Research Article

The Ethics of Retraction

Quill R Kukla[1]

1. Georgetown University, United States

This essay examines the ethics of retraction, using the tools of speech act theory. We are fundamentally imperfect beings who make mistakes, as any ethics usable in the actual world needs to acknowledge. Because we make mistakes, *repair* is an essential category of ethical action. Retraction has many uses, and not all of them are reparative. But, I will argue, retraction is a central tool of repair. We use retraction to repair ourselves, and to repair the social world, including our relationships. Thus understanding the ethics of retraction is philosophically pressing. I begin the essay by offering a pragmatic analysis of retraction and its success conditions. I will then make the case for why retraction is ethically substantive, and for the need for a developed ethics of retraction. After that, I divide my analysis into three parts. I ask: When is retraction *possible*; when is it ethically *permissible*; and, finally, when is it ethically *advisable or obligatory*, as part of a project of repair. This final section explores what kinds of repair retraction can accomplish, and when retraction is the best tool of repair.

Kintsugi is the Japanese art of 'golden repair,' in which one mends broken ceramics using precious metals, so that the lines of breakage are still visible. Kintsugi treats breakage and repair as part of the history of an object; the goal of repair, in this tradition, is not to turn back time and restore a thing to its original state, but to use the past form of a thing as a basis upon which to make something new with its own value and integrity, which retains traces of its past as part of its new form.[1] Kintsugi is an inherently value-laden practice; it does not seek to mechanically recreate the past, but to undo a break creatively, finding a way to make something valuable and whole that incorporates the traces of the fracture.

Retraction is also a rebuilding that leaves traces. Retracting a speech act is not the same as deleting it or turning back the clock; by the time we retract, our original speech act will have had effects (both perlocutionary and illocutionary) that cannot be simply undone with a retraction. Retraction, like

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Kintsugi, takes *work*; it is an act of remaking that may or may not succeed, not something effectively completed simply by being announced. And retraction may be—but is not necessarily—an act of repair: We may retract because our original speech act did or is doing harm, or will do harm if it continues to stand. Finally, retraction, like Kintsugi, is an inherently value-laden act. It is not a mere reset, but an exercise of normative power, which shifts commitments, obligations, and opportunities, and hence it must be ethically assessed.

We are fundamentally imperfect beings who make mistakes, as any ethics usable in the actual world needs to acknowledge. Because we make mistakes, *repair* is an essential category of ethical action.[2] Retraction has many uses, and not all of them are reparative. But, I will argue, retraction is a central tool of repair. We use retraction to repair ourselves, and to repair the social world, including our relationships. Thus understanding the ethics of retraction is philosophically pressing.

At the moment, there are two separate academic discourses on retraction, which do not generally engage with one another. There exists a literature on journal retractions, which takes seriously the ethics of publication and information dissemination, but does not analyze the epistemology or the linguistic pragmatics of the speech act of retraction.[3] There exists a separate literature on retraction taken as a speech act, which will be familiar to most readers of this volume, but which has not really engaged the ethics of retraction.[4] But, as I hope to show, retraction is an ethically substantive and complex action (or set of actions, really), and we cannot understand it just as an undoing. It is essential to understanding retraction that we forefront how it leaves behind normative debris. While several philosophers have pointed out that retraction leaves traces behind,[5] this fact has not been taken up in the context of an ethics of repair.

I begin by offering a pragmatic analysis of retraction and its success conditions; this initial section will draw upon the account of retraction developed in Kukla and Steinberg (2021). I will then make the case for why retraction is ethically substantive, and for the need for a developed ethics of retraction. After that, I divide my analysis into three parts. I ask: When is retraction *possible*; when is it ethically *permissible*; and, finally, when is it ethically *advisable or obligatory*, as part of a project of repair. This final section will explore what kinds of repair retraction can accomplish, and when retraction is the best tool of repair. This will require that I explore the relationship between retraction and other kinds of acts of social repair, such as apology, forgiveness, and reconciliation.

What is retraction?

Although the literature on retraction has disproportionately focused on the retraction of assertions,[6] many different kinds of speech acts, including questions, orders, invitations, exercitives, and more, can be retracted. Thus a general account of retraction cannot proceed via a semantic analysis of which contents of statements have been added to or subtracted from a conversational score, or anything of that sort. It has to be a thoroughly pragmatic analysis of what we *accomplish* in social space when we retract.

It is easy to slip into thinking that retraction is a restoration of a state before the performance of the speech act being retracted. For instance, Laura Caponetto writes, "a successful retraction should restore the normative state of affairs that preceded the performance of the retracted illocution" (2020, 2407).[7] Several authors analyze retraction as the cancellation of the illocutionary force of the original speech act (Bussière-Caraes (2022), Caponetto (2020), Vermaire (2020)). But this seems too simple. Retractions typically leave illocutionary residue. It is fairly obvious that retractions can leave behind normatively significant *perlocutionary* effects: if I invite you to a party and then retract, you still know the party is happening; if I assert something insulting about you and then retract, your feelings will still be hurt. But they will often leave behind illocutionary effects as well: If I warn you of a danger and then retract, you will still have been warned; if I retract a marriage proposal, we are no longer engaged, but various other normative changes and entanglements initiated by the marriage proposal will remain in place. The post-retraction normative state is not generally the same as the pre-retraction normative state. The status of having been invited and then disinvited, or proposed to and then un-proposed to, is not the same as the status of never having been invited or proposed to at all, nor are the normative structures of the relationships involved left unscathed. Moreover, we may be able to undo an illocutionary effect without retracting. For instance, if you promise to do me a favor, thereby obligating you to do it, and I let you off the hook and release you from your promise, I have undone this illocutionary effect but I have not retracted your speech act. Thus neither undoing the illocutionary effects of a speech act nor restoring a prior normative state of affairs is either necessary or sufficient for retraction.

