Authority, Intelligibility and Social Meaning – Who Can Say What your Action Means?

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My topic today takes up the question *how should we interpret contested actions?* A contested action is one where there is agreement on the basic form of the act – certain bodily movements were performed – but there is not agreement on the significance or moral status of those bodily movements.

Consider:

1. *Is she grandstanding, or merely animated and sincere?*
2. *Is the group rioting or protesting?*
3. *Was she acting out and seeking attention, or was her outburst an attempt to express her individuality and break free from socially oppressive norms?*
4. *Did this student not turn in work because they are lazy and unmotivated or because of crippling anxiety and depression?*
5. *Does the leader give a speech of hope and unity, or blather on with wishful thinking?*
6. *Is this man flexing his privilege and entitlement, or merely asking for a fair hearing?*
7. *Am I overreacting? Or is he gaslighting me?*

I take it the phenomenon is familiar. The question is of pressing importance, I think, because how we interpret another person’s contested action will determine which how we treat her. It will determine whether she is blamed, or praised, or admired, or excused. In the interpersonal context, the quality of our moral relationship depends on what answer we give to this question. And we wrong another person when we blame them when they ought to be praised, or excuse them when they ought to be blamed. It’s not merely a matter of the quality of our relationship with the other person, but also our responsibility to treat them as a person who is included in the moral community.

Sometimes actions are contested because we lack information. Perhaps we have only a partial glimpse of the motive, or we don’t understand the cultural assumptions that provide the social context. The action is contested because there are different ways of filling in the missing information. But sometimes, it is not a matter of ignorance, but a question of *whether the action was appropriate, culpable, harmful, noble, etc.* The action is contested because of a clash of values. According to one outlook, an action will be honorable; according to another, it may be foolish. College freshman reading Antigone often struggle to understand why she must bury her brother. Honoring the dead is not central to their outlook, especially when weighed against risk to their own life. When debating whether a group is rioting or protesting, we look to see whether their actions are an appropriate response to their animating cause. But different outlooks may have different assessments over whether it is appropriate.

Embedded in my question of *how* to interpret contested actions is a deeper interpersonal question. It is the question of *who* should determine the interpretation of the action. Philosophers in my tradition (the analytic tradition) have focused more on which interpretation is *correct* than they have on this question of *who* should get to decide which interpretation is correct. In this sense, they have viewed the task as an intellectual, rather than an interpersonal one. This methodology overlooks the role of power in determining the public social meaning of individuals and their actions. I will reflect on this missing component towards the end of this talk. However, I can only work within the tradition of my training. I am very sad not to present this talk in person and receive the benefit of your training in weighing in on my central question. I am confident that other disciplines in the humanities have a rich set of conceptual tools that will deepen and expand my thoughts here. If you would like to raise a question or make suggestions, I hope you will email me: [amy.flowerree@ttu.edu](mailto:amy.flowerree@ttu.edu).

Here is my plan for what follows: first, I will briefly set forward three of the main theories that answer our question that appear in the philosophical literature. I will suggest ways that all three crucially fall short. And I will conclude by meditating on the central role of *who* gets to decide on the interpretation. In this I will make use of the work of Simone Weil, the French philosopher and mystic from the 20th century.

The first view is to consider is what I will call the Authority View. The Authority View holds that what determines the meaning of the action is constituted by the agent’s intention in acting. Elizabeth Anscombe argues that the intentional description of the action – the description embodies the agent’s answer to the question *why?* She did what she did – this description of the agent’s intention in acting is a privileged description of the action.

And so it is a natural thought that what should determine our interpretation of another person is the agent’s intention in acting. This is rooted in both epistemic and moral considerations. The epistemic consideration is that the agent has better access to her intention in acting. If anyone knows what the agent was trying to do, it is the agent herself. The moral consideration is that respect for agents involves (in part) seeing them as determined by their reasons. If respecting another as a person involves taking her reasons as authoritative for her, and she is in the best position to understand her reasons, then we ought to default to her authority to determine the nature of her action.

However, I think we should reject this view. The moral and interpersonal significance of an action depends on more than just the agent’s description of the action. Consider Ralph Northam, governor of Virginia, who recently had old medical school photo resurface of himself in blackface. Northam didn’t intend to cause offense by wearing it. But wearing blackface is offensive regardless of the particular aims and intentions of the wear. A person can explain what they are doing, but they do not have the authority to determine that the action is not offensive.

Furthermore, in the case of contested action, the agent may not be in a good position to assess her intentions. Human agents do have knowledge of their intentions, but this knowledge is not infallible. And the class of cases where we are most likely to err – cases where our ego is at stake, where we overestimate our good qualities, or overlook our bad qualities – are exactly the cases which are likely to be contested actions.

