

Moore's Paradox: Use, Implicature, and Cause

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An assertion is a kind of utterance that has two distinguishing features: the speaker has evidence for and believes that which she is asserting (i.e., *P*).¹ The relationship between assertions and beliefs in the first-person assertive context poses a unique problem. The first-person assertive context is one in which a person asserts something about himself at the present moment. For example, suppose Tom makes the following assertion: "I believe that it is not raining, but as a matter of fact it is." Wittgenstein claims that Tom's assertion is absurd because the utterance of belief in *P* is *used* like the assertion *P*. If the utterance of belief is used like an assertion, then it is used like "It is not raining, but as a matter of fact it is." If this analysis is correct, then Tom's assertion is absurd because it is plainly contradictory.

However, an utterance of belief in *P* is not always used like the assertion *P*. Rather, G. E. Moore's explanation is more plausible: the person who makes an assertion *implies* that he believes that which he is asserting. Under this analysis, Tom would be implying "I believe it is not raining, but I believe that it is raining." Accordingly, Tom's assertion is absurd, not because his assertion is contradictory, but because his beliefs are contradictory.

Still, Moore's implicative relation between assertion and belief overlooks an important distinction: there are two ways of characterizing implication. A speaker can either intend to imply belief by making an assertion, or a speaker can imply belief by making an assertion because she ought to be following a maxim. My aim here is to adequately characterize the relation

¹ For further discussion on the nature of assertions, see Searle's "The Structure of Illocutionary Acts."

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between assertion and belief in order to account for the absurdity in Tom's assertion. Section I describes Moore's Paradox, contrasting the notion of *logical contradiction* with that of *absurdity*. Section II discusses the possibility of *using* a statement of belief like an assertion to account for the absurdity of Tom's assertion, and then sheds light on the inadequacies of this possibility. Section III discusses the possibility of *implying* a speaker's belief with an assertion to account for the absurdity, and develops an implicative relation that combines Moore's and Grice's conceptions of implicature. Section IV advances the conclusion that a particular kind of implicative relation between assertion and belief can account for the absurdity of Tom's assertion.

I. Moore's Paradox

Moore's Paradox arises upon uttering one of two sentences:

(M) "I do not believe it is raining, but as a matter of fact it is,"

or

(M') "I believe it is not raining, but as a matter of fact it is."

To begin, I will explain what I mean by "logical contradiction" and "absurdity." Both are properties of nonsensical statements. However, a logical contradiction is nonsensical merely because of the words in the statement, and an absurdity is nonsensical because its words are uttered in a specific context (Moore 207). I will focus on a particularly striking difference between the two: logical contradictions are preserved even if the tense or grammatical person is changed. In contrast, absurdities are not preserved if the tense or grammatical person is changed. Suppose Tom utters, "It is raining and it isn't raining." He has uttered a logical contradiction: *P* and not-*P*. Imagine that we change the tense of his utterance: "It was raining (at time *t*) and it was not raining (at time *t*)" [past], or "it will be raining (at time *t*) and it will not be raining (at time *t*)" [future]. Tom will still have uttered a contradiction, despite the change in tense. Now suppose Tom utters, "I am walking in the rain and I am not walking in the rain." Again, he has uttered a contradiction. Suppose then that we change the grammatical person referred to by Tom: "You are walking in the rain and you are not walking in the rain," or "He is walking in the rain and he is not walking in the rain." Tom will still have uttered a contradiction, despite the change in grammatical person.

In contrast, an absurdity, such as the one in (M) and (M'), does not hold in all tenses and all grammatical persons. Suppose Tom utters (M) in the past tense: "I did not believe it was raining, but as a matter of fact it was." (M) in the past tense is not contradictory. After all, Tom might not have believed it was raining because his office has no windows, but later found that it had been raining for several hours. Now suppose Tom utters (M) in the third-person: "He does not believe it is raining, but as a matter of fact it is." (M) in the third-person is not contradictory; Tom could be standing in the rain and speaking of James, who does not believe that it is raining because he is underground in a subway train. Hence, (M) and (M') are problematic only in the first-person assertive context.²

The two assertions (M) and (M') are absurd because they interfere with a system of norms concerning the relation between assertion and belief. In order to account for this absurdity, we need to answer two questions: (1) What is the relation between assertion and belief? Is it a use relation (as argued by Wittgenstein) or an implicative relation (as argued by Moore)? And (2) which normative system does it violate (i.e., theoretical rationality or practical rationality)?

