From Recognition to Acknowledgement:
Rethinking the Perlocutionary

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Abstract

In this paper, I argue that a serious philosophical investigation of the domain of the perlocutionary is both possible and desirable, and I show that it possesses a distinctively moral dimension that has so far been overlooked. I start, in Section II, by offering an original characterisation of the distinction between the illocutionary and the perlocutionary derived from the degree of predictability and stability that differentiates their respective effects. In Section III, I argue that, in order to grasp the specificity of the perlocutionary, we must focus on the total speech situation, which I define as *conversation*. Then, in Section IV, I show that an investigation of the domain of the perlocutionary requires us to draw a conceptual distinction between recognition and acknowledgment. This distinction proves to be crucial, because the success of perlocutions normally depends on something more than what Austin calls the 'securing of uptake': the reciprocity condition for illocutions needs to be supplemented, in the case of perlocutions, with an analysis of what I call the 'grammar of acknowledgment.' Lastly, in Section V, I elaborate the notion of 'perlocutionary responsibility,' a specific form of moral responsibility for the consequences of utterances that are not (entirely) predictable.

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I

Since the 'pragmatic revolution' in the philosophy of language of the 1950s, much ink has been spilled on the theory of speech acts, particularly on the notions of performative utterance and illocutionary force. Yet some aspects of the 'efficacy' of language, that is, of its capacity to *do* things, remain significantly underexplored: in particular, the domain of the perlocutionary. It is mostly due to Stanley Cavell's texts on passionate utterance (Cavell 2005, 7–27 & 155–91), in which he emphasises the limitations of J.L. Austin's restriction of the analysis of speech acts to illocutions, that the perlocutionary has gained some scholarly attention in the past few years (see, e.g., Raïd 2011; Lorenzini 2015; Kaufmann 2016). The aim of this paper is to strengthen this burgeoning, yet still fragile, scholarly interest by defending the claim that a serious philosophical investigation of the domain of the perlocutionary is both possible and desirable, and to show that it possesses a distinctively moral dimension that has so far been overlooked.[1]

I start, in Section II, by offering an original characterisation of the distinction between the illocutionary and the perlocutionary derived from the degree of predictability and stability that differentiates their respective effects. In Section III, I argue that, in order to grasp the specificity of the perlocutionary, our focus must be shifted, not just from isolated sentences to 'whole acts of speech' (Crary 2002 & 2006), but also from the latter to 'the total speech situation' (Austin 1975, 148), which I define as *conversation*. Indeed, the analysis of perlocutions and their effects prompts us to take into account exchanges of words that unfold over a much longer (and less clearly definable) period of time than that

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[1] Although I am sympathetic to Alice Crary's appeal to the 'ethical interest of Austin's philosophy' in the vein of what Cavell calls 'moral perfectionism' (Crary 2006, 42), I argue here that an analysis of the perlocutionary plays a crucial role not only with respect to 'moral education' (Cavell 2005, 182), but also with respect to the development of a specific form of moral responsibility.

usually associated with the study of illocutions. Then, in Section IV, I show that an investigation of the domain of the perlocutionary requires us to draw a conceptual distinction between recognition and acknowledgment. This distinction proves to be crucial, because the success of perlocutions normally depends on something *more* than (and *different* from) what Austin calls the 'securing of uptake,' or the fact that my interlocutor recognises the meaning and force of my locution (Austin 1975, 117). As a result, the reciprocity condition for illocutions (Hornsby 1994, 192–3) needs to be supplemented, in the case of perlocutions, with an analysis of what I call the 'grammar of acknowledgment.' Lastly, in Section V, by emphasising the vulnerability of language and our own vulnerability as 'creatures of language' (Cavell 1988, 141), I elaborate the notion of 'perlocutionary responsibility'—a specific form of moral responsibility for the consequences of utterances that are not (entirely) predictable.

II

In the second half of *How to Do Things with Words*, after suggesting that the constative-performative distinction might fail to dispel the 'descriptive fallacy' (Austin 1975, 100), Austin argues that, in order to analyse any given speech act, one must address three different dimensions: the locutionary, the illocutionary, and the perlocutionary (109).[2] This does not mean that a speech act should be 'fragmented' into three discrete, independent parts. The locutionary, the illocutionary, and the perlocutionary are to be understood as three different but intimately connected dimensions of the activity of speaking, of the 'total speech act in the total speech situation' (148).[3] Indeed, every utterance typically operates on all three levels: the locutionary act consists in the fact *of* saying something (meaningful), the illocutionary act corresponds to what one does *in* saying something, and the perlocutionary act indicates the effects produced *by* saying

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[2] Scholars have mistakenly tended to consider the constative-performative distinction as more or less analogous to the locutionary-illocutionary distinction, thus dismissing the perlocutionary as unessential to the theory of speech acts (see, e.g., Searle 1968; Forguson 1973). For a strong and convincing defence of their difference, see Mulhall (2006).

[3] On this point, see Laugier (2004, 286) and Kaufmann (2016, 44).

something (121). More precisely, Austin argues that there is a further sense 'in which to perform a locutionary act, and therein an illocutionary act, may also be to perform an act of another kind' (101), that is, a perlocution: 'Saying something will often, or even normally, produce certain consequential effects upon the feelings, thoughts, or actions of the audience, or of the speaker, or of other persons: and it may be done with the design, intention, or purpose of producing them' (101).

