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MOORE'S PARADOX AND EPISTEMIC NORMS

Patrizio LO PRESTI

ABSTRACT: Why does it strike us as absurd to believe that it is raining and that one doesn't believe that it is raining? Some argue that it strikes us as absurd because belief is normative. The beliefs that it is raining and that one doesn't believe that it is are, it is suggested, self-falsifying. But, so it is argued, it is essential to belief that beliefs *ought* not, among other things, be self-falsifying. That is why the beliefs strike us as absurd. I argue that while the absurdity may consist in and be explained by self-falsification, we have no reasons to accept the further claim that self-falsifying beliefs are absurd because violating norms.

KEYWORDS: Moore's paradox, epistemic norms, normative explanation, absurdity

1. Moorean Absurdity

G.E. Moore¹ said that there's something 'absurd' with asserting, "It is raining but I don't believe that it is raining." Moore also found believing "He has gone out, but he hasn't" absurd. He found it paradoxical that the absurdity persists despite the possible truth of the proposition asserted or believed.² There are circumstances in which it is true both that it is raining and that I do not believe that it is raining. However, it appears absurd to assert, or believe, that it is raining and that I don't believe it. That, in a nutshell, is Moore's paradox.

Moore's paradox displays two faces: a linguistic and a psychological.³ The linguistic paradox is that it might be true both that it is raining and that I don't believe it although it would be strange of me to *assert* both. The psychological paradox is that it might be true both that it is raining and that I don't believe that

¹ G.E. Moore, "A Reply to My Critics," in *The Philosophy of G. E. Moore*, ed. P.A. Schlippe (New York: Tudor Publishing, 1942), 533-677. See also G.E. Moore, "Russell's Theory of Descriptions," in *The Philosophy of Bertrand Russell*, ed. P.A. Schlippe (New York: Tudor Publishing, 1944), 175-225.

² Thomas Baldwin, *G. E. Moore: Selected Writings* (London: Routledge, 1993). This point has also been made in D.M. Rosenthal, "Self-Knowledge and Moore's Paradox," *Philosophical Studies* 77 (1995): 195-209.

³ Jordi Fernández, "Self-Knowledge, Rationality and Moore's Paradox," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 71, 3 (2005): 533-556; Sydney Shoemaker, "Moore's Paradox and Self-Knowledge," *Philosophical Studies* 77 (1995): 211-228.

it is, although it would be strange for me to *believe* both.⁴ I will focus on the psychological version of the paradox.

Both faces of Moore's paradox display two profiles. We may distinguish between believing that

(1) p & I don't believe that p,

and,

(2) p & I believe that not-p.⁵

If you believe (1), you believe that p and that you don't believe that p. If you believe (2), you believe that p and that you believe that not-p. Both (1) and (2) thus involves a first-order belief, that is the first conjunct, and a second-order belief about the first-order belief, that is the second conjunct. In (1) the second-order belief is the belief that you lack belief in the first conjunct. Let us call this the *omissive* version of the paradox. In (2), in contrast, the second-order belief is the belief that you believe the negation of the first-order belief. Let us call this the *commissive* version of the paradox.⁶

I will assume, what is widely agreed, that belief distributes over conjunction.⁷ According to the distribution principle, if I believe that it is raining and that water consists of H₂O, I believe that it is raining and I believe that water consists of H₂O.

Distribution Principle: If I believe (p & q), then I believe that p and I believe that q.

From the Distribution Principle we may infer that if I believe the omissive (1), then

(3) I believe that p & I believe that I don't believe that p.

From the Distribution Principle we may also infer that if I believe the commissive (2), then

⁴ Rodrigo Borges, "How to Moore a Gettier: Notes on the Dark Side of Knowledge," *Logos & Episteme* V, 2 (2014): 133-140.

⁵ Mitchell S. Green and John N. Williams, "Moore's Paradox, Truth and Accuracy," *Acta Analytica* 26 (2011): 243-255; John N. Williams, "Moore's Paradox, Evan's Principle and Self-Knowledge," *Analysis* 64, 4 (2004): 348-353; John N. Williams, "Moore's Paradox and the Priority of Belief Thesis," *Philosophical Studies* 165 (2013): 1117-1138.

⁶ Green and Williams, "Moore's Paradox, Truth and Accuracy."

⁷ John N. Williams, "Moore's Paradox in Belief and Desire," *Acta Analytica* 29 (2014): 1-23; John N. Williams, "Wittgenstein, Moorean Absurdity and its Disappearance from Speech," *Synthese* 149, 1 (2006): 225-254.

(4) I believe that p & I believe that I believe that not-p.

Both (3) and (4) conserve the initial intuition that Moore-paradoxical beliefs are not first-order contradictions. In (3), since I have a first-order belief that p but not a second-order belief that I believe that p, the second-order belief that I believe that I don't believe that p does not contradict my first-order belief that p. Similarly, in (4), since I have a first-order belief that p but no second-order belief that I believe that p, the second-order belief that I believe that not-p does not contradict my first-order belief that p.

Hence, contradiction arises only by introduction of commutability of a double-belief principle, also known as the principle of Introspective Infallibility,⁸ namely:

Introspective Infallibility: If I believe that I (do not) believe that (not-) p then I (do not) believe that (not-) p.

By the principle of Introspective Infallibility we may infer that (3) is self-contradictory. The reason for this is that, under introspective infallibility, the second conjunct's second-order belief (the belief that I don't believe that p) collapses into a first-order omission of belief that p. But this, given the distribution principle, contradicts the first conjunct's first-order belief that p.

We may also infer that (4) is self-falsifying. The reason for this is that, under introspective infallibility, the second conjunct's second-order belief (the belief that I believe that not-p) collapses into a first-order belief that not-p. But this, given the distribution principle, falsifies the first conjunct's first-order belief that p.

