

Crimmins, Gonzales and Moore

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Gonzales tells Mark Crimmins (1992) that Crimmins knows him under two guises, and that under his other guise Crimmins thinks him an idiot. Knowing his cleverness, but not knowing which guise he has in mind, Crimmins trusts Gonzales but does not know which of his beliefs to revise. He therefore asserts to Gonzales:

(FBI) I falsely believe that you are an idiot.

The significance of this example, as we understand Crimmins,¹ is that (FBI) is apparently assertible, yet Moore-paradoxical—that is, an assertion of (FBI) is in relevant respects similar to an assertion of a sentence such as:

(RAIN) It is raining and I believe that it is not raining.

A natural line of thought on (RAIN), and on Moore-paradoxical sentences in general, is that while they might on occasion be true, it is never appropriate to assert them (sincerely²). Plausibly, after all, to assert (RAIN) is to assert both ‘It is raining’ and ‘I believe that it is not raining’; but in asserting ‘It is raining’ one expresses one’s belief that it is raining, whereas in asserting ‘I believe that it is not raining’ one expresses one’s belief that it is *not* raining.³ In

¹ We should note that Crimmins does not *say* that (FBI) is an example of an assertible Moore-paradoxical sentence; however, we take it that this is what he had in mind.

² There are of course cases of insincere assertion, such as sarcasm, play-acting, lying, and so on. But these are not operative in the examples we will discuss, and so we will set them aside.

³ Of course, the idea that in asserting ‘I believe that it is not raining’ one is expressing one’s belief that it is not raining does not rule out the possibility that one is also doing other things. For example, it seems clear that one is

other words, it is plausible that to assert (RAIN) is to express contradictory beliefs, and this strongly suggests that (RAIN) is not assertible. If Crimmins as we understand him is right, however, this natural position is mistaken: Moore-paradoxical sentences can be assertible after all, and (FBI) is just such an instance. In this paper, we locate what is correct in the natural position, while clarifying and developing what Crimmins has shown.

We begin by drawing attention to two ways in which Crimmins' story should be filled in. First, if the example is going to be successful at all, Gonzales' revelation must not significantly undermine Crimmins' confidence that the person who is in fact Gonzales-in-disguise is an idiot. Suppose that Crimmins believes only that José and Julio are idiots. On hearing Gonzales' confession, he will learn that either José is Gonzales or Julio is, and therefore that either José is not an idiot or Julio is not. But if that is true, his degree of belief in either of them being idiots will presumably drop so dramatically that it becomes implausible to suppose that (FBI) is true, much less assertible. So we need to be told more—for instance, that Crimmins believes of *many* people that they are idiots, so that his degree of belief that each is an idiot will *not* drop so dramatically, and (FBI) is thus plausible.

Second, it is natural to imagine that Gonzales' confession prompts in Crimmins memories of repeated encounters with various people whom he regards as idiots.⁴ If this is right, however, it might in turn be natural to interpret his assertion of (FBI) to be equivalent to an assertion such as:

(FREQ) I frequently falsely believe that you are an idiot.

However, while (FREQ) is perfectly assertible, there is nothing Moore-paradoxical about it. The expression 'frequently' is a quantifier over times, and the pragmatic constraints on good

also expressing one's belief that one believes that it is not raining. But the important point for us is that one is *at least* expressing the belief that it is not raining.

⁴ After all, the story begins: "You have known me for years", explained Gonzales".

conversation that apply here suggest that we should not include the time of utterance among those times. The point emerges more clearly if we consider assertions of:

(ALWAYS) I always believe that you are an idiot and you are not.

It is a striking fact that (ALWAYS) is not Moore-paradoxical, or anyway, is not on a charitable reading. After all, if I always believe that you are an idiot, why do I not do so at the very moment I am uttering (ALWAYS)? The answer is that ‘always’ is a quantifier over times, and pragmatic constraints suggest that we should not include the time of utterance among those times. More generally, if Crimmins’ example is going to work, it must be that we can rule out the idea that (FBI) is naturally interpreted as (FREQ).

However, it is easy to construct Gonzales-style examples which are free of these concerns. Suppose I write an extremely long book on a certain topic. You tell me that one of the sentences I've written is false, but you don't tell me which one. Knowing your expertise in my field, I believe you. We introduce an expression ‘F’ to name the sentence that is false, and I assert:

(FBF) I falsely believe that F is true.