These 'acts' are therefore intrinsically interrelated. If a friend of mine who is visiting wants to go for a walk at 11pm, and I utter the sentence, 'This neighbourhood is very dangerous at night,' I accomplish not only a locutionary act (I say something meaningful) and an illocutionary act (I *assert* something, provided that she understands the meaning and force of my locution), but also a perlocutionary act: for instance, I might *persuade* her not to go out after all. Consequently, not only the locutionary and the illocutionary, but also the perlocutionary, if isolated from the 'total speech act,' is nothing but a philosophical 'abstraction' (147). The 'force of words' that Austin emphasises in his works (Austin 1975 & 1979) is not to be conceived as a detachable feature of our utterances, but as a complex field of interrelated forces that depend on—and can be transformed into—each other.

It is true, however, that one of Austin's main objectives in *How to Do Things with Words* is to clearly differentiate the illocutionary from both the locutionary and the perlocutionary. I focus here on the second distinction. Austin claims that the 'consequential effects' of perlocutions 'do not include a particular kind of consequential effects, those achieved, e.g., by way of committing the speaker as in promising, which come into the illocutionary act' (Austin 1975, 102–3). And he adds: 'Perhaps restrictions need making, as there is clearly a difference between what we feel to be the real production of real effects and what we regard as mere conventional consequences' (103). On the basis of these passages, it has been argued that Austin conceives of the perlocutionary effects as nothing more than 'a chance *by-product* of our utterances': what interests him is not how 'words *happen* to do things,' but 'the way they *inherently* do them' (Bauer 2006, 71). Another way to put this point is to observe that, while the illocutionary

act is typically 'built into the verb that names it,'[4] the perlocutionary act is not: if to say 'I alarm you' were *eo ipso* to alarm you, 'I would be exercising some hypnotic or other ray-like power over you, you would have lost your freedom in responding to my speech' (Cavell 2005, 172). On the contrary, to say 'I warn you,' in the appropriate circumstances, *is* to warn you.

While I have nothing to object to this reading *per se*, I want to emphasise that it runs the risk of suggesting that a serious philosophical analysis of the perlocutionary is either uninteresting or impossible, or that at any rate the perlocutionary does not belong to the theory of speech acts. Yet perlocutionary effects often constitute the most important aim of our utterances: they often give *a point* to what we do with words.[5] Asserting, for instance, would be a rather boring activity if it was always and exclusively aimed at giving others reliable 'testimony' on matters of fact. Luckily, it is not: by asserting something, we often try to convince or dissuade, amuse or anger, reassure or alarm, incite or scare, seduce or inspire, comfort or hurt. Therefore, if our theory of speech acts eschews perlocutionary effects, considering them merely as a chance by-product of our utterances, it will prove deeply unsatisfactory.

We thus need to find another way to characterise the distinction between the illocutionary and the perlocutionary. In *How to Do Things with Words*, Austin seems to ground it primarily in the fact that illocutionary acts are conventional while perlocutionary acts are not (Austin 1975, 103, 105, 121). However, many scholars have emphasised that it is not clear what Austin means by 'convention,' and have consequently put pressure on this way of distinguishing the illocutionary from the perlocutionary (see, e.g., Strawson 1964; Cohen 1973; Bach & Harnish 1979; Tsui 1987; Hornsby 1994; Moran 2018).

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[4] Indeed, it is normally possible to transform implicit illocutions into explicit ones by using the formula 'I hereby…'—warn you, promise you, congratulate you, etc. (Moran 2018, 134). See also Strawson (1964, 445). For discussion of certain exceptions, see Davis (1979, 236) and Tsui (1987, 368).

[5] However, I do not go as far as Cohen (1973) in arguing that the perlocution is *always* 'the rationale for the illocution,' or that it is 'in the nature of the illocution to effect the perlocution, and if it is obvious that this effect cannot occur, then the illocution is in some way and to some degree abortive' (500). Not only there are many cases in which illocutions do not have a perlocutionary 'rationale' (for instance, baptising a baby or christening a ship), but it would also be a mistake to say that, if I promise you something in order to reassure you, but I fail to do so, *my promise* is 'abortive.'

Indeed, a great number of illocutionary acts are performed without the need for the speaker to conform to any established conventional procedure (Strawson 1964, 443–5). Perhaps, then, Austin merely intends to refer to the conventions that fix the meaning of our utterances—what we could call 'linguistic competence' (Davis 1979, 229). But in this case, perlocutionary acts would also be 'conventional,' insofar as they typically rely on the performance of locutionary and illocutionary acts, and thus on linguistic competence.

