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Commitments continued

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1 Introduction

My target article outlines a pragmatic theory centred on the notion of commitment, which I believe is simpler and more general than what has been on offer so far. First, I argue that commitments are involved in a wider variety of utterances than are covered by alternative accounts, and are also the basis for turn-taking (question–answer, greeting–greeting, and so on). Second, the theory features a new analysis of common ground in terms of commitment sharing, which not only accommodates assertions and presuppositions, but affords a general account of how the common ground is changed by speech acts and the responses they elicit from their addressees. Third, the theory includes and extends the Gricean theory of cooperative communication, which also accounts for the sincerity inferences associated with various speech act types. Last, the theory shows how we can get much of our communicative business done without attributing mental states to each other, thus paving the way for a better understanding of the phylogeny and ontogeny of human communication.

These are the main ideas, and I am pleasantly surprised to see that the critical responses to my article are, on the whole, constructive and supportive. At the same time, I find it oddly reassuring that there is a small but vocal minority representing the intentionalist establishment, who find no merit in my theory whatsoever, and are out for the kill. As Nietzsche used to say, what does not kill you makes you stronger.

In the following, I will address a fair number of the issues raised by my critics, but first I would like to clarify my project by mentioning some of the objectives I was *not* trying to achieve. To begin with, it was not my purpose to provide, defend, or criticize any taxonomy of speech acts, or analyse in detail any type of speech act; nor did I want even to suggest, let alone argue, that an industrial strength theory of speech acts can be built from commitments alone. If there are gaps in my theory (and there are many), I will first try to fill them with such conceptual

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equipment as I have, but failing that I will be happy to extend my toolkit. Finally, although my project is informed by the conviction that the intentionalist approach to pragmatics is on the wrong track, I made no serious attempt to argue against it.¹ I merely intended to issue a reminder that intentionalism is faced with serious difficulties, the most pressing of which have to do with the development and evolution of communication. I am by no means the first to point this out, but a full-dress discussion was way beyond the scope of my target article, and although I feel compelled to say a bit more about this topic below, it is beyond the scope of this note, too (for more substantial discussion, see e.g. Gauker 2003, Breheny 2006, Bar-On 2013, or Abramova 2018).

2 Communication and information transfer

Information is cheap and abundant. Every move I make carries information of some sort, and it would be foolish to hold, as Harris claims I do, that speech acts need not involve any information transfer. I don't believe that. In fact, I don't deny that the great majority of speech acts convey information about speakers' mental states; for instance, that they are not comatose. But then, every speech act conveys the information that the speaker has a pulse, and just as I don't want to say that that is its purpose, I don't want to say that, in general, the first purpose of communication is to exchange information about mental states. My slogan is that human communication is a form of coordinated action whose first purpose is action coordination. Green interprets this as implying that "any transfer of information is a form of coordination." (p. 43) I don't believe that, either, and to the best of my knowledge I never even hint anything of the sort.

Harris observes that, on my account, it is possible for a speech act to result in it becoming common ground that p while at the same time it is mutual belief between the conversational participants that $\neg p$. On Harris's diagnosis, this is a consequence of disconnecting communication from information exchange, and he considers it to be problematic for my account and unproblematic for intentionalism. Interestingly, the kind of scenario that Harris uses to argue in favour of intentionalism has recently been used by Lewis (2019) to argue against the same doctrine (as noted by Zaefferer). The following vignette is Lewis's Case 2:

¹ Previously, I did not use the term "intentionalism," but since it is used by Green and Harris, I will follow suit, taking it to refer to the view that communication is a matter of expressing and grasping communicative intentions by speakers and hearers, respectively.

Jane and Kelly are looking to put together a team for the local recreational basketball league. They [...] both have atypical experiences with regards to the heights of the people they regularly encounter. They live in a house with a lot of people who are well below average height, including themselves. The members of their small group of friends and family are all well below average height, and they don't regularly see many other people. [...] It is well known between them that they consider 5 feet [1.52m] to be tall. Determined to get more involved in their community, they decide to put together this team. Jane says: "Let's put Lara on the team. Lara is tall."

