

# Interpretation under Oppression: Charity is Not Enough

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## I. Introduction

Here is a platitude: interpret others charitably. Commonsense morality tells us to “think the best of others.” That is, when we have before us a range of interpretations of a person’s actions or attitudes, we ought to select the interpretation that shows the person as a rational person of goodwill. Suppose my neighbor, Steve, throws a party for the neighborhood that includes setting off \$50,000 worth of fireworks. I could interpret Steve’s action in many ways. I could conclude that he is showing off his wealth and should have spent his money elsewhere, or that he really loves the neighborhood, or that he’s secretly trying to woo our neighbor Diane (who I know hates ostentatious displays), or that he really wants to terrorize my dog. Absent additional information, the platitude instructs that I ought to interpret his action as the mildest form of infraction.

Of course, it’s not clear which of these possibilities *is* the mildest form of infraction. Is it more charitable to think Steve is misguidedly trying to woo Diane, or that he really hates my dog? And we might think in more complex cases we should just withhold judgment. If I can safely ignore Steve, then perhaps then I can withhold. But if I interact with Steve regularly, I will need to accept an interpretation in order to determine how to react and which attitudes to adopt towards him.

We could nuance the platitude into a principle of charity: When interpreting another’s actions or attitudes, we should resist interpreting the other as irrational or bearing ill will. Many philosophers have endorsed some version of this principle. Existing defenses can be sorted into two general types: First, the Epistemic Defense, that the most charitable interpretations are *true* or *likely to be true*.<sup>1</sup> Second,

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<sup>1</sup> Davidson (1976) is the locus classicus of this view, but it is often adapted by those who reject Davidsonian accounts of linguistic meaning. See, for example, Williamson (2007), who offers a knowledge version. Mark Schroeder seems to put forward a version of this view if you draw together strands from Schroeder (2019) and Schroeder (2022).

the Moral Defense, that ethics requires that we *owe* charity to others, that we *wrong* them when we incorrectly attribute irrationality or ill will to others.<sup>2</sup> My primary target will be the Moral Defense, though I will have something to say against the Epistemic Defense along the way.

In this paper, I lay out the interpersonal interpretive task and its importance to ethics. I show how the Principle of Charity has been defended as the way to interpret others' attitudes and actions. I argue that interpretive charity is not enough. Conditions of power imbalance and oppression make clear that charitable interpretation fails to take into account the normatively salient features of the situation, leading to injustice against third parties, and even those being interpreted. Instead, I propose an aim of interpretive justice and sketch what that would look like.

## II. Interpretation and the Principle of Charity

As I am using the term, an interpretation is a description. A description can range from minimal (noting only the most basic components) to maximal (embedded within a diachronic, geographic and historic context that encompasses many details). There are an infinite number of true descriptions we can give of the thing we wish to describe, though many of these may be uninformative or uninteresting. For example, the Washington Monument is the Washington Monument. And, at this moment, the Washington Monument is not dancing a jig, nor is it visiting Paris.

When we interpret an attitude, action, or agent, we endorse a description. I am using the term *endorse* for the attitude of taking-true-in-practical-thinking. For some, this attitude just is *belief*. For others, this attitude encompasses a wider range of attitudes and responds to a broader range of considerations. Nothing in what I say requires that we *believe* all that we *endorse*. In the case of Steve, I might not settle on a *belief* about Steve. But if I have to relate to him regularly, I will need to endorse

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<sup>2</sup> Aquinas articulates this point in Summa Theologica II-II.60.4. Two contemporary debates in particular appeal to this principle. First, defenders of moral encroachment use it to motivate the mechanisms of moral encroachment, see Moss (2018), Basu (2023), Basu and Schroeder (2019), and Bolinger (2020). Second, defenders of epistemic partiality argue that it is required by friendship [see Stroud (2006) Keller (2004), Lange (2022)], patriotism [see Almeida and Thurow (2021)], and religion [see Dormandy (2021)].

an interpretation in order to guide how I relate to him. When he asks me the next day if I liked the display, or when I pick a route to walk my dog, my interpretation of Steve will guide my action. This is a curious disconnect between belief and endorsement. Withholding belief is a neutral attitude towards some proposition. But an interpersonal relationship does not permit (much) widespread withholding on central details of interpretation. If it did, the relationship would wither. I flag this here to forestall a typical objection that arises against the Moral Defense. Since moral reasons are the wrong kind of reasons for belief, we cannot mount a Moral Defense of the Principle of Charity.<sup>3</sup> Since endorsement is a broader category than mere belief, we can discuss the sort of reasons that bear on it without getting bogged down in debates over the right kinds of reasons for belief.

We interpret each other all the time. Usually, the interpretive task is instantaneous and reliable.<sup>4</sup> We operate with an implicit set of predictive and prescriptive representations. We easily judge the motivations of others and situate our interpretation within an evaluative framework. When headed down the grocery aisle, we correctly determine that the person coming the other way sees us and will not collide with us. But when we encounter behavior that does not fit our implicit model, we are faced with what I will call *momentary unintelligibility*. In this moment, the interpretive task becomes vivid. We ask, *What are they doing?* We can resolve the momentary unintelligibility by seeing the action under one of several descriptions. In broad brushstrokes, we can judge the agent to be ignorant, to be incoherent, or to be aimed at some mistaken value. These judgments come on a spectrum from merely mistaken to deviant.

In my earlier example of Steve, I was faced with several interpretive possibilities. Perhaps Steve is ignorant (that Diane will not appreciate his display), or incoherent (he believes that his fireworks

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<sup>3</sup> Arpaly and Brinkerhoff (2018) and Arpaly (2023).

