

Terence Cuneo

Speech and Morality: On the Metaethical Implications of Speaking, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 259 pages. ISBN: 9780198712725. Hardback: \$55.

In *Speech and Morality*, Terence Cuneo offers a novel argument for metaethical realism (pp. 8–13) – one that is officially neutral between reductive and robust versions of the view (p. 5). In brief, Cuneo’s argument combines a pedestrian assumption about our discursive practices – that we assert, promise, and perform various other kinds of speech acts – with an intriguing idea about their nature – that the conditions under which we do so are essential normative, and sometimes essentially moral – in an effort to derive the surprising transcendental conclusion that there are moral facts since we assert, promise, and *speak* more generally.

One of the many impressive aspects of *Speech and Morality* is its wide inter-sub-disciplinary appeal. It should be read by metaethicists, because it highlights an underappreciated avenue for exploring the relationship between the language and metaphysics of morality; philosophers of language, because Cuneo’s idea that speech acts have a moral character, beyond a merely normative character, constitutes fertile ground for new research in speech act theory; and normative ethicists, too, because one of the core innovations of the book is the claim that there is a significant first-order moral dimension to the performance of speech acts. All told, *Speech and Morality* is a creative and rewarding philosophical work.

Cuneo calls the main argument of the book the “Speech Act Argument” (p. 24), and it is usefully thought of as unfolding in four stages over the course of seven chapters. Stage one (Chapters 1–2) is an attempt to show that the performance of any kind of speech act depends on normative facts. Stage two (Chapter 3) purports to establish that at least some of these normative facts are moral facts. Stage three (Chapters 4–6) offers a battery of arguments against views that set out to explain these normative and moral facts along anti-realist lines such as error theory, constructivism, and expressivism. And stage four (Chapter 7) showcases how some moral realists, like nonnaturalists, could use the argument to explain how it is that our moral beliefs can be justified in light of the contingent evolutionary forces that shaped them. In the remainder of this brief review, I will critically evaluate some aspects of stages one and three, where two of the argument’s most critical premises are developed.

The primary goal of stage one is to establish a premise that Cuneo calls the “Normative Theory of Speech.” (p. 25) Cuneo understands assertions, promises, and other speech acts along traditional Austinian lines as “illocutionary acts,” which are actions that agents perform in virtue of performing “locutionary

acts,” or acts of uttering or inscribing words. On Cuneo’s Normative Theory of Speech, agents perform illocutionary acts not merely in virtue of performing locutionary acts, but also partly in virtue of having the “rights, responsibilities, and obligations of being a speaker” (p. 68).

To illustrate with a reoccurring scenario in the book, imagine that Jake’s Big Band is playing a rendition of Mack the Knife in front of an audience. After playing the song, the bandleader Jake utters ‘Ella Fitzgerald performed Mack the Knife’ into the microphone. In performing this locutionary act, Cuneo claims, Jake alters his status with respect to his audience in asserting that Ella Fitzgerald performed Mack the Knife. In so doing, according to Cuneo, Jake presents the world as being a certain way, and he is thereby liable to “correction, blame, or admonition” (p. 31) if the world is not as he presents it. But, Cuneo claims, Jake’s altering his status in this way or his “stick[ing his] neck out” (p. 47) is a normative alteration, and indeed a moral alteration.

Cuneo’s auxiliary argument for the Normative Theory of Speech is abductive. He sets out to argue against Stephen Barker’s (*Explaining Meaning*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) Perlocutionary Intention Theory of Speech, according to which it is the expression of a “perlocutionary” intention, or an intention, roughly, to produce an effect in an audience by performing an illocutionary act, that is necessary for performing speech acts. On this sort of view, Jake does not perform an assertion in virtue of any kind of normative fact, but rather does so in virtue of expressing an intention for an audience to engage with a representation of a state of affairs by accepting, confirming, or rejecting it. (p. 45) But it is open to the Normative Theorist of Speech to claim, according to Cuneo, that “in ordinary speech situations, advertising oneself as being in a representational state of a certain kind *just is* to ‘stick one’s neck out’ in a certain way, thereby laying oneself open to rightful correction if things are not as one advertises” (p. 47, emphasis mine). Since one of, if not the only, “developed alternative” (*ibid*) to Cuneo’s Normative Theory of Speech isn’t one, we ought to accept his view.