The absurdity of Moore-paradoxical beliefs is now clear. The *contents* of the relevant beliefs have unproblematic truth-conditions. But *believing* that one has the beliefs is problematic. If one believes that one's Moore-paradoxical beliefs are true, then, by the Distribution Principle and the principle of Introspective Infallibility, either one has self-contradictory or self-falsifying beliefs. Hence we may conclude with Green and Williams that,

(6) The absurdity of Moore-paradoxical beliefs consists in either self-contradiction or self-falsification.

Note that what constitutes absurdity is not that the beliefs are necessarily false. (1) and (2), for all that (6) says, may be true. It is just that if one believes that one's belief in (1) or (2) is true, one's beliefs are either self-contradictory or self-falsifying.

⁸ Williams, "Moore's Paradox in Belief and Desire," 5.

Perhaps one disagrees with (6) on the basis that belief distribution or introspective infallibility is false. I will not attempt such an attack here. I will be concerned with suggested *explanations* of the absurdity, rather than with questioning the suggested *constitution* claims. The specific explanation I will argue against is the normative explanation that one *ought* or *may* not have the relevant beliefs. To that end I will grant proponents of such an explanation the premises needed to arrive at (6) – namely both the Distribution Principle and the principle of Introspective Infallibility. Let us grant, then, that the absurdity of Moore-paradoxical beliefs *consists in* self-contradiction or self-falsification, pending whether it is the omission or commissive form that is at issue.

2. Beliefs and Norms

It has been suggested that what explains the absurdity of Moore-paradoxical belief is epistemic norms. Epistemic norms impinge oughts on doxastic states in general. There are many proposals about precisely what is normative about doxastic states.⁹ To understand what about epistemic normativity could possibly account for Moorean absurdity we have first to disambiguate the sweeping claim that belief is normative. That is what I turn to in this section.

Norms are usually supposed to be *imperatives*. For instance, the norm not to cheat has the imperative form: you *ought not* cheat. Some norms may be *conditional* imperatives. For instance, there may be a fairness norm to share with those who have less. This norm has the conditional imperative form: *if S has less than you, then you ought to share with S*. The deontic force of the imperative characteristic of norms is not necessarily obligatory though.¹⁰ Instead of impinging *oughts*, a norm may have the force of a *may*; instead of having obligatory deontic force norms may have permissible deontic force.¹¹ The fairness norm with obligatory deontic force would make it normatively incorrect to not share with those who have less. In contrast, if the same norm had permissibility-force it would not be normatively incorrect to not share with those who have less, since in that case the norm states that you *may* share with those who have less, not that you *ought* to. Not sharing in that case is to not do what you're permitted to.

Epistemic norms likewise impinge imperatives on doxastic states. The deontic force of epistemic norms may be conditional or not, and they may apply to

⁹ Clayton Littlejohn, "Are Epistemic Reasons Ever Reasons to Promote?" *Logos & Episteme* IV, 3 (2013): 353–360.

¹⁰ Pascal Engel, "Sosa on the Normativity of Belief," *Philosophical Studies* 166 (2013): 617–624.

¹¹ Clayton Littlejohn, "Moore's Paradox and Epistemic Norms," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 88, 1 (2010): 79–100.

doxastic states as obligations or permissions.¹² But apart from their formal deontic properties, there's also an important difference between the *contents* of epistemic norms. The content of epistemic norms depends on what aspect of doxastic states they are supposed to govern; truth-value, evidential support, justification, etc. These distinctions open up a logical space for a fauna of epistemic norms. The first to be considered among epistemic norms is the truth norm in obligatory form:¹³ namely,

Obligatory truth norm: You ought to believe that p only if p.

This norm obliges one to believe only what is true – even if not *all* truths, since it does not have the form ‘if p you ought to believe that p.’¹⁴ The obligatory truth norm can be translated into permissive form,¹⁵ thus:

Permissive truth norm: You may believe that p only if p.

The difference between the obligatory and permissive force of these norms may be brought out by substitution of the positive obligatory with obligatory negative form. In that case the obligatory imperative ‘ought’ translates into the conditional imperative ‘ought *not* believe that p *unless* p.’ This negative form is imperatively equivalent in force to the positive permissive. According to the latter, you are permitted to believe that p only if p, which is equivalent to being obliged not to believe that p unless p.

A second epistemic norm to consider is the evidence norm,¹⁶ namely:

Obligatory evidence norm: You ought to believe that p only if you have sufficient evidence that p.

The ‘sufficient evidence’ criterion may be cashed out in a variety of manners depending on one’s analysis of ‘evidence’.¹⁷ Suppose I believe that it is raining in Reykjavik. One way for my belief to be in accord with the obligatory evidence norm is if I observe the rain myself, if I hear meteorological reports that it is raining in Reykjavik, etc. We may accept that some state or proposition *e*

¹² Anthony Booth and Rik Peels, “Epistemic Justification, Rights, and Permissibility,” *Logos & Episteme* III, 3 (2012): 405–411.

¹³ Paul A. Boghossian, “The Normativity of Content,” *Philosophical Issues* 13 (2003): 31–45.

¹⁴ Nishi Shaw and J. David Velleman, “Doxastic Deliberation,” *The Philosophical Review* 114, 4 (2005): 497–534; Pascal Engel, “Belief and Normativity,” *Disputatio* 2, 23 (2007): 179–203.

¹⁵ Littlejohn, “Moore’s Paradox and Epistemic Norms.”

¹⁶ Timothy Williamson, *Knowledge and its Limits* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); cf. Claudio de Almeida, “What Moore’s Paradox Is About,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 62, 1 (2001): 33–58.

