ABSTRACT. 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 1 and 2). 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 2). After defending and developing my positive proposal, I explore its implications for debates over expressivism in meta-ethics (Sections 3 and 4).

1. 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, pp. 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 the speech-act. As Searle puts it, “the sincerity condition tells us what the speaker expresses in the performance of the act”. (Searle, 1969, p. 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’. 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, p. 84)

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

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