s assertion is indeed knowledge-transmission, then (2) seems to successfully avoid the apparent absurdity of (1)—i.e. the absurdity that emerges from the fact that the speaker’s sincere assertion that there are no beliefs *implies her belief* that there are no beliefs. It is worth emphasizing here that, on the basis of this point, one might easily gain the impression that (2)—although perhaps not (1)—can enable Turri to achieve his goal; namely, to construct an example that represents a genuine case of Moorean assertion that suffers from no absurdities. I wish to dispel this impression.

In what follows, I will argue that the most natural interpretations of (2) are either absurd or, ultimately, do not represent genuinely Moorean assertions. My point is that once we include the preface that specifies the normative function of assertions, the absurdity of assertions of the form ‘*p*, but I don’t believe that *p*’ becomes evident. The source of this absurdity will differ depending on how the normative function is specified, but the main idea comes to this: the absurdity in question is a result of the speaker’s incurring a commitment (specified in the preface) she explicitly denies she meet (in the second part of the sentence).[[9]](#footnote-9) I will consider the following four interpretations of (2):

1. The speaker commits herself to transmit knowledge, and expresses her lack of the relevant knowledge.
2. The speaker commits herself to transmit a justified true belief, and expresses her lack of the relevant belief.
3. The speaker commits herself to transmit knowledge that does not entail belief, and expresses her lack of the relevant belief.
4. The speaker does not incur any commitment whatsoever, for there are no propositional attitudes.

Despite the fact that it is possible to conceive of other interpretations of (2), I take it that the critical analysis of these four interpretations suffices to show the central limitations of any philosophical attempt to construct non-absurd cases of omissive Moorean assertions by relying on their normative function, and, consequently, enables me to reach the general conclusion that precludes the possibility of omissive Moorean assertions that are inherently non-absurd (regardless of their content), at least if we hold that our assertions ought to have some normative function.[[10]](#footnote-10) With these clarifications in mind, let us now consider each of these interpretations in turn.

**2. Interpretation [1]**

Let us start with the clearest case. If the central normative function of our assertions is to transmit knowledge, it becomes tempting to assume that we should modify (2) in such a way that in the second part of the sentence the speaker expresses her lack of the relevant *knowledge*. As such, (2) should become:

1. [Just so you know] Eliminativism is true, but *of course* I don’t *know* it’s true.

My argument against (3) is straightforward. If the speaker *knows* that she does not know that *p*—which is evidently the case with any speaker who sincerely utters (3)—then there is a clear sense that her assertion was dishonest (Unger 1975: 260–3). Also, if the speaker does not know that *p* but asserts it anyway, then she misrepresents herself as having the authority to do so, and we are entitled to resent her assertion (see Williamson 2000: 235–236; Turri 2011: 38). In other words, (3) is a clear-cut case of Moorean assertion in which the speaker attempts to transmit knowledge that she herself claims she does not have. The obvious absurdity involved in (3) is therefore a result of the speaker’s incurring a commitment—in this case, a commitment to transmit knowledge—she explicitly denies she meet. In fact, this sort of absurdity is strikingly similar to the absurdity involved in the cases of performative infelicity, where the speaker promises something that is (in her own opinion) impossible to achieve—e.g. ‘I promise you the Moon’ (when uttered in a non-figurative and, perhaps, non-romantic sense) (see Austin 1962).[[11]](#footnote-11)

**3. Interpretation [2]**

According to the traditional epistemological thesis, to know that *p* is to have a justified true belief that *p*. Suppose that this thesis is true.[[12]](#footnote-12) In that case ‘I know that *p*’ is semantically equivalent to ‘I have a justified true belief that *p*’. Now, I take it that the following principle about assertions is plausible:

If I have asserted ‘*p*’ and ‘*p*’ is semantically equivalent to ‘*q*’, then I have asserted that *q*.

Suppose that I assert:

(2) [Just so *you know*] Eliminativism is true, but *of course* I don’t believe it’s true.

Given the principle just outlined, it follows that I have asserted:

(4) [Just so you have *a justified true belief*] Eliminativism is true, but *of course* I don’t believe it’s true.

What is wrong with (4)? The main problem is that the speaker attempts to transmit one particular kind of *belief*—the justified and true one—that there are no beliefs. But clearly, this is absurd. It might be objected, however, that the absurdity of this particular sentence depends largely on its content, for eliminativism represents the view that there are no propositional attitudes and, consequently, that there are no beliefs. But observe that the sentence of this form would be absurd regardless of its content. Consider, for instance, the generalized formulation of (4):

(4a) [Just so you have a *justified true belief*] *x* is *p*, but *of course* I don’t believe it’s true.

