

MOORE'S PARADOXES AND ITERATED BELIEF

JOHN N. WILLIAMS
SINGAPORE MANAGEMENT UNIVERSITY

ABSTRACT: I give an account of the absurdity of Moorean beliefs of the omission form

(om) p and I don't believe that p ,
and the commissive form

(com) p and I believe that not- p ,
from which I extract a definition of Moorean absurdity. I then argue for an account of the absurdity of Moorean assertion. After neutralizing two objections to my whole account, I show that Roy Sorensen's own account of the absurdity of his 'iterated cases'

(om¹) p and I don't believe that I believe that p ,
and

(com¹) p and I believe that I believe that not- p ,
is unsatisfactory. I explain why it is less absurd to believe or assert (om¹) or (com¹) than to believe or assert (om) or (com) and show that despite appearances, subsequent iterations of (om¹) or (com¹) do not decrease the absurdity of believing or asserting them.

I. INTRODUCTION

S

Suppose that I assert

I went to the pictures last Tuesday but I don't believe that I did.

G. E. Moore famously observed that this would be "absurd".¹ Yet what I assert might be true; I may have simply forgotten my visit to the cinema. Moore calls it a "paradox" that the absurdity persists despite the fact that what I say about

myself might be true.² Moore did not notice that it is no less absurd of me to believe such a possible truth in silence. So the absurdity of the belief, as well as the assertion, needs explanation. Most people who are confronted with Moore's example say that in some sense the speaker has contradicted herself, even after admitting that no contradiction lies in what is asserted. So a natural way of solving the paradox, in other words of explaining the absurdity, is to identify a contradiction-like phenomenon with something other than the content of that belief or assertion.

Moore also observes that to say, "I believe that he has gone out, but he has not" would be likewise "absurd."³ Unlike his first example, which has the omission form

(om) *p* and I don't believe that *p*,

this has the commissive form

(com) *p* and I believe that not-*p*.⁴

This semantic difference is inherited from the genuine difference between agnostics and atheists. The result is the difference between the specific omission of true belief and the specific commission of a mistake in belief.

So any adequate account of Moorean absurdity must be able to explain the absurdity in both its omission and commissive forms.⁵ Some past⁶ and recent accounts⁷ are inadequate in this respect. Such an explanation would also have to identify other examples that share the paradigmatic absurdity of Moore's own. Plausible candidates include

I have no beliefs now,

God knows that I am not a theist,

and

God knows that I am an atheist.

If these really do share the essential features of Moore's two examples, then any account of Moorean absurdity should generalise to them as well.

Other candidates include Roy Sorensen's examples in which belief operators are iterated, such as the omission

God exists but I don't believe that I'm a theist

and the commissive

God exists but I believe that I'm an atheist

These have the forms

(om¹) *p* and I don't believe that I believe that *p*

and

(com¹) *p* and I believe that I believe that not-*p*

where the superscript denotes the order of iteration.

Sorensen comments that as iteration increases, omissional absurdity appears to decrease, while commissive absurdity does not.⁸ Thus with four iterations

(om⁴) p and I don't believe that I believe that I believe that I believe that I believe that p

seems less absurd to believe or assert than (om¹) whereas the absurdity of believing or asserting

(com⁴) p and I believe that not- p

seems undiminished. And (om¹) or (com¹) seem less absurd to believe or assert than (om) or (com). What is the explanation of this?

Here is how I will proceed. In §II, I give an account of the absurdity of Moorean belief. In §III, I use this to extract a definition of Moorean absurdity from Moore's examples. In §IV, I apply my account to the other just-noted Moorean beliefs in order to explain their absurdity. In §V, I argue for an account of the absurdity of Moorean assertion. In §VI, I apply it to the other just-noted Moorean assertions. In §VII, I defend my whole account against two objections. In §VIII, I show that Sorensen's own account of the absurdity of his 'iterated cases' is unsatisfactory. In §IX, I explain why it is less absurd to believe or assert (om¹) or (com¹) than to believe or assert (om) or (com). In §X and §XI, I show that despite appearances, subsequent iterations of (om¹) or (com¹) do not decrease the absurdity of believing or asserting them.

II. THE ABSURDITY OF MOOREAN BELIEF

All commentators who explain the absurdity of Moorean belief appeal to the highly plausible *principle that belief distributes over conjunction*:

If S believes that (p and q) then S believes that p and S believes that q .⁹

We may add to this by calling on the other traditional components of knowledge besides belief—truth and justification—to produce a simple and original explanation of the absurdity.

First consider Moore's omissional example. If I believe that (p and I don't believe that p), then since belief distributes over conjunction, I believe that p . But then my original belief is false since its second conjunct is false. My belief is not a belief in a necessary falsehood. Instead it is *self-falsifying* in the sense that although what I believe might be true of me, it cannot be true of me if I believe it. In other words, it is logically impossible for me hold a *true belief* in it. If I am at all reflective and rational then I am in a position to see, with a little reflection, that this is so.¹⁰ Since I am bound by the norm of avoiding forming false beliefs, I am irrational in holding the omissional belief.

By contrast, I can hold a true belief in Moore's commissive example, but only if I hold contradictory beliefs. Suppose that I believe that (p and I believe that not- p). Since belief distributes over conjunction, again I believe that p . If my original

belief is true, then so is its second conjunct, so I hold contradictory beliefs about whether p . To put it another way, my belief that (p and I believe that not- p), is true only if I both believe that p and believe that not- p . So I may escape holding a self-falsifying belief only by holding contradictory beliefs. But a pair of contradictory beliefs cannot be *justified*, because any justification for my belief that p counts against my belief that not- p and conversely. I am in a position to work out that my belief escapes self-falsification at the price of contradictory beliefs, as we just did. Since I am also bound by the norm of forming beliefs only when they are justified, I am irrational in holding the commissive belief.

III. DEFINING MOOREAN ABSURDITY

We are now in position to extract a definition of Moorean belief from the commonalities of Moore's two examples. Firstly, both are examples of possible truths. Just as I may have forgotten my visit to the cinema, so I may hold the mistaken belief that my friend has gone out. Secondly, if these possible truths are actually true then what follows is that I am not omniscient or that I am fallible. This itself amounts to no irrationality on my part. My forgetfulness no more impugns my rationality than the fact that good evidence leads me to mistakenly believe that my friend has gone out. Thirdly, we just saw in the last section that the omission belief is self-falsifying *simpliciter* and that the commissive belief is self-falsifying unless the believer holds contradictory beliefs. So in both cases, the belief is either self-falsifying or entails contradictory beliefs. Finally, we observed that the absurdity of such a belief arises from the fact that the believer is in a position to see that this is so with a little reflection.

It seems plausible to think that combining these four essential features of Moore's examples is sufficient for any other belief to be relevantly similar. This gives us the proposal that

S 's belief that p is Moorean just in case

- (i) It is possible that p
and
- (ii) The fact that p constitutes no irrationality in S
and
- (iii) S 's believing that p is either self-falsifying or entails contradictory beliefs
and
- (iv) S is in a position to recognise (iii) with a little reflection.