Another proposal could be to attribute the difference to the conventionality or non-conventionality of the *effects* of these acts—as Austin explicitly suggests when he distinguishes 'mere conventional consequences' and 'real effects' (Austin 1975, 103). For example, Marina Sbisà interestingly suggests that the illocutionary-perlocutionary distinction is not so much a distinction between acts or gestures as between kinds of effects for which speakers may be ascribed responsibility. Analysing an utterance from an illocutionary point of view entails an emphasis on the *conventionality* of its effects, while a perlocutionary point of view emphasises its *natural* effects (Sbisà 2007, 465), where we might say that 'natural' refers to the naturalness of human reactions first studied by Aristotle in the *Rhetoric* (Ambroise 2014, 5).[6] But the claim that perlocutionary effects are not conventional *at all* would be difficult to defend. Indeed, there are many social conventions that regulate our ordinary exchanges of words and that contribute, at least in part, to the production of perlocutionary effects (Bourdieu 1982 & 1992). Much like illocutionary effects, the latter are 'constituents of social practices, […] sustained by the practices of which they are themselves a part' (Hornsby 1994, 194). This is to say that even the natural reactions of human beings are always immersed in, and in part determined by, a socio-cultural context with its specific norms that contribute to the shaping of people's behaviour.

Instead of employing the natural-conventional distinction, I therefore propose focusing on the degree of predictability and stability that differentiates illocutionary from perlocutionary effects. When felicitously performed, an illocutionary act entails a perfectly predictable sequel of illocutionary consequences (for instance, if I promise, I commit

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[6] Cavell (2006) similarly characterises the distinction between 'the illocutionary and the perlocutionary implications and conspiracies of speech' in terms of 'a struggle' between 'nature and convention, or natural law and common law,' coming into play in any utterance (308).

myself *in a well-defined way* to keep my word)—consequences that, moreover, possess a great degree of stability because they cannot be modified or renegotiated *at will*, just by saying, for instance, 'I did not mean to promise, forget it.'[7] On the contrary, perlocutionary effects are never *entirely* predictable and they are *structurally* open to renegotiation. For instance, if I want to console you and I anger you instead, I can always say, 'I didn't mean to make you mad, forgive me, I just wanted to comfort you,' thus transforming the first perlocutionary effect into an open-ended process of renegotiation.

I take Michel Foucault to have grasped and soundly articulated this difference in his study of ancient *parrēsia*, even though he never refers to the illocutionary-perlocutionary distinction. Borrowing his words, we could say that, in the case of illocutions, 'the given elements of the situation are such that when the utterance is made, the effect which follows is known and ordered in advance,' whereas perlocutions are characterised by the fact that 'the introduction, the irruption' of a certain utterance 'determines an open situation, or rather opens the situation and makes possible effects which are, precisely, not known' (Foucault 2010, 62).[8] Of course, perlocutionary effects are not *totally* unpredictable, and this for the same reasons mentioned above: we are normally right in expecting that a certain sentence, uttered in a certain context, will produce certain perlocutionary effects. As Cavell argues, 'if I could not rationally expect, by variously expressing myself to you, to have the effect of alarming you or reassuring you, of offending or amusing you, boring or interesting you, exasperating or fascinating you,… I would lack the capacity to make myself intelligible to you' (Cavell 2005, 172). However, I can never be entirely sure that I will *actually* be able to make myself intelligible to you in

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[7] This does not mean that illocutionary effects can *never* be modified. However, their modification takes a specific form: since they are 'liable to turning out null and void under certain conditions,' illocutionary effects are defeasible in ways that perlocutionary effects are not (Sbisà 2007, 465). For instance, a marriage can be annulled and my promise can be declared void, but this is not the result of an open-ended, more or less improvised, renegotiation. Certain *well-defined* conditions should be met (e.g., one of the spouses was already married to another person, I was threatened into promising, etc.) in order for the illocutionary act itself—and all its illocutionary consequences—to be declared null. By contrast, a perlocutionary act and its effects can never simply be 'annulled' as if they never happened: their modification can take many forms and its 'final' result (if there is such a thing) is not predetermined.

[8] On this point, see Lorenzini (2015).

any given situation. Thus, acting perlocutionarily with words means first and foremost *exposing myself* to an unspecified risk connected to the freedom of the other person to respond in different ways (or not at all) to my words.

III

That perlocutionary effects are structurally open to renegotiation and never entirely predictable does not entail, however, that they fall outside the 'province of a study of language as such' (Hornsby 1994, 195) or 'outside the speech situation' (Moran 2018, 154). Instead, the perlocutionary prompts us to *extend* the temporal boundaries of speech act theory and to shift its focus, not only from isolated sentences to 'whole acts of speech,' as Crary (2002 & 2006) convincingly argues with respect to illocutions, but also from whole acts of speech to 'the total speech situation' (Austin 1975, 148).