Again, we can see that the speaker purports to transmit one particular kind of belief—the justified and true one—in the first part of the sentence, and in the second part she explicitly says that she does not have the relevant belief. The absurdity in question is, therefore, a result of the speaker’s incurring a commitment—in this case, a commitment to transmit a justified and true belief—she explicitly denies she meet. This suffices to show that any sentence of this form is absurd. It is especially worth noting that the same conclusion follows for *any* other interpretation of (2) according to which knowledge *entails* belief, in the sense that believing that *p* is a necessary condition for knowing that *p*.

**4. Interpretation [3]**

There is undoubtedly a philosophical tradition that to know that *p* is to have a justified true belief that *p*. But what if the concept of knowledge is not understood in terms of a justified true belief? More precisely, what if we endorse the view that knowledge does *not* entail belief? This view could perhaps help us avoid the problem we encountered in (4), for it would enable the speaker to say ‘Just so you know…’ to transmit knowledge, without thereby transmitting any kind of belief. Before assessing this possibility, it is instructive to point out that in the cases where knowledge (purportedly) does not entail the relevant belief, the speaker *does not know* that she knows that *p*. In fact, the speaker is surprised to learn that her answers were correct (see e.g. Radford 1966; see also Myers-Schulz & Schwitzgebel 2013).[[13]](#footnote-13) Based on this, her assertions cannot have their typical assertoric force, and therefore cannot be prefaced with ‘Just so you know’, but rather with ‘I guess that…’. As such, the proposal to endorse the concept of knowledge that does not entail belief leads us to the following interpretation:

(5) [I guess that] Eliminativism is true, but *of course* I don’t believe it’s true.

Now, let us see if (5) is absurd. It seems that everything turns on whether ‘I guess that *p* is true’ entails ‘I believe that *p* is true’. I take it that the conceptual connection between ‘I guess that *p* is true’ and ‘I believe that *p* is true’ is not one of entailment. If my contention is correct, there is nothing absurd or otherwise odd about (5). But it is also clear that in that case (5) does not represent a genuine Moorean assertion, for there is no tension whatsoever between the first and the second conjunct—i.e. the speaker merely guesses that eliminativism is true and at the same time tells us that she does not (fully) believe that it is true.[[14]](#footnote-14) If, on the other hand, we assume that ‘I guess that *p* is true’ entails ‘I believe that *p* is true’, then (5) does indeed represent a genuine Moorean assertion, but in that case it is most certainly absurd. The absurdity in question is a result of the speaker’s incurring a commitment to transfer knowledge—that *does* entail the relevant belief—she explicitly denies she meets (in the second part of her sentence). Either way, we are entitled to conclude that (5) is not a genuine case of Moorean assertion that suffers from no absurdities.

**5. Interpretation [4]**

It might be objected that I misinterpreted Turri’s example, for the kind of eliminativism that plays the central role in his argument was not specifically about *beliefs*, but rather about propositional attitudes in general. As such, by uttering ‘Eliminativism is true’ the speaker does not purport to transmit knowledge, belief, or, for that matter, any propositional attitude. It is therefore all the more tempting to suppose that the appropriate interpretation of her sentence must leave out any preface that specifies some propositional attitude that the assertion purports to transmit. This interpretation may be put like this:

1. Eliminativism is true, but *of course* I do not have *any* propositional attitude about it.

Now, we have seen that the absurdity involved in the previous interpretations of (2) was a result of the speaker’s incurring a commitment she explicitly denies she meet. This, however, does not seem to be the case with (6), for the speaker makes it clear that she does not incur any commitment whatsoever. Even so, I will argue in this section that (6) faces two very serious difficulties.

