

Sincerity and Expressivism¹

What is it for a speech-act to be sincere? A very tempting answer, defended by John Searle and others, is that a speech-act is sincere just in case the speaker has the state of mind it expresses. I argue that we should instead hold that a speech-act is sincere just in case the speaker *believes* that she has the state of mind *she believes* it expresses (sections I and II). Scenarios in which speakers are deluded about their own states of mind play an important role in arguing for this account. In the course of developing this account I also explore how it might make good use of the often neglected distinction between insincerity and mere non-sincerity (section II). After defending and developing my positive proposal, I explore its implications for debates over expressivism in meta-ethics (sections III and IV).

I. Sincerity and Delusion.

In his classic discussion of speech-acts, John Searle provides a table in which different kinds of speech-acts are assigned different sincerity rules. On Searle's canonical view, (a) assertions are sincere if and only if the speaker believes the proposition asserted, (b) requests are sincere if and only if the speaker wants her interlocutor to fulfil the request and (c) questions are sincere if and only if the speaker wants to know the answer (Searle 1969: 66-67) and so on. However, Searle does not simply provide what he takes to be a list of plausible answers to each question of the form, "What makes such and such kind of speech-act sincere?" He also provides a more general theory of sincerity, according to which a speech-act is sincere just in case the speaker has the state of mind expressed by

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the speech-act. As Searle puts it, “the sincerity condition tells us what the speaker expresses in the performance of the act.” (Searle 1969: 65). To be clear about Searle’s view we must pause over the meaning of ‘express’ in this context. On the intended reading, ‘express’ denotes a complex relation between a speaker, her interlocutor(s), and a background of linguistic conventions with which they are familiar, such that those conventions dictate that when certain criteria are fulfilled the speaker has expressed a certain mental state ‘whether he likes it or not’.² There is a clear sense in which anyone who asserts that dinosaurs are warm-blooded has thereby expressed the belief that dinosaurs are warm-blooded regardless of whether she actually believes they are. In this sense someone can express the belief that p without believing that p. This sense of ‘express’ is different from the sense in which a frown can express unhappiness. If someone is not actually unhappy then her frown only seems to express unhappiness. Searle’s view of sincerity is very seductive and seems to have functioned as an implicit philosophical orthodoxy. For example, in *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings*, Allan Gibbard endorses (but does not argue for) the Searlean view:

When one expresses a state of mind...being in that state of mind constitutes not speaking truly but being sincere. (Gibbard 1990: 84).

Other examples of philosophical discussions which embrace Searle’s view of sincerity are not uncommon.³

² Here I follow Richard Joyce; see Joyce 2002.

³ For example, Searle’s view of what it is for an assertion to be sincere is presupposed (implicitly) in David Simpson’s discussion of lying at Simpson 1992: 625. The Searlean view is also assumed in O.H. Green’s discussion of what it is for an expression of emotion to be sincere; see Green 1970: 557. One notable exception here is Robert Audi, who argues that a sincere assertion that p does not presuppose a belief that p; see Audi 1982: 139-140. Audi’s discussion is brief (one paragraph), but he does emphasize that a failure to believe that p is compatible with saying that p without thinking one is speaking falsely or having any intention to deceive one’s interlocutors or being disposed to assert that not-p to one’s friends or in fact to suppose that an accusation of insincerity would be just in light of her utterance. Audi does not attempt to provide necessary and sufficient conditions for sincerity and his discussion is restricted to the case of

However, Searle's view of sincerity seems plausible only so long as we ignore possible cases in which speakers are deluded about their own states of mind. Unless Searle implausibly insists that such delusions are conceptually impossible we have a family of counter-examples to his view at our fingertips. Consider first a Freudian case in which Bob believes that he believes his mother loves him but actually does not believe that she loves him. In fact, Bob believes his mother hates him. There are familiar ways in which Bob's behaviour might show that he has deluded himself about his own beliefs. For example, he might predict that his mother will do things that would make sense only if he believed she hated him. Perhaps Bob also feels a sort of anxiety people associate with being hated by a close family member when the subject of his mother arises, goes out of his way to try to please her and is highly deferential to her, etc. Nonetheless, because he cannot cope with the idea that his mother hates him he has somehow convinced himself that he believes that his mother loves him. Just how these forms of self-deception are possible is itself a notoriously difficult philosophical question, but cases like the case of Bob's do seem conceptually possible. Suppose we ask Bob whether his mother loves him and he says, "Yes, of course she does." In such a case, Bob's speech-act (an assertion) expresses the belief that his mother loves him, but by hypothesis he does believe that she loves him. So according to Searle's view, Bob's answer is