Let us consider one of the examples discussed by Austin in *How to Do Things with Words*. If someone says to me, 'You can't do that' (locution), the corresponding illocution, in the appropriate circumstances and supposing that the uptake is secured, would be 'He protested against my doing it,' and two different kinds of perlocutions could also be produced: perlocutions that, in their 'nomenclature,' *obliquely* refer to the performance of the locutionary or illocutionary act (e.g., 'He pulled me up, checked me'), and perlocutions that do not refer to it at all (e.g., 'He stopped me, he brought me to my senses, etc.,' or 'He annoyed me') (101–2). Thus, focusing on the illocutionary act entails concentrating on a relatively short and well-defined span of time: the sentence is uttered, it achieves uptake, and it produces a given illocutionary sequel. By contrast, focusing on the perlocutionary act requires us to take into account a much longer and less clearly defined span of time. Indeed, not only the production of a certain perlocutionary effect (pulling me up, stopping me, annoying me, etc.) demands, in order to be accounted for, a greater amount of information about the situation, the interlocutors, their relationship and their past exchanges of words, and so on. It also opens *this* specific exchange of words to an indefinite 'future' that can still arguably be considered as part of the same perlocutionary sequel. I take this to be what Austin wants to emphasise when arguing that it 'is, or should be, *a fundamental commonplace* of the theory of our language about all "action" in

general' that 'we can import *an arbitrarily long stretch* of what might also be called the "consequences" of our act into the nomenclature of the act itself' (107, my emphasis). Consequently, a study of the perlocutionary prompts us to take into account a whole series of exchanges of words unfolding over a much longer (and less clearly definable) period of time than that usually associated with the study of illocutions.[9]

Drawing inspiration from Cavell, I call this series of exchanges unfolding over an unspecified period of time a *conversation*. Indeed, in his works on the Hollywood comedies of remarriage of the 1930s and 1940s, Cavell develops a sound philosophical analysis of a specific, albeit entirely ordinary, 'mode of conversation' that, I argue, centres the perlocutionary dimension of speech (Cavell 1981 & 2004).

As is well known, these comedies each focus on the path that the members of an older pair must undertake in order to 'get *back* together, together *again*,' that is, in order to repair their marriage threatened by the risk of divorce (Cavell 1981, 1–2). The issues that the protagonists confront each other with 'are formulated less well by questions concerning what they ought to do, than by the question of how they shall live their lives, what kind of persons they aspire to be'—questions that pertain to the domain of what Cavell calls 'moral perfectionism' (Cavell 2004, 11). But how do they address these issues? Through an uninterrupted, 'living conversation' (Hadot 2002, 364). Indeed, for the protagonists of these movies, conversing is more than simply talking: it is 'a mode of association, a form of life' characterised by 'articulate responsiveness [and] expressiveness,' thanks to which they learn 'to speak the same language' (Cavell 1981, 87–8). In other words, their conversation does not chiefly aim to produce mutual agreement (as in the case of dialogue as it is conceived within the Socratic-Platonic tradition),[10] nor

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[9] On this point, see also Tsui (1987, 373–5) and Kaufmann (2016, 56–7). My focus here is on oral speech acts taking place between a speaker and an audience that are co-present. Of course, it would be necessary to elaborate a different argument in order to address written speech acts, or oral speech acts 'mediated' by technology (e.g., a voice message sent via WhatsApp or a Skype recording). Since the latter do not require the *immediate* presence of an audience to be successful, their illocutionary dimension extends over a longer, and potentially indefinite, period of time. On this point, see Fraenkel (2006) and Ambroise (2015).

[10] According to Cavell, mutual agreement does not constitute an essential aspect of moral conversation, because 'we do not have to agree with one another in order to live in the same moral world, but we do

pure and simple understanding, but more importantly *mutual acknowledgment* (199). These comedies stage a panoply of exchanges of words through which the protagonists argue or advise, provoke or seduce, anger or amuse, reassure or scare, comfort or hurt each other. In short, Cavell argues, they 'educate' each other as to human finitude and separateness: that is, they learn to acknowledge the other as a fallible human being, but also as an autonomous individual endowed with a voice of her own that must be respected in order to repair the broken bond (Cavell 1988, 178).

This notion of conversation allows us to investigate the perlocutionary as a fundamental dimension of ordinary language, and of our own lives as creatures of language. I take this to be what Cavell aims to emphasise in analysing what he calls 'passionate utterance' (Cavell 2005, 155–91), although in his texts on this topic he never (explicitly) refers to the mode of conversation he singles out in his works on the Hollywood comedy of remarriage—and vice versa.[11] However, I cannot fully subscribe to Cavell's claim that, while in relation to illocutions it is the 'I' that proves essential, perlocutions bring the 'you' into the picture (Cavell 2005, 180). Indeed, illocutions have to do with both the 'I' and the 'you': I am never merely 'on my own' when performing an illocutionary act, since for it to be felicitous I always need to secure uptake—I need that *you* recognise the meaning and force of my locution. By contrast, since they aim at and rely on mutual acknowledgment, what perlocutions truly bring for the first time into the picture is the 'we.'[12]

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have to know and respect one another's differences' (Cavell 1979, 269). On this point, see Laugier (2014, 200–1).

[11] At the end of his essay on "Performative and Passionate Utterance," Cavell does refer to a conversation—albeit not one from a movie, but one drawn from Jane Austen's novel *Emma* (Cavell 2005, 189–91).

[12] As will become clearer in what follows, this notion of conversation entails the creation of a shared form of (moral and political) life with others. This does not mean, however, that the perlocutionary in all of its dimensions always and necessarily creates a (positive or inclusive) 'we.' For instance, in hate speech (which Cavell considers a 'region of perlocutionary effect' distinct from the one he refers to when speaking of passionate utterance), the aim is not 'to elicit a response in kind but to dictate or to stifle response, to make "we" impossible'—although one could argue that, precisely in order to do so, another 'we' is constituted in opposition to a 'they' (Cavell 2006, 273).