In Kukla and Steinberg (2021), Dan Steinberg and I proposed a pragmatic account of retraction, which I mostly adopt here as well. A retraction, we argued, is always what Caponetto (2020) calls a 'second order' speech act; it follows and operates on another speech act. Only the person who performed the

original speech act can retract it, and only if the first act was itself felicitous and successful. (As Caponetto points out, making clear that a speech act was never legitimate or felicitous in the first place is not a retraction, but what she calls an annulment instead.) The retraction undoes the *central* normative output of the original speech act, although it may leave others in place; this does not necessarily restore the normative situation to its pre-original-speech-act state, but it does remove the primary output of the original. But this is not enough: in order for a retraction to be a success, the speaker must convincingly *divest themselves of their access to the entitlement to the original speech act*. This does not mean that they are no longer in fact entitled to the original speech act; for example, we can retract an assertion that we are still justified in making, because we don't want it associated with our name, perhaps, or we can retract an invitation that we remain fully entitled to issue because we no longer want the invitee to attend, or we can retract our permission for someone to use something that we still own and to which we control access. However, for our retraction to be meaningful and 'sticky', it must include our commitment not to avail ourselves of an entitlement to that speech act. If I claim that I retract, but then act in ways that demonstrate my use of the entitlement to the original speech act, then my retraction will not be convincing or successful. Divesting myself of my access to an entitlement to a speech act includes divesting myself of my entitlement to enforce norms and insist on normative statuses instituted by the speech act. If I retract an assertion, I cannot then argue in ways that show that I take myself to be entitled to the assertion. If I retract an order, I cannot then treat someone who doesn't follow the order as transgressive. If I retract a request, I cannot then express frustration that the person to whom I directed the request did not fulfill it. My behavior must demonstrate not only that I have recognized that the central normative output of my first speech act no longer holds, but also that I am no longer taking myself as someone in a position to enforce that normative output.

As we pointed out in Kukla and Steinberg (2021), retractions have, in the lingo of my earlier work, "agent-neutral" outputs. That is, a proper retraction is not *for* anyone in particular (though it may of course especially impact whoever was especially impacted by the original speech act); when I retract, I shift the normative status of the social world *for everyone*. I cannot retract a speech act 'to' one person and continue to act as if its normative output holds for other people. Likewise, if I successfully retract, then *no one* can be beholden to or claim the normative statuses that were undone. My divestment of my access to my entitlement must be total. In this way, retraction is quite different from apology, for

instance, which is typically a *directed* speech act; I apologize to *someone or some people in particular*, but I retract my speech act from *the world*.

Erik Krabbe (2001), among others, collapses the retraction of a speech act into *any* development that removes the normative force or content of that speech act. For instance he offers the following dialogue (Ibid 143):

– Peter: The fine skating weather is holding.

– Olga: Why?

– Peter: The almanac says so.

– Olga: OK. We may count on it.

He calls this an example of "retraction of doubt." But there does not seem to have been any retraction here. Olga asked a question. The question indicated that she had doubt. Her question was answered and her doubt was resolved. But the question was not retracted, it was simply answered; it did its normative work, which is now complete. Doubt is a mental state, not the right sort of thing to be retracted, so that seems to be another confusion here. But even if Olga had said, "I have my doubts about this," her indication of the resolution of her doubt would not be a retraction of that statement, but just a natural evolution of the conversation. People can change their minds without retracting. We will reserve *retraction* for the *second order discursive act* of *undoing* the main normative output of one's own original speech act and divesting oneself of access to an entitlement to it, rather than just indicating that a situation has been updated. Not every change of commitments is a retraction; sometimes, a change of commitments does not involve retrospectively taking back the original ones or acknowledging that they were mistaken or ill-advised, but rather allowing commitments to evolve and update appropriately in light of new information, in ways that are consistent with having had the earlier commitments. This will be essential shortly to understanding the ethics of retraction.

Bach and Harnish (1979), in an early discussion of retraction, argue that retracting a speech act involves a commitment to its converse: They claim that retracting an assertion that P requires being committed to ~P. But it is hard to see how to apply this rule outside of the domain of assertions. What would be the converse of making a request, say, or placing a bet? Even if we could extend the conversational move to the full range of speech acts, this theory seems clearly wrong. I can retract assertions that I still believe to be true, if I just don't want to be responsible for them or attached to them. I can retract orders that I still wish would be carried out, because I decide that I don't want to be

bossy right now or make the person feel obligated. What matters for retraction is that I work to undo, in a way that sticks, the central normative output of my speech act, and divest myself of access to my entitlement to it, regardless of my reasons for doing so or my private beliefs and desires.

Retraction is not, or at least is not typically, *immediate* or *automatic*. This has been stressed by Lwenn Bussière-Caraes (2022), as well as by Dan Steinberg and me in our earlier paper: Merely saying 'I retract' may well not be sufficient to successfully retract. The normative statuses instituted by any speech act are typically social, and generally, they stay in place unless everyone impacted by them recognizes and acknowledges in practice that they have been undone. So a retraction needs uptake in order to succeed—it needs to be heard and practically recognized, just for starters. But, more strongly, it needs to be *accepted* by its audience as legitimate and allowable, in order for it to do its characteristic normative work. Yet other people may not be willing to accept it, for instance if they don't believe that the retraction is sincere, or if undoing the normative statuses initiated by the speech act is difficult or unwelcome. Who must recognize and accept a retraction in order for it to stick? I doubt there is a sharp answer to this question, but the retraction must be accepted in practice by the key players at least, however we flesh this out, and it must get enough general uptake that it stops the original speech act from, as it were, traveling through social space and having its characteristic effects.[8]

Bussière-Caraes (2022) suggests that because of the gap between speech acts of retraction and their success, we should think of retractions as *proposals* that the illocutionary force of a previous speech act be undone, and that the normative score be updated. But I think this suggestion runs into puzzling results: If retractions were just proposals, then when we said we were retracting, we would not actually be doing so. Moreover, many philosophers including me have argued that *all* speech acts require some uptake in order to be effective (Kukla (2014), Langton (1990), Strawson (1964)), and we don't want to say that *all* speech acts are merely proposals to act. I think it works better to acknowledge that all speech acts, including in particular retractions, only succeed contingently, and that it sometimes takes more work and luck than at other times to secure the uptake they need to succeed. As we will see below, different retractions require different amounts of work and social cooperation to succeed, and often that work is ethically substantive.

