

Lecture II

Theory of Interpretation – what is interpretation?

1. Interpretation in the Humanities: Pluralistic & Innovative

There is a philosophical tradition which regards interpretation as a special way of acquiring understanding in what I will call vaguely the humanities. The notion of interpretation that I seek to elucidate aims to do justice to that claim. But I should explain at the outset that my discussion will not refer to other views in that tradition, and will avoid consideration of the understanding of historical and psychological events. Interpretation, I said in the last lecture, explains or displays the meaning of its object, making possible its understanding. Diverse and fluid though the use of the word interpretation is, its connection to meaning and understanding is fairly robust and general. But neither interpretation, nor meaning nor understanding is limited to the humanities. We can interpret, for example, scientific experiments, and their results. Here the meaning of these experiments is their significance, their bearing on various scientific issues. Their interpretation may yield an improved understanding of various natural phenomena.

The notion of interpretation I am chasing is, therefore, not comprehensive. It does not apply to all cases in which we use 'interpretation'. It is, rather, specific to some such uses. Like many others I believe that *that* notion of interpretation is sufficiently distinct, and sufficiently important to merit special attention. We gain by seeing legal, literary, social and artistic interpretation as so many types of interpretation in this sense, so many species of a genus, which is interpretation in this more limited sense. An account of a comprehensive notion of interpretation, broad enough to apply to anything which can be called interpretation without linguistic impropriety, will reveal a concept too thin and anaemic to shed much light on anything.

Of the six marks which I listed last time, by way of a general characterisation of interpretation, the first four are probably true generally of all interpretations. The fifth and the six are the ones which mark the specific concept of interpretation with which we will be concerned. They say that there can be more than one good interpretation of one and the same object, and that interpretations can be innovative.

One important clarification: I will be talking of interpretations of a KIND which can be innovative, and which allows for good conflicting interpretations. What matters is what is possible by the norms which set standards of correctness for interpretation, rather than the properties of any particular interpretation. The thought is that even, say, non-innovative, conserving or retrieving interpretations are affected by the fact that they are of a kind which allows for innovative alternatives to them. The kind is identified by the possibility of innovation, and of pluralism, rather than by the fact that each successful interpretation is innovative, or pluralistic.

2. On radical pluralism

a) Interpretive pluralism

There is a tame way of understanding the fifth mark. Often different interpretations, even by different interpreters, of, say, one novel, can be combined as so many parts of one more comprehensive interpretation. The assertion of interpretive pluralism is not meant to express this fact. Rather, its point is that several incompatible interpretations of the same object can all be good. Understanding in what sense interpretations can be incompatible is not an easy matter, and I doubt that it admits of informative formal definition. I will assume that we have an informal understanding of the notion. Things are relatively easy in interpretation through performance. What cannot be done in one performance cannot belong to one interpretation. This suggests the generalisation that if interpretations cannot be seen as parts of one interpretation then they are incompatible. True, but not very helpful.

Some marks of incompatibility are: (a) two interpretations which entail contradictory statements cannot be part of a single interpretation;

and (b) Interpretations which attribute to a work or to components of it (say characters which figure in a novel or a play) purposes, attitudes or properties which no single work or part of the work is likely to have simultaneously are not part of a single interpretation. I am not sure that there are no exceptions to the first mark, and the second is obviously extremely vague, and subject to exceptions. It is, and that is its point, broader than the first. If we think of character traits: some are not contradictory, but given how people are they cannot or are very unlikely to be found in one person. On the whole that will suggest that interpretations attributing such properties to the protagonist are incompatible, unless the interpretation takes the work to challenge our understanding of people, or regards it as a work of fantasy, etc. That is the difficulty. Interpretations are much more liberal in what they tolerate than our world. Hence the difficulty we encounter when trying to provide a formal explanation of incompatibility.

b) A methodological observation

I take all six marks to be truisms, which is not to say that everyone, not even everyone who writes on interpretation, agrees with them. The account of interpretation which I find most stimulating and challenging, that of Ronald Dworkin, is known by its adherence to the so-called right answer thesis, which entails, regarding the kind of interpretations he considers, that there is one correct, or best, interpretation of any object one can interpret.

