Review of: "The Ethics of Retraction"

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The paper focuses on retraction as a tool of repair. In retracting a past speech act, the speaker of that act rebuilds the normative landscape. In order to fulfill this role, Kukla argues that retraction can't be too easy, nor too difficult, and proposes a pragmatics of retraction that is able to explain its ethically relevant role. The paper has the merit of bringing together the linguistic study of retraction with its ethics.

I don't have any substantive objection to the paper's view. I find it very appealing—although I have to say that I'm not an expert on retraction. In this review, I'll comment on two points of the paper that, to my mind, deserve clarification or further study.

The first is about the illocutionary residue that retractions leave behind. According to Kukla, a retraction doesn't completely restore the normative state prior to the performance of the retracted speech act. The emphasis is in "completely". The proposal is that retraction "undoes the central normative output of the original speech act" but can leave a residue. I find this claim very plausible. However, it isn't clear what this residue consists in or its scope. One option (perhaps the one endorsed in the paper) is that what remains are the normative changes that the original act entitled and were performed. Kukla uses as an example a marriage proposal. Even if I retract my marriage proposal, it seems that this doesn't automatically cancel out the other commitments that other people have acquired on the basis my marriage proposal. The addressee might have invited people to the wedding, for instance. There seem to be, however, more problematic and immediate effects that are difficult to undo. We can use hate speech as an example, although probably other expressions behave similarly. When someone utters a piece of hate speech, she thereby not only performs, let's say, an assertion, but can, as McGowan argues, enact or reinforce subordinating or discriminatory norms that are difficult to undo. Imagine, for example, a sexist man who says "Women are really bad at maths!" and later retracts ("I take that back, I shouldn't have said that", etc.). Even in cases where the retraction is successful, we should doubt that it undoes all the problematic aspects of the original speech act. At least, it has raised to salience an association between women and being bad at maths that might not be easy to make unsalient. (This is what McGowan calls the asymmetric pliability of norms, a problem for counterspeech and also perhaps for retraction). It would be interesting to know more about how the author conceives the normative residue and what kinds of residue simply make the retraction unsuccessful.

The second point is about the possibility of insincere retractions. Does the proposal contemplate a condition of sincerity for retraction? In the first section of the paper, it is suggested that one reason for not accepting a retraction is the belief that it is made insincerely. It would be interesting to know a bit more about the relation between retraction and sincerity. It seems in principle possible to have successful retractions (i.e., retractions that undo the central normative output of the

target speech act) which are nonetheless perceived as insincere by the audience, or manifestly insincere. Going back to the previous example, when the sexist speaker retracts the original assertion, it seems possible for the audience to accept it as a retraction yet to believe that the speaker still endorses the sexist claim, that the speaker sees himself as entitled to it, etc. and retracts it, for instance, just to avoid a long discussion about what counts as sexism. We can also think of children who only retract what they've they said because their parents tell them to do so. This might have consequences for the ethics of retraction, since insincere retractions (assuming, as I'm doing here, that they are possible) in a sense restore the normative state, but could be morally problematic.

To finish, let me stress that I have enjoyed reading the paper and that I find the pragmatic picture convincing.