¹⁷ Engel, “Belief and Normativity,” 185.

qualifies as evidence that p only if it raises the probability that p above some threshold integer, or only if it raises the probability of p above the probability of p in the absence of e .¹⁸ Either way the idea is that you ought to believe that p only if the probability of p given e meets the relevant qualifier for e . The corresponding permissive force of the evidence norm is,

Permissive evidence norm: You may believe that p only if you have sufficient evidence that p .

This norm differs from the former obligatory in that if you do *not* believe that p given e you're not normatively incorrect, since in this case you're simply not exerting permission. In the former obligatory form this would be incorrect though. For in that case you do not just not utilize permission but violate an obligation.¹⁹

It may, thirdly, be suggested that *knowledge* is an epistemic norm for doxastic states.²⁰ The knowledge norm with obligatory deontic force reads:

Obligatory knowledge norm: You ought to believe that p only if you know that p .

The imperatival force of this norm is that your belief that p is as it ought to be just in case you know that p is true. The knowledge-norm thus differs from the truth-norm in there being circumstances in which your belief that p is in accord with the latter but in violation of the former. There are circumstances in which your belief that p is true but you don't know it.²¹ Translating the knowledge norm into its permissive counterpart, we get:

Permissive knowledge norm: You may believe that p only if you know that p .

It should be clear by now in what the difference between the obligatory and permissive force of the relevant norm consists. In the former obligatory you are wrong in not believing that p if you know that p whereas, in the latter permissive, you are not wrong if you don't believe that p when you know that p since it says that you *may* believe that p only if you know that p . The permissive knowledge norm and the permissive truth norm differ in a similar manner to how their

¹⁸ Franck Lihoreau, "Are Reasons Evidence of Oughts?" *Logos & Episteme* III, 1 (2012): 153-160.

¹⁹ Conor McHugh, "Beliefs and Aims," *Philosophical Studies* 160 (2012): 425-439.

²⁰ Littlejohn, "Are Epistemic Reasons Ever Reasons to Promote?"; Declan Smithies, "The Normative Role of Knowledge," *Nous* 46, 2 (2012): 265-288; Michael Huemer, "Moore's Paradox and the Norm of Belief," in *Themes from G. E. Moore: New Essays in Epistemology and Ethics*, eds. Susana Nuccetelli and Gary Seay (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 142-158.

²¹ David Owens, *Reasons Without Freedom* (London: Routledge, 2000); David Owens, "Does Belief Have an Aim?" *Philosophical Studies* 115 (2003): 283-305.

obligatory versions differ. That is, there are circumstances in which a belief that p is permitted courtesy p being true whereas, if p is not known, believing p in those circumstances violates the permissive truth norm.²²

Note that the above kinds of norms may support each other in various ways.²³ Endorsement of either version of the knowledge norm naturally supports endorsement of the conjunction of the corresponding version of the truth and evidence norms. The reason for that is that if you accept that it is correct to believe that p only if one knows that p, then, on most accounts of knowledge, p must be true and the belief that p enjoy some kind of support.²⁴ This norm-conglomeration is not necessary though. You may endorse either version of the evidence norm, for instance, yet deny both versions of the truth norm on the grounds that given accord with the former your belief is permitted even if false.²⁵ Then again, you may argue that there's no *absolute* norm of belief but that beliefs may be correct or incorrect in many different respects simultaneously.²⁶ In some circumstances the normative correctness of doxastic states may be adjudicated by their truth-value while, in others, it may be adjudicated by evidential support.

We have now distinguished epistemic norms according to their *contents* – whether the aspect of doxastic states that the norms are about is truth-value, evidential support, or knowledge – and according to *deontic force* – whether the norms take obligatory and permissive form. We have also considered the possibility of combining these in various respects. But epistemic norms may be distinguished along a further, third axis, namely, according to in what relation doxastic states are supposed to stand to the different imperatives. Irrespective of a norm's content and force we may ask how the norm applies to doxastic states to begin with. Suppose, for instance, that I believe that water has the chemical composition CH₄. Then you tell me that I ought not have that belief because it is false. I might then wonder what the nature of the purported relation between my belief and the norm is. There are basically two alternative understandings of how imperatives attach to doxastic states.

One proposal is that the nature of the relation between beliefs and norms is conceptual.²⁷ On this account, it is analytically true that a belief is correct only if it is in accord with the relevant norm.

²² Williamson, *Knowledge and its Limits*.

²³ Littlejohn, "Moore's Paradox and Epistemic Norms."

²⁴ Williamson, *Knowledge and its Limits*.

²⁵ Boghossian, "The Normativity of Content."

²⁶ José L. Zalabardo, "Why Believe the Truth? Shah and Velleman on the Aim of Belief," *Philosophical Explorations* 13, 1 (2010): 1-21.

²⁷ Engel, "Sosa on the Normativity of Belief," 621.

Conceptual claim: The concept of belief is such that the belief-norm applies to all beliefs.

Suppose, e.g., that the norm under consideration is the truth norm in obligatory form. According to the conceptual claim²⁸ the norm would read:

Conceptual obligatory truth norm: The concept of belief is such that, for all beliefs, you ought to believe that p only if p.

My belief that water is CH₄ would then be incorrect according to our understanding of the concept ‘belief.’ We cannot understand something as a belief, the suggestion is, without understanding it as something one is obliged to if true, thus as incorrect if false. By believing that water is CH₄ I violate an obligation to believe only truths – an obligation attached to belief by definition. Consider in contrast the truth norm with permissive force.²⁹ From the conceptual claim we then get,

Conceptual permissive truth norm: The concept of belief is such that, for all beliefs, you may believe that p only if p.

In this case my belief that water is CH₄ is, again, incorrect according to how we conceptualize belief, because I am not permitted to that belief given that water is not CH₄. However, *were* water CH₄ but I did not believe it, the omission of belief would not be incorrect, since I would then merely have not utilized a permission to believe.