Support for this proposed definition comes from the fact that it makes intuitively correct exclusions. Condition (i) correctly excludes beliefs in self-contradictions such as

It is raining and not raining

from being Moorean. Condition (ii) excludes beliefs the content of which constitutes irrationality in the believer, such as

It is raining but I believe that it is raining without the least justification¹¹ from being Moorean, given that it is irrational to hold a belief in an ordinary matter of fact on no evidence.¹²

Condition (iii) excludes beliefs that one might reasonably hold that are neither self-falsifying nor entail contradictory beliefs, such as

I am asserting nothing now

from being Moorean. After all, I could quietly believe in my continuing obedience to a Trappist vow of silence in a perfectly sensible way.¹³ Also excluded is

At least one of my beliefs is false.

This would be a perfectly reasonable belief in my own fallibility that is almost certainly true of me. It is clearly not self-falsifying, because coming to believe that I have at least one false belief hardly ensures that all of my beliefs are true. On the contrary, my belief is *self-verifying*, in the sense that believing it makes it true. For if my belief that I have at least one false belief is itself false, then none of my beliefs is false. So all my beliefs are true, including my belief that I have at least one false belief. This means I have *inconsistent beliefs*, namely a set of beliefs that cannot all be true. But it also means that I cannot be mistaken in believing that at least one of my beliefs is false. Since I almost certainly have some false beliefs anyway, my belief that this is so represents a rational motive for finding out *which* beliefs they are, notably by looking again at the quality of evidence.

The truth of my belief that I hold at least one false belief does not entail beliefs that contradict each other. Clearly I need not believe that all of my beliefs are true, for I can see that this would count as hubris.

We must admit that if belief collects over conjunction then I would believe the “fat conjunction” of all my beliefs. But there are reasons to deny that belief does collect over conjunction.

Firstly many, perhaps most, of the beliefs that I hold are unconscious, in the sense that I am not aware of holding them. Many of these unconscious beliefs are perceptual, and are in constant flux, in the sense that they come and go in step with changes in how things seem to me. Surely I cannot be aware of holding a belief that conjoins the contents of beliefs of which I am unaware. For example, in watching a sunset, my perceptual beliefs are changing rapidly. But I am normally unaware of a rapidly changing conjunctive belief about the sunset. I do not hold this conjunctive belief consciously. So I do not believe the fat conjunction of all my current beliefs consciously either. Can I hold the fat belief *unconsciously*? One reason for answering negatively is the sheer size of the set of my beliefs, plus the plausible principle that *belief requires the ability of thought*:

If *S* believes that *p* then *S* has the ability to think the thought that *p*.¹⁴

This principle explains why although we may sensibly attribute coarse-grained rudimentary beliefs to a dog about the food in its bowl, we may not sensibly attribute to it the belief that it will be beaten in Lent. Clearly it lacks the ability to think thoughts of Lent. The principle also explains our difficulty in characterizing the beliefs of higher animals in any fine-grained way, since it is difficult to specify, using the linguistic expressions of *our* thoughts, exactly what thoughts are available to them.¹⁵ But although I am able to think the thought of the content of each of my present beliefs, I am surely unable to think the thought of the vast conjunction of these contents, simply because that thought is just too complex for me to think. In that case I could not even hold an *unconscious* belief of the conjunction of everything I now believe.

Secondly, my beliefs appear to be so many that I cannot count them. To adapt Richard Foley's example, while I am asleep in London you might truly say of me that I believe that I am a little under ten miles away from Nelson's Column.¹⁶ In other words, I believe unconsciously that I live within ten miles of Nelson's Column. I also believe, at least unconsciously, that I live within eleven miles of Nelson's Column and I believe, at least unconsciously, that I live within twelve miles of Nelson's Column . . . and so on. Foley thinks that this series is infinite. If he is correct then I cannot believe the conjunction of my separate beliefs about my proximity to Nelson's Column, even unconsciously. For although I have the ability to think each thought in an infinite series, I surely do not have the ability to think the thought of their conjunction, for that would be a thought that I could never finish thinking.

One might object that the series cannot be infinite because the content of a putative belief within it will eventually contain a number so large (call it N) that just writing it down would not be achievable during a human lifetime. Since I cannot think thoughts of N , I cannot believe that I am within N miles of Nelson's Column either.¹⁷ Assume for the sake of argument that this is true. Nonetheless, the principle that belief requires the ability of thought still prohibits the conjunctive belief. For my would-be thought that (I am within 10 miles of Nelson's Column and I am within 11 miles of Nelson's Column and . . . I am within $N - 1$ miles of Nelson's Column) will be significantly more complex than my thought that I am within N miles of Nelson's Column. If the latter would-be thought is too complex for me to think then so is the former.

Even if I did believe the fat conjunction of all my beliefs, this would not contradict my belief that I have at least one false belief, because it would remain logically possible (even if not true) that the fat conjunction does not exhaust all my beliefs. So my belief in the fat conjunction will contradict my belief that at least one of my beliefs is false, only if the fat conjunction includes the final conjunct "and these are all the beliefs I hold". Surely none of us is able to believe this extra conjunct. We are in no position to list all the beliefs we hold. For one thing, we are unaware of holding many of them. For another, if Foley is correct then the list is infinite.

So my belief that at least one of my beliefs is false is neither self-falsifying nor entails contradictory beliefs. So it is not Moorean. This is as it should be, since such a commitment to the necessity of at least one false belief is benign.¹⁸ Inconsistency in my beliefs need not undermine my justification in the way my self-contradictory or contradictory beliefs do. Justification for my belief that I hold at least one false belief, such as the fact that I have held false beliefs in the past, need not count against any particular one of the vast number of other beliefs I now hold.¹⁹ Nor will justification for any particular one of these other beliefs, count in favor of my infallibility.

IV. EXPLAINING THE ABSURDITY OF OTHER MOOREAN BELIEFS

We may now apply this account to the other Moorean beliefs we considered in §I. As predicted by my definition,

I have no beliefs

intuitively shares the paradigmatic absurdity, despite the fact that it is not a belief in a conjunction. Its absurdity is easily explained. It is possible that I have no beliefs because I might be in a coma or in the first instant of my birth. To fail to hold any beliefs under these circumstances does not impugn my rationality since if I hold no beliefs then I hold no irrational beliefs either. But if I believe that I have no beliefs then what I believe is false. So my belief is self-falsifying. Since my belief is non-conjunctive, no appeal is needed to the principle that belief distributes over conjunction.

Now suppose that I believe that

God knows that I am not a theist.

This might be true.²⁰ If it is, then I am unenlightened but not necessarily irrational. To see that my belief is self-falsifying we must simply acknowledge the *factivity of knowledge*:

If *S* knows that *p* then *p*.

If my belief is true then since God's knowledge is factive, I *do not* believe that God exists. But in believing that God knows that I am not a theist, I *do* believe that God exists. Since this is a flat contradiction, the content of my original belief cannot be true once I believe it. Once again my belief is self-falsifying. Now compare this last example with

God knows that I am an *atheist*.

