

Review of: "The Ethics of Retraction"

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Review of: Quill Kukla – "The Ethics of Retraction"

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The paper reveals a fresh and open mind that can think with originality. That is about all you can ask of a philosopher. In a future larger work, however, for readers with less expertise, there could be some more detailed explanations about some important points that are commented below.

The work is situated in the frame of the theory of speech acts. This genus/species relationship should be explained from the beginning: why some acts are speech acts, among them retraction, and others are not. And we should also call attention to the theories of language that consider all acts as speech acts, in other words, that it is not possible to exist acts without speech/language and the designation does not make much sense.

As I am not in the middle of the debate, I wish to respectfully complain about some ambiguous words which are used by the author as if they had a definite, broadly accepted meaning.

"Central normative output of a speech act" is an example. Besides "speech act", "central normative output" is the other crucial concept to understand what the author means by "retraction" that is not well defined throughout the text.

Giving the similarities with the concept of forgiveness in Hannah Arendt, the author should compare it with the concept of retraction. In Arendt, forgiveness is the only constructive way to deal with the past, exactly because the past can't be undone, and the promise is the path to cope with the unknown future. The conditions of retraction also have something to do with Arendt's concept of action: deeds that, once entangled, can be neither foreseen nor undone (Arendt, 1958, p. 236 and 246). For it is exactly unpredictability and irreversibility that make retraction ethically necessary.

Dr. Kukla also says that repair is the genus and retraction, apology, forgiveness and reconciliation are its species. But what is the difference between those (speech) acts? They are ambiguous and vague words used in common language. Are there other species? What about regret? In retraction there seems to be regret, by definition. If I apologize, am I not at the same time retracting?

At page 5, she poses the question about who must recognize a retraction in order for it to stick and the answer “the retraction must be accepted in practice by the key players” brings the same meaning of endoxa in Aristotle’s Topics (I, I, 100b) and the topoi that compound it, but also the same difficulties.

Also at page 5 we read that to avoid nihilism “we must make retraction the right amount difficult and the right amount possible”. But the expression “right amount”, although essential to comprehension, is not explained. Other examples are the meaning of “educated listener” at page 11 and, at page 12, the affirmations that there are ethical and unethical reasons for retracting, without questioning exactly the criteria for this central point.

The author seems to think only in terms of an ideal dialogue like Ronald Dworkin’s (2013) or Robert Alexy’s (1978). As if everyone were ready to persuade and be persuaded, to change one’s mind and always had disposition to learn and eventually change positions. The majority of real empirically observed conversations, even between dear families and friends, is not like this. They want to win, to impose their (version of the) speech (act).

Again the author shows her high account of coherence/consistency, which is meant to be a universal demand. But for many people who value it, it is impossible to act coherently. For others who do not value it, it is not important at all, consistency should not be an ethical goal.

In fact retraction is a rhetorical tool to prevail in a debate, just like authority, persuasion, logical demonstrations, simulations and paralogisms.

Many traits of what the author puts as a universal rational ethic seems to mirror a localized Western European perspective. For example, confessions to a crime can be routinely retracted, like it happens in Brazil and other judicial systems.

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