The evidence and knowledge norms are easily translatable into the conceptual claim. All we have to do is to substitute them for ‘the belief-norm’ in the conceptual claim. I will not waste space making them explicit here. All that is required is to insert ‘the concept of belief is such that...’ before the imperative ‘ought’ or ‘may’ in the relevant norm above. This would yield the norm that, for instance, the concept of belief is such that you may believe that water is CH₄ only if there is some proposition *e* such that the probability that water is CH₄ given *e* is higher than water not being CH₄.

The other answer to our inquiry into the nature of the relation between alleged epistemic norms and doxastic states is that the relation is metaphysical. It is claimed that the *nature* of the psychological state that is belief is such that it is normatively regulated.³⁰ This metaphysical connection is often spelled out in term

²⁸ Shah and Velleman, “Doxastic Deliberation,” 252; David Velleman, *The Possibility of Practical Reason* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), 277–278.

²⁹ Littlejohn, “Moore’s Paradox and Epistemic Norms.”

³⁰ Ralph Wedgwood, “The Aim of Belief,” *Philosophical Perspectives* 16 (2002): 267–297.

of the ‘aim of belief’.³¹ The aim of cognitive mechanisms responsible for belief production are such that, as the familiar slogan has it, their aim is the production of a state whose representational content fits the world.³² If the produced state’s contents don’t fit the world it is incorrect. Another slogan that quite pinpoints the idea is of normative principles ‘built into’ our cognitive apparatuses.³³ We may formulate the relevant connection thus:

Metaphysical claim: The nature of belief is such that the belief-norm applies to all beliefs.

The procedure of disambiguation of various contents and force of metaphysical belief-norms should be clear by now. Substituting the truth-, evidence- or knowledge norm in either obligatory or permissive form for ‘the belief-norm’ in the metaphysical claim yield the corresponding specification. For example, introducing the truth norm with obligatory deontic force gives,

Metaphysical obligatory truth norm: The nature of belief is such that, for all beliefs, you ought to believe that p only if p,

and so on for the other norms and deontic forces. To avoid tedious repetitions I’ll avoid spelling out their exact formulations here. If necessary we may do so at any point in the argument.

The difference between the conceptual and metaphysical construal of the relation between epistemic norms and doxastic states is this. The conceptual claim entails that possession of the concept of belief is sufficient for a subject to recognize that, were his belief that p to violate the relevant norm, then his belief would be normatively incorrect.³⁴ What explains incorrectness in this case is the norm analytic to the concept of belief. On the metaphysical construal, in contrast, insofar one has, say, a representation-dedicated cognitive module with the aim of supplying truth-valued representations,³⁵ then satisfaction of that aim suffices for the output cognitive states to be in accord with the relevant norm. Here it is the

³¹ Benjamin W. Jarvis, “Norms of Intentionality: Norms that don’t Guide,” *Philosophical Studies* 157 (2012): 1-25.

³² Bernard Williams, *Problems of the Self* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1973); Asbjorn Steglich-Petersen, “No Norm Needed: On the Aim of Belief,” *The Philosophical Quarterly* 56, 225 (2006): 499-516; Asbjorn Steglich-Petersen, “Weighing the Aim of Belief,” *Philosophical Studies* 145 (2009): 395-405.

³³ Ralph Wedgwood, “The A Priori Rules of Rationality,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 59, 1 (1999): 113-131.

³⁴ Pascal Engel, “Is Truth a Norm?” in *Interpreting Davidson*, eds. Petr Kotátko, Peter Pagin, and Gabriel Segal (Stanford: CSLI Press, 2001), 37-51.

³⁵ Wedgwood, “The A Priori Rules of Rationality,” 130.

nature of the state that determines its correctness conditions, or vice versa, depending on the order of metaphysical determination alleged to obtain between epistemic norms and doxastic states.³⁶ It may be suggested that norms determine the nature of the state, or, the other way round, that the nature of the state determines what norms apply. Either way, when it comes to the analyticity of norms of belief suggested by the *conceptual claim*, the *nature* of the state as such is secondary to the application of the norm, while it is the other way round for the *metaphysical claim*. According to the latter, whatever *definition* we use to distinguish beliefs from other psychological states beliefs are different ultimately with reference to the ‘aim’ or ‘goal’ that govern their production.

To conclude this section, we find that the claim that belief is normative admits of a multitude of specifications. Normativity claims, unless properly disambiguated, are quite sweeping. I have tried to provide some specifications here. According to the specifications provided, there are three kinds of norms, each with an obligatory and a permissive form that might be understood as conceptually or metaphysically related to doxastic states. This basically yields twelve versions of belief-normativism (if we abstract from combinations of kinds of norms, such as the knowledge- and truth-norms). We’re now in a position to home in on and criticise various claims that the reason why Moore-paradoxical beliefs are absurd is that they violate epistemic norms.

3. First Attempted Normative Explanation of Absurdity

Green and Williams³⁷ suggest that the absurdity of Moore-paradoxical belief consists in severe violations of belief-norms: “Do not form – or continue to have – a specific belief that you can reasonably expect to be false” and “Do not form – or continue to have – a specific belief that you can be reasonably expected to see is self-falsifying.”³⁸ These are norms that any “epistemically rational” believer “certainly would endorse.”³⁹ Epistemic rationality is to be understood as “that property of one’s acquiring or continuing to have it [the belief] that turns it, if true and not Gettierized, into knowledge.”⁴⁰

Commissive Moore-paradoxical beliefs are suggested to violate the norm not to form or continue to have self-falsifying beliefs. Therefore, this account has

³⁶ Kathrin Glüer and Åsa Wikforss, “Against Content Normativity,” *Mind* 118, 469 (2009): 31–70.

