

Does the principle of charity have a problem with literary form?

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Abstract. In this paper, I propose that there are or will be examples where the principle of charity recommends an interpretation which makes a text more true than another interpretation, whereas the rival interpretation improves on making sense of its form.

Is charity for people of low birth

Or a way in which we interpret?

Is charity something we give or give to?

—O my grammar will never do!

If two interpretations of a philosophical text fit equally well with the evidence, the principle of charity, in its simplest version, tells an interpreter to favour the one in which the text comes out more true, by the interpreter's lights. I envisage that this principle will face challenges to do with the form of a text.

Let us imagine that a certain text is divided into ten paragraphs. Paragraph seven is puzzling. One interpretation makes each sentence come out more true. The other interpretation makes better sense of why these sentences have been grouped together in this paragraph. It says, "To make more sense, the author should have added this sentence here... and this sentence over here..." The transitions between sentences make more sense with the proposed additions and we can understand why all these sentences have been put together in one paragraph, but the paragraph as a

whole is less true than on the interpretation favoured by the principle of charity.

There does not appear to be anything in the principle of charity which prevents this kind of problem from arising, where its favoured interpretation makes less sense of the form of the text, though at present I have no example to illustrate the abstract worry in detail. (A verse in a manner from across a great water is not much consolation.) If methods of interpretation are brands, the principle of charity is the most well-known brand in analytic philosophy (e.g. Davidson 1973-4: 19); but I foresee that it will face other brands of interpretation which seem better on form. The principle of charity tells us to set interpretations aside if they attribute more error, but the reader who cares about form is going to find following that instruction sometimes painful (see also Carey 1988: 170). And the principle will probably not find acceptance within literary traditions in which skill with form is an outstanding quality, though I would probably take its side.

References

- Carey, S. 1988. Conceptual differences between children and adults. *Mind and Language* 3 (3): 167-181.
- Davidson, D. 1973-74. On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme. *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 47: 5-20.