When I dub the six marks of interpretation truisms I mean that we know them through direct familiarity with the practice of interpretation, namely both by observing interpretations, and by observing how people receive them, namely that they are, and how they are, evaluated and judged. I also imply, of course, that in the case of these truisms theoretical reflection does not undermine what we know through our familiarity with the practice. In principle theoretical reflection can lead us to revise opinions directly learnt through familiarity with their subject. But, and this is a promissory note, nothing in theoretical reflection undermines our

familiarity with the fact that both Derek Jacobi and Simon Russell Beale gave great, though conflicting, interpretations of Hamlet, and that the contrasting interpretations of Liszt's funerary sonata by Richter and Brendel are both outstanding, and that though different people will like or respond more to one or the other neither is better than the other.

Contrasting but valuable interpretations in performance provide particularly easy illustrations of pluralism. They are sufficient to establish that in some domains, or regarding some types of interpretation, two interpretations can be incompatible yet good. They leave open the question how wide ranging that phenomenon is. Ultimately we will want the point to be buttressed, and illuminated by theoretical reflection, and only that can establish its scope and importance. My expectation is that interpretations of works of art, or customs and ceremonies, of human relationships of friendship and love, and many others, as well as legal interpretation, are of this type. I will not consider whether, and if so how, it applies to the interpretation of historical events, of dreams and fantasies, and much else. Rather, in elucidating this notion of interpretation, we will make clear what historical or psychological interpretation has to be like if it is to be interpretation in that sense.

c) Can there be pluralistic interpretations?

Initially one may think that there is a paradox in the very idea of interpretive pluralism: if interpretation is an explanation of the meaning of its object, how can incompatible explanations be all true or good? Quick reflection dissolves the appearance of the paradox: if the object interpreted has more than one meaning then, of course there will be more than one interpretation of its meanings and they may be as incompatible as you like.

This is of course right, but does not altogether dispose of the incipient problem. Just pointing to plurality of meaning, in the way that 'bank' means both the bank of a river and the bank in the high street, makes it inexplicable what is special about interpretative pluralism at all? There is a poignancy to new interpretation which is incompatible with commonly accepted ones, but does not displace them as mistakes. That

depends on the different meanings of the interpreted object not being unrelated. They may be, e.g., competing variations on a theme, or related in some other ways. We will have to return to this point in the next lecture, when we consider the different reasons for engaging in interpretation.

3. Can there be Innovative Explanations?

a) The notion, and the two riddles

Interpretive pluralism demands that one object of interpretation can have several, though interrelated, meanings. Each rival interpretation explains one of its meanings. **Interpretive innovation**, however, goes further. The very notion suggests that the meaning it elucidates was not there all along, that the interpretation itself had something to do with the object having it. How can that be? What can that mean?

Suppose I offer an interpretation of a painting. In portraying a mother holding a baby standing on a doorstep and pouring milk into a jug held by a person in the street it represents charity, and kindness to strangers. This is either true or not. If it is true then it was so before I said what I said. After all it cannot be made true just by my saying so. If it is not true then my interpretation is not a good one. Either way there cannot be good innovative interpretations - if they are good they are not innovative, if they are innovative they are not good.

A second, and closely related, objection relies on our notion of explanation: if an interpretation is an explanation (which is the first mark of interpretations in my list of six) then it cannot be innovative. As I remarked already, explanations are inert. They do not create or modify the object that they interpret. How are all six marks consistent with each other?

The very presentation of the problems explains that innovative interpretation is not merely one which was never offered before. There are many cases in which an interpretation was, when first presented, new, that is one which its audience did not know before. Such Interpretations, while new to their audience, can be mere discoveries, retrievals of original meaning. Sometimes anthropology reveals to us the meaning of a ceremony which fell into disuse, and whose meaning, once obvious to all, has been

forgotten. Art historians may, through the discovery of documents long unavailable, discover that a painting is of a prostitute, whereas hitherto it was generally assumed to be of a young virgin, etc.: there is no paradox in having a novel interpretation. The puzzle is about the possibility of good innovative ones.