³⁷ Green and Williams, “Moore’s Paradox, Truth and Accuracy,” 249.

³⁸ Williams, “Moore’s Paradox and Priority of Belief Thesis,” 14.

³⁹ Williams, “Moore’s Paradox and Priority of Belief Thesis,” 14.

⁴⁰ Williams, “Moore’s Paradox in Belief and Desire,” 2.

it, Moore-paradoxical beliefs are absurd. Moore-paradoxical beliefs are not necessarily irrational, though. One will not always be “in a position to see” that one’s beliefs are in violation of the relevant norms.⁴¹ So absurdity is a violation of belief-norms but it isn’t surface-level self-falsification. This seems right. It preserves the conclusion arrived at in the first section, that Moorean absurdity is a property of conjugated second- and first-order beliefs that falsify or contradict each other under distribution and introspective infallibility.⁴² I agree with Green and Williams up to (6). We agree that if I form or continue to have the commissive Moore-paradoxical belief,

(2) p & I believe that not-p,

then, by introducing the Distribution Principle,

(DP 2) I believe that p & I believe that I believe that not-p,

which, given the principle of Introspective Infallibility, yields:

(7) I believe that p & I believe that not-p.⁴³

The conjuncts of the belief falsify one another. To arrive at this conclusion we’ve granted Green and Williams the auxiliary principles of distribution and infallibility they need. In other words, we are in agreement that what *constitutes* absurdity is that the beliefs are self-falsifying. But Green and Williams makes a further claim. The further claim is that what *explains* the absurdity is violations of belief-norms.⁴⁴ Here I find reason to disagree.

The relevant norm is that one ought not form or continue to have beliefs that are self-falsifying.⁴⁵ Given that commissive Moore-paradoxical beliefs are self-falsifying they violate the relevant norm. That is why, Green and Williams argue, the beliefs are absurd. Green and Williams’s normative account should be rejected for the reason that one might accept that the beliefs are absurd because self-falsifying while rejecting that self-falsifying beliefs are norm-violations. We may agree that what *constitutes* the absurdity of commissive Moore-paradoxical beliefs is that their contents are in tension, granted the agreed upon premises. And so we may answer the question *why* a commissive Moore-paradoxical belief is absurd by pointing out that forming or continuing to have it is to form or continue to have a

⁴¹ Green and Williams, “Moore’s Paradox, Truth and Accuracy,” 250.

⁴² Williams, “Moore’s Paradox in Belief and Desire,” 5.

⁴³ Williams, “Moore’s Paradox in Belief and Desire,” 6.

⁴⁴ Green and Williams, “Moore’s Paradox, Truth and Accuracy,” 249-250; Williams, “Moore’s Paradox and the Priority of Belief Thesis,” 15-16.

⁴⁵ Williams, “Moore’s Paradox in Belief and Desire,” 6-7.

belief whose conjuncts falsify each other. The absurdity is then *explained* by the fact that *believing* that p and that one believes that not-p, collapses, given the Distribution Principle and the principle of Introspective Infallibility, on which we agree for the sake of argument, into a self-falsifying belief. But that there is an *additional* reason why the beliefs are absurd, namely because an epistemic *norm* not to form or continue to have the relevant beliefs is violated, finds no support in the argument.

To illustrate, consider the beliefs that, say, it is raining and that it is not raining. Suppose I form or continue to have both. I then have self-falsifying beliefs. If I believe one then the other must be false. Now, my *reasons* for forming or continuing to have both beliefs or, indeed, my reasons for not forming both or for abandoning either, might be a range of reasons none of which necessarily is the reason that I *ought* or ought *not* to form or continue to have both. What constitutes the absurdity appears to be that the beliefs are self-falsifying. That is all well and good. But in order for it to be true that what *explains* the absurdity is a violation of epistemic norms it is necessary that at least part of what does the explanatory work is my having a reason that I *ought* or ought *not* to form or continue to have the beliefs. I do not violate or conform to a norm if, by chance, I *happen* to be wrong or right. It should rather be the case that, if we're interested in *normative* explanation, I form or continue to have the beliefs in question because I recognize that I ought *not* or *ought* to form or continue to have them.

As far as Green and Williams's argument is concerned, and I see no reason to disagree, nothing suggests that part of anyone's reasons for forming or continuing to have Moore-paradoxical beliefs is that they *ought* or ought *not* to. Admittedly, Green and Williams suggest that it is only if one recognizes that one's beliefs would be self-falsifying that they are absurd. But, surely, one might recognize that one has absurd beliefs in the sense of their being self-falsifying without it *also* being the case that one has the beliefs even partly for the reason that one ought or ought not to. Hence, Green and Williams might be entirely right that the absurdity of Moore-paradoxical belief consists in self-falsification, yet not thereby having provided any reason for accepting that the absurdity is explained by violations of epistemic norms.

It may be objected, by those of normativist persuasion, that belief, the psychological state as such, still 'aims at truth,' or is 'directed to fit' the world.⁴⁶ And, in that sense of 'normative,' beliefs that fail to meet this aim or that don't fit the world, as is the case of Moore-paradoxical beliefs *if* believed to be true by the

⁴⁶ Cf. Daniel Whiting, "Does Belief Aim (Only) at the Truth?" *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 93, 2 (2012): 279-300.