<sup>4</sup> Spaulding (2018).

display will annoy his neighbors but also wants to show his love for the neighborhood), or has a misguided value (he is showing off his wealth or wants to terrorize my dog).

Many philosophers and ordinary folk think that we ought to interpret Steve charitably. The basic idea is that we interpret the attitudes and actions of agents in the “best” light. But this is unhelpful until we specify what sense of best. Here are a few on offer:

Privilege the interpretation that

**Truth Version:** Attributes true beliefs (or knowledge or justified beliefs) to the agent.<sup>5</sup>

**Agency Version:** Attributes coherence between the agent’s beliefs and desires.<sup>6</sup>

Alternatively, Schroeder’s Version: select interpretation that maximizes the agent’s agential contribution.<sup>7</sup>

**Goodwill Version:** Attributes good will to the agent (or don’t attribute bad will to the agent; Alternatively, Hanlon’s Razor: never attribute to malice that which is adequately explained by stupidity).<sup>8</sup>

These three versions track the three general strategies for managing momentary unintelligibility. There are others, but the details do not matter for my purposes. In this paper, I am concerned with a Principle of Charity that enjoins us to attribute interpretations to others that satisfy the demands of the principle.

A few words about my ambitions in this paper. A staggering amount has been written on the Principle of Charity, with philosophers using it as the key to everything from linguistic meaning to norms of discourse to a technique for reading philosophy texts. My aim in this paper is to examine it as it arises in normative ethics, as a principle for interpersonal interpretation. I will not address the Davidsonian view that interpretation precedes truth, or the role the Principle of Charity plays in rhetoric studies, or the way we use it to teach our students how to read philosophy texts.

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<sup>5</sup> Davidson (1973), Williamson (2007), Grandy (1973).

<sup>6</sup> Davidson (1973), Malpas (2023)

<sup>7</sup> Schroeder (2019) and (2022).

<sup>8</sup> See footnote 2

Instead, I am interested in calls to a Principle of Charity in the interpersonal realm. I am not attempting to characterize and critique *anything* that might plausibly be called charity. Charity can infuse our relationships in any number of ways. Our charity can manifest in generosity and kindness towards others. We can hold fast to those who behave badly and generously overlook faulty behavior. Charity may even motivate interpretive principles other than the versions I discuss here. Readers may have their own pet versions of a Principle of Charity. My arguments here are not meant to undermine any Principle of Charity whatsoever. Rather, they are meant to critique a dominant version, and a dominant defense in non-ideal contexts. In particular, I am interested in contexts of power imbalance and oppression. Oppression “is commonly theorized as a type of structural or social injustice that confines, restricts, or immobilizes people in virtue of their membership in certain social groups.”<sup>9</sup> I am primarily interested in appeals to the principle of charity in normative ethics, as a substantive claim about how we ought to interpret each other, and so the defense that I am interested in is the claim that we should adopt a Principle of Charity for *moral* reasons.

Something like the Principle of Charity is widely preached (though perhaps less practiced) in the real world. Calls to “be charitable” or “think the best” or “give the benefit of the doubt” pervade our moral practices. And while Hanlon’s Law (“never attribute to malice what can be explained by stupidity”) isn’t articulated with moral loftiness, it is enjoining us to do the same thing. Indeed, many of us have deeply internalized a Principle of Charity. When interpreting family members, coworkers, acquaintances and strangers, we feel a conscience prick asking us to see others in the best light. And when others fail to do so, we feel the impulse to offer an alternative interpretation.

The moral defense of the principle of charity goes something like this. The interpretation we endorse of the attitudes and actions of agents determines which reactive attitudes (if any) we adopt towards them. And in turn, those attitudes ground our relationship to that person. It is wrong to blame

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<sup>9</sup> Stockdale (2021).

someone who does not deserve it. So we ought to avoid endorsing descriptions that might mistakenly blame someone.

Suppose Anna and Bill's child commits a premeditated heinous crime. Reeling, the community looks to blame Anna and Bill's parenting. Their lives are scrutinized in order to judge their attitudes and actions towards their child. Surely they must have known what their child was planning? Or, surely they ought to have known? The community's impulse is to condemn them as bad parents: negligent, overindulgent, perhaps abusive. As a result, Anna and Bill lose standing in their community. They lose friends. They are harassed, bullied, and mistreated. Eventually, they have to move to another town and attempt to restart.

But suppose further, a careful investigation reveals that they were loving, competent parents. In fact, their parenting is substantively identical to many other members of the community. Whatever motivated and shaped their child to commit this terrible crime is not reasonably traced to them, and the child was brilliant and careful and no amount of parental oversight short of pathological nosiness would have revealed the child's plans.

We might think that while the community's response is an intelligible response to tragedy, it is unfair to Anna and Bill. And the consequences Anna and Bill endure are tragic and undeserved. Their lives are materially worse because they have been interpreted as bad parents and party to their child's crime. They are harmed by this interpretation. If the community had followed a Principle of Charity, they would not have jumped to the conclusion that the crime is Anna and Bill's fault. The community ought to have held open that Anna and Bill were innocent. In failing to apply the principle of charity, they have wronged Anna and Bill.

We can multiply examples. Imagine a driver cutting you off in traffic, or a report of a friend doing something unkind, or a cutting remark coming from a loved one. In these cases, we could accept that the person in question is displaying ill will. But there are other mitigating explanations we could

go to. A dominant strain of the Principle of Charity enjoins us to refrain from endorsing the interpretation that attributes ill-will to the other. But other versions can call us to refrain from attributing irrationality or ignorance.