In trying to explain what interpretations, the kind we are interested in, are, I will concentrate on solving the two riddles of innovative interpretation. Even the explanation of what makes an interpretation innovative has to await their solution, and their solution will, hopefully, provide the major part of the account of the nature of interpretation.

b) On the identity of objects and of their meanings

The first step in dealing with the riddles is to note that formally there is no contradiction here. Interpretations explain and do not change their object. They explain their object by making plain, enabling us to understand, its meanings. The same is true of innovative interpretations. What they affect is the meaning of their object. This observation is true to our interpretive practices. It is not a formalistic or sophistical refutation of the charge of contradiction. To give but one example: if cogent, Freud's interpretation of Hamlet ('Hamlet is able to do anything - except take vengeance on the man who did away with his father and took that father's place with his mother, the man who shows him the repressed wishes of his own childhood realised. Thus the loathing which should drive him on to revenge is replaced in him by self-reproaches, by scruples of conscience, which remind him that he himself is literally no better than the sinner whom he is to punish'¹) casts new light on the play, enabling us to understand it in a new way. But it did not change the play. That is clear enough regardless of one's judgement of the merits of that interpretation. The same is true of all interpretations. None of them, however innovative, change their object. They merely help us to understand it, and sometimes, to see it in a new light, to understand it in a new and different way.

¹ THE INTERPRETATION OF DREAMS

Some of you may be particularly interested in legal interpretation, and perhaps surprised that I should support the view that interpretation does not change its object, leading, so it seems, to the conclusion that judicial decisions, being interpretive, do not change the law. A view usually associated with other theorists, e.g., Heidi Hurd, or Ronald Dworkin. I can only ask for your patience. I will take up this matter in my last lecture.

Let it be granted that interpretation does not change its object. Innovative interpretations, however, can endow their object with a new meaning. That, it can be claimed, reinstates the paradox. After all, it is natural to say that interpretations explain the meaning of their objects. If explanations are inert how can they affect the meanings that they explain? To avoid the paradox we need to avoid thinking of meanings as objects. We need to avoid the absurd picture of meanings being things attached to, bundled with the objects which have them. This is not the place to debate the nature of meaning. But that much may be helpful: Meanings are a special kind of norms indicating that a certain way of understanding their object is appropriate or correct.¹ A good innovative interpretation is a new norm which establishes the legitimacy of a new way of understanding its object.

Crucial to an account of meaning is the explanation of the special character of such norms, and how they and the understanding they specify differ from others. But reminding ourselves that meanings are normative guides to understanding helps in removing the air of paradox. Interpretations, in being explanations are readily understood as setting out, or conforming to, correct or appropriate ways of understanding their objects. Perhaps we can allow that they have an impact on what ways of understanding their objects are correct. How that can be is, however, still a puzzle, and its explanation is our main task.

4. Some Features of Cultural Values

The key lies in the nature of the objects of interpretations, or rather in the objects of that kind of interpretation where innovation is permissible

¹ But is this true of 'the meaning of life'?

or, sometimes, even desirable. I started today identifying the kind of interpretation I am trying to explain by its object - it applies to the humanities. We can make progress by thinking further about the objects of this kind of interpretation. They are diverse, and regarding some of them, for example historical events, or psychological traits, familiar claims that they are subject to such interpretations are very controversial. It is therefore best to bracket those, and focus on the central cases which are of what I will call cultural goods, namely things whose meaning depends on and in some sense derives from cultural practices.¹

They are 'goods' in a loose sense. They include things, relationships, activities, institutions, and more which can be good, or can be bad. They are normative in that they are produced and maintained by activities aimed to achieve goals assumed to be valuable, or comply with norms assumed to be valid. Their interpretation explains their meaning, including, but not confined to how and why they are valuable or valueless and bad. Two main classes of such goods stand out. First, works of art, in the broad sense, including literary works, musical works, paintings and other products of the visual arts. Second, social relations such as the various forms friendship can take, and customary social events such as weddings, anniversaries, rites of passage ceremonies, and burials.

One feature common to all cultural goods is that to benefit from them one needs to know of them. This is not true of all things of value, not even of all things with non-instrumental, that is intrinsic value. In general one need not have the concepts relating to sexual activity, nor to think of the activity as something good to enjoy sexual pleasure of some form. The same goes for the pleasures of food, or any purely sensual pleasures. Though it is significant that human cultures integrate many of them in culturally recognised activities and pursuits, thus enhancing their pleasure, but turning them into components of cultural goods, engagement with which requires some understanding of their nature. But one needs some understanding of what sonnets are to appreciate and enjoy a good sonnet,

¹ Bad, evil and worthless cultural products are also open to the same kind of interpretation, but to simplify the discussion here I will disregard them.

some understanding of what string quartets are to appreciate and enjoy a good string quartet, some understanding of what is a theatre play to appreciate and enjoy a good play. And one needs some understanding of what friendship is to be a friend, and to have friends. The reason is not far to seek. In all these cases we benefit from whichever value is in question by engaging with it, by acting in ways which are appropriate to it, with attitudes and expectations appropriate to it. Barring coincidence, we can do so only by directing our mind and actions in ways appropriate to that value, and that requires some appreciation of its nature as a value.

