

1. Philosophers on Advice

“Moral testimony in the wild...tends to be about which of several relevant features wins out, and should ultimately guide one’s actions, overriding or otherwise defeating the other relevant feature(s).” (Wiland, 2017, p. 56)

In asking the question whether Alfred ought to take the medicine or ought to pay Bertha, we are using the word “ought” in *the advice sense*. That sense is what is sometimes called the ‘all thing considered’ sense of the word. (Thomson, 1999)

Verdictive Advice: This advice aims at resolving what-to-do ignorance, i.e. ignorance about what is the right/morally required/missible thing to do. Such advice is usually about the balance of reasons.

2. Making Sense of Things

But sometimes we rely on advice because significant things happen to us – whether personally or morally significant – and we struggle to make sense of them. To illustrate consider the following examples:

Emotional Labour

Sara, who is currently staying at home while looking after her and her partner’s two young children is complaining to her friend: “I’m so tired in the evenings, I am barely standing upright. And then John comes home and he wants me to give him all my attention and listen to him tell me about whatever went down at his work. And I just want to be left in peace. And then he complains that I don’t take an interest in him. And then I feel guilty because he does have a really stressful job.” Her friend notes wryly: “So you are undertaking unpaid domestic labor all day and then he expects some emotional labor when he gets home on top of that.”

Intellectual Theft

Max is approached by his classmate Sam, with whom he is also good friends, and who is desperate about a paper that he needs to submit but that is not coming together. Max works on related topics and is very knowledgeable. He spends a lot of time talking Sam through the various arguments, drawing on a paper that he himself has written. He also tells Sam his own views about the argument. Sam is very appreciative and grateful. A few weeks later, Max sees Sam’s handout for his paper. He realizes that Sam has drawn extensively on his framing of the question and has put forward essentially the same argument that Max has told him about. He’s upset and confused. When he turns to another friend for advice, that friend tells him: “Of course, you are upset. Sam just stole your idea!”

Crush

Clara has a new co-worker, Shaun. Shaun is *really* nice, Clara thinks. She finds herself both looking forward to bumping into him in the corridor and being very flustered when she does – all of the sudden her face turns all red and she loses her train of thought. She’s really confused about her reactions. One day, her friend notices and asks Clara about what’s up. “Oh, I don’t know,” Clara deflects, “whenever Shaun is around I just start feeling like an idiot.” “I know what’s going on,” her friend responds, “I think you have a crush on him.”

Hermeneutical Advice: this advice aims to resolve hermeneutical ignorance, i.e. ignorance about how to make sense of our own moral experience. Such advice aims to shed light on the nature of our moral experience.

“A friend who asks “What should I do?” asks neither for a pronouncement nor a list of rules. She asks for help in putting her situation into perspective, finding some interpretation of her circumstances that will make one course of action clearly preferable.” (Calhoun, 2015, p. 216)

3. Resolving Hermeneutical Ignorance

What is hermeneutical ignorance and how can advice resolve it?

1. Name

Hermeneutical ignorance consists first and foremost in an inability to name one’s experience. Hermeneutical ignorance, Fricker argues, comes about when in our collective hermeneutical resources there are...

...blanks where there should be a name for an experience which it is in the interests of the subject to be able to render communicatively intelligible. (Fricker 2007, p. 161)

When such gaps result from structural injustices the hermeneutical ignorance in question will constitute a hermeneutical injustice.

It’s true that an agent who is hermeneutically ignorant will not be in a position to communicate what she has experienced to others. But the epistemic challenge that Max, Sara, and Clara face goes deeper than just missing a label for what is happening to them.

2. Perspective

The hermeneutically ignorant agent lacks a *perspective* that will allow her to systematize and interpret her situation and experience.

What are perspectives? I suggest we understand the term in the way Liz Camp (2013, 2017) uses it:

- They are ongoing dispositions to structure thought, in particular along two dimensions: (1) which features are *prominent* (noticed, remembered, attended to) and (2) which features are *central* (causing, motivating, explaining others).
- They holistically bind certain features together in an intuitive and often evaluative- and emotion-laden way, presenting some feelings as appropriate/required.
- They guide how new information is assimilated.
- They are tools for thought: “...a perspective is a tool for thinking rather than being a thought itself: it determines no truth- conditions of its own, but provides a way of organizing and navigating among thoughts.” (Camp)
- Perspectives are not concepts but they involve the disposition to employ certain concepts.