Here is a defense given by Aquinas (*Summa Theologicae* II-II.60).<sup>10</sup> Aquinas argues that when judging about non-persons, we should judge according to our evidence, since our aim is truth. But when we are judging persons, there are moral stakes. If we judge someone is good, we will honor them. If we judge they are bad, we will punish them. And it is egregious to punish someone who is innocent. So we should bias our judgments towards positive normative assessment of others. Aquinas writes,

From the very fact that a man thinks ill of another without sufficient cause, he injures and despises him. Now no man ought to despise or in any way injure another man without urgent cause: and, consequentially, unless we have evident indications of a person's wickedness, we ought to deem him good, by interpreting for the best whatever is doubtful about him.

Aquinas acknowledges that this bias will be unreliable. We will be in error. But this is necessary to offset the moral risk of misjudging someone. At the center of the argument, for Aquinas, is an *Asymmetry Thesis*: it is worse to punish the innocent than to fail to punish the guilty. Aquinas is interested both in the interpersonal consequences (such as the consequences endured by Anna and Bill) and the civil and ecclesiastical consequences (the outcomes of a court proceeding). He thinks that both ought to meet a similarly high standard of judgment in order to justify treating the other person as morally blameworthy.

A similar argument is advanced by contemporary voices warning against the dangers of Doxastic Wronging. Doxastic Wronging is the thesis that an agent can wrong another person in virtue of some belief the agent holds. Paradigmatic cases include gendered and racialized stereotype beliefs and beliefs that fail to attribute agency or good will to another. Examples include a woman asking a

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<sup>10</sup> Thanks to Sam Pell for a helpful discussion of Aquinas's passage.

black patron to retrieve her coat (wrongfully presuming him to be staff), or a spouse asking if her alcoholic partner had “fallen off the wagon” because of wine stains on their shirt.<sup>11</sup> Such beliefs, if false, would wrong the other person. While the exact details of *why* this would wrong the other person are contentious, a popular version is that it *diminishes* or *disrespects* the other person.<sup>12</sup> One concern is that it grounds a mismatch of reactive attitudes. Another is that the descriptions fail to recognize someone as an agent at all. Here, the difficulty is not that we fail to see someone as manifesting a good will, but we fail to see their actions as a manifestation of will at all. And so the thesis of Doxastic Wronging motivates a thesis about Moral Encroachment, that some beliefs, because they risk wronging, require more or different epistemic justification.

The argument from Doxastic Wronging and Moral Encroachment parallels Aquinas’. In order to avoid wronging others, we should resist forming certain beliefs about them. Much of the debate over Doxastic Wronging has focused on whether *belief* is the locus of wrong in these cases.<sup>13</sup> I have framed our discussion around *endorsement*, propositions that we make use of in our practical thinking. In the locution of this paper, we should resist endorsing interpretations that show others in a bad light (either by diminishing their agency or showing them to have a bad will). While it does not play an explicit role, a version of the asymmetry thesis emerges: it is better to fail to think poorly of someone than to incorrectly think poorly of them.

And so, proponents of Doxastic Wronging and Moral Encroachment promote a Principle of Charity on moral grounds. There is something deeply wrong about viewing others under undeserved disparaging descriptions. They advocate that we should not draw these inferences, even if they are reliable. In related discussions of epistemic partiality, philosophers have argued that we owe it to our

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<sup>11</sup> Basu (2023)

<sup>12</sup> Basu and Schroeder (2019), Marusic and White (2018)

<sup>13</sup> See Osborne (2020), Enoch and Spectre (forthcoming), and Gardiner (2018)



friends to see the best in them, and we ought to see them in the best light, whenever possible.<sup>14</sup> And others have argued that the gaze of love requires we favor a rosy gaze rather than an accurate one.<sup>15</sup>

Charity often seems morally appropriate. When we attribute bad will to others, and they are not acting from bad will, we have wronged them and opened them up to unjust criticism. These unjust criticisms have downstream social impacts, as with the case of Anne and Bill. The intuitive pull of defaulting to charity stems from a plausible moral principle. But, I will argue, charity is not the only salient moral concern when we are interpreting others.

Before I criticize this, I want to flesh out what determines a good interpretation. An interpretation is a description. It makes determinate claims of the world. But as we know from philosophy of science, which interpretation is best will depend on our aims. If we are trying to give a description of a complex microorganism on the cellular level, we might describe it very differently than if we were trying to describe it in chemical terms. The concepts we apply would be different. The structure of the account would be different. The evidence we attend to would be different, and so on. If we are trying to interpret what is going on, it depends what question we are asking.

And so it makes no sense to talk about the “best” interpretation independently of some axis of evaluation. Think about the following exchange:

Sam and Marie are on a first date. Sam asks her about her work, her family, and Marie responds openly, then returns the questions. Sam is quiet and guarded in his response. He begins to cast her furtive glances, and she is alarmed at the intensity of his gaze. At one point, Sam goes to the bathroom, and Marie leaves the restaurant.

We could describe this scene in many ways. Perhaps we could give a scientific account of the forces of motion and explain according to physics what took place. The best physics explanation would use

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<sup>14</sup> See especially Stroud (2006)

<sup>15</sup> Lovibond (2011) interprets Murdoch (1970) this way, though see Clarke (2006). Stohr (2019) can be seen to endorse “proleptic” reasons; Kierkegaard (1998) is often interpreted in this vein as well.

a range of concepts that would not include “Sam” or “Marie.” It would look nothing like this, and if this were meant to be a physics description, it would be a very bad one.