assertion, but his comments on sincerity are insightful and helpful. However, it is not clear from his discussion whether Audi thinks an intention (or desire) to deceive one's interlocutor is necessary for insincerity, though he emphasizes that such an intention (or desire) will be present in a normal or paradigmatic case of insincerity which is right as far as it goes. On the account developed here, such an intention is not strictly speaking necessary for insincerity. A speaker need not actively intend or desire to deceive her audience to be insincere. Someone who knew she was lying but was simply indifferent to whether she deceived her interlocutors (perhaps she is motivated to say what she does simply because she thinks others will find it funny) would presumably still count as insincere. Avoiding the charge of insincerity requires not only lacking an intention or desire to deceive, but also refraining from saying anything which would by one's own lights be deceptive. I return to this point in some detail in the main body of the text in section I. Again, it is unclear whether Audi would disagree with any of this, since his

insincere. However, this is simply not correct. Bob's speech-act reflects delusion rather than insincerity. After all, insincerity presumably is morally dubious at least in part because it involves a willingness to mislead one's interlocutors, but Bob's speech-act is no indication of any such willingness.⁴ So Bob's speech-act is a case of someone asserting something they do not believe without insincerity. It is therefore a counter-example both to Searle's account of what makes assertions sincere and a counter-example to Searle's more general view of what makes any utterance sincere.

I have simply invented the example of Bob, but there are cases in which on some plausible accounts real people are systematically confused about their own beliefs. Though my point against Searle's account depends only on the conceptual possibility of delusion about one's own mental states, it is worth seeing how this conceptual possibility might actually be instantiated for at least two reasons. First, an exploration of apparent actual cases of the phenomena provides a nice way of fleshing out a specific version of the counter-example in more detail. Second, the fact that it is so plausible to believe that whether people in the cases under discussion really are deluded is an empirical one bolsters the plausibility of the thesis that such self-delusion is at least conceptually possible.

On one interesting and plausible interpretation, people suffering from schizophrenia are incapable of distinguishing their mere acts of imagination from their beliefs. Gregory Currie makes a persuasive case for this interpretation of at least some

very brief yet helpful and suggestive discussion does not aim to provide necessary and sufficient conditions for sincerity or insincerity.

⁴ When I say that insincerity is morally dubious, I do not mean to suggest that it is always morally wrong. Rather, the idea is that insincerity typically violates something like what W.D. Ross would have called a 'prima facie duty' in virtue of its typically being a form of deception. This is compatible with other moral reasons making insincerity morally justified, all things considered, as in the famous case of lying to a

cases of schizophrenia (see Currie 2000: 172-178). We have prima facie reason to think some schizophrenics do not really believe what they say simply because they systematically fail to act in ways which would make sense if they believed what they said. Currie cites clinicians who characterize one of their patients as having paranoid and delusional ideas on which she “in no way acted” but instead lived peacefully for years in a small Swiss town (Currie 2000: 175). Another clinician remarked that, “None of our generals has ever attempted to act in accordance with his imaginary rank and station.” (Currie 2000: 175) Currie suggests that in these cases, “the agent believes that she has a certain thought, but actually does not believe it.” (Currie 2000: 175) On Currie’s view, schizophrenics lose the ability to distinguish mere acts of imagination from beliefs by losing of a sense of their own agency. Currie argues that the standard way people distinguish mere acts from imagination from beliefs is that acts of imagination seem to be a direct result of one’s will whereas the phenomenology of beliefs does not involve this same sense of voluntary control. Insofar as schizophrenics lose their sense of agency they might lose the sense that their acts of imagination are a direct result of their will. Since acts of imagination also figure in inferences in much the way that beliefs do, this might well lead schizophrenics to believe that what are actually acts of imagination are beliefs. On Currie’s theory at least some schizophrenics go through a phase in which they believe that they believe that p while actually merely imagining that p rather than believing that p. Such patients do in fact assert that p. For example, schizophrenics who on Currie’s interpretation believe that they believe they are Napoleon will say that they are Napoleon. On any plausible account these speech-acts are perfectly sincere even

murderer about the whereabouts of his intended victim. Thanks to an anonymous referee for drawing me out on this point.

though (according to Currie) the speakers do not believe what they are saying. Such speaker's assertions are sincere because the speakers believe that they believe they are Napoleon. After all, this second-order belief explains why their speech-acts do not betray a willingness to deceive their interlocutors.

The invented example of Bob and the example of schizophrenics as understood by Currie all focus on assertoric speech. However, it is easy enough to construct similar counter-examples involving non-assertoric speech-acts. Suppose I tell someone 'thank you' for giving me a new power tool when I honestly believe I am grateful for the gift. In fact, I am not grateful for what my interlocutor has done. I am more cold-hearted than I like to tell myself I am, and moreover the power tool simply means that I will finally have no excuse not to do those annoying repairs to my house I have been so assiduously avoiding. Once again, this looks like self-delusion but not insincerity. Or suppose I have a bad memory and believe that I have a taste for cashews when I actually detest them. Because I really do believe that I enjoy them, when my host announces that she will serve some cashews I say, "Cashews – yummy!" Plausibly, my utterance functions to express my taste for cashews since words like 'yummy' are much less controversial candidates for an expressivist treatment than moral words like 'good' and 'wrong'. So on Searle's account it seems to follow that my utterances of 'Cashews – yummy!' is insincere, as I lack the state of mind (a taste for cashews) expressed by my utterance. This is implausible; as in the previous examples my utterance does involve a failing (a bad memory) but the failing is not one of insincerity. Such counter-examples are available for each of the different kinds of speech-acts which can properly be assessed as sincere or insincere. So perhaps sincerity is instead a function of the speaker's belief that she has the