In fact, Lara's height is 5 foot 2 (1.57 m), and therefore Jane's statement is false: relative to Jane and Kelly's goal to put together a team for the local recreational basketball league, Lara does not count as tall. But at the same time it is mutual belief between the two women that Lara is tall. My commitment-based framework allows us to represent this situation in terms of social and individual commitments of the atelic variety. Whereas on the social level:

$$C_{j,k}\neg t \quad C_{k,j}\neg t \quad C_{j,k}C_{k,j}\neg t \quad C_{k,j}C_{j,k}\neg t \quad \dots$$

on the individual level we have:

$$C_{j,j}t \quad C_{k,k}t \quad C_{j,j}C_{k,k}t \quad C_{k,k}C_{j,j}t \quad \dots$$

Put otherwise, while Jane and Kelly are mutually committed to act on $\llbracket \text{Lara is not tall} \rrbracket$, it is mutual belief between them that $\llbracket \text{Lara is tall} \rrbracket$. On this analysis, there is common ground on two levels, which should be and usually are in sync, but not in this scenario, because it implies an infinite series of violations of the Integrity maxim, which entails, for starters, that given $C_{j,k}\neg t$, it should not be the case that $C_{j,j}t$.

Harris's objection may now be expressed as follows. Our actions are shaped by our beliefs. Social commitments don't affect our actions; they are "causally inert". Hence, it is our beliefs, not our social commitments, that are relevant for explaining our actions. However, this is like saying that a description of a game of chess need not refer to the rules of chess, because it is only the players' psychological states that matter; the rule book is "causally inert". Just as the rules of chess are essential for understanding what's going on when two people are pushing little pieces of wood across a checkered board, Jane and Kelly's actions are governed by their social commitments even when they are not fully aligned with their beliefs. If Jane and Kelly manage to put together a basketball team with Lara on it, they are bound to find out that Lara is not tall, and their beliefs will fall in line with their social commitments, as they should.

Lewis's basketball scenario is reminiscent of Green's case of the commanding officer who, in a devious attempt to get a soldier court-martialed, issues an order that is impossible for the soldier to obey. In this case, the officer's personal goal may even be common ground between the two parties, but at the same time it is common ground that the officer is committed to the goal that his order be

carried out. So again we have two levels of commitment, though in this scenario both are transparent to both parties. I consider it a virtue of my framework that it accommodates such cases so easily.

3 Relational commitments

I'm concerned with the primordial form of human communication, which is face to face and happens on the spot; it involves at most a handful of participants, who take turns at speaking and being spoken to. I take it that the bulk of human communication is like this, and that this is also how communication began in our lineage and begins in our children. Speakers make commitments to addressees, and commitments are intrinsically relational: there must be a committer and a committee (with accent on the last syllable), and it is the addressee who is on the receiving end. Krifka partly agrees, but worries that assertions may be an exception:

It is plausible that in an assertion, the commitment to the truth of a proposition is of a more general nature. In particular, if a speaker asserts a proposition the addressee can assume that the speaker would assert the proposition to other addressees as well (except, of course, if there are reasons to keep it secret). This is different from promises, which are more like a contract between the speaker and the addressee only. (p. 80)

In fact, assertions seem to be different in this respect not only from promises, but also from requests, questions, greetings, and so on. Krifka characterizes assertions as “public commitments by the speaker to the truth of a proposition” (p. 79) and contrasts this with my relational analysis. I'm not comfortable with this way of framing the issue. I would say that commitment making is a public affair by definition, that it is the iterative structure of common ground that captures its public aspect, and that this much holds for all speech acts, assertions included.

According to Brandom (1983, 1994), in asserting that *p* I both commit myself to the truth of *p* and authorize my audience to assert *p* to others and defer any justificatory responsibility to me. Since most other speech acts do not imply a license to reissue, this analysis, if correct, would capture Krifka's observation without contradicting that commitments are essentially relational. But actually I'm not convinced that Brandom's analysis is entirely correct. Apart from the fact that much of the information we exchange by way of assertion is confidential (as Krifka notes, too), I doubt that, in general, we can evade justificatory responsibility for our assertions by deferring to our sources. Be that as it may, it is a common practice for assertions, and constatives in general, to be reissued, with

or without permission, but that doesn't require the supposition that assertional commitments are non-relational; if anything, the opposite is true.