Again this might be true. If it is, then the most that can be said of me is that I am misguided, not irrational. Since my belief in this is commissive, its absurdity should arise from a different source. Indeed it does. If my belief is true then since God's knowledge is factive, I believe that God *does not* exist. But in believing that God knows that I am an atheist, I believe that God *does* exist. So my belief

escapes self-falsification only if I hold contradictory beliefs about the existence of God.

In each case I am in position to work the source of irrationality with a little reflection, as we just did. So I would be irrational in continuing to hold such beliefs.

V. THE ABSURDITY OF MOOREAN ASSERTION

Having defined Moorean belief, we might define Moorean assertion simply as

S's assertion that *p* is Moorean just in case *S*'s belief that *p* would be Moorean.

Although this definition seems to *capture* the correct extension of Moorean assertions, it does not itself *explain* their absurdity. What will explain it?

I will now argue that with a few harmless exceptions that I will deal with in §VII, whenever I make an assertion to you I try to make you believe *me*, or in other words, make you believe that I am *sincerely telling you the truth*. When my assertion is Moorean I am in a position to see that this attempt must fail. So while the absurdity of Moorean belief is an irrationality of theorising, that of Moorean assertion is an irrationality of practice, in the sense that I am guilty of planning to achieve something I should see cannot succeed.

There are many types of assertion.²¹ I may tell, inform or misinform you that *p*. I may let you know or tell you the lie that *p*. Or I may point out, confess, announce or contend to you that *p*.

The cases of contending and lying show that it would be a mistake to explain the absurdity of my Moorean assertions in terms of my intention to impart my knowledge to you.²² In these cases my intentions are quite different. Yet as Thomas Baldwin points out, if you know that I am telling you a lie when I make a Moorean assertion to you, this will not expunge the absurdity.²³ No other context of communication will obliterate it either, as Rosenthal notes.²⁴ For example, your knowledge that I'm reminding you, misinforming you, confessing to you or announcing to you, does not make the absurdity go away.

Despite this difficulty we can nonetheless identify a set of *common* intentions that, with a few harmless exceptions, I have whenever I make *any* assertion.

Before we identify this set of common intentions, let us forestall confusion by distinguishing between successfully making an assertion and making a successful assertion. I fail to make an assertion if I utter, "The pubs are still open" but am too drunk to articulate these words intelligibly. Nor do I succeed in making an assertion if I utter these words as an actor in a play, since all I attempt is to depict the assertion of a fictional guise.

Having successfully made an assertion, that assertion may succeed or fail depending upon its *point*, in other words what change of mind I intend to bring about in you. For example, when I let you know that *p*, I fulfill my main intention of imparting my knowledge to you. When I contend to you that *p*, I aim to instill

in you my belief that p . And when I lie to you that p , I nearly always intend to get you to acquire the false belief that p (I will deal with the exception in §VII).

In any such case I intend to get you to believe my words. But I cannot succeed in this attempt unless I also get you to think that I am sincere in making the assertion. For if you think that I'm play-acting or recognize that I'm lying then you have no reason to accept my words, so my attempt to impart knowledge or lie to you will fail. Since I should see with minimal reflection that this is so, my full intention must be to *get you to believe my words by getting you to think me sincere* in uttering them. It follows that I must intend to get you to believe that I am *sincerely telling the truth*.

In other words, I aim to make you believe *me*. Although our intuitions about what counts as “believing *me*” are not robust, there is reason to think that taking it to constitute believing that I am a sincere truth-teller is not just a convenient stipulation (although if it were, this would not affect my purposes). For if you don't believe what I say then clearly you won't believe me. Nor will you believe *me*, as opposed to merely believing *what I say*, if you accept the truth of what I say but know that I am merely parroting information or inadvertently telling the truth in an attempt to deceive you that has failed because I have got my facts wrong.

I have just argued that I must intend to get you to believe that I am sincerely telling the truth whenever I try to let you know that p or tell you the lie that p . This must also be my intention when I misinform you that p , since misinforming is either lying or a failed attempt to inform. It must further be my intention when I point out or confess to you that p , since pointing out and confessing are both types of informing.

When my assertion is Moorean, this aim is necessarily frustrated. It seems uncontroversial to endorse the principle that *assertion distributes over conjunction*:

If S asserts that (p and q) then S asserts that p and S asserts that q .²⁵

So if I tell you that (p and I believe that p) then I tell you that p . So in virtue of believing me sincere, you must think that *I believe that p*. I also tell you that I don't believe that p . So in virtue of believing that I tell the truth, you must think that *I don't believe that p*. So you must have contradictory beliefs if you believe me.

In the commissive case, if I tell you that (p and I don't believe that not- p) then since assertion distributes over conjunction, I tell you that p . So in virtue of believing me sincere, you must again think that *I believe that p*. But I also tell you that I believe that not- p . So in virtue of believing that I tell the truth, you must think that *I believe that not-p*. So this time you must think that *I have contradictory beliefs*.

This itself is no obstacle to your believing me. Perhaps you are prepared to acquire contradictory beliefs or ascribe them to me. But when I attempt to communicate with you by making an assertion, I should assume that we would both charitably avoid such ascriptions if possible. On this assumption I am in position to see with minimal reflection that my plan to be believed, in other words to be thought a sincere truth-teller, is bound to fail. So it is practically irrational of me to go ahead and make the assertion.

My account of the absurdity of Moorean assertion stands or falls independently of that of the absurdity of Moorean belief. This is less economical than an account of the absurdity of Moorean assertion in terms of that of Moorean belief. On the other hand a unified account might be too much to expect, given the different natures of belief and assertion.²⁶ Nevertheless the two accounts fit together in two ways. Firstly, what you must believe if you are to believe me when I make a Moorean assertion is identical to what is the case if I hold a true belief in my own words. Secondly, since part of my aim in making a Moorean assertion is to convince you of my sincerity, in making a Moorean assertion I intend to make you attribute a Moorean belief to me, an attribution that I should see is a license to judge me irrational.

VI. EXPLAINING THE ABSURDITY OF OTHER MOOREAN ASSERTIONS

My analysis of the absurdity of Moorean assertion in terms of the speaker's incredibility easily explains the absurdity of the other Moorean assertions.

Suppose that you believe me when I tell you that I have no beliefs. In virtue of accepting my sincerity, you must believe that *I have at least one belief*, namely my belief in what I have told you. But in virtue of accepting the truth of what I say, you must also believe that *I have no beliefs*. So if you are to believe me then you must hold contradictory beliefs about my beliefs.

Likewise, suppose that you believe me when I tell you that God knows that I am not a theist. In virtue of accepting my sincerity, you must believe that *I do believe that God exists*. But in virtue of accepting the truth of what I say, you must also believe that *I do not believe that God exists*. So if you are to believe me then you must hold contradictory beliefs about my religious convictions.