First, in order to determine which set of norms (M) and (M') violate, we need to characterize the relation between assertion and belief. The relation between assertion and belief can be characterized as a use relation or an implicative relation. The use relation is a relation in which an utterance of belief is *used* like an assertion, or an assertion is *used* like an utterance of belief. For instance, the utterance "I believe the apple is red" is used like the utterance "The apple is red." The implicative relation is a relation in which a speaker who makes an assertion *implies* his belief in something. For instance, Mary implies with her assertion "I admit that the Red Sox won," that the statement "The Red Sox won" is true.

Second, once we know what the relation between assertion and belief is, we can determine whether (M) and (M') violate theoretical rationality or practical rationality. Theoretical rationality tracks the truth: it determines whether a statement is true or not irrespective of context of use. For instance, the following sentence is theoretically irrational: "Women are not females." Its irrationality is evident from the words in the proposition. In contrast, practical rationality determines what a speaker ought to say or do according to certain norms of action. For example, the following case is practically irrational according to economic norms: suppose Joe is about to make an investment. He may choose between (a) that which he knows will bring in fifty-percent profit, and (b) that which he knows will bring in one-hundred-percent profit. All other features of the two investment choices

² Henceforth I will refer to (M) and (M') as set in the first-person assertive context only.

are the same. He chooses the former. Joe's choice is clearly irrational in this particular context. However, if Joe were faced with the same choice, but now knew that (b) will bring in more profit in the first year, but (a) will bring in more profit in five years, then his choice (i.e., (a)) would not be irrational. Practical rationality can only be determined in specific contexts. Only once we have established what the relation is and to what set of norms it adheres can we adequately account for the absurdity in (M) and (M').

II. The Use Relation

I will begin this section with a closer look at the use relation. Wittgenstein's view is an exemplar of the use relation. He states, "Moore's paradox can be put like this: the expression 'I believe that this is the case' is used like the assertion 'This is the case'" (162). He nonetheless distinguishes between asserting "I believe *P*" and asserting "*P*"; "I believe *P*" is a *hesitant* assertion, and "*P*" is a *non-hesitant* assertion (Wittgenstein 164).³ If asserting "I believe *P*" were identical to asserting "*P*," it would be a redundant feature of our language. Rather, "I believe *P*" expresses a different kind of assertion (i.e., a hesitant assertion), such that the two are different species of the same genus (i.e., assertion).

With the use relation, we can characterize the absurdity of statements like (M'). If a statement of belief is used like an assertion, then (M') would become a contradiction: "It is not raining outside [a hesitant assertion], and it is raining outside [a non-hesitant assertion]."

According to Wittgenstein's view, Moore's Paradox arises because the utterance "I believe *P*" is used like an assertion rather than to report a speaker's state of mind. "He believes that *P*" and "You believe that *P*" are used to report someone's state of mind. In contrast, "I believe that *P*" is not; it is used like an assertion (Wittgenstein 163). If Wittgenstein is correct, then the relation between assertion and belief in (M') would be the use relation, because a statement of belief is *used* like an assertion (i.e., "I believe *P*" is used to assert "*P*"). Moreover, in Wittgenstein's view, (M') would violate theoretical rationality because it would be contradictory based on the words of the statement alone.