In my article, I only considered one-on-one instances of commitment. Obviously, this is a simplification. Either party in a commitment can be a group of individuals or an institution, and as Kibble notes, such cases argue against an intentionalist account of speech acts. Kibble also points out that, once we take into account that an utterance may be heard by more than one individual, all sorts of complications arise. A student asks me whether Frege was German, and I answer that he was. The student is my primary addressee, as Kibble calls it, and therefore my answer causes me to have a commitment to her. But in this case it seems that I incur the same commitment to each of the other students in the room. They are part of my audience, too, even if they are not my primary addressees. And then there may be eavesdroppers in the corridor, whom I didn't address and haven't made a commitment to, but who still may adopt a private commitment as a consequence of my speech act. As far as I know, this is largely uncharted territory, though some charting has been done by Hughes (1984), Clark (1992), and Meijers (2007).

Commitment is an asymmetrical relation: if I make a promise to you, the commitment is mine, even if it is required that you accept that I have it. With this proviso, my theory is informed by the tacit assumption that others cannot make our commitments for us; in this sense, we are autonomous in our commitment making. Kibble observes that we can license others to make commitments on our behalf, but this much is consistent with the autonomy constraint.

Referring to Poschmann (2008) and Beyssade and Marandin (2009), De Brabanter suggests that at least some directives might be analysed in terms of a "commitment shift" from speaker to addressee. On this account, if *a* orders *b* to shut the door, the illocutionary effect of *a*'s speech act is that *b* becomes committed to shut the door. This idea clearly violates the autonomy constraint, but there are other problems with it as well. As I argued in my article, it does seem to be the case that, as a consequence of ordering *b* to shut the door, *a* becomes committed to act on $\llbracket b \text{ will shut the door} \rrbracket$. The theory adumbrated by De Brabanter leaves this commitment unaccounted for. Perhaps it could be included in the analysis of ordering, or perhaps one could suppose, following De Brabanter's suggestion, that *a* can share the commitment imposed on *b* by her own, i.e. *a*'s, order; but neither option seems particularly attractive to me. By contrast, on my analysis of directives, *a*'s order causes her to become committed to act on $\llbracket b \text{ will shut the door} \rrbracket$, and as a rule *b* will agree to share *a*'s commitment. Directives are no different from other speech acts in this regard, no special stipulations are needed, and *a* and *b* are left with the correct commitments, while respecting their autonomy.

Nevertheless, I sympathize with De Brabanter's concern that my analysis seems to emphasize the speaker's commitment at the expense of the addressee's projected commitment. I can offer three considerations that may, perhaps, assuage this unease somewhat. First, if the "apparent reversal of priorities" (as De Brabanter calls it) is problematic, then my analysis is not the only one in jeopardy. For example, intentionalist theories of illocutionary force typically highlight speakers' mental states at the expense of hearers' prospective actions. Second, even if one commitment derives from another, that doesn't render it less important or less salient. Third, as argued in the last paragraph, my analysis is preferable for economical and aesthetic reasons.

4 Expressives

In my article, I briefly discussed some speech acts whose main function seems to be to express psychological states, and suggested that they could be treated as constatives.² On this account, an utterance of "I'm sorry there is nutmeg in the pudding" commits the speaker to being sorry that there is nutmeg in the pudding. De Brabanter objects that this suggestion creates an imbalance in my account. If some speech acts are to be analysed this way, why not apply the same analysis across the illocutionary board? There are several reasons. First, it is generally agreed, even by dyed-in-the-wool intentionalists, that this will not work for conventional speech acts like "I christen this ship the USS Stormy Daniels."³ Second, as it can hardly be denied that we occasionally refer to psychological states, some of which our own, it is inevitable that the propositional content of at least some of our speech acts must be about our psychological states. But by the same token, it is inevitable that the propositional content of at least some speech acts will be

² Contrary to what De Brabanter suggests, I don't want to classify greetings with the expressives, as many authors have done. The basic function of "Hi!" may be to acknowledge the presence of another person, initiate interaction, or both. At any rate, some sort of commitment does seem to be involved, though it heavily depends on the context, and is therefore hard to pin down in the general case. Note, for example, that it will often be considered rude to greet a person and then ignore her flat out.