Why retraction is ethically important

Retraction presents a puzzle on the face of it. The point of retraction is to undo normative statuses such as commitments. But the point of commitments is to commit us! They are supposed to hold us to

a course of action. If they can be undone, then how are they real at all? Unless we are nihilists, this ought to be enough to show that retraction cannot be an action that anyone can perform automatically just by uttering 'I retract' or some equivalent; if retraction weren't somewhat limited in its availability and difficult to perform, commitments would mean nothing, and normative statuses would deflate away. But at the same time, retraction seems like it has to be possible. If we can't reconsider the legitimacy of our former commitments in response to new information or criticism, for instance, then those commitments can't be rational or grounded; commitments are supposed to be reason-responsive. Again, this way nihilism lies, since if we cannot respond to critiques by recognizing our past errors, then we are not normative agents at all. Thus somehow we must make retraction the right amount difficult and the right amount possible in order to avoid slides into nihilistic chasms on either side.

Retraction, I have already suggested, can be a crucial tool for repair, given our non-ideal agency. As I will discuss in detail below, retraction may be used to repair ourselves or our social world. When we find ourselves with commitments or entitlements that we do not believe we should have, or that violate our integrity, because we have misspoken or mis-stepped, we need a way to mend ourselves and re-establish our integrity, and this requires that we be able to retract. Likewise, we will not make it through life without harming others, damaging social relationships, and using the normative power of our speech in ways that we should not. The ability to restore normative statuses and undo normative outputs through retraction is a crucial ethical capacity. We do not add to a conversational or ethical tally on a scoreboard, but rather backtrack and repair as we go. But, as important of an ethical tool as retraction is, it is (interestingly, I think) one that cannot simply be sprinkled about as much as we want, or to which we have unlimited access. Not only is retraction itself an ethically significant act, but the ethics of how much retraction and of what types we should tolerate and recognize is itself an ethical question.

Often, philosophical conversations about retraction are restricted to the context of dialogue, argumentation, and conversation (for instance see Vermaire (2020), Krabbe (2001), and MacFarlane (2011), among many others). Here too, we see the same nihilistic dilemma. In the context of dialogue, if retraction is impossible, then conversation quickly becomes meaningless. Within any even minimally pragmatist picture of discourse, when we say something, we are accountable for its justification or legitimacy. This accountability evaporates if we cannot retract once it is shown that what we said was not in fact justified or legitimate. But just as much, if retraction is too easy, then

conversation cannot progress, because no one can count on a stable common ground, and no one can take the conversation to be proceeding in good faith or trust their interlocutors.[9] However, if we restrict our view to the context of conversation, the ethical stakes involved in retraction can feel relatively low.[10] For instance, Krabbe (2001) talks about how it can be "frustrating" or "no fun" when someone retracts too easily or refuses to retract when needed, but these are pointedly ethically frivolous terms.

But our discussion of retraction cannot be restricted to this discursive context. Speech intervenes in our social life and shifts our normative statuses more generally, and our discursive lives cannot be neatly sectioned off from the rest of our ethical lives. Promises, orders, marriage pronouncements, consentings, and other speech acts that organize our material ethical world all face this same dilemma. We need to figure out how retractions of such speech acts can be possible enough, and difficult enough, to make normative statuses real and reason-responsive. We need to recognize that every retraction chips away at the solidity of our commitments and our practical agency, but every failure to retract when repair is needed undermines our ability to create an ethical and rational world and again undermines our practical agency. We do not want to let people too easily renege on their obligations, nor do we want to hold them to commitments that may be harmful or have become inappropriate. And so, we need an ethics of when and how retraction is possible, permissible, and required.

When someone performs a speech act, norms often shift in complicated ways, with consequences over time. If I propose marriage to you, then not only have I invited you to marry me and committed to marrying you if you agree, but you might invite guests to the wedding, hurting some feelings and strengthening some relationships in the process; our friends may change their plans; we both may rearrange other parts of our social life; and so forth. If I now retract the proposal, I uninvite you to marry me and undo my commitment to marrying you. But this does not restore the normative situation as it was before my proposal. For one thing, the social status of being *disengaged* is quite different from the social status of never having been engaged, and it has consequences for our relationship. For another, my retraction is a substantive normative act that lands entangled in the midst of all these other new normative statuses that were created and initiated by my original proposal. Friendships may have shifted; wedding guests may now need to be disinvited; and so forth. Thus, especially when the original speech act was a normatively complex act with ethically weighty effects, the retraction will typically also be normatively complex and ethically weighty, in ways that

cannot simply be read in reverse off the original act, since the normative situation in which it lands will often be quite different.

An interesting feature of the ethical negotiation of retraction is that *who* controls whether a retraction 'sticks' is context-dependent. It depends on the type of speech act, and the power and authority relationships between the speaker, the recipients of the original speech act, and the general audience for the retraction. For example, if you retract an invitation to me to your home, I may be angry or resentful, but I don't really have the normative power to insist that I still have access to your home. The same is true if you retract your consent to sex. (People may *proceed* as though they did not accept your retraction in either case, but this is in fact trespassing, or rape). In both these cases, we have socially established that we give the retractor the power to enact their retraction if they wish. But if you make a bet with me, you do not necessarily get out of the bet just by trying to retract it; I retain the power to hold you to your commitment, often. We do not grant bettors the same kind of unilateral control over their retractions. And in many cases, this sort of negotiation is framed by larger issues of power and inequality. I may be better positioned to negotiate whether I can retract a promise if I have more social power, and if my word is given more prima facie weight, so that I have less to lose by retracting. Bussière-Caraes points out that certain kinds of social authority can be used to force a retraction (2022, 95): A judge can make someone retract an unenforceable illegal offer, for example.