IV

From what I have established so far, it follows that the study of the perlocutionary within the framework of a 'conversation' requires us to draw a conceptual distinction that the literature on speech acts has so far overlooked: the distinction between recognition and acknowledgment.

Hornsby (1994) and Moran (2018) have both emphasised the crucial role that the reciprocity condition plays in relation to illocutions. The fundamental difference between the illocutionary and the perlocutionary lies, they claim, in the fact that (felicitous) illocutions rely on a peculiar dependence of the speaker on her audience, 'a dependence that is given by the role of reciprocity for the accomplishment of the act she announces herself as doing' (Moran 2018, 154). Hornsby's idea, derived from Searle (1969, 47), is that the audience has to *recognise* the kind of act that the speaker is performing in order for its illocutionary force to take place: 'When reciprocity obtains between people, they are such as to recognise one another's speech as it is meant to be taken' (Hornsby 1994, 192). In other words, the reciprocity condition ensures the *illocutionary* success of speech acts, since 'it allows there to be things that speakers can do simply by being heard as (attempting to and thus) doing them' (193).[13] On the contrary, it is clear that we need *more* than reciprocity to account for the perlocutionary. As Hornsby puts it, perlocutionary consequences go 'beyond any that reciprocity could secure': to ensure their production,

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[13] With the exception of 'institutional' speech acts, that is, of those acts that depend on 'established conventions of procedure additional to the conventions governing the *meanings* of our utterances' (Strawson 1964, 443). Indeed, in the case of utterances such as 'I pronounce you husband and wife,' 'I name this ship the *Queen Elizabeth*,' or 'I declare the meeting open,' simply being heard as attempting to do these things (marrying two people, christening a ship, opening a meeting) is not a *sufficient* condition for the felicitous performance of such acts. As Austin emphasises, other conditions apply: not only 'the particular persons and circumstances in a given case must be appropriate for the invocation of the particular [conventional] procedure invoked,' but the latter must also 'be executed by all participants both correctly and completely' (Austin 1975, 14–5). By contrast, both Hornsby (1994, 198) and Moran (2018, 137) argue that recognition is a necessary *and sufficient* condition for the illocutionary success of speech acts—but they deliberately focus only on 'ordinary' speech acts, leaving the more ritualised ones aside.

'more is required […] than simple recognition on the audience's part of what the speaker is up to' (195). Moran agrees with her: if both illocutions and perlocutions 'aim at and depend on' the audience's recognition of the aim of the speaker (Moran 2018, 134), the former have 'an internal relation to the recognition of [their] audience,' since they are 'made possible by that very recognition,' whereas recognition is 'at best necessary and never sufficient' for the successful performance of perlocutions (136–7).[14] Let us consider again the example discussed in Section II. If I tell my friend, 'This neighbourhood is very dangerous at night,' her recognition of my utterance as it is meant to be taken—namely, as an assertion—is enough to ensure the success of its illocutionary dimension. By contrast, her recognition of my perlocutionary aim (that is, persuading her not to go for a walk) is *not* a sufficient condition for its realisation, since she may decide to go out regardless, thus dismissing my concern as irrational or patronising: 'Don't worry, I'm a grown woman. I can take care of myself!'

Thus, to account for (the success of) perlocutions we need something more than just recognition. What we need is, I argue, *acknowledgement*.[15] Indeed, if perlocutionary effects are structurally open to renegotiation and the temporal boundaries of the perlocutionary act are not clearly defined, any consideration about the success or failure of a given perlocution must take into account something more than the simple realisation or lack thereof of a specific perlocutionary aim. Perlocutionary effects are characterised by their openness to a future in which they will be redeployed and renegotiated; the final aim of this open-ended process is, as I showed in the previous section, mutual acknowledgment. Therefore, mutual acknowledgment constitutes the background against which perlocutionary success and failure should ultimately be evaluated. Consequently,

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[14] On this point, see also Warnock (1989, 99).

[15] One could argue that the example discussed above is really about *agreement*. However, my friend can agree with me that this is a dangerous neighborhood but still decide to go for a walk (because she urgently needs some fresh air, because she is offended that I am treating her like a child, etc.), or she can disagree ('This is not a dangerous neighborhood, I used to live here and go out every night, nothing ever happened to me!') but still opt to stay home. Thus, what is at stake here is not agreement, but acknowledgment—or refusal thereof. Is my friend willing to acknowledge my concern and take it into account in the way she decides to conduct herself? The fact that, in this specific case, she does or does not, might have relevant (perlocutionary) consequences on the future of our relationship.

perlocutionary failures are radically different from illocutionary ones in that it is not always easy—and actually it is often impossible—to say what exactly has gone wrong about them: there is no systematic 'doctrine of *the things that can be and go wrong*' (Austin 1975, 14) for perlocutions.[16] Does this mean that a serious philosophical analysis of the domain of the perlocutionary is impossible? I want to resist this conclusion by emphasising that what a study of the perlocutionary prompts us to develop is, instead of a 'doctrine of the *Infelicities*' (14), an analysis of the 'grammar of acknowledgment.'