³ Harris claims that there is a metaphysical dichotomy between conventional and communicative acts, which intentionalism gets right and my account fails to capture. However, this alleged dichotomy is just an artefact of the intentionalist doctrine: conventional acts are those which the intentionalist approach fails to explain no matter how you look at it. Hardly a compelling argument for stipulating a rift in reality. For discussion of the conventional/communicative distinction and its history, see Sbisà (2009) and Kissine (2013).

about lemon curd, and this is patently no reason for supposing that all speech acts might be analysed as being about lemon curd.

Krifka discusses “emotive” speech acts, which he characterizes as linguistic means of expressing emotions for which the notion of commitment “feels beside the point.” (p. 88) His paradigm examples are interjections like “Ouch!” and “Wow!” Intuitively, it seems wrong to say that these serve the same purpose as “I am in pain” and “I am surprised”, respectively, and I tend to agree that a commitment-based analysis may not be appropriate for these interjections; in which case an intentionalist analysis won’t work, either, by the way. That said, I have a methodological qualm about Krifka’s discussion. Krifka concedes that the hearer can extract information from the speaker’s “Ouch!”, and even that it can be communicative. (Just imagine a little girl rubbing her scratched knee, looking up at you and whimpering softly: “Ouch!”) But Krifka observes that, even so, one cannot *lie* by exclaiming “Ouch!”, and on that basis he concludes that emotives are not constatives.

My worry is that this argument hinges on what may well be a lexical fluke. Krifka is surely right that, in English as in some other languages, not every form of deception counts as lying, but that is a fact about the verb “to lie” which need not have any bearing on the classification of speech acts. This point becomes acute when we turn to other cases that Krifka proposes to classify as emotives, like “What a terrible mistake you made!” Whereas Krifka takes it to be evident that this is not a constative, I’m not sure that its communicative effect is markedly different from “You made a terrible mess”, when uttered with the right intonation. Unfortunately, as things currently stand, we don’t seem to have reliable diagnostics for settling this and other differences, but at any rate, I doubt that the lying test will be of much help.

Incidentally, a related objection applies to Green’s claim that we can separate illocutionary acts from other types (such as locution and perlocution) by applying the “saying makes it so” constraint: “an illocutionary act is one of a type that can (though need not be) be performed by saying, under the right conditions, that one is doing so.” (p. 42) If this is to be more than an informal rule of thumb, the extension of “illocutionary act” will be determined by the vagaries of the language: an utterance of “Does your dog bite?” will count as a question only if one’s language happens to provide the means for referring to question acts.

5 Graded commitments

One theme running through these commentaries is that, somehow or other, commitments seem to come in varying degrees of strength. De Brabanter observes that

giving advice and making a recommendation are “milder” directives than orders; Krifka discusses ways of hedging commitments and commitment specifiers, like “for the life of me” and “honestly”, which he says affect the speaker’s “level of commitment”; and Green contrasts and compares members of the “assertive family” (assertion, conjecture, guessing, and so on), observing, among other things, that “one who asserts that *p* takes on a more weighty commitment than one who puts it forth as an educated guess.” (p. 47, see also Green 2015)

Intuitively, it is clear that the commitments we make by way of our utterances are not always equally strong. But before asking what that might mean, it should be noted that there are several dimensions of gradedness associated with speech acts. For example, Searle and Vanderveken (1985, 15) observe that, while both ordering and pleading are stronger than requesting, “the greater strength of pleading derives from the intensity of the desire expressed, while the greater strength of ordering derives from the fact that the speaker uses a position of power or authority that he has over the hearer.” This illustrates how speech acts vary in strength along more than one dimension. Commitment is one such dimension, and the strength of commitment conveyed by a speech act need not agree with its strength on other dimensions. For example, although pleading is stronger than requesting in some sense, it may well come with a lower degree of commitment. There is no need for Betty to plead with Barney to walk the dog if she is confident that he will do as told, and therefore her pleading may evince a relatively low degree of commitment to the goal that Barney walk the dog. On the other hand, if Barney is at Betty’s beck and call, then a mere hint from her (“The dog?”) may secure his compliance, and a high degree of commitment to [Barney will walk the dog] is warranted. In short, illocutionary gradedness is a many-headed monster, and we must be careful to separate graded commitments from other graded stuff.