So we have established that retraction is ethically weighty and complex; that it is not automatic just in virtue of being announced, but rather depends on socially established success conditions and social negotiation; and that we cannot allow it too liberally nor disallow it too stringently, without rational discourse, ethical accountability, and practical interpersonal stability more broadly falling apart. In the next sections, I examine when a speech act *can* be retracted, when it is *permissible* to retract, and when we *should* retract.

When and how can we retract?

A feature of speech acts that has not gotten much philosophical attention is that not all of them are equally easy to perform, even when one has the proper authority to do so. The difficulty in performing them may come at the level of satisfying felicity conditions, securing uptake and acceptance, or both. It is, in most jurisdictions, quite difficult to divorce someone, for instance, because it requires a whole lot of bureaucracy and often some material preconditions like time spent living apart before divorcing becomes felicitous (and in some places it requires uptake and acceptance from the other party, and

this can be notoriously hard to secure). There are ethical reasons why we have mostly chosen to make this a hard speech act to perform; many think it would be socially and personally damaging for it to be too easy to accomplish. Meanwhile, assertions are particularly cheap; as long as you get uptake from anyone at all, all you have to do in order to successfully assert is to make a statement, in a context in which sincerity is plausible. For ethical and practical reasons, we put more constraints on giving testimony; not every heard statement counts as testimony. Apologies are an example of a speech act that can be difficult to perform because of the difficulty of securing uptake and acceptance. Anyone who has wronged or harmed someone can felicitously try to apologize, but it is often tricky to get others to accept an apology as an actual apology.

We have already seen that there are good ethical and practical reasons to make retraction difficult—but not *too* difficult—to perform. Socially, we impose these difficulties both at the level of setting felicity conditions and at the level of securing uptake. Some retractions, like rescinding a contract, typically require elaborate felicity conditions to be in place before they are possible. Others, like retracting a threat, may face an uphill battle in securing uptake. Yet sometimes, retraction is very easy. If I ask a question and haven't yet gotten an answer, I can typically just announce that I retract the question, in which case my demand that others answer the question simply goes away. And other times, retraction is impossible. If I greet you, it does not seem meaningful or possible for me to retract the greeting. (I might say, "Oops, I didn't mean to greet you!" but you remain greeted.)

Matthew Vermaire claims that a speaker can retract a speech act whenever they like, without any explanation of why they are retracting (2020, 3964). But this is far too sweeping a claim. Whether explanation is required depends on the speech act, the speaker, and the context. If a retraction requires social negotiation and if the retractor needs to work for uptake, an explanation of the reasons for the retraction may be key. If I promise to pick your children up after school, and then try to retract my promise, I'd better (at least) give you reasons why I am backing out, otherwise you are likely to take me as still beholden to pick up the children and transgressing an obligation if you do not. Sometimes even retractions of assertion require explanation before they will stick. If I say, "I am hungry," and you offer to stop for food, and I say "Never mind, I am not hungry at all, I retract," you will likely continue to believe that I am hungry and that I have asserted this unless I explain my change of tune. Meanwhile, as we saw, Bussière-Caraes (2022) has almost the opposite view from Vermaire's, according to which all 'retractions' are actually proposals to retract that may or may not be accepted. But some retractions are nearly immediate and require very little to be entitled, such as

retractions of most questions. Vermaire makes retraction too easy, and Bussière-Caraes makes it too difficult.

So what makes retraction possible, difficult, or easy? Remember that retraction requires undoing the central normative output of a prior speech act and divesting oneself of entitlement to it, even though other effects of the speech act may remain in place. In order for this to be possible, three things must be in place:

1. *It can't be too late.* Sometimes the central normative impact of a speech act is already over and done with, and it makes no sense to retract, either because the normative output of the speech act was time-limited or because it is causally impossible to undo it. I can't retract a request or order after you have satisfied or obeyed it, a promise after I have fulfilled it, and so forth (Bussière-Caraes 2022). Once you have become aware of a danger, I can't retract a warning. Second-person slurs may well be impossible to retract, since their impact is typically immediate and it is hard to see how they can be materially undone. Sometimes it may also just be materially and normatively unmanageable to retract a speech act, because the original normative outputs of the speech act are now so deeply tangled up in other normative effects and statuses that there is no real way to extricate and cancel that original output. For example, I may be unable to meaningfully retract a piece of advice once elaborate plans have been implemented on the basis of that advice, or I might be unable to retract a request once complicated commitments have been made and infrastructure erected to satisfy it.
2. *We must have social norms and conventions in place that establish when a retraction of a certain sort is felicitous and what it takes to perform it (these can be quite minimal, and they may be formal or informal) and these must be met.* These might be messy and ambiguous or neat and institutionalized. So for instance, we have well-defined and elaborate conventions in place for what it takes to retract a marriage agreement, a motion, a question asked of a witness in court, formal testimony, or a publication. It is much less clear what the norms are for retracting a promise or a bet, for instance. We typically are less willing to put conventions in place that enable people to retract on their obligations to others, whereas we make it easy for them to retract claims that they make on others, like requests and questions. In the case of some retractions, like retractions of sexual consent, there is dangerous disagreement as to what it takes to retract. Ethically, all decent people agree that retracting sexual consent should be easy no matter what,

but in practice, we have not established clear social conventions for what counts as a retraction of consent or how to establish that such a retraction has occurred.

3. *Social uptake and acceptance must be secured.* If no one hears your retraction, you have not retracted, because the normative changes your original speech act put into place are ultimately social changes, and they will still be in place. But people may reject a retraction even if they have heard it, and even if it was felicitous. Accusations, for instance, are often very difficult to retract, because people do not give the retraction uptake. Confessions to a crime, as Jennifer Lackey (2020) has argued, are dangerously difficult to retract; we tend to take them as permanent and definitive, even though false confessions are common and the reasons for them well-understood. Meanwhile, people are generally pretty accepting of retractions of questions and invitations, for instance.