I take this to be the aim of Cavell's—so far downplayed or overlooked—list of perlocutionary conditions for the success of passionate utterances. Compiling this list is precisely an attempt to show that the perlocutionary has a 'grammar' (Raïd 2011, 155), even though, in the case of perlocutions, 'the speaker is on his or her own to create the desired effect' (Cavell 2005, 180). Elements of such grammar include, for instance, the specific way in which the speaker (explicitly or implicitly) declares herself to have standing with her interlocutor(s) and thus singles them out as appropriate in the given case—not by 'invoking a procedure,' but by 'inviting an exchange' (181). And since we are talking about a 'perlocutionary invocation, or provocation, or confrontation, backed by no conventional procedure,' its setting or staging, as Cavell puts it, 'is grounded in my being moved to speak, hence to speak in, or out of, passion, whose capacities for lucidity and opacity leaves the genuineness of motive always vulnerable to criticism,' and, most importantly, vulnerable to the response that I expect from my interlocutor(s) (181).[17]

Consequently, while the potential obstacles to the successful performance of illocutions are well-defined (what can 'go wrong' is related either to the conventional

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[16] As Laugier (2017) rightly argues, 'it is precisely the possibility of failure that defines the speech act as an *act*, and that places the theory of speech acts in the context of a theory of action': not only does this possibility mark language 'as a human activity, happy or unhappy,' but it also allows us to characterise human actions 'in terms of vulnerability, the possibility of transgression, and of failure' (130–1). In *A Pitch of Philosophy*, Cavell similarly observes that 'if utterances *could* not fail they would not be the human actions under consideration, indeed not the actions of humans at all' (Cavell 1994, 85).

[17] Indeed, as Cavell argues referring specifically to passionate utterance, the 'feelings and actions I wish to provoke […] or bring off […] are ones I can acknowledge, or specifically refuse to acknowledge, as appropriate responses to my expressions of feeling' (Cavell 2005, 17). On this point, see also Cavell (2004, 142).

procedure invoked or to the reciprocity condition), in the case of perlocutions 'appropriateness is to be decided in each case, it is at issue in each' (181). Indeed, my interlocutor(s) may contest my invitation to exchange at any or all of the moments listed by Cavell: they may, for instance, 'deny that I have that standing with [them],' or 'dismiss the demand for the kind of response I seek, or ask to postpone it,' and so on (182). This is no surprise because in the mode of perlocutionary exchange—call it *conversation*—'there is no final word, no uptake or turndown, until a line is drawn, a withdrawal is effected, perhaps in turn to be revoked' (183). In other words, the problem is not that of the success or failure of a single, isolated speech act, but that of the human capacity to inhabit a shared language as a 'form of life' (Wittgenstein 2009, §19, §23, §241), thus creating, or failing to create, the conditions for mutual acknowledgment—conditions that, moreover, stand in need of perpetual reactualisation. Thus, as I argue in the next section, the perlocutionary emphasises the vulnerability of language, and our own vulnerability as creatures of language, in ways that the illocutionary simply cannot do.

One last point deserves to be addressed here. It is often taken for granted that the study of the perlocutionary falls within the purview of rhetoric, rather than philosophy (see, e.g., Habermas 1984, 286–7). It is true that the study of the perlocutionary includes the analysis of the multiple ways in which one can (try to) persuade others, or to influence their beliefs or actions through words. However, the study of the perlocutionary should not be reduced to a purely 'strategic' analysis of discourse conceived as a set of 'tactics' (Foucault 2001, 123) through which one acts on others, influencing their opinions and shaping their conduct (Foucault 1982, 789). In other words, it would be a mistake to depict the perlocutionary merely in terms of *intentional* strategies deployed in order to (try to) produce certain effects on the audience. Indeed, if it is extremely rare for an illocutionary act to be performed unintentionally,[18] any speech act can, and often does, produce *unintentional* perlocutionary effects.[19] Thus, the perlocutionary manifests the fact

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[18] But not impossible, since 'I may say something or refer to something without meaning to, or commit myself unintentionally to a certain undertaking; for example, I may order someone to do something when I did not intend to order him to do so' (Austin 1975, 106n1). I thus disagree with Moran's more radical claim that 'it is essential to an illocutionary act that it is performed intentionally' (Moran 2018, 215).

[19] On this point, see Sbisà (2007, 467), who convincingly criticises Bach & Harnish (1979)'s restriction of the perlocutionary to the intentional production of effects.

that speech acts—and, more generally, our language—are not exclusively about 'action' and the intentional production of effects, but also (and at least as importantly) about 'passion' and vulnerability to effects that we cannot fully control or determine.