What could it mean for one commitment to be stronger or weaker than another? Although it may seem tempting to suppose that commitments are intrinsically graded, like pollution or noise, I prefer to view gradedness as a meta-property. Once undertaken, commitments persist by default, but every once in a while they will be retracted, with or without mutual consent (cf. Bratman 1987). One reason for defaulting on a commitment is that it conflicts with another commitment. If and when this happens, one commitment is given precedence over another, and my suggestion is that such precedence orderings underlie the gradedness of our commitments. Precedence orderings could be modeled in a non-monotonic logic like Horty’s (2012), which might also help to clarify their role in practical reasoning.

I believe that an analysis along these lines may capture at least some of the variation in Green’s “assertive family” and at least some of the effects of Krifka’s

commitment specifiers. I'm less sure that it will also explain the contrast between requesting and advising that De Brabanter points to. Prima facie, it may seem that requesting implies a higher level of commitment to a goal than advising. However, unlike prototypical directives, advising need not be telic *at all*: a doctor who advises a patient to reduce her alcohol intake may be strongly committed to the soundness of his advice, while remaining entirely uncommitted with respect to the goal he believes his patient should aim for. Since, on the proposed account, there is a difference between having a weak commitment and having no commitment whatsoever, there is an important theoretical distinction between the atelicity of mere advising and the weakness of commitments associated with some proper directives. But then it is a category mistake to say that advising conveys a low level of commitment.

6 Normativity

Commitment making is first and foremost a social practice, which people engage in to coordinate their activities. On the Vygotskian view that I find myself drawn to, children acquire these practices and turn them on themselves by making private commitments, which help them to organize their own activities, planning, and problem solving (Geurts 2018). Social commitment making is a normative practice, that is to say, a practice that is properly described in terms of what one should do, is entitled to do, and so on.⁴ Kibble and Krifka point out that such normative practices are instilled by means of sanctions ranging from good-natured correction to capital punishment: we correct others for misspelling words, chide them for bad manners, and send them to jail for theft. This is how normativity manifests itself in the social sphere. But if social practices are essentially normative, then we might expect that private commitment making, too, is a normative practice, and as Kibble observes, it is not obvious that it is, especially since it is doubtful that we sanction ourselves on a regular basis.

The normativity of private commitments, aka beliefs and intentions, is a much-debated topic in philosophy, which I cannot begin to do justice to here (see McHugh and Whiting 2014 and Verbeek 2014 for recent surveys), though I should mention that, in this literature, it is uncontroversial *that* beliefs and intentions are governed by norms. Since Kibble's worry is specifically about sanctions, it may be noted that, first impressions notwithstanding, we do sanction ourselves for commitment failures of all sorts. Sanctions are measures taken by party *x* to make

⁴ Note that, pace De Brabanter, this is not to say that a commitment-based pragmatics must be a normative theory. The normativity is in the subject matter, not in the theory.

party y conform to a norm. Such measures are also used, often enough, if x and y are the same person. We blame ourselves when our beliefs or intentions fail us and we miss a train or overcook a soufflé, for example. On such occasions we may even call ourselves names (“Moron!”, “Coward!”) and slap our heads in disapproval. Such behaviours are likely functional, too: if you discover that you missed your train because you left home too late, your self-directed irritation may help to improve your future commitment making, reminding you not make the same mistake again. More generally, it seems plausible to suppose that self-correction plays a key role in our ongoing business of belief formation and intention making, and correction is a normative practice if anything is.

7 Acceptance and awareness

On my account, the common ground consists of a basis of zero-order commitments and an infinite set of higher-order commitments generated from this basis, courtesy of the acceptance principle:

Acceptance: $C_{a,b}p$ entails $C_{a,b}C_{a,b}p$ and $C_{b,a}C_{a,b}p$.

What this says is just that a cannot have a commitment to b unless a and b are each committed to the other that a has that commitment. That is all there is to it. Unfortunately, while I intended to use it as a mere term of art, the word “acceptance” connotes awareness, which seems to have caused a certain amount of overinterpretation: Kibble detects some equivocation in my treatment of acceptance, and according to De Brabanter, my theory entails that, “for a commitment to hold, both parties must be aware of it and must have somehow ratified it.” (p. 32) However, although I should have expressed myself more clearly, I emphatically reject the notion that acceptance requires awareness. Indeed, it would be suicidal for me to suppose that it did, because it is the recursive application of the acceptance principle that generates the infinitely many higher-order commitments that make up most of the common ground. If acceptance required awareness, my theory of common ground would be a non-starter.