state of mind expressed by her speech-act rather than a function of whether she actually has that state of mind. However, this is only a rough first approximation of my positive account, which I develop in detail below. Ultimately I shall argue that we should understand sincerity not in terms of the speaker's beliefs about the state of mind actually expressed by her utterance but in terms of her beliefs about the state of mind she believes is expressed by her utterance.

Assuming that we should understand sincerity in terms of a speaker's beliefs about her state of mind, one might wonder why sincerity so understood is an interesting or important concept. After all, the word 'sincerity' could have evolved to mean just what Searle mistakenly says it actually means. Indeed, we could simply make up a word to denote the Searlean property of a speech-act's being such that the speaker lacks the state of mind expressed by it; call Searle's notion 'schmincerity'. Is it a mere accident that we developed a predicate for sincerity instead of schmincerity? We have a clue to the answer to this in that sincerity is important to us in part because of the role it plays in our moral evaluations. 'Be sincere' is an important default moral norm. There are situations in which insincerity is morally acceptable, but only because of special circumstances. The moral importance of sincerity is at least in part a function of the more general moral idea that it is morally wrong and indeed blameworthy to do something which by one's own lights involves the deception of one's interlocutors. Deception is not always morally objectionable; when playing poker deception is perfectly acceptable. Still, deception is presumptively objectionable, and insincerity is important to us at least in part because its association with deception.⁵

⁵ I say 'in part' here because there are cases in which someone is known to be insincere but where his insincerity still indicates a moral failing. For example, someone who is known to flatter people insincerely

At least one reason why what I have called ‘schmincerity’ and what we might call ‘inschmincerity’ are less interesting and important concepts is that inschmincerity need not betray a willingness to engage in deception and schmincerity need not mark an unwillingness to engage in deception. Someone who really believes that she believes she is Napoleon is not thereby betraying a willingness to deceive anybody when she says, “I am Napoleon.” So inschmincerity need not indicate a willingness to deceive. Nor is schmincerity sufficient to avoid the charge of being willing to deceive others; indeed schmincerity is compatible with outright deliberate deception. For someone who believes that p but believes that she does not believe that p yet still says that p is being schmincere but not sincere. Suppose, for example, that someone is deluded and believes that she believes that her mother loves her when she actually believes that her mother hates her. Now suppose that this person wants to convince you that her mother hates her in order to win your sympathy and asserts, “My mother hates me,” believing all the while that her actual view is that her mother loves her. On Searle’s account, this assertion is sincere; in our terminology, it is schmincere. Yet in making this assertion such a person is precisely guilty of intentionally trying to get her interlocutors to believe something she takes herself not to believe, which surely is a form of deception. Given the moral role of sincerity as we actually understand it and given that schmincerity could not effectively play that moral role, it seems likely that it is not merely a historical accident that we mean what we do by sincerity instead of meaning schmincerity. This provides additional confirmation of the account proposed here. In addition to fitting better with our intuitive

and indeed who knows that he is known to be insincere about this is not really engaging in deception since nobody believes he will be believed. Still, there his insincere flattery is a mark of obsequiousness and this is a moral failing. Still, at least part of why we care about insincerity is its common association with deception.

reactions to particular cases like the ones discussed earlier, the account on offer here also fits better with our more reflective and theoretical understanding of the moral importance of sincerity and the role it plays in our moral assessments.

However, the association of sincerity with honesty and insincerity with the betrayal of a willingness to deceive one's interlocutors suggests another objection. I have argued for my positive proposal on the grounds that it provides the best explanation of our intuitions in various cases in which a speaker is deluded about her own states of mind in such a way that we would not consider her speech-act to betray a willingness to deceive her interlocutors. The objection insists that we can equally well accommodate these intuitions simply by holding that a speech-act is insincere just in case it betrays a willingness to deceive one's interlocutors and sincere otherwise.⁶ In other words, if the moral idea of deception is doing all the work in my argument against Searle then why not just define sincerity and insincerity in terms of deception at the outset? Why go through the circuitous route of instead defining sincerity and insincerity in terms of the beliefs which constitute honesty or deception when this more direct and elegant approach is available?⁷ However, a willingness to deceive is actually neither necessary nor sufficient for insincerity. The failure of sufficiency is fairly easy to illustrate. Suppose I tell my interlocutors, "I am willing to deceive you." It is relatively obvious that my speech-act betrays a willingness to deceive my interlocutors, so on the proposed analysis my speech-