V

In some of his last philosophical texts, Cavell asks whether Austin's theory of speech as action 'may be extended, in a sense re-begun, in order to articulate a theory of speech as passion' (Cavell 2005, 15). Addressing the question of the 'relation of passion to speech' would indeed allow us to counter Austin's 'relative, continued neglect of the passions, or say the expressive, in speech' (159)—a neglect that characterises virtually the whole literature on speech acts. However, it is crucial to emphasise that a theory of speech as passion can and should *not* be opposed to a theory of speech as action. Although Cavell argues that 'the passional side of utterance' is not 'a detachable issue' (163), his view remains deeply Austinian in that he still considers speech to be a (or perhaps the) fundamental human *activity*. Thus, the crucial issue that Cavell prompts us to investigate is not quite that of the 'passiveness of passion' (156), but that of the *passiveness of action itself*. This issue has to do with the vulnerability of language, and of our own vulnerability as 'creatures of language' (Cavell 1988, 141), with regard not only to illocutionary infelicities connected to specific failures in recognition or convention, but also to perlocutionary renegotiations connected to failures in acknowledgement—of our feelings and passions, to be sure, but more basically of our finitude, fallibility, and separateness.[20]

Our vulnerability as creatures of language is thus not simply due to the power that language has to hurt or wound (see, e.g., Matsuda et al. 1993; Butler 1997; Maitra & McGowan 2012; Waldron 2012). It is also rooted in the fact that we can do things with

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[20] See Cavell (2002, 263–4): 'The point […] is that the concept of acknowledgment is evidenced equally by its failure as by its success. It is not a description of a given response but a category in terms of which a given response is evaluated. […] A "failure to know" might just mean a piece of ignorance, an absence of something, a blank. A "failure to acknowledge" is the presence of something, a confusion, an indifference, a callousness, an exhaustion, a coldness.'

words *only if* we accept (but do we really have a choice?) the risk of exposing ourselves to multiple types of failure as well as to others and their responses—failures and responses that are not always predictable. In particular, by reinterpreting the theme of skepticism, Cavell famously insists on the fact that it is extremely common to lose faith in 'my capacity to be able to present myself for acknowledgment,' since it is always possible to deny that my expressions in fact express me (Cavell 1979, 382–3). In other words, it is always possible not to mean what I say (Cavell 2002), since meaning what I say exposes me to the risk of being rebuffed, of discovering that I do not matter to the other, or that I am unable to make myself intelligible to them (Cavell 1994, 37). Our vulnerability as creatures of language essentially stems from this permanent risk of disavowal and unintelligibility.

A study of the perlocutionary, I argue, allows us to explore precisely this kind of vulnerability, and to describe our life with words as constantly exposed to accidents, reproaches, and ruptures. It allows us to understand why we are all 'victims of expression' (Cavell 2005, 20), constantly speaking and acting 'in the absence of what may seem sufficient reason' (139). However, for this very reason, our life with words also merits being conceived as an 'adventure' (Diamond 1991) characterised by an incessant practice of creation and improvisation. Indeed, as Cavell points out, 'perlocutionary acts make room for, and reward, imagination and virtuosity' in a way that illocutionary acts normally do not: 'to persuade you may well take considerable thought, to insinuate as much as to console may require tact, to seduce or to confuse you may take talent,' and so on (Cavell 2005, 173). Therefore, the vulnerability of language, and our own vulnerability as creatures of language, do not trap us in a state of passivity and impotence, in a form of mere determinism. On the contrary, they allow and prompt us to be creative in and through language, thus showing that not only our biological life, but also our life with words, is a *normative activity*.[21]

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[21] See Canguilhem (1991, 126–7): '[L]ife is not indifferent to the conditions in which it is possible, life is polarity and thereby an unconscious position of value; in short, life is in fact a normative activity. […] Normative, in the fullest sense of the word, is that which establishes norms. And it is in this sense that we suggest to talk about biological normativity' (translation modified).

If, in the case of illocutions, the status of the speaker and the situation in which she finds herself determine quite precisely *what she must say* if she wants to perform a certain speech act (telling, promising, ordering, etc.), what characterises perlocutions is that, in trying, for instance, to persuade or console or seduce her interlocutor(s), the speaker relies on *her own freedom*, while also giving it a specific, concrete form—since freedom only exists insofar as it is practiced (Foucault 1984, 245–6). That is, the speaker is essentially on her own in trying to produce the desired perlocutionary effect. Hence, acting perlocutionarily with words entails exercising one's freedom to transform existing norms or to invent new norms—to improvise 'in the disorders of desire,' as Cavell puts it, rather than participating with one's interlocutor(s) 'in the order of law' (Cavell 2005, 185).

Against the background of this difficult, but often rewarding, exercise of freedom, it eventually becomes possible to emphasise that perlocutionary effects give rise to a specific form of moral responsibility that has so far been obscured in the literature on speech acts.[22] Indeed, scholars tend to argue that *only* the illocutionary dimension of speech acts 'expresses the ways in which speakers render themselves accountable to each other […] as opposed to the other ways in which they may hope in their speaking to have some kind of influence on each other' (Moran 2018, 137). However, if Sbisà is right in arguing that Austin conceives of agency as 'justly ascribed responsibility,' and that therefore 'there is agency whenever it is fair to ascribe to an agent [at least partial] responsibility for a certain outcome' (Sbisà 2007, 467), we should not so quickly rule out perlocutionary responsibility.