If the speaker undertakes a commitment, both speaker and hearer must accept that the speaker has that commitment, for otherwise he hasn’t. In many cases, the hearer’s acceptance is implied by her sharing the speaker’s commitment: if a asks b a question, for example, and b responds by giving an answer, then b ’s response entails that she shares a ’s commitment, which in its turn entails that b accepts a ’s commitment. However, in some cases, acceptance is signalled specifically, e.g., by head movements or vocalizations like “mm-hmm”

or “uh-huh”.⁵ Interestingly, such signals seem to go under the awareness radar much of the time, so even if acceptance is acknowledged specifically (which it often isn’t), acknowledgements are likely to be sent and received subliminally.

8 Implicatures

Although Grice’s theory of cooperative communication is traditionally presented in psychological terms, I argue that this is not necessary. First, the Gricean maxims are almost entirely devoid of psychological elements; the only exception is the first sub-maxim of Quality, “Do not say what you believe to be false”, which in my account gives way to a more general maxim, Integrity, which is defined in terms of commitment. Second, although Grice casts the reasoning that underpins conversational implicatures in psychological terms, those terms are dispensable without loss.

De Brabanter contests my first point: he claims, in effect, that the second sub-maxim of Quality, “Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence”, relies on a psychological notion that reappears in my reformulation, namely “evidence”. But is this a psychological term? Sometimes, we use it to refer to “the kind of thing which one might place in a plastic bag and label ‘Exhibit A’” (Kelly 2016: 1), and surely there is nothing psychological about that. Like property, evidence is the kind of thing one can have unknowingly. But on the other hand, sometimes, and these are the times De Brabanter has in mind, we cite as evidence that we have seen this or that, and presumably seeing is a psychological process. So the question to ask is this: is it a problem for my account that, occasionally, providing evidence requires that we refer to our psychological states?

My answer to this question is no, for the following reason. Performing a speech act may imply that one is capable of justifying the commitments it entails (cf. Brandom 1983, 1994 on assertion). Even if this may require making reference to psychological states, being able to provide acceptable justifications is a multifaceted skill, but is not itself of a psychological nature. Therefore, it may well be a competence that is acquired piecemeal, step by unhurried step, and the psychological facets of it may arrive relatively late. If this much is true, De Brabanter’s observation need not present a problem for my account.

Like the Gricean schema for deriving implicatures, my version starts with the observation that “the speaker has said that *p*.” This prompts Green to present me with a false dilemma: “saying that *p*” must either refer to a locutionary act, in

⁵ These signals seem to be ambivalent, in that they may indicate sharing or merely acceptance. See Enfield (2017: 107–117) for discussion.

which case my schema won't work, or to an illocutionary act, but then I have to take on board "whatever suite of communicative intentions are needed for an instance of speaker meaning." (p. 48) Here Green presupposes something that is not common ground, viz. that illocutionary force requires an intentionalist account. For those of us who reject that premiss, as I do, "saying that *p*" need not be construed in psychological terms, and Green's objection falls flat.

Further on in his discussion of implicatures, Green begs the question once again: "Normally, a plain-vanilla use of the indicative mood is sufficient to express a belief whose content is the same as the content asserted; further, expression is not a case of speaker meaning and so not a case of implicature either." (p. 50) On the face of it, this may look like an argument against my view that "expressing belief" by way of an indicative can be accounted for in terms of implicature. But as a matter of fact, Green merely presents his own opinion. Putting together *his* view that the illocutionary effect of assertion is to express a belief with *my* view that this belief is derivable as an implicature, Green concludes that *my* account must be wrong, because it conflates assertion with implicature. Hence, what Green's argument boils down to is that I'm wrong because he is right.