believer, would be wrong no matter for what reasons the believer form or continue to have them. More generally, the point may be the metaphysical normative claim that if a psychological state does not have the relevant aim, is not governed by the relevant direction of fit, then it is not a belief. And, if it fails to meet its aim, or fails to 'fit,' then it is normatively incorrect no matter what the reasons are for which the believer forms or continues to have the relevant beliefs. To this I respond that we may accept that beliefs necessarily 'aim at truth' or 'aim to fit the world,' and that any epistemically rational believer would accept this.⁴⁷ Beliefs that fail to meet this aim would be, let us say, incorrect or wrong. However, if 'incorrect' and 'wrong' in this context is not to be understood in relation to the believer's normative reasons, then 'wrong' and 'incorrect' can be made perfect sense of as *descriptive* terms. Straightforwardly, false beliefs are 'incorrect' precisely because false.⁴⁸ It would be untoward to speak of false beliefs that aim at truth, but not necessarily for any subjective normative reason, as incorrect or wrong because they *violate* oughts. A belief as such does not violate anything; it is true or false. Only by recognizing, but going against, a reason can one violate it. A belief, however, does not have reasons for its own formation or maintenance, much less *normative* reasons. Hence, if a belief is true or false it may be correct or incorrect in the descriptive sense. But if it is not for any normative reason that 'correct' and 'incorrect' apply, there seems to me nothing left from which a *normative* understanding of 'correct' and 'incorrect' can derive plausibility. Therefore, this objection fails. Moving to the metaphysical normative claim in defence of a normative explanation of Moore-paradoxical beliefs is to move away from whatever may originally have lent such an explanation support.

In a similar vein of response to the metaphysical move, I may believe that it is raining yet believe that I do not believe this, and perhaps be self-contradictory and 'absurd,' for a number of reasons. But this does not suffice for the *additional* claim that, nor does it seem necessary for the claim that, I have any particular *normative* reason stating that I ought or ought not form or continue to have the beliefs. Therefore, even accepting metaphysical claims about the 'aim' of belief, no normative constituency claim about, or normative explanation of, false beliefs follow. Likewise, the absurdity of self-falsifying beliefs, as we assume that some Moore-paradoxical beliefs are, would still not consist in or necessitate an explanation in terms of norm-violation. At least, insofar we agree with Green and Williams's premises, no normative conclusion follows.

⁴⁷ Green and Williams, "Moore's Paradox, Truth and Accuracy."

⁴⁸ Glüer and Wikforss, "Against Content Normativity," 35-36; Fred Dretske, "Norms, History and the Mental," *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 49 (2001): 87-104.

Perhaps it will still be objected that Green and Williams's point is that the absurdity of Moore-paradoxical beliefs consists in and is explained by norm-violations if I can be *reasonably expected to recognize* that the beliefs would be self-falsifying.⁴⁹ As Williams puts it, "I violate the norm ... because I may be reasonably expected to see that my belief is self-falsifying."⁵⁰ There are two reasons why the response does not avail the normativity part of Green and Williams's approach.

The first reason is that Moore-paradoxical beliefs appear no *less* absurd merely because one does not to recognize that they would be, say, self-falsifying, and thereby in violation of alleged norms. My belief, e.g., that it is raining and that I believe that it is not raining, bears the hallmark of absurdity because, we are assuming, it is self-falsifying. It would be absurd even if I do not *also* recognize that it is self-falsifying and even if I do not *also* recognize that the belief would violate some alleged norms of belief. Similarly, it appears no *less* 'correct' to reject that it is not raining if I believe that it is raining than it would be 'correct' to do so *and* do it because I recognize that one *ought* to. The beliefs are absurd or not quite irrespective of one *also* recognizing that they violate or conform to norms.⁵¹ Hence, the suggestion that it is only if I recognize that my Moore-paradoxical beliefs would be in violation of epistemic norms that my Moore-paradoxical beliefs are absurd does not avail Green and Williams's account.

The other reason for rejecting the present response is that a vicious regress ensues if the absurdity of Moore-paradoxical beliefs consists in forming or continuing to have them despite recognizing that in forming or continuing to have them one violates belief-norms. To 'recognize' beliefs as violating norms requires, minimally, believing that they would violate the relevant norms. If this is *not* required, then it cannot be *because of norm-violations* that one's beliefs are absurd, because a necessary means to *violate* is to believe that one ought (not) form some belief, yet, despite this, form (or not form) it.

To demonstrate how the regress will inevitably be engendered if we accept the normative part of Green and Williams's account, suppose that we grant their point that it is only by recognizing the normative incorrectness of one's beliefs, yet continuing to have them, that the beliefs are absurd. From this we may infer that beliefs are absurd only if one has a second-order belief that the beliefs are incorrect. That is, unless one is in a position to recognize, i.e., minimally, believe,

⁴⁹ Williams, "Moore's Paradox in Belief and Desire," 7.

⁵⁰ Williams, "Moore's Paradox in Belief and Desire."

⁵¹ Kathrin Glüer and Åsa Wikforss, "Aiming at Truth: On the Role of Belief," *Teorema* 32, 3 (2013): 137-162.

that one's beliefs are incorrect then they are not absurd. But now the necessary *second-order belief* about the normative incorrectness of one's first-order beliefs, qua itself a belief, will, on the normative proposal, be subject to the relevant epistemic norms. The second-order belief about the incorrectness of any first-order belief may itself be absurd, if it violates epistemic norms and I am in a position to recognize that this is the case. (In fact, if my second-order belief so much as *could* give rise to absurdity, *absent* recognition that it violates some alleged norm, then Green and Williams's account will be falsified. For in that case there is absurdity that does not consist in or is explained by norm-violations. On the other hand, if the second-order belief is *not* susceptible to epistemic norms just like the first-order beliefs, then the normative account will also be falsified. For then we have beliefs that may be false or self-falsifying yet not violate norms.) Suppose now that I form the necessary second-order belief about the normative incorrectness of my Moore-paradoxical beliefs and I recognize that my Moore-paradoxical beliefs would be in violation of epistemic norms. The obvious question then is: Is my second-order belief that my Moore-paradoxical belief is normatively incorrect itself normatively correct or incorrect? If we accept Green and Williams's normative account, then we can explain the absurdity or lack of absurdity of my second-order belief only by settling whether I recognize, i.e., minimally, believe, that it violates (or not) the relevant epistemic norms. I now form the necessary third-order belief about the normative correctness or incorrectness of my second-order belief that my Moore-paradoxical beliefs are normatively incorrect...⁵² Again, assuming that it is *possible* that higher-order beliefs are false or self-falsifying in relation to the lower-order beliefs that they are about, we again face the dilemma of settling whether the higher-order belief is absurd or not. If *it*, the third-order belief, cannot be absurd or not, then it is not the case that belief is normative. In that case, the prospects for providing a *normative* account of Moorean absurdity dims significantly. But if the higher-order beliefs can themselves be absurd for the normative reasons defended by Greens and Williams, then they would be absurd because I recognize, i.e., minimally, believe, that they violate some epistemic norm. In that case the regress pushes us towards absurdity for as long as we maintain that Moorean absurdity consists in or is explained by epistemic norms in the sense advocated by Green and Williams.