But if *what it is* to stick one’s neck out is to advertise oneself as being in a representational state of a certain kind, then sticking one’s neck out looks like it consists in ordinary, non-normative facts – the kind of facts that *reductive* realists trade in. Recall, however, that Cuneo advertises his argument as supporting a “generic” (p. 5) form of moral realism, one that is allegedly compatible with *nonnaturalism*. Indeed, Cuneo strongly suggests that nonnaturalists stand to gain the most from the alleged success of the Speech Act Argument (See Chapter 7, in particular). So, if Cuneo establishes the Normative Theory of Speech by arguing against Barker’s view in this way, then it isn’t entirely clear that nonnaturalists can take advantage of the Speech Act Argument.

The primary goal of stage four is to establish the premise that if agents have the rights responsibilities and obligations of being a speaker, then there are moral facts. This stage of the book contains compelling indirect arguments against rival anti-realist views, including such views as an off-the-shelf version of expressivism on which, because moral words and concepts function non-descriptively, our use of them does not put us in any position to justifiably infer that there are moral facts. The problem with the so-called Motivation Argument (pp. 135–144) for expressivism is, as Cuneo plausibly points out, that it arbitrarily privileges expressivist-friendly intuitive judgments – like the intuitive judgment that moral thoughts are practical – over realist-friendly intuitive judgments – like the intuitive judgment that there are moral facts that we can appeal to in settling moral disagreements. At best, this familiar kind of argument lends equal support to both expressivism and moral realism.

Cuneo's direct arguments against expressivism are not, however, as persuasive. In arguing against the common pairing of expressivism with deflationism about moral facts and properties he claims, for example, that if deflationary expressivism were true, then there would be “nothing informative” to say about what “in virtue of which actions are right or wrong” making it “it impossible to engage in normative ethics, which offer us substantive proposals about that in which rightness and wrongness consist.” According to Cuneo, however, “no decent metaethical theory that affirms the existence of moral facts ... should have this implication” (pp. 181–187).

Expressivists, and especially deflationary expressivists, would resist this argument, since one of their primary motivations is precisely to avoid having to say anything substantive about the nature of morality. Worse yet, it's not clear that many moral realists would welcome this argument, since it presupposes a picture of normative ethical theorizing on which the goal is it to specify what moral features *consist* in – a picture that many normative ethicists, including Cudworth, Moore, and Ross, explicitly reject, in favor of a picture on which the goal of normative ethics is to comprise a list of actions that are wrong, right, etc. *in themselves* (See pp. 1–18, Mark Schroeder *Explaining the Reasons We Share: Explanation and Expression in Ethics, Volume 1*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

Nevertheless, *Speech and Morality* contains the raw materials for advancing tough challenges to expressivism. For example, one distinctive feature of our practice of speech is that we typically recognize it when we encounter it, such that it is relatively rare to find people *disagreeing* about whether so-and-so is making an assertion, or whether such-and-such is a question. But one of the hallmarks of expressivism about morality is that it allows for a striking kind of diversity with respect to the norms that we recognize as governing it. So, if

expressivism about *all* normative thought and discourse is true, as Cuneo suggests the most plausible versions of expressivism ought to hold (pp. 151–161), then expressivists owe an explanation of why there would be so much more disagreement about when, say, someone acts wrongly, than there is about when someone makes an assertion. That it is possible to construct such a challenge to expressivism is a testament to the richness of *Speech and Morality*.¹

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¹ Thanks to Terence Cuneo and Mark Schroeder for helpful feedback on this review.