

Review of: "The Ethics of Retraction"

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Review of Quill Kukla's "The Ethics of Retraction"

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Kukla's "The Ethics of Retraction" is an insightful and thought-provoking piece of productive mix between philosophy of language and ethics. In this review, I am going to raise some questions all having to do with what it seems to me to be Kukla's individualistic bias in their otherwise wonderful analysis of retraction.

Kukla characterizes retraction as a second-order "complex set of speech acts" by means of which a speaker undo the central normative output of one or more of their original or first-order speech acts and commits themselves to divest of their access to the entitlement of said speech acts. Only the person who made the original speech act can retract it, but, as I would like to suggest, except in some special circumstances. Throughout their paper, Kukla talks of retractions as speech acts done primarily by individuals. Only when touching on the topic of obligatory retractions due to self-care reasons, Kukla discusses retractions involving more than one individual. However, what Kukla says there is more about the moral obligatoriness of proxy retractions than about the issues involved in retractions where the personhood to be held is collective. Yet, I think the latter is an important ethical dimension of retractions.

Now, I do not mean to say that proxy retractions are not worth considering. Very often, one needs others to take care of one's personal businesses, as in cases of illness or displacement, and then, others retracting in one's behalf could be a way of helping one's interests. Kukla invokes Lindemann's idea that, to keep one's integrity and coherent sense of self, some social scaffolding and uptake is needed. Proxy retractions can be a way of doing just that: others help me to build or maintain my identity, by retracting what I would retract or by accepting my retractions, or by allowing me to deny some retractions. I agree with Kukla, and yet, perhaps they might want to be more precise about what kinds of scaffolding and uptake is possible, permissible, or obligatory, in order for retraction to work as a way of helping others to keep their own integrity and/or personhood. When is possible, permissible, or obligatory for us to retract in others' behalf? When is possible, permissible, or obligatory for us to give or deny credence to others' retractions (however insincere, self-interested, coerced, etc.)?

But, group or collective retractions are worth considering by themselves. Consider first the case of a family company. The founding father made some speech acts by the early time when it was unclear how his identity was different from the identity of the company. Imagine derogatory remarks about women that attracted some kind of people to work with him; commitments made by himself to support some politician with similar ideas with company resources; designs and

instructions to organize work in the company aligned with such ideas, etc. Such acts are later shown to be false, inappropriate, harmful, or otherwise immoral. Then, upon the father's death, the heiress wants to raise the moral integrity of the company (let's suppose there is such a thing), and acting in her CEO condition, she attempts to retract those acts in the legally and socially appropriate ways.

It could be argued that what Kukla says in their paper applies here, allowing only obvious modifications from the individual case. It is true that the speaker in this case is the company and that even when the individual who enacts its agency is different (the founding father vs. the heiress), it is the company the one who retracts. But, given that it is a family company, the character of the personhood to be held is not straightforward. The heiress' retractions might be difficult or impossible, for although she is legally entitled to make them, the public might believe she cannot successfully retract anything, for the company is a collective whose character is given by the founding father.

Notice that what I am aiming at is not that some retractions are more socially or contextually difficult than others. Kukla says that explicitly in their paper. The point I am trying to make is that the logic of group or collective retractions is different from the individual ones that Kukla examines in their paper, at least to the degree that they deserve a separate consideration. Family company retractions are difficult because it is unclear whether the acts the heirs attempt to retract are the company's or the predecessors', even allowing that in the hierarchical organization of family companies, the heirs are entitled to make speech acts on behalf of the company. Along these lines, think now of collectives with more democratic or even ambiguous structures and organizations as political or religion associations, countries, or social groups: is it even possible that later generation members retract the speech acts of former generation members? Is it morally permissible or morally obligatory that later generation members attempt retractions? Similar questions can be asked when members of unstructured groups believe the speech acts made by their co-members are wrong, inappropriate, immoral, etc. Can they retract them as speech acts of their group? Is it morally permissible or obligatory to try to? I think an ethics of retraction should provide at least some guidelines on these issues, for belonging to certain groups or collectives is not always our choice and the effects of the speech acts made by others in the same group affect our own integrity and responsibility. Is it even possible, or permissible or morally obligatory to attempt to undo what others like us do, so to stop the harm or to open the way to reparations, forgiveness and reconciliation?

One observation that applies to both individual and collective retractions steams from the kintsugi practice that Kukla uses to open their paper. The mending of kintsugi not only leaves visible the marks of the breakage, but repairs them artfully by employing precious metals. Thus, the reparation makes the object even more valuable than it was before the fracture. I think the kintsugi practice is a beautiful image, though it works better for reparation than retraction. Still, I believe it suggests something insightful for the latter: in the same way that there is an ethics of retraction, there should be an aesthetics of retraction. There are ways to retract that inhabit the space of the possible, but that differ from one another in the way of execution. An aesthetics of retraction could look for ways to retract that exhibit elegance and, in that manner, not only open the path for reparation, but make the relationship even more valuable for each party than it was before. In slogan: there aren't only moral ways to retract, but also beautiful ways to do it.