The second feature of cultural goods is the one intimated by their name, that is their dependence on culture. Arguably the existence, but certainly the ability to enjoy and get the benefit of cultural values, what I will call having access to them, depends on the existence of social practices of engaging with these values, benefiting from them and respecting them. My ability to read with understanding and pleasure Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, or to read or watch with understanding and pleasure Aristophanes' *The Clouds* depends on the existence, now or in the past, here or elsewhere, of a culture where people write, read, and discuss novels and plays.

The first feature of cultural values helps in explaining the second. Access to cultural values depends on sustaining practices because we can benefit from these values only if we direct ourselves towards them, and that requires some understanding of what they are like. We acquire that understanding primarily through acculturation in, immersion in, societies where these values are recognised and engaged with, and secondarily through familiarity, personal or through testimony and other sources, with other societies or other periods, where such values were recognised. Access depends on familiarity with such sustaining practices because appreciating cultural values is rich, complex and nuanced, involving an appreciation of their relations to various other values, and as such is too thick textured to

be transmitted by description only, let alone to be invented by a single individual.¹

5. The argument from relative inevitability

a) The line of argument

The social dependence of cultural values, as I will refer to the fact that access to them depends on the existence of, and familiarity with, sustaining practices, leads directly to one explanation of the possibility of innovative interpretations of relationships, works of art and other objects of the cultural variety. It is a familiar observation that one reason why innovative interpretation is sometimes possible is because it is sometimes inevitable. The inevitability is relative. It is normally possible to avoid offering any interpretation. The claim is that under some conditions, if good interpretations are offered, they cannot but be innovative.

I will pursue this argumentative strategy. This is how it goes: It can be assumed that if something has a meaning then its meaning can be explained. The assumption is not that a comprehensive and exhaustive explanation is always possible, but that some explanation is. Alternatively, we can dispense with this assumption so long as we discuss only objects regarding which there is no doubt about the possibility of explaining them, at least to some degree. If it can be shown that it is impossible to interpret these objects except innovatively it follows that either they cannot be successfully interpreted or that good innovative interpretations of them are possible. Since we know that they can be interpreted successfully, it would follow that good innovative interpretations are possible.

The knowledge that they can be successfully interpreted is no more than knowledge that they can be explained. It does not assume, to repeat the point, anything like an exhaustively complete explanation. The existence of a flourishing practice of interpreting social events, social relationships, works of art and other cultural products secures that

¹ These points are familiar from many discussions. For my contribution see THE MORALITY OF FREEDOM ch. 12, and THE PRACTICE OF VALUE.

knowledge. Hence, the practice of interpretation would, if the argument succeeds, also assure us that there are successful innovative interpretations.

Once it is established that good innovative interpretations are possible in these cases it would follow that the nature of explanation, or the nature of meaning do not pose a principled obstacle to the possibility of innovative interpretation. Absent other grounds to doubt its possibility it would follow that there can be good innovative interpretations in general, though not necessarily in every case. There may be reasons specific to the nature of some objects of interpretation ruling them out. The strategy of argument to be pursued does, therefore, in establishing the inevitability of good innovative interpretations in some cases, opens the door for them in the generality of cases. The hope will also be that in pursuing that argument we will not only establish the possibility of such interpretations, but also understand why they are possible, and through that understand the special character of the type of interpretation I am concerned with.