The second view I would like to consider we can call the Social View. In this view, actions have socially constructed meanings, and these meanings determine how we ought to understand an action. The example of Northam’s blackface photo is one way in which the meaning of the photo is fixed by our social understanding of the significance and offensiveness of blackface. But examples are abundant: wearing a wedding ring, liking an Instagram post, saluting one’s commanding officer. We could negotiate different meanings for these actions. But given a context, it is not up to the individual what the action means.

On this view, we ought to interpret actions within their social context. Proponents of this view put it forward with an air of inevitability. Since all language rests on convention and context, and understanding actions is just one concrete manifestation of this complicated project, *what else could the action possibly mean?*

But this overlooks the complexities and contingencies of social construction. First, when we are trying to understand a contested action, we are often trying to understand an action that has multiple conventional social understandings. *Are they rioting or protesting? Is he flexing his male privilege or merely asking for a fair hearing?*

But secondly – and most importantly – our socially constructed meanings are in constant need of critique. Feminist philosophers have emphasized that the social understanding of meaning within rape culture makes it so that in many contexts, there is no action a woman could make that would fail to count as consent to a sexual encounter (think “no means yes, yes means anal”). As a result, a woman is silenced from being able to reject sex. This is a profound injustice and harm to women, as these feminist philosophers have noted. The upshot is not that the social meaning determines the reality (men who refuse to accept “no means no” have still made a mistake), but that the social meaning must be critiqued and changed as a matter of justice. We do not defer to the social reality, we must build a new one.

So far I have suggested that it is a mistake to default to the agent to interpret an action, and it is (on the other side of the continuum) a mistake to default to social understandings either. There is a third position that is often advocated, and that is to default to the rational understanding of the one doing the assessing. I will call this the “Intelligibility view.” On this view, we should interpret a person’s actions in such a way that maximizes their rationality.

It is a truism that no one is fully rational, and even more popular to decry particular groups as completely irrational, so I might need to motivate this view for you. The idea is that in order for us to understand someone as acting *at all*, we have to understand each other as acting for particular aims, from particular values. While I might not agree with your aims or values, in order to understand what you’re doing, I have to understand it as responsive to your subjective understanding of how to act in light of your values. Thus, the act of interpretation is an act of rational reconstruction: I attempt to understand you in light of your values and aims.

The problem with this approach is not so much a problem as a challenge. In a world with deep conflict over what to value and how to act, how could I possibly detach enough from myself to be responsive to you, rather than some fantasy I created of you? And even if I were able to accomplish this, how could I adjudicate between *your* understanding of what is valuable and *my* understanding of what is valuable? If you did something that by your lights was courageous, and by my lights was foolhardy, do I praise you, or criticize you? Which interpretation is the appropriate one for me to use in order to know how to relate to you, as a friend, a family member, a colleague, or a fellow citizen?

And this challenge is the challenge that has motivated my whole project. Because I think at root this is the question we must answer if we are going to live together in a community that is filled with contested actions. And we *do* live in a community that is filled with contested actions. But the Intelligibility View doesn’t tell us how to do this. So in order to do this, we must turn elsewhere.

I have briefly sketched and told you to reject principles of authority, social meaning, and intelligibility as default ways of understanding the meaning of the action. Here, I want to explore a further possibility drawn from the writing of Simone Weil. Weil’s philosophical commitments are deeply interpersonal – the philosophical project of living a good life is primarily a task of seeing other persons as persons – but they are also deeply contemplative. Understanding other persons is not a task of conquest but of discovery.

The first thing to notice when we attempt to interpret a contested action is that *we* are doing the interpretation. And we engage in this task because of its interpersonal significance *for us*. It is significant *for the relationship.* Or it is significant for how someone relates to our community. But its significance for us also introduces the potential for distortions in our interpretation. The first task of interpretation is to cultivate awareness of ourself in relation to the other. To do this, we must cultivate our powers of attention.

In “Gravity and Grace,” a collection of her essays published after her death, Weil writes

We have to try to cure our faults by attention and not by will… if we turn our mind towards the good, it is impossible that little by little the whole soul will not be attracted thereto in spite of itself….

The authentic and pure values – truth, beauty and goodness – in the same activity of a human being are the result of one and the same act, a certain application of the full attention to the object.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Weil’s proposal for understanding ourselves and others is by *attention*. In particular, it is by being attuned to the good. This is accomplished not by will, or any kind of intentional action. In the language of this essay, the way to understand the meaning of an action is to attend carefully to it. Weil’s notion of attention involves setting aside the urge to *pursue* truth, or *construct* an interpretation, or to *do* anything. Instead, we must attend to the person, the situation and our relation to both. Through this practice, we cultivate our powers of attention, resulting in Attunement, we will understand.