⁶ The theory is most plausible if couched in terms of betraying a *willingness* to deceive. The more natural proposal of understanding insincerity in terms of a deliberate attempt at deception falls afoul not only of the case discussed in the text in which somebody has no intention to deceive her interlocutors because she believes (perhaps truly) that nobody takes her seriously. It also is undermined by cases in which someone's speech-act is deceptive but this is not part of the speaker's aim. Perhaps my aim in saying something false is simply to entertain you. The fact that you are likely to acquire false beliefs (about someone I have ridiculed, e.g.) is incidental to me, in which case I am not deliberately deceiving you. Still, my speech-act does betray a willingness to deceive you – the fact that the speech-act involved deception did not, after all, deter me from performing it.

act is insincere. Yet intuitively my speech-act might be perfectly sincere; I might really be warning my interlocutors in good faith that I am in fact willing to deceive them. The failure of necessity is only slightly more complicated. Here the relevant cases are ones in which a speaker believes that her interlocutors view her judgment with such disdain or distrust that they will never believe anything on her say so. In that case, the speaker's assertions of things she believes to be false (and believes that she believes to be false) will not betray a willingness to deceive her interlocutors. For she knows perfectly well that nobody will pay any attention to what she says anyway. We can add that if she thought anybody was listening that she would not say anything she believed was false or believed that she believed was false. She is therefore actually unwilling to deceive her interlocutors. Intuitively, such a speaker's speech-act is insincere all the same. After all, if one of the speaker's interlocutors discovered that the speaker knew she did not mean what she had said then they would be within their rights to complain of her insincerity. It is interesting that we are inclined to classify such cases as ones of insincerity in spite of the deep connection between insincerity and deception. Perhaps this brings out a moral idea which informs our understanding of sincerity and insincerity. In particular, we may not want people to use what we might call the "National Enquirer Defense." The *National Enquirer* apparently once tried to block a libel lawsuit on the grounds that nobody believes what they print anyway.⁸ We might for some reason not want ordinary people to be morally (as opposed to legally) insulated from criticism when they knowingly spout falsehoods simply because they believe that nobody takes them seriously anyway. It is a

⁷ Thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing me on this point.

⁸ In a case in which Carol Burnett sued them for libel after they printed a story claiming that she became drunk and rowdy in a restaurant. See <http://list.msu.edu/cgi-bin/wa?A2=ind9602a&L=aejmc&F=&S=&P=5033> for discussion.

good question just why we do not consider this to be a good excuse, but it does seem to be an element of common sense, akin to the way in which we do not excuse the lies of a known pathological liar or a breach of contract by a well-known corporate crook. Moral intuitions of this sort may explain why we classify speech-acts as insincere even when they do not betray a willingness to deceive because the speaker believes nobody takes her seriously. So a willingness to deceive is typically but not necessarily associated with insincerity. This typical connection is of course also no accident; it is easy to see why insincerity as analyzed here would typically betray a willingness to deceive even if this connection is not deep enough to figure explicitly in an analysis of the concept.

II. Sincerity, Insincerity and Non-Sincerity.

The counter-examples to Searle's view discussed in the preceding section suggest that while having the state of mind expressed by one's speech-act is not necessary for sincerity, believing one has the state of mind expressed by one's utterance is at least sufficient for sincerity. However, there are two reasons to worry about this sufficiency claim. First, we are naturally somewhat hesitant to ascribe sincerity to someone who clearly lacks the state of mind expressed by her utterance.⁹ For example, consider the familiar case of the grudging apology. People who offer an apology in a grudging way may nonetheless convince themselves that they feel regret for what they have done when in fact they feel no such regret, in which case their speech-act is sincere on the account offered here. The fact that the apology is offered in such a grudging way makes us understandably hesitant to classify the speech-act as sincere. I suggest, however, that our hesitation in classifying such utterances as sincere stems from our uncertainty as to whether the speaker really does not realize that she does not feel regret in spite of what

we may take to be the clear and undeniable evidence to the contrary. Once it is stipulated and clearly borne in mind that the person really does believe that she feels regret when she apologizes, the intuition that she is being insincere typically vanishes (in my admittedly anecdotal survey of linguistic intuitions on this matter). Also, we may be hesitant to classify such speech-acts as sincere because this seems like a form of moral praise (however weak) when in fact what we want to do is offer moral criticism of the speaker. This is fair enough, but we must simply bear in mind that the fact that the apology is offered grudgingly still allows us to morally criticize the speaker as mean-spirited and insensitive and indeed to emphasize that her apology illustrates these character flaws. Insincerity is, after all, only one of many ways in which we may morally criticize someone in virtue of their speech-act.

Second, and more interestingly, one might object to the present proposal on the basis of cases in which a speaker is confused as to what state of mind her utterance expresses. For example, suppose a speaker believes that apologies express only regret for what one has done when in fact (let us suppose) apologies also express an intention not to repeat the behavior. Now suppose that this speaker apologizes for an action which she regrets having performed but without any intention to refrain from such behavior in the future. Intuitively such a person is not insincere, but she does fail to believe that she has the state of mind expressed by her utterance. So it is not believing one has the state of mind actually expressed by one's utterance that is sufficient for sincerity, but rather believing one has the state of mind one believes one's utterance expresses. Naturally this theoretical belief about what state of mind one's utterance expresses need not be explicit or conscious.

