Moore famously observed (1942: 543) that there is something odd or defective about sentences of the form ‘p but I do not believe that p’, or \langle p \& \neg Ib \rangle for short, for although such sentences can be true they cannot
be coherently asserted. It seems rather odd to say that it is raining but then go on to deny that one believes that it is. Moore noted that such an oddity is equally present when one utters sentences of the form \(<p \& \sim p>\). We shall call such sentences ‘Moorean sentences’. There thus appears to be something odd or defective about them, and the question that has grabbed the attention of philosophers ever since is to explain what underlies their defective nature.

There have been numerous responses to this question. Despite differing over details, all the attempted solutions of Moore’s paradox tend to see the absurdity of Moorean sentences as eventually stemming, one way or another, from the violation of the law of non-contradiction, although such sentences seem to clearly differ from flat-out contradictions of the form \(<p \& \sim p>\). While some philosophers construe the problem with such sentences as involving some sort of pragmatic contradiction arising from their assertion, others seek to locate the source of paradox in the alleged fact that such sentences cannot be truly believed (see, for example, Shoemaker 1996). Still others seem to think that what gives rise to the paradox is the violation of certain necessary conditions of epistemic justification. For convenience, I shall call the latter two approaches ‘doxastic’ and ‘epistemic’ respectively.

Recently, John Williams (2004) has offered another solution along epistemic lines arguing that Moorean sentences are absurd because they cannot be justifiably believed.¹ In this paper, I shall argue that Williams’s solution is unsuccessful. He begins by exploiting the following observation of Gareth Evans as the basis of his resolution of Moore’s paradox.

[I]n making a self-ascription of belief, one’s eyes are, so to speak, or occasionally literally, directed outward – upon the world. If someone asks me ‘Do you think there is going to be a third world war?’, I must attend, in answering him, to precisely the same outward phenomena as I would attend to if I were answering the question ‘Will there be a third world war?’. I get myself in a position to answer the question whether I believe that \(p\) by putting into operation whatever procedure I have for answering the question whether \(p\). (1982: 225–26)

Williams claims that Evans’s observation is tantamount to the rule that whenever I am in a position to sincerely assert that \(p\) then I am in a position to sincerely assert that I believe that \(p\). This, he says, yields the following principle.

¹ See also Lee 2001 and de Almeida 2001. Both Lee and Williams take their cue from a remark by Gareth Evans (1982), though Lee’s paper in not cited in Williams’s article.
(EA) Whatever justifies me in believing that $p$ also justifies me in believing that I believe that $p$.

One may usefully describe (EA) as an ‘epistemic ascent’ thesis, for what it says is that to justify ‘I believe that $p$’ is, *ipso facto*, to justify the higher-order statement ‘I believe that I believe that $p$’. It is easy to see how, by invoking (EA), one can demonstrate that one cannot justifiably believe $(p \& \neg IBp)$. For suppose one has justification for believing the sentence in question. Assuming that whatever justifies one in believing a conjunction justifies one in believing the relevant conjuncts, it follows that I am justified in believing that $p$ and justified in believing that I do not believe that $p$. By (EA), being justified in believing that $p$ implies that I am also justified in believing that I believe that $p$: ‘This is logically impossible, because anything that justifies me in believing that something is the case renders me unjustified in believing that it is not the case and vice versa’ (Williams 2004: 352).²

But what reason is there for accepting (EA)? Williams suggests the following argument.

(1) Circumstances that justify me in believing that $p$ are circumstances that tend to make me believe that $p$.

(2) Circumstances that tend to make me believe that $p$ are circumstances in which I am justified in believing that I believe that $p$.

(EA) Circumstances that justify me in believing that $p$ are circumstances that justify me in believing that I believe that $p$.

I have two problems with Williams’s argument as stated above. First, the argument, if successful, not only establishes (EA) but can also be used to generate highly implausible conclusions of the form (EA*), namely, that ‘circumstances that justify me in believing that $p$ are circumstances that justify me in believing that I believe that I believe that ... I believe that $p$’, for any finite number of iterations of ‘I believe that’. To see how this follows, all one needs to do, having derived (EA), is to construct a different instance of that argument starting with the premiss that ‘circumstances that justify me in believing that I believe that $p$ are circumstances that tend to make me believe that I believe that $p$’. This would be true for precisely the same reason that Williams offers in support of the first premiss of the original argument. Now, this premiss together with an appropriate analogue of the second premiss (of the original argument) would result in the conclusion that ‘circumstances that justify me in believing that I believe that $p$ are circumstances that justify me in believing that I believe that I believe that $p$’. Iterating the reasoning

² Note that this claim may not generally hold if we allow cases in which beliefs are underdetermined by evidence. I shall not, however, press this point.
procedure, we will eventually arrive at a highly implausible conclusion of the form \((EA^*)\) high up the series (which is even impossible to entertain).

Secondly, certain features of the argument are likely to render it impotent or redundant. To see this, consider, once again, the second premiss.

(2) Circumstances that tend to make me believe that \(p\) are circumstances in which I am justified in believing that I believe that \(p\).

To justify this premiss, suppose I see rain falling down from the sky leading me to form the belief that it is raining. Williams then claims that, in virtue of different sets of reliable connections, my perceptions of rain ‘justify both my belief that it is raining and my belief that I believe that it is raining’ (2004: 350). Let us focus only on the claim that my perceptions of rain justify me in believing that it is raining. This is a plausible claim in view of the fact that such circumstances (e.g. perceiving rain), being reliably connected to the corresponding beliefs, are justification-conferring. In (2), however, Williams is interested in circumstances that tend to induce beliefs in us and these two sets of circumstances are not identical. Quite often circumstances that dispose one to form a belief fail to be justification-conferring. However, since Williams’s reasoning proceeds in terms of justification-conferring circumstances (which is what makes his claim that our perceptions of rain justify our belief that it is raining plausible), one has to rephrase (2) accordingly.

\((2^*)\) Justification-conferring circumstances that tend to make me believe that \(p\) are circumstances in which I am justified in believing that I believe that \(p\).

But now \((2^*)\) turns out to be just a long-winded way of stating \((EA)\), rendering the argument redundant. The preceding observations, I conclude, undermine Williams’s claim to have resolved Moore’s paradox.\(^3\)

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**References**


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\(^3\) I am grateful to John Williams and Michael Clark for helpful comments.