With these conditions in mind, we can identify three categories of possibility for retractions.

1. *Straightforwardly performable retractions.* Some retractions are straightforward and easy to execute, sometimes even to the point where just saying 'I retract' is enough to count as retracting. These are cases in which we have comfortable and non-burdensome norms in place for when and how to retract, and where people are generally willing to give uptake to attempted retractions. Questions and requests for favors that have not yet been completed are in this category. Sometimes a bit more work is involved to make a retraction possible, but there is still social consensus on straightforward procedures for how to retract, and we generally give uptake to retractions that follow the correct procedures. Examples include terminating a lease early, and withdrawing an application for a job.
2. *Difficult or impossible retractions.* Some speech acts simply cannot be retracted, or can only be retracted with great difficulty, because they fail one of the three requirements above: it is too late to retract them (orders that have been executed, slurs that humiliate on impact), or we don't have norms for how to retract them (congratulations, greetings), or we do not (or do not easily) socially tolerate retractions or give them uptake (some sorts of promises, confessions, some sorts of accusations).
3. *Contingently successful retractions requiring social negotiation.* For some types of speech acts, the norms of retraction and uptake are messy, mostly implicit, unclear, and perhaps even contradictory. Securing social uptake may be challenging but possible, and it may involve a lot of contingency and social negotiation. Often in this third category, background power relations will

help shape how the attempted retraction plays out. Exercitives are a nice example. Once someone successfully establishes a rule, it is (typically) not clear how one can undo that rule. It's not necessarily impossible, but it requires social negotiation, as well as the acceptance by others that the rule no longer stands. Abdicating leadership of some enterprise is another example. Think here of Ishani Maitra's (2012) compelling discussion of how leadership over a group or control over an activity often involves what she calls 'licensed authority,' wherein someone claims social authority and that claim becomes successful because, contingently, others recognize that authority. One of her examples is of a group of hikers with no official leader, undecided over which trail to take, among whom one hiker just announces which way the group will go, as if he has the authority to lead, and the others fall in line and he becomes the *de facto* decision-maker for the group. Likewise, retracting one's own claiming of authority or control is often similarly a matter of social negotiation and contingent social recognition. Or consider retracting your agreement to care for someone, a child or an elderly parent perhaps. We don't make this socially impossible, but simply announcing that you retract certainly doesn't automatically extricate you from your adopted responsibilities. We socially negotiate when and how people can do this, in a mostly *ad hoc* manner. Having a lot of social collateral generally helps to make these complicated attempts to retract successful.

Retractions, and especially messy, contingent retractions in category three, often leave behind a great deal of ethical residue. Indeed, it is often precisely because the retraction will leave ethical residue that we are socially reluctant to make it too easy. It is because retracting a promise or an assumption of responsibility will leave people in the lurch, demonstrate a lack of care and respect, and weaken bonds of trust, that we make it difficult to do. But also, the social negotiation around the retraction itself can create new ethical residue. Granting or withholding from someone the power to retract when they want to is itself a socially complex action. It can humiliate, reinscribe social domination, or enforce accountability, for instance, and these are ethically significant effects. Furthermore, even when a given retraction is unproblematic, *too many* retractions of any kind erode trust and social stability and the groundwork for practical agency, and so they leave ethical residue.

For the most part, in this essay, I am de-emphasizing assertions and their retraction, because I believe they have gotten a disproportionate amount of attention in the retraction literature. But there are interesting questions to be asked about when and how the retraction of assertions is possible. Of course, if we find out an assertion we made was false or unjustified, retracting is certainly acceptable,

and perhaps even required. Likewise, if we demonstrate that our assertion was unjustified or unentitled, then we will be allowed to retract it. But when can we retract an assertion in cases where we continued to be entitled to it? The answer in the literature, to the extent that this question has been discussed, seems to be that we can do this without limitation. Krabbe (2001) and Vermaire (2020) both claim that we can retract an assertion whenever we like, and that retractions of assertions need no defense or explanation, or any material conditions other than being heard. But this seems to me to be wrong. For starters, if I continue to act and make inferences as if I still am entitled to an assertion, then I won't be accepted as having actually retracted it. And if I publicly fought hard for the entitlement to make the assertion, a cavalier retraction might not be taken seriously. Furthermore, I have already pointed out that some special assertions, like confessions, are routinely treated as unretractable. It is true, on the other hand, that often I can successfully retract an assertion even if I still have a warranted belief that it is true, because I don't want to be on the record as asserting it for whatever reason, or don't want to be held accountable for defending it. This at a minimum requires convincing my audience that I am genuinely divesting myself of access to any entitlement to it.

Vermaire (2020) raises an interesting category of cases that I want to repurpose here. His target is the assurance view of testimony: the idea, originating in articles such as Moran (2005) and Hinchman (2005), that when we *tell* someone something, we don't just provide them with evidence that it is true based on our reliability, but also establish a normative relationship with them in which we invite them to rely on our word, and assume responsibility for our telling. The idea behind assurance views is that the kind of knowledge we get from a telling is different from the kind we get from information-collection, in its pragmatic and normative structure. Vermaire constructs a case in which Zane, an environmental scientist, claims that the primary cause of a trout die-off was pollution caused by a paint factory. Later, Zane is under consideration for a high-paying position with the offending company, and he retracts (or at least tries to retract) his earlier claim. Vermaire's point is that anyone who knew about Zane's narrative and expertise would see right through his cynical motives for retracting, and would have as much reason to believe that the paint factory caused the die-off as they ever did. If this is right, then any special normative assurances involved in the original telling are not affecting the level of warrant that we get from it, and we are in fact treating it as evidence based on the reliability of the reporter, for epistemic purposes. He takes this as a serious problem for the assurance view.

