



REVIEWS

Cuneo, Terrence, *Speech and Morality: On the Metaethical Implications of Speaking*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014. Pp. 224. ISBN-13: 978-0198712725 (hb). \$55.00.

In his second book, Cuneo argues that reflection on the nature of speech can reveal the truth of moral realism. While there are no completely uncontentious definitions of moral realism, it can be safely glossed as the idea that some moral statements, like “Genocide is wrong,” are true in virtue of moral facts. These facts, moreover, are in no way contingent upon human beliefs, desires, or attitudes.

Although to the best of my knowledge Michael Polanyi did not use the term “moral realism,” he seems to have been sympathetic to the idea. In “The Message of the Hungarian Revolution,” Polanyi describes the plight of the Budapest intellectuals who revolted against the Soviet Union in 1956 on the grounds that the value of truth and justice could not be disestablished by party decree. No explanation of this revolt can be complete, Polanyi thought, if it leaves out the moral truths that animated the rebels.

With regard to the various schools of thought within moral realism, Cuneo tries to be ecumenical. In this respect, *Speech and Morality* is a less ambitious project

than his previous book, *The Normative Web* (OUP 2010), where Cuneo argues for specifically non-naturalist moral realism; in other words, he rejects the idea that moral facts are wholly reducible to facts of the kind discoverable by the natural sciences. Presumably, Cuneo still holds this position, but in *Speech and Morality* he endeavors to develop an argument—his Speech Act Argument—that moral realists of all stripes can get behind.

Cuneo begins by drawing our attention to a dispute between Thomas Hobbes and Samuel Clarke. In *Leviathan*, Hobbes imagines primitive, stateless human beings who have prudential reasons to ensure their own survival but lack moral obligations to others. Only when they contract with one another to transfer power to an all-powerful sovereign to protect their interests do moral reasons emerge.

Clarke objected that in order for that agreement to be binding, it would have to have already been the case that “compacts ought to be faithfully performed.” Were this not true, no promise would have the normative force to make subsequent promises binding. Cuneo calls this “Clarke’s Insight,” and the book can be

seen as an extended effort to draw out its metaethical implications (2).

What Clarke thinks is true of promising, Cuneo thinks applies to assertions, commands and adjournments, and all other speech acts. When a speaker performs one of these acts, she changes her “normative standing” with respect to her audience. When one makes an assertion, for example, one takes responsibility—*moral* responsibility—for the truth of what one has asserted.

In developing and presenting his normative theory of speech, Cuneo borrows heavily from the work of J.L. Austin and John Searle. It is a pity that he never cites Polanyi, who seems to have been a kindred spirit. For instance, Polanyi writes, “[N]o sincere assertion of fact is essentially unaccompanied by feelings of intellectual satisfaction...and a sense of personal responsibility” (*PK*27).

But, it must be emphasized, a mere feeling of responsibility isn’t enough to make one a speaker, any more than merely believing that one has taken the oath of office is enough to make one president of the United States. To be president, one must *actually* take the oath of office, and to be a speaker, one must *actually* be responsible for one’s assertions. Because the existence of this kind of responsibility entails that there are some moral facts, we are justified in concluding that moral facts exist. This, in a nutshell, is Cuneo’s Speech Act Argument.

One might object that the obligations of speakers need not be explained by recourse to the kind of mind-independent

moral facts that moral realists postulate. Perhaps the obligations of speakers are on a par with “practice-based” obligations, like those associated with being an umpire in the game of baseball. Many anti-realists seem to believe that the normativity internal to established human practices is ontologically innocent.

Cuneo is keen to convince his readers that both categorical normativity and what he calls “practice-based normativity” stand or fall together. He contends that the arguments marshalled against facts about categorical normativity inadvertently undermine facts about practice-based normativity that both realists and anti-realists generally accept.

For example, Crispin Wright claims that we have reason to believe in moral facts only if we have a reason to believe that such facts explain a wide variety of non-moral phenomena. Because moral facts are not explanatory in this way, we should reject them. If Wright’s argument is sound, then a parallel argument would show that legal facts and norms should also be rejected, Cuneo alleges.