There is one primary problem with the use relation analysis of (M) and (M'). Although the use relation can explain the absurdity in (M'), it is unclear how it could explain the absurdity in (M). One could say that "I don't believe *P*" is a hesitant assertion of not-*P*, such that "I don't believe that *P*" has the same meaning as "I believe not-*P*." Accordingly, an utterance

³ Wittgenstein classifies "I believe *P*" as hesitant. I am introducing the description "non-hesitant" to classify assertions not of this type.

of (M) would become a contradiction: "It is not raining outside [a hesitant assertion], and it is raining outside [a non-hesitant assertion]." Nonetheless, there is a subtle but important distinction between "I don't believe *P*" and "I believe not-*P*." The first is not always used to imply a belief of not-*P*. Suppose Tom says "I don't believe it is raining," and Tim says "I believe it is not raining." According to Wittgenstein, the latter uses the statement like the assertion "It is not raining," making a hesitant assertion about the state of the weather. But even if this is correct, the former need not be making the assertion "It is not raining." Rather, Tom could be stating that he does not believe that it is raining, making an assertion about his state of mind. Perhaps Tom wants to say something along the lines of "I do not believe it is raining; I know it is." If Tom is making an assertion about his state of mind, then "I don't believe it is raining" would be in the same category as "he believes it is raining" and "you believe it is raining." Accordingly, if "I don't believe it is raining" is used like "he believes it is raining" and not like the assertion "It is not raining," then even assuming Wittgenstein's argument is correct, there ought not to arise an absurdity in (M) (compare Wittgenstein § 2.1).

The use relation analysis is problematic because it cannot be applied to all assertions of belief in the first-person assertive context, and correspondingly because it cannot explain both of Moore's paradox statements, (M) and (M').

III. Moore and Grice

I will now look at Moore's and Grice's implicative relation analysis, discussing how the two analyses can work together to account for the absurdity in (M) and (M'). Implication is an aspect of meaning that is neither the literal meaning of words nor what words logically imply (though these aspects of meaning may coincide). Rather, it is the meaning that the speaker conveys. For instance, suppose that Jim says "It is raining," and, just down the street, Sam says "It is raining." There is no difference between what the words mean in the two utterances. The difference lies in the implication of each utterance (Moore 209–10): Jim implies that he believes that it is raining; Sam implies that he, and not Jim, believes that it is raining. Moore's notion of implication (hereafter *I*) can be summed up as follows:

(I) By asserting *P*, *S* implies proposition *P*.

S implies a proposition with each assertion he makes. This proposition may or may not correspond to the literal meaning of the words in the assertion. Additionally, there is the implication of belief:

(I') By asserting *P*, *S* implies that *S* believes *P*.

If we apply (I) to (M) (i.e., “I do not believe it is raining, but as a matter of fact it is”), then there is a *contradiction* between a part of what one directly asserts (that one does not believe it is raining) and a proposition which is implied by the assertion “but as a matter of fact it is” (that one believes that it is raining). The assertion (M) is contradictory, because it is contradictory to believe and not believe something at the same time. If we apply (I) to (M'), then there is an *inconsistency* between part of what one directly asserts (that one believes it is not raining) and a proposition which is implied by the assertion “but as a matter of fact it is” (that one believes that it is raining). The assertion (M') is not contradictory the way (M) is, but rather is inconsistent because it demonstrates a contradiction of beliefs (that it is and is not raining). Although (M) and (M') are contradictory in different ways—the beliefs in (M) are contradictory, and, in contrast, the contents of the beliefs are contradictory in (M')—we can explain both cases of absurdity using the notion of implication.

Nonetheless, the notion of implication is tricky. Moore makes two classificatory comments in regards to (I):

- (1) A proposition itself does not imply belief: the proposition “it is raining” does not imply that I believe it is raining. “It is raining” ought to be asserted by someone.
- (2) A proposition asserted by S does not imply belief. S may say it is raining and be lying. (210)

Even though Moore does not elaborate further on these classificatory comments, they set the stage for Grice’s notion of implication. (1) distinguishes what words mean in a linguistic community from what a speaker means to say, and (2) sheds light on the possibility that an assertion by S, on its own, does not imply belief. (I) does not state a logical or semantic fact. Rather, (I) states an empirical fact: “in the immense majority of cases in which a person says a thing assertively, he does *believe* the proposition which his words express” (Moore 210).