A thought very familiar to lawyers, but perhaps paradigmatically exemplified in performances of music, plays, or any other work, is that the meanings of certain objects is not altogether determined, and that the indeterminacy forces one to adopt an innovative interpretation, that is one which does not simply represent the meaning of the object as it is independently of the interpretation. Let me explain the presuppositions of that thought in a little detail:

b) Arguing from indeterminacy of meaning

Think, by way of illustration, of the staging and performance of plays as constituting interpretations of them. Typically, first, there will be various ways for an actor to position himself, or to move, various ways of speaking his lines, which make a difference to the meaning of the action, and a difference to the motivation, and frame of mind of that character at the time of speaking, and in general. And second, the meaning of the character's action, his motivation and frame of mind as portrayed by the text of the play, is indeterminate as to which way of performing the role is correct (in the sense of conveying best the character as created by the text

itself and nothing more). In such a case, given that to perform the play the actor has to act in one of the ways not required by the text, and given that each such way of acting will attribute to his character attitudes which the play itself does not do, whichever way the actor decides to act will constitute an innovative interpretation of the play. *Mutatis mutandis* the same is true of performances of music, opera, dance, poetry readings, etc.

We should note what this illustration does not show:

First, and trivially, it does not show that all the ways of performing the play are acceptable. Some may be inconsistent with the meaning of the action or of the character as established by the text.

Second, and equally trivially, it does not show that every time an actor decides how to speak some lines, how to position himself or how to move, he or she is interpreting the role, let alone doing so in an innovative way. They may not interpret at all, if the way they deliver the lines or move casts no light on the character, or on any other aspect of the play (in the illustration I avoided referring to other aspects which an actor may interpret, such as establishing that the play has a symbolic significance, or is set in a so-called realistic mode, and many others). Even if the piece of acting concerned does constitute a (partial) interpretation of the role or the play, it need not be innovative, for it may simply establish or at any rate conform with features of the role or of the play established by the text itself.

Third, the illustration is of a case where innovative interpretation is possible because it is inevitable. There is no suggestion that such cases exhaust the instances of legitimate interpretation, or of legitimate innovative interpretation. That is, I am not suggesting that a way of performing a role which is at odds with the character of the action or of the role as established by the text is always illegitimate, or would always constitute a bad interpretation.

Fourth, the inevitability of innovative interpretation depends on the existence of indeterminacy of meaning. But that indeterminacy is not in itself sufficient to necessitate innovative interpretation. Indeterminacy can be preserved by many interpretations, and sometimes it is essential to the

success of an interpretation that it be preserved. Think of interpretation through translation, be it, say, translation of a poem or the simultaneous translation of a political speech in the United Nations' Security Council. Clearly it is highly desirable that the translation preserves as far as possible any indeterminacy in the meaning of the original.

Fifth, nor is the fact that interpretation in performance requires one to adopt some manner of delivery, some way of pitching one's voice, some tempo, some mode of action, etc., which is underdetermined by the original sufficient (nor is it necessary) to make innovative interpretation either possible or necessary. Think again of simultaneous translation. The interpreter often faces indeterminacy not only in choice of words and phrases, but also in tone of voice, intonation, speed of delivery and the like. The interpreter is rendering in one language the speech or lecture or talk being delivered in another language with its own distinctive conventions regarding these matters, and the way they should be rendered in the language into which he or she is translating may be undetermined. Nevertheless, at least in the contexts I am familiar with, so long as the interpreter speaks in a fairly even manner his manner of delivery is understood not to convey any message. It is not part of the interpretation. It does not contribute to the display of the meaning of the original. Of course, in this case normally the audience has simultaneous access to the speech cadences of the original speaker, and can take their cue from the original. But this is not always the case, not even with simultaneous translation. For example, when done on television, typically the original is suppressed, to allow for an unhindered transmission of the translation.

Another example to illustrate the same point: Can a black actor play Desdemona (without painting herself white)? People I asked said that this is impossible. But remember that in Britain some ten or twenty years ago black actors could only portray black characters. Today they can act just about any character without the implication that that character is black. In Britain people learnt to be colour blind in the theatre, in the sense that while the gender or age of the actor convey significant information their skin complexion need not. Desdemona is different for the contrasting

complexions of her and Othello are central to the play. But need they be represented by the skin colour of the actor? Could they not be conveyed some other way (dress, speech manner, or just by the text)?

c) Generalising the Conclusion

Innovative interpretation in performance is inevitable, according to the argument from inevitability, where

- (a) some aspects of the meaning of the original being interpreted are indeterminate,
- (b) the rules of meaning direct that certain aspects of the performance carry an interpretive message, and
- (c) given the physical nature of the performance, performers have no choice but to perform in a certain meaning-conveying way, even though the original, being indeterminate, does not dictate what meaning to convey, that is they cannot sustain in their performance the indeterminacy of meaning of the original.