⁵² Note that what I refer to as a second-order belief in this argument is actually a third-order belief, and the third-order belief a fourth-order belief. The reason for this is that a Moore-paradoxical belief itself embodies a second-order belief about a first-order belief. So any belief about Moore-paradoxical beliefs will begin at the third-order.

The absurd consequence of the normative part of Green and Williams's account is, then, that in order for Moore-paradoxical beliefs to *be* absurd the believer must form ever higher-order beliefs. The only way out of this dilemma is to recognize that belief, including Moore-paradoxical beliefs, may be absurd for no normative reason but because they are, say, self-falsifying or self-contradictory. This is what Green and Williams's argument shows.

4. Second Attempted Normative Explanation

In this section we find reasons to reject another suggestion that Moorean absurdity consists in and is explained by violations of epistemic norms. The suggestion is due to Pascal Engel. He writes,

The reason why they [Moore-paradoxical beliefs] are paradoxical and the reason why we hesitate to attribute to the agent both the belief that P and the belief that not P is that when someone has a belief that P, he thereby has the belief that P is *true*. If he comes to believe (consciously, at the same time) that his belief that P is false, then either he does not have either one belief, or he is *not really* ... in a state of belief. So even someone who, for any reason, is not moved by an interest for truth, or who rejects the idea that it can be a goal for his beliefs, has to recognize that truth is what his beliefs are aiming at, *in virtue of their being beliefs*.⁵³

To be fair, Engel's general aim in this context is not to explain the absurdity of Moore-paradoxical beliefs. Even so, the passage is illuminating. In a recent paper Engel adds that, that beliefs aim at truth "is not true in the descriptive or causal sense ... It has to be true in the sense of conceptual necessity, or of normative necessity."⁵⁴ There are three points worthy to highlight in the quoted passage.

First, note that Engel says that we hesitate to attribute Moore-paradoxical beliefs because it involves attributing "both the belief that p and the belief that not-p." Engel seems to misunderstand Moore-paradoxical beliefs. To begin with, not all Moore-paradoxical beliefs have this form. In some cases, namely in the *omissive* version of the paradox, the belief is (1) "p but I don't believe that p." Engel does not mention this. His next point, that if one believes that p then one believes that p is true, will thus not apply to Moorean absurdity in general. On the other hand, the *commissive* form of the paradox that Engel mentions, in particular, has the form of (2) "p but I believe that not-p." What you should attribute to me if I have *this* belief is not the first-order beliefs that p and that not-

⁵³ Engel, "Is Truth a Norm?" 49 (emphases added).

⁵⁴ Engel, "Sosa on the Normativity of Belief," 621; Shah and Velleman, "Doxastic Deliberation," 525; Shah, "How Truth Governs Belief," *The Philosophical Review* 112, 4 (2003): 447–482.

p, but the first-order belief that p and the *second-order* belief that I believe that not-p. Otherwise the Distribution Principle yields surface-level contradiction. And that, it is clear, is not what Moore's paradox is about.⁵⁵ Perhaps Engel implicitly assumes that the principle of Introspective Infallibility is correct. We have, for the sake of argument, granted that principle. Even so, one would require some further support of it if it were to carry the weight it does here. However, let us grant again, for the sake of consistency, that the principle of Introspective Infallibility is correct.

Engel's approach then faces a second dilemma. He claims that if I come to believe that one of my Moore-paradoxical beliefs is false, then either I don't *really* have both or I'm not *really* in a state of belief with regard to one of them. In a sense then, I cannot really have both beliefs. And this is true "in the sense of conceptual necessity, or of normative necessity." That is, since there are cases in which we in fact fail to 'hit at' truth when forming beliefs, it is not the case that we *do* believe only truths, but that we *ought* to believe only truths.⁵⁶ Engel's proposal, then, is this. My belief that

(2) p and I believe that not-p

is absurd because

Conceptual Truth Norm: The concept of belief is such that, for all beliefs, you ought to believe that p only if p.

Furthermore, we saw that Engel deploys what we might call the thesis of Normative Resistance:

Normative Resistance: If you believe that your belief that 'p and I believe that not-p' violates the conceptual truth norm, then either you do not *really* believe one of the conjuncts or you are not really in a state of *belief* with regard to one of them.

The thesis of Normative Resistance is problematic. If we accept it, then Moore-paradoxical beliefs are impossible. Here's why. According to the thesis, if I believe that p and that I believe that not-p, then either I *cannot* believe both conjuncts, or I'm not in a state of *belief*. In that case I cannot really believe that p and that I believe that not-p. Now, if I cannot believe this then I cannot really have the Moore-paradoxical belief. But what is to be accounted for is precisely the absurdity of beliefs of the form (2) "p, but I believe that not-p." Supposing that Normative Resistance is correct, in conjunction with the conceptual truth norm,

⁵⁵ de Almeida, "What Moore's Paradox is About."

