Review of: "The Ethics of Retraction"

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Thanks for sharing this Quill and yes to open-access reviews!

This essay approaches the topic of retractions in speech act theory through its ethics, telling a story about the role of retractions in the ethics of repair. Kukla's idea is that as non-ideal agents we need tool to repair our relations and ourselves, and retraction provides one set of normative tools that we use to do this.

In this review, I'll raise a question about how to think about the category of retraction, raise some questions about the relation between retraction, correction, apology, and reparation, and raise a question about public retractions. I don't have any substantive worries, I'm more interested in trying to think through a knotty topic.

On retraction.

I'm not familiar with the literature on retractions in speech act theory, and I got a bit confused in the early parts of the paper about how exactly I should be understanding the category. Coming out the other end of the paper, I wonder whether there are two ways one might think about the category of retractions: first as an everyday concept that is the genus of species like rescinding an invitation, taking back an offer, and correcting a mistaken assertion, and secondly as a technical term whose role is fixed either by its moral function in repair, or by a particular role in speech act theory (maybe the idea of taking back a speech act). Maybe what I'm reporting is that I didn't have a good grip on an everyday concept of retraction, but got a much better grip by squinting at the idea of taking back a speech act. A worry here: depending on how one thinks about speech acts and the different categories of speech acts, I can imagine some philosophers of language denying that there is a unified category of retractions, instead offering spectate theories for correcting assertions, rescinding directives, and taking back questions. I think I'm just having trouble thinking my way into the topic, but I wonder what could be said against someone who denies the category of retraction.

Throughout the paper, I was thinking about politicians who get caught out saying sketch things respond publicly. Here's a stab at a typology: correction (I absolutely don't think that migrants are subhuman), retraction (I take back what I said), apology (I apologise for using the word 'swarm' in reference to migrants), reparation (I'm going to go have a photoshoot with some refugees to show that I understand them). Two things strike me about these cases: there seems to be an important category of insincere retractions, where the speaker goes through the motions of retracting, but continues to act as if entitled to the commitments of the retracted statement, and there do seem to be important differences between correction, retraction, apology and reparation. In the latter part of the paper, Kukla uses the distinction between apology and retraction to get a grip on some features of retraction. I wonder whether focusing on particular cases rather than our

general grip on apology might help to make the distinctions clearer. I found I didn't have a good grip on what it is to apologise in general: maybe it's just the expression of sorrow over the effects of speech but I feel like there's a grarly Austin-on-excuses style paper to be written about apologies, retractions, and corrections.

One kind of case that I thought might be interesting to think about cases where people retract a public assertion even though they continue to assert it in private. One kind of case is the one Kukla talks about on the bottom of page 10, where the speaker believes a claim, but doesn't want to be held accountable for it, but there seem to be another category of cases where the epistemic standards on public and private speech. Maybe the upshot of these cases is just that retraction is conversation-relative, and you can retract a claim from some contexts while continue to assert it in others, but it might be interesting to think through why people might want to retract in some conversations but not others. (Question: how does retraction in some but not all conversations differ to insincere retraction?). Presumably, there's a story to be told here about the way in which the commitments one makes are partly a matter of what one asserts (directs etc), and partly a matter of the norms on a particular kind of conversation (i.e. discourse in scientific journals vs chat in the seminar room).

Two small things in closing. There's a bit of Brendan de Kennessy's Promises as Proposals in joint deliberation which is super relevant to the discussion of promising on page 8, and I really liked the discussion of retraction and control over our practical agency on page 14.