Hermeneutical ignorance is to either lack a perspective on one’s situation or occupying an unsuitable perspective:

“The powerless are...likely to find themselves having some social experiences through a glass darkly, with at best ill-fitting meanings to draw on in the effort to make them intelligible.” (Fricker, 2007)

Note that there can be multiple perspectives that we can take on a given situation, which will foreground different aspects. We can see an interaction through the lens of the individuals involved or we can take a wider, structural angle and see it as an instance of a larger pattern (for example, date gone awry versus rape culture).

This leaves us with the following thought. The expressions used in hermeneutical advice communicate perspectives: to be told that one is having a crush, doing emotional labour, or the victim of intellectual theft provides one first and foremost with cognitive tools to organize one’s thoughts and experiences.

[Something I am curious about is the connection between perspectives and narratives. It's quite tempting to characterize hermeneutical ignorance as an inability to tell a (coherent) story about the situation.]

4. Moral Testimony as Hermeneutical Advice

Much of moral testimony “in the wild” takes the form of hermeneutical advice. It involves listening to the advisee’s recollection of events and then framing it as an instance of “harassment”, “bullying”, “theft”, “rape”, “assault”, “emotional labour”, “work”, “lie”, “flaking out”, “abuse”, “murder”, etc,...

I suggest that these terms function to impose a *moral perspective* on the series of events.

- They tend to foreground particular features as prominent: intentions and epistemic states of the relevant party, psychological/material consequences.
- They present what happened as morally significant; that is they present it as something that bears on and changes the normative landscape – the web of rights/permissions/duties that obtains between agents. In particular, it creates reparative duties on the part of the perpetrator.
- They license certain emotional responses, often explicitly: “Of course you are upset. He bullied you.”

How is the moral perspective conveyed? I suspect this varies, depending on the term in question. It seems plausible that, for example, “murder” or “rape” encode a moral perspective semantically. For others, the encoding may be pragmatic. Some terms may clue perspectives metaphorically.

“By defining *housework* as work, women have extended the meaning of work itself: and by naming women’s experience as the *double-shift* [i.e. unpaid domestic work as well as paid work in the labour force] new light is cast on the work which men perform. From this new ordering of reality, new possibilities arise, so that women can now begin to define their production of leisure for male consumption as a demanding, time consuming, and unjust task.” (Spender, p. 70)

5. Moral Testimony, Emotional Work, and Overcoming Alienation

Appreciating that moral testimony often takes the form of hermeneutical advice helps us appreciate the power of moral testimony.

There is a longstanding objection to moral testimony, according to which, even if it transmits moral knowledge, it leaves the agent emotionally alienated from the morally relevant features of her situation.

...by itself pure direct moral deference is comparatively powerless to change the moral sentiments. Even if one can form new moral beliefs on the basis of pure direct deference, one cannot form the requisite sentiments on that basis.” (Fletcher, 67)

“...there seems to be something objectionably cold about a moral judgment that is based solely on deference to the expert.” (Enoch, p. 256)

Plausibly, verdictive advice does not change our feelings about a situation. That’s because being told what you have all-things-considered reason to do simply does not bear on what it is appropriate or fitting for you to feel in this situation. (Maguire, 2017)

But that’s not true for hermeneutical advice. When you receive hermeneutical advice you receive a perspective to make sense of your situation and locate what has happened to you in the normative landscape. That perspective also allows you to make emotional sense of what happened. It legitimizes some feelings and delegitimizes others:

- For Max to think of what has happened to him as an instance of intellectual theft, means that certain features of what has happened now stand out as having particular significance (the context of the friendship, Sam’s intentions, Sam’s knowledge of what Max is working on,...). This

perspective legitimizes feelings of having been wronged, betrayal and disappointment on Max' part.

- For Sara to think of what she is doing as domestic labour, means that her activity and the never-ending list of tasks becomes foregrounded, as does the fact that her domestic activity enables her partner to do what he does outside the house. It delegitimizes her feelings of guilt at her exhaustion and lack of patience in the evenings and validates her anger and frustration. It resolves her affective conflict.

Because our emotional responses are shaped by the perspective we take on our situation, hermeneutical advice is an important tool to resolve affective conflicts, help the agent achieve emotional clarity, and render feelings more specific (for example, an amorphous feeling of upset may crystalize into feelings of betrayal).

Hermeneutical advice is itself a kind of emotional labour in Arlie Hochschild's (1983) sense (Calhoun, 2015).

6. Deference or Midwifery?

Does hermeneutical advice involve *deference*? Doesn't the advisor just help the advisee to "see things for themselves"? If that's so perhaps hermeneutical advice is not really testimony.

When trusting hermeneutical advice, we trust our advisor about which interpretive tools to use. Once we have a tool, we can then use it to draw out further inferences and come to "see for ourselves" various implications and consequences. But that does not negate the initial act of trust.

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