If this argument is successful then similar conditions determine when innovative interpretation by explanation rather than by performance is inevitable. Broadly speaking, it is inevitable where

- (a) aspects of the meaning of the original are indeterminate;
- (b) rules of meaning direct that various aspects of the interpretive statements carry interpretive message; and
- (c) such message-conveying aspects of the interpretive statements are inescapable when interpreting the original, even though they relate to indeterminate aspects of its meaning, and it is impossible for them to preserve the indeterminate contours of the original.

d) Contingency and indeterminacy

Crucial to this description of the inevitability of some innovative interpretations is that it is relative. It is relative to norms of meaning, norms which determine that the voice of a simultaneous translator is not significant, that the apparent relative age of actors in a play represents the

relative age of their characters, whereas the apparent relative age of singers in an opera does not convey that meaning. These norms are rarely arbitrary. Various factors can explain why they came about. But they are nonetheless contingent. It could have been otherwise, and my attitude-to-race example shows a norm in the process of change, or one which has recently changed. The contingency of the norms is a result of the fact that they are practice-based. They exist because of practices which sustain them, and they get transformed as the underlying practices change.

Innovative interpretation is conditionally, or relationally, inevitable. It is inevitable if several contingent conditions are met.

First, it trivially depends on someone offering an interpretation.

Second, it depends the content of contingent norms of meaning governing the interpretive activity.

Third, it depends on the existence (in light of the norms of meaning) of indeterminacy in the original.

Fourth, and finally it depends on contingent factors making it impossible, or inadvisable to preserve the indeterminacy.

The reason why the dependence of so-called inevitable innovative interpretation on contingent factors does not make it less inevitable is that the conditions are bound to be met, so long as we try to explain, i.e. interpret, in the humanities. What is contingent in a real sense is the location of the indeterminacies and related factors which make innovations inevitable, not their very existence.

As I indicated earlier, the claim is not merely that innovative interpretations are often advanced even when they are not inevitable, but also that their very possibility affects the character of interpretations in the humanities, be they innovative or not. The argument for the inevitability of innovative interpretation turns on the inescapability of indeterminacy. To see the importance of indeterminacy to the general character of all interpretations in the humanities turn, by way of contrast, to the interpretation of the findings of a scientific experiment. There is no room for similar indeterminacy there. True, the experiment may fail to resolve

the issue it was intended to resolve. It may leave us none the wiser regarding the truth of the hypothesis it was testing. But that is an epistemic indeterminacy of the evidence for or against certain propositions. It does not mean that there is no truth of the matter on these issues, merely that we do not yet know what it is.

The indeterminacies regarding the motivation, or character of a fictional persona are not epistemic. Even if there is nothing to know which we do not know there is still no truth about the motive of the character. There is nothing to know. Moreover, these indeterminacies need not arise from ordinary vagueness, of the kind that may well plague the reports of an experiment. It is not vagueness in the language of the play which makes us wonder about Hamlet's motivation at different points in the play. Rather, the inevitability as well as the possibility of innovative interpretation is a result (among other factors) of the fact that the objects interpreted and their meanings are cultural products.

Novels, plays, paintings, musical compositions and other works open to interpretation are human products. But, it is not that which makes for their indeterminacy, but their being cultural goods, i.e. objects with meaning, and whose meaning is determined in accordance with norms, sustained by social practices.

Why are norms sustained by social practices, and the values they define, underdetermined? Tempting though the thought is, the reason is not that the conduct constituting a social practice is open to various interpretations. We do not derive the content of the norms a practice sustains by observing the conduct constituting the practice, and answering the question: What rule would, if followed by the people engaged in the practice, lead them to act as they do? Admittedly that question may well lead to a variety of mutually incompatible answers all supported by the evidence, and none supported better than the others. But that is not what norms sustained by practices are. They exist only where there is common knowledge of the rules, and common acknowledgement, even in the breach, that they bind. That is, the sustained norms are those which the people

whose conduct constitutes the practice regard themselves as following, or as bound to follow.

The indeterminacy of these norms is the inevitable result of four factors.

First, the norm is expressed in sentences whose meaning is (as always) vague to a greater or lesser degree.