Finally, suppose that you believe me when I tell you that God knows that I am an atheist. In virtue of accepting my sincerity, you must believe that *I believe that God does exist*. But in virtue of accepting the truth of what I say, you must also believe that *I believe that God does not exist*. So if you believe me this time, then you must think that *I hold contradictory beliefs about the existence of God*.

Since I should assume that we are both minimally rational, I should see that in any of these cases, my plan to make you believe me is bound to fail.

VII. TWO OBJECTIONS AND REPLIES

I now consider two objections that might be raised against my whole account of Moorean absurdity.

The first objection is that there are three peculiar cases of assertion that do not fit the central account of assertion that I have given. The first case arises when I say something to you merely in order to "wind you up." For example, suppose that I know that you think highly of Bush's intelligence, an opinion I in fact share. Nonetheless I insincerely state that Bush is a moron in order to

“rattle your cage.” Here my intention is to get you to believe that I am *sincerely asserting a falsehood* in order to keep you verbally opposed to my words. The second case is a double bluff. Learning that you have just discovered that I am a habitual liar, I decide to tell you the truth for once. So when you ask me if the pubs are still open, I tell you the truth that they are, in order to deceive you into mistakenly thinking that they are not.²⁷ Here my intention is to get you to believe that I am *insincerely asserting a falsehood*. The third case is a peculiar kind of lie. Suppose that you are interrogating me in the attempt to make me confess to a crime. I am well aware that you know that I am guilty and that I cannot convince you of my innocence. But I also know that without my confession, the court will not be able to convict me. So I rationally repeat the complacent assertion, “I’m innocent.”²⁸ My lies are not attempts to make you believe that I am innocent but are merely stonewalling refusals to admit my guilt.

In none of these three cases do I aim to make you think I am *sincerely telling the truth*. Since I have explained the absurdity of Moorean assertion in terms of the central account, the objection now arises that we may coin Moorean assertions of these three non-central types. Then the central account will not be able to explain the absurdity in terms of the assertor’s intention to be thought a sincere truth-teller.

I reply that this is perfectly true. But my account of Moorean assertion still has the resources to explain the absurdity of “winding-up” or double bluff Moorean assertions as well as that of stonewalling Moorean lies.

In the “winding-up” case, I can hardly hope to prolong verbal disagreement with you unless you think (mistakenly) that I’m sincere. But when my “winding up” assertion is Moorean, I am in position to see that you couldn’t take me to hold a Moorean belief unless you thought I was irrational. So although I could still irritate you by pretending to be mad, I could not sensibly try to annoy you by making you think that we are *divided in opinion*.

In the second case, my intention in asserting that *p* is to get you to *falsely* believe that *not-p*. This means that I myself believe that *p*. But when my double bluff assertion is Moorean, I cannot rationally believe what I assert.

Moreover, my attempt to make you think me insincere is parasitic upon my expectation that you will *normally* think me sincere. This is precisely why it is a double bluff. So the full description of such an assertion includes the fact that when I assert to you that *p*, I intend to get you to mistakenly believe that I’m insincere because *I know that normally I will get you to think I am sincere*. But when my double bluff assertion is Moorean, this is bound to fail, because there is no normal case in which I can sensibly try to make you think I hold a Moorean belief.

A fuller description of the third case is that in telling you the lie that *p*, my intention is at least partly to let you know, *in the knowledge that you know that p*, that I will never admit that *p*. But when the stonewalling lie is Moorean, this means that I myself know that *p*. This is impossible. Since I cannot rationally hold a Moorean belief, I cannot know its content either. So my intention cannot succeed.

The second objection is that not all self-falsifying beliefs are absurd. So the fact that a Moorean belief is self-falsifying cannot explain its absurdity. In §IV, we noted the intuitive absurdity of believing or asserting that

I have no beliefs.

I then argued that this belief is irrational because it is self-falsifying, a fact that is easily discernible with a little reflection. In §V, I argued that the corresponding assertion is absurd because if I am charitable enough to assume that you will avoid acquiring contradictory beliefs then I am in a position to see that you will not believe me.

But now suppose that Paul Churchland asserts that

I have no beliefs (any more than I have vital spirits inside me).

We hear no absurdity. Moreover, suppose that we think that eliminative materialism is false and that consequently Churchland really does believe that there are no beliefs. Then we would have to say that his second-order belief is self-falsifying. But we would not judge that Churchland is irrational in holding this belief.²⁹

I reply that my account is not only consistent with this fact but also explains it. I agree that not all self-falsifying beliefs are absurd. I merely claim that it is irrational for someone to hold such belief *if she is in a position to see, with a little reflection*, that it *is* self-falsifying. When we first considered the example, we tacitly made the default assumption that it is believed or asserted by someone unlike Churchland, who thinks that there are such things as beliefs. Such a person is in a position to see with a little reflection that her belief is self-falsifying. By contrast, Churchland is not in this position.

Suppose that we think that eliminative materialism is true. Then we must say that Churchland has no beliefs, self-falsifying or otherwise. On the other hand, suppose that we think that eliminative materialism is false. Then we must say that Churchland believes that he has no beliefs, although he doesn't realise that he believes this. Churchland is certainly a minimally reflective and rational thinker. However, we know that he is committed to the claim that what we call "beliefs" no more exist than what we used to call "vital spirits." We also know that refuting eliminative materialism will certainty take more than a little reflection. So we know that Churchland *is in no position to see, with a little reflection* that he holds the belief that there are no beliefs and so is in no position to see, with a little reflection, that he holds a belief that is self-falsifying. In other words, condition (iv) of my proposed definition of Moorean belief is false. This explains why we will judge that Churchland is merely mistaken but not irrational. Although his belief is self-falsifying, it is not Moorean.

My account also explains why we hear no absurdity in Churchland's assertion. If he asserts that

I have no beliefs (any more than I have vital spirits inside me)

then we cannot charitably take him as intending to make us hold mental states that, from his point of view, do not exist. So we cannot take him as intending to make us

acquire the *belief* that he has no beliefs. Likewise we cannot charitably take him as intending to make us attribute *to him* mental states that, from his point of view, do not exist. So we cannot take him as intending to make us attribute to him the belief that he has no beliefs. Churchland holds that the folk-psychological notion of belief will be replaced by a mental attitude to be elucidated by science. For convenience, call this attitude, “mental assent.” Then when Churchland asserts to us that there are no beliefs, we should not take him as intending to make us believe that his assertion is true by making us believe that he believes that his assertion is true. Rather we should take him as intending that we mentally assent that he has no beliefs by also mentally assenting that he mentally assents that he has no beliefs. If Churchland’s intention is fulfilled, we neither hold contradictory beliefs nor contradictory attitudes of mental assent. So the fact that we will avoid ascriptions of irrationality when possible is no obstacle to the fulfillment of his intention.