When a plaintiff makes an angry outburst at a judge, the legal facts explain not only why the angry outburst counts as an act of disrespect toward the judge, but also why the plaintiff is anxious about being punished. Legal norms explain the goings-on in the world through our beliefs and attitudes about them.

If this kind of explanation is sufficient for facts about legal normativity to be explanatorily useful, then perhaps facts about moral normativity could be

explanatorily useful in a similar way. If, on the other hand, this kind of explanation doesn't suffice, then we should accept neither legal nor moral normativity. Similar conclusions are drawn about a number of other attempts to reject categorical normativity while retaining practice-based normativity.

After making this argument, Cuneo presents his case against three kinds of anti-realism: error theory, expressivism, and constructivism. Here I will focus on his case against error theory, the view that moral statements attempt to describe the world, but that all of them fail to do so because there are no moral facts. Cuneo summarizes his argument against error theory as follows: "If an error-theoretic view of morality were true, however, then there would be no moral features and, so, no moral facts. And thus we could not speak. But we do speak, and so error theoretic views are false." (164)

In asserting that "we could not speak" were error theory true, Cuneo does not mean that we would remain silent but that we could not perform normative speech acts. I find it unclear why the error theorist would not simply embrace that conclusion, just as an atheist would embrace the conclusion that there are no true baptisms on the assumption that a baptism places one in a relationship with God.

It is one thing to reject baptism, and another to reject all ordinary speech acts, an idea Cuneo calls "deeply unattractive." Error theory, however, is *on its face* a deeply unattractive position. The error

theorist who is willing to say "it isn't true that the trans-Atlantic slave trade was morally wrong" is unlikely to shrink from saying counter-intuitive things about speech acts if that is what his metaethical theory commits him to saying.

So it's unclear whether Cuneo's response to the error theorist confers any dialectical advantage upon the realist. His response is further undermined by his earlier statements about the communication of animals and small children. Having the rights and obligations of a speaker requires a level of rationality that most animals and very young children have not attained. When they communicate, they engage only in what Cuneo calls "proto-speech acts," which are speech acts only in an "honorific" sense (69-75).

Honorific degrees are bestowed by institutions that normally bestow regular, non-honorific degrees; do genuine speakers somehow bestow the honorific speaker status on non-speakers? Apparently so: "[O]ne can properly ascribe...the status of having performed a speech act (or something close thereto) in virtue of the fact that one is being treated as a participant in the social practice of speaking" (71, emphasis mine).

Plausibly, though, a monkey incapable of speech has a reason to shriek to warn of an approaching snake, and makes an error, although not a *moral* error, when it shrieks at a snake-shaped stick. The monkey's communication can be evaluated as appropriate or inappropriate even if there were no genuine speakers on earth

to grant it honorary membership in the speaking club.

Cuneo would do best to dispense with the idea of “honorific” speech acts and accept that all communication involves normativity, though not necessarily *moral* normativity. Otherwise, Cuneo must concede that all the proto-speech acts whose utterers have not been granted “honorific” status are instances of non-normative communication. Once the category of “non-normative communication” is acknowledged, the door is open for the error-theorist to claim that it encompasses *all* speech and thereby de-fang Cuneo’s case for realism.

In the final chapter, Cuneo shows that his normative theory of speech can help answer an epistemic problem for realists that has been forcefully advanced by Sharon Street. Given that our moral sensibilities have been so thoroughly influenced by evolutionary pressures, how can realists explain our ability to detect the mind-independent moral facts without postulating a miracle or a cosmic coincidence?

Cuneo suggests an elegant solution to this so-called “Darwinian dilemma.” The ability to speak clearly has survival value and, if Cuneo is on point, presupposes awareness of some moral facts. So when evolutionary forces favored the development of speech, they also inadvertently favored rudimentary moral awareness. Once evolution creates beings capable of understanding some moral truths, they can reason their way to other moral truths.

Cuneo’s *Speech and Morality* comes highly recommended to those interested in moral realism. Students of Polanyi’s philosophy will find much to appreciate in the way Cuneo connects speech act theory to contemporary debates in meta-ethics. If the book is unlikely to convince moral skeptics, expressivists, and error theorists, it at least succeeds in bringing to light some hidden costs of their positions.

Spencer Jay Case
spencer.case@Colorado.EDU