⁹ Thanks to an anonymous referee for drawing me out on this point.

So perhaps we can safely infer that believing one has the state of mind one believes is expressed by one's utterance is at least sufficient for sincerity. However, is believing one has this state of mind also necessary for sincerity? Here we must note that one might fail to believe one has the relevant mental state in one of two ways: (a) by believing one does not have it instead or (b) by having no opinion one way or the other as to whether one has it. In cases in which the person actually disbelieves that they have the state of mind their speech-act expresses instead of believing they have it, it is very plausible to suppose that they are being insincere. Suppose, for example, that I believe that I do not enjoy chocolate but I want my interlocutor to think I enjoy it so I say, "chocolate for dessert – yummy." This already seems to be enough to conclude that I have been insincere even if it turns out that I was mistaken about my own tastes (again, I may just have a bad memory or perhaps my tastes have changed without my having yet realized it) and actually do enjoy chocolate. Before drawing any hasty conclusions, though, we should consider some other examples. Suppose someone says 'thanks' for a gift, thereby expressing gratitude, and let us suppose that the person really does feel gratitude for the gift. However, the person does not believe she feels any gratitude, perhaps because she has a poor self-image, or perhaps because she was erroneously told as a child that she suffered from a form of brain damage which left her unable to feel gratitude, or perhaps because she is an eliminative materialist who rejects the categories of folk psychology (including feelings of gratitude) altogether but who nonetheless admits that speech-acts like 'thank you' do conventionally express gratitude. The last example is admittedly odd; to be a counter-example we must imagine that the eliminative materialist holds that our speech-acts systematically and conventionally function

'express' a state of mind which does not and has never existed.¹⁰ Surely, the objection continues, we are not forced to say that in all of these cases the speakers, whose feelings of gratitude might be palpably obvious to any competent external judge, are being insincere? In my view, we should say such people are insincere. After all, they are by their own lights willing to deceive us with their utterance, presenting themselves as having a state of mind which they take themselves to lack. There is a kind of illusion here which might tempt some people to deny this inference. For when we imagine someone whose radiant expression makes her gratitude obvious saying in a heartfelt and genuinely emotional tone how thankful she is, we are imagining someone who in many ways seems like a paradigm of sincerity. In our ordinary classifications of speech-acts we may well rely very heavily on heuristic devices which put a great deal of weight on whether the person actually has the state of mind expressed by her utterance. This is understandable. For it may be rare for the speaker's state of mind and her beliefs about her state of mind to come apart; so this heuristic may be very reliable in most actual cases. However, we must then be very careful not to mistake a useful heuristic for the actual criterion for sincerity. Once we reflect carefully on the nature of sincerity and why we care about it (*viz.*, because of its association with deception), it should become clear that the preceding cases all really do involve insincerity. With apologies to Patricia Churchland, an eliminative materialist who still thinks that our utterances conventionally express folk psychological states of mind (as opposed to the states of mind which will figure in a mature neuroscience) cannot be sincere. I leave it to others to determine whether the fact that eliminative materialism renders those who accept it (and a common sense view of what states of mind our utterances express) incapable of sincerity is an

¹⁰ Thanks to an anonymous referee for these helpful examples.

objection to the eliminative materialism or merely an unfortunate consequence of its acceptance which does not gainsay its truth.

So far I have focused on cases in which the speaker believes that she lacks the state of mind she believes is expressed by her utterance. However, we must also consider the trickier cases in which a speaker simply suspends judgment as to whether she has the state of mind she believes is expressed by her utterance. For example, someone might feel a little bad about accidentally harming someone in a minor way but not be sure whether the bad feeling is guilt, shame, repentance, disappointment, remorse or any of a range of other negative feelings. I might therefore suspend judgment as to whether I feel guilty. To take another example, I might feel something akin to gratitude to my grandparents for giving birth to my parents but at the same time think that 'grateful' is not quite the right label for what I feel. Again, I might well suspend judgment about my own state of mind.¹¹ Should we classify cases in which the speaker suspends judgment about whether she has the state of mind she believes her utterance expresses as instances of sincerity, insincerity or some third category?