I want to table the issue of whether the educated listener's level of warrant is the same before and after the retraction. I think Vermaire's argument here is interesting, and I do not have a developed view on whether this is the right way of describing the epistemic situation. I grant that he has raised an interesting challenge to any version of the assurance view that takes the normative structure of assurances as adding directly and essentially to the amount of credence we should give the proposition being assured. I want to focus instead on how Vermaire's example actually sharpens an important distinction that he elides, between telling and asserting. Assurance views are theories of *telling*, which is a second-person directed act that is different from merely asserting.[11] Vermaire's reading of the situation is premised on his claim that anyone can retract any *assertion* they want without explanation, regardless of whether they still believe it to be true. But it seems to me that what Zane has successfully retracted in this scenario is his telling but not his assertion. By retracting, he has made it clear that he is no longer offering us his assurance that his former claim is true; he no longer invites us to depend on his word, nor does he accept practical accountability for the statement. In this sense, he has indeed changed the normative situation with his retraction. But (given the way Vermaire set up the situation) he has not made a convincing enough case for his divestment of his entitlement to the assertion to successfully retract it. He may, for example, still be cited as an *evidentiary* source for his original claim, whether he wants to be or not. This seems to indicate that the retraction conditions for tellings and for assertions are different, and that retracting an assertion may involve substantive, contingent work. Moreover, retracting a telling can be ethically significant, as it disrupts expectations and entitlements; it backtracks on an offer to let others rely on you. Zane's retraction of his telling seems to be successful but ethically impermissible, whereas his retraction of his assertion seems unsuccessful. This leads us to our next section, on the permissibility or impermissibility of retractions.

Permissible and impermissible retractions

In the last section, I explored what can make retraction possible, impossible, or difficult and messy. I've also argued that retractions are often ethically significant interventions, and that people have ethical reasons for making them, resisting them, or giving them uptake. But that doesn't mean that all retractions that are successful are ethically permissible. Sometimes we allow someone to retract even though they should not, either because they have enough social power that we can't really stop them, or because we give some latitude for people to use their autonomy to do unethical things. I might orally offer you a job, and you might make elaborate and expensive plans around accepting it, and then

I might retract the job offer just because someone I like more came along, and the power relations between us and social conventions are such that there is really nothing you can do about it, even though it is ethically wrong for me to do this. Or I might agree to come with you to an event and support you, and then back out at the last minute, and you may decide to accept my retraction rather than holding me accountable for transgressing, even though I shouldn't have left you in the lurch. In the previous section, we saw Zane the environmental scientist successfully retract his telling for unethical reasons.

Retractions, as we have seen, undo the central normative output of a previous speech act, but in doing so they may disrupt the normative ecosystem that has arisen after the first speech act. So the ethical permissibility of a retraction cannot be assessed only in terms of the ethics of the original speech act; the retraction also needs to be assessed in terms of whether it will do harm in the current situation. In other words: If I perform an unethical speech act, then it might seem intuitive that retracting it is ethical, but this is not necessarily so. For example, if I offer you a job because I like you better than the other candidates, and not because you are the most qualified, it is still probably unethical for me to retract that job offer, once you have planned your life around accepting it. If I reveal a fact to a journalist that I did not have the authority to reveal, it is ethically acceptable for me to retract immediately and tell them not to use the quotation. But if I allow the journalist to use me as a source for the fact, and then retract, I am undermining the journalist and destabilizing public trust.[12] More generally, if others have come to rely in important ways on the normative situation created by my speech act, retracting it may well be ethically impermissible.

Retractions can be used to repair harm, even though they do not simply reinstate an earlier normative situation. But, importantly, when we retract, we undo the central normative output of our original action, and hence cease to be responsible for that output. Thus another dimension along which we can assess the ethical permissibility of a retraction is whether it is ethically acceptable to divest oneself of responsibility for an output in this way. Retraction may preclude some other kinds of repair because of this divestment. For example, while apology always invites (but does not demand) forgiveness, retraction can undermine the felicity of forgiveness. Once I retract an action, it does not make sense for you to forgive me for that action anymore (although you may forgive me for harm done along the way). But sometimes, ethically necessary forms of repair require me to continue to take ownership of an action and its output. If I give you a terrible piece of advice that leads to harm, for example, what is needed is not for me to retract that advice, but to apologize, take responsibility for it and its ongoing

impact, and help repair the harm it has done in other ways. It is appropriate for me to say, "I am sorry, I should not have advised you to do this," but not, "Never mind, I take back that advice." (Sometimes it might be useful to do both, of course.)

I am not planning on offering a test for the ethical permissibility of retraction, but by now we can see several dimensions along which this should be assessed. An ethically acceptable retraction does not cause undue added harm, and in particular it does not frivolously undercut important obligations that I have taken on, or other people's reliance on the effects of my original speech act, or upon a social ecosystem that my retraction will throw into disarray. It is helpful for, or at least consistent with, any needed forms of repair. Also, it does not problematically destabilize norms or undermine trust by chipping away too much at the weightiness or stickiness of commitments and other normative statuses.

When *should* we retract?

So far I have discussed when retraction is possible and when it is ethically permissible. But sometimes, retraction is not only permissible but indeed called-for. In this section, I discuss when retraction is obligatory, or at least ethically beneficial. I divide this discussion into two parts. First, I consider when retracting is a form of ethical *self-care*. Then, I explore when retraction is owed for the purpose of *social* repair.

Retraction as self-care

All of us would, of course, like to be right all of the time, and to always be able to act in accordance with our desires and our values. However, all of us also misstep, and find ourselves with commitments and other normative positionings that we wish we could get rid of. As I have discussed, retraction cannot be too easy; our commitments need to be 'sticky' if normativity is to be real at all and if social trust and cooperation are to be possible. At the same time, it is important that we sometimes be able to retract in order to preserve our integrity and be able to act in accordance with our important values. This is a balancing act, because sometimes we need to simply take responsibility for and ownership of our missteps, mistakes, and bad choices. But being able to retract some of our speech acts that have left us with commitments or entitlements that we don't think we should have, and that undermine our ability to act with practical agency and integrity, is important. If we no longer believe something we asserted earlier, we should not have to continue to defend it or reason consistently with it.[13] If I have

committed myself to a course of action that I now see is deeply wrong, for instance by making a promise to help a friend support an organization that they run and that I now believe to be harmful and corrupt, then it is important that I be able to undo that commitment by retracting the promise. If I have claimed an entitlement that I now don't believe I should ethically have, I should be able to divest myself of the entitlement. Not all cases will be this crisp. Sometimes I may perform a speech act that embroils me in an elaborate normative web that shapes my possibilities for agency in ways that make me stray far from who I want to be and think I should be. Retraction, in this case, will typically not undo the whole web but it may be a necessary start.