First, observe that, according to virtually all conceptions of sincerity in speech, our *sincere* assertions can only be distinguished from insincere assertions depending on whether the speaker has a certain propositional attitude toward their content; that is, the speaker’s assertions are sincere only if they somehow reflect her attitude toward their content (see Eriksson 2011: 213). Thus, whether we take it that sincerity in speech is to be understood in terms of first-order *beliefs* (Searle 1969; see also Gibbard 1990; Simpson 1992; Green 2007; Davis 2008), second-order *beliefs* (Mellor 1978; Ridge 2006), or mental *assent* (Shoemaker 1996; Stokke 2014),[[15]](#footnote-15) it is clear that the speaker’s propositional attitudes play crucial role in determining the sincerity of her assertions. It follows from this that in the cases where the speaker does not have any attitude toward the content of her assertion—which is the case with the assertion of (6)—it is impossible to distinguish whether it is sincere or not. Now, recall that Turri maintains that Ellie’s assertion ‘Eliminativism is true, but of course I don’t believe it’s true’ is, in fact, *sincere* (Turri 2010: 38). If we take it that (6) represents the correct analysis or interpretation of Ellie’s assertion—as I think we should—then Turri’s claim becomes utterly unsubstantiated. But this is only one part of the problem. Namely, given Wittgenstein’s famous observation that sentences of the syntactic form ‘*p*, but I do not believe that *p*’ must be asserted *sincerely* in order to represent a genuine case of Moorean assertion (see Wittgenstein 1980: §§485–7; see also Green & Williams 2007: 8), the correct conclusion to be drawn is that (6) is not genuinely Moorean after all. I do not want to put too much weight on this point, however, for it does not indicate the *absurdity* of (6), although, in my opinion, it most certainly indicates that (6) is deeply problematic, at least in the sense that it is questionable whether it represents a genuine case of Moorean assertion.

In addition to the problem just outlined, note that if an assertion does not purport to transmit *any* propositional attitude, it is doubtful whether it can have any normative function. In order to make this point as clear as possible, a brief explanation of the normative function of assertions is called for. Thus, according to one popular line of thought, the normative function of assertions provides the rule that the speaker needs to follow in order to offer a *proper* assertion (see Lackey 2007: 294). More precisely, the normative function of assertions requires that the *speaker* stands in some specific relation to the content she asserts; that is, one properly asserts that *p* only if one knows that *p* (Williamson 2000; Stanley 2005; De Rose 2002; Turri 2016a, 2016b), believes that *p* (Bach 2008; Bach & Harnish 1979), or reasonably believes that *p* (Lackey 2007).[[16]](#footnote-16) If the speaker does *not* stand in the particular relation to the content she asserts, then she lacks the authority to make the relevant assertion and, as a result, her assertion is improper. On this line of though, however, it is obvious that (6) cannot have any normative function.[[17]](#footnote-17) The problem here is not that the speaker of (6) does not stand in some *specific* relation to the content she asserts; it is rather that she does not stand in *any* relation to this content. But then, to make an assertion that does not have any normative function strikes me as absurd. The absurdity in question emerges from the fact that the speaker makes an assertion that, by her own acknowledgment, lacks the crucial condition on the basis of which it can be assessed as a *proper* assertion. I think that the two difficulties outlined in this section provide good reasons for the rejection of the assumption that (6) can represent a genuine case of Moorean assertion that suffers from no absurdities.

**6. Concluding remarks**

I hope to have successfully demonstrated that all four interpretations of (2) are deeply problematic, in the sense that they are either absurd [(3), (4), and (6)] or do not represent genuine Moorean assertions [(5), and perhaps (6)]. This conclusion decidedly precludes the possibility of genuine (omissive) Moorean assertions that are inherently non-absurd, at least if we hold that our assertions ought to have some normative function.[[18]](#footnote-18) Furthermore, I take it that the conclusion of this paper is fully compatible with all leading contemporary approaches to belief, including representationalism, dispositionalism, functionalism, interpretationism, and (perhaps somewhat surprisingly) eliminativism. It is also worth noting that this conclusion is not limited to Moorean assertions about *eliminativism*, for it precludes the possibility of genuine (omissive) Moorean assertions that are inherently non-absurd *regardless of their content*. As such, it seems to me that all of the following general assertions are either absurd or do not represent genuine Moorean assertions:

(3a) [Just so you know] *x* is *p* is true, but *of course* I don’t know it’s true.

(4a) [Just so you have a *justified true belief*] *x* is *p*, but *of course* I don’t believe it’s true.

(5a) [I guess that] *x* is *p*, but *of course* I don’t believe it’s true.

(6a) *X* is *p*, but *of course* I do not have *any* propositional attitude about it.