At this point in the dialectic we should consider the generally neglected but important distinction between insincerity and mere non-sincerity. We should draw such a distinction anyway simply because things other than speech-acts (rocks, chairs, trees) are neither sincere nor insincere. Once we have drawn this distinction to handle things other than speech-acts, though, we might reasonably decide that speech-acts of a kind which can in general be sincere or insincere (those which are what we might call 'sincerity-apt') nonetheless are sometimes neither. So one might argue that we should classify cases in which someone suspends judgement as to whether she has the state of mind she believes

is expressed by her utterance as cases of mere non-sincerity. This is an interesting but ultimately misguided proposal. Recall that we care about insincerity because it betrays a willingness to deceive one's interlocutors. Someone who says she is sorry while not being sure whether she really has the state of mind she takes to be expressed by her utterance does betray just such a willingness to deceive. For insofar as one is uncertain whether one has the state of mind one takes to be expressed by one's utterance, one should be equally uncertain as to whether one's interlocutors will be misled by one's utterance if they take it at face value. Admittedly, this is not as morally dubious as saying that *p* when you are absolutely sure that you do not believe that *p*, but it does seem morally objectionable for much the same sort of reason, just to a lesser extent. Suppose we learn that someone who has told us categorically that she is sorry for what she is done was actually not entirely sure whether she felt any regret for what she had done. In my view we would quite rightly feel that such a person had been insincere; to say that she was neither sincere nor insincere is too anemic to capture the moral force of our legitimate complaint. Note that there will also be cases in which someone is not fully confident that she feels regret (e.g.) but where she thinks it more likely (perhaps just by the slightest margin) that she does feel regret than that she does not. Such cases are perhaps well described as ones in which the speaker does believe that she feels regret, albeit with a very low degree of confidence. On the account proposed here, such speech-acts can be sincere, which is not to say that they will always be morally innocent. Even a speech-act which is fully sincere can be objectionable for other reasons, and in these sorts of cases we might complain about a lack of candor; the speaker should perhaps let us in on her doubts about her own state of mind if she is really that unsure. Still, a lack of

¹¹ Thanks to an anonymous referee for these very helpful examples.

candor is not insincerity. In any event, a speech-act which one believes expresses a state of mind when one suspends judgement altogether as to whether one has that state of mind are plausibly characterized as cases of insincerity and not mere non-sincerity.

However, we should not jump to the conclusion that all speech-acts are either sincere or insincere. For arguably some speech-acts do not express states of mind at all. Searle gives the example of greetings like 'hello' (Searle 1969: 64). Since sincerity is best understood on all accounts in terms of the state of mind expressed (or believed by the speaker to be expressed) by the speech-act in question, Searle seems right to classify these cases as instantiations of mere non-sincerity (assuming that the speaker does not falsely believe that the speech-act does express a state of mind, that is). So cases in which a speaker believes her speech-act does not express a state of mind at all might be ones in which the issue of sincerity does not arise at all (though of course linguistic confusion might well arise; just imagine someone who was so deeply confused that she believes that assertions do not in any sense express beliefs). One other class of cases is worth mentioning here; cases in which a speaker both believes that she has the state of mind she believes is expressed by her speech-act and believes that she lacks that very state of mind. What should we say about speech-acts by people who are of two minds about their own state of mind (assuming such cases are even possible, which is hardly obvious). These are cases in which the speech-act lacks some of the paradigmatic features of sincerity but also lacks some of the paradigmatic features of insincerity, so I tentatively suggest that we should classify such cases as merely non-sincere. However, I freely admit that cases involving contradictory beliefs in this way really are puzzling and any account of them will inevitably be somewhat unsatisfying.

We are now in a position to lay out the proposed account in more detail:

- (1) A speech-act is sincere if and only if (a) the speaker believes she has the state of mind she believes it expresses *and* (b) the speaker does not believe she lacks the state of mind she believes it expresses.
- (2) A speech-act is merely non-sincere if and only if either (a) the speaker believes that the speech-act fails to express a state of mind at all (as one might reasonably believe of greetings like ‘hello’) *or* (b) the speaker both believes she has the state of mind she believes the speech-act expresses and at the same time believes she lacks that very state of mind (contradictory beliefs).
- (3) A speech-act is insincere if and only if it the speaker does not believe she has the state of mind she believes it expresses.

With this account in hand can now explore its implications for debates in meta-ethics.

III. Sincerity and Motivational Internalism in Meta-Ethics.

A better understanding of sincerity is essential to a proper assessment of expressivism in meta-ethics. Expressivism is best understood as the thesis that moral speech-acts do not express beliefs guaranteed to provide the truth-conditions for those speech-acts, but rather function to express certain kinds of non-cognitive attitudes. Expressivists are generally thought to be committed to a form of ‘judgement internalism’ according to which *sincere* moral judgement necessarily involves suitable motivation. At this point it should be clear that this thought is a particular manifestation of a more general Searlean view of sincerity. If, as Searle claims, a speech-act is sincere just in case the speaker has the state of mind it expresses then it would follow from expressivism that sincere moral judgement necessarily involves suitable motivation. Once we abandon the Searlean view of sincerity and accept the account of sincerity developed here, it should no longer seem plausible to suppose that expressivists are committed to this form of internalism.