Or perhaps we are giving a psychological description. Sam was shy and had intense eye contact. This triggered something in Marie, and she got creeped out. According to her social script about the risks of dating, she felt unsafe and left. This might be the best psychological explanation of the behavior. Maybe a fuller account would appeal to Sam’s neurodiversity and Marie’s bad experiences on previous dates.

Or perhaps we are giving an interpersonal description. Sam was shy and nervous, inexperienced, and so behaved rudely. But Marie did too, ghosting Sam. Whether Marie’s actions are excused depends on whether you think women ought to stay in social situations where they find a potential romantic partner creepy. And so the “best” explanation of what happened interpersonally will depend on substantive normative features about the normative expectations that bind individuals in a first date context.

The point is that all of these interpretations of what happened can be good interpretations according to the dimension we are seeking to understand. Let’s suppose that they are in fact the best interpretations, they are *true* interpretations. Now, they may all be equally true, but it would be odd and unhelpful to give the physical description if we are trying to understand the ethical significance of Sam and Marie’s actions. A true description is not always an apt description, given our interpretive aim.

When we interpret others, it is for some aim. To make possible communication.<sup>16</sup> To predict behavior.<sup>17</sup> To stand in right moral relationship with them.<sup>18</sup> Our interpretive aims determine what counts as a good interpretation. The commentator will interpret a political speech using different

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<sup>16</sup> Davidson (1973).

<sup>17</sup> Davidson (1973), Grandy (1973), Williamson (2009).

<sup>18</sup> Schroeder (2019), Basu (2023), Kierkegaard (1998), Aquinas.

descriptions than the scribe, and each could be an excellent interpretation despite having little in common. The commentator's description will draw out thematic elements or connect the speech to historical events. The scribe will aim to faithfully reproduce the text in written form. A doctor will interpret a sudden spike in heart rate using different concepts than the lover. An interpretive aim will fix which concepts are appropriate. They will also fix which evidential standards are appropriate. The evidential burden in law is different than in ordinary conversation. A community could appropriately interpret an action as a murder even if the legal case has not yet been made. It would be inappropriate for a newspaper or a judge to do so.

Our aim in the interpersonal context is to see each other so that we can live in right relationship with each other. This involves interpreting each other as agents, as proper objects of the reactive attitudes. It involves attunement to the normative features of the person and situation. By this, I do not only mean the moral status, character traits, and quality of will. Interpersonal relationships involve seeing each other in a moral light. But they also involve seeing each other as hilarious, and knowledgeable, and skillful. The interpersonal interpretive task consists in applying concepts that are rich and important for the quality of our interpersonal relationships.

Consider a neuroscientist who refuses to apply any concepts to her children other than neurochemical ones. Rather than talking about achievement, or character traits. The parent only describes their children in terms of neurotransmitters. "Endorphin levels are high!" or "Your adrenaline pulled you through!" The neuroscientist might be saying all true things. But she fails to relate to her child as a *person*. She fails to relate to her child's happiness, determination, and achievements. As a result, her interpersonal relationship will suffer.

Or consider a vociferous youtuber who argues that we cannot interpret someone as guilty of anything unless they are legally convicted of a crime. And so, even if the action clearly meets the ordinary evidential standard for murder, but the legal process has not yet been completed, the youtuber

berates others for “jumping to conclusions.” And if the legal process fails to reach that conclusion (perhaps because of systematic injustice or incompetent prosecution), the youtuber claims that we cannot claim that the person is a murderer. This person is applying the right concepts, but applying the wrong evidential standard. If we were to adopt the youtuber’s position, it would impede our ability to understand and repair the moral wrong that has been done.

We do not always have an interpersonal interpretive aim. Many roles adopt a different aim: doctors, psychologists, biologists, and chemists aim to interpret the world (including persons’ actions and attitudes) according to different aims. And, as Strawson notes, sometimes we step aside from the interpersonal stance because it is tedious.<sup>19</sup> But when we do aim to relate to each other interpersonally, we also aim to interpret each other in a way that tracks the normative features that constitute the quality of our relationship.

## II. Charity is Myopic

My chief concern with the Principle of Charity is that it is myopic. It treats the situation as though the person being interpreted is the only morally salient feature. But even in the Garden of Eden there were *two* people around.<sup>20</sup> In answer to the question, “did you eat the forbidden fruit?” Adam admits it, but deflects that he is non-culpable, “the woman gave it to me.” His attempt to absolve himself requires interpreting Eve as the temptress. This narrative has been used for centuries to unjustly punish women for their “responsibility” in “leading men astray.” Adam wanted to avoid punishment, but his dodge is at the cost of passing it on to someone else. Charity for Adam is punishment for Eve.

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<sup>19</sup> Strawson (1962).

<sup>20</sup> Arguably there are four persons, since God and the Serpent play a role as well.

Once we leave the Garden of Eden, the Principle of Charity further distorts our interpretive task because the way that power dynamics and oppression obscure harms. Insulting or despising someone for having a bad will is not the only morally salient harm. When the other is a powerful person, and the bad will has the propensity to cause harm, it is important to consider the harm that could be done to others by overlooking a bad will. But the Principle of Charity focuses our attention on the person being interpreted. Sexual predators are given the benefit of the doubt and go on to harm many more victims. Tell-tale signs of abuse are written off as momentary blips. A default interpretation of charity encourages us to overlook or ignore the ways in which other people are impacted by an action because it fixes our attention on the person being interpreted. Once our attention is fixed, we become oblivious to the bigger picture. When we privilege charitable interpretations, we dismiss third party harms as normatively insignificant.