VIII. TWO PROBLEMS WITH SORENSEN’S ACCOUNT OF HIS ITERATED CASES

We may now return to Sorensen’s claim that as iteration increases, omission absurdity decreases, while commissive type absurdity does not. Using the notation “ $B^n a \sim p$ ”, where the superscript denotes the number of belief-operators (so that, for example, “ $B^3 a p$ ” means that “*a* believes that she believes that she believes that *p*”) he writes

My solution endorses the intuition that ‘ $p \& B^n \sim p$ ’ is a Moorean sentence for all n , but ‘ $p \& \sim B^n p$ ’ need not be a Moorean sentence when n is a large number. ‘ $p \& B^n a \sim p$ ’ does not entail that *a* has a specifiable directly opposed belief. But ‘ $Ba(p \& B^n a \sim p)$ ’ entails that *a* has directly opposed beliefs about *p*, under the assumption that *a* believes the consequences of his beliefs and that ‘ $p \& B^n a \sim p$ ’ is true. This entailment follows directly for $n = 1$. When $n > 1$, the entailment is secured by a necessary condition for self-attributing higher-order beliefs.³⁰

The condition in question is a recursive application of the *principle of belief-elimination*:

If *S* believes that she believes that *p* then *S* believes that *p*.³¹

Sorensen appeals to this principle together with the *principle that belief is closed under logical consequence*:

If *q* is a logical consequence of *p* and *S* believes that *p* then *S* believes that *q*.

It follows that I cannot hold a true belief that

(com¹) *p* and I believe that I believe that not-*p*

unless I hold contradictory, or ‘directly opposed’ beliefs about whether *p*. For if I believe that (*p* and I believe that I believe that not-*p*) then a logical consequence of what I believe is that *p*, so *I believe that p*. But if my belief in (com¹) is true then I believe that I believe that not-*p*, in which case the principle of belief-elimination

ensures that *I believe that not-p*. Since that principle may be applied recursively, the same diagnosis of the absurdity will hold for any order of iteration of the belief-operator, as in

(com⁴) *p and I believe that not-p.*

It also applies to

(com) *p and I believe that not-p*

in which case the principle of belief-elimination is not needed. Sorensen's account diagnoses no such absurdity in

(om¹) *p and I don't believe that I believe that p.*

For if I believe that (*p and I don't believe that I believe that p*) then a logical consequence of what I believe is that *p*, so I believe that *p*. But if my belief in (om¹) is true then I don't believe that I believe that *p*, in which case the principle of belief-elimination fails to apply.

But there are two problems with this account. Firstly, Sorensen must explain the absurdity of

(om) *p and I don't believe that p*

as follows: If I believe that (*p and I don't believe that p*) then a logical consequence of what I believe is that *p*, so *I believe that p*. But if my belief in (om) is true then *I don't believe that p*. But this is not, as Sorensen supposes, a case of contradictory beliefs but rather a flat contradiction.

Secondly, Sorensen's appeal to the success of the principle that belief is closed under logical consequence is problematic. It is clear that it fails as a psychological principle. I may believe that a triangle is equilateral without believing that it is equiangular. Nor can it be true of me as a principle of ideal rationality. Suppose that I believe that Singapore is a democracy but have no idea what a plutocracy is. Then, as predicted by the principle that belief requires the ability of thought, I fail to believe that Singapore is either a democracy or a plutocracy. This failure may represent an indictment of my knowledge but hardly counts as a failure of theoretical rationality.

Sorensen tries to circumvent this difficulty by making my "thorough obedience" to the principle that belief is closed under logical consequence a test of my degree of ideal rationality.³² This move is futile, because the failure of the principle would extend even to an ideally rational believer who has no idea what a plutocracy is.

Moreover, although we should agree that degrees of rationality are vague, surely there is a difference between total obedience to Sorensen's principle and none. So what is missing from Sorensen's account is a principled place on this scale that is distinctive of the degree of Moorean irrationality.³³ This means that Moorean absurdity cannot be explained in terms of failure of the principle. For if such failure is a form of theoretical irrationality at all, rather than a criticizable epistemic failing,

it is a very *mild* form of irrationality. By contrast, a Moorean believer is guilty of a *severe* theoretical irrationality.

IX. THE NON-MOOREAN ABSURDITY OF THE ITERATED CASES

In fact, my definition of Moorean belief shows that

(om¹) p and I don't believe that I believe that p

and

(com¹) p and I believe that I believe that not- p

are not Moorean beliefs at all. Admittedly, they are possible truths that do not impugn my rationality, thus satisfying conditions (i) and (ii) of the definition. As a case of (om¹), suppose that I have no way of discovering the truth that it is raining because I have been incarcerated in a sealed room. I might reasonably withhold the belief that it is raining by suspending judgment on the matter either way. In so doing I need not mistakenly think that I believe it is raining. As a case of (com¹), suppose that my captors fool me with the illusion of dry weather. I might be perfectly justified, not only in mistakenly believing that it is not raining, but also in recognizing this belief. So the truth of (com¹) constitutes no irrationality in me either.

But such beliefs fail condition (iii) of the definition. They are neither self-falsifying nor entail contradictory beliefs. If I hold a true belief in either, then since belief distributes over conjunction, I believe that p . But this does not contradict the second conjunct of (om¹) namely that I don't believe that I believe that p . Moreover the fact that I believe that p is consistent with the second conjunct of (com¹), namely that I believe that I believe that not- p , in a way that allows me to avoid holding a pair of contradictory beliefs. For my belief that I believe that not- p , may be mistaken.

Nonetheless I do seem to be absurd in some sense to believe either. What is the explanation of this non-Moorean but related absurdity?

The principle that belief distributes over conjunction helps explains the related absurdity as follows. In believing (om) or (com), I am not only guilty of the *major* fault that my belief is self-falsifying or entails contradictory beliefs but am guilty of a *minor* fault (of introspective non-omniscience or fallibility) as well. When the belief gets iterated, the major fault is expunged but the minor fault remains.

The principle of belief-elimination is one half of the *principle of introspective infallibility*:

If S believes that she believes that p then she believes that p

and

If S believes that she does not believe that p then she does not believe that p
just as the converse of that principle is one half of the *principle of introspective omniscience*:

If S believes that p then she believes that she believes that p

and

If S does not believe that p then she believes that she does not believe that p .³⁴

The failure of either constitutes an instance of mistaken belief or ignorance about one's own beliefs.

For example, my assertion that I don't believe that women are inferior may be sincere because I am blind to the way I treat women. You may be in a better position to recognize that my boorish behavior is the manifestation of the existing belief that I believe I do not hold. In other words, *I mistakenly believe I don't hold a specific belief* and so fail the second conjunct of the principle of introspective infallibility.

In the same circumstances, you could also reasonably judge that I do not think that I hold the belief that women are inferior, although in fact I do hold it. This would be a case in which *I hold a belief that I fail to recognize*, and so fail the first conjunct of the principle of introspective omniscience.

Since omniscience and infallibility are God-like qualities, such failures do not seem to be instances of irrationality. Suppose that I believe that we will lose a soccer match. It might be pragmatically rational for me to fail to believe that I hold this belief, because setting it aside might keep me from performing worse in the match. Nonetheless I am still open to epistemic criticism by the standards of introspection, given that introspection is normally an authoritative source of justification for beliefs about my mental states. However, such epistemic criticism seems *minor* in comparison with the irrationality of holding beliefs that are self-falsifying or that contradict each other.