It is true that every speech act usually gives rise to a specific illocutionary responsibility: if I promise you something, I render myself accountable. Although my promise does not exert a despotic power over me that *forces* me to keep it—after all, I am still free not to keep my promise[23]—my utterance of a promise gives you reasons to *expect* me to keep it, and to *demand* that I do so. It is in this sense that 'our word is our bond' (Austin 1975, 10).

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[22] With the important exception of Bauer (2006), who clearly emphasises that responsibility plays a crucial role *both* in the domain of the illocutionary and in that of the perlocutionary, since we are always required 'to make judgements about who is responsible for which effects,' although in the case of perlocutions 'we cannot rely on convention to sort out the question of responsibility' (90).

[23] On this point, see Ducrot (1985, 79) and Laugier (2004), who rightly argues that 'there is nothing *in language* that forces me to keep my promise' (300). Incidentally, that's why excuses exist (Austin 1957).

However, responsibility does not only arise in relation to a well-defined and predictable illocutionary sequel. We are also responsible for the opening of a (perlocutionary) space of confrontation with others that may, and typically will, entail consequences that we cannot entirely predict in advance. Take the example discussed in Bauer (2015, 100). A man has been seeing the same woman for a while. One night, while they are having a romantic dinner, he tells her that he loves her. However, soon afterwards, the woman discovers that the man is also dating someone else. When she confronts him, he replies that he just meant that he is fond of her, not that he is *in love* with her. Of course, we could treat this as an instance of illocutionary responsibility and argue that the man should have known what his words committed him to—and that the woman's reaction is therefore entirely predictable: 'You *told me* you loved me, how can you be dating someone else?' However, Bauer asks us to suppose that the man is absolutely sincere and that he really did not mean to suggest that he was ready for their relationship to become exclusive. We could perhaps suppose that being in an exclusive relationship is not part of his idea of 'love.' But, as Bauer rightly observes, it remains the case that the woman has a right to feel hurt, deceived, or even betrayed. Consequently, the man can be judged not only to have acted incorrectly in that he should have known what his words (illocutionarily) committed him to, but also to continue acting incorrectly when he subsequently fails to respond to the hurt feelings he created, even if unintentionally.

The concept of perlocutionary responsibility aims to capture precisely this kind of situation, in which one is legitimately held accountable for consequences of their words that they did not foresee and that they cannot fully control. Perlocutionary responsibility is thus structurally *indefinite*: we are capable of harming through and being harmed by words in many unforeseeable ways—and we might rightly be rendered accountable for (at least) some of them. In the domain of the perlocutionary, the question of responsibility is thus itself a matter of (re)negotiation, since it has to be addressed and decided in each particular case. Far from being easily attributable, responsibility and the ascribing thereof is subject to confrontation and conversation—it is a matter of dispute, often just a step in a much longer perlocutionary sequel. As Bauer (2015) argues, referring to the above-cited case, 'the woman can respond to the man's failure to mean what he said in any number of ways,' so that 'the resolution of the mess the man has made could go on for quite a while' (100–1).

Let us take another example. There is a famous scene from George Cukor's movie *The Philadelphia Story* (1940) in which C.K. Dexter Haven (Cary Grant) and Tracy Lord (Katharine Hepburn) confront each other about Dexter's drinking problem. As it turns out, their conversation is really about who is responsible for the failure of their marriage. Dexter reproaches Tracy for being incapable of accepting other people's faults ('She finds human imperfection unforgivable'), including his 'deep but gorgeous thirst,' to which Tracy rebuts that she found it disgusting and that it made Dexter deeply unattractive to her. Ultimately, she says, 'That was your problem,' to which Dexter retorts, 'But you took on that problem with me when you took me, right?' This particular exchange does not clearly lead to any resolution. However, as the remainder of the film shows, it is not by attributing responsibility once and for all to one or to the other, but by constantly renegotiating this responsibility, making it a matter of confrontation and conversation, that Dexter and Tracy will eventually be able to remarry. This is not to say that perlocutionary responsibility is illusory, nor that it must remain open-ended. On the contrary, it is precisely because Dexter and Tracy are willing to talk about it over and over again, eventually (albeit implicitly) assuming their part thereof by accepting their respective flaws—and thus by accepting to change, to acknowledge each other, and to learn (once again) to speak the same language—that the bond between them can be repaired.

Therefore, if I call this specific form of responsibility 'moral,' it is not because it applies to unequivocally blameworthy or blameless actions (Sbisà 2007, 467n6). Instead, I want to emphasise that morality does not only take the clear-cut form of a law (as in the case of illocutionary responsibility), but also the blurred, unpredictable, and creative form of improvisation. I take this to be what Cavell means by arguing that human speech is 'radically, in each uttered word, *ethical*,' since 'speaking, or failing to speak, to another is as subject to responsibility, say to further response, as touching, or failing to touch, another' (Cavell 2010, 321, my emphasis). It is this specific form of moral responsibility for effects of our words that we cannot fully control or even predict, and that are subject to constant renegotiation, that a serious philosophical study of the perlocutionary must explore. In this respect, perlocutionary responsibility is the necessary correlate of the grammar of acknowledgement described in Section IV, since I cannot acknowledge you, nor expect

you to acknowledge me, if I am not willing to accept that I could be held accountable for *any* of the effects that my utterances produce on you.

Acknowledgments

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