The principle of charity not only encourages us to overlook and explain away harmful actions. It also refuses to allow us to question the motives in a seemingly benign action. The male professor shows strong interest in supporting a promising female graduate student, offering her compliments and opportunities. A charitable interpretation would see this as an expression of care. A less charitable interpretation would wonder if it's an instance of grooming, a predatory behavior that could result in harm to the female student. If we default to charity, we are neglecting the moral risks that are posed to others.

Consider the first-person case. Suppose you are a young woman on a first date. For reasons you cannot quite articulate, you start to wonder whether the person across the table is creepy. A default interpretation of charity would require that you squelch those doubts, continue with the date, and let

him walk you to your car. But concern for your own safety is also an important component of reading this situation. It is perfectly permissible for you to cut the date short and leave.<sup>21</sup>

So far, I have argued that the principle of charity myopically ignores features of the normative landscape and privileges only the status of the person being interpreted. This is especially brought out in contexts of power imbalance. But the interpreter may face high stakes as well, and these are not captured in the Principle of Charity calculation. When the person being interpreted is a high status, powerful person, the cost of interpreting a powerful person as behaving badly is very high for the interpreter, especially if that person is not high status. If a congregant accuses a pastor of sexual activity with an underage person, it is very easy for the power structure of the church to hide the complaint and punish the accuser. It is relatively difficult for low status testifiers to be heard, much less believed. By contrast, to attribute wrongdoing to a low status ingroup member or an outgroup member usually carries very little cost for the interpreter.

As a result of the costs to the interpreter in systems of oppression, we can predict that certain patterns about the practice of using the Principle of Charity will occur. The prediction is that the practice will enforce calls of charity towards high status in group members, since this functions to protect the powerful in the group. Part of what it means to be a powerful member of a group is to have the ability to act with some degree of impunity. And we predict that our practice will downplay or forget to enforce the principle of charity on interpretations of outgroup members or low status ingroup members (especially if we must choose between a high status and low status member).

We can see the effects of power dynamics in contexts where powerful men are accused of wrongdoing. Whether it's the Catholic Church, the Southern Baptist Convention, any of a long list of megachurch pastors, high profile politicians, or even philosophers, we see calls for charitable

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<sup>21</sup> Example from Eric Wiland. I am using the attitude of endorsement, namely treating-as-true for the purpose of practical thinking. Regardless of what the person *believes*, they are treating *date is creepy* as a salient proposition that they make use of in their practical reasoning.

interpretation towards the powerful. Those who come forward to allege abuse face a high bar of scrutiny. And while the #metoo movement has slightly moved the dial towards believing women (at least in some quarters), the default is still to look with suspicion on those bringing accusations.

The Principle of Charity guides our attention to fixate on the one being interpreted, but this is a false clarity. When someone comes forward and alleges abuse, we are charged with interpreting *whether the abuse happened*, or whether the accuser's interpretation is the one we should adopt. But this also requires us to interpret the accuser. *Are they speaking ignorantly, maliciously, irrationally?* If we are charitable to the accuser, then we cannot be to the accused. But the accused is the one who takes our attention. How do we weigh the moral force when all parties cannot be interpreted charitably? What we need is to consider the moral weight of misinterpreting the accuser and the accused. Or, what we need is to track *all* the morally salient harms in the context. Appealing to Charity distorts this task.

I have been focused primarily on the Goodwill Version of the Principle of Charity – not to interpret others as lacking a good will. But it's important to point out that in many cases, no interpretation is actually charitable. Recall, the Principle of Charity is motivated by appeals to protect agents from undue condemnation. It doesn't matter whether we are condemning them for ill will, irrationality, or ignorance. If we adopt one of these interpretations, then a range of reactive attitudes will follow that have direct and indirect consequences for the agent in question.

When we interpret each other within the interpersonal stance, the quality of will of others matters a great deal to us. Whether their actions manifest ill will, or misguided good will, or negligence, will determine the reactive attitudes we take towards them. If we mistakenly attribute an ill will to someone, we will open them up to criticism and reactive attitudes like blame, anger, and resentment. The Goodwill version of the principle of charity enjoins us to shy away from seeing others in a bad light in order to prevent unjust moral and social consequences being meted out against the interpreted person.

But so also with charges of irrationality. If we attribute incoherence to another person, we open them up to rational criticism, and perhaps ridicule. They will not be taken seriously, they will not be treated as an autonomous agent. Irrationality can be used as grounds for paternalistic interventions. The Agency versions of the Principle of Charity enjoins us to shy away from seeing others as compromised agents because then they will not be taken seriously.

One might think that there is an easy out. When faced with a momentary unintelligibility, the easiest strategy is to say that the other person is coherent and values something good, but that they are mistaken about some matter of fact. They are ignorant. This does not impinge on their autonomy or goodwill.

However, there can be severe consequences of judging someone to be ignorant. When we judge someone to be ignorant, we downgrade them as informants. They cannot contribute to the knowledge economy, they cannot shape our collective understanding. And, as Miranda Fricker argues, to be downgraded as a knower can be an epistemic injustice under certain circumstances. The immediate and downstream effects of being viewed as not a knower can have as dire consequences as either of the other two options.

