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Theory of Knowledge

Essay Assignment

Session May 2022

1447 words

5. How can we distinguish between good and bad interpretations? Discuss with reference to the arts and one other area of knowledge.

From a young age, I've been guided towards the "correct" interpretations in school - most prominently in English classes where students would be given poems and told to try and decipher the deeper meaning behind the ambiguous lines. Students would often discuss among themselves, throwing about different interpretations and considering their possibilities. However, there would always be an "intended" interpretation that the teacher would reveal to everyone. Such interpretations would often include things that none of the students would think of; yet most would agree on the superiority of the interpretation and a consensus would be formed that the provided interpretation is simply the "answer". For example, last year when my English class read Margaret Atwood's poem *It is Dangerous to Read Newspapers*, my peers and I were aware of the juxtaposition of childhood scenes to the imagery of bloody conflicts. That was simply our basic interpretation of the poem, no one had yet made the connection between the line "detonated red bombs" (Atwood) on line 8 with the symbolic correlation of the colour red and communism. Given that hint from our teacher and also being aware of the historical context that this poem

was written in 1968, we were all in agreement that this interpretation of the poem as being a direct by-product of the Vietnam war was indeed the correct interpretation.

However, this advance towards the correct interpretation was not unique to English as they are also present in my science classes. I can recall in the earlier grades of perhaps 9 or 10, students were taught the different atom models that were prominent in the past. Most notably: John Daltons' solid sphere model from 1803, J.J. Thompson's "plum pudding" model from 1904, Ernest Rutherford's nuclear model from 1911, Niels Bohr's planetary model from 1913 and finally, Erwin Schrodinger's quantum model from 1926 that is still widely accepted and in use today. These models and theories were brought up because they are all essentially different interpretations of the same thing, the atom. Similarly to the differing interpretations of Atwood's previously mentioned poem, it is far easier to distinguish between good and bad interpretations when the thing that is being interpreted is constant. For instance, comparing the interpretation of Atwood's poem to Bohr's theory of the atom would be like comparing apples to oranges. In this case on atom models, the most recent one theorized by Bohr is the good or best interpretation due to its acceptance and use today.

This concludes the introduction of the two areas of knowledge that will be focused on, which are the arts and the natural sciences. Both examples beg the question of how close the correlation between the "correct" interpretation of something is, compared to the "good" interpretation. Before delving further into the main essay question, the various terms present should be given a definition. In the context of arts, interpretations can be thought of as someone's understanding of an idea that an artist is trying to present. In the natural sciences, interpretations usually lead to

models or theories which are essentially scientists trying to understand the world around us. In both situations, the interpretation can usually be seen as either true or false. However, this is not to say that true and false interpretations can easily categorize into either good or bad. In practice, good can be associated with things that are beneficial whereas bad is associated with things that are unfavourable or perhaps even harmful. Accordingly, factually true things may still be harmful, such as the correct formula for gunpowder or the proper instructions for creating a bomb with the intent to harm others. In this sense, good and bad can be put on somewhat of a spectrum as it is rare for things to be truly good without any bad or truly bad without any redeeming factors. For example, the creation and usage of the nuclear bombs during World War II greatly shortened the war which prevented further deaths with the trade-off of many innocent Japanese lives being lost (history.com). This is primarily how the two pairs of words differ. True and false are Boolean values (Khan Academy), meaning that they can only be one or the other whereas good and bad are on a spectrum. Building off this point further, rather than distinguishing between fully good or bad interpretations, in some cases, it may be more effective to look at which interpretations are better, and which are worse when comparing them to each other. In the context of the question, the extent of how good or bad an interpretation cannot be considered due to the near-infinite number of variables such as context, time, cultural perspectives, and many others. Instead, the closest we may come to distinguish between good and bad interpretations is only to a certain extent where they are compared with one another on a case-by-case basis given their unique contexts. However, there are also cases where differing interpretations may both be good in different situations.

Returning to the example with the different models of atoms, time is an important factor when determining good and bad interpretations. Many scientific models are only created due to specific advances. For example, Rutherford's model only came to fruition because of the gold-foil experiments he performed. By launching beams of alpha particles at a thin foil of gold, a few of them were deflected. Upon this observation, in 1911 he proposed that an atom is mostly made up of open space but with the existence of a tiny, dense, positively charged nucleus (Khan Academy). However, prior to this experiment, the existence of a nucleus in an atom was a foreign idea that had no or little evidence of even existing. Prior to 1911, Thompson's "plum pudding" model would have been the best interpretation of the atom at the time. Thus, it could be distinguished as a good interpretation but only in the context that it was prior to the gold-foil experiment. But afterwards, the "plum pudding" model would no longer be the leading theory on the model of the atom and instead be inferior to Rutherford's nuclear model. In this situation, the "plum pudding" model must be distinguished as worse and in turn, the lesser interpretation between the two. However, in the grand scheme of things, it would be unfitting to call the other models to be bad interpretations of the atom as each one built off its predecessor in some aspect. At most, they would be worse interpretations relative to Bohr's planetary model but distinguishing them as purely bad is almost unethical to an extent.

However, even when considering the most modern theory of the atom, Schrodinger's quantum model, it is unlikely for it to be the final iteration. Thus, its days as "the" good interpretation of an atom are likely to be numbered due to further advances in the field of atom theory.

The famous painting, *The Scream* by Edvard Munch has often been misinterpreted. When most people glance or even analyze the painting, they see a figure screaming. Perhaps out of despair, sadness, or frustration. However, a German inscription on the back of the original black and white lithograph version states that “I felt the great scream throughout nature.”. Meaning that the figure with its hands over its ears is blocking out a scream rather than producing a scream. This would in turn mean that all prior interpretations of the figure being the one who is screaming are wrong and thus are all bad interpretations. If the definition of the good interpretation in natural sciences is the one that is the most valid after going through the most experiments and being proven. It would only be reasonable to have a similar situation in the arts where the interpretation given by the artist themselves would be the only good one. Regardless of the opinions of the majority or any other external factors. However, it feels inherently wrong to cast away so many opinions in the arts. An area that is dominated by subjective personal views. Thus, perhaps in the arts, all views can be considered as good as the right answer to one person may differ from the right answer to someone else unlike the natural sciences. Where in most fields and topics, there is often only one theory greatly standing above the rest in terms of validity.

In conclusion, within the area of knowledge that is the arts, most interpretations should be seen as “good” by default. However, some may be treated as lessors when compared to deeper interpretations. In a less subjective area of knowledge such as the natural sciences, inherently “bad” interpretations can be identified and agreed upon with much more ease and consensus.

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