Ethics of Interpretation, AK Flowerree ([amy.flowerree@ttu.edu](mailto:amy.flowerree@ttu.edu), Texas Tech University)

Setup:

*Is she grandstanding, or merely animated and sincere?*

*Is the group rioting or protesting?*

*Was she acting out and seeking attention, or was her outburst an attempt to express her individuality and break free from socially oppressive norms?*

*Did this student not turn in work because they are lazy and unmotivated or because of crippling anxiety and depression?*

*Does the leader give a speech of hope and unity, or blather on with wishful thinking?*

*Is this man flexing his privilege and entitlement, or merely asking for a fair hearing?*

*Am I overreacting? Or is he gaslighting me?*

**Contested Action:** 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.

Plan

* Understanding Action and the role of interpretation
* A dance through some philosophical literature
* Attunement (from Simone Weil)
* Concluding thoughts

1. Understanding Action

What is an action?

* Mere act: series of bodily movements
* Action: a description of the act that includes the agent’s reason for acting
* Interpreting an action involves situating it within its broader meaning, settling not just which act/action was performed, but also the ethical and interpersonal significance of that act/action.

Why are actions contested?

* Information is missing (or there are equally epistemically good ways of filling in the answer)
* A question of which concepts to apply to the situation (Contested Understanding)
* Conditions of applying concepts are themselves contested
* Conditions of applying concepts are vague
* Clash of evaluative outlooks
  + College Freshmen reading *Antigone*

Why care about interpretations?

* Quality of our interpersonal relationships
* Matter of justice
* Driven to understand each other, to be mutually intelligible, not just as idle curiosity.
* We have a strong social need to have shared interpretations of significant events and actions.
* The interpretive task is fundamentally an ethical task of seeing others justly.

**Question: in a contested action, how should we settle on the meaning of an action?**

2. A Dance through some philosophical literature:

The Authority View

* From Anscombe: agent knows what she is doing without inference, expressed via her intention. So we ought to defer to the agent to understand the meaning of her actions

1. An intention expresses the agent’s reasons for action
2. Agents have privileged access to their intentions

Deference is grounded in epistemic and moral reasons

The epistemic consideration is that the agent has better access to her intention in acting.

The moral consideration is that respect for agents involves (in part) seeing them as determined by their reasons.

Reply 1: the intentional description of the action is not sufficient for the meaning of the action. (Blackface, should have known/should have done)

Reply 2: Agents can be self-deceived, especially in contested actions, they are not a good guide.

The Social Meaning View

* The meaning of the action is determined by available social scripts, schemas and blueprints
  + Action, A, means M, in circumstances C
  + Blackface, 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.
  + But contested actions often have multiple social meanings
  + But social scripts are in constant need of *critique* because their meanings are unjust or obfuscatory (Ex. Silencing, hermeneutical injustice, hermeneutical obfuscation)

Principle of Charity *(Aquinas, Kierkegaard, Doxastic Wronging Literature)*

* Interpret the person as acting from good will, whenever possible
* Reply: Charity is not at odds with truth. But it is a bad interpretive principle
  + It ignores harms to third parties. It will make predatory behavior invisible.
  + It will never allow for ulterior motives in seemingly innocent situations (grooming)
  + It ignores the importance of self-protection (creepy date)
  + It is dubious that the rosy glow of partiality spurs moral improvement.
  + Is charity indexed to the agent’s evaluative outlook? Or the evaluator?
  + Is it more charitable to view the person as vastly irrational than it is to view them as acting from bad will?

Response: interpretive principle of justice

* The interpretive task is an ethical task
* we interpret in order to understand, and our understanding is guided by the aim of living in right relationship with others. Our guiding principle is interpretive *justice*.

*Question: how do we do that, if charity, authority, social meaning and intelligibility can be distorting?*

*Answer: Cultivate the virtue of attunement*

**Attunement**

We ought to interpret each other by paying attention to the features of the act/action: the agent, the situation, and (most especially) our relationship to each.

Through the practice of attention, we develop the virtue of *attunement* (ex. Hungry person asking for food)

“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)”

Joan of Arc.

* Canonized as a saint in 1920
* Condemned as a witch, a heretic.
* Social meanings are contingent:1430s or the 1920s or the 2020s. Which one is relevant?
* we must recognize our own role in determining the interpretation.

**Conclusion**

*how should we interpret contested actions?*

* We should attend carefully to the person, action, and circumstances.
* 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 potential distortions in our interpretation, and so 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.