Since belief distributes over conjunction, if I believe that

(om) p and I don't believe that p

then I believe that p and I believe that I don't believe that p . In other words, *I mistakenly think I don't hold a specific belief* and so fail to be introspectively infallible. So I am guilty of the *minor* fault of being introspectively fallible *as well as the major* irrationality of holding a self-falsifying belief. By contrast, if I believe (om¹) then the major irrationality is expunged but a minor fault remains. To see how the major irrationality disappears, suppose that I hold the true belief that (p and I don't believe that I believe that p). Since belief distributes over conjunction, *I believe that p*. But since the conjunction is true, *I don't believe that I believe that p*. This is neither a flat contradiction nor a contradiction in belief. Rather *I hold a belief that I fail to recognize*. In other words, I may escape the major irrationality of holding a self-falsifying belief by the minor fault of not being introspectively omniscient. Therefore I am less criticizable in believing (om¹) than in believing (om). This vindicates our intuition that

God exists but I do not believe that I am a theist
seems less absurd to believe than

God exists but I don't believe that God exists.

We may explain the decrease in absurdity of believing (com¹) in parallel fashion. Since belief distributes over conjunction, if I believe that

(com) p and I believe that $\text{not-}p$

then I believe that p but I believe that I believe that $\text{not-}p$. In other words, *what I really believe contradicts what I think I believe*. Unless I hold contradictory beliefs about whether p , I fail the first conjunct of the principle of introspective infallibility. Thus in believing (com), I am guilty of both the major irrationality of holding a self-falsifying belief and the minor fault of being introspectively fallible unless I am guilty of the major irrationality of holding contradictory beliefs. By contrast, if I believe (com¹) then the major irrationality is expunged but a minor fault remains. For if I hold the true belief that (p and I believe that I believe that $\text{not-}p$) then *I believe that p* (since belief distributes over conjunction) but *I believe that I believe that not-p* (in virtue of the truth of the second conjunct of what I believe). This is neither a flat contradiction nor a contradiction in belief. Unless I hold contradictory beliefs about whether p , I fail the first conjunct of the principle of introspective infallibility. So I may escape both major irrationalities of holding a self-falsifying belief or holding contradictory beliefs by the minor fault of being introspectively fallible. Therefore I am less criticizable in believing (com¹) than in believing (com). This vindicates our intuition that

God exists but I believe that I am an atheist

seems less absurd than

God exists but I believe that God does not exist.

It might be objected that a failure to be introspectively omniscient or infallible about really simple beliefs such as that $2 + 2 = 4$ constitutes a *major* epistemic fault.³⁵ There is justice in this complaint. It seems pathological to believe that $2 + 2 = 4$ while thinking that one does not hold this belief. However this does not damage my explanation of the decrease in absurdity for the simple reason that two faults are always worse than either one alone, whatever their relative badness.

My iterated assertions are less absurd than their original counterparts. When I assert (om) to you, you can only believe me by sacrificing your own rationality in acquiring contradictory beliefs. But when I assert (om¹) to you, you can consistently judge that I have a specific belief that I fail to recognize. And the criticism you must make of me if you believe me when I assert (com), namely that I have contradictory beliefs, is severer than that you may charitably make when I assert (com¹), namely that I hold a specific belief that contradicts what I think I believe.

X. WHY FURTHER ITERATION DOES NOT INCREASE ABSURDITY IN BELIEF

We may now show that subsequent iterations of (om¹) or (com¹) do not decrease the absurdity in belief. If I hold the true belief that

(om²) p and I don't believe that I believe that I believe that p

then *I believe that p* (since belief distributes over conjunction) and *I don't believe that I believe that I believe that p* (because the second conjunct of what I believe is true). But then I fail to be introspectively omniscient, since double application of the first conjunct of the principle of introspective omniscience to the fact that I believe that *p* results in the flat contradiction that I both have and lack the belief that I believe that I believe that *p*. So I may escape the major criticism that I hold a self-falsifying belief by being guilty of the minor criticism that I am not introspectively omniscient. Since the first conjunct of the principle of introspective omniscience may be applied recursively, this result holds for any further iteration. So further iteration of (*om*¹) does not decrease absurdity. For any iteration, the most charitable criticism to which I am vulnerable is that I am not introspectively omniscient.

Likewise, if I hold the true belief that

(*com*²) *p* and I believe that I believe that not-*p*

then *I believe that p* (since belief distributes over conjunction) and *I believe that I believe that not-p* (because the second conjunct of what I believe is true). In other words, my belief in (*com*²) avoids self-falsification only if I really have a belief that contradicts the belief that I think I believe I have. But for any iteration of (*com*¹), I am guilty of the same failing, namely that I can hold beliefs all of which are true only if I hold contradictory beliefs. The truth of my *n*th-iterated belief that not-*p* entails the existence of my (*n*-1)-iterated belief that not-*p*, the truth of which entails the existence of my belief (*n*-2)-iterated belief that not-*p* . . . and so on back down the series until I hold contradictory beliefs. So I can only avoid both holding a self-falsifying belief and contradictory beliefs by mistakenly believing I hold a belief, thus failing the principle of introspective infallibility. Thus further iteration of (*com*¹) does not diminish absurdity. For any iteration, the most charitable criticism to which I am vulnerable is that I am introspectively fallible.

This result contradicts Sorensen's claim that as iteration increases, the absurdity of omission belief decreases. In fact, the decrease is only apparent. This appearance arises from an easily made confusion between the absurd belief that, for example,

(*om*¹⁰⁰⁰) It is raining and I don't believe that I believe that . . . I believe that it is raining

and the non-absurd belief that

It is raining but I don't hold a one-thousandth-iterated belief that it is raining.

This difference is explained by the principle that belief requires the ability of thought. Suppose that my beliefs are iterated in the following series:

I believe that I believe that I believe that it is raining

I believe that I believe that I believe that I believe that it is raining

. . . and so on.

Although I do not lose the concepts of rain, belief or of myself as the series progresses, eventually the sheer complexity of the iteration will prevent any human being from thinking thoughts of it. If I hold a belief in (*om*¹⁰⁰⁰) then in my case, this

point is marked higher than the thousandth iteration of the belief and in that case I am open to the criticism that I fail to be introspectively omniscient. Conversely, if the point at which I am incapable of thinking the iterated thought is marked by the thousandth iteration of the belief then I cannot hold a belief in (om^{1000}) . But in that case I may justifiably believe that

It is raining but I don't hold a one-thousandth-iterated belief that it is raining since I may sensibly recognize the fact that despite the rain, I cannot form beliefs of such complexity. Lacking the ability to hold such a belief does not prevent me from having the concept of it. Analogously, although I lack the ability to expand the series of positive integers forever, I have the concept of myself doing so. Or on looking at Escher's lithograph of an impossible circular staircase that ascends forever, I may conceive of myself as completing a circle while continuously ascending the stairs, although I cannot have the ability to do so.³⁶ Moreover the abbreviated thought of a "one-thousandth-iterated belief" that we have just now formed in considering the series above is not particularly complex, as opposed to the thought that we would have formed in actually *holding* a one-thousandth iterated belief.³⁷

XI. WHY FURTHER ITERATION DOES NOT INCREASE ABSURDITY IN ASSERTION

Suppose that you believe me when I assert

(om¹) p and I don't believe that I believe that p .

