

Goldberg, Sanford C. *Conversational Pressure: Normativity in Speech Exchanges*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020. ix+ 255 pp.

Given our current communicative ecosystem—which is, thanks to the internet, both gargantuan and high speed—you could be forgiven for feeling overwhelmed. In his satire of the pandemic-era internet, Bo Burnham summed up our collective exhaustion: “Is it necessary that every single person on this planet um, expresses every single opinion that they have on every single thing that occurs all at the same time?...Or to ask in a slightly different way, um, can...can anyone shut the [expletive] up?”

Both the cover image—a crowd of speakers, heads turned unexpectedly this way and that—and the title of Sanford C. Goldberg’s new book evokes this familiar, maddening cacophony. In its best moments, *Conversational Pressure* imposes order on the clamor. Goldberg aspires to limn, if only partially, exactly what we do and don’t owe to those who seek to tell us things. It turns out that we generally owe them our attention and a fair hear. We don’t owe them a presumption of trustworthiness. Sometimes, we owe them our voice: when the conditions are right, Goldberg argues, I am obligated to tell you when I reject your assertion.

In the push-and-pull between the individual and the collective, Goldberg tends to side with the latter. Goldberg’s silences are telling. He rarely discusses the values of privacy and individual autonomy. To be clear, all parties to the debate agree that, to some extent, a person is beholden to her fellow people. What is notable is how little room Goldberg leaves her.

Here’s a particularly dramatic example. In the beginning of the book, Goldberg argues that “every rational being who is also a social being has [a defeasible] entitlement to have the attention of other social rational beings” (33). Suppose that I am walking to work while engrossed in the memory of a Shakespeare soliloquy or while chewing over the problem of personal identity or while fantasizing about a trip to Istanbul. A street vender calls out to me in order to hawk a newspaper. What may I do? Let’s spot Goldberg the claim that if I were virtuous, I would smile at the vendor and say, “No, thanks, not today.” But must I do this? In this particular tug-of-war between the individual and the collective, it’s not obvious that the collective deserves to win out.

But Goldberg argues that I *owe it* to the vendor to wrench my attention away from these private, delectable thoughts and turn my attention towards him (45-46). Goldberg grants that I am within my rights to find the vendor’s call irritating. He even grants that the vendor is manipulating our collective speech practices. But for all that, I still owe the vendor my attention. (No wonder poor Bo Burnham is so overwhelmed!) Whether you find Goldberg’s outlook refreshing, disconcerting, or simply intriguing will depend upon your own ethical sensibilities.

Goldberg divides the book into three sections, each corresponding to a different moment in the life cycle of a speech act. In the first section, Goldberg investigates the moment of address: the

moment *before* you and I are conversing, when you merely seek to capture my attention. When you seek to capture my attention in order to initiate cooperation with me, Goldberg argues, I am *pro tanto* morally obligated to grant you this attention.

In the second and third sections, Goldberg restricts his discussion to assertion and its close cousins. In the second section, arguably the heart of the book, Goldberg investigates the moment in which the assertion is proffered. Goldberg argues that when you assert that *p*, and I observe your assertion, I am morally required to treat you “with the sort of respect due to one who conveys having [epistemic] authority,” with regard to the truth of *p* (94). In short: I am morally obligated not to dismiss your testimony out of hand. In the third section, Goldberg investigates the post-assertion moment, when the addressee must decide how to respond. Goldberg argues that, if I disagree with what you asserted, I am *pro tanto* obligated to voice my disagreement. Meanwhile, you are entitled to presume that if I don’t speak up, I agree with you.

Goldberg also embarks on several side quests, two of which deserve special mention. In arguably the best chapter of the book, chapter seven, Goldberg vindicates our tendency to trust our friends’ testimony more than we trust strangers’. When you and I are friends, it’s common knowledge that we value our friendship. Since it’s also common knowledge that deceptive or careless testimony would undermine our friendship, Goldberg argues, it’s common knowledge that we have extra reason to speak honestly and carefully to each other and extra reason to believe that each will speak honestly and carefully to the other. If it succeeds, Goldberg’s account obviates the need for more radical hypotheses, such as those that appeal to pragmatic encroachment or disharmony between epistemic rationality and our friendship-generated obligations.