Hilde Lindemann has explored the phenomenon that she calls "holding in personhood" (Lindemann (2009), (2009a), (2016)). Her core idea is that we cannot generally sustain our integrity and our coherent sense of self without social scaffolding and the right kinds of social uptake. Especially but not only in times of illness or displacement, others may need to do some of the work of maintaining our identity and values for us; she gives examples such as bringing someone who is institutionalized with dementia an album from their record collection, or helping an ill person care for their pets. I find this notion of holding in personhood endlessly philosophically and ethically fertile. I do not think that it relies on a questionable metaphysics of a 'core self' or 'true inner self' separate from action. Actions that are out of step with our values or sense of self are still ours, and our responsibility. However, most of us organize our agency and our sense of identity and possibility around some central values and narratives (perhaps multiple, shifting over time, and maybe even conflicting). When we act or speak in a way that gives us commitments that are out of step with these central values and narratives, or in a way that sends us down a path of practical entanglements that are alien to or at odds with who we are trying to be, it is important that we hold ourselves and be held by others in our identity.

Retraction may be a crucial tool for this purpose; we need to have ways of resetting and repairing. We cannot overuse retraction without becoming unstable and undependable, but judicious use of retraction is needed, given our fallibility and finitude. Thus retraction can be an important tool in holding *ourselves* in our own individual personhood. At the same time, giving uptake to *others'* retractions of this sort—letting them revise and reset in order to maintain their integrity—is, when performed judiciously, an important social tool for holding *others* in personhood, and respecting their integrity. In Kukla and Steinberg (2021), we argued that the ability to retract within reason is an important component of our (finite) right to privacy; it is essential to our being able to control our public persona and reputation. My argument here is somewhat different, though similar in form. Here

I am arguing that the ability to retract is essential to building and protecting our integrity, and to setting paths for practical agency for ourselves that make sense.

But notice that refusing to retract under pressure to do so, when our original action is central to our sense of self and our integrity, or when we are not comfortable giving up our entitlement to it, can also be an important component of holding oneself in personhood.[14] And accordingly, respecting someone's refusal to retract can be a way of holding them in personhood. Moreover, *not allowing* someone too many retractions can also be a way of holding them in personhood, sustaining their stability as a trustworthy and accountable self.

Retraction as social repair

When do we owe retraction to others, for the purpose of social repair? I have no general rules to offer, but it is worth understanding how retraction functions as one of a number of reparative social tools. My goal in this section is to show the complexity of retraction as a tool for social repair, and to show that its ethical uses and limitations are distinctive, and different from those of apology and other reparative work. I am particularly interested in highlighting and exploring the power and limitations of retraction, because apology and forgiveness have received such a disproportionate amount of attention in philosophical discussions of moral repair.[15]

Retraction is an especially helpful reparative tool when undoing the original central normative output of a speech act and demonstrating that one will not make use of an entitlement to that speech act again are particularly important, and when the retraction itself will not cause undue harm. Retraction is the best tool for social repair when the normative output of the original speech act is the main source of harm, and there hasn't been too much collateral damage or too many normative ripples and complications from the original harm since. Retractions will not typically restore social relationships when these have been transformed or damaged in lasting ways over time. So for instance, if I have falsely or unjustifiably accused someone of something, then no amount of apologizing will repair the situation. I have to retract the accusation in order to stop harming them. Accusations, as I discussed earlier, are quite hard to retract, so this will take social labor, both to disseminate the retraction and to make sure it is convincing and gets uptake. But this labor is essential to repair. I might *also* need to apologize for the harm done by the accusation, including the harm that cannot be undone by retracting it, such as emotional damage, disruption of the relationships of the accused, and so forth,

but I cannot get away with not retracting. Ill-advised or immoral orders and requests also require retraction, unless they have already been acted on in a way that has been completed, in which case retraction is impossible.

Other kinds of discursive harm cannot be repaired by retraction. Sometimes this is because retraction is impossible, but sometimes it is because even though it is possible, it is not really a primary tool for mending harm. If I tell someone your secret, and thereby harm you, undoing my telling is possible, but it doesn't really make much headway in terms of undoing harm. I might give you an order to do something relatively harmless that humiliates you by displaying my power over you. In such a case, even if I retract the order before you have performed it, the humiliation may well remain. Here, retraction is not really an especially useful tool of social repair. Because retractions do not simply restore the normative situation to its pristine state, but rather land in the midst of whatever complex normative situation the original speech act contributed to, the kind of repair they can enact, and when they are the right tool for repair, will be complex. Sometimes once harm has been done, the best way to repair is not to partially backtrack but to build something new.

Sometimes retraction is just one necessary part of a complex multi-step process of repair. Because speech acts have complicated downstream effects and retraction undoes only their central normative outputs, this undoing may well not only leave other harms in place but itself cause new sorts of social rifts and effects that need to be repaired. Imagine that I invite your toxic and abusive mother with whom you have been trying to sever contact to your family dinner without checking with you, and when you find out, you are furious and afraid. Clearly, retracting the invitation is one part of the repair that I must do. But in turn, retracting the invitation may anger your mother and reveal facts about your feelings about her that you didn't want revealed. So not only does my retraction not undo your feelings of anger and violation at my having invited her in the first place, but the retraction itself causes new social harms that I now have to work to repair. Some of these harms may be irreparable, and apology may be my only remaining option. Apology may help repair my relationship with you, though not the other harms done.