Moreover, it is easy enough to construct counter-examples analogous to those raised against the Searlean view in section I but in the framework of expressivism. For

example, a speaker who honestly believes that she disapproves of abortion and is thereby led to say, “Abortion is wrong” in order to express this disapproval is being sincere even if she is deluded about her own state of mind and does not really disapprove of abortion. A variation on our original case of Bob (who believes that he believes his mother loves him but who does not really believe she loves him) also seems likely to illustrate the basic point. Bob might think that he thinks his mother’s treatment of him is morally good, but his behavior might make it clear that he does not really believe this. Bob might show signs of anger when his mother’s treatment of him arises as a topic of conversation arises, he might have general views about the treatment of children that entail that what he takes to have been her treatment of him was wrong, etc. Given expressivism, Bob will still count as expressing approval of his mother’s treatment of him when he says, “my mother treats me well” but we have already seen that in the relevant sense of ‘express’ one can express a state of mind one does not actually have (recall the dinosaur belief example discussed much earlier). Intuitively we should say that Bob’s speech-act is sincere even though he does not have the state of mind it expresses. So there are no special reasons to think the kinds of counter-examples to Searle’s view discussed in section I do not extend to the moral case understood in expressivist terms.

It is worth pausing to contrast the preceding argument with a rather different argument for the same conclusion given by Richard Joyce. Joyce argues that expressivism does not entail judgement internalism but not because of the possibility of self-delusion. Instead, Joyce’s argument appeals to cases in which a speaker says something under rushed conditions. Although Joyce’s conclusion is correct, his

argument for that conclusion is unconvincing. Joyce rightly points out that judgement internalism is an instance of a more general thesis he calls 'Sincerity':

Sincerity: S's utterance U (at time t) is sincere iff U functions to express mental state M, and S has M (at t).

This, of course, just is Searle's view of sincerity (although Joyce does not attribute it to Searle). Joyce gives two examples to undermine Sincerity. First, he gives the case of Fred and Carol. When leaving a dinner party they unexpectedly say 'Thanks!' on their way out, but their minds were on some other matter at the time and at the moment of thanking they were 'not feeling any gratitude whatsoever'.¹² Nonetheless, we would not accuse them of insincerity. Second, suppose that just before their hurried departure they had been discussing the morality of Britain's keeping the Elgin marbles and Fred still distracted says as they leave, 'The marbles belong to the Greeks and keeping them is wrong!' According to expressivism, Fred has expressed his disapproval of keeping the marbles but Joyce suggests that our normal criteria do not require for his utterance to be sincere that 'he had activated some particular kind of attitudinal/emotional state'.¹³

However, Joyce's argument is too quick. It is no coincidence that Joyce's argument is couched in terms of occurrent mental events, as with one's 'feeling gratitude at the moment of thanking' and one's 'having *activated* a particular attitudinal/emotional state' (emphasis mine) at the time of one's moral utterance. Those who accept Sincerity can accommodate these intuitions but insist that to be sincere these speakers must still be grateful and disapproving of keeping the marbles (respectively) in a suitably dispositional sense. There is, after all, an intuitive dispositional sense in which someone can continue believing that grass is green, being grateful for something and disapproving of certain

¹² Joyce 2002: 341.

actions even when their minds are on something altogether different – indeed, even when they are asleep. A rigorous philosophical account of this dispositional sense will not be trivial but neither can it reasonably be dismissed out of hand. So while Joyce is right that expressivism is not committed to standard versions of judgement internalism, his argument for this conclusion is unconvincing.

So expressivists are not committed to the version of internalism typically attributed to them. However, expressivists are nonetheless committed to a weaker form of internalism. For an obvious move to make at this point is to switch to a weaker form of internalism according to which anyone who makes a moral utterance is either (a) suitably motivated or (b) not sincere or (c) deluded about her own motivations or about the states of mind expressed by her utterance. The addition of (c) clearly avoids the force of the counter-examples offered above. So expressivists are committed to a non-trivial form of internalism. Nonetheless, this form of internalism is weaker than the forms of internalism to which expressivists are generally assumed to be committed.

IV. Sincerity and Expressivism

The preceding section shows how a proper understanding of sincerity is important to a plausible articulation the terms of a central debate in meta-ethics. In this section I argue that getting a proper understanding of sincerity is also crucial to a proper evaluation of an interesting argument against expressivism. In particular, a proper understanding of sincerity is also crucial to seeing why a much-discussed and interesting recent objection to expressivism by Frank Jackson and Philip Pettit goes wrong.¹⁴ Very roughly, Jackson and Pettit sketch a Lockean account of meaning and argue that because expressivism

¹³ Joyce 2002: 342.

holds that the function of moral discourse is to express a speaker's non-cognitive attitudes, expressivists must concede that a moral utterance is sincere only if the speaker believes she has the non-cognitive attitude expressed by her moral utterance. After all, expressivists hold that voicing our attitudes is the primary function of ethical utterances. So, Jackson and Pettit argue, expressivists must concede that we are committed insofar as we are sincere to refrain from uttering a moral sentence unless we *believe* we have the attitude it would express. Without such a constraint, my *sincere* use of an ethical sentence is consistent with my knowing full well that I lack the attitude I want you to "share." Jackson and Pettit infer from the supposition that due concern with sincerity in one's moral utterance requires believing that one has the attitude expressed by that utterance that the expressivist must admit that moral utterances are true if and only if this belief is true – if and only if the speaker has the relevant attitude. Here are Jackson and Pettit:

But that is to say that expressivists must allow that we use the word *sincerely* only when we *believe* that we have a certain kind of attitude. And then it is hard to see how they can avoid conceding truth conditions to 'That is good', namely those of that belief. (Jackson and Pettit 1998: 242, first emphasis added)

If this argument were sound then expressivism would collapse into the subjectivist doctrine that moral utterances are simply reports of a speaker's desires. That would be a serious problem, since expressivists very much want to distance themselves from subjectivists for a variety of reasons. For one thing, subjectivism seems unable to give a plausible account of moral agreement and moral disagreement. On the subjectivist account, it seems that when you say 'Abortion is wrong' and I reply 'No its not!' that we

¹⁴ See Jackson and Pettit 1998. For discussion, see Mautner 2000, Ridge 1999, and Smith and Stoljar (forthcoming).

no more disagree than when you say 'I am tall' and I reply 'No I'm not!' Expressivists aim to avoid these pitfalls.

Fortunately for the expressivist, Jackson and Pettit's argument is unsound. The form of their argument is roughly, (1) If expressivism is true then a belief that one has such-and-such attitude is necessary for a sincere moral utterance, therefore (2) If expressivism is true then a moral utterance is true just in case the speaker believes herself to have the attitude expressed by the utterance. (1) is true, and indeed in accepting (1) Jackson and Pettit are quite rightly committed to rejecting Searle's account of what makes an utterance sincere. For Searle's account entails that if expressivism were true then a moral utterance is sincere if and only if the speaker has the non-cognitive attitude expressed by the utterance, not if and only if the speaker believes herself to have such an attitude. In implicitly rejecting Searle's account of sincerity, Jackson and Pettit seem committed to a view much closer to the one defended here.

However, for their argument to work its suppressed premise must be that if a belief that p is necessary for the sincerity of an utterance then the utterance is true if and only if p. Jackson and Pettit provide no argument for this suppressed premise, simply suggesting that it is 'hard to see' how the belief needed for sincerity could fail to provide the truth-conditions for the utterance. However, the account of sincerity developed here (and which is indeed the natural generalisation of Pettit and Jackson's own account in the case of expressivism) counsels strongly against this crucial suppressed premise of their argument. Consider again the case of ordinary factual assertions. The arguments of section I show that in this case sincerity requires that the speaker believes she has the belief (she believes is) expressed by her utterance. If we were to accept the suppressed

premise of Jackson and Pettit's argument this would imply the patently absurd consequence that the truth-condition for ordinary token factual utterances like 'grass is green' is that the speaker thinks that grass is green. The thesis that a token utterance of 'grass is green' is true if and only if the speaker who uttered that token believes at the time of utterance that grass is green is of course patently absurd. Which is just to say that the suppressed premise of Jackson and Pettit's argument is vulnerable to a *reductio ad absurdum*. On the view implicit in this suppressed premise all assertions would turn out to be about the speaker's state of mind at the time of utterance rather than about other parts of the world. We should instead maintain that sincerity requires that if I say 'p' then I believe that I believe that p but insist that it is the belief that p, and not the meta-belief that I have such a belief that provides the truth-conditions for my utterance. The idea is simply that my thought that p is one thing and the thought I must have in order sincerely to say 'p' is another. Which is just to say that sincerity-conditions and truth-conditions are distinct.

Conclusion.

We should reject the seductive view that a speech-act is sincere just in case the speaker has the state of mind it expresses. We should instead hold that a speech-act is sincere just in case the speaker believes she has the state of mind she believes is expressed by it and does not believe that she lacks it. We should also distinguish insincerity from mere non-sincerity. This has important implications for debates in meta-ethics. First, expressivists are not committed to the forms of internalism typically attributed to them, but are committed only to the weaker version of internalism articulated here. Second, the account of sincerity defended here reveals how an interesting objection to expressivism

goes wrong. A proper appreciation of what makes a speech-act sincere reveals that the truth of a belief necessary for the sincerity of a speech-act is neither necessary nor sufficient for the truth of the sentence which figures in that speech-act. Once we reject Searle's view of what makes a speech-act sincere, we have reason to be very dubious of the idea that truth-conditions and sincerity-conditions must line up in this way. This, in turn, gives us the resources to explain why Jackson and Pettit's argument that expressivism collapses into subjectivism goes wrong. Of course, these examples from meta-ethics provide just a couple of illustrations of the philosophical pitfalls of relying on a mistaken theory of sincerity. Sincerity is, after all, a fairly basic concept in the philosophy of language. If our understanding of such a basic concept remains in the grip of mistaken Searlean doctrines then the rot most likely will spread. Sincerity turns out to be more complicated and interesting than it might first appear to be, and worth more sustained philosophical attention than it has so far received.

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