Second, and more importantly, even where there is common knowledge of a norm, that is common agreement about its content, the agreement is not complete. It allows for disagreements in which conflicting views have undefeated claim to be correct statements of the common agreement, which is therefore indeterminate.

Third, a point which elaborates a central aspect of the previous one, the meaning of each kind of cultural goods is governed by a field of meaning-norms. That is, their meanings are interdependent; they import each other and presuppose each other. Cultural goods are what I called elsewhere¹, mixed value goods. The values they are consist of a mix of others. Their norms of meaning determine the character of that interdependence. The interdependence of cultural goods creates much room for unresolved questions, for indeterminacies.

The fourth reason for the indeterminacy of norms and values that depend on sustaining practices is the most important one for the resolution of the riddles the possibility of innovative interpretation generates. The content of the norms is limited to the content of the practices sustaining them.

Let me explain through a comparison with people's beliefs.² We report the content of people's beliefs (our own and others) by ascribing to them belief in certain propositions. But what they believe is less than the content of the proposition, at least if the content of a proposition is understood, as it commonly is, to include all that is entailed by the proposition. True, what is entailed or implied by a proposition I believe imposes rational constraints on me. E.g., I should not believe a proposition while rejecting what it entails. Therefore if something is entailed by a belief

¹ ENGAGING REASON, ch.

² A point I discuss in ETHICS IN THE PUBLIC DOMAIN (1995) PP. 227-8.

of mine I have a reason either to believe the conclusion or to abandon my belief in the premise. But that is far from saying that I already believe whatever my beliefs entail.

In a similar way, while the contents of a practice- sustained norm or value are expressed¹ in propositions they do not include all that those propositions entail. They include only such entailments as can be reasonably said to be part of the common knowledge of the content of the norm.² This feature, which I will refer to as the contingency of norms and values which depend on sustaining practices, contributes greatly to their indeterminacy. It means that various logical constructs and various normative arguments which could otherwise be relied upon to reduce indeterminacy cannot be relied upon unless they themselves are grounded in the common knowledge of the sustaining practice.

6. The Argument from Social Dependence

How successful is the argument from inevitability in resolving the riddles of innovative interpretations?

First, one point to put out of the way: While my illustrations, such as they were, referred to works of art, if the argument is good about them it holds good for social relations, institutions, ceremonies, and of course for the law as well. My observations have to be adapted to apply to other cases, but such adaptations are not hard to make, though we do not have the time to do so here.

I aimed to establish the possibility of innovative interpretations by showing that they are, sometimes inevitable. They are inevitable, if one is

¹ At least in part. I do not wish to consider here the difficult question whether the content of such norms or of the values they define, can be completely stated in propositional form.

² Common knowledge conditions are often taken to imply universal agreement. That is not my meaning. To use again the analogy with people's beliefs: people may not be aware that they believe something, and yet they do. For example, they do if it is such an immediate consequence of their beliefs that it is impossible to attribute to them belief in one proposition without the other. Similarly, in the social sphere the immediate implications of common knowledge are common knowledge, even if no one is aware of them. Not surprisingly given that common knowledge is a function of the beliefs and conduct of many people there are more ways in which aspects of it may elude people's awareness than in the individual case.

to interpret at all, in cases where, among other conditions, the meaning of the original is indeterminate. But are they possible?

My argument was, quite properly, based in part on describing something we all know, namely how in performance we must interpret, and how those interpretations go beyond the established meaning of the original. I went further and described some theoretical presuppositions of such situations. But so far I avoided facing the riddles directly. It is time to do so.

The first riddle said: if the interpretation is a good one then it must have been good before I propounded it. Just putting it forward could not have made it good, or true. Now we see that so put the first riddle begs the question. If a good interpretation is innovative then the act of putting it forward must make a difference. It generates a new way of understanding the original. The interpreter's act of putting forward the interpretation is like an act of invention. It is an invention of something new, except that that thing is not a machine, but a way of understanding the interpreted object.

But there was more to the riddle than simply begging the question: it said, and this is irrefutable, that if the interpretation is good then it must have been good before I propounded it. That point cannot be dismissed by saying that it is just like saying that if I invent a new machine the invention would have been a good one had I or someone else made it earlier. The point of the riddle is that the interpretation is made good by features of the object which were there all along, since an interpretation, as I remarked earlier, does not change the object. So why do we think of innovative interpretations as analogous to inventions rather than to discoveries which reveal to us what was the case all along? The reason lies in the contingency of practice dependent norms and values.