On my account, there are various ways in which speech acts can convey mental states, but the most important route is via social commitments: I assert that Louis de Funès was the first president of the Fifth Republic, thereby become committed to my audience that this is the case, and my thus committing myself may implicate that I believe what I say.⁶ Harris claims that this order of explanation can be reversed, and that social commitments are derivable from communicative intentions manifested by speakers. If he was right about this, it would further the intentionalist cause considerably. But unfortunately for Harris his reasoning is defective. Take the case of promising:

[If you make me a promise], you intend me to form a belief about your intentions—and so an expectation about your actions—that will factor into my practical reasoning about what to do. If you break your promise, uncoordinated action is likely to result and I am within my rights to criticize you for knowingly putting us into the incoherent state that led to our failure. (p. 64)

This may seem mildly plausible until one realises that commitments are not necessarily contingent on cooperation in the way Harris's argument requires. For example, if I make a promise that is obviously false, it is common ground between us that I don't intend to honour my commitment, yet I do have a commitment. Clearly, speech acts have normative effects even if cooperativity cannot be taken

⁶ "May", not "must": if I make the same statement in response to a question in a quiz show, it may be transparent that I'm guessing, but I will still have committed myself.

for granted. My theory allows for this; Harris's doesn't. Speaking more generally, it seems to me that the prospects of an intention-based account of normativity are dim, simply because I don't see how social normativity could derive from the expression of private states.

Whereas Harris and I agree that either commitments or intentions must come first in a theory of speech acts, Zaefferer advocates an egalitarian treatment that puts these two notions on a par. Although I don't want to deny that this view may have its advantages, it must be noted that one important advantage of a non-egalitarian approach is lost on Zaefferer's account: it rules out the possibility of deriving commitments from intentions, or vice versa.

9 Can kids do it?

Intentionalism is the view that a speech act expresses a communicative intention of the speaker's, which the hearer must grasp in order for communication to be achieved. A communicative intention is a higher-order psychological state: it is an intention that is intended to be recognized as such. A common worry is that this puts the standard for successful communication so high that it becomes unattainable for three-year-olds, who would seem to be pretty effective communicators.⁷ A remarkably popular response to this worry is to bite the bullet and maintain that three-year-olds have the conceptual resources for dealing with communicative intentions, after all. Zaefferer and Harris are drawn to this view, and the latter argues as follows:

1. There is empirical evidence that toddlers and even infants are capable of "mind reading", i.e. predicting and explaining other agents' behaviour by attributing mental states to them.
2. There is a view to the effect that "infants possess the conceptual capacity for mindreading but haven't yet fully developed some of the cognitive resources needed to deploy it in adult-like ways." (p. 56)⁸

⁷ In my article I took it for granted that this implies that children must be able to attribute intentions before they can understand promises. This is Harris's view, too, but not Green's, who avers that one "may deny that the order of conceptual analysis has to correspond to any temporal series." (p. 41) As a general principle, this is obviously correct, but in this particular case I fail to see how it could be true, and as I already mentioned in the introduction, I'm not the only one.

⁸ According to Harris, this view is supported by Rubio-Fernández and Geurts (2013). I reject that allegation, as does my co-author.

3. Supposing that this view is correct, “young children may be good enough mindreaders to begin learning how to perform and interpret speech acts, even if we shouldn’t expect them to communicate like adults.” (ibid.)

The empirical evidence on which this argument hinges is controversial, and that’s putting it exceedingly mildly. As detailed by Rakoczy and Behne, most of the experimental measures on which the evidence is based have failed to replicate, and to the extent that they do replicate, their validity is in doubt. Rakoczy and Behne’s conclusion is that “in light of the existing evidence, we do not know whether there is indeed such a thing as implicit [mind reading] before age 4.” (p. 94)

This is enough to dismiss Harris’s argument, but let’s follow his line of reasoning a bit further. What if the empirical evidence had been robust? Would it then have supported the intentionalist cause? No. The experimental measures that can be used in studies with infants and toddlers are, of necessity, very indirect, or “implicit” as Rakoczy and Behne put it, and long before it became clear that the data are of poor quality, their interpretation was quite moot. The resolute nativism that Harris pins his hopes on may be an option, but there are alternative theories on offer that are considerably less stipulative. The notion that infants have the conceptual resources for mind reading but have a hard time employing them is like the view that the pyramids of Giza were built by extraterrestrial visitors: it is an intriguing hypothesis, for sure, but there are others to be considered first.

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