Since you think me sincere in asserting the first conjunct, you believe that *I believe that p*. And since you believe what I say in the second conjunct, you believe that *I don't believe that I believe that p*. So if you are to believe me, you must judge that I have a belief that I fail to recognize. Thus you may make only the minor criticism that I fail to be introspectively omniscient. Likewise if you believe me when I assert

(com¹) p and I believe that I believe that not- p

then since you think me sincere in asserting the first conjunct, you must believe that *I believe that p*. And since you believe what I say in the second conjunct, you must believe that *I believe that I believe that not-p*. So if you are to believe me, you must judge that I really hold a belief that p that contradicts what I think I believe (in other words, that I fail the principle of introspective infallibility unless I hold contradictory beliefs about whether p). Given your charity in withholding the judgment that I have contradictory beliefs, you may make only the minor criticism that I am introspectively fallible. In either case, you can only most charitably believe me if you think I'm not introspectively omniscient or not introspectively infallible.

Subsequent iterations do not decrease the absurdity of omission assertion. My assertion that

It is raining but I don't hold a one-thousandth-iterated belief that it is raining

is perfectly credible, since neither you nor I can humanly hold such beliefs. My assertion may be a truthful report of a psychological limit. But this is not the assertion that

(om¹⁰⁰⁰) It is raining and I don't believe that I believe that . . . I believe that it is raining.

To assert (om¹⁰⁰⁰), I must be in a position to believe it, and so think the thought of it, in which case I am not subject to the same psychological limits. If you believe me when I assert it, then in virtue of thinking me sincere in asserting the first conjunct, you must think that I believe that it is raining. But in virtue of thinking that the second conjunct is true, you must also think that I don't believe that I believe that . . . I believe that it is raining. So you are in a position to see that at some point in the iteration I fail the first conjunct of the principle of introspective omniscience.

Nor is my credibility in making commissive assertions strengthened by further iteration. Your judgment that I have a belief that contradicts what I take myself (over a thousand iterations) to believe should be that I am still at fault to the same degree. My iterated belief still commits me to a belief that is iterated one order less, and so on back down the series until I am committed to contradictory beliefs. If you believe me when I assert (com¹⁰⁰⁰), you are still in a position to see that I can avoid contradictory beliefs only if, somewhere in the series, I take myself to have a belief that in fact, I don't have.³⁸

ENDNOTES

1. G. E. Moore, "A Reply to My Critics," in *The Philosophy of G. E. Moore*, ed. P. Schilpp (Evanston: Tudor, 1942), 534.
2. *G. E. Moore: Selected Writings*, ed. T. Baldwin (London: Routledge, 1993), 209.
3. G. E. Moore, "Russell's Theory of Descriptions," in *The Philosophy of Bertrand Russell*, ed. P. Schilpp (Evanston: Tudor, 1944), 204.
4. This formal difference is disguised by Moore's examples. If we formalize "I went to the pictures last Tuesday but I don't believe that I did" as "*p* and I do not believe that *p*" then "I believe that he has gone out, but he has not" becomes "I believe that *p* and not-*p*." By commutation this is equivalent to "not-*p* and I believe that *p*," which may equally well be represented as "*p* and I believe that not-*p*."
5. I argue for this constraint on explanation in "Moorean Absurdities and the Nature of Assertion," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 74 (1996), 135 and "Wittgensteinian Accounts of Moorean Absurdity," *Philosophical Studies* 92 (1998), 285–286. The constraint is recognized by Claudio De Almeida, "What Moore's Paradox is About," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 62 (2001), 30 and Jane Heal, "Moore's Paradox: A Wittgensteinian Approach," *Mind* 103 (1994), 6.
6. Moore himself holds that if I assert that *p* then I "imply" that I don't believe that not-*p*. ("Russell's Theory of Descriptions," 204.) So by asserting that (*p* and I believe that not-*p*) I imply that I don't believe that not-*p*, which contradicts the second conjunct of my assertion.

This fails to explain the absurdity of the omissive assertion. For if I assert that (p and I don't believe that p) then I imply-and-assert that I neither believe that $\neg p$ nor believe that p , which is neither a self-contradiction nor a contradiction in belief. In "A Note on Saying and Disbelieving," *Analysis* 25 (1965), 54, Max Deutscher says of the commissive assertion, "What is wrong with ' p but I believe that $\neg p$ ' is this. If the speaker is correct then what he says is false". By "correct," Deutscher means, "correct in believing the conjunctive saying." But this is true only of the omissive assertion. In "Bonney on Saying and Disbelieving," *Analysis* 27 (1967), 184, he modifies his analysis to the claim that, "if the speaker believes all that he says when he utters ' p but I don't believe that p ', then it is logically impossible for him to hold *any* correct beliefs" (my italics). This can't be right however. Although it is impossible that my belief that (p and I don't believe that p) is correct (because it is self-falsifying), this does not mean that I cannot at the same time correctly believe that p . Deutscher could have repaired this flaw by substituting, "then it is logically impossible for him to hold *all* correct beliefs." That would hold true for both the omissive and commissive assertion, but would then fail to capture the essence of the absurdity, since my assertion that I have at least one false belief fits that diagnosis without being absurd at all.

7. Heal (op. cit., 296) holds that my assertion "I believe that $\neg p$ " is in effect my assertion that $\neg p$. So when I make the commissive assertion, " p and I believe that $\neg p$," I have made two contradictory assertions. But this fails to explain the absurdity of the omissive assertion, because by asserting, "I do not believe that p ," I need not assert that $\neg p$.

In "Inescapable Surprises and Acquirable Intentions," *Analysis* 53 (1993), 93–95, Laurence Goldstein assumes otherwise. But an agnostic who truthfully reports, "I neither believe that God exists nor believe that he doesn't" would, on that assumption, be making contradictory assertions about the existence of God. Plainly he isn't.

In "Crimmins, Gonzales, and Moore," *Analysis* 61 (2001), 209, Alan Hájek and Daniel Stoljar observe that in asserting that (p and I believe that $\neg p$), I assert that p and so express a belief that p . I also assert that I believe that $\neg p$ and so express the belief that $\neg p$. So I express contradictory beliefs. But this diagnosis does not apply to the omissive assertion without Goldstein's false assumption.

8. Roy Sorensen, "Moore's Problem with Iterated Belief," *Philosophical Quarterly* 50 (2000), 29.

9. For example, Heal, op. cit., 21–22, De Almeida, op. cit., 47, and Jaakko Hintikka, *Knowledge and Belief*, (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1962), 67.