In the case of Moore’s implicative relation, (M) violates practical rationality. We ought to believe *P* when we make an assertion *P*, because we imply belief in *P* when we assert *P*. Accordingly, we can recognize cases in which one does not believe another’s assertion, such as cases of lying.⁴ Nevertheless, Moore does not give a thorough account of the role of implication in communication, and this is where Grice’s view can fill in the gap.

In order to define implication, Grice distinguishes two kinds of meaning (“Meaning” 108–13): *natural* meaning and *non-natural* meaning.

⁴ For discussion on “sincerity conditions” of assertions, see Austin’s “Performative Utterances” and Searle’s “The Structure of Illocutionary Acts.”

Natural meaning is conveyed by a statement such as “those spots mean chickenpox,” because the statement suggests a relation of cause and effect—spots are an effect of having chickenpox. Non-natural meaning involves an agent who intends to communicate meaning through a certain speech act. For instance, Smith uttered “I can’t get on without my trouble and strife” intending to communicate that his wife is indispensable.

In light of Grice’s distinction between natural and non-natural meaning, (I) *could* have natural meaning: the assertion *P* causes the audience to think that “the utterer of *P* believes that *P*”—so the audience thinking “the utterer of *P* believes that *P*” is just an effect of the assertion *P*. However, the notion of natural meaning does not satisfy Moore’s two classificatory comments. According to Moore’s first classificatory comment, there ought to be a speaker asserting *P*; in contrast, natural meaning is not communicated by a speaker. Natural meaning is not classified as communication because communication is a normative act; in the example above, it is clear that the spots are not communicating “chickenpox.” Rather, (I) could have non-natural meaning: *S* asserts *P* intending the audience to recognize that he believes that *P*. Non-natural meaning follows a system of norms, and consequently is characterized as communication. This definition of meaning satisfies both of Moore’s classificatory comments.

Non-natural meaning is not merely that which is suggested. An especially telling instance of non-natural meaning is given by Grice in his example of Jones the athlete:

How we are to avoid saying, for example, that “Jones is tall” is part of what is non-naturally meant by “Jones is an athlete,” since to tell someone that Jones is an athlete would tend to make him believe that Jones is tall. Stevenson here resorts to invoking linguistic rules, namely a permissive rule of language that “athletes may be nontall.” This amounts to saying that we are not prohibited by rule from speaking of “nontall athletes.” But why are we not prohibited? Not because it is not bad grammar, or is not impolite, and so on, but presumably because it is not meaningless. (“Meaning” 110)

The Jones example sheds light on the possibility that although an utterance would tend to make someone believe something, the resulting belief is not necessarily part of the non-natural meaning of the utterance. The speaker may have uttered “Jones is an athlete” without intending to make a comment on Jones’s height. Accordingly, Grice grounds non-natural meaning in intention: an audience can understand what one says in terms of one’s intentions to produce a response (for instance, a belief) in an audience.

Accordingly, “S meant something by assertion *P*” (i.e., that he believes *P*) is true if, for some audience *A*, S uttered *P* intending three things:

- (1) *A* to produce a particular response *R* (in this case is, to believe that S believes *P*)
 - (2) *A* to think (recognize) that S intends (1)
 - (3) *A* to fulfill (1) on the basis of his fulfillment of (2).
- (“Meaning” 151)

The consequence of non-natural meaning for (I') is either (a) that by asserting *P*, S makes someone believe “S believes *P*,” even though “S believes *P*” is not necessarily part of the meaning of the assertion, or (b) that by asserting *P*, S intends to imply that S believes *P*. In (a), the relation between assertion and belief is derived from a rule in the linguistic community—a conversational maxim. In (b), the relation between assertion and belief is a speaker-implicative relation, because S explicitly intends to imply that S believes *P*.