⁵⁶ Engel, "Belief and Normativity."

makes this belief impossible. This, in turn, is problematic for two reasons. On the one hand, we have established that it is perfectly possible for it to be the case that *p* and that I believe that *not-p*.⁵⁷ Indeed, and this is the other problem, the situation had better *not* be impossible. For if it were, then the explanation would explain nothing. The explanans – the conceptual truth norm and the thesis of Normative Resistance – render the explanandum – the belief that *p* and that I believe that *not-p* – impossible. But then the explanation is itself contradictory. It starts out by having us imagine an instance of Moore-paradoxical beliefs. It then attempts to explain what is paradoxical in terms of norms that apply to beliefs by conceptual necessity. But it thereby renders the beliefs in question impossible by conceptual necessity. And so the approach debouches in the claim that the reason why we hesitate to attribute Moore-paradoxical beliefs is that Moore-paradoxical beliefs are impossible. Hence Engel effectively ends up empty-handed; there's nothing to explain, much less anything meriting normative explanation.

However, let us grant Engel that, somehow, the explanation can nevertheless be made to work. That is, assume that the reason why we hesitate to attribute to an agent a Moore-paradoxical belief is that we would then be attributing beliefs that violate the conceptual truth norm. This leads us to the third dilemma. One hallmark of *norms* is that they tell us what we ought (not) to or may (not) do; i.e., they take the form of imperatives with deontic force. If, as Engel rightly points out,⁵⁸ we substitute the 'ought' or 'may' in the imperative for a 'do' or 'will,' then the result is not norms, but descriptions of regularities between facts, evidence and the formation of belief. We can put this point in terms of the requirement that,

Normative Difference: Norms *should make a difference* to the way we form, manage and revise beliefs.

The deontic force embedded in an epistemic imperative should, that is, play a role in our forming, and way of forming, revising and abandoning beliefs. Glüer and Wikforss⁵⁹ argue that if a reason for belief fails to satisfy this requirement, then it is redundant to label it a *normative* reason. That is, if no part of one's reason for believing *p* is the reason that one *ought* to believe that *p*, then, even if there were a norm for believing that *p*, the norm makes no difference for what one ends up believing and how one ended up believing it. And if the norm makes no difference, then it is utterly idle and plays no role in an account of (manners of)

⁵⁷ Borges, "How to Moore a Gettier," 134.

⁵⁸ Engel, "Sosa on the Normativity of Belief."

⁵⁹ Kathrin Glüer and Åsa Wikforss, "Against Belief Normativity," in *The Aim of Belief*, ed. Timothy Chan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 80-99.

forming, continuing to have or revise belief. Furthermore, the Normative Difference-requirement suggests that one be in a position to choose to believe (or not believe) that p. A normative reason is open to deliberation. If what explains my belief that p is the normative reason that I *ought* to – rather than that I *will* believe it in my circumstances – then I may *violate* the norm. If I *cannot* do so, then the reason for my belief that p cannot be a *normative* reason. At the very least, to say that it was a normative reason that I *could not* violate would be no different from saying that it was, say, a causal reason that I had no influence over. So a norm has to make a difference in the sense that it can figure as my reason to form, maintain or revise a specific belief without it being necessary that I form, maintain or revise the belief accordingly.

Our considerations now make obvious the third dilemma with Engel's normative account. If violations of the conceptual truth norm are cases of *not really believing*, and if this is so by conceptual necessity, then the conceptual truth norm cannot make a difference in my forming, maintaining or revising Moore-paradoxical beliefs. If it is the case that I *cannot really* believe that p and that I believe that not-p, then it does not matter if, in addition, I ought or ought not have these beliefs. Of course I *may* recognize that I ought not have the relevant beliefs. But the *reason why* I don't (indeed never *really*) form them would, on Engel's account, not be that I recognize that I ought not to, but that I cannot, given the conceptual normative truth about belief. Hence, what explains the absurdity of Moore-paradoxical beliefs cannot be some *normative* reason. Perhaps there are such normative reasons against Moore-paradoxical beliefs. But the way Engel has set up the case, no such reasons figure in the explanation of why Moore-paradoxical beliefs are paradoxical.

We may conclude that Engel's normative explanation is problematic for three reasons. First, he doesn't really address Moore's paradox, at least not in its full complexity. Secondly, even if he were to address the paradox he would make it an impossible explanandum since his analysis of 'belief' entails that there cannot really be Moore-paradoxical beliefs. If there cannot be Moore-paradoxical beliefs, then there simply is no (normative) explanation of Moore-paradoxical beliefs. Thirdly, the norm invoked to explain the paradox would be explanatorily idle because if one forms Moore-paradoxical beliefs (given that one could) one would believe incorrectly no matter whether one forms the beliefs for any normative reason. Moreover, if the reason why one does not form Moore-paradoxical beliefs is that one *cannot*, then a norm that one *ought not* ads nothing to why one does not.

5. Conclusions

The two lines of thought examined here, according to which the absurdity of Moore-paradoxical beliefs consists in and is explained by belief-norm violations, are problematic. I have had the courtesy to grant premises that on closer inspection might themselves be problematic. The principle of Introspective Infallibility, for instance, might not be appealing to some. Some might find that Moore's paradox isn't about self-falsifying beliefs at all, as I have granted here. I'm sympathetic to worries that perhaps the paradoxical nature of the beliefs should be understood along other lines. But here I've wished to grant proponents of normative accounts as much as possible in order to refute their case. In being generous, we've found reasons to reject normative accounts. I conclude that an account of the psychological version of Moore's paradox that appeals to epistemic norms is unsatisfactory.⁶⁰

⁶⁰ Thanks to participants at the ECAP8 for comments on an earlier version of this paper. Special thanks to Åsa Wikforss for helping me get to the point.