If this is correct, it follows that authors who attempt to present examples of Moorean assertions that suffer from no absurdities have to provide a persuasive argument that shows that these assertions can have at least some sort of normative function. However, based on the points that are developed and defended in this paper, it is highly doubtful that such an argument can be given. Needless to say, this is an often-overlooked conclusion in the philosophical literature about Moorean assertions.[[19]](#footnote-19)

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1. Research for this article was supported by the project “Dynamic Systems in Nature and Society: Philosophical and Empirical Aspects” [grant number 179041], financed by the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technological Development of the Republic of Serbia. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For relevant discussion, see Williams 1979; Green & Williams 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For a helpful general survey, see Green & Williams 2007: 11–29, 2011; see also Williams 1996; Chan 2010; Smithies 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Some recent examples include Turri 2010; Pruss 2012; Frances 2016; Fileva & Brakel (forthcoming). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Andre Gallois gives a similar example of an eliminativist about belief who says ‘Neurophysiology is the key to understanding the mind, but I do not believe that it is’ (Gallois 1996: 52). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. It should be noted that Ellie is in no position to make the commissive assertion of (1), for if she asserts ‘Eliminativism is true, but of course I believe it’s not true’, the second part of the assertion commits her to the existence of beliefs and, consequently, to a rejection of eliminativism. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. This view is often called the *Unger-Williamson thesis*. According to this thesis, the normative function of assertions is that one properly asserts that *p* only if one *knows* it, and that in asserting that *p* one represents oneself as *knowing* that *p*. For the classic exposition of this thesis, see Unger 1975; Slote 1979; De Rose 1991; Williamson 2000. For criticism and discussion of this thesis, see e.g. Coffman 2014; Douven 2006; Hill & Schechter 2007; Kvanvig 2009; Lackey 2007; Wright 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Turri points out that not only the unusual or atypical character of such prefaces supports this view, but also ‘a wealth of theoretical and empirical evidence’ (Turri 2016b: 293). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. I would like to thank an anonymous referee for urging me to clarify this point. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Of course, some authors propose that we do not need the normative function in order to individuate and understand assertions (see Johnson 2018). Owing to limitations of space, I must pass over the details of this proposal. I should make it clear, however, that the analysis in this paper assumes the view that our assertions ought to have at least some normative function. I believe this is a plausible view, and it is, in any case, widely accepted in the literature (see Pagin 2016; Lackey 2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Woods makes a similar remark (2014: 2). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. I should emphasise that I do not know of any contemporary philosopher who maintains that to know that *p* is just to have a justified true belief that *p*. At best, epistemologists think that knowledge *involves* these three conditions or, in other words, they think that these three conditions (as they are typically understood) are *necessary*, but not *sufficient* for knowledge. Exactly what the correct characterization of knowledge is seems to represent a matter of some philosophical debate, into the complexities of which I will not enter as my argumentation in this section does not ultimately depend on one particular way or other of resolving the matter. I will therefore rely in what follows on a plausible thesis that knowledge *involves* these three conditions. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. The arguments that have been raised in the literature in support of this theory are complex and not important for this paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. It might be argued, however, that there is still an absurdity in the central sentence, created not by ‘I don’t believe’ but by ‘of course’, whose apparent commitment to the *obviousness* (rather than merely the truth) of the belief is naturally read as making even guessing inappropriate. This is an artifact of Turri’s example, but it may be worth pointing out that on interpretation [3], the assertion may be both not genuinely Moorean and nevertheless absurd. Thanks to an anonymous referee for emphasizing this point. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. As Shoemaker points out, to mentally assent to a certain proposition is to have a certain *attitude* toward this proposition; in other words, mental assent is, properly understood, the *acceptance* of a proposition (1996: 78). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See Pagin (2016) for a helpful general survey. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Some authors maintain that the normative function of assertion requires that the asserted *content* has some property—e.g. certainty (Stanley 2008) or truth (Weiner 2005; Whiting 2013). I concede that, on this view, (6) could have normative function, at least in principle. However, given that Turri embraces the view according to which the normative function of assertions requires that the speaker *knows* the content she asserts, this option is not available to him. As such, my point is that Turri—and, for that matter, any proponent of the view according to which the normative function of assertion requires that the *speaker* stands in some specified relation to the content she asserts—is forced to accept that (6) does not have any normative function. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. At any rate, it is clear that Turri would have to accept this conclusion, for it is shown in this paper that his claim that there are Moorean assertions that suffer from no absurdities and his claim that the normative function of assertions is knowledge-transmission are incompatible, which means in turn that his counterexample ultimately fails. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. I owe a debt of gratitude to an anonymous referee from this journal for very helpful comments on earlier drafts. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)