The correct analysis of (I') is tricky. Just like the speaker in the athlete example did not intend to communicate that Jones is tall, we do not want to say that Tom intends to communicate his belief that *P* in the immense majority of cases (even though he may believe it). In the immense majority of cases, by uttering “It is raining outside,” Tom intends to communicate simply that it is raining outside. Accordingly, we cannot conclude from his assertion *P* that he intentionally implies that he believes *P*, and correspondingly the speaker-implicative relation does not correctly characterize (I').

Rather, let us try to characterize the implicative relation in (I') (i.e., by asserting *P*, S implies that S believes *P*) as a relation derived from a conversational maxim. The non-natural meaning that Grice grounds in intention is communicated by *conversational implicature*. During an act of spoken communication, conversational implicature is the act of communicating a meaning that is neither the literal meaning of the words nor what the words logically imply (though these aspects of meaning may coincide). Rather, the meaning is the effect produced (e.g., a belief) in an audience by means of the recognition of S's intended utterance *P*. To grasp the implicatures of a speaker's utterances, the audience assumes that the speaker is adhering to the Cooperative Principle.

Broadly, Grice's Cooperative Principle is defined as the cooperation between the speaker and the audience to ensure successful communication: “make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged” (“Logic” 173). There are four maxims of the Cooperative Principle: quantity, quality, relation, and manner. The

maxim of quantity states that one's utterance ought to be as informative as required (and, consequently, not more informative than required); The maxim of quality can be divided into two maxims: one ought not to say what one believes to be false, and one ought not to say that for which one lacks evidence; The maxim of relation states that one ought to say that which is relevant; And, the maxim of manner states that one's utterance ought to be clear and precise ("Logic" 173–74). When the speaker adheres to these four maxims, an audience can understand the conversational implicature. Without these maxims, it is difficult to imagine how speech could be meaningful: e.g., if a speaker could utter something he believed true or false with no maxim to adhere to, the audience would never be able to discern a truth from a lie.

It is plausible that (I') could be derived from the Cooperative Principle or a maxim we normally adhere to in everyday speech. For instance, (I') could be a stronger version of one of the maxims of quality: One ought not to say what one believes to be false. In light of this characterization of (I'), (M) would be absurd if *S* were adhering to the maxim of quality.

IV. Conversation-Implicative Relation

Moore set out requirements for (I') in his classificatory comments that he did not expand on. Above I suggested a possible link between the maxim of quality and (I'). Let us see if the maxim of quality fulfils the requirements of Moore's two classificatory comments given above. The first comment states that the words themselves do not assert belief, but a speaker does. The maxim of quality applies only to acts of communication, so a person ought to be asserting something. Accordingly, the first comment is satisfied. The second comment states that *S*, who asserts *P*, does not imply "S believes *P*," because *S* could be lying. The maxim of quality is not defined as follows: one *does not* say what one believes to be false. Rather, it is defined as follows: one *ought not* to say what one believes to be false. Accordingly, the second comment is also satisfied.

(I') is defined as follows: by asserting *P*, *S* implies that *S* believes *P*. In light of the maxim of quality, it is assumed that when *S* asserts *P*, *S* believes *P* (or more precisely, it is assumed that it is not the case that *S* believes not-*P*). (M) will become "I do not believe it is raining" and, according to assumptions based on the maxims of the Cooperative Principle, "I believe it is raining" (or, more precisely: it is not the case that "I believe it is not raining"). When *S* asserts (M), *S* has contradictory beliefs. Likewise, (M') will become "I believe it is not raining" and, according to assumptions based on the maxims of the Cooperative Principle, "I believe it is raining"

(or more precisely: it is not the case that “I believe it is not raining”). When S asserts (M'), the content of the speaker's beliefs is contradictory. I have shown, as Moore wanted to, a contradiction in the first person assertive context (either of beliefs or of the content of beliefs), such that unless S is flouting the maxim of quality (for instance, because S is lying), (M) and (M') are absurd.

Using Grice's theory of implicature, we were able to characterize the relation between assertion and belief as a relation derived from a maxim of conversation; and, using this characterization, we were able to adequately explain the absurdity in Moore's Paradox statements.

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