10. As De Almeida notes (op. cit., 42), I need the minimal intelligence to present myself with such an argument for the absurdity. But this hardly constitutes an objection.

11. However, in "The Ethics of Belief: Off the Wrong Track," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 23 (1999), 267–285, Jonathan Adler argues that such a belief is conceptually impossible.

12. I have not considered beliefs in the existence of other minds or the rationality of induction. Such beliefs are not Moorean. Some foundationalists might claim that these are epistemologically "bedrock" and so cannot in principle be justified. If this is true then a fifth condition that

It is not epistemologically bedrock for S that p

is needed to exclude them. It would take a separate paper to both elucidate this properly and evaluate the claim that such beliefs cannot be justified.

13. Against Rosenthal's claim that "Moore's paradox occurs with sentences . . . which are self-defeating in a way that prevents one from making an assertion with them," op. cit., 167.
14. John Searle argues for the similar claim that a belief is a possible conscious thought. See his *The Rediscovery of the Mind*, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992), 155–162.
15. This principle is challenged by the fact that in one sense I can believe things on authority that I do not understand. For example, I may believe an authority on physics that assures me that entropy is increasing although I have no idea what entropy is. But believing that she has said something true is different from believing what she says. Although I don't believe that entropy is increasing, I do believe that she has said something true (although I don't know what) since although I cannot think thoughts of entropy, I can think the thought that by using the word "entropy," she has said something true. Similarly, when presented with the inscription,

$$1 + 1 + 1 + 1 + 1 + 1 + 1 + 1 + 1 \text{ is greater than } 1 + 1 + 1 + 1 + 1 + 1 + 1$$

I can sincerely assert, "That's true" without having the thought that 10 is greater than 7. What I believe is that the inscription says something true, in virtue of believing that the number denoted by the left-hand side is greater than that denoted by the right-hand side.

A different sort of apparent counterexample arises when I seem to have only a partial grasp of the content of my belief. For example, mistakenly thinking that "arthritis" denotes an inflammation of bones as well as joints, I sincerely utter, "Arthritis has spread to my thigh." Intuitively we feel that I mistakenly believe something to do with arthritis. The correctness of this intuition seems to contradict the principle. For since my inability to reliably distinguish cases of arthritis from other aliments precludes my grasp of the concept of arthritis embedded in would-be thoughts of arthritis, it follows that I can't think any thoughts of arthritis. Thus, I cannot hold any beliefs about arthritis, in apparent contradiction of the intuition that I mistakenly believe something to do with arthritis. But even though I cannot hold beliefs *about* arthritis, I may still hold beliefs *to do with* arthritis. Surely what I do mistakenly believe is that inflammation of the joints and bones has spread to my thigh. Moreover I mistakenly believe that what others call "arthritis" has spread to my thigh. The principle does not prohibit these beliefs because I can think thoughts of inflamed joints and bones as well as thoughts of what others call "arthritis." Since inflammation of the joints and bones and what others call "arthritis," both have something to do with arthritis, the correctness of the intuition that I mistakenly believe something to do with arthritis is consistent with the principle after all.

16. Richard Foley, "Inferential Justification and the Infinite Regress," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 15 (1978), 311–312. Foley claims that if I believe that I am within one hundred miles of Boston, then I believe that I am within two hundred miles of Boston and I believe that I am within three hundred miles of Boston . . . and *ad infinitum*. I reserve judgment on the infinity supposedly involved. I prefer Nelson's Column to Boston simply because it marks a more definite point.

17. I make this objection myself in "Justified Belief and the Infinite Regress Argument," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 18 (1981), 86. I am no longer sure whether it holds.

18. Against De Almeida's objection, op. cit., 42–43.

19. This fact is consistent with the possibility that evidence for my general fallibility does count a tiny bit as defeasible evidence against *each* of my other beliefs.

20. I just now assumed that the existence of God is logically possible. Since this might be denied, stricter formulation of the first condition of Moorean belief is that what is believed is *possible by the believer's own lights*.
21. For a different discussion of the importance of this point for accounts of Moorean assertion, see my "Moorean Absurdity and the Intentional 'Structure' of Assertion," *Analysis* 54 (1994), 160–166.
22. Against O. R. Jones, "Moore's Paradox, Assertion and Knowledge," *Analysis* 51 (1991), 185 and Michael Welbourne, "More on Moore," *Analysis* 52 (1992), 237–241.
23. Thomas Baldwin, *G. E. Moore* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), 228.
24. David Rosenthal, "Self-Knowledge and Moore's Paradox," *Philosophical Studies* 77 (1995), 203.
25. Some would accept that assertion collects over conjunction as well. For example, Michael Dummett holds that "there is no significant contrast between a conjunction of assertions and an assertion of a conjunction." See his *Frege: Philosophy of Language*, 2nd edition, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981), 336. But it does seem odd to count all the statements I have ever made as a single assertion, especially since pairs of them may well reflect repudiations of teenage opinions.
26. See Uriah Kriegel, "Moore's Paradox and the Structure of Conscious Belief," *Erkenntnis* 61 (2004), 100.
27. I owe this example to Michael Pelczar.
28. An anonymous referee suggested an example very close to this.
29. The same referee made this sharp objection.
30. Sorensen, op. cit., 42.
31. Ibid., 39–42.
32. Roy Sorensen, *Blindspots*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 37.
33. Since we frequently judge that some thinkers are more rational than others, the suggestion that there are degrees of rationality is appealing. It looks tricky to cash out however, especially in the currency of Sorensen's principle. We might try to calculate the degree to which a believer is rational as the ratio of the number of the logical consequences of her beliefs that she accepts to the total of the logical consequences of her beliefs. One problem with this is that any belief that *p* has an infinity of logical consequences that *p* or *r*, that *p* or *s*, that *p* or *t* It follows that the degree of rationality of a person who only accepts a finite set of these is infinitesimally close to zero. This is surely too harsh a verdict.
34. Uriah Kriegel suggested these formulations.
35. A second referee pointed this out.
36. M. C. Escher, "Ascending and Descending," 1960. Cornelius Van S. Roosevelt Collection, National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.
37. I have heard someone object that both "I have a tenth-iterated belief that *p*" and "I believe that I believe that *p*" are equally nonsensical. If this claim were true then it would be impossible for me to believe either of (om¹⁰) or

(com¹⁰). For the grammatical negation of a piece of nonsense is also nonsense. Since “Blah is bleh” is nonsense, so is “Blah is not bleh.” So “I *don’t* believe that I believe that *p*” would also be nonsense. I cannot believe nonsense, as predicted by the principle that belief requires the ability of thought. But I see no reason to accept the claim. Certainly it is not true for lower iterations. “I think I’m an atheist,” is perfectly intelligible. So is, “I know for a fact that I think I’m an atheist.” The least the objector owes us is an explanation of why the alleged nonsensicality appears at higher levels.

38. This paper is one result of a Singapore Management University Research Project. I thank Tan Yoo Guan, Uriah Kriegel and two referees for very useful comments.