Consider common reactions to Christine Blasey Ford's testimony that then Supreme Court Nominee Brett Kavanaugh had sexually assaulted her in high school. "I believe *she* believes he sexually assaulted her." Or "I believe someone sexually assaulted her, though I doubt it was him." These interpretations of Blasey Ford's testimony were in service of interpreting her charitably. She is testifying in good faith. She is a coherent agent. She is saying at least some true things. But the thing that she does not know is the very central thing she is there to testify about: "Brett Kavanaugh sexually assaulted me." It may be true that these interpretations of Blasey Ford invite less ire than ones that attribute malevolence. But to refuse to believe victims when they testify to what has happened to them is profoundly damaging to them, individually and socially. At the very least it prevents them from



receiving justice. And on a social scale it makes it so that other victims are unlikely to come forward, unlikely to be believed when they do, and unlikely to receive justice.

Under conditions of power inequality, it can seem like attributing ignorance is charitable. This is because interpreting the accuser as ignorant doesn't invite (much) additional blame on them. Since they are already not very powerful, this does not decrease their power (or, not by much). Of course, the most charitable interpretation would be to *believe* them. But the power imbalance has skewed this possibility so that it is not visible. This criticism is not aimed against the Principle of Charity in its pure ideal form. Rather, it is against the practice of the Principle of Charity in non-ideal, unjust contexts. When the interpreter will face severe consequences for interpreting the powerful person as in the wrong, this possibility is "screened off." Power imbalance distorts our appreciation of the ranking of charitable interpretations.

One might think that the upshot is to try to reform our practice. By asking others to attend to an equitable application of charity, we might avoid these problems. But this is not the answer, for two reasons. First, the Principle of Charity already primes us to have a cognitive blind spot by asking us to interpret the person acting, rather than attending to the entire context. Even a pure version of the Principle of Charity would not focus our attention in the relevant places. And even if we applied it equitably, we would still sanction harm to third parties and instability of interpreting testimony of wrongdoing. Second, if we reformulated the Principle to be responsive to all the normative features, it would no longer be a Principle of Charity. Recall, the Principles were stated purely in terms of the person interpreted, and were justified purely by looking at how incorrect judgments affect that person. If we shift the Principle to include the entire context, and harm to third parties, this is tantamount to giving up the Principle.

### III. Oppression Distorts Charity's Aims

Oppression not only restricts the freedoms of oppressed persons, it also distorts the epistemic landscape to make that oppression seem natural, justified, or inevitable.<sup>22</sup> It is not just that oppression distorts our incentives to make it costly to interpret in ways that punish the powerful. It also distorts our cognitive resources and evidential thresholds. Even if we aim to equitably dispense the Principle of Charity, our attempts will seem forced or unjustified.

Perhaps the most prominent discussion of this epistemic distortion comes through the vast literature on epistemic injustice. An epistemic injustice occurs when someone is wronged in their capacity as a knower because of prejudice tied to their identity. One paradigmatic type is when a speaker's credibility is downgraded because of their gender or race. They do not "seem credible." This judgment arises because of deep seated prejudice from the interpreter. But to "correct for" that prejudice will feel forced or unjustified to the interpreter. That is because interpreters have internalized schemas that are part of a general theory of interpretation. Even if one has good reason to reject that theory, it will not feel obvious or justified to adopt an alternative strategy. Such interpreters are alienated from their interpretive framework.

Often, the interpreter's implicit model of the world will rule out as implausible what the testifier is saying. Karen Jones calls these "surprising reports."<sup>23</sup> Because the report is surprising, the interpreter will be tempted to downgrade either the speaker's competence or veracity. But instead, Jones argues, if the speaker is a marginalized knower, the interpreter ought to distrust their background plausibility judgment. This is because the dominant knower is not in a good epistemic position to know what a marginalized person's experience is like, or how they would respond, or who they can

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<sup>22</sup> Hill Collins (2000), Zheng and Stear (2023), Mills (2007) and Bell (forthcoming).

<sup>23</sup> Jones (1993).

trust. She argues that dominantly situated persons have an undercutting defeater for their background plausibility judgment.

Oppression's distortion goes beyond just testimony and background explanatory theories. It also distorts the concepts we use to interpret persons and objects. Stereotypes pervade our thinking and make it difficult for us to consider different interpretive possibilities. The female teacher who fails to be nurturing is immediately characterized according to a derogatory slur, where a man would be an absent-minded professor. The black woman asking for service is interpreted as too loud, and too demanding, where a white man would be a leader who knows his worth. When someone's behavior can easily fit into a stereotype, it would be cognitively challenging to see it in any other way. Further, as Rowan Bell (forthcoming) notes, our appraisal of others can come under thick evaluative terms that masquerade as "just facts." So we can think that describing someone as a welfare queen or a golden boy is just a description, but in fact embeds a false normative picture. In an oppressive context, our conceptual landscape will be littered with these false starts.

Mills, in his work on white ignorance, calls our attention to the way our individual and collective memories are shaped by oppressive forces. Our heroes get statues and we erase the history that paints them in a bad light. This in turn shapes our intuitive theories of what is plausible and hides past wrongs that need remedy. As a result, when claims of oppression or injustice arise, dominantly situated members are in a poor epistemic position. Such reports will sound incredible or unlikely. What seems like a proportionate response to a marginalized knower will seem outrageous to the dominant knower, as reactions to protests of George Floyd's death show. And further, normative features of those situations will be invisible to dominantly situated subjects. For example, the trope that women accuse men of sexual misconduct because they love the attention was enough for interpreters of Christine Blasey Ford to think she got what she wanted. They were very concerned

about being charitable to Brett Kavanaugh and the potential damage to his career, and oblivious to the death threats and career obstacles brought to her.