In chapter nine, Goldberg argues that the *No Silent Rejection* norm—that is, our *pro tanto* obligation to speak up when we disagree—partially explains the architecture of oppression. When a dominant party speaks to an oppressed party, the *No Silent Rejection* norm does not bind the oppressed party. But the dominant party may erroneously believe that *NSR* is in effect and that the addressee is conforming to it. This explains why sometimes, the coerced silence of the oppressed is misinterpreted as tacit assent. Goldberg ends his argument here, but I think he can go further. Insofar as oppression characteristically masks its existence from its perpetrators, dominant parties will *characteristically* suffer from the delusion that conditions are not oppressive. *A fortiori*, dominant parties will *characteristically* misinterpret the silence of the oppressed as assent.

Despite their virtues, Goldberg’s arguments are not uniformly persuasive. For example, consider our obligation to attend to those who call for our attention. Goldberg justifies this obligation on two grounds. First, he offers a naturalistic justification: given our manifest need to cooperate with each other, we couldn’t help but develop such a norm. Second, he contends that the obligation is a special instance of the general requirement to respect rational agents.

With respect to attention capture, it’s not obvious that a norm is needed. When someone calls to me, my psychology makes it extremely difficult to fail to attend to them. (That’s why, when I lived in an area plagued with street harassment, I wore headphones and cranked up the music.) Isn’t it plausible to think that evolutionary psychology facilitates our ability to capture each

other's attention? And if that's right, then there would have been no need to develop an extra deontic doodad.

Dissimilarities between the obligation to respect someone and the obligation to attend to her call into question Goldberg's second justification. Generally, respect-based obligations are incredibly stringent. If you hurl slurs at me, I'm not *ipso facto* permitted to hurl slurs at you. This is because, generally, your disrespect towards me does not defeat my requirement to respect you. But in order to get the right verdicts, Goldberg must say that the addresser's disrespect is enough to defeat your obligation to respect her, at least insofar as attending to her goes.

Suppose my colleague shouts at me, "Hey, sugartits, come over here and help me lift this." My colleague is attempting to initiate a cooperative activity with me, but he is doing so in a disrespectful way. It strikes me as perverse to think that I am even *pro tanto* required to attend to him. But as we've seen, your *disrespect* towards me doesn't defeat my requirement to respect you. What this suggests is that the requirement to attend to a speaker is not just an instance of the requirement to respect her.

Goldberg's second appeal to respect is inconclusive as well. In the second section of the book, Goldberg argues that I am morally required to treat speakers with the "respect due to one who conveys having [epistemic] authority" (94). Crucially, this does not amount to believing the speaker or even granting her a presumption of trustworthiness. To respect a speaker, in the target sense, is to "*adjust [one]'s doxastic reaction to a proper (epistemic) assessment of the speaker's epistemic authority*" (96, emphasis original). As far as I can tell, this is just to say that I am morally obligated to do what I am epistemically required to do, with respect to a speaker's testimony. This norm dredges up an infamously tangled ball of problems. In short: it's not at all obvious that moral norms, which paradigmatically govern voluntary action, can prescribe anything about our beliefs, which may not be under our voluntary control.

In the opening pages of section two, Goldberg gestures towards a brief argument in defense of an ethics for belief. When an addressee summarily dismisses the addresser's testimony, we sometimes say that the addresser has been wronged, harmed, insulted, abused, slighted, rebuffed, or disrespected (61). Well, fair enough. But we say many things, and many of those things are, upon reflection, revealed to be ill-founded or confused. The mere fact that I feel insulted when you don't believe me doesn't entail that I was insulted, let alone that I was wronged. If I extend my friendship towards you, and you politely and courteously decline it, I may feel rebuffed. But on this basis, we can't infer that you were morally obligated to become my friend. This sort of evidence is too flimsy to convince a philosopher skeptical, or even agnostic, about the possibility that morality could govern belief.

With that being said, the scope of Goldberg's achievement cannot be denied. *Conversational Pressure* is an excellent, inventive, and thought-provoking volume. It contributes to an impressive range of subfields, including social epistemology, philosophy of language, and ethics. To philosophers generally: you should read it. To philosophers working on the social world: you've got to.

References

Burnham, Bo, director. *Bo Burnham: Inside*. Netflix, 2021.

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