

# Review of: "The Ethics of Retraction"

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## The ethics of retraction

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The author presents an interesting and challenging article on the ethics of retraction, using speech act theory. By recognising we are 'fundamentally imperfect beings who make mistakes' it argues *repair* is an essential category of ethical action, and that retraction is a central tool of repair. By engaging in retraction, the author argues it is possible 'to repair ourselves and to repair our social world, including our relationships.' Understood as different from other acts of social repair such as apology, forgiveness and reconciliation, retraction is 'an ethically substantive and complex action' - an act of remaking that may or may not succeed and something which cannot be completed 'simply by being announced.' It argues that for retraction to work, I must 'work to undo [...] the central normative output of my speech act and divest myself of access to my entitlement to it.' The work rightly argues that retraction is ethically important and that we must be allowed to reconsider our commitments in the light of new information or criticism if we are to avoid nihilism. In doing so, we can preserve our integrity and continue to act in accordance with our important values.

As a tool of social repair, retraction is different and distinctive from that of apology and other reparative work. The sorts of reparative tools available include a range of discursive acts such as: 'holding harm-doers accountable, explaining hidden reasons behind one's action, offering reparations' as well as non-discursive tools such as 'money, and time to spend on social organising.' An interesting follow-on, is the belief that retraction can also make reconciliation possible by undoing a harm that disrupted a social relationship even though it is 'not accompanied by an apology, remorse or forgiveness.' In the authors view 'it is quite unclear exactly how apologies repair' and also claims that retraction 'can undermine the felicity of forgiveness' because once I retract, I am no longer responsible for that output and therefore no longer require forgiveness.

What this paper attempts, is to shift the discussion away from the usual avenues of repair cited in the repair literature that focus on apology, forgiveness and reconciliation and to offer a much more pragmatic approach. In doing so, it looks beyond issues of sincerity and accountability and private emotional states and argues for a pragmatic approach to undoing harm through a range of discursive and non-discursive means and towards repairing a 'normative ecosystem.' But in disputing whether apologies repair or not, there is no discussion of the context of an apology. Some apologies for example are not easy to achieve. A current example is the reluctance of governments to apologise over forced adoptions: in the UK of the four devolved nations, only Scotland has offered an apology. It is also questionable whether forgiveness always leads to reconciliation, as it may be possible to forgive someone but choose not to be in a relationship with them. That

said, the paper offers a useful signposting of alternative avenues beyond apology, forgiveness, and reconciliation to repairing ourselves and the social world, and our relationships within it.