In this case, it is clear that there are many sentences that I think are true, so there is no problem so far as degree of belief goes; nor, in asserting (FBF), am I asserting something such as ‘I frequently falsely believe that F is true’. Yet it is obvious that this example—which closely resembles the Preface and Lottery Paradoxes—is structurally similar to Crimmins' original case. Once again, then, we seem in (FBI) and (FBF) to have examples of assertible Moore-paradoxical sentences and, in consequence, there must be something wrong with the natural position that there can be no such thing.

with that there is such a distinction. Intuitively, to report a belief is explicitly to say that someone has the belief; to express a belief, by contrast, is to *endorse* its content, to display a certain *commitment* to it.⁶ If I assert ‘I believe that it is raining’, then on the face of it I am both reporting myself as having a certain belief, and expressing the belief in question. On the other hand, if I merely say ‘It is raining’, then, while I am expressing my belief, I am not reporting that I have it. Or again: if I say ‘Jones believes that it is raining’ I am reporting that Jones has a certain belief, but I am not expressing my own belief that it is raining. One can distance or detach oneself from a mere report of a belief in a way that is not possible for an expression of a belief; and one can express a belief without ascribing it to anyone, in a way that is not possible for a report of a belief.

Expressions of belief have a distinctively 'first-person, present-tense' character: one can imagine appending the words "*I am standing behind this claim, now*" to them. Reports of belief are neutral as to person—I can equally report my belief, your belief, or Jones' belief. And to the extent that one can regard one's past or future selves from a third-person perspective, one can merely report one's past or future beliefs. Furthermore, note that second-person, third-person, past tense and future tense versions of (DROPBELIEVE) would be clearly false. It may well be appropriate for me to assert ‘You believe that it is raining’, or ‘Jones believes that it is raining’, yet inappropriate for me to assert ‘it is raining’—for I may not share your or Jones' belief. Similarly, it may well be appropriate for me to assert ‘I believed that it was raining’, or ‘I will believe that it is raining’, yet inappropriate for me to assert ‘it is raining’—for I may have changed my mind, or expect that I will. In all of these cases, it may be appropriate to report the belief in question, but there is no distinctive first-person, present-tense endorsement that is the hallmark of expressing the belief.

It should come as no surprise, then, that the reporting/expressing distinction is the key to rejecting (DROPBELIEVE). We can now distinguish two sorts of situation in which it is appropriate to assert ‘I believe that p’: when it is appropriate to *report* that belief, and when it is

⁶ This performative aspect of expressions of belief can be analogized to that of promise-making. When I promise to meet the deadline, I am not merely reporting an autobiographical fact—I am undertaking a commitment.

appropriate to *express* that belief. On the other hand, there would appear to be only *one* sort of situation in which it is appropriate to assert 'p', namely, only if it is appropriate to *express* one's belief that p—for that is what one is doing *by* asserting 'p'. But this suggests a general recipe for producing counterexamples to (DROPBELIEVE): produce situations in which it is appropriate to report one's belief without expressing it.

Are there such situations? We offer three kinds of case (there may be others). Examples of the first kind of case are (FREQ) and (ALWAYS)—sentences that, thanks to pragmatics, quantify over times other than the moment of utterance. It may well be appropriate to assert 'I frequently believe that it is raining' and 'I always believe that it is raining', yet inappropriate to assert that it is raining—for the 'frequently' and the 'always' may not be quantifying over the present moment, so I may merely be saying that I habitually have that belief, without expressing that belief now. An example of the second kind of case is one in which I believe that it is raining, but only tentatively—too tentatively to stand by that belief in the present context with an outright assertion. I might nonetheless report the fact that I have the belief.⁷ And an example of the third kind of case is Crimmins' Gonzales case. Quite apart from any theoretical considerations, (FBI) certainly seems to be a mere report of a belief the content of which Crimmins surely does not truly endorse. One imagines Crimmins somewhat bemused, even sheepish ("I must with some embarrassment accept what you say", in Crimmins' words). Nevertheless, (FBI) *is* assertible. And similar points apply to (FBF).

On the other hand, if it is right to say that in asserting (FBI) and (FBF) one is reporting one's belief but not expressing it, then the question remains as to whether they are then Moore-paradoxical. This is of course a partly terminological point. Perhaps by 'Moore-paradoxical sentences' we simply mean sentences that have a certain form, for example 'I falsely believe that p', or 'p, and I believe not p'. Then trivially (FBI) and (FBF) are Moore-paradoxical. On the other hand, it is natural to suppose more strongly that a crucial fact about any Moore-paradoxical sentence that in asserting the sentence one is *expressing* contradictory beliefs. In that sense,

⁷Thanks to Michael Thau for this example.

(FBI) and (FBF) are not Moore-paradoxical, as we have argued. We might mark the distinction by calling a sentence of the first sort 'weakly Moore-paradoxical', and a sentence of the second sort 'strongly Moore-paradoxical'. Then Crimmins has succeeded in producing a novel example of an assertible, weakly Moore-paradoxical sentence, and this is an achievement to be sure. But we can save what was right in the natural position that we presented at the outset by insisting that he has not produced an example of an assertible, strongly Moore-paradoxical sentence.⁸

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