As with most principles, the Principle of Charity is egocentric. It begins with *my* assessment of the world, of rationality, of goodness. And then it measures the other person against me. But, of course, there is an overlooked set of possibilities. *I* could be ignorant, irrational, or evil. When I am interpreting another person, I am not the standard of knowledge, rationality and goodness. Knowledge, rationality, and goodness are the relevant standards for these things. Of course, by my own lights, I will prefer myself to the person with whom I'm disagreeing. But this must be a fallibilist starting point. One thing I might learn from disagreement is that I am the one in need of change.

In non-oppressive contexts, this egocentrism can be corrected by deliberation with others within the interpersonal sphere. We can call each other out for misjudging the situation. We can face consequences for our missteps. But when we (the interpreters) are in a position of power, there is often little consequence for getting things wrong. Marginalized and marginalized interpreters alike will face strong pressure to interpret the world according to the dominant perspective. Epistemic injustice has structured our information landscape in such a way that marginalized perspectives can never challenge or correct our distorted picture. The world continues on, and we (individually and collectively) power through with our Charitable Interpretation – the one that refuses to learn or adapt – and the result is that the marginalized perspective remains unintelligible to us.<sup>24</sup>

In oppressive contexts, the Principle of Charity becomes a tool of oppression. Oppressive contexts are distorted in ways that benefit the powerful and obscure the perspective of the marginalized. This is part of what it is to be marginalized, to be decentered from the dominant way of thinking. And it is essential to oppressive structures for them to be obscured, since few of us have the stomach to knowingly oppress our fellow humans. And so our interpretations will be flawed. One

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<sup>24</sup> Lockard (forthcoming) discusses the pernicious effects of this application of charity in philosophy.

conclusion we can draw here is that a Principle of Charity under oppression is not likely to render true judgments. Though not the target of this paper, I think this serves to undermine the epistemic defense of the Principle of Charity.

Oppression can distort our interpretations in many ways, but I want to call attention to violations of normative expectations. Our interpretive frameworks draw on an implicit social contract. The implicit social contract embeds normative expectations. Those expectations are minute. They tell us how far apart to stand, how much eye contact to have, when to smile, when to protest, when to be silent. They delineate roles for how social situations are to be governed. And they carry with them implicit judgments about suitability for various tasks. Our conceptual framework, when applied to a situation, presents a context as ready to be understood in terms of normative and descriptive expectations.

Behavior that deviates from our implicit interpretive framework requires extra interpretive work. Here, the principle of charity swings into action, attempting to render the momentarily unintelligible behavior intelligible. Deviations from our implicit interpretive framework ground reactive attitudes. The person is standing too close, is there a culturally appropriate reason for them to do so, or is it a domination move? When we settle on an interpretation, this determines whether we excuse the deviation, or whether we adopt an attitude of blame, anger or resentment.

In cross cultural interactions, misinterpretation is common and need not be morally significant. For example, the overly familiar friendliness of a person from the Southern US might be bewildering to someone in a coastal city. Or crossing a road without a light might invite ire in Germany. While these misinterpretations are uncomfortable and engender mismatched reactive attitudes, they need not cause deep harm.

But in unjust contexts, part of what makes that context unjust is that it is rife with unjust normative expectations. Someone, by virtue of their identity markers (sex, gender, ethnicity, race or

religion) are expected to fill a social role, usually a subservient one. Social exchanges are judged by how well a person conforms to the normative expectations of the implicit social contract. And reactive attitudes are apportioned accordingly. If someone breaks the implicit social contract, the interpreter takes themselves to be justified in various reactive attitudes.<sup>25</sup>

It does not matter which principle of charity we adopt. In an unjust social context, deviations from social scripts will result in mismatched reactive attitudes. These mismatches will be pervasive and harmful. The result will be the systematic misapplication of negative reactive attitudes. The long-term result of being treated in this way harms the marginalized person.

Now let's think about the interpretive task in contexts of oppression from the standpoint of a dominant group member. A dominantly situated person can only interpret from within their understanding of the implicit social contract. So the just interpretation – the one that accounts for the normative features of the situation as it actually is – will be hidden from them. This is because their interpretive framework itself is unjust. Applying a Principle of Charity (on whatever version: seeking to interpret the other person in such a way as minimizes the negative consequences they will endure if the interpretation is mistaken) will still systematically lead to a failure to recognize and respond to the normative features of the situation.

The Principle of Charity, as we've formulated it, is applied within an existing framework. But when the framework itself is unjust, it will lead to bad judgments. And so, in oppressive contexts it is imperative that the dominantly situated interpreter work on building a better framework. I will discuss how in the next section. Charitable interpretation within a dominant framework then will be systematically skewed in favor of judgments that favor the dominant group and fail to understand the normative features of the situation.

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<sup>25</sup> See Manne (2017) .

I have been speaking of the epistemically distorting effect of oppressed contexts. But one might wonder how agents can assess whether they are in such contexts.<sup>26</sup> In an unjust world, it is safe to say that there will always be at least some oppression. But where it is and what effect it has may be hidden to agents. One of the features of oppression is that it often renders itself invisible, inevitable, or justified. And within structures of interlocking oppression, it might be difficult to tell the structure and shape of the oppression. Our patterns of attention, normative and predictive expectations, and conceptual resources might make it nearly impossible for us to pinpoint the cognitive effects of oppression. In short, agents may legitimately wonder whether they are in such contexts, and they may not be able to discover the answer. As a result, it is vital that agents look to engage different perspectives and discover new information, rather than conform their interpretation to the preset option given by a default Principle of Charity.