The features which establish that an interpretation is a good one are features of its object, and its context, and of general truths, e.g. about human psychology. They are not limited to those aspects of the object and the world which are generally known or thought to be important. The determination of what meanings the object already has, and what meanings

are new does depend on the contingency of the meaning- fixing- norms. A way of understanding a play, the wedding ceremony, or any object of interpretation, which has never been thought of before is a new way of understanding, and the interpretation propounding it is innovative, simply because it was never thought of before. The fact that the features of the play or the ceremony or whatever, which show it to be a good interpretation were there all along does not matter. The contingency of socially dependent meanings makes ample room for innovative interpretations, that is ones which show new ways of understanding their objects, and in so doing establish new meanings for their objects.

The first riddle is solved by the contingency of interpretation. The second riddles: how can an interpretation be explanatory and innovative at the same time, is solved somewhat differently. Innovative interpretations are not purely explanatory. They set a new meaning, a new way of understanding their object. But innovative interpretations are explanatory as well; they explain their object by explaining a new meaning, one which they themselves establish.

7. Towards an Explanation

It would be wrong to think that innovative interpretations are limited to cases where they are inescapable, or that they are regrettably necessary. This is far from the truth. Innovative interpretations are a welcome feature of our engagement with cultural goods, but the exploration of this point belongs with the second question an account of interpretation must face: why interpret? I will return to it in the last lecture. Yet, indeterminacy of meaning plays a crucial role in making innovative interpretations what they are. But what are they? And what are interpretations in the sense we are striving to explain?

The key to an explanation is the connection between interpretation and practice-sustained norms of meaning. One well-known point is of crucial importance: Social- practice- sustained norms both govern individual conduct and depend for their existence on individual conduct.

A word of explanation before we continue. I noted before that while cultural goods depend on sustaining practices these need not persist for the goods to remain available to people. In the current discussion, however, I will be concerned exclusively with the interpretation of cultural goods by people living in communities where such sustaining practices obtain. There are severe limits to the possibility of innovative interpretations where this is not the case, but we cannot examine them now.¹

Remember that we are discussing cultural goods and their interpretation, and cultural goods depend either for their existence or for access to them, on the existence of sustaining practices. That means that to engage with cultural goods people have to be guided by the norms and values sustained by these practices. We are governed by the practices, and aim to comply with them, or rather, by the values and norms that they sustain. On the other hand, when people deviate from the norms they undermine the norms. Over time such deviations may spread and lead to the practices being abandoned or transformed. But regardless of whether this is likely or not, individual, personal, deviations from the norms are always possible.

The peculiarity of cultural goods is that the attitude to deviant behaviour implicit in their sustaining practices is not altogether negative. It is in the nature of cultural goods that people need to have some understanding of them to engage with them, to benefit from them and enjoy them. If, as I argued, innovative interpretations are sometimes inevitable then the implicit attitude of the sustaining practices to innovative interpretations cannot be altogether negative.

This remark should not be misinterpreted. I have not overlooked the fact that certain societies may require rigorous compliance with their norms, and be hostile to any deviation. Nor have I forgotten that many societies may be unaware of the fact that cultural goods depend on sustaining social practices, and may vary with them. I did not say that

¹ Obviously one thing that cannot happen outside a society where the sustaining practice is alive, is for deviations from it to change it.

people accept the legitimacy of innovative interpretations, only that the nature of cultural goods requires such acknowledgement. This enables the emergence of attitudes which, however incompletely, recognise the dependence of cultural goods on traditions and practices, recognises the resulting contingency underlying their existence, and the indeterminacy of their meanings, and allows for pluralism of reasonable interpretations, as well as for the appropriateness, in some circumstances, of innovative interpretations. Clearly, if the root of innovation is in the indeterminacy of meaning then innovation is not complete. It always relates to existing meanings. At the minimum it incorporates them and transcends them. On other occasions it derives its force from flouting them. The analysis I offered today points the road to the explanation of such phenomena, to the explanation of the uses of interpretation. We will return to this in my last lecture which will focus on the special case of the law as background to a discussion of the questions 'Why interpret?' and 'How to interpret?'