She asks us to consider the person begging for food. She writes, “To know that this man who is hungry and thirsty really exists as much as I do – that is enough, the rest follows of itself.”[[2]](#footnote-2) In order to ignore this man’s need, we must convince ourselves that he does not really need it, or we cannot really help him. But if we are properly attuned to his need, and our ability to help, we will be unable to arrive at any other conclusion than that we must help him. And so, for Weil, the wisdom that is needed to interpret the meaning of an action is given to us through the practice of attention.

In this essay, I have talked of the meaning of an action, where the meaning includes not just the action done, but its significance for the agent and others. When we encounter contested actions, we are unsure which way to interpret the meaning of the action. Weil herself described this activity as “reading” the meaning of the action. She writes

We read, but also we are read by, others. Interferences in these readings. Forcing someone to read himself as we read him (slavery). Forcing others to read us as we read ourselves (conquest).[[3]](#footnote-3)

Interpretation of others, for Weil, is an interpersonal task, one that should not be one of slavery or conquest. Instead, we ought to carefully balance the forces that seek to interfere with our readings, always aware of the way others and ourselves will interfere with our interpretations. And justice requires that we are always willing to revise our readings.

Weil regards the Social View I discussed above as an especially pernicious distorting feature. She emphasizes to dangers to “social conformity.” On the one hand, we might uncritically read the actions of others according to the popular view. We offload the task of interpretation on to others. We might choose this route due to peer pressure, a desire not to be out of step with our peers. When we do this, it potentially harms our relationships with those we interpret, since we do not take care to understand them.

But a second way is a thoughtless deferral to social meaning. This too can lead to distortion because social meaning can provide us unhelpful or unkind social scripts for interpreting actions. Social scripts can be a source of error because they are based on contingent features that may or may not track anything of value. She explores this idea through the example of Joan of Arc. Joan of Arc is widely lauded by Weil’s contemporary catholic religious community who canonized her. But she wasn’t condemned for being a saint. The catholic religious community who condemned her read her actions as a witch, a heretic. And so the social meanings that Weil’s contemporaries use read her as a saint; the social meanings of Joan’s contemporaries read her as a heretic. But which social meaning is relevant? We cannot accept *both* social meanings as the correct interpretation of her actions. It is a totally contingent matter whether we use the social meanings of the 1400s or the 1940s or the 2020s. Which one is relevant? If we choose our social context, we must recognize our own role in determining the interpretation.

By being attuned to the agent, the situation, and ourselves, we are able to see the ways that our prejudice and social contingency leads us to misread others. Using her term for human nature, which she calls gravity, she writes, “With a higher quality of attention our reading discovers gravity itself, and various systems of possible balance.” Through attunement, we are able to see the situation correctly, and understand how to balance competing considerations of authority, social meaning, and intelligibility into a single reading. So attention is prior to any of these interpretive principles, and helps us to balance the various considerations.

What does the principle of attunement give us that the other three do not? First, she thinks it reveals to us the assumptions we are making about our interpretation. It lays bare how much work goes into constructing a reading, and makes salient the interpretive moves we are making. Interpretations of others are more fundamentally readings of ourselves. They reflect us as much as they reflect those we read. We see ourselves in our readings.

But, secondly, the result is not a debunking of readings. It’s not that the contingency and constructedness of readings makes it any less important or legitimate to read the actions of others. Instead, attunement helps us accomplish something significant. The primary accomplishment is that we understand our own relationship to the interpretation of others, and so understand our own limitations. Practicing attunement ought to bring with it increased compassion and humility in our judgments.

And finally, attunement also makes central what we take to be valuable, appropriate, respectful and required. Attunement puts in bold relief our normative commitments. If we follow Weil’s story out (particularly traced through the path of Iris Murdoch), it comes with a story about our normative concepts themselves, and how the practice of attunement draws us into mature possession of concepts of goodness and rightness. One might pursue this line of thought. But I do not think you have to go this far, all the way to Plato, in order to make use of Weil’s insight. Attunement can draw our attention to our conception of the good and the role that normative commitments play in interpreting the actions of others.

I began this talk with the question *how should we interpret contested actions?* After briefly exploring a few salient strategies, I explored a strategy put forward by Simone Weil, a principle of attention. On Weil’s view, by carefully attending to the details of the situation, the moral features will become salient to us. The process of attention helps us to reflect on the ways that we are reading our social scripts and assumptions into the situation. As a result, it helps us to avoid error. The practice of attention is a skill that can be improved through practice, and we can expect that by careful attention, we will grow better at interpreting the actions of others, more humble about the potential for interference and error, and more attuned to the value and worth of the other person.

1. Weil, *Attention and Will* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Gravity and Grace, 119. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Gravity and Grace, 135. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)