It is interesting to me that apology has received such a disproportionate share of attention in the repair literature, as it is quite unclear exactly *how* apologies repair. Even once we get a handle on what makes for a good apology, imposing conditions such as sincerity, willingness to be held accountable for harm, or whatever else,[16] it remains unclear how exactly apologies function pragmatically to undo harm and repair a normative ecosystem. Of course an apology may make the person receiving the

apology feel better, and this is a good thing, but even an accepted apology may not have this emotional effect, and that effect seems relatively limited and contained when it comes to fixing a system of social relationships and a concrete situation that has been damaged. In Kukla, Herbert, and Watson (forthcoming), we argue that apologies open possibilities for repair but do not essentially have a reparative function themselves, although they may contingently cause good feelings that are parts of repair. I will not defend that account here, but rather just point out that whatever role apologies do play in repair, it is nonobvious. Apologizing certainly involves, among other things, taking responsibility for harm that one has caused, but it is not directly clear how this helps repair the harm. I am not arguing that apology is unimportant, but I am urging that we have other, more straightforward tools that are sometimes helpful for social repair, including retraction.

Retraction and apology are not the only discursive tools of repair. For example, Caponetto (2020) discusses *annulment*, wherein we point out that a previous speech act never was legitimate (for instance, a marriage pronouncement involving a secret bigamist), and *amendment*, wherein we alter the force of a standing speech act (for instance, strengthening a request for help into an entreaty or a demand for help), and she contrasts these with retraction. Her analysis is not centrally concerned with social repair or its ethics, but clearly, both annulment and amendment could have reparative functions. Holding harm-doers accountable, explaining hidden reasons behind one's action, offering reparations, and countless more discursive acts may also be reparative tools. We usually also have non-discursive tools for social repair in our repertoire, such as money, and time to spend on social organizing.

Reconciliation is often an essential component of repair. Barrett Emerick (2017) argues that reconciliation requires remorse and forgiveness, but this seems to me to be only one form of reconciliation, and one especially suited to being triggered by apology. Relationships can be restored and rebuilt in a variety of ways, and while remorse for harm done may be common and expressions of remorse may often be helpful, I don’t see the argument for making remorse essential. Reconciliation is an interpersonal social status, and I am not sure how private emotional states could be required as a measure of its success. In some circumstances, I may retract and rebuild without remorse, but with a recognition that I am responsible for repair, and this may lead to reconciliation. And if I retract, then forgiveness may become less essential to reconciliation, since I may have undone the harm and divested myself of my entitlement to the action that would have needed forgiveness. That is,

retraction can sometimes make reconciliation possible, by undoing a harm that disrupted a social relationship, even if it is not accompanied by apology, remorse, or forgiveness.

Retraction, I hope to have made clear by now, ought to be a phenomenon of substantive concern to ethicists as well as to philosophers of language. We cannot understand the ethics of retraction without doing discursive pragmatics, nor can we understand the discursive structure of retraction without doing ethics. I have explored the conditions under which retraction is possible, permissible, and ethically advisable as part of a project of holding in personhood or of social repair. We have seen that retraction is a distinctively ethically weighty speech act, for at least two reasons. First, there are ethically serious consequences if it is *either* too easy to perform and too common, *or* too difficult to perform and too rare. Second, it is by nature a speech act that intervenes upon the normative structure of social life, shifting commitments, entitlements, and statuses. While it may seem, upon first reflection, to simply be a tool for turning back normative time, we have seen that it cannot do that. Retraction is a pragmatically and ethically complex speech act—or rather, a complex set of speech acts, since it has different possibility conditions and different effects depending on what is being retracted, by whom, and in what context.

Footnotes

[1]https://mymodernmet.com/kintsugi-kintsukuroi/; see also BoJack Horseman S6E10, "Good Damage."

[2] For a book-length exploration of a nonideal ethics in which repair is an ethically essential activity, see Emerick and Yap (forthcoming), especially Chapter 5.

[3] See, for example, Steen (2011), Resnik and Dinse (2013), and da Silva (2015).

[4] Some of the most influential include Marques (2018), Krabbe (2001), MacFarlane (2011), Bach and Harnish (1979), and Caponetto (2020).

[5] See for instance Caponetto (2020) and Bussière-Caraes (2022).

[6] This imbalance is slowly being rectified. See Caponetto (2020) and Caponetto's contribution to this volume, Vermaire (2020), Bussière-Caraes (2022), and Kukla and Steinberg (2021).

[7] In Caponetto's contribution to this volume, she is careful to insist that retraction does *not* simply restore the previous state of affairs.

[8] Retracted articles, for instance, are often still heavily cited. Their retraction doesn't always successfully undermine their normative impact. See Kukla and Steinberg (2021) for discussion and examples.

[9] See Krabbe (2001) and Bussière-Caraes (2022) for discussions of this conversational dilemma.

[10] I don't think they necessarily *are* low, even in this context. Lots of important ethical work happens in the context of argumentation and conversation. But a focus on argumentation and information exchange in the philosophy of language treatments of retraction has tended to go hand in hand with a fairly intellectualized approach to the topic, within which nothing much of ethical substance appears to be at stake.

[11] See Kukla and Lance (2009), Chapter 1, for an extended discussion of the telling/asserting distinction.

[12] This example is a variant of an example suggested by Dan Steinberg.

[13] Thanks to Dan Steinberg for first making this point to me, and more generally for making me think about how retracting can be a matter of integrity.

[14] I thank an anonymous reviewer for making this important point.

[15] See for instance Emerick (201)7, Emerick and Yap (forthcoming), MacLachlan (2015), MacLachlan (2020), Norlock (forthcoming), and Walker (2006).

[16] See Emerick and Yap (forthcoming) and MacLachlan (2015) for excellent discussions of what apology requires. See also Kukla, Herbert, and Watson (forthcoming) for a more in-depth discussion of the nature and limitations of apology.

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