## VI. The Aim of Interpretive Justice

Let me sum up what I have argued so far. As social creatures we must interpret the actions, attitudes, and agents we encounter. Our aim in these interpretations is to see them so that we can live in right relationship with them (whatever that may be). A Principle of Charity tracks one dimension of living in right relationship with others – seeing them in an undeservedly bad light harms our relationship with them – but it is not the only dimension, and the missing normative features can be significant and harmful to ourselves and others. In situations of power imbalance and oppression, our ability to track the normative features may be systematically obscured from us because we lack the conceptual resources to see the wrongdoing, or because the power structures make it very costly.

Here is what I propose instead. Rather than a Principle of Charity, we should endorse an Aim of Justice.

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<sup>26</sup> Thanks to a referee for raising this question.

**Aim of Justice:** interpret persons in a way that tracks the normative features of the situation.

How does an aim differ from a principle? Unlike a principle, which functions as a rule to be followed, an aim is a regulative ideal. The dictum *believe truth!* sets the conditions for correct belief, but it is not a rule we follow to believe well. So too with the Aim of Justice. We might adopt a range of strategies to achieve our aim. The first strategy is to examine all the relevant normative features of the situation, not just the risks posed to the person being interpreted. Unlike a Principle of Charity, this principle is dynamic. It requires us to *learn*, to improve our conceptual resources, and to notice the way power is distorting our interpretive incentives.

But I think, additionally, the interpretive task makes a claim on how we develop ourselves as interpreters. It requires us to become attuned to the normative situation. It requires us to forge and acquire better concepts and attune our evidential standards. And it may require changing our practice of assigning reactive attitudes.

Here is a practice that I think can help dominantly situated persons to become better interpreters. In his famous essay, “What is Enlightenment?” Kant argues that we must develop a cognitive empathy for the perspective of others.<sup>27</sup> Intellectual maturity requires first that we think about the issue from our own perspective. And then, fully and unreservedly, we think about it from the standpoint of others. We try to fully inhabit the alternative perspective(s). And then, we come back to our perspective and attempt to make a synthesis of the two. Kant’s version of this activity involves thinking from the standpoint of any rational thinker. I propose adapting this to our non-ideal context by instead deeply, and fully, engaging the topic from the perspective of marginalized thinkers. This requires reading firsthand accounts and seeking to understand the history that has shaped this perspective. In order to do this well, we must cultivate intellectual humility. We must be able to set aside our own perspective enough to inhabit the other without judgment. This process does not seek

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<sup>27</sup> Kant (1992)



to curtail judgment by fitting the marginalized perspective into the dominant one. It doesn't seek to diminish the disagreement. Instead, it allows it to be as deep and intractable as it first appears. No attempt is made to resolve the disagreement until *after* one has occupied the alternative viewpoint. The task is much greater, but so is the reward. If done successfully, the agent is able to understand their opponent's position and then seek to *learn from them*.

My proposal here is just a sketch and much more work is required to defend a full account. But two challenges should be discussed here.

The first worry is that the demands of justice might make us bad friends.<sup>28</sup> It would be better if, following the Principle of Charity, we show favoritism (or charity) to our friends at the expense of understanding the full context of what is happening. If we hear an unflattering report of a friend's behavior, we should default to thinking the least bad thing of them. And this is true precisely because of the value of the interpersonal relationship. So the right making features of that relationship will come at the cost of a well-rounded picture. My account suggests that interpretation aim at justice, but interpersonal relationships need not aim at justice. In fact, my proposal may make our most important interpersonal relationships significantly worse.

From what I have said, the aim of justice is the aim to see the in the situation the features of it that are essential to living in right relationship with others. It is consistent with my account that those features are partial. I have not given any substantive constraints on what features are necessary, and it's possible that the conditions of friendship should cause us to weigh the good features of our friends more heavily than the concerns of others, and this is what justice (in the sense I have endorsed here) requires. My argument was that the *moral* case for the principle of charity was weak. There might still be a friendship-derived case. But even in this case, I think the principle of charity will be the wrong sized shoe to defend partiality in friendship. If you are wondering whether your loved one has fallen

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<sup>28</sup> Stroud (2006), Flowerree (forthcoming).

off the wagon, for example, it is relevant whether they are merely chatting about their evening or asking for the keys to drive home. Other features of the situation matter, even for the relationship, not only the impact of interpreting them wrongly. Or suppose your partner tells you they will pick up your child from school, even though it's not built into your schedule. But you know they are timeblind and this is a real struggle for them to remember to leave at the right time. Defaulting to charity precludes acting in ways that suggest they might forget. More broadly, it could be true that interpreting the friend charitably at the cost of seeing the harm they are causing in the world is a failure to provide accountability as a friend.

The second worry is that empathizing with bad perspectives may corrupt our ability to be sensitive to ethically significant features.<sup>29</sup> Inhabiting bad perspectives will make us bad people. This deserves a much fuller treatment than I can give it here, but I will say two things. First, our imaginative capacities allow us to inhabit multiple perspectives without endorsing them. So while perspective taking may challenge (or even temporarily incapacitate) our ability to make moral judgments, it doesn't undermine our core abilities of evaluation. And secondly, pursuing perspective taking in community can provide a necessary ballast as we seek to synthesize various perspectives.

What the Aim of Justice proposes is that what the dominant person needs to do is to learn. They need to expand their interpretive repertoire. They need to practice taking the perspective of the other. And this is a substantive task that is not easily accomplished. Because the conceptual interpretive priming is implicit and automatic, it is not something the dominant interpreter is well positioned to do. They must build a framework in order to inhabit it. And this is accomplished slowly, intentionally, and requires intellectual humility.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Paul (2021).

<sup>30</sup> See, especially, Whitcomb et al (2021) and Callahan (2022)

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